

Printed from the Independent Weekly website: localhost

POSTED ON AUGUST 26, 2009:

Amanda Barr's new age of *Public Healing* at Golden Belt

We are stardust

By Amy White

Amanda Barr: *Public Healing* Golden Belt, Building 3, Room 100 Through Oct. 11

I recently met someone who claims to have been at Woodstock. She was 15 at the time, never got very close to the stage because she didn't like crowds. Her primary takeaway from the experience: "It was good to see The Tribe."

The zeitgeist of The Tribe may not have been born at Woodstock, but it certainly crystalized in that moment and has endured as a subset of American cultural mythology ever since. If one were to diagram and track the ways in which tribal themes have made their way into our collective unconscious, surely a dotted line would lead directly from Woodstock to the artwork of Amanda Barr.

Public Healing is Barr's current offering, having opened just in time for Woodstock's 40-year anniversary. The show, mounted at Golden Belt's Room 100 in Durham as the last show by Branch Gallery, is a balancing act of the sacred and the absurd, a compendium of works that shape-shift between artifact and artifice, whimsical craft and ritual object. Barr announces the show with a handmade banner bearing the words "Public Healing" in multicolored fabrics, a loose geometry in the guise of hippie patchwork in gingham, metallics and bright colors.

The show courses with a tension between the real and the fake. "Saint Bun," an unapologetic homage to Native American tribal art, is a wall hanging of raw canvas framed by white synthetic hair that drapes across the top edge and falls along each side. White feathers with Day-Glo pink and yellow tips symmetrically embellish the edges of the work, and two fake hamburger buns punctuate the upper corners. An appliqué of striped denim creates a spare mandala form in the center of the composition. "Saint Bun" is a giddy contradiction of formal clarity and New Age handicraft. Despite its goofiness (fake buns?! fake hair?!), the piece manages to convey a sense of the sacred.

"Owlguin Totem" is a stack of white papier-mâché owls of graduated size that form a totemic sculpture, with a patchwork skirt of cheap fabrics that encircles the base. The stylized owl figures (Barr's spirit



[Click for larger image](#) • "Shaman Blanket" (2009)
Photo by D.L. Anderson

animal, perhaps?) are reminiscent of 1970s craft. "Flesh Rocks" consists of a collection of fabricated stone forms done in ceramic and plaster that rests on the floor. The "rocks" are painted in a spectrum of flesh tones (in media that includes, oddly, oil paint and shoe polish). In her artist's statement Barr describes these rock forms as clusters of human social groupings. It's a bit of a stretch to construe these lumpy, inert forms in anthropomorphic terms, but it's somehow endearing that viewers are asked to do so.

"Healing" is a minimalist wall hanging made of raw canvas with a curvilinear matrix of sewn seams that cause the fabric's surface to buckle. The lines of the seams are painted roughly with white primer. A sort of nest made of tangled raffia sits on the floor below, upon which float peacock feathers and fake black flowers. The overall gestalt of the work is one of wreckage and repair. "Healing" and a similar work, "Nestled," which includes a clump of fur and slight strips of appliquéd denim, feel thematically similar. Despite their austerity, they manage to deliver Barr's signature blend of humor and sincerity of intention.

A second, smaller room houses Barr's installation, "Shaman Blanket," a makeshift shrine in the form of a multicolored blanket populated with an array of ritual offerings: fresh flowers, animal skin, drums, whistles, bells, bundles of sage, feathers, candles, stones, crystals, a toy guitar, a large fake lemon, an ear of fake white plastic corn, a kachina doll, rocks—or rock-like objects—painted white and decorated with colorful crystal-shaped insignia, rubber snakes, a goofy necklace strung with rainbow beads, shells and fake lips, a massive pencil, two cigarettes (that may be fake). Barr refuses to differentiate between the sanctimonious and the ridiculous. She ups the ante by bringing her idiosyncratic brand of spirituality into the confines of the gallery space as works of art. "Shaman Blanket" is an uncompromising work that exists as both art and ritual, comic and sacred, giving equal weight to its real and fake components. The work is accompanied by a video entitled "Shaman," which features Barr in shamanistic regalia, wearing an owl mask. The video alternates between images of Barr performing a ritual dance and black-and-white footage of desert landscapes, birds and close-ups of owls.

Sharing space with "Shaman Blanket" is "Spiritualized," a black-painted plaster head that seems to float in space. It's perched atop a metal rod, with a quartz crystal implanted in the crown. The crystal glows different colors—blue, red, green, violet—an overt depiction of cosmic awareness. At the base of this sculpture is an industrial electrical unit set on a dirty block of wood. A heavy gray plastic cord snakes into the electrical socket in the wall. Rather than aiming to minimize or hide the technology of her sculpture, Barr allows these elements to carry as much visual impact as the glowing head. This scans as a kind of honesty on Barr's part, as if she wishes to assure her viewers that her work contains no illusion or artifice. Even when she displays fake things, there is never any question about their fakeness, which supports a sense of transparency in the work. Barr seeks to create a bond of trust between her work and the viewer.

Public Healing is an absurd invocation and an invocation of the absurd that never abandons a core of genuine intention rooted in tribal healing practices. At the opening reception of *Public Healing* last Friday, Barr had a body-double wear her shaman costume and perform ritual tasks, such as lighting candles, burning incense and dancing against the video projection.

Barr has kindred spirits in the art world, fellow travelers such as the Reverend Ethan Acres and his Church of the Holy Fool, the hybrid art/music performers Lucky Dragons and Canada's Jason de Haan (seen last year at Lump Gallery in Raleigh). Barr also resonates with outsider artists like Howard Finster. Her outsider qualities appear to be intentional, self-imposed, self-conscious, as she walks a line between insider and outsider, real and fake, absurd and sublime. Barr's *Public Healing* brings a whole new meaning to the term "counterculture."

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