



AMERICANANANA
SELECTIONS FROM THE COLLECTION OF BROO BLEGEN

ROCHESTER **ART** CENTER

November 16, 2012 – January 6, 2013

Everyone's a critic. Scratch that. Everyone's a critic and a curator. We're not just constantly making little judgments in our heads whenever we look at art—love this, hate that—we're also organizing little shows in our heads all the time.¹

Broc Blegen is not satisfied with leaving the “little shows” in his head. His practice is motivated by a desire to engage long term with particular works by other artists. Owning and living with his favored works is not possible, as such a collection would prove to be both an incredible and impossible financial burden. Interacting with images online or merely reading about the works does not approximate the experience of daily interaction with these objects over time. Hence, a virtual collection could not satisfy, and financing a personal collection of important contemporary art works was not possible. Blegen, as artist, collector, and curator has spent the last several years developing his collection, which consists of accurate replicas of original works by artists such as Ceal Floyer, Félix Gonzalez-Torres, Glen Ligon, Bruce Nauman, Jenny Holzer, or Fiona Banner—all well known and highly valued in the systems of contemporary art and exhibited frequently at highly-respected institutions. The composition of any collection reflects upon the values and preferences of the collector. In this exhibition, viewers have the opportunity to experience Blegen's strategic selection and reproduction of works that resonate with him as an artist. Beyond the impact of the individual works and the interactions among these pieces, Blegen's exhibition invites consideration of this artist's process of selection, production and presentation as commentary on the social, economic, institutional, and political factors that can inspire yet undermine the creation and experience of contemporary art.

“Americana” typically refers to artifacts and objects, or a collection of such objects that relate to the cultural history and heritage of the United States. The objects are imbued with, or symbolic of, American patriotism and nostalgia. Blegen is particularly interested in works that challenge traditional characterizations and mythologies of America. For example Richard Prince, Cady Noland, and Andy Warhol, among many others, are influential for Blegen in their exploration of traditional notions of American society. The current exhibition title *Americananana: Selections from the Collection of Broc Blegen* reflects a curiosity about objects used to represent the American condition. The suffix “nana” suggests a continuation, or as Blegen has described, “a certain reverberation or repetition. While some of the artworks in the exhibition were made in the past, I argue that they maintain relevance in contemporary American society. They are still alive, and reverberating.”²

Blegen does not attempt to depict an unbiased or universal portrayal of contemporary society. Instead, these works are from his personal collection, and therefore represent the concepts and objects that reflect his own history or beliefs regarding the American experience. Although these works were made in the past, Blegen's recreation and representation underscores the importance of these ideas and objects today. Consequently, the artists who originally created these works become Blegen's unsolicited collaborators. The questions evoked by their works are presented again to a new audience, and the works assembled into a group show of sorts that yields to Blegen's control and preferences.

There is perhaps a subversive delight for Blegen in bucking conventional art acquisition and creation practices. The “nana” at the end of *Americananana* can also suggest a teasing or taunting, here perhaps, of the museum establishment. Blegen's exhibition *Coming Out Party: Selections from the Collection of Broc Blegen* was shown at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts as part of their Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program. In this show, Blegen presented his replication of important works addressing sexuality and identity, including references to pieces that were considered controversial. In this exhibition he reminds the viewer of the cultural wars that included contemporary art as ammunition. Blegen has explained that this exhibition was his opportunity to present ideas and objects that he believed would not have been exhibited at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Blegen's practice of careful selection, recreation and re-presentation of works not previously shown together provides a circumnavigation of traditional art practices, freeing him from the biases of institutions and the art marketplace.

Blegen's work also invites consideration of the cost and value of contemporary art. Although he is able to recreate works for a fraction of the expense of buying the original, his works are not inexpensive imitations. Instead, the emphasis is on pulling forward the objects that Blegen finds to be compelling examples of his personal views on the American condition. In his exhibition for the Rochester Art Center, Blegen presents works that reflect a timely theme of politics and protest. Consider his piece *Ceal Floyer, Secret, 2009/2012*. This piece is a replica of Ceal Floyer's 2009 sculpture *Secret* which consists of two megaphones adhered to each other at the bell end. Megaphones are useful for loud one-way communication from one person to a crowd, and consequently can symbolize aggressive language used by individuals to protest, or by authorities attempting to subdue such protest. However, in this work the two megaphones are quiet with the communicating

