

PARABELLUM KENNY COLE FIRES THE FIRST SHOT

In his first solo museum show, Kenny Cole has created what he calls an immersive environment of interactive paintings. Audiences entering the University of Maine Museum of Art's Zillman Gallery will likely feel enveloped by his grid of double-sided paintings hung ceiling to floor.

The wall-to-wall immersive engagement of canvases is hinged to open throughout, revealing fully composed flip-sides as well as composed surfaces flush with the wall. The entirety functions as a narrative, with poetry and layered imagery created with gouache on vintage newspaper, elements of paper mache and sumi ink on canvas. Cole explores a rationale developed for this exhibition titled "Parabellum," meaning "Prepare for War".

Expressed in gallery materials separate from the artwork, the backstory is defined as the trajectory of two characters in history, Baines Revere and Hiram Maxim, one fictional the other actual.

Cole explores these identities in tandem through the eyes of the fictional person using a complex of inter-weaving of images and poetry. A core feature anchoring the artist's premise is that the two knew each other and lived during the time of the Civil War, with Revere forming his identity at that time. The actual personage of Hiram Maxim later became successful as the inventor of the automatic machine gun. Baines Revere is the fictional identity Cole assumes as the creator of this artwork.

He explores his character's complexity across a multi-surface tableaux meticulously assembled to include newspapers from the era. Cole found the newsprint when replacing floorboards in his house and has embedded or layered this newsprint into the artwork. In descriptive notes, again separate from the artwork, Cole quotes Ulysses S. Grant in a passage where the general expresses compassion for terrified men while noting another officer's lack of sympathy.

The artist essentially articulates his fictional character of Baines Revere as someone perhaps affected by post-traumatic stress, a condition unnamed at the time of the Civil War. The imagined persona of Baines is described by Cole as "anxious and doubtful about what he came to see as 'perpetual war' viewed with great trepidation. [This trauma] compelled him to try and express his visionary sense and innate pacifism through his artistic creations...Let's say these creations were discovered installed floor to ceiling in the parlor of a Sangerville home in 2005 and are now on exhibit for the first time..."

FACT VS. FICTION

Creatively, folk toys, popular comics and zine culture, as well as factual historical accounts influence Cole's style. The types of research conducted by the artist include absorbing daily news information blended into a tactic called "culture jamming." His method reflects an obsession with image and text, in this case layered as graphic musings that undermine the museum as a source of historical fact. Cole's work has physicality and rich content, which speaks of the past, present and to the future.

University of Maine Museum of Art's curator George Kinghorn spoke by phone from December's Miami Art Fairs with enthusiasm about showing Cole's artwork in January. He mentioned the importance of rapport and mentorship as essential for encouraging artists to develop their strongest work, a sentiment echoed by the artist's gallerist, Aucocisco Gallery director Andy Verzosa. Both agree that Kenny Cole is among the best political artists creating today. Kinghorn pointed out that his work could certainly hold its own within the international dialogue of Miami's Art Fairs.

Verzosa noted that it was only after Cole had moved from New York to Maine in 1994 that the artist began to think about social activism, which Verzosa recognizes as an integral feature of

Cole's work and an important part of Maine's identity. He went on to say that the artist's talent was, in a sense, incubated within the state's cultural scene, rich in social activism, which stylistically allowed the components of Kenny Cole's aesthetic to reach maturity.

Kinghorn primarily learned of Kenny's work through institutional channels: The Center for Maine Contemporary Art Biennial plus "I-95" Triennial. Verzosa became aware of Kenny's work by noting his name coming up in relation to various grass-roots activist organizations, such as the Union of Maine Visual Artists, in which the artist continues to be creatively engaged.

Kinghorn made several studio visits during the development of this new body of work, which artist and curator admit stretches Cole's aesthetic range. The immersive approach is something Cole has experimented with in several earlier situations; however, this opportunity showcases the collaborative dialogue between artist and curator brought to fruition.

Cole explains that he wanted to work with Kinghorn because he sought him out - a first for Cole. On the flip side, Kinghorn noted that his curatorial mission is to acknowledge talent when it exists. He especially likes Cole's use of gouache and the material's extremely flat, matte surface. He says that when all of the panels are closed, the installation takes on the presence of a graphic motif, a view referencing the influence of Jasper Johns.

Kinghorn went on to say that he looks forward to Cole's conceptual blanketing of Zillman Gallery and the prospect of University of Maine Museum of Art audiences flipping open the paintings to finding a detailed reverse side as well as detail on dimensional surfaces against the wall. These three elements of interplay at once should make for interesting viewing.

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