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DAVID DIXON'S LATEST ART: YOU CAN BANK ON IT

A SITE-SPECIFIC INSTALLATION WORK EVOKES HISTORY AND ESCHEWS RACISM

by Edward M. Gómez

David Dixon robbed a bank.

More precisely, he borrowed the history-flavored spirit of a former bank building's stately interior and used it as part of the raw material for one of his newest, site-specific art projects, which he realized earlier this summer in Beacon, New York, a small town on the west bank of the Hudson River, about 55 miles (88.5 kilometers) north of New York City.



David Dixon, "Bank. Church. Cathouse. (The Sins of the Father)," 2022, mixed-media, site-specific artwork installed in a former bank building in Beacon, New York, July 2-17, 2022. Photo courtesy of Cathouse Proper

In 2003, the Dia Art Foundation's opening in Beacon of a renovated industrial building as a home for its collection of modern art dating back to the 1960s put the town on the map as a significant satellite of the New York City art world. Today, it boasts many commercial art galleries of its own.

Dixon is the founder and director of Cathouse Proper, a gallery in Brooklyn that is an outgrowth of his earlier Cathouse FUNeral gallery. About his venues' curious names: Cathouse FUNeral was located in a section of a building that was primarily occupied by a funeral parlor; Dixon often altered the interior layout of that gallery when mounting new exhibitions. For a while, he operated two separate spaces, the second of which became known as "Cathouse Proper." This is the artist and art dealer's main gallery space today (at 524 Court Street in Brooklyn's Carroll Gardens neighborhood).

Over the years, at both of his gallery spaces, Dixon often has shown the work of conceptual artists or artists whose works have displayed noticeable affinities with conceptual art's sensibility and principles. In his own work, Dixon likes to overlap and tease out thematic relationships between numerous ideas simultaneously, making for imaginative concoctions that require time in which to be examined and fully comprehended.



Entrance from the street into the former bank building in Beacon, New York, in which the artist David Dixon's mixed-media, site-specific work "Bank. Church. Cathouse. (The Sins of the Father)" was presented earlier this summer. On the display table to the right: Copies of books by the author Thomas F. Dixon, Jr. (no relation to the artist), which were published in the early 20th century. Photo courtesy of Cathouse Proper

Often, his mixed-media installation works point to several different themes and simply invite — or demand — that viewers consider them and draw their own conclusions about how they might relate to each other.

Such was the case with “Bank. Church. Cathouse. (The Sins of the Father),” the mixed-media work he installed in a former Mechanics Savings Bank, with its typical, neo-classical façade and interior from decades ago, on Beacon’s main street earlier this summer. Until recently, the building had served as the home of the Star of Bethlehem Church. (Dixon’s exhibition was presented in collaboration with Mother Gallery, a venue in Beacon run by the artist Paola Oxo.) As Dixon’s own written description of the work he created in and for the old-bank setting explained, it was designed to “take into consideration generations of the building’s past uses by installing in its vast main space a free-standing wall evoking an altarpiece.” That structure, Dixon’s notes indicated, “embraced through its form and proximity the bank’s original *in situ* vault. [Editor’s note: That massive structure still exists in the Beacon bank and can be seen in some of the photos that appear here.] The wall/altar, which was constructed like a stage set, was built from ‘harvestings’ from my Cathouse gallery spaces, that is from the Sheetrock and plywood physical remnants of exhibitions that had been presented at those venues in the past and were repurposed for this new installation.”



David Dixon, “Bank. Church. Cathouse. (The Sins of the Father),” 2022, mixed-media, site-specific artwork installed in a former bank building in Beacon, New York, July 2-17, 2022; front side of the “altar/wall.” Photo courtesy of Cathouse Proper

Behind the wall/altar, inside the bank’s walk-in vault, whose round door had been left wide open, a tall, vertical-format painting could be seen. Symbolically depicting what Dixon described as “a clash of cultures,” it consisted, as he put it, “of a photographic image, appropriated from a museum catalog, of an African Fang reliquary figure standing atop a bark basket that would have

contained generations of Fang ancestral skulls.” He noted, however, that “European missionary and colonial efforts had physically and spiritually severed this relationship of sculptural figure to skull, with the Europeans having taken the sculpture while disposing of the ancestral skulls.” In addition to these elements evoking a sense of history, “Bank. Church. Cathouse. (The Sins of the Father)” featured another component, one that required some explaining.

That element was a novel, *The Sins of the Father: A Romance of the South*, which was written by Thomas F. Dixon, Jr. and published in 1912. (There is no direct ancestral link between the artist Dixon and this book’s author.) Thomas F. Dixon, Jr. (1864-1946), a Baptist minister and white supremacist, among other claims to notoriety, also wrote *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905), a novel celebrating racism and the Lost Cause of the Confederacy that served as the basis for D.W. Griffith’s film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).



