My DIY Retirement
Cressman Center for Visual Arts
100 East Main Street

On view March 12-April 30, 2021

   The Hite Art Institute is excited to announce My DIY Retirement, a solo exhibition by John Begley. Printmaking is a decidedly democratic artform. Particularly in the modern era—and, really, since Walter Benjamin wrote his endlessly-cited 1935 essay on the political stakes of mechanical reproductivity—printmaking has been celebrated for its rejection of "originality" (and all the auratic claims to rarity and value that implies) in favor of accessibility and reproducibility. There is no doubt that John Begley is a printmaker, committed, as he is, to technologies of print and to democratic access to artwork. But the work on view at the Cressman Center for Visual Arts as part of the exhibition My DIY Retirement is democratic in a radically new way.

   My DIY Retirement is comprised of the printed iterations of a series of digital images that Begley has made (once per day) since he retired in 2014. The conceit here is already humorous, since the sheer abundance of artwork belies the life of a man "retired" from making. The artwork that results from this process can be humorous too. Each day Begley makes a novel image using various digital technologies, primarily "Brushes XP." This program is not at all specialized and is available to anyone interested enough to poke around on the internet and experiment (you can find it on the app store). Indeed, poking around on the internet and experimenting would serve as an apt subtitle to Begley's not-quite-retirement. In this regard, his new mode of making tracks with what we might expect retirement to look like today—crafty home making using the tools of modern digital technology. Similarly, the artwork that results from this daily experimentation takes the form of digital hobbyism. Almost every one of the works on view, which include scarves and bed linens, drapery and books, canvasses, Plexi, and aluminum decorations, are made by print-on-demand digital services. These objects are of a kind with those of other creative hobbyists— weekend warriors, proud parents, crafty clothes makers—who turn their favorite (photographed) memories into ready-to-wear or ready-to-read objects via a simple online form (you may have made something like this yourself through Shutterfly or any other online photo-to-book service). Here is where Begley's new mode of printmaking is most radical. Rather than use the complex, specialized, and often expensive tools of professional printmaking, Begley's art is sympathetic to— reconciled to—the kinds of creative making that have proliferated in the digital age. Not just democratic in the fact of its reproducibility, his art is democratic in its methods of reproduction.

   In this way Begley's art is also personal—or, at least, personal in all the ways that our keepsakes are personal. This too is a democratic gesture. These works are materially accessible to us, instantly legible as keepsake. The gesture is at once sympathetic and sly, because while we are disarmed by the familiarity of the things themselves (and what lovely things they are!), Begley's art is able to draw us, sometimes unwittingly, into a nuanced dialogue about the nature of representation and artistic making across media. These are, after all, digital things, made in the world of digital information and brought into the world of the living via a for-profit intermediary. Such for-profit processes are, increasingly, how the world of the living is populated. We are surrounded in our daily lives by screens, and by the tables, facts, print outs, photos and other immaterial objects that began their lives online. For the artist, the processes of digital making is akin to journaling. He makes image-passages every day, tracing his way through the digital world.

The "real world" of his daily life is then made over by the world of the digital, which breaks through into our world at the moment of "print" (from a computer printer or a professional one). This of course means that printmaking, which has forever taught us to imagine a world without an original, is particularly well positioned to help us navigate the interplay between "digital" and "material" worlds.

Begley helps us navigate this interplay, in part, via reference to his predecessors, particularly Sam Gilliam, a graduate of the same University of Louisville department where Begley once taught. Gilliam's draped canvases undermined the flat picture plane of the 2D work of art, bringing the gestural hand of the artist into the sculptural, 3D space of the viewer. Begley nods to such work with his various wall-hung draped prints, which play at the flatness of canvas but ultimately drip down the wall like melting sculptures. In this regard, the work is also evocative of the felt draped pieces of Robert Morris, who similarly sought to undermine the vertical dominance of painting and architecture in favor of the horizontal plane of sculpture. Such vertical-horizontal tension is key in Begley's recent work, which includes a bedspread designed to be encountered in the horizontal. In every case, the image that precipitates the work—the digital image—begins its life in the vertical. The world of the digital, unlike the world of the canvas or the built environment—is the first truly vertical space. Digital images are written in code, which is read top to bottom, and are meant to be viewed on a desktop or laptop screen. We scroll down pages, whether they be word, browser, or Facebook. This is the world of Begley's images, and it only submits to the horizontal when it enters our physical space via the printer. Thus, Begley's work can be understood as a continuation of a modernist project first articulated by Rosalind Krauss and Yves Alain Bois in the exhibition "Formless: A User's Guide," an exhibition that rewrote modernity as a process of horizontalization.

For Begley, such negotiations—such horizontalizations—are not just between the easel and flatbed picture plane, or between painting and sculpture. Most literally in his work the vertical/horizontal negotiation takes place between digital and material worlds. But that does not make it a new negotiation. And indeed, it is really the various "planes" of existence that modernism has forever sought to reconcile. That is, the horizontal plane of the illusionary work and the vertical plane of the canvas; the horizontal extension of architectural space vs the vertical construction of architecture itself. Precedent to his work is easy enough to find as far back as Dada experimentation, particularly Kurt Schwitter's Merzbau, an art/architectural space for living that combines the plane of the artwork with the planes of architecture. That is how I encounter a room of Begley's work too—it comes off the wall into living space because this is art for living. It is for wearing and sleeping and watching. It is a reconciliation, not an antagonism, between the worlds of creative making and the everyday. Which is maybe why the art is so happy. The colors are cheerful, the forms are playful. This art is somehow not threatening even though it does indeed threaten some of our most beloved boundaries (between art and life, fine art and fashion, the digital and the material, the professional and the amateur; work and play). We should be thankful for it. Boundary transgression should be liberating, not threatening. Begley (borrowing from Beuys) reminds us of this fact at every turn.