

RETRENCHMENT IN THE ARTS:

BY: DANIEL BROWN

Just as the same banking/investment firms which wrecked the American global economy are about to finesse any real Congressional regulations, we must understand the magnitude of what they got away with, and will again. The *laissez-faire* type of capitalism with which they are intimately associated is seemingly quiescent, laying low, but by no means gone away. The type of unbridled corporate capitalism American multinational businesses evolved between the 1980's and the September, 2008 markets crash, involving overt collusion between and amongst government agencies and Congress, think tanks, media propagandists and speculative banking, not only parallels what wrought American finance in the '20s and '30s, but also defines what came to be known in Italy in the '30s and '40s as Fascism. Fascism's original name, appropriately, was 'corporatism'; the word 'fascism' simply was a slangy shortening of *fasce*, the type of uniform worn by Italian soldiers.

The collusion of the business school MBA degree and unbridled corporate capitalism has been well documented (most recently by English writer Philip Delves Broughton in his nonfiction account of 'What They Teach you at Harvard Business School: My Two years inside the Cauldron of Capitalism'. The two qualities most valued at Harvard's "B" school and top management of Corporate America, according to the book, are greed and hubris.

Whether Americans have connected the MBA-inspired Wall Street of unregulated corporatism with the current recession/depression remains in doubt, as evidenced by the ease with which a vocal minority of Congressional Republicans have virtually disassembled President Obama's health care reform bills through a combination of overt lies, disruptive public behavior at gun-toting town hall meetings, and, of course, huge amounts of money and lobbyists from corporate insurance and pharmaceutical companies. If the Supreme Court reverses a prior decision and allows corporate money directly into political campaigns, our democracy is sunk.

And the republic is about to be inundated, yet again, by corporatism's favorite component, marketing. It is baffling that Americans



Scene from Cincinnati Opera's production of *Margaret Garner*. Gregg Baker as Robert Garner and Denyee Graves as Margaret Garner. Photo Courtesy of Cincinnati Opera/Philip Groshong, 2005

seem to understand how advertising created wants and needs as early as the 1950's, but remains in thrall to advertising's Siamese twin, marketing. Since the 1980's, business leaders who filled the ranks of the boards of arts institutions insisted that non-profit arts and educational institutions be "run like businesses" (and never show a deficit — the most amazing piece of disinformation of all, considering the source and their near-collapsing debt loads). The basic 'take' to arts lenders: without a business and a marketing plan, you might as well go home. Since a unit of production of, say, toothpaste is quantifiable and always the same, marketing's job is to help create as many markets (through advertising, for example) as is possible, nationally, and, at the current time, globally. A work of art (or entire exhibition) — or a symphony or ballet — is not a unit of production, is never the same, and cannot be quantified and marketed the same way. That's been, as they say, the fly in the ointment, or how corporate marketing and arts programming were never more than, say, third cousins. Call it a "product" if you insist, but an art exhibit isn't one, and cannot be marketed with the same precision as toothpaste. The

analogy wasn't wrong, but was shaky, and it is time to examine the differences.

Be aware, and/or beware, then, that marketing is following the exact corporate model as it has been for forty years, as part of the same corporate tactics which have failed us so. The contemporary version, which has as its goal the capturing of that elusive under 35 years old market, has glomped onto the electronic toys ("social networking" electronic media) to seek and market to younger, affluent first-worlders. It's a short step from email and voice mail to texting and twittering and Facebook and YouTube. Graphic designers, animators, computer video game designers are challenged to divert these social networkers into consumers of products: the goal's the same, if the tools are different. Only the unhip Luddite will fail to see the merits...except that this generation is widely known for its aversion to brand loyalty and for its nearly nihilistic insistence on not attending — or joining — cultural events and institutions. (Many have told me of conversations at home growing up, as parents schemed to be selected for Boards of Trustees as part of their career advancement network. Careers being in short supply, and dating/mating a matter of intense skepticism, younger Americans get most of their entertainment at bars, restaurants or at home [e.g. Netflix]. Boomers have been asked to exit the scene, stage left, just as they might enter the culture markets.

