

Exhibition Critiques:

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness

by Nigel Briggs, Kerr Houston, and Peg Koetsch

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness: A Critique by Nigel Briggs

At the National Museum of American History, my workplace, artifacts are commonly displayed—along with copious amounts of text and graphic reproductions—as vehicles for illustrating episodes of our history. Few of the artifacts there would be found in any art gallery, visionary or otherwise. History exhibitions are often complex and cluttered affairs. I like to visit art galleries for their tendency to be calm and contemplative places. There, the visual nature of a display is more important than the presentation of narrative. Text is often relegated to a block of small type on the wall to the side of a work so as not to interfere with its visual impact. That approach can, however, frustrate the visitor who looks for information. *Life, Liberty & the Pursuit of Happiness*, which explores “the quest for human rights and the search for personal fulfillment” by exhibiting the works of 86 artists, looks like an art gallery hanging with longer than normal labels for each work.

Entering the Museum

The American Visionary Art Museum is housed in an appealing meld of old and new buildings with a large sculpture in a courtyard helping to identify its mission. Standing on a corner, there is a busy street on one side, a quieter one with parking on the other. It took a while to find the entrance.

Above the reception desk a large sign proclaims the exhibition name. The staff is friendly, and I ask for directions to the exhibition: It is on the

first and second floors. A ramp enclosed by a masonry wall on one side and glass on the other leads to a grand flight of stairs, shop, and small gallery (perhaps 500sf).

Looking for the Exhibition Entrance

Looking into the gallery it seems I have found the beginning of the show. Large type on the wall announces the name of the exhibition. But I am disappointed that there is no introduction. What is the show about? How do these things relate to the exhibition title? Perhaps I am being too formal in my expectations; after all visionary artists are probably not the type to follow conventions; why should the exhibition be any less free?

The gallery, however, looks like an ordinary art gallery: white walls, track lights, text silk-screened onto wall next to art, acrylic cases protecting sculpture, and creaking floorboards with a bothersome air handler rattling somewhere in the ceiling. I take one photo before discovering that it is not allowed.

A ship of many, many toothpicks is central to the gallery and draws me to investigate. I read about Wayne Kusy who spends his free time in a small apartment meticulously creating accurate scale models of ships with nothing but toothpicks and glue. He knows, and we are told, exactly how many toothpicks and how much glue it took to build his model of Lusitania. Following my visit I learned that this model has been on display in this room since the opening of the museum. Is it repurposed to suit the theme of each exhibition?

The lighting in the gallery is uneven, but overall the room is well arranged with a lot to look at. I get the impression that the exhibition is a

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*On the next few pages you will find three critiques of the exhibition **Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness**, on view at the Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, MD from October 3, 2009 - September 5, 2010. We provided the following direction to our three seasoned professionals: A critique is an individual viewpoint, shaped by expertise and experience. Its audience is the profession. It involves your analysis of the exhibition, and your assessment of its strengths and weaknesses from your personal and professional viewpoint—as a designer, an educator, an exhibit developer, or whatever your area of expertise. The Editor.*



Model ship in the small gallery, ground floor. Photograph by Nigel Briggs.

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sampling of work, generally one apiece, from a diverse group of artists each with a singular message and motive. A biographic text gives some insight into the artist's motive, message, and method. The text is somewhat difficult to read—it is too small, tightly set, and too low on the wall for me to read comfortably. If the rest of the show is to be presented like this it is going to be a tiring visit. Some of the lettering has already been rubbed off the wall.

Leaving the first gallery I climb the stairs. There are some small works on the wall. It's not clear if they are part of the exhibition, and they seem out of place—too small and difficult to see while moving up stairs. There is a fabulous Icarus-like figure hanging above, but I can't tell if he belongs in the show either.

At the top of the stairs there is a niche display with many versions of the Statue of Liberty and at the end of the hall a magnificent construction, another Statue of Liberty of weathered wood framed against a window. These are clear signs that I have found the exhibition—perhaps this is where it really begins? Some campaign-style bunting on the railings seems to have been added in a decorative manner to reinforce the theme of the exhibition but it looks tacky. There is no introductory label here.

