

Tampa Bay Times

Review: Luke DuBois exhibit at Ringling mines data for art



A TERROR 01: 1
 IRAQ IRAQI 02: 2
 TERRORIST AL QAIDA 03: 3
 REGIME HUSSEIN MASS HOMELAND 04: 4
 MARRIAGE COALITION ACCOUNTS 11TH MEDICINE 05: 5
 PRESCRIPTION REGIMES RAGS MATH INSPECTORS MURDER 06: 6
 HOSPITAL LEADING WITH TECHNOLOGICAL TRENDS CANALS TERRORISM 07: 7
 TROUBLE AIRCRAFT GARDENS, SPINNING TUTORIAL FRODO PROTECTING RACE 08: 8
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A GENTLEMEN 01: 1
 PROVISION FELLOW 02: 2
 INFORMATION INDIANS PARTICULAR 03: 3
 LAID MILITIA OUGHT OBJECT 04: 4
 WHETHER CIRCUMSTANCES CONSTITUTION OBJECTS REGARD 05: 5
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Our data-obsessed world accumulates vast caches of information for specific or random purposes, often with little thought behind clinical analysis. Voluntarily or not, we provide knowledge about ourselves that governments, businesses and individuals access and use.

In a survey of his works at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, R. Luke DuBois asks: Are we known better because more is known? That isn't a typical "art" question and you may ask, in an initial encounter with some of the art, why it is considered art. And for me, several of the installations serve more as social observation and commentary than aesthetic statement. But they're also artfully entertaining.

Beyond saying he's a conceptual artist, putting him in a category is difficult because most of his art, which includes filmmaking, music and printmaking, is so underpinned by science and technology. A good approach to understanding DuBois' art, says Matthew McLendon, the Ringling's curator of modern and contemporary art, is to keep in mind his two basic themes, time and portraiture.

Time passes quickly in several works but not to deliver the cliched message about living in a revved-up world. In Academy, every Best Picture Academy Award winner from the first, *Wings* (1927), through *Chicago* (2002) is depicted. Each is shown in its entirety but compressed to one minute so the whole runs for about 76 minutes. They become a big, glorious blur, going so by quickly we have only a fleeting moment to identify them. Most of the early movies were shorter than today's so they are a little slower but when we hit the longer *Titanic* (1997), for example, much of it is a giant spray of water. It's an epic idea and shows in concentrated form the evolution of American cinema.

Similarly, *Billboard* compresses the top singles on the Billboard chart beginning in 1958. Instead of compressing the songs, DuBois (and I'm quoting him from the catalog because this is *really* technical) writes, "The 857 songs used to make the piece are analyzed digitally and a spectral average is then derived from the entire song. Just as a long camera exposure will fuse motion into a single image, spectral averaging allows us to look at the average sonority of a piece of music. The spectral average of each song plays for one second for each week it stayed number one of the Billboard chart."

Thinking about art

Okay, sounds cerebral. But the experience is delightful. We don't hear any melodies, just sounds, and we see on a video monitor the name of the "time-lapse" song and the number of chart weeks. You'll discover interesting and surprising facts such as a Beatles song lasted but one week in 1967 and Lu Lu's *To Sir With Love* lasted five.

DuBois brings whimsy, wit and charm to his art but he also, in some, adds a hint of melancholy. *Hindsight Is Always 20/20* is a completely cohesive installation that merges vision and application. DuBois used a computer program to analyze a State of the Union speech by each president from George Washington through George W. Bush. (This work was commissioned by the Democratic National Convention in 2008.) The program isolated the top 66 words in each, eliminating incidental ones such as articles and prepositions. DuBois had each presidential set printed in an eye chart format so the most-used word was in large type at the top and others in descending order. Washington used "gentlemen" the most, Bush, "terror." Going through the 43 prints is a guide to our nation's concerns at particular times and the presidential prism through which we see them.

Another work based on data crunching is another tour de force. *A More Perfect Union* uses the national census model to create a different form of demographics. In 2010, the year of the official census, DuBois said in a recent telephone interview, "I ran my own census. I joined 21 different online dating services and 'spidered' their contents, downloading 19 million profiles of single Americans . . . sorted by ZIP codes and analyzed for significant words." So we see official-looking maps of states with dots locating all their cities. Instead of the city's name, though, DuBois prints the most-used word in the combined profiles for that area. It's a census in which we define ourselves by romantic perceptions rather than ethnicity, income or number of children. In our area, the top word was "dieting."

Fashionably Late for the Relationship is a more traditional art film that he directed and for which he co-composed a musical score. It's a straightforward narrative: A pretty young woman (Lián Amaris Sifuentes) gets ready in her boudoir for a date. DuBois, of course, complicates it. The "room" is a furnished, open-sided tent on a traffic island in New York's Union Square and the cameras roll for 72 hours. In filming, Sifuentes slowed her movements so that DuBois could speed up the film, making her surroundings a frenetic, jumpy canvas of cars, pedestrians, darkness and daylight, with her gestures not overly exaggerated. Clock hands show that the film condenses an hour into a minute. It has the interesting duality of a slow unfolding inside the tent and a heated acceleration beyond. Through the 72-minute performance, which Sifuentes choreographed, we see mundane actions become fraught with obsessive-compulsive behavior as time passes, is killed or wasted.

Sarasota Circus is a new work, commissioned by the Ringling. It's a lyrical group portrait of six circus performers. DuBois filmed them on the museum grounds and also performing in the Asolo Theater, using saturated colors and a slightly blurry focus, giving them the look of fantasy. Each of five videos (two of the performers work as a pair) is surrounded by a baroque-style frame, a nod to the art museum's famous permanent collection, and the performances are collaged so we see multiples of each in performance. It is an argument against the theory that direct experience is superior to a recorded one, seen after the fact. "I was trying to show something not seen in a performance," DuBois said, the details of closer observation rather than from an arena seat. It's also a paean to a dying tradition. "There's a little heartbreak," he said. "Things change and go away. There's something really amazing about circus performance as a practice. It's one of those things worth fighting for."

Mesmerizing results

So we return to the art question. Yes this show is mostly based on esoteric manipulations of algorithms and highly advanced software programs that I will never understand. But I am mesmerized by the visual and aural muscle of their applications, the words of Google founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page he designed, expanding and contracting in kaleidoscopic patterns, for example, and the six-movement composition for string quartet he created for *Hard Data*, a moving tribute to fallen civilians and soldiers during six years of the Iraq War. In the end, I stopped thinking about the technology and just marveled at the creative virtuosity of this collection. Would someone please nominate DuBois for one of those MacArthur Foundation genius grants?