

STYLE

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ZEST

DINING OUT

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Section G ★★★



Classics get an update

Robert Hodge's exhibit 'Destroy and Rebuild' infuses European art with hip-hop culture

By Molly Glentzer

Robert Hodge thought the rain would never stop during his 2013 two-month summer residency at Maine's prestigious Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.

He was planning his first solo show at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, making sketches for a series of mixed-media works that involve layers of fused reclaimed paper, print-making, painting, collage and stitching.

But a cloudy mood gripped him: His wife, Nikita McElroy-Hodge, at home in Houston with their 2-year old daughter, was so unhappy Hodge feared the relationship wouldn't survive.

Thinking about Outkast's apologetic song "Ms. Jackson" — and about how fragile a marriage can be — Hodge spray-painted a huge piece of cardboard gray.

so it resembled concrete, and carved some of the lyrics on it: "Forever, forever, ever, ever, forever, ever."

He put the piece outside and left it there until August, when he folded it up and brought the deteriorated remains home.

"Forever Ever" now hangs prominently in the museum's Zilkha Gallery, part of Hodge's show "Destroy and Rebuild." Among 15 works — most of which are inspired by famous black figures or consider the treatment of blacks through the lens of 18th- and 19th-century art — it's intensely personal.

"It's about a fragile thing, and how you keep it together," Hodge said. (He and his wife made it through the rough times.)

The show's largest work, "Jesus Piece," is personal in a cheeky, colorful way, more in tune with Hodge's upbeat personality. It consists of a huge, sparkly stencil of a medallion cut from layers of fused paper on a wall

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ART



Pieces in Robert Hodge's first solo show, "Destroy and Rebuild," at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, clockwise, from top: "Why You All in My Grill?"; "Bert Williams (Tapdance)"; "The Great Electric Show and Dance"; and "All My Sons."

Courtesy Robert Hodge

Exhibit showcases Hodge's conceptual and physical strength

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painted like a kuji sweater (the colorful knit made popular by Bill Cosby).

In hip-hop culture, Hodge said, that medalion-sweater combination has been a status symbol, like a Rolex or a Mercedes.

"This is like saying I've arrived," he said, proud to be among the growing list of Houston artists recognized by the museum.

Museum curator Valerie Cassell Oliver likes the combination of conceptual and physical strength in Hodge's work. She's watched him for about a decade, first appreciating screenprints he created that utilized recorded history. Her interest grew when he began walking the streets of the Third Ward to gather paper detritus, building "canvases" from it and excising loaded text into the canvases — language as loaded as the layers underneath.

"It has a through line," she said.

"His work has always been amazing, but now it's really incredible," said Michael Peranteau, the director of Art League Houston; he's giving Hodge and his long-time collaborator, Phillip Pyle II, a show in November.

Hodge could have followed a different path a decade ago. While he studied at the Pratt Institute and Atlanta College of Art in the early 2000s, some of his friends from the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts were becoming kings of rock and rap.

"I went to school with Robert Glasper (who won a Grammy in 2012). I had friends who became really big producers for Mariah Carey and Usher. I was in a different zone, a poor art student eating peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches," he said.

For about a year, he played beats with a relatively successful band called the Transmissions, but the lifestyle didn't suit him.

"I'm really low-key," he said.

Music still influences his paintings: The series he created for the show superimposes hip-hop references over prints of classical European paintings and drawings. He turned toward those subjects this year after he was short-listed for another honor — London's Young Masters Art Prize, which encourages contemporary

artists to engage with past traditions.

"Part of it was about painting in this really refined, detailed style. I wasn't interested in doing that," he said.

Identifying with beautiful works that incorporated people of color or somehow portrayed historical attitudes about blacks, he quickly paired classical images with text drawn from lyrics and urban slang.

Even when you take hip-hop outside the context of drum lines and bass, he said, "these lyrics start to say things."

The Dutch master Christiaan van Couwenbergh's 17th-century painting "Three Young White Men and a Black Woman," which depicts a rape, brought to mind Lauryn Hill's "Forgive Them Father." Images of Saartjie Baartman, who was taken from Africa to England as a freak-show attraction in the early 19th century, appear under the word "Anaconda," the title of a Nicki Minaj song.

John Singleton Copley's "Watson and the Shark" (exhibited last year in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston show "American Adversaries") is visible underneath the words "Floating Face Down." Thomas Rowlandson's satirical 18th-century print, "Transplantation of Teeth," about the practice of pulling teeth from healthy slaves to replace teeth lost by aristocrats, peeks underneath the message, "Why You All In My Grill?"

