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ART

Street Matter — Decay & Forever / Golden Age

By KAHLIL ROBERT IRVING | 30 NOV 2018



In “Street Matter — Decay & Forever / Golden Age,” St. Louis-based artist Kahlil Robert Irving manipulates ceramics to retrace the legacy of colonialism and industrialization. His collage-like, trompe l’oeil sculptures evoke nostalgia while simultaneously overloading the viewer with information—not unlike the experience of living in our digital era. As told to The Offing, Irving illuminated on the meaning and process behind a selection of his works.



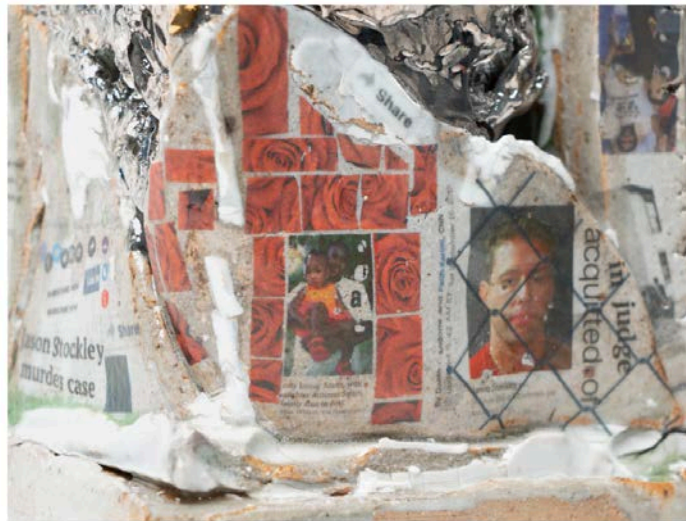
This one is called *3 Cans for Freedom; JASON STOCKLEY IS A MURDERER, (LIKE, COMMENT, SHARE)*. I've been thinking about collecting, or how we get our news from Facebook or some digital realm—like on the phone or on the computer or also newspaper-based information—and information transformation to how things are, how things have been represented historically. This is an opalescent covering on top of blue dish—it's where you put your silverware after you're done eating. It's a design from a Hungarian factory, from an industrial design class when I was working there last fall, next to a to-go container made out of porcelain soda cans, which is made out of porcelain, too. This amalgamation is tying back to St. Louis with specific references to Jason Stockely, who's a cop who killed a man in 2011.



Detail of *3 Cans for Freedom; JASON STOCKLEY IS A MURDERER, (LIKE, COMMENT, SHARE)*, 2018.

The lids, I made these in Hungary. They're lids to terrines or to jars like a soup container. It references the industrial produced ceramics that then also stem from Europeans trying to figure out some way to replicate Asian ceramics—Japanese, Korean, Chinese. Porcelain comes from Kaolin, a mountain in Jingdezhen, China. It's not really porcelain until it gets a stamp by a factory. And then some of it is made in Europe to look like Asian ceramics. And so I'm thinking about that historical trajectory and making these works reference that whole set of production that then comes to the United States. This is a reference to that whole trajectory that's embedded in each work.

How is colonialism embedded within our our day-to-day experience—in soup containers, in a newspaper, in the patterns that we see? But then, it's also deconstructed in a way that's re-amassed and then redesigned in ceramic material.



Rose Memorial 2018 edition: (RIP ALH) – STL, 2018.

Using texts to think about and delineate form, I also think about it as figuring out: how is it decoration? When is text so present that it's just decorative? And when is the situation of killing black people—unarmed black people—or the encounters or issues of colonialism or imperialism just decoration? When you see images of white people making porcelain objects that have Asian people depicted in the imagery that makes me really scratch my head. Or the [Moor figurines](#).

We're constantly reminded that we're inhuman, that we're lesser than. And so for me, these are memorial objects of the experience of this environment and what happens in this environment—but then really privileging the assassination or the murder or the killing, and also highlighting the person who did it or and who's doing it.

I feel like these sculptures are a bit more cacophonous than my previous works, which were very strictly composed. It's almost like walking in Times Square, and you're bombarded by all of these things, all these people, and all the screens, where it's much more layered and much more complicated.



Mixed Methods and Matter; Why did a cop kill a MAN – (Share, Share, Share) @wescaf and Basquiat, 2018.

Being from a mixed race parentage, I had seen this relationship of being from the states but not really being from the states. It's kind of like being from a non-place. And I think that's something that really draws me to make these works and build them in this cacophonous manner. My life is not cacophonous, but it's not "normal." If I am seen in many ways that is not normal, then how do I also figure out the placement of that? How do I place the work in this not normal setting? So then that in itself would advance the reality or the understanding of making with not only this material but with this set of information. And then maybe we'll be able to read things and see things in a whole other way.

One idea that has constantly been going through my head is reminding the oppressor of their behavior. I'm reminding the system that the system is why we are where we are.



Multi – single stacks, Jacks (cigarettes) & Coke: 123456789, 2018.

When I use a symbol, I try not to be too far away. So like the soda, like on the surface of the bottle—we know that’s referencing some kind of drink, and it’s an encapsulated in a brand of sorts. There’s a large, zoomed-in image of cigarettes, cigarette butts. But then there’s a small-scale image, a zoomed-in image of an event in St. Louis or protest against Jason Stockely being acquitted. So scale-shift is also interesting. I’m interested in when does something become larger or smaller, and then how is that translated or not understood.

I think about Ed and Nancy Kienholz, who are post-war artists. They’re dealing with some similar content like I am, but they are using found objects, and they render and transform the materials in a very different way. They have a very different experience with the world than I do. But the way they make, and the way they present, is something that’s interesting to me. I’m also trying to figure out how to make work that’s also timeless. Like when is it not set in a time? Even though I’m using this information that’s imagery in this text, is it only relative to the time in which I’ve made it in? Can it span and go further?

“Street Matter — Decay & Forever / Golden Age” is on view at the Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery at Wesleyan University until December 9, 2018.

Kahlil Robert Irving is an artist born in San Diego, California, in 1992, currently living and working in St. Louis. He attended the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Art, Washington University, in St. Louis (MFA, 2017) and the Kansas City Art Institute (BFA, Art History and Ceramics, 2015). In 2017, Callicoon Fine Arts mounted his first solo exhibition in New York titled Streets:Chains:Cocktails.