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WORDS ON CONTEMPORARY ART AND FLORIDA

## Physically Small, Conceptually Large: JEMA Retrospective at Bob Rauschenberg Gallery

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Oliver Herring's "Areas of Action" at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery

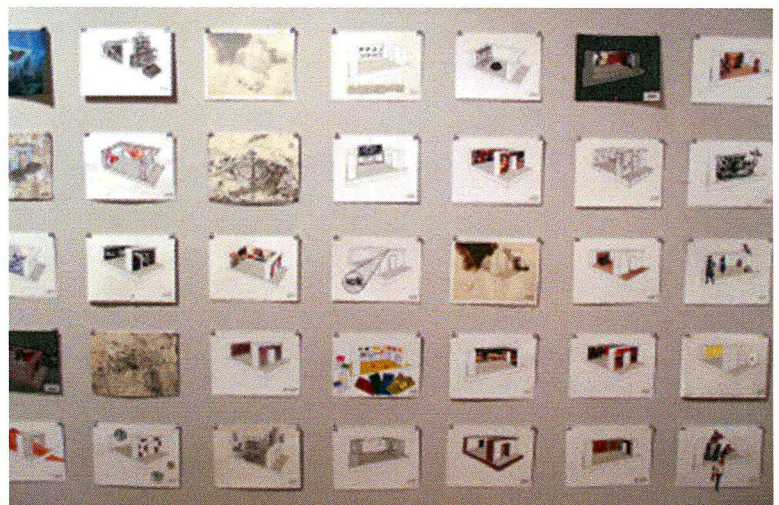
The John Erickson Museum of Art occupies a peculiar intersection of place and object. To be sure, the museum was born in the lobby of another, its first exhibit lasting only two minutes. Over the course of countless exhibitions the museum itself becomes an artwork, the exhibition a performance and, in a way, a



means is revealed to be the end. The museum's 10 year retrospective at Fort Myers' Bob Rauschenberg Gallery demonstrates that these are much more than semantic ambiguities.

JEMA is a self-described "location variable museum," its exhibitions often presented using miniature galleries fitting within a 16 x 12 x 9 inch aluminum carrying case. Pragmatically, the specific dimensions were set to allow the gallery carrying cases to fit inside airplane overhead compartments (the gallery at a scale of 1/4 inch = 1 foot). Aside from the diminutive size, JEMA is not without many of the trappings of a typically sized museum such as guards and a soon to come museum store. The night of the reception a few people involved with the exhibition and performances therein even sported grey JEMA coveralls. Interestingly, however, these details don't serve to insert JEMA alongside their larger institutional counterparts. Rather, they work toward sharpening JEMA's reflexive focus on museums and the dynamics behind experiencing art. Of course, smallness and location play no small parts in this focus as well.

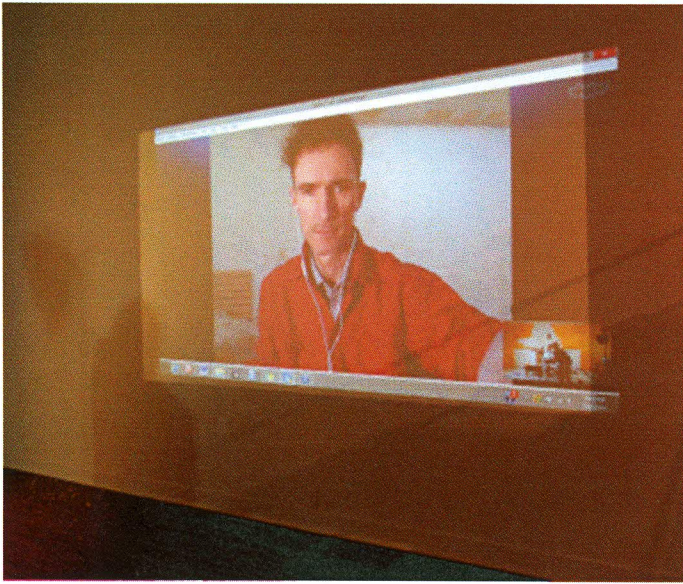
Apart from proper gallery shows, JEMA's size allows exhibitions to make unconventional and, at times, unauthorized stops. During a panel discussion at the exhibition's opening, museum founder Sean Miller related exhibition sites as diverse as parades, Costco parking lots and museum visits both authorized and not. The idea of size as a conceptual tool, however, was made especially apparent with an anecdote of a JEMA trip to, and subsequently being kicked out of,



