

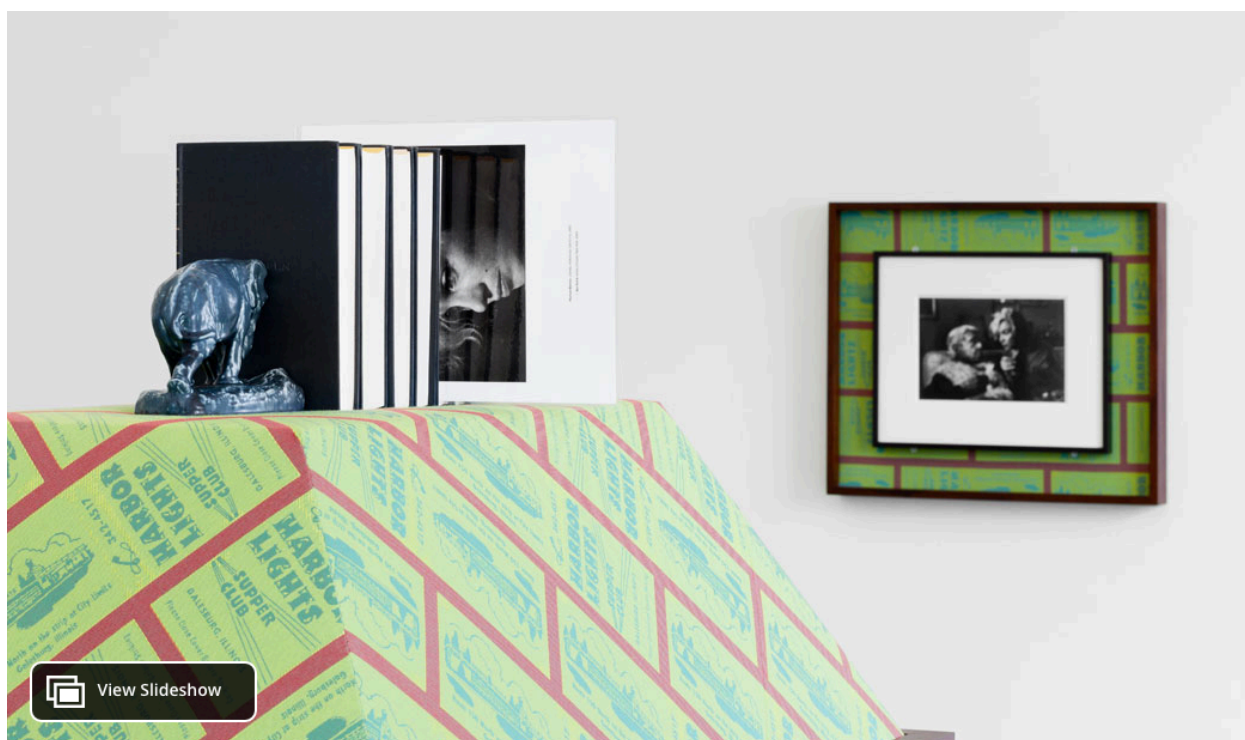
Scott Indrisek, "Midwestern Enigma: Stephen Prina's Offbeat 'Autobiography,'" *Blouin Artinfo*, April 30, 2016.

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Midwestern Enigma: Stephen Prina's Offbeat "Autobiography"

BY SCOTT INDRISEK, MODERN PAINTERS | APRIL 30, 2016

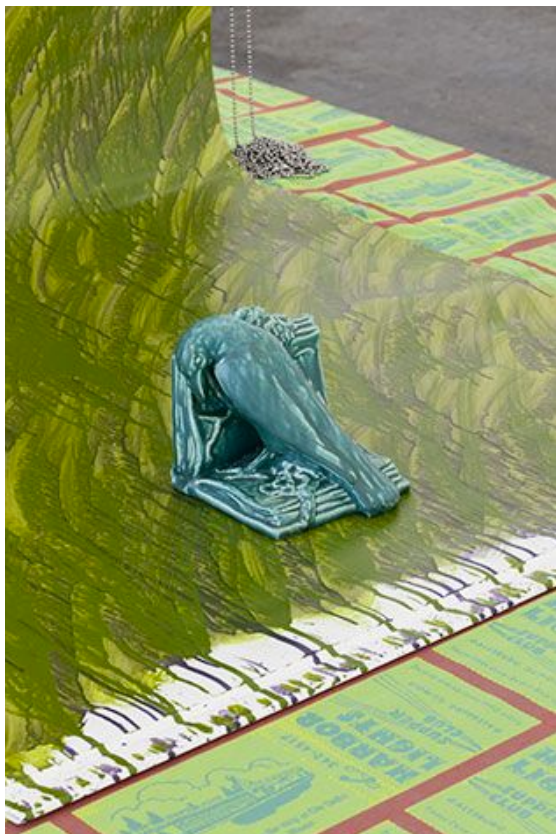


Installation view of Stephen Prina's "Galesburg, Illinois+" at Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, 2015. (Stephen Prina and Petzel Gallery, New York)

Call it what you like—a forensic investigation undertaken by a poet-detective, an archival history of the esoteric Midwest through objects—but Stephen Prina's "Galesburg, Illinois+" is an exhibition that purposefully wiggles away from categorization. It's also a chance for the 61-year-old artist to reflect on a potentially fraught subject (himself) by obliquely examining the Illinois town of his birth. The installation, composed of photographs, statuettes, books, paintings on blinds, and aerial photographs of sites in Galesburg, among other things, is far from straightforward. "To frame the work as autobiographical could be quizzical to people when they actually see it," says Prina, who admits to a certain generationally shared knee-jerk aversion to art that is too directly tied to its creator's own life story. "I thought I'd attempt to animate some of these materials, directions, and references, and see if I could come up with anything that I found acceptable."

