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From Portland With Love

SEAN JOSEPH PATRICK CARNEY, NICOLE MARIE MILCHAK, AND STEPHEN SLAPPE

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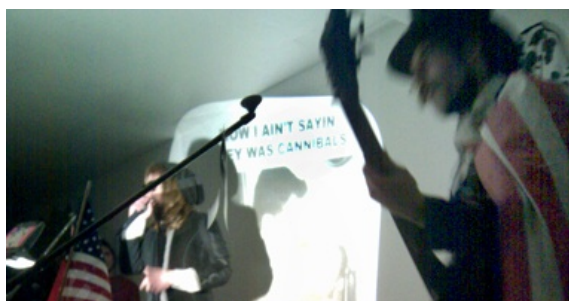
LIVE WORK

by *Carol Anne McChrystal*

The three pieces of video, installation, and performance at Michael Zheng’s artist-run project-space, LiVE WORK, revel in the self-conscious and secret sphere of the teenager. Punctuated by a DIY sensibility, *From Portland with Love* takes as its starting point the production of culture, and resonates with the liminal headspace of the teenager and resistant subcultures. Zines, punk rock accessories, and notebook doodles complexly layer a certain nostalgia, which lends itself to a sense of anxiety and uneasiness, with notions of human agency in cultural production and identity formation.

Stephen Slappe’s fifteen-minute, split screen video *Shelter in Place* (2009) evokes the films of [Jon Moritsugu](#), as well as Gregg Araki’s 1997 teen-apocalypse flick *Nowhere*. Intercut with 1980s news footage about the Carbide Union Disaster, the Cold War, and general middle class malaise, this is the sweetie-pie story of two punk teens—caricatures that dance in their respective bedrooms, listen to records, and intermittently chat on the phone. As nuclear power plants and oil refineries fade onto the green-screened bedroom walls, all manner of punk accessories are wondrously transferred back and forth through the telephone line. Addressing notions of revolt, rebellion, and resistance, the video is reminiscent of Tony Oursler’s *DTAOT: Combine (Don’t Trust Anyone Over Thirty, All Over Again)* (2005). In a similar way, Slappe’s video asks a basic question about critical power and human agency. Using analog media as analogy, *Shelter in Place* touches on the willfulness of youth to exert energy in the image of resistance. Ultimately, the teenagers themselves are transported into outer space as the logical extreme of their own human-energy loop. As beautiful, shimmering waves of energy encompass their naked bodies, which drift hand-in-hand through the cosmos, it’s clear that their resistant identities are merely images of disruption, existing always and only in that culturally scripted place designated for subversion, resistance, and opposition.

Sean Joseph Patrick Carney’s performance, *Joaquin Phoenix’s DONNER DANCE PARTY* (2010), takes a similar small leap from the production of mainstream culture. An amusing recombination of recent Top 40 hip hop hits with radically altered lyrics, this thirty-minute “hip-opera tells the tale of the Donner Party’s ill-fated westward journey across the United States in the mid-nineteenth century.”¹ Carney performs this piece in the guise of “actor-turned-rapper-turned-actor-again” Joaquin Phoenix—a cultural performer who reportedly, in recent history, has [performed the performance of culture](#).²





Sean Joseph Patrick Carney. *Joaquin Phoenix's DONNER DANCE PARTY*, 2010. Performance.



Stephen Slappe. *Shelter in Place*, 2009; production still. Photo: Sarah Meadows.

Complementing Carney's piece are comical, hastily-Photoshopped visual aids, projected using an old-school overhead projector. Deliberately undercutting his own finely-tuned cultural performance, these visual aids exclaim things like, "After fifty rich years of performance art, this guy is doing *this*?" The performance and accompanying zine give the impression of an effortless unpacking or illustration of Baudrillard's indices—hyperreality, simulacra, infinite reference, spectacle, and celebrity are flippantly intertwined with inside-out temporality and pop hits. Encouraging the viewer to delight in an SNL-style humor that's rooted in anachronism—exploring the line between art and entertainment—Carney doesn't travel far from his starting point. His recombination of elements of our constructed and produced culture suggests that the possibilities of cultural production are already limited from the get-go. Carney's awkward antagonism implies that all subjects in this total system are merely a function of culture, even as we pile on and peel off the layers of variables.

Nicole Marie Milchak's installation, *Disenchanted Pony: a Prelude to a Sequel* (2010), reconstructs the intimate space of a teenage bedroom; two sets of paper-doll-esque cutouts of shrouded figures and multi-horned-unicorn-goat-creatures are affixed atop twin turntables rotating at 33 RPM. Invoking teenage dilettante bedroom boredom, the turntables are neatly dripped with a fresh coat of candle wax and dusted beneath with a clumping of glitter. Makeshift wallpaper, layered in repeating and non-repeating patterns, resembles high-school notebook doodles of Baphomet Pentagrams, evil ice creams, and other vaguely gothy organic forms. A framed picture of a non-objective, hellish landscape hangs next to a photograph that's been manipulated to depict a sinister Keane—a mass-produced, sad-eyed waif that stares down a viewer. *Disenchanted Pony* rearticulates an inquiry into our correlation of innocence with the notions of youth and femininity, but never considers these notions without their corresponding darker aspects. Milchak's installation is part *Emily the Strange*, part Sue DeBeer meets Banks Violette, and part 2:00 a.m. skinny-dipping.

Unlike Araki's doomed teenage apocalypse, *From Portland With Love* is particularly sweet and even hopeful. Each work

is rife with analog and obsolete media—the overhead projector, rotary phones, and turntables—and, thus, a patina of nostalgia complicates the relationship between cultural production and resistant identity construction. While the works are sometimes irreverent in tone, they remain academic in spirit, each operating decidedly and politely within the given limits of the chosen media, as well as within the arena of official “art.” There’s an adolescent aura that’s employed not in an angsty, “Fuck you, Dad!” way, but a dancing-in-your-bedroom-mirror-core kind of way. While *From Portland With Love* can be said to address the complexity of identity formation in relation to the larger production of culture, each work only topically invokes a DIY spirit, serving only to illustrate, rather than enact, a relationship with resistance. The show reinforces the idea that these types of subcultures are, in actuality, a performance of resistance—a cultural script that names the culture and the subsequent positing of an opposition. Nevertheless, by taking this cultural script as a space of possibility, *From Portland with Love* could be a fun, engaging, and optimistically refreshing show. The works, executed with conviction, manage to sidestep slipping into a vapid wasteland of either the youth-driven consumer culture or the fruitlessly nostalgic.

FROM PORTLAND WITH LOVE IS ON VIEW AT [LIVE WORK](#), IN SAN FRANCISCO, THROUGH DECEMBER 4, 2010.

NOTES:

1 LIVE WORK. “Sean Joseph Patrick Carney—Joaquin Phoenix’s Donner Dance Party.”

2 Sean Joseph Patrick Carney, *Joaquin Phoenix’s Donner Dance Party* ’Zine (Self-published, 2010).