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Dada lives in Brandon

Don't expect order when you enter "The Whole Truth" by Paris-based American artist Matthew Rose at Gallery In-The-Field in Brandon. Be prepared instead for a floor-to-ceiling jumble of drawings, collages, faux magazine covers and imprinted tea towels spread across three large walls. Employ some imagination, and you can visualize the walls of the Café Voltaire in Zurich during World War I.

The Dada movement of the nineteen-teens and 1920s is frequently characterized as being anti-art, but a better term would be anti-establishment. The movement's artists were united in their opposition to the war, to European society and to the pretentiousness of museum – and academy –based art.

Dadaists mocked the preciousness and permanence of traditional art by creating work that was intended to be fugitive, using everyday materials. Their cabaret evenings were the birthplace of performance art; they re-created Babel in poems spoken simultaneously by several readers in multiple languages and nonsense sounds, and in their manifestoes and journals strove to deflate the egos of the self-important.

Dada's spirit has occasionally been revived, usually by groups with a similar disdain for authority but lacking the talent of the originals. "The Whole Truth" is a masterly presentation of Dada aesthetic ideals that communicates the sense of the original without slavishly copying it, and seamlessly brings it into contemporary context.

The juxtaposition of unrelated images to create a sense of unreality was an important Dadaist, and later, Surrealist, tool. As a collagist, Rose reproduces both the spirit and quality of the originals while lending his own creativity and sense of humor, as when he makes a 1957 Chevrolet traverse an Alpine mountain on the page of an 1866 German natural history book.

Graphic design and the publication of periodicals were central to the Dada political agenda. Rose revises contemporary icons, attaching letters to the Kellogg "K" ("Krap"), using McDonald's golden arches to frame the letters G-O-D, putting Donald Duck on a box of matzoh ball mix.

Imaginary magazine covers include titles like "Pest," "Zorro," and "La Formica" ("ant" in Italian). "Rien" (French for "nothing") mimics the Life Magazine layout, and "LeMon," with its yellow border and photo of a jaundiced woman reflects that of the venerable National Geographic. And proclaiming the source of all this, albeit in Hebrew letters, are a few "issues" of DADA!

This show is effective on many levels: as a tour de force of the collagist's art; as a salute to a seminal modernist movement; and, true to its roots, as a poke at self-importance. It's also fun.

There are worlds within worlds to explore in the meticulous details, and magnifying glasses and binoculars are provided for the purpose. More seriously, this show is a must-see for art students brought up on PhotoShop, who should know that real creation involves more than a mouse click.

The show will be up through July 8. Gallery In-The-Field is north of Brandon village, at 685 Arnold District Road, and is open from 1 to 5 p.m. weekends and by appointment through the week. Call 247-0125 or visit www.galleryinthefield.com.

Richard L. Brown is an art historian and former gallery director.
