

The page contains several systems of musical notation. Each system typically consists of two staves, with the upper staff marked 'L' and the lower staff marked 'R'. The notation includes stems, beams, and various musical symbols. Large, irregular black redaction marks are placed over the notes and stems, obscuring the specific musical content. Some redaction marks are shaped like musical notes or beams. There are also some faint, large, light-colored letters 'S' and 'A' in the background.



MARK HARRIS by Sue Spaid

The Weston Art Gallery, Cincinnati OH January 25 - March 30, 2008



Attempting to jump start a better world, if not a better music scene, Cincinnati-based artist Mark Harris and Chinese alternative music promoter Yang Licai convened a night of bands at 2Kolegas Bar in Beijing on Bastille

Day, 2006. Harris's video *Utopian Bands* shows him introducing that night's upcoming festivities, citing the influence of nineteenth-century writers on utopian communities, though there is no mention of event participants appreciating the same texts. While watching documents of that memorable evening and listening to dozens of Chinese songs accessible on a CD sampler wall, one is immediately transported via their high-tech exports to their region of the world, which seems eerily familiar. Viewers cannot assume, however, that these musicians join bands and perform publicly in order to taste freedom or to express individuality, lest one risk continuing the narcissistic Orientalist's tendency of confining "others" to the observers' categories. Most likely, these Chinese musicians have their own reasons for playing gigs or participating in one another's bands, which elude any we're likely to infer from watching them perform.

Trapped as we are in our mindset of liberty, it's difficult to imagine that this music, however Western or typically Chinese (whatever "Chinese" could mean to one-billion-plus people), could be cherished for reasons other than its libratory powers, such as music's cognitive benefits (enhancing mathematical aptitudes) or its value as a breathing exercise (akin to t'ai-chi). Research shows, however, that those values we Westerners most admire are often unacceptable elsewhere, so there's no good reason to imagine their utopia as resembling ours, even as we admire their outfits, hairdos, accessories, hand gestures, musical attitudes, dispositions, and instruments. Could this be mimicking run amok? It thus remains to be seen whether Chinese musicians seek autonomy or just enjoy performing: manipulating people's emotions, attracting greater audiences, feeding fan frenzy, or "playing out" among friends.

In the absence of an anti-institutional DIY mindset, making music and organizing gigs may have little political import as it would for young Western musicians. If this were Latin America circa 1970, we could credit their efforts as courageous acts of defiance in the face of autocratic governments, especially since they described their projects that way. Yet I'm not so sure that those values Westerners happily project onto everything that looks "freeing" work here. I don't mean to downplay this event or to spurn its ensuing video, but to encourage viewers to brainstorm alternative motivations for these band



MARK HARRIS, (ABOVE TOP TO BOTTOM) DETAIL VIEW OF VITRINE OF VINTAGE CHINESE PAPER CUTOUTS & BOOKS. *UTOPIAN BANDS*, 2006, INSTALLATION VIEW OF DVD FEATURING THE BAND HANG ON THE BOX, 2008. (OPPOSITE TOP) INSTALLATION VIEW OF *I AM A RED COMET* (BAND NAME: HANG ON THE BOX), 2008, PAPER CUTOUT, ACRYLIC ON PAPER, 9 X 10 IN. PHOTO TONY WALSH. COURTESY THE WESTON ART GALLERY, CINCINNATI.

GRETCHEN BENNETT by Elizabeth Pence

Howard House Contemporary Art, Seattle WA

February 28 · April 12, 2008

"Hello" is Gretchen Bennett's second solo show at Howard House, accompanied by a group exhibition called "Supernature," which she curated. The work of seven New York-based artists seeks "the perfect landscape," whether through processes of exacting detail, such as Saul Chernick's ink drawings, or of paring down as in Suzanne Walter's wilderness scenes. The notions propping up "Supernature" meet and cross over at the intersection of natural and abstract space.

