

Reassessing MiddleCoast Art by Dan Gunn

[Heartland](#) October 1, 2009 - January 17, 2010

Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 5550 S. Greenwood Avenue, Chicago, IL 60637

If “Heartland” at the Smart Museum were only another tired attempt to define “Midwestern-ness,” it would have failed before it began. Exhibitions that fall into this trap of showing “Midwestern-ness,” inevitably end up in condescending generalizations, or in forced comparisons, made to prove that “Midwesterners have culture too” which is equally condescending.

Fortunately, “Heartland” is not such an exhibition. “Heartland,” is an exhibition that, for once, takes Midwestern art production on its own terms, creating a multi-pronged show full of interesting, location-specific facets. A significant portion of this interest stems from the exhibition’s co-sponsor, the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Netherlands. The three curators of “Heartland,” Charles Esche, Director of the Van Abbemuseum, Kerstin Niemann, Research Curator for the Van Abbemuseum and Stephanie Smith, Curator and Director of Exhibitions and Collections, at the Smart Museum, took some extensive road trips around the MiddleCoast. Their fascinating back and forth communications, snapshots and reflections [are located on their Heartland Project Blog](#). The blog provides some important context about the thinking behind the show; one curator describes Detroit as almost “post-urban” and reflects that the civic irresponsibility there makes anything in Eindhoven look trivial by comparison. The Dutch curators investigated the American Midwest as an unknown quantity between two culturally dominate coasts, an important political force leading up to the presidential election and as a site of possible models for post-industrial, post-capitalist cultural production.

The lucidity of the presentation is surely a credit to Ms. Smith’s own motivations. In fact the *Heartland* show at the Smart Museum is actually the second half of the collaboration. The first half of the show was presented in Eindhoven in October of 2008 under the same name, *Heartland*.



Loosely arranged by city, the show incorporates artists from Chicago, Kansas City, Memphis, Indianapolis, and Detroit to name a few. Detroit proves to be a particularly fertile site due to the extreme, widespread ravages of its depressed industry. Their cavernous and hauntingly empty factories are featured in the photographs of Scott Hocking. Mr. Hocking built orderly stacked pyramids of loose brick inside of the factories' vast expanses of peeling paint. Shot from far away, these entombed ziggurats transfer their connotation as the last remaining symbol of power for otherwise lost civilizations onto their factory containers.

If Mr. Hocking's photos are monuments to shifting social structures, the project by the Detroit Tree of Heaven Workshop represents a re-engaged social practice. The Workshop used their commission money to buy an empty lot and plant Chinese sumac, called the "Tree of Heaven". The tree, a.k.a. the "ghetto palm," grows invasively in blighted neighborhoods. The Workshop harvests these trees for sculptures and products turning a sign of disregard and decay into a resource. When considered alongside other initiatives like the Compass Group or Design 99 there is a significant segment of the show devoted to groups investigating systemic cultural, economic and environmental issues.

Cody Critchloe with SSION's video *Boy*, features Critchloe himself as a pop-cultural music icon. Also from Kansas City is Whoop-Dee-Doo, a confetti and streamer crazed public access TV performance group. Taken together they seem to present a completely nihilistic and marginalized form of social disengagement. Where as some groups in the show seek to transform their engagement with culture, Cody Critchloe and Whoop-Dee-Doo ingest every ounce of tacky mass cultural glam and mash it up into a maximalist wonder drug. The affect of this is either the production of complete nihilism where every action no matter how trivial is celebrated, or inherent criticism of media culture through a latent irony (think Ryan Trecartin).

Another theme weaving through the show was a reclaiming of history. Jeremiah Day used the social impact and model of a small civil rights group, the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, as a muse to consider the practical effects of race, memory and personal freedom. Similarly but with a hint more fiction, Kerry James Marshall diagrams and depicts favored South Side Chicago haunts of days gone by and Deb Sokolow constructs a drawn, film-noir narrative about art, the CIA and artist-hit men.

These narratives of urban decay, environmental action, and lost histories point briefly to the existence of a superstructure that wouldn't have been addressed if it weren't for Julika Rudelius' two channel video *Rites of Passage*. If the Heartland is being exploited environmentally, culturally and historically who's benefiting? In Ms. Rudelius' provocative video, young dapper but unsure men answer questions from older authoritative men on why they want to be leaders. Set in lush red velvet and gold trimmed rooms oozing with the look of American colonial power, the older men give their leadership advice. With probing questions and penetrating looks the old men pick apart their young counterparts, reforming their psyches to match their own. The men repeat phrases like "to be a leader requires perfect conviction" or "the message is unimportant" making it clear that it's only the belief in the messenger that makes people follow a leader.

As an exhibition "Heartland" is a lot about reconsidering the means-to-an-end and all of these disparate parts make up a complicated but fascinating context for Midwest art production. Heartland re-positions these practices squarely inside of thematic issues that are globally relevant to the present time.

--Dan Gunn

(Images: Greely Myatt, *Cleave*, 2008, Cotton plant roots and found object. Installation view at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands. Photo by Peter Cox. Courtesy of the artist and David Lusk Gallery, Memphis, TN; Scott Hocking, *Ziggurat East/Fisher Body*, Detroit, 2008, Archival digital print. Courtesy of the artist and the Smart Museum)

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