

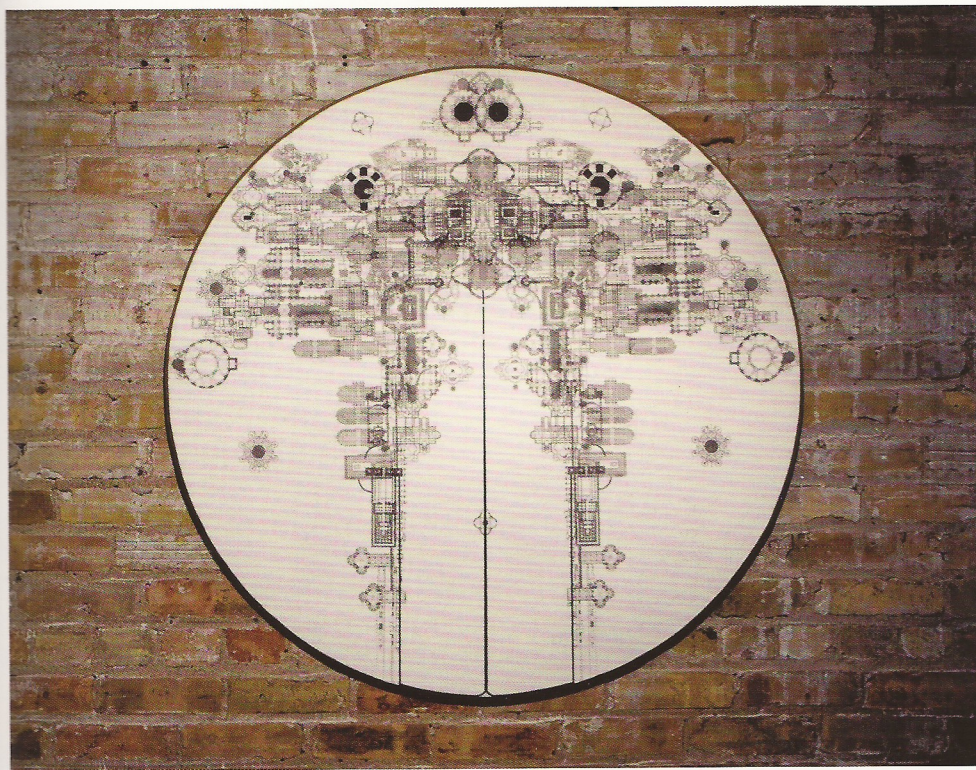
# A THEORY OF VALUES

Soap Factory – Minneapolis

Curated by Kris Douglas and Scott Stulen

## On the Value of Anywhere: The 2010 Minnesota Biennial

By Christina Schmid



Andy Messerschmidt, *Garden of the Evaporated Halo*, 2010, graphite and ink on routed MDF. Courtesy Soap Factory.

Notoriously tricky to curate, biennials demand a choice between showing a broad survey and a focused selection of work. The first risks fragmentation for the sake of being representational, the other tends to reveal more about curatorial preferences than the full spectrum of artistic practices. Kris Douglas and Scott Stulen, co-curators of the 2010 Minnesota Biennial, suggestively titled “A Theory of Values,” opted for coherence and chose to present a formally and conceptually narrow sliver of art being made in Minnesota in 2010.

Inspired by a short story by Minnesota author Sinclair Lewis, Douglas and Stulen selected work by artists who, like the story’s main character, have chosen to stay put despite the lure of a bigger, better elsewhere. Valuing this place, its Midwestern identity and work ethic, is part of the theory this biennial proposes. Yet the curators’ choices also profess a preference for a particular kind of aesthetic: the work on view is sparse, reductionist, abstract, and often made of modest materials. The artists’ formal investigations seem carefully calibrated to capitalize on the venue’s unique properties: the Soap Factory’s exposed brick walls and gnarly wooden floors effectively set the stage for an experience deeply indebted to the industrial roots of the region.

But for all the lip service paid to the importance of place and staying put, “A Theory of Values” does little more than flirt with Midwestern identity. In the interview printed in the exhibition’s catalog, Stulen carefully distances the show from any trace of regionalism: “I don’t think it reads like a ‘Minnesota exhibition,’” he says. “This work could be shown

in a contemporary gallery anywhere.” And that, presumably, is a good thing. But when Stulen explains that “because you can look at anything, everyone ends up looking at the same stuff, talking about the same artists, participating in the same conversations, aware of the same trends,” this pervasive sameness seems to detract rather than add value to the work on view.

The disavowal of geographic distinction points to the tension underlying the show as a whole: yes to highly formalized negotiations of place and identity, but only as long as they could have been made anywhere.

The only piece explicitly concerned with Minnesotan identity is Karl Unnasch’s *Near Mint Condition*, a tractor with stained-glass windows that references the history of transforming prairie into farmland, driven by the seductive/destructive doctrine of manifest destiny. Other works on view resist such literalism, but share a dry sense of humor.

Ute Bertog, a German-born artist, paints language games in thick oils, with a tangible gusto for texture. Joe Smith dresses up a crude plywood platform in silver Mylar strips. Propped up sideways, the platform’s pristinely white, reflective surface no longer serves any function other than suggesting a tongue-in-cheek metaphor for fine art itself. Alec Soth, photographic storyteller extraordinaire, appears in the guise of his oddball alter ego Lester B. Morrison, “artist, poet, and hermit.”

Fictional backwoodsmen aside, Andy Messerschmidt, a resident of Ely in Minnesota’s far north, is represented by two bodies of work: a series of landscapes, complete with regional architecture—churches, half-timbered houses—and obsessively detailed tondo drawings on MDF panels. The latter’s mystifying utopian architecture not only transcends place but, in their reference to Star Wars’ Death Star, questions the value of progress for progress’ sake. This beautifully rendered negotiation of hope, doubt, and transcendence eases all fears initially raised by the specter of provincialism inherent in disavowing place in search of a bigger, brighter elsewhere.

“A Theory of Values,” then, is one of the many possible stories that could be told about art-making in Minnesota in 2010. Whether it is the “most innovative,” as the curators claim, remains subject to debate. ■

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Christina Schmid is an Assistant Professor in Liberal Arts at the College of Visual Arts in St. Paul, MN.