

LET'S TALK ARTS

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consideration to the arts in southeast missouri

A Question & Answer Session with Artists Michael Baird & Justin Henry Miller

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By: Dr. Joni Hand

Artists Michael Baird and Justin Henry Miller will partner to bring "Dark Wonders" with painting, installation, and puppetry to the Arts Council of Southeast Missouri from October 7 – 29, 2016. In a recent interview by Dr. Joni Hand, Assistant Professor of Art History at Southeast Missouri State University, the artists discuss their fascinations with science fiction, references to genre art, and their technical processes.

JH: Both of you approach your work through a lens of nostalgia, Michael looking at a child's sense of wonder, and Justin to a purity in the genetic make-up of living beings. Do you see your works offering an alternative to the encroachment of technology?

MB: I love technology. In fact, in this show, I will be displaying remote controlled creatures, automated critters, audio-activated lighting effects, and more. All of these live alongside manually operated puppets and big fake landscape forms. I have created this series of work especially with the feeling of wonder I receive from old science fiction books, movies and TV shows where the reader/viewer was invited to imagine what might await us in the far-off regions of outer space. The endless horizon technology presents can be very exciting.

JHM: I am not necessarily looking to offer up alternatives as much as I am an observer influenced by the ever changing world around me. I am concerned with our societal need to see the next technological breakthrough without considering the backlash, side effects, or mishaps along the way. I see my artwork more as cautionary tales. Each work is little window into what could be.

JH: Science fiction informs both of you and your work. Are there any specific examples from this genre that you are especially influenced by?

MB: I adore really cheesy B movies from the 1950s through 70s. Giant monsters, ridiculous costumes, pathetic plot lines, there is just something charming about them. I would have a hard time pointing to anything specific as an influence for this work. I love *Gamera*, *Angry Red Planet*, *Lost In Space*, *The Green Slime*, *The X From Outer Space*, and *Ultraman* to name just a few.

JHM: For me an overriding attraction to science fiction comes from the endless possibilities the genre endorses. Worlds are created where seemingly anything is possible. I have become increasingly interested in the closing gap between science fiction and science fact. Take for instance cloning. This is a scientific practice that I am sure my parent's generation would have deemed fiction earlier in their lives, now it has become a reality.

I find myself drawn to films that use the concept of synthetic mimicry to question what it means to be human. In essence films that deal with the creation of artificial intelligence. These include *Blade Runner*, *Ex Machina*, *Terminator*, etc. Even the c3po and r2d2 characters of *Star Wars* seem at times "human" to me.

JH: What made each of you interested in exhibiting together?

MB: When the Arts Council invited me to exhibit my work again, I was concerned that I would struggle to fill their generous space with my installation. Thankfully, the Arts Council suggested that I could exhibit with Professor Miller. I have always adored his fantastically immersive paintings and his wild imagination, so I was ecstatic. The more the idea soaked in, the more exciting the pairing became to me.

JHM: Michael and I both installed separate shows at the Arts Council in the Fall of 2013. After experiencing each other's work firsthand I think there was a mutual admiration and realization that we shared several similar interests. When Murielle Gaither, the Director of the Arts Council, approached me about exhibiting with Michael I enthusiastically jumped at the opportunity. The macabre nature of work makes for a good pairing, especially for the month of October with Halloween and the Arts Council's 'Trick-Art-Treat' event.

JH: Your artists' statements outline things that are lacking or skewed in contemporary society, yet both of you embrace play and whimsy in your work. How do you see the serious nature of your intent coexisting with this playfulness?

MB: Play is serious. In children, it is a means to learn about the world. The type of play

may change as we age, but we must never stop playing, never stop using our imaginations to probe the limits of our inner and outer universe. Whimsy too, is crucial in many ways. Whimsy allows us to address ideas that would otherwise be repulsive, taboo, or just plain boring. My intent in bringing this installation to the public is to invite a little whimsy, a bit of playfulness, and with luck a little wonder into the viewers' lives. We can never have too much wonder.

JHM: I enjoy artwork with a certain push-pull experience. That is to say I like being seduced into an artwork because of its approachable aesthetic only to find myself in a content-rich message. I try to pull viewers into my work with candy-coated palettes, high technical resolve, and cartoonish characters. Once pulled in hopefully the viewer finds something deeper. A perfect example of this would be an artist like Takashi Murakami. If you look at his mushroom painting series you at first glance seem to be simply be looking at candy-colored mushroom characters pulled from a manga comic. However, after closer inspection of the composition and a consideration of Murakami's Japanese heritage you realize a more ominous connection to the mushroom cloud and the WWII bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

JH: Which artists are you influenced by and why?

MB: I am influenced by slews of artists. Though some of my most beloved would be Jim Henson for his work toward bringing puppetry to adult audiences, Douglas Adams for his unbound humor and imagination, and Eiji Tsuburaya for his work in making giant monsters a cinematic phenomenon.

JHM: From a technical standpoint I love looking at the Dutch Golden Age painters. Abraham Mignon is a particular favorite of mine from this era. Not only are their works exquisitely crafted but I love the visual payoff of viewing them in person. Housed within their still lifes and floral paintings you often find little micro-worlds, insects chasing other insects, and other tiny details. I similarly try to encode little visual details within the larger narrative of my paintings. In a similar, but more bizarre way, I am a fan of Hieronymus Bosch. I remember seeing his most famous work, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, in the Prado and I think that by the time I left the museum I had returned to that painting 3 or 4 times. I love paintings that keep you coming back to discover something new. Not to mention his paintings have some downright wild stuff going on in them. From a more contemporary standpoint I have found myself increasingly drawn to several pop surrealist artists like, Mark Ryden, Jeff Soto, and Camille Rose Garcia. Aside from their technical prowess, I find myself drawn to their social consciousness.

JH: How do the materials and processes of your art making support the overall intent of your work?

MB: The materials I use vary widely depending on my physical needs. Installations create

huge challenges that demand creative solutions. However, I tend to utilize materials and processes that present a softer, more organic appearance. I feel like this is helpful in creating an approachable atmosphere that I hope viewers will feel comfortable investigating, even if it's really weird.

JHM: On a technical level I like for my paintings to feel void of an artist's hand. I want my images to feel somewhat mechanically made. I think this plays into our present day where we consume so many images through a screen or monitor and where visual products themselves are increasingly synthetic.

For this particular show I am broadening my typical working process and media. While I will be displaying some of my more traditional paintings and drawings, I am also going to be creating a 17-foot long mural. I think the increased scale will help the kraken creature I am painting feel a little more imposing and leviathan-like.

JH: What do you want your audience to learn from your work?

JHM: On a very basic level I want the viewers to be entertained. Hopefully they will find relatable moments within the show but experience them in new and thought-provoking ways.

MB: Ultimately, I would love to inspire viewers to tap into their childlike sense of wonder, to imagine seemingly crazy possibilities that could lay just beyond the edges of our knowledge.

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For more information on Michael Baird, visit: www.facebook.com/BairdSculpture

For more information on Justin H. Miller, visit: www.justinhenrymiller.wordpress.com