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'Exempla' artist takes technology to artistic realm

Interview | Brian Knep

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The Daily sat down with Brian Knep, whose current exhibit "Exempla," at the Tufts University Art Gallery, examines the inextricable force of change in life through interactive projections — and, surprisingly, humor. Knep spoke about his recent exhibit, his artistic beginnings and the reasoning behind his work.

Anna Majeski: When did you first start experimenting with art?

Brian Knep: Art has always been a part of my life as background, but I didn't take it seriously until 2003. The gallery where I first showed was the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln. My whole identity had been as an engineer, so I didn't take [art] seriously. I came from a family that appreciated art, but where it wasn't considered a career. I also had no formal training. I didn't go to art school, so I had no language for it ... no context for it. I was scared to show [my art], but I got feedback from some creative friends, and they liked it.

AM: What was the work from your first show?

BK: My first show was actually one piece, "Healing #1" (2003). It was a floor projection, about size of a carpet, nine by six feet. It was an organic pattern. As you walked across the pattern, you wounded it, you erased it. The pattern then healed itself behind you, but whenever it grew back, it never grew back the same way. It left a scar where you walked. Over time, other people's lines erased your line but your interaction changed it forever. Every interaction causes a permanent change.

AM: Do you always use interactive projections in your work?

BK: I often do interactive work, but only when it makes sense. I also do non-repeating videos, regenerating videos which are responsive to time — as time changes, the video changes. But I've done prints and photographs as well as some sculptural work.

AM: What are you interested in communicating through your art?

BK: All of my work is somehow about change, impermanence, how everything changes, how everything is connected. In life there is only one constant, the fact that everything changes — your thoughts, your age, weather — everything changes, and one of the struggles in life is how you deal with that. People are actually quite scared of change. One of our struggles is how you change ... with the piece "Healing #1," it was really about idea that you interact with piece and that changes you. [Change] also continues forward, and I'm very interested in how those changes continue. So my work is all about how nothing is permanent, how everything changes and is connected.

AM: How did you come to decide on a digital medium? Do you think it conveys what you have to say more effectively?

BK: I was an engineer first, [I] worked in computer science. I worked in the film industry, so I've always been interested in technology. So it seemed natural to use [technology]. I could express myself with that. Painters are good at paint; they know how to mix the paints, use them. Sculptors understand their material, so my craft is technology. So that's one answer. The other answer is that I love and hate technology. I have a lot of fun with it, but often what we consider progress — email, etc. — actually [disconnects] us with our environment, and that creates a less rich experience. Technology is powerful, but it can be used in a bad way. I sort of thought, how can I use technology to create a richer experience with the world? I make a program where you interact with the piece, with each other. You become aware of your environment through it.

AM: What is the main concept behind “Exempla?”

BK: A lot of pieces are about futility, running around on walls, not getting anywhere. [The figures in the pieces] are doing things: running around, building towers and, from their point of view, they are constantly getting somewhere. From our point of view, it’s obvious that they are just cycling, but they can never see that. It’s hard to get perspective on your own life — actually it’s pretty much impossible. There are moments where we can break out, but mostly it’s impossible, so it’s sort of about trying to accept that. I get up, go to the gym, go to work, meditate. Who knows if the things we do will make us better?

AM: In “Exempla”, you are talking about mindless forces in humanity, the way that we go through the motions with little or no thought. Do you think you’re combating that through your work? Or do you feel that you’re participating in it also?

BK: [I think I’m] accepting it ... Accepting it, and trying to get other people to accept it and laugh at it, and then maybe take a step to get perspective on it. If you accept it, then you can make small steps.