

Tropical Sunday

Exhibit detailing artist's battle with author Roth shares space with anime-enhanced tantric imagery at Locust Projects, 8M

A Daring Duo

Cutting-edge artist Bryan Zanisnik works on his installation, an homage to writer Philip Roth, at the Locust Projects. The installation is on display through March 19.



A cozy reading nook in the Locust Projects entryway.

ART EXHIBITS

Two to view

Bryan Zanisnik's 'Presidential Library' inspired by battle with novelist Philip Roth

Roth sued for copyright infringement after Zanisnik held a copy of his book during a performance

BY SIOBHAN MORRISSEY
Special to the Miami Herald

As Jim Croce famously said, "You don't spit into the wind." Philip Roth, the great American novelist, should have heeded that advice when he demanded that performance artist Bryan Zanisnik cease and desist from silently reading one of his books during a show in New York a few years ago.

Far from ceasing, Zanisnik continued with the show and created a spin-off that is now featured at Locust Projects through March 19 (coincidentally, Roth's 83rd birthday). With his new show — *Philip Roth Presidential Library* — Zanisnik both pokes fun at what could be perceived as the author's pomposity and invites others to be caught in public silently reading one of Roth's works.

The impetus for the show started on March 30, 2012, opening night at New York's Abrons Arts Center of *Bryan Zanisnik: Every Inch a Man*. The artist had created a 12-foot-tall Plexiglas installation that essentially became a wind tunnel, with baseball cards and U.S. currency swirling around him, while he silently read from Roth's *The Great American Novel*. The white shoe law firm of Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy, with offices in New York, Los Angeles, Washington, London, Frankfurt, Munich, Beijing, Hong Kong, Singapore, Tokyo and São Paulo, sent some men in suits to shut him down for allegedly violating Roth's copyright.

"I'm noticing all these people in suits — not the normal crowd for opening night in the Lower East Side," the artist said. "All I was doing

was holding a copyrighted work in public. If a court sided with Roth, that means every time someone held a book in public — of anybody's — they're violating copyright. You wouldn't even be able to carry it." The artist and his pro bono lawyer mused that all books would have to be kept out of sight for fear of litigation. "We joked it would be like a beer," he says. "You'd have to brown bag your book."

The lawsuit went away — but not before other artists heckled Roth for his heavy handedness. Artist Richard Prince, who at the time was embroiled in his own copyright battle, chided Roth. "Say it ain't so," Prince wrote in his blog, in which he first praised the author's writing and then castigated him for trying to silence an emerging artist who is getting hit with baseball cards inside a wind tunnel, which he describes as a "baseball card snow globe." Prince added, "It's strange, because Roth was good friends with Philip Guston up in Woodstock and hung out together, and was exposed to Guston's 'crazy' cartoon paintings. I thought that would have been enough to sign off on any 'shenanigans' put out by an up and coming, 'starting-out' artist."

Roth has been proactive about how his name appears in public, sometimes rightly so. He even took on Wikipedia, writing in *The New Yorker* about his attempts to convince the online encyclopedia to correct a misperception about who served as the source for a character in one of his books. When Wikipedia dismissed Roth as not being a credible source, the author painstakingly made his case in "An Open Letter to Wikipedia," which ran on Sept. 6, 2012, roughly five months after he took on Zanisnik. A month later he announced his retirement from writing.

Initially Roth played a minor role in Zanisnik's earlier performance piece.

"It was

“**IF A COURT SIDED WITH ROTH ... YOU'D HAVE TO BROWN BAG YOUR BOOK.**

Bryan Zanisnik, performance artist

going to be a small reference," Zanisnik says of the Roth novel. "It's this huge installation about a lot of different concepts and Roth was an accent or note in it. But then because of the legal battle, it's become so much more. If I had done that performance in 2012 and there was never that legal battle, there would never be the *Presidential Library* today."

The tongue-in-cheek library features a salon in the Locust Projects entryway. It is a cozy reading nook with chairs, a table, a lamp and several of Roth's books. Included in the display is a scrapbook the artist compiled of clippings from the lawsuit. On the walls are a couple of cross-stitch samplers, one featuring Roth's image, another representing the cover of his seminal work, *Portnoy's Complaint*. In keeping with other presidential libraries, Zanisnik even created a 3-D printed bust of Roth's head.

