

emergency room



Josh Bernstein

Man Corn

February 2–March 15, 2012

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

Josh Bernstein was born in Hanover, New Hampshire and grew up in Montreal and New Hampshire. He studied physics and fine arts at Amherst College, where he received his BA in 2000. He studied painting, sculpture and printmaking in the Post-Baccalaureate certificate program at Brandeis University, and received his MFA from Mason Gross School of Art at Rutgers University in 2008 with an interdisciplinary concentration. His work has been exhibited at Vox Populi in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the Hunterdon Art Museum in Clinton, New Jersey, and Bryan Miller Gallery in Houston, Texas, and has been reviewed in the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Houston Press*, and the online journal *Art Fag City*. His work will also be included in the upcoming exhibition *Utopia/Dystopia: Construction and Destruction in Photography and Collage* at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston. He lives and works in Houston, Texas.



Sail (Detail)
2010, 8 x 8 feet, dyed men's dress shirts

Emergency Room is generously supported by Rice Public Art.



Near Shore
2010, 8 x 8 feet, dyed men's dress shirts

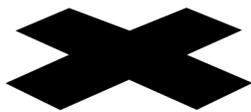


The Emergency Room is the latest venture by the Department of Visual and Dramatic Arts. This new exhibition space is aimed at better serving the Houston arts community and the arts on the Rice University campus. Visiting emerging artists will develop new exhibitions, give public lectures, and interact 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. *Gallery hours are Thursday, 5-9 p.m., Saturday 11 a.m. - 3 p.m., and by appointment. Closed on university holidays.*

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On view February 2–March 15, 2012
Lecture and Reception on February 2 from 6 p.m.



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THEY EAT THEMSELVES

Over the past three years, Josh Bernstein has cultivated a complex symbolic language related to global exploration, outsider status, and the grotesque. Textiles, prints, photography, performance, sculpture, and drawing are all tied together in a web of meanings that are utterly engrossing even as they defy precise explanation. The centerpiece of his exhibition at Emergency Room is a large red sail made from pieces of mens' shirts with an intricate batik coat of arms showing a double-headed eagle attempting to eat itself. The same bicephalous bird appears in two accompanying woodcuts where the print made from wooden block reflects its source and completes the symmetry of the images. At the center of the room is a tent of sorts made from a swirling construction of reeds that supports a carved gourd at its apex. These baroque works are intentionally allusive, yet undeniably visceral with organic textures and colors. The symmetry and repeated shapes of their forms imply a closed circuit of meanings and associations that likewise fold in on themselves in infinite self-reflection.

Bernstein's research for his project began with a study of the Spanish explorer Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and his exploits on Galveston Island, which the explorer dubbed the Island of Doom. Cabeza de Vaca was part of a crew that, unsure of their location, wandered down the Gulf Coast desperately seeking Spanish territory. By the time they reached Galveston, the crew was navigating the gulf in a few small vessels, which they attempted to repair with their own clothing but ultimately failed. Without food or fresh water, the number of explorers dwindled significantly as they were forced to resort to cannibalism in order to survive. The crew was later imprisoned by the

native Karankawa, who were disgusted with the barbarism of the captured Spaniards. Cabeza de Vaca was eventually able to escape with a few others and make his way to Mexico City. Upon returning to Spain, he published a book about his explorations around the Gulf Coast titled *La Relación* or *The Report*.

Although the historical details of Cabeza de Vaca's story serve as a source for many of the materials and forms of Bernstein's work, the artist is primarily interested in the ways that the conquistador's life inverts false dichotomies of outsider and native, civilization and barbarism, heroism and desperation, etc. Bernstein's invented coat of arms is symbolic of these more abstract ideas. It is based on a Mayan drawing of the Hapsburg crest and thus combines the aesthetic of an indigenous American visual language with the sign of the Holy Roman Empire. In Bernstein's rendering, this merging of the new and old worlds consumes itself like the ancient Ourobouroos symbolizing life, death, and rebirth. The brutality of the implied cannibalism serves almost as an exorcism, releasing the violent nature of the early meetings of Europeans and Native Americans. In the context of these ideas, the artist's objects stand like relics of forgotten rituals to be reinterpreted by those who discover them. Such fetishization would feed into Bernstein's work, which welcomes projections of mystery, horror, and the power of the undefined.

Rachel Hooper

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