

Ellen: So, could you tell us a little bit more about your philosophy of peace, and how that's impacting some of the new directions you're going with your work?

Deryk: Well, you know, peace is something that...you always have to work for, there's always elements and things that are going to try and squelch it for their own benefits, and so peace is something that takes work.... It's not going to go away, we have to work on it ... I certainly have full intentions that will be the focus for the rest of my life.

One of the things I'm doing right now is that I did this peace sanctuary project up north using a bulldozer, mother and child image on the ground, earthen work. And I want to go into the second phase which is to make it into a peace sanctuary project, you know, it's a sculpture project, a peace sanctuary sculpture park. I've actually formed a society, a legal society ... so even after I am gone, there will be people in that society that will continue to encourage... sculptors to donate any of their sculpture works related to peace ... to donate it before a committee.

So this summer 2012 we are driving down to the states to pick up a sculpture that has been donated to us that we're going to be driving back... The following year we'll install it at the Peace Sanctuary. So those are the kind of projects that I'm working on.

I noticed that in other artist's works that are often getting involved in these issues it's extremely hard on them, you know. It was extremely hard on me. But they either get through it, or they can actually find the magic path that leads them out of it into something more positive. And I think when you actually do find that path, as I think I have, it's better for yourself, it's better for the opportunity of, maybe, sharing peace with other people.



Biography

Deryk Houston's work was featured in the National Film Board of Canada documentary, "From Baghdad to Peace Country" (Director: Sherry Le Page).

His work has been exhibited in one man exhibitions in the former Soviet Union, Scotland, Iraq, and the United States. Deryk's work is included in many private and public collections including the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. He has completed large scale ground art projects in Iraq, Canada, and Scotland in support of children's rights.

Much of his work is about the earth and creating conditions for seeds to grow...a metaphor for the search for peace.

Curator: Ellen McCluskey

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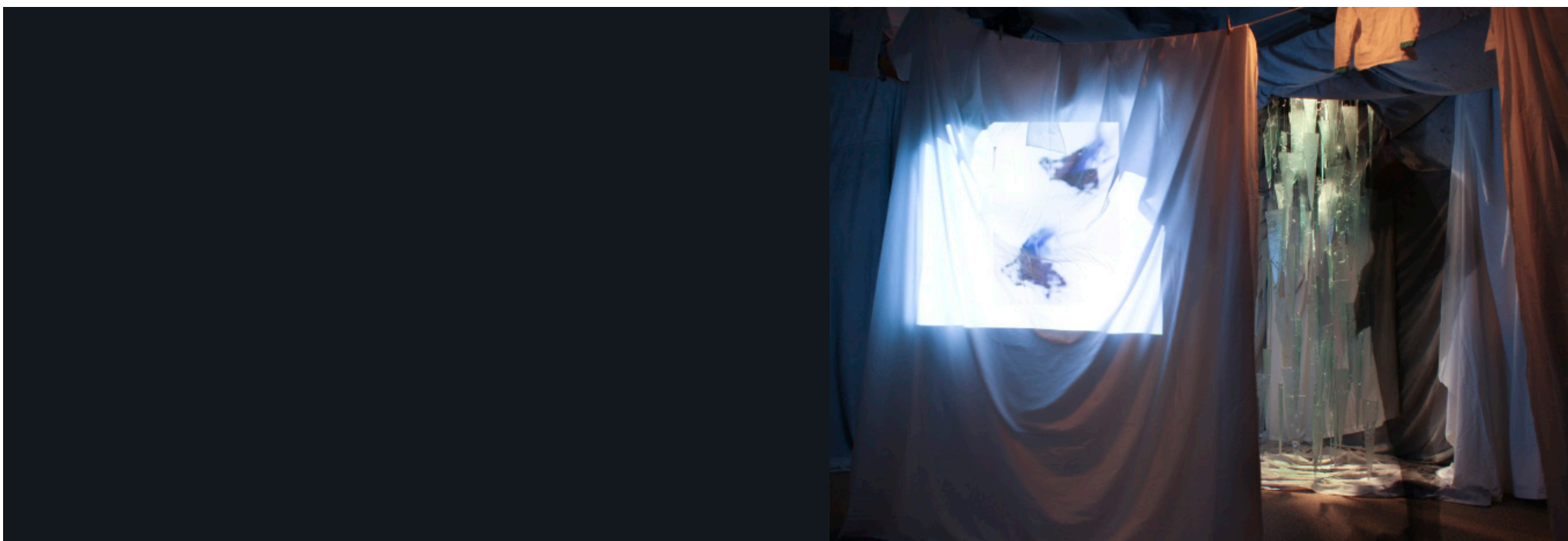
A special thank you to Jan Johnson for the loan of props for Seeking Peace

