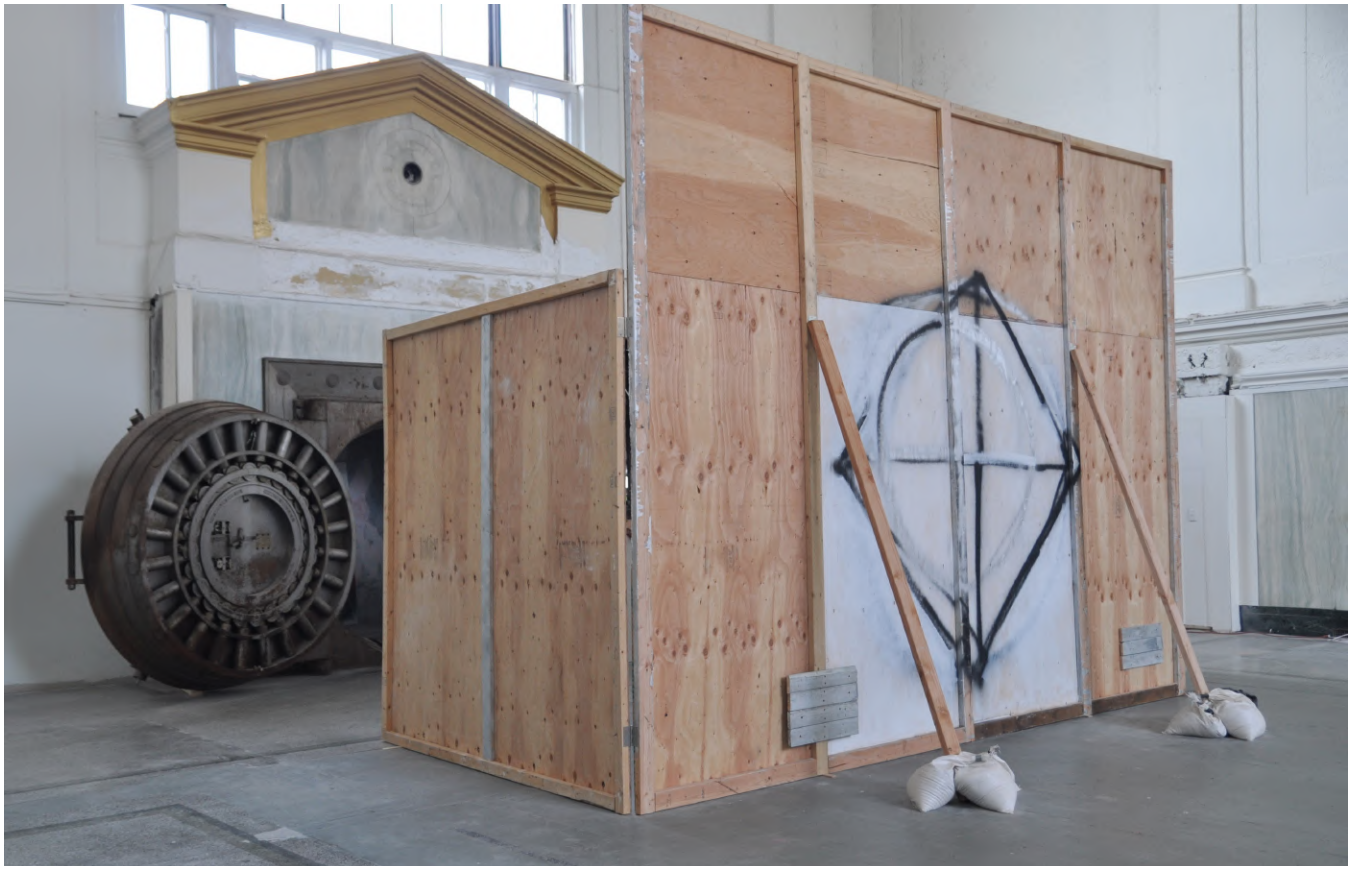
David Dixon
artist-curator
founding director
Cathouse FUNeral / Proper
gallery project, 2013-2023

This large-scale work is a representation of the Cathouse FUNeral gallery logo, along with the gallery motto, "Life to Art to Life," written backwards. The painting is made with a Venetian plaster inlay technique of pigment infused plaster, along with silkscreen and paint. The head is derived from a Kota reliquary figure and has a cowrie shell, a traditional form of currency, inset for the mouth. The "Cathouse" gallery name is a self-critical comment on the monetizing aspect of running a commercial art gallery. From 2013-2023 we mounted over fifty solo and group exhibitions in the Cathouse FUNeral then Cathouse Proper spaces, as well as in off-site locations. The enclosed thirteen artworks, select press and writing are a sample of how my art and curatorial practice have interrelated.

Cathouse FUNeral, 2018, paint, ink, pigment, cement, plaster, shell on burlap on wood, 7 x 9 feet



Altarpiece was installed as part of a solo exhibition in association with Mother Gallery titled *Bank, Church, Cathouse (The Sins of the Father).* This off-site location in Beacon, NY, was originally built as a bank that up until this exhibition had been a Baptist church. The plywood used for *Altarpiece* was "harvested" from an exhibition installation in Cathouse Proper's Brooklyn space titled *Diasporic Entropic Diremption and the Cross-Cultural Cross*, where the plywood was used for a second floor platform built into the gallery. *Altarpiece* embraces the bank's *in situ* vault, and has a painted Celtic and Kongo cross combination.

Altarpiece (D.E.D. and the C-C.C. harvesting), 2022, plywood, whitewash, charcoal, paint, plaster, nail, hinges, sandbags, UV ink-jet on aluminum, 12 x 32 feet

This is the opposite side of *Altarpiece* that is seen in Artwork 2. The checkerboard pattern was originally painted for the platform floor in the Cathouse Proper, Brooklyn exhibition, *Diasporic Entropic Diremption and the Cross-Cultural Cross,* seen in Artwork 4. Here it has been added to and altered for the purposes of this exhibition. As well as sharing the plywood, the content for this Beacon solo exhibition and the earlier Brooklyn group exhibition are related.

