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THE ARTISTS OF "GALLERY CLOSED"

What happens when a beloved community arts organization gets replaced, subsumed, or usurped by quasi-art entities whose goals, motivations, and methodologies are opaque, and suspect at best? Such is the question brought forth by artist/curator Kenny Cole in the four-artist exhibition, "GALLERY CLOSED", opening July 26th, featuring Kenny Cole, Geoff Hargadon, Paula Lalala, and Brian Reeves. This blog post is part of our ongoing series interviewing the phenomenal artists who show their work in our galleries.



Left to right: Geoff Hargadon, Brian Reeves, Kenny Cole, Paula Lalala



Artist/Curator Kenny Cole



Artist Geoff Hargadon Photo credit: Barry Chin

Geoff: I'm a self-taught, conceptual artist who explores ideas related to the psychology of money. In my "day job" as a private banker I've experienced how people interact with money beyond its

traditional utility. For many, it's a measuring stick, and contemporary art meets some of the same criteria for collectors. It's not about the artwork itself: it's how it compares with what others have, part commodity and part currency.



Self Portrait in the Garden, courtesy of Paula Lalala

Paula: We want to be able to grasp an artist's oeuvre in a tantalizing short sentence, to understand the story of someone's whole life in a paragraph. The art I create is the fruit of a life-long search for meaning and understanding.

I am an artist. I consider art to be a universal impulse practiced by everyone; it is creation itself. I believe people who self-define as artists inhabit a social role. On a personal level, there are many parts of myself which remain elusive from my conscious awareness. Some parts of myself are more familiar. Among the familiar facets are selves I am glad to identify with and

selves I struggle with. Art is a tool for increasing understanding, not only of ourselves, but for all of existence. As an artist, I mediate between the great mysteries and consensual reality.

Brian: I'm a bundle of manifesting, sometimes contradictory possibilities—a teacher and learner, an artist playing at business tycoon, heretic and provocateur playing at conformist. I studied drawing, printmaking and art history and have long been engaged with the promise of technology to extend the connection to fellow humans, but semi-averse to the standard accepted ways of doing so.

PLEASE TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOUR PARTICIPATION IN "GALLERY CLOSED".

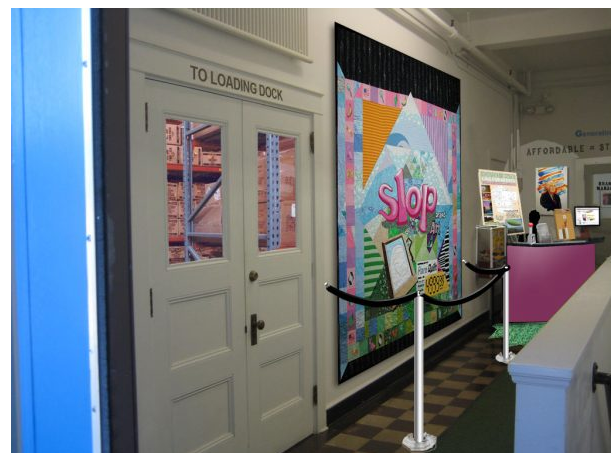
Kenny: "GALLERY CLOSED" was an idea that I had wanted to manifest at Waterfall Arts several years ago but never was able to sell or formulate in to a viable concept. Back then, I really wanted to close the gallery doors but allow visitors to peer into it through them, where they would see what would look like warehouse shelving loaded with pre-cast ceramic figurines that local artists had painted. I think I planned to auction them as a fundraiser. When I was asked to show work or organize this show relating to my walk-through walls as an "Alternative Environment"* installation, I thought back to my first failed attempt and developed a variation. Also, Brian Reeves was very much a part of and inspiration for the round one version.

Geoff: Kenny had seen my work and invited me to come, which I gladly accepted. I've visited Waterfall Arts and Belfast often as I've spent summers since my childhood down the road in South China. I'm glad to bring my ideas to the community and to interact with those who are interested in this sort of thing.

Paula: The primary purpose of art is to communicate, yet it fills many roles: financial instrument, social signifier, spiritual vehicle, educational or instructional device, political or propagandistic tool, and more.

I think of Art as a practice for framing and contextualizing experience. It is more than an image and something beyond material, physical objects. Art is an exploration of being. Art is the creative process. It is my goal as an artist to serve as an intermediary bridging the unseen realm with the physical material realm; to manifest and honor the ineffable.

