

## Worth of an idea found in figurative art

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Sometimes, a small event can instigate a large question. For a friend of mine, the event was a visit we paid several years ago to a New York gallery. The resulting question involved the value of cutting-edge art.

Upon entering the gallery, we confronted a work of art consisting of an old pair of jeans so calcified with the sediment of wear they appeared starched. The gallery director mentioned that the jeans had been worn during a work of performance art in which the artist lived as a homeless person.

My friend looked perplexed so I offered a two-cent analysis regarding the irony of a pair of jeans that could stand on their own (literally) when their owner could not (figuratively) and an observation about this object's embodiment of the concept of disenfranchisement. Her perplexity turned to disgust.

"You call that art?" she sneered. Ultimately, my explanations about the conceptual merit of the piece failed to dissuade her from her conviction: This art was hoey. Fair enough.

This question of intrinsic versus extrinsic value also has relevance for "Dialogical," a group show at the Salem Art Association's A. N. Bush Gallery. What is an idea worth? Is the value in the idea? Or in the manifestation of that idea? Or both?

For many representational artists, a work of art simply is what it is: a landscape, a bowl of fruit, a human figure. Enormous amounts of energy are spent executing and packaging this type of artwork as a precious commodity. And it is.

For conceptual artists however, it is the idea that is precious. Many share their artistic messages through mediums that have a modest intrinsic value. But are their works of art less valuable because of this? The short answer is no.

Take "Maypole," a performance by Michael Reinsch in the "Dialogical" show. Employing little more than party supplies and a portable stereo, Reinsch conveys the angst of 21st-century corporate culture by reciting fragmented phrases about job-related issues while mummifying



Artist Michael Reinsch performs his "Maypole" multimedia performance as part of Salem Art Association's "Dialogical" show. Catherine Alexander | Special to the Statesman Journal

### About this series

Salem Art Association's series of essays addresses a need for more critical and analytical writing on contemporary art.

This monthly series endeavors to create dialog among artists and writers and invites the community to engage in the arts on a critical level.

himself in crepe streamers. The juxtaposition of colorful childhood trappings with grown-up malaise makes his performance particularly poignant.

Helen Reed explores art history utilizing a similar methodology. Her contribution to the exhibition takes the form of documentary artifacts from "Portrait of Erskine Wood," a performance in which Reed offered face painting, costume dress-up and a special docent tour to children visiting the Portland Art Museum. The kids were made up to resemble the young subject of a portrait in the museum's collections. The artifacts — a face painting kit, photos and a mirror with a replica of Erskine's dickie stuck to it — are displayed in the gallery. What can't be objectified is the experience in which the children engaged.

Even abstract paintings by Michelle Ross — arguably among the most object-oriented works in the show — present an idea, albeit covertly. Hidden beneath her brushstrokes are magazine pages. They elicit a profound query: If information is obscured, does it cease to exist?

Another effective example of conceptual art is "Marginalia," a serial work by Anna Gray and Ryan Wilson Paulsen composed of large-scale photocopies of annotated pages from books by the likes of Emerson and Whitman. The intrinsic value (referring to the toner on copy paper) is minimal. But its extrinsic value (referring to the overarching intentions) is vast. Gray and Paulsen's piece is a rabbit hole of literary references percolated through a visually metaphoric vocabulary.

The fact is, most artwork created today is a blend of ideas and objects, vision and craft. Like Swahili or computing source code, however, the language of contemporary art has to be learned to be fully appreciated.

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