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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

The Island of Lost Returns

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Art

by

Benjamin David Boatright

Thesis Committee:
Professor Monica Majoli, Chair
Professor Simon Leung
Professor Juli Carson
Professor Kevin Appel

2015

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DEDICATION

to

my parents, Jimmy and Julie Boatright. You are with me always, as you have always been there for each other. Every day, through thick and thin.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Island of Lost Returns

by

Benjamin David Boatright

Master of Fine Art in Art

University of California, Irvine, 2015

Professor Monica Majoli, Chair

The Island of Lost Returns is an intermedia performance and installation work that addresses the social and psychological effects of financial crises as told through the fall of The Buccaneer, a beachside resort on Jekyll Island off the coast of Georgia. The piece has an autobiographical basis, as the motel was in part built and run by my grandfather until his death in 1980, after which my father became increasingly involved with the business. By 2001, the motel company had failed, leaving my father bankrupt.

The piece is comprised of live performance, music, video, and a host of performance objects, sculptures, and paintings. It functions on equal grounds as a performance and as an installation. There is a large hut, which is a replica of The Jekyll Island Club Hotel, originally run by the wealthy business elite of the Gilded Age and site of the creation of the Aldrich Plan, what would later become the Federal Reserve. The hut's presence and fort-like appearance dominate a large portion of the space. It takes on the symbolism of capital gain and power, an imaginary fortress that forms the background of the environment against the tale of the failed family motel.

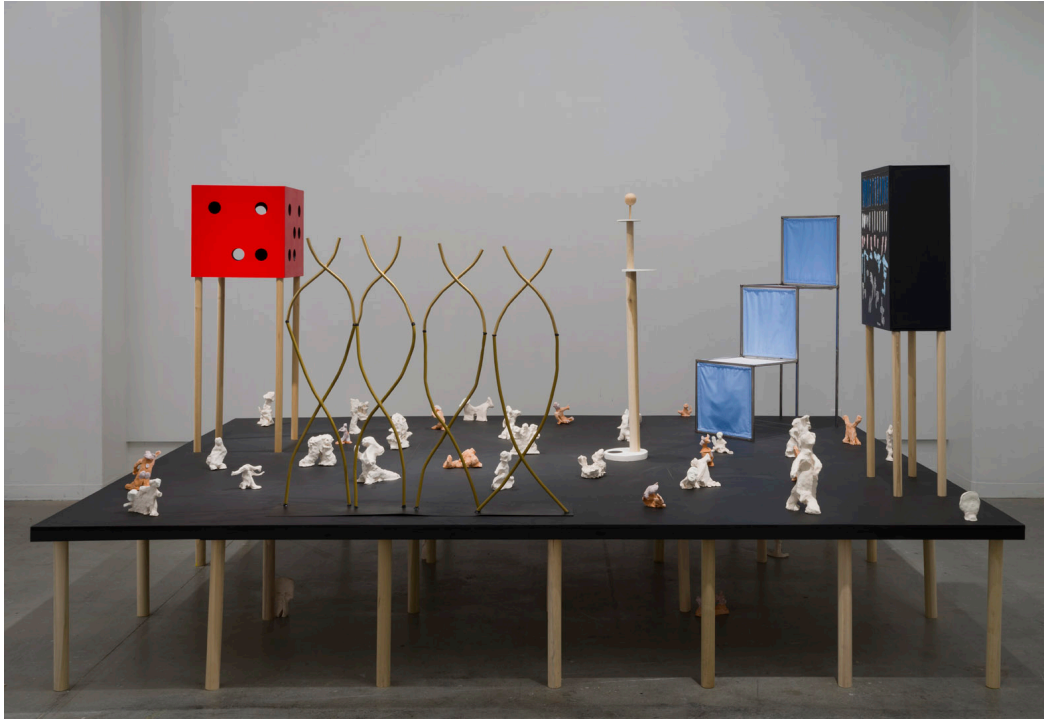
Introduction

Prior to graduate school most of my work had been in performance. These performances derived the bulk of their content from psychological, interior realms, with particular systems of thinking and processing the world. In most cases I veered away from external references, such as current events. During this time I was in New York, and heavily influenced by avant-garde dance communities, such as Movement Research and Chez Bushwick. As a result, I paid special attention to physical presence and movement in my work.

