



MUSEUMS & GALLERIES

ESCAPE TO ALCATRAZ

Ai Weiwei's *@Large* illuminates contemporary political ties to the historic prison-turned-tourist-destination.

By Sarah Burke

After visiting the new Ai Weiwei installation last week, a tour guide near the dock yelled out to me, “Hey, did you have a good time?” I must have been frowning, reflecting on the cells that I had just sat in, and the prisoners’ mugs. The seven works that were recently installed in the historic prison — and popular tourist destination — had made for stunning photos, but it didn’t feel right to say I had enjoyed my visit to “the Rock.”

Ai Weiwei is a prolific, Beijing-based, multidisciplinary artist and activist best known for his work concerning free speech and his radical use of social media. In 2011, he was detained by the Chinese government without any official charges for 81 days: he is still prohibited from leaving the country. But through a collaboration with the For-Site Foundation, Ai has developed and implemented *@Large*, an elaborate artistic intervention that he designed for Alcatraz and had shipped to the United States. It inhabits sections of the prison that are normally roped-off from the public.

The show centers on unjust incarceration, implying a relationship between confinement and censorship by focusing on political prisoners who have been incarcerated for critiquing their governments. The works point to a large number of specific historical instances, while also gesturing toward a conceptual oscillation between restriction and release.

For “Stay Tuned,” Ai chose a dozen songs and spoken-word recordings written by individuals who have been detained for creative expression, including Russian feminist punks Pussy Riot and Tibetan singer Lolo.

Each is played inside a small cell, in which visitors may sit on a metal stool and listen. The experience is one of immediate claustrophobia that is simultaneously intensified and appeased by the reverberating sounds of resilience. For “Trace,” Ai carpeted the floor of Alcatraz’s massive New Industries Building with portraits of political prisoners assembled from LEGOs. For “Blossom,” he filled bathtubs, sinks, and toilets in the prison’s psych ward with delicate beds of white porcelain flowers.

All seven pieces are exquisitely executed, breathtakingly positioned in the light coming through the old, broken windows of the prison’s deteriorating buildings. The distinct aesthetic of rusted metal, dark corners, and broken glass remains consistent throughout the entire park — until you exit into the clean, shiny, and over-crowded gift shop, that is.

Alcatraz makes for a somewhat troubling site for the installations because it invites visitors to consume a pre-packaged aesthetic of imprisonment, romanticizing and fictionalizing it for the sake of spectacle. Ai’s installation is almost explicitly intended to disrupt that one-dimensionality, relating the site to contemporary global politics, and asking viewers to recognize prisoners whose stories haven’t been glorified. In practice, though, the works flicker between contributing to the tourist-oriented presentation of those stories, and undermining it. The distinction ultimately pivots on the viewer’s decision to either engage thoughtfully with the works, or go home with a T-shirt.

Through April 26, 2015. \$30. For-Site.org



MUSEUMS & GALLERIES

THE FUTURE FRONTIER

All Exit by Jennifer and Kevin McCoy traces the American ideology of manifest destiny from the frontier to Silicon Valley and into the apocalyptic beyond.

By Sarah Burke

In the piece “Aerie,” a corporate tower with the Twitter logo sits atop a steep cliff. The cliff is a 2D cardboard cutout jutting out of a 3D sculpture of a mountain in front of an oil-painted landscape with a small screen showing footage of a corporate building floating in the sky above. The entire scene is encapsulated into a diorama housed in a small black box.

“Aerie” is the first piece you see when you enter *All Exit*, a show by Brooklyn-based artistic duo Jennifer and Kevin McCoy currently on view at Johansson Projects (2300 Telegraph Ave., Oakland). It physicalizes the various levels of abstraction involved in the representation of online corporate entities such as Twitter, by bringing together media that range from the realistic to the romanticized. In part, the show is interested in articulating the role of these Silicon Valley icons in contemporary cultural mythology, making them tangible in order to point out the way they are fictionalized.

Most of the artwork that aims to expose the shadowy underbelly of Silicon Valley comes from the Bay Area and points to specific instances of displacement or discrimination. But the McCoys are interested in the way that Silicon Valley as an icon fits into the broader cultural narrative, tracing the historical trajectory of the chase for free enterprise and the ways that it consistently overlaps with dreams of a utopian, tech-filled future. Part of that is identifying how the lawless appeal of the frontier still exists today, costumed in conservative political outfits. “This sort of

blending of political and philosophical thought meshed into business practice is such a uniquely American trope, and it’s sort of part of the American psyche,” said Kevin McCoy in an interview.

In “Priest of the Temple,” a cutout of tech titan Gordon Moore’s head juts out of a clay ruin of a corporate headquarters atop a mountain of rubble. A tiny screen showing a marketing video for a massage at a luxurious Silicon Valley spa is posted out front. Two cameras capture the diorama live, and run it to a mounted computer, where software that Kevin coded collages the footage in real time before another projector shines the kaleidoscope of imagery onto the facing wall. Meanwhile, eerie music sets an ominous tone.

The piece presents a metaphorical model of the system that feeds us mediated and mythicized culture, implying that the reality we are confronted with only comes to us through a series of filters. At the same time, it alludes to an apocalyptic future at the far end of the lineage it traces. Gordon Moore is both the cofounder of Intel and the father of Moore’s Law, the 1965 prediction that every two years, computing capacity would double — which has proved accurate to this day. It’s a progress narrative that exemplifies the broader push toward technological innovation and the dream world that comes with it. “That idea has had such vast cultural impact, but it also is by definition a kind of exponential,” Kevin said. “And exponentials eventually blow up.”

Through Jan. 3. JohanssonProjects.com or 510-444-9140.



