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David Ford, *Perception*, 2009, Mixed Media.



Jim Leedy, *Earth Lies Screaming*, 1999, polymer foam.



Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937, oil on canvas.

When Art Speaks to the Cognitive Dissonances of History

**Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art
4525 Oak Street
816-751-1278
Kansas City
David Ford
May 11, 2012**

By BLAIR SCHULMAN

I have always had a difficult time reconciling David Ford's work to a single piece. On their own, I often feel something is missing to the left or right of me and that feeling is assuaged when all the works exist alongside one another, Incorporating installations and live performance with everything bleeding over walls, floors, and into other rooms you confront the intentions writ large. Ford is no navel gazer.

His oeuvre can send one down a rabbit hole. One thought leads to another, which leads to another and through it all you start to really question mankind's motivations. But above it all, Ford places his faith in the truth. "I am a patriot...where we come from and where we can be,"

These pictorial artifacts as a non-blurring of gallery work and live performance is on the money. They are a re-assemblage of place in which the individual is "present beneath every accident or event" to loosely paraphrase the late French philosopher, Jacques Derrida. Our life is theatre and that is how Ford plays it for us. Whether we're in the audience or onstage, the reverberations of events, however they unfold, continues. That is, if



Nancy Spero, Love Peace Glory, 1968, Gouache and ink on paper.



David Ford, *Your Face Here*, Acrylic on Canvas, 2008.

we are conscious.

His work, his talk asks us to wonder. If this is the path upon which we are meant to travel? For should we not stop and ask why this path is before us? Can we not change it? Should we not change it? Or risk this direction and simply go forward?

On Friday, May 11, artist David Ford was the fourth, and final speaker, in a series of Talk and Tours at Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. And as expected, it did not disappoint.

His themes of otherness, immigration, race, homosexuality, manifest destiny, and Native Americans are a body slam, forcing a good hard look at both American and world history.

In the great westward migration, for example, the slaughter of Native Americans in the name of progress has been accurately depicted many times. Earliest settlers considered it God's will, a divine plan that John Gast's *American Progress* (Oil on canvas, circa 1872) is represented as an allegory. Here Columbia, the poetic and historical personification of the United States before being replaced by the Statue of Liberty, moves as a ghostly and ghastly symbol of civilization headed west. In her wake, telegraph wires, pioneers and other symbols of modernization follow while Indians and wildlife run for their lives.

An installation in San Francisco, *Manifest Destiny* is a temporary structure (447 Bush Street, SF, CA. until through



David Ford, *Wonder*, 2010, Rope, styrofoam, pigment, 15 x 12 x 16".

October 2012). Created by Brooklyn-based artist Mark Reigelman, in collaboration with architect Jenny Chapman, it. "seeks out areas of unclaimed territory for establishing a new home front in the (city's) remaining voids of San Francisco, California."

Hanging forty feet in the air, the structure is created with vintage building materials and century-old reclaimed barn board from Ohio. Called "a romantic spirit of the western myth and a commentary on the arrogance of westward expansion" it recalls Ford's own *Mission Accomplished* (Acrylic on paper, 2007) — the final bastion of migration completed, a soldier raises a glasses to his vainglory.

Filled with varying translations and interpretation to the tragedies of war does bring to mind, is *Guernica* (Pablo Picasso, oil on canvas, 1937) Bringing Illuminating world attention to the Spanish Civil War, it responds to the suffering the war inflicts upon all. If Picasso's politics may have been confusing (Picasso once said to Jean Cocteau in reference to the communists of whom he was a member: "I have joined a family, and like all families, it's full of shit"), this anti-war symbol is not. Conversely, Kansas City master artist Jim Leedy, portrays the aftermath of war much more plainly. His opus *The Earth Lies Screaming* (1999) is a 50-foot long wall sculpture composed of bones, skulls and limbs made from foam that does not shy away from symbolism, but also comes straight to the point.

Nancy Spero (1926-2009) devoted five years of work creating War Series (1966-70). Representing her disgust with the



David Ford, *Secret War Plan*, 2012, Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60".

Vietnam War, these are small gouache and inks on paper, "executed rapidly, represented the obscenity and destruction of war. The War Series is among the most sustained and powerful group of works in the genre of history painting that condemns war and its real and lasting consequences."

A favorite installation of mine from Ford is *Intractable Positions* (2009, Mixed media). A Palestinian and Israeli flag are boxed into a corner. Neither can move forward without the other one following. Since both nations refuse the role of supplicant, it is there they will remain until a solution can be discovered.

Conversely, Lawrence, Kansas-based sculptor Matt Burke brings up Christo and Jeanne-Claude's 2005 site-specific installation, *The Gates*. As he says in a Facebook conversation, "The people who came out to walk through the gates ranged from people you never see in the street—the beyond super rich—to the middle class, to the down and out nuts, homeless, wandering. I've never been in one space with that broad a demographic. I believe it created a polis (city in Greek) that was unique, rare, and momentary. The "politics" of the work was the "polis" it created."

Ultimately, Ford takes responsibility for his work, but once the viewer takes the space, they enter the void and one is put upon to understand. He stands alongside a long line of artists whose work tells time, not in hours or seconds, but in life-changing events. Critic Philip Yenawine may have once said, "art probes the mysterious" but art also tells the truth and



over the centuries, artists have been the messengers of truth, both good and bad.



David Ford, *Mission Accomplished*, 2007, Acrylic on Paper.

David Ford, *All Suffering Soon to End*, 2012, acrylic on canvas with tape, 40 x 30".



David Ford, *Intractable Positions*, 2009, Mixed Media.



David Ford, *Persephone*, 2011, installation