

ARTLOG

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Giving Up on Underdog

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Chad Person, A Hero Never Fails, 2011.
Courtesy Freight + Volume Gallery.

Whether it's Oprah or *Working Girl*, we've all been told that we can be success stories. Greed, determination, and an insatiable need to rise to the top are made to look romantic and saintly in the popular media. Gazing down pathetically at his iPhone, Chad Person's inflatable Underdog, based on the 60s animated television show character, is the anthesis of such saintliness. The conceptual artist has taken this symbol of heroism and made him look tired and worn. He sits in a pool of the vitamin pills that supply him with his power. His ruse has been uncovered; he's been rendered helpless. Chad Person's first solo exhibition in New York unflinchingly satirizes the fallacy of American heroism.

Person's newest work is marked by one salient characteristic: apathy. Dispirited by the hardships he, as a working man in America, has had to endure for the past years, he's resigned himself to a fate of endless, if cautionary, laughter. *A Hero Never Fails* consists of the aforementioned inflatable; a two-channel video, *Trust the Future* (2011), that sets slightly apocalyptic images against an episode of the Underdog series; and walls covered with blocky wooden words of dejection – "FEIGN," "BURN OUT," "ACCEPT LESS."

Person is no apologist, and his critiques are scathing. Recently, AOL.com named him "the most paranoid man in America" for his RECESS project, an attempt build his own survival shelter. Last year, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives seized one of his pieces, *Improvised Shotgun: White*, from Los Angeles' Mark Moore Gallery on the grounds that it constituted illegal manufacturing and trafficking of a firearm. *Hero* is clearly the work of a politically driven artist who seeks to outrage us into conversation. Person has been driven to the point where he can't make sense of the chaotic world around him. Looking at his Underdog, one gets the sense that the hero has lost control – not that he's brought this upon himself, but, rather, that the forces around him have made him this way.



Chad Person, Trust the Future, 2011. Video still.
Courtesy Freight + Volume Gallery.

Mayukh Sen: This project critiques the American concept of heroism – and, more specifically, a rather naive and blind allegiance to it that penetrates our national consciousness. I think we’ve all been fed these images, to some extent. Describe your upbringing to me – where did you grow up, and what messages were you fed regarding the American dream?

Chad Person: I was born in a tiny town in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and spent most of my childhood in rural Wisconsin. I grew up watching a lot of TV but had equal time roaming the countryside as if feral. Shows like *He-Man*, *Thundercats*, *G.I. Joe*, and *Transformers* were in their first run, but I spent as much time watching syndicated reruns from the previous decades. *Underdog* was one of my favorites. He was a less polished version of Superman, who habitually and unapologetically inflicted collateral damage in the name of his greater purpose. I glommed onto messages like the pursuit of justice and that the moral right should be upheld at all costs; hard work, strength, honesty and intelligence are the keys to success, wealth and happiness; and life is filled with choices, some of which are absolute. Re-watching this stuff now is a trip.

MS: Your work intrigues me because it’s so unapologetically critical but also humorous. You’re one of the louder dissenting voices I’ve encountered, but you present this voice in an unpretentious way. Where were the impulses for this project born – what brought about the disillusionment, the resignation, the struggle that created your apathy?

CP: Thanks. I am critical of this country’s socioeconomic framework, but I’m equally sold on it. I’m squarely enslaved in the hardworking American middle class. I have a family to support, credit debt, two cars, school loans and a good sized mortgage. I work a 50+ hour week for somebody else, feeling routinely dejected and underappreciated. I work equally as many hours in my studio and promoting my art career, and I have a slew of unrelated projects on the side. I do all this because I love my family and love my stuff, and more than anything, I want to look around, ask questions, and make things. It’s a real struggle, and every working artist in America knows it’s true. I spend night after night in the studio, getting three or four hours of sleep, and I often ask myself why? This is where the apathy is born. But ask me if I’ll stop? Never. I love it and I’m all in, at whatever cost. Though I’d like to believe that somewhere at the top of this plutocracy there is someone who will give me a big break (or check) and propel me out of what appears to be a loser’s game.



Chad Person, A Hero Never Fails, 2011.
Courtesy Freight + Volume Gallery.

MS: Apathy is interesting because it’s an emotion that is often associated with inaction. Your work certainly highlights problems and apes the myths that penetrate, rather violently, our cultural memory – particularly that of the American dream. What solution does your work offer – how does it tell us to react to what’s happening?

CP: I don’t offer a solution with the work, and I’m not going to try. I set out to ask questions. A guy at the opening told me that my work made him want to quit his job. Great. If your job sucks maybe you should quit. I hope I would. If capitalism sucks, we should all get together and figure out a new system. If the state is broken, let’s revolt. I try to do what feels right and keeps me connected to something larger than self-interest. I hope that’s my nature. Some days I want to detach and sit still. I’m not sure I know what the American dream is supposed to be anymore.

