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The Soft Bite Of Surveillance

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UNDERCOVER BOSS

AT REYES PROJECTS, DETROIT

REVIEWED BY MEGAN GARWOOD

The group exhibition, Undercover Boss, opens a conversation on the ubiquity of surveillance, insofar as the ability to view another's intimate affairs without their knowledge through social media outlets, the multiplicity of images that dilutes their meaning, and how this information can be mishandled. The inaugural show at metro Detroit-based gallery Reyes Projects features artists Tony Cox, Greg Fadell, Sadie Laska, Jane Moseley, Jonathan Rajewski, Scott Reeder, Tyson Reeder, and Joe Roberts.

The exhibition takes its name from a CBS reality television show. Currently in its eighth season, the series is an audience favorite because each episode delivers a predictable plot and plot twist as follows: a "boss," or high-level executive or owner of a large corporation, agrees to take an entry job at his or her company; said boss believes the job will be easy and his or her employees are happy in their positions; the boss is given a paper-thin disguise, such as a badly glued fake beard or wig, then flung into the new role; pitfalls, such as the wig falling below his or her eye, foil the boss's performance and generate audience laughs; throughout the process both the boss's and employees' personal lives unfurl; the boss admits that he or she didn't realize how much he or she could empathize with his or her employees, and; the concluding reveal takes place in which dutiful employee is rewarded.

One can entertain how the exhibition at Reyes Projects pulls motifs of surveillance, multiplicity of images, and misuse of information from the television series of the same name.

Firstly, the employees starring in the series are unaware that the new hire is really their boss disguised, and that they are being filmed through hidden cameras affixed to the uniform of the new hire, i.e., disguised boss, as well as planted in the workplace. Therefore, these employees are recorded unbeknownst to them until the reveal. One has to wonder if these employees are all that willing to sign release waivers, as one might have difficulty disappointing their boss with a "No." Secondly, the repeated storyline, in which each episode characters are replaced by new characters, spills into a sea of insignificance. As in, the images of these characters, their individuality, their struggles, their strife, they are all just like anyone else's. The boss fits into the boss role; the employee in his or her's. Finally, the audience undervalues the information provided by the story. The delicate relationship between boss and employee becomes entertainment, and the lessons we learned are turned into internet memes and watercooler jokes. So yes, on TV these tropes are watered down from Baucis and Philemon to Jerry Springer, but they still ring true to our current culture and are subtly revealed in the artwork on view in Undercover Boss.



Picnic in Yosemite

Artist Joe Roberts forces the audience to surveil by using a bird's-eye view. Here, we might not be surveilling a narrative or static figures, but we are surveilling a setting that hints at a narrative — and Roberts offers us no choice but to look down on it from a surveillance-camera perspective. In the series of three works, 11 by 14 inches each, the artist conjures seemingly simple landscapes littered with symbols and obscured meanings.

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Gallery Hours
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The Bohemian Highway Near Occidental

With a *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* vibe, *Picnic in Yosemite*, 2017, depicts a serene picnic in the woods rife with supplies: a loaf of trendy Ezekiel 4.9 Organic Sprouted Whole Grain bread, Smucker's Seedless Strawberry Jam, and Peter Pan® Peanut Butter, creamy or crunchy undisclosed. Framed by pink flowers and juxtaposed against a lush forest, the serape blanket presents the spread pieced, plotted, and exposed like an anthropological dig. The flattened composition and neat arrangement of prop-like objects clearly sets up ample viewing ground for the eye with small delights that appear only with close observation, such as 'shrooms that populate each slice of bread as a psychedelic treat.

