

Unlived Histories - Curated by Lauren Turner

[Exhibition Image \(#image\)](#)

Oct 3, 2012 - Oct 28, 2012

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Unlived Histories: The phrase is oxymoronic and purposefully so. If history is a combination of events past, then how is such a combination formed when those events did not occur? However, there is a difference between an experienced event and a remembered event. Humans manipulate history, aside from blatantly assembling fictitious reflections. For the purposes of this exhibition, history is as much a record as experience, and as a record, all the ills to which man may subject a text can also plague it: history may be misrepresented, misinterpreted, edited, omitted, bowdlerized, and destroyed. Unlived Histories does not only look at artists utilizing explicitly fake histories, invented fictions purporting to occur in a previous time. It also offers a glimpse into the scope of problems encountered – and the corresponding reactions employed – by contemporary artists when engaging with history in their works. For them, the idea of history is oftentimes more compelling than specific episodes. To a certain extent, it is an unsurprising state of affairs for a generation who has witnessed a bestselling “biography” and its blockbuster film transform a beloved president into a supernatural killer.

It would be easy to ascribe an examination of history’s construction to a postmodern ethos. The belief that the perception of fact is typically a result of one’s ethnic, religious, and socio-economic background would go far in explaining attacks, revisions, and satires on history. To view the historical record as a sort of “universal truth” is to impossibly underestimate the forces that go into its construction. When it is presented as an objective, rather than subjective, account, then history’s fallibility can quickly become apparent to critical viewers. This revelation can lead to a general distrust of its sources, for better or worse.

Such a distrust is currently supported by the speed with which contemporary society’s Internet culture popularizes opinions and crowd-sourced research – in other words, materials which – left unchecked – can espouse the “truthiness” (“truth that comes from the gut, not books”) that Stephen Colbert famously acknowledged in 2005. Reactions to this climate certainly do factor in to the execution of works in this exhibition. Artists Randy Regier, Adam Ryder, and Christopher Schneberger each rely on countless small details to support their narratives presented. Though fabricated, these added touches ironically go to fulfill the increased diligence demanded by researchers to support claims in the age of truthiness, and they assist in leading viewers to suspend disbelief.

However, it is a misleading assumption to believe that doubting history’s accuracy is a new behavior. Napoleon is credited with saying, “History is a set of lies that people have agreed upon.” Whether or not he actually said these words, or even that their translation is correctly nuanced, is beside the point. It appears in enough collections of quotations that it seems people want him to have said it (potentially serving as its own example of the malleability of the historical record). It is simply too convenient a perspective to discard. For a deposed and dejected ruler to admit that history is unreliable can strengthen one’s belief that its construction is tied to whomever is currently allowed to hold power. History becomes not just a privileged narrative, but often a narrative of the privileged.

When viewed as a tool of hegemony, history allows one to infer that those not immortalized in deed are forgotten because they are on the wrong side of the disparity of power. In times when many people feel that they or others are disenfranchised (evidenced currently by movements like Occupy Wall Street), high-jacking the historical narrative then becomes incredibly tempting. If history is written by the victors, then it follows that its writers and their subjects are correspondingly elevated in status. In Unlived Histories, varying perspectives on the ways in which power and history tie together manifest in the works of Danielle Durchslag, Sebastian Martorana, Derek Toomes, and Frohawk Two Feathers. In reconstructing vernacular photographic artifacts and placing them on the pristine white walls of a gallery, Durchslag attempts to redress the absences inspired by anonymity. By elevating corporate icons to the perches of Roman statesmen, Martorana makes apparent the shifts of power in a globalized economy. From carefully examining and imagining traces of war and colonialism, Toomes and Two Feathers remember and reframe the sins of the fathers against later generations.

While skepticism towards the historical record is not specific to contemporary society, today’s information age does allow for an unparalleled transfer of information that enables an increased engagement with these issues. Digitized archives, open-source materials, and specialized supply vendors enable casual users to acquire specific information and resources regarding their interests. Lauren Adams is able to track and incorporate the Elizabethan imagery that she explores in her Lost Colony Project, often in specialized media like mass-produced fans or custom-printed fabrics. Anna Fidler turns to the Oregon Historical Society’s archives to reclaim and reinvent photographs within its collections. Noah Doely sources and purchases the limited chemicals necessary for his ambrotypes and tintypes. These pursuits still require determination and patience, but the accessibility offered and encouraged by the information age assists greater numbers of emerging practitioners in doing so.

Nonetheless, despite the glut of data becoming increasingly available, there will always be gaps and inaccuracies in the written record. These omissions frustrate those seeking to discover more about their roots. The works of Keliy Anderson-Staley and Jen Blazina approach history at a personal level. Their pieces aim to spur intimacy with family and friends by turning to its history. This practice is complex, for it is at odds with the ephemeral nature not just of their sources, but also of relationships.

Other artists look to history to inspire societal awareness instead of individual enlightenment. Satire is a strong tool for tweaking common assumptions. By applying it with a critical view to history, it can offer insights into the human condition of the past, present, and future. Eric Beltz skewers beloved myths and complicates simplified viewpoints to add depth to historical episodes. Amelia Bauer represents film stills of various genres to outline contemporary society’s reliance on popular culture. Lori Nix forecasts the future, and the ruins foretold inspire contemplative caution in the viewer.

Any consideration of artists manipulating the historical record would not be complete without mentioning the current dynamism of the steampunk movement in popular culture. Grown from literary, craft, and fashion styles, steampunk is a type of anti-modern celebration of the Victorian and Edwardian reigns. One of the more creative definitions of the phenomenon is the equation, “STEAMPUNK=Mad Scientist Inventor [invention (steam x airship or metal man/baroque stylings) x (pseudo) Victorian setting] + progressive or reactionary politics x adventure plot” (Jeff VanderMeer and S.J. Chambers, *The Steampunk Bible*, 2011). More generally, steampunk combines a love letter to history with infinite considerations of “what ifs.” Artists can make works evocative of steampunk culture without defining themselves as its practitioners. The genre can – and has – solely fueled art exhibitions, but it is considered within Unlived Histories as a cultural background against which these artists work. In this vein, Edward Bateman’s posed automatons, Roger Wood’s assembled sculptures, and Scott Campbell’s fanciful flying machines all claim to depict late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century technology.

Perhaps the most enduring perception for the idea of history that this assembly of artists attacks is its sacrosanctity. Their works re-evaluate global forces, re-appropriate biased narratives, redress unfortunate omissions, and reconsider lost favorites. And yet they undertake these actions – traditionally described in scholarly discourse using somber language and sober theories – through art that includes such disparate elements as cowboy figurines, ghostly siblings, interplanetary travel, Muppets, and Replicants. Essentially, they are allowing fun and imagination to run amok in history’s hallowed hall of records. And if

that rampage means that they achieve their critical goals, then it is worth more than a few errant spitballs.

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