

***"Lonely
are the
Brave"***

JESSE AMADO
JUSTIN BOYD
KELLY O'CONNOR
CHRIS SAUTER

HILLS SNYDER **curator**

BLUE STAR **CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER**
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Rabbit Quest 2009: Lonely Are the Brave

HILLS SNYDER

“The only thing you knew for sure about Henry Porter was that his name wasn’t Henry Porter.”

The film *Lonely Are the Brave* was released in 1962, the same year that Binney and Smith, in response to the Civil Rights Movement, changed the name of one of their crayons from flesh to peach. The movie stars Kirk Douglas as Jack Burns, a guy that is not sympatico with the taming-down tendencies of civilization. He’s taken to jail for brawling in a bar with a one armed man acted by amputee and WW II veteran Bill Raisch, who from 1963 – 1967, would go on to play the more famous one armed man pursued by Dr. Richard Kimble in *The Fugitive* television series. Burns wants to get thrown in the slammer so he can bust out his friend, Paul Bondi, who is in there waiting to be transferred to prison for helping undocumented workers from Mexico. Burns eventually has to assault a police officer to complete his goal, only to find that his buddy won’t break out with him. So, lonely and brave as he is, he escapes on his own and goes on the run, now a genuine fugitive. Coincidences and art/life/art imitations aside, and the merits of the film notwithstanding, here also is George Kennedy as Deputy Sheriff Gutierrez, bent on nailing the on the lam hero, though it is his attempt at a Mexican accent that is the true crime.

Cut to 21st Century America — we’re lonely as ever, with one hand on the wheel of a 1962 Chevy Apache pickup with a bumper sticker that says Amnesia, Love It or Leave It. Or maybe it says God Bless A Camera. The dashboard is littered with road trip detritus casting a windshield reflection of where we’ve been. We’re part actor, part hero, part fugitive, part self-observing voyeur, and we’re driving this pickup, direction undetermined. But who are we now, after all we’ve done lately?

Who is this phantom limb?

My best guess: Walter Matthau.

(OK, whatever, but we can’t be Carrie Prejean).

Matthau plays Sheriff Johnson. He’s lonely and brave too, but it’s his job to capture Burns. He admires Jack’s freewheeling spirit and half hopes he fails to catch him. He is also fascinated, and for that reason wants to get his man. He’s a regular guy and has the integrity of a person who does his job well. It’s like what Justin Boyd says about his own work, that he is “navigating the byways of Our history, looking for moments of true spirit and conviction.” Such moments are exactly what Sheriff Johnson sees in Burns.

“In every false movie is the true movie that must be set free.”

Edward Abbey, author of *The Brave Cowboy*, the 1956 novel that *Lonely Are the Brave* is based on, famously remarked in his later *Desert Solitaire*, that the North American West was “the place where the tangible and the mythical became the same.” He also wrote that “To refute the metaphysical idealist all that you have to

do is take him out and throw a rock at his head: if he ducks he's a liar." Colorful. And evidently just as cantankerous and contradictory as Dalton Trumbo, another colorful guy. Blacklisted in the McCarthy era, *Lonely Are the Brave* and *Spartacus* were the first films to acknowledge his screenwriting credit since the late forties. In Abbey's book, Burns' friend Bondi is in jail for refusing to register for the draft, but in Trumbo's version the character is in jail for border activism, a cause Abbey did not support. Not to imply that Trumbo was necessarily pro draft — in the early seventies he wrote and directed *Johnny Got His Gun*, a blistering anti-war film. Perhaps the change was made because the connection between Burns and Bondi is not well felt in the film. The screenwriter's solution: these are guys that met as soldiers in the war. That is why the audience is supposed to believe they are close. And as a consequence, Bondi can no longer be a draft resistor. So the life vs. art, tangible vs. mythical tensions continue, and both Abbey and Trumbo have been lionized and demonized one way and another by those who follow their causes and commentaries. But let us not engage in testing those extremities by throwing rocks.

"Spirit and conviction" — this is a good balance, for conviction alone can turn isolationist, supremacist or just too greatmanist. Take the aforementioned *Spartacus* for example. He is a legendary hero, yet the best thing about being *Spartacus* is that everybody else is you too. It takes the pressure off.

