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Michael Galbreth in a 12-hour performance/ construction Saturday at OnWaugh with Kevin Cunningham.

MIXING IT UP

ONWAUGH PRESENTS: KEVIN CUNNINGHAM, JIM PIRTLE, RICK SARGENT, through July 22
reviewed by LOUIS DOBAY

OnWaugh gallery continues to "mix it up" with a show featuring painter Jim Pirtle, Rick Sargent, a painter who works with different media, and Kevin Cunningham, a sculptor who works with paint and anything else he can find. Coinciding with the opening Saturday was a collaborative installation created at the gallery over a 12-hour period during which Cunningham and artist Michael Galbreth remained silent. Characteristic of the show in general is a statement "Our backs," written on the wall during the Cunningham/ Galbreth performance. In the case of the performance, it underscores a turning away from the use of language, and even a turning away from a traditional relationship between artist and viewer. And it might seem that "Our backs" even referred to the relationship of the different artists to each other. There were, though, similarities, as we shall see.

Pirtle and Sargent display paintings that reflect a testing of several styles. Much of the subject matter for both artists is mundane. Pirtle's work reflects family events, relationships, or events from his own life, as titles *Stopping in the Road*, *Claude Just Loves Babies*, and *A Family Scene* might suggest. Of this type of work, two paintings seem to sum it up: *Acadians Languishing Over LSU Loss*, and *My Life and Heisenberg*. *Acadians* contains the themes associated with many of the other paintings. It is a kind of group portrait of dejected football fans after the big game that owes much to photographic recording. The figures are unposed and the scene is painted as it might spontaneously occur, without symbolic additions. The painter is not active in the process; he is rather a recorder of events to which he does not add secondary comment.

In *My Life and Heisenberg* and in the problematic but curious *Baby on Blanket*, or *Woman out of Hole* a more active involvement in depiction is demonstrated. *My Life* is a collage painting incorporating photographs, printed materials and other documents of the artist's life. But the theme is uncertainty, after Heisenberg's early quantum physics principle that certain particles cannot actually be observed, only predicted. The implications of this theory were devastating to principles of scientific verification and certainty at the heart of classical physics. And for the artist, this has been translated into a very real philosophical paradox concerning individual certainty and actions. This paradox is displayed openly in a painting that literally has two contradictory titles possible. In *Baby*, or *Woman* the physical surface behind the human figure is either the ground covered by a blanket, or a hole. Crucial to our choice of the more viable option is our perception of what the human figure is. As presented, this

question is left unanswered. The artist himself seems unable to answer the question for us, creating a dilemma.

Similar questions arise upon confronting the Rick Sargent's works. His most recent pieces are collage on black paper that features newsprint statements, such as "Party was just a little too dead." This work is titled in reduced form, *Too Dead*. It features, as the series it is part of, a format in which the underlying statement is demonstrated by a crude newspaper representation of a head, with ink-marker lines that create an expressive face centering on the eyes. Taken together with what seems to be earlier works, *Contemplating Speech* and *Looking Past You*, a striking development takes place. *Speech* and *Looking* are almost exclusively painted, using a dark palette, with oversized figuration of heads either in mute, introspective pondering or ironic yearning. In *Looking*, for instance, the eyes are open and receptive, though they are undercut by a mouth painted in sensual red colors and subtle brushstrokes. Whereas in *Contemplating Speech*, actual speech is unlikely, the eyes and mouth are closed, only the oversized ears might be receptive to the external world. One wonders about the discrepancy and about the development that caused the next series to be muted, passively expressive, without coloration, not even painted — and yet defined by printed statements. There is a break. What is indicated between the two sets of work is a missing element in which the figures speak for or express themselves. Here too, as with Pirtle, are the makings of a philosophical comment, namely that something between the two processes has changed. Thought on the one hand — the desire to speak — in the first series becomes an after-the-fact depiction, where characters are spoken for by mass-produced common slogans that approximate what they wanted to say in the second.

Oddly enough, and seemingly without any prior arrangement, the Cunningham/ Galbreth construction-performance is linked to the themes of Pirtle and Sargent's work. Throughout the day Cunningham and Galbreth produced an environment in a room, and neither spoke one word to the other. The result, as actual object making, seems less important for what it is than what it is not. It is not collaborative in any preconceived way, excepting the structure of the performance, *i.e.*, it was to take place in said room at said time using found materials. Further, the objects produced do not utilize language either in written or spoken form. What remained were signs of a non linguistic process of communication. This kind of performance springs from impressionism's development to abstract representation, and to a kind of abstract presentation, or abstract action. The question of the role of language in art is not as new as it might seem.

Theoretically, at least from Peter Burgher, the question of language and art is tied to language's debasement to mere communication of reality between individuals. During the 19th century, impressionism was the result of a perception that the use of a common language did not guarantee that a speaker, say a politician, would use words for their meaning, or their truth, rather that anyone could manipulate language to create false impressions, to spread misinformation, to lie. For the 19th century, this meant what was stated or described as real, was not necessarily either. The effect of this in art was impressionism. In saying this, it is important to note that the impressionists were sympathetically depicting their perception of a happy, sun-dappled world full of beautiful flowers and contented Sunday sailboat enthusiasts. It was as if to say: despite the problems, things are O.K.. In fact, as the course of the century proved, such was not the underlying health of European culture. The development of total abstraction in the 20th century nullified content as signified in the image, and by implication, language. Content, the idea of truth itself was no longer possible. Right or wrong became simply obsolete. We are now post-modern, post-literate, and must find some way to communicate.

The relevance of this question of language to these artists is this: given that language is sort of taken over, how can communication take place? The structure of language, it seems, might provide a clue. During their performance, Galbreth wore a blindfold, and neither artist spoke. But what remained of their work, the objects they made, ended up doing being the words of their non-verbal communication.

Hints of this problem of language are directly or indirectly contained in much of the subject matter of the show. Jim Pirtle depicts people who are animated only by experiences, unique to that place or time, without continuity, one side of communication. Sargent gives us the human unable to speak for himself, with closed mouth, effectively gagged, who in the end must resort to newspaper clippings about generalities to approximate or represent some individual emotion or thought. Finally, Cunningham's individual work takes the form of elaborately fortified and symbol-laden books. Inside are laminated texts written by the artist. Metal hinges hold together plywood covers, which themselves are coated with thick coats of plastic and solidly attached objects. It is as if something is to be protected, to be made real, to be retrieved from obscurity, to be saved. All these things in a funny little gallery, happening right under our noses. Perhaps when we look back we will ask: how can it be?