

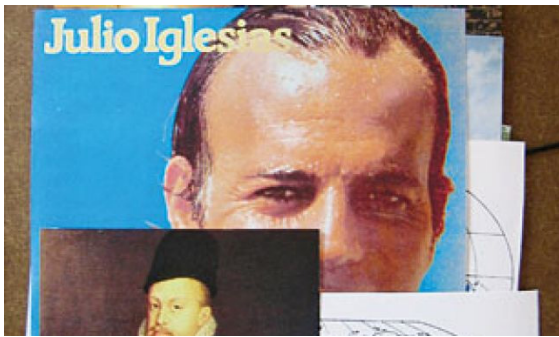
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MODERN PAINTERS

December 2008/January 2009

"Bending the Word"
Berkeley Art Museum
By Yasmine Van Pee



still from *Folklore II*, 2008. Video, 13 min 33 sec.

Stories are as old as the world. They are both low-tech ur-entertainment wired to our most archaic pleasure buttons and, since stories weave graspable pattern out of cluttered reality, a prime social agent used to shape collective perceptions and official histories. Of course, the ancient art of storytelling is not just a conduit for order. Sly raconteurs have always resorted to storytelling's potential to annotate and détourne. It is this same waywardness the artists in "Bending the Word" pursue, though with differing success. Olivia Plender's installation on the Spiritualist movement is somewhat flat, wavering between mock-ethnography and earnest fascination. More engaging is Martha Colburn's infinitely labor-intensive animation film *Myth Labs* (2008), which dissolves narrative flow in an apocalyptic torrent of crazed pilgrims and junkies riddled with track marks. Patricia Esquivias's endearingly gawky and tongue-in-cheek video *Folklore II* (2008) explains the kinship between Habsburg monarch Philip II and Julio Iglesias by means of a laptop PowerPoint presentation, filmed slightly off-kilter, and floppy cutout images of the subjects in question. Tris Vonna-Michell's *hahn/huhn* (2004-2008) also impressed. The piece, an installation of slides and sound, is the sedimented version of a forceful, rambling live performance in which the artist drove his highly associative narrative (pivoting around the near-homophonic German last names Hahn, "rooster," and Huhn, "chicken"), along with the staccato urgency of an announcer at the races — aided only by an egg timer. Like circuit benders altering home electronics to extract deviant sound, the artists here rely on lo-fi tricks to short out traditional narrative devices, splicing fact with fiction and injecting received tales with personal narrative.