

## ...might be good

Contemporary Culture  
Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin  
Through October 31  
by Dan Boehl

2009 has been a big year. The United States swore in the first black president, was plunged into the depths of the Great Recession, and the Beatles reissued their entire catalog with nearly each album getting a 10 from Pitchfork. If that isn't highwater enough for you, there were the Bailouts, Maddoff, the co-opted townhall meetings, and Obama depicted as the Joker. Also as Hitler. I could detail the crash of the art market and numerous art org failures, but the Woodstock boxset and the Beatles Guitar Hero are more important to the masses than the problems plaguing the Rose Art Museum.



You know all this. But you may not know how it adds up: the United States has fundamentally changed. In order to mirror these changes Lora Reynolds offers Contemporary Culture, a survey of artists who tackle the zeitgeist. But the show comes up short, pointing to change without internalizing it.

The best example of this is the Time is Money, Money is Time series of drawings by Mads Lynnerup. Ink on colored paper, each drawing offers an everyday image paired with a time/money advertising slogan: "Money to Think" on the back of a man's t-shirt, "no money to worry" on a lightpole banner. The pattern follows thusly; find a money or time slogan, switch out the word money for the word time and vice versa. The move is pretty clever, but in that ironic Ad Busters/preaching to the choir kind of way. It takes a swat at the over-consumption indicative of the aughts, but doesn't acknowledge that over-consumption as we knew it is dead. Subprime home loans killed it. In this respect the drawings become quaint, a Yale sophomore's Marxism, disembodied from experience. Jim Torok's paintings fall into the same trap. Simple slogans slapped on wood tell us to "Keep Focused," "Stay Calm" and "Relax." The irony is that it's impossible to relax with near 10% unemployment and a culture war brewing. But without dialing up some kind of meaningful emotional context, it's a limp irony.

The collaborations of Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry have the opposite problem. Black and white photo reproductions are painted in oil. The same image is ghosted over by printing and stretching it on silk, lending them a Gerhard Richter quality. Each image depicts an important moment in the Civil Rights movement, and each evokes funereal solemnity. There is, however, a 60-year leap between 337 Students Boycotted. February 27, 1959 (2007) and contemporary images of President Obama wielding a lightsaber on the White House lawn. The work informs the contemporary moment, but in the post-race debate, it's far removed from the contemporary dialogue.

Of course, actively addressing political and social issues is a trap. The best art comes to politics sideways, as a tangent rather than a point. Colby Bird takes this tack in his sculpture This is This (2009), infusing middle-class frustration and gun-toting to the menacing effect that startled congressmen at town hall meetings this summer. This is This is risky and provocative. Against the backdrop of its concealed weapon, the rest of the show seems earnest, safe, or clever.

# lora reynolds gallery

I like much of the work in the show, but it seems disingenuous to say that the artists here are informing contemporary issues. They almost inform them. I don't want to invoke Bush, but any artist trying to make work that addresses uncertain times needs to acknowledge that one of the US's greatest triumphs came on the heels of one of its most shameful moments. Corporate greed and political incompetence nearly destroyed the United States. But for a few moments of insight, Contemporary Culture is much too conservative to really shed light on the considerable changes wrought by the last two aughts.

Dan Boehl is a poet. His chapbook *Les MISERES ET LES MAL-HEURS DE LA GUERRE* will be available from [Greying Ghost](#) this fall.

Image: Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry  
337 Students Boycotted. February 27, 1959 (after unknown photographer; New York World-Telegraph & Sun Collection, Library of Congress)  
2007  
Oil on canvas and toner on silk  
16 x 20-1/4 inches