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Total Recall

by Robyn Farrell Roulo

Instruments of Resurrection

Group Exhibition
Roots & Culture

1034 N. Milwaukee , Chicago, IL 60622

February 19, 2011 6:00 PM - 9:00 PM



An artist now plays many roles outside the traditional definition of their vocation. As educators, interpreters, critics and activists they lend their voice to issues of concern, controversy and history, bringing intellectual and generational interests to the forefront of contemporary culture. Roots and Culture's current exhibition, "Instruments of Resurrection", includes work from artists who act in all of these roles, including artist-as-collector.

I'm not referring to the type of collecting featured in the Modern Wing series, or the eclectic collecting habits of Roger Brown or Joseph Cornell. Instead, this is a gathering of collected histories, moments and personal identity. "Instruments of Resurrection", explores this natural human impulse through the conceptual missions of five artists and their distinctive practices.

Zachary Cahill, Theaster Gates, Mathew Paul Jinks, Aspen Mays and Cauleen Smith take on the role of cultural collector tracing the path of historical occurrence, personal experience and distant memory. The interdisciplinary nature of the artists' respective practices and processes makes for a comprehensive examination of the perception and interpretation of history. Under the guidance of curator Elizabeth Chodos, the five artists transform Roots and Culture into a vestibule of time and space. Porcelain speakers, video, choral arrangements, clay figures, personal interviews and photography variously populate the sections of viewing. The artworks collide and collaborate as certain elements relate or contrast to the theme at hand. The convergence of tangible and ephemeral collection enables the exhibition to revive, recount and reveal cultural and historic truths from a contemporary point of view.

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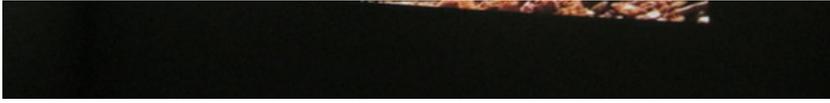
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On view in a side gallery, is *Remote Viewing* (2010), seen above, part of a series of three video works (also on view at [The Kitchen](#) in New York, through March 8th) by filmmaker, screenwriter and visual artist Cauleen Smith. Known for her experimental work on film, Smith examines the relationship between time, culture, race and the female identity.

Focused on the theme of burial and excavation, *Remote Viewing* reenacts the 1959 forced exodus in Sheridan, Arkansas, [where African-Americans were forced to move outside of the city limits due to an official policy of segregation](#). After this departure, the city bulldozed the African-American school and buried any remnants of the educational building. The dramatic force of the bulldozer, emotion of witnesses and burial of the schoolhouse charge a reaction to an event that, when seen on film, doesn't seem so long ago.

Smith nods to Robert Smithson and land art prevalent in the 1970s while adding aspects of her practice. Smith's visual spectacle of displacement is moving, so much so that it has the ability to immobilize the viewer in front of the screen.

What could be seen as the lead work in the exhibition, is interrupted from time to time by the echoes of a choral gathering heard from across the gallery's space. Chanting and hymns emanate from another culturally-charged piece by Theaster Gates, setting the soundtrack for the entire exhibition. Whether the choice to overlap the audio for the two works was a deliberate decision to encourage the viewer to move through the exhibition is not clear. In some ways Gates' magnified voices intensify the emotion of

Smith's visual treatises, but at the same time they draw attention away from Smith.



If you were to follow the voices, you will find yourself at the centerpiece of the exhibition, *Dave: A Legendary Black Clay Superhero*, 2010, seen directly above. The work by Theaster Gates weaves a succinct narrative of history, race and American decorative arts. Similar to Smith, Gates reflects on a period of American history and its effect on African-American culture, but instead of focusing on a specific event, the artist reinterprets the legacy of Dave Drake. Also known as Dave the Potter, he was a South Carolinian enslaved man whose poems grace many of his ceramics from the early American era.

