



"Holocene"

Eudenbach's Visual Riddles

By Betsy DiJulio

Back in the day, a popular training experience for museum docents involved the interpretation of a silver punchbowl juxtaposed with different objects, e.g. a silver candelabra, a strand of pearls, a pair of rubber gloves, etc. The experience was designed to help these tour guides understand, albeit it in a simplistic way, the role of context and juxtaposition in the assignation of meaning to objects and artifacts, as the interpretation of the punchbowl changed markedly depending on its contiguous relationships.

That lesson is key to understanding Norfolk-based artist and ODU art professor, Peter Eudenbach's, current projects at the Hermitage Museum. Inserted surreptitiously in and amongst the Sloane's renowned collection of furniture and

Asian art are 12 objects either found, created, or altered by Eudenbach, whose aesthetic runs toward the sleek, well-crafted and metaphoric. After perusing the museum galleries on several walk-throughs with curator Colin Brady, Eudenbach—inspired by *wunderkammers* (cabinets of wonder), early precursors to museums—began selecting objects and experimenting with their placement inside vitrines and atop furniture in the house museum's collection, seeking to strike the perfect note of resonance.

Though these "foreign objects" may at first appear enigmatic—once one actually spies them, that is—visitors who are willing to spend a little time and effort to connect the dots between the inserted objects and the adjacent ones

from the institution's collection will soon begin to recognize themes related to past and present, nature and culture, travel and commerce, and organic growth and economic expansion, as well as signification, just for starters. That the museum lies in close proximity to the largest U.S. naval base, the world's busiest coal pier, and a major East Coast container port was not lost on Eudenbach in selecting and situating the eclectic objects as touchstones for reflection. Trying to identify and then dig deeply into his layered associations becomes an addicting and satisfying mind game.

Eudenbach's thoughtfully-established intellectual and visual riddles throw both the inserted objects and those of the museum's permanent collection into high relief, causing viewers to see them all in a new light with, as Eudenbach notes, "everything talking to everything else." Indeed, the silent dialogue that emerges links ideas across vast expans-

es of time, geography, and cultures.

What does a sleek golden 1950s aluminum and Bakelite TV antennae have to do with the Buddha figures surrounding it? Though certainly not spiritual, explains Eudenbach, the antennae's donut shape visually echoes that of a halo and, at a deeper level, relates to signification or the transmission of energy and signals. Elsewhere, toy shipping containers resting atop a Chinese abacus share a vitrine with camel sculptures, calling to mind ideas about transportation and commerce, for both the containers and camels provide(d) conveyance along trade routes.

In a display case of ancient bronze mirrors, Eudenbach provided the perfect "foil" in the form of a found turtle shell that he silverleafed and then applied a stamped red wax seal in the center. The image carved into the stamp, exhibited in another case, is the QR code for the artist's personal website. Embodied in this

deceptively simple image, as he explains, is the joining of one of the oldest forms of signification (the seal) with one of the most current (the QR code). And so it goes throughout the first floor Asian collection.

Down the hall, in one of the period rooms, is a video screening in which a toy sea plane putters around aimlessly, repetitively, and quasi-comically in a swimming pool, moving in and out of the frame and playing with our interpretation of reality and scale. Geometric and brightly colored, some of the close-up compositions bear a resemblance to nonobjective modern art, though the pool's lane markings are suggestive of runways. But, while the video imagery is visually appealing, it is in the consideration of this synthetic and contained microcosm of the sea against the nearby backdrop of the ocean and its resolutely purposeful commercial and military traffic that some more profound significance is to be discovered.

Upstairs, the museum's two contemporary changing galleries showcase one sculpture each. Equal parts spiraling snail shell and shipping container, *Halocene* (2009-2013) is one of those deceptively simple hybrids that strikes all the right notes in terms of overall form, detail, and color (a spot-on tone of blue-green) to, in this case, ignite cognitive reverberation between organic, commercial, and industrial notions of expansion-contraction and exteriority-interiority, just to scratch the surface.

Next door, past-present and land-sea-sky linkages are elegantly explored in *Than-Qui* (Tortoise Spirit) (2013). A found turtle shell, lit from underneath by a hovering video bubble of gently moving indeterminate imagery, arches over a resin pool that reflects the skeletal underside of the shell. Resting atop a pedestal in a darkened room with black walls, the mystical-seeming sculpture refers to Ancient Chinese plastronomy. Known as the turtle shell oracle, plastronomy is a divination practice involving the interpretation of cracks in uninhabited turtle shells caused by plunging in hot pokers, as explained in a nearby didactic panel featuring a 17th century image of turtles by Athanasius Kircher.

Throughout the museum, Eudenbach's particular brand of site-specificity offers added dimension and meaning in terms of past-present continuity through his use not only of the collection as context, but also the views of the Lafayette River and maritime commerce out the windows, the surrounding woodlands and wetlands, the museum's cotton merchant founders, and the institution's history. Taken together, all is always now. **V**



"Plane Video"



"Antennae with Buddhas"

**All is Always Now: Sculpture and Video
Projects by Peter Eudenbach
Through September 17
Hermitage Museum & Gardens
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