

understood, a concept of bourgeois society)—that is, a concept that recodes an opaque and unequal process of appropriation as a transparent one of supposedly free and equal interchange and communication.” In such transnationalist histories, cultural transactions do not merely take place in a poetic sense, but inevitably also in a neoliberal capitalist sense, regardless of whether it is intentional, acknowledged, or desired.

The essentialism with which Moon's work might be seen as a benign reflection of globe-eating hybridization is evidence that the work embodies the Western poststructuralist canon as it has enveloped a globalized culture. At its most glib and deliciously eclectic, this canon does not take into account the high stakes involved or the possibilities and difficulties of postcolonial politics and culture. In it, hybridization, as an aspect of appropriation, is regarded as a fundamental good, an avenue of invention, as in the case of Moon's work, in which the iconography becomes a decorative vocabulary that both inscribes and evades identification. Cultural hegemony is maintained, along with its commodified seductiveness, exemplified by Moon's appropriation of such ubiquitous commercial icons as *Angry Birds* and the Botan dog. The viewer is being asked to buy in, to receive a message about contemporary culture that is seen on the surface as either apolitical or about cultural identity when, in fact, the work is about the commodification and train wreck of neoliberal, postmodern global cultures.

In some of her works, Moon includes an avian-human hybrid, an altered play on images she found in *Munjado* paintings of the Choson period (1392–1910) from the *Minhwa* tradition. Traditional *Munjado* painting includes Chinese characters communicating Confucian principles of virtue such as filial piety, loyalty, trust, propriety, etc. The composite figure in Moon's paintings has a delicate sparrow-like body with a charming female face and carries a letter in its beak. It is a form metaphorically exact for her work: a hybrid creature carrying sealed messages. Like the banality in letter writing—so few are really about anything significant—this communication takes place on a personal, everyday level.

In the current political climate, where hybridity and otherness are under attack even in diversified cultures such as the United States and Western Europe, and inclusivity isn't to be assumed, the conversation about Moon's work should be framed within a context that doesn't omit the Global South and the fact of neoliberal global dominance—and that doesn't sidestep the unraveling of knotty intersectionality. Her work, as exhibited in Richmond, is complex and fresh in this milieu. It offers the opportunity to look at the mix of images that form the discourse of late capitalist culture, to see threads of its interactions over time, and to consider current ideological conditions. This is truly meaningful, as long as we don't mystify the babble or revel in it as playfully indecipherable. If Moon's message appears benign—and perhaps is banal—that is evidence that it is important, and needs to be recognized.

—Dinah Ryan



## Mystery and Benevolence

American Folk Art Museum, New York

In *Mystery and Benevolence: Masonic and Odd Fellows Folk Art From the Kendra and Allan Daniel Collection* (January 21–May 8, 2016), an exhibition recently held at the American Folk Art Museum in New York, the material culture of America's fraternal societies was displayed in all its tasseled glory. Focusing on the Independent Order of Odd Fellows and the Freemasons in particular, the exhibition incorporated a variety of furniture, craft, costumes, and art—all part of a collection of almost 200 ceremonial objects and artworks, dating from the late 18th century through the mid-20th century, recently given to the museum.

Items on display included ceremonial axes, staffs with symbolic head carvings, banners, clocks, and ceremonial aprons. Smaller, regional groups—such as Indiana's Order of Owls and the problematically named Improved Order of Red Men—were also represented alongside work pertaining to Freemasonry. Although their pop cultural profile may have faded in recent decades, fraternities like these are still active, and continue to carry strong associations with mysticism and the occult. Formally speaking, the objects on display were characterized by an unsettling combination of mystical symbolism, naïve execution, and an unchecked appetite for pageantry; the overall effect of seeing them was a little like viewing a Renaissance altarpiece, albeit with different dominant imagery. Yet the information provided by the museum about the meaning and function of the symbols and objects on view suggested that these fraternities were more like workers' guilds with a charitable agenda than they were places for (white, middle-aged) men to commune with

the spirit world. Walking through the exhibition, then, I found myself wondering: how does a mandate of self-improvement and responsible citizenship become conflated with mysticism?

