



Jolly Good Core Fellows

By Robert Boyd

The annual Core exhibit is always a bit incoherent. After all, the only thing that links these artists is that they happen to be in the same residency program at the same time. But one can say that except for work by one artist, all of the pieces in this exhibit are non-paintings. And even the artist who paints does so somewhat apologetically, by inventing a much older alter-ego to be the putative author of the paintings. So without curatorial oversight, these disparate artists nonetheless managed to create a show that once again declares the death of painting.



Tatiana Istomina, Alissa Blumenthal, "Small Abstractions," early 1950s, 2012, oil on canvas

Even Tatiana Istomina's oil paintings speak to that. The work was described like this in the press release for the exhibit: The three abstract paintings in the show are attributed to Alissa Blumenthal, a little-known American artist of the 20th century. Born in Russia in 1897, she studied art at Vitebsk Practical Art School in 1920- 23 and in 1925 emigrated to the United States. Schooled in the tradition of Russian Constructivism, by the mid-1930s Alissa developed an individual style, which reflected her preoccupation with cinematography and language. Although virtually unknown until her death in 1995, Alissa Blumenthal was one of the first American painters to work with abstraction,



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her geometric compositions predating those of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko by more than 10 years.

Of course, Alissa Blumenthal is a fictional character, an alter-ego. Istomina describes her as a "cover," a way for her to do abstract easel painting. Because in some ways, doing abstract paintings now feels awkward and retrograde. (I write this knowing that there are many abstract painters working whose paintings I admire and who, as far as I can tell, suffer no particular angst over doing abstractions after the "demise" of Modernism. People keep on painting despite painting's many obituaries.)

This awkwardness and even coyness about abstract paintings was one of the subjects of *Exile's Return* by Thomas McEvelley. He basically posited that Modernism reached an ultimate crisis point in the 1960s, and painting was overthrown as the most important Western visual art form. The theories of historical progress that underlie the expansion of the West (the good-- expansion of democracy, citizen rights for women and others, etc.; and the bad, slavery, colonialism, environmental degradation, totalitarian governments, etc.) worked hand in hand with the theories that underlie modernism. As he pungently put it, Abstract art came to seem the ultimate self-delusion of Euro- Modernism, no longer to be viewed with a reverent gaze but with a knowing smirk. Malevich's Black Square became the flag on the masthead of the slave ship, flapping sinisterly in the breeze of history. [Thomas McEvelley, *The Exile's Return*, p. 6, 1993]

McEvelley's problem, as for so many of us, was that he really loved paintings, including abstract paintings. So the entire book is about strategies that painters used to redeem their practice after Modernism foundered on the shoals of history (to mix up the metaphor).

This seems to be what Istomina is doing. By creating a fictional counterpart, she gives herself permission to explore Modernist abstraction without being a modernist. She doesn't have to dive into the quasi-religious sublime of the



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indistinct space of abstraction or color-field painting. She is one step removed. That remove could result in a "knowing smirk," a parody of the earlier forms. But I don't think that's what's happening. I think the remove allows Istomina to explore abstraction as if she were Blumenthal while remaining historically aware. These are the paintings of an artist named Blumenthal while simultaneously being the biography of an artist named Blumenthal.

Istomina has another piece in the show as well--a video made from found footage from the Yalta Conference. As in her Blumenthal paintings, she creates a fiction here--through the addition of narration, the film tells the story of a person who disappeared. The video is titled Yalta:A Story of disappearance, and it can be seen on Istomina's website.

Another work that deals with art history (a favorite subject of contemporary artists) is *Object with the Sound of Its Own Discourse* by Anthea Behm. The object is an Amazon box addressed to Behm with a speaker hidden inside.

The sound the box is making is from a video on YouTube showing a protest by a group of Peruvian indigenous people against laws that would open up more of the Peruvian Amazon to mining and agriculture. The spoken part is in Spanish, which I can only understand a bit of. One can get the gist of what is happening by watching the source video itself.

The piece references *Box With the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961) by Robert Morris. Morris's piece is a key work of conceptual art but could also be seen as a bit of solipsistic cleverness. So perhaps Behm, by including the sound of a political protest, is trying to use conceptual strategies to engage the world instead of navel-gazing.

If so, this seems like a pretty bad way to do so. I take no position on the Peruvian protests. I don't know if the protesters in this video represent a majority of the indigenous Amazonian Peruvians, or if most indigenous people



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welcome increased opportunities for economic development, for example. So in terms of educating a viewer about a political situation, this is not particularly successful unless you are already know something about this situation.

