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Buttering up Obama

Published: 11-05-12

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Two instructors in the Art & Design Department are leaving the public with a taste of the extraordinary, or at least a craving for all things buttery.



Carolina Sanchez THE CHRONICLE

Industry of the Ordinary, an artistic venture founded in 2003 by artists Mathew Wilson and Adam Brooks, has a history of challenging common perceptions of familiar objects. Its latest performance art piece involved pushing a bust of President Barack Obama made entirely of butter through the streets of Chicago while filming the reactions of passersby.

Though the artwork depicts Obama, Wilson said the

piece is more about provoking a reaction from audiences than it is a political statement. He said the responses from pedestrians, who saw him and Brooks navigating the streets with their 70-pound butter Obama on Oct. 26, ranged from amused to offended, while some paid little attention.

"Regardless of your political views and who you might be voting for, we think our interest in Obama was of his unique place in American cultural and political history," Wilson said.

Wilson, who moved to the U.S. from England 15 years ago, said the act of butter sculpting fascinates and inspires him. While he and Brooks were conceptualizing the butter bust, Wilson found that several state capitals hosted butter carving contests. After searching the Internet for an artist, they commissioned Ohio-based sculptor Bob Kling, who has been sculpting at the Ohio State Fair for the past 13 years.

According to Kling, the American Dairy Association Mideast typically hosts these fairs and the sculptures are often recycled and made into ethanol. In the past, the butter was discarded because it had been handled. He said he's seen very little protesting of butter sculpting since the sculptures started being repurposed.

Kling, who said he has no official training in sculpture, said he is an Obama supporter, and his initial concern when Wilson approached him about the project was that the piece wouldn't portray Obama in a positive light. He changed his mind once he



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EDITOR'S PICKS

considered the project's folk art concept, he said.

"[Wilson and Brooks'] idea is much bigger than just [the bust], of course," Kling said. "I'm very intrigued by the Industry of the Ordinary, and what I did was fairly ordinary. I made a sculpture out of butter, and I [did] that because I love to manipulate anything."

Kling was flown to Chicago Oct. 23 to work on-site. According to Wilson, the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events provided housing and purchased supplies for Kling, including a refrigerator to transport the sculpture and 150 pounds of butter, about half of which went unused.

Wilson and Brooks moved the sculpture from the West Side to the Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington St., on Oct. 30 to become part of their exhibition "Sic Transit Gloria Mundi," which is Latin for "Thus passes away the glory of the world." Both Columbia and The Illinois Arts Council helped produce the exhibition, which is a retrospective of Wilson's and Brook's careers and includes 10 years' worth of photos, sculptures and documented performance pieces.

Lynne Warren, curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, said she appreciates the duo's independent creative efforts to force viewers to look at everyday objects from a new perspective, despite lacking assistance from art institutions and commissions, an issue she said is growing in the art world.

"They subsume themselves to this [unique] thing," Warren said. "It's their willingness, not so much to work with the ordinary, but their willingness to sincerely work extra-institutionally. I find it exciting that these are artists who are on the ground floor of making art that isn't studio-based art, per se, and getting it out there."

Wilson said he and Brooks want people to become less passive when they view everyday surroundings and to help them look closer at the experiences everyone shares.

He added that their work, which sometimes deals with topics like terrorism and infidelity, can be controversial, but pushing boundaries is part of the human experience, he said.

"Whether [the bust] transforms the ordinary into extraordinary, I don't know," Wilson said. "But I do know our inspiration comes from experiences that are not unique to us."

Industry of the Ordinary's exhibition runs through Feb. 17 in the Exhibit Hall at the Chicago Cultural Center. Admission is free.

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