



Call and Response: Tom Greenwood's The Salem Singers
By John Motley

(An essay on Tom Greenwood's solo exhibition curated by Chris Johanson
on view March 23rd – May 12th, 2010)

Tom Greenwood's practices as a musician and visual artist are so assiduously entwined that drawing any clearly defined boundary between the two is impossible. Scanning the walls and shelves of his stuffed apartment in Southwest Portland, Oregon, one can see how, for Greenwood, sound and image share a symbiotic relationship. There are paintings made for the albums he issues with his band, Jackie-O Motherfucker, and then there are paintings made directly on the surfaces of used LPs. There are posters promoting gigs for the band; tambourines screen-printed with overlaid pinwheels and starbursts; and yellowing pages from ancient issues of *Rolling Stone*, which Greenwood has singed into lacy, latticed patterns with burning incense sticks.

"The work I've done is primarily in music, but my background is in visual arts," explains Greenwood, who excelled at photography as a high school student and earned his degree in media arts from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design in 1990.

"Everything I've done with music has had a connection to something visual." In fact, the music Greenwood makes with Jackie-O is marked by a high-minded conceptualism and hunger for experimentation that locates it closer to contemporary art than pop music. The band scavenges sounds and styles, however seemingly incongruous: the organic warmth of folk, blues, and country; free jazz skronk; space rock's narcotic atmospheres; and loops, electronic manipulations, and *musique concrète*. The artist's omnivorous aesthetic,

which is inclusive enough to incorporate so many kinds of music, is complemented by a flair for collaboration and improvisation. Since Greenwood founded the band in 1994, dozens of musicians have passed through its ranks, ensuring that the Jackie-O sound varies seismically between albums, even within nights on a single tour. Most musicians strive to document an authoritative version of a song; Greenwood and Jackie-O destabilize the rigidity of conventional composition by privileging performance. As a live act, the band is stridently open to the alien forms that materialize when structure is allowed to dissolve.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Greenwood's impulses as a visual artist are closely linked to Jackie-O's *bricolage* of musical styles. Often taking the form of collage, his work is predicated on the manipulation of existing material. The earliest pieces included in *The Salem Singers*, the artist's decade-spanning survey at CUE, are concert fliers for Jackie-O gigs, comprising cut-up text and images. Although this scrappy, DIY sensibility was a matter of necessity—rather than a formal choice—for underground rock acts promoting themselves throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it armed Greenwood with a broader strategy for creating images, in which source material, once excised from its original context, could be activated for entirely new significations. In the collaged concert poster *Down the Dirt Road*, 2006, Greenwood creates a dense and dystopian cityscape: his city sprawls vertically, piling buildings from disparate eras and regions into a bleak and sooty heap of patchwork architecture. Here, brick walls and dark alleyways butt up against twisting freeway systems, forcing viewers to reconcile the conspicuously inconsistent sizes and perspectives as a single plane. A rickety small town restaurant, bearing the hand-painted sign "Moore's Café," looms largest in this assemblage, as a pair of New York City skylines sketch out identical, adjacent horizons. In the lower left-hand corner, vertical signage emblazoned with the band's initials ("JOMF") discreetly advertises its services

next to turn-of-the-century shingles for tools, guns, and jewelry. This pictorial space, like Jackie-O's music, slyly flaunts its aversion to convention. It is the picture plane as broken window.

In recent years, Greenwood has abstracted aspects of his work in collage—its disorienting cacophony and appropriation of found material—to create work that is at once more formal and more conceptual. For the cover of Jackie-O's *The Blood of Life* album, 2008, he screen-printed a found tapestry—itsself bearing a tranquil woodland scene—with a series of sand dollar-like discs in a mandalic configuration. His screen-printed alteration imbues the idyllic image—evergreen trees skirting a lake, expansive blue sky—with associations of sub-cultural spirituality. The disc forms, which reprise throughout Greenwood's work as flower petals and propeller shapes, point toward the dizzying optics of psychedelic album art as well as the geometric contours of New Age crystals and dream catchers. In this instance, his additions to the tapestry work with—not against—the source material to extend and complicate the original's meaning. In an even more literal example of building upon the foundation of a readymade image, Greenwood has acquired discarded sketchbooks from thrift stores to “finish” the portraits and still life studies begun by anonymous amateur artists.

