

JUSTIN LOWE

MATRIX 159

JUNE 3 - SEPTEMBER 5, 2010



WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

WEREWOLF KARAOKE

Enter the Wadsworth Atheneum's Avery Court, an International Style architectural interior that features three open floors of collections galleries. On the ground floor of the 1934 Avery Memorial building, twentieth-century Modern European paintings by such artists as Salvador Dalí, Giorgio de Chirico, and René Magritte¹ line the walls that surround a dramatic, Baroque fountain *Venus with Nymph and Satyr*, created in 1600 by French artist Pietro Francavilla. Such surprising juxtapositions—the presentation of artworks separated by hundreds of years within the same space—were typical of the visionary A. Everett “Chick” Austin, Jr. Director of the Wadsworth from 1927 to 1944, Austin was instrumental in the design of the Modern interior of the Avery Memorial. Today, one of the smaller galleries lining the east side of the courtyard appears to have been converted into a lavatory, given the familiar “restroom” signage on the door.

The usually pristine courtyard is upset by the condition of the restroom door—well worn, grungy even, and vandalized. Cross the threshold and face the shock of a derelict bathroom covered with an endless swarm of graffiti. No surface has been spared. Walls, counter, ceiling, stalls, bulletin board, and even the porcelain elements, bear the vibrant tags of an ever-changing graffiti work. Throughout, the attention to detail is convincingly real. Can this neglected space really be the museum's restroom?

So begins the experience of Justin Lowe's *Werewolf Karaoke*, described by the artist as “a new site-specific installation comprised of four interconnected rooms that reference different aspects of the Wadsworth's collections through an intense collage process.”² Lowe's four spaces—a restroom, passageway, gallery, and video room—are distinctly different in every sense. He likens the abrupt transitions from one room to another to filmic jump cuts, which express the installation's strange and completely immersive disjunction. Additionally, each space possesses a unique time and place in the universe, drawing parallels with the Wadsworth's Austin House, the former home of Chick Austin. Conceived by Austin, the exterior was modeled on a sixteenth-century Venetian villa and its room interiors designed in entirely different artistic styles: Rococo, Art Deco, and the International Style.

Anchoring the exhibition, Lowe's public lavatory poses a stark contrast to, and vast reconsideration of the typical period-room subject, most often a salon from a private mansion, as those on view at the Wadsworth Atheneum. The museum's collections include two American period rooms from prominent Connecticut families: the Wetmore Parlor (1746) with its masterful ornamental painting and regional craftsmanship, and the Goodwin Reception Room (1871–74), highlighted by strong color and Victorian-era opulence. Justin Lowe's contemporary counterpart for the early American period rooms is rooted in and around the 1970s in the notoriously filthy, graffiti-covered bathroom of the legendary New York punk and hardcore music club CBGB (1973–2006). Widely considered the birthplace of American punk movement, this temple of the



JUSTIN LOWE, *HELTER SWELTER*, 2006
INSTALLATION VIEW AT OLIVER KAMM/5BE GALLERY, NEW YORK
COURTESY OF OLIVER KAMM



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COURTESY OF OLIVER KAMM

cutting-edge music scene certainly merited preservation,³ but ultimately receives a grand tribute through Lowe's own version of an unforgettable, colorful restroom.

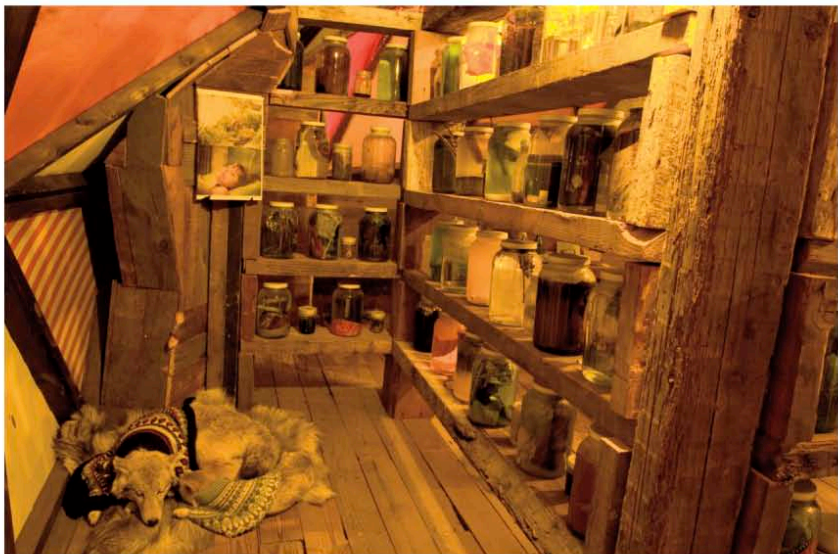
Beyond the graffiti-embellished restroom as installation art, Lowe also finds interest in the restroom as a "multipurpose" space, in all its public and private uses. Outside of the intended function as a place to relieve oneself, a public restroom like CBGB's has seen it all—sex, drugs, fights, life and death. As a site for expression, these walls *do* talk with a wide variety of voices coming in and out of focus: lines of poetry by Rimbaud and Yeats alongside vulgarities, declarations of love and hate, gang symbols, the posting of phone numbers, and stickers of favorite bands. Lowe aptly qualifies the space as a kind of community message board in a pre-internet world.