Exploring the Exhibition

There are galleries off both sides of the corridor. A quick walk through shows a wealth of things to see in this exhibition. There are various rooms, each one themed to different aspects of the show: LIBERTY, THE ROOTS OF RIGHTS, RIGHT TO LIFE, BEYOND THESE WALLS, and so on. Wall colors change from room to room, and there is large lettering on the walls: quotations and statements that compete with the art works for my attention. As on the first floor there is text on the wall next to each work. The lighting is generally more uniform in these galleries. You can choose your own path through the rooms. This makes sense, as there is no linear narrative to follow.

After scanning the room for the main label and looking around I read the biographic label of each work before looking at it. This makes sense to me as I may or may not have been attracted to the work, but the biography provides context for viewing the work. The biographies are fascinating. At times I want to learn more about the artists, perhaps to see more images of them in their environments, their homes, and families. But then I begin to tire—there is so much to read and I begin, inevitably, to surf, deciding almost at random to read this label, not that; to look at this piece, not that.

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As my visit matured I became more inclined to investigate work that was simply attractive in the conventional sense, and less likely to investigate work that I did not immediately like. I was tired of reading. I am sure that I missed some fascinating stories and some themes that the curator would regard as important. There were many quotations both on the walls and on the room labels—some of them were rather long.

The rooms dealing with liberty were most coherent. The stories of imprisonment, economic division, and of racial tension were particularly powerful, and the room label helped to put the collected works into some perspective—explaining why these works had been selected while the biographical texts provided fascinating glimpses into the worlds of the artists.

In one room there was a continuous audio track that I found annoying as it invaded all the other nearby works but was not related to them. I was intrigued, though, that there was a work in media other than paint, pencil, and sculptural materials. I was disappointed to find that it was just a clip from a documentary about an artist. There was a lot of material on display from

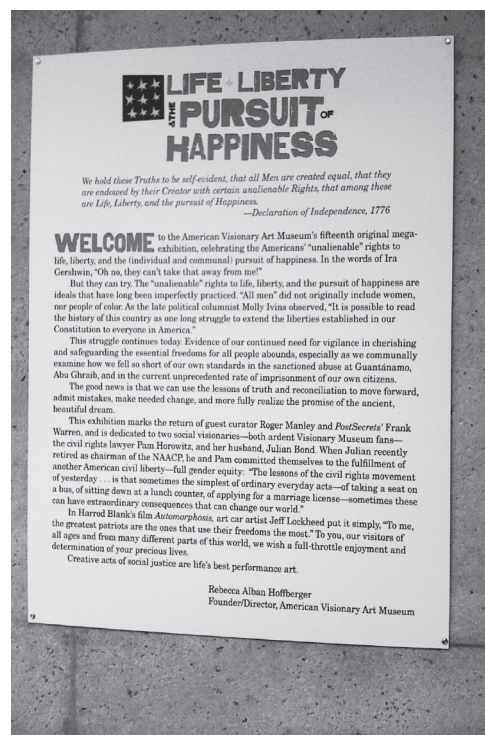
this particular artist, and while the video provided a wealth of information, it did not seem to me that this work required a video presentation any more than all of the other works.

Ready for a Break

I had spent two hours in the museum and was ready for refreshment. Unfortunately the restaurant was being renovated while I was there. It is open now. The gift shop was a wonderful heap of fun toys and gifts, but I was out of energy, even for shopping. They did not have the exhibition book (Editor's note: available in January 2010).

On my way out I encountered the introductory exhibition label. It would be at your left shoulder as you neared the top of the ramp when entering the museum—not really in your line of sight. I was not really interested in it at that point so I snapped a photo to review later.

I greatly enjoyed both looking at the works of art in this exhibition and reading the engrossing biographies of the artists. There are paintings, drawings, sculpture, and assemblages of an encyclopedic array of materials. The work was at times beautiful, provocative, or disturbing,



The exhibition introductory label, encountered on the way out. Photograph by Nigel Briggs.