At UCI, I began incorporating more drawing, painting, and object-making into my practice, putting them on par with performance. These paintings and drawings often illustrate notation-like maps or scores. Much of the formal qualities and aesthetic seen in my performances carried over into this work, particularly notions of interior and exterior spaces.

For my piece in UCI's 2nd Year MFA Show, *Notes on the Invariance of Shame and Ambivalence*, I created a field of interiority situated on stilts and populated with a cast of warped ceramic figures and towering architectural sculptures. The world created on the stage existed wholly separate from that of the viewer, not impinging on her space. Although the piece embodied space three-dimensionally, it functioned like a painting, or a snow-globe, where one contemplates a world rendered within a frame safely outside of it. The psychological content of the performances – even the act of performing itself – remained

present in the installation via the expressive qualities of the figures, its theatrical stage, as well as through the work's title.



Notes on the Invariance of Shame and Ambivalence, UCI Room Gallery, 2014.

When examining *Notes* in relation to the evolution of my work, it more closely resembles much of the performance I had been doing years prior, in spirit if not in form. My first two years of graduate school I had often tried to break out of this way of working, but found difficulty in incorporating political and social commentary into the largely abstract realm of my practice. For my thesis year, my goal in part was to try and break down this binary I had set up by taking on a subject that focused on concrete events in the world and social issues that I felt connected to without compromising the aesthetic and emotive basis of my practice.

At the end of my second year, I wrote a proposal to utilize UCI's xMPL space to do my thesis work in, which at the time I called *The Jekyll Island Club*. It was to be a performance and installation that fused the rise and fall of both The Buccaneer Resort and the more historically revered Jekyll Island Club. I opted out of using the space in the end, and deliberated on whether or not I would continue with the same project for my thesis. Then in November of my thesis year, I went forward with the idea by performing a kind of prequel to my thesis. Four undergraduate students from my fall Basic Performance class – Jasmine Dillon, Kenny Kong, Nathalia Fagundes, and Cody Zhang – began working with me in this piece and would continue to work with me throughout the year up until my thesis.

The Jekyll Island Club was ritualistic and vaudeville-esque. Although it shared content and had the beginnings of the themes and structure of what would become my thesis – music, voiceover, the same four performers, and myself in a slippery state of orchestrating the piece while it was being performed, etc. –, it had no direct mention of The Buccaneer. Instead, it derived the bulk of its content from The Jekyll Island Club. The installation was minimal, and its 'tribal' aesthetic made for an unusual, but apt connection to the elite families of the Island Club who presided over the American financial and political system at the time. Totemic props and map-like paintings delineated the space, while the actions of the performers were methodical and ritualized.

In the performance, I take on several guises. I begin by playing the role of a worker, or common man, lamenting on not being able to get time off, while the other four performers act out rituals and games with various objects. Their activities focus on themes of being inside or outside of a space, and on winning and losing. They function as a kind of chorus, with their roles and amount of presence in the piece being similarly weighted. Over

the course of the performance I switch to a more ominous character, a wizard-like robber baron. At its climax, I appear to cast a spell on the chorus, gesturing toward them, spreading out change, and breaking ceramic objects. By the end, I emerge in the role of a host who sings along with them to a ballad about being unable to access an idealized island.



The Jekyll Island Club, photograph of performance, UCI, 2014.

In the months following *The Jekyll Island Club*, I proceeded to do more research on the Buccaneer and on Jekyll's history outside of the Island Club era. I became interested in the history of Jekyll as it transitioned from privately owned land into a state park in the optimistic, post-war climate of the late 1940s and 50s. I took a special interest in a photography book from the *Images of America* series entitled *Jekyll: A State Park*. I decided early on to use the photographs from the book as material. During rehearsals I had the

performers try out a number of poses taken from the images while I read arrangements of the short texts that were often coupled with them in the book.