In any case, I don't think Behm had anything as simple in mind as consciousness raising. If that was her purpose, she could have picked a less obscure way to present it. (After all, how many people are going to see *Object with the Sound of Its Own Discourse*? And of those, how many are going to follow up and watch the video? And of those, how many are going to follow that up and research the situation? And of those, how many are going to take concrete action to help affect the situation?) It may be that this piece is simply a critique of the hermetic quality of 1960s conceptualism (and minimalism and post- minimalism)--its refusal to engage the world. And certainly, engagement, participation, and collaboration are important aspects of art today, with critics rewriting the history of art through the lens of participatory art (*Artificial Hells* by Claire Bishop), compiling interviews exploring the various approaches to participatory art (*What We Made* by Tom Finkelpearl) as well as participatory art projects happening (*City Council Meeting*, *Hear Our Houston*) here in Houston. But if critiquing conceptualism's lack of engagement is what Behm is about, why make another object in order to critique Morris's object? In other words, I feel like I'm probably misreading it in some fundamental way.

But so what? It caught my attention and made me think quite a bit. I was fascinated by it on opening night, so much so that I returned the next day so I could record the sound it made (without the noise of a crowd of culture vultures drowning it out). This Amazon box induced me to watch a five minute video of a Peruvian protest in Spanish that I would certainly have never watched otherwise. And I felt like I had to make a little video (above) to properly convey the experience of the box. I put a surprising (to me) amount of time into thinking about this piece. In this regard, *Object with the Sound of*



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Its Own Discourse has to count as one of the most successful pieces in the show.

Ronny Quevedo just got his MFA last year, but he got his BFA in 2003 and has been exhibiting throughout this period. His piece in the Core exhibit is an installation in a darkened room. There are two conga drums in the room. One of them is missing the drumhead. It has a group of colored lights inside it. The other has colored lights resting on top of it. The room also has some other stuff in it, but it's hard to see what that other stuff is in the dim blinking light.

The title is amusing. Quevedo leaves it to the viewer to decide how the phrase, "el hijo de la gran..." should end. The answer seems obvious. Google has a suggestion.

"Hijo de la gran puta" is an insult in Spanish, literally "son of a big whore"--the equivalent of "son of a bitch." But I can't see any obvious connection between the title and the piece. The installation strikes me as an attempt to create a visual analogue to music--an eternal challenge for artists. (I think of the psychedelic posters of artists like Victor Moscoso and Stanley Mouse, for example.) The blinking lights, the congas--one can't help but think of salsa and meringue. (It also made me think of the "melted" conga of Los Carpinteros.)

Miguel Amat's pieces are continuations of the installation, Alter Door, he did at Project Row Houses. Apparently he traded new doors to people for their old doors and made sculptures, such as Alter- Door above. I like to imagine him walking up to a modest house with an old door, knocking on it, and offering to replace it for free. Do the residents think, is this some kind of scam? I would. So to complete this project, he has to be very persuasive. He has to convince the home-dwellers that he isn't crazy or criminal. It would seem then that the project itself involves negotiation. I think whenever art--particularly contemporary art--has contact with the general public, there is always an inherent negotiation. Contemporary art is always saying, in essence,



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I'm not crazy and I'm not trying to con you, even though I recognize that you may have a hard time accepting that I'm "art" as you understand it.

In any case, once Amat has the old doors, he alters them in such a way that they are unmistakably art. Alter-Door has rather dangerous- looking wedges cut out of it and reattached. In another part of the exhibit, Amat has created a sculptural group, Uprising, of giant wedges made out of old doors.



Miguel Amat, Uprising (from the series Imageries of the Multitude/Multitude Imageries), 2013, used doors received in exchange for new doors

All these wedges made of doors make me think of doorstops, which hold doors open. Amat's first challenge to receive these old doors is to convince the home-dweller to open the door. A door propped open is an optimistic image. It speaks to openness (obviously) and inclusion, to sharing and intercourse.

Anna Elise Johnson has made art out of images of world leaders meeting, and there seems like there may be some of that in this large installation, If they were able to conceive or dream another time, perhaps they would be able to live in it. One of the collages, made of transparent images sandwiched within layers of clear acrylic, shows a pair of shaking hands.

Anna Elise Johnson, If they were able to conceive or dream another time, perhaps they would be able to live in it (detail--Handshake on the right, Red



Banner on the left), 2012-2013, center: aluminum, vinyl, plastic, projection;
collages: acrylic, archival digital prints, resin

But the other collages seem at least in part made from well known pieces of art--Liberty Leading the People by Delacroix and The Tower of Babel by Breugel were two I could identify. Both are paintings that could relate to political leaders meeting in summits (Babel symbolizing mutual incomprehension, Liberty being a political goal), but I don't know if that is Johnson's intent.



Anna Elise Johnson, If they were able to conceive or dream another time, perhaps they would be able to live in it (detail), 2012-2013, center: aluminum, vinyl, plastic, projection; collages: acrylic, archival digital prints, resin

In the center of the room is a structure with hanging sheets of plastic. Part of the sheets are transparent, while other parts are "frosted" in such a way that they are semitransparent. From either side of the room, projectors are projecting images onto the plastic sheets.



