

"A HORSE WALKS INTO A BAR" AND OTHER CURIOUS NOTIONS AT HAMPDEN GALLERY

Thursday, March 19th, 2020 // Artscope Online, Current Exhibits, Visual Arts



Matthew Garrison, "Rock After Excalibur," 1997.

by Hannah Carrigan

D. Dominick Lombardi's curation of what is unmistakable. In a fine arts show at UMassAmherst's Hampden Gallery featuring works by 26 artists, and with a theme as broad as humor, cohesiveness is not a given. And yet, while "A Horse Walks into a Bar" contains a myriad of mediums and styles, its parts come together to form a wonderfully silly, provocative and subtly nostalgic whole.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of "A Horse Walks Into A Bar" is the innovative and unique use of materials and methods to achieve a sense of playfulness and absurdity. Among the most intriguing of these is Lucy White's Band-Aid prints, "Sex Pistols," 2005, "Peace Panty," 2006, and "I Hate You Brief XL," 2006. In her signature minimalist style, with an edge of art-poking-fun-at-art, White offers viewers an easy avenue into weighty issues like gender inequality and gun violence.

Other exciting uses of materials include Sally Curcio's "Hypochondriac (Self Portrait)," 2014, a whimsical reclamation of and self-lambastment for a not uncommon anxiety disorder and clever repurposing of the classic board game "Operation," and Amy Johnquest's found photo cabinet cards from the 1800s, which she revives and makes new again using casein and acrylic to turn once prized (then lost) relics into celebratory and somewhat cosmic pieces which are both silly and sentimental.

Rick Krieger's "Shut the fuck up Donny!" 2017, is an image of a screen-captured still from the classic film, "The Big Lebowski." Unique in its own right, as a photograph of a screen, Krieger infuses the scene with hilarity by superimposing the head of a molded clay figure over Jeff Bridges' character, "The Dude." With big pointed ears and buck-toothed grin, Krieger's creature is impossible not to smile at the sight of.

Almost all of the pieces in "A Horse Walks Into A Bar" somehow draw on memory and/or history to provoke thought and curiosity about self, society and modern-day issues. Curcio's "Hypochondriac (Self Portrait)," 2014, Rina Goldfield's uncanny "Cookie Monster," Bill Gusky's abstract "Galileo from the Great Americans Series" 2011, and Cynthia Consentino's clay stools, "Little Girls," 2020, for example, each contain imagery which reminds the viewer of childhood games, characters, cartoons or fairy tales, respectively. Even without a critical eye it is easy for viewers to be drawn into these pieces — one feels as if they are both familiar and contemporary; amusing and unsettling.

Two additional pieces that reference well-known media to make new statements are James Hilger's "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet" and Matthew Garrison's "Rock After Excalibur," 1997. Hilger's piece is a New York Times-style cartoon featuring a wide-eyed man pointing out the airplane window, where a green Pokémon appears to be sitting on the wing of the plane. In his other hand is a smartphone. The caption reads: "There's ... a ... Pokémon ... out on the wing!" An obvious reference to a "Twilight Zone" episode, Hilger's cartoon is a timely and punny warning of the mind-bending and addictive nature of virtual reality.

In "Rock After Excalibur," 1997, Garrison also calls upon a cultural motif, yet his hefty sculpture (a large rock covered in vibrant cocktail swords) craftily inverts and deconstructs the well-known narrative of the single sword in the stone, waiting for a hero to pull it out. With connotations of hope and magic, Garrison's piece reminds us of collective humanity and offers itself our imagination.

"A Horse Walks into A Bar" is a dynamic show of how humor can handle the weight of even the most solemn of issues and spaces, and indeed transform them into something new and bright. Robert Zott's set of 12 black and white photographs are one of the punchiest and most delightful displays of this dark humor. His photographs center single-name tombstones with words such as "Swim" "See" "Dick" and "Drown," which read collectively as a parody of the Dick and Jane book series. Having begun his larger project, of returning tombstone names to language, 25 years ago, Zott's work is exciting, poetic, playful and macabre; a perfect combination of many of the show's less obvious themes.

Lombardi's curation comes at a time when most of us are in dire need of a bit of levity. While humor comes in many forms and is generally quite a personal thing, there is something refreshing about an exhibition where humor is the central element. Standing in front of her prints, Lucy White explained that using humor in art might be one of the most radical things you could do these days — you run the risk of sending the wrong message and offending someone, closing off and creating division rather than opening space for inquiry and creativity. But the works in "A Horse Walks Into A Bar" are less controversial than they are curious, provoking thought and, for those inclined, a grin.

("A Horse Walks Into A Bar" opened on March 7 before being officially closed after the beginning of spring break on March 16 as part of a campus-wide shutdown in hope of containing the COVID-19 virus at the Hampden Gallery at the Fine Arts Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. We encourage you to explore more works by the artists mentioned in this story through links at the end of the [exhibition website](#).)