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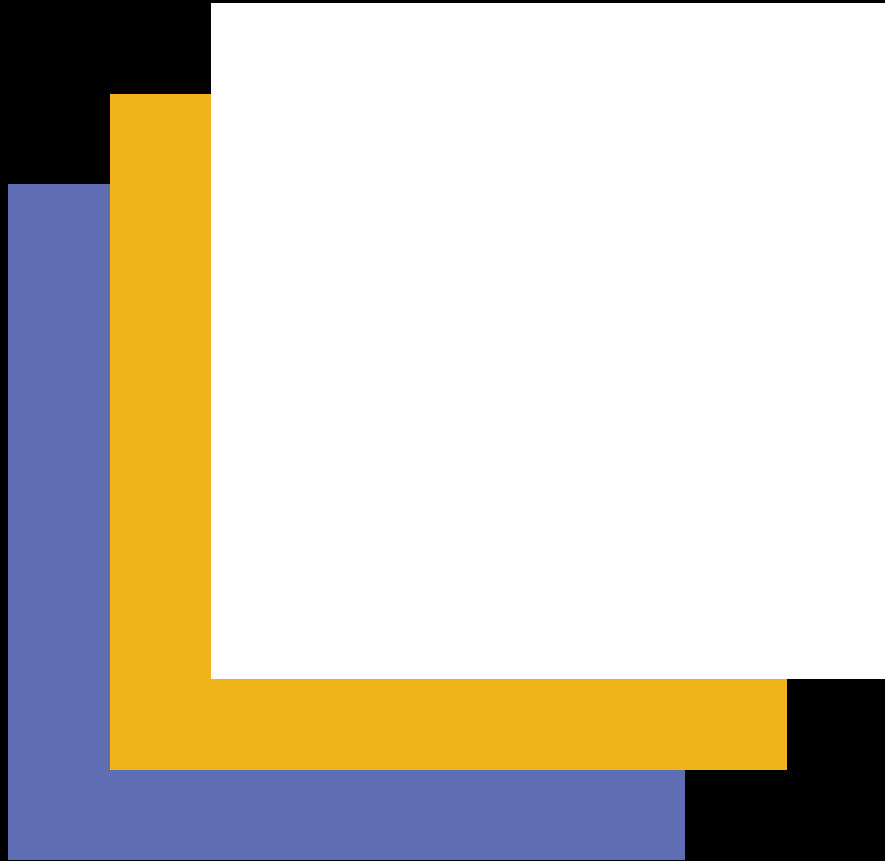
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EXHIBITION & BOOK REVIEWS, AUGUST 01ST 2013

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Christian Holstad *The Book of Hours*

Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York City

May 11–June 22, 2013

Christian Holstad's solo exhibition *The Book of Hours* (May 11–June 22, 2013) was the American artist's first at Andrew Kreps Gallery in New York, and the inaugural show in the gallery's roomy new space on 22nd Street. Holstad's largest-scale project in recent years, *The Book of Hours* presented a heartbreaking installation of textile sculptures and drawings that staged a garbage-strewn, post-ecological-collapse urban landscape. Living beings and discarded refuse fused together amid a sprawling mise-en-scène framed by Holstad's eponymous reference to the intricate, illustrated medieval Christian devotional books designed for laymen (mostly women, actually) to guide the practice of their faith in day-to-day domestic life.

Holstad has been deeply distressed of late by the phenomenon of Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD), which is ravaging bee populations and—in turn—threatening the global ecosystem that their pollination once held in delicate harmony. Holstad's art typically filters such urgent political concerns through an idiosyncratic, highly personal set of queer cultural references, humble materials and crafty processes. The primary molecule of *The Book of Hours* is a decorative towel produced



Holstad's world might be abstracted by mutation but it is immediately recognizable as our own.

and sold in a variety of colours by Martha Stewart (the visible tags proudly proclaim their origin), and Holstad twists and turns the terrycloth fabric into a panoply of distorted, expressively rendered bodies to populate his depressed landscape. As the gallery's press release notes, the beauty and care of Holstad's craft generates a sense of "accidental hope" that just might see us through the devastation around us.