Reading one's way through the restroom, past a urinal and a toilet—probable references to Marcel Duchamp's infamous *Fountain*⁴ (1917) and the Avery Court fountain—a visit to the handicap stall offers a surprise encounter with a Jackson Pollock painting.⁵ Lowe draws a visual connection between Pollock's expressive Action painting and its next-generation incarnation in the form of graffiti art. To the right and left of the painting are portals, doorways savagely ripped through the drywall, offering a choice of direction. Proceeding through the jagged opening to the right, an abrupt change of environment occurs. From the restroom teeming with visual stimulation materializes a slick black box, an early version of a video lounge with dark wall-to-wall carpeting, plush floor cushions, and a large video projection. The trippy video superimposes imagery from two films—Barbet Schroeder's drug drama *More* (1969), and George Greenough's surf film *Crystal Voyager* (1973)—layering the slow spiral into heroin addiction with the hypnotic curl of the waves. The video is accompanied by a new soundtrack of trance-like music by the Brooklyn-based band the Psychic Ills. The relaxing space encourages a sit-down to linger for a while on the "beach," stretched out on one of the beach-towel floor pillows decorated with larger-than-life sexy Venice Beach girls, present-day counterparts of the Venus fountain sculpture in the courtyard.

Back through the stall and the other ripped doorway, slide images dissolve and transform on a distant wall, dimly illuminating the passageway. The projectors whirl and click as the carousels advance. At the end, the hall jogs to the left in an explosion of light. A step up leads through a doorway into yet another wildly different environment flooded in color and light. Lowe's psychedelic gallery features mirrored walls, pink and yellow window light, and a candy-colored checkered floor. Thousands of top-stain paperback books with their signature red, orange, yellow, green, and blue edges make up the floor, providing a sensory walking experience. Two large, three-dimensional collages—*The End* (2010) and *Liberated Future* (2010)—dominate the space, their dense imagery pushing and pulling off the canvas. Text, pattern, color, figures and landscapes come into view, and then recede. The activated space in perpetual transition was inspired by the Wadsworth's eighteenth-century *Anamorphic Painting of Adam and Eve*.⁶



JONAH FREEMAN AND JUSTIN LOWE, *BLACK ACID CO-OP*
INSTALLATION VIEW, DEITCH PROJECTS, 18 WOOSTER STREET, NEW YORK
JULY 2 - AUGUST 15, 2009
PHOTO CREDIT: GREG KESSLER



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JUSTIN LOWE, *LIBERATED FUTURE*, 2010

ACRYLIC, ENAMEL, AND PAPER ON DIGITAL INKJET PRINT ON CANVAS

65 ½ X 80 INCHES

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST





The Pacifics

LIBERATED
FUTURE:
VOYAGES INTO TOMORROW

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THE DEATH

new York

Don't

JUSTIN LOWE, *THE END*, 2010
ACRYLIC, ENAMEL, AND PAPER ON DIGITAL INKJET PRINT ON CANVAS
71 ½ X 141 ½ INCHES
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



