

Beth Redmond-Jones is Senior Director of Public Programs at the San Diego Natural History Museum. She may be contacted at bredmondjones@sdnhm.org.

If you would like to comment on this article or others in this issue, please log on to the NAME listserv at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NAME-AAM/>.

Happy Fall! I hope this installment of Exhibit Newsline finds you well and ready for the upcoming holidays. So, what's new in the exhibition world...Bill Dambrova of Dambrova Designs sent this in.

Whenever I travel to the East Coast for a project I usually scope out museum websites in the area to see what is showing. When I saw that the Philadelphia Museum of Art had a temporary show called Great and Mighty Things: Outsider Art from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection, I booked my lodgings for the week within walking distance to PMA even though my project was in another state.

The exhibition displayed around 200 works by 27 untrained American artists. A loose definition of "outsider art" is art created by artists outside of the mainstream art world. In short, this exhibition was a paradox. The artists creating the work in this show most likely never intended to display it beyond their front yard. They are labeled as "Outsiders," yet they've been allowed in. I'll leave that for you to ponder.

I usually view art museum exhibitions from three points of view, as an artist, a designer, and a "visitor;" breaking down what is working, what isn't, and how I would have done it better.



"Monster with Rubber Snake" by Miles B. Carpenter and framed drawings by Joseph Yoakum. Photo by Bill Dambrova.

With this show I was so excited I forgot to pay attention to all that. I bounced from object to object like a kid in a toy store. I had to view the exhibit three times, admiring the unencumbered freedom radiating out of each soulful work of art.

The designers used the “white box” technique for this one. No colors on the walls. Just white. The sculpture was displayed on white pedestals. Even the graphics were white with black text. They did a great job of describing the artist’s life and put the work into context in just a few short paragraphs, keeping the visitors flowing along throughout the gallery. My personal test for a great art exhibition is when I forget I’m an artist, or a designer, or a “visitor,” and I can just enjoy the art, take in the message, and get inspired. This exhibition exceeded my expectations.

On my third visit through the gallery I got the message as to why they used the “white box” for the design. Showing the work this way is an attempt to bring outsider artists up to the same level as artists with resumes. By displaying outsider artists on the same playing field as trained artists all artists may be viewed as equals. For me it was the other way around. After seeing such raw and rich whimsical work displayed in a traditional 20th century museum gallery format, as opposed to the art environments or “yard shows” I’m used to seeing them in, contemporary artists shown elsewhere in the museum like Miro and Dubuffet looked over-thought and forced.

As an artist I was inspired by the work that I saw in that show. As a visitor I was moved by the stories written about each of the artists. As a designer



“Chicken Bone Throne” by Eugene Von Bruenchenhein. Photo by Bill Dambrova.

I was reminded that the best exhibition designers keep their ego out of it, and sometimes the best design is hardly any design at all.

At the American Alliance of Museums meeting in Baltimore in May, Roy Campbell, Darcie Fohrman, Judy Gradwohl, Steven Lubar, and Rainey Tisdale facilitated the session *Is It Real? Who Cares?*. They sent this to me in hopes that *Exhibitionist* readers would continue the conversation.

Is It Real? Who Cares? was certainly the most fun we’ve had at an AAM session. It started with the realization that different museum people had different ideas about how important it is that the objects displayed in museums be authentic. Further conversation made it



Disney traveling exhibition at the Oakland Museum. It's real if it's under plexiglass. Photo by Darcie Fohrman.



A close up of the shoes shows the “wear” on the revolutionary war-era replicas and the pristine condition of the authentic boots from Vietnam and Iraq wars. Courtesy of The National Museum of American History.



Is this bust of Nefertiti at the Egyptian Museum in Berlin or San Jose? The Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum in San Jose, CA has a large collection of Egyptian artifacts displayed to describe Egyptian history and culture. The replicas of busts of Nefertiti and the Rosetta stone raise questions of the authenticity of the other artifacts. Photo by Darcie Fohrman.

(continued from page 5)

clear that the category of “real” was very complicated, with fascinating grey areas. We realized that this was a conversation that should reach a wider audience, that it could help challenge the assumptions we bring to our work. And so, at the Baltimore meeting, we asked the audience to place about twenty objects on a grid laid out on the meeting room floor, ranking them from real to fake, from works to doesn't work. We gave them pictures of the objects, and asked them to move to the spot on the grid where they

thought the object belonged—and say why it belonged there! The session lives on at Tumblr <http://is-it-real-who-cares.tumblr.com>, and we'd like you to join the conversation. Visit the site. Add your comments. And we'd like to expand the conversation. What does the public think about Is it Real? How can we find out?

If you see something noteworthy in the coming months, please send me an email and let's share it with your colleagues. Cheers! ✨