

Tom Hughes: We All Know the Words

September 27, 2009-January 17, 2010

Opening reception with artist talk, Sunday, September 27, 2:00-4:00 p.m.



tomhughes



Got It, 2009, enamel on acrylic, particle board and fluorescent lights, two parts (shown left and right), 18 x 18 x 36 inches each.

I'm a Word Person

Personal affirmations and motivational phrases are at the heart of Tom Hughes' new body of work. Using light boxes, varying in size, shape and arrangement; he presents the museum audience with "exclamations of empowerment" etched on the surfaces. Hughes said, "When the viewer reads the words a connection is made and through the meaning they [the works] get some resonance." Exclaiming "Now you're Good!", "Bask in the glow!" or "Aren't we all awesome?" offers instant empowerment!

Hughes is fascinated with how children are taught to understand meaning. He is inspired by their curiosity, experiencing firsthand how his own children are learning to articulate words and communicate by putting words in order. To the artist, "the idea of language and communication is like an ocean. People mostly skip across the top without getting in too deep." Communicating meaning is a poignant human gesture and being asked to explain what something means (something that an adult may take for granted) can be a surprisingly complicated task. For example,

why is the sun hot? Why is an apple red? Where does snow come from? We take these things for granted, but to a child the answers can be magical.

Little Creatures

The artist regards his works as "their own little creatures with their own existence." He considers the "voice" of the works to be artificial, but in fact the voice of the works is the audience. Hughes said, "I play the role of creator and the artworks...they are the characters." As visitors explore the exhibition, they consciously or unconsciously read or speak the words and give the artworks their voices. "My intention is to give visitors something to run with in their heads," said Hughes. The phrases he uses have the potential for misinterpretation, but words will always communicate at some level.

Audience Participation

With Hughes' recent work, the viewer is half the equation. The artist stated, "If a tree falls in the forest—does it make a sound? If someone makes an artwork—is it art if no one sees it?"



Potent, 2008, contact paper on corrugated plastic, particle board and fluorescent lights, two parts, 96 x 10 x 10 each.



(detail) *Sweettalker*, 2009, enamel on acrylic, particle board, fluorescent lights, two parts, 12 x 6 x 20 inches.

ARTIST STATEMENT

I work with words. I build simple objects, sometimes in complicated relationships, which are centered on the ideas of language as a human construction and an anthropomorphic tool. As static pieces, like preserved conversations filling up the room, they allow for a continuous dissection of meaning, and over time that evolves. Simplicity gives way to complication. Dwell on it too long and shifts away from anything recognizable. Everything does.

Given a human voice, the metaphor extends: they rely on each other somewhat; in groups they fumble towards something meaningful. They are illuminated. They can be wired together, they are plugged in, when connected, they shine.

Tom Hughes, Summer 2009

He creates works of art that reach out to people and they, in turn, provide the auditory input to complete each piece. "Everyone can relate these pieces...the work has a democratic angle. The more a viewer brings more to it, the more they get out of it," said Hughes. He admits to trying a multitude of variations on an idea and takes "a stab in the dark" with some of his text selections. Sometimes, Hughes says, he fails..."but that is better than not trying at all." Always conscious not to over think the works, when he comes across a phrase that resonates with him, Hughes moves forward with the creation. The construction of the light boxes is raw, echoing the spontaneity in his work. It is this spontaneity in the assembly of these works that makes them interesting and so inviting. Hughes said, "This is the most honest way to work. I build them. Let them go. See what happens."

Hughes acknowledges that his works have a shelf-life. Once they have been on view for a period of time; if they are not sold, they are taken back to the studio to be re-tooled. "They are given life for as long as they need. There is no sense of permanency. They may get dismantled and made into something else." They are not

precious objects in the formal sense. "There is a curious degree of communication and sympathy with these non-human forms and their relation to viewers. They are more about being dealt with."

