

"I HAVEN'T BLOCKED OUT THE PAST. I WOULDN'T TRADE THE PERSON I AM, OR WHAT I'VE DONE—OR THE PEOPLE I'VE KNOWN—FOR ANYTHING. SO I DO THINK ABOUT IT. AND AT TIMES IT'S A RATHER MELLOW TRIP TO LAY BACK AND REMEMBER."

—TED BUNDY

"LOOK DOWN ON ME, YOU WILL SEE A FOOL. LOOK UP AT ME, YOU WILL SEE YOUR LORD. LOOK STRAIGHT AT ME, YOU WILL SEE YOURSELF."

—CHARLES MANSON

A collection comprises the works of Scott Benzel at the Cirrus Gallery in Los Angeles. Accouterment, bric-a-brac, *chingaderos*¹, collectables. Look closely to feel the wealth of atmospheric information and you will come to find yourself in the realm of a mad man; among the belongings of a serial killer. Scott Benzel has been pushing the fake together in order to carry on the hopelessness of modernism with each shunning glare of anything "post" or posited as change. Like any artist foraging for relevancy in this age, Benzel, as well as his work, speaks of art as Ted Bundy speaks of life: but the question is, what is there to remember?

His work is forged from a past to be profited upon. These forgeries speak of remonstrance to the legal, to the sheltered. They reach to the impeachment of the straight and narrow. How has he come this far from the secretive markings made during his nascent journeys of the late 80's at CalArts before turning to the fakirs and the 'fuckery' of fakery? Who was he then that he is not now? As a Benzelian scholar, much is needed in the way of understanding and communication to dissolve the forces behind Benzel's current work in concordance with the past that inevitably projected him forward. However we look at this oeuvre—to glance down at a fool, to peer up at a *homemade*² god, to shake in fear at an imposed self-reflexivity—there is sure to be a diligence to the ethic and a postulation at the epithets: we all cannot be among these collections for long, lest our bowels become sliced by their over arching need for apostrophe.

Such apostrophes were given by the entomologist turned writer Dr. A. Hadlen Schmailer. Strangely enough it was Benzel's work that charged Schmailer with the impetus to work in the realm of art as a liaison between the thinking of an artist and that of the layman (similar to the ways lawyers must intervene in the understanding of the interactions between serial killers and the world outside them). The poetry Schmailer generated by being introduced to Benzel's work delves ferociously into the realm of the fantasy by his current collections. One such work concerned with Benzel's most recent work on display at Cirrus Gallery, reads:

*However Blunt,
The passages are more rare
Than few.
Far and between,
We distance ourselves.
We endure the shelves,
Upon shelves these spectral ideas
Which we find littered inside ourselves
When we realize a rhythm and time,
With these specious indices.
—from *Enduring Sophocles*, A. Hadlen Schmailer, 2012³*

¹. Span.—knickknacks, lit. 'fucking things'

². Here the author refers to the deaf character named Singer from McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Re: Chapter 8

³. Schmailer. Hadlen A., Collections of Intent Driven Rhetoric, *Enduring Sophocles*, pp 9-10. University of California Press. 2012

Schmailer's words capture the *modus operandi* Benzel's work has long since derived from outside forces as a way of commenting on the relationship between viewer and subject. Like the mirror work, *Funhouse II (Lady from Shanghai)*, 2012, which causes the individual to become immediately enthralled by their own image replicated into many perplexing sighs, Schmailer authenticates the multi-faceted derision we hide inside ourselves. These other accouterments, the spilled nail polish, fake dog excrement, Led Zeppelin memorabilia, and rat eaten cockroach traps, whether gathered by a serial killer—as if mementoes from pale corpses—or gathered by Benzel—mementoes for pale corpses—cause us to look inside ourselves, something we are not often comfortable with doing. But why does Benzel do it differently than all the other artists out there? So much of contemporary art, noted in myriad artist's statements, proclaims its pertinence and purpose as being a mirror unto the visitor or viewer's mind/soul. So much of contemporary art fails at this, mainly because the trick consists of a large stick berating a horse's already mangled corpse. Here lie the victims of Benzel, not because they are lifeless but mainly because their work is no longer functioning.