It might be fair to say that here in America we keep dodging the mythical to fuck up the tangible. Or vice versa. Or maybe driving a big truck over sage and squirrel is just too tempting. Either way, we keep using the American myth against us, but it won't go away: just the other day I was reading *The Constitution* over a taco at Tito's and was barely able to duck in time.

"I put my hand inside his cranium, oh we had such a brainiac-amour"

Chris Sauter's work presupposes the existence of a Hill Country Brain, composed of barn wood and bobbed-wire, but not likely to show up adjacent to the Spirit Catcher kiosk at your Exxon station. But it will do until he's able to get his stomach tattooed plaid, his personal American dream.



The Known Universe (childhood bedroom) Chris Sauter

And here? — in a boyhood bedroom re-made, a telescope, cut right out of the walls, compounding ascending circles of opacity, yet the see-through stars, in wonderfully random array, are right in the room. And nearby, a sheet-rock plow, harvested from the wall but never planted there, a fragile anachronism now leaning against a secret. It's been parted-out from two perpendicular walls, the cavities that remain piling up on either side of the furrowing edge that is the corner. According to the 1978 edition of *The Secret Life of Sheetrock*, "Drywall screams when humans cut into it." This only partially discredited paperback sensation from

the waning months of the Hippie Carpenter Period was rivaled in popularity by a country song 7 year old Chris listened to late at night on his radio, *If Walls Could Talk (Go Ahead, Peek Inside, There's Nothing There)*.

Chris' dual photo piece offers a shot-from-the-stage view of the set from the Attic Rep production of Sam Shepard's play *True West* alongside a second perspective of the same scene. The blue and orange lighting

lends an eerie feeling to what already reads as absence and the window offers some insight too — outside is only black and yet the low angle light of evening shines through and hits the refrigerator with the intensity of an alien landing. The second view is aerial, oblique and framed by an expanse of white paper which leaves the viewer fading up and away, as if on a receding line that will finally give way to a single point of distant observation. The sense of loneliness and false serenity is palpable — your mother's kitchen may not be that comforting in real life — doubly so in these pre-play scenes. And the broom, perhaps the most potentially active object on view, waits for some lost apprentice to come along and sweep the absence, the loneliness, the distance, all the fugitive feelings, under the rug (any rug).

Meanwhile, outside, nature lurks like a word someone made up. A plywood sign creaks in the breeze and heralds four walls naked to night sky:

HERE AT THE SAGE & SQUIRREL WE WORK UNDER THE STARS

Double Meanwhile: Jesse Amado's fringes festoon the largest wall with swooping gestures which connect his love of the material to its historically manifested increments: six inches for this epaulet, a yard for that bridle, possibly some great quantity for a theatre curtain. Indeed, he imagines a search for "a theatre bright enough and big enough, far away enough" from an imposed cultural matrix; a fortified milieu that he sees as a site gained by reordering with play the various duties of material. Perhaps it is an inner stage, a metaphysical arena, from which the random encroachments of the unnatural order can be turned back. The pins that hold up the fringe, like tiny marks of punctuation or musical notation, their tentative grip on the wall indicative of transience, ultimately do support the fringe in its whimsical and sensual responses to gravity. [Vanitas + Gravitas = Levitas] The template based bubbles which accent and pause the action of the fringe directly refer to 17th Century Dutch Vanitas painting, in which soap bubbles are used as one of many symbols (skulls, overturned crowns, dead flowers, raw/rotting food, spilled wine, etc.) for the impermanence of life. They also work like thought bubbles in cartoons — dog imagines turkey leg — a legitimate reference, given that Jesse's bubbles are created on the peripheries of want — with bronze paint, itself a substitute for supernatural light, and drawn lines based on hands stroking dicks and tits and ass found on the internet. These lines are perhaps a palimpsest of desire itself — its object is not present — they suggest rather than define and in this same way the suspended fringes create rather than occupy space. Fringe becomes horizon, valley, ridge, peak, prairie and plateau, each a wish for the outside, becoming also dribble and stroke, reminiscent of Kelly O'Connor's drooling clouds, pregnant with black and dripping. And barreling through the immense space of possibility that is simultaneously the world of Jack Burns and of the artist, comes R. Mutt (played by Carol O'Connor), rolling on 18 wheels, intent to deliver the goods to their appointed twentieth century intersection. A "mitigated assertion" Jesse might call it, or "mélanger la chèvre et la chou", to use the parlance of Duchamp's riddling, rural uncle.

