

John Slepian

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The art of provocation



"Our World" by James Montford.  
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By Cate McQuaid  
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For a show in a Connecticut gallery in 1995, multimedia and conceptual artist James Montford staged "Throw Away Words," inviting viewers to write a racial slur on a piece of paper, crumple it, and throw it into a circle of other crumpled epithets on the floor. Visitors could pick up and read the discarded slurs, and return them to the floor.

It's a potent exercise, an opportunity to express words and ideas suppressed in polite society, which have visceral power whether or not you subscribe to them. In a review, one uncomfortable critic called the project "stacked and manipulative," as if for Montford it was a game of "gotcha" rather than a chance to examine a highly charged, usually verboten issue.

The piece is re-created in Montford's sharply pointed retrospective at the Boston Center for the Arts' Mills Gallery. Curator Vera Ingrid Grant, director of the Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art at Harvard, has dug into the artist's archive to display some of the queasiness his work has prompted, such as that review. With police shootings of black men keen in our national consciousness, the show couldn't be better timed.

Indeed, the artist's most recent works, mixed-media paintings such as "Our World," depict astronauts floating in space with feathered Indian headdresses attached to their

spacesuits, taking the “hands up” gesture of protest that has arisen in response to the police shootings. It’s particularly poignant in a setting — outer space — we think of as utopian and pure.

Montford has populated galaxies with racially charged images for years. He sets his “Big Lipper Constellations” series in grids (even as he’s deploying a social agenda, Montford lovingly attends to painterly issues of composition and abstraction), describing frothy, star-speckled galleries. Look closely and you’ll see minstrel-show-style pitch-black faces and grinning red mouths swirling amid the nebulae.

The paper-moon reverie “Black Heads in Space/Swing” puts a mournful black tot with a watermelon slice on a starry ring around a blue-white planet. Black faces with yellow eyes and white halos adorn that ringlike charms on a bracelet. Works like these feel paradoxically hopeful and despairing — as if the galaxies might offer freedom from earthbound conflict, yet they are cluttered with our projections, fears, and prejudices.

There are many cosmic pictures here — too many. Some recall paintings by Ellen Gallagher; she too reproduces and repeats fragments of images of black people from old ads and other sources. Yet Montford’s starry-eyed phantasms have more narrative, oblique as it is. There’s a wily storyteller here, one who has wounds to cauterize and dreams to purvey.

In his performances, Montford can be more piercingly direct. For a performance outside Niagara University’s Castellani Art Museum when he was in residence there in 2004, he covered himself in dark blankets and bound himself in ropes; he looked like an abused prisoner at Abu Ghraib, or a victim of a lynching.

Montford is a deliberate provocateur. He traffics in images and language that make people wince. Not everything works; “[Expletive] Omelet/Fried Black Hair and Semen” is not cooked enough conceptually; it reads simply as a relic of the 1990s, when using bodily fluids in art (a response to the AIDS epidemic) was trendy.

The trick is to handle this freighted material eloquently, in a layered, thoughtful way. Mostly, Montford succeeds. He will lead a discussion, “You and Identity in Art,” at the gallery on Thursday at 6:30 p.m.

### **Luminous and lighthearted**

The geeky artists at COLLISIONcollective have put together a show at Boston Cyberarts Gallery on the topic of simulation. But all art is simulation, one way or another, and the

exhibition is less a probing examination of virtual worlds and the way they reshape our lives and imaginations than it is a playful catchall.

W. Benjamin Bray offers the most serious work. For his luminous photographic images, “Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation — (Profound Heat),” Bray poured molten glass onto drawings of ocean currents, creating a caterpillar-like form in glass. Then he projected ocean temperature data through the suspended glass and took pictures. The glowing forms, positioned to look almost like pistons, radiate color like heat.

Many of the pieces have a video-game aesthetic — eye-popping, with lush colors and accentuated volumes. Faith Holland uses it to cheeky effect, satirizing rickety cinematic tropes for sex in her “Visual Orgasms” series of over-excited, animated gifs of rockets, popcorn popping, waterfalls, and volcanoes.

John Slepian also goes for the ribald with “Artist’s Fabrication,” a 3-D printer that replicates poop in yellow plastic. It’s a comment on how we do useless things with new technologies, and a call back to artist/prankster Piero Manzoni, who, to needle the art market in 1961, offered up cans titled “Merda d’Artista,” which he sold for their weight in gold.

In “Swarming,” textile artist Anna Kristina Goransson and tech artist Rob Gonsalves present warm-toned woolen chalices lolling on the wall like giant flower petals as tiny, digitally projected insects or birds hover and scatter around them. If you wave your arm in front of it, you’ll draw bubbly bolts of light through this whimsical bouquet. It’s fun and a bit goofy, like much of the work in this show.