In his book *Occult America: The Secret History of How Mysticism Shaped Our Nation* (2009), author Mitch Horowitz states that “early American Freemasons held a sense of breaking with an Old World past in which one overarching authority regulated the exchange of religious ideas and sought to position itself as an intermediary between the individual and the spiritual search.” Whereas belief in a “higher power” of some kind was a prerequisite to joining many fraternities, what came through strongly from the objects on display at the American Folk Art Museum was that, by removing that organized religious intermediary, the individual effectively became the starting and end point of the spiritual search to which Horowitz refers. Consequently, spiritual transcendence becomes achievable through self-reliance. As with altarpieces, fraternal imagery was used to remind and instruct believers on how to live a better life, and the exhibition went into some depth in discussing themes that were significant to such fraternities, such as wisdom, labor, fellowship, and charity. Prominent symbols among the fraternities considered include the open hand with a heart on the palm to represent sincerity; an ax with a halberd is used by Odd Fellows to remind them that they are “pioneers in the pathway of life,” with beehives symbolizing labor and industriousness among both Freemasons and Odd Fellows.

To me—a Canadian—this approach to the arcane

ABOVE: Unknown, *Independent Order of Odd Fellows Banner*, 1900–1920, paint on canvas with wood and metal, 88 1/2 x 71 inches [photo: José Andrés Ramírez; courtesy of American Folk Art Museum, New York]



## It Can Howl

### Atlanta Contemporary, Atlanta

felt distinctly American. Standing in a museum located just blocks from Trump Tower, I also wondered if the exhibition could yield some insight into a mystery being pondered by media around the world: the political rise of Donald Trump. Although Trump himself may not have any fraternal ties, he certainly preaches the gospel of self-reliance, to say nothing of the ostentatious flair his ethos shares with everything in the exhibition. (Were he involved with fraternal life, however, he would be keeping presidential company: it seems that George Washington was a Freemason, as were Benjamin Franklin and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.)

Whereas during the Renaissance the use of systematized imagery was a way to spread the tenets of Roman Catholicism in a time of widespread illiteracy, in the case of the fraternities considered here, we learn that “the symbolic lexicon that is fully understood only by a fraternity’s own members, and whose practices may not be observed by outsiders, are protective veils that set the fraternity apart and separate from the mainstream, and also serve to bond its members closely to one another.” An understanding of the symbols, then, gains one entry not only to the fraternity but, it seems, to its “wisdom”—an asset that was repeatedly referenced in the exhibition’s literature, yet never quite explained. Perhaps to do so would defeat the point.

Interestingly, the opacity of this lexicon was further compounded by the isolated way in which the symbols were necessarily presented—that is, in the fact that they were being shown in a museum, rather than a fraternal hall or lodge. Permeating the exhibition was a deafening absence of big-picture historical narrative, which was filled in by the odd bit of contextual trivia provided about specific objects. Given the emphasis on self-reliance and personal accountability, perhaps the objects are not intended to have their own story, but rather to illuminate the path of an individual member’s life, supporting and shaping his narrative, instead of telling a collective story.

Whether this is an accurate analysis of an individualist tradition I suppose I’ll never know: for one thing, I’m a woman. Within the context of an exhibition though, this absence of context seemed to place these objects in a strange no-man’s land that exists between very real power and utter nonsense. Not unlike the way Trump does.

—Elizabeth Grant

Roots, TV monitors, a concrete dog, piled bricks, a “welcome” sign, Rubbermaid trashcans, and enamelware bowls stuffed with fake food give *It Can Howl*, a group exhibition on view at the Atlanta Contemporary [May 19–August 7, 2016], the total effect of the yard sales, storage unit auctions, and garage workshops I remember from my childhood in Georgia. Described in the press release as a look at “numerous experiences of the American South,” the exhibition is refreshingly not a “who’s who” survey of contemporary Southern artists, but instead a cross-section of some of the most exciting young artists working today, along with voices from the past, all affectionately approached through a regional lens.

