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'All American' plays with tradition at Salt Lake Art Center

By Deseret News | July 5, 2009 12 a.m. MDT

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In July, the United States celebrates its birthday and its traditions. Think apple pie, barbecue and rodeo.

Do these traditions identified as American really define Americans?

"All American: Defining Ourselves in a Time of Change" features 13 contemporary artists, both national and regional artists. All ask that same question.

"We aren't going to tell you who we are as Americans. We aren't really making any conclusions. We are creating a dialogue. Some with skepticism, some with patriotism," said Marlow Hoffman, director of communication at the Salt Lake Art Center.

American symbols, such as the Washington Monument and the flag, are reconstructed into interpretive versions, to tell a different story, some involving immigration, the economy or American pastimes.

Artist Jerry Bleem took pieces from multiple flags and retied the pieces to create a new flag, titled "The Un-United States of America," challenging the idea of a nationwide unity.

An impressive piece, also playing off connectivity, or the lack thereof, is "United States," by Brian Dettmer.

Dettmer took a U.S. map and cut away all the pieces that were not a U.S. highway.

The map shows the connectedness of the United States by having a central highway system. Just following the roads one can literally draw the country.

Salt Lake City artist Brad Slaugh made his approach to American culture by revisiting old photographs.

Each of his four pieces is a skewed painting, making a statement about nostalgia and familiar scenes, such as the class portrait in "Cheese."

His painting, "Cocktail Party," features, as he called it, a farm with a serious peacock problem.

The work contains a young male, holding a rifle with other men in the background, smoking cigarettes and holding cans, while numerous peacocks are flocking around them, some dead.

"I think of it as commentary on myths of the American man," Slaugh said.

Artist Patrick Lichty's piece, "Suburban Meditation," is a piece of artificial turf with lawn chairs and a lawn mower, depicting a scene in the American backyard and the fascination with keeping a pristine lawn.

Grainy film footage plays on the wall by the yard scene, giving it a haunting air.

Each photograph captured ways Americans try to recreate nature, even though nature is all around them.

The piece by Scott Grieger is likely the exhibit's bluntest piece. The large black-and-white painting has a text, "United States of Anxiety," painted largely across the country.

"Some pieces hit you immediately, in a very real way," Hoffman said.

"Some are more contemplative but you can come up with more interpretations."

"All American: Defining Ourselves in a Time of Change" will run through Oct. 31 in the Main and Projects Gallery and is free to the public.

If you go . . .

What: "All American: Defining Ourselves in a Time of Change"

Where: Salt Lake Art Center

When: Through Oct. 31, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Friday 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Cost: Free

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