

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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UnCommon Territories at Heaven Gallery

by **Jeriah Hildwine**

Friday (2/19/10), Heaven Gallery unveiled “UnCommon Territories,” an exhibition of SAIC grad students Marissa Benedict, Christopher Bradley, Scott Carter, Lauren Carter, Younghwan Choi, Colleen Coleman, Allison Fall, Elise Goldstein, Katya Grokhovsky, Samantha Hill, Holly Holmes, Scott Jarrett, Selena Jones, Maya Mackrandilal, Lisa Nonken, Luis Palacios, Ben Stagl, Stephanie Victa, and Andrew Norm Wilson. All are MFA Sculpture candidates except Allison Fall who is Ceramics.

This show is best seen in light of New Blood III, a recent show of performance pieces by SAIC grad students which took place at the Chicago Cultural Center (Nov. 20-22, 2009). Todd Frugia, Co-Artistic Director of Rooms Productions, wrote a review of that show, and in what is looking to me less and less like coincidence, the three artists he reviewed were the same three who stood out to me from UnCommon Territories.



Christopher Bradley

Christopher Bradley’s “Wiper Drawings: Happiness is” at New Blood III were hypnotic, his presentation also theatrical. The amplified audio of the wiper’s sound was particularly mesmerizing. I

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also enjoyed his garage door piece at MVSEVM as part of “Exhibition 4.01162010” (MVSEVM’s exhibition titles are, conveniently, the date on which they open). Bradley had two pieces at UnCommon Territories, and one of them wasn’t too far from what I’d experienced of his work: a wall-mounted windshield wiper with a fabric sleeve on like (yes, like from a jacket); the result was a flapping, reciprocating machine which made some noise and was accumulating some kind of mark on the wall.

Bradley’s other piece was an aluminum container of french fries in a deep layer of ketchup, set on a pedestal. By the time I arrived they were quite cold, although I hear they were fresh when installed and completely filled the space with their smell. I can already hear the distant voices explaining to me how it’s about ephemerality and sculpture that uses all of your senses, and I’m certain that if I were to hear Bradley explain the piece, I would find at least his thought process interesting. On their own, however, I was less interested in this piece than Bradley’s other work. Or, if one preferred to rephrase this criticism in the form of a compliment, “Bradley’s mechanical sculptures are more interesting than a cold plate of fries.” (After the reception closed, viewers were encouraged, or at least permitted, to eat the fries. I tried one, but of course, they’d been sitting out for about five hours, and so were unsurprisingly pretty lousy.)

What I like about Bradley’s work is that it encourages a playful fascination with everyday phenomena without being stupid about it. Windshield wipers and garage doors really are fascinating things, if you take a good look at them and think about them for a bit, but they’re also ordinary, and Bradley acknowledges this by, apparently, not taking them any more seriously than they deserve. It may be fairly shallow water he’s paddling, but he makes a compelling case to join him.

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Allison Fall

Allison Fall's performance "Tensile" at the Chicago Cultural Center, which was a dance-like interaction with taut elastic sheets, was theatrical and really gorgeous. Allison is technically in the Ceramics department at SAIC, but fits in pretty well with the sculpture crowd. Her dynamic interaction with the long sheets of latex explored the mechanical properties of the material as well suggestion a physical and emotional tension as implied by the title. It was also a hell of a lot of fun to watch.

I've had conversations with Allison about her works in progress, and one of these projects linked her interests in both performance and ceramics. She described to me a meditative process of making small porcelain "drops," and then interacting with them in a physical performance. I believe at one point her idea had been to strew them across a floor and then dance on them, bare-footed, breaking the drops and bloodying her feet, which sounded amazing to me. As of our last conversation, Allison had discovered that dancing on the porcelain drops didn't actually break them, and so she was rethinking her strategy for the performance.

I can only imagine that she's still in the process of figuring out the ideal manifestation of this performance, as its embodiment in UnCommon Territories felt like half experiment, half gesture of frustration. Allison, warmly dressed, sat in an inflatable kiddie pool on the back deck of Heaven, drinking whiskey out of a water bottle and chatting informally with those around her. The bottom of a pool contained a few inches' depth worth of the porcelain "drops," which were circles about the size of a nickel and the shape of a red blood cell: circular, with a thick edge and a thin center. Viewers were invited to join Allison in the pool; I accepted. I let handfuls of the

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drops run through my fingers, imagining their possibilities. I'm curious and excited to see what they become.



