



NATE LARSON CINCINNATI

The lines separating truth from falsehood and possibility from impossibility blur in Nate Larson's deadpan inquiries into our desire to believe and the human affinity to deception. In *Miracle Pennies and Other Stories: Photography and Video by Nate Larson*, the artist spoofs—or doesn't, your call—miraculous events, dream logic, fortune cookies, and questions of identity [Alice F. and Harris K. Weston Art Gallery; January 25—March 30, 2008]. The use of photography to question truth rather than illustrate it, to fabricate instead of document, is a subversive strategy Larson finds exactly to his purpose.

The exhibition consists of two photographic series and four video works, all meticulously executed. An active presence in his own work, Larson appears in both still images and videos wearing clothes that establish his persona: khaki slacks, short-sleeved white dress shirt with striped tie, eye glasses delicately rimmed at top but rimless below. His hair is almost burr-cut; as if to counter that, he has a tiny suggestion of beard. In short, excepting the beard, he wears a costume from a period before he was born, the mid-twentieth century. His appearance underlines the general ambiguity of the works.

A chance encounter apparently set off the *Miracle Pennies Series*, 2006, whose narrative rewards close attention. Ten sets of photographs document receipt of an amazing letter, containing prayer-anointed miracle pennies and complicated instructions on their disposal in order to receive fiscal rewards. In the course of documenting his response, Larson lets us know that his "Secret Money Place," where a miracle penny is to go, is a box for Tarot cards that, kept in the "t's" on his bookshelf, already contains a roll of twenty-dollar bills. The final photograph shows one such bill—from the roll, perhaps?—inserted into the return envelope—his acquiescence to a requested donation, purported to ensure results and bring forth further instructions. As this is the final panel, we must assume neither results nor instructions ensued.

Each work in the 2005 *Burden of Proof Series* is a narrative in itself. For *Fortune Cookie*, Larson played the lottery with numbers from fortune cookies, spending \$3 to win \$35.50. Numbers accompanying the "Thinking is heavily endorsed" fortune cookie did not win; "There is a way to everything you want" did, which may tell us something. For *Another Nate Larson*, he requested photographs from fourteen persons with the same name as his, found on the Internet.

All four videos, 2005, are silent, and shot mostly in black and white so that color, appearing in one segment in the form of a dislodged and faintly bloody tooth, produces a small shock. Larson goes seriously and unsmilingly about his work in these short works, suggesting, among other things, that we may all take ourselves too seriously.

Larson's elaborate stagings and stories remind us of our need to believe. One of the videos, *Five Explanations for a White Spot on a Grey Floor*, presents a range of answers, from the supernatural to the trickster and the mundane. While the mundane is likely and the trickster possible, the supernatural is certainly most alluring. Photography, a medium we've traditionally associated with truth, now shows us truth as a slippery proposition. Larson is an adept practitioner in the field.

—Jane Durrell

KERRY JAMES MARSHALL COLUMBUS, OH

Every Beat of My Heart is the result of Kerry James Marshall's residency at the Wexner Center for the Arts, where he worked with a group of twenty-two Columbus teens to bring his famous comic strip *Rythm Mastr* to the stage as Japanese Bunraku puppet theater [Wexner Center for the Arts; February 2—April 13, 2008]. This collaboration resulted in two nights of performance with the teens as puppet masters. On display in the gallery are the stage set, the Bunraku puppets, which resemble African sculptures but followed Bunraku construction techniques, and a selection of the early *Rythm Mastr* comic strip dailies.

A clear conceptual thread runs from the oversized newspaper comic strips, executed in black and white and displayed on the wall, to the Bunraku puppets/superheroes waiting patiently to be reanimated as they rest against the urban scenery backdrop that served as the set for *Every Beat of My Heart*. Part stage set, part sculpture, part drawing, and part installation, the exhibition itself is a testament to Marshall's imaginative amalgamation of Bunraku puppet theater, superhero graphic literature, the sculptural traditions of the Yoruba of Nigeria and the Senufo of Côte d'Ivoire and Mali, and the culture of Watts and South Central L.A. where he grew up. Rahim, the protagonist of the epic story *Rythm Mastr*, is a master drummer and proprietor of The Ancient Egyptian Museum. Through his drumming, Rahim is able to bring the African superheroes, based partially on the Yoruban pantheon, to life. *Every Beat of My Heart* tells the story of Stasha and Farrell, two teenage lovers who live in a city of the future. Stasha, a science whiz injured in a drive-by shooting, builds robots in retaliation. Upon Rahim's death, Farrell becomes the *rythm mastr*. Together, they use their powers to fight the gang violence that plagues their neighborhood.

The message of the play was uplifting. Handmade by Marshall, the exquisitely constructed puppets were fascinating to watch as the teenagers moved them across the stage, three to a puppet. The teens seemed

ABOVE: Nate Larson, *Another Nate Larson*, 2005, pigment print, 12 x 26 inches, ed. 2/6 [courtesy of the artist and Alice F. and Harris K. Weston Art Gallery, Cincinnati]