

# ARTPULSE

ARTPULSE NO. 21 | VOL. 6 | 2015  
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Kendall Buster

Enrique Marty

Craig Drennen

Jorge Perianes

Angel Abreu on  
Tim Rollins and K.O.S.

**Artists as Educators:  
The Legacy of 1950's  
Bay Area Figurative Painters**

**Art Fairs and  
Thought-Space**

**arte\_FIST FOUNDATION**

**Building:  
Misbehaving the City**

**The Critic As Artist:  
Peter Schjeldahl on Oscar Wilde**



# Douglas Coupland

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is anywhere  
is anything  
is everything

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*Douglas Coupland: everywhere is anywhere is anything is everything* is organized and circulated by the Vancouver Art Gallery and curated by Daina Augaitis, Chief Curator/Associate Director. The exhibition is presented in Toronto by the Royal Ontario Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art and is being held concurrently at both institutions. This exhibition was made possible with the generous support of The Keg Steakhouse + Bar, and The Artworkers Retirement Society. Images: Top: Douglas Coupland, *Brilliant Information Overload Pop Head*, 2010, acrylic and epoxy on pigment print, Collection of Lucia Haugen Lundin. Bottom: Douglas Coupland, *Towers*, 2014, Lego, 50 components, Courtesy of the Artist and Daniel Faria Gallery. Photos: Rachel Topham, Vancouver Art Gallery. The ROM is an agency of the Government of Ontario.



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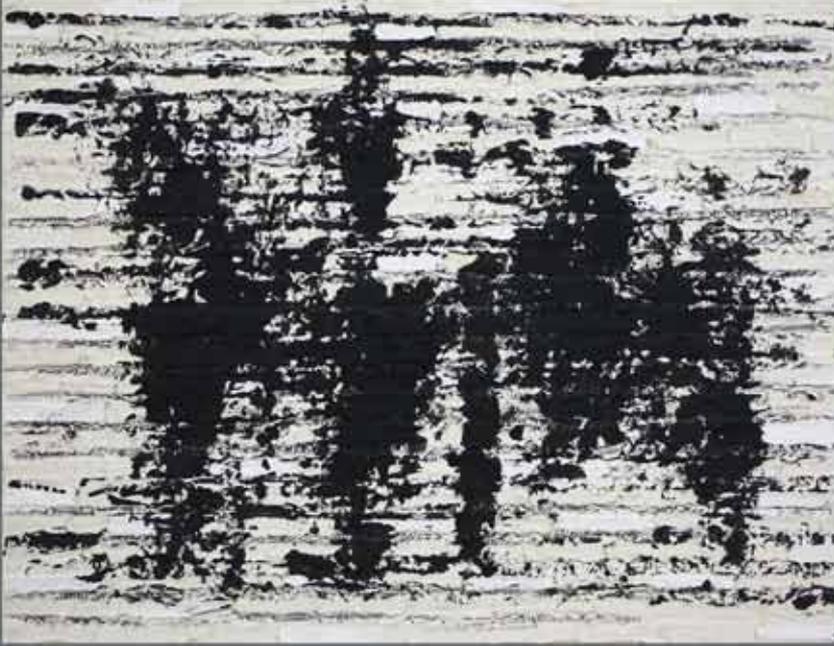
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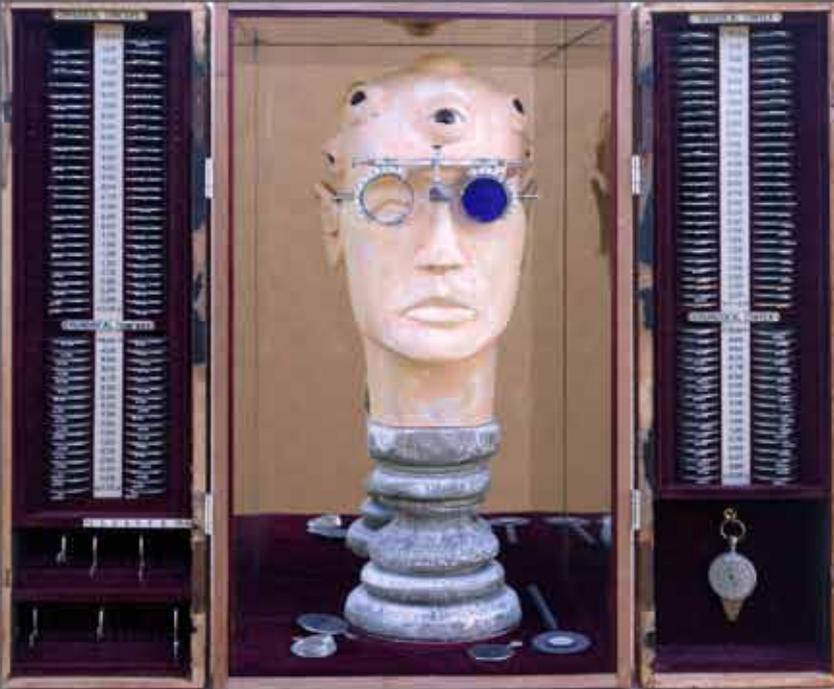
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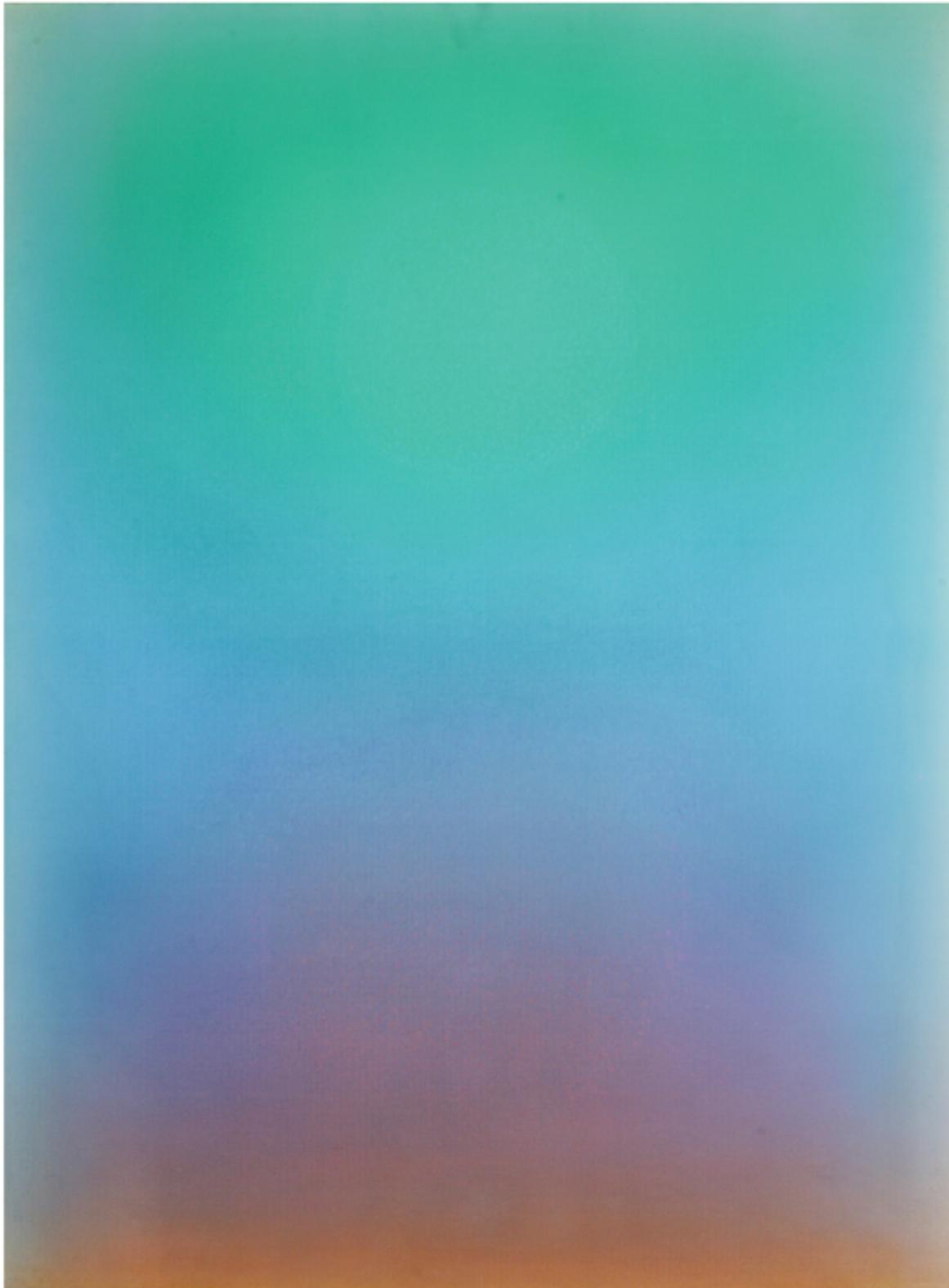
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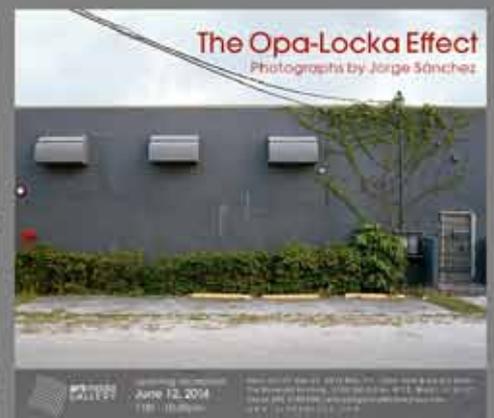
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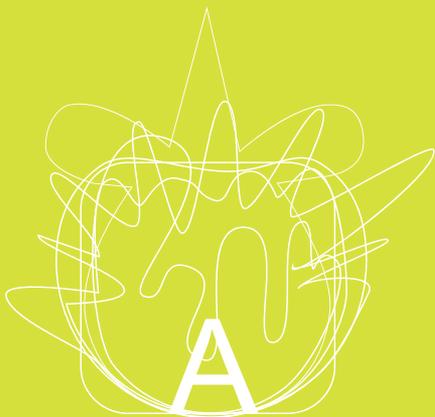
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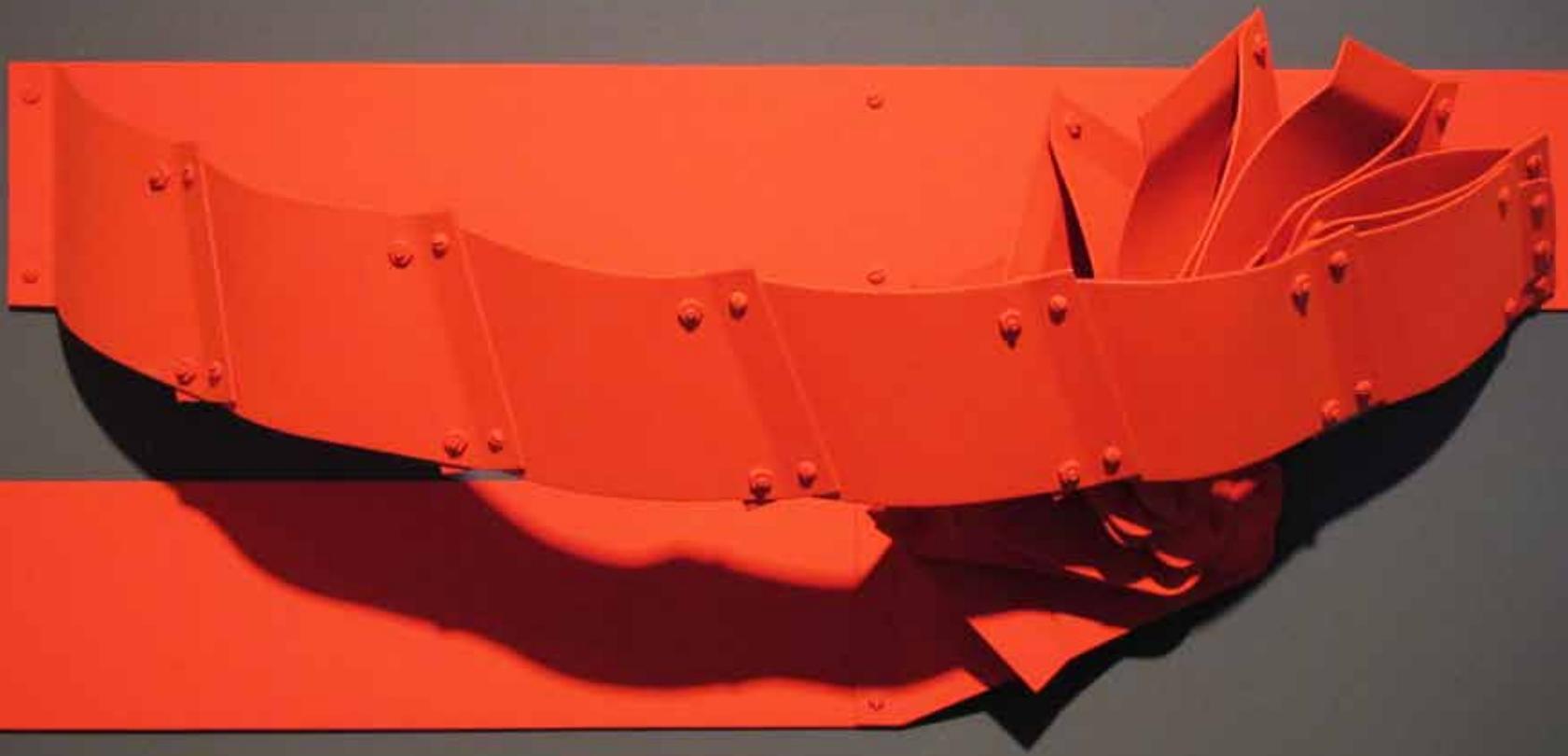
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# Rising Above the Predictable

