

“Coming Out Party: Selections from the Collection of Broc Blegen”

BY CHRISTOPHER ATKINS

Dad! Tom Cruise won't come out of the closet!

—Stan, from an episode of *South Park*

I would prefer not to.

—Bartleby, from Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivner*

ALL OF THE ARTWORKS IN “COMING OUT PARTY” are copies of important works of art by well-established contemporary artists, replicated in exacting detail by local artist Broc Blegen and hired fabricators. Blegen has chosen and researched artworks he can accurately duplicate, recreating the form and experience of each original piece. He selects these works for their conceptual content and context, focusing, in this exhibition, on issues of gender, sexuality, and identity politics.

This kind of presentation, in which a creative gesture puts contemporary issues into high relief, appeals to Blegen. He is interested in the economics of art and art-making, and considers the objects he has created his personal art collection. Like Bartleby in Herman Melville's short story, *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, Blegen puts forth a kind of resistance; in this case to the expectations that come with an art exhibition. On the one hand, “Coming Out Party” is a perfect example of a traditional exhibition because it includes new work by Blegen. But on the other, it is nontraditional because his copies so closely resemble the original works of other artists.

He has built his art collection for a fraction of the cost of buying originals through galleries or on the secondary market. He loves the original works and gives full credit to their makers, but as an exhibited collection, his duplicates carry an incisive commentary on the impact of the market on art. The works he has chosen to replicate already have accumulated significant historical and monetary value and, to some extent, that knowledge affects the way viewers experience them.

If Blegen can make copies that very closely resemble these important pieces, it begs the question: What do collectors get when they pay thousands, or even millions of dollars for an identical object? Those who can afford to collect originals would say there is an enormous amount of cultural value, investment potential, and power that comes with owning an original work of art by a famous artist. But Blegen suggests other values are important and wants to create a parallel market, allowing collectors of lesser means to live with compelling objects, too. The re-fabricated works in Blegen's collection allow viewers to return to experiencing the power of art without the distraction of market value and historical cachet.

In “Coming Out Party,” Blegen uses creative strategies to invoke ghosts from the so-called “culture wars” of the 1990s, during which political commentator Pat Buchanan famously pitted progressives against traditionalists. Blegen also employs different forms of truth telling, such as making self-deprecating jokes, to goad viewers into thinking about issues of sexual identity and disclosure.

One of the central works in the exhibition is Blegen's re-creation of Glenn Ligon's *Red Portfolio* of 1993. Ligon created this work as a direct comment on the culture wars, exemplified by the federal obscenity charges leveled at the Cincinnati Art Center (CAC) and its director, Dennis Barrie, for hosting Robert Mapplethorpe's “Perfect Moment” exhibition in 1990. Ligon's portfolio contains nine black-and-white photographic prints of text written by the Christian Coalition in its attempt to influence the trial and attack the National Endowment for the Arts for funding controversial

A photo of a man's arm (up to the forearm) in another man's rectum.

art. The Christian Coalition wrote one-line descriptions of the photographs, such as “A close-up of a man with his pinkie finger inserted in his penis,” and distributed them by direct mail in red envelopes labeled “TAXPAYER FUNDED” and “Too Vulgar to Print,” along with a letter of support by the conservative religious leader Rev. Pat Robertson. The Christian Coalition texts summarized what it considered to be Mapplethorpe's most objectionable photographs but, in doing so, reproduced and distributed the very material they were attempting to censor. Photo #7 was described as “A photo of naked children in bed with a naked man,” which was a fabrication (no such image was ever photographed by Mapplethorpe).¹

These captions, via Ligon and now Blegen, are ironic stand-ins for Mapplethorpe's work. Even though the CAC and Barrie were acquitted, these Christian Coalition mailings

A photo showing one man holding another man's genitals.

created massive negative publicity against the artist, the museum, and its director, accusing them of pornography in their attempt to prove the exhibition unworthy of support from the United States government. In recreating Ligon's original photographs, Blegen goes one step further to remind us that conflicts over prejudice and free speech continue today and will carry over into the future.

