

Joseph Grigely

COHAN & LESLIE

A typical work by Joseph Grigely comprises bits of paper pinned to a wall, each one scribbled with a snatch of conversation. These scraps—napkins, envelopes, notebook pages—are presented in formal, snowflake-like arrangements, but their motley shapes and finishes suggest that they are incidental as objects; they simply came to hand while Grigely, who lost his hearing as a child, was scrawl-chatting with a friend. What counts is the sense of just-missed implication: the casual “tone” expressed by loopy or cramped handwriting; the cryptic phrases whose in-joke resonance is kept though their sense is lost. Grigely’s deafness thus becomes a lens through which to observe conversation unfolding not as talk but as text. Archived and displayed, the snippets of self-recorded speech index intimacy and mark its absence; the more we feel that we have captured the knowing glance or telling inflection, the more we realize that the live conversation is missing, though its trace remains.

This strategy is infinitely variable—we never have the same tête-à-tête twice, and eavesdropping is always compelling. Still, Grigely has been relying on it since 1994, and it’s natural to want to branch out.

Which brings us to his recent show, “Very Different Things About the Same Thing.” This “same thing” appeared to be, as before, the dialectic between communication and isolation. The “different things” included sculpture, video, and photography, plus *62 Round Conversations* (all works 2005), a signature arrangement of bar coasters and paper plates. The mixed-media work didn’t seem immediately successful. But failed experiments, of course, often turn out to be the most important ones.

The show’s major endeavor was *Remembering is a difficult job, but Somebody has to do it*, in which video footage of iceberg-strewn water is projected on a large screen flanked by artificial palm trees. At the foot of the screen, a monitor shows Grigely seated at a table behind a microphone, reciting in the echoey tones of the deaf the theme song from “Gilligan’s Island.” Opposite hung a triptych of stills from the video, setting up a loose dialogue. Another dyad consisted of a promotional shot of Gilligan, the Skipper, and the rest, and a newspaper photograph of two guys ice fishing on Lake Michigan. The duo sit on upturned plastic buckets, and the image’s caption reads CONVERSATION . . . THAT’S WHAT WE LIVE FOR.

In the other room, next to *62 Round Conversations*, stood two cast-polyurethane sculptures mimicking those white buckets. So: something about ice and snow—stasis, withdrawal—versus tropical beach—warmth, relaxation? But all faked: ice-fishing in the city; sitcom castaways on an uncharted isle where makeup is perpetually available? What to make of Grigely sitting there alone, having brought sound into the heretofore silent world of his conversational writing by reciting from memory the words of a jingle that has to do with being marooned in a group? One is unable, then, as a griot whose job is to archive shared experience, to pick and choose between profundity and trivia?

And what about the last pair of sculptures, collaborations with artist Amy Vogel? These are a white cast-urethane chandelier and ornate mantelpiece adorned with Gollum-like monkeys and derived, according to the press release, from an Edgar Allan Poe story called “Hop-Frog” (1850). Poe’s tale concerns a jester who entraps a scornful king and courtiers in ape suits, then kills them. The designated cultural rememberer or collector is thus presented as equivalent both to the absent interlocutor or stranded companion, and to the public fool whose storytelling blends salutary mockery with gleeful revenge. The conversational dyad thus becomes a fluid, intersecting set of methods, images, and tonalities, promising interesting developments to come.

—Frances Richard

Joseph Grigely,
*Remembering is a
difficult job, but
Somebody has
to do it (detail)*, 2005,
TV monitor, artificial
palm trees, color
photographs, video
projection, 4 minutes
45 seconds,
dimensions variable.