The installation prompts speculation of a disaster narrative, but leaves the specifics up to the imagination. The entrance conjures up a post-apocalyptic Sesame Street: visitors are flanked by a row of wall-mounted pots holding flowers dangling limp and lifeless before we pass through a collapsing, faux-wrought iron gate into the main space. A discarded, crumpled baby stroller lies nearby—ominously empty. Figures appear as hybrids of animal (human and non-) and vegetable—bushes, trees and other greenery—as if prototypes for a new form of embodiment that we will be forced to take on, an evolutionary punishment enacted on arrogant humanity for our crimes against other species. The future Holstad envisions is bleak—deformed and dirty—and all the more potent for being sculpted in pleasing hues and textures.

Holstad treats the terrycloth almost as a drawing implement and renders a brood of chickens, for example, as a

kind of three-dimensional sketch from a few coloured lines. A similarly economical use of black and yellow produces numerous damaged, or rather “fallen,” bees of various shapes and sizes that pathetically crawl throughout the installation. Holstad’s world might be abstracted by mutation but it is immediately recognizable as our own. A large sculpted ink-pen seemingly formed from its own squiggly lines appears like a cloud going through a process of transubstantiation. A mere suggestion of a tree stands guard, represented only by its stump on a textile sidewalk and by a branch that has been impaled by a power line. Subtle, elegiac and witty, the installation rewards careful looking: what might appear to be a chaotic blur of fabric from a distance takes on a figurative presence on closer inspection and is full of ornate detail. The face of the campy figure *Star Gayzer*, for example, looks modeled on Wayland Flowers’s puppet sidekick, Madame. Contributing to the sense of an overarching narrative is the wonderful sound installation by French artist Martin



Maugeais that animates the scene with vocal, harpsichord and organ compositions originating from a row of trashcans hovering along one wall. As in earlier Holstad installations, smashed shipping pallets act as provisional stages for sculptures, from the plump, toxin-engorged bees to the many trashcans, adding to the theatricality.

Through a faux-brick doorway flanked by wreaths and trashcans full of lovingly crafted dog feces, diapers and mutated shrimp, the back room is a sanctuary for Holstad's take on the Books of Hours of the twenty-first century: daily newspapers (and by extension, mass media), which bind people to a shared lifestyle organized by materialist consumption rather than by religious faith. Here we have a suite of Holstad's delicate "newspaper drawings," which are created by erasing and re-drawing (with graphite and with gold leaf) sections of newspaper pages to create new juxtapositions of words and images and to uncover new meanings. The process takes on a psychological dimension as if Holstad is digging deep and peeling back the layers of a mass "hive" mind to reveal what articles and advertisements really believe, mining profound existentialist messages from bank and watch ads.

Other than the "fallen" bees, the other spectre that haunted the exhibition was that of Daniel Reich, the young gallerist who championed Holstad's work and with whom Holstad was very close. In my mind, Reich and Holstad were kindred spirits in advancing an intelligent, sensitive, experimental and refreshingly earnest contemporary art that stands in stark opposition to the soul-deadening churn of the Chelsea industrial complex. Mere weeks before Holstad's exhibition opened, Reich's family revealed that he had committed suicide late last year, and I could not help but project his face onto the many ailing figures on view here.

Jon Davies

is a widely published writer and curator based in Toronto. His exhibitions include *People Like Us: The Gossip of Colin Campbell* (2008), *Where I Lived, and What I Lived For* (2012–13) and *Kelly Jazvac: PARK* (forthcoming, 2013) for Oakville Galleries, where he is Associate Curator, as well as *Ryan Trecartin: Any Ever* (2010, with Helena Reckitt), *To What Earth Does This Sweet Cold Belong?* (2011) and *Coming After* (2011–12) for The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery.

