Exhibition Review: Salt Lake City

As American as Apple Pie

Amy Jorgensen’s Far From the Tree at UMOCA

by Laura Allred Hurtado

When you stop by the visitor’s desk at Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, you’ll see a large glass bowl, placed there by curator Becca Maksym, topped full with apples. Red. Shiny. Delicious. The kind that greet you in hotel lobbies. As a fruit, it’s a sentinel of welcome, of home. In fact, the apple has long stood as a symbol of wholesomeness and autumn harvest, echoing the rich goldenness of October afternoons. Within our cultural landscape, it functions symbolically outside the largesse of its obvious purpose. It is the hope of a new school year, a token of appreciation. The apple often stands in for the big and bold myths of American goodness, a land of freedom, milk and honey, filled with amber waves of grain.

Fitting for an October opening then is Amy Jorgensen’s exhibition Far From the Tree, which takes on the loaded icon of the apple in three distinct artworks—all rooted in performance art, two video, one photographic—that deconstruct the fruit both literally and symbolically. Describing the collective project, Jorgensen says that each work “examines the arching theme of the apple as a loaded and sometimes contradictory cultural symbol.” Further, she explains that “all the works in the show make some reference to the political landscape of terrorism and torture.” A topic, according to Jorgensen, that has saturated our collective public imagination. By doing so, her work inverts the perceived wholesomeness of apple imagery, and its extended implication of American goodness, within the framework
Exhibition Review: Salt Lake City

The Freakish “Differences – A Dialogue”

An Essential Experience at Art Access
by Ann Poore

It was a crowded opening with obviously interested viewers eagerly engaged with a variety of well-presented art: Marcee and Ric Blackerby’s “Freak Show” went off without a hitch.

Except for the title, that is — which, shortly after the initial postcards were sent, was abruptly changed by the Art Access board to something less catchy though (perhaps) more politically correct: Differences - A Dialogue.

What would Toulouse-Lautrec say?

Before the name change, the majority of the 20 artists already had created works commensurate with the original theme. And the fact is that many of the artists are “different” in some respect — Marcee Blackerby, for example, has used a wheelchair since stricken with polio as a child — and most don’t consider the “Freak Show” title derogatory. Blackerby certainly embraced it. Her small box of “Mixed Freaks” has conjoined twins, a turtle boy, a girl with four arms and others along with a handy mirror so you can place yourself in the cast of characters.

Blackerby acknowledges that “freak” is a powerful word, and a loaded one. “But it’s moving into the mainstream with a vengeance,” she says. Even the Kennedy Center, parent organization to Art Access, performed the freakish play “Side Show” this year. And Sheryl Gillian, executive director of Art Access, points out: “Today’s proponents of the word freak wave their ‘freak flags’ high, and forthrightly declare their right to be unique, eccentric, creative and adventurous.” As a blogger she quotes flatly states, “I bet it’s brought you some embarrassment . . . but . . . it’s also what makes you powerful.”

Gillian says “freak” can still also be used derogatorily, “and those children and adults labeled as such are often the victims of bullying behavior. Thus, the conundrum of why ‘different’ people (and animals) get picked on when perhaps their differences could be harnessed as a wellspring of power, identity and creativity.”

Logan Madsen is one artist who knows how to harness the power of difference. His powerful and evocative work has a powerful and evocative of a political critique. Within this context, the fruit (and nation) becomes vilified when paired within the landscape of post-9/11 America.

“Far From the Tree” is a video performance of the artist unsuccessfully bobbing for apples. Shot from underwater with audio, the viewer watches Jorgensen struggle, drowning, desperately searching for the desired fruit. Her hair floats eerily outward, filling the frame. She struggles back and forth, fluttering about, failing. The exercise is futile; the apple is never attained. Mirroring documentation of waterboarding, the seemingly playful reference to the childhood party game feels terrifying from this perspective. And as a viewer, one is left as the voyeur, watching without an ability to assist. Therefore, it is a metaphor for other, similar, yet more horrific images of American torture. Such images can be difficult to see because they debunk the notion of American exceptionalism. They demystify America, a nation fallen from the tree.