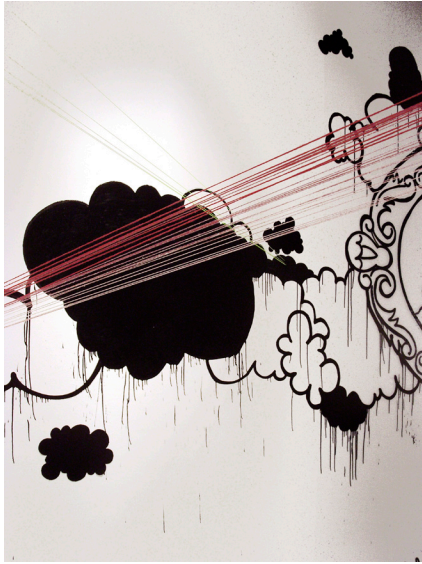


A Short History of The West and have you tapped it yet? (detail of work in progress) Jesse Amado

"The sword in her hand seemed only just to have been raised aloft, and the unchained winds blew about her form."

Not exactly a bricoleur — her materials are not random — Kelly O'Connor collages components from an American childhood in a way that tempers their inherent idealism without disparaging her obvious love of them. She uses her No. 11 blade to remove images from their contexts as a sort of emergency surgery. Her motivations, conscious or not, are essentially revivalist, not nostalgic — she wants Judy Garland to outlast

Dorothy, but she also hopes that troubles melt like lemon drops. And Kelly's knife knows that Alice is a sexual being, but it won't deny her chasing white rabbits. Together they want to return to the scene of the crash that killed Grace Kelly to cut in Cary Grant and a picnic basket. The knife knows. That is Kelly's ace — the absence of the space that gets cut out is a vacuum that becomes the site of a creative exchange that is personally transformative. And while it is true that her clouds pin the optimism back, with a viscous black that adheres to the surface like road repair before dripping to the whim of gravity, the up wins out.



Mirror Magic (detail of work in progress) Kelly O'Connor

In *Mirror Magic*, created on site specifically for this exhibition, she stows the blade and relies for the first time on images created only with black ink and colored yarn (more supernatural light), but the experimental nature of the project extends beyond the materials — this is her first venture into grand scale. Your first view of the work is framed by the seven by seven foot entry to the Project Space, but as you draw near you'll understand that a second portal is in play, Lewis Carroll's Looking Glass to be sure. The backwards text alerts us to our location

on the Wonderland side of the surface and the Disney characters spilling across the plane seem glad to see us. But they should know better. Shouldn't they be asking themselves a few hard questions, such as who are these people and what are they doing in our world? But even in their world I sense duplicity: the anonymous raccoon that frolics with Thumper should get wise to Davy Crockett's cap. And Crockett, he should at least wipe that silly grin off his face — we're not the R.O.T. anymore — or yet one might say to our governor.

"I must remember to yell 'Timber!' occasionally."

Justin Boyd's word/pictures are sometimes stretched — letters strangely wide or tall, or, otherwise distorted,



Our change has come, but keep the powder dry. Justin Boyd

like the H in *Here bombs fade away*, spanning other letters like a rooftop. In this, they are like a tall tale — Pecos Bill, Paul Bunyan or some such yarn. It's almost as if exaggeration is what yields the image out of the word. The tower of letters in *Wonder, Wander* seems to move in a river of blue on a yellow parallelogram raft, but Huck Finn is only implied — the image floats more on the paper — it is you, the viewer, that must pole the water and make imagination move. And movement is key — American wanderlust pervades most of these images, and if not the wandering, then the kindness of strangers that must accompany it. Justin's America is the *Promised Land* of Chuck Berry — it's driven by a personal quest, but will need to crash on your couch.