*An adulterated copy of the book *The Sins of the Father: A Romance of the South* (1912), by the white-supremacist author Thomas F. Dixon, Jr. (no relation to David Dixon), was an element of the artist Dixon’s mixed-media, site-specific work “Bank. Church. Cathouse. (The Sins of the Father)”. Photo courtesy of Cathouse Proper*

In “Bank. Church. Cathouse. (The Sins of the Father),” a copy of *The Sins of the Father* was displayed off to the side of David Dixon’s free-standing wall; described by the artist as “a kind of liturgical ‘holy book of evil,’” it was sealed shut and wrapped in chains. A copy of *The Clansman* was also on view, also bound up in a chain, with a rusty nail hammered into its front cover. Inside, the artist had marked up its pages with abstract drawings. His installation work also included a copy of “The Grave Digger,” a short text the artist Dixon had written himself, in

which he discussed, with historical-philosophical references, “the spirit of community,” pointing out that no genuine community can ever be created or nurtured as long as bigotry and hatred are allowed to thrive among its members. It pointedly cites slavery as the United States of America’s “original sin.”

In summary, history turned out to be one of the overarching subjects of Dixon’s site-specific art installation in the old bank building; its various elements introduced their own sub-themes to what turned out to be a multilayered, symbolic thought piece.



David Dixon, “Bank. Church. Cathouse. (The Sins of the Father),” 2022, mixed-media, site-specific artwork installed in a former bank building in Beacon, New York, July 2-17, 2022; back side of the “altar/wall.” Photo courtesy of Cathouse Proper

As an undergraduate, Dixon studied at Wake Forest University in North Carolina and at Parsons in New York City, majoring in sculpture. Many years later, he earned a master’s degree in the studio-art program at Cornell University in upstate New York, and shortly thereafter, opened Cathouse FUNeral, his first gallery, in Brooklyn.

Dixon told **brutjournal** about his interest in conceptual art and about his own ways of working in a manner that sometimes might seem to recall something of its spirit, even if he does not regard what he produces as conceptual art per se.

He said, “For me, conceptual art should not have any [physical] material of consequence and, if it does, it seems to me to betray the ethos of what I define as ‘conceptual art.’” He referred to the artist Yoko Ono’s brief instructional texts in her seminal conceptual-art book *Grapefruit* (1964), which invited — and required — readers to imagine (and, thereby, to realize, if only in their minds) the immaterial artworks those statements described.



On display inside the old bank building’s walk-in vault: A painting featuring a photographic image, appropriated from a museum catalog, of an African Fang reliquary figure, was another component of David Dixon’s mixed-media, site-specific artwork “Bank. Church. Cathouse. (The Sins of the Father),” 2022. Photo courtesy of Cathouse Proper.

Dixon observed of such quintessential conceptual art, “You hold the sculpture — or whatever it might be — in your mind. Something you can’t actually make, although you can think about it and imagine it. Even Lawrence Weiner, I feel, goes too far. [Weiner (1942-2021), one of the central figures in conceptual art, used written words and phrases as his material.] There is a certain idealism in conceptual art, because, of course, it’s difficult to make something that has no material presence. But for me, Weiner’s texts, which he displayed on walls — in choosing their typefaces and colors, even that was going too far with regard to the material and the aesthetic. Today, I don’t know anyone who is working in the more narrow sense of conceptual art that is represented by such artists. I associate that kind of conceptual art with works that were being created back in the 1960s and the 1970s.”

About his recently exhibited installation work, Dixon noted, “I knew the space in Beacon from when I presented an exhibition there in 2017, and, this time, I found out that it had become available after having served for a while as a church. For me, this former bank and former church — those details, as background material, were very rich, as was the building’s architecture, which resembled that of both a church and a bank.”

Because of the old building’s location on the town’s main street, Dixon’s exhibition received a lot of walk-in traffic. “Visitors’ reactions ranged from intense surprise to those who couldn’t even find where the art was,” he recalled. “I was often present during the run of the show. Some people asked questions, but some didn’t ask any at all. One visitor, a white guy in his forties, asked about the books, which were wrapped up in chains. He said, ‘I didn’t know about these books. What I got is that you really don’t like them and that you needed to punish them.’” Overall, Dixon felt that the spirit of his work came across effectively. He said, “You want a viewer’s first impression to be in line with all the aspects — historical, conceptual, or otherwise — of a piece, and if they’re all lined up, then you have yourself a pretty rich art experience.”



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