

Bruce Burris: A Shrine for a Shrine

Schneider Museum of Art
October 5th through December 9th, 2021



Bruce Burris
Ye are New Seekers
 2021
 80 x 16 inches

ESSAY

The News According to Bruce Burris

BEAN GILSDORF

TRYING TO EXPLAIN WHAT'S GOING ON, shout the words painted atop Bruce Burris's mixed-media panel *Ye are New Seekers* (2021). There is perhaps no better summary of the artist's labors: Burris's works overflow with distinctly American colloquialisms that give voice to our unruly national psyche. Massed phrases shape the visual space of the work—text in straight lines, meandering ribbons, and isolated bubbles, all vying for the viewer's (or should we say reader's) attention. His colorful acrylic paintings are so densely packed with aphorisms and exhortations that the language piles up on the surface of his canvases. The texts, inscribed in an array of fonts and colors, wrap around pictures appropriated from newspapers and magazines, and are adorned with yarn, glitter, tinsel, plastic beads, metallic pipe cleaners, and wire. Taken in aggregate, the stream-of-consciousness adages suggest associative meanings: *The last caddledrive* (2019) proclaims SOME OL ROCK OPRY / ONE FER YA / WE ARE OF THIS PLACE / HIS LAST CATTLE DRIVE / R.I.P. WHOSE LAND AND FOR WHAT / GRAZING RIGHTS AS IF / ITS LIKE THAT GLACIER / WORKIN FOR IT / TIME NOW TO TEND OUR GARDEN / IT IS A SAME SAD THING / WE DO WHAT WE DO. Overall, the effect is a cacophony of voices that phase in and out of harmony with each other, cooperating and disagreeing, clamoring to be heard.

Since the 1980s, Burris has been developing an intensely detailed body of work inspired by local and national news, his interest in an array of subcultures, his connection to humble—even kitsch—materials, and the social energies of the places he's lived. Burris spent an impressionable decade in San Francisco's Haight district, where his travels to and from his abode on Clayton Street took him daily past psychedelic posters and peace gardens filled with folk art. Later, in Lexington, Kentucky, Burris engaged with environmental activism around the effects of mining and founded a visual arts program for neurodiverse artists. Currently he resides in Corvallis, Oregon, where he observes the performative goings-on of nearby loggers, ranchers,



Bruce Burris
Hippiewannacigarette
 2020
 Mixed media, 39 x 50 inches

hippies, Malheur occupiers, and other peripheral coteries that range up and down the West Coast.

Burris is a messenger, a medium channeling unstable cultural currents into visual forms, so naturally these assemblages are turbulent. His simultaneous articulation of a spectrum of positions and mindsets amplifies their mutual tensions and inner discrepancies. A multi-textured work stippled with raised dots of paint, *Hippiewannacigarette* (2020), proclaims LIGHT UP SHRUG IT OFF / HEY FUCK YOU / FUCK YA ORYGUN THE CURTAIN HAS RISEN, the confrontational tone and disjointed phrases pushing aggressively against the stars-and-stripes hand that flashes the peace sign in the middle of the canvas. This is the dark edge of the Aquarian children: Hey, man, don't harsh my mellow, *or else*.

Burris's work vibrates with these kinds of collisions: The snippets of text, multicolored acrylic dots, and brushstroke grids compete for space amid dime-store decorations: shiny plastic crystals, beads, glitter, and yarn. Occasionally, sections are excised from the canvases in neatly cut circles and oblongs; in other instances, layers of adornments accumulate over the text, pushing it towards illegibility—tinsel, wire coat hangers, seashells, tinfoil ropes, and pipe-cleaner-and-bead balls resembling holiday ornaments made by children. The maximal approach of Burris's frantic communications feels like a metaphor for twenty-first century America, a nation that exists at exactly the point where the obliviousness of celebration meets the anxiety of immanent collapse—sparkling cheaply and constantly squawking for



Bruce Burris
memorialforsomeranchers
 2020
 Mixed media, 38 x 36 inches

“Burris is a messenger, a medium channeling unstable cultural currents into visual forms, so naturally these assemblages are turbulent.”

BEAN GILSDORF



Bruce Burris
Ye Are One With Stoner Creek
 2014
 Mixed media on paper, 85 x 140 inches

attention. *memorialforsomeranchers* (2020) actually waves the flag, two child-sized standards hung on either side of a central medallion made from loops and loops of yarn encrusted with beads, wire, glitter paint, Christmas decorations, and collaged images of the Bundy clan. This freak-out mandala is affixed to a battered, partly painted piece of lumber that leans against the wall, a downmarket roadside crucifix for wannabe martyrs, exposing as absurd the hypocritical imaginings of so-called patriots.