I had originally planned to build two huts in the gallery each with a video projection inside; one would represent the Island Club, the other the Buccaneer. In March of 2015 I traveled to Jekyll with Nathaniel Klein, a fellow student in the program, to shoot documentation. We shot in several locations, the most important being the former site of the Buccaneer, which was razed in 2007 and is now fenced off awaiting construction. In some of the footage I interacted with the landscape in varying ways, trying out different movements and activating arrangements of objects. In others we focused on capturing wildlife scene on Jekyll as well as shots of the Island Club.

The trip was an essential process for me after having done research and the first performance. Although I almost always return to Jekyll on trips home, these were generally briefer visits where I would more or less experience it through the framework of my own memories from earlier in my life. Interacting with the various sites and seeing them through the process of shooting video forced me to witness the island in its present moment, which perpetuated a kind of confrontation with myself. While shooting on the Buccaneer site, I pinched a spinal nerve by doing a movement sequence, an injury that persisted throughout the production of the piece. Just moments before leaving for the airport to return to California, I lost the keys to my apartment, my car, and studio, most likely on the beach at Jekyll. In the following two months after returning to California I lost my wallet, experienced severe digestive problems, and suffered from bouts of depression and anxiety.

I understood these disruptions as an unconscious self-sabotage on my health, which became part and parcel of my thesis production. At the time I was confounded by this very untimely breakdown, but eventually came to see it as a mental and physical reenactment of my parents' experience of loss and bankruptcy 15 years earlier. Although it may have prevented me from attaining various goals I had for the piece, it very much informed the emotional and psychological content of the work. Perhaps more importantly, this experience functioned as a coming to terms with my own identity in relation to *The Buccaneer* and what it meant symbolically with regards to gaining insight into my own privilege, whiteness, class-consciousness, and Southern heritage.



The Island of Lost Returns, installation shot, UCI Room Gallery, 2015.



The Island of Lost Returns, installation shot, UCI Room Gallery, 2015.

Description of Installation

Upon entering UCI's Room Gallery, one sees the usual white walls of the gallery have been painted a sky blue. It is a vibrant sky blue, yet tinted slightly gray. The castle-like hut stands opposite the entrance. It is painted the same blue as the walls, and has a deep blue flag atop its turret. A large rectangular field of brown artificial grass, the color of pine straw, fills the center of the room. Its ripe, earthy color and plastic sheen border on being garish in comparison to the softness of the surrounding blue. On the wall in the back left corner opposite the hut is a large projection of a video with historical images and

contemporary footage of Jekyll Island. Beneath it is a 10'x10' area with a small wooden foldout desk and chair. There are a dozen or so small concrete and tile artifacts surrounding it. Atop the desk is a large hunter-green photo album with family photographs dating from 1900 until the 1970s. A small chunk of tabby, a building material made of limestone and seashells that is specific to the coastal region of the colonial Southeast, sits atop a block of wood.

A weathered orange netting loops around the ground of this area and up two gray-brown beams standing erect on either side of the projection. One blue seersucker flag stands to the right of the projection, but within the space encircled by the netting. A large wooden beam lies vertical at the front of this space. It is stained a faint white and has a series of empty flag holes, save for two flags standing. One is triangle and peach in color, the other is dark brown, square, and smaller. The beam separates the netted area from the turf. On the far left side of the turf is a crudely constructed wooden bench, the seat of which is painted white. Next to it are four handcrafted croquet mallets and a plastic yellow sand pail with a few croquet balls, some wooden, some rubber. On the turf in front of the bench is a classic white, blue, yellow, and red beach ball that has been dirtied by spray paint and bits of debris stuck to it.

A pair of clunky white tennis shoes lie at the back mid portion of the turf. They have a utilitarian look, like nursing shoes. On the right end of the turf, closest to the entrance lies a plastic green tarp. About 20 croquet balls are scattered on and around it. The balls, like the ones in the pail, are wooden or plastic, colored white, muted orange, or tan. Next to it is a large black golf bag with clubs protruding out of it.