This work is an extension of a larger exhibition mounted last year at the [Milwaukee Art Museum](#), and similar to the edifying impact of that exhibition, this multi-media installation acts as both memorial and portal to this often overlooked subject in history. The video, shown lying on the gallery's floor, depicts the choir as they sing. The camera pans through the crowd of singers, Gates varies the focus from face to face, which seems to give a view into the soul of each singer as they are deeply engaged in their song. Flanked by an intricately engineered sound system, the porcelain speakers, the combination of effects creates a larger discourse surrounding slavery and its relationship with the American craft

movement. Gates explores the legacy of Dave, reviving material and his spirit that acts the lightning rod for collaboration with the surrounding works in the exhibition.



If Theaster Gates uses a collective of vision and sound as a vehicle to elevate the importance of the past, Zachary Cahill takes his opportunity to critique the present. Directly across from *Dave: A Legendary Black Clay Superhero* is Cahill's *Gift Shop of the Once and Future Revolution*, 2010, (installation above and detail seen below), a satirical and wry look at politics, pop culture and Chicago.





Channeling the likes of William Hogarth and **William Gropper**, Cahill's feigned gift shop is a sculptural comic strip, jeering at everything from the Chicago Bears to Rod Blagojevich to Karl Marx reading President Obama's memoirs. Like others in the exhibition, the work is part of a larger project titled *USSA 20112*, a darkly whimsical interpretation of figures and events that many of us have strong opinions on.

Exit through Cahill's gift shop to the work of Aspen Mays and Mathew Paul Jinks. This part of the exhibition fulfills the two-dimensional option, with the two artists experimenting with the expressive and scientific nature of photography. Both artists touch on themes seen throughout their oeuvre, which are also consistent with the thesis of the exhibition.

Direct from her stay aboard in Chile, May's *Punched Out Stars* (2010) is an astronomical grid constructed from a forgotten collection of discarded 35mm black-and-white slides of star fields. No stranger to photographic documentation, Mays discovered the archive at the University of Chile and embarked on the systematic exercise, deconstructing and re-creating the scientific order of celestial bodies. By punching out stars with a hole punch and exposing the formations, she conveys a new identity and order of cosmic space.

Mathew Paul Jinks pursues a contrasting approach in his photographic series, *Markers Unfolding* (2010/2011) from the *Trauma Narratives* series, seen below. Known for his performance and exploration with heritage, ritual and identity, the artist employs a different method for his view of resurrection. Presenting a visual reaction to distressed accounts of pain and suffering, Jinks departs from the moving image, for a more traditional, static representation. Jinks expresses the visceral nature of trauma, memory and personal identity with three black and white photographs depicting crumpled sheets of brass. Warped and twisted, Jinks conceptually layers the mangled forms by providing transcripts of his interviews in print, together creating the conceptual and physical account of memory. Jinks approaches incredible accounts with this piece, the narrative here is about **the 1984 anti-Sikh violence in India**, but he does so at arm's length. The meticulous details and stark aesthetic provide an intensely personal view coupled with an outsider's perspective.



The exhibition mounts to a concrete idea, unbroken by the dissimilar nature of the five works on view. Despite the range of collected memory and material, Chodos creates a balanced symbiosis between the ambition of the exhibition and the process of each artist. It is this varying level of thought and execution that prompted my curiosity at the exhibition's opening last month. I found myself wondering which came first, the concept or the work? Was there a common thread that links each work or was the curator inspired by the process and explorative nature of these artists?

It turns out I am not the only one to asked this question. Chodos explained that the process was very organic and intuitive, in the sense she had thought about the concept for some time, but things became more apparent once she realized that there was an affinity between the artists, their interests and the ways they each create a work of art. Chodos said that, "Once it crystallized that each of these artists were mining narratives and histories in relatable ways, the show came together."

Each work conveys a social critique or complex narrative probing the past while working in the present. The exhibition is a vehicle for serious reflection, with a keen focus from each artist, who in turn contributed a voice that each felt should be heard. The title of this exhibition is just that, a case study of artists using these "instruments" for resurrection.

-Robyn Farrell Roulo, ArtSlant Staff Writer

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