America's young are hyper-aware of the corporate marketer's cooptation of their electronic communication devices, and are likelier to be more resistant to the messages bombarding them. The medium is the message, as Marshall McLuhan maintained in the '60s, and the product/arts group/fundraiser another set of "deletables." The arts are not exactly businesses (either are schools), and so the corporate strategizers and the corporate juggernaut are already poised for partial failure, although they still fill the ranks of our arts boards.

The advent of the corporatized Board of Trustees coincides with the growth of new areas of staff, which in this era of retrenchment in which we find ourselves, can be eliminated: development directors and 'event planners' do not need to be paid staff at arts institutions. Development is a Board obligation, perhaps the most important. "Give, get or get off" was the '80s definition of a board member's primary role; "Wealth, wisdom or work" was the more polite antecedent. Most development directors (the positions were created in the mid-1980s) do not have the clout necessary to approach donors; their job could be replaced by shared grant-writers, whose salaries are partly contingent on funds they raise. The Fine Arts Fund might oversee the coordination of grant writing to avoid conflicts within their efforts. The rest should be done by the boards.

"Event Planners" — people who plan and implement benefit parties, fund-raisers and the like — used to come, as well, from the ranks of Board members; larger institutions with docents or the former "men's" and "women's" committees of the symphony, for example, took charge of and ran these parties. Development and Marketing are converging, and event planning falls under both categories. Both the Contemporary Arts Center and the Cincinnati Symphony are looking to hire paid staff members as Event Planners.¹ Although 'special events' and fundraisers do raise necessary extra funds and may increase attendance/and or develop new audiences, I believe that such events are at the point of diminishing returns and need a facelift or makeover. Surely party-planning can be implemented by some combination of Board members and volunteers, however. One begins to wonder what, precisely, our arts institutions' increasingly (and unnecessarily) large members of Board members actually do, other than "represent" diverse constituencies (or however the diversity machine is currently worded, and give the illusion of business/corporate acumen and leadership). It also appears that fundraisers and other special events — anything falling under the general rubric of development and/or marketing, and which veers closely into entertainment, takes increasing precedence over any of the arts' scholarly missions (catalogues used to be something of a commonplace, attendant to museum shows; although costs are generally given as the reason for their general demise, one senses that they are perceived as not fun, not development material. Event planners aren't likely to propose an after-party for the publication of a catalogue! The young, urban hip they so desperately seek as members or audiences would, presumably, find these publications to be "a drag." Do we just want to entertain, not stimulate or educate, them?)

Some combination of civic leaders needs to reassess the educational and outreach departments of our arts institutions, as some of the most growth in dollars and staff have occurred in these areas, particularly since the 1980s. Whether these areas belong within arts institutions at all needs reexamination. The removal of arts programming from our schools because of cost-cutting (with some notable exceptions) seems to have moved them into the arts institutions. Some more equitable (and perhaps more interdisciplinary and thus even more effective) division of educational/outreach model might include a consortium of arts educators, museum professionals, undergraduate BFA and graduate MFA students; practicing artists and performers under one umbrella. Perhaps foundations and corporate donors could target more dollars to these areas if more arts education goes back into our schools. (Might a creative approach to one novel, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (i.e. visit the Harriet Beecher Stowe and Carey houses, and other real and remaining aspects of the Underground Railway, along with a visit to Mayville, Kentucky's Old Slave Quarters), already made into the opera *Margaret Garner*, have been more effective than the entire Freedom Center, which most people I've interviewed think of as a great boondoggle? Can we discover how much "exposure" to the arts leads to self-sufficient interest? How much arts programming — primary or adjunct — should be targeted towards "diversity"? Since diversity is a community-wide issue, could not more of the community relieve the arts of this huge new area? And, as the arts chase citizens in Warren, Butler, Clermont, Boone and Campbell counties for membership and dollars, are they not blindly assuming that the arts may be for everyone? What if they are not? Are sports and 'fine dining,' Botox and 'lifestyle centers' for everyone? (More and more suburbs and exurbs are building their own arts centers: is anyone trying to stop this trend, or run with it to benefit the city?)