As one traverses the space, other details are made out. Save for the back wall, three sets of three ceramic croquet wickets line up diagonally along the center of the walls. They are cream, tan, and brown in color from top to bottom. The ceramic wickets have a playful, cartoon-like quality as they contrast starkly with their usual thin, metal form to be inserted into the ground. The bottom of the far left and back wall have about a foot's length of recessed cinder block that is painted a sand-colored yellow, adding more of a traditional beach feel to the room otherwise dominated by the strangeness of the brown turf.

On each wall is a 12"x12" mirror. Each pair of mirrors is lined up so that they face each other: the side walls' mirrors sit at the bottom of the wall, toward the front of the space, while the front and back walls' mirrors are hung in the center, around eye level. When passing by these pairs of mirrors, one glimpses an infinitely repeating reflection of oneself therein.

Two blue and white beach chairs sit at the front of the space, looking onto the scene of the turf and the projection. Along the right side wall, before arriving at the hut, a slender stick, about 6' tall and painted an olive green, leans against the wall. A small red seersucker flag next to it does the same.

A narrow space –about two to three feet –stands between the hut and the right side wall. Its only entrance is accessed here by a six-and-a-half foot tall door space. Inside one sees a dimly lit room, with the raw wood of the roof exposed above. Images of two paintings are seen projected on the back wall opposite the entrance. One is a romantic-style painting of the 19th century ship, *The Wanderer*, the last known ship to bring slaves to the United States from West Africa, which landed on Jekyll Island in 1858. The other is an 18th century painting of Sir Joseph Jekyll, who helped back the debtor colony of Georgia in the

early 1730s. The two images switch in and out, remaining in view about 10 seconds before fading to black and then reappearing. On the walls one can make out a small constellation of gold ceramic plates of varying sizes. Three black hooded coats hang from the walls and at the back right corner of the room. The floor is draped in black plastic. Leaning against the wall to the left of the entrance is a driftwood staff and wooden board, both painted the same gray-brown color as the beams next to the projection.



The Island of Lost Returns, installation shot, UCI Room Gallery, 2015.

Performance and Video

Three sections of subtexts are narrated in the video and performance: the early history of Jekyll, its transition into a state park, and the story of the Buccaneer. Images of the video give direct visual references to the text and have either direct or indirect correspondence to what is taking place in the space. In the performance, games of croquet are interchanged with poses from historical photographs during the period being described. Five songs were composed for the piece, each contributing to the content and emotional tone of the narrative.

The narrative is told via a recording of a man and a woman with accents from the region, first beginning with geographical descriptions of the island. Three figures enter in from outside the gallery through a side door. They are wearing black hooded rain gear and swiftly jolt across the space to the hut. Images of the natural setting of the island appear on the video projection on the back wall of the gallery, opposite the hut. The four 'players' enter from the gallery's closet door and perform a ritual with flags and mirrors to a lullaby. Next, a myth-like description of Jekyll and the Island Club's role in the creation of the Aldrich Plan is heard while a croquet game by two of the players begins on the brown turf occupying the central space. An image of the Island Club Hotel appears on the back wall. Here the hut's relation to the narrative has a strong referent via the video. As the narrative progresses, it's implicitly referred to as the resort that wins out, while the space below and around the video projection is understood as the remains of what was once the Buccaneer, the resort/business that failed.

The voiceovers go on to describe the island's transition into a state park and the eventual arrival of beachside resorts in the late 50s and early 60s. A flag procession is performed, Busby Berkley-style, to a cheerful ballad about the opening of the causeway to the island. Following this, references to segregation, environmental damage, and various difficulties of funding Jekyll as a park are spoken to. The players carry on with croquet as I tend to them as a motel manager figure in white attire that will become increasingly dirtied over the duration of the piece. Present-day footage of eroded beaches on the north end of the island as well as vintage postcard images of motels on the island are seen in the video.