This proto-Surrealist work pictures intentionally distorted figures and text that are only made legible from a specific angle in a side mirror. Thus, the visual experience also parallels that of the Surrealist paintings lining the adjacent Avery Court. Lowe's collages' source imagery is literally underfoot, mostly culled from sci-fi paperback book covers as well as album cover art. Stacked in a nearby doorway, monitors play a new video work derived from the exploitation film *Werewolves on Wheels* (1971). The low-budget cult classic absurdly combines two unrelated genres, the motorcycle gang film and the traditional horror movie. The video highlights occult imagery that corresponds to the paintings, including Tarot cards, bikers, fire, and human-animal hybrids, such as werewolves. Here lies the source of Lowe's curious project title—*Werewolf Karaoke*—as well as the thread that ties the disparate environments together. Lowe states, "Every image is in a state of dissolve where hidden elements are revealed but as they come into focus they are once again obscured in a continual push and pull. This can be seen as a purposeful adulteration of the classic werewolf transformation scene in film."⁷

In *Werewolf Karaoke*, Justin Lowe offers a layered experience relating specifically to the Wadsworth Atheneum that fully transports the visitor to another reality. From the unexpected transitions from room to room to the recurring components that intertwine throughout the installation, Lowe makes a connection to the adjoining gallery containing Surrealist works. And the restroom brings an unanticipated alternative to the period room. In all, Lowe rethinks what art can be in the form of an escapist fantasy—"a psychic space of the mediated subconscious."⁸

PATRICIA HICKSON

Emily Hall Tremain Curator of Contemporary Art
Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

JUSTIN LOWE

Justin Lowe has been exhibiting since 2000, creating installation “environments” like gallery-lounges, cluttered house interiors, and—for his 2006 solo show at Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery in New York—an intricately stocked bodega and Mister Softee ice cream truck. Most recently, Lowe collaborated with Jonah Freeman and Alexandre Singh on elaborate labyrinthine environments exploring the community ritual and psychoses surrounding the historical trajectory of meth culture, including its separatist hippie roots and its ties to global alchemy, which was presented at Ballroom Marfa in Texas and Deitch Projects in New York.

EDUCATION

- 2004 MFA, Columbia University
- 2000 BA, Hampshire College

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2010 *Justin Lowe/MATRIX 159 – Werewolf Karaoke*, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT
The New War, Galleria Cesare Manzo, Rome, Italy
- 2009 *Black Acid Co-op* (with Jonah Freeman), Deitch Projects, New York, NY
- 2008 *Freedom Time Is Here Little Kittens*, Galerie Frédéric Giroux, Paris, France
Hello Meth Lab in the Sun (with Jonah Freeman & Alexandre Singh), Ballroom Marfa, Marfa, TX
- 2007 *45 on the 33*, Galleria Cesare Manzo, Rome, Italy
- 2006 *Helter Swelter*, Oliver Kamm / 5BE Gallery, New York, NY
Slouching Toward Bethlehem, Galerie Frédéric Giroux, Paris, France
- 2005 *Collecting Pictures in the Brain Hotel*, In Practice, Winter '05, Sculpture Center, Long Island City, NY
On the Beach, (curated exhibition), Back Room, Printed Matter, New York, NY
- 2004 *Dwellings*, Brooklyn Public Library, Brooklyn, NY
Waterfall, The Wrong Gallery, New York, NY
Passage, PS1 Special Project Room, Long Island City, NY

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2008 *Hello Meth Lab with a View* (with Jonah Freeman), The Station, Miami, FL
- 2007 *Fuori Uso – Altered States, Are you experienced?*, WAX (ex MEO), Budapest, Hungary; and Galeria Noua and MNAC National Museum of Contemporary Art Bucharest, Romania
- 2006 *Fuori Uso – Altered States, Are you experienced?*, Ex Mercato Ottofrutticolo, Pescara, Italy
Bricks in the Hood, Oliver Kamm / 5BE Gallery, New York, NY
Slow Burn, Galerie Edward Mitterand, Geneva, Switzerland
Studio Visit, Exit Art, New York, NY
- 2005 *The Pantagruel Syndrome*, Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy
Greater New York 2005, PS1, Long Island City, NY
Bring the War Home, Angstrom Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
- 2004 *Household Psychedelics*, Fia Backstrom Projects, Brooklyn, NY
- 2003 *The Melvins*, Anton Kern Gallery, New York, NY

Born 1976 in Dayton, Ohio
Lives and works in New York

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Justin Lowe
Werewolf Karaoke, 2010
Mixed-media, multi-room installation
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist
On-site scenic design: Dennis Hoekstra
Original score: Psychic Ills

ARTIST TALKS

MATRIX Small Talks
Justin Lowe
5:30 pm and 6:30 pm
Thursday, June 3, 2010
Artist Justin Lowe will give informal
15-minute talks about his work
in the MATRIX gallery.

