

Hills Snyder: The Story Doesn't Tell Itself
by Jennifer Davy

"Viewed from a certain distance, the great, simple outlines which define the storyteller stand out in him, or rather, they become visible in him, just as in a rock a human head or an animal's body may appear to an observer at the proper distance and angle of vision."¹
--Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller"

Chances are Hills Snyder was born in Lubbock, Texas in 1950 although he may have been birthed on a Tennessee mountaintop.² Raised a Texan he grew up out in the West Texas panhandle where he co-mingled the trials of suburban Lubbock and the tribulations of a ranching legacy along the Texas-New Mexico border. It is fairly certain Snyder wandered far from his surroundings with the help of *Time Life's* version of modern art, Bob Dylan, and the British invasion of the airwaves. And though he is definitely not a cowboy the lore of the western frontier is immanent in the artist's heritage and spurs his work; like the myths and trails that have outlined the west so too do they outline Snyder's art.

Even though they might not seem to exist at all, like Walter Benjamin's storyteller the simple outlines that define Snyder's work become visible depending on where you stand (all puns intended). Typically, you can't mistake the "outlines" that form his work as seen in his infamous smiley faces that smile or wink at you or his colorful, silhouetted teacups—blatant simple forms. More literal, at least formally, are the artist's line drawings and incisions as seen in *Empire* (2001): geometric incisions outlining the patterns of five national flags, their abstract representations signified by the five newspapers below corresponding to each form's nationality. In other cases Snyder's work is so seamlessly merged within its environment—*Knock's* (2002) Plexiglas sky-scape overlaid on an existing cornice—that it can go unnoticed. Herein lies the convergence of Snyder's simplicity and complexity, and coupled with his outwardly simple use of materials and form is the artist's devotion to the unforeseen and the overlooked. Complexity doesn't reveal itself at first glance, like the overlooked it often remains hidden and is only seen from the proper distance or angle of vision.

The "key" to *Take Me to Your Leader* (2001) is precisely in your line of sight, which is inevitably drawn upwards toward the ceiling where an illustrated key hangs high on the wall. Assuming you're at the proper distance and angle, it's a "key on a kite string"³ referencing, in a myriad of ways, Benjamin Franklin and the French Revolution directly, idealism and politics indirectly. The visibility in Snyder's art often exists on the periphery; simple surfaces border complex narratives where, at their most successful, the banal and the extraordinary are illuminated. *Vigil/Vanishing Point/Meanwhile* (1986), places the viewer at the periphery. In this 'western-folk' inspired sculpture the artist inscribed a text that descends from the pedestal base, at an angle, and wraps itself around the long plinth that stages the piece. This sculpture in-the-round forces the viewer around its circumference, realizing the 'act' of looking at a sculpture while circumventing the experience because you're reading it. Playing with the adage, "sculpture is what you bump into when you're backing up to look at a painting," Snyder more than enacts the act of looking he incites a visual translation, where your eye traces points that reference both

his narrative and the structure that holds the “picture” together. Snyder’s unfolding narratives defy the boundaries from which they spawn and the simple iconography in which they make their appearance.

The inherent ambiguity of perception has been at play in Snyder’s work from the beginning, operating both as a formal tool and a conceptual backbone. Formally the artist’s work has always maintained an economy of means as if to emphasize the image(s) or object(s) to be perceived. This emphasis has found its greatest manifestation in his Plexiglas pieces inaugurated in the 1996 exhibition, *Hand Not Hand*. The title of the exhibition refers to his technique in which the manufactured appearance of his colorful silhouetted forms is emphatic only on the surface.⁴ Stripped of the artist’s earlier inscribed, western-folk aesthetic these simple—minimalist pop—forms of the more or less familiar play host to a wealth of text. Though an essential feature in the work—whether it’s located in the title, on the work, in the work, or all of the above—text is never didactic and is to be looked at as much as to be read.

While narrative is consistently at work in the artist’s oeuvre he “makes us think visually rather than literally.”⁵ The artist constructs a visual conundrum that doesn’t find resolution in literal interpretation but rather in the irresolvable appearance of the image. What’s been coined the “smiley cross,”⁶ essentially a smiley face overlaid by a cross, the latter maintaining the positive shape of the conjoined image, provides a perfect example. Its appearance has, of course, elicited much response, including one in which the response was to dismiss it entirely. Regardless of the happenstance in which the artist realized the image, the “smiley cross” rouses conjecture. *AC/DC*, the title of the conflated image’s first appearance, is provocative not merely because of its sacred platitude but because of its uncanny reticence. Rather than idiomatic expressions Snyder’s work pervades language and perception and their malleable propensity to engage the viewer.

