

Not the Same As It Ever Was

A review of the exhibition: *Double Vision: Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* at the Zilkha Gallery, Wesleyan University, January 2011

by Geoffrey Detrani

The past is with us.

Perhaps it's due to an insecurity of the moment. Maybe it comes from an indelible place at the core of American culture. Whatever its source, there is special significance to the sort of originalism for which the American "founding fathers" serve as a convenient emblem. Their writings, biographies and lifestyles are attended to as lesson-giving examples for our troubled modern times.

Consider the Tea Party and its selective deference to the founders and the costume tropes of 18th century Americana. Consider Supreme Court Justice Scalia and the jurists who give lip service to a "literal/ original" reading of the constitution.

In his exhibition *Double Vision: Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* at Wesleyan University, the artist Jeffrey Schiff delves into this originalist morass, taking bits of colonial exposition as points for imaginative departure.

To do this, Schiff begins with a book. He takes as his starting point three essays from the 1786 *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*. A leading think-tank of its day, the American Philosophical Society's esteemed membership included founders such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, whose learned opinions linger with us still.

The titles of the three essays read like poetry: *Two Hearts Found in One Partridge*, *Account of a Worm in a Horse's Eye* and *Some Account of a Pye Coloured Girl and Mulatto Boy*. Each considers the paradox of an apparent duality in nature – a duality that taxes that author's credulity and questions well-held assumptions.

For Schiff, a close reading of these texts can cause us to consider how assumptions of the past color our perceptions of the present. To expose this, the artist parlays his readings of these texts into several impressive artworks. Sensitive to the strength of the original documents, the artist reproduces enlarged excerpts of these texts, presented, on the wall, like artworks. With their yellowed pages, irregular typesetting, archaic phrasing and diction, they stake out a key presence in the show.

Schiff is a nimble facilitator of aesthetic experience across a spectrum of media. The works in the exhibition range from terra cotta vases –some smashed to reveal pagoda-like cores - to videos on ipods, digital prints, and elegant laboratory vessels with bulb-like centers and graceful, reaching necks.

In several works, the artist relies on the use of old fashioned stereoscopes, which offer a means to optically conflate two separate images. In these, the theme of seeing twice, of viewing, reviewing and crafting synthetic, new meaning to conjoined things is evinced most literally.

Duality is at the core in the other works as well. *Proposition* consists of several laboratory tables on which sit graceful glass tubes and vessels. In most motor oil and water are distributed in various amounts, gathering in bottles and filling tubes but never mixing. In one version, though, the dark and light liquids do mix, suggesting, again, the hybridity that shatters rigid categories.

Schiff evokes the monumental in *Mappa Mundi (Portolani)*, a fifteen-foot high photographic sculpture. In this, the artist - referring to the “pye” colored girl and “mulatto child” that so intrigued their original, dubious observers – pieces together a portrait of a standing figure with mottled black and white skin. Mixed with excerpts of nautical and navigational charts, fauna and topography, it suggests the myriad signals of a changing world – one of fractured assumptions and newly constructed knowledge.

Schiff’s project is interpretation and response. In abstracting image and form from the conceits of the original texts, Schiff, in effect, annotates those texts, creating experiences that can enrich our reading of them.