In other works, Burris takes a less riotously colorful approach, though his feverish intensity remains. *Ye Are One With Stoner Creek* (2014) evokes a weathered newspaper, with black hand-drawn headlines on parchment-colored paper, and interlocking text so dense it creates its own undulating shapes and compositions on the pages. The work consists of five panels so far (Burris describes it as a work in progress), with designs that flow from one panel to the next, punctuated by images of '70s rock stars suspended in the text like bubbles in a liquid. It's a fitting configuration for a work whose title references an 87-mile-long creek in central Kentucky that frequently floods. The text itself is a disjointed crush: DIE FAKER DIE / WAR OUR TRUEST SECURITY / JUST DOPE Y'ALL / STEP BACK SUCKA / THE OLD RIVER JUST A TEST. The work's eccentric fractiousness echoes and distills the frustrated denizens of countless American towns eroded by strip mining, deforestation, fracking, corporate abandonment, and painkillers.

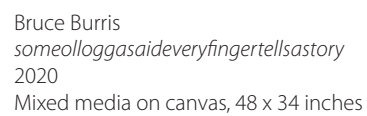
Persuasively, the churn on these canvases reflects the volatile precariousness of his fellow citizens. There is too much to see, and each work incorporates so many words that one could not hope to absorb them all. In this way, they function as proxies for the news-deluged world we now occupy. For much of



Bruce Burris
The lastcaddledrive
 2019
 Mixed media, 36 x 48 inches

his career, the artist objected to the term *obsessive* in characterizations of his practice; but as the connotation of that term has shifted away from mental illness toward a descriptor for dedicated, focused intensity, it is hard to find another way to sum up the unbounded, exhaustive energy of his work. The sheer force of Burris's reckonings dazzles and confounds, with a net effect that is something between a Greek chorus and a Pentecostal preacher—a scrambled late-night radio transmission from America's anguished subconscious.

Bean Gilsdorf is an artist and writer. Her artworks have been exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, and the American Textile History Museum, as well as exhibition spaces in Poland, England, Italy, China, and South Africa. Her reviews and essays have been published by Artforum, Art in America, Frieze, and the Los Angeles Review of Books. Gilsdorf is the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, including an Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant (2020), two Fulbright Fellowships to Poland (2015–2016 and 2016–2017), a Graduate Fellowship at Headlands Center for the Arts (2011–2012), and a Graduate Merit Full Scholarship at California College of the Arts (2009–2011). Gilsdorf holds a BA in Literature from Simon's Rock at Bard College and an MFA in Fine Arts from California College of the Arts.





Bruce Burris
A Shrine for A Shrine
 2021
 Mixed media collage, 26 x 26 inches

"Instead of a direct and reactive critique of social, political and environmental wrongs,... he recognizes that when two-way conversation is absent, only mutual blame and recrimination remain."

BEAN GILSDORF

ESSAY

Bruce Burris

PATRICK COLLIER

Many young minds of the generation to which Bruce Burris belongs gained some of their political awareness while in their basements listening to what was then considered radical, socially-conscious rock and roll music. And while this music was available to purchase in record shops, "underground stations" found on a sparsely (at that time) populated FM dial provided that music in bulk.

One genre of note was the rock opera and its epic stories, often critical of the society in which we found ourselves: "S.F. Sorrow" by The Pretty Things is the story of a working-class war veteran and "factories of misery"; The Who's "Tommy" is as much about a dysfunctional family as it is overcoming disadvantages and abuse; Paul Kantner and Jefferson Airplane's "Blows Against the Empire" is a futuristic, somewhat anarchistic story of revolution in space after the environmental and political corruption of Earth; and we must also include David Bowie's "The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars," which a bit later opened eyes and hearts to alternate lifestyles. Yet there was a lesson afoot that some listeners might not have anticipated, even though the evidence had already shown itself.

While some credit might be due to the Flower Children for helping to stop the Vietnam War, supporting civil rights issues and feminism, in reality a vast part of the world, including expansive parts of the United States, went unfazed and persisted in the slow crawl to late capitalism. The term "Long Hair" went from a pejorative to a mere fashion choice that had nothing to do with one's politics. Many proponents of "do your own thing" morphed into libertarians. Dead Heads became futures traders on the Chicago Board of Trade.

Yet, there were some folks who "kept on keeping on." Bruce Burris is one of these holdouts.

If you sit with Bruce Burris for a couple hours, you will discover that he is a storyteller, and this manifests in his artwork: his chronicles or diaries play out on canvas and whatever other surface he can find to work on. Nowhere is this

more evident than in *Ye Are One With Stoner Creek* (2014). The amount of written text is almost overwhelming; to read it all might require a couple hours of free time as well as a magnifying glass. (In a perfect world, a young art student might transcribe the whole of the text for class credit.) The collaged-in rock stars (e.g., Diana Ross, Mick Jagger and Bowie) act as places where one can rest the eyes while the text swims around. There are also areas where the paper has been left blank, presumably because this is an ongoing story or Burris no longer resides in the area. Still, more sheets of paper could be added should the story ever require it. And it hypothetically might, because Stoner Creek is an actual body of water that traverses through a sizable geographical region east of Lexington, Kentucky. Add to that the generations of residents in the area, and one realizes this story is far from complete.