It is also time to determine whether the arts are better off or not having a united Fine Arts Fund. No institution in the arts seems as feared as it is, and, over the years, a number of institutions have maintained a belief that they could raise more money without it (Fine Arts Fund institutions cannot raise money at all during the Fine Arts Fund drive).

These periods of retrenchment also can be made creative and exciting, if curators can exert more autonomy within their institutions, connecting more seriously and in more depth with the community in which they exist — no better time than the present for proposing ‘a new regionalism.’ Every director or chief curator who comes here espouses a desire to get to know and/or work with the artists who create and work here: it’s the party line, and makes good press during those first interviews when they arrive. Reality dictates otherwise: what to do with ‘local artists’ becomes known within institutions as a problem (mainly to be avoided).

Somehow, our directors and curators seem to assume that what’s in the neighborhood/backyard must be significantly worse than art in virtually any other region in the country. After a very successful area artist’s exhibition at an important institution here, a curator commented to me that “local artists are now beating at her door.” I said, “Why don’t you open it?”

The Contemporary Arts Center has begun, over the past two years or so, to integrate some area artists into their exhibitions. The Taft Museum is currently exhibiting young Cincinnati painter Emil Robinson in its upstairs Keystone Gallery in the first of four annual regional emerging artists exhibitions (the opening and lecture in August were sold out, the audience filled with younger Cincinnatians).

The Art Museum had begun to offer one exhibition per year to one regional artist — Mark Fox, Tony Lundesman — but seems to have stopped with its exhibition of Cincinnati mid-century Modernist Charlie Harper (joined by shows of Noel Martin at the Contemporary Arts Center). A new Fourth Floor Club (contemporary art at the Cincinnati Art Museum is located on the fourth floor) has been established by contemporary arts curator Jessica Flores. Its members (presumably young collectors) voted for an exhibition of an artist from Lexington, KY. Stewart Goldman’s one-person show was refreshing and popular.

Each institution can do more, creatively, productively, and cheaply. If the Cincinnati Art Museum used its Dutch portraits as the core of a special exhibition, for example, it could add portraits by some superior Cincinnati painters such as Carl Samson, Brian Joiner, Karen Hebenstreit, Constance McClure, David Mueller, Emil Robinson and Robert Anderson. Ideas like this are waiting to be discovered and put into action.

We could add portraits from the Taft Museum of Art’s collection; Brian Joiner is the current Duncanson Artist in Residence, and Robinson is showing there now, too. We have a lot of talent here, partly because of the number of art schools, colleges and departments both past (Edgecliff College) and present.

The Weston Gallery at the Aronoff has exhibited some of the finest shows around, many by regional artists, and the Manifest Gallery often includes work by area artists as well. It is disturbing to see how infrequently, if ever, one sees staff members from the Cincinnati Art Museum, the Contemporary Arts Center or the Taft at area shows, other than occasional shows which show art/installations uncommonly like their own. Mainstream commercial galleries are virtually ignored by the staff of our larger non-profits. The talent’s often right there/here, ripe for the plucking.

And let’s not forget the value, popularity, and relatively low costs of Biennials of area artists (the Contemporary Arts Center did three in the ‘80s — still life, object and landscapes as I recall). Figure painting has returned since then, and more independent area curators are available here for hire. The financial instability of our arts organizations could turn into a triumph of creativity and of regional bridge-building by giving a real look at some of our area’s most gifted artists (Frank Herrmann, Bukang Kim, Kim Krause, Carl Samson, Thom Shaw, Cole Carothers, Deborah Morrissey-McGoff, Stuart Fink, Althea Thomson, Valerie Shesko, David Mueller, Ana England, Gary Gaffney, Kay Hurley, Greg Storer, Frank Satogata, John Stewart, Terrance Corbin, Jane Stevens, Tim Schiff, Margot Gotoff, Beverly Erschell, Patrick Dougherty, Barbara Houghton, Cal Kowal, Anita Douthat, David Rosenthal, Michael Wilson, Brad Austin Smith, Karen Heyl, Leslie Shiels, Paula Wiggins, Kevin Munte, Rob Anderson, Emil Robinson, Bruce Erikson, Marsha Karagheusian, Velma Morris, Alice Weston, Nancy Fletcher Cassell, Daniel Greene, Rebecca Seeman, Jay Bolotin, Jymi Bolden all come immediately to mind (and no doubt there are others) as artists of the first rank whose work would be respectable in any museum.