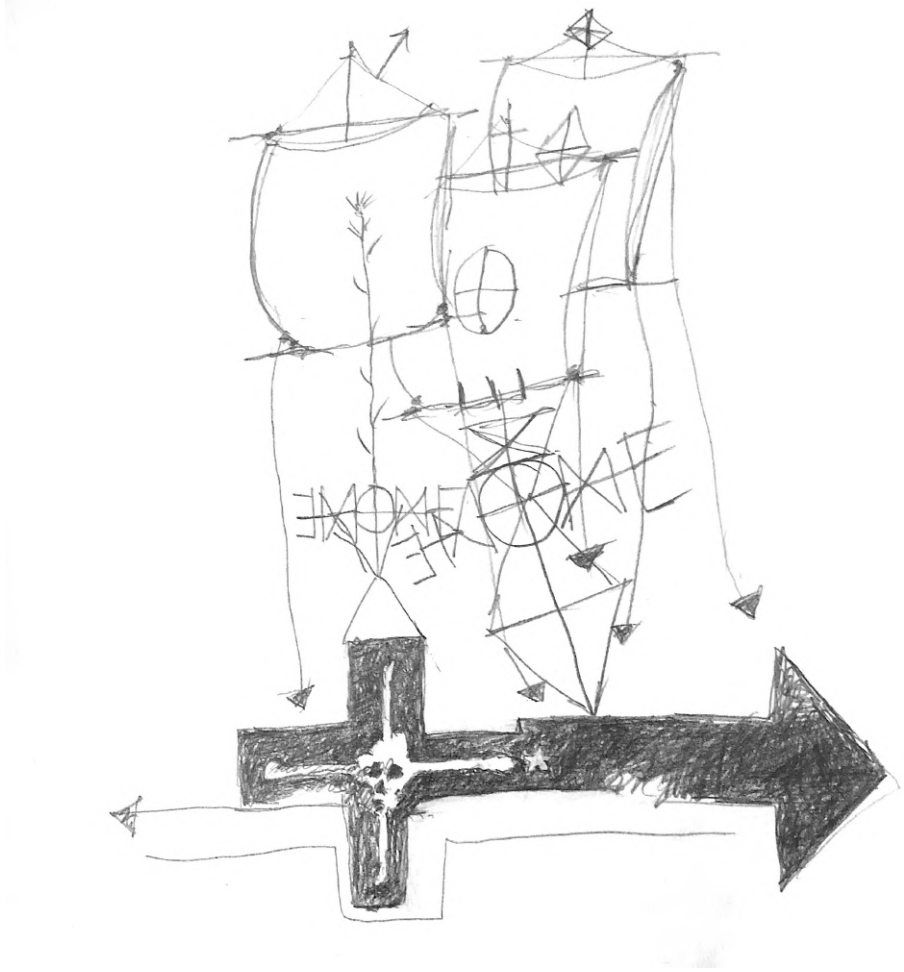
Altarpiece (D.E.D and the C-C.C. harvesting), 2022, plywood, whitewash, charcoal, paint, plaster, nail, hinges, sandbags, UV ink-jet on aluminum, 12 x 32 ft.

This image shows the painted plywood floor that was harvested and repurposed for *Altarpiece* in *Bank. Church. Cathouse. (The Sins of the Father)* seen in Artwork 2 and 3. As well as sharing the plywood, these two exhibitions shared many of the same concerns and themes, among them cultural culpability. At the bottom center of the photo, one can see the opening and ladder that was used to gain access to the second floor. Under the platform, the height was only five feet high and dimly lit. All the artwork installed below the platform was hung upside down, above the platform the artwork was hung right-side up, evoking the dichotomy between the underworld and conscious world, among other associations.

Installation view of the group exhibition *Diasporic Entropic Diremption and the Cross-Cultural Cross* at Cathouse Proper, 2022, including the work of artists Reneé Cox, Nari Ward, Frank Frances, Daniel Swanigan Snow, Ellwood C. Dixon, David Dixon, scholar Cécile Fromont, and traditional Kota reliquaries loaned from the collection of Al Bolton

