

Monday, November 29, 2010

## The Posthumously Working Artist

*Brian Joiner still exhibiting and curating after his death*

By Selena Reder



Many artists have a story about Brian Joiner.

"We saw each other across a crowded gallery room," Pam Kravetz says. "Cliché, but true. He looked at my art and said, 'Girl, you should be famous.' "

"Brian was kind and friendly with a strong, deep voice," Antonio Adams says.

"One of the sweetest things Brian did for me was to show up one day with a book of Karl Blossfeldt photographs. He wanted me to have it because it reminded him of my work," Celene Hawkins says.

Cincinnati artist Brian Joiner had a powerful body of work behind him and an ambitious career ahead of him when he passed away this October. Among his many honors, *Cincinnati Magazine* named him "Best Portrait Artist" in 1999, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center selected him for a prestigious commission in 2004 and in 2009 he was awarded the Duncanson Artist-in-Residence at the Taft Museum of Art. Cancer put his plans on hold but it did not derail them. That's why even after his death, he has a group exhibit opening this Friday at Prairie Gallery.

Joiner brought his proposal for the exhibit to David Rosenthal in early 2010. The idea was to invite 14 artists to join him in a world of fantasy and indulgence — making art inspired by chocolate. In his gallery statement, Joiner described his exhibit *Chocolat* "as an escape, a feel-good, light hearted, poetic vision of artists' experience with chocolate." He produced this show once before at Flowers and Beyond in Over-the-Rhine almost a decade ago and

wanted to bring it back at Prairie.

Joiner began work on *Chocolat* this year, along with a solo exhibit at PAC Gallery titled *Hold On! Change is Coming!* Joiner was diagnosed with liver cancer and entered hospice before he could finish his curatorial work. Rosenthal kept Joiner's vision alive by following up with artists and moving forward with plans for the exhibit. Joiner passed away on Oct. 8. Now, *Chocolat* has become a way for the 14 participating artists to pay tribute to Joiner's life and career.

Adams' tribute to Joiner includes five drawings titled *The Life History of Brian Joiner*. Bill Ross of Thundersky Inc. interviewed Adams (who is developmentally disabled) on my behalf, e-mailing me with responses. For *Chocolat*, Adams says the initial concept was to tell Joiner's life story as part fantasy and part real-life. The marker drawings with text, illustrate the stages of Joiner's life from adolescence to adulthood. The last drawing is a portrait of Joiner, straddling the living and spirit world, literally split down the middle. Adams responds to Brian's death with directness and immediacy, letting us in on his grief without reservation.

Hawkins found it difficult to continue her work for this exhibit after Joiner's death but she has persevered. Her sculptures are metal coated in chocolate, making something inedible appear indulgent.

"These pieces reference the duality of seduction and denial. They look delicious but are not," Hawkins says.

Cedric Michael Cox says his acrylic painting for *Chocolat* explores sensuality. Speaking by phone, Cox tells me he draws inspiration from the green leaves and red pods of the cocoa plant.

"Sometimes they have these orange colors, cadmium reds and burnt sienna," Cox says of the cacao pod.

These warm earth tones are also a familiar color palette in his current exhibit *Transcending Horizons* at the Weston Art Gallery.

"When I was prepping for my show at the Weston, I looked at Brian who not only filled the Weston Gallery but worked relentlessly and lovingly," Cox says. "That was an amazing inspiration for me."

Kravetz illustrates her relationship with Joiner and with chocolate in two narrative quilts.

"Many of my narrative quilted dolls, wall pieces and marionettes deal with my love/hate relationship with food," Kravetz says. "Creating art for the *Chocolat* show was a perfect vehicle for me to continue this dance."

Paying homage to Joiner is her 8-foot tall "Dark Chocolate Man" a marionette with dark chocolate candy quilted onto the surface.

Other artists working directly with chocolate include Terrence Hammonds. He explains that his portrait of Larry Blackmon is a silkscreen done in chocolate syrup. It might have you singing Cameo's 1986 hit "Candy." Matt Morris makes use of white chocolate for an installation that acts as a visual metaphor for edible delicacies. Morris will also serve white chocolate baked goods so that guests can consume his art.

Joiner planned to make a limited-edition print for the show. In keeping with his plans, Rosenthal has selected a self-portrait Joiner made in 2008 owned by Sara Vance, who has given permission to create a fine-art reproduction for the exhibit. In the painting, Joiner depicted himself wearing a crown, working in what he called his "Cubist style" with accents of folk and outsider art.

Rosenthal also selected a number of Joiner's paintings and drawings for display in *Chocolat*, including a portrait of the artist's mother. Irene Joiner cradles a pearl in her palm. Her face and hand are classically rendered, but Joiner leaves the paper blank where he would have depicted her stomach.

"That space is so gut wrenching to me," Rosenthal says. "It's like she's this empty vessel contemplating this tiny pearl."

For Rosenthal, it speaks to a complicated relationship between mother and son.

"As much as he worked in traditional media I think he was a very bold, daring artist," Rosenthal says still musing over the way Joiner worked the negative space in his drawings.

---

**CHOCOLAT, a group exhibit curated by Brian Joiner, opens Friday at Prairie Gallery (4035 Hamilton Ave., Northside; 513 557-3819) with a reception from 6-9 pm. The show runs through Feb. 5. A portion of proceeds from the exhibition's sales benefit the Taft Museum of Art's Duncanson Society. Find more details at [www.prairiecincinnati.com](http://www.prairiecincinnati.com).**

---

{Island}