end of the megaphone interrupted by the communicating end of the other. Both parties are projecting sounds, with no evidence of listening or understanding, and the opposing positions of the megaphones suggests opposing viewpoints. With this positioning, however, the shouting is silenced or equaled and the intended communication thwarted. A secret is typically a sensitive and personal truth, shared through quiet, hushed words. Consequently, the physical positioning of the two megaphones and the title of the work complicates our understanding of how beliefs and personal truths are communicated, and questions the effectiveness of a bullhorn approach. Blegen's creation of this work for an exhibition taking place in 2012 facilitates the reverberation of this message over time.

Another work included in the exhibition is *Shannon Ebner, Not Equal, 2009/2012*. This sculpture presents the viewer with the traditional mathematic not equal sign, positioned on the floor and supported by the gallery wall. This symbol, which is easily understood through language and known to many, becomes more conceptually intricate when addressing the representative power of a singular object. Just as one can use established symbols to confront the very system from which they originated or support, Ebner attempts to rationalize and offer aesthetic solutions to the blurred territory surrounding representation. Ebner explains:

Images point to what is in the world; that is the problem with representation. I think that is why there has been so much activity around abstraction — it offers one possible way around the problem of pictures. I am looking for a way out of the problems of representation but I am not satisfied to leave the world of representation all together. I am somehow looking to stay in the world of depictive images by simply asking for more from them through developing a different system, idea or model of how they might function.³

The artwork in *Americananana: Selections from the Collection of Broc Blegen* create a personal portrait of Blegen's views on political and ideological conflict and protest as part of the American condition. These works, along with his creation process, underscore the enduring role of contemporary art in prompting consideration of ourselves and our society. By presenting selections from his own collection, Blegen takes an active role in freeing important concepts and objects from their history and location, and propels them into the future where their impact can continue to resonate. Politics and biases certainly also exist within arts institutions, and there are powerful social and economic forces that impact the availability and perceived value of art. However, Blegen is building his own collection, and there may be a bit of a subversive jab in that. Na na na na na.

Kris Douglas, Chief Curator, Rochester Art Center

¹ O' Sullivan, M. (2006, August 11). *Artist as Curator: Another Perspective*. Washington Post.

² In communication with the author, November 8, 2012.

³ Ebner, S. (2009). Press release, *Invisible Language Workshop – Wallspace Gallery*. Retrieved from www.wallspacegallery.com/MEDIA/00899.pdf

artist biography

Broc Blegen received his BFA from the University of Minnesota in 2011. His work has been exhibited at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN; University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, and Portland State University, Portland, OR, amongst other venues. Blegen was co-founder and co-director of 1419, an interdisciplinary art space and collective in Minneapolis (2009 – 2011).

rochester art center 3rd floor emerging artist series

Rochester Art Center continually strives to engage community members of all ages in the creation, contemplation, and appreciation of the visual arts. As a non-collecting institution, the Art Center focuses its efforts on presenting temporary exhibitions throughout the year featuring established local, national and international artists, as well as emerging artists from diverse backgrounds working in a variety of media.

In 2004, Rochester Art Center initiated the *3rd Floor Emerging Artist Series*—an exhibition program dedicated to promising young artists working in the state of Minnesota. Since its inception, the series has reflected shifting trends in contemporary artistic practice and production, and has helped to facilitate the creation of new bodies of work in a variety of media including photography, installation, sound, painting, drawing, sculpture and film. Now in its eighth year, the *3rd Floor Emerging Artist Series* continues to support emerging artists and to provide a dedicated forum for the exhibition of new work.



Cady Noland, *Awning Blank*, 1990/2012
Aluminum
24 x 55 x 16 inches



Ceal Floyer, *Secret*, 2009/2012
Two megaphones
18 x 6 x 6 inches



Shannon Ebner, *Not Equal*, 2009/2012
Plywood, wood glue and enamel paint
13 x 17.75 inches

All photos courtesy of Broc Blegen

cover image:

Fiona Banner, *Black Bunting*, 2001/2012
Polyester
Dimensions variable

jerome foundation The 3rd Floor Emerging Artist Series is made possible through funding by The Jerome Foundation.