

WESTERN ★ PROJECT

Selected Press on Arne Svenson

New Yorker

Goings On About Town

January 11, 2010

“HEADS”

This cleverly chosen group of photographs suggests the various ways artists deal with portraiture. In many instances here, they avoid direct confrontation with human subjects (and any suggestion that they can plumb the depths of people’s souls) by photographing dolls, mannequins, paintings, or other representations. Arne Svenson brings us face to face with an unnervingly expressive forensic model of a child, based on skeletal remains, and Tanya Marcuse zeroes in on the seductive smile of a reclining wax figure. Other photographers—Valérie Belin, Gary Schneider, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Hellen van Meene—find ways to emphasize the shifting reality of the portrait with images of real people that slip into beguiling fictions. Through Jan. 9. (Saul, 535 W. 22nd St.

Las Vegas Sun September 12, 2009 by Kristen Peterson

An infusion of art

Contemporary works from Los Angeles gracing UNLV’S Donna Beam space



Among other works featured in the exhibit “Way Out West” at UNLV’s Donna Beam Fine Art Gallery at UNLV are Jason Adkins’ “Whiffenpoof,” left, Michael Reafsnyder’s “Chipper,” center, and Adkins’ “Cathedral” sculpture.

There may not be an abundance of contemporary art galleries in Las Vegas, but a small group of curators does what it can to get art to the people. This time it’s Jerry Schefcik’s turn. The director of Donna Beam Fine Art gallery at UNLV saw a gap in the gallery’s scheduling, contacted Los Angeles’ Western Project to see if UNLV could borrow works for an exhibit and put together the show in two weeks.

The arrangement makes sense considering that the gallery has close ties with Las Vegas. Western Project is owned by Cliff Benjamin, who represents artists who studied or live in Las Vegas — Thomas Burke, Sush Machida-Gaikotsu, Yek and Aaron Sheppard. Benjamin was also a guest lecturer at UNLV during the spring semester.

On display through Sept. 19, “Way Out West” features work by Machida-Gaikotsu, Michaels Reafsnyder, Jason Adkins, Tanya Batura and Arne Svenson.

Schefcik curated the show based on the contrasting rhythms, color use and spatial relationships that vary from artist to artist. It’s a fun show that celebrates chaos and order in composition.

2762 S. La Cienega Blvd. Los Angeles, CA 90034 phone: (310) 838-0609 fax: (310) 838-0610
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Reafsnyder, whose works have evolved since his solo show at the Las Vegas Art Museum in 2005, has two pieces in the show, "Chipper" and "Glissade." The works have Reafsnyder's trademark smiley face, but rather than layers and layers of freshly squeezed and untouched paint, Reafsnyder has smeared the colors and globs into lyrically explosive compositions that bring together dynamic textures, patterns and strokes that bounce from the whimsical to the decisive to the unruly.

Adkins' floor sculptures, composed of monochromatic boards contrasting colors — DayGlo pink, orange, yellow or gray — reconfigure a sense of depth and are a sort of fun nod to Sol Lewitt's modular floor sculptures, but with the vibrant colors of Lewitt's paintings.

Batura's clay and acrylic monochromatic heads are refined, minimal and suggestive, but less contorted and less blatantly erotic than her previous works. With the heads placed on pedestals in the gallery's second floor, you can examine their silently haunting gestures for hours in the company of Svenson's portraits of forensic facial reconstruction sculptures created to help identify victims. The photos are alarming and a bit eerie in that they are realistic enough for you to believe they are living humans wearing masks, but strangely distorted to remind you that something is amiss. There is a twinkle in each reconstructed eye and a story in the expression.

The upstairs gallery has a significantly different tone than the works on the main floor, which include two of Machida-Gaikotsu's paintings, one of which is a large-scale rendition of ocean waves, a reductive, vibrantly line-patterned pop rendition emblematic of Katsushika Hokusai's 19th century woodcut print, "The Great Wave off Kanagawa." (Those wanting to follow the evolution of the wave from an illustrative rendition to a more stylized abstract work can check out Machida-Gaikotsu's Master of Fine Arts works at Trifecta Gallery in the Arts Factory, on display with paintings and collages by artist Brian Porray.)

"Most of the students are not going to go to L.A. to see the art," Schefcik says. "Some of them will, but not all. So here they can see a little of what's going on in L.A."

