

EXPERIENCE OFF THE WALL: GRADUATE EXHIBITION @ AIB MFA GALLERY
DIG BOSTON

Posted on July 9, 2012 by CHRISTINA LACOSTE Email



Last Saturday The AIB MFA gallery at 700 Beacon Street held their annual Graduate Exhibition for AIB and MFA graduates. The show was impressive to say the least. I was able to chat with three of the artists who I felt presented the best work: **Jill Brody**, **Jeff Brown** and **Liselott Johnsson**.



A first look at Jill Body's photographs can be slightly disorienting. The combination of old fashioned characters with modern day objects and architecture create an ambiguous setting of time.

This led to my immediate assumptions that Jill's art was deploying a dialogue between values and concepts of postmodern society in relation to a more traditional and simple way of living. I wasn't wrong, but there is so much more. Turns out the photographs weren't staged, but actually of real people in the West! Jill Brody was kind enough to provide insight into the origin of her work.



There are over 49,000 Hutterites living in small colonies in the rural west. This is actually from one colony. She's been photographing them for four years. It is definitely a subculture, similar to the Amish but they live in secluded colonies, and want to insure their seclusion."

"They are Anabaptists, which means they believe in adult baptism, which means that other Christians feel that the children and young people are living in sin. And they are also pacifists, which means that they have also been persecuted by governments when there is war. They've been chased all over the world, so even though they've found a congenial place in this country, they are still concerned about being rejected. So they still discourage strangers."

As a relatively small community that seems to have been put through the ringer, their long-term survival as a culture is fascinating, especially with the new technologies that are so invasive.

“They started in Bavaria in 1540, moved whenever they were persecuted and ended up in Russia for about 80 years, before coming to North America in 1874. They still practice a very simple kind of Christianity that includes having no iconography in their chapels.”

“They are rooted in the New Testament and their own history, which includes retelling the stories of their persecution as well as the history of how they began and how they continue their traditions.”

Between their traditional dress and overall cultural conduct, the Hutterites seem to be an unlikely group to find in modern day America. As we know, our country struggles with trying to be tolerant of a range of personal values and politics, in addition to the effects of new technology on everyday conduct.

“I’m not sure how long they’ve dressed the way they do. Certainly since they’ve been in this country, and probably from when they were still in Eastern Europe, since their clothes are similar to ones you find in that region of the world. They live communally and don’t have personal possessions. So an outlet of creativity is expressed in the fabrics of their clothes. But they are deeply community orientated. They don’t believe in the idea of a personal god, but that God resides in the community.”

“They make their own clothes. Although you can see that these colors are different, the dresses and aprons are all cut from the same patterns. There are some small individual differences but they are small. There’s nothing geared toward somebody’s ego. And what I just want to say about them is that all the things that we talk about in our culture with being economical and living in a market economy is purposefully avoided. They are so congenial with each other, which is so different from us, and that fascinates me because they depend on each other to get things done.”

The contrast of the communal Hutterite lifestyle with today’s hyper capitalistic standard poses questions concerning human nature, and balance within society.

“They asked me if I wanted to become a Hutterite and when I said ‘no’ they were relieved. Because they don’t want converts. They don’t want to have to nurse someone through that process. It’s a very intensive process to live this very communal life with no personal possessions and no value placed on economic advantage.”



Because of their tumultuous history and countercultural practices, the Hutterites prefer to remain reclusive from major media attention. Fear of further tyranny and their chosen passivism raise concerns about their level of vulnerability.

“I had been working out West for 20 years before I ever heard of them. They value their seclusion. They do understand that they have some ways of living that we could understand and that could help our wider culture for better ways of living. They kind of get that I’m interested in that and that they have something to offer. They don’t want me to put anything on the Internet. I can’t keep a blog with them on it. But they understand that in this world that’s the form that it will eventually take. I’m making books for them and they know that the world will receive the book in other formats as well.”

“I made the promise that I wouldn’t put information on the internet. But even if this work makes it onto the internet and millions of people may see it, those people may never be interested in meeting the Hutterites or ever stepping foot in a Hutterite colony, even if they talk about or blog about them.”