Blegen is also interested in the work of Richard Prince, an artist who has worked in a variety of mediums but is particularly well known for his “one-liner” paintings of the 1990s. The painting *Untitled*, 1995, which Blegen has repainted for this exhibition, reads “My parents kept me in a closet for years. Until I was fifteen I thought I was a suit.”² Jokes tend to appear out of nowhere, uncredited, going through so many retellings and mutations that the original joke is sometimes lost. But most good jokes provide a way

A photo of a man urinating in another man's mouth.

of sublimating pain. Using the familiar trope of the closet, with its implied depth and darkness, Blegen's painting also refers to “coming out” in terms of one's sexual identity. As is the case with the remake of the Ligon, and all the works in the installation, Blegen reiterates texts and artworks with a double purpose. Not only does he invite the viewer to re-examine political and social issues that made headlines in the 1970s through the 1990s, but also he encourages us to remember that these issues remain relevant today.

Blegen owns all the works in his “Coming Out Party” exhibition, but in a way that sidesteps the traditional means of acquiring art. His collection is a rebuff to the commercialization and commodification of art, while at the same time providing a fresh consideration of important ideas, images, and histories. His works aren't

Glenn Ligon, Red Portfolio, 1993/2012, 3 of 9 gelatin silver prints, 20 x 16 inches (24 x 20 inches framed)

Front: *Bruce Nauman, Run From Fear Fun From Rear*, 1972/2012, yellow and pink neon tubing with glass tubing suspension frames, two parts, each 8 x 46 x 2¼ inches

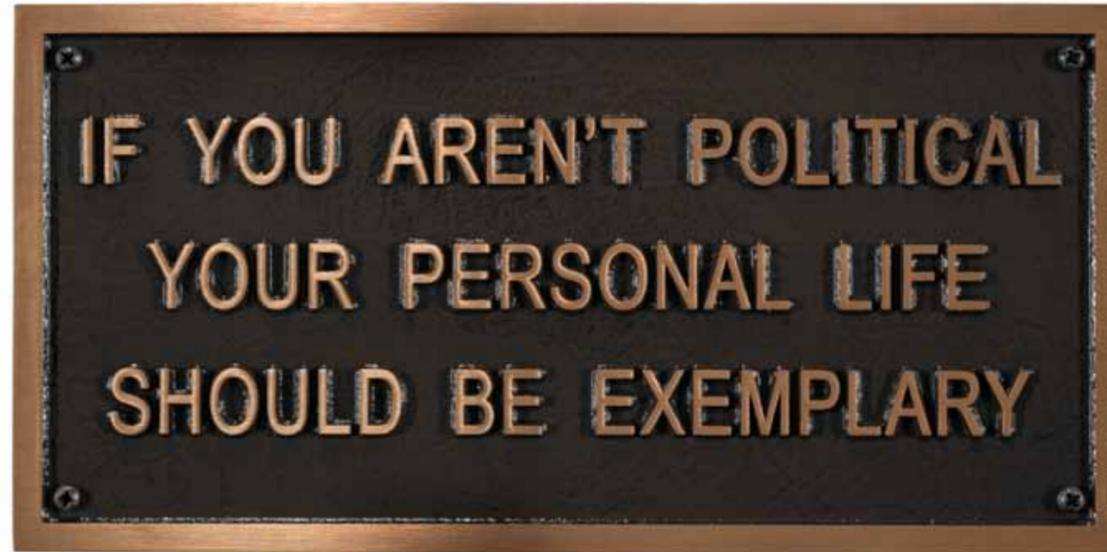
Flap: *Jonathan Horowitz, Official Vatican Portrait of Pope Benedict XVI Torn in Half (after Sinead O'Connor)*, 2008/2012, framed C-print, 20¾ x 17 inches

forgeries (they don't attempt to take the place of the original), yet they possess a refreshing sense of homage. They don't steal the auras of the originals but, rather, attempt to restore them.

1. For a detailed description of the trial see Richard Meyer's *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth Century Art*.
2. Richard Prince's *Untitled*, 1995, was sold at auction for \$1,202,500 on November 10, 2010.

Christopher Atkins is the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program (MAEP) coordinator.

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Jenny Holzer, *If You Aren't Political Your Personal Life Should Be Exemplary*, 1998/2012, bronze plaque, 5 x 10 inches

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Broc Blegen

AND

Remnants and Ruminations

Binod Shrestha

October 19–December 30, 2012

Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program
Galleries

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Thursday, October 18, at 7 p.m.

Artists' Talks

Thursday, November 15, at 7 p.m.

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Thursday, December 20, at 7 p.m.

ALL EVENTS ARE FREE, OPEN TO THE PUBLIC.

For more information about the artists,
this exhibition, and MAEP, visit:

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