

**MORGAN LEHMAN**

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Noah Becker's

**WHITEHOT**  **MAGAZINE**  
of contemporary art <sup>TM</sup>

## **Truth Telling: Duke Riley and Frohawk Two Feathers at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati**

*Based on a True Story: Duke Riley and Frohawk Two Feathers*  
the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati through March 22, 2015.

By **MARIA SEDA-REEDER**, FEB. 2015

At a time when news channels are not beholden to accuracy, having video evidence of murder on camera still isn't enough to charge perpetrators with a crime, and more people prefer to get their "news" from satire sources such as the Onion or Stephen Colbert, broad historical truths with implied heroes and villains seems like quite a precarious subject to tackle these days. Truth is funny that way: it is a constantly moving target.

But if truth could ever be summarized in a sound bite, you wouldn't know it from the sprawling, visually dense exhibition "Based on a True Story: Duke Riley and Frohawk Two Feathers," on view at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati through March 22, 2015.

The CAC's newest Curator, Steven Matijcio paired Two Feathers and Riley, whose interdisciplinary works speak to the same subjects (peoples on the fringes of society who perform singular acts of rebellion), in much the same ways (by creating a faux archeological record). Yet, surprisingly the two have never had a show together prior.

LA-based visual artist Umar Rashid has gone by the pseudonym Frohawk Two Feathers for this exhibition and various others since 2006—"an homage" as he calls it, to his distant Native American ancestry (Blackfoot and Choctaw.) In Two Feathers' fictional parallel universe "Frenland," he creates a surreal hybridization of a future/past via historic painting/portraiture and sculptural primitivism with references to contemporary popular culture throughout; and it is the juxtaposition of the two incongruities which seems to breathe life into what might be considered otherwise fully-explored media.

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*Duke Riley, Frohawk Two Feathers, False Beard of Kingship, 2013  
image courtesy of the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati*



*Duke Riley, Frohawk Two Feathers, Frengland and the New World, in situ with Duke Riley's Invitation to Lubberland in the background, 2015 image courtesy of the Contemporary Arts Center ©Tony Walsh.*

Boston-bred Riley is a New York-based art instigator who is equally versed at staging public interventions as he is drawing intricate large-scale narrative history paintings, carving scrimshaw, or creating large-scale mosaics. Such meticulous and performative work seems apt for an artist who is also a

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sought-after tattooist with his own shop in Brooklyn called East River Tattoo. And the artworks in “Based on a True Story” resonate visually as well as conceptually—each carrying a formal and connotative weight of history.

The layout for this exhibition at the Zaha Hadid-designed museum (called “the most important American building to be completed since the cold war” by New York Times’ Architecture critic, Herbert Muschamp,) is an intense visual juggernaut.

The Acorn, Riley’s one-man submarine, which he built, launched in New York harbor, and got within a few yards of the Queen Mary 2, before he was arrested in it in 2007, stands guard near the exhibition’s entrance. In the farthest reaches of the gallery, in a space that is notoriously challenging for artists due to its short ceiling, claustrophobic walls & angular cement columns throughout, Riley’s multi-media installation *An Invitation to Lubberland* overtakes the tunnel-like passageway, leaving visitors little room and light with which to navigate.

The work’s placing makes sense when you get that Riley is weaving the tale of a lost “hobo’s paradise” near an inlet of the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, known as Kingsbury Run—the vestiges of which were diverted underground half a century ago. As the story goes, in 1938 a Depression-era police force led by Eliot Ness, (hell-bent on ending a search for a serial murderer who had targeted the populous encampment,) rounded up and displaced the inhabitants, and burned the makeshift town to the ground. To create the work, Riley hopped freight trains from New York to Ohio, kayaked through sewage, and otherwise trespassed boundaries of commonsense and legality to arrive at his destination: a sewage tunnel near the original site.



*Duke Riley, Frohawk Two Feathers' wall of portraits, in situ 2015 image courtesy of the Contemporary Arts Center ©Tony Walsh.*

*Lubberland* consists mostly of assembled works of readymade objects (mosaics and mixed media installations of coins, cigarettes, and rail spikes, among other things) as well as video of his journey to—and here’s the important point—*Riley’s version* of the shantytown: where Kingsbury Run flows with

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whiskey instead of sewage, and marginal peoples weren't systematically removed from chosen geography. And much like Two Feathers', Riley's text and titles throughout encourage further possibilities for interpretation.

Two Feathers' fantastic portraits of revolutionaries and colonial era characters—each with their own lengthy narrative text—sit sentinel on the opposite side of the second floor upper gallery walls, and his striking subjects peer (and sometimes glare) back at the viewer through traditional open arched window-like framing devices.

The heroes and heroines of Frengland are more ethnically diverse (and far more tattooed) than any of the wealthy white men we typically see in the historic record; and the artist treats his paper surface with coffee and tea, making them look right at home alongside his animal hide paintings, carved drums and primitivist sculpture.

Like with his portraits, text is central to Two Feathers' (himself a self-published author) visual work. For example, a funerary mask made from deer hide, sinew and braided horsehair entitled *False Beard of Kingship* (2013), includes some of the artist's briefest (yet foreboding) label copy: "A death mask of Ineke made by Sam, her lover." Like many of the open-ended stories about the characters that Two Feathers conjures, the viewer is left with more questions about Sam and Ineke than answers.

In addition to showing Riley and Two Feathers' work together for the first time, Matijicic intended for "Based on a True Story" to resonate within the larger institution-wide 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary show, "Memory Palace."

Regarding his curatorial aim, Matijicic says, "Rather than bask in nostalgia and reaffirm past objects and accolades, I wanted to forefront the beautifully imperfect way that histories are redrawn over the course of time - not as amnesia but emancipation. 'Based on a True Story' connects to, and performs this underlying theme: offering an expanded look at two artists who actively rework canonical histories through a subjective lens."

Like two sides of the same wooden nickel, Two Feathers and Riley add an arbitrary truth to the historical record that is filled with more potential for "truth" perhaps than the imitated currency itself.

Like the various iterations of history we've seen in movies, semi-fictionalized historical dramas and trivia games, the more that "Truth" is re-told to us in various media (something both Riley and Two Feathers do as a regular part of their practice), the more likely we are to believe it. **WM**