



<< BACK



CONTACT



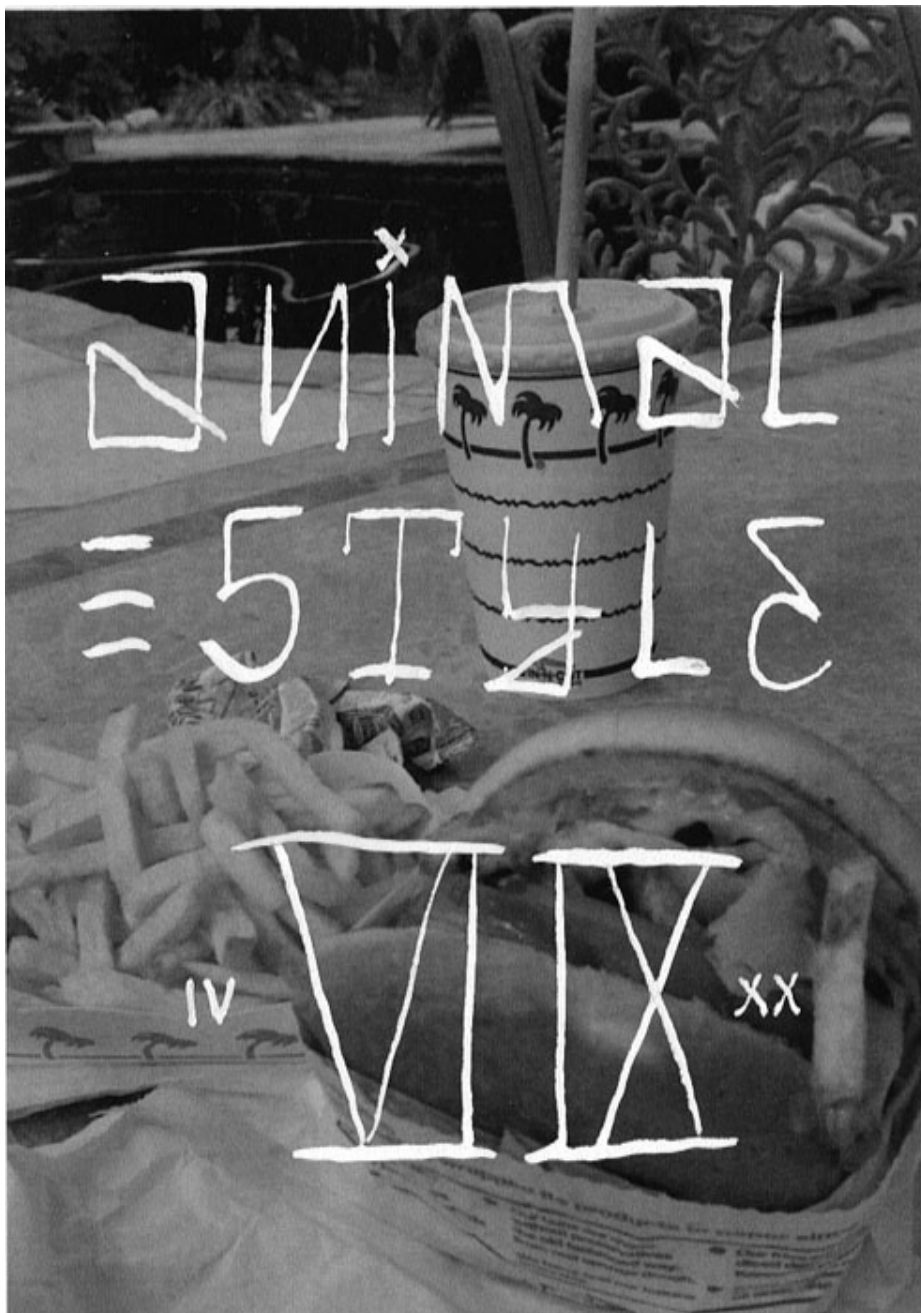
SEARCH



CLASSIFIEDS



Matthew Huff, *Animal Style* — a close-up of a burger and fries — along with *Get High, Mike* — Michael Jordan making a slam dunk and *Forever Young* (a dead snake).





Matthew Huff, *La Familia: Language of the Street*, Installation view.