This leads into texts specifically about the The Buccaneer and its parent company, Motel Properties, Inc. An old advertisement for the motel is read enthusiastically preceding a sentimental song about memories of vacationing at such a spot. A brief account of the history of the motel is given, which mentions my grandfather's name, J.H. Boatright, Jr. It recounts its early days sporting the name of a famous golfer to its turn to franchise and eventual closing. Meanwhile the players toss a beach ball, continue croquet, and strike poses golfing or sunning on beach towels.

As the closure of the motel is narrated, the croquet turns sinister as the players begin striking the balls onto me, lying on the tarp. I writhe on the ground, protesting several times that "He's going to call me back," while the players respond as a chorus, "He's not going to call you back." A heartfelt, melancholic melody, *Eulogy for the Buccaneer* comes on as I begin a series of movements mimicking the arrangement of the balls on the tarp; the players spread out the worn orange netting in the back space.



The Island of Lost Returns, photo of performance, UCI Room Gallery, 2015.

At the end of the performance, I am seen handing out flags to the players, which are taken one by one into the hut. On screen I appear for the first time, holding up white batons and trekking across the old Buccaneer site. The narrative speaks posthumously of the motel and closes with remarks warning of the present-day development on Jekyll. The last song, *Hope Against Hope* comes on. It is a kind of homecoming song, played via a keyboard organ. I am seen walking along the eroded beach in the video, as I finish handing out the flags to the players, who retire into the hut. I take off my shoes at the end of the song, echoing the same gesture alluded to in the song, and kneel in a pose of surrender on the tarp.



The Island of Lost Returns, performance still, UCI Room Gallery, 2015.

A Thesis in Flux

The descriptions above are more of an idealized or intended version of the thesis, as quite a number of things were altered and changed in the performances, projections, and installation work during the two weeks of the show. Three performances were given over the course of the exhibition, two on the opening and one the following week. The original two did not have a projection on the back wall, but featured the two paintings in its place, mentioned earlier in the installation description. The third performance had a still of a lone, barren tree on the eroded beach that appears several times as a base image in the video.

Each performance had variations in its sequencing, the third being the most different. Only two of the players performed, the hooded figures were not featured, and I began and ended the performance on top of a ladder, erected by the turret of the hut. This

break in the aesthetic was intensified by the door to the work closet being left open throughout the performance, breaking the illusion of a closed off realm. I switched out a solid blue flag atop the turret in the beginning for a seersucker one at the end. My own performance was done in high camp, in comparison to the earlier two, which had much more sentimental registers throughout. With only two performers, nearly all of the performance scenes changed, which made for a more spontaneous and looser rendition.

None of the performances coincided with the actual video as planned, as the video was yet to be completed until the last days of the exhibition. With the installation, the interior of the hut was painted, decorated with ceramics, and the projection of the paintings were installed. The white pickets along the walls were re-arranged, the sets of mirrors hung on either wall, and a host of other elements were altered or moved around. Lastly, the exterior of the hut was painted blue to blend with the wall, as opposed to the butter yellow which matched the Club Hotel it was mimicking.

I came to understand my thesis not as a final, closed piece, but as an evolving project. I think part of this is due to the production process described earlier, and the intense amount of reworking and changing direction that is always involved when I make work. There is difficulty in this to be sure, as intentions for what is opened or closed can often become ambiguous or confusing when understanding the piece both during and especially after the work has come down. That said, those two weeks between the opening and closing of the show were the most enjoyable and among the most generative parts of the production.

Cultural Significance and Artistic Influences

My thesis in many ways takes post-war American optimism as its central theme. It speaks to the ways in which it came to be, how it has thrived and has been passed down, its naïveté and racist foundations, and how it has faltered. It also suggests that its faltering was built into its makeup by highlighting the historical moment of the Jekyll Island Club. This is most visible with the hut that is a replica of the Club hotel. The design of its interior illustrates the historical roots of both the institution of racism and a precedence of the rise of late capitalism. The projected paintings of historical icons from the region and golden plates on the wall point to connections between slavery, debt, and commerce that were the building blocks of Georgia and the United States.

