John Bowitz: Recent Thoughts

July 11 – October 25, 2015
John Bowitz thinks a lot about art, but he thinks about a lot of things. And then some of those things find their way, through his thinking about art, into his art. And then he thinks about that. During his career, he has utilized a broad range of art mediums. However, he has spent much of his more than forty years as an art professional using relatively basic materials to produce art: using paper, either for drawings or collages or combinations of both. This allows his work, while still thoughtful and thought-provoking, to be produced more spontaneously.

John Bowitz was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1947. He received a Bachelor of Science degree at Wisconsin State University in Whitewater and a Master of Fine Arts degree at University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. By the time he had completed his graduate degree, Bowitz specialized in ceramic pottery and sculpture, while serving as an instructor of drawing.

While looking for his first job out of graduate school, Bowitz discovered that a proficiency in many different areas of art could make him a more attractive candidate. When a position at Ottumwa Heights College opened and the search committee asked what he could teach, he agreed to teach anything. Ceramics, drawing, painting, design, and even art history became a part of his busy first professorship. Though he loved teaching the studio classes, initially Bowitz had no great affection for art history. Over time, however, he began to see art history less as a dry method of studying the development of artistic styles and more as a way to unlock the ideas and values of people from different times and places. As he continued to discern the questioning and searching that artists throughout history had undertaken, Bowitz began to make those tasks a more focused part of his own art making.

By the time Bowitz left Ottumwa to join the art faculty at Morningside College in 1977, he already had a long track record of exhibiting his work throughout the region. He became the chair of Morningside College’s Art Department in 1993, and served in that position until his retirement in 2014. He is Professor Emeritus of the Art Department, where he continues to teach.

Many of the works in this exhibition come from one of Bowitz’s current series, End Games. He began the ongoing series a few years as he was approaching retirement as art department chair. End Games brings together past, present, and future: Bowitz is effectively working on a form of visual autobiography, utilizing and elevating the assorted “junk” he has collected at home, while viewing the project as a “way to open up the future.”

So he has looked back over his life, rummaged through the things and ideas that have stayed with him, and looked to the future. There is a sense in which the artworks in this series represent moments in which the time of Bowitz’s life has collapsed on itself, bringing everything together on simple sheets of paper. His childhood and family, his career, travels, and momentous occasions, and his deep respect
for art and other artists are brought forward, reconsidered, and recombined to find meaning that might otherwise remain hidden.

He has incorporated words into his art since at least his time as an undergraduate. So impressed was he by the Dylan Thomas poem “The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower” that he hand-scratched the title into countless ceramic pots he made. The poem convinced Bowitz that the addition of the sound and meaning of words could be powerful. He began incorporating text into many of his works on paper beginning in the 1970s, either within the image or as very prominently placed handwritten titles.

Bowitz’s choice to use words in his artworks has connections to a wide range of early 20th-century artists such as Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, Hannah Höch, and René Magritte. These artists and others used text for two key reasons: one was to add a layer of meaning to the images, or to alter viewers’ understanding of the images; the other was to use the written or printed words for their purely visual qualities. In many cases, most notably Ignotus Fatuus, the words either define or refine the image portions of the works.

Bowitz mentions a number of other artists in his works, including Hannah Höch, Henri Matisse, Ad Reinhardt, Egon Schiele, and Richard Serra. In part this comes from a straightforward admiration of the art and ideas of these artists. However, his admiration of these artists comes through absorption of their work, so that Bowitz can declare that “I am Richard Serra” in one artwork or even “I am Art History” in another. He can make such declarations because of his deep appreciation for the ideas of artists throughout history.

He says that as an undergraduate he considered a number of other subjects to be his major, but made the decision to focus on art because “that was where the magic was.” The questions raised by art were more interesting to him than those raised by science, math, or any of the other subjects he considered majoring in. His own questions have never stopped coming. And so the magic continues…

1. John Bowitz, End Games: I am Hanna Höch, 2015 mixed media on paper, 20 x 24 inches courtesy of the artist
2. John Bowitz, End Games: Dating History/Events, 2014 mixed media on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches courtesy of the artist
3. John Bowitz, End Games: For Mom, 2013 mixed media on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches courtesy of the artist
4. John Bowitz, I am the History of Art, 2015 mixed media on paper, 22 x 30 inches courtesy of the artist
front cover:
John Bowitz, *End Games: Memories & History*, 2013
mixed media on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches
courtesy of the artist

back cover:
mixed media on canvas, 30 x 22 inches
courtesy of the artist