

OCWEEKLY

R. Luke Dubois Makes Algorithms From the Heart

Written By Dave Barton

OCMA's exhibits his equations that sum up decades of insights into nifty videos and graphics

While the government combs through your phone messages and emails for potentially dangerous buzzwords, in the West Coast premiere of "R. Luke DuBois—Now" at Orange County Museum of Art (OCMA), artist R. Luke Dubois cares about the mundane. He created algorithms that scan through dating profiles, messages on Craigslist and Billboard Top 100 lists, mining the data of love, lust, politics and pop culture to create art from our collective loneliness.

For *A More Perfect Union*, DuBois aggregated 19 million dating-site profiles throughout the United States to create a map of the words that individuals use to describe themselves, replacing the names of cities with the most common words from their profiles. Each map is an eyeful, bursting with unusual descriptions, but even random words from the top of the state and the bottom can be revelatory: one end of Texas has the word "boots" while the other "godly," with Los Angeles' descriptions use "suicidal" and "screenplay."

The detached, analytical feel to DuBois' work benefits its McLuhan-esque "cool" commentary, so expect to do a little work on your walk-through, especially when it comes to parsing Matthew McLendon's occasionally impenetrable curator notes about the science and mathematics behind the programming. I often felt I wasn't as smart as the artist—and that's okay because I like my artists to be smarter than me—but the notes brought up more questions than answers. I had to go online after the fact and read through the detailed museum catalog to discover DuBois' process. One wishes there had been a bit more of that available in the exhibition itself. Nowhere is that more obvious than in *Billboard*, an amalgamation of No. 1 songs since 1958, with the number of weeks each song is represented lasting only seconds. There are notes about "spectral averaging," musical "color" and "sonority," as almost 50 years of songs play over the iPod loop, but non-musicians will need better definitions to grapple with the complexity of the art in front of us.

As is often the case with OCMA, the video work presented is stellar, even if the seating provided sabotages the presentation of that work. (Pop) *Icon: Britney* is a 60-minute loop of Britney Spears' music videos playing on an LCD in an elegant baroque frame. Reminiscent of the creepy photorealistic paintings of Jesus whose eyes follow you about the room, the video has been manipulated so that her eyes are locked into the same space on the frame, while the remaining action in the video blurrily shifts around her morphing visage. The songs have been stripped away, leaving just her vocals, which are filtered through reverb so they're indistinguishable from the soundtrack of a 1950s science-fiction film.

The 50-second loop of Playboy models in the artist's 2006 *Play* gives us decades of female beauty—or, at least, Hugh Hefner's idea of what that was—flashing in front of us, as hairstyles, makeup,



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to catch up whenever there are words in common. The continuous loop mocks the never-ending speeches and rhetoric of political campaigns, but it also feeds into the tired trope that there isn't that much difference between the two parties.

I was especially fascinated by *Hindsight Is Always 20/20*, a series of letterpress prints commissioned for the 2008 Democratic Convention. Patterned after Snellen eye charts, Dubois has replaced the chart's letters with the 66 most commonly used words in the State of the Union speeches by each president from George Washington to George W. Bush. The artist describes it as a "Constitutionally mandated piece of political theater," and it's an often-acute visual summation of each president's career in one simple poster. Washington's most used word? "Gentlemen." The younger Bush's? "Terror."

In an era in which we binge-watch television shows in mere days and skip from one idea to the next via hyperlinks, in which the artistic resources of the past—its music, films and books—are all immediately available, as we fast-forward through the dull parts of our lives to get to the good part, the title of Dubois' exhibition couldn't be more apt. Consume, stuff yourself, taking just what you need from each piece, and then move on to the next, until you feel a little like reminiscing and come back and do it all over again. Welcome to "Now."

lighting and eye-fucking the camera changes over the years. It's a short, sweet, even sexy chance to time travel. Academy works in a similar way: a 76-minute video of the first 75 years of Oscar-winning best pictures, with the entirety of each film compressed into an individual minute. I found it intriguing and would have watched for a longer period if the museum had provided seating. And in Acceptance, Mitt Romney and Barack Obama deliver speeches in which 85 percent of the words they use—according to DuBois—are the same. As one video plays, the other skips and fast-forwards