These elements' occupation of the interior of the hotel replica points to an underlying pivotal role in the operations of what happens in the rest of the piece. Moreover, the paintings' passing hands between the Island Club and the state of Georgia when the island was sold reveals the shared value systems between the wealthy elite and the government. The symbolic weight of this gesture muddies the agreement between the state and its citizens, as the exchange was predicated on turning something private and exclusive into something public and free.

Despite its large size, the replica fits in seamlessly in its surrounding with its sky blue color, which matches the walls around it. Its being camouflaged in this sense is analogous to the ways in which people are blind to everyday injustices of how wealth and power continue to operate in our culture. This sentiment is also echoed in when and how the subject of the Island Club appears in the video and performance. The hooded figures

who enter and exit the space in the beginning allude to the story of the financiers who posed as duck hunters in order to secretly compose the Aldrich Plan on Jekyll, spoken of shortly after in the voiceover. Just as nature and ritual precede the advent of the narrative in the piece, the story of the Island Club is also ushered in as happening prior to the rest of the story.

Two important texts were carried over from *The Jekyll Island Club* prequel into *The Island of Lost Returns*. One was an account of the creation of the Aldrich Plan, assembled in part from a text by June and William McCash, authors of a book on the families of the Island Club:

The banking panic of 1907 made clear to those in power the need for banking reform in the United States. Senator Aldrich of Rhode Island headed a monetary commission to look into the matter. Aldrich himself was a wealthy man whose daughter was married to the nephew of Jekyll Island Club member William Rockefeller. He believed that a counsel of banking experts other than members of the monetary commission was necessary in developing a plan. But the motives of the representatives of financial institutions were so suspect, that it seemed advisable to act quickly to avoid publicity that might undermine the proposal. In November of 1910, under cover of darkness and posing as duck hunters, Aldrich's team of financiers boarded his private railroad car for Jekyll Island. There they stayed at the Island Club, and worked uninterrupted for weeks on plans for what would later become the Federal Reserve System, established in 1913.

The language in the text has a mythic and narrative quality to it, with the literary rhythm and tone of a legend. It also points to the cyclic nature of the American financial system, with the Banking Panic of 1907 repeating itself 100 years later with the 2008 Financial Crisis, both leading to subsequent responses of the Aldrich Plan of 1910, and the Dodd-Frank Act in 2010, both of which, in many regards, worked more to perpetuate rather than alleviate the crises that preceded them.

Individualism, material abundance, and upward mobility, i.e. “the good life”, achieved through honesty and hard work, are what are generally focused on when referring to the American dream. Indeed, one thinks of white picket fences, suburban homes, chipper father figures and housewives, and other images iconic of the 1950s. It was during this time that the state of Georgia advertised cheap deals leasing land on Jekyll in order to develop the island and sustain it as a park. This kind of opportunity, which led to my grandfather and his partners building the Buccaneer, exemplifies post-war American optimism and the rosy entrepreneurial spirit of America at the time embodied in the creation of The Buccaneer.

In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant defines the object of desire as “a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us.” She explains that optimism is an affective orientation to a subject’s attachments to these objects. Many attachments feel downright pessimistic or sick or useless, like an attachment to an ex-lover, to drugs, or obsessive thinking. With optimistic ones, the subject’s orientation is persistently driven back to be in proximity to its object of desire. “[W]here cruel optimism operates,” she explains,

[T]he very vitalizing or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place. This might point to something as banal as a scouring love, but it also opens out to obsessive appetites, patriotism, all kinds of things. One makes affective bargains about the costliness of one's attachments, usually unconscious ones, most of which keep one in proximity to the scene of desire/attrition." Berlant, pg. 25

Throughout the book, Berlant speaks of these attachments specifically within the conditions of contemporary subjects, from the 1990s to the present, whose desires are oriented towards ideologies such as the American dream, or in the case of Europe, socialist economic systems set in place to take care of its citizens. She maintains the models and lifestyles that such ideologies promote are now outmoded due to their being denigrated and worn out by neoliberal culture and economic policies over the past thirty years, leaving contemporary subjects under the spell of cruel optimism.