Thirty photographs of rotten, smashed and otherwise discarded apples fill the east wall of the gallery. “An Apple a Day” depicts a month’s worth of Jorgensen following the idiom, “an apple a day, keeps the doctor away.” Each day, an apple was partially eaten—sometimes a tiny little bite; sometimes almost consumed to the core—then discarded onto a stained floor and hit by a sledge hammer. According to Maksym, the images were “shot in a way to suggest decay, repulsion and unsanitary conditions.” Jorgensen herself repeated this concept in an interview, when she compared the images to the dank darkness of a prison cell. Thus, the collective imagery deconstructs ubiquitous depictions of apples as icons of health, happiness and optimism. The reference to a prison cell draws a likely comparison to sites like Guantanamo Bay and highlights the poor conditions and treatment of suspected terrorists.

The final work in the gallery is a four-channel video called “Apple of my Eye,” which consists of two frames of a single apple being blown to pieces and two channels of Jorgensen target shooting with with a .45 Sig Sauer P220 on one screen and a .45 Kimber Match II in the other. From the audio, one can hear the sound of bullets and apples falling to the ground, set in a nondescript desert landscape. It is disarming repeatedly to see a close-cropped gun being fired with apple flesh falling to the floor. While historically the image makes reference to Dr. Harold Edgerton, an MIT professor who first developed cameras fast enough to capture bullets shooting through apples in slow motion, such sharp
story behind it. Art often does, but it isn’t always as well executed as this. An accomplished self-portrait by the self-taught painter accompanied by details of one of his four-fingered hands and one of his eyes hang beside a large view of Madsen’s back showing more of the extremely rare and heartbreaking conditions with which he is afflicted and emotively depicts the depression which accompanies them. There are fewer than 30 documented cases of Miller’s Syndrome worldwide and, according to Amanda Finlayson at Art Access, Madsen and his older sister, Heather, are the only sibling pair to have it. It affects muscle and bone formation, joints and some organs and also causes hearing loss. Incessant physical and emotional pain, the artist writes, is compounded by rampant anxiety and depression. The siblings also have Primary Cyliary Dyskinesia, which causes chronic lung disease and an autism spectrum disorder.

“When I see somebody who looks different I want to inspect them as much as I can,” Madsen says in his artist’s statement. “Clearly it’s not nice to stare, but WE ALL WANT TO. I wish I could touch them, talk with them, understand them, but it’s too risky. I might offend them or get stuck having to be overly charitable . . . . We all must become more comfortable with being uncomfortable. So I am asking that you share the burden of discomfort that I have to endure. If calling me a ‘freak’ offends you, as it does me, then I will scream it out loud if only to make the masses feel my disparity for just one second. . . . I am pushing myself out onto the ledge so that you can see how scary it is to be different. You and I are different. Let’s help each other understand how that makes us equal.”

Cat Palmer’s photo and mixed media studies on old locker doors are dandy: intriguing combinations of quotes and images that offer contrasts to make you contemplate differences. For instance, two doors feature a conservative couple and a counter-culture couple seated on the identical loveseat before the same brick wall backdrop. (They could be the same people.) One has a quote from Audre Lorde: “It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.” The other from Thoreau: “It’s not what you look at that matters, it’s what you see.” She also has a locker-door study of two men’s body types, under- and overweight, and a transformative one of a youth. Elsewhere in the gallery she offers telling photographs of queens in regular and drag life.

Several artists offer versions of Freak Shows:

Travis Tanner does a tongue-in-cheek take with a mixed-media box (beautifully framed, natch) containing layers of tiny LEGO people that represent a “Neat Freak,” a “Speed Freak,” a “Jesus Freak,” a “Control Freak,” and even a “FreaknStein.” He reminds us that there are freak accidents, freaks of nature – you get the idea. It’s a veritable “State Fair Side Show of Freaks.” He says that in his work he arranges “images from our visual culture into new conceptually layered pieces. This can leave the viewer to consider the most familiar images in more provocative ways.”