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Detail view of "Galesburg, Illinois+."

A bit of a prologue is in order here. Prina grew up in Galesburg, whose population at the time, he guesstimates, was around 36,000. He returned there after college and before departing for a graduate degree at CalArts, where he would study with the likes of Michael Asher and John Baldessari. "The project comes from this period of being between," he says. "I was on the cusp of making major decisions that are still with me." At the time, Prina was moonlighting as a guitarist and vocalist for a cover band, Genie and Her Aladdins, which played at the Harbor Lights Supper Club, a local institution that drew crowds from neighboring towns. This establishment is the spirit animal of "Galesburg, Illinois+"—its serially tiled logo appears everywhere in the show, and a large photographic print depicts the former site of the club, shot from a plane. (Harbor Lights was razed in 1986 and replaced by a car wash.)

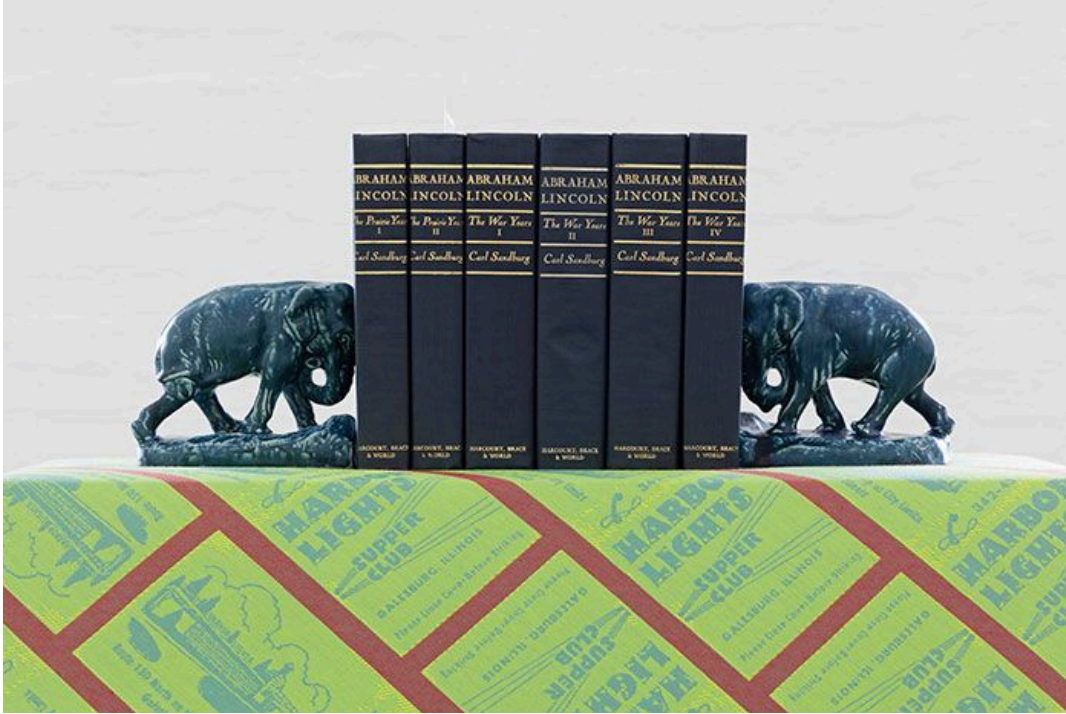
A series of eerie coincidences compelled Prina to pursue a cohesive exhibition about the town. On his first trip to New York, in 1979, the artist recalls attending a performance of Robert Ashley's *Perfect*

Lives. Having finally escaped the smalltown orbit of Galesburg, Prina was shocked when the very first image in this experimental opera flashed across the onstage monitor: a shot of none other than the Harbor Lights Supper Club. (Ashley was romantically involved with—and eventually married—Mimi Johnson, a niece of the artist Dorothea Tanning, who was born in Galesburg in 1910.) "Small world is an understatement," Prina says. "I started laughing to myself: I understand what had happened, that you can't ever truly distance yourself from your history."

Tanning would become a focal point of the Galesburg work, one of a number of "different components, held in suspension in some kind of an orbit, a parallel field to the field of the town itself." (The exhibition includes a four-piece photographic work composed of images shot by Prina, from various angles, of a 1969 fabric sculpture by Tanning.) Another touchstone is John Cage, who was once a visiting artist and lecturer at local Knox College. Prina returned to Galesburg, using its library as a headquarters for his own form of unconventional research. Knox College confirmed the visit from Cage, but there were complications. "There was one of those curious archival moments where I witnessed the shame and embarrassment of a librarian," Prina says. "They used to have an audiotape of Cage's lecture, and photographs, but all of that had gone missing." Instead, the librarian pulled a previously unpublished portrait of Cage, taken at Knox years later. "It's a placeholder for the earlier event. Those kinds of slippages are the moments I live for."

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Detail view of "Galesburg, Illinois+."

"Galesburg, Illinois+" is associative and evocative, but certainly not concerned with the most efficient way of relaying information about a person, place, or history. The artist thinks of his installations in literary terms: as essays (a fluid concept he borrowed from Baldessari) or as the culmination of a "syntactical relationship" between objects. "I would prefer someone to walk in and say, how in the world can this constitute an autobiography?" Prina muses. "The objects themselves elude the immediate response of 'this means that.' In our culture, we're supposed to know immediately what something means when we confront it. And I've always thought that what art does is to resist or disassemble that."

"Galesburg, Illinois+" is on view at Petzel Gallery in New York May 5 through June 18. Later in June, Stephen Prina will open a collaborative installation there with Wade Guyton.

<http://uk.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1389730/midwestern-enigma-stephen-prinas-offbeat-autobiography>