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## Bert Long Lives On!

12 Dec 2016 / Paula Newton / O Comments



Photo: Brett Coomer, Houston Chronicle.

Bert L. Long Jr. (1940-2013) still lives on in the Houston art scene, as well as the international art scene. Long's work, which straddles the worlds of fine art and outsider art, can be found in many collections, and now it is described in the book, Bert Long: The Artist's Journey. Thomas McEvilley, who died only weeks after Long did, opens the book by describing his chance encounter with Long on a Houston street in 1980. An African American artist who grew up in Houston's Fifth Ward, Long was an energetic and enthusiastic artist—painter, sculptor, and photographer— who was trained as an executive chef and came to his art through his growing ability to carve ice and make decorative food in the hospitality industry.

In conjunction with <u>Deborah Colton Gallery</u>'s current exhibition, *Bert Long: Looking for the Right Time*, currently on view through January 28, the celebration of McEvilley's monograph on the life and career of the beloved Houston artist will take place on Wednesday, December 14 at 6:30pm.





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## Bert Long at Deborah Colton Gallery 26 Dec 2016 / Midrael Bise / O Comments

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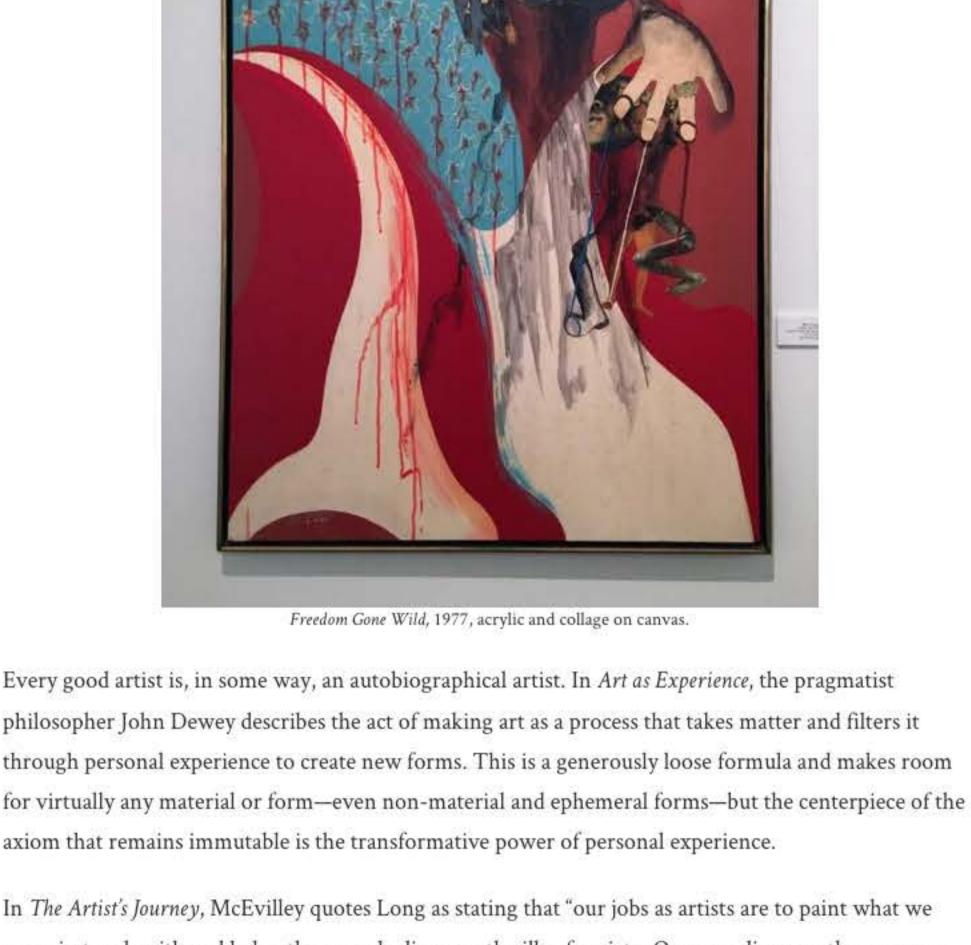
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painting. In 1990 he was among 25 artists to win the prestigious Prix de Rome.