I am concerned that the corporate mantra of consistent growth and the discovery and/or chase for new markets for products and other goals established by the MBA corporate model are draining our arts institutions rather than vitalizing them. Since every corporation is fiddling with new electronic communication mediums to hook younger audiences, these same techniques will be forced upon the arts with insufficient return on investment in time and money. We’ve already seen that the Obama machine successfully garner the computer and its adjuncts to win the primary election, but we’ve also seen the young who helped to propel him to overall victory vanish back where they came from. Whether electronic media, and the marketing therefrom, is as successful as pundits predict and assume is yet to be determined. Younger Americans’ cynicism about being marketed is widely recognized. As the arts rethink their roles and goals and missions and futures, let’s remember their differences from conventional businesses, while not forgetting the damage the latter have wrought on the world economy. The biggest waste of money for the arts is in marketing — the focus should be on product, not numbers and perennial growth. A smaller budget may mean a smaller audience, but at least they will care more about the work, and some turn into patrons.

Retrenchment, revision and reassessment are as relevant as goals for arts institutions as growth strategies are for corporations. We will not, contrary to chamber-of-commerce hype, likely attract tourists from Berlin or Shanghai or even Portland for our cultural offerings here. We have a lot to offer culturally — but so do Cleveland and St. Louis and Kansas City and Denver, to think of equivalent cities. An art museum’s primary mission is to collect, exhibit and to conserve works of art deemed to be of lasting and significant value. All the rest is, really, gravy.

¹Molly O’Toole of the Contemporary Art Center emailed the journal to inform us that the CAC has not been seeking an event planner. Daniel said that he found the position listed recently on the Fine Arts Fund job list (the list is curiously not open to the public). An associate of his even applied for the position.

THE SENSUAL AND THE SENSATIONAL:

SANDRA SMALL GALLERY EXPLORES 'THE EROTIC GAZE'

BY: TAMERA LENZ MUENTE

Sandra Small Gallery's current show 'The Erotic Gaze,' organized by independent curator (and regular ÆQAI contributor) Daniel Brown, seeks to explore the shift of eroticized art from that which has been made for the "male gaze," to that which is currently being created by a wider range of artists for a broader audience.

The notion of the "male gaze" came out of feminist art theory in the 1970s. Looking back through a centuries-old procession of images, feminists charged that, since pretty much the dawn of time, art had been made by male artists for a male audience. They also purported that the "male gaze" permeated popular culture, and this is arguably still very much the case—just watch a few music videos or look at fashion advertising. Artists, both male and female, have been complicating the matter for decades, and 'The Erotic Gaze' provides some compelling examples.

Among the works by the six artists featured in the exhibition, some are straightforward, such as graphite drawings by Myrix, which offer homoerotic nude males so polished they seem lifted from the pages of a magazine. Others are more subtle, like the lush figurative watercolors

of Todd Reynolds, some of which feature androgynous figures, and others that seem innocuous on the surface yet carry titles such as *Girl Touching Herself* and *Afterglow*.

Donna Talerico addresses the politics of the public gaze in her expressionistic paintings of café scenes. Talerico's lone figures and couples occasionally bring to mind Edward Hopper, especially her *La Robe Rouge*, in which a woman in a bright red dress stands behind a man seated with his back to her. The painting creates the most tension of all Talerico's works in the show. Two of Talerico's paintings feature women in public talking on cell phones, suggesting that people-watching (and displaying oneself in public) has moved beyond visual voyeurism to include eavesdropping and verbal exhibitionism.



