

TITLE MAGAZINE

Jason Rhoades, Four Roads

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[Institute of Contemporary Art at The University of Pennsylvania](#)

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By Daniel Gerwin

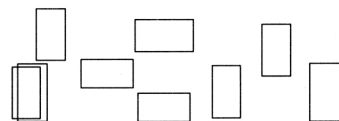


Against a wall stand tall logs wrapped mostly in pages from porn mags. A few feet away a chop saw awaits, ready to cut the porn-logs into short lengths that would next be split with an axe, were Jason Rhoades still alive to wield it. This is the first portion of Rhoades's *The Creation Myth* (1998), and it is only the tiniest part of a work that extends itself leviathan over half the first floor of the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) at The University of Pennsylvania.

Rhoades died at age 41 in 2006, felled by a drug-related heart attack. He generated a prodigious amount of art for a twelve-year career, and it was his strong belief that everything he made was actually a single, vast, contiguous work. Chief Curator Ingrid Schaffner has shown ingenuity not just in choosing which works to exhibit in the ICA's limited space, but in arranging these works to maximum effect. The first floor is devoted to *Garage Renovation New York* (CHERRY Makita), (1993), *The Creation Myth*, (1998), and several of Rhoades's multiples, while the second holds *Sutter's Mill*, (2000) and *My Madinah: in pursuit of my ermitage...*, (2004). Significantly, Schaffner has removed a second floor interior wall that has been in place since 2007, but more on that later.

Returning to the beginning of *The Creation Myth*: the chop saw serves as a mouth, or a point of absorption, into the large brain-structure of this work, and if Rhoades were performing the piece he might be moving around inside it, processing all sorts of material in countless ways. Within the brain, the split porn-logs are stacked like firewood, which Rhoades explained is actually memory storage, covered with ripstop nylon as a protective membrane.

If all this sounds absurd, it surely is, but it is a calculated absurdity, designed to add up to a particular array of meanings. *The Creation Myth* is a representation of a nearly complete living system, including eyes, mouth, brain, a full gastrointestinal tract, and a spine. The brain is its largest and most complicated aspect, filled with a proto-Internet mélange of reproductive technologies: mirrors, reflective domes, copy machines, cameras, projectors, computers, and a video game console. Images are bouncing all over the place, and pornography continues its starring role.



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As you walk around the innumerable elements of *The Creation Myth*, it's only a matter of time before your eyes are drawn to the soft radiance of the second floor, visible due to the missing wall. You will gaze up to a firmament in neon hues: glowing words such as Poke Hole, Passion Flower, Fluttering Love Wallet, Baby Oven, Cock Pocket, Breakfast of Champions, Crotch Gobbler; 144 such words to be exact. These are the misogynist, debased, and occasionally silly Pussy Words written in neon in *My Madinah: in pursuit of my ermitage...*

Neon light is the ultimate American Come Hither, and you should not resist. Go up the back stairs to the second floor, but pause at the landing mid-way, where you will find a kit created by Rhoades for the Do-It-Yourself production of his singular invention, PeaRoeFoam, a revolting mixture of peas, salmon roe, and virgin foam pellets. Look for photos on the mezzanine that document just how repulsive this stuff was when Rhoades deployed it in quantities large and small.

On the opening night of Jason Rhoades, *Four Roads*, I had numerous conversations with people who were put off or downright offended by all the pornography and crude slang. This should come as no surprise, since a major reason Rhoades' career flourished across the Atlantic rather than at home is that the American art world found him distasteful on too many levels. Rhoades arrived on the scene in the nineties, precisely when identity politics was ascendant in art. American galleries and museums were waking up to the fact that they had a bad habit of primarily supporting the work of white males. Another engine revving, sex obsessed, bad boy was hard to accept, and clearly still is. But here's the problem: he is a fascinating artist whose work deserves serious consideration.

Consider *My Madinah: in pursuit of my ermitage...* The 144 Pussy Words are powered by hundreds of yards of bright orange extension cord that tangle like a web just below the ceiling and drape down one wall. The cord recalls Duchamp's *16 Miles of String*, a work that Rhoades acknowledged as a key inspiration for another one of his installations, *Perfect World*, in which he constructed five miles of gleaming aluminum scaffolding at Deichtorhallen in Hamburg, Germany. Below the neon words lies a landscape of towels resembling a view of farmland seen from an airplane, an image that would have been unmistakable to Rhoades, who grew up on a farm outside Sacramento. Upon these towels he has placed new age healing crystals, and items that simultaneously reference agriculture and sex: corn cobs and tubers, as well as various seeds and dried splats of hot glue that do a great job of looking like semen. Human and vegetable seed sown on fertile soil seems an excellent recipe for generativity, artistic and otherwise. Roaming around in the midst of all this are ceramic donkeys; Rhoades's parents raised miniature donkeys on their farm.

The installation is modeled on a mosque, and is thus both perverse and sacred. Rhoades has taken the Pussy Words, the most vulgar element of the work, and elevated them to the heavens by dissolution into pure light. He has meanwhile taken the reproductive function of sex, held sacred by religion, and left it as a vulgar spill on the floor. What makes Rhoades especially interesting is that in making the carnal transcendent he does not sanitize it, and in bringing the sacred down to earth he nevertheless celebrates the glory of fecundity. His PeaRoeFoam makes the same point: seeds and eggs might be nasty, but they are a powerful blend.

The relationship between above and below in this exhibit is crucial. *Sutter's Mill* is a structure built from remnants of *Perfect World*, which Rhoades claimed to be the largest artwork ever made. If you had visited *Perfect World* and signed a waiver, you would have climbed into a one-person lift and been carried aloft to view the scaffolding from above. There you would have discovered a vast, scale reproduction of Rhoades's parents' vegetable garden. Exploring *The Creation Myth* on the first floor while repeatedly raising my eyes to the insistent warmth on the second ensured that Rhoades's maxim was in force: it was all one artwork. The pornography he was ingesting was indeed being processed in the machinery of his body and spirit, ultimately transmogrified into the intricacy of *My Madinah: in pursuit of my ermitage...* The direct architectural connection between the first and second floor embodies the union Rhoades sought between the rawly transgressive and ethereally transcendent. Just as Rhoades carried visitors above and below at *Perfect World*, we ascend and descend between the two floors of the ICA, with all that this implies. *CHERRY Makita* operates through the relationship between its main floor, sub-floor, and its attic, and *The Creation Myth* also has three levels. *Sutter's Mill* is continuously assembled and disassembled throughout the run of the exhibit, in an endless loop of rising, falling, and rising again. I suspect that Rhoades wants us to be up and down simultaneously so that our comfortable categories and distinctions no longer apply. Once he knocks us loose from fixity, perhaps we can experience revelation.

Daniel Gerwin is a painter living in Philadelphia. His work can currently be seen in his solo show as a Wind Challenge artist at the Fleisher Art Memorial.