“Despite demands that they be left alone, the Hutterites also see what they have to offer the larger population: the benefits of living as a communal unit and the values of simple living. But they would use it as a way of looking back at our culture: how do we function in our society as a whole. For instance, there are 150 people in their colony and if something happens to one of them, they all pitch in. I bet that if something happens to you in your apartment building, then you have to deal with it on your own. And somebody asked me when do people help each other here? I said in a snowstorm. That’s when everybody pitches in and recognizes and helps each other.”

“And helping each other out is part of the dialogue I was hoping to open with this project. I think social media has the potential to do that. It’s not the same as a colony of people living together, but it’s something, and it doesn’t have to be based on an economic model, doesn’t have to be based on increased growth. Thinking about the way that the Hutterites live might give us ideas about how to live can make our own communities better.”

Jeff Brown’s work seems to be a great next step out of Jill’s, as it continues to question post modern (and according to him, the move into post human) society. His work is freakish. It seems like you’re caught in a surreal nightmare where you are haunted by a digital rendering of your own face. Yikes.

“That actually started from doing a series of pencil and paper sketches of self-portraits. So I had a project to do for a month of daily self-portrait sketches. After about three weeks I was like well what really has to happen now is a digital self-portrait so I started that. It took a while.”



Jeff’s work is one of the first displays featured as you enter the exhibit. A center screen depicts Jeff in a sort of control room surrounded by his digital heads that he feeds in a clockwise circle. On the right another screen depicts Jeff in a bright field running around a digital Easter Island version of his head in amazement.



“The Easter Island statue of my head plays with the idea of making ourselves monumental through virtual means. And the one to the far left is quite different. You can see that I’m still undecided about the whole thing.”



The final screen shows Jeff in an outdoor stormy setting dragging a ball and chain. The ball is his digital head that rises up from the ground to stare menacingly at Jeff. Like I said, freakish.

“This is all about investigating what the digital self is in modern day society. It’s about real versus virtual and the idea of humans moving through postmodern to post humans. If you’re on Facebook you’ve taken the leap. It’s extending ourselves through the virtual world.”

Set up below the two screens was the final piece in Jeff’s project. It is a table with carvings of his face through which multiple images move. I suggest that he use it as a coffee table later and Patton the idea. I think personalized face coffee tables would be a big hit at Pier 1 ... but that’s just me.

“That is the most recent piece that is experimental in putting my physical self into the digital world as a three model then re-realizing it out of this virtual computer controlled machine. So I craved the model then used plastic over that so it looks 3D. So in this way I’m putting virtual back into the real world.”

Liselott Johnsson on the other hand deals with the physical world of paintings, more specifically their place in society in terms of semiotics. After the recent rise of digital art, painting has become a more peripheral art form.

“This painting is about the history of painting and abstraction and maybe a painting today. And it’s a heap of paintings next to a parking spot as you can see over there. I think there is some relationship made with this parking spot and the paintings lying there that can ultimately be put back. Like a car they have the ability of leaving. Typically it has to come to a stop but there will be another future for painting.”



“All of these paintings reference specific painting, a sports team or a flag or a signal. It explores how patterns and images can move from one domain to another and to the next. So fashion influences painting, painting influences signals and they go back and forth.”

“And depending on where you find this heap it can have different meanings. If you place it in a stadium it could mean sports teams. And if you put in a mall it could mean fashion as if it’s a brand.”

“And each person could read it differently. A sports fanatic would read it as sport logos or a person interested in fashion may see it as chic. It is sort of an arranged chaos. I am sort of taking control of what is random. Every time I set it up at a show it is different. I am working on another piece that is three times as large”

Those are just three of the amazing artists featured in the MFA visual Graduate exhibition. The eclectic mix of MFA and AIB residents really brought their best work to the table, ranging from video art to sculpture. Although there was no specific tying theme to the work, each series effectively raises questions to better understand everyday discourse whether it is political social or personal.

EXHIBITION ENDED JUNE 30th