



VISUAL ARTS

Jason Lazarus exhibit at the Nerman Museum thinks beyond the frame

BY ALICE THORSON

THE KANSAS CITY STAR



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The installation, “T.H.T.K. (Kansas City)” (2014), features selections from the more than 4,000 photographs artist Jason Lazarus has collected as part of his ongoing T.H.T.K., project, in which he asked people to donate photographs that they found too hard to keep. **E. G. SCHEMPF**

The photographic works of Jason Lazarus address some of the most momentous events in modern history: the rise of Nazism, the murder of Emmett Till, the Iraq War, Hurricane Katrina, the election of Barack Obama.

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But the subjects *of* Lazarus' pictures do not appear *in* his pictures. His photographs point to things that exist beyond the frame, seeking to shift focus from the static image to engage a world of flux and change. For him photography is a tool of research and exploration.

"The frame is not an endpoint but a beginning," Lazarus said in an interview at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, in conjunction with his intelligent and refreshingly unprogrammatic exhibit, "Jason Lazarus: Don't Close These Doors Unless You Know What You're Doing."

Born in Kansas City, Lazarus is now based in Chicago, where he received his masters of fine arts in photography from Columbia College Chicago in 2003.

Over the past decade, he has built an impressive resume, including exhibits at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, D3 Projects Los Angeles and SF Camerawork. The Nerman exhibit is a selected 10-year overview and includes one of his best-known projects, "T.H.T.K." (Too Hard to Keep). Since 2010, Lazarus has collected more than 4,000 photographs that their original owners found too hard to keep.

"I started by asking friends," he said, "and then broadened my solicitation."

In the museum's McCaffree Gallery, the small, personal images of individuals and family gatherings, babies and pets, are airily displayed as if on a room-sized bulletin board. At the request of their original owners, some are turned to the wall, including a columnar arrangement in a corner of reversed images that document an eight-year relationship.

That's all Lazarus had to say about them — it's up to the viewer to imagine just what about these images made them too hard to keep.

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It's a sad pursuit — people rarely give away things that bring them joy — so one assumes these pictures of family Christmases and smiling friends are fraught with traumatic memories. In her essay on the project for the artist's Camerawork show in San Francisco, eminent theorist and critic Abigail Solomon-Godeau characterized it as a “flexible, protean and secular reliquary.”

The “T.H.T.K.” installation includes photo ephemera, including canisters of undeveloped film, entire photo albums and a slide projection that Lazarus edited from a submission of 200 slides.

Like the donated images in “T.H.T.K.,” Lazarus' own photographs tend to focus on ordinary scenes and events with ties to larger stories, personal as well as public.

After his father fell unconscious and an ambulance had taken him away, Lazarus took a photograph of the sweat-stained pillow left behind in the house, seeing “the ghost” of his father in the patch of damp in the center of the floral-edged case. The image marks his realization of the mortality of a parent, he said. Happily, his father survived the episode.

The title of the pillow image is a simple date: “May 24th, 2008.” But the titles of other works offer clues to the events that generated the images.

A rectangle of gray sky, featureless save the hazy illumination rising from the lower edge, is labeled “Obama Election Night Rally, November 4, 2008 (Grant Park, Chicago, IL)” (2008). The photograph captures the view any one of the elated thousands would have seen when looking heavenward that night, while tacitly casting the nation's election of its first black president as a cosmic event.

Hanging across from the Obama election-night photo is a landscape image, showing a sheet of plywood in the foreground of a grassy, tree-bordered clearing under a blue sky streaked with clouds. Titled “Standing at the Grave of Emmett Till, Day of Exhumation, June 1st 2005 (Alsip, IL)” (2005). The peaceful scene marks the day the body of the African-American teen murdered in Mississippi in 1955 was exhumed for autopsy, in a search for further clues about his death and definitive confirmation that the body in the grave was his.

The Obama and Till images mark a 50-year span, said Bruce Hartman, the Nerman's executive director. Their proximity in the exhibit provokes reflection on what has and hasn't

changed in the course of those decades when it comes to race.

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Lazarus' show becomes addictive as one seeks out the whys behind his matter-of-fact images, such as the close-up of a marble panel inscribed in capital letters, "Akademie Der Bildenden Kunste."

It's a plaque mounted at the entrance of the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, which as Lazarus' title explains, "Denied Hitler Enrollment Twice Citing 'Unfitness for Painting.'"

As Barry Blinderman, director of the University Galleries at Illinois State University wryly observed in an essay for a 2011 Lazarus exhibit at ISU, "In a strange way, the work incorporates a critique of the Academy into its parenthetical subtitle, indicating the worst of all possible career paths ever to succeed artistic failure."

At the Overland Park venue, the work also resonates in the wake of the Jewish Community Center shootings, Lazarus said, and suspect Frazier Glenn Miller's cry of "Heil Hitler."