In our postmodern firmament “hope” may not be the sexiest idea, but it is timely as we focus this issue on such topics as doing things better in our little niches of the art world.

Jon Seals’ essay, *A Common Core*, centers on the 1950’s Bay Area Figurative painters, and delivers a mantra that is the heart of this issue: “The best artist/educators, like rip currents, pull everyone in their path far past the shore’s safety and into the unknown expanse of the ocean.”

To enlighten this idea Scott Thorp interviews Kids of Survival (K.O.S.) artist Angel Abreu. Thirty years ago, when Angel was eleven, a rip current named Tim Rollins arrived at a hell-bent school in the Bronx and took Angel and his at-risk cohorts on the ride of their lives. With decades of museum shows to their credit, K.O.S. and Abreu continue to pull school kids into professional collaboration.

Then Peter Schjeldahl, art critic of *The New Yorker*, joins us with his essay, *The Critic as Artist*, reminding us that when we pull others from the safety of the shore, we take ourselves into the unknown as well. I wish we could have more art criticism like Schjeldahl’s. I am hopeful we can.

Schjeldahl’s timely advice offers an alternative to the common brand of art criticism built on dry description and predictable arguments: “We grope for a sentence that advances the argument we’re making; reads well; and, we hope, surprises us. We live to be surprised.”

In *Art (Without) Criticism* Paco Barragán reminds us that critics still have power in “passionate, honest, and direct” writing that unhitches itself from art criticism’s identity crisis. Practicing a little forgetfulness concerning market supremacy goes a long way here. Don’t count the underdog out.

And on that note, Colleen Asper interviews Craig Drennen, a painter who “inhabits” cultural artifacts that are iconic for their very obscurity. Imagine five years of work based on the 1984 movie *Supergirl*, “a spinoff largely regarded as a failure and left out of the Superman canon.”

Into the mix we add the artist, educator and writer Kendall Buster. She and I talked about her popular text (co-authored with Paula Crawford) *The Critique Hand Book: The Art Student’s Sourcebook and Survival Guide*. Her advice can make us all better at letting artwork reveal itself by, basically, slowing down: “I typically begin critiques with writing. It slows everyone down to really look at the work and get in touch with their responses before beginning the very different dynamic of verbal discussion.”

Owen Duffy dovetails into this theme with his essay *Art Fairs and Thought-Space*, where he cautions us about the limitations of the razzle dazzle, high-speed experiences at the art fair. While the art fair creates under-one-roof convenience “it denies us the possibility of what art historian and cultural critic Aby Warburg called ‘thought-space’ (*Denkraum*), the sense of distance from our environment needed for contemplation.” Bet on Jean Baudrillard being brought into the discussion here.

