

"The Old, Weird America" exhibit tweaks U.S. history – The Boston Globe

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ART REVIEW

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Tweaking history at DeCordova

By Sebastian Smee, Globe Staff | June 28, 2009

LINCOLN - America's unofficial histories - the kaleidoscopic, chaotic, constantly self-replenishing supply of tales, traditions, superstitions, and psychoses that make up this stupendous nation's sense of itself - are tackled in a fascinating new show at the DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum.

"The Old, Weird America" is subtitled "Folk Themes in Contemporary Art." It's not, to be clear, an exhibition of folk art, or of what is often called "Outsider Art." None of the 18 artists in the show are old, and few of them are genuinely weird. They are, instead, academically trained artists in their 30s, 40s, and 50s.

But they are all part of what curator Toby Kamps of the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, which organized the show, describes as a resurgence of folk themes in American art.

The show includes stars of contemporary art such as Kara Walker, Matthew Day Jackson, and the late Jeremy Blake, along with such less well-known but equally impressive artists as Brad Kahlhamer, Barnaby Furnas, and Dario Robleto. It presents paintings, animated puppetry, collage, and even spinning dresses in works that address - often with scathing irony - major themes in American history, from the founding fathers, slavery, and the Civil War through the space race.

There's also work that deliberately borrows from actual folk art, with various motives and degrees of success: Deborah Grant, for instance, "samples" the art of Bill Traylor, a self-taught artist and former slave from Alabama, while Kahlhamer amalgamates Native American iconography and Americana in large-scale drawings in watercolor and ink.

The show takes its title from Greil Marcus's book of the same name (originally published as "Invisible Republic") about Bob Dylan and The Band's "Basement Tapes." Like the book, the exhibition has a tendentious, straining quality, and it occasionally veers off into unhinged theater and paranoia. But it is never less than entertaining.

Be aware: "folklore," for Kamps, is a loaded term. He is not interested in benign, feel-good alternative traditions, like doily-making or Shaker chairs. He is interested, instead, in stories that are at once highly charged and actively repressed, with volatile ramifications.

There is no better example than the handful of works by the brilliant young Texan Dario Robleto, who is given a room to himself in the upstairs galleries (this is the first time, by the way, that the DeCordova has given over its entire indoor gallery space to a single show).

Walking past Robleto's ornately framed trio of hair braids pinned to a silk backing, you might not think to look twice. But if your eyes stop to glance over the work's wall label, you will read, after the title ("Your Lullaby Will Find a Home in my Head"), an eye-popping list of the materials involved: "hair braids made from a stretched and curled audio tape recording of Sylvia Plath reciting 'November Graveyard,' homemade paper (pulp made from soldiers' letters to mothers and daughters from various wars, ink retrieved from letters, sepia), excavated and melted bullet lead, carved ribcage bone and ivory, mourning dress fabric" and so on.

Bizarre as they undoubtedly are, Robleto's relics and remedies evoke a visionary clarity. His fastidious presentation, coupled with dollops of black humor, encourage us to persist with objects that may seem trifling at first. The history of rock 'n' roll, for instance, plays a leading part in his idiosyncratic vision. Another of his pieces, "Shaker Apothecary," is a pine chest holding 28 storage drawers, each scientifically labeled with a style of dance from the '50s and '60s and the name of the medicinal plant inside: "The Jerk/Hemlock" for instance, or "Do the Hand Jive/Rose of Jericho."

Perched on top of the chest are two other works that combine Eros and Thanatos in completely unexpected ways. One of them, "A Rosary for Rhythm," combines ground hipbone dust with melted and carved vinyl records of Jerry Lee

Lewis's and Little Richards's "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On."

America may have its overarching big ideas. But it is also a country, Robleto reminds us, of homemade, privatized myths, myths that are anything but hygienic. Instead, they come freighted with contradictions, humor, and violence.

For the most part, Kamps's selections have been very good, and in some cases genuinely inspired. But there is, regrettably, a side to the show that feels wearily predictable. What could have remained genuinely weird and provocative has been pushed aside in several cases by familiar forms of patronizing "identity art" - art that addresses, in the most dutiful, box-ticking ways, the familiar tropes of exclusion and wrongdoing.

I'm thinking, for instance, of Sam Durant's two life-size dioramas that suggest alternative interpretations of the first Thanksgiving. The dioramas are set up on a circular platform, divided in half, that slowly revolves. One side shows a Native American teaching a pilgrim how to grow corn (with the help of a buried herring); the other shows Captain Myles Standish beating to death the Pequot Indian Pecksuot, which, the catalog tells us, led to a raid on the Pequots and subsequent celebration.

Durant purchased both displays from the defunct Plymouth National Wax Museum in Massachusetts. But to what end? The work he has made from them is as didactic and kitsch as the originals, and it isn't saved from being so by the artist's ironic know-ingness.

Works by Eric Beltz, McDermott & McGough, Greta Pratt, and Allison Smith felt similarly constrained by academic conceits. But there were plenty of artists who were game to cut loose.

The watercolors of both Furnas and Kahlhamer I found utterly compelling. Furnas's depictions of Civil War mayhem have a focused, demotic quality that seems to push the watery delicacy of the medium in the direction of video-game graphics. And his large portrait of John Brown with a noose around his neck is surely one of the most haunting pictures in recent American art.

Kahlhamer's rampantly undulating visual fields of Mohicans, cartoon characters, skulls, prairie girls, butting bison, and Native American motifs (Kahlhamer has Native American heritage) are saved from the perils of "identity art" by a manic, scabrous quality. His work withholds judgment the better to cling to contradiction and uncertainty.

National mythologies inevitably - some would say instantly - succumb to kitsch. It's no surprise, then, that evidence of kitsch is everywhere in this show. Kahlhamer, for one, seems to want to clutch kitsch by the neck, and either strangle it or shake it back to life. In her film addressing the narratives of slavery, Kara Walker attempts something similar: a kind of visual shock therapy for clichés of the mind.

Her outrageous scenarios (slaves lynched by Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox; a muscular male slave impregnated by a weakling plantation master, and so on) employ the conventions of silent movies and Balinese shadow puppetry to suggest something obscene but forever unknowable, because it is constantly being shrouded, beaten back, denied.

Is it cathartic to make such obscenities visible? Who knows? But then, catharsis may not be the aim. For most of the artists in this show, the real point seems to be that they will stand for no more denial. Official history be damned - let the chaos and contradiction in.

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