

work is to assert the richness and autonomy of drawing, moving from early, exploratory but more focused studies (as in detailed views of Hercules and two of his adversaries, Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons and the giant Antaeus) to final mixed-media realizations which push a full tonal range, enhanced by a sense of dramatic chiaroscuro. Hodges makes intuitive use of traces or washes of color which, far from seeming like gratuitous inclusions, add to the sense of drama. The artist also uses an expanded scale and taut composition as physical counterparts to the larger-than-life nature of these violent exploits.

Hodges makes vital decisions about where to position the viewer in relation to the drama captured in Vincenzo's sculpture. Preliminary studies suggest an exploration of various angles and viewing distances; by the time the artist has begun his final drawing, we have been drawn inexorably into the circle of conflict, no longer standing apart. In *Ercole e*

Ippolita, for example, the Amazon queen attempts to shield herself from Hercules, her raised arm a poignant echo of his impending blow. A similar and incongruous intimacy is found in *Ercole e il Centauro*, where the artist has structured an extreme foreshortened view in a spatial hierarchy of victory and defeat.

To a considerable extent, Hodges follows in a time-honored tradition of drawing (quite literally) from the art of the past in using Vincenzo's sculpture as a source of inspiration. These twenty-first century drawings are closely aligned with their sixteenth century models in the celebration of the human body as a locus of eroticized power, perpetual struggle and ultimate nobility. In works such as *Ercole e il Cinghiale* the link to the still marble form is more evident. But

Hodges is also capable of uncoupling sculpture and drawing in a sense that is liberating to both. In *Ercole e Anteo*, with two figures locked in close combat, marble is transformed into flesh, and myth becomes metaphor.

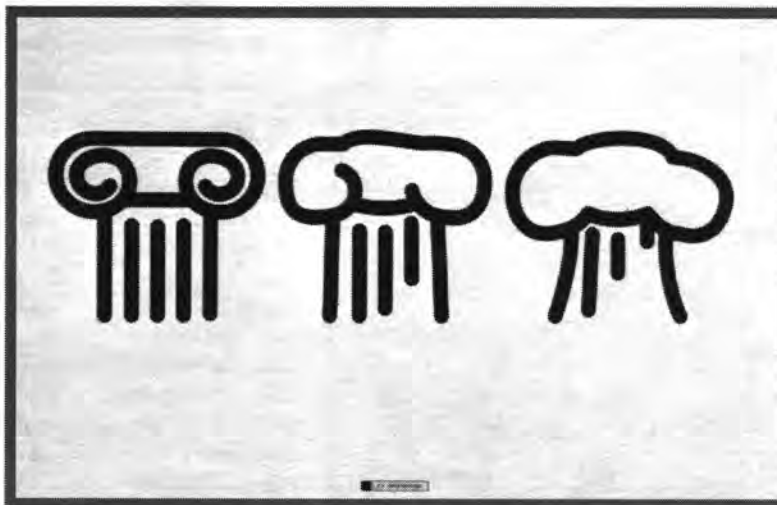
—Marcia Morse

Snowden Hodges:
Florence and the Labors of Hercules closes June 16 at the Honolulu Academy of Arts, 900 S. Beretania St., Honolulu.

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Designs in *Universal Warning Sign: Yucca Mountain*, at the Marjorie Barrick Museum, University of Nevada, Las Vegas: (above) Ashok Sukumaran, below: Jessica Latta (background), Goil Amornvivat and Thomas Morbitzer (foreground).



Designs in *Universal Warning Sign: Yucca Mountain*, at the Marjorie Barrick Museum, University of Nevada, Las Vegas: (above) Lex Drewinski; (below) Goil Amornvivat and Thomas Morbitzer, *fields of asphodel*.



