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An Artistic Industry of the Ordinary

by [Philip A Hartigan](#) on October 5, 2012



Industry of the Ordinary, “The Portrait Project” (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

CHICAGO — A few years ago, when I spent most of a summer in Prague (Czech Republic), I visited the [lapidarium](#), the museum where they store all the fragments of old statues. I thought of that museum again when I saw [Industry of the Ordinary: Sic Transit Gloria Mundi](#) at the [Chicago Cultural Center](#). Industry of the Ordinary (IOTO) are Adam Brooks and Matthew Wilson, two British artists who have lived in Chicago for many years. Their stated aim is to raise our consciousness about what constitutes an ordinary or extraordinary human action, or work of art, but that hardly does justice to the almost bewildering variety of forms that are displayed in this

mid-career survey. In one display case you see two busts of the artists; a T-shirt bearing the words “BURN HISTORY”; a chef’s hat that reads, “Industry of the Ordinary”; a pair of sexy pink boy shorts with the word “PRAY” printed on them; and what looks like a whiskey bottle with all insignias replaced with the word “ORDINARY.” It’s the artists’ personal lapidarium, a series of fragments of things, of objects that are the physical remains of their actions, installations, and performances from the past ten years or so.



Industry of the Ordinary, “Pray”

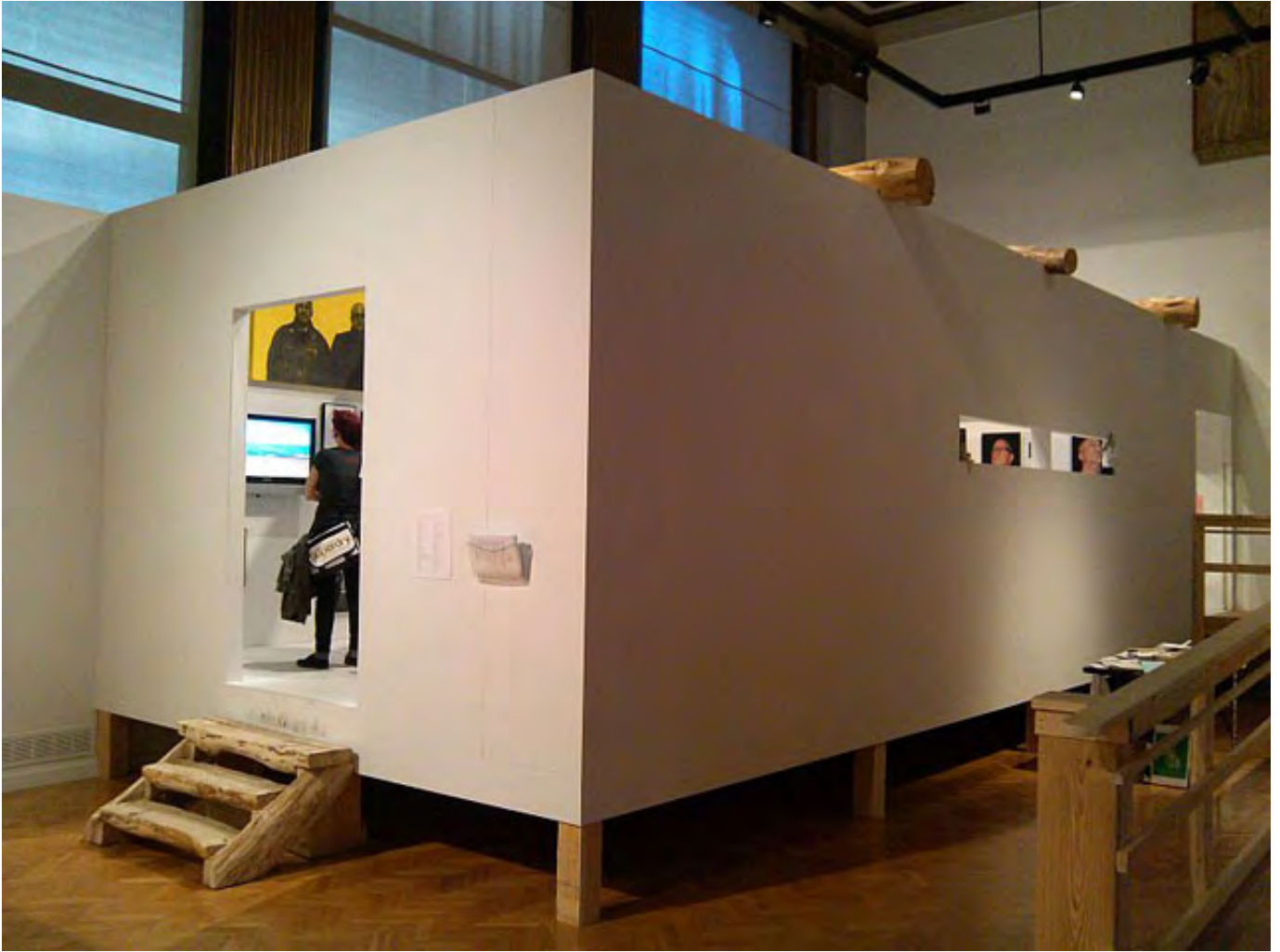
The fun continues in the main exhibition hall on the fourth floor of the Cultural Center. There is a large photo of a man and woman sitting on a bed, naked except for the animal masks concealing their faces. This resulted from IOTO placing an ad on Craigslist in which they promised one night in an expensive hotel room for a couple having an extra-marital affair, as long as they were willing to have their picture taken. In a video just around the corner, you see people making sexy-time and apparently being watched by the artists, who are visible in an inset, lounging against a wall and staring blankly down at a screen.



Industry of the Ordinary's beeswax baby (click to enlarge)

Then there is a metal hospital table with a lifesize baby made from beeswax, which the artists rather hilariously put up for auction on eBay. In a specially constructed room is *The Portrait Project*, for which IOTO asked more than 50 Chicago artists to create a portrait of them, the results ranging from small oil paintings to videos. The portraits, like the sitters' faces, are unremarkable in themselves: their significance comes from the idea that they embody, which is IOTO's desire to make art that stems from interaction and contact between people.

The Latin epigram that provides the title of the show, "Sic Transit Gloria Mundi" (So Passes the Glory of the World), is meant to be a semi-serious reminder that all objects, including everything in these galleries, will eventually fade from the world. The lapidary form is a definite thread in contemporary art, as in the disparate work of Gabriel Orozco and Urs Fischer. But in contrast to Fischer's overblown jokiness and Orozco's mystical symbolism, Industry of the Ordinary possess a rarer quality: they make work that is genuinely funny and that has an ingenious conceptual point, while still valuing the materials they use.



Industry of the Ordinary, exterior of “The Portrait Project” room

Case in point: As part of their retrospective, at the end of October, they are going to walk a refrigerated case containing a butter sculpture of President Obama through the streets of the city, from the meatpacking district to the Cultural Center, documenting the response of Chicagoans along the way. There’s no word yet on what will happen to the sculpture once it reaches its destination. Maybe it will take its place in the IOTO collection of fragments, or maybe (I’m hoping) the artists will dispense with it in an act of traditional British ordinariness: by spreading it on some English muffins and eating it together with a cup of tea.

[Industry of the Ordinary: Sic Transit Gloria Mundi](#) continues at the Chicago Cultural Center (78 East Washington Street, Chicago) until February 17, 2013.

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