



Brian Bress:

Make Your Own Friends

Cover | *Organizing The Physical Evidence (Purple)*, 2014, detail,
high definition dual-channel video (color), high definition monitors and players,
wall mount, framed. Courtesy of Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles ©Brian Bress.

Brian Bress: Make Your Own Friends

salt 12

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"I will make myself into many. And from those many I will make much."

- Caption from Brian Bress's 2007 video *Under Cover*

Over the past ten years, Brian Bress has created countless characters and eccentric weirdos out of makeup and wigs, pencil and paper, scissors and glue, upholstery foam and paint, and canvas and camera. His fictional anthropomorphic characters are bizarre and slightly off-kilter. But, they are also friendly. They are perplexing yet endearing, relatable yet unlike anything you've ever seen. Bress draws from both pop culture and high culture, applying familiar attributes of children's television and painting to his multimedia works, and this approach makes his characters exceptionally accessible. They, in turn, invite viewers to participate.

Bress's ability to set up characters instantaneously, with deft touches, is uncanny. Constructing his characters with an economy of form, Bress relies on a phenomenon known as face pareidolia, the human tendency to see faces in inanimate objects. He trusts that viewers will read a pile of foam rocks wearing a cowboy hat and goggles as a life form. Even beaded curtains and abstractly painted canvases take on souls when Bress gives them a human shape, but he doesn't develop his characters much beyond their distinct physical appearances. Instead, Bress's characters seem to hover in a timeless state of repetitive being, a moment that perpetually introduces them. We meet a heavily made-up woman playing with a giant strand of pearls, an astronaut going about his morning routine, a colorful beaded being who

bounces, or three bright creatures carving faces in a wall of plants. They don't have complex personalities, relationships, or character arcs. Most don't talk, and when they do, they are limited to a very restricted vocabulary. But through carefully crafted phrases, facial tics, simple gestures, and set design, Bress creates characters that are succinct and instantly recognizable, often referencing common archetypes or fictional tropes. This clarity instills confidence in viewers, inspiring them to be receptive to their unique responses to the work's humor, social critique, and psychological layers.

"I think everyone, even adults, feels the power of being acknowledged as the kid on the other side of the glass."

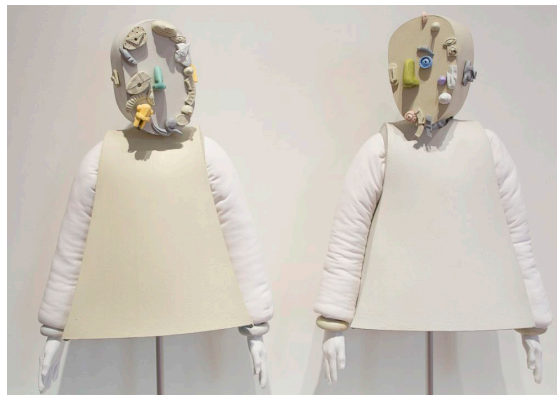
- Brian Bress, 2014¹

Brian Bress was born in Norfolk, Virginia in 1975, when children's programming was available to anyone with a TV set, until cable, and then satellite and the Internet, began to change viewing habits in the 1990s. Like many other 30- and 40-somethings today, Bress grew up watching *Sesame Street*, *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*, *Pee Wee's Playhouse*, and Saturday morning cartoons,

¹ Kurchanova, Natasha. "Brian Bress: 'I Come To Video With The Agenda of a Painter,'" Studio International, December, 19, 2014. <http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/brian-bress-art-basel-miami-beach-2014-interview-video-painting-performance>

and their influence is apparent in Bress's videos, particularly in how he engages viewers.

Pee-wee Herman (aka actor Paul Reubens) and Jim Henson were particularly influential, Bress says, in how their shows broke the "fourth wall"—the imaginary wall at the front of the stage, through which the audience sees the fictional world of a play in a traditional theater. On film or television, the fourth wall separating the fictional action from the viewer is the camera and/or the television screen. When a fictional character speaks directly to the audience through this invisible wall, the character "breaks the fourth wall." Bress explains that "when the performer's gaze turns towards the viewer, it changes the relationship of viewer from passive watcher to active participant, and it changes the object displaying the performance from picture to window or portal. This happens all the time in kids' shows—it's amazing to see this consistency."² Pee-wee, Mr. Rogers, and the characters on Sesame Street all spoke directly to their viewers in this way, looking straight at the camera and asking kids to answer questions, to sing along, or to imagine. In Bress's earlier videos, he speaks constantly to the camera/viewer. In *Can You See Me?* (2007), Bress, covered in red face paint and dressed in princely Renaissance attire, repeatedly asks the audience if they can see him and then immediately instructs the audience to close their eyes, as if to ask the audience to just imagine the prince. "Can you see me? Close your eyes. Can you see me? Close your eyes." Later in the nine-minute video, the prince invites his viewers to play an imaginary game. Holding up a giant red spoon in one hand and a giant red fork in the other, the prince says, "Me. You. Together we make a spork" over and over again. This character is hypnotic, surreal, psychedelic, and absurdly funny, but above all, he is collaborative.



