



JOEL BRENDEN • Completely Speculative • November 11 to December 23, 2011

LIST OF WORKS (front to back): Mobile Work, 2010, Prismacolor WC pencils on bristol board • Dreamhouse, 2009—ongoing, ink on bristol board • Mr Owl, Donatello, Pikachu, Bowser, Webby VanderQuack..., 2011, ink on paper • Mobile Work, 2010, Prismacolor WC pencils on bristol board • Daycase (prototype), 2010, acrylic sheeting, steel, LEDs, and electrical

Joel Brenden's art practice is multi-disciplinary and conceptual. With drawing forming the foundation, his projects extend into graphic design, typography and bookmaking, sculpture and installation. Joel's interest in cultural memory frequently stands as the starting point for projects that probe questions about information cultures of the past and present, and suggest alternative ways for configuring the future. He holds an M.F.A. in Visual Studies from the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he was a Dean's Scholar and Teaching Assistant, and a B.F.A. in Drawing at Central Washington University. He was a featured artist in Beyond/In Western New York 2010, exhibiting drawing and sculptural design at the Western New York Book Arts Center. In 2011, he was selected by curator Julian Montague for the benefit auction "Buffalo on the Bowery", at the Charles Bank Gallery. Along with developing and exhibiting his artworks, Brenden is currently working as a graphic designer for Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper, and as a partner in Super Giant, a design and silkscreening studio. Since 2010 he has worked frequently as a Teaching Artist at Just Buffalo Literary Center and CEPA Gallery, conducting intensive book arts and photography workshops in Buffalo's Public Schools as part of the Writing With Light Program. He lives and works in Buffalo, NY.

Hallwalls' visual arts program is supported by generous grants from the New York State Council of the Arts, Erie County Arts & Cultural Funding, the City of Buffalo and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

HALL WALLS 341 DELAWARE AVENUE BUFFALO, NY 14202 www.hallwalls.org



HALL WALLS
CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER



M&T Bank
Understanding what's important.



The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts

JOEL BRENDEN
COMPLETELY SPECULATIVE



Completely Speculative brings together various conceptually-based works by Buffalo artist Joel Brenden centered upon a foundation of drawing. Included here are various drawing approaches, variable sets of initial parameters, and distinctly different subject matter that all hover like satellite moons around the artist and suggest elastic orbits of memory, process, and meaning—all three of which may or may not be completely speculative.

Locating the “what” of Brenden’s artistic practice may only last as long as one of these orbiting moons can be held still in an eclipse of meaning. While there are aspects of nostalgia imbued throughout the works, they are not driven by sentimentality. Popular culture noticeably feeds several tangents of his projects, but even the works derived directly from popular culture are ultimately not about that. Memory is found throughout the works, though not the recollection of any particular memory. For Brenden, memory, popular culture, and drawing are all malleable tools and mechanisms through which to investigate shared and overlapping ideas.

If there is a prevalent theme moving through most of Brenden’s recent works, it might be some comingling of rigor and relaxation, work and play, effort and ease. This notion appears most overtly in the works that center on Brenden’s notion of the “prosumer,” a conflation of the consumer and the producer, exemplified in both the Mobile Work series of drawings and the Daycase prototype sculpture. In the drawings, culled from mass-market periodicals of the 1960s and 70s, workers are depicted in ambiguous states of stasis—not necessarily relaxing, but perhaps only being casually productive. Brenden articulates this in-between state by employing a fairly rigorous sketching style of small hash marks, but done in the relaxed shades of colored pencils. Working hard, he has rendered images of hardly working.

And while Brenden has sourced these images from decades gone by, they play into a contemporary quandary over the definition and quantification of “work” as people allow themselves ever more technologically-based distractions, forgoing rigorous and continuous work for mediated socializing peppered with spurts of work. His proposed prototype for a Daycase fulfills similar desires—designed sufficiently to keep one organized, its analog demeanor prevents one from working too hard. Far sleeker than a pencil case or trapper keeper but not nearly as complex as a laptop, it folds open into a compartmentalized arena that is just organized enough. It serves as lunch holder, personal organizer, and even provides a 110v outlet. At the same time, its inset lights evoke a makeup

mirror so it’s never quite clear whether the case is optimized to stroke our productivity or our vanity.

In two other series, Brenden employs different levels of draughtsmanship—from prodigious to slight—and different degrees of memory—from considerable to none—to extend the work/leisure paradigm. Mr Owl, Donatello, Pikachu, Bowser, Webby VanderQuack ... is a mural-sized drawing installation in which he draws every two-dimensional cartoon character he can name by memory. It seems like a geek-specific exercise, until you realize how many characters you yourself recognize. With Brenden relying exclusively on his memory—rather than, say, Google—he is manifesting himself as the analog solution to the question at hand. It shouldn’t be the case that we’re so reliant on our digital, prosthetic memories, but it’s undeniably true, making Brenden’s rogues gallery an even more wistful gesture than it appears.

In a parallel work that negates the function of memory, Brenden’s Dreamhouse is a series of black and white wet ink drawings based on images found via a Google image search for “dream house.” His renditions are so evocative that they read as memories, despite being derived from specific image sources. Interestingly, where Brenden makes no use of memory, he makes considerable use of his drawing skills; and where memory is more heavily taxed, his drawing style is far more economical. The actual memory is presented as a hard, defined line, the non-memory referent as a dreamy icon.

In these works, Joel Brenden comingles nostalgia and memory with various modes of representation and elusive notions of the future, and even dubious notions of the present. It is a multi-directional, drawing-based effort, somewhere between work and play, with an iconoclastic and personalized style of rendering and something resembling information gathering and dissemination. That may sound completely speculative, but why not? Speculation need not connote uncertainty. Speculation may be the most satisfying path, the one imbued with the most possibility.

John Massier
Visual Arts Curator

