

CALENDAR

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Obama poet breaks new ground

Richard Blanco is first Latino, first openly gay man asked to recite at inauguration.

By HECTOR TOBAR

President Obama's choice of the relatively unknown Cuban American poet Richard Blanco to read at his inauguration later this month caught many people in poetry circles by surprise.

Blanco, 44, will be the first Latino poet, and the first openly gay man given the honor of reading at a presidential inauguration. And his choice is a reflection of the great shifts in American poetry circles and U.S. culture at large.

"I think it's an inspired choice," said David St. John, a poet and professor at USC. Though Blanco is well-known in poetry circles for his award-winning first collection of poetry and recently published his third book, "Looking for the Gulf Motel," he's "not an establishment poet," as former California poet laureate Carol Muske-Dukes put it.

"It's a choice that's not only important for the gay and lesbian and Latino communities," St. John said, "but also for poets who work to give voice to people outside the mainstream of popular culture."

Muske-Dukes noted that it's "a great literary honor" for Blanco, as well as "a politically wise and politically conscientious" decision on President Obama's part. By choosing a Latino and openly gay poet, Obama is reflecting on changes in both the country he leads and in the face of American literature.

Blanco arrived in the U.S. when he was a few months old and was raised in Miami. He's a civil engineer who's been writing poems for two decades but only recently [See Poet, D8]



Photographs by KATIE FALKENBERG Los Angeles Times

SAMUEL FREEMAN, with gallery director Amy Thoner, recently exhibited Guy de Cointet's work, including "Sophie Rummel (4)."

Clues to his mystery hang on the walls

The L.A. art world rediscovers the odd legacy of Guy de Cointet

By JORI FINKEL >>> Making the rounds at galleries these days, it's easy to feel like you're hot on the trail of the artist Guy de Cointet.

Although the Paris-born, L.A.-based artist died in 1983 without great acclaim, his drawings, paintings and sculptures are now popping up in museums and galleries across town. And many of the artworks themselves look like clues.

Bold paintings feature strings of numbers that don't quite add up, or letters that don't make familiar words. Elegantly patterned geometric drawings have cryptic captions or titles written in cursive along the bottom, lines like "The widow will never come out again" and "Time flies with a fighting whale on one's hands." A fake newspaper used in a theatrical performance is called ACR/CIT, which doesn't make any more sense in French than English.

It's enough to make you wonder: Who is this guy and what exactly is he trying to tell us?

L.A. gallerist Samuel Freeman, who had a small Cointet show last month, said he has not cracked the code. "Some of the pieces are [See Cointet, D6]



"HE KEEPS you in limbo," says Freeman of the artist's work, such as "Lost at Sea L..."

ASK AMY

She's lost that friendly feeling

Dear Amy: I am a married 70-year-old woman with a family. I have been friends for 15 years with a single woman. In recent years, the friendship has not been rewarding for me, but I continue to see her out of loyalty.

She started giving me unwanted health advice, until I asked her to stop. Several weeks later, at lunch, she went into a tirade about how poorly I had treated her. I apologized, but I told her she needs to respect me and my judgment. She finally settled down. After that, I did not want to see her anymore.

I felt guilty and depressed. We volunteer for the same group, and I've been polite. She sent me a letter about wanting to resume our friendship, then an email inviting me on a costly trip she would pay for.

I told her that the friendship was too intense and that I no longer had the energy for it. Now I have received a love letter, which is embarrassing and depressing.

I want to ignore it, but should I tell her again that the friendship is over?

TOO OLD FOR THIS

Dear Too Old: You have been very responsive. If you want to ignore this, then you should. You don't owe her more explanations.

She may approach you again. If so, you're going to have to convey that the relationship is over. If you choose to do this, keep it simple and respectful.

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Dear Amy: Like others, I just had to respond to the letter from "PO'd Husband," about his wife's struggles staying away from her co-worker's candy dish.

I have a candy container next to my desk. There is usually something chocolate, but being diabetic I know better than to eat it. I may grab one occasionally, but I know my limits. We are responsible for our health and should have the willpower to resist temptation.

IN CONTROL

Dear Control: Your willpower is admirable. I agree that mature people must find their own ways to cope with temptations. As I said, the world cannot remove all risk from his wife's path

Send questions to Amy Dickinson by email to askamy@tribune.com or by mail to Ask Amy, Chicago Tribune, TT500, 435 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60611.

Tracking the cryptic Cointet

[Cointet, from D] pretty plain — like reverse mirror images," Freeman said. "But most of them are very hard to solve or resolve. You know there is some sort of code in there, but he keeps you in limbo, unable to figure out what the symbols mean, or how they lead to that answer key written at the bottom."

Freeman, who organized his exhibition to accompany new work by Stephanie Taylor, said he sees a new generation of artists inspired by Cointet, not just because of his use of cryptography but because he made bold sculptural objects that double as theatrical props and sometimes serve as abbreviated scripts too.

