

OBJECT PROJECT:

Common Subjects, Uncommon Results

Fifteen artists included the same five objects in their still-life drawings and paintings as a way of demonstrating both their individuality and their shared commitment to representational art. That collection of pictures is beginning a national tour, starting at The Evansville Museum of Arts, History, and Science, in Evansville, Indiana. | **by M. Stephen Doherty**

The Object Project exhibition, currently on view in Evansville, Indiana, (October 14, 2007 through January 6, 2008) came together through an extraordinary collaboration between contemporary realist artists and a group of museum officials, and it now affords viewers an opportunity to consider the connections and differences between those artists. The show is exceptional because the artists initiated it and because The Evansville Museum of Arts, History, and Science (www.emuseum.org) agreed to host it before any of the pictures had been created. It is quite unusual for artists to effectively curate their own museum displays and for cultural institutions to commit their resources to an exhibition that doesn't exist. Clearly, the concept was so compelling and the roster of participating artists was so strong that the entire program developed purely on faith.

The organizing concept for the exhibition is brilliant in both its simplicity and its depth.

Each one of the 15 artists agreed to create one multipanel painting or two similarly sized paintings, with the only stipulation being that five common objects (a clear glass of water, a moth, a ball of string, a bone, and a mirror) would appear in some fashion within those pictures. The artists committed themselves to incorporating the objects in any way they saw fit. Indeed, the 15 artists were chosen specifically because they were expected to blend the common elements into pictures that would be totally consistent with their existing body of landscapes, still lifes, portraits, and figure compositions. The intention was to present 30 paintings that would be unified by the five common objects and, at the same time, separated by the responses offered by each individual. It was assumed the final exhibition would be more about the unique vision of each artist than it would about the repeated elements.



June Holding Glass

by Steven Assael,
oil, 62 x 18. © Steven Assael
courtesy Forum Gallery, New
York, New York.

The idea for the Object Project surfaced during conversations between several of the artists who shared a similar commitment to the breadth and depth of realist art. They were interested in the challenges posed by the project; in the opportunity for like-minded, midcareer artists to collaborate; and in the questions that might be raised by the juxtaposition of paintings that were similar yet remarkably varied. The artists started with an idea for the exhibition, spent months hammering out a detailed plan, and then devoted almost two years to executing the artwork.

In order to deal with the questions about the number and selection of artists to be included in the exhibition, the steering committee drew up a list of artists they admired, exhibited with, and/or knew personally. It was assumed the process of inviting each participant to submit a list of three pieces they would most like to paint, sending ballots so the artists could rank their top five choices from among the 45 proposed elements, and then tabulating the final results. Fortunately, five objects received enough votes to make them the clear favorites among the entire group of painters. No one is quite sure what would have happened if 10 objects had received the same number of votes.

The steering committee wisely decided that each artist

final selection had to add up to a manageably sized exhibition of 30 to 35 pictures that could be crated and shipped from one venue to another. The question of who to invite was a little more difficult to answer. Some names were eliminated from the list because those artists would have had to work outside their oeuvre to create paintings with five pre-selected objects. For example, plein air landscape painters and traditional portraitists would likely have had to strain to incorporate a bone into two paintings consistent with their current work. Some artists removed themselves from the preliminary list because they weren't interested or able to make a firm commitment to the group.

The determination of which objects the artists would put into their pictures was made through the democratic should be given a box containing duplicates of the five objects. Sharing the same bone, moth, and mirror would have been a logistical nightmare, and it would have prevented the artists from altering the objects if they so chose. From the very beginning of the project it was assumed the artists would be free to use the objects in any way they wanted. "The objects can be painted as they are, smashed, attached to the canvas, altered, etc.," the steering committee explained in a letter. "In other words, how the artist uti-

lizes the objects is a matter of his or her own discretion and other objects or even figures or landscapes can of course be added.”

The unexpected difficulty that arose was finding 15 moths and bones that were exactly alike. The group had to solicit the help of an entomologist to locate moths of the right shape, color, and size; and a sculpture supply company was paid to make resin casts of a bone that met the artists’ requirements. Fortunately, the mirror, string, and glass were not difficult to find in sufficient quantities. When all the objects were assembled, they were shipped to the 15 artists, along with a reminder about the amount of time available for completing the paintings.

Initially, the steering committee asked the artists to create paintings approximately 48" x 48" (unframed) so that the museums considering the exhibition could evaluate how it might be hung and so that the logistics of crating and shipping would be more manageable. It was suggested that if an artist wanted to create one large picture, he or she should consider making their second picture smaller in fairness to the other exhibiting artists. There was a further agreement that although the artwork could be made available for sale, all the pictures had to remain in the exhibition until the end of the tour.

As The Object Project was taking shape in discussions between the artists, queries were sent to dozens of museums that might have enough interest, money, and time in their schedules to host the traveling exhibition. As might be expected, some curators and directors had no interest in the project, others were enthusiastic but didn’t have funds or time available, and several agreed to present the show as long as someone else assumed the responsibility for organizing and circulating the display. Fortunately, John Streetman, the white knight who has championed contemporary realist artists for more than 20 years, responded with great enthusiasm and immediately committed his considerable energy and wise counsel—as well as his largest exhibition space—to the project. He was the visionary, the advisor, and the champion needed to turn a well-developed idea into a major exhibition and catalogue. Once Streetman expressed his support for the project, several other museum directors followed suit.

Although it is obvious the 15 artists are exceptionally gifted and dedicated, it can also be revealed that they had a great deal of fun incorporating the five objects into their paintings. Viewers of the exhibition will also have fun locating the common elements while they consider the symbolism and historical context of each moth, bone, glass of water, string, and mirror; and while they marvel at the variety of pictures created with egg tempera, pastel, graphite, mixed media, and oil paint. These works of art will likely elicit laughter, puzzlement, reflection, and delight—all the emotions the artists blended into their creations.

Streetman explains that The Object Project celebrates the artists and their creations and, at the same time, it extends The Evansville Museum’s longstanding commitment to “broaden public awareness of the particular gifts of realist artists. All of the participating museums hope the communities they serve will recognize that the artists who contributed to this exhibition used the tried-and-true formulas passed down to them from generation to generation in order to create something fresh and new.” ■

M. Stephen Doherty is the editor-in-chief of American Artist.

About the Exhibition

The Object Project exhibition will be on view at The Evansville Museum of Arts, History, and Science, in Evansville, Indiana, from October 14, 2007 through January 6, 2008. It will then travel to the Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, South Carolina, February 3 through April 27, 2008; the Philbrook Museum of Art, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, June 29 through September 21, 2008; and the Hunter Museum of American Art, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, October 11, 2008 through January 11, 2009. For more information on the exhibition or the participating artists, visit www.theobjectproject.com.