

MICA: Then and Now

Ethan Cohen Beacon, New York

By DeShawn Dumas

Mining the artistic production of the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), which is the oldest continuously operating degree-granting college of art in the US, *MICA: Then and Now*, focusses on the legacy of MICA's president Fred Lazarus IV from 1978-2014.

The exhibition, curated by Barry Nemett, contrasts the present artistic production of former MICA students' with their respective undergraduate efforts. The opening piece in the show, Jeff Koon's framed silkscreen *Monkey Train* (2007) flaunts a fluorescent yellow pigmented ground, overlaid with Technicolor photos of tree branch perched birds, the metallic stencil outline of a speeding locomotive is contrasted by the static depiction of a horse and carriage. Superimposed over this is an inflatable, hyper-happy, plastic monkey head. Looking at Koon's undergraduate etching *Untitled* (1974), it seems he has always had an interest in collapsing space and confounding subjectivity. *Untitled* depicts a blue sky in its background, in the middle ground a brick wall with a large hole through it. In the foreground, five dog-like shapes rip flesh colored chunks from a geometric humanoid figure.

Directly across from this work, Stuart Abarbanel's *Still Life with Book* (1975) looks like an attempt to reproduce a Giorgio Morandi using watercolor. Although Abarbanel's planar study of volume and local color is not totally devoid of charm, it lacks the concreteness of Morandi's oil paintings and the abstract quality of his watercolors. Abarbanel shows his mastery of objecthood and motion in *Happy, Zippy* (2009), a 35 x 50 inch, painted wood totem-like wall work that suggests a dialogue with Elizabeth Murray's wall abstractions and the cartoony figuration of *Red Grooms*.

Donald Baechler's *Yellow Rose*, (2009), engages with the heroic scale of Abstract expressionist and the degraded allure of graffiti art. A gigantic drop cloth covered with provisional paint blobs and splatters: red over green over orange over yellow over red. This harsh kaleidoscopic ground settles into a smoky taupe, punctuated by flashes of receding color. Baechler's long stemmed *Yellow Rose* blooms to the top of the canvas, while the stem encroaches on the bottom. Even in the 1980s, in Manhattan's downtown arts scene,

Baechler appreciated the economy of the graphic line. Attesting to this is *Untitled* (1983), a 9 x 6 inch ink drawing. Baechler's brand of humor is particular apparent in a Douglas Huebler-like postcard series from 1976. Having then recently graduated from MICA, Baechler addressed four blank postcards to Barry Nemett, his former painting instructor. The back of each card features simple, if not crass, black line drawings, detailing Baechler's post graduate reality as a bartender, earning a dollar an hour, eating breakfast at 3am and getting home at 5am every night.

Two recent MICA undergraduates, Brock Enright, class of 1998, and Shinique Smith, class of 2003, present some noteworthy sculpture. In *Lemon and Razorblades*, (2013), Enright conflates time based performance with a process driven installation. The empirical products of his labor are two small but infinitely brutal wall sculptures. Enright brashly installed the works by nailing two fresh lemons to the wall. Then he feverishly inscribed the lemons with store-bought razor blades. The result is that dozens of rusty razor blades protrude from two greenish brown lemon peels, dehydrated and nailed to a wall striated, rusty red, by citric acid. Shinique Smith's *Bale Variant No. 0020* (Christmas,



Joyce J. Scott *Yaller Girl*, 2006. Beadwork, wood, mixed media, 25 x 10 x 9 inches. Courtesy: Ethan Cohen Fine Art, New York.

2011), stands over 6 feet tall and measures 30 inches on all four sides. Her obelisk is erected from piles of thrift store clothing, including but not limited to, stuffed animals, floral aprons and pink stenciled T-shirts. This pile of seemingly ephemeral textiles is bound together by intervals of ribbon; as a soft sculpture with dramatic shifts in color and internal composition the work takes on the disgruntled effect of a painting by Per Kirkeby. Like her two-dimensional counterparts, Smith's sculpture deals in timeless poetics, her chosen medium is arguably the oldest form of human adornment – clothing. The work is a geometric tomb of discarded human "necessities," a monument that speaks to a distinctly American conception of disposability.

