

Published: Feb 08, 2009 07:18 AM

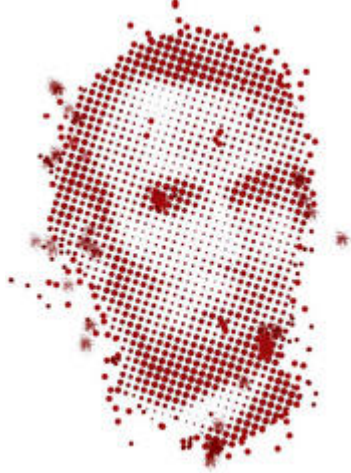


Photo courtesy of Severn Eaton

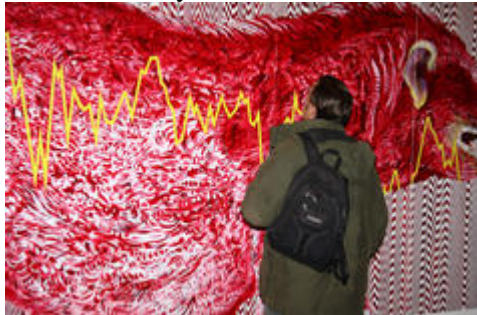


Photo courtesy of Kris Stanley

'Bailout' tackles economy

By Michele Natale, Correspondent [Comment on this story](#)

DURHAM - A group of 26 artists rallied around the call for entries for the "Bailout Biennial," a timely commentary on global economic woes, and the results are displayed on the third floor of Building 2 in the newly developed Golden Belt project.

The space, all arched windows, exposed bricks and beams, wooden floors and repeating columns, is familiar in type to turn-of-the-century warehouse architecture. It is an admirable setting for art presented in traditional frames, found-object tableaux and more adventurous offerings scattered at floor level or hung from the ceiling. Precedents for this type of show in recent memory are the multi-artist LOOM events organized a few years back at the Chatham Mills in Pittsboro.

The artists' call to arms was rapid, and results vary, from hastily conceived and executed in throwaway materials, to more evolved productions created specifically for the show, to relevant earlier works by particular artists. Several works in the show date from more than a decade ago. The final mix is enough to intellectually engage viewers in the politics of the day, an encouraging reminder that there are still artists out there who call attention to society's issues in time-honored tradition.

That said, "Bailout Biennial" hits marks high and low. There are artists who treat the subject with cynical humor, such as Joshua Bienko, using advertising formats to equate recent financial excesses with our culture's obsession with unnaturally distorted bodies.

Julie Thompson sets up a voting booth, offers free take-home buttons printed with the amount the bailout will cost each American citizen and offers a comment forum asking the question, "What does \$2,296.84 mean to you?" Some have responded that it is a significant portion of their annual paycheck, tuition, or health care cost, highlighting the actual cost in touchingly human terms.

"Futures," Andrew Johnson's monumental pig, painted in roiling strokes of magenta and white paint, is the backdrop for a jagged, uncontrollable stock graph, held at one end by a putto who has been turned upside down trying to hold onto that yellow line. These figures are placed on top of a vibrating, geometric op art background that further agitates the senses. Painted over the past four years in five panels measuring 15 feet long and more than 7 feet high, this work is a major statement in terms of execution and content.

Other works are more conceptual, such as Geoffrey Owen Miller's "Babylon," a set of 18 altered dollar bills that have a stamped manifesto on one side and the face of George W. Bush superimposed over that of Washington on the other. Referencing the recent Republican candidate, Hiroshi Sunairi's "Maverick – Long Lost and Forgotten (After John McCain)" consists of three large, neatly lettered pieces of paper, two presented crumpled on the floor, one half-heartedly pinned by a corner onto the wall, refuse from a failed campaign.

Becca Albee simply frames a copy of the AIG invoice summary of Oct. 3, 2008, from the St. Regis Resort in Dana Point, Calif., reminding us that while their companies were on the brink of economic collapse, bigwigs were enjoying a resort vacation that cost more than \$442,000.

Taking inspiration from Chuck Close, dot-matrix portraits of the presidents whose visages are printed on money were made by Severn Eaton, who substituted blood for pigment, according to the exhibition checklist.

Lauren Frances Adams, whose thoughtful and politically engaged work has been seen before in "Crosscurrents" at the N.C. Museum of Art, weighs in with a witty set of untitled works from her "Communist and Capitalist Plate Series" that superimposes Soviet realist imagery to critique the American way.

One of the show's most compelling moments is experienced in an unexpected alcove, where Andrew Johnson has fashioned a baseball bat covered in "eyes of vertebrata." To inspect the bat,

suspended from the ceiling like the sword of Damocles, one has to enter the alcove, which quickly becomes a vertiginous experience as the uneven concrete floor – with holes bored through to the floor below – is revealed. Here, the resonance of space and artwork is truly memorable, highlighting the great potential of the venue.

At least one artist in the show, Clare Britt, seems to be looking for the silver lining amid this doom. She contributes a modestly scaled photographic series she calls "Found Rainbow" that documents unexpected displays of prismatic light and even a found drawing.

Closing out the show, Susan Mullally's photographic series, "What I Keep," chronicles the plight of the homeless, unemployed and disabled, while "Bailout" co-organizer Jeff Waites' "Foliage" offers a penny-studded life-jacket, defying its buoyant function to become a kind of body armor.

Artwork within the show is unmarked, so it's necessary to navigate with checklist in hand. While this is occasionally inconvenient, the strategy to force careful attention upon each offering succeeds.

"Bailout Biennial" functions as a much-needed visual and conceptual rant against business as usual.

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BAILOUT BIENNIAL

Where: Golden Belt, 807 E. Main St., Durham

When: Through March 15

Contact: 967-7700 or www.goldenbeltarts.com

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