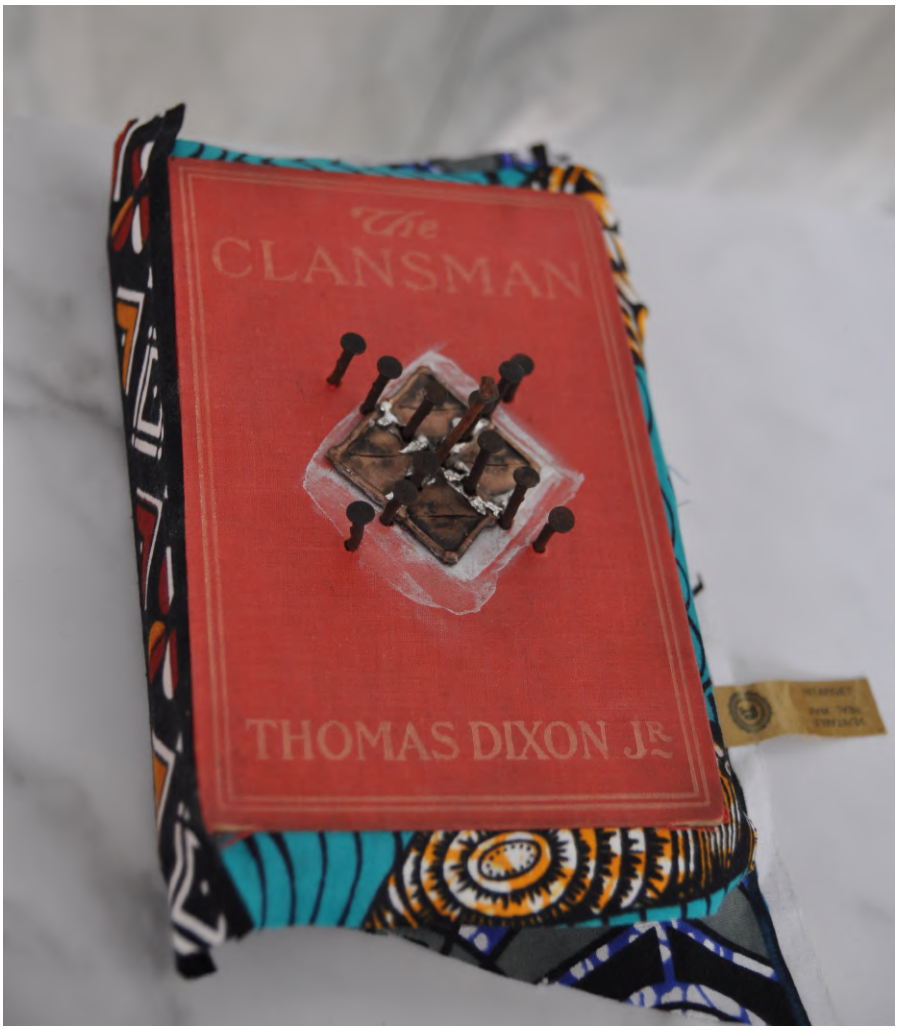
This series conjoins two of Gustave Courbet's major works, and was the impetus that lead to the built plywood platform for *Diasporic Entropic Diremption and the Cross-Cultural Cross* seen in Artwork 4. These two paintings by Courbet, made seven years apart, are united here to read as a single statement about art and death. The centrally located painter painting in *The Painter's Studio,* below, fuses perfectly with the grave in *A Burial at Ornans,* above. The layout of this piece relates to the platform installation seen in *Diasporic Entropic Diremption*, which had an inverted ladder connecting the lower and upper levels through an opening cut in the plywood floor, and which had artworks below the platform installed upside down.

Funeral / Studio (Necromancy), 2020, scratched and painted postcards of Gustave Courbet's *A Burial at Ornans* (1849) and *The Painter's Studio* (1855), paint, ink, paper, 6 x 6.5 inches, one from a series of seven



Incantation, 2021, pencil on paper, 11 x 9 inches

This is a drawing from a group of over one hundred titled *Incantation*. This particular example was used to promote the exhibition, *Diasporic Entropic Diremption and the Cross-Cultural Cross.* It combines symbolic markings that range from the word "Dixie," ships' sails, the Celtic cross, the Kongo cosmogram, directional arrows, North, a star (here, slightly evoking the Confederate flag), a skull, a schematic rendering of a grave, and a tree of life (the form of which references first century Christian iconography found etched onto sarcophagi). Each of the over one hundred drawings combines these motifs, and more, in various compositions.



The Clansman III, 2022, bronze, silver solder, rusted nails (from shipping pallets), fabric, ink on book by Thomas F. Dixon, Jr., published 1905, 7 x 5 x 1.5 inches

The Clansman is the novel that DW Griffith's film, *The Birth of a Nation,* is based on. Its author, Thomas F. Dixon, Jr., was the ideological force behind the film, writing the book in 1905, then adapting it to script, first, for theater then for film in 1915. Dixon's work is credited with giving birth to the second wave of the Ku Klux Klan. I share the author's surname, although there is no direct family relation. However, there are cultural overlaps that make my manipulations of this text personally salient. I have studied and altered four of this author's titles, and have made three versions of *The Clansma*n. The basic strategy, as a form of exorcism, is to festoon Dixon's books with African material and symbols, a gesture that, no doubt, the author would have hated. There are also drawings in the interior of the book that are similar in form to the *Incantation* represented in Artwork 6. I call this series *The Holy Books of Evil.*

Installation view of the exhibition *Final Harvestings* at Cathouse FUNeral, 2016

This image is of the final exhibition in the original Cathouse FUNeral space in East Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The building was a former funeral home, our gallery was in what were the funeral home's "viewing rooms." The space shown here started out as a white cube, like any other gallery, but from the first exhibition onward was never returned to its original white walls. Rather, the gallery accrued visual material history from its over twenty solo and group exhibitions. I would often build walls over walls to preserve material behind. The majority of the walls are Venetian plastered, not painted. For this final show, tilted *Final Harvestings*, I cut through to some of the layers beneath the wallboard and hung work "harvested" from earlier exhibitions. The building was sold, and we had to leave this space, but I took the walls with me, including the studs. I use this harvested material for off-site exhibitions.

Installation view of *Cathouse FUNeral Harvested,* Chelsea, NYC, 2017

This is an example of an off-site exhibition using the harvested walls from the original Cathouse FUNeral gallery space. The pictured gallery space is in Chelsea and was between owners. It was offered to my program for use on a temporary basis.

