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Blast from the past

At Mass MoCA and elsewhere, artists take on historic reenactment



Greta Pratt's 'Nine Lincolns, Hodgenville, KY' is part of 'Ahistoric Occasion,' a group show at Mass MoCA. (Photo courtesy of the artist)

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | June 9, 2006

"History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake," said Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's "Ulysses."

But for the countless historic re enactors who spend their weekends replicating battles and their weeknights stitching period buttons on period costumes, history is a rich, deeply felt dream they're trying to live in, if only for a day or two.

Why, exactly? Perhaps artists can tell us. Increasingly, they aim to capture the hobbyists' obsession in photographs, or to turn re enactment into a kind of performance art. They're like Sigmund Freud, tapping his pen on his notebook, trying to figure out what, exactly, this dream of history says about the dreamers.

Historic re enactment is a burgeoning hobby in the United States and in Europe. Interest in it began to grow in the 1960s, with the centenaries of Civil War battles. Today, it's practically an industry.

Artists have lit on the trend, and they inspired "Ahistoric Occasion," an exhibit at Mass MoCA spotlighting art that appropriates history and examines how slippery it is. Five of the 11 artists in the show work directly with re enactment.

Depicting the past in the present can create a jarring irony. Photographer Greta Pratt's series "19 Lincolns," showing distinctly different Abraham Lincoln impersonators, is up at Mass MoCA. Last year, Pratt published "Using History," a photography book about how Americans portray American history.

"I'm looking at who we are by what we say about our past," says Pratt, on the phone from her home in New Jersey. "Really, history doesn't exist except in what the people in the present say about it."

Allison Smith, who has several pieces in "Ahistoric Occasion," has worked extensively with re enactors who she says "consider themselves living ambassadors of the past."

"It's an imagined return to a simpler time, yet that's a paradox because they're reenacting war. . . . The impulse comes from living in times of turmoil and war and being unsure what our government stands for."

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Smith is fascinated with the hobbyists' devotion to craftsmanship; her "Victory Hall" installation takes replicas of 1860s-era arms and arrays them in a patterned display Martha Stewart would be proud of.

"Re enactors, like sculptors, like their objects," says Nato Thompson, curator of "Ahistoric Occasion." "[To them] objects retain meaning. There are re enactors known as thread-counters, who know the exact thread count of uniforms. It's fetishistic, obsessive-compulsive, on a level like many artists."

Last year, Smith staged "The Muster," a Civil War-style call to arms, on Governor's Island in New York. Her rallying cry, a lengthy speech penned calligraphically, is up at Mass MoCA. The address, rife with flourishes of 19th-century oratory, draws connections between Stonewall Jackson and the Stonewall Riots, which in 1969 launched gay activism, and ties the Civil War with civil union into a neat, albeit unnerving, bow.

Also at Mass MoCA, Felix Gmelin's video "Color Test, The Red Flag II" shows him re enacting a 1968 pro-communist demonstration in which his father took part: Young men ran through the streets of Berlin, proudly holding a red flag like the Olympic torch. Gmelin staged the same performance in 2002 in Stockholm; the once potent symbolism became sad and comic.

"When you smash two moments together, you forget the gradualness of history," says Larissa Harris, associate director of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT. There, John Malpede's show "RFK in EKY" revisits Senator Robert F. Kennedy's trip to the coal-mining communities of Eastern Kentucky in February 1968.

Using transcripts and press accounts, Malpede reconstructed Kennedy's two-day trip, during which the senator investigated how President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty was faring in a poor corner of the nation. The cast was made up entirely of locals. The exhibit features archival photographs and footage of Kennedy's trip, and videos of the performance Malpede directed.

The echoes from 1968 to 2004 are strong. War protesters, poverty, corporate greed, and young people leaving the area to seek their fortunes elsewhere all make the two times seem like one. Yet the backdrop of the Bush administration's attention to poverty in contrast to that of Johnson's is dramatic, as is the sense that 36 years have seen little improvement.

"Re enactment is a strange, vivid, and strong tactic," Harris says. "It holds the tension between one time and another in one body."

Jeremy Deller's "The Battle of Orgreave," a 2001 re enactment of the 1984 standoff between striking miners and riot police in Yorkshire, England, is on view in a video at Mass MoCA. The performance was filmed and made into a documentary by "Leaving Las Vegas" director Mike Figgis.

The performance gave many miners the opportunity to relive a traumatic moment in their lives. But most historic re enactment goes further back than a generation or two. Artists who reach back in time examine larger cultural stories.

Photographers Andrea Robbins and Max Becher, represented locally by the Bernard Toale Gallery, have shot Germans who dress up in 19th-century Native American garb.

"It's a green movement, and a way of identifying with victims of American imperialism," says Robbins, who hails from Marblehead.

Boston-area artist Jonathan Santos cordons off public space with caution tape printed with the Gettysburg Address in Morse code. He plans to mount the project on Boston Common later this month.

"I was responding to recent political divisions," he says. Many curators note an upsurge in interest in the Civil War as a response to the red state-blue state divide.

Yinka Shonibare's "Un Ballo in Maschera (A Masked Ball)" at Mass MoCA features a video of Shonibare's staging of the assassination of Sweden's King Gustav III. The video plays forward, then in reverse, suggesting that history circles back on itself. The costumes on display are 18th-century European attire made from African textiles.

Historic re enactors strive for authenticity. Shonibare puts the lie to the very notion of authenticity, and not just by subverting European costume with African textiles. It seems "authentic" African textiles like these were originally produced by the Dutch in the 19th century, who were copying Indonesian batik patterns.

Re enactors' hunger for authenticity is an interesting counterbalance to the historic revisionism that's going on in academic and artistic circles.

"They're so specific and anal retentive about all those little details," says Stephan Jacobs, a Boston artist who photographed World War II re enactments in order to reconsider the black-and-white, heroes-and-villains stories he'd heard about that war. "They know more than the people who lived through it."

Jacobs, represented locally by Gallery Kayafas, was in a show this winter at the University of Rhode Island, "States of Siege," featuring photography of historic reenactment. Judith Tolnick Champa, who curated that show, points out that "authentic" Civil War-era photographs were often staged. In the moment after it happens, history becomes fiction.

Historic re enactment is the lived equivalent of war monuments, but even more immediate. ``It's about being able to touch that which is no longer," says Champa.

That may be true for the hobbyists, but not the artists. ``Re enactment," Smith says, ``is always about the present."

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