

(The following is an excerpt from the exhibition catalog for “Break Up and Tear Downs; Kveck, Russ and Stellmon”, at The Barrick Museum 2015-2016.)

Dangerous Viewing

by Danielle Kelly

Try as we might to keep it nice and tight, life is a messy, messy beast of a thing. Hearts get broken and loyalties betrayed, but we keep on keeping on as we tidy up and move along. Beyond daily transgressions, the world today can feel horrifying, ugly, terrifying and impossible. Out of control.

For decades, artists have used artistic processes to navigate and articulate the complexities of existence. Theater, dance, music, poetry, and visual art can express a sensation in ways words cannot. It can destroy villains, reveal false gods, offer an escape route, uncover light in the dark and point the way to hope on the horizon. Collage is a particularly lethal process. The act of tearing apart material culture and reorganizing it to open up meaning, interpretation and accessibility remains ever on the avant-garde of art making.

Since the turn of the 20th Century, artists have used collage as a method for processing first the horrors of war and, by extension, the contemporary condition. Recoiling in the face of World War I and a society that made it possible, Dada retaliated by championing a mode of art-making that was absurd, satirical and dangerous. Among its most profound contributions to the history of art, collage and assemblage tore apart the dominant aesthetic currency and skewered the hypocrisy of reigning cultural norms. It was dangerous work.

What is it to look at something dangerous? Or better yet, to produce dangerous viewing? Hannah Hoch, a marginalized Dadaist, was on the vanguard of collage and photomontage. A designer, Hoch applied what were likely techniques already employed in publishing or print media to visual art. The result was a body of work that radically and fearlessly examined politics, proto-feminism, aesthetics, the body and the gaze, all with humor and an incomparable ability to seduce the eye.

Wendy Kveck, JK Russ and Erin Stellmon each have a relationship to Hoch and her collage sensibilities, whether stated or implied.

While perhaps not directly Dadaist in nature, each artist implodes and reconstructs existing culture, materials, shapes, icons, symbols or ideas and re-imagines or reshapes them into something else, demanding another kind of consumption. They share more than a relationship to Las Vegas. From the personal and playful to the political or profound, they share Break Ups and Tear Downs.

Break ups and tear downs are a brutal business. We build relationships with people, things or ideas, only to have them ripped from our hands whether by choice or by chance-change, as they say, is the only constant. Architecture is no exception. Buildings embed themselves into the psyche. People spend time with architecture, creating memories: we live, we work, we experience sorrow, pain and joy.

Architecture cradles reminiscence, real or imagined; it nurtures real life events and inspires elaborate fictions for lives we might never lead. An occupied building pulses with the residue of vitality; an empty building is unnervingly still amid the vacuum of life it has relinquished, or perhaps never knew. It waits for existence. Then there is the physical mess of breaking and tearing: concrete and I-beams, splintered wood and peeling paint. The carcass of a building, abandoned or demolished, is haunting and vulnerable. Architecture effortlessly assumes corporeal status. Thank goodness Erin Stellmon is there to pick up the pieces.

Although not all of the artist's work is architecturally inspired, Stellmon leaves a trail of reinvented buildings that intrinsically address recurring concerns: impermanence and chance, empowerment and change, luck and loss, and the comfort and confines of memory. Beginning with the "Restoration" series, Stellmon seizes iconic Las Vegas structures, disassembling and rebuilding in form and idea. "Silver Slipper Restoration" and "Binion's Horseshoe Restoration", pieces from the series, imagine a fleeting moment of slippage in the lifespan of two quintessential Las Vegas neon signs as they become new and whole again. The works isolate and disembody key design elements of the signs, transforming them into dynamic-and heroic-whirlwinds of change. In Stellmon's hands, these oft disregarded remnants of pop culture have the stamina to stand down the fickle fortunes of taste and trends. Their most winning design components, articulated and elevated, explode with effusive joy at renewed sentience.