In *The Island of Lost Returns*, an operation of unhealthy attachment, of cruel optimism, is played out in the role of the hotel manager. This is foreshadowed by the second text that was brought over from *The Jekyll Island Club*. This text was a chant I wrote for two of the performers, recited while methodically walking in a circle. It is a kind of pledge to achieve access to a club. The chant contrasts in its language and tone to the mythologized telling of the creation of the Federal Reserve heard initially in the voiceover:

One step at a time
and we'll get it done
we'll reach that plateau
that plateau of membership
no more last but not least
no more proposed and rejected
just pure, requited, legitimate access

The chant's sleepwalk-like recitation suggests that what is being articulated is not consciously recognized, but circulates non-consciously. The chant is optimistic in its pledge of persistence to attain its desired goal of membership, but the chant's drone-like recitation points to the cruelty of its optimism: the desires are unconscious and result from living in a culture that ceaselessly reminds the majority of their want of status which an elite minority maintain.

Over the course of the narrative, my identity as motel manager is woven together from my grandfather, father, and myself. My grandfather, a chief creator of The Buccaneer and Motel Properties, Inc., understood and largely experienced the enterprise as an opportunity for financial gain. He was part of what has come to be known as the Greatest Generation, or G.I. Generation, which came of age during the depression, fought in WWII, and came into prominence starting in the 1950s.

My father witnessed the motel being built as a teenager and eventually inherited the role of managing it much later in his life. He comes of age recognizing it as a site of

entrepreneurial opportunity, albeit one with risks, but risks that could be afforded. As an adult he sees it as stable enough to be a retirement investment. This understanding drastically alters in midlife, as the motel fails and embodies deep personal failure and financial ruin. At this time, he was the same age as his father when the motel was built, early to mid fifties.

Growing up I understood the motel as a given, something that had always been there, and would always be there. Its failure occurred during my coming of age, the same age as my father when the motel was built. As a result, what was imprinted upon me was an aversion to entrepreneurial risk. As an adult, I have come to see the motel as a former privilege, a site of family trauma, and a caution against hope.

The American Dream and post-war optimism that were emblemized earlier in the performance are later rendered as implausible and cruel. Towards the end of the piece I relinquish flag after flag from the replica of the Buccaneer plot for the players to carry away to the Island Club hut. In the video I am seen revisiting the former grounds of the motel – site of the prior generations' creation and failure. In the video I am seen walking the grounds, diligently marking out spaces where former buildings once stood. As the last song comes on I am walking, head held high, down an eroded beach surrounded by dead trees and encroaching water. As the song suggests, I “hope against hope” that I can learn from my forefathers' mistakes. As the last text forebodes, the era in which I live is beginning to resemble that which occurred prior to my grandfathers' lifetime: the Gilded Age of the Jekyll Island Club. Amidst the ecological hazards and privatized development currently taking place, I sing of hoping against hope, still attached to the island.

A number of artistic influences stand out in the piece, including Joan Jonas, Rhee Morton, Mike Kelley, Paul Thek, and Robert Gober to name a few. The influence of video and performance artist Joan Jonas can be seen in all aspects of the production. In her work, live performance, video, and an array of objects come together to construct worlds of abstract symbols and archetypal figures. These elements are often juxtaposed in unexpected ways and overlaid with spoken text and dialogue to get at a larger story.

In her video *I Want to Live in the Country (And Other Romances)* (1976), coastal images of rural Nova Scotia are juxtaposed with an interior scene of a woman in a film studio engaged with simple objects and composing geometric shapes on a chalkboard. Jonas is heard reciting diaristic texts that relay a mix of observations and reflections from a country getaway. Although the tone of her voice feels detached, it is calmly engaged. There are a few moments when her descriptions match the ones seen in the video, yet they are often out of synch. The layer of the spoken text is woven in with the visual footage as it folds in and out of the exterior and interior settings. An old country song fades in and out at seemingly random moments during the video. These elements build a literary space that hovers on becoming narrative, yet is too nonlinear and surreal to satisfy the composition of a story's traditional sequence of events.