LOS ANGELES TIMES
Tuesday August 30, 2005

PHOTOGRAPHY
Life and Death

Arne Svenson's photos of forensic sculptures highlight their humanity.
By David Hay *Special to The Times*

New York -- Five years ago, Arne Svenson was working at the Mutter Museum, a Philadelphia-based institution dedicated to preserving its founder's landmark collection of medical artifacts. Photographing odd parts of human anatomy for display in its fund-raising calendar, Svenson soon discovered that the museum hid its more bizarre items in its back rooms.

"The director, Gretchen Worden, had asked me not to go anywhere private, but she knew full well I would," the photographer said.



It was not long before Svenson happened upon a strange fiberglass sculpture of a woman's head, complete with wig and a pair of quite ordinary glasses.

It was the work of Philadelphia sculptor Frank Bender. Hired by police departments across the U.S., using as much data as he can collect, Bender sculpts likenesses of the faces of murder

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victims whose bodies have been found decomposed beyond recognition. Using such a forensic reconstruction, the police try to identify the victims — in this case, Linda Keyes, discovered in early 1980 lying in a field outside Philadelphia — in hopes of better pursuing their killers.

"I held it in my hand — it was painted a weird blue color as it only had to be photographed in black and white — and I became instantly fascinated by the subjectivity of the sculptor who made it," Svenson said.

The 53-year-old photographer, much of whose career has been a meditation on the undiscovered work of other sometimes-offbeat artists, realized that he too wanted to photograph the head.

"I thought, 'What can I do to further humanize this?'"

Answering this question would take him three years.

The result, Svenson's imposing, 40-by-50-inch portraits of forensic sculptures by Bender and the Mill Valley-based artist Gloria Nusse, will be shown for the first time at Western Project in Culver City. The exhibition opens Sept. 10.

At first glance, Svenson's new series is a natural extension of his earlier work, including his recent book, "Mrs. Ballard's Parrots." In it, Svenson assembled photographs of dressed-up parrots taken in the late 1960s by Long Island homemaker Alba Ballard and her husband, Marvin.

Thomas Sokolowski, the director of the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, who has exhibited Svenson's photography, argued that "he works like a curator almost, using other artists' materials, to ask an audience to say, 'What do you make of that?'"

The photographer maintains strongly that "Arne Svenson: Portraits," the title of the Western Project show, is more than commentary. The series inspired him to confront another theme evident in his previous work: the reanimation of lifeless forms.

In his popular photographs of socks turned into children's toys, chronicled in the 2003 publication "sock monkeys (200 out of 1,863)," Svenson sought to breathe life back into a beloved plaything.

"They were first made by a grandmother, for a long while clutched by a child to its chest and then discarded," he said. "I wanted, in my photos, to return each hand toy to the space it was created for."

With his new portraits, Svenson moved into more problematic territory. "I'm dealing with real people who were murdered; obviously it's more profound," he said. "But the process was the same: Can I, as an artist, give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to these 'masks' and make the viewer walk into the room and think they're real?"

Svenson was lucky to secure the cooperation of Bender and, later, Nusse.

Bender, who is something of celebrity thanks to his success in helping solve murders — he has been featured on "60 Minutes" and profiled in Esquire — was intrigued by Svenson's interest. "His vision is totally different to mine," he noted.

In contrast to Bender, Svenson has little time for the gruesome particularities of his subject's deaths. Such details blocked his ability to imagine new life for his subjects. "I had to avoid the 'true crime' aspect," he acknowledged recently, sitting in his Tribeca studio.

This left him searching for another way to "see" his subjects. "I could not 'get them,'" he said. "They looked like nothing more than beautiful photographs of interesting sculptures. But they were not alive as people."

Svenson took himself to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and wandered the portrait galleries. And he looked back at his work. "What makes a portrait compelling," he reminded himself, "is when the eyes are alive and addressing the viewer."

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Svenson determined that his fiberglass characters had to look straight at the camera.

Not only did he light the eyes — adding, for instance, in the case of a little boy captured in "Portrait #4," two small spots to give him a childlike twinkle — but he went further, ensuring that only the eyes would be in focus.

Tilting his traditional, 4-by-5 view camera fractions of an inch vertically and horizontally, he altered the plane between the lens and the film, forcing much of the image slightly out of focus. All he had to do was ensure that the area across the eyes was in focus, an often maddening task.

The formula was not foolproof. Bender painted the eyes of his faces. Nusse used glass eyes. In the case of "Portrait #1," a Jane Doe from Marin County, the paths of vision in her eyes did not match. Svenson opted to concentrate on her right eye. "When they're looking at an audience, I wanted them to say, 'Find me,' " he said. "I also wanted them to be looking at their murderer."