Las Vegas architecture and its well-documented embrace of reinvention is a gift that keeps on giving. Moving from signs to buildings, Stellmon examines lost landmarks and new ones, with a critical eye to urban planning and architectural styles along the way. Works like "The Ogden" and "Desert Bloom" re-imagine a more honest architecture, Rorschach-like shapes rearranged to convey alternate meanings, strategies or intentions behind a facade. In its stealth critique of gentrification, the work is as sinister as it is sublime. Other "paintings" detach and animate bits and pieces of structures, cast by Stellmon as

characters in stories of danger and daring-do. Neon sign fragments seek refuge from an unknown threat in “Run to the Hills”, while a Godzilla-like creature battles forces of glass and steel in “I Ain’t Got Time to Bleed”.

Stellmon’s remarkable eye for composition, deconstruction and reanimation is not confined to architecture; works like “Repeater” and “Empire” are cleft from a variety of architectural sources and mutated into dimensional wall sculptures born of an intergalactic world utterly their own. “Tilt” reassembles the strata of a pinball game into a floating chimerical wizard, a puzzling terrain of dancing shapes and bright, shiny temptations. Throughout all of her work, familiar pop cultural imagery erupts: evil fortresses, sci-f monsters, citadels and princesses, carnies and mazes, heroes and villains, rock gods and rock operas.

This practice of taking existing structures and re-purposing them through painting, installation and collage is cathartic. Stellmon’s deconstruction can make the object of her attention appear vulnerable, but it always emerges stronger from the process, often revealing hidden tenacity. Obscure buildings or frameworks are liberated from false meaning. For Stellmon, reinvention is an exercise in empowerment. “It goes back to building with blocks or making forts and then tearing them down and rebuilding. (The work) resemble castles, cathedrals, circus tents or sci-f film sets because that is what my ideal future looks like.” We have the power to remake our reality.

Like all three of the artists in *Break Ups and Tear Downs*, medium is thoughtfully selected and cunningly haptic in its ability to inform the visual experience. Stellmon’s creative use of materials imbue humility and sincerity, if not a heavy dose of nostalgia. Torn and cut paper, vintage fabrics, and shrinky dinks carry very personal, relatable meaning. Different eras and ages collide in the artist’s hand-wrought recreations of memory and form.

The pinball-inspired “Tilt” more directly overlaps with Stellmon’s ruminations on luck, chance and choice. The newest series represented in the exhibition, “13 times...”, considers the hidden opportunities in a perceived peril and the corrective potential of superstition. It is also a welcome opportunity to engage Stellmon’s one of a kind drawings. Installed, according to the artist, as a kind of “choose your own adventure series”, small framed works alternately depict delicate renderings of four leaf clovers with lottery cards, sink holes and ladders. “Is a sink hole lucky if it didn’t swallow your house? Is the insect that ate that 4 leaf clover the luckiest bug ever?” asks Stellmon. What if walking under a ladder is the quickest route to the winning lottery ticket? And maybe a sinkhole is a window into

another world or another you. Finding it just takes a little luck and a willingness to fail. "Sand to Sea," one of the artist's expansive mural-based installations, merges for Break Ups and Tear Downs many of Stellmon's recurring motifs and meditations. Recently relocating from Las Vegas to Baltimore, the piece would not be out of place in the artist's "Restoration" series. Incorporating iconic and vaguely similar architectural symbols from both cities, "Sand to Sea" depicts an in-between space of possibility and hope, a threshold of transformation. It is a farewell to the place she called home for a decade amidst the welcome embrace of new shapes, icons and ideas. There is always an element of autobiography to Stellmon's work, and "Sand to Sea" is no exception. In the face of collapse and loss, the artist always depicts the optimism at the eye of the storm. Her work looks destruction in the eye and laughs, breathing life into the inanimate and bestowing unimaginable opportunities to be powerful, brave and alive.