

Arts » Visual Art

November 05, 2014

Art review: Bill Thelen's visual double entendre at Spectre Arts

By Amy White

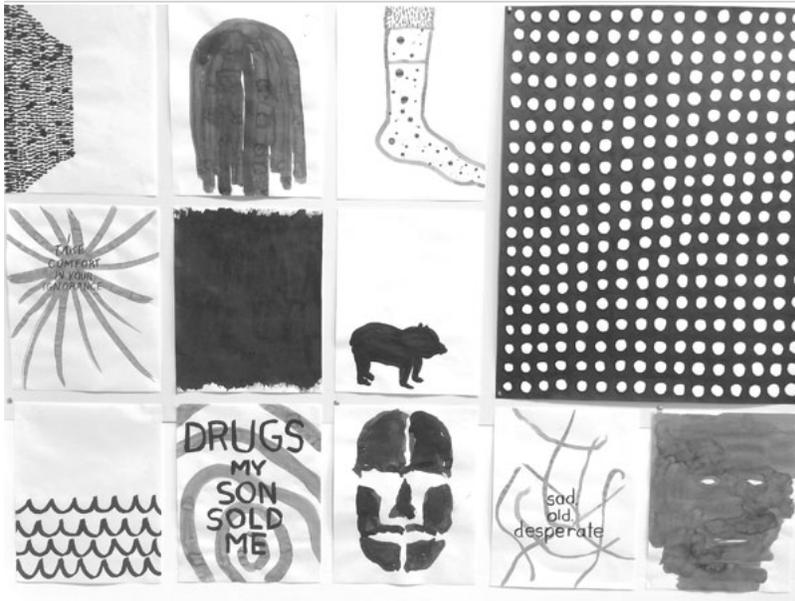


Photo courtesy Bill Thelen / Spectre Arts

A selection of drawings from *_low_ hanging fruit* as seen at Spectre Arts

On the 1984 single "Erotic City," Prince made a complex move. Claiming a performance by Parliament–Funkadelic as inspiration, the sly musician (who at times has been identified only by a wordless symbol) pushed the idea of the double entendre to its FCC–tolerated limits, risking steep fines for radio stations, by maintaining that the word "fuck" was, in fact, "funk." We knew what we were hearing, but in order for the song to be played publically, we were asked to do some translating in our heads, toggling between "F" words as we rocked out to Prince's ornately sexualized groove.

The meaning of "double entendre" is hearing two ways, receiving double meanings. **Bill Thelen's *_low_ hanging fruit* at Spectre Arts in Durham**, which includes a shout–out to "Erotic City," traffics in such doubling. But Thelen goes further, cashing in on a kaleidoscopic ambiguity, banking on our dazzling capacity for projection and distortion, desire and dumb subjectivity.

The exhibition consists of several hundred works in sumi ink on bamboo paper, which cover the walls in loosely constructed grids. Each drawing evolves a single theme—visual, conceptual, textual. The show can be read as an immersive Rorschach test, with individual drawings functioning as forceful projective stimuli. There's a cinematic impulse at play as we jump–cut from frame to frame. It's a multi–dimensional **Kuleshov experiment** from which we each walk away with a different story to tell.

On a trip to China in 2013, Thelen acquired a set of sumi brushes and ink.

When he got back to his Raleigh studio, he began to incorporate them into his longstanding, idiosyncratic drawing practice. Thelen has been producing and showing his art for years, generating bodies of work that undermine preconceptions about authorial voice in exhibitions so disparate they feel like group shows. He is also part of the Team Lump collective, another strategy for destabilizing the idea of individual expression. As the director of **Lump Gallery**, Thelen has cultivated a curatorial eye and mind, devoting time and energy to the work of others. It is worthwhile to consider his work through this lens of indeterminate authorial identity, which raises questions about public clichés, subcultural codes and intrapersonal obsessions. Thelen's work generates a tension between what appears to be an almost confessional personal narrative and apersonal, theoretical abstraction.

Riddled with riddles, icons and loaded texts, *_low_hanging_fruit* is a self-guided tour through a labyrinth of psychic and psychosexual triggers. Text pieces include references to contemporary art, such as "Genital Panic," a fragment of the title of Valie Export's confrontational 1969 feminist performance in which she entered a public movie theater wearing crotchless leather pants. Other word clusters include "Gang Bang," "Inability to Construct a Future" and "Lies My Mother Told Me." AIDS and death are undercurrents in the show, which includes funerary grids of black-ink washed pages, punctuated by occasional lone sheets of day-glo orange that inject the space with a sense of urgency. On one wall we encounter the painted elegiac phrase "You Died." On another, "I Miss You."

Within Thelen's onslaught of imagery, there's plenty of fuel for projection. We find a hand grenade, fingers displaying a pharmaceutical capsule, a cocktail, a cockroach, a headless male torso, a bear, a sketchy approximation of the Ralph Lauren Polo shirt logo—and abstract rivulets of diluted ink. Think fast: What drug is that? What's in that cocktail? Name that fluid ...

This article appeared in print with the headline "Look twice"

Tags: **Visual Art**

latest in visual art

Eye of the Beholder: Casey Cook's essential shapes and William H. Mumler's spirit photography

Cook's *Geometric Desire* is on view at LIGHT Art + Design, while Mumler's spirit photo anchors a mini-exhibit at the Ackland

by Chris Vitiello

Eye of the Beholder: Humanity and artifice square off in a safe portraiture show at NCMA and a controversial one at Meredith College

Small Treasures is currently on view at NCMA; *American Girls* is at Meredith College

by Chris Vitiello

Art review: Fine photography books escape from the coffee table to the art gallery

We review *Picture Books* at the Power Plant Gallery

by Lisa Sorg

more by amy white

Dance reviews: Tere O'Connor at the American Dance Festival

Varieties of choreographic experience in O'Connor's overdue ADF debut

by Amy White

Gabriel Dawe's *Plexus No. 25* activates the connection between spectator and spectrum

Showing at CAM Raleigh through August 31

by Amy White