The issue reminds us that—thankfully—there are real art worlds beyond the tent. Jeff Edwards interviews Carolina Stubbe, founder of arte FIST FOUNDATION a non-profit in Puerto Rico that facilitates site-specific land art public projects. Then Irina Leyva-Pérez interviews Jorge Perianes, a Spanish artist known for evoking thought space through absurd nature-based installations that mull over our inability to understand our very existence. Then Jennie Klein’s essay, *Buildering: Misbehaving the City* shows us art that finds its currency in swinging on, climbing—and even jumping from—urban structures. Then, Michele Robecchi contextualizes the 2013 work of Sharon Hayes: video interviews investigating sexual orientation of students at a women’s college in Massachusetts.

And to book-end this summary, Paco Barragán interviews artist Enrique Marty, an artist whose view on irony and sarcasm should be pulled into the conversation: “Sarcasm ... is something I try to avoid (it even repels me). I’m solely interested in irony, and always as a beginning point, never for its own sake. Sarcasm and cynicism are like salt on grass.”

They are corrosive to hope.

Stephen Knudsen  
*Senior Editor*

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**Scott Thorp** is an artist and professor at the Savannah College of Art and Design. Specializing in creativity, his book, *A Curious Path: Creativity in an Age of Abundance*, is to be published late in 2014. His essay “You’ve Got Talent” is forthcoming in the anthology *The ART of Critique/Re-imagining Professional Art Criticism and the Art School Critique*.



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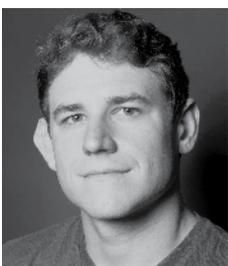
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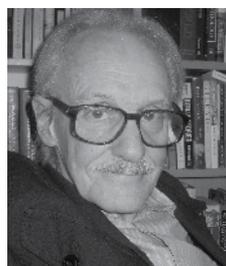
**Jeff Edwards** is an arts writer and faculty member in the Visual and Critical Studies Department at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York. He has an MFA in art criticism and writing from SVA and a master’s degree in public and private management from the Yale School of Management.



**Jon Seals** is a master’s candidate in religion and visual arts at Yale Divinity School and Yale Institute of Sacred Music and teaches a course called “Exploring the Arts of New York City” at The College of New Rochelle. He holds an MFA in painting from Savannah College of Art and Design.



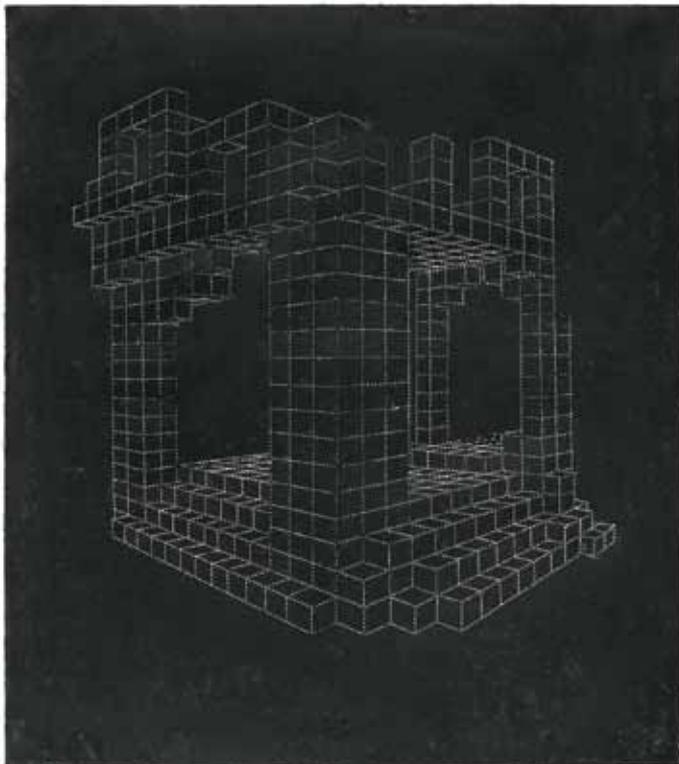
**Owen Duffy** is a Ph.D. candidate studying contemporary art history at Virginia Commonwealth University. He has been published by *Art in Print*, *Fjords Review* and *Ceramics Monthly* and has presented research at the National Gallery of Art, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and Stedelijk Museum. He curated “The Tapia Twins: Bringing Together Art & Medicine,” the inaugural exhibition at VCU’s The Depot.



**Peter Schjeldahl** has been an art critic for *The New Yorker* since 1998. He was a regular art critic for *The Sunday New York Times* (1969-1975), *The Village Voice* (1966, 1980-1982, 1990-1998), and *7 Days* (1988-1990). His writing has also appeared in *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*. His collections of criticism include *The Hydrogen Jukebox: Selected Writings* (1991) and *Let’s See: Writings on Art from The New Yorker* (2008).



**BASIM MAGDY: An Absent Population Laughs at its Haunting Withdrawal**



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Kendall Buster, *Resonance*, 2010, steel, shadecloth, Chemistry Lab Atrium, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ. Photo courtesy Bruce M. White.

## Ricerche e comizi d'amore

BY MICHELE ROBECCHI



Founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to fight sexual discrimination in academic circles, American women's colleges were hit by a serious storm in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when significant changes affecting the social landscape

prompted more institutions to become coeducational, resulting in a greater number of women enrolling. Quickly establishing themselves in this environment, female students became a cornerstone of this newly refounded scholastic system, earning high grades in large percentages, eventually completing their studies more often than their male counterparts. To cope with this new reality, women's colleges developed a strategy of survival in which exclusivity replaced necessity, effectively splitting public opinion in two camps, with critics accusing them of being representative of a select, privileged society still rooted in primordial ideals, and supporters claiming that segregated education constitutes a more efficient and fundamentally less distracting instructive model at what is normally considered a delicate age for a student.

Forty or so years later, many things have changed. According to research conducted by the Women's College Coalition in 2013, there are only 47 women's colleges left in the U.S., most of them surviving by recruiting international students. Their diminished role and new demographic have done little to disperse die-hard cliques normally attached to them, though, including the aforementioned "ahead" versus "behind" debate and the fact that same-sex institutions, whether they are seminaries or women's colleges, are often viewed (or fantasized) as fertile soil for intense gay sexual activities.

This latter point has been the subject of *Ricerche: Three* (2013), Sharon Hayes' video documentary previewed at the 55th Venice Biennale last year. Based on Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Comizi d'amore*, a black-and-white film shot in 1963 in which the director conducted a series of field interviews across Italy about people's love life and sexual habits, *Ricerche* (the number "three" being intentionally adopted to underscore a fraction of a wider examination) investigates the same subject with a group of students from a women's college in Massachusetts. It's hard to imagine anything more remote than a cloistered institution in New England in the 2010s than Italy in the 1960s, a country where divorce and abortion were still illegal, and where being gay, courtesy of the strong Catholic climate and the predominant Latin macho mentality, was more than an issue. (In their groundbreaking debut album in 1984, the English pop-dance act Bronski Beat published the age



Sharon Hayes, *Ricerche: three*, 2013, single channel HD video, 38 minutes, HD video still. Participant: Octavia Cephas. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin.

of consent for gay sex in every European country. Italy was the only one where no law was in place in this sense, perhaps to its credit). Still, Hayes' work is possibly the most successful attempt ever made by a contemporary artist to capture some of Pasolini's original intentions. Unlike Pasolini, who hopped from teenagers to blue-collar workers, football players, pop stars and fellow writers like Oriana Fallaci, Alberto Moravia and Giuseppe Ungaretti, Hayes' focused on a smaller group of people, and yet her research surprisingly produced similar results in terms of complexity.

"Many of [these institutions] have a new task of accommodating students who decide (after enrollment) to change their gender from female to male," Hayes has acutely observed. "Thus, the population attending the school exists on a much wider gender spectrum than the description 'all-women's college' can hold clear."

What both films have in common is their venturing into an intricate topic in a time of deep social transformation. The biggest drive of *Ricerche*, as the name suggests, is not to present absolute answers, but to understand and promote understanding. Hayes, like Pasolini, is the quintessential example of a sharp intellectual brain who doesn't fall into the trap of patronizing or manipulating her subjects. Even in the most inquisitive moments, her attitude is tactful, sensitive and not at all judgmental, refraining from assuming the heroic position of the artist as a spokesperson for the truth. ■

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# Art (without) Criticism

BY PACO BARRAGÁN



## THE CRISIS OF ART CRITICISM

Maybe it has always been like that, maybe it's just the reflection of the cultural logic of late capitalism with its complexity and contradiction. After all, art and culture—as Jameson would put it—have ceased to be super-structural in relation to economy revealing its relations of production and consumption.

