

# LA ARTLAND

## FEBRUARY 7, 2012

### MUNGO THOMSON

by Matthew Stromberg



The American Desert (For Chuck Jones), 2004, video, 34 minutes.

With an output that includes but is not limited to drawing, installation, sculpture, film, video and sound pieces, Mungo Thomson uses the language of mass culture to explore issues of authenticity, cultural appropriation, American identity and institutional critique. His works often focus on the inbetween spaces of culture and media, exposing that which lies under the surface. They also convey a sense of quiet disappointment and ennui, albeit humorously.

Thomson's sound works take as their subject the extraneous noise and ambient sounds of performance and art. *The Collected Live Recordings of Bob Dylan 1963-1995*, 1999, is nothing more than the sounds of crowd applause in between songs at the titular performances. The eager anticipation of waiting for a performance to start, quickly turns to confusion and disappointment the longer it remains unfulfilled. Bus shelter posters and billboards that advertise the piece whenever it is exhibited contribute to this sense of expectation. His ongoing audio project, *The Bootleg Series*, consists of recordings of the ambient noise at art-related functions such as openings. It stands as a humorous attempt to capture the essence of high art, by listening to the sounds of its institutional viewing and reception. Similarly 1998's *Room Tone* tries to shed some light on the mystery of artistic creation by replaying the noise of the artist's empty studio.

Thomson's film and video work also explore the mechanics of artistic perception, focusing on the framework of cinema, instead of the narrative. *The American Desert (For Chuck Jones)*, completed in 2002, compiles scenes from classic Road Runner cartoons created by the famous animator. Thomson has removed all of the characters from the scenes, instead leaving barren images of the American West. From a popular American cartoon, he creates a contemplative, yet lonesome landscape, speaking to our fractured national identities.

*Everything Has Been Recorded*, 2000, is a book Thomson produced in the manner of free religious texts given out in public places. As Thomson notes, “*Everything Has Been Recorded* pairs my drawings of cosmic, apocalyptic, and mundane scenes with excerpts from my graduate school journals that dramatize the peaks and valleys of my own art practice as a religion unto itself.” Distributed in public places, the work serves to disseminate art to a broader public than would normally be exposed to it. Fusing the language of evangelical religion with DIY artmaking, the work highlights the transcendent potential of art to go beyond the gallery and exist in the world.