

EXHIBITS

Can You FAKE the TRUTH ?

THE MIA'S FIRST-EVER MAJOR CONTEMPORARY ART EXHIBITION EXPLORES THE IDEA OF "TRUTHINESS" IN ART AND LIFE. | BY TAD SIMONS

When comedian Stephen Colbert coined the term "truthiness" on his first show in 2005, he managed to distill into a single word the complex swirl of deception and subterfuge that has become such an inescapable part of our public discourse.

The word originally referred to people who trust the "truth" of their gut feelings even when facts, logic, analysis, and other evidence contradict it. Truthiness has

This slippery relationship between fact and fiction is the subject of a new exhibition at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts called *More Real?: Art in the Age of Truthiness*. Conceived by the MIA's recently hired curator of contemporary art, Elizabeth Armstrong, and created in collaboration with SITE Santa Fe, *More Real?* includes the work of 28 international artists from 18 countries and is the first major contemporary art show the MIA has ever produced.

"Truthiness is one of the biggest problems in society." —Elizabeth Armstrong

since become shorthand for virtually every kind of spin that seeks to disguise or distort reality, and it neatly sums up the idea that so much of what masquerades as truth these days—in media, politics, religion, law, education, and online—is a blatant, bold-faced lie.

"We're an encyclopedic museum, so even in a contemporary art show we knew it was important to tackle some big themes," says Armstrong. "Themes that have relevance in the culture in general."

According to Armstrong, the show was inspired by hundreds of trips past

Disneyland on the Anaheim freeway when she was working in Los Angeles (the capital of fake realities), as well as several years of wondering why young people supposedly trust the information they get from fake news shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* more than information from actual news sources such as CNN and *The New York Times*.

"Truthiness is one of the biggest problems in society," says Armstrong. Not only does it erode confidence in people and institutions that are supposed to be trustworthy, it also creates uncertain footing for all kinds of decision making. The run-up to the Iraq War, evolution vs. creationism, climate change, taxes, gun control—the discussion over all of these issues has been warped by fundamentally different perceptions about what is and isn't true. On top of that, technology has made it possible to create, alter, and enter realities that are ever more sophisticated and seductive, not to mention more deceitful and manipulative.

The notorious unreliability of our perceptions has of course been the subject of exhaustive artistic inquiry for decades, if not centuries. What differentiates the artists in *More Real?* is their engagement in current issues affecting the real world, as well as their international pedigree.

One of the show's central works is an installation by Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle called *Phantom Truck*. If you'll recall, in February 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell told one of the biggest whoppers in history when he informed the United Nations that the United States had intelligence proving that Saddam Hussein was hiding weapons of mass destruction. Part of his presentation was a computer-generated simulation of a mobile biological chemical weapons lab—a digital re-creation of labs that, it turns out, didn't exist. *Phantom Truck* is a three-dimensional physical model of one of these fictional labs—a fake version of something that was supposed to be real but wasn't. Besides the existen-



THROW RUG

→ Copy of the rug on TV's *West Wing*, made out of confetti.



TRICK TRUCK

→ *Phantom Truck* depicts an imagined threat that caused a real war.



DREAM WORK

→ Art critics everywhere are asking: What's up with the green baby?

OVAL OFFICE PHOTO COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY, NEW YORK AND LOS ANGELES; PHANTOM TRUCK PHOTO BY BARBARA SAX/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; DREAMLAND PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ZOE BELOFF

tial whiplash it unleashes, *Phantom Truck* is, writes Armstrong in the exhibition's catalog, "a visceral reminder that fictional narratives can and do generate reality." Sometimes dangerous ones.

"The artists I've chosen for this show all have a moral compass," Armstrong explains. "They're setting out in their artwork to comment on these issues in ways that raise real questions and concerns," she says. "After all, how do you make meaning in a world where you're not sure what's real?"

That said, the MIA is doing

as much to muddy the waters of perception as it is to clarify them. The "official" video preview of the exhibition is pretty much the opposite of what it seems. And one of the exhibition's showpieces is an extended bit of theater that involves the office of a long-dead MIA curator that was sealed off during a renovation and has remained untouched for the past 70 years. Or so the story goes.

Curator's Office is really an installation by artist Mark Dion that looks exactly like a curator's office from the 1950s, complete with vintage

card catalogs, Underwood typewriter, Kodak film chemicals, and hundreds of other period-perfect pieces of nostalgic bric-a-brac. It will be presented as a "period room," but, since it is a completely fake period room, *Curator's Office* calls into question the veracity of actual period rooms in the museum, some of which would have a tough time proving themselves any more "authentic" than the room Dion has assembled.

In ways both playful and profound, *More Real?* reminds us that one of the appalling regularities of modern life is

that those who claim to be telling the truth are lying through their teeth. Intentionally. Willfully. Shamelessly. The difference between the show's artistic trickery and Lance Armstrong's deceit or Glenn Beck's campaign of misinformation is that the artists aren't pretending their work is real—they are faking it in the name of honesty and insight.

"We live in this moment of theater presented as truth," says Armstrong. "It's one thing for us to talk about simulation and hyper-reality, but a lot of these artists are trying to give you that experience." ■

MORE REEL

Films that explore the "truthiness" theme are a part of the upcoming MSP International Film Festival.

In conjunction with the MIA's *More Real?* exhibition, the Film Society of Minneapolis/St. Paul is dedicating a portion of its annual international film festival to movies that blur the line between fact and fiction. Among the dozen or so films being considered for the More REEL series are a pair of documentaries by Warner Herzog (*Lessons of Darkness* and *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner*), a new film by Errol Morris (*The Unknown Known*), and an early work by the writer/producer of HBO's *Girls*, Lena Dunham, called *Creative Nonfiction*. The MSP International Film Festival runs April 11–28. For a complete schedule, visit mspfilmfest.org.