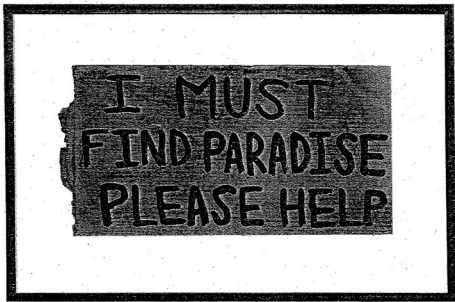


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John Brodie's art using cardboard signs captures the longing and the problems of the human condition.

Stop and read the signs

By HARVEST HENDERSON
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

John Brodie is neither homeless nor hungry. So why has the owner of Le Happy restaurant spent the past several months painting hand-drawn signs on cardboard?

Brodie's new signs are hanging at Stumptown Coffee Roasters downtown in an exhibit titled "Signs, Desperate." Each block-lettered, cardboard sign is framed against a white matte, turning creases and ragged edges into design elements, and angst-ridden slogans such as "The life is all sucked out of me" into gallery fare.

Manipulating context to elevate the commonplace is one device artists have used before, but that doesn't bother Brodie.

"Maybe it's not that original of an idea, but I don't think that's important," Brodie says.

Brodie's work references the homeless, but what he's ultimate-

review

"Signs, Desperate"

What: Art by John Brodie
Where: Stumptown Coffee Roasters, 129 S.W. Third Ave.

Admission: Free
Closes: May 29

ly trying to do is distill universal existential feelings into the fewest words possible. Everyone, Brodie says, holds signs.

"I was walking downtown in February and saw a woman holding a sign on a corner," he says. "She was middle-aged, middle-class, and I wondered what her sign said. Then I realized: All it had to say was, 'Standing on a corner, holding a sign.' Because when you get to a point where you're actually standing on a corner holding a sign, it doesn't matter what the sign says."

Brodie went back to his studio

and painted the words "Standing on a corner holding a sign — please help" on a piece of cardboard, which became the first piece in the "Signs, Desperate" series. After making a few more, he called Stumptown about exhibiting them.

Brodie says viewers can find broader social and political meaning in his signs, but it's the articulation of universal emotion that fascinates him.

"We all have situations in our lives where we wonder, 'How bad can this get before something happens?'" Brodie says. From concerns about the Patriot Act to contemplations of the crushing monotony of a passionless day job, Brodie's got a sign for it.

Some signs was melodramatic on failed dreams or relationships, like "I never imagined this," or "This is the end of us." Others are sly, even humorous, such as "Small sign — please help" or simply "I can't paint."

Brodie can paint, and "Signs, Desperate" is a departure from his usual acrylics and oils. He's also made amateur books, like the collection of sketches and cryptic musings that accompanied his April 2003 painting exhibit at Lovelake Gallery. For the Stumptown show, he bound more than 20 cardboard signs into a large book for viewers to browse.

Flipping through the book, viewers might recognize pieces of themselves in phrases like "I'm beginning to shut down — please help," and "This uniform isn't me — please help." Perhaps the most elegant piece of the show, and the one Brodie seems most excited about is the largest sign of the bunch, titled "Listen (after Kafka and Self-Help)."

It reads, in part: "I wish to remain entirely conscious of this feeling. We were beautiful in the early days. Now it's like a living thing writhing in one's hands... Somebody please do something."