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rarely was it dull. In some of the rooms I found the theme and content to be a particularly poignant combination. In others the connection between theme and works seemed less strong, but that did not matter to me when I became engaged with an individual's story and work.

Too Much of a Good Thing?

The Visionary Art Museum has billed this as another of its *mega-exhibitions*. But in my view it lacks a narrative arc or a progressive thread that might help the visitor to pace himself as, say, at a banquet where one can anticipate the courses and save room for desert. The similarity of one room to the next makes the exhibition too much for consumption, like an all-you-can-eat buffet where you simply have to stop when you are full.

The Exploration of Independence *by Kerr Houston*

Age, religion, addiction: you certainly can't claim that the American Visionary Art Museum had shied away in past years from large themes. And this past winter, at a moment when Baltimore's two other leading art museums were emphasizing the prints of Matisse and classical Greek notions of the hero, AVAM cheerfully turned its entire second floor (and then some) over to a meditation on three vast ideas that form the very warp and weft of our national consciousness: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The scale of the exhibition matches the scope of its title: it features more than 200 works by over 80 artists, who hail from ten countries. Given AVAM's intentionally flexible definition

of visionaries—individuals who produce well-made, or beautifully performed, works—these artists vary wildly in background, approach, and style. But as Roger Manley, the show's curator, points out in his introduction, the works can be viewed cumulatively as a potent reminder “of the value of taking risks, and suggest that the things we most desire—happiness, freedom, and peace of mind—can never be held onto for long, unless and until we are willing to extend them to others.”

In other words, folks, leave your jingoistic expectations and comfortable mythologies at the door. The museum stands only a few minutes' drive from Fort McHenry, where a flag still flying on an 1814 morning inspired Francis Scott Key to write our national anthem. But the current show is as interested in emphasizing the constant need to revisit and revise our national priorities as it is in articulating or celebrating American mythologies and ideals.

Politics on an Individual Level

Before we even reach the main entrance, in fact, we're faced with seven raucous metal totems made by M.T. Liggett and once placed along the boundaries of his Kansas property. Oversized caricatures of political figures in painted metal, they refuse to assume the solemn poses of Mount Rushmore's presidents. Instead, they feel like records of indignation; distorted features and sarcastic captions suggest Liggett's disappointment with his elected representatives. And, in the process, we gain a sense of the irreducible power of the individual voice in the political arena. Sure, there's a certain type of grand power that is suggested by national monuments. But Liggett's sculptures remind us that ideals only matter, really, when manifested on an individual level.

That's an idea that's stressed in an introductory text written by Rebecca Hoffberger, the museum's director, and installed at the base of the ramp just inside the museum. After noting that the unalienable rights promised by the Declaration of Independence have long been imperfectly practiced—she mentions the recent abuses at Abu Ghraib as an example—Hoffberger argues that the arts may offer a means of correcting such failings: “Creative acts of social justice,” she concludes, “are life’s best performance art.” She’s referring in part, of course, to some of the works in the show—but she also seems to be challenging the visitor by insisting that a successful democracy rests on the conscientious choices of individuals, rather than august assemblies. To the right of her text, as if a concrete embodiment of her challenge to participate, the stairs to the show beckon.

The Many Faces of Freedom

Near the top of the stairs, there's a niche. Filled with sculpted renderings, by a number of artists, of Uncle Sam and the Statue of Liberty, this apse feels at first like a nationalistic shrine: the icons stand vigilantly, coattails in place and torches raised. After a few minutes, though, the sheer diversity of the images begins to erode any sense of stability and to point instead to the possibility that the power of such symbols stems precisely from their ability to represent different things to different people. Ovis Woodard depicts the Statue of Liberty, for instance, as a gilded figure whose wide eyes suggest that she is a descendent of the piercingly intense medieval Madonna of Essen. Cyril Billiot's rendering of the same figure, on the other hand, is stiff and formless, with a constant face that recalls the heads of Easter Island, and a spiked crown that evokes a cage. Freedom, we soon realize, can assume many forms.



