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“Art of Third Ward: Whole through Composites”

Exposure Houston, 2010: The Aftermath of Slavery and The Civil Rights Movement

The last and lasting impression I hold is of a child holding his house, leaving as I left. This was his newfound prize, a hinged dollhouse opening outwards, revealing its interior: the windows, floors and walls. This had been a house abandoned, a house now with a home.

Exploring Third Ward, one finds many such objects strewn about—leftover loveseats, cushions removed; once warm, now worn recliners; unwanted clothing and discarded bottles; decades-stale dolls. In all these piles, there seems to be no garbage—nothing is thrown away. And yet, the objects change from day to day, week to week. Where does it all go? I discovered the answer in the process of art making.

Art, an external manifestation of internal states, is undeniably revealing. It crafts a whole from composite pieces or elements—or in this case, found objects within the environment. What form it takes on is a reflection of those who create it, be it the essence of rough-cut construction paper paired with clay, of manic scribbling next to patient lettering, of toy-layered walls, or even of self-acknowledging photographs. Art is simply self-expression. Whatever form it takes on is always the attempt at one whole statement, one expression of self, from so many pieces.

For this racially homogeneous community in Houston, a collective wholeness is derived in part from a shared history—African American history, and with this, the tradition of racial discrimination. How this common bond manifests itself differs. Identity is called into question and is met with different answers. These answers are presented in

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art—art that grapples with, among other issues, the tension that race presents, a tension that traces its roots back to American slavery and the mixed messages of personal black value.

Third Ward is home to a variety of artistic spirits, many of whom are drawn to the artistic community nurtured by Project Row Houses. During the summer, PRH hosts art programming targeting students in grade school through college. Summer Art Program, held in nearby Trinity Church, allows children to experiment with various mediums in a summer-camp-style environment, culminating in a one-night show of visual and performing arts. Summer Studios, intended specifically for college students, are set up in renovated row houses along Holman Street, and house installation work. Around the corner from PRH headquarters is home of Cleveland Turner, the local folk artist known as “Flower Man”.

For this varied group—children, elders, college kids and late-20-somethings—art is a response to situations of personal interest. The one unifying circumstance, in this case, is the environment and history of Third Ward. In speaking and spending time with members of this art community, it became apparent that the obvious influence ran much deeper, elucidating subconscious thoughts dealing with Third Ward as a community and as a home.

The setting of PRH’s Summer Studios recalls the historic shotgun style homes of Third Ward. Though the houses have been renovated, they retain certain characteristics of their predecessors. Nico Gardner, resident of 2010 Summer Studios, found the actual installation of his work downright challenging. I could see why: it was a giant, working marionette sculpted entirely from wire, fleshed out in twine. Lack of both air

conditioning and air circulation, in sweltering summer heat, made his studio an oven. Just in walking through the houses, at 5:30 in the afternoon on opening day, I felt sluggish and sweaty, needy of AC. How could anyone work in this heat? Gardner, taking my reaction in, quipped, “it makes you think: this is your life—not just a project with an end—when you can’t live anywhere else.” The environment, one so familiar to many residents of Third Ward, affected the art, and the art responded to the environment. It instills a sense of connection with the community, an understanding of the struggle to live in a very specific and traditional Third Ward. Gardner completed “String Marionette” mostly away from his studio, finding ways to assemble smaller elements similar to those found in Third Ward into larger pieces that could then be installed.

“Flower Man”, based two blocks away, is familiar with the heat. Though this condition limits much of what the 70-something can accomplish, his focus in art is not on the architecture and air. He collects what is arguably garbage—discarded, dirty objects—and builds from it his home. Through this, he observes and records his environment. His walls and floors and yard are covered in dusty toys and trophies that fight for prominence over trash bags upon trash bags of crushed beer cans. Continually he moves these material objects he identifies with: articles of childhood, objects of achievement, reminders of his struggle with alcoholism. He claims he is “celebrating 26 years sober,” despite the palate of glinting aluminum he knows I’ve seen; he justifies his frills-free lifestyle as an understanding and rejection of “high society”, though he is being sued, believing that, after neither signing nor paying for his house, he rightfully owns it; he maintains a wholesome, if somewhat eccentric, front toward the community, in spite of past advances on underage and “inexperienced” white females. Flower Man has issues he

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is dealing with, even without conscious realization. His art is a three-dimensional and ever-shifting collage, a tangible emblem of all personal contradictions and truths.

In observing art making, I was called to consider value. Looking at so many found objects, deserted pieces of lives and people, it became apparent that the individual objects existed necessarily in accordance to value. For the Summer Studios, I saw the reaction of outsiders to the living conditions of Third Ward and the resultant shifting prioritization and value of tasks; in the children, I saw an eagerness to connect with the environment and family; in artists previously established in the area, I observed a connection and reaction to the environment through found objects.

That dollhouse I picked up, the one I left behind, became the circular closure in my experience in the physical confines of Third Ward, considering art and value and objects. Leaving the house behind, I left without any expectations for its reclamation. Yet when I drove past, that house was once again in someone's hand. A newfound treasure, value reclaimed! What art, what whole, that house will spawn is a matter of the value the mind imposes.