And as such, art and the art system are trapped in a permanent *contradictio in terminis*. Groys' assertion in *Art Power* keenly account for this: "For the functioning of the art system is based on certain aesthetic value judgments, on certain criteria of choice, rules of inclusion and exclusion, and the like. All these value judgments, criteria and rules are, of course, not autonomous. Rather, they reflect the dominant social conventions and power structures."

Most of us tend to believe that art criticism stands for symbolic value and disinterestedness, but in the short-, mid- and long-run it implies in many cases the formation of value, a market value that is imbued with the same "romantic" demands of authenticity, sublimity or humanization. Storytelling is at the core of capitalist culture. Art criticism is a sophisticated form of storytelling. It tells us which artists and works of art are innovative, progressive or even utopian. First capitalism took over pop culture, and now it has taken hold of high art. Culture in both manifestations becomes the new battleground for the clash of classes and the Marxian relations of production.

The question now is: Does art criticism still tell a necessary and transformative story?

At this point I'm not really interested in defining what art criticism is or can be. Ten different people would give 10 different, abstract and equally valid definitions. In a 2002 *October* magazine roundtable discussion about art criticism, Rosalind Krauss said that it's about generating a "discursive space within which the artist has to be placed in order for the work to take on a certain kind of importance."

To be honest, I'm more interested in Hal Foster's idea of "post-criticism": "Today there is little space for critique, even in the universities and the museums. Bullied by conservative commentators, most academia no longer stress the importance of critical thinking for an engaged citizenry, and most curators, dependent on corporate sponsors, no longer promote the critical debate once deemed essential to the public reception of advanced art." (Foster, H. "Post-Critical", *OCTOBER* 139, Winter 2012). Indeed, it's this idea of outdatedness that I'm interested in analyzing. So, let's skip the whats of art criticism and let's go for the whys of this malaise.

There are basically three main components in this dismissal of critical judgment: the shift from a text-based to an image-based society; the advent of pop culture in the realms of high art; and changes in the function, perspective and validation authority of the art critic.

## FROM CRITIC TO COLLECTOR

Whether we want to accept that art criticism is in crisis or not, we have to admit that the position of the art critic has changed in late



Álvaro Barrios, *Wedding Present*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 35.4" x 35.4." Courtesy Nohra Haime Gallery, New York.

capitalism. From a quasi-demiurgic role *a la manière de* Clement Greenberg, we have moved to the other extreme in which the commodification of the power structures—museums, art media and galleries—together with the advent of new players—artists, curators and especially collectors—have questioned the functions of the art critic.

Benjamin Buchloh said a while ago in the abovementioned roundtable discussion on art criticism that the market had dismantled the competence of the art critic as "the public sphere of the museum is no longer calling for that third independent voice between the producer and the recipient," concluding that "It is at such a moment, when it has become more than evident that the critic has no place anymore in our cultural structures."

The fact is that this late capitalist society brought along on one hand the democratization of culture with the popularization of art in general, and the museum in particular; at the same time, the commodification of culture and the idea of "culture industries" capable of staging memorable artistic experiences turned museums, but also biennials, art fairs and festivals into what I framed in 2008 as "Urban Entertainment Centers" (UEC)—think of the last coincidence of a *Grand Tour* comprising Manifesta, Documenta and Art Basel. And these platforms are competing with the museum and the art critic by validating more and more a select group of art and artists.

And, finally, in the wake of the 21st century we experienced the reign of the collector. Price has become more valuable than artistic judgment; commercial value subsumes critical value. Today, it's about collectors, their desires, tastes and preferences. And maybe that's why contemporary art has become so kitsch: a lack of competence in the field of aesthetic appraisal.

What can we as art critics do? Just be honest, direct and passionate in our writings and forget about the market. ■

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# A COMMON CORE

BY JON SEALS

“Those who can’t *do, teach.*” Few sentiments burn an educator quite like that cliché. Besides being offensive, it isn’t true. If it were, what would those who “can’t do” really be teaching?

No one can fault artists who struggle for a time when they assume the roles of teachers. But when the best teachers find the perfect balance between the two careers, teaching is not simply secondary to the practice of art. Nor is it a long-term pandering in the harbor of identity crisis, one easily transferred to students. Rather the best artist/educators, like rip currents, pull everyone in their path far past the shore’s safety and into the unknown expanse of the ocean.<sup>1</sup>

The best teachers, instead of viewing studios and classrooms, students, and colleagues as distractions from work done in their own studios, see just the opposite. It is precisely *through* studio visits, meaningful relationships, and classroom environments that an artist can do even better artistic work. Great teachers and artists have much in common; they know how to absorb the best, worst, and most interesting experiences and transform them into complex, compelling ways that both challenge and affirm their students.

Recently, New Haven, CT has served as an interesting crossroads, showcasing artists who have influenced decades-worth of young artists who have themselves found success as artists/educators. Two recent New Haven exhibitions compelled me to consider the role of artist as educator, provoking new questions and providing examples of significant artists who led distinguished teaching careers.

These two exhibitions,—“Five West Coast Artists: Bischoff, Diebenkorn, Neri, Park, and Thiebaud” at Yale University Art Gallery (March 28 - July 13, 2014), and “William Bailey Paintings and Drawings” at FRED.GIAMPIETRO Gallery (May 30 - July 12, 2014)—have overlapped, as did the artists/educators they featured. William Bailey, from the East Coast, and David Park, Elmer Bischoff, Richard Diebenkorn, Wayne Thiebaud, and Manuel Neri, all from the West Coast, correspond loosely in their years as teachers. Bailey was a professor of art at Yale from 1969 to 1995.<sup>2</sup> Out west, the Bay Area artists taught at a host of schools from the 1950s into the 1990s. Both groups brought the object/figure back into painting in new and interesting ways, swimming against the current of Clement Greenberg’s abstract expressionists and influencing hundreds of students through both their pedagogy and art making.

In the Bay Area Figurative Movement, the charismatic David Park inspired a group of university professors and artists to challenge the status quo. After a brief teaching stint in New England, Park taught at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) from 1946 to 1952 and then at Berkeley from 1955 to 1960.<sup>3</sup> Park had been painting in abstract modes through the 1940s, but in an unlikely, vigorous artistic turn, he spearheaded a group that revived representational subjects and the physical world to explore the kind of exuberant color and brushwork used by many in the New York School.<sup>4</sup>

Nancy Boas, in her new book *David Park: A Painter’s Life* provides a landmark account of Park’s painting and teaching lives. “Park’s course descriptions,” she writes, “reveal his artistic aims as well as his teaching principles,”<sup>5</sup> including his exhortations to stu-

dents to, “constantly look for what is meaningful to themselves, and try to present this meaningfulness to others,” and to “make working habits as genuinely simple, unselfconscious and vital as any process of nature.”<sup>6</sup> Park’s magnetic teaching style lay in his combined grit and sophistication. This, partnered with his urgent, physical painting, attracted a wave of postwar GI Bill students that was filling CSFA’s rosters. Some were allowed to share his studio space; others set up shop outside his classroom. Still others were lucky enough to play in his band, named the *Studio 13 Jazz Band*,<sup>7</sup> made up of fellow faculty, administration, and students. One notable student, Richard Diebenkorn, grew to be Park’s kindred spirit, each man playing a significant role in the other’s life.<sup>8</sup>

Students, faculty, family and friends all inspired Park’s insatiable drive to paint. During Park’s time at CSFA, something special was happening there, and it owed much to the people surrounding him, people who both affirmed and resisted his influence. Park’s influence was by no means monolithic. Boas cites Diebenkorn to point out that abstract painters like “Mark Rothko (who taught in the 1947 and 1949 summer sessions) and Ad Reinhardt (who taught in the 1950 summer session) provided inspiration for the CSFA students, he said, but ‘the revolution’ of the postwar period in the Bay Area ‘didn’t look like any of these guys in attitude or spirit.’” Diebenkorn recalled that Park and Bischoff “caught the enthusiasm of the students who were responding to these rather severe men. Staid Rothko, stuffy Still, careful, secretive Reinhardt had all these hang loose students . . . It was the looseness and the extravagance of abstract expressionism.”<sup>9</sup>

Still, Park’s devotees were legion. “His presence was extraordinary,” his student Howard Margolis explained. “He was very bright, but simple—the most effective kind of brightness. His greatness came through in the classroom. You sensed it in his teaching, and there it was in his paintings—the passion and honesty together.”<sup>10</sup> This squares with Park’s own artist statements. In 1959 he wrote, “The very same things that we value most, the ideals of humanity, are the properties of the arts. The words that come to mind are many—energy, wisdom, courage, delight, humor, sympathy, gentleness, honesty, peace, freedom . . . I believe most artists are goaded by a vision of making their work vivid and alive with such qualities.”<sup>11</sup>

The “Five West Coast Artists” exhibition captures how Park’s infectious pedagogy influenced a lineage of students. Early on were Bischoff and Diebenkorn, whose own legacies are profound. In turn, one of their prominent students was Manuel Neri, who went on to teach at CSFA and UC Davis until his retirement in 1990.<sup>12</sup>

Also retiring from UC Davis the same year was Wayne Thiebaud who taught from 1951 - 1990.<sup>13</sup> When asked about his long tenure of teaching, Thiebaud said teaching was vital to his process, and a vital part of his teaching was showing students how to choose subject matter.

