

Double Take: Two Exhibits

By Jennifer Landes

(August 12, 2010) During the past few years, the Bruce High Quality Foundation has taken its critical view of art world excess through works ranging from scrappy pranks to videos, full-blown installations, and its own biennial of artists, some of whom we have been fortunate to see here on the South Fork.

Now the group, comprised mostly of Cooper Union trained artists, is taking its creation myth one step further in an exhibit of "Self-Portraits" of their namesake, the late fictional sculptor Bruce High Quality, at the Fireplace Project in Springs.

With one exception, every work in the show dates from 2001 to 2010. The earlier date underscores the death of Quality, which was to have taken place on Sept. 11 of that year. We know this because the artist as a foam head said so in a 2005 video "The Life and Death of Bruce High Quality." In his/its place came the dominance of market sensibilities fostered by the Bush presidency and the eager consumerism that era brought, members of the collective have said.

In its role as "official arbiter of the estate" of the artist, the group uses mockery and satire in its examination of high and low culture from distant history to contemporary times, but the members appear to take themselves very seriously even as they brandish Wite-Out, ballpoint pens, and cigarette butts to impart a universal Bruce-ian expression on every image they see.

Still, emotions related to loss, longing, and broken promises and dreams do percolate to the surface, sometimes subtly, as in the case of the disfigured reproductions, or more directly, as one watches the video presentations.

One flat screen in the gallery's bathroom displays a montage of the artist's life set to music by the Carpenters and other clichéd background noise for a favorite iPhone slide show. Quality, the artist, is represented by a masked figure at various snapshot-worthy moments of his life. As alienating as the presentation is, the sentimental conventions it embraces still elicit a programmed response.

With reference to Walter Benjamin, the other video piece is presented on an old tiny TV placed inside a copy machine. The layered obsolescence of the piece's components telegraphs a degree of waste and loss that lends the piece depth and meaning. The inflectionless monotone of a computer-generated voice repeats a string of one-lined sentiments like "maybe the dream just goes away," reminiscent of Jenny Holtzer's "Truisms."

The entire exhibit feels similar to wading through the layered lost cultures of Rome, but where antiquity is often measured in days and months, not decadescenturies. Uncle Sam, Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother," Woody from "Toy Story," a "Boyz to Men" cassette single, a VHS tape of "Ghost Busters," old ads for Apple computers, a Martin Kippenberg catalog, and a long parade of figurines all get the same Wite-Out, pen, and cigarette treatment.

Foam appears throughout and ties into the "Foundation" of the group's name, which was taken from a sign already on its building in Brooklyn. Presumably, in its previous incarnation, it produced foam mattress foundations. Figures are rendered in foam, and foam also serves as a framing device, including serving as a thick mat for a final image of a wall-long installation showing the World Trade Center towers under construction, the beginning of the end.

At first the show's content can seem flippant and snarky, but it suggests much about how we process the richness and dross of our culture. Although this show leaves its mark on our culture, in doing so it reminds us how it leaves a longer and deeper imprint on us.