

Master of Evocation: Michael Combs and Parrish Roadshow

August 29, 2014

by Mike Solomon

The latest iteration of the Parrish Road Show—"Michael Combs at Hallockville Museum Farm," on view through September 28, 2014—makes crystal clear, one of the most indelible elements of the collective American psyche is our archetypal past.

This might be because we think of ourselves as still a new country compared to the "old world" and thus cling hard to that relatively shallow "past" for comfort. (Native Americans, of course, would no doubt have a different sense of this history.)

Or it could be that we have a nostalgia for times when things seemed simpler, and therefore somehow better. Whatever the reason, there is a deep draw in imagery tied to American history. In the mind's eye, it is a raw, more natural world that made us, and perhaps, we often think, something we should try somehow to recapture.

Michael Combs's heritage and lineage is rooted in the past of Long island, to a time when hunters, fishermen (baymen) and farmers occupied the wild places that sustained the expanding metropolis to the west, New York City.

Imagine a child of today growing up in a tradition that dates back hundreds of years, in which all attention was devoted to the sea, to the bays, the skies and all the places where game existed and provided livelihoods for the people who lived in those places.

Michael's father, "Captain Jack" Combs, comes from a long line of baymen, rumrunners, boat builders and hunting guides whose ancestors arrived on the Mayflower, with roots on Long Island that date to 1644. Michael can trace in a direct line his family's carving tradition, back to his great-great-grandfather Captain George Combs. Born in 1848, Captain George shot birds for the feather trade, and family lore says the tradition goes back further that that.

These people completely depended upon skill, in fishing, netting, lure making, rod building, salting, brining and smoking, along with hunting, shooting, trapping, decoy carving, skinning, preserving and a host of other skills most people today never heard of.

Imagine being that child, the last in the line who who was taught those skills and learned the traditions. The one who also, being pulled out of this context by the impetus of time and progress, finds an interest in art and becomes thoroughly educated in its contemporary concerns, partly by apprenticing with one of the most sophisticated contemporary artists of our time, Frank Moore.

Imagine all this person could then bring to the table as an artist. He could serve things that would satisfy the contemporary hunger for the archetypal elements that are considered foundational, while at the same time honoring the current emphasis on questioning everything about the world we see and have transformed.

This is the artist, Michael Combs.

Andrea Grover, Curator of Special Exhibitions at the Parrish Art Museum, was given the assignment to bring fresh contemporary vibrancy to the programming at the museum. As the museum was transitioning from its former home in Southampton Village to the new site in Water Mill, Grover adapted the seminal roving art program she developed in Texas that brought her national recognition, Aurora Picture Show, to keep the museum in the public eye during the move.

The success of the program, now called the Parrish Road Show, prompted the museum's Executive Director, Terry Sultan, to ask Grover to "keep it going." For the Road Show exhibitions, the museum sponsors artists to do installations, screenings and/or performances away from the museum's home base, taking the art activity "into the community."

Since its inception three years ago, there have been several memorable Road Show realizations, including Alice Hope's obsessive magnet installation beneath the radar disk at Camp Hero in Montauk, Maziar Behrooz's *Container (Rapid Deployment Functional Unit)* placed next to his Arc House in Wainscott, and Jill Musnicki's stop-motion photographs and videos installed at the Bridgehampton Historical Society, among others. This summer the Parrish Road Show features Evan Desmond Yee at GeekHampton in Sag Harbor and Michael Combs at Hallockville Museum Farm in Riverhead.

The Combs piece at Hallockville is *Outhouse*, the first phase of work he will later present under the new title, *Self Portrait*. The structure installed at Hallockville is a full-scale working model, an exact replica of the outhouse built in the style of Bayhouse tradition that serviced the Combs family's fishing/hunting base camp on an island in the middle of the Great South Bay.



“Outhouse” by Michael Combs, 2014. Installed at Hallockville Museum Farm.
Photo by Pat Rogers.

The structure is a small upright ventilated cubicle with slanted roof, a plank seat and bucket; it is standing at the end of a long dock-way leading up to it. The door has a cutout in the shape of a quarter moon. The wood is painted with gray green stain and the whole piece is situated in a solitary way in a field adjacent to the museum farm.



Detail of "Outhouse" by Michael Combs, 2014, Installed at Hallockville Museum Farm. Photo by Pat Rogers.

As Combs conceives the final work, "Self Portrait," the entire structure will be coated with a mirrored and aluminum surface. " Self reflection", "solitude" and "sanctuary" are the words Combs uses to describe the piece.

The artist said in a conversation we had that the outhouse was where he went as child to get away from the adults, the men of his family who congregated at the base camp (really an ample sized Bayhouse) when they weren't out fishing or hunting. While he enjoyed their company and learning from them, there were any number of things he encountered along the way during his youth that troubled him or that presented challenges, and so he found neutral ground by going to the one place others only went to for a specific purpose.

Perhaps this impulse, at so young an age, foretold of his emerging artistic self, a self, willing to endure an occasional stench to gain greater self-awareness. And what was that awareness? He spoke to me with great passion about the Great South Bay, the beauty of it and its importance as one of the essential estuaries in North America.

He said even as a child he was an avid and knowledgeable nature lover and aspiring Boy Scout and

that he often encountered family practices that bothered him, that were at odds with what he believed should be their priorities, regarding the preservation of the nature that surrounded them. How they got rid of various wastes for instance, including those produced at the outhouse, was one of his concerns.

So, when he was troubled and feeling at odds with the traditions and outlook of his family, he would retreat to the solitude of the outhouse to wrestle with these issues. In his work, Combs has the consistent ability to exhume these very personal experiences and transform them through his craftsmanship so that they become something shared, something to empathize with, as well as wonderful archetypal forms to look at.



“Outhouse” by Michael Combs, 2014. Installed at Hallockville Museum Farm.
Photo by Pat Rogers.

I can’t think of any contemporary artist who has such an integrated and organic set of personal references combined with immense physical skills and such a thorough knowledge of contemporary interests.

I pointed out that most artists would not let the cat out of the bag like this, putting forth an interim phase of a work for public scrutiny. But he said he was very comfortable with it, that there was enough form and content in the model to be worthy of presentation and that he learned a lot from getting the work on view at this stage.

He equated the Road Show *Outhouse* to sharing sketches in a notebook, a modest comparison, given the scope and scale of the piece, but his attitude underscores both his and the museum’s intent, to make the artistic process more transparent.

Treated to this kind of unusual exposure to such an artist's conceptual and working process, it is we, the viewers, who are the lucky ones.

BASIC FACTS: Parrish Road Show: "Outhouse" by Michael Combs is exhibited August 28 to September 28, 2014 at [Hallockville Museum Farm](http://HallockvilleMuseumFarm.com), 6038 Sound Avenue, Riverhead, NY. 11901 www.parrishart.org

Copyright 2014 Hamptons Art Hub LLC. All rights reserved.