Nevada

'Universal Warning Sign' at UNLV's Barrick Museum

It was with the sobering reminder of the daunting task of making any kind of sign that might function as an effective deterrent for the full life span of radioactive waste that Joshua Abbey put out a call to artists, architects and designers to create a warning sign appropriate for Yucca Mountain, the site of a proposed nuclear waste depository. Abbey is the director of the Desert Space Foundation, a Nevada organization that uses the fine and performing

arts as a channel for ecological change. The winning designs were exhibited at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas's Marjorie Barrick Museum, together with weathered and decaying nuclear waste site signs and artifacts brought together by Abbey.

The concept of this exhibit leaves the purely artistic realm of

images and objects and approaches didacticism by pointing out the urgency involved in making such a selection. The U.S. Department of Energy's plan is to place a simple lettered and illustrated sign above the storage area and leave it there, hoping that archaeologists and laypersons 10,000 years from now will understand the pictograph and heed its warning. The exhibition's response to this duck-and-cover naïveté is to display a series of antiquated nuclear waste warning signs produced as early as 1958. Already their surfaces are tarnished, their immediacy compromised. Given that advanced-degree archaeologists struggle to interpret the meanings of Neolithic objects and pictographs, it should come as no surprise that none of the signs in this exhibit, whether dated or recent, are actually viable. Image and text can always be misconstrued over time, rendering them irrelevant.

It is for this reason that some of the entries have chosen to forego language altogether. Ashok

Sukumaran took "Best of Show" for his design of a series of genetically engineered bright blue yucca plants to be placed just above the storage site, functioning as a natural and reasonably permanent alarm signal for onlookers. Fabian Winkler's proposal utilizes local elements unique to Yucca Mountain, i.e., the mountainous area, extreme sunlight and risk of earthquakes. He suggests that reflectors be used to increase heat throughout the area of containment, as well as an earthquake simulator akin to the one used in the film *Dune*. As soon as Winkler introduces purely cinematic elements such as the aforementioned movie reference, however, the intent of the piece becomes clear.

Many also make reference to the accomplishments of the ancients, as exemplified in Lex Drewinski's entry, one of several to appear in the final exhibit. It depicts the visual transition

between an ionic capital and an atomic cloud, with the top of the capital gradually morphing into the mushroom-like mass of gas that typically surrounds a nuclear explosion, a now-familiar image due to televised broadcasts of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. An eerily Lichtenstein-esque cartoon, it reduces the decline of humanity to street-sign-style iconography. By decontextualizing both images, Drewinski calls attention to the double-edged sword of human progress; seeing the measure of man's greatness juxtaposed with the measure of his evil gives the viewer pause, wondering how linear our progress has actually been during the last three thousand years.

Yulia Hanansen literally expands upon the idea of a universal nuclear waste warning by expanding the pictograph itself. Her proposal mandates the use of the pictograph on a large scale—a triple-pyramid-shaped structure that can be entered by any onlookers. The further one travels into the pyramids, the taller the walls become, the colors increasing in intensity. At the center of the structure viewers find themselves surrounded by shades of bright white and yellow, indicating that they are edging progressively closer to something dangerous. In this way the piece mirrors the edging of humanity to an inevitable collapse of the nuclear technology upon which we have all become so dependent.

Viewing the show, one is overcome with discomfort due to the combination of absurd and viable entries, wondering why they should have to exist at all. These warning signs represent a legacy that seems unworthy of any kind of aesthetic considerations ... but that's precisely the point. Working well as a unified whole, the pieces speak of the way this country consistently chooses the convenience of affordable energy over the considerable risk of the waste that will follow. The art community has been one of few groups to speak out on the issue, perhaps due in part to widespread preoccupation with the recent terrorist attacks, which have far eclipsed nuclear waste as the emblem of capitalism's Achilles' heel.

—Katherine Anania

Universal Warning Sign: Yucca Mountain closed in March at the Marjorie Barrick Museum, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

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Jay Backstrand, (above) *Oskar Had a Tin Drum*, 2001, mixed media, 90" x 181" x 11-3/4"; (below) *The Hare and the Hat*, 2001, mixed media, 91-1/2" x 138-7/8"; at Laura Russo Gallery, Portland.