NANAIMO ART GALLERY
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Deryk Houston ~ Seeking Peace

January 13th, 2012 to April 14th, 2012 Reception: Friday, January 13th, 5:00 - 7:00pm

DERYK HOUSTON - Seeking Peace

Ellen: Deryk, share with us your vision and goals as an artist as they relate to Seeking Peace.

Deryk: I was very lucky to run into an artist, Jan Johnson. He had a similar interest, both of us shared a common interest in war and trying to find peace and he has... in the forest... laid out a lot of his experiences in Vietnam and when I seen that and I thought, oh God, I could use these nicely in my exhibit because ... they look like the kind of thing I'm looking for you know, and so I was able to get permission from Jan before he left us to use these.

Ellen: That's very much part of this show, that element of hope.

Deryk: Absolutely, and to be able to find it, you know, seeking it and being able to find it. I think that there are a lot of things we can do in our society to help us find that peace and that path to peace.

Ellen: You have constructed a structural frame that determines how one navigates Seeking Peace, punctuating the journey with symbolic objects and constructed forms and layered surfaces. Would you speak to this?

Deryk: So basically, the idea is to come into the exhibit and you get a choice of going down an empty path, down that way, or you can go this way and hopefully people will choose to go this way. If they go the other way it is not a disaster to me, but I am hoping people will be drawn by their curiosity to take in some of these things here.

Ellen: Seeking Peace, though precipitated by a negative life-altering experience when touring the Ameriyha bomb shelter in Baghdad, Iraq, provides the possibility of new beginnings and a message of hope. Would you take us through the installation with that in mind?

Deryk: I wanted the exhibit to start off fairly dark, fairly macabre ... kind of on the dark side. Trying not to be too heavy handed, but at the same time leaving people with an impression of a feeling of unease and not very nice visual images, you know, and I found some of these things of Jan Johnson's like the little figure and the tricycle, like, they just suited character-wise what I wanted you know, so I was lucky to get those.

This idea here is almost like a bit of a blast wave ... from the explosion that happened inside the Ameriyha bomb shelter. So I want people to come from the darkness following what looks like a brighter area here ... but as they do come around this corner they'll be aware of the fighter jets overhead. But I want people to definitely have a sense of

brightness over there, also want people to have a sense of, what started out maybe as just walls, they now see it as laundry and...part of this idea was ... this woman that took me through this shelter, the bomb shelter ... she survived simply because she had decided at the last minute to go do some laundry at home. During a war, you know, and bombings and things like that, life still has to go on, there is still a sense of normalcy ... to the whole thing, so they do things like go out and do laundry, go out and get food, you know, that kind of thing.

Ellen: What challenges, if any, occurred as you conceptualized and constructed Seeking Peace and worked with the various media?

Deryk: I built a frame ... to support the main heavy structure, which is where I have all this glass hanging which you'll see at the next stage as we go through. So I've played with space... so it directs you through in a gentle way so that you don't feel necessarily that you're just following, you know, a path, one set path, I wanted to see that there were some areas that maybe you could go in there but you can't go that way. Its like seeking peace, you know, you try and go one way and then you have to go back and go another way. And just from a visual point of view...try and keep it interesting, stimulating to the brain because the brain does get kind of bored pretty quick. So I tried to create a variety of kind of solutions to ... try to break up that space to take you one way, dead end, and have to come back you know.

