

Out of the Past

The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling. And it depends on chance whether or not we come upon this object before we ourselves must die.

--Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume 1: Swann's Way* (1913)¹

In Dennis Scholl's recent work *Untitled (M. Monroe & J. DiMaggio)*, we encounter the two celebrities in a series of images on the wall. It is not unusual, of course, to find Marilyn Monroe in a gallery. Artists as diverse as Ray Johnson, Richard Hamilton, and Andy Warhol have used Monroe's image before and after her suicide in ways that have twisted her iconic presence in popular culture. In nearly every case, Monroe's studio-fabricated glamorous persona is manipulated—silhouetted, canceled, repeated—to reveal an underbelly of voracious consumerism and star worship and to peel back the thinly gilded veneer that hides the dark underframe of America.

But something different is at play in Scholl's work. Five copies of the Daily News from the 1962 week of Monroe's death are arranged on the wall in a circular geometric pattern. These are not reproductions or facsimiles but genuine artifacts of the New York tabloid; they are "acquired objects," as Scholl refers to them, yellowed and faded with time. Each day the edition has a different screaming headline: Marilyn Dead, Joe Whispers "I Love You," Marilyn Speaks. Nor are these candid shots of Monroe and her celebrated baseball hero ex-husband the

fashionable production stills or publicity poses used by other artists. Instead, they are gritty voyeuristic snapshots by paparazzi street photographers. The revelations about Monroe and American culture are not the main point of this artwork. Through several artistic devices, we are instead compelled to travel into the memories of a sad week, of events and feelings long past.

Scholl's use of valued artifacts acquired at auction is the opposite of traditional assemblage art. In Bruce Conner or Ed Kienholz's work, the artists use detritus with little value, recombining many discarded articles into something that gives them new meaning. Scholl reverses the procedure. He understands the human need to possess fragments of the past. In his work, he presents these objects in such a way as to undermine their value as collectibles and increase their talisman-like presence as gateways to lost moments. In this sense, Scholl's pieces are almost Proustian in nature, attempting to recapture and re-present lost time and to expand on our vital need to hold onto the past and reconnect to its significance. Monroe and DiMaggio may be long gone, but through artifacts displayed in rather unexpected ways, we can once again connect with them. Whether royalty statements of Lennon-McCartney songs, vintage photographs and commemorative coins of President Kennedy during his 1961 Berlin visit, Civil War-era courtship letters, or decades-old baseball cards, the past—and the emotions associated with it—once again becomes perceptible and tangible in the present.

Displaying bygone eras and manipulating time are things that the cinema does well, so it is no surprise that Scholl is also an award-winning documentary

filmmaker. (One not-for-sale artwork utilizes his personal Emmy Awards.) Using footage from the past and the present and intercutting it much like a collage artist, the documentarian disrupts the normal flow of time, reversing it, interweaving it, and ultimately transcending it. This same approach of manipulating time is at the heart of Scholl's artwork, and the artist underscores the cinematic nature of his work by occasionally using celluloid, film reels, and movie canisters. The Daily News editions about Monroe rotate around a film reel containing vintage footage of Monroe's wedding to DiMaggio while the empty canister rests on the floor in front of the work like a curious object of desire; another piece uses vintage films by the designers Charles and Ray Eames that remain wound on reels, again installed above the original canisters; and the Civil War-era work springs to life through a "soundtrack," a voice-over reading of the letters. The sight of vintage film material not only lends these works an aura of the dream-like experience of the classic movie theater but hints at the control cinema has over time and space. Film unraveling from a reel is like a dangling silver thread of time that simultaneously leads forward and backward; stored in a canister, film footage suggests long-forgotten narratives, lives compressed inside a magician's box that can at any moment be ignited by light and brought back to life.

To underscore his interest in controlling time, Scholl relies on another device to link present and past: the dodecagon. Like the wall drawings of Sol LeWitt, Scholl lightly renders this archetypal 12-sided geometric pattern in pencil in the framed work and extends the lines into the actual room. The dodecagon is then used to structure the presentation of the vintage objects. The result is a systematic and sometimes overlapping pattern of images or objects that recalls other artists

interested in serializing time and space, such as Eadweard Muybridge and his chronophotographs or Jan Dibbets and his sequential landscape studies. But the dodecagon, with its associations with the 12 hours of the clock and the 12 months of the year, also provides a symbolic sense of time that is set in motion by the converging lines creating a vortex, a black-hole void that draws time into it and where it is freed from one-dimensionality. It is as if the vintage items are caught in an unending, revolving maelstrom, which lifts the objects and their present value beyond the reach of the art world and collector, beyond the realms of the past or the present, and into a suspended state, neither then nor now, but timeless in nature. As such, a three-dimensional pathway emerges outside of linear time that leads in all directions simultaneously.

This desire to manipulate time is even more apparent in Scholl's drawings. Using thousands of repetitive markings inscribed with micron pens, Scholl creates vibrating abstractions similar in size and imagery but varying in detail and color. The use of thousands of small pen strokes seems inspired by Zen meditation and the hypnotic use of dots and cross-hatching in Aboriginal art, which Scholl collects. At the same time, the rendered shapes recall certain Abstract Expressionist paintings and drawings, such as those by Clyfford Still, who was the subject of an award-winning documentary by the artist. Following the 12 points of the dodecagon, these repeating abstract images radiate out of the vortex with divine force. In both the process of their making and the celestial imagery, these pieces have a sense of energy, pulsation, and motion that find precedent in only a few works, perhaps Marcel Duchamp's rotoreliefs, the synesthetic abstractions of Hilma af Klint, or the cosmic consciousness films of John and James Whitney.

In Scholl's short film *Les Outils de Jeu* (*The Tools of the Game*), we trace the fascinating manufacture of the Louisville Slugger baseball bat. The multi-step process of creating something associated with traditional America demonstrates the fascination with the past as it plays out in the present and parallels Scholl's interest in objects of value. The spin on the title of Jean Renoir's 1939 film *La Règle du Jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*) is a playful indicator of Scholl's desire to undermine the practices of the art and auction worlds. His artwork, which uses the desired object and the symbolic manipulation of time—thereby merging popular culture and abstraction—could probably only be created by someone who is both a collector and filmmaker. By bending the rules, Scholl finds a means of satisfying our desperate desire for things past, which ultimately gives us meaning in the present.

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¹ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume 1: Swann's Way* (New York: Random House, 2003) 59-60.