



Amanda Bennick • Nancy Laning • Sai Wang • Art History 365: The Harry Brorby Project • Hope College, Holland, Michigan

Abstract

The timeline aspect of the comprehensive ‘Harry Brorby Project’ seeks to both broaden and deepen ones capacity to engage contextually with the life of the Midwest-born artist, Harry Brorby (1927-2012). With 16 beer boxes full of primary documents, the ‘Harry Brorby Timeline’ integrates primary archival research, organization, and interpersonal experiences. It’s visual form is presently both a working digital and drawn-out document of general dates, exhibition, and artwork dates from the artists’ life and career. While it seeks to explore the comprehensive nature of his life from birth to death, it is also open to the lives of his immediate family members (parents Melvin and Rowena Brorby, sibling Virginia Horner, wife Nancy Hardin, and children Mike and Katie). Additionally, there exists a working collection of first-hand witnesses to the lives of the Brorby’s, but especially to Harry as an artist, family member, friend, and/or teacher. This list notes contact information of witnesses (if alive), and whether or not the individuals are accessible for interviewing purposes. The interviewees, thus far, have been family friends and past students of Harry who have been able to meet in Holland, MI. This interpersonal aspect, as well as dates logged from independent-research progress of ‘Art 365: The Harry Brorby Project’ students, have been particularly helpful in generating contextual weight behind documentation on the Harry Brorby Timeline. Organizationally, these ‘stories of emphasis’, along with other leads and points of emphasis, are continually being logged in a systematic binder that corresponds to the Timeline for ease of association-mapping. The ‘Harry Brorby Project’ is expansive and will undoubtedly continue beyond the Spring of 2015.

Background

Student driven writing and research intensive seminar considers the art of West Michigan printmaker, painter, and sculptor, Harry Brorby, through an active and thoughtful investigation of his archives. In 2014 The DePree Gallery was given twelve boxes of Brorby’s personal documents, drawings, and ephemera. A noteworthy and respected artist in the 1960’s (whose work is part of the permanent collections of the MoMA and Walker Art Center to name a couple), this course seeks to understand Brorby’s prolific career within the context of Contemporary Art and, moreover, the notion of artistic legacy and collective cultural memory.



Image courtesy of Hope College Archives: Harry Brorby Project

Methods

Creation of the timeline involved sorting research documents, scanning images, seeking information through interviews, and organization of dynamic documentation systems. Recorded interviews have been stored on CD-ROM discs among the archives for further Harry Brorby Project research purposes. The entire class began with the task of sorting through 16 boxes full of primary research that are yet to be fully organized and archived. The documents include photographs, receipts, exhibition pamphlets, and other ephemera from the life of artist Harry Brorby. Pertaining to these archives, the exhibition pamphlets have been emphasized the most in the timeline. The ‘Indus’ book scanner at the Hope College Van Wylen Library and group recruitment within the Harry Brorby Project cohort for the timeline facet of the project also played a strategic role in the capacity to gather information. Information deemed significant pertained to Harry Brorby directly (life and death, education, exhibition dates, places of residence, etc.), or indirectly through family and friends. Direct family dates are also included on the timeline for general awareness or interest of peripheral, independent research projects among all group members of The Brorby Project. The next task for the Harry Brorby Timeline group was to log dates and maintain a working digital document of said dates for printing, cutting, and adhering to the visual-tangible/paper timeline. Organization was a very important aspect in this process, as was organizing a supplementary timeline binder and chart of potential interviewees. For the binder, red-colored dots were adhered to both the Harry-Brorby-specific date-slips and a corresponding paper section in the binder. This binder method provides a new way to view the chronology of the timeline, as it is a space to elaborate upon each timeline date, and is organized first chronologically, and then by dot-color/person. In future research, anytime Harry Brorby’s father, Melvin, might be mentioned, for instance, the online list, the timeline slips, and binder information could be denoted with a blue-colored dot. Someone interested in Melvin, specifically, would have easy access to the progress made on him, thus far. Progress on the aforementioned methods is tracked through weekly progress reports and photographs of the timeline inventory. For a more sustainable, aesthetically pleasing format, it is suggested that future student-researchers consider the timeline be digitized near completion.

General Dates
1943-1950 (Holland, Pennsylvania Academy)
1947 Painted Ribbe Court (the view from the upstairs window of his Chicago house) which was eventually selected for The American Show at the Chicago Art Institute and won a prize.
1947 Year off to Paris in Mexico Study part-time at Chicago Art Institute and the Institute of Design.
1951-1955/1956-1957 (University of Iowa, MFA, Lasansky)
1955-1956 (Army, at Albuquerque) Found cottonwood roots on the banks of the Rio Grande River and carved the Dancers heads.
1957-1964 (Holland, Michigan)

Harry Brorby Exhibition Information from Exhibition Pamphlets
Michigan Office Equipment (incl Harry Brorby) Sept 25, 1957-Jan 1, 1958
Michigan Watercolor Society Exhibition! June 5-26, 1959 Artwork: "View Of Saugatuck," watercolor
Michigan Watercolor Society Exhibition! March 24-April 11, 1963 Artwork: "Grey-Red Dishwashing Figure"
Walker Art Center 4th Biennial Exhibition of Paintings & Prints! Jan 17- March 7, 1964 Artwork: El Dia de los Muertos, intaglio 18x26" purchased by the walker art center

Results

The Harry Brorby Timeline includes a variety of labels of the artists’ life in a visual-tangible and digital (list) format. Three categories made include general dates, exhibition dates, and works of art by Harry Brorby with confirmed or approximated dates. Individual growth within each category has been primarily observed on a weekly basis in the crowding visual-tangible timeline space as well as the growing list in the digital format. With the divergent mindset of the timeline research team this Spring 2015, growth in the three aforementioned categories within the timeline have revealed a more expansive life of Harry Brorby than initially envisioned. A new appreciation for the word ‘comprehensive’ calls for reflection on the initial goal. The initial goal for the Spring 2015 ‘Timeline’ research cohort was to create an organized, comprehensive timeline of Harry Brorby in both a visual-tangible and digital format that included information from interpersonal interactions with witnesses of his life. While the information gauged so far is significant in comparison to the nearly blank start which the project began, the newly apparent notion of how expansive the word ‘comprehensive’ can be makes the work done to-date seem insignificant. Thus, while the former aspect of this goal was met, the ‘comprehensive’ aspect was not. It is suggested for the next group of researchers to continue exploration and documentation in these three main categories while actively seeking out new categories and spheres of influence, such as family members. It is especially important to consider how events and people form relationships throughout the documentation process. With the divergent mindset that pervaded this semester, it is also suggested that future researchers seek equilibrium through a mindset of convergence in sustainably, and dynamically documenting connections between dates, works of art, interviews, family members, life events, etc. The initial intent of the timeline binder was to organize and elaborate on dates that reflected the visual-tangible timeline, develop a color-coded system per family member, and stimulate connections for independent researchers. Continue to hone in on this aspect, and allow it to keep pace with the divergent nature of the timeline duties.



Image: Panoramic snapshot of working timeline in Reserves workspace, Van Wylen Library

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