(fig 1) Costumes for *Organizing the Physical Evidence*, 2014. Upholstery Foam, tricot, latex, acrylic paint, sheet metal, resin, spray paint, foam tubing, cotton, batting, magnets, contact cement, staples, thread, nylon, Velcro, automotive body filler, and cotton gloves. Courtesy the artist and Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles.

Bress's newer videos continue to invite engagement. They are less dense with improvisation, visual stimulus, and noise, but these silent compositions offer viewers more opportunities to imagine how they'd participate. His characters no longer speak directly to viewers, but they continue to address the fourth wall. "The figure is facing the camera/screen," Bress explains, "but instead of dialogue being the language that connects viewer to performer, I think it's the disruption of the picture plane."³ For instance, in the dual-monitor piece *Organizing the Physical Evidence (purple)* (2014), (cover and fig 1), a faceless humanoid character looks out of each monitor as it reaches offscreen, grabbing small colorful abstract sculptures to stick to its face. These characters rearrange the sculptures, forming cubist faces with pseudo ears or lips where eyes and noses should be. Eventually, the figures reach beyond their own monitors, cross the space of the viewer, and reach into their partner's camera frame to steal each other's facial features.

² Kurchanova.

³ Personal email exchange with the artist. July 1, 2015.



(fig 2) *Being Bamboo*, 2006, standard definition single-channel video (color, sound). Courtesy of Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles ©Brian Bress.

This, and the way their gaze fixates on the action within another flat screen monitor, breaks the fictional illusion of the video. The viewer is made aware of technology and her own existence in relation to the artwork. Without the viewer, and without addressing the space of the viewer, these artworks would fail to function. His silent characters cut through, draw upon, and build against the fourth wall, thus acknowledging the relationship between performer and viewer—separated, yet connected and codependent.

Bress also connects with his adult viewers through play, a model that Sesame Street developed. When “learning through play,” an educational and psychological concept used to describe how children learn to make sense of the world around them, children develop social and cognitive skills, mature emotionally, and gain the self-confidence required to engage in new experiences and environments. Bress uses this idea of pedagogy through play—particularly with modeling, make-believe, repetition, and humor—to encourage his viewers to approach the poten-



(fig 3) *Rock Cowboy*, 2006, standard definition single-channel video (color, sound). Courtesy of Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles ©Brian Bress.

tially intimidating media of video art with open eyes and creative, expansive thinking. In *Being Bamboo* (2006), (fig 2), Bress inspires imagination and creativity. Addressing a large wooden pole painted green, Bress, wearing a sparkly costume and mask, tells the pole in a high-pitched, reassuring voice, “You don’t always have to be bamboo.” He then launches into an improvised list of what this green pole could be, repeating over and over such possibilities as a peg leg, a walking stick, a hobbyhorse, a baseball bat, a dumbbell, and a broom. He asks the viewers to fire up their imaginations to help. “What else could it be? Hmm? What else could it be?” Jumping around in a ridiculous outfit, playing with “bamboo” made out of Ikea table legs screwed together, and repeating the same phrases, Bress is overtly self-deprecating. He rejects the cool, elite ego of The Artist and instead invites viewers to laugh, creating a participatory space free of judgment.