Freedom personified. Images of Uncle Sam and the Statue of Liberty. Courtesy of The American Visionary Art Museum.

The rest of the exhibition develops that idea. The second floor of the museum is divided into loose thematic units, each consisting of the work of several artists, and each illustrating a particular mode of thinking about freedom, or about its absence. One room, for instance, is given over to an exploration of civil rights and human rights, while another space offers works that were in some way the outcome of violence on foreign soil. Given the broad nature of such organizational principles, of course, the work in any given space varies greatly.

But, again, that's one of the reasons for the show's effectiveness. A series of recently woven Afghan rugs that include a frankly literal military iconography—army helicopters and

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The tools of force. Woven rug, Afghanistan, c. 2001. Courtesy of The American Visionary Art Museum.

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automatic rifles replace the more familiar and more benign traditional geometric patterns—stuns as a record of the way in which the so-called war on terror can infect, virus-like, longstanding artistic forms. But the rugs acquire an even greater resonance when viewed in relation to the nearby delicate crayon and pen arabesques of Suleiman al-Nadhi, a Guantánamo detainee. Recalling the ornate leaves of Ottoman Qur’ans, the drawings suggest a gentle, ruminative mood, until one then notices the word SECRET stamped abruptly, by governmental agents, on each page. Although they occupy the same space, then, the rugs and the drawings are utterly different, stylistically. On an abstract level, however, they work in concert, suggesting some of the ways in which the visual image can respond to, or can resist, the imposition of external force.

Two Thoughts on Context

Or you could think about it in this way.

Much of the show is inflected by—perhaps unsurprisingly, given the museum’s interest in outsider artists—an insistent anti-institutionalism. An intricate drawing of New York City by Jean-Pierre Nadau includes a cynically corrupted Great Seal; a carved birthing scene by Ernest Patton presents the hospital staff as stiff and emotionless. And a placard near a Southwestern weaving piously tells us that “Navajo shepherds have long tolerated helicopters and fighter jets roaring over their frightened herds.” But while the show’s tenor thus feels vaguely libertarian, much of the work in the show was produced, paradoxically, by artists in institutions. In several cases, this means prison: at least three of the artists, by my count, began to make art while behind bars, and several other exhibited images date from stints in the military. To be sure, some of the artists use art as a means of transcending their setting: Vincent Nardone’s drawings, done while he was incarcerated, are soaked with a nostalgic yearning for the world of his youth. Still, one comes away from the show wondering if pure, unadulterated liberty is somehow inimical to art. Art depends, it seems, on the existence of some force against which one can react, or protest.

Given that, it’s ironic that the greatest struggle that some of the pieces have to fight is against the vast amount of wall text offered by the museum. AVAM has always tended toward long descriptions of the artists’ lives, but here these overviews are supplemented by overarching subtitles, floating epigrams, and meditations on subjects as disparate as abortion and the notion of otherness. Taken individually, they’re often intriguing; taken as a whole, they threaten to overwhelm the exhibited art, which is forced into an illustrative role. And at points, too, the

texts seem to wander, offering trivia that's not clearly relevant. Did the fact that James Harold Jennings lived with his mother, for example, and worked as a projectionist at a drive-in theater really affect his notion of freedom, or his art? If so, I sure couldn't figure out how—but I was certain, after reading more than 100 paragraphs of wall text, that I'd read more than enough. It's clear that such verbosity is merely a result of AVAM's deep interest in the artists that they show. But enthusiasm, when it takes the form of a monologue, sometimes evinces little more than exhaustion.

The Point of It All

Which is a shame, because this show really does feature a terrific collection of objects. Edward Nagrodski's delightful objects of protest—a branding iron that features the word, TAX, is a highlight—combine an arch humor with a hint of latent violence. This produces an anti-establishmentarian mood that is both enigmatic and effective. An Iroquois war club also delighted: smooth and sleek, but also ready to do lethal work, it seemed to acknowledge that we do need to fight for basic liberties—but that conflict avoided is even more beautiful than conflict enacted.

