



emergency room

Nick Barbee

Cato

On view November 29, 2012–January 13, 2012

Lecture and Reception on November 29 from 6 p.m.

Sewall Hall, #402
Department of Visual and Dramatic Arts
Rice University
6100 Main Street
Houston, Texas 77005





The Emergency Room is the latest venture by the Department of Visual and Dramatic Arts. This new exhibition space is aimed at better serving the Houston arts community and the arts on the Rice University campus. Visiting emerging artists will develop new exhibitions, give public lectures, and interact with Rice studio arts students. Emerging artists are an underserved population within the Houston region, and the Emergency Room is an attempt to correct this by presenting the highest quality exhibitions within the context of a serious academic program.

Nick Barbee received his MFA in Painting from Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia, PA in 2009. He received his BFA in Painting from Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY in 2003. From 2009 and 2010 he was an Artist in Residence with the Core Fellowship Program at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. He was the recipient of an Exhibitions Fellowship from Temple University in 2007 and 2008. Barbee's work has been exhibited at the MAC and CentralTrak in Dallas and Inman Gallery and the Glassell School's Blanton Gallery in Houston, TX. His work has also been shown at Temple Gallery, Vox Populi and The Ice Box/Crane in Philadelphia, and Doran Gallery in Boston. Barbee has given lectures at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX and The Glassell School of Art, Houston, TX. His work has been written about in the Philadelphia Weekly, Chief Mag as well as ArtLes.com. His work is in the collection of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. He has taught drawing and sculpture courses at Rice University, University of Houston, Houston Community College and College of the Mainland.

Barbee is currently an Artist in Residence with G.A.R. in Galveston, TX.



Washington Crossing the Delaware
 Photograph Documentation
 2008

Emergency Room is generously supported by Rice Public Art.



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Liberty or Death: Nick Barbee's Cato

Nick Barbee's installation *Cato* is a concise distillation of the artist's interest in abstraction. For Barbee, abstraction is not only an artistic process, which is used here to create elegant slender forms mounted on wooden pedestals. Abstract forms can also be physical markers of the evolution of concepts over time and metaphors for historical distortion as each generation inherits ideas, adds their own perspectives and misinterpretations, and reforms the concepts they inherited.

For the past three years, Barbee has looked to the creation of our collective memory as Americans, particularly in our American legends and histories, as a source of inspiration. The title of his installation at the Emergency Room refers to a British play written in 1712 by Joseph Addison—*Cato*, a Tragedy. Wildly popular amongst the founding fathers, George Washington is said to have performed this tale of a Roman senator's resistance to Julius Caesar in the name of republican virtue at Valley Forge to raise the spirits of the troops. Addison's play is also the source of many of the most famous dictums of the Revolutionary War including "Give me liberty or give me death" and "I regret that I have but one life to give for my country." The loss of *Cato* to history as it was forgotten as a reference and progenitor of concepts of liberty and stoicism is symbolic of the process of abstraction in general. It begs the question—what is lost and what is gained as ideas gradually become unmoored from their sources over time?

Barbee's sculptures likewise glide on the tension of this question. The objects are beautiful as discrete entities, and their undulating reductive profiles imply flight and organic growth. For those familiar with modern sculpture, they evoke Constantin Brancusi's *Bird in Space* series (c. 1920-1940) that also sought to capture the essence of flight in the abstraction of a bird's body and propeller blade. However, the source of Barbee's forms is far less benign. The shapes of the sculptures in *Cato*



Battle of Germantown
 Photograph Documentation
 2008

are taken from diagrams of bullet trajectories showing the wounds in the human body produced by different types of bullets. The fatal implication of these shapes seems antithetical to their elegant carving in wood or casting in plaster and aluminum. Thus, even knowing the reference, the sculptures stand only as relics of their violent origins. Jasper Johns famously described his artmaking process as one of gradual manipulation—"take an object, do something to it, do something else to it." Barbee's process extends this idea from objects to histories and ideas. Knowing parts of the extensive research behind his forms can open them up to associations that take the viewer on a journey through their own memories and historical constructs. Thus Barbee sculptures evoke a subjective abstract experience wherein his works are both exactly what you see in front of you and what you imagine them to be.

Rachel Hooper

Rachel Hooper is a Ph.D. student in art history at Rice University.