THANKS

Cecil Adams, Merideth Adams, Marie Allen, John Atwood, Cat Balco, Alan Barton, Ulrich Birkmaier, Power Boothe, Erik Bowen, Beata Copp, Willard Coppedge, David and Mary Dangremond, Jon Eastman, Kathy Lynn Emerson, Zen Gansziniec, Mark Giuliano, Laura Harris, Michael Hickson, Oliver Kamm, Joan Kenney, Krista LaBella, Jasmine Levett, Efrain Lopez, Ann Mattioli, Shamim Momin, Erin Monroe, Meredith Nickie, Adria Patterson; Stephen Persing, Johanna Plummer; Allen Phillips, Ed Porter, Alicia Ritson, Hank Phillippi Ryan, Mary Schroeder, Kay Srinivasan, Olivia White, and Steve Winot.

Christine Sarrazin of Connecticut Library Consortium; Jean Adler of Mark Twain Library, Redding; Francine A. Aloia of Somers Public Library; Jane Atkinson of Weston Public Library; Friends of C.H. Booth Library, Newtown; Jennifer Brubacher and Deborah Lifton of New Haven Reads; Amy de Neergaard Buck of Cornwall Library; Linda Chapron and Gail Donnelly of Farmington Library; Elizabeth Davis of Hartford Public Library; Ruth Fields of Thomaston Public Library; Linda Fox of Chester Public Library; Sharon Geer of Voluntown Public Library; Goshen Public Library; Nancy Haag of North Haven Memorial Library; Mary Hogan of Cora J. Belden Library, Rocky Hill; Amy Kennedy of Wheeler Library, North Stonington; Karen Murdock of Traveler Restaurant, Union; Luci V. Pantuosco of Tolland Public Library; Cathy Perrill of South Windsor Public Library; Terri Planco of Lucy Robbins Welles Library, Newington; Tranixa B. Rosen of Stafford Library; Sue Rudnickas of Booth & Dimock Library, Coventry; Leslie Scherer of Wallingford Public Library; Sisters in Crime; and Maureen Slane of Prosser Public Library, Bloomfield.

The artist would like to send special thanks to Jason Archer, Marie Ely, Dennis Hoekstra, Psychic Ills, and his parents.

Most of all, thank you to Justin Lowe for a fantastic installation.

Cover Image:

Justin Lowe

Liberated Future, 2010 (detail)

Acrylic, enamel, and paper on digital inkjet print on canvas

65 ½ x 80 inches

Courtesy of the artist



Wadsworth
Atheneum
Museum of Art

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¹ The Wadsworth Atheneum's Surrealism collection is exceptional and the Avery Court installation includes masterpieces by Jean (Hans) Arp, Giorgio de Chirico, Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, Alberto Giacometti, René Magritte, Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, and Yves Tanguy.

² Justin Lowe, email correspondence to the author, 14 April 2010.

³ CBGB's owner Hilly Kristal attempted to obtain historical landmark status for the club, but ultimately failed.

⁴ Dada artist Marcel Duchamp's controversial *Fountain*, 1917, is considered a landmark of twentieth-century art. The *readymade* sculpture—a standard model urinal placed on its side—was submitted by Duchamp under the false name “R. Mutt” to a show at the Society of Independent Artists in New York in 1917. It was sidelined in the exhibition presentation, but initiated a debate about what can be considered art. Lowe asks the same with his period room.

⁵ Jackson Pollock (American, 1912–1956), *Number 8*, 1952. Oil on canvas, 43 1/8 x 57 3/8 inches. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut; The Philip L. Goodwin Collection, Gift of James L. Goodwin, Henry Sage Goodwin, and Richmond L. Brown, 1958.223.

⁶ Italian, 18th century, *Anamorphic Image of Adam and Eve*. Oil on canvas, 31 7/8 x 48 ½ inches. The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Cattin Sumner Collection Fund, 1997.12.1

⁷ Justin Lowe, email correspondence to the author, 13 April 2010.

⁸ Justin Lowe, telephone conversation with the author, 5 April 2010.