The Work of Tim Okamura

September 12 - November 29, 2013

This Story Has Not Yet Been Told...

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The Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum
The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History
About The Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum

The Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum at the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History is dedicated to the enrichment of visual culture on campus and in the community. The Brown Gallery supports the Stone Center’s commitment to the critical examination of all dimensions of African-American diaspora cultures through the formal exhibition of art, artifacts and material culture.

History and Overview of The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History

The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History is part of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As a center within the University’s Academic Affairs Division, we have a central role in supporting the University’s academic mission. We have a commitment to broaden the range of intellectual discourse about African-Americans and to encourage better understanding of the peoples of the African diaspora and their perspectives on important social and cultural issues.

SPECIAL THANKS to
Douglas Udell and Christine Brisson, Douglas Udell Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta and Vancouver, British Columbia
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Front Cover: Progressive Youth #2
Back Cover: The Peace Queen

This STORY HAS NOT YET BEEN TOLD...
These concerns are the reason we chose Tim Okamura as the featured artist in the Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum during the Fall 2013 observance of the 25th Anniversary of the Stone Center. We chose him because of his subjects – all youthful, all urban, with, as their demeanor suggests, serious stories to tell – and because of the insights he brings to bear when telling these stories on canvas.

Although some might see his work as heir to 18th and 19th century classical portraiture, it’s also indisputable that his large-scale renderings bring to mind the imposing murals that were popularized during the Black Arts Movement’s ubiquitous Wall of Respect projects. The first of these murals was a 20’ x 60’ mural completed by OBAC artists (Organization of Black American Culture) in Chicago in August 1967. The Chicago mural, like most of the movement’s work, celebrated local, national and international historical figures, producing an iconic, collage-like statement. The OBAC artists worked from a sense of political urgency, and found direct inspiration from the politics of the day. The graffiti artists who burst on the scene in the 1970s, provide the continuing connection and open the door for today’s pioneering installation artists who mix and remix various genres to make their statements.

Okamura has tapped into these histories, and we can trace his lineage without denying him a claim to the originality that has brought a diverse set of admirers in the art world to his door. A better tactic might be to situate him among his peers and contemporaries that include Kehinde Wiley, with whom he shares an enviable ability to capture the “attitude” of his subjects; multi-medium artist Shinique Smith, who shares Okamura’s roots in graffiti; and a host of graffiti artists whose work can now be found in the most prestigious galleries as well as in the streets.

His work, uneasily situated somewhere between the ordered civic planning that produces “public art” and the anti-authoritarianism that is typical of graffiti, allows him a bit of freedom that eludes those who are confined to either one of these genres. It is significant that one can still find some element of this tension in his work, although we can’t say he is prosecuting a political position. It might be better to say that he has taken advantage of the political positioning accorded to artists of his generation who pursue some sort of realism in their work.

Tim’s work is unrelentingly contemporary, but it still retains an aura of the “outsider inside” a regulated art world. There is a point, if not a moment, where the converging concerns of muralism, social realism and graffiti reach an agreement of sorts: that art and visual expression can, and at times, must reflect and/or address the prevailing social conditions.
This Story Has Not Yet Been Told ... is an exhibition comprised of paintings created within the last decade that have emerged from a lifelong fascination with the emotionally expressive power of the human form and an intense interest in the juxtaposition of people in their environment. I consider myself a storyteller and feel these paintings serve on some level as a form of visual documentation of individuals shaped by their personal histories and experiences of urban life in America.

Guernica Dress

and disciplined world. In his Guernica Dress (2009) or in Confidence and Doubt (2009) we are asked to consider the ‘coded’ text of the art, and to acknowledge his connections to the graffiti aesthetic. Guernica Dress “samples” Picasso and remixes those items to create a new social critique or, if we press the issue, shows us how this new content reconfigures tragedy into a mystery, symbolized by the young woman/girl wearing a red, white and blue shift-dress emblazoned with the word “Guernica.” In a doorway in Brooklyn, no less! In this composition the figures extracted from Guernica are arranged on an apartment door, floating above the girl's head, and juxtaposed to graffiti signatures and glyphs. Perhaps this is personal; the desolation and decimations suggested by the original piece by Picasso, embodied in the figure of a young woman who is oriented or directed by a boldly painted white arrow toward the entry point of the door. Does the danger come home?