In addition to teaching creativity through play, the children’s programs Bress credits also provided a moral compass. Reubens sought to



(fig 4) Installation view of *Brian Bress: Make Your Own Friends* in the salt gallery at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts.

teach children the ethics of reciprocity on *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, and Mr. Rogers reminded his viewers that people like them just the way they are. In the same vein, Rock Cowboy (fig 3), Bress's character from the 2006 eponymously titled video, tells viewers, "I'm here to tell you that it's important to be nice to everyone all the time...A good way to do that is to put yourself in somebody else's shoes." Through a pile of foam rocks, a doll that is also a lamp, and a frog that is also a candle, Bress uses absurdity and make-believe to teach about empathy. "What kind of feelings does a Doll Lamp have? Probably different feelings than a Rock Cowboy. Way different!" the Rock Cowboy says. Bress's methods work for children, but their familiarity and absurdity also help break down adult barriers to reception. Humor and nostalgia help viewers let their guards down, priming them to pick up what Bress is putting down. Accepting differences between oneself and others is as relevant a lesson to contemporary adult

audiences as it was to Pee-wee's and Mr. Roger's six-year-old viewers.

"I think of myself more as a painter, a sculptor, or a collage artist who uses video as the final container for those kinds of mediums."

- Brian Bress, 2014⁴

What makes an object video art? Or sculpture? Or painting? Most of the works in *Brian Bress: Make Your Own Friends* could be classified as videos, but Bress doesn't think of himself as a video artist. He has a flexible understanding of fine art categories and moves fluidly between two- and three-dimensional media as well as static and time-based art forms. Sculpture performs in videos. Videos read as paintings. Paintings become costumes. Drawings manifest on camera. His lack of loyalty to a specific type of image-making gives him freedom to explore ideas unfettered by ideology and to challenge

⁴ Kurchanova.

the definition of traditional art forms and the perceived rules of museum visitor experience.

From 2006 to 2009 Bress built elaborate sets and performed in front of them so that the end product—a video—reads like a painting. He shot these action-packed videos, which sit somewhere between improvised performance and planned narrative, with a fixed frame in his studio. His constructed backdrops often continue onto the floor, creating the illusion of compressed space. He skillfully arranged found objects to trick the eye, eliminating the appearance of depth and mimicking the flat plane of a canvas. Further elevating his video works to the traditionally valued status of painting, Bress designed the imagery within his fixed frame—sets, characters, objects—with great attention to the formal aesthetics often associated with painting: line, color, texture, light and shadow, composition. Bress’s backdrops and whimsical costumes (worn in his videos but presented in the exhibition as soft sculptures) are made by hand, underscoring the videos’ relationship to painting. Bress lives and works in Los Angeles, the epicenter of bringing inanimate things to life. He acknowledges that L.A.’s technical resources—equipment, skilled people, prop houses—are unbeatable, but he specifically sidesteps Hollywood’s slick production approach in favor of a more DIY style. Paint drips and peeling paper purposely expose the artist’s touch, so that viewers can’t completely escape into a fictional space. By making the constructed nature of his characters visible, Bress prevents viewers from suspending their disbelief, the usual goal of special effects. Instead, his viewers understand that they are looking at something created with artisanal skill not software. Even though they are essentially pixels on a digital display, Bress’s commitment to making aligns his videos with the traditional art forms of painting and sculpture.



(fig 5) Installation view of *Brian Bress: Make Your Own Friends* in the salt gallery at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts.

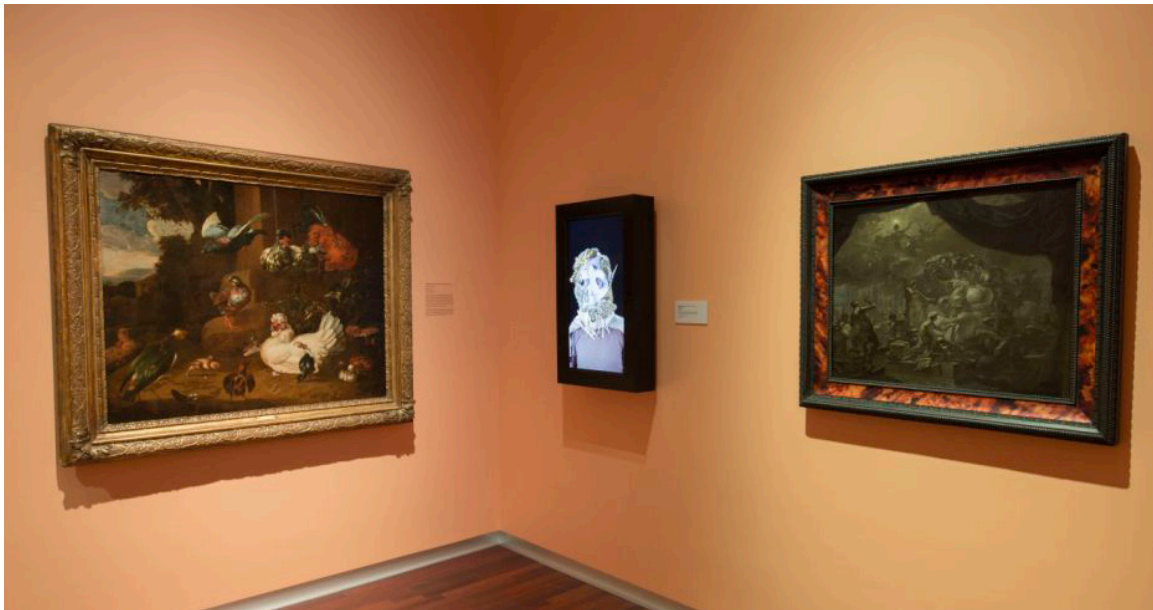
As Bress increasingly sought to blur the distinction between video and painting, he identified inherent limitations in his process. Because of the time-based nature of moving image, his early videos were structured with a beginning, an end, and a narrative in between, and the movements and sounds of the characters Bress inhabits aligned the work with performance. The hardware and presentation standards video requires further prevented his first moving compositions from slipping into the realm of painting. The experience of watching a projection of an artist performing, of sitting in a dark room with seats, of scheduling a viewing with a start time, or of being tethered to a monitor with headphones is completely unlike the experiencing of looking at a painting.

