

ART SY

# History Repeats Itself in the Bruce High Quality Foundation's Apocalyptic Landscapes

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Bruce High Quality Foundation. *Isle of the Dead*, 2014. McClain Gallery

In the Bruce High Quality Foundation's (BHQF) 2013 exhibition at The Brooklyn Museum, the polarizing collective of millennial artists premiered a video about art world zombies called *Isle of the Dead*. The work presents an alternate reality in which the entire art world is offed by a mysterious disaster. Some players resurrect as a troupe of malcontent walking dead who sing an ode (Bryan Adams' *Summer of '69*) to an age when art felt less commercial and more culturally motivating.

In "*Isles of the Dead*" at McClain Gallery in Houston, BHQF teases out the comically cynical narrative introduced in last year's retrospective. Both the 2013 video and the exhibition of new silkscreens and sculptures borrow the title of an Arnold Böcklin painting from the late 1880s. It depicts a romantic scene in which a boat carries two figures, one shrouded, toward a small island (connections have been drawn to Greek mythology's Charon transporting souls to the afterlife). The famous work, of which Böcklin made five versions, has inspired artistic output—and many copies—across centuries and mediums.

BHQF, who mine art history to question the cultural impact (and repetitious nature) of art-making and the market, usually find fodder in the most popular works of yore. *Isle*

of the Dead offers an especially fruitful case study, which the artists use to surface themes of appropriation, New York ethnocentricity, and the death of radical art.

The silkscreen and acrylic works in the show combine Andy Warhol's factory aesthetic with reproductions of Böcklin's painting and BHQF's own adaptation of the allegorical scene—a veiled figure floats toward a huge garbage dump that obscures the Manhattan skyline. BQHF covers both Böcklin's and their own images with screens of geometric color and splatters of paint that recall big-time art historical movements like Abstract Expressionism, Pop, and Neo-Expressionism. The colors feel radioactive—like Superman's kryptonite—and drive home the sense of near- or post-apocalypse introduced by the mythological narrative.

BHQF connects apocalyptic allusions with an investigation of appropriation through extreme repetition—nearly all of the works in the show are titled *Isle of the Dead*. However, the show's single sculpture (also *Isle of the Dead*) suggests that mimesis isn't all bad. In it, a floating record player pipes Rachmaninoff's 1908 opus, *Isle of the Dead*, offering the buoyant thought that imitation, when done right, reads as inspiration.