"He was one of the early conceptual artists to merge visual art and performance, two things that are hard today for us even to split," Freeman said.

Now, in part because of strong interest in performance art, he's enjoying a major resurgence. Last year he appeared in multiple museums' Pacific Standard Time shows, including MOCA and the Orange County Museum of Art.

New stagings of his absurdist theater work have taken place at both the Getty Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The Barnsdall art gallery currently has a handful of his works in its French-American exhibition "Lost." On Wednesday, LACE will open a group show that explores the artist's legacy. (Both the Barnsdall and LACE shows are part of a larger French-centric arts festival, "Ceci N'est Pas...")

Carol Stakenas, director of Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, said the "multifunctional object" is one of the key threads of her show, which has examples of prints that Cointet made in 1973 for his first theatrical piece, called "Cizeghoh Tur NDJMB," alongside work by 20 living artists.

These artists, who come from many countries, give objects odd or secret uses, according to the exhibition announcement: "a wall drawing is also a poster; a drawing can be also a script; a mailed letter becomes a map; a carpet is a score; and a window blind is a poem that can be sung."

Stakenas said she discovered Cointet in doing research for the 2011 Getty-funded initiative Pacific Standard Time. By that time his work was gaining art-world currency, with the French gallery Air de Paris representing the estate and Cirrus and Overduin and Kite galleries having shown the artist's work in L.A.

But Stakenas said she didn't think about holding a Cointet show until meeting Marie de Brugerolle, who became the guest curator of her upcoming exhibition.

An art historian who teaches in France and Switzerland, Brugerolle staged



Air de Paris

MUCH MYSTERY surrounds the late artist Guy de Cointet, shown in 1979.



EMILY MAST

A STILL from Emily Mast's 2012 video "Bird Bra'n (Addendum)," which was inspired by Cointet.

major shows of his work starting in Geneva in 2004, published a book on him in 2011 and just completed a documentary that's making the rounds on the museum-screening circuit.

According to Brugerolle, some facts about Cointet's life are clear. Born in Paris in 1934 to a high-ranking French military officer, he grew up a great reader of avant-garde French literature, cultivating a taste for the opaque poetry of Mallarmé and the riddle-poems of Raymond-Roussel. He also developed an abiding interest in cryptography.

He moved to New York in 1965. At the time he was trained as a graphic de-

signer, but a meeting with artist Larry Bell through Warhol superstar Viva led to a job as Bell's assistant. When Bell returned to Venice Beach a couple years later, Cointet drove Bell's VW bug to California and worked in his studio until Bell moved to Taos, N.M., in 1973. At that point, Cointet focused more on his own art, working locally until he died in 1983 of hepatitis C.

But even his biography is full of holes. Brugerolle wrote in her book about Cointet that his romantic life is a cipher. "[W]e know almost nothing of his private life. He is not known to have had a girlfriend or open love affair," she wrote, adding

the 1970s, said he admired both Cointet's intelligence and his dexterity. "He could write script with either hand in either direction, left to right or right to left, and upside down or rightside-up. And he had such a steady hand, even though he smoked all the time."

Wilhite described their collaborations as highly experimental. "Normally in a play you learn about people and the drama between them, and the props are incidental," he said. "In these cases, the props are the stars, and they behave in ways you would never expect."

When asked about the spy rumors, Wilhite said, "I think that was over the line. He was just trying to eke out an existence like the rest of us."

Bell says Cointet remained a mystery to him despite seven years as his studio assistant. "He was a very eloquent guy but he was very private, very quiet. To pull anything out of him, you had to really go after him."

At one point they collaborated on a work, a book called "Animated Discourse," which will be shown at LACE. It reproduces photographs of people running in different sequences. Each picture represents a different letter of the alphabet, spelling out a secret message.

So is the message nonsense? "Not at all," said Bell. "It was cribbed from an anarchist text: 'Treatise on Living for the Young' by Raoul Vaneigem, a Belgian anarchist."

Another contemporary of Cointet, John Baldessari is one of the artists creating new work for the LACE show: a piece based on carpenter's folding rulers, only this has a chronology of world history on one side and art history on the other. He has added his own text to it, saying things like "Art history can be like a film with jump cuts."

A younger artist in the show, Emily Mast, had made a work inspired by Cointet for the Pacific Standard Time performance art festival last year called "Bird Bra'n." She said the piece explores language's "potential for communication and miscommunication" and involved a stutterer, an auctioneer and a stand-up comedian among the performers. For the LACE show, she has made a new video based on this performance.

She calls Cointet "a sort of ghost who accompanied the project from start to finish." But, she adds, she never had a light-bulb moment where it all made sense to her. "I certainly got more and more hints, but the deep mystery is so integral to what he did."

"It's one of those cases: The more you think you know about the work, the less you really know."

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