The actual library itself is contained in a second exhibition room in which the artist created several floor-

to-ceiling pillars framed in wood and covered in dry-wall. He then punched holes in the pillars and placed shelves that display Roth's books from within the pillars.

"I was thinking of time capsules," Zanisnik says. "You hear these stories of up in New England where someone's renovating their home and they find Thomas Jefferson's notebook. ... This is a very Roth-esque kind of humor." The sensation of finding treasure within your walls becomes kind of a letdown when it turns out to be contemporary novels, he says. "I like this idea of you rip open the wall and it's full of Philip Roth novels, like you want to find the Declaration of Independence. ..."

Never having met Roth in person, Zanisnik confesses to being nervous at the thought.

"I welcome him to Miami," he says. "I just want a photo with him for Instagram. I think that would say it all." Then his eyes glance over at his reading table and he spots one of his own works.

"He could be silently reading my book," Zanisnik says, with a laugh and pointing to his catalog, also on display in his show.

TOBY BARNES IN THE PROJECT ROOM

Alotta Fagina comes to mind when viewing Toby Barnes' *Body Electric* exhibition in the project room. No, the show is not a riff on the Austin Powers villainess, but there certainly is a lot of female genitalia on display.

"They are supposed to stop you in your tracks," Barnes says of his work, which emulates the early Buddhist tantric art that emphasizes the divine origin of life. "The early representations were for people who did not read," he says, so art served as a primal way to communicate. "It draws you in, and you basically lose yourself."

In his show, Barnes updates the tantric imagery using Japanese anime in his paintings.

He also



The library's 'walls' reveal a collection of Roth novels.

created a series of barbells and workout benches that represent altars to the body beautiful. The benches play on the imagery depicted in the paintings. A squat press made of unvarnished wood supports a barbell with weights made from cast concrete. That piece of equipment, which can help sculpt a Kardashian butt, is placed next to a painting that features two robust backsides protruding from green thongs. Another bench helps enhance pectoral muscles; the flesh-toned painting behind it presents an abstract eye-ful.

Throughout the show, Barnes plays on his heritage — a mixture of Oriental and Occidental, with a backdrop of sun, sand and surf. The son of an American father who married a Thai woman he met while in the Peace Corps, Barnes grew up in South Florida, where fascination with the body plays out in the clubs, on the beach and in the gym.

"Growing up in North Miami, I had always admired the kids who had put together their own gyms in their backyards, alleys, parking lots," he says. "It's like someone who wanted to make a shrine at the roadside."

If You Go

What: Bryan Zanisnik's "Philip Roth Presidential Library," a tribute of sorts to the great American novelist. Toby Barnes exhibits his "Body Electric" tantric art in the Project Room.

Where: Locust Projects, 3852 N. Miami Ave., Miami.

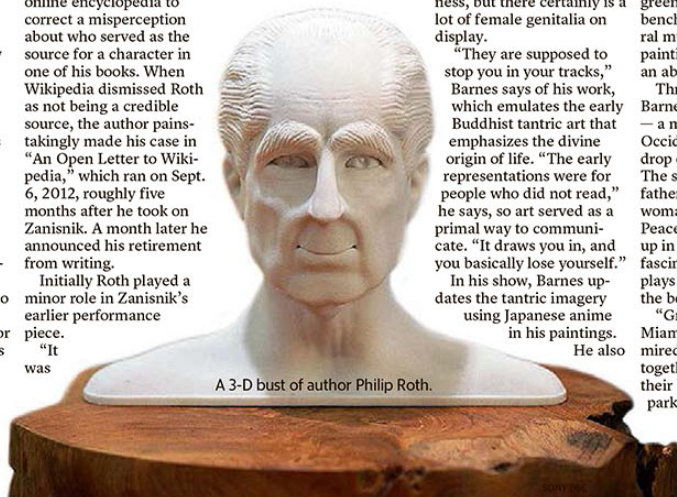
When: Through March 19.

Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Tuesday-Saturday. Free.

Info: 305-576-8570, or www.locustprojects.org

Visitors will encounter a treat to the senses, as Barnes integrates sight, sound, scent and touch into his show. A gym rat soundtrack with repetitive grunts and clanging metal and the scent of incense drive home the surreal sense of being in a homemade gym that doubles as a gallery, where you can wander amid makeshift shrines or sit on foam-covered benches while inspecting the paintings.

With its focus on the physical, the exhibition is a perfect counterpoint to the intellectual humor of the Philip Roth show.



A 3-D bust of author Philip Roth.