Libyan born artist Fawad Khan, class of 2001, presents three well-crafted gouache works on paper. These ink works present the paper's white ground as a non-threatening void. Khan uses this "utopian" space to choreograph phantasmagorical catastrophes and scenes of annihilation. Muted by peaceful pastel hues, trucks gracefully spiral through cyclones of smoke and splintered wood while buses explode into mountains of tangled metal. In the end, Khan presents depictions of distant realities that are like cotton-candy on a desensitized tongue.

Nearby, two portraits by Frank Hyder are far more forceful. His 1980 self-portrait appears compulsively carved; capturing Hyder's uncanny physical resemblance to Van Gogh. The 2013 acrylic portrait is rendered on an oblong, undulating, 70 x 72 inch piece of carved wood. Due to the shape and texture of Hyder's support, the solemn male face resembles a wooden mask partially cloaked by an unseen hood. This formidable portrait is done in a chromatic ombre of Prussian blue, Scarlet red and blazing orange.

The exhibition continues with an enigmatic drawing on paper by Morris Louis, #D247, 1949- (1953). Surprisingly, the work is nothing like his famous poured pieces, which makes this treat all the more special. On the other hand, another legendary MICA alumni, Joyce J. Scott, serves-up artistic provocation as food for thought. Scott's small sculpture, *From the Day After Rape Series: Gatherer of Wood* (2009), articulates the semi-abstracted anatomy of a reclining female figure. The legs of this figure are constructed from regal-looking smoking pipes. A 13 inch piece of drift wood describes an arched torso, adorned with a blouse of weaved seed beads. The phallus-like, seven-inch piece of driftwood provides a vivid appendage to the figures diaphragm. Scott's anthropomorphic work is equal parts wit, horror and history; referencing both the Native-American pipe-smoking tradition and the Neolithic seed bead legacy of Egypt. By invoking such complex materials, Scott is able to weave an infinitely subjective narrative that questions: truth, value and



Donald Baechler (undated). Courtesy: Ethan Cohen Fine Art, New York.

use. For instance, while the Native American pipe smoking tradition would eventually be appropriated by Europeans for leisure, the exchange-value of seed beads would be exploited for asymmetrical economic gain as a currency to purchase everything from Ivory to human beings.

On the whole, these artists show aptitude for integrating individual content within somewhat banal forms. For example, Tony Shore's *Beatdown* (2008) depicts five Caucasian males, one is a victim pinned to the ground by one of the four perpetrators. The other three aggressors stand over the defenseless youth; two of them wait in anticipation as the third positions a large trash can over his head. This fierce depiction of shadowy street violence has gravitas, precisely, because Shore paints the scene on black velvet instead of traditional canvas. While this particular surface references kitsch paraphernalia, counter-intuitively it is the black velvet that gives Shore's ominous scene a palpable weight. Not completely dissimilar to a Barnett Newman zip, the dark velvet spaces in Shore's work rest below the painted areas, therefore, the shadows are free of paint. This absence imbues Shore's shadows with an uncanny presence and incites figurative and literal fear of blackness. As a rectilinear object, the work functions like a black hole continually threatening the reality of the white wall.

As a metaphorical image, *Beatdown* presents civilization as organized violence, take it as a paradox or a revelation. Shore's *At the Benches* (1992), oil on paper is of a similar grouping to his 2008 work. Yet, this earlier work is done in a more cartoony, pinkish style. It depicts six Caucasian males seated on stadium bleachers, in two rows of three, and in the background a blue sky is covered by the lattice pattern of a steel fence. In the front row of the bleachers, three muscular boys make profane gesticulations at an unseen spectator. In the second row a noticeably smaller boy appears to be the outsider; sandwiched between two larger figures who laugh and point at him. A cliché, for sure, as true then as it is now. **M**