



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Nathan Huff received an MFA in Drawing and Painting from California State University, Long Beach. He is currently Assistant Professor of Art at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, CA. He has been featured in solo exhibitions at D.E.N. Contemporary (West Hollywood, CA) and Gallerie View (Salambo, Tunisia). He has been in group exhibitions at JK Gallery (Culver City, CA), The Lillian Berkely Collection (Escondido, CA), Angels Gate Cultural Center (San Pedro, CA), Concrete Walls gallery in (Los Angeles, CA), Biola University (La Mirada, CA) and at the Istituto San Lodovico (Orvieto, Italy). In 2011, he was invited by the state department with Art in Embassies for the US Ambassador in New Zealand to create an exhibition, *Encountering Place*. He works and lives in Los Angeles and Santa Barbara.

Artist website: <http://nathanhuff.com>

DOMESTICATING DISTURBANCES: New Work by Nathan Huff was organized by UCR ARTSblock and curated by Jennifer Frias, Associate Curator, Sweeney Art Gallery, University of California, Riverside. Support provided by UCR's College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (CHASS), the City of Riverside, and Westmont College Professional Development Grant.

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DOMESTICATING DISTURBANCES
New Work by Nathan Huff
June 24 - November 1, 2014

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DOMESTICATING DISTURBANCES

New Work by Nathan Huff



In *Domesticating Disturbances*, artist Nathan Huff presents a series of new works in various media ranging from refined drawings to mixed media sculptures, throughout the galleries at the Culver Center of the Arts and Sweeney Art Gallery. In each, he orchestrates an experience for the viewer to explore familiar images from our everyday world – such as boats, chairs and numerous animals – in a manner that suggest they are archetypes found within intimate domestic spaces. The title of the exhibition evokes a double-entendre as it refers not only to human living spaces, but also to the domestication of animals, the latter of which have been powerful metaphors throughout the history of art.

What Huff considers as a “disturbance” stems from his idea that harmony and chaos should co-exist. He feels that we need chaos in our lives to force us to live in civilization. Pairing animals with everyday objects in a domestic space creates a sense of ambiguity. In this exhibition, Huff uses the repetitive multiples of objects, as if asking a question over and over again: How does one reflect and become familiar with the growing changes in their environment in order to ultimately ascertain a level of stability with their own existence?

DOMESTIC SPACE AS NEUTRAL ARENA

Huff questions whether the concept of “natural” has been diluted relative to the domestication of animals. “Domestic spaces” recur throughout the exhibition as placeholders for generating experiences and memories for humans. He states that there is a level of acceptance that one has to assume when the intrusion of the “natural” world meets the domestic. Animals, although they may appear to be domesticated, may still possess the same instinctual, non-human traits and temperament even when they are brought into an environment beyond their natural habitat. Placing these two entities in a common space is Huff’s visual metaphor that considers how artifice and nature can coexist.

ANIMALS AS ARCHETYPES

Nathan Huff’s interest in the human psyche can be traced throughout numerous pieces in the exhibition in which animals emerge as archetypes of the human experience. In the center of the Culver Center of the Art’s two-story atrium, viewers are greeted by *Fortunate Find* (2013-2014). It consists of seven scrolls hanging at various lengths ranging from eight to thirty feet long. Each one contains images of owls in flight amidst an endless pattern of Damask wallpaper. This monumental body of work alludes to Huff’s imagination in that the patterns of the scrolls are mental recollections of the Damask designs on furniture that he recalls seeing around his house when he was a child. He remembers how the patterns resembled faces of owls with their wings spread out. In his drawings, he renders an image of these haunting owls from childhood as if an apparition trapped in the pattern of Damask. During studio visits with Huff, he has stated that the inclusion of the drawings of dismembered chairs alongside of the owls indicates a second level of the unconscious for him: when we are looking at non-human animals, we are always looking at ourselves, hence the owls surrounded by items found in a domestic space – chairs and fabric patterns.¹

Throughout the exhibition, paintings of a grizzly bear inhabit every corner of the Sweeney Art Gallery. *Cornered* (2012), *Cornered 2* (2013), and *Carousing* (2104) feature a grizzly bear aimlessly exploring domestic domains. For Huff, the grizzly bear’s behavior correlates to a near forgotten instinctual side of human beings. He captures the creature in



careless acts of destroying everyday objects such as plants and furniture within its reach, or engaging in carnal pursuits on top of a vehicle. These acts are meant to explore the human struggle to balance seemingly uncontrollable desires with the practical side of self-imposed laws and government.