We All Know the Words

Beyond the meaning and metaphors lies a bit of the subversive and spontaneous. The exhibition title *We All Know the Words* is, in the artist's own words, "...like in a group sing-along. People join in a song together, expressing something in one voice, frequently without having the slightest idea what they are saying. And yet, all the same, they 'know it'...something like when young people learn the words to their favorite songs. It's both sweet and creepy." So in other words, my words, I leave it to the museum audience to complete the exhibition and speak these words of empowerment. Hughes's work featured in the Topspin gallery enables visitors to call out "Now you're Good!" or "Aren't we all awesome?" and by the close of the exhibition we will know all the words!

Michael J. Beam Curator of Collections and Exhibitions

Tom Hughes and Robert Lynch, a previously featured TOPSPIN artist, will host a reception at their art studio, 706 Chilton, Niagara Falls, NY, on Monday October 5, 5:00-7:00 p.m. For more information, directions, and to RSVP, please contact Curator Michael Beam at 716-286-8286 or mjbeam@niagara.edu.

Tom Hughes was raised in Niagara Falls, NY, attended the State University of New York at Buffalo and shortly thereafter needed the world to get bigger. In 1997 he moved to Seattle, WA; where he met his wife, Zoe. Graduate studies in fine art took them to Boston, MA for the School of the Museum of Fine Arts Post-Baccalaureate Program. That proved successful, getting Hughes on track for a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Originally entering into the Printmaking Department, he found the cross-disciplinary atmosphere to be much to

his liking, and was encouraged to follow his ideas into whatever medium he required. Shifting into installation and sculpture, his graduate studies culminated in an exhibition of sculptural text rendered on the floor in 50,000 firecrackers.

Hughes currently lives and works in North Tonawanda, NY with his wife and two children. He was recently appointed as full-time Art Department Faculty at Erie Community College, State University of New York at Buffalo.

b. 1972, Buffalo NY.

EDUCATION

2005 Master of Fine Arts, University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.

2004 Master of Arts, University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.

2001 Post-Baccalaureate Studies, School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA.

1999 Pratt Fine Arts Center, Seattle, WA.

1997 Printmaking Studio, Sev Shoon Arts Center, Seattle, WA.

1995 Bachelor of Fine Arts, State University of New York at Buffalo, NY.

RECENT EXHIBITIONS Solo exhibitions are indicated with an asterisk (*).

2009

"Sweettalker," Sugar City Arts Collaborative, Buffalo, NY.*

2008

"They Will Hear Us for Miles," autocrat, Buffalo, NY.*

"Unhinged," Artist and Models Affair, Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center at the Central Terminal, Buffalo, NY.

"Mere Mortals," Autocrat, Buffalo, NY.*

2006

"Trustee," Museum of Contextual Amputations, Limassol, Cyprus.

Itinerario Festival, Cesena, Italy

"Book Art Project," Artetica Gallery, Rome, Italy.

2005

"Now We're Getting Somewhere," Thesis Exhibition, Seventh Floor Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.*

"Capita/ol Portfolio," 734 Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.

"Gimme Baby Robots," OneTen Gallery, Madison, WI.

2004

"3 New Experimental Works of Tom Hughes," Seventh Floor Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.*

"Say it Like You Mean it," Master of Arts Degree Exhibition, Seventh Floor Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.*

"Everything Is All Right Now," StoneMetal Press, Blue Star Arts Complex, San Antonio, TX.*

"I Watch You When You Turn Away," Catacombs, Madison, WI.

"Print Till You Drop: Graphics Area Exhibition," Seventh Floor Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Your tenuous beauty, 2008, pink insulation foam, corrugated plastic, contact paper and fluorescent lights, (two pieces) each 96 x 8 x 18 inches.

Slow down, 2009, blue insulation foam, Plexiglas, enamel, extension cord, lights, 18 x 46 x 8 inches.

