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ART REVIEW

Show Gives Art History New Meaning



George Ruhe/Enelusion

Works by 16 mostly young, contemporary artists are included in the exhibition "Don't Know Much About History" at Artspace in New Haven.

By BEN GENOCCHIO
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Once more, Artspace, a plucky alternative to traditional galleries and museums, presents us with what seems like a perversely irreverent exhibition. The show, "Don't Know Much About History," pokes gentle fun at the American public's lack of general historical knowledge, aiming to set things right, sort of.

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Apparently, the 16 mostly young, contemporary artists included in the exhibition do know about history.

Their works invite us to look, think and learn about the past and the ways it can teach us to live responsibly in the present.

Those ignorant of history may be more than a touch mystified by the displays, so the thoughtful catalog written by the exhibition curator, Denise Markonish, is probably a good place for viewers to start. The artworks can be divided into categories, she explains: those that look at the relationship of art to history; that link historical events in various ways to the present; or that chart the way artworks reflect on time passing.

The artists examining the relationship of art to history include Charles Browning, Titus Kaphar, Mary Dwyer and Lalla A. Essaydi. Mr. Browning and Mr. Kaphar quote from and reconfigure historical paintings by European and American artists to comment on the marginalization of people of African descent. Similarly, Ms. Essaydi looks at the ways in which Orientalism in art has affected the portrayal of non-Western people. Her paintings concoct pastiches of imagery of the exotic, erotic Far East from art history, a common Orientalist trope.

More literally, Ms. Dwyer examines artwork as a means of documenting the lives of famous people, sharing details otherwise unknown or lost. Here she focuses on Paul Revere, with a series of delicate portrait paintings that trace his life from his early career as a silversmith to his fabled midnight ride of 1775, announcing the start of the Revolutionary War.

Those artists examining the connection between historical events and the present include Joe Zane, Colleen Coleman, Johnny Carrera, Andrea Robbins and Max Becher. Ms. Coleman has gathered books written by people affected by the African diaspora, a chair and a chalkboard; visitors can read through the books, then comment on them.

Questions of history, memory and power intermingle in Mr. Carrera's collage, "United States of Amnesia" (2005), in which the artist has replaced Andrew Jackson's head on a \$20 bill with that of [Saddam Hussein](#). He has also inserted little details, like the words: "This note is a reminder that US mates deal with snakes"; "Is hindsight 20/20?"; and "The United States of Amnesia."

More bizarrely, Ms. Robbins and Mr. Becher, artist collaborators, have used photographs to document an annual festival in Radebeul, a German town near Dresden, where people dress as American Indians and celebrate, with re-enactments, the birthday of Karl May, a 19th-century German writer of cowboy and Indian stories.

The transformation of history into pageantry is also the subject of Jonathan Santos's video "The Alamo" (2003), in which we see Japanese carp swimming in an artificial pond inside a tourist facility at the site of the bloody 1836 battle between Texan forces and Mexico.

Memory and the passage of time are common themes in this show, dominating pieces by Michael Krueger, Phil Whitman and Deborah Bright. Most effectively, Ms. Bright has taken a contemporary photograph of the site of the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876, in which George Armstrong Custer and much of the Seventh Cavalry were wiped out by Indian tribes. The quietude of the rural landscape depicted in the photograph belies the haunting history of the place.

Then there are works that don't fit categories at all, trading in seemingly useless facts. Among them are Justin Richel's pornographic paintings of George Washington, either in the buff or attempting to inseminate a house. It is hard to get a read on any of this, though a wall caption boldly informs viewers that the father of our nation was sterile.

This bit of trivia — many historians contend that Washington probably *was* sterile — only serves to highlight the depth of research and thought underpinning these works, which together present an impressive amount of history in a relatively small space.

"Don't Know Much About History," Artspace, 50 Orange Street, New Haven, through Jan. 20. Information (203) 772-2709, www.artspacenh.org.

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