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Myth Making

Artists harness their 'Source Energies' in Bemis Center installation

By Michael Joe Krainak

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Installation art is not foreign to the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, Omaha's vanguard devoted to the creation and display of experimental new media as well as more time-honored forms. Yet, with its gallery spaces on the first floor and even its Underground featuring more traditional solo and group shows recently, it has been a year or more since we have seen installation the likes of Rachel Ziegler's and Nic Bartlett's "Remainder" below ground and Michele Kong's elaborate, yet delicate constructions, "Critical Density" above.

That all changed last weekend when the Bemis Center opened two uniquely impressive installation exhibits in its main galleries, Nic Nicosia's imaginative and paradoxical "Drawing" and "Cuthbert & Solzberg, Archivists and Researchers: Investigations in Source Energies." Both installations are on view until May 17, but this review concerns itself with "Source Energies," the creation of wife-husband collaborators Tara Cuthbert and Stuart Solzberg. A review of Nicosia's "Drawing" will follow later this month.

Cuthbert and Solzberg, whose combined name or title has a deliberate professional ring to it, have been collaborating since 1998 in an ongoing conceptual project of archiving and research. Though they have fine arts degrees in ceramics and painting respectively, the "firm" of Cuthbert and Solzberg has been concentrating its creative energies in the fabrication and actualization of a family history and genealogy in several phases, currently known as "Source Energies," the installation now on display at Bemis. This multi-media exhibit incorporates drawings, video, photography, sound, hand-sewn tapestries, artifacts and replicas, all of which are inspired from historical societies, academic research and even Shamanism. In a busy and complex design of mini-installations, Cuthbert and Solzberg transpose viewers backwards in time via a narrative they can relate to because of a shared pattern of events and experiences preserved as artifacts, expressed in art and ritual and united by what they describe as source energies.



This current exhibit has its roots in earlier phases, including "Bushwick Farms" and "The Traveling Variety Show," both of which are incorporated into "Source Energies" via their artifacts. Bushwick Farms is described at its Web site as a "tangible fiction, which revolves around a family farm, its extended genealogy, and a constructed mythology." Cuthbert and Solzberg say they began this endeavor as a way of "blurring the boundaries between art and life," but not merely for its own sake though their overall design and recreation in various media, which continues with "Source Energies," is artful and eminently inviting.

Bushwick Farms was created while the two artists were living in the Brooklyn neighborhood of

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Bushwick. Through altering postcards and found photographs, they constructed an elaborate family history. Many of the artifacts in the Bemis show belong to this fabricated Bushwick family collection which dates from the first half of the 20th century and spans the history of this Dutch American family and their belief in source energies. Photographs of this farming tribe include a family business manufacturing pumpkin butter produced by Earl Martense and Josephine Mary Bushwick who founded Bushwick Farms in Vermont in 1958.

Not satisfied with this blend of fact and fiction, Cuthbert and Solzberg took Bushwick Farms on the road in 2001 via a 1979 Ford pickup and a 17-foot travel trailer, transforming them into a mobile studio/home. Soon after, they converted their road trip into the Traveling Variety Show and adopted the personas of Joe Rotto and Violet Gray, themselves part of the Bushwick family. As Joe and Violet they spent four years traversing America under the guise of the conceptual Traveling Variety Show. Think of it as a variation on the Traveling Wilburys, "Vols I & III," concept albums founded by musicians George Harrison and Tom Petty, who created mythical characters and a narrative for themselves and fellow band members Bob Dylan, Roy Orbison and Jeff Lynne and then made music accordingly.

Now, the Bushwick Farms' experiment and journey has evolved into "Source Energies" which according to one of the exhibits' many helpful didactic panels "completely surround us and connect all spirit, human, plant, mineral and animal. Since the dawn of time this underlying force has captivated and enthralled humans. Since the first time that people gazed up into the milky black sky dotted with stars, or the first time that they stopped and listened to the wind." If this sounds a tad New Agey to one, or better yet, George Lucas' "Force," rest assured Cuthbert and Solzberg are fine with that association as well, as one of their panels quotes liberally from the late mythologist Joseph Campbell, who revered the original "Star Wars" mythos connecting it to his own "Hero with a 1000 Faces": "Looking back at what promised to be our own unique, unpredictable and dangerous adventure, all we find at the end is such a series of standard metamorphoses as men and women have undergone in every quarter of the world, in all recorded centuries, and every guise of civilization."