Oberschlake, Jamie. *Untitled*, date n.d. Mixed media collage, 12" x 16". Photo courtesy of AEQAI staff.



Taylor, Kim Rae. *Hair Series 0*, date: n.d. Oil and mixed media on panel, 48" x 36". Photo courtesy of the artist.

Kim Rae Taylor and Jamie Oberschlake utilize paint to deconstruct the tradition of the classical nude. Worlds away from smooth, polished surfaces, both combine thick paint application and mixed media collage that cause the viewer to be alternately swept up in content and seduced by form. For example, Taylor painted *Repose*—a figure with an androgynous face and hairstyle, large hands, and generous breasts—with lush brushwork. The composition continually draws the eye back to the figures' ample breasts terminating in large nipples. The rich color and paint application is so compelling that viewers may find themselves studying this section for quite some time—not because it depicts breasts, but because of the tantalizing paint, chunky in spots, frosting-smooth in others. Of the artists in the exhibition, Taylor most directly engages the history of women as painting subjects. For instance, her painting *Hair Series 0*, which depicts a seated young woman, legs sprawled, contemplatively staring off in the distance, puts a contemporary spin on the nineteenth-century convention of the woman in reverie.

Even more so than Taylor's, Oberschlake's paintings wrap up the viewers' experience in form. His figures, almost completely removed from academic, anatomical correctness, verge on pure abstraction. Yet, we recognize the vertical shape in *Untitled* as a standing nude, and the horizontal one in *Pregnancy/Intimacy* as a reclining figure. His figures seem to both melt and meld—paint mimics drooping or deconstructed flesh, yet carries structure and marries the form to the surface. One is taken by surprise when, first captivated by Oberschlake's masterful technique, thoughts shift to reflecting on the physicality of the human body and its imperfections, and the ease with which this fascination arises.

Dawn Hunter's acrylic paintings unflinchingly transport the viewer to a strange world of sex parties, lesbian shows, swinger gatherings, and other situations that both fascinate and repel. In them, men watch women, women perform for men, men watch other men with women. Her painting *Hard-Core Pussy*, for example, depicts a man in a sailor uniform engaging in sexual activity with a woman outdoors as a group of men in various costumes watch. In *A Touch of Lesbian*, women dance with women, some in lingerie, some dressed as men in tuxedos and top hats. In Hunter's work, rarely, if ever, are women the spectators, but rather serve as the spectacle. In this way, her work most effectively engages, and questions, the show's theme of the erotic gaze.

Like the act of voyeurism, which is purely visual without physical contact or resolution, 'The Erotic Gaze' left me feeling unsatisfied, which is not to say it isn't a success—any inquiry into gender and eroticism in art, if done thoroughly, should leave one with more questions than answers.



Hunter, Dawn. *A Touch of the Lesbian*, 2005. Ink and acrylic on paper, 12" x 18".
Photo courtesy of the artist.

ELEGY AND THE THE ROMANTIC MOOD:

INTERPRETING TWO ARTISTS' WORKS IN THE LIGHT OF THE ROMANTIC ERA

BY: A.C. FRABETTI

Elegeia - the term refers to an ancient Greek tradition of memorial poetry, implying that the work in question commemorates loss. But the loss to which the exhibition 'Elegeia: Works by Brenda Stumpf and Tom Kelly' at the Eva G. Farris Art Gallery refers is not specific; it seems to reflect the mood of an epoch looking back upon some previous mode of human existence. For the artists refer to antiquity both in the formal and narrative aspects of their art: Stumpf through impermanence and architectural/historical/mystical references, and Kelly through his interpretation of Sappho's verse.