In the same manner, and where Guernica Dress can be said to have some literal elements, Confidence and Doubt introduces a more cryptic structure that pulls away from the rigid demands of the social realism one might see in Okamura's work. Three young women situated in the foreground of this piece are surrounded by echoes of the title line, with each adopting what might be called poses of “conscious aloofness.” Large white block letters that spell “doubt” loom behind and form both a backdrop and a divider between them and seven male figures in the background. The word “confi-dence” is split in half and written high on a back wall with two young men casually strolling through the middle portion that separates the letters. Each of the groupings of young men is graced with framing “auras” or “crowns,” which may be seen as graphic depictions of confidence. In this rendering of opposites, however, the women are presented in high relief, with sharply drawn lines and vivid color, while the young men are not wholly constructed and appear almost as if they were not fully constituted.

The works presented in This Story Has Not Yet Been Told ... emerge from his continuing homage to these and other figures from the Brooklyn community that have sustained him for the past 10 years. Besides these concerns with symbolism, subject and setting, Okamura has capably explored the central elements of social realism and has succeeded in capturing the political and cultural ethos of a movement, a generation and a community by reinterpreting that tradition.

Joseph F. Jordan

...uneasily situated somewhere between the ordered civic planning that produces ‘public art’ and the anti-authoritarianism that is typical of graffiti..."
Tim Okamura investigates identity, the urban environment, metaphor and cultural iconography through a unique method of painting – one that combines an essentially “realist” approach to the figure with collage, spray paint and mixed media. The juxtaposition of the rawness and urgency of street art and academic ideals has created a visual language that acknowledges a traditional form of storytelling through portraiture, while infusing the work with resonant contemporary motifs.

Born in Edmonton, Canada, painter Tim Okamura earned a B.F.A. with Distinction at the Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary, Canada, before moving to New York City to attend the School of Visual Arts in 1991. After graduating with an M.F.A. in Illustration as Visual Journalism, Okamura moved to Brooklyn, New York, where he continues to live and work.

Okamura – a recipient of the 2004 Fellowship in Painting from the New York Foundation for the Arts – has exhibited extensively in galleries throughout the U.S. and Canada, and has been selected nine times to appear in the prestigious BP Portrait Award Exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in London, England.

In 2006, he was short-listed by the Royal Surveyor of the Queen’s Picture Collection for a commissioned portrait of the Queen of England.

Tim Okamura’s work is represented in the permanent collections of the Davis Museum at Wellesley College, The Alberta Foundation for the Arts, the Toronto Congress Center, the Hotel Arts in Calgary, Canada, and Standard Chartered Bank in London, England.

Celebrity collectors include Uma Thurman, musicians John Mellencamp and Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson (The Roots), director Ben Younger and actors Bryan Greenberg, Vanessa Marcil, Annabella Sciorra and Ethan Hawke.

Tim Okamura is currently represented by Lyons Wier Gallery in New York and Douglas Udell Gallery in Canada.
INTERVIEW WITH TIM OKAMURA BY ANDREA GRANT

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Q: Tell us about your artistic aesthetic. What inspires you – what formed your outlook?

A: I have often drawn parallels with other creative mediums in order to explain my artistic outlook and aesthetic inspiration. I think using music as an analogy, in particular, has been helpful because of the commonality of our exposure and experience with it. So, I often say that in the same way I have very eclectic musical tastes—an affinity for rock, jazz, classical, blues and hip-hop—I similarly find inspiration in the work of artists as diverse in range as Rembrandt, Degas, Basquiat, Lucien Freud, Richard Diebenkorn, Larry Rivers, Wildstyle graffiti writers and street art. In particular, I think early hip-hop best characterizes my approach: it was all about sampling a classic groove or quintessential hook, and putting it in a new context, with a harder beat driving the track, and new words and ideas layered on top. I like to think of the academic elements of my work—the faces and figures—as being the classic groove while the urban motifs (doorways, Brooklyn walls, warehouse loading docks) serve as the beat and the graffiti, written and symbolic elements are the new messages or “pop culture” ideas layered on top. Separately these elements are familiar, but juxtaposed against one another I hope they take on a new meaning and create a new experience for the viewer. It’s the spirit of the hip-hop DJ or the mash-up DJ that I hope to channel.

