

Cherry and Martin

Hill, Scotti. "New Brian Bress Exhibit at UMFA Escapes Classification To Create Unique Experience," *Deseret News*, September 26, 2015

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SALT LAKE CITY — For many people, going to art museums is a daunting task.

Visions of endless hallways packed with relics of the historical past seem intimidating, perhaps even boring. Often, large museums are divided into general categories based on era, style or geography, making it all the more difficult to know where to begin.

The Utah Museum of Fine Arts, however, strikes a steady balance between art of the past and of the present with its rich permanent collection as well as an alternating roster of new exhibitions.

Its latest show, "Brian Bress: Make Your Own Friends," is likely one of the most novel and interactive exhibits the museum has ever undertaken. Due to the exhibit's unique approach, visitors can bypass the strict classification of art in favor of a visual experience unlike any other.

Brought about by a partnership with the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, the show highlights the amazingly diverse work of Los Angeles-based Brian Bress, a video artist whose work pushes the boundaries of artistic experimentation. According to a news release, this exhibition "is the most significant presentation of the LA artist's work to date."

The show surveys the past decade of Bress' artistic practice, compiling drawings, collages and videos with life-size sculptures and costumes in the "salt" gallery — a space that for the past several years has served as UMFA's venue for cutting-edge contemporary art from around the globe — and throughout the museum's permanent collection.

Two trios of collages and sketches appear near the salt gallery's entrance. Through their playful abstraction, these images resemble the modern artistic movements of cubism and dadaism. But while the collages are imaginatively abstract, the sketches are nothing more than modest doodles on

lined paper. Initially, one may be confused as to why doodles bear inclusion in a fine art museum. It's this playful charm, mixed with the conceptual strength of his artistic process, that provides strength to Bress' work.

As visitors continue to navigate the room, large costumed figures and masks penetrate the gallery's modest space. They appear daunting and otherworldly, blanketed with long strands, beads and found objects. A surprising and uncanny continuity arises from visitors who begin to move about the exhibition, and the interconnectedness of the artist's doodles, sculptures and video pieces becomes apparent.

In addition to the range of experimental artworks in the salt gallery, Bress' work is placed throughout the museum's permanent collection. His video portraits, consisting of moving costumed figures in vertical LED frames, can be found within UMFA's Oceanic, European and Medieval collections.

"It's a goal of mine to have the salt shows expand the concept of exhibitions, breaking outside the confines of the traditional white cube," said Whitney Tassie, UMFA's curator of modern and contemporary art.

After Tassie approached Bress with the idea, he began to consider the parallels between his work and the art historical periods in the museum's collections.

"I'd like to think that artists are building upon a visual language," Bress said. "If this technology would have been available to earlier artists, they would have used it."

In a world replete with categories, Bress' artistic gesture forces viewers to consider the possibility of visual continuity devoid of the strict labels history has mandated.

For frequent museum patrons, this show offers an invitation to navigate sections of the museum they may have overlooked. The desire to locate the video portraits impels an adventure through the museum's rich collection, all the while drawing fascinating parallels between the eerily abstract video subjects and the art historical eras nestled in their midst.

"Make Your Own Friends" exists due to the joint curatorial effort of Tassie and Nora Burnett Abrams of MCA Denver. After the show's run concludes at UMFA in January, the exhibit will travel to MCA Denver, where it will run until June. But while UMFA is taking a decidedly interdisciplinary approach, MCA Denver will show the works together in a 3000-square-foot gallery space.