

The Highlights - Ronnie Bass at I-20

One descends a short staircase to enter *2012*, Ronnie Bass's first solo exhibition at I-20. The staircase terminates in a foyer, cut short by the discerning head-tilt of a gallerista. The foyer is fronted, like a proscenium, by the white face of a wall. Choose your cosmogony, or your eschatology, or your god, or your myth: This is the bottom tier of Bass's somber exhibition stage, and the frame for the contemporary epic soon to play out upon it.



Ronnie Bass, Installation view, 2008. Courtesy of I-20 Gallery, New York.

Morning and Night. Fathers and Sons. Life and Death. Bass's beginnings, endings and in-betweens assume well-worn dualisms: reflexively so. His protagonists-makers and doers, entrepreneurs and hard-workers all-walk paths paved by stars and stripes, be they a Frick, a Lincoln, or a scissor-maker. And for *2012*, Bass's supporting cast of troubadours convene to sing of the latest alter ego forged on the anvil of American mythos: of Jeremy Eilers, an aspirant baker and first victim of self-making in the new millennium.

A door is cut into the far side of the wall, giving passage to a small hallway. The press release would have this be "The Commemoration Room," and the two painted portraits of Eilers on its walls would suggest him as its subject. These ghostly conspiracies of El Greco and Bass are differentiated by three appendages: Eilers's arms, protectively folded atop each another, in *Jeremy Eilers* (all works 2008), and the titular prosthesis *New*, temporally rending *Jeremy Eilers* from its armless variant, *Jeremy Eilers New*.

How has Eilers gone from the possession of his arms to the lack thereof? This is as simple

and confounding a question as that concerning the passage of night to morning, a journey we sense might help Bass resolve the traumatic, causing-arms-less-ness around which his exhibition fitfully and lyrically turns. The hallway's other aesthetic memorabilia provide clues: a dirt and wire mound on a pedestal, cooked in a red hue (*Dirt Pile*); an upside-down, hand-made flour machine arm, reappropriated as theremin (*Theremin*); and a foreboding digital print of Eilers, wrapped around this arm, that masquerades in its fat brown frame and canvas undergarment as a painting (*The Accident*). An accompanying flat screen plays *2012*, a video set to the ambient, synth-heavy song "*Systems Colliding*," which Bass composed and performs. This call-and-response tune efficaciously condenses volumes of Freud's case studies, as a bedside Bass looks toward his father and inquires about the coming of the morning, then asks the night wind if the radius is dividing, and if his boys are awaiting him. One pauses to consider: just what is a radius dividing?



Ronnie Bass, *The Accident*, 2008. Ink jet print on canvas, mounted on board. 5.5 × 7.5 inches. Courtesy of I-20 Gallery, New York.

Even for a song as plagued by mythopoeia and patriarchal symptoms as this one is, the line cuts with a surrealistic precision that has the effect of abstracting all that follow. Insistent question follows insistent question; reprises double for compulsive returns; and the grieving process is given a sonic countenance: affective and forceful.

The hallway opens onto a square theater, where wooden chairs angle, in rows, towards a small, elevated platform. Just above, a projected video slips between musical performance and epic cinema (*The Sky Needs You Too*). An instrumental announces the motivic structure of the songs to follow as an overture would a sword-and-sandals flick; the song "*I Am Ready For The Day*" pairs a Cardew-esque performance scene with footage of a distant, vertical structure, shown amid the silhouettes of hills and flat lines of clouds; and closer "*The Sky Needs You Too*" layers this morning landscape atop the three musicians, whose frontal, presentational composition here implicates-and therefore draws attention to their absence from-the actual exhibition platform.

Interwoven throughout this last song are scenes of a young Bass teaching Eilers how to operate the flour machine, wrought in bright, well-lit tones to contrast this moment of early idealism with the shadowy *mise-en-scène* of *2012*, and the funereal blacks worn by this song's performers. By presenting the bookends of Eilers's life and career, the contours of which are carved, with deliberate omissions, throughout the rest of the exhibition, *The Sky Needs You Too* provides a sense of closure and reassurance as seemingly sincere as it is deceptive. Like those of many men and women driven by the American promise of self-making, Eilers's life telescopes the mortal and mythic spheres, and the various relics that populate this exhibition are both testament to the life of the man and indicative of his need to solidify a legacy beyond his time.

In this light, the ambiguous identities of Bass's self-makers discover a fitting medium in the pop song, a form predicated upon the transformation of personal emotion into mass-consumed platitude, and on the singer's occupation of the intermediary field. His awareness of the genre's psychical import recalls that of David Lynch, whose songwriting collaborations with Angelo Badalamenti and Julee Cruise gave a deadpan, melodramatic gloss to films and TV episodes composed of little else. Bass's compositions are similarly unsettling: through their earnest embrace of the sentimental, they become symptomatic of the same confusion between lived and mythic time that consumes the artist's alter egos. Yet far from serving to indict his characters' aspirations, as a novel by Dreiser might do, Bass's work ultimately seems to suggest this myth to persist in American culture for a reason, and for its full arc of success, upset, and possible tragedy, to provide a foundation for storytelling and a locus of personal reflection.

2012, 2008, Video on DVD, 8 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

The Sky Needs You Too, 2008, Video on DVD, 8 minutes.

Courtesy of the artist.