



Folded Child

SURFACE TREATMENT

While the COVID-19 situation is keeping the galleries closed, we will keep your art experiences alive by looking back at memorable shows/reviews, as well as offering some new and special online exhibitions. Today we revisit some figurative art from 2008.

James Cobb

With two series based on very different concepts, this artist demonstrates reality's possibilities.

BY NANCY MOYER

SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

San Antonio artist, James Cobb, produces some amazing digital prints along with intriguing mixed-media works. His dual series, "The Children" and "The Secret Lives of Sticks and Stones", is on display at the STC Library Art Gallery.

"The Children" is a series of children's images that share the same centralized format. Slightly less than life size, these images appear to be eternally frozen. Is this the result of some unknown catastrophe inflicted upon an exotic culture that we never knew? Each image appears suspended in a colorful fluid within its own confined space, creating the illusion of a rare specimen.

But catastrophe was not the case. A scanner photographed living children, section by section, sometimes up to fifteen scans per child. Cobb then digitally reattached the separately scanned

sections to create single prints. There is an eerie quality to these portraits because of the positions each child had to assume in order to be scanned. The fact that these children seem to be totally tattooed adds to the wonder.

“This is a genuinely fresh and original view embracing figurative art,” said David Freeman, Curator of the exhibit. “Cobb’s scanned images, superimposed on the children’s skin reflects artistic styles such as baroque, renaissance, Disney cartoons and lowbrow.”

“Theora” is scanned in a pose that suggests an Eastern deity. Images of skulls and wildlife tattoo her torso. Her thigh presents a comic pig facing a richly pastiche of imagery flowing down her leg, and the head of Christ gracefully forms her disconnected ankle. It is suggested that these pictorial images reflect the culture that will be intangibly superimposed upon the children as they complete their lives; the tattoos represent the heritage that they are assuming – the content of a pre-patterned life.

“The Secret Lives of Sticks and Stones” is more recent and offers a much different visual experience. While “The Children” evoke an emotional reaction, “Secret Lives’ is intellectually restrained. These abstract works developed from Cobb’s work in advertising design and his previous interest in painting. For instance, “Nourishment” makes use of a multiple complex of linear shapes and lines. Cobb synthesized his painting aesthetic with digital tools. There is a play between the hidden and the visible, between the past and the present. “The Life of a Stick” demonstrates this premise clearly. Patterns on the linear shapes emerge from background layers through erasure. He achieves unexpected complex patterns by this process of subtraction, revealing that which is hidden.

These two series of prints are so different in process and intent that one cannot help but wonder, which is the real James Cobb? Will he continue with the non-objective process? Or will he renew his experience with the figurative? Or both? “That’s an interesting question,” replied Cobb, “because one of the pieces downstairs is not truly a part of that (non-objective) series. It’s a 3-piece triptych image that’s called *Gratitude x 3*. I wanted to take a step backwards using what I had learned digitally to inform it, but I felt that I had left that place and was somewhere else. It may feel good at some future point to do that, but it doesn’t right now, so the short-term answer would be ‘no’.”

Cobb teaches new media in the Art Department at Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio. One of his driving forces is to create visual work that reveals the unknown. “It’s a real personal thing that I’m trying to get at,” he mused. “Reality, right? It is belied by what we see and touch and feel.”

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