We talk about that, so long as the primary purpose is to make something really well made. The formal values are greatly stressed, and the subject matter must come out of



David Park teaching at the California School of Fine Arts, ca. 1949 (San Francisco Art Institute Archives) reproduced with permission from William Heick Jr.

that concern, or on top of that concern. The trouble with subject matter is that I think students often feel that there are certain subjects that are more important than other subjects. And in my judgment, the conventions and subject matter of any kind are always there for development, so that if they want to paint flowers they should be able to do that and to learn to do it in some sort of extraordinary way. So the subject matter, I think, is often tested so that they get away from any kind of sophomoric qualification of the subject and really dig into it in such a way that it really finally means something to them.<sup>14</sup>

Jock Reynolds, Director of the Yale University Art Gallery, organized the “Five West Coast Artists” exhibition. He also studied under Thiebaud at UC Davis and has expanded the legacy of artist/educator into his role of arts administrator. For the exhibit, Reynolds recreated the feeling of being in a classroom, with the gallery’s airy rooms, lit by skylights, and the printed anecdotes posted next to the paintings that set the room’s tone as a space for learning. One anecdote was by Reynolds himself:

I remember attending my first graduate seminar with Wayne Thiebaud, who looked out at his new crop of stu-

dents and explained that he and his faculty peers couldn’t teach any of us how to become artists, that we had to assume that identity for ourselves and get on with making work. Thiebaud added, almost cryptically, that there were some very practical things he could teach us that might be useful during our years at UC Davis. What followed was a remarkably lucid lecture on where to buy the best and cheapest salami, cheese, olives, coffee, fruit, bread, cakes, wine, and more in the region... he was sharing something more than a shopping list with us. He was giving his students direct insight into the very subject matter that was inspiring his own art: the frosted cakes, cream pies, lollipops, trays of herring and sardines, and other foods he transformed, through the skilled application of paint onto canvas, into tactile and sensuous visual representations. I took this first lesson at UC Davis to heart as a genuine gift, a true sharing of what inspired my professor...

While the West Coast artists reached for the object/figure in their art and their teaching, William Bailey pursued a similar course back east. Bailey’s early work, like Park’s, was abstract expressionist.<sup>15</sup> But he later found inspiration in none other than



William Bailey in his studio, 2010. Courtesy of Michael Marsland. Yale University.

the humble egg as a way to experiment with the purity of form.<sup>16</sup> After obtaining his B.F.A. in 1955 and M.F.A. in 1957 from the School of Art at Yale, Bailey taught there from 1965 to 1995, where he now holds the position of Kingman Brewster Professor Emeritus of Art.<sup>17</sup> As a teacher he is beloved, and as a painter, he has work in major collections nationwide, including the Museum of Modern Art and the National Museum of American Art in Washington, and he keeps an active exhibition calendar. Like the Bay Area Figurative artists on the West Coast, he investigates formal qualities such as shape, form, color, temperature, and spatial relationships. Bailey, as Park was known to do,<sup>18</sup> creates his paintings from memory or mental images, allowing room for viewers' interpretations and inserting himself into the work. But unlike Park, he does it without the abstract expressionist painter's athletic brushwork. That said, Bailey's paintings' are subtly active on the surface, including a tremendous amount of rhythm created by the dominant one-directional hatching of the backgrounds in contrast to the alternating dance of directional hatching that create each vessel and object. As the poet Mark Strand has noted,<sup>19</sup> every object is perfectly in place within the composition, until one moves to the next painting in which the same or very similar objects are arranged differently to create new, perfectly placed compositions. Bailey's craft is remarkably intentional, and so I was almost surprised when, on closer examination, I noticed an edge of the painted table in *Terra Nuova*, 2002, left for the viewer to see the iteration. With paintings as carefully

calculated as Bailey's, this was no doubt an intentional move. I soon noticed several other subtle irregularities and after-the-fact alterations and iterations. I could also see his influence in the work of three of his former students: Hilary Harkness, John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in a very quiet way, I began to see connections to the likes of Park and Diebenkorn, both of whom allowed the viewer to see the act of painting in their work. Such work is an invitation to learn something about painting, as in a lesson—a teaching moment for both painter and viewer.

I spoke with Bailey about his teaching and painting legacy. At 84, he had a firm handshake and piercing eyes. I recognized his august intellect immediately, but it was delivered with a warm smile.

**Jon Seals** - Did teaching influence your paintings? How did your painting shape your teaching?

**William Bailey** - For my generation, teaching in universities was one of the few ways of supporting oneself while working as a professional artist. Almost no one, after the WPA, could survive on the sales of paintings. I took teaching seriously and tried to do it well. I can't say how it influenced my work but must point out that they are very different activities. As a painter I am totally involved in the world of the painting. As a teacher I'm responsible for the students' visual and intellectual development. I tried to awaken their talents and teach them to employ the technical and formal devices, which are a necessary part of the education of the artist.



David Park, *Boy Painting*, 1957, oil on canvas, 50" x 36". Courtesy of Hackett | Mill, representative of the Estate of David Park.

**J.S.** - What does it mean to teach art? What should art teachers be doing today?

**W.B.** - First, art can't be taught. A teacher should help students develop the capacity to discover what they need to teach themselves.

**J.S.** - Some professors stop teaching after reaching high levels of success with their own studio work. But after you reached that level of success with your paintings, you continued to teach. What kept you in the classroom?

**W.B.** - When I was financially able to do it, I reduced the amount of time I spent teaching. During my last five years, I continued to teach because I enjoyed the interaction with students and colleagues at Yale.

**J.S.** - Do you have any thoughts on balancing teaching, making art, and family?

**W.B.** - It's almost impossible to achieve a satisfactory balance. I found that I was moonlighting when I was painting and I was moonlighting when I was teaching. Each one took time away from the other.

**J.S.** - So there's no magic equation or solution on how to balance the time?

**W.B.** - I don't think so. People who have done it successfully, like Thiebaud, have always been a mystery to me. I don't know how he does *all* the things that he does, and he does them with such, I wouldn't say apparent ease, but he just doesn't seem to break a sweat. I feel more akin to

Diebenkorn because we are both anxious about getting it right, which is a great motivator. I don't sense that anxiety with Wayne.

When I asked Baily to share stories from the classroom, he was reticent, alluding to a teacher/student ethic that would not allow it. "I've been very lucky. I've had some very talented students and some students who went on to celebrity," he said with a smile. "They're not always the same ones."

I had the good fortune of catching up with one of Bailey's former students, Jennifer Toth, (M.F.A. Yale School of Art), Professor in Painting at Wagner College in Staten Island, New York.<sup>21</sup>

"William Bailey is a legendary teacher," she said. "I was very blessed to have been able to take his last figure painting class at Yale in the MFA program in 1995. He demonstrated such wisdom and knowledge of art and gave me a glimpse of the complexities, subtleties, and depths of painting. He influenced my art and my teaching style by helping me slow down and see moments of great painting in my own work or in students' work, and also to appreciate differences. He gave me the patience to see more carefully and slowly."