Press, see below, *Artforum,* Critic's Pick by Nicole Kaack

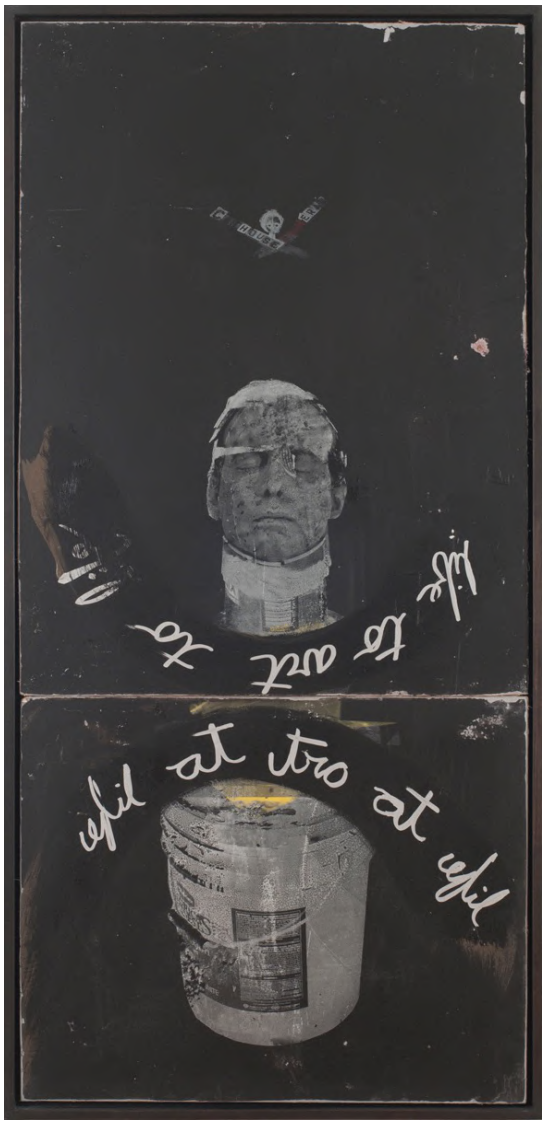
Harvesting: FUNeral Triptych, 2016, gypsum board, paint, graphite, pigment, plaster, wood frame, 43 x 72 inches

This is an example of what I call "harvestings." Harvestings are not always gypsum board cut from the gallery walls, but they often are. This triptych combines wallboard taken at various stages from the walls of Cathouse FUNeral. From left, 1, Brad Benischek's solo show, *Ghost City;* 2, a plastered gray wall from *Final Harvestings;* 3, this panel contains traces from four consecutive shows, *Shrink it Pink it, For the Love of Agnes and Barney, The Hunt,* and *Heroic Social Worker.*

Installation view, *Leaving Home: Cathouse FUNeral Migrates North*, 2017, group show organized in Beacon, NY

This seventeen-artist group exhibition, titled *Leaving Home: Cathouse FUNeral Migrates North*, was mounted in a 3,500 sq. ft. warehouse space in Beacon, NY, a five-minute walk from Dia. The walls were harvested from the original Cathouse FUNeral space, rearranged and rebuilt, and supported by jacks and sandbags. New sheetrock was also added where needed. The lighting was controlled and installed with intention, creating a shadowy, dusty environment replete with history and cultural baggage. The feel and content of the exhibition was in striking contrast to Dia's light-filled minimalism.

Press, see below, *Highlands Current*, local newspaper article by Brian PJ Cronin



Life to Art to Life, 2018, ink and paint on harvested, plastered and painted gypsum board, stained wood frame, 50 x 24 inches

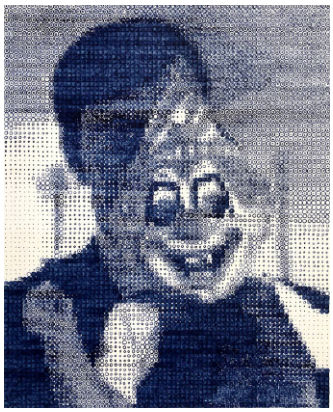
The black-plastered gypsum board support used for this work was harvested from the exhibition wall design for Tariku Shiferaw's solo show, *This Ain't Safe,* at Cathouse Proper in 2018. The black gypsum board surface was made by me in collaboration with Shiferaw and used here with his consent and in several other related pieces. This work includes the gallery motto, "Life to Art to Life," with the gallery logo hovering, like an idea or dream, over the severed head of this artist/gallerist. The head is balanced on a stack of studio buckets.

Alex Brown: Presence Chamber, 2023, pigment, plaster, plywood, wire, ink, nails, Lost Planet lime, mirrors, 30 x 26.5 x1 inches

This work was made while in residence with the Alex Brown Foundation in Des Moines, Iowa. Soon after the death of painter Alex Brown in 2019 his family founded an artists residency program in his former studio. I knew Alex, and proposed to organize an exhibition of his painting for Cathouse Proper while I also made art in his studio. The first posthumous exhibition of Alex Brown opened at Cathouse Proper, February 2023. The exhibition, like this assemblage, was titled *Alex Brown: Presence Chamber.* The silk-screened abstracted image is derived from Brown's painting *Presence Chamber,* 1998. The two mirrors hung behind are installed face to face. I have made six pieces with similar materials and motifs.

Press, see below, *Artforum*, review by Jeffrey Kastner

ARTFORUM



Alex Brown, *Untitled*, ca. 2015, ink on paper, 16 × 12"

May 2023
Alex Brown: Presence Chamber
CATHOUSE PROPER AT 524 PROJECTS
Review by Jeffrey Kastner

On a Thursday afternoon at the beginning of February, I joined an unusual Zoom broadcast linking Cathouse Proper in Brooklyn with its director, David Dixon, who was in Iowa. The occasion was the installation of the first gallery exhibition of works by painter Alex Brown since his death almost exactly four years earlier. Dixon—who is also an artist and was at the time participating in a residency Brown's family had initiated posthumously in his name—was sitting with the late painter's mother at her home south of Des Moines, directing the proceedings back at Cathouse and talking with her about her son.

Brown was just fifty-two when he died of an aneurysm. He'd had a good run during the 1980s and '90s in New York and is fondly remembered by his many friends as smart, unassuming, and funny. He played guitar in respected hardcore bands Gorilla Biscuits, Project X, and Side by Side, and graduated from the Parsons School of Design before returning to the Midwest in 1996, feeling "eaten up by the city for various reasons," as Rachel Kushner put it in an affecting reminiscence published in these pages shortly after his passing. But his presence in the New York art world actually grew after his return home, marked by a string of shows between 1998 and 2012 at the estimable Manhattan gallery Feature Inc. To make his *sui generis* works, the artist typically sourced found images and then fractured them into kaleidoscopically complex compositions that, at their best, demolish the lines between figuration and abstraction, never allowing the viewer's gaze to settle into one stable way of seeing. Brown's oeuvre operates at an improbable juncture between Op art, Photorealism, and Pictures Generation media critique, with the artist strategically mobilizing what he once referred to as "the specific emptiness of certain images" to create works that infuse finely wrought, technically bewildering visual puzzles with sensuality and pathos.

