

Art **Reviews**

Beaded Paintings, Epic Narratives, and Beastlands at a Midwestern Biennial



by Sheila Regan
October 28, 2015



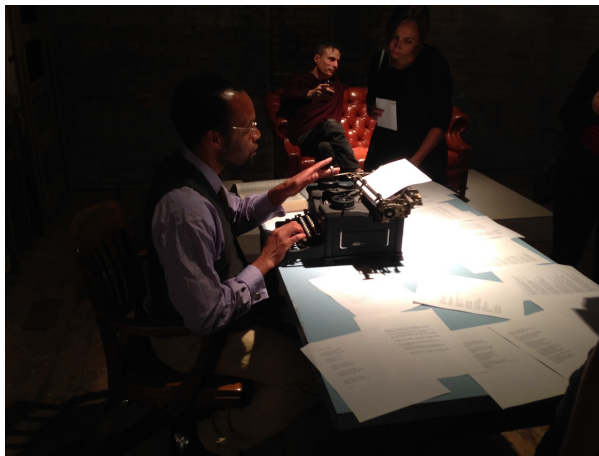
Sonja Peterson, "Ghost Ship"
(2015), papercut, woodcut, cut vinyl, fabric
(all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

MINNEAPOLIS — Clarence White had the coziest station at the opening of the 4th annual [Soap Factory Biennial](#). He sat at an old typewriter, papers sprawled across his large wooden desk, across from a comfy leather couch where visitors were invited to sit and share the thoughts they were having trouble putting into words.

On opening night at the biennial, White was posing as a kind of Cyrano de Bergerac, weaving into poems and letters the scattered thoughts of his

visitors, adapting them into an eloquent piece of writing that became part of the installation. Participatory art is a tricky thing. As an audience member, sometimes you can feel put-upon. So often it's one-sided, where the participant isn't really contributing to the work, just filling in an empty blank to make the artist's vision complete. Not so with White's project, which truly felt like a collaborative experience. I had a de facto therapy session with him, revealing anxieties and trepidations that he effortlessly drew out of me. The poem he composed conveyed exactly how I was feeling, in a way I could have never stated myself.





Clarence White, "Untitled" (2015)

The biennial was curated by Cheryl Wilgren Clyne, who has brought together a satisfying, diverse array of Midwestern artists, with a mix of performative and interactive pieces as well as photography, painting, print, and even a living sculpture by Carlos DeGroot that looked a bit like a science experiment. Titling the biennial "Superusted," Wilgren Clyne plays off the Soap Factory's dank atmosphere

(the building used to literally be a soap factory and has a warehouse-y, industrial quality, so "rusted" feels just right as a descriptor), but also includes the implication of "super you," suggesting an exhibition that's aimed at the artists' relationship with the viewer.

One of the highlights of the show is Andrea Carlson's "Sunshine on a Cannibal," a monumental mixed-media work made of 24 paper segments. Carlson's epic narrative positions the artist Yves Klein as someone else's subject, alluding to the artist's experience of being featured in the 1962 shock documentary *Mondo Cane* (*A Dog's World*), by filmmakers Paolo Cavara, Franco Prosperi, and Gualtiero Jacopetti, which consisted of exploitive footage from cultures around the

Andrea Carlson, "Sunshine on a Cannibal" (2015), mixed media on 24 paper segments, 4 feet x 15 inches (click to enlarge)

world. The real-life Klein was horrified by the way his "Anthropometries" demonstration (a ritualistic performance where models became "living brushes," pressing their bodies onto gauze to create the artwork) was portrayed. Not long after, he died from a series of heart attacks.



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In Carlson's work, Klein's blue female body imprints are scattered about the landscape, amid other images of world cultures that were exploited not only in *Mondo Cane* but throughout Western culture. As part of the work, Carlson writes, "INSERT TRIGGER WARNING HERE IN CASES WHERE THE SUBJECT IS ALSO THE PRIMARY AUDIENCE." She uses the example of Yves's dismay to point to the historical and continued experience of Indigenous cultures and people of color having to watch as their cultural histories are rolled out to be viewed or fetishized as strange and bizarre, the unwilling subject of Western imagination.

Carlson's piece acts as a foil to Areca Roe's installation, "Beastlands," which takes its title from a Dungeons and Dragons plane of existence. To see these images, you have to look through one of the many stereoscopic viewers hanging from the ceiling. These viewers, much like the 1980s View-Master toys, reveal three-dimensional images when you look through them. The large rectangle of light at the far end of the installation provides a backlight for the slide images in the viewfinders, thus the installation is experienced not only by seeing the images but also by taking in the

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Visitors viewing Areca Roe's "Beastlands" (2015)

larger construction of the backlit dangling viewfinders. As the audience stepped into the piece, they looked like part of a futuristic science-fiction scene.

In Dungeons and Dragons, Beastlands is a place where, after death, mortal souls end up living among the animals, dressed in pelts, eventually turning into beasts themselves. It's also known in the game as the Happy Hunting

Ground, a concept appropriated from several Great Plains tribes, where there is hunting aplenty in the afterlife. Roe created her own Beastlands: scenic slide images of nature inhabited by a white couple and their child who lounge around in fur loincloths. They hang around in the outdoors, with a picturesque background of rivers, lakes, and woods. You see the Eve-like woman nursing her child or walking serenely in a field of daisies, the baby playing in the water and climbing sand dunes, and the family nestled by the campfire.

Though a lively work, Roe would have benefited from a more clarified critique of the appropriated roots of subjectified Indigenous culture in the piece. However, it works well that Roe and Carlson's work appear in the same exhibit.

Another excellent pairing is that of Sonja Peterson and Laura Primozic, who both find inspiration from ships at sea. There's a dreamlike, fantastical quality to both artists' work, floating over darker undercurrents. In Primozic's "Unascertainable Reconstruction," the artist uses paraffin wax to create arctic glaciers on top of which she places toy-sized oil





Sonja Peterson, "Ghost Ship" (click to enlarge)

rigs. In some cases the rigs are broken, or, in one of the pieces, the rig acts as a lasso to a mound of ice, as if the glacier were cattle. Below the water are sweeping, cloud-like pools of oil, juxtaposing the horrors of the spill with pools of oil that spread out like angelic wings, producing a startling result. Similarly, Peterson's installation invites viewers into a winter wonderland of paper-cut and woodcut artistry, but with sly hints of shipwreck and death that make the work much darker than it first appears.



Laura Primoizic, "Unascertainable Reconstruction" (2014), porcelain, metal, wood, paraffin wax

Other standouts in the exhibition include Dyani White Hawk Polk's stunning paintings, which incorporate beadwork; Shana Kaplow's haunting work with ink; and Pritika Chowdhry's relief poem, which uses the spatial relationship of the text to draw out the meaning of her words. The work's four words— "longing," "endless," "forever," and "unstill" — are arranged in a square, with the letters floating in space, creating a sense of buoying restlessness.

The Soap Factory has a history of presenting work that offers interactive experiences, and certainly *superusted* follows this tradition. However, even with the pieces that aren't technically interactive, there's a thread throughout much of the work that the artists are opening up a dialogue with the visitors, rather than creating in a vacuum.





Shana Kaplow, "Unfinished Business" (2015),
ink on paper



Pritika Chowdhry, "Poem #3" (2015), ink on paper

[superusted](#) continues at the Soap Factory (514 Second St SE, Minneapolis) until November 8.