In Marc Trujillo's recent *Huffington Post* entry "The Influence of William Bailey," the painter Jenny Dubnau comments:

William Bailey really taught me how to paint, or, should I say, gave me the tools to teach myself how to paint. Style was never a particular preoccupation for Bailey: he taught formal issues in a spare, open and almost philosophical way. Form transmuted into meaning almost seamlessly. How you make space in your painting, how you use color to create space, was, for Bailey, the deepest incarnation of metaphor, and style flowed from that: he'd always talk about the "world" that your painting conjured, and that world was the metaphorical structure around which your meaning circulated. I also recall with fondness some of his quintessential questions: "Can I 'peel' this piece of paint 'off' the painting's surface? Can I 'press' into the surface of the painting?" In other words, how effectively are you building your space?<sup>22</sup>

If for Bailey a painting may conjure a "world," what are its boundaries? William Bailey and David Park generate the worlds they want to see in their painting. But it's more than optics for both men. Through countless testimony of their lives and work, it is evident they also created the world they wanted to experience. I'm reminded of a specific story in which Park, in part, has been given credit for saving the life of Sam Francis. Francis was a veteran Park heard about who was seriously ill in the hospital with tuberculosis of the spine who had an affinity for art. Park paid several visits to Francis while he was in the hospital to talk about life, and art, quickly a friendship was born. Francis was no formal student of Park's, no son of a collector or wealthy patron, but Park would pay him weekly visits, coordinate a museum field trip, and bring in borrowed works of art from his friends to challenge and inspire Francis. Park expanded his artistic philosophies beyond the canvas, beyond the classroom, and sought out his own student to bring hope. And it worked. After a long friendship Francis was eventually healed. Francis said of Park, "He saved my life by getting me to paint pictures."<sup>23</sup> Park did not view art or teaching as



William Bailey, *Afternoon in Umbria II*, 2010-11, tempera on wood panel, 20" x 24". Courtesy of the artist, Betty Cuninghame Gallery, New York and FRED.GIAMPIETRO Gallery, New Haven, CT.

distractions from the seriousness of life, but rather as a way to move through life. Francis would later describe Park, "He seemed to be a living example of the principle of brotherly love."<sup>24</sup>

Prodigious artist/educators like Bailey and Park encourage us to challenge the status quo of the artist/teacher role—to imagine new ways to respond to the world (which may involve re-imagined strategies from the past), and to bring others along in discovery. Time invested in these deeply meaningful teacher/student relationships can change the direction of not only a young artist's life and craft, but of art itself as it continues to unfold. ■

#### NOTES

1. These sentiments come from my work in issue #19 of *ARTPULSE*, a short review titled, "The Sting of Art Education" of the exhibition titled "Five West Coast Artists: Bischoff, Diebenkorn, Neri, Park, and Thiebaud," that ran March 28–July 13, 2014 at Yale University Art Gallery. The intent of this essay titled, "A Common Core" is to expand and investigate concepts first presented in that earlier review.
2. Dorie Baker, "The 'made up' world of artist William Bailey." *Yale News*. <http://news.yale.edu/2010/12/10/made-world-artist-william-bailey> (accessed July 28, 2014).
3. Helen Park Bigelow, *David Park, Painter: Nothing Held Back*. Manchester, Vt.: Hudson Hills Press, 2009. 188-190.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Nancy Boas, *David Park: A Painter's Life*. Berkeley: UC Press, 2012. 111.

6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 180.
8. *Ibid.*, 96-103.
9. *Ibid.*, 116.
10. *Ibid.*, 116.
11. *Ibid.*, 211.
12. Bruce Nixon, and Maxwell L. Anderson, *Manuel Neri: The Figure in Relief*. Hamilton, N.J.: Grounds For Sculpture. In association with Hudson Hills Press, 2006. Xvi.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Wayne Thiebaud, and Dana Self, *Wayne Thiebaud: Fifty Years of Painting*. Kansas City, Mo.: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003. 5.
15. Giuliano Briganti, and John Hollander, "Introduction by John Hollander." In *William Bailey*. New York: Rizzoli, 1991. 16-18.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Dorie Baker, "The 'made up' world of artist William Bailey." *Yale News*. <http://news.yale.edu/2010/12/10/made-world-artist-william-bailey> (accessed July 28, 2014).
18. *The Figurative Mode: Bay Area Painting, 1956-66*. New York, Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, 1984. 12.
19. Mark Strand, and William Bailey, "Essay by Mark Strand." In *William Bailey*. New York: Abrams, 1987. 32-34.
20. Karen Rosenberg, "Art and Design." *nytimes.com*. [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/26/arts/design/26galleries.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/26/arts/design/26galleries.html?_r=0) (accessed July 28, 2014).
21. *Ibid.*
22. Marc Trujillo, "The Influence of William Bailey." *The Huffington Post*. *TheHuffingtonPost.com*, 13 Oct. 2014. Web. 24 Oct. 2014. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marc-trujillo/the-influence-of-william-b\\_5970074.html?utm\\_hp\\_ref=arts&ir=Arts](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marc-trujillo/the-influence-of-william-b_5970074.html?utm_hp_ref=arts&ir=Arts)>.
23. Nancy Boas, *David Park: A Painter's Life*. Berkeley: UC Press, 2012. 116.
24. *Ibid.*

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# THE CRITIC AS ARTIST:

## Updating Oscar Wilde

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Oscar Wilde's "The Critic as Artist," published in 1890, manifests art criticism as a branch of what is called, often dismissively, *belles lettres*. It is dauntingly long, and congested with purple rhetorical flights and flourishes. Wilde flaunts his knowledge and sophistication in a blizzard of references, variously obvious or murky now, to art and artists throughout history. I suspect that the display excited readers in the eighteen-nineties as a sort of house tour of a fully and beautifully furnished mind in the latest art-for-art's-sake fashion. Today it's somewhat like a period room in a museum, behind a velvet rope. But, along the way, Wilde mounts razor-edged assaults on dreary, timid, deadening attitudes toward art, of kinds that have changed in form, over a hundred and twenty-some years, but never expire. While praising beauty, he exhibits its utility as a weapon.

I pledge allegiance to Oscar Wilde's model of art criticism.

The model promotes intelligence and energy in culture, as all criticism should, while making the exercise as little forbidding and boring as possible. It posits pleasures of the text as a rightful expectation of readers. The mode is autobiographical. Ideas and even facts, as well as feelings, register as events in a life.

The speaker both is and isn't the writer. While going by the names "I" and "me," the critic-as-artist is a fictional being, mysteriously hell-bent for self-cultivation and never tired or confused. No one knows better the flimsiness of that illusion than any actual writer, who is often tired and regularly confused. He or she bets that readers, if engaged enough, will condone the masquerade.

The critic-as-artist conveys artificially heightened states of mind. Not really belonging to the writer, the states are open to the reader. A name for the transaction is "style." Critics-as-artists are stylists, in key with tastes of their times. They operate in the flashing present, where everybody lives. Inevitably, if not terminally, they become dated. In exceptional cases, like that of Wilde, the meat of what they say outlasts its sizzle.

In dialogue, a pleasant character named Ernest advances popular opinions, and a smart-aleck named Gilbert shoots them down. Says Ernest,

*Why should the artist be troubled by the shrill clamour of criticism? Why should those who cannot create take upon themselves to estimate the value of creative work? What can they know about it?*

Gilbert's answers go beyond a defense of art criticism, as a professional vocation, to a case for independent thought, as an ethical imperative. He begins by pointing out that artists themselves function critically, in what they choose to do and not do. They are critics narrowly but deeply focused on their own work. Their decisions become history.

Says Gilbert,

*...there has never been a creative age that has not been*

*critical also. For it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms. The tendency of creation is to repeat itself. It is to the critical instinct that we owe each new school that springs up, each new mould that art finds ready to its hand.*

Another critic-as-artist, Gertrude Stein, once said, "Artists don't need criticism. They need appreciation. If they need criticism, they aren't artists." This true statement supports Wilde's view. Proper art criticism is not directed to artists. Sensing this can make some artists grumpy.

Gilbert goes on,

*I am aware that there are many honest workers in painting as well as in literature who object to criticism entirely. They are quite right. Their work stands in no intellectual relation to their age. It brings us no new element of pleasure. It suggests no fresh departure of thought, or passion, or beauty. It should not be spoken of. It should be left to the oblivion that it deserves.*

There is a world of significance in Wilde's phrase "intellectual relation to their age." I will dwell on it. I don't think it refers to the value of critical ideas, in themselves, much less systems of ideas. Intellectual systems antagonize critics-as-artists. In turn, adherents of systems tend to regard such critics, if at all, as mosquito-like nuisances. (I speak as one who is used to being swatted by academics.)

Most intellectual systems stand in relation not to their ages, but to previous ones. Clement Greenberg consolidated his program of modernism in the late nineteen-fifties and early sixties, just in time for Pop and minimalist artists to demolish it, with up-to-date critical insight. The set of beliefs called post-modernism arose on a wave of nostalgia for the glory days of that and even earlier demolitions. Marcel Duchamp kept being hauled from his grave and sent, zombie-like, against imaginary oppressors.

