

Johannes Deyoung, Steffani Jemison, Phil Lique, Laura Marsh At Real Art Ways

Connecticut-Based Artists At Hartford Venue

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"Ego Loser" by Johannes Deyoung at Real Art Ways (Johannes Deyoung / April 30, 2012)

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"Visualize and Achieve"

With these words, the first video in Johannes Deyoung's art installation "Ego Loser" begins. An animated papier-mâché head, its eye sockets empty and its mouth grossly distorted, spouts self-help mantras and go-getter bromides against a shifting, candy-bright backdrop. It's disturbing and mesmerizing.

"I started with a script generated from spam that came in my email," Deyoung said in a phone interview from [New Haven](#), where he lives and lectures at Yale. "Some of it is seems very profound.... Other thoughts are just incredibly strange and bizarre. It all comes together into an absurdist beat poetry."

"Ego Loser" is one of three new exhibits by four Connecticut artists at [Real Art Ways](#) in Hartford.

In another video by Deyoung, a different, more clownish, papier-mâché head spins off of the quote "seriousness is an accident of time" from Herman Hesse's "Steppenwolf," and riffs on what else is accidental. In the third video, that same clownish head regurgitates U.S. copyright law.

"An uncanny thing starts to happen when you kind of recognize the thing he's saying, but it also feels really strange," Deyoung says. "These words become absurd, taken out of context. To me what's interesting is the cognitive dissonance between what the voice is saying and what is seen on the screen."

Steffani Jemison

The jumping-off point for Steffani Jemison's art is also a piece of writing, a heartbreaking one: In 2009, her 14-year-old cousin was shot to death in Chicago. Shortly thereafter, another teen was shot in Chicago. It was reported in the papers that the second teenager, [Derrión Albert](#), kept a poem called "Affirmations for Living," containing a lot of motivational messages, next to his desk.

"This text is written from the point of view of an adult, things like 'If I could I would go to the gym and stop talking about going' or 'I would go back to school to take that class I've been wanting to take,'" Jemison said. "What's poignant is that it's an inspirational text, but it's based on regret, imagining a life in which certain things are missed, but you can't miss them unless you have been in an adult place of regret."

Jemison creates collages using "Affirmations for Living" as a starting point. "I was working with collage and thought about the process of trapping something, almost like ending it, freezing it," said Jemison, who teaches at [Trinity College](#) in Hartford. "I also had been making work that explored seriality, what it means to repeat things."

Jemison's exhibit, which also includes serial, abstracted photos, is called "Such is your Luck," a portion of a quote from "The Confessions of Nat Turner," "Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bear it."

"I think of that as a state of mind, the tension between hope and resignation," she said. "He imagined a kind of utopian possibility of liberation, but at same time he was blind to the fact that it might not appear in his lifetime."

Phil Lique & Laura Marsh

The bits of writing that inform Phil Lique's work are succinct: They're price tags. Each of the works by Lique in the two-person exhibit "Half Off" is accompanied by a showy tag.

"Our works discuss Americana and money and value," Lique said from his home in New Haven. "It seems that where we're from, the priority is getting the most for you money and the best bargain, where quality is not as important as the bargain, the sort of ethic where you can buy 10 [bad] cars over the course of a decade but you really don't want to commit to buying the one good car that will last you all the way through."

Apropos of this philosophy, the tags are a bit too vivid, next to the more toned-down works. "The price tag is in the proximity of the piece of artwork and it is totally crisp and clean," he said. "The intensity of the colors in the price tag almost turn down the intensity of the colors in the artwork."

His work features consumer and iconographic items — a running shoe, vodka, an American flag, AK-47s — but despite these themes, they are not comments on the economic downturn. "Everyone talks about that as a big hallmark.... But for me, I don't know anything different," said Lique, 28. "The economy sucked when I got out of school. It still sucks. This has just been life for us."

When Lique says "us," he refers to himself and Laura Marsh, his wife and partner in "Half Off." Marsh's work has similarities to Lique's, in that it references pop culture, but her pieces are sculptural, and tend toward the overstated and outlandish.

"I begin by thinking up kind of a character ... that refers to a pun or a political interest," she said. "I wouldn't say they are caricatures, but there is absurdity in the work."

Her sculptures include a menacing bird-person wearing biker clothes, another creature commenting on the culture of beauty, and a pair of elaborate cat's-eye eyeglasses that loom overhead, decorated with Wal-Mart-ish smiley faces.

"When I was making the glasses, I started to think about the Wal-Mart motto, 'Rollback.' I wondered how I could transform that word into a statement in support of smaller businesses, in a way rolling back to better times."

Even though she and her husband's work have differences, she is enjoying sharing gallery space with him. "We both think about big issues and want to work with them," she said. "It's interesting to see two artists and where their ideas cross over."

"EGO LOSER," "SUCH IS YOUR LUCK" AND "HALF OFF" will be on display until Sunday, June 17, at [Real Art Ways](#), 56 Arbor St. in Hartford. Details: <http://www.realartways.org>.

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