

KEVIN deFOREST - STATEMENT

Most of my three weeks in Kyoto and Tokyo were spent on foot, wandering backstreets on the way to shrines, grocery stores, record shops. There were moments when an overwhelming sensation of sadness passed through my body. I cried with my kindergarden teacher and principal in my old school. The same stone entry, playground and hallway I could recall, my memory enhanced by super 8 home movie footage. What I was sure of was that I had absorbed a certain introspection, a certain humility through my own silent way of looking.

I first met Barbara Ess at her visiting artist's talk at Banff. She backgrounded her presentation by a listing off of her passions and influences, one of them being rock'n'roll. That phrase just stuck out like a sore thumb for me, heavy on the Brooklynese, like a screeching Johnny Thunders guitar lick. Art making was supposed to be operating at a more profound level than teenage trash rebellion. But her pinhole photographs somehow embraced that familiar energy, sucking her experience through a tiny hole in a cardboard box with a quirky, delirious intimacy.

At the moment I'm painting on record album covers. They're certainly the stuff of my daily routine, littering my studio and apartment in scattered piles. I don't know how many oceans of second-hand vinyl I've flipped through in pursuit of the nonsensical or the sublime. Call it my major vice and commodity fetish, but I continue to collect and obsess over other people's sounds and attitude. It's in the blood for me - my mother listening to classical records in her neighborhood coffeeshop in post-war Kyoto, my dad blasting his free jazz albums at high volumes in the northeastern States and Canada.

Maybe the lp paintings are in part a teenage wish-fulfillment, letting me be my own pop-star role model. I'm wanting to feel my own groove, search out my funky bad self. Re-imaging and altering the jackets gives my that permission. When I paint myself as an honorary member of Kiss, become a ghost/tourist/voyeur of my own half-Japanese culture, or look for my own ideal sci-fi home, I allow myself to be as serious, as goofy, as sexy, as self-questioning as I get through the week.

There's a certain familiar image overload at work here. When I first began painting in the relative isolation of the midwestern prairies, I invented my own art world, mostly through library art magazines. This secondhand imagining of what an artwork could be was reflected in my own work. I approached my painting more as an idea, as opposed to experiencing its substance. I wanted to make art not like the images I was seeing but more like the experience of going through an entire issue of Artforum or Just Another Asshole (I very rarely however watch television and don't see the point in channel-surfing). Recently I've been able to demystify some of the pretensions around art that is selected (and more significantly, left out) for magazine publication or the history books. And I've returned to the inspiration of my immediate peers, and finally, to myself.

Working autobiographically is new for me, and I'm charged by the head on collision course it makes between my practise and experience. Reconciling the loss of an important lover, my mixed cultural/racial identification, confronting the love/humiliation I have around rock'n'roll, my heterosexuality - these are categories that I know, wonder, dream and worry about all day long.

I'm trying to avoid premeditating my results or setting up too many categories. Sometimes the records are ordered in groups, sometimes not. I don't see my artmaking role as providing a consummate structure or organization with which to view the world. For the moment, I'm more concerned with exploring my own urgencies, and just expecting them to be as lurid, strange and multi-layered as they are for me each day. I also need to short-circuit explanations, in order to sidestep my own stifling self-consciousness. I need to get down and kick ass.

A complaint: in part I'm responding to a glut (at least here in Canada) of work I've seen from younger artists that seems a little over-strategized, wanting to validate itself through theoretical alibis and a professional look (actually, that sounds a little like work I was making about a year ago). Whatever happened to the sensation of seeing art by experiencing the room, the object? Lately I seem

to end up reading a text off a visually illiterate installation or a highly polished department store display. Academic cultural theory also appears to have become part of this "look" and that disturbs me. The colour of my skin is not a style or an abstract idea. Its also not the sum-total of who I am. What I am working towards is a revision of categories like race and multiculturalism, through the representation of my own diversity of identities and concerns.

I wouldn't describe my work as activist, but I feel it still has a level of political engagement. I think the voice in my work is quiet and at times ambiguous, but it still needs to be heard. Strong work for me resonates with its own personal engagement, which is not at all to suggest a banishment of the abstractions of theory. Instead I very idealistically want the theory scene to forfeit its powers of validating authority and become another factor in everyday negotiation. I think writing from Trinh Minh-ha (When the Moon Waxes Red) and Barthes (A Lover's Discourse) has engaged my own life in this way because it speaks firstly from a personal and everyday politic.

Finally, I seem to have lost interest in more art-historically focused concerns. If painting can be termed an archaic stained glass medium in the ladder of contemporary cultural priorities that's fine by me. It can finally be let go as a prop for academic power negotiations. Painting as commodity, as fetish object, as colonial signifier, as trace of hand, as original, as pointless. Doing the laundry, drinking coffee, laughing, painting, reading. Wandering.

Hearing my interval, my silence.

Acknowledging the everyday as the site of wonder.

"It's hot and it's cold and it's hot and it's cold ... at the same time"

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