The artist’s inclusive, multi-layered approach is quite necessarily dependent on the audience who plays a pivotal role in the expansion of the work long after its physicality has been experienced. In the spirit of Dada, life and art coexist because neither is distinct. As a writer, musician, and an artist Snyder does not make distinctions, art and life, past and present, fact and fiction, freely cohabit. Tristan Fabriani, a character-author penned by the artist, wrote *Our Man Menard* (2005/1991) for the online arts magazine *Glasstire*, in anticipation of the 400th year anniversary of Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*.⁷ The essay engages in a dialogue on Jorge Luis Borges’ *Pierre Menard, Author of The Quixote* (1939) highlighting Borges’s fictional author’s stance on the unavailability of producing the Quixote in the 17th century versus the impossibility of its production in the 20th century. Beginning with Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lectures on Don Quixote* (1983)⁸ and ending with José Ortega Y Gasset’s *Meditations on Quixote* (1961), Snyder offers an astute discussion on narrative, translation and the palimpsest realized in Cervantes’s, then Borges’s invention, Menard’s reinvention, and the double bind⁹ that entangles all the auteurs, including the artist himself. Underscoring such mirroring is the accompanying photograph of the artist in masquerade—the double—seen in profile opening a rickety door by candlelight, the caption reads, “Tristan Fabriani subjecting the shed to a little

light;” the phrase is itself a double, reincarnated from an exhibition title used by the artist.¹⁰

Don Quixote and Nabokov make additional appearances, as does Borges as a leitmotif—formally and conceptually—in Snyder’s labyrinth *Son of Samson* (2003). Like Borges and Cervantes and their subsequent characters, Snyder evokes stories within stories within stories in this performative installation and accompanying texts, *The Book of Sam* and *The Book of Sam II. Phone Booth*, the opening performance piece, sets in motion the first of many nonlinear narratives. There are essentially four characters, “The Barber” and “Son of Samson”, and their tangential doubles, “head Curator” and “titan reformed”, designated as such by the Gothic style lettering on the backs of the former’s shirt and the latter’s cape, at first unseen as it doubles for an apron. The space is filled with an auratic pink light and an audio track layered with atmospheric night sounds, a naïve version of “Mary Had a Little Lamb” banged out on a piano, and a Schubert Impromptu for piano the artist recorded from the film *Man on the Train*.¹¹ The commencing dialogue acknowledges that it’s “time for some change,” as does one of the installation’s miniature vignettes, *Goofy’s Just Pluto with Clothes*. In the Victorian sitting room this text is lettered above a loveseat and underscored by the tiny harmonica that sits on its cushion—the artist’s nod to Dylan’s “The Times They Are A Changin’”—and a pair of dimes resting in a little dog bed on the rug of this miniature room.

Change requires a haircut for the Son of Samson, a style ranging between “fresh out of jail” and “world class soccer player.”¹² Either way Son of Samson is in a hurry; he has a “chance meeting” (also the title of another vignette in the show) “in three minutes.” Three minutes later Snyder’s character is blindfolded, facing an antique oval mirror labeled “Hail mute beast!” and responds to the Barbers inquiry, “perfect.” The Barber/head Curator escorts Son of Samson/titan reformed through a door marked “telephone” in another gallery where the artist’s character(s) reemerges in plain clothes among the crowd. Not exactly Superman (although he occurs/recurs in *Beyond post to Kelloggs*, (2002),¹³ the Son of Samson/titan reformed has transformed, perhaps even disappeared, losing his power he is blindly led by the “head Curator” in search of redemption. Stories layered upon each other, Samson’s loss for Delilah’s bribe, the beholden artist for the curator, the Son of Sam’s black lab for the lamb of god, each expounding upon the other.¹⁴ The remnants of Snyder’s performance transform as well within the installation: *Phone Booth* now exists as a mirror with a soundtrack and a memory, *Fuzzy Logic* now comes into being with the remains of the artist’s haircut encircling the stool he sat on—an exact replica of the stool on the cover of Snyder’s copy of *Don Quixote*—where upon rests the book.