The Cathouse show was titled "Presence Chamber" after a 1998 painting of Brown's—an apt name for the conjuring job essayed by the selection included here: three paintings, a dozen-odd ink drawings, and several pieces of ephemera. The exhilarating challenges set by the artist's work for the eye and mind were crystallized in the largest work on view, *The Captain*, 2000. Depicting a vaguely seafaring character who resembles a half-melted Lego figure, the canvas is constructed from a cascade of colorful brushstrokes, like fluttering scraps of fabric hung on a hidden armature. The image, which just about resolves into the titular subject when seen in reproduction, inexplicably refused to do so when encountered in person—its uncannily sideways *trompe l'oeil* effect placed the meticulously rendered surface back into dialogue with the photographic medium from which it originally came. It was joined by the haunting *Girl,* 2017, a small portrait of a downcast young woman as if seen through a layer of pixelating window privacy film, and *Tapestry,* 2018, made the year before the artist died. The latter work features, in something of a departure, an object that is itself abstract: an image of a striped rug that the artist splintered into a gloriously vibratory quasi-quatrefoil pattern, presumably with the help of an overhead projector–style transparency bearing a delicately filigreed design that was also included in the show.

The works on paper were no less captivating; never feeling preparatory, they were obviously conceived as pieces in full. They included *Untitled*, ca. 2015, for example, is a drawing based on a photo of the artist as a child, being held by his father while wearing a clown mask, that somehow materializes out of a rigidly patterned field of small blue squares and circles filled to varying intensities. Meanwhile, *Untitled,* 2018, features a skein of impossibly fine red and blue crosshatchings that gather into an image of a woman doing her makeup in front of a mirror, a scene that is itself doubled as though she and her vanity were passing through some sort of temporal causality loop. Displayed on a small shelf at the entrance of the show, the latter encapsulates the achievements of Brown's nuanced practice, foregrounding not just his virtuosity, but also the way he exercised it to conjure his singular mix of banality and longing.

— Jeffrey Kastner

ARTFORUM

"Cathouse FUNeral Harvested"

CATHOUSE FUNERAL | CHELSEA
132 10th Ave.
December 15, 2016–February 18, 2017

View of "Cathouse FUNeral Harvested," 2016–17.

On November 20 of last year, the original site of this Brooklyn exhibition space in East Williamsburg, located in a former funeral home, closed its doors for the last time. The artist-run venue had an unquiet rest, however—another version of it currently exists as a projects space in Carroll Gardens, while its first body has been exhumed for a second life in Chelsea. "Cathouse FUNeral Harvested" (an extension of which will open on the Lower East Side on January 8) collects residue from twenty shows of murals and installations via fragments of sheetrock and other architectural excerpts, presented as collaborative works that have been three years in the making. Crowded with freestanding wall segments and framed remnants, the Tenth Avenue space is punctuated by dead ends and ersatz corridors. Zips of pink are in evidence from the 2014 group show "Shrink It, Pink It." A mural by Brad Benischek begins with *Harvesting: FUNeral Tryptic (w/ Brad Benischek)* and ends in *FUNeral Gallery-Object 2 (w/ Benischek)* (both 2016), though the slabs are anachronistically joined (by David Dixon, Cathouse's wallah, with the artist's permission) to unlike parts. Excavated to stand like clean-cut monoliths, the "harvestings" present a mess of artifacts that refuse to straighten into a tidy narrative; even the three gypsum tablets that chronicle the Cathouse's exhibition history are placed out of sequence. These structures share no design with their former digs and make no attempt at a documentary-like report. Although these assembled remains contain the potential for a whimsical archive, they are shown not as gestures of mourning or memory, but as celebrations of the vitality and opportunity of ending.

— *Nicole Kaack*

Leaving Home: Cathouse FUNeral Migrates North
By Brian PJ Cronin, Reporter | August 31, 2017
Shadowy, timely exhibit pops up in Beacon

When David Dixon placed the artwork for a group show on exhibit at 18 West Main St. in Beacon, he knew there was only one place for his own pieces — in the darkest corner.

"If I put anyone else's piece there, it wouldn't be acceptable," says Dixon with a laugh. The exhibit, *Leaving Home*, a project of the Brooklyn-based collective Cathouse FUNeral, will be on display from noon to 6 p.m. Friday to Sunday through Sept. 10. (After the show departs, the space will be remodeled for retail.) It is anchored by a model of Christopher Columbus's ship Santa Maria that Dixon's grandfather built in 1926.

The darkness in the cavernous room is a feature, not a bug, that drew Dixon to the space when he visited for the first time and saw it illuminated only by a single overhead light.

"I wanted it to feel like we snuck into the storage space of a forgotten museum," he says.

One work by Dixon that leers out from the shadows is called *The Clansman*, a painting of swirling Klan hoods that friends as recently as a month ago told him was no longer relevant in American politics.

The other, called *Twins*, is a split Confederate flag, light and dark, rearranged so that the cross makes a diamond. The flipped X references a Congolese cosmogram, "a conduit to the spirit world," said Dixon. "You're born from that, and when you die you go back into that. The X is a negation, but if you draw a field of them, you also get a field of diamonds."

The X also conjures crossroads, a space that in many cultures is vulnerable to liminal energy from the spirit world. (Think of Robert Johnson selling his soul to the devil there.) The relationship between X's and diamonds changed as Congolese imagery became woven into the fabric of African-American culture, and that is explored in a piece called *Hole Nation*, by Nari Ward.

Years ago, Ward discovered an X inside of a diamond drilled into the floor of the First African Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia, and later learned they were breathing holes above a crawlspace used by slaves fleeing in the Underground Railroad. The cosmogram has since become an integral part of his work; In *Hole Nation*, the symbol is nailed into a U.S. history textbook.

