Sorehead Hill: Jesse Howard + Matthew Higgs

From his twenty-acre property north of Fulton, Missouri, Jesse Howard (1885–1983) witnessed the modernization of America and grew skeptical as the country progressed through the twentieth century. Equipped with newspapers, a Bible, the Farmer’s Almanac, and a McGuffey’s Reader, he expressed to the world exactly what he believed. Over the next forty years Howard filled his property with his signature signs, bold black print highlighted with red and emphatic pointed fingers, and called his place Sorehead Hill.

In 1952, some of Howard’s neighbors circulated a petition to commit him to the “State Lunatic Asylum.” There was also increased vandalism and theft on the property and, as a result, his subject matter became more directed to the local thieves, vandals, and naysayers.

Despite the negative reaction from his community, Howard and his art were embraced by the art world. A large selection was purchased by the Kansas City Art Institute in 1974 and was included in an important exhibition at the Walker Art Center, Naives and Visionaries. Today, his signs are in museum collections all over the U.S. including the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, the American Folk Art Museum, and the Walker Art Center.

Matthew Higgs is a curator, critic, and artist living and working in New York. Since the early 1990s he has sought to develop a practice that considers the intersections and overlaps between these disciplines. Over the past twenty years he has organized more than 250 exhibitions and projects in Europe and North America and is currently the Director and Chief Curator of White Columns, New York’s oldest non-profit art space. For this installation, Higgs worked with Detroit-based Scott Reeder to ignite a visual conversation between Reeder’s text-based works and Jesse Howard’s hand-painted signs.

How were you first introduced to the work of Jesse Howard?

Howard’s work was something I was initially familiar with through reproduction, through reading about it within the larger narrative of American folk art. I understood his work in relation to other self-taught, maverick artists such as Howard Finster or Prophet Royal Robertson, who also used vernacular language and sign-writing forms as a part of their practices. My first in-person encounter with Howard’s work was at the H&R Block Artspace in Kansas City, which housed a large collection of Howard’s. Howard’s works were a kind of aesthetic paradox: they aligned an earlier, premodern folk art-like sensibility (e.g., his use of found, scavenged materials, etc.) with a form of declarative, often incendiary language that seemed utterly contemporary. (I imagine, like our current President, he would have enjoyed Twitter.) Howard’s objects are extraordinary manifestations of ad hoc creativity. They are possessed by an energy uniquely his own. It took a while to acclimatize to the syntax and flow of Howard’s ‘voice.’ (His texts have been described elsewhere as being akin to “the confusion of language.”) There is often a staccato-like aspect to Howard’s texts, a
repetitive, almost stuttering-like quality, as if he is constantly struggling to reiterate or underscore a specific point. Colliding Biblical language with more secular, even profane texts, Howard’s signs seem to anticipate—or mirror—the literary ‘cutups’ of writers such as William S. Burroughs, as much as they allude to the forms of poetry and song lyrics. (Howard’s texts would sound amazing set to music.) Created as signs, Howard’s works suggest that language is fundamentally a ‘public’ form, a vehicle for both communicating and sharing ideas, and suggest that art itself is a forum for dialogue and exchange.

How does your own background inform your response to Howard’s work?

Over the past fifteen years I have worked extensively with self-taught artists and artists who have unconventional backgrounds. In my curatorial work I have sought to bring the work of these so-called ‘outsider’ artists into a dialogue with the work of more conventionally-trained contemporary artists. This curatorial dialogue began with my introduction to the Creative Growth Art Center—a studio program and an art gallery that supports the work of a large community of artists living and working with mental and developmental disabilities—in Oakland, California, in the early 2000s. The visionary founders of Creative Growth—Elias Katz and Florence Ludins-Katz—established a radical and forward-thinking environment to support the creative development of all individuals, regardless of their personal circumstances or background. Importantly, they sought to present the work produced at Creative Growth alongside all other forms of contemporary art without any of the prejudices typically applied to art made by people with disabilities. Over the past decade at White Columns—the organization I run in New York—we have presented the work of many artists associated with Creative Growth (and artists affiliated with other centers inspired by Creative Growth) as well as ‘maverick’ artists like Prophet Royal Robertson, for example, alongside other forms of contemporary art. Our goal is simply to try and represent something of the complexity of art, regardless of an individual artist’s background, training, or intentions. Central to this is allowing different forms of art-making to coexist, to enter into a dialogue with each other through the temporal form of the exhibition. For this installation, Howard’s work ‘faces off’ against the work of the Detroit and Chicago-based artist Scott Reeder. Both artists employ language in their work, but often to very different ends. I’m interested in this discrepancy, and the idea of two voices ‘talking’ at once, to create a kind of visual cacophony through which the visitor must pass through.

Has working on this exhibition changed or expanded your notions about what you do?

Each opportunity to create an exhibition is an opportunity to rethink my own personal relationship with art. The circumstances and context in which the work is shown also provide me with an opportunity to set up a (temporary) dialogue between artists and artworks that I hope might add to our understanding of their intentions. The exhibition, as much as it is a formal display of artifacts and objects, is also a temporal form: one that unfolds in real time over the duration of its run. Exhibitions, like books and films, have beginnings,
middles, and ends. Exhibitions are living forms. The presence of the visitor and their interactions with the works bring a performative subjectivity to the situation; they animate the displays in often unexpected ways, in turn shifting our understanding of both the curator’s and the artist's intentions. At the Arts Center, I have created a self-consciously theatrical and immersive presentation of Howard’s and Reeder’s works. I couldn’t imagine proposing this installation for another institution, so in this regard it is site specific. The gallery—a long corridor-like space—creates a threshold for the visitor to pass through, encountering on one side a cacophonous display of Howard’s signs and on the other a more restrained presentation of Reeder’s deadpan text works, that typically employ humor as a central device. My hope is ultimately to create a tension between the work of two very different artists, of very different generations, and with very different intentions. The pairing of the works of Jesse Howard and Scott Reeder does not necessarily seek to establish connections between the two artists’ work (although I suspect connections exist); rather it hopes instead to privilege, and perhaps even amplify their differences.