One of Hodge's favorites, "All My Sons," pairs John Trumbull's 1780 portrait "George Washington" (which also depicts the first president's slave and valet Billy Lee) with text from Nas' "If I Ruled the World (Imagine That)."

"Billy Lee had a 30-year relationship with George Washington. They were really close. Movies never show you that side; it's always black and white. But these relationships were complicated," Hodge said. Because he also was thinking about the horrors of Hurricane Katrina, Hodge replaced Washington's head with an image of George W. Bush.

Like hip-hop, the works are brash and unapologetic. They're also history lessons, sometimes told with a wink.

Hodge's incorporation of masterworks was "the harmonic convergence" that persuaded Cassell Oliver to introduce him to



Molly Glentzer / Houston Chronicle

Robert Hodge's works are brash and unapologetic. They're also history lessons, sometimes told with a wink.



Max Fields

Hodge's "Jesus Piece" is a site-specific work for his exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. It references how kuji sweaters and medallions of Christ have become status symbols in the hip-hop world.

museum visitors, she said. She likes how the 21st-century hip-hop text pushes against the images that portray blacks as objects of spectacle or oppression.

"It's language that's all about black determination," she said.

Other profound business seeps through Hodge's dense layering of materials.

Hodge first began fusing papers after a leak in his Third Ward studio fused a stack of posters. Now his favorite materials are the scraps of event and movie posters left plastered on poles and buildings. It's time-consuming to create: Each layer must be built slowly and dried before it's painted.

When the poster accident happened, Hodge thought he'd invented something, unaware of the similar process employed by the Los Angeles abstract artist Mark Brad-

ford, or even of the long history of collage.

"You realize nothing is new," Hodge said. But knowing his process belonged to a tradition encouraged him; he kept experimenting.

Hodge likes to say he gives paper new life. The paper also adds an element of life, considering the community history the posters contain —

although it's not obvious. The events advertised are forgotten, and the details are hidden under paint by the time Hodge is done.

He points out the colors beneath the white wash on "Severus."

"These are things I used to try to reproduce, but this paper gave it to me naturally," he said.

"Severus" also hints at Hodge's print-making expertise. He originally created the central figure — depicting a bust of the black emperor of Rome — for lithographs. He often makes prints so he can repeat images, then collage them back together.

Many of the works also contain long, even stitches made with yarn and an upholstery needle — not an easy thing to push through that thick material.

The stitching isn't just an aesthetic touch. He doesn't trust glue to hold

the thick layers of fused paper together. Hodge learned to stitch a few years ago in Nairobi, when he went to Kenya for his Amnesia Project.

"When you have amnesia, it means you have a memory, a recollection of something, and you've lost it. But I had never been to Africa before; so it was like, how do I tell a story about being an African American going to the motherland and reconnecting?" he said.

He started juxtaposing images and sewing them together.

"It felt really human; like when you have a cut in your arm: You sew it up, and it heals properly. I saw stitching as a way to bring things together organically," he said. "And it looked beautiful, so I kept stitching."

Hodge also produces more ephemeral work through the collaborative Everything Records, which he co-founded with Pyle and other Houston artists, musicians and writers.

Last year, they staged "The Beauty Box," a temporary outdoor space for weekly concerts and readings. It was designed to mimic a comfortable living and dining room — a place of normalcy in dilapidated surroundings. They'll reprise "The Beauty Box" at 3705 Lyons in the Fifth Ward in November in conjunction with "Destroy and Rebuild."

Cassell Oliver said it's important to share Hodge's ideas with people who might not visit a museum.

Hodge and Pyle have other projects going, too. They recently released a rap song about being the only black guys in the house when they visit the Menil Collection. And they're having fun with "Presenting... The Black Guys," the performance-based show next month at Art League Houston. It's inspired by their longtime heroes, the Art Guys.

In the meantime, Hodge is thrilled to be occupied fulltime in his studio. The physical labor of his process makes him feel normal, like he puts in an honest day's work, he said.

"It's not just making easy drawings. I like sweating. These paintings are really heavy, and I drag them around."

Perhaps there's a lyric for that.

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'Robert Hodge: Destroy and Rebuild'

When: 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturdays, noon-6 p.m. Sundays, through Jan. 4

Where: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 5216 Montrose

Tickets: Free; 713-284-8250, camh.org