Oregon

Jay Backstrand at Laura Russo Gallery

Now in the sixth decade of life, Jay Backstrand has long pursued a difficult and elusive Muse.

He is a quiet man whose work initiates much discussion, but rarely with his participation. His infrequent shows have always been evidence of a technical ability in both two- and three-dimensional works. Instead of opting for easy success, however, he has chosen to dig deep within himself for significant ideas, the rationales that generate them, and the emotions in which they are rooted. When all this is filtered through his highly intellectual approach to painting, the results are beautiful to see and perplexing to read. But no matter how abstruse the content, the craftsmanship and formal polish are unmistakable.

In past work Backstrand has probed the psychic contradictions, memory lacunae, denials and limitations that affect—and distort—our perceptions of the world. For this year's show, featuring huge paintings supplemented by many smaller ones, he produced several groups of work, each crisply painted in a clear, brushless appearance more often found in commercial art. The largest group deals with the question of painting's function, what it does for both the artist and the viewer. It's a continuation of his long-standing dialogue between the materiality of painting and its underlying philosophical questions. Another group explores various representations of the parallel and contradictory existence of evil and beauty.

Although all the paintings draw on art history, some simply pay homage to Backstrand's own heritage as an American artist steeped in the art of Europe. References to specific artists and artworks are more than usually obvious in *The Hare and the Hat*. Joseph Beuys and Albrecht Dürer share honors in this spectacularly large painting. Its two parts are dominated by a depiction of Beuys's head in the left section and Dürer's drawing of a hare, an animal important to both, in the right. Beuys's ever-pre-

sent felt hat isn't in its usual place on his head, but has become a sculpture, bronzed and mounted above the hare. These two main images are surrounded by small iconic images relating to the two artists. A striking detail is Beuys's intensely blue eye socket which offers a view into a room containing only a ladder.

Another of the outsize paintings, *Oskar Had a Tin Drum*, features a Fragonard painting, *The Bathers*, in the left section, a full figure of Hitler in the right, and between them, mounted on a narrow band of black, a vertical line of small, three-dimensional iconic figures in a sitting position, probably suggesting everyman. Like all of Backstrand's paintings, this one features layered and overlapping images. The Fragonard illustration is encircled by a serpent on either side. Behind Hitler stand a saluting soldier and a line drawing of a figure inspired by the Günter Grass novel, holding a tin drum. The figures stand against a background consisting of rows and rows of numbers and a smoke stack rising above a dark building. A huge butterfly, often a symbol for the fragility of life, is superimposed on the three figures. A thin blue line, which I take to mark Backstrand's presence, curves horizontally over the left section and vertically over the right. Rather than presenting information sequentially, Backstrand prefers to place it all in the same space so that we seem to look through one image to another, taking in everything at once. The vivid colors on the side panels—shades of blue, red and yellow along with some of their complementary colors—are separated and accentuated by the middle black section, which works to heighten the drama.

A smaller version of *Oskar Had a Tin Drum* looks not nearly as finished as the large one. Like several other paintings of its size that were nearly identical to their enormous counterparts, it became a study after Backstrand decided that the amount of information he wanted to include required a much larger format.

Probably the most personal pieces were those in the series *Sleight of Hand*, based on the artist's musings about art's function. In these paintings the artist assumes the role of a magician, one who creates illusions and uses tricks of the trade to fool his audience. In *Sleight of Hand #3*, the left panel, in green, features a section of the artist's upper body with his elbow resting on a ledge occupying a lower foreground section. Superimposed on his upraised hand is a transparent contour drawing in orange of the Greek sculpture *Nike of Samothrace*. Overlaid on his neck and chin another line drawing, a geometrically divided rectangle, suggests the artist's measuring techniques. The panel on the right is an upended simulation of George Caleb Bingham's *Fur Traders on the Missouri* that has a grid of red dots