The key word in Wilde's phrase "intellectual relation" is "relation": thought that pays its way by coaxing meaning from encounters with reality. The effect is temporary. It involves ideas only as instruments. No idea is true in itself. Truth happens to an idea when it clarifies an experience. Then its work is done. It may prove useful again. I think of Charles Baudelaire's definition of beauty, as a spark between something fleeting and something timeless. That idea never wears out for me. But it is true only occasionally, when beauty strikes. Then it goes back to being words on a page.

I've mentioned a natural antagonism between artists, who want appreciation, and critics, who criticize. Gilbert dramatizes it in a fairly jolting passage that ends with what, for critics, has to be the most comforting sentence in the essay:

*Bad artists always admire each other's work. They call it being large-minded and free from prejudice. But a truly*

## Oscar Wilde



## The Critic As Artist

Oscar Wilde's *The Critic as Artist* was first published in 1890. This photo of Wilde by Napoleon Sarony corresponds to the 2007 edition, published by Mondial (New York).

*great artist cannot conceive of life being shown, or beauty fashioned, under any conditions other than those that he has selected. Creation employs all its critical faculty within its own sphere. It may not use it in the sphere that belongs to others. It is exactly because a man cannot do a thing that he is the proper judge of it.*

That is, the inept man or woman is free to slip in and out of the minds of artists whose mastery is, besides a kind of palace, a kind of prison. The unskilled must bow to skill, of course. I hope always to keep in mind that I'm unqualified to understand the work of artists in the ways that they do. However, I can understand it in a way that they don't: as myself, whoever that may be on a given occasion.

Like the artist, the critic creates and affirms value to the degree of his or her individuality. This is a rule without exceptions.

Says Gilbert:

*...there is no fine art without self-consciousness, and self-consciousness and the critical spirit are one. ... For there is no art where there is no style, and no style where there is no unity, and unity is of the individual. No doubt Homer had old ballads and stories to deal with,*

*as Shakespeare had chronicles and plays from which to work, but they were merely his rough material. He took them, and shaped them into song.*

I think that is or should be common sense. Both good art and good criticism employ self-consciousness as a workaday tool. We model our thoughts and feelings to ourselves, as if they were actors and we were directors auditioning them. Many we reject out of hand, some we schedule for call-backs, and a few we hire on the spot. If we are writers, we keep framing sentences in our minds, each with a tone of confidence and conviction even when a moment's reflection proves it lame and wrong. We grope for a sentence that advances the argument we're making, reads well, and, we hope, surprises us. We live to be surprised.

O.K, it's a job. Critics toil within editorial constraints, which affect our styles. In an otherwise fantastically generous essay on me in *The New York Review of Books*, the critic-as-artist Sanford Schwartz decided that my writing was more fun before I joined *The New Yorker*. For all I know, that's true. But to hear me complain about working for *The New Yorker*, you would need to have the ears of Superman and to hold your breath and concentrate until you die.

Says Gilbert, pressing the point about individuality home:

*...it is only by intensifying his own personality that the critic can interpret the personality and work of others, and the more strongly this personality enters into the interpretation the more real the interpretation becomes, the more satisfying, the more convincing, and the more true.*

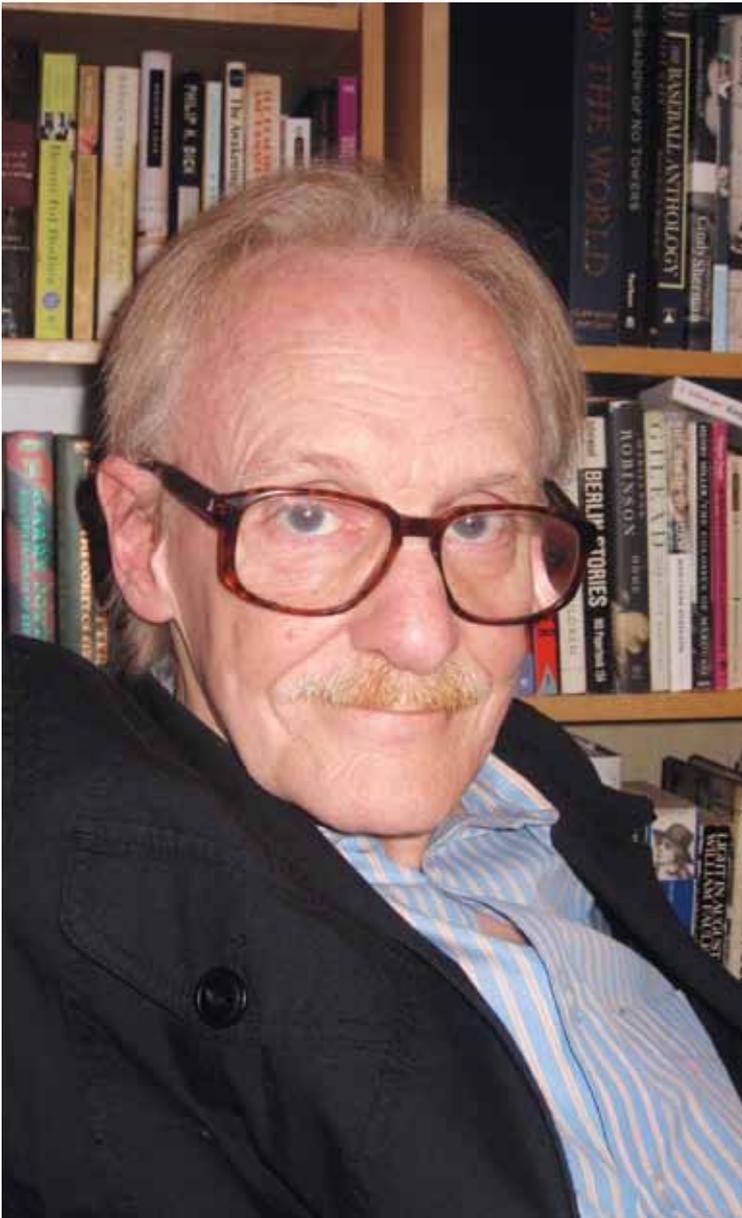
That's tricky if you're not Oscar Wilde. Not many of us have personalities that are integral and robust enough to carry the full weight of an argument. So we must pretend that we do. A famous declaration of Rimbaud, "*Je est un autre*—I is somebody else," seems to me a normal condition for persuasive writing. We comb out our sorry selves to discover better ones.

I'm always glad when someone praises my work, but at times I've been uneasy, as if I had gotten away with a scam. I want to say, "That wasn't me." A former actress, to whom I'm married, long ago taught me the right response. She said, "Smile and say thank you." And she added, "Keep moving."

Having known a number of savvy performers—actors, comedians, musicians—has instructed me in this regard, by osmosis. By the way, I believe that frequent attendance at theater, cabaret, and music events, as well as dance and, if you can afford it, opera, is the best nourishment for a critical sensibility, as reading other critics is the worst. Those are arts embodied by and for real people, in real time; they can form visceral memories, which set standards for private looking and reading. Let's remember that Wilde's most pronounced genius was for the stage.

Criticism is a performing art. Compared to more directly creative artists, we may be role-bound functionaries. But the tighter the space in which you can swing your arms, the more precious is your liberty to do so.

Every good artist is an outsider artist, in a way that counts; and every good critic is an outsider critic, in a way that counts. Good art and good criticism are not "practices"—that ghastly word, so prevalent in art babble lately. Practices are professional specialties. Associated with art, the word assumes settled social agreements on what artists do. This may comfort the moms and dads of



Peter Schjeldahl is one of America's most esteemed art critics.

art students, casting their children's somewhat alarming choice of career as akin to medicine or the law. It is stupid. Like all jargon, it lets us rattle on about something without feeling, and thereby doubting, the truth of what we say.

The life of art is a renegade passion that scraps the menu of standard professions in a society. I don't insist on myths of the bohemian rebel or holy fool, though there is recurrent truth in them. Independence of spirit doesn't rule out a worldly-wise career, with dealers and assistants and a house in the country. But I do insist that an original, burning dissatisfaction, likely ignited in early childhood, distinguishes artists from their fellow citizens. The same goes for critics-as-artists.

Lastingly majestic about Oscar Wilde is his outsidership at the center of creative culture in his time. His Irishness, gayness, dandyism, and erudition—laced with the feel for trends of a crack journalist—gave him an outsider's angles on the society that he inhabited and adorned. His wit still startles by registering lightning dissents from conventional wisdom that didn't know it was conventional yet. He omits what he contradicts, leaving us to supply it. An unexamined assumption is destroyed, throwing us off balance. We must think a new thought to right ourselves.