In another text-based work, "Orion Over Baghdad: Flickr Title Archive I" (2009), Lazarus weighs in on the Iraq War. The silver gelatin print comprises a series of phrases — "ready to roll," "shift change" "dangerous place to be" — all typed in the same font size and running continuously, creating an effect not unlike the names in Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

The "Orion Over Baghdad" phrases are titles of photos that soldiers posted on their Flickr accounts. After collecting them in a word document that he converted into digital negatives, Lazarus made photograms, laying the negatives on the same type of silver gelatin paper historically used for photographs of war. It's a way, he said, of "operating with the existing circuitry."

"Spilled Milk" (2014), the most experimental piece in the show, is a distillation of "Milk," a famous photograph by Jeff Wall. After determining the exact amounts of colored ink needed to make a large digital print of Wall's piece, Lazarus measured each color into a separate vial. He then used a hypodermic needle to squirt the inks onto the gallery wall, creating a series of colored streaks of different lengths.

Iconoclastic gestures such as this are why Lazarus is widely regarded as a conceptual artist first and a photographer second.

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Lazarus harasses photography, in his words, “rebuking its straightforward project, the palette, the aesthetic, the rules.” His stated goal is “to recast the relationship of photography, history and knowledge.”

While all of this makes fertile ground for the theoretically minded, the power of Lazarus’ work stems from its profoundly human view of people and events. We confront our own vulnerabilities in “T.H.T.K.” and “Orion Over Baghdad,” while works like “Emmett Till” and “Vienna Academy” enlist our vigilance.

There’s an activist dimension to “Untitled (New Orleans)” (2011), a bulky bundle of found objects. .

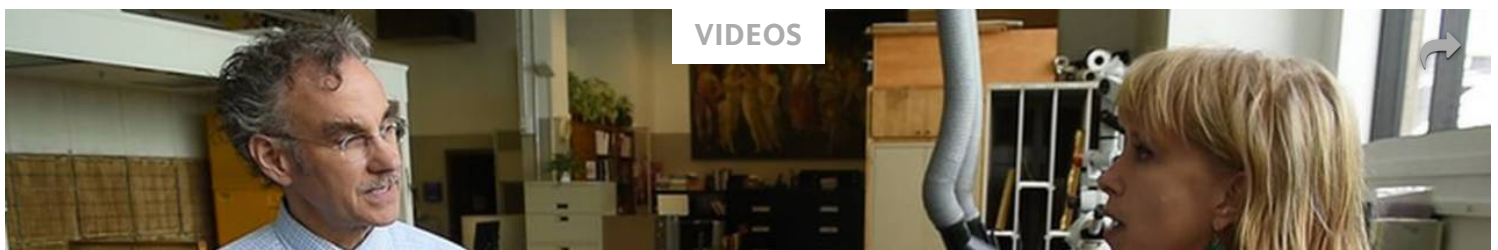
During a visit to New Orleans, Lazarus stopped in a junk shop, where he came across a board with scavenged African-American family snapshots. Post-Katrina, various production companies had rented the board as a prop. Lazarus bought it, wrapped it in a pink blanket with black tape, and that’s how he is displaying it, deliberately retiring the images from their role in the media’s spectacle of victimhood.

To reach Alice Thorson, call 816-234-4763 or send email to athorson@kcstar.com.

Lazarus exhibit

“Jason Lazarus: Don’t Close These Doors Unless You Know What You’re Doing” continues at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art at Johnson County Community College, 12345 College Blvd., Overland Park, through Aug. 31. Hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Friday; noon-5 p.m. Sunday. Closed Monday. For more information: 913-469-3000 or nermanmuseum.org. Admission is free.