Opening night Justin will perform a new sound piece on a monochord contraption made with bailing wire, a fence post and contact mics. He'll appear as something of a stand-in for Jack Burns, complete with denim shirt, cowhide gloves and a pair of wire cutters in his back pocket. Any lurking busybodies around might be alerting the nearby Texas Highway Patrol Museum of this last item, as it is still illegal to carry them in the state of Texas. At the heart of the piece will be Justin's love of what Constance Rourke has termed "American vagaries" which have "woven together a tradition which is various, subtle, sinewy, scant at times but not poor." Indeed, Justin's singing fence draws from Blues, Gospel and other bedrock American forms, not to mention the more rarified tones of La Monte Young and Alvin

Lucier. All this will be anchored by a Sysyphian loop from *Lonely Are the Brave* in which Jack and his horse Whiskey attempt to crest the final ridge between themselves and freedom. But they find out when they reach the top they're on the bottom. And finding us as we are these days, perhaps forgetful and too close to a new signal of promise, said loop could be much like our own struggle to avoid folly and the feedback of repetition.

VOICE OF WINSTON HIBLER: ...LIGHTS FADE SOFTLY INTO MOONLIGHT...COYOTE FADES)

Floating quotations are from Brownsville Girl, Bob Dylan and Sam Shepard; Zeroville, Steve Erickson; Land, Patti Smith; Amerika (The Man Who Disappeared), Franz Kafka; and Cary Grant as John Robie in To Catch A Thief, Alfred Hitchcock. Constance Rourke is quoted from her 1931 book, American Humor: A Study of The National Character. Winston Hibler is the narrator of Chico The Misunderstood Coyote, a 1961 episode of Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color. coyote fades) is from the final stage directions of True West, Sam Shepard.

The French phrase means mixing (mélanger) the goat and the cabbage, a play on ménager la chèvre et le chou, from the riddle that queries how to manage getting a goat, a wolf and a cabbage across the river without the goat or the cabbage being eaten.

EXHIBITION NOTES

Scattered throughout the space (mostly stripped bare, even) you'll find painted walls, song lyrics which appear in *New Danville Girl* but not in *Brownsville Girl*, a burnt out campfire and more, including a movie viewing room showing the 1962 film which lends us the title, *Lonely Are the Brave*. These treatments are not art works as such, but tweaks by the curator whose intention is to tease out some of the meanings that may dwell in the void that is circumnavigated by the four artists of this show. These are not the objects of Duchamp, chosen with indifference, but he is here somewhere and he also appears in the film as a truck driver.

SAGE & SQUIRREL:

National Geographic map of America (Point Hope to Cape Horn, 9919 miles), replica of Odie's TV box with **I Own You** sticker (thanks Justin Parr), U.S. Constitution as seen through binoculars, 1962 movie poster, checkered chair, horse blanket, lamp made of automotive funnel and wood bracket found in Peru, squirrel on wire, American Gothic window, Chavin head, Norfolk, Virginia phone number scrawled on bark, powder horn, *True West* broom with debris swept under rug, prickly pear.

Vanitas objects: cow skull painted by Max Snyder at age 5, T bone painting by Utah Snyder, mirror, Death wearing Rappin' Hamster cap, books in plywood case, dead flowers, Harlequin with extinguished candle.

Snagglepuss, even.



LIST OF WORKS

JESSE AMADO

A Short History of The West and have you tapped it yet?

iridescent acrylic paint, fringe, map pins

11' x 54'

2009

KELLY OCONNOR

Mirror Magic

black ink, colored yarn

12' x 58' x 18'

2009

JUSTIN BOYD

Optional Obstacles (Lonely Are the Brave)

Video, fence post, bailing wire, wire cutters, modified contact mics, sine wave generator, acrylic and vinyl on fiberboard and nails on wood

dimensions variable

2009

I am hopefull.

Digital print with collage

40" x 40"

2009

Here all the bombs fade away.

Digital print with collage

40" x 40"

2009

A vessel that is large enough to gather your friends.

Digital print with collage

40" x 40"

2009

Wonder, Wander

Digital print with collage

40" x 40"

2009

Our change has come, but keep the powder dry.

Digital print with collage

40" x 40"

2009

CHRIS SAUTER

Adam

overalls, bandanna, cap, hook, drywall dust

72" x 8" x 3"

2003/2009

The Known Universe (childhood bedroom)

constructed bedroom, furniture, toys, cassettes, books, clarinet, figurines, art, map, plastic forks, stuff, telescope made from material cut from room.

8.5' x 11' x 14'

2007

Kitchen (near)

photograph

30" x 45"

2009

Kitchen (far)

photograph

30" x 45"

2009

Turn and Harvest

plow constructed from gallery walls, drywall dust, holes
dimensions variable / plow 3' x 8' x 2'

2009

contemporary art month



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