The works greeting visitors just outside the gallery are Chloe Seibert’s *Concrete Expression #25* (2015)—a gray relief of a manic, shitty grin—and Hayley Silverman’s light-up boob bandle, *Spare Ribs I* (2016). Imagine the pair of works as a smirking “Her,” telling viewers that this exhibition is animated with fierce, politicized bodies and an urgency to play. This energy also inhabits Danielle Dean’s *Baby Girl* (2012), an awkwardly acted, raw, cyclical 12-minute video narrative exploring the artist’s own multinational identity. Dean cast members of her family to perform her collaged, part-found and part-original script, which took its readymade narrative structure from Nigerian soap opera. In doing so, she builds a compelling intersectional mini-saga that connects the dots between corporate greed in Nigeria, institutionalized racism in the United States, and global issues of feminism and familial discord.

Another powerful video in the exhibition is Martine Syms’ *Lessons I-XXX* (2014–present), part of an ongoing project consisting of digitally scrubbed images and videos, sequenced into a masterly, staccato orchestra of mass culture. Syms’ acute ability to find a range of depth and complexity in such a flicker of cuts suggests that an ongoing Final Cut Pro file is perhaps the most appropriate record-keeping software for our clip-soaked lives.

This seemingly generational predilection for amalgam and collage also inhabits Silverman’s resin-fused bowls of soup, in which fake ramen noodles swim with silk flowers and strange groups of figurines, resulting in sculptures reminiscent of the sand trays used in art therapy. In a similar spirit, works by the late, Georgian-born artist Bessie Harvey (1929–1994) engage a different kind of readymade: the natural form of a tree, which in her root sculptures transforms into brightly decorated personalities accentuated with paint, cloth, beads, and string. Harvey’s inclusion here brings a welcome break from the cut-and-paste narrative that surrounds generalization about emerging artists in the digital age, as a break from usual presentations of work by self-taught artists who, like Harvey, are often

exhibited separately, relegated to adjacent categories of “folk” or “outsider” artists. Although there are several of Harvey’s large-scale works on display at the Atlanta Contemporary, the star among them is a small, single face placed near a corner of the room: *The Poison of the Lying Tongues* (1987), a sculpture of found wood, painted black except for four gnarled bright red tongues spilling out of a toothy mouth.

Nancy Lupo’s *Train* (2015) is another reimagining of quotidian, mundane materials. The work comprises nine fire-engine red plastic trashcans, hitched together and covered with consumables—cherries on one can, toilet paper, quail eggs, and candies on others—materials that aren’t quite, but are well on their way to being, garbage. Linked together, the trashcans effectively recall Southern Railway steam engines, with their cars full of coal, corn, diapers, and other products for American consumption.

In contrast with these symbolically packed videos and materially fierce sculptures, three ghosts in the room provide a cooler repose. Lili Renaud-Dewar’s four-channel black-and-white video *I don’t know what a conceptual artist looks like* (2012) follows the artist’s black-painted, naked body as it oscillates around an empty gallery space—a dance which queasily references both the history of blackface and that of the reclining female nude so often depicted between similar institutional walls. Renaud-Dewar’s intensely physical, inwardly focused movements read as an attempt to exorcise these Western cultural demons. Chloe Seibert’s bucket-brained concrete dog, poised to howl, and her all-caps “WELCOME” sign written in letters roughly hammered into the largest wall in the space, provide the show with humorous yet still heavy anti-heroes. And Jeanine Oleson’s brick shrine, *Building an empire and other things of no consequence ... (detail of ziggurat)* (2009), is a structure that, although dense and glowing, seems to evade our attention, perhaps communing instead with something we cannot see.

I fled the South the moment I turned 18; *It Can Howl* spoke to me as an artist reimagining a regional experience I once so self-consciously tried to reject. The show reflects a commonality to Southern identity that can be recognized across regional borders as a galvanizing, constructive background. The exhibition’s “howl” is an ebullient, sovereign, and challenging cry from the eight women presented; I am grateful to have heard and identified myself in their chorus.

—Erin Jane Nelson

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