Looking for the Right Time, a small survey of Long's paintings, drawings, prints and assemblages at Deborah Colton Gallery in Houston, mounted in conjunction with the publication of The Artist's Journey published by the Houston Artists Fund with a long, historical essay by art historian, teacher and critic Thomas McEvilley, provides an opportunity to revisit the work and life of one of the many artists

who contributed to the foundational strata of the Houston art world.



come in touch with and help other people diagnose the ills of society. Once we diagnose them we can

cure them." This definition of the artist situates Long squarely within the mythology of the heroic artist who sacrifices his personal identity and privacy to the collective consciousness of the society in which he lives.

Purgatory, 2012, acrylic on canvas, neon signs, branch and. birds' feet.

It's a bold declaration of universality when an artist believes that by mythologizing his own life, he is

mythologizing all human life. But this is exactly what the autobiographical artist, and Long himself,

essentially claim. It takes a precise mix of ego and humility for an artist to identify himself with all

sort of thing and, as far as I can tell, it's an essential ingredient in the production of art.

people and to assume that by building an entire iconography around his life and experience, he'll have

something enlightening to say about human existence in general. It takes a kind of faith to believe this

Long has this faith. Whether this kind of belief results in fortune or folly is mostly beyond the control

personality. Anyone who knew Long (I didn't) will attest to the uplifting power of his personality. But

personality and memory fade. McEvilley's book and the work of Long's archivist Pete Gershon will go a

long way to further cementing Long's impact on not only the Houston, but the American art narrative.

of any individual artist. Much of Long's legacy relies on a combination of a vast, idiosyncratic,

sometimes profound, sometimes humorous body of objects and the force of his remembered

what kind of general character the work possesses? What's the general thrust of the artist's personality, his way of being in the world? The world, in all times, is pretty much a shitshow and an artist's style is

One of the most important questions to ask about an artist when looking back on a closed oeuvre is

always a clear indication of how he manage the mess-with a laugh, a sigh, or a groan.

Brothers, 1988, acrylic on canvas, frame of wood, plaster of Paris, brooch.

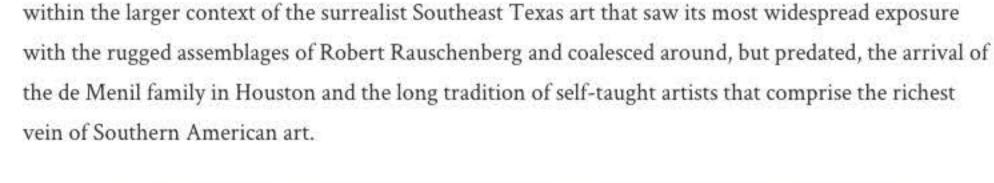
Whether humorously mocking the stupidity of the KKK in performances with fellow Houston artist

John Alexander, or painting an absolutely sincere image, like Brothers in the Colton show, in which

black-and-white hands open at the wrists to reveal blood vessels that contain the same blood, Long

So let's locate Long's work art historically. McEvilley does a convincing job of situating Long's work

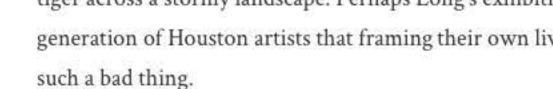
demonstrates a transcendental idealism that, honestly, is difficult for me to understand.



Happiness, 2010, acrylic in canvas, plaster canvas and silver paint. Long was almost entirely self-taught but his work is saturated with references to the Western European art tradition. In Art/Life, a 30-foot long mural in the Looscan Neighborhood Library, Long situates a complex personal narrative set in shark-infested waters under the sign of influences like Rembrandt, Picasso and Warhol. Both Brothers and Art/Life seem almost naïve in a current social environment that sees black and white, East and West as diametrically and possibly permanently divided. I prefer Long's universalist vision to a more recent vision that tends to view most claims to universality as suspect at best and insidious at worst.

Riding the Tiger, 2000, acrylic on canvas.

I like to think that I am, above all, a formalist. For me, if artworks are unable to convince me of their formal integrity, I am usually unwilling to invest myself in their narratives. But just as a certain kind of formal proficiency is often present in the absence of any deeper spirit, so too can deep spirit exist in forms that are sometimes unconvincing. I'm not always persuaded by Long's skills as a painter or sculptor, but the forms he has created over the long course of his career as an artist add up to a mythology that is greater than the sum of its parts. Riding the Tiger, one of Long's more well-known paintings, depicts the artist naked, grey beard and long hair trailing behind him, as he rides a ferocious tiger across a stormy landscape. Perhaps Long's exhibition, and McEvilley's book, will convince a new generation of Houston artists that framing their own lives and work as acts of heroism might not be



Through Jan. 28, 2017 at Deborah Colton Gallery, Houston.