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An Interview With Artists Tim Berg And Rebekah Myers

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by Christopher Michno

Tim Berg and Rebekah Myers work collaboratively to produce objects that are sensually appealing and refer to advertising, design, and glossy consumer products. Their work is intentionally ambiguous, mining objects for their capacity to mean different things to different people; and in this way, it operates both within a specific narrative, and as work about the nature of how we construct meaning. *This Way Lies Madness* (2018), their latest, a neon sign made for “Manifesto: A Moderate Proposal,” the exhibition at the Pitzer College Lenzner Family Gallery through March 29, adopts a line from King Lear. The sign reads “This Way Lies Madness Lies” and is shaped in a continuous circle. In a conversation in their Claremont studio, Myers and Berg discussed Madness, manifestos, and making objects that create space for dialog.

TIM BERG: We were thinking [about] the way that we can become enraptured by an ideology and get sucked into it; and the way that this piece [Madness] is a portal or a hole. You get sucked into that one way of seeing the world and can't escape it. That's what leads to the

madness—and madness in terms of anger and craziness. One of the things I like about these words is that they can be read in different ways; whether it's madness or lies, they have different meanings, depending on how you look at them.

CHRISTOPHER MICHNO:

This question is a way, I think, to talk about your practice as a whole, and how your practice comments on culture and values. Your work has addressed environmental crises, the collapse of species and habitat, and how that has implications for how we produce, consume and organize. How do you negotiate aesthetics, materiality and message?



This Way Lies Madness (2018)

BERG: I would divide it into two different categories. When we have a solo show with multiple pieces, we usually start with the themes that will be central to that body of work, and working from there, figuring out all of the different ways we can address them. Addressing each of those themes becomes a question of what material, what process, and the details of all of those parts. When we're working on individual projects, then it becomes a question of context.

REBEKAH MYERS: This [Madness] was a direct response to the prompt that was given to the artists for "Manifesto."

MICHNO: Do you use text often?

BERG: We spend a lot of time on titles, and titles sometimes lead to work. Discovering how the title elucidates a piece is an important part of our process. We spend weeks making long lists of all the possibilities and editing down from there.



Every Cloud Has A Silver Lining (2007)



Every Cloud Has A Silver Lining (2007):
installation view from the exhibition **Hope Springs Eternal**

Many years ago, we made a neon piece titled Every Cloud Has a Silver Lining. The title was part of the piece itself, which was an installation at Ohio University [from the exhibition Hope Springs Eternal]. It encompassed three of the walls, so it was hundreds of feet long. It was a landscape of clouds, with a cloud at the beginning that was raining, like a big storm cloud. There was a little model plane that had seeded the clouds. Text is there, in the past, but not like Thomas Müller. He uses text for all of his pieces now. It's less prominent in our work.

MYERS: We often have souvenirs when we have a large solo show. There's a large piece with smaller versions as souvenirs. There's always a neon sign that says "Souvenirs." It brings a lot of content, I think, to our ideas about consumerism.

BERG: But back to your question about the relationship between what we're thinking about here [which is a new body of work] and other bodies of work, this piece in particular seems connected. It's called Turn a Blind Eye. We're thinking about the contradiction of a canary, which is a sentinel species meant to warn humans in coal mines of impending doom, and the title: having the canary turning and facing the wall, away from the viewer, looking inward and



Turn a Blind Eye (2017)

impossible.

MICHNO: And it feels increasingly so because we all have filters that we look through to make sense of our world. This speaks to the political moment we're in. How do we have conversations about issues in a civil way when we talk to people that we disagree with? I don't know if it's possible to agree about some of these issues, especially when it comes to the political divides that exist. Is it possible to learn something?

BERG: That's one of the things we're asking. On a very personal level, I feel [this] very acutely—my family is very conservative. I don't think that I believe the same things as any of my siblings.

avoiding what's right in front of it.