While Thomas Salmon, former consultant for the Benzel Collection Museum Donations Program, states that "Scott Benzel's collection leads a path for insight into the important issues of our times—gender, race, identity, and empowerment—each fakir given support to their singular voice and unique vision." Schmailer says otherwise, in that "while Benzel commemorates the possibility of comment, he truly revamps the idea of ideas. There is no insight but that which lies in the world of the viewer"⁴. In terms of the Charles Manson quote above it seems Salmon is looking towards Benzel's collection as a hermaphrodite is viewed by the wholly sexed while Schmailer wishes to endure no subject without the understanding that he, Schmailer, is the one doing all the 'empowerment' if it is indeed there.

However Benzel's earlier work is to be compared to his current implications of fiction, there is a right and a wrong way to breach the safety of simply clicking 'like' on any of his works as if they were Facebook posts. While Salmon does just that, clicking 'like' with the smug self-assuredness of any of the collectors Benzel wishes to find money in, Schmailer yet again harks back to find ingenuity in Benzel's earlier works. After the secret imagery work of Benzel which cannot be discussed in this essay for lack of permission from the artist and general comprehension by the reader [I have failed several times before to convey these works only to see fervent lividness in the letter to the Editor section of many a magazine (e.g. Please see my previous articles on the subject, "Unearthing a Paleontology of Benzel", *The Harvard Art Review*, Feb 2010, Harvard University Press, or "Demanding an Apology for the Fakir: The Collective Stylings of Scott Benzel", *Artform Magazine*, January 2006)], where else is Schmailer, another high-ranking and dedicated Benzel scholar (having written several books on the artist himself), supposed to go? In "A Letter to Myself", Schmailer amidst all of his own collection of information on the artist while embroiled in the task of writing one of such books, remarks on the beginnings of Benzel's work:

"There wasn't a lawless expectancy nor a divergent thought. How many times do we concur that such a virus will end us all, technologically derived or not? I haven't spent enough years with the secrecy of adamant thought nor have I become beleaguered with the precept of a dialect notwithstanding. And we make more profit and more literature in regard to "those who have come to

fake a plague versus those who have come to fake memorabilia to save”, this person, who fakes plagues, comes to oversee construction and production for the enemy. This person collects his faked fates. This person maps and surreptitiously bombs the realities optimists see in his pedantic revelry. I am not sure if these ideas are wanton or as ephemeral as this grey smoke from my wilting and heated Nat Sherman...”⁵

In Schmailer’s words the defeat at his self-conscious inability to divulge any understanding of Benzel’s work builds the image of a layman, an outsider, a psychologist, a family member attempting to understand the motives and the emotion (or lack thereof) of a serial killer. Those bullet hole stickers on Benzel’s *Funhouse II* piece never fail to mesmerize me in their mockery. Such an image, an imitation violence against a reflective surface, one that holds the viewer in gaze upon themselves, pushes towards an evidential catalyst, something evident in the words Schmailer conjugates as an interrogative, serving to commemorate the feelings of past’s predecessor and the futility of trading the person you are for the person you have become (in Bundy’s terms), yet those stickers cause you to realize you are the same shape that has always been there.

These collections of Benzel’s are nothing in the way of his virus works and nothing in the way of the secret CalArt’s something or another, the other *chingaderos*, that no one will hear of again. These collections serve to perpetuate his fakir madness, his semi-colon at the brink of a discourse in nomenclature; we see nothing worse than that which is evident in naming what is in ourselves. If we are meant to become disposed at the “tastelessness versus taste deserved” aspect granted by his collection of fakes, we only need to discuss such matters with ourselves rather than the masses Salmon, a la Herodotus, dictates is crucial to being “empowered” via any statement we use to define ourselves. So, who do you believe, the serial killers whose words begin this essay, or the battling intellects? Whether you follow the nonplussed Schmailer or the evidently excited Salmon, the words of the serial killers still ring true. Their thoughts are not as cryptic as the book by Guy de Cointet that rests on the top shelf of Benzel’s *Memento Mori / Gag Cabinet*, 2012, yet just like Manson says, when we look them straight in the eye, we shudder at the reflection and quickly turn away when it becomes evident it is we who are standing there.

⁵. Schmailer, A. Hadlen, “A Letter to Myself”, Yale University Press, 2006.