

The Des Lee Gallery presents *Past Perfect, Present Tense*, an exhibition of art works by the twelve students enrolled in the eponymous course offered in Fall of 2009 at Washington University in St. Louis, taught by Lauren F. Adams.

The interdisciplinary course "Past Perfect, Present Tense" investigates the use of historical research as a strategy within contemporary artistic practice. The structure of the course follows the trajectory of delving into one archival topic, or set of topics, and making a series of works in that arena. Henry L. and Natalie E. Freund Visiting Artist Allison Smith interacted with the class over several sessions, including student involvement in a collaborative sewing bee and a provisional photo studio to assist in the production of Smith's work. This mode of research and production is inspired by the art works Smith will be producing for her exhibition *Needle Work* at the Mildred Lane Kemper Museum in the spring of 2010.

This course invited students to select a research topic and create a variety of works using various media strategies, culminating in final projects resulting from semester-long explorations. Participants in the course include a range of BFA and MFA painters, performance artists, sculptors and photographers. The semester's thematic sections were broken into "The Visible Collection," "Making Meaning," and "Performativity and Process." Shadowing Smith's studio practice has allowed the students to see up close and firsthand the opportunities and challenges of this working method. The exhibition *Past Perfect, Present Tense* introduces into the gallery final works that address vital theory and artistic models present in the contemporary art world, as well as providing a look at how current culture reflects and absorbs historical issues.

Issues of reliability and objective authority are present in the work *Measure of Man* by **John Early**. Collecting data from the 1904 Olympic Games, held in St. Louis with the conjunction of the World's Fair, Early has re-presented Olympic challenge results as dry spoken word in two opposing speakers. Separated by a sculptural pile of wooden hurdles, one speaker broadcasts a reading of the quantitative results of the typical Olympic events like long jump and relay racing. The other broadcast is the same type of list, but from a different event unique to the St. Louis Olympics. Anthropology Days, a 'scientific experiment' where a variety of men from indigenous populations, including Pygmies, Filipinos, Patagonians and various American Indian tribes, competed so that Olympic spectators and anthropologists could see how they compared to the white man. Early, struggling to surmount the very contemporary question of how to respond ethically and aesthetically to this sordid aspect of American (and St. Louis) history, confronts us with an obstacle.

Zak Marmalefsky also presents us with a unique perspective contrived from local history. Bloody Island, a 19th century no-mans-land in the Mississippi river between St. Louis and East St. Louis was the site of multiple duels dramatically detailed in archival news accounts. As the artist states, these archives were peppered with "endearingly antiquated syntax prone to exaggeration, fabrication, and sentimentality." Marmalefsky's strategy for *BLOODY ISLAND!* was to create an epic narrative in the form of a 70 foot long inked scroll, along with wall drawings. Responding to the class prompt to copy, re-enact, and recreate, in the mythic mode of these St. Louis denizens, and perhaps in a form of homage to another famous once-local artist, Philip Guston, Marmalefsky states that he "attempted to approximate some of those old accounts' mannerisms and tropes and mostly just amped up the melodrama, affecting the voice of some silly, maudlin hype-man."

Virginia Eckinger is also concerned with contrived myth and its relationship to history, specifically archaeology and Mesozoic marine reptiles. With the nascent question, 'What kind of animals existed in Missouri prehistory?' Eckinger began a search for scientific illustrations, fossils, and texts. Unsatisfied with the thin body of evidence available in archives, what we see in the gallery is the result of the artist longing to fill in gaps and looking to substitute incompletes with fantastic fancies. Adopting the strategy of scientific and museum display cases, Eckinger presents us with an untitled ceramic inventory of fabricated history.

Now back to a history frozen indefinitely, and available in explicit detail for our contemporary experience. **Kathryn Neale** traveled to Pompeii, Italy in September, participating in a trek that millions have made but with a keen eye to investigate, as a painter interested in decorative surfaces, the decay and destruction wrought by the explosive eruption of Mt. Vesuvius almost 2,000 years ago. Positing Pompeii as a "literal time warp," Neale playfully and selectively erases and transposes images of actual frescos, encountering realistic landscape and figures with an eye towards abstraction through sampled surface texture. Her material process in apprehending the fresco tradition is evident in the do-it-yourself studio ethic of making do with plaster and ripped papers and canvas, plus pigments, witnessed in the video component to her installation "*Golden Hour*": *Intonaco* and *House of Mysteries*.