For me, though, the climax was a simple prison-issue flexible ballpoint pen, distributed by the West Virginia department of corrections. At several points in the show, Manley supplements conventional works of art with historical objects that act as quiet comments on the surrounding images. Shown in a small vitrine, the pen throws the show's major concerns into a sharp relief: if an innocuous pen can be a tool of violence, how can simple liberties, we wonder, ever be completely ensured? The world conspires, it seems, to pose threats and

to imagine new harms. And yet, the pen also answers its own question: the very need to make marks and to create is so strong, the flexible pen suggests, that it will always find a way, even in the harshest of conditions.

...and the Pursuit of Education? A Critique of *Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness* at the American Visionary Art Museum by Margaret Koetsch

Unexpectedly, on my visit to the American Visionary Art Museum, in Baltimore, Maryland, I was overwhelmed emotionally by the works of art and the artists' stories. These "visionaries" have not had formal art training, yet to overcome life's tremendous challenges, they've figured out how to express truths that come from the depths of their souls. What role do education and exhibition strategies play in eliciting powerful reactions and facilitating visitors to construct meaningful interpretations about works of art?

Clarifying Goals

While viewing exhibitions I mentally check off two lists of strategies. As a museum educator, I want exposure to, and a chance to apply, stimulating thoughts and facts. As an exhibition curator, I notice which museum elements (arrangement of works of art, label content, wall colors, etc.) are manipulated to convey the main concept and help visitors interpret the works of art and artists' stories. Exiting, I want something that summarizes what I've learned and motivates deeper thinking about the art and the exhibition's overarching concept. Assessing how well education and exhibition strategies



Statue of Liberty and Star-Spangled Banner by Adam Morales. Courtesy of Dan Meyers.

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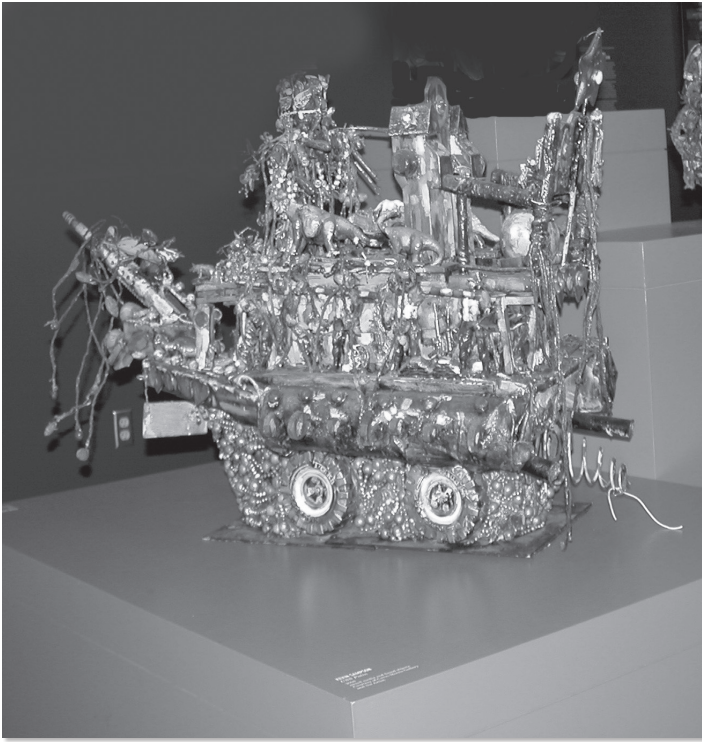
work together determines whether or not I've been moved both intellectually and affectively, and perhaps, even transformed in some way. Despite my tears, did the exhibition help me make an intellectual connection?