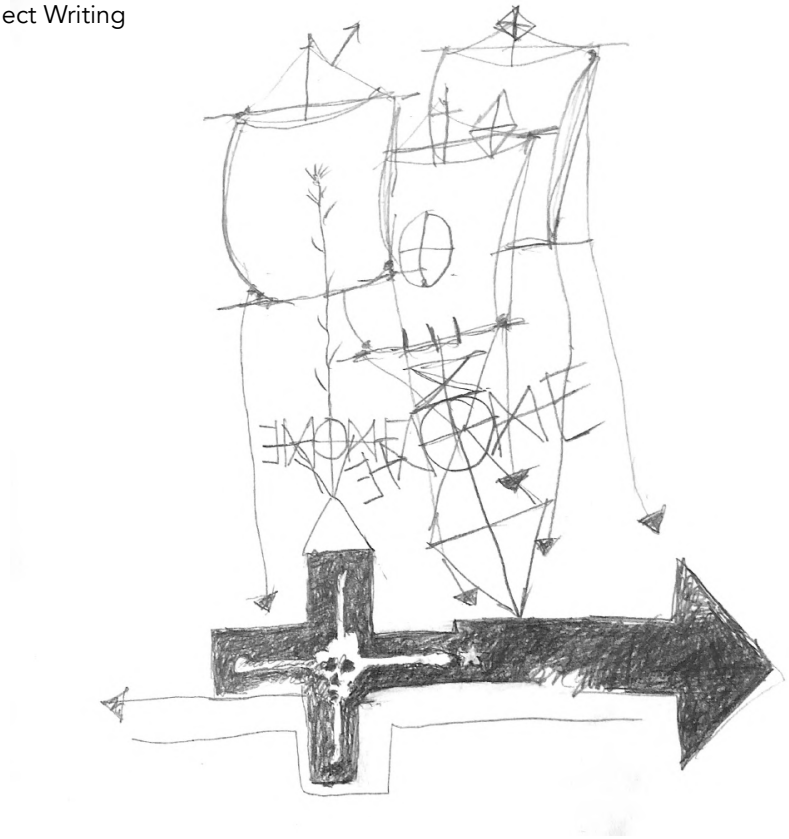
Other pairings in the space illuminate and contrast with each other. The tarps of Tariku Shiferaw's *XXX* and *King Kunta* hang near the ornate shrouds of Baseera Khan's *Acoustic Sound Blankets*. Resembling burqas, the shrouds are often worn by the artist in performances in which Khan invites viewers to join her underneath them.

The series *Refugees Leaving Venezuela RGB* by Davide Cantoni are done in pearlescent paint that absorbs light, with the image revealing itself as the viewer moves through the space and the light that hits the canvas changes.

"Oddly enough, you can see the image better if you look at it through the camera on your phone, since it compresses it," notes Dixon. One of Cantoni's paintings is overlain by Farideh Sekhaeifar's *ISIS/NASA*, which also uses pearlescent paint to show images of rockets blasting into space alternating with mosques and monuments being destroyed; columns of flame that push humanity forward or backward.

The show ends on a hopeful note with Luisa Rabbia's *Toward*. The blue lumps spread to the furthest reaches of the tallest wall suggest barnacles. But, upon closer inspection, they are blue porcelain heads, staring downward, modeled after photographs from Yann Arthus-Bertrand's book, *Six Billion Others*.

"It's hard not to love this piece," says Dixon. "And it's hard not to love humanity when you stand under it."



Diasporic Entropic Diremption and the Cross-Cultural Cross

group exhibition
with the participation of:

Al Bolton, Renée Cox, David Dixon, Ellwood C. Dixon, Frank Frances, Cécile Fromont, Daniel Swanigan Snow, Nari Ward

opens Saturday, February 5, 2022

The exhibition, *Diasporic Entropic Diremption and the Cross-Cultural Cross* is a focused yet wide-ranging exhibition that spans both traditional and contemporary African continental and diasporic art production within the rubric of Americana and the modern tack toward liberation movements. It brings together an emerging artist, an outsider artist, a photographer, a sculptor, a scholar, a collector, an ancestor, and a curator.

Exploiting the gallery's high ceilings, the exhibition takes surprising form by adding a second floor to Cathouse Proper's main gallery space at 524 Projects. Some works that have been exhibited by the program before will reappear in this new exhibition context, including photographer **Renée Cox**'s monumental 1993 diptych, *Origin*; sculptor **Nari Ward**'s drilled American history book, *Hole Nation*; and ancestor **Ellwood C. Dixon**'s handcrafted model of Christopher Columbus's ship, *Santa Maria.* Other works have been recently created, specifically emerging artist **Frank Frances**'s paintings of flags and cotton, as well as photographs re-contextualized from his professional shoots for high-end home decor magazines. Collector **Al Bolton**, who buys art directly from sources in Burkina Faso, loans several traditional Kota reliquary objects, and scholar **Cécile Fromont**, whose published research has helped inform

this exhibition, provides an original rendering based on archeological material that conflates the Kongo and Christian crosses. Fromont also contributes an animation that demonstrates the dialectical visual relationship of cross and lozenge. Unifying this diverse installation of works, outsider artist **Daniel Swanigan Snow** has been commissioned to assist in the overall exhibition design, while curator **David Dixon** shows a few works of his own that lend insight into the conception and form of the exhibition itself.

Abstract:
According to G.W.F. Hegel, diremption is the source of the need for philosophy. A seldom used word in English, *diremption* means a self-tearing apart, or a whole that is, in its essence, always already divided. The word is brought to bear by Hegel on human consciousness; the individual is self aware due to this essential division, *viz.,* one reflects upon one's self both as subject and as object due to diremption.

