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whitehot | October 2007, Conspiracy and Economy: Chris Bassett @ Sea and Space Explorations, Los Angeles



Chris Bassett, Henry Ford beneath Tiger Stadium, 1912 (detail) plywood, basswood, doll, plexiglass, lights, inkjet prints on gatorboard, photocopies 2007 diorama 59" x 26" x 26"

by Patrick Marcoux

Full disclosure: The following article may have been influenced by a media smokescreen disseminated in the interests of an inner circle of power, governing a secretive network of conspiratorial international bankers. That's among the possibilities circulating at the "Minerval Reading Society: Lodge of Instruction," the first solo exhibition in Los Angeles by Chris Bassett, at Sea and Space Explorations, in Highland Park.

The gallery is furnished like an advocacy project, presented by "The Institute for Mystical Capitalism," with the artist credited as director for the institute. There is a stocked bookcase (with the exhibition's bibliography), a reading table with chairs, trifold brochures, and a series of video documentary screening nights during the run of the show. However, a playful pair of dioramas suggests comic relief, and brings a whiff of ironic distance to the more formal historical information presented in photo-text panels and timelines.

The exhibition fits loosely in the genre of conspiracy fiction, akin to movies and books such as *The Illuminatus! Trilogy*. As one expression of Bassett's larger research project, this "Lodge of Instruction" offers credible historical reports of 20th century economic development in the United States, embellished with enigmatic fictional dimensions. The allegation is that secret agencies of growth and change in the economic sphere work toward the mysterious aims of a "Mystical Capitalism." Mystical Capitalism, with its rituals, factions, and iconography, appears to be a variation on the conspiracy theorist's favorite shadow organization, the Illuminati.

Conspiracy discourse, in earnest, is symptomatic of a postmodern condition; in which the amount of information describing the world is of such complexity that it is no longer possible to force large-scale systems (like governments and economies) into figuration. Conspiracy theories are grand narratives after the death of grand narratives; reflecting a psychological desire to see and name individual, tangible actors shaping the course of history. And in the "Lodge of Instruction," the Institute for Mystical Capitalism names Henry Ford (of Ford Motor Company) and the proto-punk band the MC5. Dioramas picture them wearing druidic robes, involved in mystical rituals at key moments in the evolution of consumer society-- Ford in 1912, and the MC5 in 1968.

But the dioramas are funny. And that humor calls for a closer inspection of the rest of the gallery, where the weighty-looking craftsman-style table, chairs, and bookcase turn out to be built from faux-finished MDF. They are as much a façade as the insertion of an institutional guise between the artist and the artwork, signalling that the artist stands at a distance of irony from the enigmatic elements of this economic report. What distinguishes this work from other conspiracy fiction is that Bassett's goal isn't to exploit the crisis of truth in the postmodern era for its dramatic potential. Rather, the secret society content is effectively a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down.

Bassett's exhibition locates a method for making the uncontested facts that form the backbone of conspiracy theories *more palatable*. Having "Mystical Capitalism" firmly in mind adds a layer of enthusiasm for the scholarly elements of the exhibition, like the Institute's video screening of a PBS "Frontline" special on the origins and impact of consumer credit cards in the United States. The fictional structure and playful sculptural objects don't obscure the more straightforward economic analysis, but in fact draw the viewer in to what might otherwise risk being a dry presentation of these unnerving developments from the 20th century.

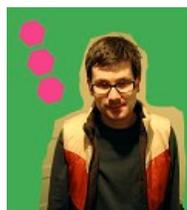
"Minerval Reading Society: Lodge of Instruction" at Sea and Space Explorations: Sept.9-29, 2007.

www.seaandspace.org

www.instituteformysticalcapitalism.com

www.robot138.com/imc.html

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