

Art review: 'Indigestion' depicts the world through smartphone screens

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By Daniel Kany

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“Indigestion” is Monroe artist Kenny Cole’s playful starting steps into an artistic exploration using accidental images made by blindly cutting glossy magazines into 3.5-by-2-inch rectangles – roughly the size of an iPhone screen.

The show at Buoy in Kittery is anchored by a large, two-sided shaped canvas – “The World on Steroids” – that hangs on hinges on a center wall cut so that it can be viewed from either side. The outside of “The World on Steroids” is covered with the magazine images/cellphone screen stand-ins while the inside, which can be seen through the wall or by pulling the work open, is shaped like the inside of a digestive tract. Cole has created intestine-like tunnels through which viewers can roll papier-mâché balls made of the magazine images. It is a wild thing, and it’s made to be played with.

ART REVIEW

WHAT: Kenny Cole, “Indigestion”

WHERE: Buoy, 2 Government St., Kittery

WHEN: 4 to 10 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday, through Nov. 30

INFO: (207) 450-2402, kennycole.com

Cole, who attended the Pratt Institute of Fine Art after winning the Charles Burchfield scholarship in 1976, lived and worked in New York until 1994, when he moved to Monroe with his wife and two children. Since then he has exhibited widely at galleries and museums between Maine and New York. Most of the works in “Indigestion” are in the shape and form of a drawing, painting or collage. (Cole’s works are generally all three of these at once.) They are frisky and mischievous. For this show, Cole has taken a broader concept-generated approach that is exploratory and expansive rather than focused on any particular message. The work goes deep, particularly, on certain ideas about framing and how our societal use of smartphones has changed our relationship to images, information and place; Cole uses the smartphone bezel (the frame of the screen) as the leitmotif to balance and contextualize the thousands of screen-shaped magazine images. The result is a show that puts many ideas into play without over-determining the audience experience. This can be a little intimidating at first: Clearly Cole is up to something, but after a bit it becomes clear(ish) the artist is playing with possibilities rather than trying to focus on any conceptual message. The smartphone is neither hero nor villain: It’s just the way things are now. This, Cole implies, is who (not “what”) we have become.

This approach is an excellent vehicle for Cole’s wildly imaginative creativity. While virtually all of the collage paintings include the cut magazine elements, Cole is otherwise unlimited with his imagery. There are landscapes with playful worms, hands reaching down from the sky, bezels piled on bezels, political images, grids of letters and numbers, historical and mythological imagery (like Uncle Sam and Santa Claus facing each other in what look like foxholes) – far more than could be mentioned. But everywhere there are hands holding smartphones loaded with images: selfies, news, people on the other end of the line and so on.

Cole's painting and drawing is loose, highly-stylized and instantly recognizable. And he uses this to great effect as it plays up the idea of the cultural proliferation of the smartphone and its (mediated/mediating) way of seeing images and, in turn, the world. After a while, the presence of the smartphone imagery is so dominant that it shifts from epistemology (how we know something) to cosmology (how we picture the world).

One painted collage, for example, shows four disturbingly distorted hands in red-and-white-striped Uncle Sam suits, each holding a smartphone with an indistinct image together so that they appear as a single, quad-imaged smartphone. The smartphone, that vehicle for memes, has itself become the meme, a repeated ironically semi-comic leitmotif. But it's not that simple. Built into this approach is some pretty sharp self-criticism on Cole's part: He is, after all, an artist who has a highly-recognizable style and who uses ever-repeating branding points, such as drawing in red, block-printed letters, Uncle Sams, hands with suit sleeves pointing down from the clouds and so on. It's a subtle but poignant position: Cole makes it extremely clear he is not making any self-righteous claims.

Because it playfully ferrets out possibilities, Cole's process takes the form of late (synthetic) Cubism. By combining this with a Surrealist approach to imagery (anything goes and the weirder, the better), Cole has created a wildly entertaining and engaging body of work that borders on overwhelming. I suspect some viewers might not have the patience or confidence to sift through the repeated imagery and grids of letters and numbers that look like codes to get to the point of understanding there is no underlying specific conceptual conclusion to "Indigestion." Moreover, I think the title "Indigestion" hints the point of the exhibition is political commentary: a consideration supported by the presence of some political imagery. But the title also hints at inconclusiveness: It is not possible, Cole implies, to fully digest so much imagery.

I am particularly interested in Cole's image exploration regarding framing – not only the bezels and literal frames of the works, but his hand imagery and even the use of faces on the screens, since they imply your own viewing face. It's hard not to wonder at any given moment if a face on a screen is supposed to be a news photo, a picture of a friend, a selfie image in the process of being captured, or a video of a friend to whom you (the viewer,



"Guardians," collage, gouache on paper, 14 by 11 inches.



"The World on Steroids," detail, acrylic, collage, papier-mache, plastic packaging on canvas, 96 by 120 inches.

the owner of the hands, etc.) are talking. This kind of content – the examination of the subjectivity of the viewer – was a key aspect of Modernism (i.e., the painting as a frame for the viewer’s experience of that painting) as well as a fundamental component of contemporary (read: post-modern) art focused on identity issues and processes (e.g., feminist art of the 1970s). In Cole’s hands, these concepts are important but softly handled. Their philosophical feel is compelling and interesting without ever seeming self-righteous or ideologically overdetermined. And Cole isn’t simply rehashing old ideas: He finds new turf and puts it on the map with well-grounded confidence.

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