Because Greenwood also works as a vintage clothing “picker,” he spends many hours in Goodwills and Value Villages around the Pacific Northwest, accumulating inventory as well as material for his art. Over the past decade, he made regular trips to the Goodwill in Salem, Oregon and amassed a group of archival photographs, magazine clippings, and other discarded objects. He found that what he'd gathered, though disjunctive, seemed to form a loose narrative. He began to organize the material to emphasize the story and, later, edited a montage of still images. The resulting eight-minute video, *The Salem Singers*, 2010, which provides the exhibition with both its name

and centerpiece, constructs the multi-generational saga of a family of musicians who immigrate to the United States from Eastern Europe. As they struggle to make a living with their music, they travel to California, represented by images of Western landscapes and soaring birds as well as a pointed shift in the sound track. They settle there until divorce splinters the family, as implied by the interpolation of court documents. From there, the children—a brother and sister—are separated and, in the end, the sister makes her home in Salem, where she dies in the 1980s, ostensibly leaving behind the fictional history Greenwood presents.

And though it is doubtful the people who populate *The Salem Singers* share any resemblance to Greenwood's story, let alone connections to one another, the artist's sequencing prods viewers to read the work as linear and coherent, to create a story with a beginning, middle, and end. In part, it is the magic of film, in which viewers seamlessly connect disparate fragments through their imaginative participation. This process of smoothing fractured imagery into a fluid narrative occurs through the subjective projections each viewer brings to the piece. After all, Greenwood's skeletal plot is mythic in its ambiguity, instantly identifiable in its broad gestures of separation and loss. "When we view an image, we bring something to the image as a viewer—something of our own past or history," says Greenwood. "In this way, there is a historical line that runs through us into everything we see. There is also a contemporary line: what we feel now in the moment. It's the same kind of emotional process that occurs when we hear a song. It touches us and brings up introspection from our past and blends it with the moment we are in now."

According to Greenwood, he conceived of *The Salem Singers* as a kind of song. The video contains music, as the artist accompanies the images with guitar, banjo, and field recordings, and its title was taken from a found piece of music: a private press LP of

a church choir, with a group of female vocalists in angelic white gowns on its cover. But, for Greenwood, the piece's similarity to song is more abstract. The incidental stars of his video have been subjected to the same corrosion that folk and popular songs undergo: As a song is passed down from one generation to the next, its origins may be misremembered, confused, or forgotten altogether. Lyrics may be misheard or whole verses shorn off. And yet some essential aspect of the song endures: even as its words are sung by many voices, some underlying quality of its story compels those voices to reprise its words. The importance of where they came from or what they first meant fades. We are disconnected from the cross-wired histories in *The Salem Singers*, even as the stills effortlessly congeal into narrative. But Greenwood knew we could find our way around a tune. The words are already on the tips of our tongues.

The writer, **John Motley**, has been published in *The Portland Mercury*, where he was visual arts critic from 2005 to 2009, as well as *Art Papers*, *Pitchfork Media*, *The Oregonian*, and *Under the Radar*. In 2009, he was the recipient of a Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for Short-Form Writing. He is currently working on a book-length project in collaboration with Fourteen30 Contemporary in Portland, Oregon.

The mentor, **Elizabeth Baker**, was editor of *Art in America* magazine from 1974 to 2008. Previously she was associate editor and then managing editor of *Art News*. She has taught history of art at the School of Visual Arts, Wheaton College and Boston University, and has written on a wide range of contemporary artists and art topics.

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