

Cherry and Martin

Hegert, Natalie. "Brian Bress and Friends: On Video and Objects, Illusion and Empathy," *MutualArt.com*, October 7, 2015.



Two figures, between two flatscreen video monitors, busy themselves slowly, unsurely, arranging and rearranging their facial features. With white-gloved hands, they blindly affix cartoonish clay ears, mouths, noses, and eyes to their lozenge shaped heads, then, turning to face each other across the gap between the two video monitors, they attach and remove those features from the other's face. Clumsily fumbling and groping, they are clearly unable to see, yet out from the scrambled orifices placed haphazardly across their faces—an ear where a mouth should be, a single eye in the middle of the face, an errant moustache—one imagines they are gazing, out of their video frames, at each other, and, occasionally, at the viewer.

These two figures, from the 2014 work *Organizing the Physical Evidence (Purple)*, are the first to greet the viewer to *Brian Bress: Make Your Own Friends* at the Utah Museum of Fine Art (UMFA), the latest in the museum's *salt* series of solo exhibitions of contemporary artists. Upstairs, in the *salt* gallery, one encounters the neutral-colored plush foam costumes and magnetized facial features that appear in *Organizing the Physical Evidence*, along with more masks and full-figure costumes, drawings, collages, and sketches—the basis of Bress's many other video works. Employing a cast of fictional characters, abstract backgrounds, and anthropomorphic objects, his videos collapse drawing, painting, and sculpture into the two-dimensional frame of the video monitor.

This is the first exhibition to gather together these different elements and background processes of Bress's work alongside his videos. "In the past I've been reticent to show them," Bress told me, referring to the costumes, props, and soft sculptures, rather withholding the physical artifacts as "a strategic decision about how I wanted the videos to be perceived...I wanted more confusion or mystery about the videos as objects." In the non-commercial environment of a museum exhibition, however, he came to think of their inclusion as an opportunity to educate the viewers about his process, allowing them to "unpack how these things were created." As such, the UMFA exhibition constitutes the most comprehensive collection of the Los Angeles-based artist's work ever displayed. He explained that while the exhibition wasn't approached as a retrospective at first, after speaking with Whitney Tassie of the UMFA and Nora Burnett Abrams of the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, the joint curators of the exhibition, it "slowly evolved into a ten year survey."

Bress's earlier works incorporate painted backdrops, sculptural elements, along with dialogue and narrative, while his more recent videos take advantage of the properties of the flat panel video monitor to focus more on the language and constructs of painting. The 2010 work, *Creative Ideas for Every Season*—a surreal, 20-minute video, with dialogue ranging abruptly from existential philosophizing to absurd non-sequiturs, and characters and costumes seeming to summon both Jim Henson and Paul McCarthy—proved a watershed moment for Bress. "It led me away from trying to do everything in one piece," he says. Subsequent works would strip away narrative and cinematic elements, and focus on the formal flatness of the surface of the video monitor, and the connections to painting that it invites. Bress became more concerned with "playing around with the illusion of putting a figure inside a flat glowing box."

Like in *Organizing the Physical Evidence*, these works contain a single figure in the video, framed like a portrait, and blindly engaged in some sort of creative endeavor, an act of making and remaking—arranging a face, making a drawing, stacking objects. The first of these works is entitled *Cowboy (Brian led by Peter Kirby)* (2012), whose eponymous character proceeds to draw pictures on a piece of glass in front of him. Bress describes his *Cowboy* as a "simple doodle, coming to life." The subject's shift from the two-dimensional to three-dimensional inspired his self-reflexive activity; Bress explains, "It occurred to me that this thing that comes from drawing, should then make drawings." Yet the decision to perform the final creative act while blind came as a final impulse: "I literally had the razor in my hand, about to cut the eye holes," but thought "maybe it's better if I can't see."

The *Cowboy* is included in the exhibition, but one won't encounter it in the *salt* gallery among other contemporary works. Instead, the video monitor is hung in the Art of Utah and the West gallery of the museum, with a Remington and other, traditional portraits of cowboys. In fact, Bress's work pervades the museum, drawing viewers out into rooms of the museum's collection of European, American Indian, Oceanic art, and other galleries. The opportunity for his work to interact with such a diverse collection excited Bress, who confesses, "I'm in love with art history." Finding his videos, masks, and full body costumes embedded among historic costumes and painted portraits, brings not only his work, but also new technology into conversation with art history. As for his own position in art history, Bress feels privileged to be among the first users of such new technologies and the experimental freedom that follows. "There's so many things that haven't been done," he says, because digital media and video are such new technologies, in comparison to such time-honored mediums as painting and sculpture.

While Bress's work takes advantage of the tools of digital media, it is just as invested in the handmade, physical objects. Bress's work plays with the tension this generates, as many of his video works may appear, at first glance, to be entirely digitally rendered, an illusion that is quickly shattered by the recognizable physical evidence of human gestures, sweat, hair. Knowing that one is seeing a real physical object or puppet inspires "an empathy for that object," he says. But the power of digital media also exerts a remarkable force over the viewer, he observes: "The glowing screen: it's scary but we are like moths to a flame." At the MCA Denver, where *Make Your Own Friends* will travel to early next year, Bress has a site-specific commission planned for the museum's second story window, that overlooks the street, planning to fill up the windows with monitors mimicking a massive store window. He said, "using that primal urge to my advantage," hoping the massive glowing screen will draw in the crowds.