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness is AVAM's current mega-exhibition, occupying a series of galleries on the second floor. For content, each gallery interprets the unalienable rights through a particular theme, illustrated with works of art created by a wide range of artists. For education, AVAM's goals strive to "empower" visitors to "build upon innate intelligence and inner strengths" and

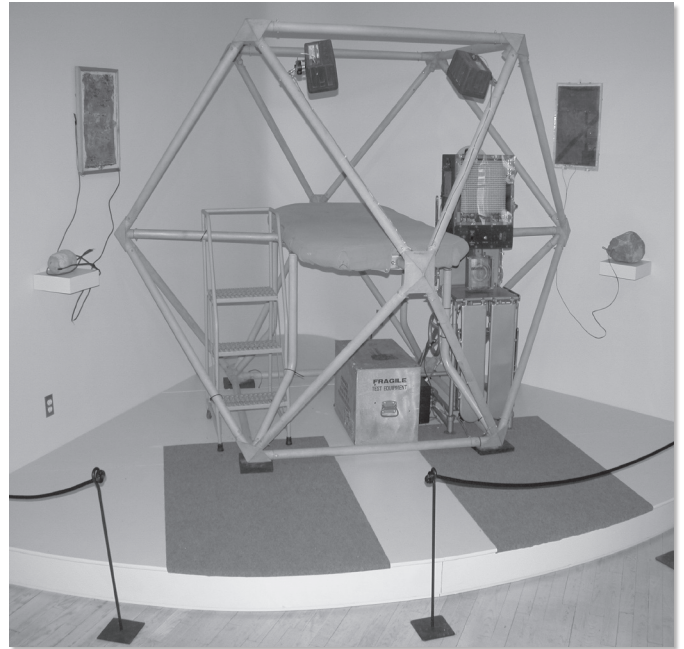
to "engender respect" to "do something really well." I'll be looking for evidence that the exhibition's concrete words and works of art encourage visitors to express their interpretations and feelings.

In her introductory statement, Rebecca Hoffberger, AVAM's Founder and Director, references Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib to conclude that the rights, as stated in the Declaration of Independence, are "imperfectly practiced." Roger Manley, the Exhibition's Curator, links artists with these rights by naming a shared motivation, a "revolutionary spirit."

Without having to read the labels, I understood that the works of art grouped together in the first gallery declared that political and personal issues are inseparable, and are being "practiced." Multiple depictions of Uncle Sam and the Statue of Liberty convey the message that different, subjective interpretations of universal symbols of Americans' rights will be found throughout the exhibition. Surrounding Adam Morales' driftwood Statue of Liberty and American Flag 1999, with windows implies that the struggle for freedom can't be thwarted by thought or material boundaries. These works of art corroborate AVAM's practice of inclusiveness: that all artists' works will be presented with respect, regardless of where they live, their finances, spoken language, mental stability, or anonymity. Processing these arrangements as warm-ups to reaching deeper understandings, I moved on, hoping to find evidence of what Felice Cleveland, AVAM's Education Coordinator, and security guards emphasize, that AVAM's overarching goal is "to get people talking about ideas that impact all of humankind, throughout history and across cultures and generations."



USS Palin by Kevin Sampson. Photo by Peg Koetsch.



Purr Generator by Duncan Laurie. Photo by Peg Koetsch.

Synthesizing Exhibition and Education Strategies

Cleveland confirmed that Manley selected the artists, artworks, and wall colors, composed the label information, and decided the placement of all these elements. As compelling as the works of art were, visitors' discussions appeared to be ignited more often by the information on the labels. A visitor was overheard saying, "Unlike most museums, it's all very interesting to read." The labels' appeal emanated from components Manley pieced together to create a connection with each artist: their photographic portraits, thoughts, and life stories. These methods merge exhibition and education strategies to communicate consistently that artists are valued as individuals.