Other works by Roberts contain less pronounced, if not an entire lack of objects, arousing feelings of exhaustion and even shame as one views a different landscape from a similar surveillance-camera angle. In *The Bohemian Highway Near Occidental*, 2017, a small blue house is tucked among unbelievably tall trees, as a blue lumber truck plows through the foreground. The quaint home's only open orifice is a dim garage, to where a darker blue pick-up truck is headed. By incorporating blue hues with a contemporary spin on American gothic subject matter onto the planar surface, the artist leaves the viewer few clues of the focal point and leads him or her to wonder exactly what he or she is looking for. Ambiguity of the viewer's purpose gently echoes the response of a voyeur outside the gallery to our culture's inundation of surveillance-type television shows or social media outlets that lay ample ground for viewing people and places from afar but little direction on why to do it. Moreover, Roberts' blue house, closed off, provokes the viewer to almost violate the canvas. The viewer has to peer into the interior of the house or trucks to glean any idea of a narrative.

The theme of multiplicity of images and their inherent loss of context, yielding empty meaning can be seen in a large collage work entitled *I Wish My Uncle Ray Was Here*, 2017, by Detroit-based artist Jonathan Rajewski. Although the surface of the collage is quite flat, it's produced by layers of acrylic, marker, paper, magazine cutouts, fabric, tie-dye, cardboard, a portion of a beach ball, and particle board on canvas. The abstract composition coalesces discordant iconography onto stark waves of primary colors. Reminiscent of Roberts's anthropological study of a picnic, Rajewski removes figuration, as well as context, to scatter sociological puzzle pieces across the canvas. An Athenian vase, Greek cross, zoomorphic tie-dyed creature, a tiny drawing are connected only because the artist chooses to include them on the canvas. In turn, the depictions of these objects become visual building blocks of the composition and appear at random, as if you were scrolling through his Instagram feed. Although the artist does not portray them amongst many, the images, askew, rouse visual solitude that can be seen as a metaphor for images lost in an abyss.



I Wish My Uncle Ray Was Here

Rajewski is known for his painting, but in his new series of oversized wind chimes he expands the motif of information and image saturation into a critique of how we exploit images themselves. The swaying structures are larger than most adults are tall and comprised of disparate childhood objects, like a plastic Elmo, robust piggy bank, or hardcover children's books. These signifiers, displaced by reconstruction, lose some of their charm by being stripped of context and smudged with paint, dirtied and resembling orphaned childhood memories. After Rajewski disjoins these objects, he hangs them, along with metal rods, from thick metal chains in tiers. Disturbing up close, Rajewski's assemblages appear whimsical from afar, producing the spectral sounds of peace and serenity just out of reach. These are not pleasant pieces: Their disfigured parts haunt the viewer and the sound produced amplifies this, like the film score of a horror movie.

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Appropriation of materials through deconstruction and reconstruction often is a tool employed by artists to represent the destruction of meaning, in which the original is usurped by the artist's intended meaning — and this is not limited to constructions. Painter Scott Reeder borrows the formula of abstraction to create a series of large untitled paintings, 60 by 84 inches. Using the utilitarian tool, house paint roller, to apply acrylic on canvas, the artist starts with one color, finishes, then moves on to the next. Each layer conceals the latter. Finally when the painting is near completion, the artist defiles the surface with brush strokes of black paint. Black the amalgamation of all color pigments, as well as the lack of color in light, implies a void, emptiness. Moreover, these severe strokes cut across the canvas in a narrow X-shape as if not only concealing but actually eradicating the work below. Reeder's treatment can be viewed as malevolent, a deliberate attack on the ubiquitous form of abstraction. However, it also raises the question is this misuse or a revolt that can only be decided by the viewer.

The themes of *Undercover Boss*, both the show and exhibition, wear a friendly face but bite you in the end. The caustic relationship is similar to our use of contemporary technology that allow us to surveil willing or unwilling subjects, which overuse then oversaturation normally renders images or information meaningless, which then allows us to reuse or reconstruct in images and information to our own liking, such as through social memes. Like the television show, the artwork exhibited wraps these questions in a big bow. However rather than concluding with a happy ending, the artwork distorts these issues with beauty.