Nabokov is also referenced here, *Mary* (1970/1926) “appears” (not only with the little lamb) at the top of a stack of Jerzy Kosinski’s *Being There* (1971) all resting on a miniature wooden bed in yet another vignette, *Princess and P*. Here, chance and mirror—Kosinski’s gardener and his role in life—are usurped by a character who never directly appears, in Nabokov’s book, instead exists only in the potential of a vision, a memory. Iterated by the gardener himself in *Man on the Train*, “no one ever remembers a gardener.”¹⁵ This meta-fiction finds paranoia and ecstasy written together, each word

inscribed in the wall forming the title's shape, *Big Bowtie*, like a Rorschach drawing. The text, like the exhibition itself, is a double-bind, a paradox of sorts like the original and the copy, the generic and the obscure, and have occupied the artist's works for decades. In this infinite pasture on which to graze the artist and his audience find themselves in a paradoxical star wars, the implications of which yield endless trajectories with a rare interdependency that seems unreal in their calibrated compatibility. These implications allow for and in fact encourage the artist to work and provoke on a multitude of levels and/or to just create "fuzzy logic."

Provoking Snyder's enduring interest in multiplicity and synchronicity was a formidable moment in the artist's life and subsequent career that occurred while in residence at the Ucross Foundation in Wyoming in the mid-eighties. Upon his arrival he called a relative whom had shared much family lore with Snyder, in particular stories about the great cattle baron D.H. Snyder, the artist's great grandfather. "I first learned about how DH killed his stepfather Wolfgen from a man (we'll just call him X) I ended up on a plane with by accident. We'd both been to the same funeral. Wolfgen got killed because he'd took to beating his wife and stepsons with a chain. Shortly after the plane ride I called X from Ucross, Wyoming to tell him how I'd drove up there on the same path as DH and his cattle. He asked me, 'where in Ucross are you finding a phone.' I told him in the old school house which had been converted into apartments for resident artists which is why I was up there. 'Well,' says X, 'about how far from the front door are you.' I told him. 'That's about where my desk was in second grade.' That's what he said back."¹⁶

The story is important to note because integral to the artist's work—directly and indirectly—is the results of his own experience and how he's found his way in the world. Surely this could be exemplary of many an artist, but in a post-postmodern world where the "grand narrative" has been attacked one's experience in the world, one's biography, one's fascination in the—grande ou petit—narratives that twine through past and present seems oblique. For Benjamin's storyteller this is what tales are made of, for the storyteller "it is granted to him to reach back to a whole lifetime (a life, incidentally, that comprises not only his own experience but no little of the experience of others; what the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to his own). His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life."¹⁷

Snyder loves a great story, to say the least, and is a great storyteller himself in song and prose, and in art and life. What's pivotal in considering his work, in relation to story, is the role it plays throughout the structure of his pieces. He is not so focused on a *storyline* per se as he is in the discovery or uncovering of *a* story, or, *the* story, or, *their* contingent stories and what's behind, in front of, and to the side of those stories. It's "the one and the many"¹⁸ that results in a profound congruence of inter-in-dependent narratives overlapping thought, time, and place.¹⁹ This essential quality of Snyder's work reveals itself quite convincingly in his interest in historiography evidenced in the artist's exhibitions such as *Flaternité* (2004), a conflation of the French Revolution's "liberté, égalité, fraternité," and *Gloville* (1998) at the Casino Luxembourg Forum d'Art Contemporain where the work was initiated in situ. Each exhibition comprised a series of

individual (yet interrelated) pieces the artist refers to as “semi-sites,” referential historically and geographically.²⁰

The latter exhibition’s title is in part derived from “global village,” *Gloville*, is a conflation of idealism and history, as well as the “glow” of a ville d’imaginaire, and the artist’s notion of “the world as a place that we alternately awaken to and take for granted, almost as if we have an on/off switch.”²¹ In addition to some of the more overt incorporations or references to the global, the village, and illumination, one of the more subtle and poignant annunciations of these ideas is *Providence*, a red mirrored and black acrylic Plexiglas silhouette of a boot scraper. Throughout Luxembourg the artist found the domestic and utilitarian object to be as common as a doormat and consequently obscure. In “discovering” these well crafted and built-in/installed iron boot scrapers the artist “uncovered” an emblem to a way of life, a mark of the ritual in the everyday, a divine presence or a *Proof of Providence*—a drawing of the same object, its symmetrical other. The work’s manifestation in *Gloville* has embedded the connotations of the semi-site as much as it references a timeless and placeless gift of amenity.