We are potent, 2008, particle board, corrugated plastic, contact paper, extension

"Agents Orange," Seventh Floor Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.

"Blueprint: A Portfolio Exchange of Folded Prints," (Co-organizer): G. Gibson Gallery, Seattle, WA.; Mason Gross School of Art, Rutgers University, NJ.; 734 Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.; Printmaking Gallery, University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA.; Art Department Galleries, California State University, Long Beach, CA.

"Process: Drawings, Accidents and Related Work," 734 Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.

"3D: Diversity, Dimension and Discourse," Southern Graphics Council Exchange Portfolio, Mason Gross School of Art, Rutgers University, NJ.

2003

"Word of Mouth," 734 Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.*

"Centro-Oeste Nucleo Madison," Museo de Arte de Brasilia, Brazil, Casa Thomas Jefferson, Brasilia, Brazil

"Off the Shelf," Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN.

"Class of 2005," Seventh Floor Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.

"Silver Buckle Press," Memorial Library, University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.

2002

"Off the Shelf," Seventh Floor Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.

"Three Aces," University of Texas at Austin, TX.; Louisiana State University, LA.; University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2009-current Instructor, Art/Humanities, Erie Community College, State University of New York, Buffalo, NY.

2008-2009 Founder/Owner of *Autocrat*, Art Laboratory/Gallery/Studio, Buffalo, NY.

2007-2009 Digital Resources Coordinator, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo NY.

2006 Image Specialist/Art Handler, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo NY.

2005-2006 Preparator, Bellevue Arts Museum, Bellevue, WA.

2004-2005 Teaching Assistant (Instructor of Record), University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.

cords, fluorescent lights, (two pieces) each 96 x 10 x 12 inches.

Sweettalker, 2009, particle board, Plexiglas, enamel, extension cords, aluminum, lights (two pieces) 12 x 6 x 18 inches and 12 x 6 x 22 inches, height variable.

Now you're good, 2009, particle board, Plexiglas, enamel, extension cord, lights

2003-2004 Teaching Assistant (Instructor of Record), Foundations of Contemporary Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.

2003 Ad Hoc Program Specialist in Art (Independent Instructor), Fundamentals of Black and White Photography, Wisconsin Union University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.

2001 Teaching Assistant, Black and White Photography, School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA.

AWARDS/SPECIAL PROJECTS

2003 Merton R. and Peggy E. Barry Scholarship, Graduate Program, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI.

2002 Printmaker's Award, School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA.

1991-1993 University Honors Scholar, State University of New York at Buffalo, NY.

2003 "Boldly towards Tomorrow," (a book multiple regarding international understanding), presented to the leaders of twelve North American and western European countries.

PUBLICATIONS

2008

"Inciting Insight," *The Buffalo News*, August 8, 2008.

"An Exhibition for Mere Mortals," *Buffalo Rising Online*, April 2008.

2004

Exhibition Review, *San Antonio Express-News*, July 18, 2004.

2003

"Off the Shelf," Exhibition Catalog, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN.

COLLECTIONS

University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.

Kohler Library, University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI.

School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA.

University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA.

Southern Graphics Print Council, Athens, GA.

Office of the President of the United States of America

Office of the Prime Minister of Great Britain

(two pieces) each approximately 24 x 24 x 36 inches.

Distance, 2009, particle board, Plexiglas, acrylic, enamel, extension cords, fluorescent lights, overall dimensions 456 x 10 x 11 inches.

Bask in the glow, 2008, commercial lightboxes, contact paper, (two pieces) each 24 x 48 x 12 inches.

TOPSPIN

Artists of the Buffalo/Niagara Region

The museum's Tops Gallery—dedicated to the exhibition of work by local and regional artists—presents the **TopSpin** series. **TopSpin** features a broad range of visual expressions, varied in media as well as message, and focuses mainly on new and emerging artists.

TopSpin is made possible through the generous Support of Tops Friendly Markets, LLC.

TOPS



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