Color can enhance or work against the message of an artwork. In the "We're Only Human" gallery, placing Kevin Sampson's *USS Palin* on a cerulean blue pedestal makes it look like it could sail off into the sunset. But, this trip wasn't a cruise. The label revealed he's suffered from multiple deaths of close family members. This "ship" is a memorial, helping the person pass to the next life. In contrast, Bessie Harvey's jutting tree branch sculptures faded on the cerulean blue pedestals. As a result, the work's message of love was muddled. Only the label communicated how Harvey tried to make sense of the challenges she encountered. In both examples, the color overwhelmed the artists' messages and instead of leading me to a revelation, left me confused and not encouraged

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Reading the Ala Bashir Exhibit Label. Photo by Peg Koetsch.

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to study them further.

Educationally, I find hands-on activities not only have the power to teach; by observing the quality of the participation, a museum can assess what visitors are learning. Thus, upon reaching the gallery, “Worlds of Their Own Making,” I was excited by the potential in Duncan Laurie’s *Purr Generator*. It looked like something I could pursue the Right of Happiness in, but since there were no instructions and the technology wasn’t turned on, I was stymied. Determined, I consulted a security guard, who convinced me to lie down on the gurney. She pushed a button, the gurney started vibrating, and speakers emitted a white noise to simulate the healing power of a cat’s purr. When asked why there were no instructions, she responded that the guards needed to monitor how it was used. Putting the onus on a visitor to initiate the interaction resulted in my almost missing an opportunity to learn.

The addition of quotations next to each gallery’s title sparked different, sometimes controversial, ways to think about Americans’ rights. In the gallery, “Not So Divine Interventions,” author Leon Uris revealed that “Terrorism is the war of the poor. War is the terrorism of the rich.” But

before noticing how the works of art illuminated this statement, my attention was caught by visitors being captivated by a particular label for the work of Ala Bashir. Was it a result of combining exhibition and education strategies, including: (a) the first thing a visitor sees when entering the gallery; (b) the artist’s photograph; or (c) the ease of reading white letters against a dark wall? Whichever reason attracted them in the first place, the content kept them fascinated. Ala Bashir was a prominent surgeon before Saddam Hussein picked him to be his personal physician and artist. When asked if his paintings were influenced by surrealists, Bashir responded that he painted what he saw, adding that his “duty was to compete with death.” As unnerving a statement as this was, the works of art and this particular installation didn’t prompt me to look deeper.

Suleiman Al-Nadhi’s small artworks could easily be overpowered as they were placed next to Bashir’s large paintings. But this installation made its own forceful statement, by introducing multiple perspectives of Al-Nadhi’s incarceration. The label explained why he was being held at Guantánamo Bay. His simple, heartfelt drawings, given as thanks to his defense lawyers, offered a stark contrast to typed, redacted, government documents

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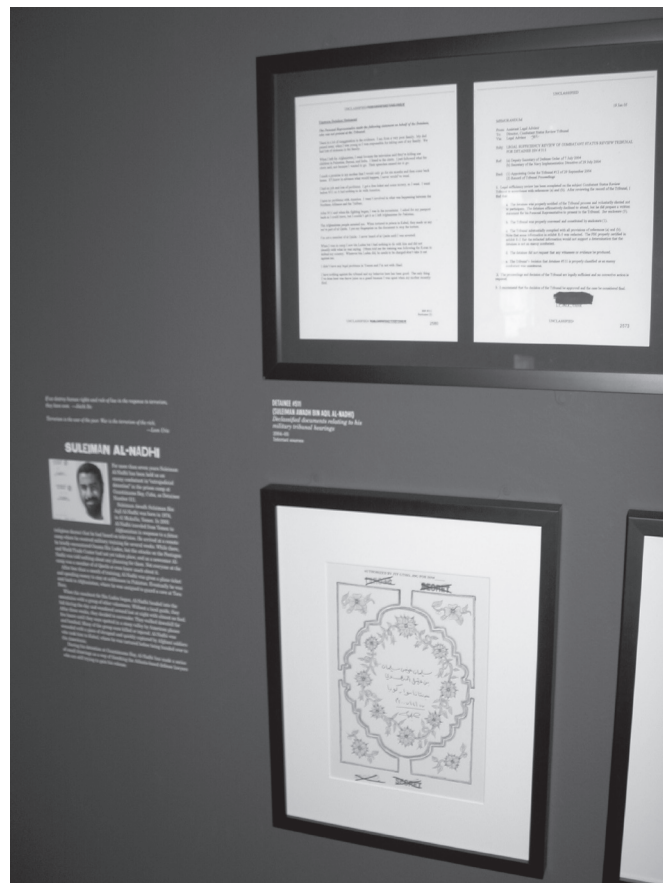
outlining the consequences of his not guilty testimony. These primary resources conjured a balancing scale, where one couldn't help but believe that the truth of Al-Nadhi's voice outweighed the government's rule-by-the-book decision. Displaying the drawings and documents together generated thoughts about the cause and effect of legal decisions on individual rights. The integration of these education and exhibition strategies challenged me to draw my own conclusions and ponder larger issues of cause and effect. Now, I wanted to spend more time in this gallery.

