

In Conversation with Bruce Burris

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Bruce Burris is presenting a new body of work entitled *We Will Someday, Someday We Will* at Institute 193, a non-profit contemporary art space in Lexington, Kentucky. The colorful ensemble of paintings, drawings, sculptures and interactive installation directly addresses mountaintop removal, the politics of rural community centers and the role of protest in the resolution of pressing environmental problems. These issues have traditionally been treated as geographically specific concerns but are increasingly viewed as essential aspects of the larger “green movement.” Burris, a native of Delaware, is working with this material as an interested observer, employing an established aesthetic to further these broadening conversations visually and intellectually. The show at Institute 193 serves as a re-introduction of Burris’ work after a 10-year, self-described “hiatus” from art making.



Bruce Burris; *We Will Someday, Someday We Will*, 2009; (Both Sides Pictured); 17 x 19 x 13; Mixed Media Courtesy Institute 193

PJ: *You essentially stopped making artwork 10 years ago. What made you stop?*

BB: I was unable to find any long-term, regional support structure – patrons, grants, museums, art centers. I sort of ran out of steam.

PJ: *You have, however, recently begun making work again.*

BB: The regional issues of Kentucky are rich, fascinating, incredible – begging to be explored. Environmental issues like mountaintop removal, political issues, socio-economics, racial tension and identity. I wanted to re-engage with the material. And, quite frankly, this show represents an opportunity.

PJ: *You are one of the few contemporary artists I know creating work about mountaintop removal, politics of rural community centers, etc. – but you aren't from Kentucky – let alone Appalachia...*

BB: I'm not sure I've ever really even been to Appalachia. The parts of the country that we traditionally identify as “Appalachian” anyways, but their politics and culture have helped form the identity of Lexington.



Bruce Burris; *Lonely Mountain Community Center (Bulletin Board)*, 2009; 72 x 96; Mixed Media; Courtesy Institute 193

PJ: Are you saying that Lexington is close enough?

BB: Not necessarily. I think that the issues warrant explanation, and I don't think that artists have to be from a particular region to explore the issues that really affect us all. The larger culture is paying more attention to environmental issues, but contemporary artists, specifically those in the South, aren't dealing with these issues in ways that are satisfying to me. Artists are saying a lot by not dealing with this material – but I don't want to risk suggesting what it may be.

PJ: Your work is extremely charged – both with detail and written content. Are you providing “crutches” for the viewer?

BB: I have always like signs. Information. Pamphlets. I like short bursts of colorful information. Bulletin boards. My visual material is often structured as scaffolding supported by language. Writing is the common element in everything I make. The protesters, the bulletin board, the drawings are essentially text. The figures and landscapes are more like supporting actors.

PJ: Your show at Institute 193 is your first exhibition in ten years – are you excited or nervous?

BB: I wouldn't say that I am particularly nervous. In my view, a lot of this work is about things I hope to expand and take outside of the region. The bulletin board installation, in particular, has the capacity to grow and evolve both in scope and scale. The piece functions as a self-contained community center. Writers come in and perform with the material. School groups can join in. I would like for it to grow and sponsor events, soccer teams, stream clean ups. It's about empowering people to create and support activity in all its forms.

PJ: Wait... How can an art piece sponsor anything?

BB: Why not? Depending on the particular format of the show, this piece could grow into anything related to the larger community in which it appears. I have spent most of my life working in community centers and have seen things evolve quickly into projects, events, sponsorships, whatever...

PJ: Your large-format drawings are entitled, *Are Ye One with Stoner Creek* – Is that a real place?

BB: Stoner Creek is a 99-mile stream that winds through Central Kentucky. It can be an idyllic setting for boating and other times turns into, literally, a drainage ditch. I love the idea of grinding extremely local material into my larger body of work. There are plenty of people in Lexington who don't know that Stoner Creek exists. It's a way to alert people to our own lack of awareness of the places and things that provide for us. We don't know our own infrastructure or how it works. Where does our water come from? Our electricity?

PJ: Our artists?

BB: Exactly.



Bruce Burris; We Are Fighting for Them, 2009; 8 x 6 x 2; Mixed Media; Courtesy Institute 193