Our next three artists begin with the framework of a personal archive. **Ryan Fabel, Katherine Osborn, and Bridgette Zou** plumb their own intimate pasts in search of awareness and potential revelation.

Ryan Fabel presents perhaps the most democratic vision of nostalgia available to the obsessive collector. With an apparent attitude allowing both 'anything goes' and a rigorous criteria of inclusion, Fabel's installation *Past's Perfect? Present's Tense.*, overwhelms the wall, corner, and floor, adhering not to the modernist grid but to a different perspective on public-cum-private (and back again) display. "It is a catalogue of sorts of time and place," Fabel offers, "and a physical documentation of temporal moments that have passed, leaving only traces in memory and in these collected physical markers." Fabel's catalogue can be understood in some ways by Derrida's explanation of archive fever, in which the collector compulsively invokes "nostalgia for the return of the most archaic place of absolute beginning." For Fabel, this place is no place, the ephemeral handbill or dried maple leaf being as significant as everything but also as an inadequate descriptor of utopic times of the past, present, and future.

Collecting takes on a different meaning in *Birds of a Feather*, by **Bridgette Zou**. Challenged with the task of creating her own touchstones, Zou borrows the collecting phenomena from baseball cards and board games to document personal relationships and secretive stories. According to Zou, whose criteria for defining friendship was "not only the dialogue and time you spent with someone, but the context of what you tell people – the most important intimate secrets or especially times one felt vulnerable and hurt by someone else." Similar to artists like Sophie Calle and Tracy Emin, who weave personal history with questionable triangulated narratives, we are left wondering whether the voice hand-written onto the cards is an authentic representation of fact, or perhaps a more malleable, less tidy, but altogether more engaging form of placing oneself in the world and amongst constellations of people.

How many identities do we construct within our one lifetime? **Katherine Osburn** explores the relationship between handwriting and identity formation through the vocabulary of abstract painting. Early explorations in this past semester had Osburn copying and re-creating handwritten childhood letters, culled from drawings and elementary school assignments. In the video "*I like to live in the country beckus I cood beabl to play out sid mour thin in sid,*" we see the adult artist exploring mark-making in a diaristic manner. Extrapolating from more found letters, in the formal rubric of ephemeral materials like tracing paper and varying sheens of clear and tinted ink washes, *An Elaboration on the Top Left Corner* becomes a clustered meditation on abstraction in language and identity in the making.

There is another artist that I would like to discuss within the notion of formation of identity in youth. **Emily Moorhead** has explored in various works the relationship between mass media and the individual's identity. Delving deeply into the specific media content of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* as a model for many violent television shows, Moorhead has enlisted a group of young adults (including the artist) to read the printed script of the show. Moorhead explains, "The text establishes ideological disputes that are suppressed through reinforcing established norms. The show is teaching us social values and attitudes that we must accept in order to enjoy the program but more importantly, to function in the dominant society." With the title of *Interpellation*, we could take that to mean the process by which you recognize yourself to belong to a particular identity, and how identity interacts with the dominant ideology referenced by the artist. Moorhead's open-ended spoken word recording is somehow perversely mirrored and visually manifested in the appropriated stock photography of a somewhat average-looking middle class American family displayed next to the recording. Whose average? Whose middle class? Through appropriation and re-enactment, Moorhead shows herself to be aware of the impossibility of answers to certain questions.

A vague sense of tension also permeates the work of **Donna Smith** in *Tether*, a sculptural video installation making use of a Victorian-style couch and a performative attitude. In many of Smith's previous works, we see the artist use her body as a pliable form, in this case specific to her research of Victorian corsets and other body modification rituals historically documented throughout the globe. Musing on the relationship between utilitarian domestic forms like 19th century fainting couches and their costumed predecessor, the corset, Smith offers an uncomfortable pose, writhing within and against a very personal critique of the historically troubled feminine form.

We end this adventure with the work of **Alexander Vitti**, whose research topic grew out of a long line of documentation of mental illness and creativity. Vitti's strategy of collage, where forms disrupt and morph alongside and on top of each other, seems an appropriate place to site a reactive meditation. Lifting iconic images from artists such as Henry Darger, Vincent Van Gogh, and Martin Ramirez, what we see is a cloud of impressions, some obvious in their success and some melting into obscurity, like the artists that made them. Conducting his work in tape, Vitti uses a well-known characteristic of many folk and outsider artists who worked with the materials immediately available (like James Castle, who worked in soot and spit, or Darger, who taped together pieces of notebook paper). What results is as ephemeral as the original work that inspired it.