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ART REVIEW: "State of the City 2010"

By Rebecca Rafferty on August 11, 2010

Rochester Contemporary's annual "State of the City" exhibit is always a thoughtful and thought-provoking examination of the local and regional urban environment, as well as a call for public focus on the realities and meanings of its state and shift. In this year's exhibit, lasting fine art meets time-based grass-roots projects and public participation in an exploration of the definition of a city, which exists amorphously in its people, spaces, and history. The LAB Space hosts a smart pairing for the "State of the City" exhibit is Vicki Hartman's "Common," ceramic meditations on the individual and the community, home, and questions about uniqueness and commonality expressed through silhouettes of figures and houses.

Amy Casey's mostly acrylic on paper work speaks to the anxious age we're living in, and is inspired by a recurring dream about the end of the world, from which she wakes "in a panic and with a heavy sense of inevitability," she says in her artist statement. She depicts unsettling, terrain-less vacuums of white space populated only by dwellings and industrial buildings stacked or strung together on lines.

"Twist" has roadways, a blue bridge, houses, power lines, and chain-link fence rollercoaster off the page. Coupled with this volatile, tornado-like energy, Casey's intricate illustrative style makes the perfect visual metaphor for ever-shifting urban environments and our nervousness about the state and future of the world. The work explores "ideas of anxiety and vulnerability, community, and the illusions of safety," she says. In "Break Wall," ladders and wood planks support a partial brick wall of painstaking detail - each brick is about the size of a tiny ant, and there are thousands of them. Houses on ropes swing heavily toward the wall like wrecking balls, threatening with the force of a tidal wave.

But in the wake of destructive forces, and in the face of what we cannot control, Casey says she is "fascinated by the resilience of life. Every disaster is followed by rebirth, where we try to cobble together a Plan B out of what remains." These works are the falling apart, return-to-chaos segment of the cycle.

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One of the intricate paintings by Amy Casey on display at the "State of the City 2010" exhibit at Rochester Contemporary. PHOTO PROVIDED



A still from the documentary by the Spectres of Liberty on their project entitled "Ghost of the Liberty Street Church." View this video and more work by the Spectres at Rochester Contemporary. PHOTO PROVIDED



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Historic and contemporary social themes surrounding Abolitionism and concepts of freedom today are tackled by art collective Spectres of Liberty, and discussed through multimedia, including video and sound installations, projections, prints, and zoetropes. Spectres Dara Greenwald, Josh MacPhee, and Olivia Robinson, in collaboration with Art School in the Art School (a project by Joanna Spitzner), made their own versions of these early cinematic devices by hooking up old bike frames to a moving-picture mechanism composed of a multi-walled cylinder with slits in the sides and changing images on the inner walls, so that the act of pedaling powers the movie. The group was inspired by zoetropes and bicycles because both inventions were contemporary to the Abolitionist movement and symbolically linked, as the "moving picture" enables us to envision the world differently, and the bike represented freedom, particularly to women. The zoetropes reveal two animations: a man raising and lowering a megaphone, and a chain link breaking and rejoining repeatedly. Layers of connections and associations arise as the viewer powers the art. That the chains reconnect, and that the man must repeatedly shout his message, signify that revolutions are cyclical, that there are always new chains to break through.



A wall of letterpress prints by The Spectres of Liberty at Rochester Contemporary. PHOTO PROVIDED

The zoetropes were built during workshops the group held recently in Syracuse, where they also ran a print shop, radio station, and discussions that culminated in a one-night event, a "dialogue about Syracuse's abolition past as it relates to contemporary social conditions in the city," per the artist statement. The Spectres were inspired by anti-slavery history of Syracuse, called the "Great Central Depot" as residents helped thousands of people escape slavery. Jermain Loguen, a local reverend and station master in the Underground Railroad, called Syracuse "Open City" "because it provided sanctuary for freedom-seekers," according to the group. He served as inspiration for many of the discussions, and is quoted, along with contemporary participants in the discussion, in the letterpress prints present on the gallery's walls. One Loguen quote, "I don't respect this law/I won't fear it/I won't obey it," serves as a reminder to us of our responsibility to use our own moral compasses and take active and thoughtful part in the shape of our government.

In the round room is a viewing station for "Ghost of the Liberty Street Church," a short and well made documentary about the Spectre's May 2008 project on the site of the Liberty Street Presbyterian Church in Troy, New York, where for one night only, the former meeting ground for organizers of the Underground Railroad haunted the space, which is now a parking lot. The group constructed a full-scale inflatable model of the church, and "engaged community members to think more deeply about the site, its history and relevancy today," per the provided statement.

The first reverend of the church was Henry Highland Garnet, internationally known for his "militant orations and publications calling on people to actively participate in the fight to end slavery." Viewers were invited to enter that space and read projected words circling out of the mouth of a Garnet projection, as from across time he called them to fight complacency, practice thoughtful morality, to use their individual judgments about the state of things. The group's impermanent art seeks to make crucial concepts and lessons from history permanent in the viewer's mind, memory, and conscience. As I was exiting the viewing space, another projection high on the wall caught my attention as it shifted to spell out "We know we are right."

British artist Trevor Flynn, who operates a business that encourages the act of drawing to work out problems in virtually any field of study or industry, hosted a drawing workshop on June 26 at the Memorial Art Gallery, which "proposed drawing, sketching, and responding to the ideas of others as important tools in reconsidering the 9'x20' parking spaces that we encounter every day." This was followed up by a "Public Participatory Drawing Mob," which took place before and during the opening reception at Rochester Contemporary on Friday, and the product of which can be viewed on the brown paper lining one of the gallery's walls. Ideas and tangents for the parking spaces include a reflecting pool, a public performance platform, and...kittens. PARK(ing) Day will take place this

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year on September 17 10 a.m.-6 p.m., when parking spaces throughout the city will be converted into temporary parks. For more information on that and an upcoming bicycle tour of street art, visit rochestercontemporary.org.

"State of the City 2010"

By Trevor Flynn, Amy Casey, Spectres of Liberty (with Vicki Hartman in the LAB Space)

Through September 19

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