

Art & Design

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Art review

John Arndt



Rowland Contemporary, through Apr 5.

Italy may be full of historic sites, beautiful people and delicious pasta, but if you don't speak the language, you're limited to a clichéd tourist experience. During a one-month residency in Italy, Chicago-based artist John Arndt delved into this universal problem using the only solution available: a travelers' phrase book.

The result is the 27-minute video *Italian for Travelers*. Its cheerful male and female narrators—recognizable from any language-instruction recording—utter ridiculous dialogue over scenes of Italy: As litter piles up in rushing water, the subtitle “Everything is so interesting” appears. “Look how polluted this water is” would have been a more appropriate phrase, but guidebooks don't accommodate critiques of consumer culture. A trip to Rome's infamous Capuchini Bone Chapel—where even infants' skeletons are formed into ghastly arrangements of “art”—yields phrases like “I don't feel well” and “What exactly is wrong with me?” Through this subtly poignant work, Arndt suggests that such limited phrases actually undermine communication—and exposes the disconnect between our romantic visions of foreign climes and the less-than-picturesque reality.



John Arndt, *Italian for Travelers* (still), 2007.

Arndt also presents graphite renditions of “lost dog” flyers posted during the summer of 2007, when Italian pets were kidnapped for dogfights. The illustrated flyers convey the worried owners' sentiments about their helpless dogs in a way that words alone never could. The concept behind Arndt's work is a bit too obvious, but viewers will remember his deft use of humor long after they've forgotten their language lessons.

— Alicia Eler