

ArtsHouston

by Garland Fielder

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[Kara Hearn - A Problem of Courage](#)



Memory plays a colossal role in how people think about, define and understand themselves. It is the place that contains the mosaic of our lives and allows us to give meaning to existence. Kara Hearn understands this and uses memory as a sort of philosophical starting point in her art. In *A Problem of Courage*, the artist presents several pieces that serve as meditation aids to a transcendence of self through a peeling away of memory. The results are challenging and at times, baffling, but overall, Hearn's ability to question remains earnest and heartfelt.

None of the works in the show are titled and no list of works was available. A short essay in four parts was supplied and this may or may not have a literal reference to any of the work in the show. In the essay, Hearn speaks about such topics as "The benefits of being lost" and "A word on leaking," a paragraph discussing the artist's grandmother's gradual slip into dementia. This document can be seen as a sort of commentary on the work in the show, rather than an explanation. This strategy works well when Hearn's work begins to unfold in the space.

The first piece consists of a small pile of rocks placed unpretentiously in a pile near the wall. Upon inspection, it is revealed that they are painted shades of off white, some glossy, others matte. There is no discernable purpose of the painting of the rocks. They speak of neither earthworks nor meticulously recreated found art. They are just there, taking up space in a manner in which can only be divined by the person who placed them there. This fact becomes important later on in relation to other works that convey more of a sense of purpose, but less presence.

Across from the rocks hangs a framed photograph depicting a plywood wall with a photograph pinned to it. This photograph within the photograph perhaps once depicted a figure standing against a wall, however there is a cutout where the figure (?) once stood, so interpretation is again stymied. There is enough shape recognition to piece together an absent presence, but this again, is really rooted in nothing more than guesswork.

Two more adjacent photographs hang together, suggesting a diptych. They depict angles, found and suggested. The first is of a long piece of thin wood fit against the corner of a room, its shadow completing a triangle of darkened space. The other shows a triangle made of tape (think of those folded paper footballs kids make to flick through a finger goal post) gently resting between two nails protruding from a wall. Both of these images are very modest, but closely cropped so that there is a sense of intrusion about them. This sentiment is pervasive in Hearn's work; a lowbrow aesthetic pushed to a place that is somewhat intrusive, too personal by way of an abstract immodesty. In other words, the work comes off as awkwardly personal when there is not really any reason to think so.

Perhaps the most intriguing piece in the show, consists of a projection playing in the corner of the space. A fifth of the image is projected onto one wall, the rest stretched into the adjacent corner giving the projection a 3 dimensional feeling. The video consists of a balmy sky passing by in real time. A tiny telephone pole in the lower left corner helps to scale the video. A sound recording of street noise accompanies the piece. Occasionally a bird or plane will fly by, giving an odd transparency to the illusion of the sky "box". It is as though a small rectangular piece of the sky has been placed in the corner of the gallery. This work somehow also conveys a sense of being lost. There is so little grounding in the "grounded" projection (placed at floor level), one wonders about the import of terms like sky and earth, figure and ground.

The other two works in the show are video pieces that incorporate Hearn's corporal self in a way that evokes both humor and pathos. In three small wall mounted video displays, the artist has filmed herself and others. In the first panel, Hearn wrestles with a non-figure, an actor that has been digitally blackened out to match the black background. The overall effect is that the artist is having a heated struggle with either her self or with the space itself. The next monitor shows various slumbering figures in repose. They toss and turn in a somniferous manner, occasionally and abruptly getting up, but then quickly replaced by another body at rest. The third monitor shows (the same) procession of bodies limply hanging in the arms of the afore mentioned non-figure. This video triptych could contain any number of meanings and associations. It is a strange mix of personal situations exposed in a rather enigmatic methodology, making for an awkward ensemble.

The final work of the show is a long video of various scenes playing on a TV monitor in the corner with three headphones supplying the soundtrack. In these videos, Hearn herself plays numerous characters: two sparring lovers, a family of three that hits a cow (played by Hearn) in on a darkened drive, a fed ex counter employee and waiting patrons, etc. The video is an exercise in self-exploration via role-playing and mirror associations all affected by the artist. This work is in one regard, the most personal of the entire show, and yet somehow, by the plethora of characters being played by the artist, the least. Some of the vignettes are humorous in a sort of ham-fisted kind of way, others more poignant.

In all of the works, Hearn seems to be asking the question of how it is we contend with the constantly changing roles we all play in our lives from one moment to the next. Memory links us to ourselves, but what links memory to us? Somehow a pile of painted rocks may contain the key to that question, or it may just be a pile of rocks. The photograph with the hole cut out of it was somehow worth taking a photo of, or was it? Is the document implicit in an affirmation of that question or not? It is an unsettling place to be to have to face these questions, even in a gallery setting. Hearn finds this existential grappling worth delving into, and curious viewer may agree.

-Garland Fielder