

**Our American Cousin** is the most ambitious work to date by **Cooper**, one of Miami's most highly regarded and innovative young artists. The installation falsely appears to be the remnants of a performance piece à la Paul McCarthy or Joseph Beuys; but the "performance" was never carried out in front of an audience or even recorded. The deliberate effect is of a theatrical set that has been abandoned mid-way through the production. This impression is reinforced by the title, which is the name of the play that John Wilkes Booth famously interrupted when he murdered Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theater. This reference is just one of the work's many buried associations, several of which relate to themes that the artist first introduced in prior works. Through a process of free-association that places the onus on the viewer to create his/her own overarching narrative interpretation, the work blends together these various conceptual layers into a rich, deliriously complex stew.

The main components of *Our American Cousin* include a wooden, cone-like element that dangles from the ceiling, inside of which is installed a monitor that displays a video of the artist crawling through a dark, bowel-like tunnel while wearing a mask of Lincoln. Throughout Cooper's work, the tunnel motif has served loosely as a symbol for the passage between the conscious mind and the Hades-like realm of the unconscious. As the artist makes his way through this never-ending, claustrophobic space, the video suggests a disturbing vision of Lincoln perpetually trapped in a hellish afterlife, as if cursed beyond the grave by the nightmare of the Civil War and the violence of his assassination. The imagery also conjures the notion of a desperate escape, with ready associations to prison-break movies (e.g., *Shawshank Redemption*), as well as to the individuals who escaped slavery through the Underground Railroad. The ultimate result is an exploration of the tensions between conventional, textbook-style history (in this case, that of the American Civil War) and the dark realities that underlie it (particularly the history of racial and ethnic struggle in the U.S.).

Nearby the video, one finds a large object that is apparently the tunnel through which the artist crawled in the video. The installation also includes the mask and costume, which is hung on a coat rack. On the floor, there is a blood-spattered bed surrounded by an array of objects including a bowl, a bottle of pills, and a vintage oil lantern, which together recall the gruesome spectacle of the Civil-War era battlefield surgeon. Inside the bowl, there is a bloody bullet (ostensibly the bullet that John Wilkes Booth shot into the Lincoln's back), which Cooper shot into the wall of the gallery in which the work was first installed, and then painstakingly removed.

As is typical of Cooper's work, the installation has a poetic and absurdly long alternative title:

**Drainpipes and death myths, headrest bombs and dusty things in closets, rotten pastries and years of privation; but let's 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**

Cooper received a BFA from Pratt Institute and an MFA from the University of Alabama. His work has been exhibited at venues including Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Miami; White Box, New York; The Moore Space, Miami; the Frost Art Museum at FIU, Miami; Bass Museum, Miami Beach; Wooster Projects, New York; Exit Art, New York; Musee d'Art Moderne et Contemporain de Strasbourg; Oficina Cultural Osvaldo Andrade, São Paulo, Brazil; MOCA, Miami; Locust Projects, Miami; and Pulse, New York. Cooper is a co-founder of Locust Projects in Miami. He has received several grants and awards, and is represented in numerous important private and public collections.

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