Looking down from the "war" quotation, I spotted rugs created by two nations under siege. Traditional geometric designs, woven symbols of the Navajo Nation's harmony with nature, were replaced with airplanes and weapons reflecting the daily maneuvers over their land by the U.S. military. The multiple wars in Afghanistan have transformed flower images into hand grenades, bullets and tanks. Sweeping my eyes from the rugs on the floor to Bashir and Al-Nadhi's works on the wall, I was prompted to pay attention to these different perspectives. As I stepped back to take in the effect of the whole gallery, I pondered larger issues of freedom, the U.S.'s role in human and civil rights, confidence in government and universal ideals, and a questioning of one's place in history.

Though this gallery was the most successful in melding exhibition and education strategies, my musings hung in mid-air. I wanted an opportunity to express my voice. But there wasn't a method in place whereby I could apply my thoughts and give feedback. Taking this further, I wanted AVAM to demonstrate that it values my opinion, by assessing the impact of the exhibition on me.

Lingering Thoughts

As I exited, I realized that education at AVAM is a thought-provoking process embedded primarily in exhibition elements, rather than exercised as a valid element in and of itself. Reviewing the thinking I did throughout the exhibition, I concluded that AVAM's education goals to "empower" visitors, "build upon innate intelligence and inner strengths", and "engender respect" were met.



Suleiman Al-Nadhi's exhibition installation. Photo by Peg Koetsch.



Not So Divine Interventions by various artists. Photo by Peg Koetsch.

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Considering AVAM has a small staff, the burden is on the exhibition to motivate visitors to “do something really well.” But, how would AVAM know that this has taken place?

To establish AVAM as a “safe place to discuss larger issues,” Cleveland trains teachers to assist students in, “...marinating their ideas. What is here can get personal quickly. Students aren’t necessarily ready to have that conversation with someone they don’t know.” Considering AVAM has a small staff, the burden is on the exhibition to motivate visitors to “do something really well.” But, how would AVAM know that this has taken place?

AVAM uses the number of return visits, participation in related education programs, and memberships sold, as indicators of an exhibition’s success. The security guards unabashedly claim that when they come to work in a bad mood, they always leave feeling good from the presence of the works of art and the artists’ creativity. This isn’t enough evidence that AVAM’s exhibitions have a transformative power.

To accomplish AVAM’s goals of encouraging

discussion and motivating visitors, basic education strategies and techniques could be introduced throughout the galleries. Open-ended questions or hands-on stations could start a dialogue about the creative “revolutionary spirit.” In addition, documenting visitor participation in activities, including exit surveys or feedback stations, would help AVAM assess the learning that has taken place and the exhibition’s impact.

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness moved me both intellectually and affectively. Because I believe in the artists and works of art that AVAM supports, that their curators don’t shy away from presenting resolute opinions and stimulating ideas, I am a member. And I will return again and again. Even starting with tears, I left feeling hopeful that all their education goals will be reached with my next visit. I want to exercise the Right to Be Transformed. ✨