

The New York Times: 'Fake Artifact by an Unknown? Sold! Bruce High Quality Skewers (and Seduces) the Art World' by Jesse McKinley. December 5, 2013.

Fake Artifact by an Unknown? Sold!
Bruce High Quality Skewers (and Seduces) the Art World



Karsten Moran for The New York Times

By JESSE MCKINLEY
Published: December 5, 2013

It's a tick or two into an early November morning, and at a basement club in NoHo, members of the city's most famous — and yet technically anonymous — art collective, the Bruce High Quality Foundation, are celebrating their latest lark.

That night, the group had opened a single show in two Manhattan galleries: "Meditations," largely devoted to a potentially decades-long project to recreate some 17,000 antiquities in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Greek and Roman collection ... in modeling clay like Play-Doh. It is simultaneously a massive act of homage and mockery. The artists are meticulously studying and expertly remaking dozens of pieces: busts, breast plates, life-size lions. But still, it's Play-Doh.

It's a telling example of the duality embedded in the Bruces, as they are known. For example, Bruce is a foundation in name only, apocryphally purported to honor an artist named Bruce High Quality who died in the Sept. 11 attacks. And while the group is officially veiled, it is not media shy. On this opening night, in fact, a tall, handsome sculptor with the group — we'll call him the Tall, Handsome Sculptor — with a face as rough hewed as his work has been entertaining a reporter with tales of current projects and future dreams.

Yet keeping secrets also remains at the top of his agenda. At one point, he heads to the bar, grabs a coaster and scribbles a liquor-stained memorandum of understanding: “I will not publish any information that I learned or did tonight,” he writes, “until the year 2115.”

He asks the reporter to sign and then emblazons the coaster with a wild scribble of his own, which — if you look closely — approximates the single word that defines both his and the collective’s work: “Bruce.”

That the Bruces have managed to gain wide acclaim while remaining largely unknown seems an unlikely trick. Anyone dialed into the art world — or able to search Google — can find pictures of various members of the foundation, sometimes alongside famous faces.

Devoted to the idea that an artwork should stand on its own — without the artist’s identity or biography affecting its worth — the group’s no-name ethos has, perhaps intentionally, proven to be a potent and lucrative creative tool for members and a seductive draw for collectors. The collective says that Bruce is a comment on “the contemporary context of art,” including occasional financial excess (see Francis Bacon and \$142.4 million), but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t participate. Last month, a haunting silk-screen by the foundation itself — “Hooverville,” depicting a panorama of New York and a couple of hobos — sold for \$425,000 at Sotheby’s. Pieces of the “Meditations” exhibition have also been snapped up for up to six figures, according to the dealer Mark Fletcher, who said all four pieces at his space on Washington Square had sold quickly, including a giant golden equestrian stature of Marcus Aurelius (with video monitors for its head and that of the horse he’s riding on). Almost all of the 26 pieces at a space used by Vito Schnabel, the collective’s New York dealer, also sold, with prices running to \$100,000.

And while Bruce is described by a spokesman for the group as “a nothing, a cipher, a mockery of the game playing out every day in the art world,” he seems awfully popular. In the last year the group, which works out of a spacious sixth-floor loft in Brooklyn, has been the subject of a retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum and exhibited work in Switzerland, Germany, London, Dubai, and Washington. The “Meditations” exhibition runs through Dec. 18, closing shortly after the group returns from displaying a new piece depicting a car crash — symbolizing “a deconstructed history of artistic passion” — at Art Basel Miami. “They’re in a good spot,” Mr. Schnabel said.

Over the years, the Bruces’ output has varied wildly in medium and message — films and videos, scripts, sculptures, installations and even plain old canvases. But fans say the works almost always convey two elements: a wicked sense of humor and overt comments on art history, including works riffing on Géricault’s “The Raft of the Medusa,” Picasso’s “Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R.)” and Christo’s “Gates.”

“The group looks at the art world as outsiders while being very much embedded in that world,” said Eugenie Tsai, a curator at the Brooklyn Museum who organized the exhibition there. “That’s a uniquely privileged position to be in.” Its members rarely give interviews in person, preferring the identity-cloaking of email. But on the condition that their names would be kept out of print yet verified by a reporter, a representative sat down with The New York Times. Why?

“A lot of pressure,” said an appointed Bruce spokesman, a quiet and slyly funny artist with blocky glasses and an East Village apartment. “And hope that by talking about it, it gets a clear picture out there of why we’re even in that conflicted place.”

