

ARTS

A Duke Riley installation at MOCA Cleveland looks back at the Kingsbury Run Torso Murders

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By Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer



Dismembered limbs go with the flow in Duke Riley's poetic evocation of the Torso Murders in Kingsbury Run.

The up-and-coming artist Duke Riley made a big media splash in 2007 when he was arrested in New York harbor while piloting a replica of the Revolutionary War submarine known as the "Acorn."

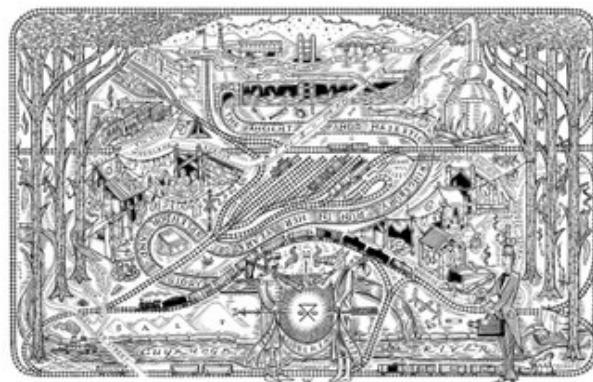


His goal was to sidle up to the Queen Mary 2 in order to make a videotape, his tiny plywood sub floating next to the giant hull of the cruise ship. It was to be a tongue-in-cheek re-enactment of an 18th-century attack on a British warship.

But Riley and two companions were taken into custody by police about 200 feet from the bow of the Queen Mary. The artist was later issued a citation for violating the ship's security zone and for unsafe boating, according to The New York Times.

Riley, whose art blends history, geography and sometimes outrageous public stunts, has staged his newest effort at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, which commissioned him in 2008 to create an original installation based on a theme related to Cleveland history.

The result, "An Invitation to Lubberland," blends video, drawing, mosaics and other elements to weave a wistful mood about Kingsbury Run, a Depression-era Cleveland shantytown destroyed by police chief Eliot Ness in 1938 in an attempt to end the notorious Torso Murders. It is, in a word, brilliant.



Duke Riley's folksy map of

Kingsbury Run in its heyday
as a hobo shantytown
includes a cigarette-
smoking squirrel on a tree at
left.

The installation, curated by MOCA's Megan Lykins Reich, is humorous, absorbing and saturated with a deep artistic integrity, which pervades each and every element of the project.

Kingsbury Run is a tributary of the Cuyahoga River, which once flowed between the Slavic Village and Kinsman neighborhoods through a gorge and a flood plain about a mile south and southeast of downtown.

In the 19th century, John D. Rockefeller founded Standard Oil Co. on the creek, just upstream from the Cuyahoga. Further upstream, a hobo village took root along the banks of the creek, not far from the railroads that served as free transportation for the itinerant poor.

A dozen gruesome killings in the area between 1935 and 1938 earned the nickname "Torso Murders," because the victims were all decapitated and many were dismembered.

REVIEW: Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland

What: The exhibition "Duke Riley: An Invitation to Lubberland."



When: Through Sunday, Jan. 9.

Where: 8501 Carnegie Ave.,

Cleveland.

Admission: \$4. Go to mocacleeland.com or call 216-421-8671.

In 1938, Ness, who was famous for having busted Al Capone in Chicago and was then Cleveland's safety director, ordered the Kingsbury Run settlement burned to the ground. The killings stopped, but they were never solved. Decades later, the creek was buried in a culvert, which essentially turned it into a sewer.

For his installation, Riley re-created the hobo experience by grabbing unauthorized rides on freight trains between New York and Cleveland with a small cast and video crew. He also launched a kayak into the Kingsbury Run culvert to make videos inside.

Riley was questioned by police and warned not to explore the culvert, but he apparently got the footage he needed without attracting the kind of attention he received in New York.



Duke Riley's "Lubberland" video imagines a crusading Eliot Ness charging up the

Kingsbury Run culvert with a flashlight to investigate the Torso Murders.

"We didn't ask too many questions," MOCA director Jill Snyder said, acknowledging that the artist was "skirting the lines of the law." She noted that the \$50,000 project didn't involve government funding.

Installation and video art are two hugely popular contemporary art forms, often resulting in tendentious tedium. This is not the case at all with Riley's piece.

To experience it, you duck behind a black curtain to enter a series of narrow corridors that double back on one another, framed in part with used lumber to evoke a shantytown feel. The lighting is dim, which creates a mood of mystery and nostalgia, and the air is filled with the muted roar of passing trains, a mournful sound.

A half-dozen black-and-white videos, filmed in the herky-jerky style of silent movies, present a narrative of Kingsbury Run as a hobo paradise, a "Lubberland" in the argot of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Cleveland is never named, but the title screens in one video call it a city "that was friendlier than all" and a place where "the townspeople were openhanded and thier [sic] police were merciful."



The videos strike a skeptical note about government by stating that official inspectors rode the rails alongside the hobos, not to improve conditions for the poor but to keep a

not-too-benevolent eye on them.

A mosaic panel in the installation, made of ceramic, glass and other materials, shows a census worker scribbling numbers on a huge scroll covered with dates that reach from 1938 back to the depression of 1873, when hobos first started riding the rails. It's a subtle indictment of a government willing to countenance poverty for decades without trying to help.

In another poignant moment, Riley created a pencil-on-paper map of Kingsbury Run in its "Years of Splendor and Glory." The drawing evokes the folksy-naive look of scrimshaw -- the 19th-century art of carving images into whale's teeth -- and the satiric wit of contemporary drawings by R. Crumb or William T. Wiley.



A Duke Riley mosaic compresses historical time by combining the present-day Cleveland skyline with images of itinerant wanderers hitching rides on trains through the late 19th- and early 20th centuries.



The videos, mosaics and drawings chart the demise of Kingsbury Run as a serial killer begins hacking up bodies and government responds by bringing in the unnamed Ness, who ends the spree of death by burning Lubberland to the ground.

The fiery end of the settlement is depicted in a stunning, wall-size drawing. Riley depicts tongues of flame licking at the gables of the shanties, with a vast cloud of smoke rising into the sky in swirling cloud patterns based on Chinese and Japanese art.

In the exhibition's final room, Riley exhibits artifacts and byproducts collected in the making of the project, from the muddied swallowtail suit and bowler hat worn by the government "inspector" in the train-hopping videos to a section of rusty, Gothic-style railing salvaged from somewhere in the city.

Also on view are photos of Riley getting into character by downing cheap whiskey after hopping on a train, and the police having a chat with Riley and his video crew.

The installation is remarkable not only for the high quality of each element, but also for the consistency of Riley's artistic voice and presentation throughout.

The title panels in the silent films, along with the mosaics and drawings, narrate the story of Lubberland as a timeless urban fable, as if it were some kind of poem read aloud around a campfire. In his drawings, mosaics and constructions, Riley maintains the same folksy, semi-naïve style in every medium he touches.



If there's a sad note here, it's that because MOCA is not a collecting institution, the components of the exhibition could be scattered among collectors after the show ends. The drawings on view, particularly the map of Lubberland, ought to be acquired by a Northeast Ohio museum to create a permanent local presence for at least a part of Riley's extraordinary work.

The installation, Riley's first solo museum show, is a triumph for him and for MOCA. It also sets a benchmark for any local art institution that commissions an artist -- local or otherwise -- to create something new. It's a mark that will not be easily surpassed any time soon.

As a final note, here's a video of Riley's "Acorn" launch in New York Harbor:



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