

The Land Between.
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At this point in time, *The Heartland* exhibition at The Smart Museum probably will have been reviewed, discussed and debated in all the glory that it deserves. In true Midwestern spirit, I raise a can of Old Style to all! What is the most interesting experience of the exhibition is the process that we do not really see, a curatorial process based on open research. I thank the curatorial team for generating this concept and pushing notions of what curating can be - as well as breaking some of the tedious and often predictable actions of the museum world by looking into the notion of regionalism through a investigative lens.

The Heartland exhibition openly engages the viewer with the comfortable familiarity of rethinking the good old fashioned stereotypes about the Heartland and its people, while simultaneously posits a question about the traditional definitions of cultural production, artists, and art centers, outside the urban centers of the land between the coasts.

It is somewhat known that many Midwesterners measure distance by the amount of time it takes to

get to a location, in this case of the exhibition time is measured by the slow enjoyment of the show, and the sheer madness of it not wanting to end. In 2007 and 2008, *The Heartland* curators, Charles Esche and Kerstin Niemann from Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, Netherlands collaborated with Stephanie Smith of The Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, and began with a symbolic letting go of what I deem to be “typical curatorial practices.” They embarked on a research trip in the true American spirit of the road-trip through the mid-west. The horizon framed by what I imagine to be a rental car windshield, a reliable google-map and a good car radio - the curatorial team sought to create an endless journey, a dialogue along the drive with artist communities and art spaces. (Too bad we are not allowed more of a glimpse of the thinking, conversations and good roadside chatter of these three...for example, who drove the car?) These research trips informed two exhibitions, in two countries over a two year period.

The first presentation, which opened in October 2008 at the Van Abbemuseum in the Netherlands, investigated to uncover new ways of thinking about the American interior workings during Obama’s landmark U.S. presidential election which also offered a Northern European audience access to a broad survey of the Midwest culture, art, music and innovative thinking. The similarities might be given with any exhibition of a topic that defines a sense of place – one that seeks to question identity through

geography. The second exhibition currently presented at The Smart Museum seeks to captivate American audiences with an honest look at the thinking and practices that dominate the 'land between' the American coasts. The two exhibitions have created a good dialogue, and have hopefully opened a new audience to the Heartland no matter where that is for the viewer, and that we can be given confidence that the world of cultural production flourishes, despite the "go to New York or LA" sensibility of the art world.

What is refreshing about the exhibition is that there are no stereotypical Midwest or "Dutch" stereotypes, rather there is an investigation of materials, ideas which share both countries sense of place. In this vein, it appears that an interesting goal of the exhibition is to demonstrate the cross-cultural connectivity between the American mid-west and the area outside the Randstad region of the Netherlands (the region where most of the dense urban centres in the Netherlands are situated; Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague) Both Heartlands hang a red, white and blue flag as well acknowledge similar issues about regionalism, and ideologies of their "second" status. The location of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven aligns in academic integrity and standing the location of the Heartland between the obvious American East and West Coasts, and the tedious art world standards and worship within the art metropolis. Great art and artists stand as strong and as that, no matter the location

and elitism previously established, regionalism is presented as a contemporary identity.

Red States and Blue States which were the infamous “battleground” areas of the 2008 election season are the opening inspirational playground for the exhibition. The Heartland follows the mighty Mississippi River, grabbing the geography from New Orleans to Minneapolis in the north including Omaha, Kansas City, Detroit and Chicago in the middle nether land between. Like the mighty river itself, this exhibition conceptually coils, snakes, and politically informs the viewer, featuring commissioned work, photography, sculpture, painting and performance. It is my belief that both exhibitions offer an interesting overlay on the overlooked, and at times, an emergent style of art production that is neither of a “place”. European or American, citizenship is not the point, the work is strong, experimental and fresh. Featuring emerging and established artists together within broad based thematic curatorial gestures does not always work, however the emphasis on “known artist” Kerry James Marshall, Jose Silva aligns with “under-recognized artist” seems to be at play with Chicago’s, Carol Jackson, Theaster Gates and Kansas City’s, Woop De Doo. We need more of these superheroes! It is my estimation that the work in both Eindhoven and Chicago shares a quiet politic, a high pitched dog whistle of visual poetry and humour which after three viewings in Chicago, I still want more. The Chicago team of Theaster Gates and The Mississippi Monks in

the Eindhoven space produced memorable actions and commentary, the overall show has a slight neo-American feel to it, but at the same time my familiarity of the American artists might have colored my opinions in the lowlands. My only critique of the Chicago exhibition is why exhibit the artists we already are familiar with? Fresh new work, new acquaintances with artist collectives are highlights of the show, and this leaves me wondering what other investigative work by the curatorial team will be revealed in the future.

Does familiarity breed a certain ideology? One familiar element is the sense of urbanity that drives many projects and ideas. For example, my favorite piece was produced by The Tree of Heaven Workshop, a Detroit-based collaborative, inspires an homage with the wood processed from what the Chinese call the *Tree of Heaven*. Chicagoans might be familiar with this broad-leafed sprouting silent beauty, as the plant has been popularly nicknamed with the dubious moniker of "the ghetto palm" as it populates empty lots in urban landscapes. The tree survives where there is little soil and seems to survive as an icon of loss and decay. The framing of this icon frames the often overlooked into a new and fresh approach with humour to our familiar landscape.

As the process of the curatorial team has been good spirited, adventurous and transparent, the notion of the wide open road and horizon ahead, seems to be

an underlying current with the exhibition, is this a Midwestern gentility and Dutch sense of humor? How does the value of a place respond The intimacy of the works exhibited, the understanding that the democratization of art and the role of the artist is explored outside of perceptions of the “mainstream” to realize that art is art, no matter the location of perceptions of art centers – the work ultimately speaks for itself.