

COOPER

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Abstract: Artist description and selection criteria.

COOPER was born Bryan Cooper of Miami, Florida in 1976. His family is also native of Miami, which shows his ties to the city as a place of origin and also, as will be seen in the following pages, his good fortune in starting his own journey as a person and an artist in one of the strongest art communities in the nation.

As a child, Cooper was already building upon his natural, creative abilities. As

he puts it, "Drawing well as a child led me to thinking visually, I wanted to invent, I wanted adventure...each new material led to new ideas." It is easy to see how this energy continues today, as his pieces get more elaborate. He may assemble a small doll that is very sparse, and then follow up such work with elaborate sculptures and working machinery.

COOPER's early education was completed in Miami through the New World School of the Arts (NWSA). NWSA is a high school devoted to the arts and in preparing their students for higher education in the same field. In 2003, COOPER was actually part of a group exhibition that was formed out of NWSA alumni. The show was called Made in Miami and was in the Fredric Snitzer Gallery. COOPER sought his higher education at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York for his BFA, then continued to the University of Alabama Tuscaloosa for his Masters in Fine Arts. During his studies in the South, he acquired certain sensibilities that would later inform his artistic work. For instance, his 2001 show, Drainpipes and death myths, headrest bombs and dusty things in closets, rotten pastries and years of privation; but lets consider a moment in the past when we could have done things differently, or perhaps been someone else--'locum tenens' for the sake of change--through fences, across fields and out of windows with our American cousin. Or (our American cousin), is heavily imbued with themes

and figures that are special to the American South, its culture, and its endless preoccupation with the Civil War. Even Abraham Lincoln makes an appearance, of course in COOPER's aesthetic. These themes that were constantly before him during his time in University of Alabama now manifest themselves either explicitly, as with Abraham Lincoln, or more subtly through COOPER's fascination with hooded figures and the swamp-like murkiness characteristic in many of his sculptures and reliefs. This also carries over to COOPER's interests in com-

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menting on American society itself through his work.

It becomes necessary now to establish Bryan Cooper as COOPER. This new name is more than just a pseudonym and represents a new identity with a message that would later become an integral part in COOPER's work. He changed his name in an endeavor to "explore social constructs, starting with my name as a minor symbol and a useless label." Social constructs play an integral part in COOPER's work, as will later be discussed further. Therefore, it is only natural that such a preoccupation would transfer into the artist himself and through the social construct that he is immediately given upon entering the world—his name. This abandonment of his name automatically puts him on the fringes of society, which is a place he occupies with absolute content and passion. Labels also serve a major role in how COOPER titles his work. The lengthy title of the exhibition discussed earlier should have sounded a few alarms in the mind of the reader. Titles are usually a phrase, a word or even nothing at all (Untitled). However, instead of throwing out these "useless labels" entirely, it can be argued that COOPER just takes these labels and amplifies them to the highest degree, which results in revealing the inherent nonsense that defines a title of a work of art.

After his final studies in Alabama, COOPER returned to his hometown of Miami

to begin his career as an artist. Creating art seemed not to be the only thing on his mind because in 1997 he was the co-founder of Locust Projects, located in the Wynwood Art District in Miami, Florida. The exhibition space functions as an innovative, non-profit venue that allows artists to show works that are representative of their oeuvre. As outlined in their Mission Statement, they are "dedicated to providing contemporary visual artists the freedom to experiment with new ideas and methods without the pressures of gallery sales or other limita-

tations of conventional exhibition spaces." This project is quite interesting because the usual aspects of artistic work that sometimes inhibit, or at least become a pre-

occupation on the artist's mind, are conveniently done away with so that the artist may work somewhat more purely. The pieces that go into the space provided by Locust Projects are site-specific. Therefore, the work is distinctive both through the artist's ability to sift out the usual anxieties involved in an exhibition and also distinctive through the gallery itself, which only allows pieces that were made for Locust Projects. 2008 marked Locust Projects' ten year anniversary, and, as outlined on their website (www.locustprojects.org), it appears that these ten years have been quite fruitful "with more than 65 exhibitions, representing more than 210 local, national, and international artists." In 2009, COOPER himself is currently on the selection committee and board of directors for Locust Projects, along with the other founders and twenty-four other directors. When asked what COOPER liked best about working within Miami's artistic community, especially through his work in Locust Projects, he replied, "meeting people who live outside of social order--the fringe."

In 2000, COOPER's career as an artist really started to take off, and this year also marks his addition to the artists represented by the Fredric Snitzer Gallery, which is in the Wynwood Art District of Miami. His first show at the Fredric Snitzer Gallery was Robot, and he has been able to show a new collection of works there at least once every year since. COOPER's works have

been exhibited in New York, New Mexico, France, and Brazil, but Miami and the Fredric Snitzer Gallery has been his regular artistic home for his major individual and group shows. His most recent show was in 2008, titled *Seven Years Bad Luck*, which displayed the influence of his new environment of the previous two years in New Mexico, while still returning to the ever-present American South of his Masters education with such pieces as *Battlefield horror*

When the title suggests so much, it encourages many readings.

from the war of northern aggression, slave rape, abu ghraib torture, grassy knolls, rich girl bank robberies and “pig” finger-written in blood on mansion walls, slow spiked garrote death, a bucket with all of Friday night’s vomit spilled across every city street collected, restaurant dumpsters, dead drug addicts in the morgue’s walk-in refrigerator, lies between lovers, profitable deception, death-row lunch trays sitting soiled in a broken industrial dish-washer or a speeding pickup slamming into a pregnant dog on a back-country road. He currently spends much of his time in New Mexico where he continues to create and find inspiration for his work.

