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Print Article

Entrance to "Kurt" at Seattle Art Museum

Elizabeth Peyton
Zoe's Kurt
1995
© Zoe Stillpass

Scott Fife
Kurt Cobain
2006
Collection of Theodore M. Wight

KURT LIVES
by Ben Davis

"Kurt," May 13-Sept. 6, 2010, at Seattle Art Museum, 1300 First Avenue, Seattle, WA 98101

Though I'm from Seattle, and was a teenager when grunge broke big, I missed the Nirvana wave. I spent the period living in Balboa, Panama, where my Jimmy Buffett-loving parents had gotten the family stranded (it's a long story). Even in Panama, though, I can remember when the news broke that Kurt Cobain had committed suicide, and how all the adults quizzed me and my sister about why he did it -- as if we, as teenagers, were some kind of experts, and Cobain some kind of avatar of the general "teen spirit."

These memories testify, I suppose, to the quasi-universal resonance of Nirvana's bruising brand of rock-and-roll. Eventually, my family migrated back to Seattle, and from that vantage point, I can better appreciate the unique connection Seattleites feel with Kurt Cobain and his famous band. "Kurt," the current exhibition of contemporary art inspired by Cobain at the Seattle Art Museum, tries to tap into this affinity. With mixed success.

The show is organized by Michael Darling, a rising star who is leaving SAM for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. In some ways, it seems to be a transparent gimmick show, an effort to get bodies through the door (which, I hear, it is doing, modestly). I don't know if "Kurt" is actually great -- but it is, at least, thought-provoking with regard to the relationship of contemporary art to pop culture. If an exhibition can't elicit an ecstatic *Ahhh!*, I suppose the next best thing is a good, puzzled *Hmmm*. . .

In general, the art in the show is not about Cobain the person. It's also not about Cobain the musician. It's about Kurt Cobain the media image. Elizabeth Peyton's small, deliberately precious picture of a beatified Cobain gets a wall all its own at the center of the SAM galleries, radiating the sense of the intimate imaginary space that exists between fans and their idols. Seattle artist Scott Fife creates an oversized model of Cobain's head from disheveled, screwed-together cardboard, evoking a monument laid low.

Both these works are extracted from larger series by Fife and Peyton dedicated to images of famous people -- ultimately, they are really about an interest in something abstract, "fame," rather than Cobain himself. Works by several UK artists in "Kurt" make this underlying vagueness even clearer: Gillian Wearing's video of herself dancing in a mall to music you can't hear -- we are told that it alternates between *Smells Like Teen Spirit* and *I Will Survive*, and that we are meant to guess which she is listening to by how she moves -- renders Nirvana simply as one pole of a general pop-culture duality; and Douglas Gordon's blank photo of himself wearing a blonde wig, titled *Self-Portrait as Kurt Cobain, as Andy Warhol, as Myra Hindley, as Marilyn Monroe*, is pretty much *about* the fact that Cobain has become just one reference among a sea of others.

Not one, but two of the works at SAM turn Nirvana lyrics into a sort

Courtesy of the artist
© Scott Fife

Gillian Wearing
Dancing in Peckham
1994
Courtesy Maureen Paley

Douglas Gordon
Self-Portrait as Kurt Cobain, as Andy Warhol, as Myra Hindley, as Marilyn Monroe
1996
Audrey and Sydney Irmas Collection
Courtesy of the artist

Jennifer West
Nirvana Alchemy Film
2007
Courtesy of the artist and Marc Foxx

of esthetic recipe kit. Jennifer West's *Nirvana Alchemy Film* features a distorted, vaguely psychedelic 16-mm clip of the artist jumping on a trampoline with her son, the film stained with various substances referenced in Nirvana songs, e.g. it has been "doused in mud, sopped in bleach" (a la *Come as You Are*). Joe Mama-Nitzberg and Marc Swanson's *Untitled (Kurt Cobain)* involves a flower arrangement tribute to Cobain incorporating actual "angel hair [glass tinsel] and baby's breath [flowers]" (a la *Heart-Shaped Box*). Such gestures are testimony to the evocative power of Cobain's lyrics. But they are also a wee bit gimmicky.

A lot more could be said about the art in the show, which ranges from Vancouver-based Rodney Graham's deadpan slideshow about Cobain's hometown of Aberdeen, Wa., to Jordan Kantor's oil-on-canvas paintings of the scene of Cobain's death -- another ode to the media swarm around the man, rather than the man himself. But let's cut to Banks Violette's well-known installation, *Dead Star Memorial Structure (on their hands at last)* (2003), which revolves around a spooky, melty black drum set. I actually like Violette, and think this installation, which is a sculptural, mythological, walk-in memorial to Cobain, is really good.

