

Material Response: Michael James at the Racine Art Museum

by Jody Clowes

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Inspiration is a mystery, a quixotic and deeply personal event. Amid the mad swirl of information we take in every day, what makes a certain image, sound or movement cleave to the heart? Why this and not that? Where is it absorbed, and how does it evolve? Does inspiration come unbidden, or can it be sought?

At the risk of sounding glib, I'd say that seeking inspiration is a fool's errand, like the fabled journey of the wise innocent open to chance and possibility. In the stories, the Fool sets out to meet a king's outrageous challenge: Bring back a ring from the bottom of the ocean, or a feather from the eagle at the top of the world. Against all odds he does, and his quest restores the kingdom. The princess laughs, the Fool becomes a wise and good king, and everyone lives happily ever after.

The premise of "Material Response," the Racine Art Museum's exhibition of Michael James's quilts, reminds me of the Fool's challenge.¹ Davira Taragin, RAM's director of exhibitions and programs, and Bruce Pepich, executive director and curator of collections, invited James to the museum and charged him with finding inspiration there. Dig through the collections, wander the galleries and find that elusive ring. Create something magical that will transform the space and breathe life into works of art that may have been overlooked. You'll know when you've got it: the princess will laugh.

" . . . images were floated and those with the most staying power, those that crept constantly back into my consciousness, were brought to fruition." ²

Although it opened with a brief retrospective of James' earlier work, "Material Response" focused on the five quilts he created in response to RAM and its holdings. Taking in the building and the collections together is a big program, and James circled around awhile before individual artworks, images and architectural elements began to claim space in his mind. The resulting works, all 2005, combine the format of his recent quilts—dense, digitally produced images and patterns, subtle machine-quilting and distinct panels that play off one another—with an idiosyncratic blend of motifs from within and without the museum. Two of the quilts refer directly to works from the collection. The powerful and clear ***Home Economics*** evolved from an unexpected constellation of Karen Thuesen Massaro's earthenware *Stacked Irons*, 1980, and a group of WPA prints, photographs and textiles. ***Potsherds (after Ken Eastman)*** is the direct transformation of one inspiration into another, a brilliant rendering of Eastman's stoneware *Vessel*, 1993, in fabric and two dimensions.

James also found compelling a diverse group of contemporary works on paper and singular details that emerged from the architecture and his photographs of the building. The remaining three quilts—***Alcove***, ***Ghost Figure***, and ***Interference Effect: (Betrayed) Lover's Knot #2***—work imagery from these sources into enigmatic personal

statements that are less easily interpreted. In these compositions, James brought as much to the journey (the Pantheon's dome, a thick knotted rope and a Gothic sculpture of Eve, for example) as he found at RAM. Slippery and multivalent, these quilts document the convergence of James's visit to the museum with the artistic concerns and emotional timbre of that moment in his life. For me, they also capture the deliciously fractured quality of the museum experience: such compressed richness is too much to take in at once—yet you eat it up anyway.

"Influences were assimilated; issues of appropriation, quotation, and derivation were explored and resolved."

Since the early 1990's, many museums have brought artist into the curatorial aerie. The intent has ranged broadly: critiquing the institution's culture, presenting alternative voices and interpretations, or bringing a fresh perspective to the collections. These invitations implicitly acknowledge the symbiosis between artists and museums and the crucial interplay between art and art history. A self-described museum buff, James welcomed the opportunity to examine his relationship with museums through this project.

Yet neither the works created for this exhibition nor their installation critically engages the loaded issues of appropriation, quotation or derivation, as the wall texts suggest. Instead this project become a loving and eccentric tribute, a celebration of the museum's offerings and a distinctly personal reaction to isolated motifs and works by kindred spirits. James explored his responses and resolved them within his own idiomatic expressions. Perhaps the best measure of James's achievement is that each piece stands beautifully without reference to its sources. This body of work transcends the museum's challenge, which speaks well for everyone involved. The king got his ring, and I think the princess is laughing.

The Fool is a trickster, and sometimes he keeps his best jokes to himself. Among the myriad images in these five quilts, I found this most evocative: James himself, reflected in the museum's glass and Plexiglas surfaces. I wouldn't have recognized James's reflection in *Ghost Figure* and *Alcove* if the labels hadn't tipped me off, and I almost wish I hadn't. But the punch line has been revealed. The five quilts that make up Michael James's "material response" are self-portraits of the artist in the museum.

1. "Material Response: Michael James at RAM" (January 22-April 30) was the second in a series of exhibitions based on the museum's collections; the first was *Drawing Out the Collection: John McQueen* (May 2-September 5, 2004). A six-page, illustrated Michael James catalog/brochure is \$3 from RAM, 262-638-8200.
2. Quotations from Michael James are from wall texts in the exhibition.

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