A slow deliberate stroll through "Source Energies" may not be "unpredictable or dangerous," but it does reveal much that motivates and binds us to one another. This is a very sensual and energetic installation that both demands our attention while it invites our scrutiny. Initially, we are in a strange place, but soon find ourselves on familiar grounds with mini-installations on walls and in corners that may resemble set pieces from and about our own pasts. The east wall of the gallery as well as its north and southeast corners seem to be given over to the role of the archivist (Cuthbert) while the south, west and most of the north wall, as well as the center area are the purview of the researcher (Solzberg).

Historically, the collaborators say, an archivist protects and preserves the past for future generations while the researcher interprets and traces patterns within given parameters. The former is accomplished in "Source Energies" with a collection of correspondence, photos, artifacts, replicas, moving images, audio and hand-sewn tapestries including highlights from the previous mentioned Traveling Variety Show and Bushwick family lineage. These items are carefully, almost ritually, arranged on mantel or shelf, end tables or in curio cabinets. Though the figures and objects look familiar as do their settings since they resemble our own "altarpieces" at home, what we really recognize is that shared energy, the need to find, collect, preserve and proudly display our own heritage.

On the south wall the artists have assembled a massive "Celestial Sphere," well over 100 images of portraits, places and objects all interlocked by twine to a central tri-circle figure signifying interconnectedness. Unlike the archival mini-installations, the digital printouts here are largely representative or symbolic as the generic portraits are bonded by such mythical signs as the flight of a bird, a sailing ship, a setting and/or rising sun, a moon's tidal pool, the northern lights as



well as other images of journey, exploration and discovery.

These patterns of source energies repeat again on the west and north walls but in different manner and mediums. On the west wall are a series of "Energy Investigations," embroidered tapestries with similar imagery as that of the "Celestial Sphere," but whose graphic and geometric shapes and outlines emphasize more simply the similar patterns of a log cabin, a galaxy, a mathematical formula and a blueprint, among others. The north wall, titled "Providence," reinforces these patterns of energy and interconnectedness in a set of drawings that give greater shape and form to the minimal sketches in the tapestries.

A bank of six monitors in the gallery's center plus three additional on walls and two video projections repeat these visual motifs and patterns but add a more dynamic, contemporary source energy of their own. What began for Cuthbert and Solzberg in microcosm, the singular creation of the Bushwick Farms history, has expanded with this installation into a macrocosm of universal truths. The former may be a myth, but in "Source Energies," it reveals its mythical powers.

Joslyn's sculpture garden ready for 'Phase II'

The second and final stage of Joslyn Art Museum's multi-million dollar sculpture garden is underway. The official grand opening for the garden is expected to be sometime in spring of 2009.

A press release from the museum had this to offer: "The garden is the focal point of a campus redevelopment and beautification plan that is dramatically changing the face of Joslyn's grounds," including "a variety of important 19th and 20th century sculptures, as well as contemporary works by internationally renowned artists."

Phase I of the sculpture garden was completed last year.

Local art scene: the Bedford House

Wayne and Laurie Brekke are artists who live in a quaint little house located a few blocks north of Northwest Radial, near 49th Street and Bedford Avenue. During select times each year, the couple transforms their house into an art gallery for the local art community's enjoyment.

This upcoming Saturday, March 15, the Brekke's house, or the Bedford House as they call it, will once again open its doors at 7 p.m. On view this year will be acrylic and mixed media works by Wayne Brekke, among others, some of which are for sale.

Come one, come all and enjoy the ambiance of a creative and festive atmosphere. This event is free and open to the public.

The Bedford House, 4926 Bedford Ave. For more information, visit WayneArtGallery.com.

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