First Solo: Jonny Farrow
Myth, Nowhat?
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Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood

Essay by Rahel Aima

The 18th century pioneer and explorer Daniel Boone was an all-American hero. He was the ur-frontiersman, a prodigiously skilled woodsman, trapper, hunter, and marksman. He was an agent of Manifest Destiny who blazed the Wilderness Trail through the Appalachian Mountains that opened Jonny Farrow's home state of Kentucky up to settlers from the East. During the Revolutionary War of 1775-1783, he was captured by the indigenous Shawnee tribe who fought on the British side, but managed to escape to warn his militia of an impending attack, which the Americans subsequently repulsed despite being greatly outnumbered. He went on to fight other wars, to serve as a politician and a land speculator, to serve as the flesh-and-blood buttressing a legend that would quickly eclipse his life and actions.

Really, what Boone actually did or did not do does not matter. Variously immortalised in Lord Byron's epic poem *Don Juan*, Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, and countless other books and films, these fictionalised accounts of his achievements inscribed Boone as the archetypal Western hero. His legacy remains malleable—depending on the political winds of the time, he was whatever the nascent nation needed him to be—variously a Great Civiliser and accomplished Indian Killer, a pacifist who was overly sympathetic to Native Americans, or the rapacious Columbus of the Woods. His outdoorsy chops however remain watertight: a youth program bearing his name, the Sons of Daniel Boone, would later go on to become the Boy Scouts of America. The spectre of Daniel Boone is deeply embedded in the fabric of America, in its God-granted mission to expand, colonise, civilise, and settle the West—collateral damage be damned. We know how the rest of that story goes. On a more intimate scale, the figure of Boone illuminates the precisely calibrated construction, preservation and, most crucially, modulation of cultural heritage construction, especially when conscripted to a nationalist mandate. It feels perfectly natural, then, that his shadow extends like the long arm of American exceptionalism to fall

upon Dubai's carefully historic Al Fahidi neighbourhood, itself formerly known as Bastakiya.

Most immediately, this very long shadow of Daniel Boone materialises in the very long barrel of *Daniel Boone's very very very very very very long rifle* that girds the exhibition space. Based on the longrifle or Kentucky rifle, the piece is made of fabric. Like all good national narratives, it requires reinforcements to hold it up, with parallels found in the sculptural pedestal work that has no statue to hold up. Like all good myths and legends, it constantly threatens to collapse in on itself.

Historical support is proffered in the series *Filmstripped*, which provides the narrative underpinnings for the show. Here Farrow redraws frames from a mid-century educational reel extolling the life and times of Boone, including side quests like a fateful salt-making party "among the bones of some prehistoric dinosaurs." The considerable wear and tear of the film print is evident in the faithful notation of each scratch and speckle, even when these scars threaten to supercede and obscure the story below. The simple dialogue, shown in hand-lettered subtitles, belies a more complex historical revisionism at play that sanitises the narrative both for the presumed younger audience, and for the judgement of history. Daniel is brave and Daniel is good; the Shawnee, meanwhile are not depicted as savage, bloodthirsty, less than human, but simply as a convenient foil for Boone's nobility. Some local colour; nothing more, nothing less.

Of particular interest is an event that takes place on July 14, 1776—a scant 10 days after the Declaration of Independence was ratified and the USA brought into being. Boone's teenaged daughter Jemima and a pair of her friends were kidnapped by a Shawnee war party and whisked away in the direction of their settlements in Ohio. The trio are bonneted, beribboned, and terrified of the weapons their captors are pointing at them. Below, the subtitle primly offers, "Often, there was danger from Indians…" Boone followed in hot pursuit with a group of local men and managed to catch the Shawnee off-guard in a mealtime ambush and rescue the girls. It is a scene that is reimagined by Farrow in *Often There Was Danger*. In a wry commentary on contemporary American politics—increasingly virulent attitudes towards undocumented 'illegal aliens', and a bedrock of genocide and displacement estranging Native Americans from their own lands—the girls have been replaced by a standard issue flying saucer. It is delightfully unclear whether the aliens present a danger to the Shawnee or the girls.This same scene is reprised a third time in *History is Not to*

Scale, a crop of Henry Schile's 1874 lithograph *Daniel Boone Protects His Family*. A widely popular image in its time, the print shows an oversized Boone (a rather literal Great Man) restraining a bellicose Shawnee warrior (who is accordingly shrunken) bent on murdering his family. Boone is somewhat incongruously wearing a Renaissance style cap; a cowering wife and son, and a dog standing in for fidelity (to family, to country; to race) complete the picture. Schile's print is in itself a depiction of Horatio Greenough's controversial sculpture *The Rescue* (1837-50), which was commissioned for the US Capitol's rotunda but was removed after only five years. In *History is Not to Scale*, however, the tight crop to the heads and shoulders of the two central figures, as well as the dreamy blurriness of the low resolution entirely change the dynamic between them. Blown up to this scale, the visible pixelation begins to resemble a tiled mosaic, and the two men's unspoken exchange does not suggest antagonism so much as the light frisson of desire.

There is a sense of screenburn and of the lingering afterimage of history here that pervades the show, especially in the works named *Boone's Traces IIIII*. (The capture of Boone's daughter appears for a fourth time here in a slightly different configuration and hewn in thin plywood.) The series is named after the 319 mile-long Sheltowee Trace Trail whose name in turn refers to Boone's given Shawnee name of Sheltowee, or Big Turtle, when he was adopted into the tribe following the aforementioned salt-making excursion. Boone readily lived amongst the Shawanee for months—so convincingly that he was in fact later tried on suspicion of having defected to the British—but made his escape at the first opportunity. Although he did immediately try to prove his American loyalty by leading a raid against his former Shawnee brothers, the episode points to the extreme contingency of settler-Native American relations, which continued to reshuffle and be reshuffled long after flesh became myth.