It seems like Johnson perhaps wanted a similar effect to the broken up transparent images in the acrylic side objects. But it doesn't really work--you couldn't make out the images being projected against the plastic at all--they just looked like two spotlights reflecting off the plastic. (In order to see the projected images, you have to ask someone to stand between the projectors and the plastic. Fortunately, I had Dean Liscum to act as my human movie screen.)



Anna Elise Johnson, *If they were able to conceive or dream another time, perhaps they would be able to live in it* (detail--Handshake on the right, Red Banner on the left), 2012-2013, center: aluminum, vinyl, plastic, projection; collages: acrylic, archival digital prints, resin

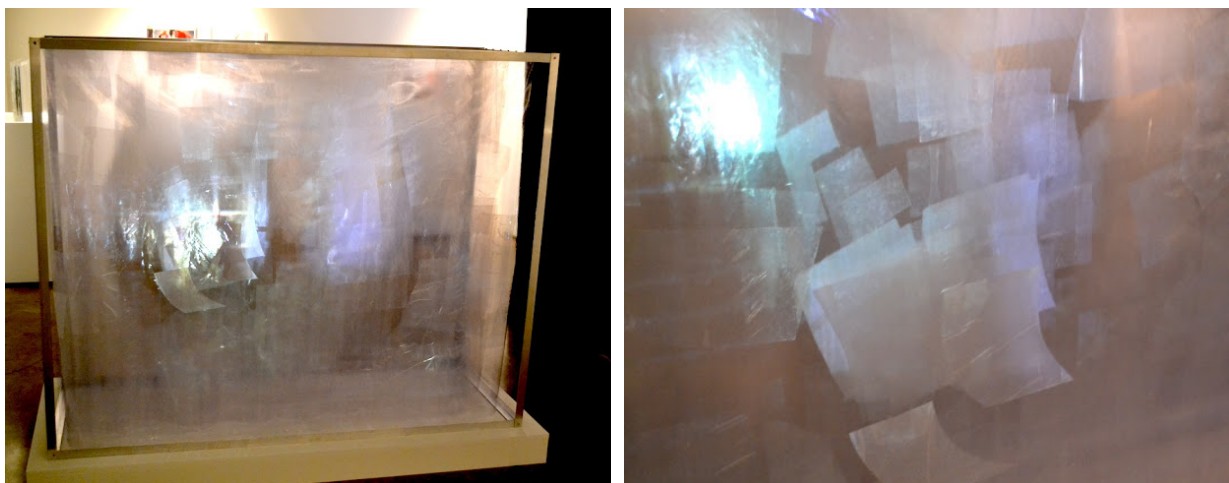
Johnson created a related project called Congress Applauding as part of Main Street Projects, a series of window installations in a building at 3700 Main. But in that piece, the technical issues were resolved better--the projected image on the glass was hazy but visible.

The pieces speak about political processes (summits, addresses to Congress, etc.) that are at least somewhat staged. The work of politics is done in closed rooms. But what Johnson is saying about these bits of political theater is not



clear. The fact that the elements are simultaneously transparent and difficult to read may be important.

Built From Memory (Like Some Other Men) by Madsen Minax consisted of a pile of big old televisions each showing a short, repeating image of what looked like a drag show. Each screen shows a portion of the show repeating a brief bit, some loops of only a few seconds. There wasn't much there there in this piece. It felt like it maybe a little slice of something bigger. This feeling is amplified when one looks at the projects on Minax's website--they seem so much more complete and accomplished than Built From Memory (Like Some Other Men), which in comparison feels very tentative.



Anna Elise Johnson, If they were able to conceive or dream another time, perhaps they would be able to live in it (detail--center structure)), 2012-2013, center: aluminum, vinyl, plastic, projection; collages: acrylic, archival digital prints, resin

Jang Soon Im has a show up right now at the Joanna. He had one piece in the Core exhibit, and like Madsen Minax's, it felt a bit incomplete. However, this video was so visually overwhelming that I can't complain. It consisted of two rectangular sides, each a different, constantly changing color. Within each rectangle were silhouettes that appeared to come from Asian war epics--archers, swordsmen, etc. The fast cuts and changing colors gave the piece a somewhat stroboscopic effect. In terms of sheer visual overload, it was



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extremely satisfying.

Senalka McDonald does some freaky photography and video--look at her website for some examples. As a Real One seems like an exception to her usual work--if not a new direction. It appears to be the ghostly remnant of an image of someone running. As a composition, it is elegant and spare. The panel on the left barely has any visible pigment at all. I find it a haunting image--and kind of the visual opposite of Jang Soon Im.