In 2009 Bress broke with his previous format and distilled his approach. For *Imposter*, his first video to truly masquerade as a painting, Bress focused on one character, an Arcimboldo-esque figure born from a collaged photograph of Ernest Hemingway. Bress pared down the presentation, scene, story, sound, and action—qualities we identify with video art—so much that at first glance, a viewer might mistake *Imposter* for an Italian Renaissance portrait painting. The video offers no illusions of space or scene.

There is only the figure, seen from the torso up, existing in a vacuum. He (it?) faces forward in front of an empty black nothingness. He barely moves, tightly confined by the camera's fixed frame. A hollow wind, the video's sole soundtrack, rustles the feathers that accentuate the figure's otherwise static expression. The only other movement occurs when he adjusts his gloved hands or turns slightly as though looking offscreen. This minimal performance runs on loop, with no discernible beginning or end, without a narrative structure, dialogue, or character development. The character, and thus the video, is defined by understated gestures and an elaborate physical appearance that provoke questions: What kind of creature is this staring out at the viewer? Who or what is he looking

for? This farce, this imposter of a painting, is further embellished by Bress's decision to hide the electrical components and to hang the flat screen monitor vertically, flush against the wall, capped with a custom frame. After creating *Imposter*, Bress eliminated sound from his video compositions, so the imposters that followed, which he continues to make today, are as silent as paintings.

Video art can be intimidating, especially for viewers who don't identify as contemporary art lovers, but Bress's style makes his work approachable. He defies viewer expectations and challenges existing ideas about video, especially viewer anxiety about how much time they need to spend looking at video art.



(fig 6) Brian Bress. *Imposter*, 2009. High definition single-channel video (color) on Samsung ID-32pw monitor with sound. The Masi Kolb Collection. Melchior de Hondecoeter (Dutch 1636-1695). *Birds in a Landscape*. Oil on canvas. Gift of Mrs. Herbert I. Michael. UMFA1965.017. Domenicus van Wijnen, called Ascanius (Dutch, 1661-after 1690). *An Allegory of Amsterdam, after 1690*. Oil on canvas. Purchased with funds from the Marriner S. Eccles Foundation. UMFA1995.010.001