MS: Thematically, this deals with many of the same issues as your 2010 exhibition, *Surviving the End of Your World*, which was exhibited at Mark Moore in LA. That work was very much marked by a feeling of loss that reflected our country's socioeconomic malaise. That was a year ago – how do you feel this work has built on, continued, or perhaps rejected the themes you explored in that work? Does it reflect the change between what this country was a year ago and what it's become?

CP: Yes, there is a shift from the previous body of work. That work was really about questioning the fabric of my local community and its civility, given the threat of a total meltdown, and I'm not done with it. This work is about the drudgery. It's about putting my head down and accepting the slow demise. It's about the need to constantly pop pills to maintain. I have pills to make me happy, pills for health, strength, speed, focus, and pills to knock me out when I can't quiet my busy mind. Above all, this work is about making work. I tried to make a show that would address the struggle of the maker.



Chad Person, *A Hero Never Fails*, 2011.
Courtesy Freight + Volume Gallery.

MS: Where'd the idea for *Trust the Future* come about?

CP: The video was inspired by the subversive messages I read from archival *Underdog* footage, and by the cultural promise that tomorrow will be a better day. "Trust the Future" is a phrase I borrowed from a piece by my friend Karl Hoffmann – who's an amazing artist. I've had his flyer on my studio wall for months, and that phrase has been ringing in my head. The wooden word art pieces are based on a type of art that's big where I was raised. People have these little text billboards in their homes that say "Believe," "Love," etc. I assume they serve as a reminder to be a thoughtful, loving, productive human being. I usually ignore billboards after a few passes, and hate them after a few more. So my theory here is that the message becomes something to resist over time. My word art pieces are meant to fight that voice of apathy, by repeating it until it's lost in the background. When I came to "Trust the Future," I tried something else. I just wanted to burn it down. The sentiment is complete bullshit. Believing a blind promise of future progress is a recipe for doom. Tomorrow is what we make it.

MS: I'm really intrigued by the use of inflatables in your work ("big bags of air"), because they're so towering – they're spectacles – and we can't take our eyes off them. They demand our attention. What first attracted you to this medium?

CP: I was struck by the richness of the medium. Advertising inflatables are gigantic, impressive and inherently spectacular. It's the medium of the used car dealership gorilla. Those gorillas beg for attention, with garish colors and sheer enormity. They have one message: CONSUME. As you point out, beyond the spectacle the object is pure facade, perhaps more so in the confines and sterility of the gallery/museum. The inflatables are also temporary. They have no inherent structure or mass, and are completely reliant on the constant electrical power that sustains them. There is so much to explore.



Chad Person, A Hero Never Fails, 2011.
Courtesy Freight + Volume Gallery.

MS: I'm curious about the placement of the iPhone on your inflatable. You seem to be saying that our reliance on technologies like these is one of the many things that's malignant about living in the 21st century – that iPhones are diseasing us, that they're consuming our lives to the point that we become numb. To what extent do you think technological trifles like these have played a role in creating our apathy?

CP: On one level, *Hero* offers the same message of transformative consumption as the gorilla. For that matter, so did the original Underdog. The cartoon was dreamt up to sell cereal to kids – yet somehow Underdog ended up popping pills to sustain his superpowers? I don't think the message is changed by adding the iPhone, it's just blurred a little. I use two types of technology to control the world; internal and external. I love my iPhone as much as I love a good blast of something I shouldn't be taking. Either can give me super powers, and they both leave me feeling burnt out, lonely, and numb when I overdo it. Does my love of technology add to the apathy? You bet. I burn as many hours playing scrabble as I do blowing my mind with chemicals. That's lost time either way.

MS: I was reading earlier today about how Kathryn Bigelow and Mark Boal are making a film about the Bin Laden raid, describing it as a "heroic and non-partisan" act of courage. That got me thinking about all the #obamagotosama talk. Obama's been sold as the hero of our country, our savior, but I think these past two or three years have been characterized by a gentle disillusionment with this heroic figure. How do you feel about this messianic discourse, and have any of the feelings you've experienced under the Obama administration bled into your work?

CP: I'm not an expert, but it seems rather improbable that the American military, backed by trillions of tax dollars couldn't capture Bin Laden any sooner. Perhaps the "heroic act of courage" was that Obama carried through with it. I can only imagine how difficult it must be to get anything done in Washington. I voted for Obama. I'd like to see a real end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I don't know about his role as a savior of this country, but I'd hoped for more backbone and that he would get our troops home. Add me to the list of not-so-gently disillusioned.

MS: You've been quoted in the press release saying that you're essentially asking two different questions with this work – has the time come for heroism, or should we just resign ourselves to our dead-end fates and laugh? To me, your work really subscribes to the latter. I'm curious to know how you interpret this, though – you have described art making as a form of heroism. Do you view yourself as a hero?

CP: I'm glad you like my jokes. I've heard that moviegoers flooded comedies during the Great Depression. Hero? Honestly, I'm clinging to my last thread here. I get up every day and try to get the work made. Here's my current hypothesis on creation: If you're making art and it comes easily – you're doing it wrong. In my eyes, every working artist in America is a hero. Artist or not, if you wake up tomorrow, do something creative, and feel passionate about it then you're a hero, too.