

Exhibition Interview

NEWS



Jon Horvath

The Current Tendencies exhibition series is designed by the Haggerty to showcase the work of outstanding emerging and established Milwaukee artists. As a part of its commitment to serving the Milwaukee community, the museum seeks to support local visual artists and to increase awareness of and appreciation for the remarkably vibrant and diverse artworks they are creating.

The fall exhibition *Current Tendencies III: Artists from Milwaukee* features nine artists working in a variety of media, including photography, painting, drawing, printmaking, and sculpture. For this

iteration of the exhibition series, artists were asked to select, respond to, and incorporate into their installations work from the Haggerty's permanent collection. Associate Curator Emilia Layden sat down with Jon Horvath, one of the participating artists, to discuss his educational background, artistic practice, and plans for his installation.

Emilia Layden: You attended Marquette as an undergraduate. Does your broad liberal arts education serve as an important foundation for your art practice?

Jon Horvath: When I started at Marquette I had no vision or aspiration to be an artist. I was musical—part of the reason I chose Marquette was because my friend and bandmate was attending—so there was that creative impulse, but I was much more of a mathematical and analytical thinker. Initially my studies were science-based, but I always had an interest in literature and I eventually declared an English major. Marquette requires so many core credits as part of the Arts and Sciences program—I obviously had a very well-rounded education—that I ended up with a concentration in Philosophy as well. In my senior year I became aware of the reciprocal exchange program between MIAD and Marquette, which allows students from each school to take classes at the other. I took a basic drawing class, a 2-D design class, and two photography classes, and it was at that point that I started to think seriously about pursuing a career as an artist.

EL: Why photography? Is it something to do with the accessibility of the medium? Or is this the vehicle that best supports your conceptual and intellectual pursuits?

JH: Photography is a medium that doesn't exist exclusively in the art realm. It's something that every single person engages with every day. Given my background in English and Philosophy, I spent a lot of time thinking, observing, looking and listening, and trying to synthesize information. The camera is a very useful tool—a tool of analysis—for that type of mind. When I first started making photographs I was very much in a gathering mode, receiving rather than constructing images. This is partly because of my previous studies at Marquette, where this contemplative method was emphasized, and where I was provoked to look and think and understand. When you have a camera in your hand, you can just pause in the middle of that kind of thought process and capture something. When I was taking the classes at MIAD I had this moment of revelation that I loved and had a knack for process and the technical elements of photography. I realized I should have been doing this throughout collection, and at that point I decided to pursue a M.F.A. at UWM.

EL: You have taught at MIAD and UWM and are now a Lecturer in the Peck School of the Arts at UWM. Do you find that your somewhat circuitous/non-traditional route to becoming an artist influences your classroom approach? Is your interdisciplinary background an asset or a liability?

JH: Early on in grad school I might have considered my educational background a liability, simply because I hadn't been exposed to the same level of art historical and studio arts training that many of my peers had. However, in my final year things started to click into place. I realized that my non-traditional background helped me approach my art making with a fresh perspective. I was always looking for and interested in ambiguity, gray areas, the moments when logic breaks down

(and this is often tied to finding humor in situations) but I just never associated that curiosity with art making or considered it one of the essential qualities of an artist's mind. I eventually came to understand my practice within this framework. I'm very much a "what if" artist; my practice is structured around acting out those "what if" impulses. In many ways, this is a source of content for my work, and I'm able filter that through my background in philosophy and writing.

In terms of being a practicing artist who also teaches: I think those two spheres of activity are very related. My artwork is most multifaceted when I am teaching, because my mind is active and I'm surrounded by colleagues and students who are all curious and working through their own ideas. It's a very stimulating environment. And I approach teaching in a very experimental way, one that isn't necessarily tied to the traditional critique environment of most art schools. I like to introduce diverse materials. Right now, I'm teaching a class at MIAD based on the concept of humor. We spend equal parts of the class studying conceptual artwork as we do looking at stand-up comedy clips, as well as maybe a sitcom television show. For me, and what I try to emphasize to my students, observing the everyday is a way to process, reframe, or unpack the abstract meaning in conceptual art. There are similar strategies being deployed in each of these different realms, and sometimes viewing one can be a key to understanding the other.

EL: Do you think of your practice as one that stems from the history of the photographic medium or one that is more conceptual, based on image making (for which photography is just one means to an end)? I ask because in your *Current Tendencies III* installation you will be incorporating a range of visual strategies (photo, mixed media collage, video, text).

JH: Early on in my own mind I was strictly a photographer, and I was studying the masters of the medium and trying to define my practice in relation to theirs, that is, am I a photographer in the vein of Robert Frank or William Eggleston or Stephen Shore? Their work is still influential, but through my own educational process, which brought increased exposure to other artwork, I came to realize that my practice is really driven more by ideas. I see my project *Wide Eyed* as a hybrid of my emerging conceptual practice and my foundation in traditional photographic studies.

EL: You very generously donated four works from your series *Wide Eyed* to the Haggerty. Can you go into greater detail about how this project serves as a bridge between your past and current interests?

JH: The photographs are very much tied into my history of active looking, responding to visual stimuli and coming to an aesthetic conclusion, that is, the beautiful image. There is also a conceptual structure that is based on plurality, the way the images in the series begin to play off one another and create new relationships, and how that context encourages meaning. The images were generated in a very traditional manner, but the application of those images is more conceptual. In thinking about the trajectory of my work, there are two polarities: what I consider passive work—photographs that are about receiving, reacting to, or gathering information—and active work, which has structure as a cohesive grouping but not a prescribed meaning. In *Wide Eyed* no single meaning is attached to a particular image. All of the images are interrelated, and I want people to

make their own connections, establish their own relationships. This approach is much more open-ended. It embraces chance and unresolved conclusions.

EL: Your *Current Tendencies* installation is very ambitious. You've said that you're interested in gray areas—conceptual conflicts, polarities, and contrasts—and suggested that you're often looking to reveal connections in unexpected and disparate places. Can you talk more about the kind of multilayered viewing experience you're thinking about/hoping to create?

JH: The *Current Tendencies* installation will be philosophically related to *Wide Eyed*—in many ways it is an evolution of some of the ideas I started to explore in that project, such as opening oneself up to the possibility of looking with fresh eyes, experiencing something without preconceived notions, understanding that meaning is not fixed—but very different stylistically. My work is grounded in perception and semiotics, that is, how we process information and then assign it meaning, and I've recently realized that photography doesn't have to be the dominant medium, that perhaps there are more appropriate ways for me to approach some of my artistic ideas. The *Current Tendencies* show is a great opportunity to scratch that itch and explore some of these alternatives.

I will be including photographs in the installation, with a number of different photographic processes represented, but I will also be including mixed media, text-based, and video works. And of course I will be including work from the Haggerty's permanent collection. But I'm not a curator or art historian; I selected permanent collection works based on my subjective associations, not on their historical significance. All of the works in the show function as singular and self-contained objects, but they hold the potential to establish relationships between and among one another. My intention in displaying these seemingly unrelated works together is to activate them in new ways, to open up the possibility of seeing them differently and, hopefully, to prompt the viewer to perceive the subtle connections that exist.



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