Bennett's latest work is a series of Prismacolor pencil drawings of Nirvana's Kurt Cobain, which were made by projecting slides of images selected either from YouTube footage or the Gus Van Sant film *Last Days* (2005), a fictional account "inspired by" the Cobain story. Yet Bennett's image grabs of the legendary rock singer are quirkily precise. By offering us moments unfamiliar to all but initiates, the artist performs the insider formation of the in-group, the hub of mass-media receptions. As Bennett says about the show, "it's almost self-portraiture or landscape. It's a way of contextualizing myself in this landscape."

Deceptively subtle in their ambition, the drawings seem more like a vaporous confusion of smudges or marks, but without ever losing that photographic precision necessary to snap the entire picture into place. You can never quite settle on an exact shape or arrive at a definitive edge—such things are always just out of reach. But the result nonetheless coheres, drawing attention to the viewer's own ambiguous, reconstructive stance. *Blue Like Nevermind (Last Days)* (all work 2008) shows a Cobain avatar named "Blake" at the moment of exiting a stone archway after returning from a lengthy walk through the grounds of his estate. Given that we know this was originally Van Sant's framing and conceptualization of the Cobain myth only removes it a further step from Bennett's own misty rendering of the scene. Somewhat larger is *Like a Setting Sun (South G. Street, Tacoma WA)*. Its iridescent red surface, perforated with a tenebrous light pushed toward overexposure, turns Cobain's acting out at the microphone into a virtual dissolve.

What transforms these slide-projected drawings into almost gestural painting relates to the precision with which they maintain slight differences of mood and register throughout the spread of work. The abrupt presence of *Come On Over*, a tightly cropped Cobain at the mike, presents a very different subjective proposition than, say, *When you wake up this morning, please read my diary. Look through my things, and figure me out*, which, as with *Like A Setting Sun*, is taken from performance footage and has a featureless, burned-out tone. The point here is not to redeem Cobain's mystique, but to return us all to the same misrecognition of the medium to which we owe yet another cultural icon.



members who appear to travel in the same fashion loop as we do. Or perhaps we are moving in *their* loop, sporting *their* look, just as we unwittingly adopt Japanese fashion trends. Either way, *Utopian Bands* conveys Harris's keen visual sense, as he trains the camera's lens on the suburban-motel-like site, the bands' instruments, parked cars, beer kegs, participants' outfits, and body art. So what was Harris's artistic role? Part impresario, part promoter, part party planner, and part liberator, he clearly aimed to document a memorable gig.

For over a decade, Harris has adorned his paintings with hand-cut paper, so it's not surprising that China's supremacy in that genre fascinates him. For "Utopian Bands and Related Works," Harris presented his notable collection of vintage Chinese paper cuts in a vitrine. Harris also tried his hand at this delicate and fiddly skill by cutting out images of the six rock bands from video stills, using four sheets of red paper at a time (Chinese artisans routinely cut hundreds of sheets at a time). He also scanned video stills into a computer that laser-cuts printing plates, enabling him to print these same images with red ink.

In recent years, there has been no shortage of artists filming exposés of urban youths' escapist activities. One immediately recalls videos by Rineke Dijkstra, Gillian Wearing, or Phil Collins documenting young club goers. Unlike those artists who record their subjects as objects, Harris shows the bands intent on making something happen, detailing their activities from setup to last gig. Rather than shine a bright light on them, inviting his audience to "laugh at" or "applaud" their efforts, as the case may be, Harris went so far as to pair Beijing's enormous population with the enormity in popularity of its "unsigned" musical groups, who completely fill the wall's CD sampler. Harris is clearly amazed by the quality of local bands, the sheer volume of unsigned groups managing to survive without record deals, as well as the variety of musical styles. This exhibition is thus a kind of contemporary musical journey through Beijing, a view no tourist would have the chance to experience, unless his or her purpose was to curate a night of bands, as Harris did. Struck by their endurance and sense of community, he indeed located a utopia.