

Ahistoric Occasions: Artists Making History

Mass MoCA

John Navarro

Nestled in a valley in northwestern Massachusetts, Mass MoCA opened *Ahistoric Occasions: Artists Making History* in May. Curator Nato Thompson invited artists to contribute works that explore ideas of legacy and continuity and tie static snapshots of history into the modern world. While approaches varied, the use of artifacts came into play prominently in Allison Smith's installation *Victory Hall*. Smith used reproductions of Civil War weaponry to create a decorative wall display of mandalalike patterns. The entry to the hall is draped with an embroidered curtain of similar motif in blue and gold.



Greta Pratt, *Nine Lincolns*, 2006
Archival pigmented inkjet on photo rag
24 x 29 inches

notion of fighting the Feds or Rebels. Here, the beauty of Smith's weaponry obscures the reality of the trenches.

Dario Robleto employs strategies of contagious magic as described by Sir James George Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1922). Like Smith, Robleto's work explores the inherent value of artifacts as carriers. His process begins with a program of seemingly random ingredients; objects are inter-fused into new forms—focused manifestations of an imagined moment in time. Materials remain linked to their origins and maintain a connection with their source as a line of power. Compounds of certain materials produce items of control, while the final product pulls together strands of time and joins them into a knot of new verbal and visual associations.

The homunculi and golems of legend were formed by similar ritualistic techniques, creating life from inanimate objects by combining them in a pseudoscientific pastiche of essence and allegory. These items become props for a narrative that is self-generated by its components, such as in *A Defeated Soldier Wishes To Walk His Daughter Down The Wedding Aisle*. The immediate impression is of a pair of boots that shuffle from a discarded oilcan down a matrimonial lane of white rice. The boots and cast legs inside are made from melted vinyl records—*Soldier Boy* and *The End Of The World*. The substance of the amputated legs imbues the soldier's walk down the aisle with plain-

tive regret for a life spent involved in constant warfare instead of beauty and love. The oilcan contains a homemade tincture that includes gun oil, rose oil, bacteria grown on records of prison songs, medicinal herbs, ballistic gelatin and dirt from various battlefields. The can acts as a talisman, its placement a farewell gesture to the world. The mixture is suggestive of a philter of both empowerment and ensnarement that must be thrown away to enable the warrior to escape, kicking war like a drug habit.

On a tack unrelated to violence, London-based Yinka Shonibare brings forth an entirely different aesthetic in his recreations of the Dutch Colonial era and American space exploration. In *Space Walk*, brightly clothed astronauts orbit around a capsule. Their space suits, reminiscent of MTV's original logo, are silkscreened with multicolored patterns and images of prominent Black cultural figures. The piece portrays how the information fields we cloak ourselves in communicate our cultural identities, as well as serve an environmental need. Overall, the work functions as a study of contrast—between art and technology—and how they can possibly operate together. Like Smith and Robleto, Shonibare uses icons of the past as a means of deciphering where we stand today.

British artist Jeremy Deller's Turner Prize-winning *Memory Bucket*, produced during his residency at Artpace San Antonio, is a collection of oral histories juxtaposed with features of the natural and vernacular landscape of Texas. Deller traveled to Waco—to the site of the Branch Davidian compound—and talked to residents about their recollections of the infamous 1993 government siege. These scenes are balanced with footage from Crawford and one historian's perspective on the Alamo. Flurries of bats leaving their cave are interspersed throughout the video—an expression of consciousness just below the surface of the visible world.

Deller's piece is a telling commentary on collective memory: How information is relayed determines whether history deems one a nut or a hero. In the age of mass media, it is possible to play back and analyze our history in an instant. This can lead to confusion and chaos as history becomes revisionist and experimental, but it can also lead to new perceptions as the collective memory is rearranged for creative effect.

Jeremy Deller, *Memory Bucket*, 2003
Video stills
00:21:45 DVD with sound

The installation has the feeling of a historical museum display in its reverential treatment of seemingly ancestral objects and images. By idealizing the tools of war—by turning what could be a mausoleum into a showroom—Smith shows how the concept of battle can be sold as a noble and worthy pursuit. This recalls the romance of *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and the stories of Ambrose Bierce, when young men were seduced by the