COOPER’s art is guided by an exploration of things left behind, of light and dark, contrasts, and other topics hanging on the fringes of thought. The best way to take on these notions is through looking at specific works of art. Each piece will help to materialize the mental nebulous of thought through which the original ideas and concepts must cross through in order to end up as a work of art. No art is created in a vacuum; cultural and historical aspects therefore play their appropriate roles in artwork coming into fruition. Drawing is imperative for COOPER, and it is the part of the process that begins to shape his ideas into art. “Drawing is everything; it is where I discover, invent, process, it is extremely necessary to my being. I communicate more thoroughly through image and marks. And as an artist, I enjoy making drawings an integral part of my decision making process. If I am working on a project and I am concerned about some portion, I can make it happen first, in the drawing.”

Looking at COOPER’s work with cultural lenses, the sense of a lost opportunity,

with a possibility to change things for the better, is seen in some of his pieces. Thinking about recent events such as environmental issues, pieces like *I sure could use another planet*, 2006 hone in on the very real opportunity people have today to reverse many policies that have been harmful to overall environmental health. America serves as an important foundation for such artwork. With huge SUV’s and less than fair gas mileage, America is running up a

large and wasteful bill. The title is humorous, but humor plays on a very basic way of understanding the world. COOPER does not scold viewers, his title does not admonish people, but the speechless piece is worth the proverbial thousand words. The aesthetic is rough, coarse, and direct. He uses wood, binding agents, polyurethane, soil, sawdust, foam, ink, electronics and steel. The piece is a square wooden shelf hanging off of a wall, with a steel bucket beneath it, and pipes running from the wall to the bucket carrying ink. The materials are a synthesis of natural and artificial elements. The contrast between the dark, hefty, thick look of the soil on top of the hardedge, light, wooden shelf emphasizes the nature of the materials. Nature is both smooth and hard. The kinetic movement of the ink and the dark soil add freshness to a heavy piece. The piece is heavy, but not static, the materials are crude, but not rotting, though they appear dark and almost menacing, but ultimately soil has life giving associations. The materials are not delicate, yet there is a delicacy in the simplicity of the piece. This simplicity provides the confrontational element for the installation. The title is also straightforward. It suggests an impossible solution, using another planet, to solve the problems of this one.

COOPER revisits the environmental issue, but the title of this particular piece is not as concise as the previous one. First our garbage will become our fuel, then with all the smoke and fumes and enough time, our waste will become suns. (Trapping light invites all sorts of

intriguing questions, for instance, if you light a candle in a room lined with perfect mirrors [mirrors that return nearly 95 per-

cent or more of the light that contacts the reflective surface], would the room stay illuminated even after the flame is extinguished.) But first, let’s mine the cemeteries for fresh things to sell, 2008. This title goes beyond simply labeling the piece; it evokes thoughts and processes related to the installation. The piece is a larger version of *I sure could use another planet*, with some modifications. Like in the previous work, liquid flows through the pipes into the bucket; it is

kinetic. COOPER has commented on his installations through a dialogue between Self and COOPER.

“SELF”- Do your ‘installations’ function through the human

form in the manner in which her ‘architecture’ does?

COOPER- (silence) No, I would say that my work, particularly the installation forms, function with human, or perhaps mammalian perception (I don’t believe in placing humans in a hierarchical relationship with animals or vegetation). I mean to say that the aesthetic machines and situations are organic in visual construction, contained and sectioned with orifices where the supply (being provided through interaction with a viewer) either enters or exits” (COOPER Art Statement).

COOPER combines environmentally charged issues with the larger aims of his artistic goals. In the larger context of his work, COOPER focuses on the human condition as animal, as organisms, part of the bigger organic structure. Placing human beings as a part of nature, but not apart from nature imply a sense of needed responsibility. COOPER expresses, “I am interested in man’s interaction with the natural universe, the power that we possess in our ability to build, design, theorize, modify... tinker with the world we have been given, seeking the answers, becoming god.” In this way, man is both creator and participant.