"Concentrating on the eyes," argued Jane Reed, a San Francisco-based photography curator and editor who has followed Svenson's work for two decades, "makes you ask what's behind them — and leads you to see a core of sadness associated with their deaths, and our own, that's almost overwhelming."

For Svenson, the eyes turned out to be the start of the humanizing process. He experimented with the backdrops. On "Portrait #5," an older woman looking blankly at the camera, he opted for a gray background because "I felt she was one of the most lost, and I wanted to match the flatness of her expression."

He dressed them. "Portrait #6," of a black woman with a decidedly plaintive look, demanded a simple white shirt. "She seemed so very Protestant," he explained, "like someone who went to church and who could've been a nurse."

With "Portrait #2," one of more than 350 women found murdered in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, over the last 12 years, Svenson ended up putting his own shirt on the fiberglass sculpture.

"I was standing there behind my camera half naked," he said. "The attorney general of the state of Chihuahua was in the next room, a gun on his desk, but what choice did I have? I couldn't take the head anywhere else."

At the time, Svenson took digital images of the nine heads of the Ciudad Juárez victims sculpted by Bender. Disseminated widely, the photos led the identification of one victim.

With his "Arne Svenson: Portraits" going public, further identifications are possible. Though hopeful this will occur, Svenson is also anxious: "I hope whoever it is understands these portraits are the antithesis of exploitation and that somehow I have done justice making them remembered for their lives as against their deaths."

The presence of such a knowing eye could answer the question that led Svenson on his photographic journey. "Am I getting closer to revealing what these people looked like or further away?" he asked.

Now all the photographer and the viewer have is ambiguity, a quality he still finds satisfying.

"I want the viewer to be rendered as off-balance as the victim."

'Arne Svenson: Portraits' / Western Project , 3830 Main St., Culver City / Sept. 10 through Oct. 8

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The New York Times

Directions

CSI: Photography Studio

By ANDREW ADAM NEWMAN



Published: August 28, 2005

The photographer Arne Svenson has found art in sock monkeys ("Sock Monkeys," Ideal World Books) and the collected snapshots of a Long Island woman who dressed her parrots as Liberace and Johnny Cash ("Mrs. Ballard's Parrots," Harry N. Abrams). In his latest project, Mr. Svenson explores an equally unusual, if decidedly less whimsical, world: forensic facial sculptures, commissioned by law enforcement agencies to put a face on unidentified skulls. Mr. Svenson's series of portraits, which will be featured in a show opening at the Western Project gallery in Los Angeles on Sept. 10, includes a sculpture by Gloria Nusse of Mill Valley, Calif., of a boy whose identity remains unknown. Ms. Nusse and Mr. Svenson recently described their approaches.

Gloria Nusse: "I get the skull and I usually make a mold, though sometimes I work directly on the real skull. The face is reconstructed based on scientific studies of average depth of tissue at certain landmarks in the skull. But if I know the cheekbone is going to be six millimeters thick, I also need to know that it's six millimeters of this tissue and that tissue and muscle and fatty pads. It's a real blend of science and art."

Arne Svenson: "In the first incarnations I photographed these in hyper-focus against a white background, and they just looked like sculptures. You could see that they were clay or plaster. It was too clinical. Then I began using an extraordinarily shallow depth of field, so only the eyes are in focus. Knocking out the focus on the rest of the face helped to 'demannequinize' them, so that whatever they're made of looks like skin. I also went to darker backgrounds and started dressing them around the shoulder, sometimes taking off my own shirt and putting that on them."

Nusse: "In 1974 a dog found the skull near a golf course and brought it to a neighbor's house, who called the coroner's office. He's been in the coroner's office a long time - they first called me a couple years ago, and I sculpted him as a girl, then through DNA testing they found out he was a little boy, so I redid it as a little boy just last year."

Svenson: "I photographed it twice as a girl, then Gloria calls and says, 'Well Arne, now it's a boy.' I shot the final image in my friend Marcia's laundry room in San Francisco. I've got lights pointing toward reflective umbrellas to bounce off of him. I wanted it to appear that he was outdoors and sunlight was reflecting off of a white house. She had a bare light bulb in the ceiling and I wrapped tin foil around it to direct the light as a spot on his hair, like the sun. I had to get the eyes to gleam, and to make them more gleamy I licked the eyes."

Nusse: "I've been doing this for about five years and only had a couple reconstructions that have been positively identified. It has to end up being seen by the right person. Someone has to say, 'Oh, that kind of does look like Aunt Sally and I haven't seen Aunt Sally for three years - and she did have that weird boyfriend.'"

Svenson: "I wanted them to be looking at us as if they're saying, 'Find me,' and also as if they're looking at their killer."