

Performance Installation Explores Goals of Human Survival, with Clones, and The Hamptons in “Off-Season”

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by Annette Hinkle

An offbeat art exhibit currently on view at [Halsey McKay Gallery](#) in East Hampton Village, NY has curious passersby stopping in their tracks to gaze through the gallery’s large front window and wonder what exactly is going on.

“Off Season” is an immersive, interactive exhibition by Brooklyn-based artist [David Kennedy Cutler](#). The show, which broadcasts via webcam 24-hours a day, is also something of a social experiment that delves into the most basic facets of human nature.

Within the four walls of the gallery on Newtown Lane, Cutler has created another four walls—an environment within an environment—inspired loosely by Maslow’s “[Hierarchy of Needs](#).” First put forward in the 1943 paper, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” Maslow’s hierarchy was an attempt to describe the pattern that human motivations generally move through, from meeting physiological needs up through the emotional to, at the top, the need for “self-actualization.”

“I had started thinking about those building blocks of your life: clothing, food. What defines us and our identity?” Cutler said during a recent interview at the gallery. “For me, it’s my favorite plaid shirt, my jeans, my Vans slip-ons and the food I eat.”

“I created a structure of a 10-week show, almost like 10 episodes,” the artist continued, noting that he also developed a list of 10 goals associated with the various human needs. “Each week, I’ll work on one or more — shelter, food, clothing, warmth, tools, and companionship times four.”

“Times four” is Cutler’s reference to the “clones” who share the space with him — stuffed dummies dressed identically to Cutler, right down to the mask he wears topped off by curls of fake hair. Every weekend during the run of “Off Season,” Cutler camps out in the gallery alongside his clones. While in the space, over a period that typically runs from Friday night through Monday afternoon, Cutler keeps busy. Like a pioneer on the prairie, he is always working to improve his shelter, adding windows or putting gashes in drywall to allow air flow into the structure.



David Kennedy Cutler and his many clones in "Off Season" running January 14 through March 24, 2018 at Halsey McKay Gallery, 79 Newtown Lane, East Hampton. Courtesy of Halsey McKay Gallery.

He makes sculptural art and also spends a lot of time moving the clones around the space as well, putting them to bed, having them ride around in sleds or, in honor of the recent women's marches around the country, hooking them on a long pole so they could all march around the space together in solidarity.



David Kennedy Cutler and his clones in the “Off Season” immersive art exhibition at Halsey McKay Gallery in East Hampton. Photo: Annette Hinkle.

At the heart of Cutler’s alternative reality is a massive inkjet printer that has been a critical component of the visual elements in the show. The two-dimensional printer has been used to make practically all the visuals, including the facial masks (the flat image is fitted over a plastic life-mask form), the flannel shirts and the jeans that Cutler and his clones wear imprinted with images of food.



David Kennedy Cutler and his clones in the “Off Season” immersive art exhibition at Halsey McKay Gallery in East Hampton. Photo: Annette Hinkle.

The images are all printed on acetate, sheets of clear plastic similar to those used in animation cels that are used in the various pieces throughout the gallery. The color images have even been incorporated into the artworks that hang on the wall: scans of flannel shirts embedded in plaster backed by the actual shirt scanned for the piece.



Artwork made by Cutler comprised of an acetate print of a flannel shirt embedded in plaster over the actual shirt. Photo: Annette Hinkle.



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Because the printer is such a large part of his narrative, Cutler's first mission in week one was to erect a shelter around it, with the printer occupying a place of honor in the center.

"I put the dummies in there too and sealed it up, and made it a perfect box," he said. "I slept outside the first night. I have a quasi-narrative that I missed my companions over the course of the evening and that I heard them calling in the winter wind. It's a metaphor for creating a safe, hermetic space and then regretting it.

"They were calling out for doors and windows, so I started hammering them out."

Speaking to Cutler while he's busy working in the space can be a little unnerving — especially when he's shuffling clones around the gallery that look exactly like him. But once he's out of view of the webcam, Cutler is happy to take off his mask and share the motivations behind "Off Season."

"I think it's a survival metaphor. I've done exhibitions with the gallery before, and I've been doing these performances—as my image surrogate or alter ego— for a while," said Cutler. "When Ryan

[Wallace] asked me to do the show, he gave me the liberty to do what I wanted in the off season. I thought it would be a parody of going out into the middle of nowhere, but in fact this is a happening town.”

Being in the Hamptons—a summer coastal resort—in the depths of winter has given Cutler an insight to the area that he didn’t have before. He’s gotten to experience a bit of winter East Hampton on foraging runs to Citarella or Stop & Shop, where he procures his food (after taking off the mask and putting on street clothes).

“I would say part of my interest in this is also a metaphor for labor,” the artist said. “I’m interested in the inversion of it. To pay bills, I’m a freelance art handler and I often work for people out here; I’m coming here to work and not to enjoy myself, like most summer people.”

“I think that says something about a condition of privilege,” he added. “You don’t have to recognize the day-to-day mechanizations, but the arts in the Hamptons exist because people with money support them.”

Switching between life in his self-made world in East Hampton, NY and his real-life existence in New York City on a weekly basis has created something of a dual experience in the artist’s mind as well. When Cutler leaves the gallery on Monday to head west, he has to recall his real life and make plans for what he must accomplish in the week ahead.

“I’ll get on the train and think, ‘What do I have to do?’” he said. “In a weird way, by doing this self inflicted work situation, I’m giving my brain a break.”

Cutler is never in need of something to do during his time in the gallery space, whether anyone is watching (either in person or via webcam) or not. Which begs the obvious question: if an artist is performing as part of his overall vision in a space when no one is watching, is it still art?

For David Cutler, the answer is decidedly “yes.” And it’s a space he’s definitely looking to keep artistically sacred.

“I’ve been locking the door as much as I can,” he said. “I’m trying to keep the world vacant of other people so I’m the sole person. Some people I know have come by or made an appointment. Some people I don’t know have knocked to demand what’s going on.”

“It’s definitely freaking some people out.”

“Off Season” began broadcasting on January 13, 2018 and Cutler will continue installing the show through March 24, 2018 when his residency ends. An exhibition in reverse, his weekly work in the space is ostensibly in preparation for the “opening” of the show, which in fact will be its closing.

BASIC FACTS: “David Kennedy Cutler: Off Season” is on view January 13 to March 24, 2018 at Halsey McKay Gallery, 79 Newtown Lane, East Hampton, NY 11937. The artist is in residence weekends only. To link to the live webcam, visit www.halseymckay.com.

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