Art Basel Miami. The incident culminated in a guard employed by Art Basel confronting the guard employed by JEMA, an awkward situation of conflicting stewardships. Miller wondered how small the museum would necessarily be in order to avoid warranting attention from the fair and be removed. If he could fit a museum on his shoulder and walk throughout the fair with the museum perched on his shoulder, would that be acceptable? It's a humorous question but revealing of Miller's larger inquiry. At what point does the physical gallery space assert itself unto the power behind the institution of a museum? JEMA does this by affirming its own small space while, at times, undermining the space-power of another larger institution.

Also participating in the panel discussion, Jack Massing of the Art Guys and a JEMA participating artist explained, "We all revel in doing something unsanctioned, we're unsanctioned artists." However, he continued, "The irony is not meant to demean the art world." No, JEMA does not entirely stand apart from the institutions it explores. In a way it disembodies the museum from its physical structure and reifies it as its simple intention and potential. In this way JEMA does not undermine institutional art exhibiting by taking up arms on the countering side of a binary opposition, but instead by playfully pointing out they share two spots on the same continuum. This makes for the familiarities of the art museum (and by extension the art gallery) intriguingly unfamiliar.





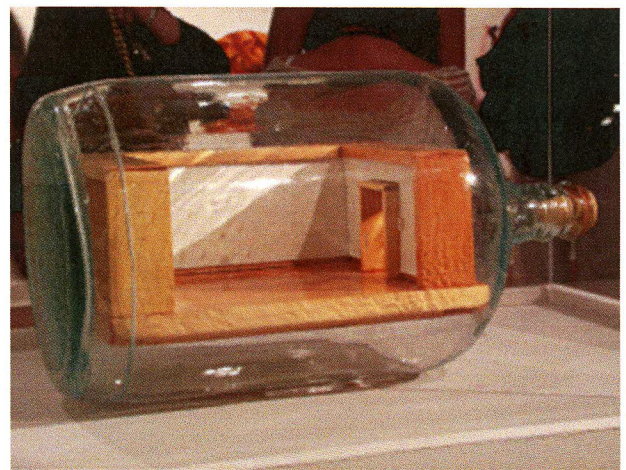
Oliver Herring via Skype during “Areas of Action”

“The way [art] is presented is as important as the way it’s created” Miller said during the discussion. Complementing the retrospective, presentation very literally became creation with the work of Oliver Herring. A large yellow alcove in the gallery was dedicated to “Areas of Action” a piece by the Brooklyn based artist. Via Skype Herring instructed three volunteers to interact with each other, the room, paint and other materials in various ways. The Skype feed was projected to the right side of the alcove, Herring watching over the performance and gallery-goers watching Herring.

At the other end of the gallery a series of abstracts on paper seemed to hang on the wall. The circular images on paper were photographed microscopic views of museum dust. Dust had been collected from various works of art in varying museums, cataloged, magnified, photographed and hung as its own exhibit. The images seem to simultaneously mock and indulge the near sacred awe we afford the works of art from which the dust had been gathered. The series fetishizes a common symbol of neglect or something forgotten. Mental images of layers of dust strengthen a mental connection between the Museum and the Mausoleum – a connection also made during the panel discussion – underscoring the often perceived impotence of museums to meaningfully connect with its audience.

Among many examples of the museum’s small galleries, Jack Massing’s stood ready for deployment. Massing’s exhibition space sat inside of a large glass carboy-like bottle. Eventually the bottle and the exhibit would be released into a bayou near his home, likely to drift into the Gulf of Mexico and the Gulf Stream. The typical concerns of audience, duration and setting are entirely abandoned, electing chance as a sort of curator.

Massing’s piece, along with the entire show, demonstrate that certain seemingly monolithic traits of our art institutions may be pliable and playful. Meaningful discourse between museums, its visitors, and its artwork can be resurrected. A museum can be more than the space it inhabits or even the sum of its collection.



Jack Massing’s seaworthy JEMA exhibit