Matthew Huff Returns Us to the Many-Layered Language of the Street



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**Plenum Space Gallery**  
**504 East 18th Street**  
**Kansas City**  
*La Familia: Language of the Street*  
**September 3-24, 2010**

by **BLAIR SCHULMAN**

In a small and smartly executed show at Plenum Space Gallery in Kansas City's East Crossroads, artist Matthew Huff reinterprets the coded symbolism of graffiti. *La Familia* pairs these modern hieroglyphics with digital imagery that deftly illustrates the quick-fire manner in which we have come to document our surroundings.

Huff eschews the fat, knuckle-busting color-drenched lettering from more recognized taggers of the 1970s and 1980s like EROS and Fab 5 Freddy for something that tests our hidden dyslexia. Using black spray paint on white butcher paper that line two walls of the space, his markings espouse the historical importance of language whether it comes from Lascaux, France or the Boogie-down Bronx.

Huff is interested in "creating something out of an obstacle." Wanting to replicate an urban feel, he sought out a space before starting the work. After contacting other galleries, he was put in touch with Paula Rose, gallery director of Plenum Space. After visiting, his ideas started to take a more definitive shape.

Visitors must walk up a narrow staircase cutting through the center of this exhibit, and then lean against metal railings. And though it might not be East 138th Street, Plenum Space is raw enough in its physical character to have one feel as if they're waiting on a subway platform, circa 1978.

Gang culture and their warnings signs are noticeable throughout. As a teenage skateboarder in Los Angeles County, Huff often found the best places to skate were far away from a TV-ready landscape. He discovered markings on street signs, walls and sides of houses denoting which territory he was in. The inappropriateness



Matthew Huff, *La Familia: Language of the Street*, Installation view.



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of this, he says, made one excited and nervous, but not uncomfortable. Skateboarders are given respect in this environment -- a renegade in a renegade neighborhood, Huff was never harassed.

Subliminal, and ironical, messaging is rendered in white ink over blown-up pictures taken from his iPhone. With more than three thousand to choose from, Huff selected images he believed would look best in black and white. He then sent JPEGs to a copy shop for full sheet prints. Without any retouching, he practiced writing and creating the alpha matrix that eventually wound up on the walls. Finally, scanning small images at 200 dpi, he had FedEx do the larger printing where the images were blown up 1,000 times to their present 36 x 54".

The most elegant of these pieces is *Dream Big*, which feels like a still from a Grace Kelly movie. A speedboat rippling through the water is taken from afar. The smallness of this expensive toy keeps the viewer at a distance from its reality. The writing over the image adds dimension and dialogue.

*Animal Style* — a close-up of a burger and fries — along with *Get High*, *Mike* — Michael Jordan making a slam dunk and *Forever Young* (a dead snake) — all make light of our culture's preoccupations — gluttony, organized sports and death.

A sleeping dog is depicted in *Work and Play*. Over the animal are the Roman numerals VI x IX. Adding to the irony — or pun — they also add up to 69, which can be construed as both work and play. Math nerds can see square roots here, and throughout the show, an unintended layer added by the artist.

*420 Love* is a detail taken from a Los Angeles barbershop sign advertising haircuts. The tear drop on the woman's face has multiple interpretations — a gang murder, loss of a loved one or the marking of prison time. But Huff brands it to suit his own meaning. The number 420 is seen throughout the exhibit and might represent one thing to a party animal, but for the artist it's a simple gesture of affection. He met his girlfriend, designer and styanista Peggy Noland, on April 20.

A native of Los Angeles County and the San Gabriel Valley, Huff began making art as a Fine Arts student at Pacific Northwest College of Art (Portland, Oregon) in the mid-2000s. His other vocation is the drummer for LAZY, a "post-Punk" band formed in December 2009, which recently returned from a West Coast tour.

The work Huff creates has an anachronistic quality, much like the music of Ariel Pink, whom he likes to listen to when working. Both the music and his imagery, have a nostalgic, out-of-date fuzziness that is refreshing. The markings and imagery are loose and open-ended. It resonates with a maturity that shows his research into the differences between actual gang graffiti and run-of-the-mill street tagging. Attracted to "an ambiance of danger", Huff takes us to another side and shows us it's a tough old world, but it ain't all that bad.



Matthew Huff, *La Familia: Language of the Street*, Installation view.



Matthew Huff, *La Familia: Language of the Street*, Installation view.



Matthew Huff, *Love*.



Matthew Huff, *Dream Big*.



Matthew Huff, *Get High Mike*.



Matthew Huff, *Forever Young*.



Matthew Huff, *La Familia: Language of the Street*, Installation view.

Matthew Huff, *Work and Play.*

