

THE JOURNAL NEWS
June 1, 2008

Immortality behind the images

By Georgette Gouveia

For British sculptor Chris Jones, being in America has given him a sense of both déjà vu and culture shock.

On the one hand, Jones hails from the mountainous, industrial north of England, so living in Peekskill on South Street - during his recent three-month residency at the neighboring Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art - wasn't that much of a stretch.

On the other, Jones, who has made his home in London's East End for the past seven years, doesn't drive.

"The driving culture was a shock," says the sculptor, who found his world bound to some extent by places within walking distance - the supermarket and the local library.

Among the books he pored over was one of photographs of horse-drawn carriages passing through Peekskill: "There was something almost ghostly about it."

The images proved haunting enough to provide an inspiration for Jones' own spectral horse and carriage, one of four sculptures by the artist that are on view at HVCCA through Aug. 17.

In contemporary art, the medium is often the message, and so it is with Jones, whose medium is paper - discount books, magazines, calendars and paper models. He "layers and layers and layers" a model with pages from the books and magazines, finishing it off with varnish.



Sculptor Chris Jones stands next to his piece "Repair Is the Dream of the Thing" at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill. (Ricky Flores/The Journal News)

"Part of (the work's appeal) is the meticulousness of it and the detail," says Livia Straus, HVCCA's president and acting director, who has watched Jones deepen as an artist during the past two years.

In "Repair Is the Dream of the Broken Thing," the title of Jones' life-size horse-drawn carriage, there are glimpses of actual images - an insect, a nude couple running toward the beach at sunset, as well as an overall effect of dark, corroded metal. The result is both densely textured and intensely tattered - a kind of modern ruin. It's an impression underscored by the fact that the rearing horse is headless.

The decapitated figure is eerily resonant for Straus, who immediately saw in it the Headless Horseman of Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow."

She also remembers Jones completing the work in the center's mezzanine gallery a week before the Kentucky Derby, in which the filly Eight Belles fractured her front ankles and was euthanized: "It became a prophetic piece."

"For me, art always, always starts with an image," Jones says. The image that helped inspire the headless horse was a funerary monument in The Metropolitan Museum of Art's New Greek and Roman Galleries. The work depicts a husband and wife, but the face of the wife is rough, formless, as if the long-ago artist didn't have time to finish it.

"It's something so bare and shocking," Jones says.



Detail of the Chris Jones sculpture "Repair Is the Dream of the Thing" at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art. (Ricky Flores/The Journal News)

While creating sculpture, he looks at historical art, reads books and watches movies. (He doesn't view contemporary art when he's busy making it.)

Jones also spends a good deal of time with photographs. They provide not only the material and specific inspirations for his sculptures but metaphors for his penetrating thoughts on reality and illusion, impermanence and immortality.

Like the French literary critic and philosopher Roland Barthes - who, along with Argentine fiction writer Jorge Luis Borges and surrealist painter Max Ernst, serve as influences - Jones is fascinated by photography's ability to make a permanent record of the past, particularly that of digital photography, which theoretically can last forever.

But since the past is past - and a record can be doctored - photography and its purposes are also illusory. This is different from film, he says, which is not about freezing a moment but about capturing many moments unfolding in time.

In Jones' "The Old House," the cover of a 1979 Time-Life Book becomes the doorway to a terraced sculpture and the notion that you can't go home again.

"When you no longer live in a house, you can't go in and out anymore," Jones says ruefully.

To a writer, what may be more disturbing is the idea of cutting up books to make art.

Jones smiles in recognition. The ones he uses are discards, he says, adding, "Artists are ruthless. ... What gets in the way is irrelevant."

The sculptor's real interest is memory, which he describes as a fluid thing. Perhaps not surprisingly, he plans to visit Coney Island before heading back to London.

"With some artists, the work is very specific," Straus says. "With (Jones), it's a broader reach. He's dissecting the memory, layering the memory so that the pieces resonate for anyone."

IF YOU GO

What: "Chris Jones"

Where: The Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, 1701 Main St., Peekskill.

When: Through Aug. 17.

Hours: Noon-6 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays and by appointment.

Admission: \$5; \$4 for senior citizens and educators; \$2 for children younger than 12 and students.

Information: 914-788-0100, www.hvcca.org

Also in Peekskill:

The 11th annual Peekskill Open Studios, noon-5 p.m. June 7 and 8, featuring a wide variety of music, performance art and poetry. Participants include the Paramount Center for the Arts, Westchester Gallery, H Art Gallery, Driftwood Gallery, Flat Iron Gallery, Marlyn Productions, Maxwell Fine Arts, Peekskill Coffee House, VanGlen Gallery and The Hat Factory. Information: 914-734-1292, www.PeekskillArtsCouncil.org