Its just like when you're painting you have to try and stimulate the eyes of the viewer in certain ways without using the same trick every time.... As you come this way... the light is more prominent, creating more shadows, more light, more folds...the folds themselves have an organic kind of quality to it, like more lifelike, like folds in people's clothing. I've also added some laundry in here with children's toys... put some more personal touch to the thing so that it's more human. It's also a much more positive thing than the first images we saw of the children with the dolls, disfigured and broken. This is almost more hopeful in a way because it's more normal, its more like a normal life, normal scene, where things might improve, things can get better. So that's all part of it that went into the thinking of it.

What you're ultimately aiming for is this column of light, which is what we went through in the real Ameriyha bomb shelter. We went through pretty concrete, bare structure just like the underground parking lot, you know, where you park and go do your shopping. This is a similar kind of place except that when you come around the corner you see this beam of light and ... I wanted to try and portray that in a way that would be physically interesting, visually stimulating. I love the qualities of glass, you know, glass works best under light. All the glass is touchable although I wouldn't like people grabbing it, but if they do... they've all been melted in the kiln so you won't cut your hands.... It also kind of reflects the heat of this massive explosion inside the real Ameriyha bomb shelter, like molten glass that's been reshaped ... and so it plays...on that a little bit.

In the beam of light that I saw there were... birds coming floating in and flying around inside this beam of light, so that's one of the reasons I have the projections of the birds on the sheets ... and a little animation there- nothing complicated, just a little gesture, you know, that to recognize that. And same in here, on the frosted glass I've got little imprints of some of the doves and things that I've put in there... Most people probably wouldn't notice it, but they might, you know, and if they do that's great.

Ellen: Well, they might see that connection with the projected images of the birds.

Deryk: Yeah, I know it's there, and that's one of the important things, you know, for me as an artist, I know its there, and that's that cathartic thing again, you know, doesn't matter if any one else sees it, I know its there. I also like the sound, the glass can kind of bang away and ... there is a gentleness to that. I saw Elizabeth making a wind chime, she makes wind chimes with glass...if they can take that much beating, you know, from hanging out on a tree, small ones, I thought why can't we go a little bigger and use them in this column of light, you know. Glass is an amazingly strong product - it's definitely got beautiful qualities to it.

Ellen: So looking at the glass and the light, and also the play of light and shadow with the birds ... what is the importance of light in terms of the role of light in this exhibition?

Deryk: The one place that I found in that whole shelter that offered some kind of sanity, some kind of hope, especially with the birds in there, the gentleness of those, ah, I think somebody I know said it best when they said the, that the birds are coming in through there, sort of amplify the beauty, and in fact it was you that said that, ha! But the birds they are coming in from above and in to that beautiful, almost spiritual light... such a huge contrast to the violence that was all inside that room, you know, and knowing what happened to the people inside that room. I mean it was such a catastrophic, violent explosion that ... people were just completely evaporated, you know ... in fact the same way as you see at Hiroshima there with the x-rays of people's images on the walls.

Ellen: You've said that the impetus for the installation, Seeking Peace, was inspired by a profound experience. Would you elaborate? And what messages or responses do you seek to elicit in the viewers?

Deryk: There was a woman breastfeeding her child, you could actually see, you could make out this image of this woman breastfeeding the baby...one fraction of a second she's there and the next thing she's just an x-ray, you know. And so this gentle light, in contrast to that violence, is something that just puts everything into perspective of where we are at. So to see the birds coming in there, to see the sunlight just gave me...that there is beauty out there in the world that is worth preserving, even if it doesn't seem like its possible with the surroundings you're in sometimes. You definitely have to try and hold on to that, just like when you are swimming you can't give up. If you're out in the middle of the ocean and looking for an island over the horizon, and you could stop swimming, or you can keep going and when you see the sunlight coming through that place and the birds in there, then there is a little bit of an ability to hang on and hope there will be better things.

It totally changed my life and made me want to dedicate myself to the subject of peace. They described it as a life altering journey, you know, and it definitely does that, you know. You can't look at anything else again in the same way.

