

Dr. Kristin Congdon on “The Significance of Folk Art”

by Vi West

A piece of string, a broken glass bottle, and some crumpled aluminum foil- to many folk artists and Dr. Kristin Congdon, these are treasures and parts of works of art that will define this time in history.

“Folk art is different things to different people”, Congdon explains, as she displays slides of several local St. Petersburg folk artists to the auditorium at the University of Memphis Meeman Journalism Building on February 18, 2007 at 7 pm. Congdon is a professor of film and philosophy and director of the Cultural Heritage Alliance at the University of Central Florida, and has a Ph.D. in art education.

“Art History is so encased in postmodernist theory that we have to understand it through theory- folk art is understanding it through story”, Congdon says, explaining that there is fluidity between story and theory in art. Many of the constructions composed of thrown out items exemplify the process of recycling and resurrection. The beauty of recycled art is that “the meaning changes with different contexts”.

Taff Richardson, an artist living in Tampa, Florida, creates his sculptures out of road kill. He takes these unwanted bones, cleans them, carries them around to learn their story, and then resurrects the animal into a sculpture. Richardson hopes that the same principle can be given to bring new hope to the children in his neighborhood.

Congdon acknowledges that these works of art lack formal composition, but states that, “every piece is done with careful consideration; it’s not monumental art; it negates what the notion of a monument would be”. Recognizing that these everyday objects carry memories allows for the art to represent new meanings in a changing world.

Art as a mode of envisioning reality for survival is shown by Emery Blagdon’s “healing machines”, abstract compilations of wire and canvas intended to cleanse the room they were hanging in. This idea of the earth providing what the people need to heal is a common theme throughout modern folk art, and, through this, art serves as an

example of how our culture tries to make things obsolete, instead of reusing material and recycling in order to regenerate growth.

Congdon discusses twenty different folk artists, each with a compelling story and unique art form that reflects their view of the world. The reconstruction of discarded objects is important, she explains, in a world in which “the amount of space we take up is already overcrowded by garbage, the dispossessed, and the tossed away, whose lives our actions effect”.

This “precarious nature of permanence” is not addressed enough today, Congdon explains, except in the works of these folk artists, who show that recycled art can create a powerful image that carries collective memories as it reveals each new meaning.

Congdon believes that the power of pluralism held in the modern folk artists’ work is a source for renewal for art educators and for their students. In this ‘anti-form’ form of creating art, the context is the idea of the work, instead of the content. The artwork is understood through understanding of the human self, and the art acts as a healing agent.

“Art changes as we change,” Congdon concludes; “art is moving from an art history focus to a visual culture focus, and this (modern folk art) is the response to the shift towards a visual culture”. These works of art become the medium through which the contemporary story is told.