Elise Goldstein

Elise Goldstein's *Open Seclusion* was one of the strongest pieces in *New Blood III*, and I'm not just saying that because we're friends. Elise has some background in theater, and she used it to good effect in this piece. She had the absolutely perfect space (the Cultural Center's Gars Hall) for this piece, huge and elegant, rendered cavernous by darkness. Elise transformed this space into the perfect stage for her performance, in which she had placed a row of beds, small and institutional in their simplicity. Elise, blindfolded with a locking mask that felt like a prop from an erotic role-playing session based on the movie *Saw*, silently ripped apart pillows and searching through the stuffing. Occasionally, she would find a key, and try it in the lock at the back of the mask: none of them worked. All the while, her co-performer read from a variety of texts dealing in one way or another with psychiatric disorders and treatment. The implicit frustration and neurosis in tearing through bedding in search of the key that will finally unlock her mask gave Elise's performance a chilling emotional impact. Mental illness is a tough subject, easy to address glibly and difficult to deal with responsibly. Elise knows her material and handles it well, delivering her content wrapped in a theatrical, aestheticized context that, like a spoonful of sugar, helps the medicine go down.

Elise has moved on to new subject matter, at least for now, and fortunately so: she's said what she had to say about the former topic, and quite rightly sees no sense in repeating herself. She has moved on

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to new subjects, but like Allison Fall and her porcelain drops, hasn't quite figured out what to do with them yet. Her new piece, titled, 'You may laugh and say, "Not here. Too personal, too hungry, no business, too close," but even miracles need a witness' was an exploration of BDSM lifestyles and her personal interest in them, and in particular her relationship with a new partner who shares her interests.

The performance was installed in a small room; viewers entered through a door (with a functional lock, I noticed) and entered a space containing three primary salient features: a bed, a curtain which divided the room from a space beyond, and a number of sex toys hanging on the wall: a paddle, a cat o' nine tails, a bridle, a riding crop. Over the bed was suspended an illuminated sign, facing downwards (so it could only be read by a person laying on the bed); it read "Yes, this is the bed where it happens." The sign, like the toys, appeared laser-cut from dark-stained wood. The viewer was encouraged to enter the space and lay down on the bed; behind the curtain, Elise read both sides of a transcribed conversation she'd had with her current partner about BDSM.

I learned that Elise put this piece together in under a week, having the idea on Monday for a show opening Friday, which is an impressive accomplishment in and of itself, considering the finished and polished appearance of the installation. Everything was up to Elise's usual standard of carefully considered aesthetic decisions and meticulous execution. Yet the piece itself didn't have nearly the effect on me that Open Seclusion did. I ruminated on this, knowing that sooner or later Elise and I would talk about the piece. As I told her the next day over coffee, I think the main difference for me was that this piece didn't make me uncomfortable, the way her stronger work does. Part of this is intrinsic to the subject matter: sex is fun, mental illness isn't, and of course that's going to come across in the work. And, of course, not all art needs to make the viewer uncomfortable: Chris Bradley's very successful works are more joyful than foreboding, and Allison Fall's Tensile was intense but not menacing.

I did consider the possibility that I was unfairly expecting Elise to keep making work that conformed to a certain idea I had about her, but I don't think that's it. It may be that if the work is about something fun (like fucking), then it should feel that way, that the work should be more playful. Or it may be that there's serious stuff going on, that just hasn't come to the surface yet. Certainly I don't advocate a retrograde step, retreating into the safe territory of familiar (if painful) subject matter which resulted in successful past works: the only way out, is through.

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My take-away from this rumination is that although presented as a gallery exhibition, a show presented by MFA students who must be hard at work preparing for their thesis exhibitions is more accurately seen as a sort of off-site open studio. With this exhibition a sort of hastily-prepared preview, and New Blood III as a more accurate metric of the type of work these artists are capable of creating, the signs are auspicious for some exciting new work in the near future. All three of these artists are second-year MFA candidates (Chris and Elise in Sculpture, Allison in ceramics), and I can say without hesitation that we can all expect very impressive things from them in their upcoming thesis shows.

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