A final drawing in *Filmstripped* depicts Boone riding into new lands—into the future of America—oxen-drawn covered wagon in tow. The subtitle jovially concludes, "And so once again, Daniel Boone managed to push our country westwards, ever westwards, in search of new lands." This sentiment is humourously echoed in the video work *Daniel Boone's Wanderlust In The Form Of An Interstellar Raccoon Skin Cap Animation Video* which, as the title suggests, extends this frontier even further, taking it all the way into interstellar realms. Like the title of the show itself, these works suggest a certain editorial hand that frames historical narrative as neatly tied up and fixed in the record. A done-and-

dusted point from which we can depart—whether further West or into space rather than something that is constantly being reproduced. *Myth. Now What?*

Except—the title is more properly spelled "*Myth Nowhat*,' and might equally connote either "*Myth, no what?*" or "*Myth, know what?*" A further possibility is "*Myth now hat*, as suggested by the flag's—flying outside—central emblem of a raccoon-skin cap. Inextricably associated with the North American Frontier today, it should be noted that these hats were (along with moccasins and other articles of clothing) appropriated from the traditions of Native Americans and First Nations people. In particular it is believed to stem from the spiritual beliefs of the Abenaki people, which include a trickster raccoon figure named Azeban that would deceive humans and animals alike to procure its meals. Believers would don raccoon skin caps when hunting in hopes that Azeban's spirit might attract prey and result in a more bountiful hunt. Other slogans like IMN OTY OUR FRI END, carry forward the playful syntactical experiment, and are twinned with other prey animals. There's a particularly dark humour in the all-black MUSTWIN SITUATION, whose raccoon emblem is presumably still alive, unlike its less fortunate furry cousin in *Myth, Nowhat?*

The hunting theme continues in *Why Don't You Ask The Bear What It Does In The Woods* in which a black bear appears to be surprised in the act (of what, it again doesn't matter) and appears comically human in its guilt by association. Especially striking is the rather sardonic *Poetics of Potential* in which a rusty animal trap is displayed on felt in a sealed plexiglass case. Although the end of its chain dangles out forlornly, like the handle on an old, abandoned cistern, there is no way of activating the trap. In this it invokes both the dangerously slipperiness of history—a set of jaws that can never quite close—and the rusty manacles of transatlantic slavery.

Here, *Poetics of Potential* gestures towards some of Kentucky's darker histories, which remain far less acknowledged than the violent mistreatment and displacement of its indigenous peoples. Although Kentucky eventually fought on the side of the Union in the American civil war the state was, like so many of its kin, entirely founded upon and fuelled by slave labour. Beginning from the 1830s, however, the decline of the tobacco industry meant that many slaves ended up being sold on to other territories, to the plantations in the Deep South. The phenomenon was enshrined in a 1952 anti-slavery ballad *My Old Kentucky Home* by Stephen Foster, broadly considered to be the father

of modern American songwriting. (It's worth noting here that the show as a whole is awash with the figure of the founding father who, instead of filial piety demands something more akin to patriotic loyalty.)
Also pertinent here is a process of identity building—of shaping myth—that is predicated in large part on land. There's an abundance of ostensibly empty (to Europeans) land to be settled, yes, but also an appreciation for its natural bounty—its open skies, endless prairies, thicketed woods, and "purple mountain majesties … from sea to shining sea" as *America the Beautiful* puts it. *Good Boy Gone Bad: Daniel Boone's Footsteps Compressed Into a Piece of Coal, Spinning, Powered by Fossil Fuel* is a kinetic installation consisting of a piece of coal dangling from a rope that is made to spin in endless circles. It extrapolates this dynamic to contemporary questions of resource extraction, land acquisition, and fracking.

Similarly rhapsodic descriptions of the land in the first stanza of *My Old Kentucky Home* (the second and third are usually omitted in modern usage, along with the deployment of the word "darkeys".) let the song to be taken up as the Kentucky state anthem, with all the sentimental, sweetly nostalgic baggage this implies. It is with this we arrive at *We don't like being called that anymore, or My Old Kentucky Home*, which loops video footage of the former Kentucky Governor and Major League Baseball Commissioner A.B. "Happy" Chandler singing the state song. It's March 1988 at the University of Kentucky, and the commentator (a news anchor, perhaps) bills the scene as one of the most emotional moments in sport. As Chandler begins singing the camera pans to a trio of cheerleaders whose hairstyles index the moment: a mulletted white man, a bouffantly feathered white woman, and a black man with a fade. They're all crying; as the song unfolds we see officials and players alike all struggling to maintain their composures. It's certainly a powerful moment, one that becomes amplified in the large letters on the cheerleaders' uniforms, which ominously spell out KKK. The juxtaposition is especially poignant in the moment, in which xenophobia and fascism are openly on the rise. This show opens mere weeks after a Klan rally turned violent in California, in which three people were stabbed with the pole of a Confederate flag. Things become even more troubling when you consider that one of the US' main KKK groups, the Imperial Klans of America, is headquartered within Kentucky in the small town of Dawson Springs.
We see that image of the cheerleaders once more, but this time it's drawn with ink on wood in the form of a sliding picture puzzle. Yet where most such puzzles are designed to allow their component tiles to be moved around, we are denied that here. The puzzle tiles are fixed, each

carefully inked with a part of the original image, and remain as competing fragments that are never allowed to fully come together. As the work's title demurs, *To solve the puzzle for the crying cheerleader would only complicate things*.