COOPER describes his own artistic style as a “blender.” He also stipulates, “I am currently investigating the basics, the fabric of the universe, the design, the details, the unseen.” Drawing from a variety of artistic styles and historical references, from horror, the steampunk aesthetic, and American his-

tory, COOPER often produces work that is reflective of chaos and order; chaos and order act as artistic tendencies and themes in his work. He believes the world is massive and complex, art thus serves as a vehicle of reflecting, and perhaps even organizing, some of the disorder. Same as the last time, except this time, nobody was listening, and then one terrible night it all ended, 2004 is exemplary of the fringe element in his work. The title of this piece conveys a repetitive event, and although it is recurring, no one is listening or paying attention. Others are able to ignore things, but avoidance is only possible to a certain point, until “one terrible night it all ended.” This is not to say that the work is a warning. It depicts a doll-like figure, with a paper bag over its face, one small square-shaped hole where viewers can see an eye, and red ribbon dangling from under the black long-sleeved shirt. The figure is 1.5’x 1.5’x 1.5’, essentially, it is small. If the doll is representative of man, then man is small in the scheme of things, soft, and only using one eye to see the world. It is relatable to his other works in this way, as they try to catch the attention of others through the use of a variety of materials, motion, and titles. Titles that are so lengthy, they almost serve as explanations, not merely as labels. They reflect on the nature of the human condition and of human behavior.

Deliberating on the nature of the human condition, COOPER’s work touches certain socio-political tendencies. They are not descriptive about these tendencies in their stylistic execution, but again, the titles provide viewers with hints about the inspiration for the pictorial rendering. A simple system of rules that eventually complicated everything, 2008 is a work on paper. Could it be that COOPER is commenting on the political system? Or on the daily social interactions of others? The title evokes these thoughts and the images reinforce them. COOPER uses duralar, acrylic paint, tape, charcoal, gold leaf adhesive, and distillant. The results are stimulating side by side pieces depicting expressively rendered hanging octagon-like shapes. Paint drips from the bottom of the octagon-like figures. On the depiction to the left, the inner part of the shape is visible. Viewers can see the star-like illustration within the shape. The star-like illus-

tration is simple and the color is grey with some shadowing. There are horizontals, verticals, and diagonals contained within the shape. The depiction on the right side portrays a counter image to the one on the left. The shape is colored roughly and expressively in black. There are only light hints that there were any horizontals, verticals, or diagonals. The title can refer to the progression between the pieces. However, it is unclear which way they should be viewed, left to right or right to left. Employing how things are typically read, if viewed from left to right, the image on the left portrays the structure within, making it accessible to the viewer, while the image on the right clouds the arrangement within, thus rendering it illegible. The illegibility adds a layer of complication to the image. The ability to “read” the pieces in a variety of ways adds layers to the meaning and overall goal of the piece. While COOPER’s social and political moves in his work are readily apparent to the viewer, he has other works that find their explicit influence from previous artists and artistic movements. For instance, in 2000, COOPER showed a work titled *The Burden of Chris*. In this work, he essentially re-enacted Chris Burden’s performance piece *Shoot from 1971*. However, instead of re-enacting the piece live in the gallery, as Chris Burden did in the original, COOPER recorded it on a video that would play constantly. The title and action of the piece imply COOPER’s interest in the artistic movements that came before him, while simultaneously commenting upon the difficulties caused by Chris Burden’s work. *The Burden of Chris* is actually the burden upon current artists, especially those like COOPER who are interested in self-mutilation and masochism, caused by Chris Burden. This exemplifies how COOPER is aware of his own place in the art world, even early on in his career. It is safe to say through the aforementioned themes and materials in his work that he has found his own niche in this world and is prepared to push the envelope in his own, individual aesthetic.

After studying COOPER’s works, we felt that he would be a perfect fit for our show at the end of the Spring semester in 2009, which included other Miami-based

artists with the same predilection toward commentary upon society’s constructs. We first contacted COOPER through e-mail to which he quickly replied to and accepted our offer to be a part of the *Aesthetic and Values Exhibition 2009*. Unfortunately, COOPER was stationed in New Mexico at this time, so most of our correspondence had to take place through e-mail. He visited Miami for *Art Basel*, but given the highly strenuous and busy period that is, we were unable to ever get him for a face-to-face meeting. However, he was always most gracious in his e-mails and gave us all the information we needed and desired about himself and his work. He was heavily involved with us from day one.

Since COOPER was away in New Mexico, we had to do most of the work with the Fredric Snitzer gallery ourselves, which was frustrating at times because we were a small group of mostly non-art major students trying to curate our own show. Nevertheless, the Fredric Snitzer gallery was always helpful and willing to work with us to make our exhibition, and COOPER’s involvement in it, a success. We were given access to many of COOPER’s works over his years of work with the gallery, and we were able to make the difficult decision to borrow three pieces of his collection of work. The three pieces that went up in the *Aesthetic and Values Exhibition* in 2009 were: [1] Same as the last time, except this time, nobody was listening, and then one terrible night it all ended; [2] *Ladies and Gentleman*, I present you to the honorable and brave hero; [3] A baptismal device for the last few survivors.

Working with COOPER and the Fredric Snitzer Gallery provided a behind the scenes look at the Miami art world with its diversity and burgeoning influence upon the rest of the contemporary art world. All of his pieces were a great hit in the exhibition, especially in the reception as many wanted to know what all the masks and hoods meant, what was behind them, and what did these pieces say about COOPER. It is questions like these that fuel the inquiry upon COOPER’s fascinating body of work, which seems blatant upon first glance but hides a myriad of meanings beneath its initial brash surface. □