Doug Wildfeuer shows a long “Boardwalk” that nearly fills a wall, Dr. Nightmare’s Amusements, covered with remembered freaks from his shooting again seems to be a visual nod to the proliferation of gun violence here in America as well as the violence of American military involvement.

As an exhibition, Far From the Tree recodes the apple from its polished frame set cozily within notions of Americana and replaces it within the framework of American aggression, violence and torture. Duplicitious realities often exist simultaneously. But what are we to do with Jorgensen’s recoding of our own story through the metaphor of the apple? Perhaps they are moralizing, designed to elicit sympathy, designed to critique. Said Susan Sontag, in Regarding the Pain of Others, “So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. . . . Yet, compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers.” Withers, yes, especially within this content when such criticism are coded in the poetics of aesthetics. As viewers, the question remains, where do we go from here? What action are we to take?

Perhaps we are left with our own impotence in the face of such horrors and, of course, with a delicious red apple as we exit.
childhood, done in watercolor. He hails from Brooklyn, near Coney Island and its famed sideshow, where he says performers were quite possibly exploited by their employers and spent their days being unapologetically stared at by strangers “but at least they were making a living at it. That might sound callous, but many of those who had physical anomalies came to freak shows after being rejected by their families.” And, he adds, found a place where they could raise their own families and have friends who accepted them as they were.

Two superb pieces came from the show’s curators: Ric Blackerby’s charming metal insect sculpture, a sort of Harlequin beetle on wheels, richly varicolored, that looks ready to go to Mardi Gras. He says he is calling attention to some of the small “freaks” in nature, which are often thought of as scary. And his wife’s “Walking the Rainbow,” a very large acrylic box (Blackerby is well known for her story boxes) with a painted rainbow background features a lovely woman sporting red high heels on long legs made of springs, a white rat nibbling at her coil rib cage. She balances with a downy black wing on a long blue stick. On a swing suspended from the top are conjoined bandit twins, each with a single eyeball in the center of its forehead. A magical image that’s most difficult to forget.

Not all pieces are freak-related: Frank McEntire exhibits a sculpture about the Enola Gay; a “Chapel” with the devil guarding the door (look down through the bell tower for a surprise); and the mixed media “A Great Earthquake” where one steps on a button on the floor to bring the interactive piece to life. Nancy and David Starks’ “Dancing Skeleton” lamp is a charmer — she seems to be doing a Tarantella despite her ominous message about death. Rod Millar’s superb photographs of caterpillars draw the viewer right to the wall — the ones on a stem seem to glow in glorious psychedelic green. Mary Wells’ watercolor children’s book is easy to miss but well worth finding. Race is addressed in Soren Green’s “Color Blind,” a nicely done mixed-media montage of a black woman resting, eyes closed, wearing a bold yellow dress, her hair streaming in colors reminiscent of Milton Glaser’s famed Bob Dylan poster.

Finally, as artist Brian Bean depicts in his excellent renderings of a series of five delightful consecutively numbered chickens (or maybe they’re roosters — he hasn’t decided) in “The Pecking Order,” we are all social animals. Bean writes: “Anyone who has seen or been the object of ostracism or persecution knows that we aren’t too different than a flock of chickens. They have a rigid hierarchy enforced by punishment and persecution to sort status from high to low. We may use more subtle methods, but the pecking order plays out just as thoroughly in human lives.”

Ultimately we might remember what writer Andre Dubus II (father of the National Book Award winner for House of Sand and Fog) discovered when his legs were crushed by a car as he assisted at an accident scene: Those of us who are not disabled “are merely temporarily abled.” That makes us all just freaks in waiting. Let’s see this powerful show and “dialogue” about it.
Differences - A Dialogue is at Art Access Gallery in Salt Lake City through November 14. The show also features work by Wayne Geary, Bonnie Succe, Trish Empey, Miranda Whitlock, Matthew Jones, Jared Nielsen, Grant Fuhst and Stephanie Swift.