We may gain insight through the writings of the philosopher Hegel, although admittedly his prose often daunts readers. What he referred to as the 'Romantic' era (based on, though different from, the actual Romantic movement, though I will use the term loosely), as part of his metanarrative of the unfolding of World Spirit, represented a shift from the preceding one (the 'Classical') and was characterized in part by its wistful reflections upon the previous era. For Classical art embodied, according to Hegel, the unity of Spirit and Matter, the outer body

rendered as an image of higher perfection (Greek sculpture). The Romantic phase, intuiting the infinite quality of Spirit, felt that finite matter—the external world—was inadequate for the representation of the Eternal. Nevertheless the Romantic, faced with the incommensurability between the outer world and the inner, looked longingly at the simple beauty and unity of Classical art; it represented an irretrievable consciousness and incomparable beauty. For example, the Romantics, as per their namesake, 'romanticized' the classical era by frequently painting ancient ruins. It is in this sense that the exhibition is elegiac: These two artists, both in the narrative and formal qualities of their artwork, create in the Romantic mood.

There are two key elements noted above about the Romantic mood: one, nostalgia and reverence for an ancient past, and two, negation of finite Matter for infinite Spirit. The question remains as to how these two artists' works reflect these two aspects; an analysis of how these two artists' works reflect these two aspects follows.



Stumpf, Brenda. *Flos Sacer*, 2005. 23"x 11.5"x 11.5". Paper from steeped tea bags, rubber bands, sanding wheel, wood objects, acrylic paint, sand, matte medium. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Stumpf, Brenda. *A Passing of Time (For E. V.)*, 2006. 24"x 16"x 11.5". Wax, pigment, paper, from steeped tea bags, melted broom, cloth, wood boxes, sand, acrylic paint, matte medium. Photo courtesy of the artist.

BRENDA STUMPF

Stumpf's sculptures —the three in the show from her Offerings and Attributes series— bear this love of antiquity and etherification. Outwardly, they are each highly balanced, centripetal formations, like ziggurats or Egyptian pyramids (though as pyramids, more similar to those of the various ancient peoples of Central and South America): wide at the base, triangulated with large steps for each layer. This is especially apparent in *Flos Sacer*, 2005. Though it is the one that least resembles a pyramid, its overall directional tendency is triangular. The apex of each represents the culmination of this metamorphosis in floral, brush-like crests. The sculpture emulates the growth of a flowering plant but with the peculiar solidity of antique monumental constructions.

The lower levels are wrapped in materials such as gauze that give them the effect of being embalmed. Egyptian embalming preserved the form (corpse or body) for the next phase of its existence as part of the transmigration of the soul, here represented in the floral summit. Matter, once dead and inanimate, becomes, through a process of internment the metamorphosed, refined element. Each layer of the pyramidal structure represents a metamorphosis of the previous one into a more refined state.

TOM KELLY

In reverence for the fragmentary remnants of Sappho's lyrical verse (itself a symbol of fragmented memory and unrecoverable past), and the beauty of the content of her poems, Kelly creates softened, burnt umbra hues breaking sporadically through textured white paint. Some of the smallest works are carefully selected segments of larger pieces — fragments (like Sappho's surviving poems), yet wholesome in their composition. Emulating Cy Twombly, he works with that artist's language deftly. Like the Romantic, he seeks to negate matter as an unsuitable vessel for Spirit (and finds inspiration in a Greek poet); in his case, he achieves this with luminosity. For example, *Amid wild blossoms of the spring*, 2009 he began with strong reds and dark umber tones and then illumined them by layering the white paint successively. As a modernist process-style of painting, the previous strokes and layers are still visible (*pentimenti*), though somewhat veiled.

Stumpf and Kelly arguably have much more occurring in their work than mentioned here; these above thoughts are in the context of the theme of their exhibition, and are reflections on the mode of consciousness to which I believe they sentimentally ascribe.

For both are conscious of their choices, attested by their own writings and thoughts about their work; hence we may conclude that in their temperament they freely root themselves in history, but as artists are fully contemporary.



Kelly, Tom. *Amid wild blossoms of the spring*, 2009. 44" x 77". Acrylic on canvas. Photo courtesy of Tom Kelly.