In the same vein, I aspire to have my work capture the viewer at least on some level. To a large extent, I don’t feel like I am issuing a challenge as to whether or not you “get it,” but rather hope that the audience is drawn into the work, first through finding some kind of empathy for the subject(s), and then perhaps a continued exploration of the environment and meaning of any symbology or wordplay that may be present. I will answer questions as to what I was thinking about when I incorporated a specific element or what the title of the painting means to me, but obviously I want the viewer to come up with their own interpretations of the work and attach their own experience to it as well ... perhaps this is most important to me.

Q: Tell us how others describe your work versus how you see it. Do people understand it or do you constantly have to explain it?

A: I think people have often described the work as “realistic” or “real.” I prefer “real” because I take it as a double meaning—not only in a representational sense, but also in a larger context of capturing some of the soul behind the eyes of the subjects, as well as the spirit of the environments they inhabit. But I see a lot of “abstract” passages in the work that others sometimes find upon more of a prolonged investigation of the painting— I’ve always thought the work has had abstraction in the representation. Also, surface and shifts in texture (from impasto to washes, for example) are very important to me, and when people see the original paintings as opposed to reproductions, they have often expressed their surprise at how much of a physical experience they have with the work.

As far as explanations go, I’ve always hoped that people would be able to have an emotional interaction with the work regardless of age, culture or experience in viewing art. I think when you are working in the realm of realism, the human figure and portraiture in particular, there is naturally going to be a connection made with the viewer at least on some level. To a large extent, I don’t feel like I am issuing a challenge as to whether or not you “get it,” but rather hope that the audience is drawn into the work, first through finding some kind of empathy for the subject(s), and then perhaps a continued exploration of the environment and meaning of any symbology or wordplay that may be present. I will answer questions as to what I was thinking about when I incorporated a specific element or what the title of the painting means to me, but obviously I want the viewer to come up with their own interpretations of the work and attach their own experience to it as well ... perhaps this is most important to me.

Q: Give us an example of obstacles you have overcome or are currently struggling with.

A: I think I have always had that feeling of the work not quite fitting in. I’ve been told it’s not painted “correctly” for the academic figure painting enthusiasts, who have kind of looked down their nose at me, and “too academic” for the conceptual crowd, who also have looked down their (even longer) nose. But hopefully this is meaningful in a positive way. I certainly wouldn’t want to be pigeonholed at all. It’s just a matter of finding the right audience for the work, and fortunately for me, having the paintings featured in some Hollywood films (most prominently in Prime with Uma Thurman and Meryl Streep) has helped to get my work more exposure. I feel like I’m starting to find my audience. But I definitely know I’ve paid my dues—I am still paying dues—and I have lived up to every classic stereotype of the “starving artist” and then some.

Prior to getting into teaching I worked in advertising, bartended, waited tables, was a bouncer, delivery guy, etc. I lived in my studio with no kitchen, no shower, mice... all the good stuff. My brother kept me going for a while when times were really tough—he would give me a $40 allowance a couple times a week and had to pay my rent a few times when the landlord would start giving me a hard time for being three months late (surprising, huh?). Thankfully those days seem to be behind me, but you never know, since highs and lows are inherent to the career of a painter. I’ve always said it’s a rollercoaster ride (think the Cyclone at Coney Island — wooden tracks and a shaky little lap bar, nothing else) and I can’t get off... I had my chance but I’m committed now.

The other thing that is a huge concern is to keep pushing forward creatively, and finding new ideas, and new ways of communicating those ideas—I don’t want to keep repeating a formula, but I also want to have some connection and (semi-)logical progression from prior work. And looking for more opportunities to exhibit here in New York and abroad. So this is a big part of the struggle now, along with staying focused on good work habits, being better organized (must be more prompt returning e-mails, phone calls), getting enough sleep, cutting down on video games, and eating healthy foods... I need more vitamins!

TIM’S WEBSITE IS WWW.TIMOKAMURA.COM

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GALLERY HOURS MONDAY- FRIDAY, 10 A.M. – 8 P.M. OR BY APPOINTMENT; CLOSED UNIVERSITY HOLIDAYS.

MORE INFORMATION THE SONJA HAYNES STONE CENTER FOR BLACK CULTURE AND HISTORY
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This exhibition and all events associated with it are free and open to the public. The Stone Center is ADA compliant. Limited fee parking is available in the Bell Tower Deck behind the Stone Center after 5pm.