One of the hypocrisies of the European enlightenment/colonization era was the duplicitous metering of what was asserted as a standard, universal human consciousness. For example, most basically, the people of sub-Saharan Africa were dehumanized by European interests in order to justify the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The Slave Trade set in motion a cultural entropy. Two differently ordered continents, Africa and Europe, converge (albeit unequally) and, like the thermodynamic law itself, the two distinct systems break down as they incorporate each other moving towards a mixed-cultural stasis, or newly defined system, *i.e.,*(combined with other cultural entities) the Americas.

Therefore, a parallel can be drawn in which diaspora is to culture what entropy is to thermodynamic systems. However, at the most basic level diremption's steady division continues to rile entropy's desired stasis, producing an ever-changing cultural self-consciousness.

Yet how dissimilar were the two systems of sub-Saharan Africa and Europe? The cultural forces of power, trade, and empire were all at play on both continents when the Portuguese arrived in their sailing ships to the Kingdom of Kongo on the western Atlantic coast of Central Africa in 1483 C.E. Emblazoned on the sails of the Portuguese's caravel ships was the sign of the cross, specifically the "Order of Christ" cross.

Recent scholarship has been steadily deconstructing notions of the Christian cross such that it can now be safely hypothesized that the Portuguese, rather than bringing the sign of the "true cross" to the Africans, as they believed they were doing, in actuality, were returning their cross to its source. African cross imagery not only predates the arrival of Europeans but, through various cultural channels, very likely influenced early Christianity's development of beliefs regarding death and resurrection, which later became associated with the crucifix.

The cross-cultural cross is both a symbol of and bridge through diasporic entropic diremption.

Two postcards of Gustave Courbet's *A Burial at Ornans* (1849) and *The Painter's Studio: A real allegory summing up seven years of my artistic and moral life* (1855) combined and sewn as *The Grave Digger*, 2020 by David Dixon

July 14, 2020

The Grave Digger

by David Dixon

The *being in the brain* is the *sensus communis*, the WE defined by the *spirit of community.* The spirit of community within the American dynamic, in turn, has been defined by ethnicity, race, or color of skin. The being of spirit may be bone,* as Hegel tells us, but here, and perhaps everywhere, flesh taints being's bone-spirit causing division, or *diremption*, within the larger body politic. Hence, our consciousness as a nation, our bone-being, is stained by color. The irreversible, entropic diremption born with We The People was inbred by the color-flesh of our original sin. Our national identity, henceforth, has been plagued and conditioned by a need to *flay the flesh* to get to the bone of being beyond color.

Integration, WE, cannot happen while the beings in the brains of the body politic are defined by color-flesh; justice cannot be had if one defines the other solely by what one is not, without acknowledging that the *other-mother/brother* is a part of oneself due to, *at the minimum*, this very reverse definition. And much tragedy—beyond economic determinations—can be

attributed to majority Whiteness's blindness to Blackness's other-mother/brotherness. Yet, while WE (U.S.) not-so-patiently await the raising of our collective unhappy consciousness by White other-mother/brothers who remain ossified, neither is WE integration all that desirable for Black other-mother/brothers whose flesh has been so consistently mortified that any more flaying of the flesh to get to colorless bone is not tenable, even if it may lead to more equity, creating a WE condition difficult to rectify.

Yet, in the meantime, the being in the brain of the Black other-mother/brother, who wishes not, nor wished ever, to be penetrated by the White Light of integration oppression—past, present or future—but rather, from our (U.S.) inception, like a black star, or a *Black (W)hole* of being, sucks in the White Light, bending it to conform, not to the Black Whole's will, necessarily, but to the will of *justice,* which is within the purview of the event horizon of the Black Whole due to their having been formed, in part, within the condition of *unjust* White Light oppression. This is the redemption that can rectify our (U.S.) original sin's diremption born in and with the body politic, and in color. This bending of the White Light—who are, after all, the original sinners—by the Black Whole may lead to the redemption of the body politic, but only if the pressure is great enough to transform We The People—who has never been *WE*—into a *sensus communis* (or spirit/soul of common purpose). This may get U.S. (WE), the people, beyond the event horizon of our color-border self to the being in the brain that, in any event, will always remain, indubitably, *blood stained* bone—stained with the guilt of the oppressor and the pain of the oppressed (we, even if we can get to "WE," still remain within history)—but a bone, nonetheless. It will then be up to the *formerly*-oppressed, and they alone, to bury that bone if and when they have determined that justice has been served (and that must be trusted) finally liberating themselves and, if so desired (this court seeks justice not forgiveness), the oppressor from the condition of our (U.S.) original sin (the oppressor has no power in this regard). The stained bone once buried, however, will inevitably sprout new diremptions—due to the conditions of consciousness *qua* consciousness—both within and without, but ones no longer conditioned by the skin now flayed from the bone of the being in the brain of the American body politic.

*p. 208, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* G.W.F. Hegel, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford Univ. Press

CATHOUSE FUNERAL

The Birth of a Nation
Wednesday, September 2, 7:30pm, free admission
260 Richardson St. Brooklyn 11222

Screened in conjunction with David Dixon's solo-exhibition, *DIXIE,*
open through September 6, 2015.

As Americans, how responsible are we for our first feature film, our first masterpiece of the filmed arts? We didn't collectively make it, of course, D.W. Griffith made it along with Thomas Dixon, Jr., who wrote then adapted his book, *The Clansman,* on which the film is based. But we loved it; we made it the highest grossing film of the early 20th century, millions upon millions of us in the North and South have thrilled to it and absorbed its view of America in the post-Civil War Reconstruction period. That view was put forward as historical fact by Griffith and Dixon; they believed filmed history would soon replace the written word, and that by viewing films one could re-live history *as it was*. Publicity for the film in 1915, when it was released, stressed it was told from the Southern point of view as Southerners had lived it. Its goal, as stated by Dixon, "…was to revolutionize Northern audiences that would transform every man into a Southern Partisan for life." His book, the full title being, *The Clansman*: *an Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan,* begins by stating his intention to address "the Race Conflict" and tell of the political chaos in the South brought about by the assassination of Lincoln, whom Dixon calls "The Great Heart." This "Reconstruction chaos" and its "Africanization of ten great states" is brought back into proper order by the birth of, and the terror executed by, the Ku Klux Klan, the heroes of the book, who re-disenfranchise Blacks after "emancipation" to maintain White dominance across the South. In real life, President Grant recognized the Klan as the terrorist organization that it was and disbanded it in 1871, but thanks to the efforts of Dixon and Griffith, and the immense popular success of their work, the "Invisible Empire" became very visible, yet again, early in the 20th century, exponentially growing in numbers and virulence. Today, the film is still used for Klan recruitment purposes, America's first film masterpiece, one hundred years old in 2015.