Whether the group can remain both relevant and reclusive has become a point of debate inside the collective, according to the Bruce spokesman, who said the foundation had considered dropping the whole concept of declining to name its members. “Too often, for our tastes, Bruce is seen as the name of a group, like a band,” he said. “And that’s not what it is. The foundation is a fictional artist. It’s a work itself. We’re wondering, and we haven’t decided, if being more open about who the people behind it are would help make the distinction.”

All of which — the downtown cachet, the precocious success, the purposeful anonymity, the Play-Doh — has raised the inevitable questions of whether the group is guilty of success by gimmickry, or a rare example of the success of gimmickry. (New York magazine, for example, called the anonymity “pretentious drapery,” while judging “Meditations” to be “kind of interestingly pretentious.”)

Fans prefer the latter interpretation. “Their whole approach is, ‘Is this real or is this a joke?’” said Bob Colacello, an arts writer for Vanity Fair and an Andy Warhol biographer who has taken part in events with the group. “And a lot of people have a hard time understanding that it’s both.”

In the age of Banksy, it could just be that anonymity is the new prized currency, he said. “Everyone is famous now, as Andy predicted,” Mr. Colacello said. “So maybe anonymity becomes the new kind of glamour.”

The group, formed in the early 2000s by some students at Cooper Union, remains small: just eight people, give or take, a mix of male and female, artistic and administrative, in their 20s and early 30s. It’s a revolving and evolving group that has traditionally eschewed formal structure, with a decision-making process that sounds like part therapy and part college bull session.

“We just talk,” said the spokesman, “until we feel like we have the right answer.”

The early hype, he said, stirred worry among collectors that the collective might be “too freewheeling and crazy of a project to really have any longevity.”

“There was a hesitation for a number of years because, well, is this going to be anything five years from now, or is this just going to be a momentary blip?” he said.

Artistically, however, having a Bruce to hide behind has been liberating, particularly for young artists still trying to find their way. “We could try on different hats,” he said. “And try to do things that we normally wouldn’t do.”

To this day, not everyone in their orbit knows what is fake and what is real. Mr. Fletcher, for one, said that early on even he was confused about exactly who the Bruces were. “It was never told to me, and I never asked,” he said. “I literally just gave them a key.”

Mr. Schnabel, the 27-year-old son of the artist Julian Schnabel, who has also known the collective since its early days, said he had initially been drawn in by the group’s creation myth — “I probably realized it was fake right when they told me, but I wanted to believe” — and stayed around because of the quality of the work. (And, no doubt, the sales revenue.)

The Bruce spokesman said the foundation is a Such idealism appears genuine and is also behind the group’s free — and decidedly unaccredited — “university” on Avenue A in the East Village, something that it envisions as a challenge to the current system of arts education for young artists, which its spokesman calls “this big scary system that costs them \$200,000.” Described as a “learning experiment,” the curriculum includes art lectures, classes, critiques and movie nights. (There’s also talk of a school production of “West Side Story.”)

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The name Bruce High Quality came about in 2005, when the group had already completed a couple of projects as a collective, including a sendup of Robert Smithson's “Floating Island,” a patch of greenery on a barge that art-world planners launched off the shores of Manhattan that year. In response, the Bruces tailed Smithson's island in a motorboat with a floating exhibition of its own, a mock-up of one of Christo's Central Park “Gates.”

It was around that time that the group heard about a reality show being filmed in New York about fledgling artists. “We thought, ‘This is the most vile thing we've ever heard of — we have to go,’” said the Bruce spokesman.

So the group built a giant foam head on wheels, complete with movable eyes and mouth and space inside for several puppeteers. To audition, the puppet needed a voice, and the computer program that the collective used to create it had two settings: something called Bruce, and a better version called — you guessed it — Bruce, High Quality, the spokesman said. “We dropped the comma,” he said.

Today, that head hangs on the wall of the group's 12,000-square-foot studio on the Brooklyn waterfront with dozens of other Bruces, many of which contain a “Where's Waldo”-style signifier: a dangling cigarette from someone's mouth (or other body part). In the back-room is the production area for the pseudo-Play-Doh — they make it with flour, water, salt and pigment — and catalogs full of photos of actual Met antiquities. Dozens of works are in progress, including a 13-foot pillar.

The spokesman said he anticipated that the project would take about 90 years. “So I'll be dead, but someone else will be there,” he said.

He is a little more guarded about what the Bruces may end up doing next.

“We're in that lucky position where things sell, but we still have to wake up in the morning and figure out what we want to do,” he said. “And that still makes us ask the question: what's interesting to do now?”