MYERS: That's a theme that runs through all of our work—seeing what is in front of you without any sort of filter, trying to reckon with what's in front of you, even if it's terribly uncomfortable. Even if it goes against everything you feel, it's still there, it's not going away: Look at it. So we make it really big and put it right in front of people.

MICHNO: Seeing things without a filter seems incredibly difficult.

MYERS: It may be

As you said, how do you have a conversation, how do you dialog? How do you spend a pleasant evening with your family? It's becoming increasingly difficult. But I don't want to give up hope.

MYERS: I hope that our work doesn't have just one point of view. I think it's open to more than one point of view. There's a lot of ambiguity there, and maybe people can have a discussion about what feelings it elicits in them, and what ideas it brings up for someone else. It's not just pointing people in one direction, like "this is the answer: this is the only way to think about something." It's more like challenging people to leave the way they normally think or the assumptions they have, and to step aside and look at something in a different way. I think that's the only way people can come together—if they take a moment and put their ideals and thoughts and everything they know to be true for them aside, so they can see it in a different way and a different point of view, so they can understand how other people live and what it means for them to experience different things.

MICHNO: Two questions in response: How do you do that in an exhibition context—to make it open ended, rather than as if there is a predetermined point that you as artists are communicating that the audience needs to figure out for themselves? And how do you do that when you're giving an artist talk, or interacting with the public, where there is a conversation about meaning?

MYERS: I think for this show in particular, we like to say that it's an anti-manifesto. The prompt was: what is your manifesto for the world, today; and for how you want to live? And what things are important to you that may be different from what's happening politically, when things are so polemical? So ours is a kind of anti-manifesto because manifestos are insular. We wanted to get away from that—even if it is a manifesto about wonderful things, things everyone can agree on. It's still the idea of a manifesto.

MICHNO: And manifestos don't have a good history.

BERG & MYERS: No.

MYERS: That word holds a lot of weight, so we wanted to, even within the show, maybe...

BERG: ...subvert that a little.

MYERS: I think in order to open up a discussion, we like to use humor. So this is our little bit of knowing humor within the “Manifesto” show.

MICHNO: So this could actually refer to the manifesto itself.

MYERS: It could! I mean, it's open ended. Depending on what you believe. I don't know where madness lies for you, or for other people. If you only think in one capacity, madness lies that way for everyone.

MICHNO: The second part of that question is when you're doing artists talks, how does that manifest. In part, the context—this is a narrative that is promulgated in particular media contexts—that cultural institutions have a hard left agenda: the context of the artwork gives clues as to how to interpret the objects within that context.

BERG: We tend to tell people what we were thinking, and also in some cases, give more than one answer. Like, this thing could mean this, or this. It could mean both. These ideas aren't mutually exclusive.



Here Today, Gone Tomorrow (Blue Raspberry) (2010).

No Time to Lose (2017)

I think one of the ways we came to that is from when we started making the creamsicles. For us, it was clearly about consumption and environmental degradation because of its context within an exhibition with melting icebergs and disappearing ecologies. It was really clear to us that those things went together.

It was in Denver in the hottest summer Denver had ever had at that point. There were icebergs with penguins on them spread out through the gallery, and the icebergs were getting increasingly smaller.

Once taken out of the context of that exhibition, people saw the works and discussed them in very nostalgic terms.



You Can't Take it With You (2013)

MYERS: Loss of childhood, loss of memories.

BERG: They connected to it on a very personal level because of the connection to that object, I think.

MYERS: They had a lot of memories as children, eating those specific types of popsicles, so everything—all the memories that were attached to that point of their lives...

BERG: ...and the emotions—and that's not something that we had considered...

MYERS: They were saying, that's so incredibly sad.

BERG: And we were thinking it was sad for a different reason.

MYERS: We can't control people's interpretations.

BERG: And I love that interpretation. There's something nice about the fact that people can

connect to it in a way that we had completely overlooked. And now we can talk about it in both of those ways, and they aren't mutually exclusive. They can be both of those things. I think those two things can reinforce each other to have more of an impact in changing someone's behavior potentially. Or, not even necessarily changing their behavior, but just getting them to recognize something that wasn't there for them in the first place.