CULTURE SPY

HOT DOG

Oakland native J. Otto Seibold, famous for his zany children's books about a dog named Mr. Lunch, brings his illustrations off the page.

By Sarah Burke

Mr. Lunch is a professional bird-chasing dog. In fact, he is so good that he gets invited to be on a television show to talk about his work. But, in order to get there, he has to take a plane, and he soon finds out that all dogs must ride with the luggage. So, Mr. Lunch has to find a way to keep himself calm and entertained throughout the trip.

That is the premise of illustrator J. Otto Seibold's first children's book, *Mr. Lunch Takes a Plane Ride*, written by Vivian Walsh. The 1993 debut was just the beginning of a long and fruitful career for the Oakland-born-and-based offbeat artist who has since illustrated fifteen more children's books, including many others featuring the famous Mr. Lunch — a Jack Russell terrier with a bulbous head and small black eyes. Seibold's books are popular for their wacky, retro cartoon aesthetic, which strays from conventional page compositions, and offers uncompromised originality and imagination.

When Seibold was in the process of publishing *Mr. Lunch Takes a Plane Ride*, his Viking Juvenile editor asked him to take out a sentence. "Mr. Lunch thought his passport photo looked handsome," it read. The editor likely thought that it wasn't relatable enough for kids. But Seibold isn't the type to pander to the assumed tastes of audience demographics. So, he agreed to make the change, then never did.

Seibold was able to sidestep the request because he was the first children's book author to publish a book with digitally rendered illustrations. At the time, Adobe illustrating software was still a new tool to the market. Most illustrating professionals hadn't even learned how to use its complex vector mapping mechanisms. Seibold mostly taught it to himself, eventually mastering the fresh aesthetic of flat color fields filled with totally even tones — like paper cutouts pasted together. His editor didn't know how to maneuver the program's dense interface. That gave Seibold the opportunity to send the book off to print the way he wanted it — a tactic he said he used on many occasions to worm around editorial demands.

Seibold emerged at a perfect time for his work. "It was a unique moment in children's publishing, where smart, contemporary stories and illustration styles were seen as commercially viable. This was before the internet wave crested and 'everything' became 'cool,'" Seibold recalled in the exhibition wall text. At the time, "outsider art" was all the rage, and if you were interesting enough, you could walk into a publishing house with a half-baked pitch and charm them into giving you a book deal then and there. That's how Seibold described the birth of his career as a children's book illustrator — along with a grateful attribution to "dumb luck" — at the press reception for the solo show of his work now up at the Contemporary Jewish Museum.

The exhibit, *J. Otto Seibold and Mr. Lunch*, is testimony to the fact that it's more than dumb luck that has pushed Seibold through his celebrated career. As Simpson's creator Matt Groening aptly pinpoints in the show's introductory wall text, "J. Otto Seibold has somehow been able to inject the digital medium with the wholesome, seemingly hand-drawn style of the best children's books." But it is lucky that he decided to keep the line about the passports, because that element of the story

now plays a big role in the show.

The exhibit centers around the *Mr. Lunch* series, presenting large prints of pages from a number of the books, along with original character and page sketches. But the exciting part is the interactive installations. When you walk into the show, you immediately encounter a life-size wooden rendition of the customs security checkpoint and airplane that Seibold illustrated in *Mr. Lunch Takes a Plane Ride*. That leads into an area with the jail cell housing Mr. Lunch in *Free Lunch*, and the canoe from *Mr. Lunch Borrows a Canoe*. As children enter, they can pick up a small passport with Mr. Lunch's handsome face on it, which they can add stamps to as they explore the gallery.

Seibold said it was important to him that the show be interactive in an analog way, without the screens and "clicky kiosks." In one corner of the room there is a big desk with a massive computer and tiny chairs surrounding it — all built to resemble blown-up versions of Seibold's 2-D illustrations. The desk is for Seibold's "office hours," at which he will be sitting in the gallery to do live illustrations for visitors. To do so, he needs a big Mac and a tablet, but he asked the builders to design a wooden housing for the monitor so that it would look like the unattractive, clunky machine that he used back in the 1990s. He prefers it "neutered from its luxurious, culty, silver Apple world," he said, letting a bit of his anti-capitalist sentiments show through, as well as his dislike for the hyper-clean tech aesthetic that he manages to dirty in his digital renderings. (Seibold once turned down a hefty TV show offer from Sony Columbia because he didn't want to put Mr. Lunch in creative hands he didn't trust.)

Standing in the fancy pressroom of CJM, in front of a sleek metal wall and across from an arrangement of tiny, ornate cupcakes, 54-year-old Seibold brought his subtly rebellious style to the room without the help of his art. He wore a slightly wrinkled purple paisley button-down and a pink hair clip securing back the bangs of his stringy, brown locks. In this manner, he explained to the attendees that his aim for the show was to appeal to that one student who really didn't want to get on the school bus. "There's always one kid who is the version of me with the teacher on each side," he said. That's the kid whose mind he hoped to change.

During the same introduction, someone asked CJM's executive director, Lori Starr, why Mr. Lunch belonged at the museum. Her answer was that Mr. Lunch is a quintessentially Jewish character, because he is an outsider. Throughout his journeys, he continuously struggles with alienation, learning to be proud of who he is and making things work his way. Even though he's a professional, he's forced to sit with the luggage because he's a dog, and yet he finds a way to cope by using his imagination. I think it's safe to say that Mr. Lunch makes sense as an incarnation of Seibold. And the show titled after the two offers an enjoyably multilayered opportunity for visitors of all ages to appreciate people and aesthetics that don't comply with the conventions handed to them — and succeed because of that. Seibold obviously knows that he's not a typical children's book author, but he also seems sure that that doesn't matter. As his bio states on the inside jacket of his books: "J. Otto draws all the time. It's his job. He is a professional." ●