

Michael Petry: The Treasure of Memory

Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery

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It is an established artistic strategy to generate metaphors from which viewers can extract personal narratives, but rarely is it taken to the lengths Michael Petry attains in his recent installation *The Treasure of Memory* at Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery. Petry transformed the 900-square-foot gallery into a woman's collarbone, bare but for an oversized string of thirty multicolored glass beads stretching the forty-two-foot span of the space. Their shapes alternated—outward from the center—beginning with ovoid, followed by oblong and then spherical beads. A knot between each prevented the heavy baubles from gravitating to the center of the room. Each object was given a title: some of the beads were historical references, but others, like *Pink Venetian* and *Prada*, alluded to shape, color and elements of pop culture.

The Treasure of Memory changes with each exhibition. This is its second showing; the first was at the Hå Art Center in Norway, and following its visit to Houston, the work will be housed at the Museum of Arts & Design in New York. Petry allows galleries and museums to install the piece at their discretion, tightening the rope and removing beads to suit each exhibition space. In Devin Borden Hiram Butler, the colossal ornament felt more like a total environment than a traditional sculpture. It dominated the room so completely

that viewers were all but obliged to take part in the construction of its meaning.

In his *New York Times* article "No Stage, No Actors, But It's Theater (and Art)" (1999), Robert Storr likens similar installations to theatrical space, and Petry successfully motivated spectators to experience the work in this very manner. Walking into the vast white cube was much like stepping onto a stage, where the monumental necklace awaited. Viewers must move around Petry's set like actors, interacting with the piece as though in dialogue. The grand scale of an otherwise insignificant object elevated its importance, which weighed on those who stepped closer to—or farther from it—in order to grasp its hidden significance.

Moving in and around the installation generated the same sort of excitement as the sheer wonder of sifting through a parent's jewelry box—a treasure chest where the memories of their past and hopes for our future collide. In actuality, Petry took his inspiration from a string of beads found in a Viking burial ground—a precious trinket that defied time itself by accompanying someone beyond death, yet *The Treasure of Memory* is not an artifact in the traditional sense. It merely refers to a place in the past, reminding viewers of their own stories and the experience of time. With this piece, Petry collapsed individual and collective memory

Michael Petry, *The Treasure of Memory*, 2006
Installation view, Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery
Dimensions variable

into a single place where viewers engendered their own memory and, therefore, their own meaning. This achievement notwithstanding, the work displayed a universal quality rather unexpected from an artist whose projects are often marked by erotically charged images from the private domain.

Although Petry dealt with a specific place and time by modeling *The Treasure of Memory* after an artifact, it is by no means culturally specific. History was not the subject here; as the work's title indicates, memory is central. Although often inaccurate and unreliable, in our minds memories become truer than actual events. And, as new attitudes towards history reveal, we use these memories—real or imagined—to review and revise our collective history as well. While numerous artists and curators have tackled the subject of memory, so few deliberately use their exhibitions as a forum for making memory. Petry, on the other hand, constructs a space where viewers can look at his work like they look at history—from all sides—revisiting old reminiscences and creating new experiences.