I think we have to be open to the idea that the object becomes the place of dialog rather than: this is us telling you what we think; these are our ideas; consume them. People do bring their own ideas to the work, and those ideas can make sense to us. That opens us up to more opportunities for what the work can do in the world.

MICHNO: How did you initially begin to think about using your work to explore these kinds of social themes?

BERG: That's a good question.

MICHNO: I imagine it changes and evolves over time, but I'm curious where along your education, your training, your practice, where did you start saying, you know, this is what I want to do with this piece?

BERG: I think the shift for me happened in grad school, which I started in August 2001. My first month in, it was like the world was falling apart. When I went to grad school, I was making really formal, utilitarian, odd, quirky things, and I guess I felt like I couldn't justify the existence of those things in a world that was going to hell. They felt superfluous. So things changed pretty quickly after that. I started making more sculpture and doing installations and doing a lot about animal rights and hunting. I made a lot of pieces about hunting because I grew up hunting. I made videos and installations and kinetic sculptures, all about the paradox of hunting as a form of entertainment, as something fun but also as something deadly and barbaric. That's how I was thinking about it. I think most people thought of them as fun. I made a bright yellow ceramic decoy. It was inside an inner tube that was filled with just a little bit of water and spinning on the wall. So it looked like the decoy was just bobbing along, but it wasn't going anywhere. And it looked like a target.



From the exhibition On The Brink (2011), with the neon sign "Souvenirs."

MYERS: For me, it was probably going to CU [University of Colorado, Boulder]. The education that we got there was more conceptual, less formal, less technique based. They really valued your ideas the most. I think it probably started there. And then I went to California College of the Arts for a year. I was doing a graphic design program.

It was interesting because I don't think I was expecting this, but everything we did there was—they wanted you to question everything you were doing. Who were you going to be working for—for this fake assignment—what were your values and beliefs: Would you even take this kind of assignment if it was from this sort of a company? And everything started from there. Everything was political throughout the whole process of creating anything. I was not expecting that at all. I don't know if it was just that school, but they wanted you to ask those questions about everything you were doing. That was very directly about cultural and political ideas.

I think this is just one facet of work that we like to do. We also enjoy other design projects that are less overtly—that maybe have some sort of agenda, even if the agenda is just to open up

dialog between people. In general I think it's just about what we like and what grabs our attention. What's art's place; what is important about it; how can it exist; why should it exist; and what can it do for people? It can help people think differently. It doesn't have to change their minds forever. If it can open the door a tiny bit into something new, I think that's important.

BERG: I also feel that you can't escape the social and political and cultural. We're a part of it; it's a part of us. I'd rather embrace that and find out what we can do with it, how we can manipulate it or subvert it, what we can say about it—very fundamental questions.

MICHNO: And your work isn't only about the social and the political. Obviously you care very much about material, craft, surface, color. It's a very effective union of ideas and material and object.

BERG: I think that's something we learned in undergrad. They were always asking those questions—basic questions, like: why would you use that material? And you're taking a ceramics class. "Why would you use that clay?"

MYERS: It wasn't a foregone conclusion.

BERG: Yeah, it wasn't: what you were doing, what materials you were using or why you were using them—you had to make an argument. "I'm using this for these reasons, and it makes sense because of that." I think that's one of the main things we learned, and that's still how we operate. It's one of the first questions we ask ourselves: does it make sense to make it in this way, or out of this material, and what is this material bringing to the content, and how is it reinforcing the content?



You can see more of Tim Berg's and Rebekah Myers' work at the [MyersBerg Studios website](#).

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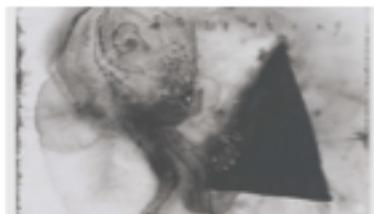
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