

Rutland Herald

This is a printer friendly version of an article from www.rutlandherald.com

To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[Back](#)

Article published Sep 17, 2009

Futuristic visions

Art of Action comes to Brattleboro

Ah, the future. Until recently, typical futuristic scenarios in pop culture and art were ubiquitous and involved human-like robots serving us tea and then turning on us and wreaking murderous havoc, or intergalactic war-torn cities, or cars flying among the tops of skyscrapers. Since the early part of this decade, society's obsession with the future seems to have died down, as the current political landscape, state of perpetual war and economic fluctuations imbue the present with far too much immediate consequence to think about how our leisure time, work life, etc. may look a century or two down the line. Humans are thinking squarely about "us" and "now."

This stands as ironic, given the fact that our current sociopolitical situations will directly affect the future of society. Why hasn't there been a Hollywood field day green-lighting post-WWIII desolation films? Where's the Nicholas Cage year-2315 thriller with evil hackers using deprivatized health care as a way to inject people's medicines with a virus? Where are the Adult Swim cartoons about stem cell research having created a race of super-humans?

My theory is this: We are no longer obsessed with possible futures because we are, in fact, living in a surreal, convoluted version of the futuristic images we already set up over the course of the past century, and we are so jaded and inundated with the hyper-technological reality of our own design that we can't even fathom what next year will resemble, not to mention the far future.

Think about magic conversations with floating heads on a screen in "Fahrenheit 451" or "Star Trek" the next time you're video-Skyping with your buddy in South Africa while simultaneously IMing your boss in your e-mail box during a Facebook conversation with someone in Alaska you've never met. While driving.

As a culture, we are so wayward and schizophrenic that we're starved for clear, logical options of what the future brings. And within this, our little state gets big points. Vermont — on the level of socioeconomic and arts initiatives — has gone against the grain and become focused on what the technology, changing patterns of global trade, changing nature of government trickle-down effects and communication patterns of today will dictate for the future of the state and society at large. (For those interested, the Council on the Future of Vermont — futureofvermont.org — is a good base of information). The most publicized of these initiatives, and that which has the potential to be most effective at a street level — is the statewide Art of Action: Shaping Vermont's Future Through Art tour, coming to Brattleboro's River Garden this Saturday from noon to 4 p.m.

Art of Action was conceived through a collaboration between Alex Aldrich, Vermont Arts Council executive director, and seventh-generation Vermonter Lyman Orton, fabled philanthropist and entrepreneur who owns the multimillion-dollar enterprise The Vermont Country Store.

Sixty-seven year-old Orton is an avid collector of Vermont art, and decided in 2006 that his next collection would be one that was not yet painted. Being a Yankee from the old school, he'd always been interested in the patterns of cultural change he saw happening from one generation to the next, and wanted to commission a group of artists to create individual series of works addressing what they saw as issues essential to the development of the state's future.

Orton engaged in talks with Aldrich. Together they decided to request open proposals from artists based on data from a Council on the Future of Vermont report wherein hundreds of Vermonters were asked their thoughts on the state's future. The search was not relegated to Vermont: 300 applicants from 26 states and 3 foreign countries applied, with a scant 20 finalists chosen.

In February of this year, 10 winners were awarded equal shares of the hefty \$250,000 commission to create their large-scale projects. These artists — all from Vermont, coincidentally or not — are Curtis Hale of Danville, Gail Boyaijan of Strafford, John Miller of Coventry, Kathleen Kolb of Lincoln, Phillip Godenschwager of Randolph, Valerie Hird of Burlington, Janet McKenzie of Island Pond, Susan Abbott of Marshfield, Annemie Curlin of Charlotte and David Brewster of Halifax.

A primary goal was to create a media buzz around issues of the day and those of the future, with the Arts Council supplying a running update of artists' progress, artists creating special Web sites and blogs to showcase their works' evolution, etc. Some of the issues tackled through paint, sculpture and photography are infrastructure, conservation of the natural landscape, big-box retail culture, labor and landscape, and community-based cultural change. Works range from seemingly quaint landscapes to garish, dystopic visions of psychedelic realms, with Brewster's work being exemplary of the latter.

The collective 105 pieces began a planned yearlong tour on Sept. 1 in Manchester, and makes its second stop at the gala event in Brattleboro, with Aldrich, Orton and Ellen McCullough — president of Marlboro College, member of the Council on the Future of Vermont and past executive director of the President's Committee on Arts and Humanities under President Clinton — on hand for discussion. The exhibition remains at the River Garden until Sept. 30, when it makes it way to Windsor on Oct. 1 and then Rutland on Oct. 12.

Extending the mission to engage dynamically with the future, a preview party of the Brattleboro exhibition occurs tonight at 5:30 p.m., focusing on the first ever "Tweet-In Festival." Twitter is the social networking Web site, wherein users are granted a 140-character maximum to express single thoughts or bullets of information to their contacts. It has rampantly caught on. During the two weeks that Art of Action is at River Garden, spectators are encouraged to "tweet" — the verb for using Twitter — about the exhibit, their thoughts about Vermont and its future, and the social issues

addressed by the artworks. Tonight's preview is called the Twitter Town Meeting and guests will have access to computers; tweets will be compiled and sent to the legislature.

How long tweeting or Vermont's current culture will last is anyone's guess, but dreaming up and discussing a future world, for good or for worse, is never wasted time.

Correction from last week: Singer Haale, a subject in last week's Southerly Exposure, worked with battered and homeless women in the past although was not battered and homeless herself. Also, her Bellows Falls concert takes place Saturday.

Clara Rose Thornton is a freelance cultural critic and arts journalist originally hailing from Chicago who now lives in an artists' colony in Bellows Falls. She can be reached at clara@inkblotcomplex.com, or through her Web site, clararosethornton.com.