Brian: The work I'm sharing here represents some of my efforts to create delivery systems for



A mock-up image for the original "GALLERY CLOSED" photo courtesy of Brian Reeves



A mock-up image for the original "GALLERY CLOSED" photo courtesy of Brian Reeves

artwork in order to make it seem more accessible, as if it's readily available in less hallowed halls like the grocery store. This is somewhat ironic, in that when Kenny and I were making a proposal in 2008 to mount a somewhat nightmarish vision of a corporate takeover of Waterfall Arts, we envisioned closing the gallery door so visitors could only peer through the door window to see warehouse-style shelves stacked with cardboard boxes containing the Fine Art Products. Fortunately, that idea was rejected and in this incarnation the gallery is open to interaction.

HOW DID YOU GET INTO ART?

Kenny: When I was a wee lad I was encouraged often and took that encouragement to heart. It really has always been what I wanted to do and what was important to me. I've always considered it my identity.

Geoff: For most of my life I would occasionally be heard saying, "You know what? Someone should do blah blah blah." And then months later I would hear about someone doing that exact thing. About 20 years ago I decided that if I had an idea I would execute it myself instead, without expectation of success or notoriety. What I've come to enjoy about my practice is the process and expression of an idea. I'm satisfied with whatever happens as a result.

Paula: There are periods in life which function as thresholds. I grew up in Texas as a devout Christian Fundamentalist. My childhood included a broad spectrum of experiences including repeated trauma as well as love and joy. As an adolescent I experienced an intense period of violence and loss. After a suicide attempt at the age of 17, I began to explore art for the first time. I had a transcendent experience while viewing a Kandinsky painting. As a senior in high school I took my first art class and began discovering my own artistic abilities.

Brian: I've always had a desire to make things and to sometimes share them. I'm grateful to have enjoyed plenty of encouragement. Early remembrances: on occasions I was sick and home from school my mother would buy me how-to-draw books to occupy me. I drew pictures to pass the time when my parents took me to church. My mother encouraged me to take classes and my classmates laughed when I drew silly or mean cartoons. The state of Iowa gave me a scholarship that sealed the deal.

HOW DOES THE ENVIRONMENT/NATURAL WORLD FACTOR INTO YOUR ART?

Kenny: I feel that I am compelled to illustrate how the natural world has been brutalized by

humans. Lately, I've been getting into depicting volcanos a lot again. They feel like nature crying out in pain, or trying to send smoke signals. I also like depicting strata as it presents really well within the context of a drawing or painting and like volcanos, reminds us that the stuff under our feet is all that we have and that we should think about how we are treating it. Since the Trump Base has storm trooped into our world I've painted many a tornado.



CFYW New Mexico, photo courtesy of Geoff Hargadon

Geoff: All of my Cash For Your Warhol installations are done in the open, most of the time on telephone poles, never on trees. The sites are not chosen for maximum exposure but rather for the environment in which they sit, and each is documented (there are examples of that in the exhibition). I have also put up stickers; there is one on Main Street in Belfast that has been there for about 10 years.

Paula: Everything in this universe exists as an energetic state. It is possible to view one's own life as a single thread belonging to an endless web; connected, forking, branching. My own life is linked to vast numbers of other individual lives. In addition to the present connections of which I am aware, I am influenced by the unseen and mysterious realms. I am the product of previous generations and all that has befallen them. As an organism, I am impacted by the environment and culture I live in. My artwork is a metaphysical practice.

Brian: The environment begins with our sense of our own minds and bodies—a relationship that mirrors what we have with the external world. By considering humans and what we do as separate from nature, we unhelpfully detach ourselves from our environment and responsibility to it. Just as a beaver dam is a natural occurrence, so is a Twinkie wrapper or nuclear bomb.

The works I've made available include drawings and paintings of my immediate environment, from my right thumb, to the moon, which has been a part of every human culture's environment since the dawn of life on Earth, to the idea of the navel or omphalos, which has been central to each human's existence, marking our direct connection to each of our mothers.

WHAT'S THE MOST RECENT THING THAT'S MOVED YOU?