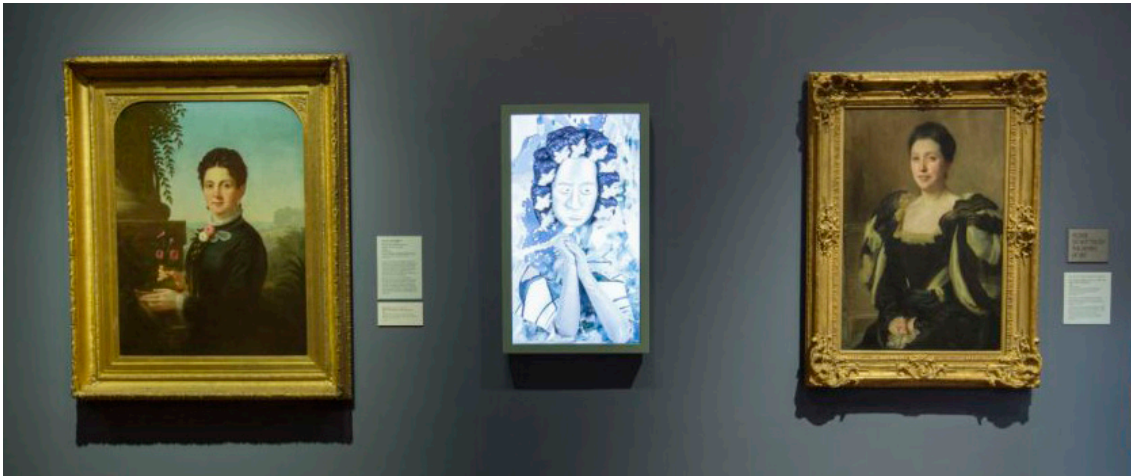
Because his looping portraits are nonlinear and structured with minimal, repeated action, the videos are consumable in short segments. Viewers can engage and disengage at will, much as they do with a painting. But it is not a painting, of course, and that discovery can be magical, especially if the work is experienced among real paintings, as it is at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts. *Brian Bress: Make Your Own Friends* unfolds from the *salt* gallery with drawings, collages, early videos, and costumes that, exhibited together for the first time, highlight Bress's studio process (fig 4 and fig 5). Bress's imaginative characters are born as doodles or collages, take shape as sculptural costumes, and come to life as they are performed in front of painted backdrops. The final work is compressed back into the two

dimensions of video. At the UMFA, visitors must explore the museum's permanent collection galleries to discover Bress's video portraits, many of which are the end result of the work on view in the *salt* gallery. Installed in ten different galleries, including Native American, Art of Utah and the West, European, and Modern and Contemporary (to name a few), Bress's videos intervene among masks, landscapes, pottery, and minimalist sculpture.

The locations of the videos were selected based on a rubric of variables including aesthetics, associations of content, and architectural feasibility, but the relationship between Bress's videos and their neighbor objects is ultimately subjective. The interactions between Bress's "friends" and



(fig 7) Brian Bress. *The Mushroom (Ellie)*, 2012. High definition single-channel video (color), high definition monitor and player, wall mount, and frame. Collection of John J. Friedman. Bartholomaus Bruyn the Younger (German, ca. 1530-1607/1610). *Portrait of a Gentleman*, ca. 1555-1565. Oil on panel. Gift of Val A. Browning. UMFA1994.017.006. Bartholomaus Bruyn the Younger (German, ca. 1530-1607/1610). *Portrait of a Lady*, ca. 1555-1565. Oil on panel. Gift of Val A. Browning. UMFA1994.017.007. Attributed to Frans Pourbus the Younger (Flemish, 1569-1622). *Portrait of a Lady*. Oil on canvas. Gift of F. William and Mary E. Gay. UMFA1982.293



(fig 8) Brian Bress. *Ridley-Tree Sleeper #1 (Nick and Brian)*, 2012. High definition single-channel video (color), high definition monitor and player, wall mount, and frame. Collection of Cyndee Howard. George Caleb Bingham (American, 1811-1879). *Portrait of Mrs. James Thomas Birch*. Oil on canvas. In loving memory of our mother, Anna Louise Birch Stephens, donated by Mary Stephens DeWalt, Margaret Stephens Anderson, Cordelia Stephens Birrell, and William Fulton Stephens, Jr. UMFA2007.12.1 John Singer Sargent (American, 1856-1925). *Portrait of Mrs. Colin Hunter*, 1896. Oil on canvas. Purchased with funds from the Marriner S. Eccles Foundation, assisted by Mrs. Nathan (Jane) Porter, Emma Eccles Jones, the estate of Dolores Doré (Mrs. George S.) Eccles, and Friends of the Art Museum. UMFA1996.33.1



(fig 9) Brian Bress. *Cowboy (Brian led by Peter Kirby)*, 2012. High definition single-channel video (color), high definition monitor and player, wall mount, and frame. Collection of Gail and Stanley Hollander. Cyrus Edwin Dallin (American, 1861-1944). *The Scout*, 1910. Bronze. Purchased with funds from Herbert I. and Elsa Bamberger Michael Fund and the Friends of the Art Museum. UMFA1984.122