Similarly, Huff continues the exploration of the primitive behavior of human beings through the representation the deer. *Florescent Divine* (2014) was created in response to the artist’s trauma of witnessing a deer hit by a vehicle. Huff describes that event in its most harrowing, yet disturbingly sublime, moment: seeing a deer catapulted from the ground and then suspended up in the air. Placing the deer in a domestic space was an attempt for Huff to reconcile the traumatic event as it represents a level of neutrality from personal disturbances, thus supplanting the effects of a traumatic event. *Florescent Divine*’s composition suggests that the deer ascends through the domestic space in a state of rapture. Here, Huff is clearly in dialogue with Renaissance master painter Raphael’s *Transfiguration* (1561-1520), which illustrates Christ ascending before witnesses. However, Huff’s translation is a contemporary one by framing the ascending deer in a domestic space. But the shared experience for viewer 500 years apart is that they and the respective artists share in the occasion of the painting, acting as witnesses to the sublime, rapturous, transfiguring, yet traumatic events.

REPETITION OF OBJECTS

While animals are represented in iconic archetypal fashion in Huff’s work, he presents everyday objects through a compilation of repetition. Objects such as chairs, drinking glasses, rowboats and trampolines recur in duplicates or in multiples. Huff employs the technique as metaphors to explore familiar personal experiences. He explains that mundane situations told through these objects are like suspended fables without a moral.

Up a Creek and Down River (2014) exemplifies this notion. It is comprised of over 500 drinking glasses that contain water with a variety of forty-five wooden rowboats handmade by the artist. Huff hopes to link the struggle of sustainability and containment in one’s life by asking, “How can you traverse a body of water when it’s the size of a glass?” His answer, in effect, is the creation of simulated choppy stream with drinking glasses varying



in different shapes and sizes. The glasses closest to the makeshift faucet in the pedestal are filled with water close to its rim. As the glasses wind down through the gallery, suggesting an eddy in the stream, they appear to be half full and close to empty. Huff feels that the role of each rowboat represents individual journeys while each drinking glass that rests on denotes individual life challenges. In the midst of the overwhelming presence of the drinking glasses and their implied turbulent currents, Huff references the biblical quote “My Cup Runneth Over”² which suggest that there can be abundant gifts held and found within each challenge.

If all of the separate installations in this exhibition are viewed as an experience made into chapters, then *Shop Talk* (2014) marks the conclusion to Huff’s narrative. It is made up of repeated objects that correspond in likeness located in a small intimate room in the Sweeney Art Gallery. Various styles of chairs, from craftsman to midcentury, that were constructed by the artist in balsa wood, are horded in a circle as if they were animate and sentient. This sensibility suggests they are witnesses to a spectacle of hand tools acrobatically placed in the center. The latent tools suggest the opportunity for group discussion and ultimately the direction of the constructed identity. According to Huff, *Shop Talk* is about “community” and it is made of different voices and opinions seeking to give language to authentic needs and roles that exist in the environment. The variety of chairs represents the diverse personalities that occupy them. It is an attempt for the individual chairs to reach a conclusion to realize their potential both as individuals or as a part of a group; perhaps one of the eternal struggles for every living creature, or at least, human beings.

Jennifer Frias, Associate Curator, Sweeney Art Gallery, UCR ARTSblock

1 In *Electric Animal* (2008) Akira Lippit’s study on how humans are seeking “to recover the traces of animality” in the human sciences, is germane to that investigation and a salutary reminder that, when we are looking at non-human animals, we are always looking at ourselves.

2 From Hebrew Bible which means “I have more enough of my needs.” Huff uses the over abundant repetition of drinking glasses each containing water to illustrate this quote.

IMAGES: (Cover) *Carousing 2*, 2013, 60 x 54 inches, Gouache and charcoal on paper. (Insert, from left to right): *Florescent Divine*, 55 x 101 inches, Gouache and acrylic on paper. Installation view of *Shop Talk*, 2014, Dimensions variable, Balsa wood and found tools. Detail of *Fortunate Find*, 2014, Dimensions variable, Gouache, graphite and acrylic on watercolor paper. (Back cover, from top to bottom) Installation view of *Up a Creek and Down River*, 2014, Dimensions variable, Found glassware, water, faucet, and balsa wood. Installation view of *Fortunate Find*, 2014. All works courtesy of the artist. Photographs by Nikolay Maslov and Jennifer Frias and courtesy of UCR ARTSblock.