

A JURIED EXHIBITION

State Fare: Three Ohio Artists



Mark Harris | Tracy Featherstone | Rain Harris

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Mark Harris



Mao Songs, 2006, image courtesy of the artist

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Mark Harris is a ravenous and erudite student of philosophy and art. He holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from Goldsmiths College at the University of London and is currently the director of the visual arts program at the University of Cincinnati. But despite his high academic stature and years of university and art school training, he remains deeply involved in the exuberant, unmediated, and wild idealism that exists within popular youth culture and its subcultures of drugs and rock and roll.

All his work rises from this rich terrain. He creates obsessively cut and crafted psychedelic paintings,

organizes outdoor concerts, makes documentary videos of Chinese rock bands, offers sketchy, journal-like musings on youthful transgressions, reads Baudelaire and Benjamin to cannabis plants (to stimulate a more vigorous growth and THC production), and even offers a *Bad Music Seminar*. What makes Harris's work intriguing is his straightforward celebration of these subjects. He is not interested in deconstructing their popular appeal but encouraging a sense of wonder and intoxication at their transformative potential. His unique talent lies in mediating experiences without being didactic or overly romantic regarding his subjects. He tends to work in a

matter-of-fact way, setting up specific scenarios or rules of engagement for his art that encourage unexpected, chance outcomes to generate the content. This allows viewers and subjects a participatory role for creative interpretation. *Mao Songs* and *Utopian Bands*, two videos in *State Fare* that both investigate popular music in China, seem to embody his overall creative practice.

In *Mao Songs*, he simply asked 35 Beijing musicians to perform a poem written by Mao Zedong in any musical idiom or venue that they choose. Harris describes the project; "this video presents what occurs during the recordings—encounters between a westerner (with limited understanding of Mao) and Chinese musicians for whom Mao's legacy leaves complex, ambivalent impressions." The resulting performances foreground a tremendous range of individual interpretations, and through Harris's direct documentary vision we witness small acts of revolutionary joy and critique.

For *Utopian Bands*, Harris served as the impresario for a concert by six Chinese bands. He appears during a brief intermission to explain the project and then steps back to continue documenting the event. Harris is a fitting guide for this strange gathering. Having been born in Singapore and subsequently growing up in India, Japan, and the U.K., he purposely engages in cross- and countercultural translations and allows slight miscommunications and moments of ambiguity to yield poetic, visionary possibilities. This method creates ruptures in expectations that afford viewers a significant amount of interpretive freedom with which to access his work. Harris billed the *Utopian Bands* concert as "a return of the repressed" and this suggests the splendor of creative re-production. The artist sees the Chinese musicians as exposing "micro-cosmic

utopian communities." Social hierarchies may tend to repress youthful rebellion and idealism, but our ravenous desire for some kind of political or aesthetic transcendence remains. *Utopian Bands* reminds us that we too easily overlook the revolutionary power involved in highly articulated acts of individual creative will and their power to facilitate social transformation.

Harris sees the obscure machinations of counterculture as a rich locale in which to find and illuminate vestiges of utopian and visionary ideals. His work is ultimately generous and inviting. Humor, wry wit, social and political critique, and visionary, poetic indulgences are all possible ways to engage Harris's art. It's no secret that art has the capacity to excite wonder, but within the right conditions, especially those that Harris carefully cultivates, it can rewire the ways in which we understand the world and harness our social will.



Marijuana in the UK, 1999, image courtesy of the artist

Quotations from Mark Harris come from the liner notes for *Mao Songs* and *Utopian Bands*.