As with *I Want to Live in the Country (And Other Romances)*, the installation, performance and video in *The Island of Lost Returns* create a dream-like state. Both have performers interacting with child-like props, pastoral video footage, and the documentary tone of spoken text interspersed with slightly incongruous songs. These elements work together to blur the chronology of the narrative. In *The Island of Lost Returns* specifically, an imaginary space is created where several stories are conflated into one. The narrative

styles of filmmakers David Lynch and Robert Altman are echoed here as well. In films such as *Mulholland Drive* and *Three Women*, main characters slip surreally into other roles and personas and temporal logic collapses. Similarly, the hotel manager in *Island* folds into several roles over the course of the performance and at the end of the video. The chronology begins with public histories that become narrowed and condensed to focus on a family motel.

The perverse, uncanny, or child-like qualities of the piece bring to mind the work of Robert Gober, Mike Kelley, and Rhee Morton. Both the installation and performance give the feel of a melancholy *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*. It is an imaginary space where repressed or unpleasant stories are re-created and revised in a warped nostalgia that in many ways simultaneously works to negate the subject of its sentimentality. As with the work of Gober or Morton, psychological narratives pulse from the uncanny constellation of objects and unorthodox aesthetics. The pastels and primary colors of the installation are pulled down by the brown in the room, most notably on the turf, but also referred to in the text, video, and one of the paintings. It is aesthetically awkward and stands in contrast to the frosting cream blue of the walls and hut. It hovers on being ugly, a reference to dirt, shit, or tacky 70s carpet. It is simultaneously fertile and morbid, dominating the floor of the space, with the majority of the performance taking place on it. There is a direct relation here to the razed grounds of the motel property. Where there were buildings and landmarks there is now dirt, or heaps of rubble. The turf also serves to ground the space, and signifies various aspects of nature in the region being addressed – the color of the sea there, of pine straw, of swamps.

Paul Thek's *Untitled (Diver)* from 1969/70 as well as Forrest Bess's seascape paintings can be seen in the paintings hanging on the outside of the hut. Although they contrast in style, they bare a direct relation to the images of the paintings inside. A mythic figure and mythic scene – the white man with no arms, cast away in profile; a painting of the brown ocean as seen in the video and text. Both correspond to the projected images of historic paintings within of Sir Joseph Jekyll and *The Wanderer*. Thek's *The Tomb: Death of a Hippie* (1967) also comes to mind here, as these paintings and objects are relics of the past, symbolic icons that are actively being memorialized. The creepiness of the dimly lit space and ghostly projections are amplified by the sheen of the black plastic flooring and mute-colored staff and raft that lean mysteriously against the wall.

In Mike Kelley's *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstructions* from 2005-6, the artist reenacts photographs from his high school yearbooks in videos, performances, and installations. Although the effect is not as disturbing or uncanny in *Island*, it is the same operation and has a similar 'local' feel to it. The images are from a time 30 years prior to Kelley's yearbook scenes, but nonetheless capture a dated moment in American culture, in this case, southern American culture. Kelley's performances and music videos are also alluded to in the performance and the musical theater structure of the piece. In musical theater, the narrative is generally grounded in representational reality, whereas the musical numbers depart from it. The musical numbers go into an imaginary space that exists outside of the normal life of the narrative, and points to a better life, a fantasy of what the narrative *could be*.

In *Island*, musical numbers take place either in an ahistorical time (in the case of the lullaby), or in the past, either during the island's initial change into a state park, or during

the days of the motel. As is typical in musicals, while idyllic and imaginary in its homecoming, the underlying message in the song undercuts the affect and any clear resolution that might be suggested. The last song, *Hope Against Hope*, property is being relinquished, land is being eroded, and the protagonist is seen taking a cautious and ambivalent position to hope.



The Island of Lost Returns, video still, UCI Room Gallery, 2015.

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