The Birth of a Nation was famously previewed by President Woodrow Wilson, a friend of Dixon's, the first film ever to have been screened in the White House. "It's like writing history with lightning," the President gushed, "And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." Wilson was the first Southerner to have been elected president after the Civil War and is extensively quoted from his tome, *A History of the American People,* in this silent film's inter-titles, lending official sanction and validity to the production. Anticipating legal issues, the film was also screened for the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Edward White, whom Dixon reports in his memoir as having privately confessed

to him of being a former Klansman himself. The book had already been made into a live theatrical play, which was immensely divisive, controversial and *popular*, making Dixon rich as it toured the country leaving riots, demonstrations and violence in its wake. Considering this, getting the Supreme Court behind the film was a smart move as the nascent NAACP tried repeatedly, and unsuccessfully, to censor it.

With all this in mind, can this really be America's first filmed masterpiece, and why watch it now? In 1940, Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein said of *The Birth*, "The disgraceful propaganda of racial hatred toward the colored people which permeates this film cannot be redeemed by the purely cinematographic effects of its production," which is basically how it is discussed today, mostly in film schools. But one cannot so easily separate its form from its content; it is a masterpiece, no doubt, just not the positivist, "historical facsimile" (as the inter-titles repeatedly assert) that it believes itself to be. Rather, it is a finely wrought, darkly expressionistic nightmare as told from the morally compromised position of the demoralized South. Amazon tells me that, "others who bought this item," also purchased *Gone with the Wind*, which implies that it is not being watched very critically. It should be viewed along with Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi *Triumph of the Will* or Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*. Coincidentally, the Marxist Pontecorvo is quoted as having said, in an unrelated context, "…the birth of a nation happens with pain on both sides, although one side has cause and the other not." The notion of "terrorism" can certainly be considered in this light, as both *Algiers* and *The Birth* show homegrown "resistance groups" from a privileged interior view.

If one looks deeply into the real, Black faces in this film (the lead Black roles are played, not surprisingly considering this history, by Whites in blackface, but there are many *real* "extras" awkwardly intermixed), one begins to see the film from behind. bell hooks advocates for a cultural "oppositional gaze" which can be applied here, and the editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma* wrote in 1969 that "…even in films that seem to articulate the most hegemonic collection of myths and ideas at times contain contradictions that undermine the myths they ostensibly express." In one glorious moment, Dr. Cameron, the film's noble father and former slave owner, is captured in chains and aggressively spit upon *with vigor* by authentic, Black female extras, openly contradicting the film's pervasive "Lost Cause" gloss that all had been chummy down in Dixie; that slavery was a benign, happy institution; and that, in this scene in particular, it was the enslaved men that had been doing the raping. Moments like this undermine the pervasive sense of *victimized Whites* as the story unfolds amidst unchecked bigotry and blind racism. Lessons can certainly be learned as this film twists and inverts all understanding; one begins to wonder who really won the Civil War? The North? The South? The U.S.? Us? Who is "us"? We certainly learn who lost the war: the formerly enslaved, despite "emancipation."

Indeed, the original tile of the film was meant to be *The Clansman*, like the book, but it is reported that Dixon, after watching a screened preview, was so thrilled by the grandeur and scope of its production, that he insisted it should be called, "The Birth of a Nation," which perfectly summed up his belief, and the point of his propaganda, that the U.S. was not fully unified until *after* the Civil War, and it was to be unified *only* as a great Aryan

nation. An inter-title near the end of the film bluntly states, "The former enemies of North and South are united again in common defense of their Aryan birthright." Again, this is our first film masterpiece, and in it there is no place for the formerly enslaved as equals in America, in fact, there was no place for Blacks at all: Dixon, in his historical romance novel, has Lincoln argue that implicit in the 13th Amendment was that formerly enslaved Blacks needed to be colonized *someplace else*; this is why President Lincoln is considered "The Great Heart" by Dixon and his Southern Rebels, despite the seeming contradictions. Lincoln was assassinated only five days after General Lee's surrender, it is not known how he would have "reconstructed" the South, but forty years after, in 1905, when Dixon is writing his ideological-tract-disguised-as-a-novel (even Dixon describes his book as such), anyone could claim "America's greatest president" as his own. Something else to consider: the film is referred to as "masterpiece," although the book never is.

By now you may have begun to wonder, "Is this David Dixon who is currently showing *Dixie* at Cathouse FUNeral a relative of this Thomas Dixon, Jr. fellow who wrote *The Clansman*?" The answer is "No," not as far as I can tell, but to speak only of blood relations is to speak in Dixon's clansman-like terms. Nonetheless, he and I are certainly bound by ethnicity: White, Scotch-Irish, from North Carolina, Baptist; he went to the same university that I did, Wake Forest in Winston-Salem; his manuscripts are at Duke University, where my father worked during my youth; he was a "Jr.," so his father's name was Thomas, but his grandfather's name was David, whom I read was a drinker (I hope because of internal moral conflict). But the real clincher is that *my* father's name is Thomas, that's what leveled me when I first found this book, that my loving father could somehow be associated with this travesty, but he can be, and so can I, and so can we all. This film is ours, come see.

September 2, 2015, 7:30pm, doors open 7pm

-David Dixon, 2015

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