Spirituality has been a long standing tradition in the artist’s work entwined with myth, history, politics, popular culture, comic relief, among other things, which for certain audiences makes it all the more palatable. In Snyder’s latest installation, *Book of the Dead* (2005) at Artpace, San Antonio, the spiritual makes its presence in death. Through the door marked “Book of the Dead” in Gothic lettering, (which appears like the cover of a book though it opens from the left), one enters the installation. Structured around three portals, the artist crafts an experience for his audience that is as much a physical challenge as it is a mental one. Referring to it in passing the artist called his piece a “flight simulator for the afterlife,” and Portal 1 offers such a sensation. Through an ellipse shaped opening—a recurring form and structural analogy—one enters the first portal and finds themselves in a dark, black room laid with matching soft carpet. A sleek, black recliner beckons invitingly for one to sit back in and gaze up at *Lunette*, a video of the sky viewed through an aperture. The experience is a replicate for an antigravity chair, the sky-scape that passes overhead mesmerizes and calms, evoking a state of suspension.

Portal 2, *Stay*, is entered through another ellipse and presents the viewer with a fluorescent pink, Plexiglas clad “electric” chair illuminated by black light—that in itself is ‘illuminating’. Opposite the electric chair is a one-way door lobbying one to “stay” in large, white capital letters across the black-mirrored glass reflecting where you’ve been. Depending on whether or not you “get” a stay or choose to stay is up to you; refusing its command brings you into *Limbo*. As the checklist refers to it, *Limbo* is “darkness,” a completely blacked out room constructed in an intricate maze where the artist can invoke one’s vulnerability rather than insinuate it. In this sense the audience fulfills—at the very least physically—the artist’s ongoing ambition to fully engage the viewer as a participant and integral part of the piece.

One’s final annunciation into the piece occurs only after discovering the next ellipse (a poignant dilemma) leading you through the 3rd Portal and into the *Living Room* where you are met by the *Intoxicating Angel* (the artist in a white tuxedo and shades), who

delivers you a shot of tequila in a miniature fluorescent pink glass, welcomes you with your own unique page number, and hopes “you enjoy your *stay* in the living room.”²² Now an honorary attendant it becomes your duty to partake in the harvest, the *Living Room*, the afterlife.

This haven from limbo is a coded harvest where, “sometimes the winner comes before the fall.”²³ The well-calibrated room—a cross between Americana kitsch and 19th century Romanticism—is awash in Autumn Festival wall paint, thrift store furnishings, two ornately framed mirrors and two similarly framed reproductions of German romantic paintings: August Vischer’s *Fair Dance on the Threshing Floor* and *The Summer (Landscape with Lovers)* by Caspar David Friedrich. Clearly the double is at play in multitudinous ways: the mirrors reflect the ensuing harvest of the living room, the mirroring of the harvest in the rural harvest imaged by the Vischer reproduction with its own view to the sky, the pairing of lovers and doves in *The Summer* and the lovers painted on a nearby lamp. The references, inferences, and associations become infinite as does the space itself. With the exception of an identical pair of lamps (less the shades, one light, one dark) and two end tables, the furnishings themselves don’t find particular matches yet there is an overwhelming sense of mirroring within the room due to the artist’s attention to detail evidenced in the palettes, patterns, styles, and placement of the room’s objects.

“The most extraordinary things, the marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced—thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks;”²⁴ Snyder’s book is laid out but the story continues to unfold. Only the last stanza of the artist’s *Song 44*²⁵ is reprinted on a wall in the *Living Room*, it is a confession to a murder that never took place and a love song to a disappearing feminine. While one never hears this song it resonates throughout the piece and is punctuated by the last page of Snyder’s book, *Don’t Be A Pussy*, the exit hiding behind a cedar door. Through these doors, portals and lunettes it is the participant (the sower) who enacts the *passage*—the painterly technique of merging two seemingly irresolvable parts—like the leitmotifs that populate the artist’s work much of what we “see” is not actually visible. Remember, “it’s not the bullet that kills you it’s the hole.”²⁶

¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (NY: Schocken, 1968), 83.