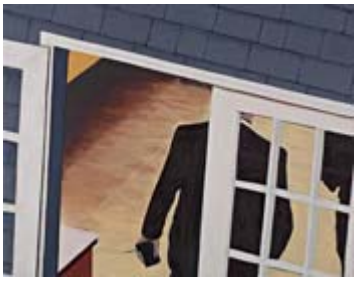
Even so, pressed into too-close contact with the ghost of Kurt, made to actually say something about him, *Dead Star Memorial Structure* feels stilted, over-intellectual. You can debate endlessly who Cobain really was, what his music meant. What seems clear is that fans identified with his music because it felt raw, and real and genuine, welding timeless themes of teenage frustration to the malaise of early-'90s, recession-crippled America. In this light, Violette's esoteric installation is no more true to Nirvana's spirit than the attraction over at Seattle's dire, Paul Allen-backed "music museum," the Experience Music Project, where you can sit in a soundproof booth and be instructed by a computer how to belt like Kurt Cobain. In both cases, the man has been transformed into an attraction in a theme park.

Nothing is inherently wrong with making art that is a tribute to one's heroes. Cobain himself made some of his best music covering his heroes: Think of the lacerating, Gothic rendition of Leadbelly's *In the Pines*, from *Unplugged*. But that cataclysmic tribute illustrates, really, everything that the artworks in "Kurt" aren't: Contemporary art is into head games; it does not do heartfelt well. Its dominant language is of "responding to," of being "interested in themes of," "reflecting on," being "concerned with" -- and that is the dominant language in "Kurt."

Good people can debate how appropriate these works are to their subject matter, and perhaps the issue is just a matter of what different fields are good at, of pop-music catharsis vs. museum culture reserve. Still, I would have liked to see more big, corny emotions here. I would have liked to see some angst, goddamit! When you think of Nirvana, the imagery that comes to mind is the Anarchist Cheerleaders in the *Smells Like Teen Spirit* video, writhing like demons in a gymnasium being sucked to hell; the revolver in *Come As You Are*, sinking hypnotically into a swimming pool like a lost thing. Is this symbolism obvious? Yes. But I prefer it to the archness of Dario Robleto's *It Sounds Like They Still Love Each Other to Me* (1998), a pair of earplugs, one cast from a melted Nirvana record and one made from a record by Hole, former band of Cobain's girlfriend, Courtney Love. To me, such works in "Kurt" present the image of contemporary artists as emotional vampires, looking for any reference that still contains some emotional juice, to latch onto and suck dry.

Inasmuch as there is another possibility for relating to pop culture in this show, it comes in the form of Charles Peterson's black-and-white

Joe Mama-Nitzberg and Marc Swanson
Untitled (Kurt Cobain)
2009
Courtesy Richard Gray Gallery



Jordan Kantor
Greenhouse
2006
Courtesy of Ratio 3

Installation view of Banks Violette's *Dead Star Memorial Structure (on their hands at last)* (2003) in "Kurt" at Seattle Art Museum
Photo by Jen Graves

images of the early Nirvana onstage. Yet as stirring as these pics are, they feel like documentary, not art.

However, at least one piece at SAM does offer the sought-after spark of connection with Kurt Cobain, in spirit as well as in subject matter: Northwest photographer Alice Wheeler's image of a young man, with bleached, Cobain-esque hair, and the whisper of a beard, staring out at us with an indecipherable intensity. He wears a Nirvana T-shirt, beneath a red-checked lumberjack shirt. The old Seattle Kingdome sits in the background (long since demolished to make way for not one, but two wasteful replacement stadiums, with corporate names), time-stamping the picture. He stands in front of one of Seattle's tent cities for the homeless, which, you guess, he calls home. People used to knock grunge as "homeless chic." Here things flow the other way.

Tent City, Seattle, WA, April, 1999, as the piece is called, touches on the relationship of art, celebrity and the real world, like all the other art here, but the stakes are vivid and clear. Wheeler's photo hurts a little to look at, because you have the sense of something frail and confused and human looking back at you. But let's be honest: Only something that hurts a little can be true to the past that this show tries to tap into, or, for that matter, to our present.

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Charles Peterson
Nirvana, Rajis, Los Angeles 2/15/90
1990
Courtesy of Charles Peterson

Alice Wheeler
Tent City, Seattle, WA, April, 1999
1999
Courtesy of the artist and Greg Kucera Gallery