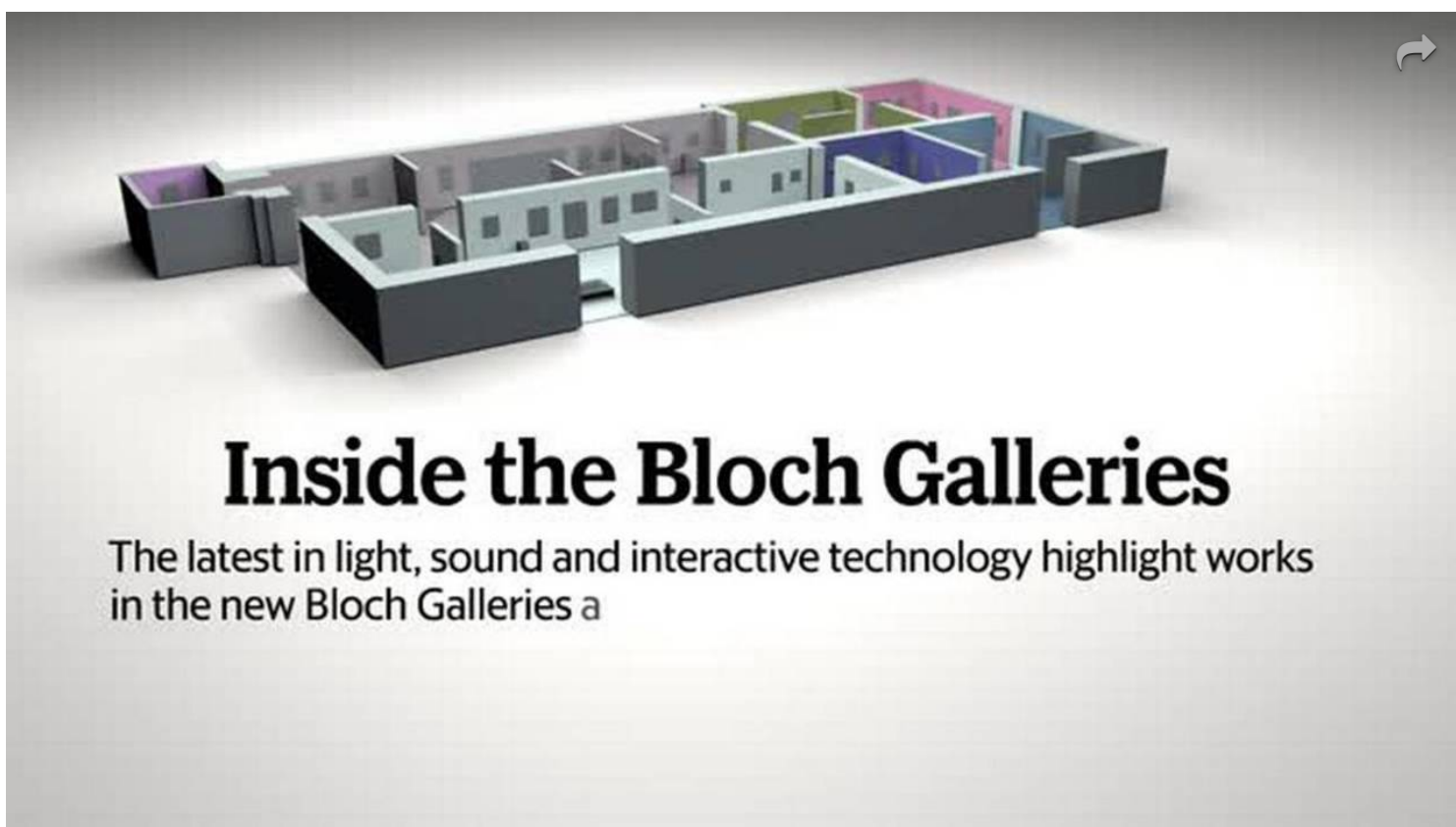
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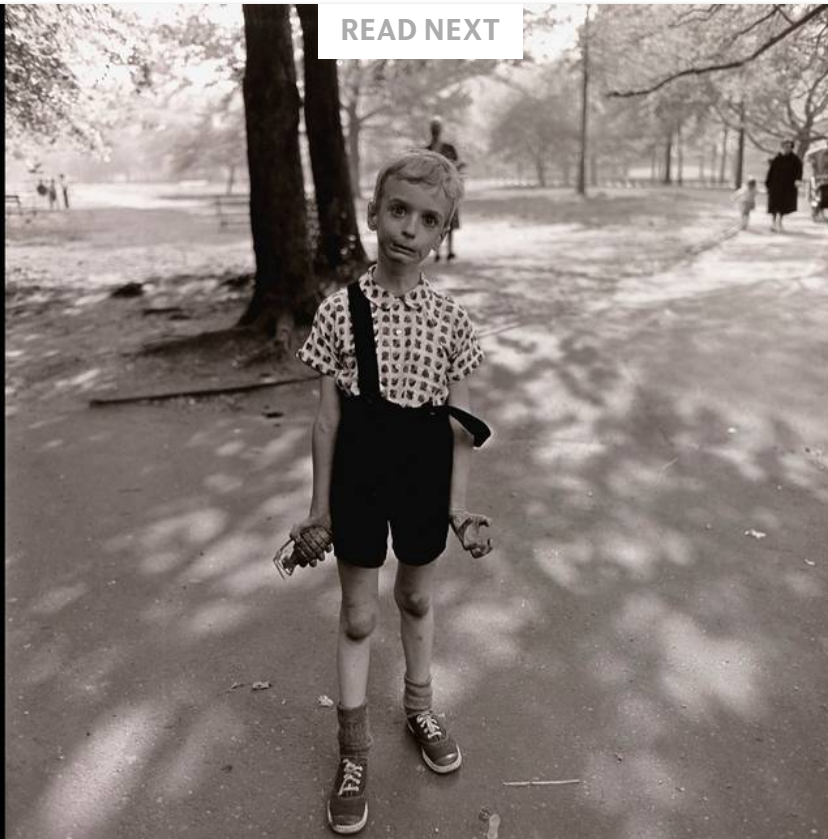
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BY MATT CAMPBELL

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