



BENJAMIN ENTNER
WORKS ON PAPER

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Benjamin Entner believes art can be fun. Although trained as a sculptor, Entner works in a variety of media that illustrates his adaptive nature: video, installation, performance, drawing, sound, painting and even woodworking. He has stated, "My work is driven by ideas or curiosities and I simply try to find the best tools to address them...I create works that are the result of play or experimentation, and/or are self-reflective of the trials and tribulations of everyday life."

For his exhibition of large-scale sculptures at the Kansas City Artists Coalition, Entner created balloon-like works out of Tyvek, and then rubbed them with powdered graphite. Whirring hairdryers keep each piece inflated. The imagery in *Still Life* (2008) includes a cube, an elephant, the letter "M," a carrot, a whale, and an inflatable "frame" surrounding the whole. The forms in the immense charcoal-on-Tyvek piece *Landscape* (made in 2008 at Sculpture Space in Utica, NY) consist of a hot dog in a bun and a brontosaurus, as well as another inflatable "frame."

By making playful large-scale sculptures, Entner evokes Pop-oriented artists such as Claes Oldenburg and Jeff Koons, both of whom he expresses an interest in. (One of his other works is entitled *Poor Man's Koons*, although he is quick to point out that unlike Koons, he continues the hand-made craft tradition rather than utilizing a team of fabricators and industrial methods).²

Entner's combination of elements in each piece appears to be arbitrary, but their titles and the inflatable frames around them provide a context in which to consider them. The frames signal that although these works exist as sculptures, they refer to the history and aesthetics of painting. By relying mainly on just two materials (a drawing medium and a surface) Entner engages painting at its most basic form—drawing—to focus our attention on core issues.

Still Life of course refers to the painting genre of the same name, in which an artist renders a scene made up of various components such as fruit, flowers, tableware, and historically, game fowl or fish. This type of painting came to maturity in 17th-century Holland, where a long tradition was established in which the still life elements were understood to serve as reminders of mortality (*memento mori*): fruit and flowers wilt and die, game is hunted and consumed. Furthermore, in art classes, still life settings commonly feature geometric forms to enable the student to study the effects of light and shade, recalling Entner's cube. In his *Still Life*, one might read the random grouping of forms as poking fun at the dignified history of still life painting.

Likewise, *Landscape* can be related to the landscape painting genre. The work is so large that the entire work cannot be seen at once, becoming a metaphor for a landscape that stretches into the distance. In addition, a portion of the brontosaurus appears to meld with the hot dog-and-bun, just as objects on a horizon are

difficult to discern. Besides, one wonders why a hot dog appears in a landscape. As something human-made, it stands as a symbol of civilization and culture, albeit one characterized by fast food and consumerism, whereas the brontosaurus embodies nature.

Entner's work also yields valuable fruit when it is considered in the context of concerns that initially seem to lie outside the art world.

In 2008, many experts have stated that the economy is in the worst shape since the Great Depression as major financial institutions fail, the stock market crashes, consumer prices rise and home values stagnate. Scientists agree that global warming threatens life itself unless we change methods of production, consumption and transportation. Two wars in the Middle East continue on with mounting human and economic costs.

In such serious times, what happens to the place of art in the world? Will collectors slow down or stop purchasing out of fear about the economy, seeing art-buying as "discretionary spending"? Will politicians and philanthropists reduce arts funding amid explanations that there are too many more important priorities to pay for? Will corporations choose to sequester or sell off their art collections because they are perceived as untenable luxuries?

Undoubtedly, some will act in such manners, stating to their constituents that they are responding to the sober times sensibly. Yet one can hope that the prevailing reaction will focus on the positive instead. At the most basic level, art performs a valuable service to many: providing respite to refresh the mind and spirit. Moreover, now more than ever, the nation should value seeing the world through an artist's eyes for a few moments.³ Learning to appreciate art—even difficult and provocative art—can rewire our thinking patterns and help us approach tasks with more openness. Through this process, art promotes inclusion and diversity in our world, qualities that surely are essential to solving the world's dilemmas.

By greeting everyday life with experimentation, play and a sense of humor, Entner encourages us to accentuate the positive and to believe in possibilities. Ultimately, the artist himself offers the best summation of his work. As he stated to this writer, "Art is recreation, in a sense, and it should be a place where things are done in a serious manner but they don't have to be serious."⁴

James Martin is an independent curator and art historian based in Merriam, Kansas.



Landscape, Tyvek, charcoal, hair dryers, 10x19x25 feet, 2008

Notes

1 Artist statement, undated.

2 Telephone conversation with artist, November 20, 2008.

3 Indeed, over the past 10 years or so a number of writers have noted the rising influence of creative types, such as Richard Florida, Daniel Pink and the team of Paul H. Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson.

4 Telephone conversation with artist, November 20, 2008.

BENJAMIN ENTNER RÉSUMÉ

EDUCATION

2006 Syracuse University 2006
MFA in Sculpture
2002 University at Albany, SUNY
BA in Renaissance and Medieval Studies

EXHIBITIONS

2008 *Benjamin Entner: Works on Paper*
Kansas City Artists Coalition, Mallin Gallery
Kansas City, Missouri

2007 *Upcoming*
Clermont Art Gallery
University of Cincinnati

Made in NY
Schweinfurth Memorial Art Center
Auburn, NY

Everson Biennial
Everson Museum, Syracuse, NY

Seekers and Visions
Gallery 181, Lawrence, MA

2nd Annual Backyard Invitational
252 Miles, Syracuse, NY

Master of Fine Arts Exhibition
Lowe Art Gallery, Syracuse, NY

Side Show: New Works of Benjamin Entner
Delavan Art Center, Syracuse, NY

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cover image: *Still Life*, Tyvek, graphite, hair dryers, 10x18x8 feet, 2008



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