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## **EXPLODING FACES, [ Confining Spaces ]**

**[ Nathan Vernau | Steven Frost | Tiphonie Spencer ]**

**[ February 12 — March 15, 2011 ]**

**[ Opening Reception Saturday, February 12<sup>th</sup> from 5-8pm ]**

Robert Bills Contemporary's group exhibition, *Exploding Faces, Confining Spaces*, presents three artists whose violence and energy breaks the constraints of historical connotation and exceeds the confined space of their marginalized media. Nathan Vernau's tormenting psychological narratives become entertainment for the viewer, showcased in shallow, comic-book-like and theatrical environments. The simple playfulness associated with the spaces and color themes inverts itself to become another mocking voice that tortures the multiple figurations of the artist that participate in acting out emotional turmoil. Steven Frost appropriates the combination of violence and theatricality that defines professional wrestling and boxing using the rhetoric of craft and textile. The exploding faces of the male figures, the symbolic location of their fictional and socially loaded identities, dissolve into entropic clouds shaped so as to embody the violence of their abstraction. Tiphonie Spencer's employment of the antiquated arabesque aesthetic melds dainty decoration, abstracted figures and narratives into a single web of linear connectivity that seems to dismantle what was previously an entire environment into its component parts, yet whose forms and branches remain hopelessly entangled.

Nathan Vernau's florescent yet grotesque self-portraits illustrate both the transparency and multiplicity of the self. These colorful scenes are saturated with emotion, to the point where it oozes out of the figures into puddles on the ground. In some pieces, the multiple forms of the artist depicted violently struggle with the clothing that constrains them, attempting to hold the manifestations together into one contained entity. In others, the figures seem to be struggling against forces that drag them apart. These scenes of brutal brawling are enclosed within pastel-colored, circus-like environments created within a comic-book aesthetic, where the seriousness of the figures' drama is mocked by light pink and baby blue surroundings. The figures labor to free themselves from the court-gesture patterns that adorn their boxer shorts, and express an extreme frustration, contempt, and disgust that is so powerful, it penetrates their grotesque carnival masks and anonymous brown paper bags.

Steven Frost represents male tropes appropriated from pop culture within a textile-based rhetoric, bringing together a deceptively playful lightness and a sharp awareness of these tropes' embodied violence. His brilliant abstracting of violent movement and energy with materials like colorful pom-pom balls, string, rhinestones, and other craft materials creates an extremely emotive tension that is immediately registered by the viewer. The seemingly simple compositions pack a strong and disturbing punch with a complexity only fully realized when one becomes aware of the strange quality the craft materials take on in this context. Bullets are represented by rhinestones in the depiction of Davey Crocket, and a tangled mess of string instantly comes to represent the mutilation of flesh when considered in the context of a boxing match, standing in for the boxer's destroyed face.

Tiphonie Spencer uses delicate penmanship and painstaking attention to detail to create intricate webs of connecting figures that undulate between inevitable entropy and firm balance and control. The work ignores the most fundamental tenants of historical drawing practice such as perspective and depth, privileging a linear vocabulary that references the flat, decorated spaces of ancient Roman painting, later appropriated by the arabesque. While these contoured forms designate their own physical boundaries, the outreaching arms of the massive entities seem to hold the geometric forms and linear figures in place, keeping them from floating outwards as if in a zero-gravity environment.

Robert Bills Contemporary was named one of the top ten hottest galleries at Next 2010 by The Chicago Tribune. The gallery is located in Chicago's West Loop at 222 North Desplaines Street at Lake on the lower level. For general inquiries please contact the Gallery Director, Emma Stein at [emma@robertbillscontemporary.com](mailto:emma@robertbillscontemporary.com), or call 312.234.9091.