

FERNANDO BRYCE, ONE-OF-A-KIND COPYIST, ON VIEW IN CHELSEA

BY Christian Viveros-Fauné



The pen-and-ink works of Fernando Bryce, on view at Alexander and Bonin
Courtesy Alexander and Bonin/Photo Joerg Lohse

Impressionable people, the Scottish historian Charles Mackay once said, think in herds, go mad in herds, and, unfortunately, recover their senses one by one. A crystalline thought for our conformist age, this observation cuts against the grain of our current copycat culture. For every thousand people who unthinkingly swear that social media trumps newspapers, Facebook friends are the same as actual friends, and art improves when it's in thrall to money, there are always a few cussed originals willing to challenge received assumptions.

One such pioneer is Peruvian artist Fernando Bryce, who is committed to exploring the wisdom manifest in antique ideas and timeworn technologies. Bryce's art consists mostly of ink-on-paper drawings of old books, pamphlets, newspapers, advertisements, and magazines. The fact that his handmade versions of printed matter can now be easily reproduced by means of scanning, printing, photography, and photocopying bolsters rather than diminishes their potency. There's a compelling anachronism at work here: Behold the case of the artist who arrived at the idea of being an original by becoming a copyist.

In the Middle Ages, copyists, or scribes, not only transcribed books and lectures, they proved crucial to the survival of a beleaguered civilization. Centuries later, as Gutenberg's printing press converted Europe from a manuscript to a print culture, new editions of Bibles and other fundamental books eschewed the use of copyists in favor of standardized processes. Today, as the age of mechanical reproduction gives way to the relentless entertainments of digital culture, certain creators have made it their duty to recover key ideas from the twilight of mass discourse. For Bryce that mission starts with selecting and hand-drawing historical archives. Minus the gold leaf, they function like pictures with pronounced textual elements — in other words, illustrated manuscripts for the 21st century.

Alexander and Bonin

Starting in 2000, when the artist sought to manually represent the recent history of his native Peru in 494 drawings, Bryce has applied what he calls a method of "mimetic analysis" to various sets of printed archives. These include, among other disparate sources, English- and German-language clippings from the magazines *Time* and *Die Welt*, U.S. tourism brochures for 1940s-era tropical paradises Cuba and Mexico, and a set of facsimiles of modernist paintings the Peruvian air force once used to educate pilots (even for fighting men, the 1960s were really all about self-improvement). Reproduced in plain white paper and black ink, the drawings have been hung salon-style since they were first displayed. Despite their nature as copies, they make a convincing claim for uniqueness that channels Andy Warhol's disaster paintings and Roy Lichtenstein's DC Comics.

For his current show at Chelsea's Alexander and Bonin — which you should catch while you still can, through December 19 — Bryce turns to three distinct stocks of historical publications from the 1940s and '50s for the very first works he has produced in the U.S. (Until recently the artist lived and worked in Berlin.) These include articles and images from *Parisian* and Latin American art magazines unearthed from MoMA's library, gallery advertisements from the magazine *ARTnews*, and pages and covers taken from the defunct print version of the periodical *Courier*, the magazine of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) that was once published in more than thirty languages (including Braille). At the time, UNESCO was considered the "intellectual" mouthpiece of the United Nations. Today the organization is the largely forgotten defender of a harried humanist project, known chiefly for decrying obliterated world heritage sites like Nimrud and Nineveh.

Arranged low, for reading purposes, and in cloudlike formations, Bryce's 81 hand-drawn renditions of enlightened treatises published in *Courier* and 31 ads from *ARTnews* face off in the gallery's main space like two sides of a single publication. On the one side is editorial, safe in the knowledge of its vaunted intellectual superiority. On the other is the sales team, eagerly pushing discounts and subscriptions while it soberly promotes solo exhibitions by the likes of Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky, and Robert De Niro Sr. Taken together, the twin installations propose contrasting notions of enduring loss and evolutionary change. While staring at Bryce's wall of forgotten period writings by Niels Bohr, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and George Bernard Shaw can be dispiriting, studying counterfeit ads for bygone outfits like the Bertha Schaefer Gallery, Julien Levy Gallery, and Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery is like trudging through a mile of kale. No doubt a similarly vigorous regeneration will befall these galleries' successors.

But directly contrasting these works — Bryce calls one group *The Book of Needs*, the other simply *ARTnews* 1944–1947 — only provides a partial reading of the aesthetic and philosophical pleasure to be gained from these drawings. Sketched out in grisaille figures and interpretive block letters that constitute the artist's mimetic style — at times the drawings approach the look of Tintin comic strips — these works also provide a signal lesson in history's passing romances and ruthless leavings. As underscored by a third set of silkscreens Bryce made from old magazines and titled *Arte Nuevo*, the artist presents a composite portrait of New York at the time of its greatest cultural, political, and moral triumph.

The historical moment Bryce renders in period black-and-white was enshrined in the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the phrase "the triumph of the New York School" — later to be satirized on canvas by painter Mark Tansey. Ever the independent-minded rummager, Bryce pays homage to that era's universalist impulse and delineates its bedrock moral values yet makes clear that his likeness is a fake.

Fernando Bryce

Alexander and Bonin

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