² The ambiguity arises from the artist’s preamble to his CV: “It is widely believed that Hills Snyder was born in Lubbock, Texas though some say it was on a mountaintop in Tennessee. The year of his birth is known to be 1950.” Although it isn’t difficult to confirm the actual truth, it isn’t as exciting.

³ The phrase “key on a kite string” comes from artist’s invitation card to this show’s exhibition, *green glasses* at the Angstrom Gallery in Dallas, Texas during the spring of 2001. Snyder will often include phrases printed in a smaller font size and run along the side of his exhibition invitation cards (in the shape of a miniature album cover) that reference individual pieces and/or themes that build the overall context of the show.

⁴ The artist maintains the “hand” through the form’s original drawing and subsequent armature.

⁵ Frances Colpitt, “The Road to Gloville,” in *Hills Snyder: Gloville* (Luxembourg: Casino Luxembourg—Forum d’art contemporain, 1998), 11.

⁶ The term was coined by Arend Zwartjes in his review of the artist's show, *Jack*, published in *Artlies* 26 (2000), 82.

⁷ For the full text see: <http://glasstire.com/features/ourmanmenard.htm>.

⁸ Nabokov's lectures were published post-humously; they were originally delivered at Harvard during the spring semester of 1952.

⁹ The theory of the double-bind is derived from Gregory Bateson's theories on schizophrenia and is an integral influence in Snyder's work, as is the influence of Jorge Luis Borges.

¹⁰ The exhibition, *Subjecting the Shed to a Little Light*, was held at the Saulsbury Gallery Cultural Activities Center, Temple, Texas in 1989. The phrase itself is also a play and evocation of the rural—in the shed—and the rural “law” that wisdom comes from lived experience as opposed to books read.

¹¹ Pascal Estève, the film's composer, reinterpreted Schubert's Impromptu en la Bémol Majeur n°2 (opus 142) as part of the film score for *Man on the Train* (2003) directed by Patrice Leconte.

¹² The quoted phrases and fictitious scene the artist used were taken from a scene in *Man on The Train* spoken by the character Monsieur Manesquier played by Jean Rochefort who uttered them to a barber in his shop.

¹³ Beyond post to Kelloggs was a performance given at the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio and exists as a text piece on *Glasstire* (<http://www.glasstire.com/FeaturesDetail.asp?id=143>).

¹⁴ The artist incorporates narrative threads and tangents and character roles from the Bible's story of Samson and Delia, the 1970's serial killer, Son of Sam, who received murderous orders from his neighbors dog and employs plays and puns with language and naming that can associate and disassociate within various microcosms (the art world) and macrocosms (the world).

¹⁵ Aside from the many coincidental parallels in *Man on the Train* there are numerous other relations that could be explored with the circulation of all of these narratives from Nabokov's commitment to translation discussed in the prologue of his English edition to Kosinski's issues with copy, to the internal relationships of particular characters and their external relationship to the characters of *Son of Samson*.

¹⁶ In discussion with the artist over email, February 22, 2006.

¹⁷ Benjamin, 108.

¹⁸ The phrase, “the one and the many,” I borrow from the artist; the phrase comes from the artist's exhibition, *Tea For One* at the Three Walls gallery in San Antonio, Texas in 2000.

¹⁹ The last part of this sentence came influenced by Brett McCabe's phrase, “overlapping times and ideas,” in McCabe's review of Snyder's *Green Glasses* show in Dallas, 2001, published in the online Texas arts magazine *Glasstire*, (<http://www.glasstire.com/ReviewsDetail.asp?id=172>).

²⁰ The concept behind the semi-site is it's quasi site-specificity; in origin the piece is made for a specific site yet, and this is where the “semi” comes in, after its initial appearance the work can transfer from site to site as it has been conceived/constructed for modularity. Just as these works are components of the larger exhibition existing collectively they operate as well individually.

²¹ In discussion with the artist, February 27, 2006.

²² The italics are my emphasis.

²³ One of three wall texts inscribed on the wall from the artist's prose.

²⁴ Benjamin, 89.

²⁵ The last stanza of *Song 44* follows below;

sentenced here am I for my writing crime
though for the act of killing you I'll never do no time
your body holds no blood nor wind this is a truth sublime
twas ever thus my reason says or at least says so my rhyme

²⁶ The quote is from a Laurie Anderson song.