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Who the Hell Do We Think We Are? The Luminary's New Exhibits Examine History, Society, and Personal Identity

By Daniel Stumeier June 23, 2015 2:14 PM

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The Luminary's two new exhibits, "A New Use of the Self" and Jessica Harvey's "Future Great City of the World" reconsider roles of identity and society, and how they influence each other. Taking its title from the writings of the philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, "A New Use of the Self" features artists who draw attention from themselves, redefining identities through the lens of society. In her solo exhibit, "Future Great City of the World," the Luminary's recent artist-in-residence, Harvey combines photography, archival material, and sculptural elements, resulting in a mystifying curation of images and signifiers that examine how the St. Louis-based secret society, Veiled Prophet Organization, has impacted the city's past and present.

Harvey intersperses original photographs with those selected from the Missouri History Museum. The

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archival prints depict ceremonial images of the VP Organization. Formed 137 years ago by white elites, the group constructed elaborate rituals and myths, using pageantry to emphasize existing power structures and reinforce their values on working class citizens—all under the innocuous guise of anonymity. As part of an annual ball, a panel chooses a person to play the role of the Veiled Prophet. Dressed in ornate robes and veil, the unidentified person oversees the dance and chooses the Queen of Love and Beauty from an exclusive list of attendees. Only two Prophets have had their identities known, and only one was revealed willingly by the organization. In 1972, in a guerrilla protest action organized by local activist Percy Green, Gena Scott slid down a power cable and unmasked the Prophet, revealing him to be the then-executive vice-president of Monsanto, Tom K. Smith. Scott's car was later bombed, and her house was vandalized.

Harvey's photographs depict St. Louis landmarks that operate in a similar fashion as the VP Organization's ceremonies. *Sunset in Forest Park* (looking south of Delmar Blvd., looking north of Delmar Blvd.) is comprised of two skylscapes. The title mentions Delmar, the economic and racial dividing line in St. Louis (which often referred to as "the Delmar Divide"). The photos are nearly identical, but the title, as well as how they are displayed—the frames are butted together in a corner with a swath of crushed velvet dangling licentiously where they meet—suggest latent tensions. Another photograph, *Origin Story* depicts an altered image of the Gateway Arch. The monument reflects itself, and two arches form an endless loop that levitates idol-like in ambiguous space. The Gateway Arch and Forest Park are both manufactured attractions whose splendor, like that of the VP Organization, can often conveniently distract us from inequities that pervade St. Louis.

"A New Use of the Self" considers how social and political powers affect individuals, asserting that transformation is possible through an emptying of identity. In their mixed media installation, *Troika*, three Slovenian artists—all named Janez Janša—reference how they changed their names to that of the former Prime Minister of Slovenia. A large image of the Slovenian flag is painted directly onto a wall, and a small grid of the artists' ID and credit cards show their original and altered names. On the floor, a flat panel TV lies face up. A looped video plays in which the artists read a letter to Janez Janša—their voices synced in unison.

In her three-channel video, *Searching for a Character*, Chelsea Knight documents her cross-country road trip looking for amateur actors to perform from scripts. Knight generates performances of identity, insisting that actors break character. Knight interrupts performances, demanding actors to be more boring. A man reads a script while standing in a shallow pool. Another man quickly alternates between jumping jacks, pushups, and sit-ups per Knight's commands, all the while reciting lines. With each new physical assertion, he slips more out of character. Weird traces of actors' personalities persist. The performances feel awkwardly voyeuristic; as actors slip in and out of character, unembellished identities leak through.

Sara Magenheimer's video, *Slow Zoom Long Pause* is a trance-like composite of images, narrations, text, symbols, and music. A bare abdomen is followed by a bulldozer digging a trench, followed by a warbling bird and a rotating cake. Images overlap and jar each other. A narrator recites monologues; sometimes it has a conversation with itself, answering its own poetic questions with pseudo-profound answers. "What color is the sound of your name?" it asks. "Peach," it answers. Footage of a black cat is contained in a circle. The screen goes blank, and we hear a woman moaning in pleasure. Digital bubbles cascade over a red anvil like a generic screensaver. Letters and punctuation marks appear, sometimes overlapping and filling the screen. A seven turns into a check mark.

In Magenheimer's collaged prints, solitary enigmatic objects are surrounded by jumbles of words and typography. Objects and their relationships to text and symbols are unclear. *Your name stays the same objects around you change* depicts a mysterious, black triangular form that is evocative of Malevich's infamous *Black Square*. The form is surrounded by titular text and other typography. The title could be a subtitle for the entire show. Our names stay the same, objects around us change. As changes occur in our society, we are coerced to adapt—forging new postures and new identities.

The Luminary is located at 2701 Cherokee. "A New Use of the Self" and "Future Great City of the World," both run through July 24; for more information, visit theluminaryarts.com.

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