Kenny: The brutal dismemberment of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi last fall really upset me. It was not the first time I reacted, through my art, to the murder of a journalist so this was something that hit a familiar nerve. Yet this time my government had a more direct connection to the factors that led to this murder and the flimsy cover-up and denial that ensued immediately after. For me, I get a certain degree of satisfaction exploring things that upset me in my art. I don't do this exclusively, but beyond the obvious therapeutic value it might have for my own psyche, I hope that this type of art can keep a certain dialogue or sets of dialogues open for others to engage with, beyond the time frame in which the event or issue was generated.

Further, I feel art has the ability to engage people differently than news or politics and can be a more positive experience.

Geoff: Aside from the chaos this country finds itself in, I would have to say Tottenham Hotspur's victory over Ajax in Amsterdam, which I was lucky to attend. (insert smiley face here)

Paula: When I am conscious and functional, I am constantly moved, to varying degrees.

Brian: It was the Earth itself—I had the privilege of visiting Hawaii where I experienced my first noticeable earthquake. I also saw and was able to compare the dramatic change in the Kilauea caldera one year apart after the most recent eruptions. It's easy to forget we're on a ball of rock, some liquid, hurling through space. Any semblance of stability seems so unlikely and this primordial gurgle reminded me that all is borne of change.

WHAT OTHER ARTISTS SHOULD WE CHECK OUT?

Kenny: Philip Guston is an all-time favorite and really turned things around, historically, back from the precipice of abstraction to narrative friendly work. Nancy Spero, her husband Leon Golub, Robert Colscott, Mark Lombardi, Hans Haacke, Käthe Kollwitz are great narrative or political art pioneers.

Geoff: I recently came to know Jenny Brillhart's work, who now lives in Maine. It's beautiful and skilled, and I wish I could do it myself. But since I can't I'm happy to admire it.

Paula: Look around, art is everywhere. We are all artists. Look at your own life; how are you expressing yourself?

Brian: Other than Kenny Cole, Andy Warhol, and Claes Oldenburg, Godfather of the Slop Supermarket, some of the art I recommend includes the giant thumbs of César Baldaccini, site-specific installations of Banksy, everything by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Albrecht Dürer, Francisco Goya's Los Caprichos, Kathe Kollwitz's lifetime of self-portraits, installations by Sarah Sze and Jamie Wyeth's current show featuring paintings of his late wife Phylis Mills Wyeth.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR YOUNGER AND/OR EMERGING ARTISTS?

Kenny: Believe in your inner voice even if it takes a lifetime to find it. Regularly try to find opportunities to expose your work to the world. It's important to get feedback and find support and encouragement. There are many opportunities and alternative venues out there. Set yourself up to present your work to the world or your community even though you may not be ready. You are never ready but it is all a process, anyway.

Geoff: Don't give up your day job. This is a hard, crazy, unregulated business. But keep putting it out there.

Paula: Our experience of life is limited and fragmentary. Our perception of reality comes in via limited sensory perception. We cannot see the big picture, only our little section of the whole. Memories are snippets of past events, easily transmuted to alternate versions. Our brains are malleable and plastic.

Brian: Give art a go. Be whichever self you choose each moment. Use an opaque white non-toxic poster marker in your sketchbook. Get started with computer programming on behalf of your imagination. Look at all the beautiful birds!

WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE THING ABOUT WATERFALL ARTS?

Kenny: Your classes are excellent opportunities for young and old to learn about and develop their creative voice and artistic skills. The exhibits are fantastic opportunities to study ideas and see well-developed concepts brought to visual form in an accessible format. In short, I love having a place where these two things coexist.

Geoff: That it exists!

Paula: It seems like a living and vital organization. One that contributes to and is valued by interconnected communities.

Brian: The people I've met and the diversity of programs are impressive—I wish I had access to as a kid. On the day I installed my work there was a help-an-egg-survive-a-fall-from-the-roof challenge!

ANYTHING ELSE YOU'D LIKE TO ADD?

Kenny: I hope "GALLERY CLOSED" gives viewers new things to think about and ways to see the world. That art can engage and even be political in a positive and inclusive way.

Paula: Goals and aspirations to live by—generative over exploitative, kind instead of cruel, augment rather than diminish, encourage over belittle, humane not inhumane.

* "Alternative Environments" is Waterfall Arts' 2019 theme.

"GALLERY CLOSED" is on display July 26 – September 20 in the Clifford and Corridor Galleries. Our galleries are open Tuesday – Friday from 10 AM to 5 PM and Saturdays in July

and August from 10 AM to 2 PM.

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