Stoner Creek is also a good place to start when considering Burris's aesthetic and its points of origin. The swirls of writing echo the paisley print attire for both men and women of the 1960s as well as the rock concert posters of the time. And while Burris uses '60s-era psychedelia as a means to adorn his collages, the absolute cacophony that occurs around contemporary issues—social media, cable television and any other platform for an expression of ideas and opinions, including political rallies and insurrections—his pandemonium of designs and images relay a frenzied urgency that make this approach wholly appropriate.

Burris's sensitivity to societal ills goes deep, and so does his sensitivity to the range of emotions one might feel after collective tragedy—nevermind the multitude of perspectives on how the misfortune came to be. In *someollogasaideveryfingertellsastory* (2020) the mangled green hand echoes the title, and alongside it is a proclamation, "We was dealt this fer shit hand." Add to that the banner proclaiming, "Here we come stand aside mudders we have pitched a tent."

Above these proclamations, is a collaged-in image of a man with a large stitched-up area across his face. On his forehead, where a "third eye" might be found, is an image of LaVoy Finicum, one of the more high-profile occupiers of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and the only fatality among the protesters from that event. The case Burris makes is that their sardonic wit readily turns into anger from perceived oppression, which then builds until it leads to violence.

Burris has addressed the 2016 Malheur Occupation a number of times. As with all protests, this one was performative, full of bravado, yet it also involved fantasy roleplaying with land-moving equipment and assault weapons. The spectacle was such that Burris saw fit to make *The lastcaddledrive* (2019), and in an ironic gesture plastered a banner across the top proclaiming, "SOME OL' ROCK OPRY."

The story lines in operas are often driven by a loss of face, treachery, infidelity, or even simple misunderstanding. They are morality plays for which the lesson from the ensuing tragedy is a call for greater understanding and compassion. Otherwise, corrective measures are doomed to failure, the end result being that a main character, whether protagonist or antagonist, guilty or innocent, dies, largely because of his or her foibles.



Bruce Burris
ClimateChangeCommies
 2020
 Mixed media on paper, 22 x 15 inches

"...he makes us "listen" to the opposition, for how else can we make an informed opinion about what is true suffering and what is an imagined or self-inflicted victimization?"

PATRICK COLLIER



Bruce Burris
Conflict Resolution Tools
2020
Mixed media on board, 23 x 16 inches

Rather than making his own political leanings apparent in pieces like *someolloggasaideveryfingertellsastory* and *The lastcaddledrive*, Burris lays the drama out. He attempts to represent the perpetrators' troubled worldview, albeit fancifully, using their own words to establish their mythos. In doing so, he makes us "listen" to the opposition, for how else can we make an informed opinion about what is true suffering and what is an imagined or self-inflicted victimization? How else will one know if it is right to rail against the transgressions of one's perceived enemy while ignoring the ways one might also be complicit or equally responsible?

Instead of a direct and reactive critique of social, political and environmental wrongs (which Burris does do in his "Protest Signs"), he recognizes that when two-way conversation is absent, only mutual blame and recrimination remain.

This is what sets Bruce Burris apart as an artist-activist.



Bruce Burris
Guns n Knife Show
1997
Mixed media on paper, 22 x 15 inches

Patrick Collier – Holding a BA in Philosophy and an MA in English Literature from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, plus an MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago, Collier is a writer as well as a visual artist. He writes art criticism for Oregon ArtsWatch (www.orartswatch.org) in Portland, Oregon, and is the author of a number of catalogue essays. His approach to art making is multidisciplinary, including poetry, drawing, sculpture, photography and video, often in the same artwork or installation. Recent exhibitions include *The Suburban* in Oak Park, Illinois, *Nine Gallery* in Portland, *Portland State University Schneider Museum of Art*, *University of Illinois at Springfield*, and *Oregon State University*.

BRUCE BURRIS

Bruce Burris is an artist who has worked and collaborated with artists who are neurodiverse for over 40 years and has served as founder/director/owner of a number of agencies/programs noted for crafting innovative supports which enable people to assume roles of significance in their community via participation in the arts.

As an artist Bruce's content has always been about the issues of place—where he lives and the strife that is embedded in the locality. His focus is most always on issues that affect working people. He exhibits a high level of craft and corresponding ideas which are always gutsy in content and beautifully rendered and have a very specific aesthetic and trajectory in terms of his ideas.

Bruce has exhibited throughout the US, including the Portland2016 Biennial, curated by Michelle Grabner and most recently in solo exhibits at Summertime Gallery NYC and A.L.S.O./ Shrine NYC. Burris has been awarded numerous fellowships including the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, the Hallie Ford Foundation, the Kentucky State Arts Council-Al Smith Fellowship, the Delaware State Arts Council, the NEA-SAF. His work is included in numerous public and private collections including the University of Kentucky Art Museum. Burris attended the San Francisco Art Institute and is represented by March Gallery, NYC.



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Bruce Burris
Gby Bruce Baillee HeyCowboy WachaSmokinBuoy
2021
Mixed media Woolworth's mirror, 49 x 14 inches

COVER

Bruce Burris
Protest Sign #11
2013–present
Mixed media on board, 34 x 24 inches



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