(fig 10) Installation view of *Beadman (Parker)* (2012) and *Whitewalker #1* (2012) in *Brian Bress: Make Your Own Friends* in the Pacific Island gallery at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts.

the Museum's beloved art historical characters are open to interpretation. His characters, peering out of their frames, have the eerie effect of charging up our imaginations and bringing the other inanimate objects in the gallery to life. *Imposter* (fig 6) sits perpendicular to Melchior de Hondecoeter's seventeenth-century painting of exotic birds. Has this feathered creature escaped from that painting? Or perhaps this mysterious being is plotting to pluck a few choice plumes from de Hondecoeter's birds to add to his own headdress. *The Mushroom (Ellie)* (fig 7) joins three somber sitters. Locked in individual frames yet sharing the same gloomy, nondescript background, a stern German couple and an equally stiff aristocratic woman observe Bress's grisaille mushroom-face figure as she levitates a small mushroom. It appears all four figures have gathered in darkness to conduct a mysterious ceremony. On a wall of the American gallery, a slow-moving figure (*Ridley-Tree Sleeper #1 (Nick and Brian)*) (fig 8) shifts ever so slightly,

drifting in and out of consciousness. The figure's "hair" is comprised of profile heads with dark buns, much like the coiffed hairstyles of her (its?) adjacent companions, George Caleb Bingham's (American, 1811-1879) *Mrs. James Thomas Birch* and John Singer Sargent's (American, 1856-1925) *Mrs. Colin Hunter*. The three seem entirely bored with the experience of having their portrait painted. Watching the action unfold between bronze "cowboys and Indians" on horseback in the Art of Utah and the West gallery, Bress's cartoon cowboy (*Cowboy (Brian led by Peter Kirby)*) (fig 9) sketches his own steed, draws a cigar to smoke, and doodles the ubiquitous cactus. This mark-making cowboy is at home among other artists of the western frontier. In the Pacific Island gallery, two beaded beings (*Whitewalker #1* and *Beadman (Parker)*) (fig 10) strut and jump alongside three Asmat body masks from twentieth-century New Guinea. The rhythmic movement of Bress's creations reminds viewers that the mounted ethnographic museum



(fig 11) *370 Cover*, 2015, high definition six-channel video (color), high definition monitors and players, wall mounts, framed. Collection of Felix and Heather Baker. ©Brian Bress.

objects were once alive with spirit and movement when they too were donned and performed. An uncanny moment of discovery disrupts a routine viewing experience. Movement and gesture change the energy in typically static galleries, and Bress's intervention inspires new ways of contextualizing permanent collection objects. The viewer draws new connections between the past and the present, and the distinctions between painting, sculpture, and video become a little less clear.

Bress's character Captain Comfort explains in *Status Report*, "I like making everybody to feel comfortable." And so does Bress. He is an incredibly generous artist making work with the broadest audience in mind. Presented with the trappings of kids' TV and conventions of fine

art forms, Bress's oddball characters welcome viewer participation. While in-the-know art world folks will understand Bress's aesthetic and conceptual reference to Sol LeWitt's wall drawing #370 in his work *370 Cover* (2015) (fig 11), familiarity with the father of conceptual art is not necessary to become fully absorbed in the piece, a freedom and inclusiveness that runs through all of Bress's work. The playful, stylized characters invite us into their make-believe world as they peek at us with their goofy, google-y eyes. With their electric saws, they slowly remove the barrier between us and them, compelling us to wait and watch for the final reveal of these funny little beings.

Whitney Tassie
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art

Brian Bress (American, born 1975, lives in Los Angeles, CA) has a BFA in film/animation/video from the Rhode Island School of Design (1998) and an MFA in painting and drawing from the University of California, Los Angeles (2006). He also studied at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Drawing (2007). Recently, he has had solo exhibitions at Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles, CA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museo d'arte contemporanea, Roma, Rome, Italy; Galeria Marta Cevera, Madrid, Spain; Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, CA; and the New Museum, New York, NY. His work can be found in the permanent collections of such institutions as the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA; Museum of Contemporary, Chicago; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.

Brian Bress: Make Your Own Friends is jointly curated by Whitney Tassie, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, and Nora Burnett Abrams, Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver.

Brian Bress: Make Your Own Friends at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts is presented as the twelfth installment of the UMFA's *salt* series of new work by emerging contemporary artists from around the globe. This presentation of the exhibition is made possible by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and the UMFA Friends of Contemporary Art (FoCA). The exhibition will travel to the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver in February 2016.

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