Wilde's high-wire act couldn't succeed indefinitely, because it was reliant on a nimble perception of cultural change, moment to moment. He likely would have stumbled in the Age of Cubism. Like his rivalrous friend Whistler, he was fully modern, but on a British sidetrack of the Continental modernity express. The cause of his fall didn't have to be an untimely mishap of hubris, which gave people whom he had outraged the chance to destroy him. In brief: he sued a man for calling him homosexual, which defense lawyers proved in court that he was. He was jailed for three years and died in poverty, of cerebral meningitis, in 1900, forty-six years old. The tragedy had one good effect. It afforded a naked view of the real Oscar Wilde, beneath the gaudy masquerade: a serious, decent, brave man. His aplomb survived it all. As he lay dying in an ugly hotel room, he was heard to say, "Either this wallpaper goes, or I do."

Dave Hickey has noted that when two curators agree, that's a trend, but when two critics agree, one of them is redundant. Bringing to bear and even exaggerating our peculiarities is both the pleasure and the duty of dedicated critics. Readers should not be able to predict, with precision, what we will say on a given subject, because we can't know, ourselves, until in the feverish midst of saying it. We may be perverse, when we can't think of a cogent alternative to a commonplace opinion. Wrongness worries us less than tedium. By sacrificing our dignity, we might at least counter the drag of banality on art talk.

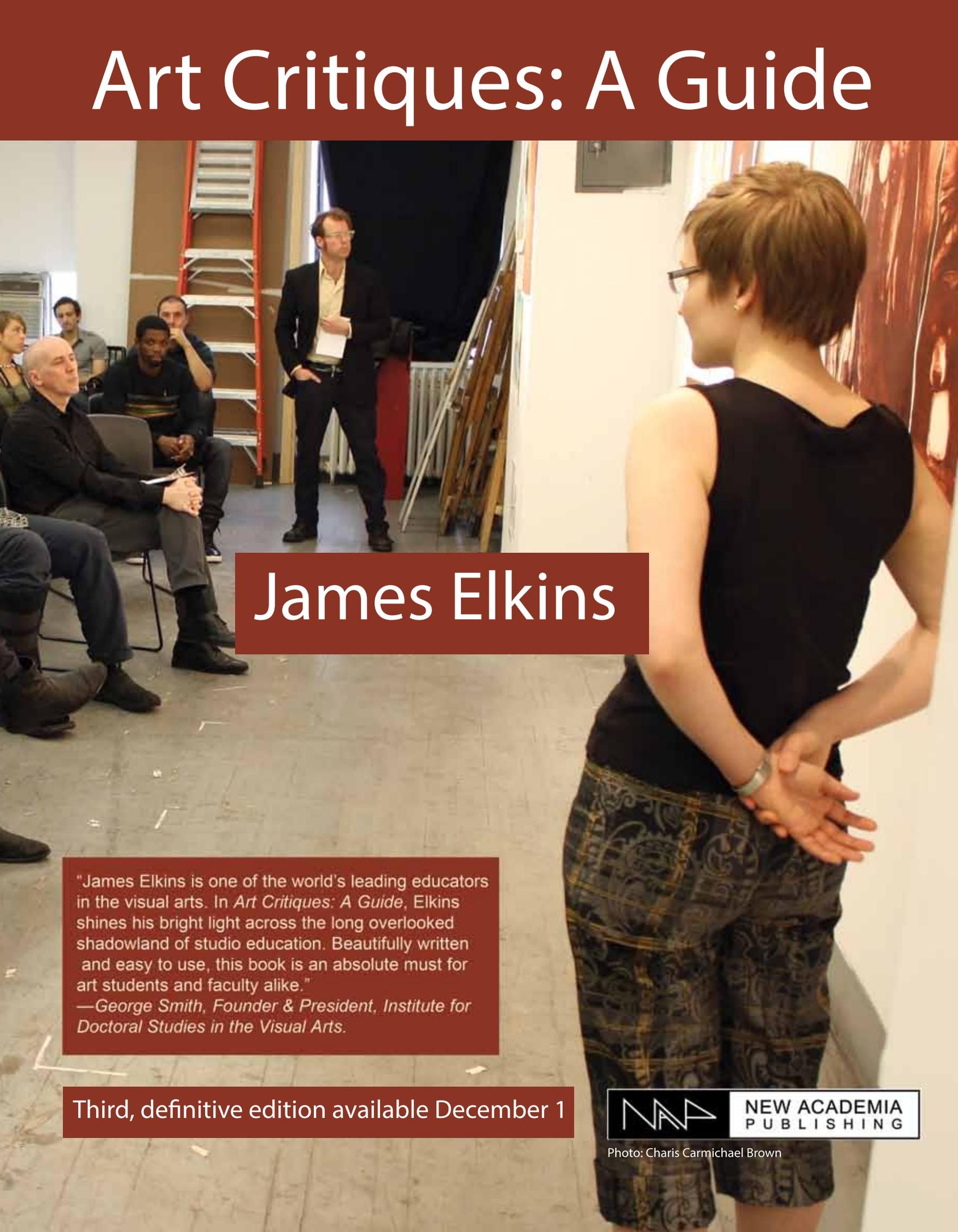
One of my intellectual patron saints, William James, remarked that a thinker can avoid error or seek truth, but cannot do both. Another, Baudelaire, wrote, "I cultivated my hysteria with terror and delight." If that doesn't sound crazy to you, you may be a critic. Your potential reflects the type and degree of outsidership that your life and character have stuck you with—along with an itch to crash the circles of insiders and teach them a little courtesy toward the likes of you. You will tolerate as much loneliness as you can, to the verge of panic. That verge is your limit. You have to feel liked by somebody.

But, most of all, you require a loving relationship with an ideal reader, whom you have never met and never will, in person, but who companions you constantly, in imagination. The relationship is conducted with a full view on the world but a step away from it, as an exclusive compact of mutual devotion. I'm reminded of a pretty good speech by Shakespeare, which gives symbolic voice to my own fondest wish, in this regard, and with which I'll conclude. Lear to Cordelia:

*... Come, let's away to prison.  
We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage.  
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down  
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,  
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
Talk of court news, and we'll talk with them too—  
Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out—  
And take upon 's the mystery of things  
As if we were God's spies. And we'll wear out  
In a walled prison packs and sects of great ones  
That ebb and flow by the moon.*

The play's chief villain speaks next. He says, "Take them away." So away we go. ■

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# LIFE IS A RIVER

## A Conversation with Angel Abreu from Tim Rollins and K.O.S.

BY SCOTT THORP

Heraclitus claimed “no man steps in the same river twice.” His insight points to the universe as being in a constant state of flux. Change is an inevitable part of existence. Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival) know this all too well. Over the last 30 years, their unlikely collaboration has defied all odds, beginning when a young Rollins became a special education art teacher met a group of at-risk teenagers in the Bronx, in one of the worst school districts in America. K.O.S.’s improbable relationship has evolved into one of the longest-lasting artistic studios in history, and their career has epitomized Heraclitean flux, a roller coaster ride from abject poverty to international stardom, a fall from grace and now back to the top. While many of its original members remain, the function of the ensemble has evolved. So it’s fitting that they’ve chosen a river as the metaphor for their latest works.

In 1981, when Rollins began his first day as the special education art teacher at Intermediate School 52, stepping cautiously from the safety of a New York subway onto a platform in the heart of the Bronx, he had no idea what was to come. To his surprise, when he met the principal, the principal yelled, “I won, I won; pay up!” and began collecting his winnings. The teachers had bet against Rollins making it the short distance from subway station to school.

The building—in total disrepair—was situated in an area Rollins refers to as “hell on earth.” The art room that Rollins called the “Hip Hop Sistine Chapel” was floor to ceiling graffiti. The sink didn’t work and there were no supplies. But he stayed. Over time, he and the students began building a unique artistic relationship. Within a few years, the collaboration between Rollins and the kids became recognized for its large-scale works related to classical literature. Their momentum increased until they received international acclaim. Then, in the 1990s, the art market’s collapse, combined with the tragic murder of a K.O.S. member, threw the group into a period of despair.

More than 30 years after that first day in the Bronx, Rollins and K.O.S. are back with large-scale exhibitions, reviews and collaborations worldwide. The kids of K.O.S. are now all grown up, and they and Rollins are now colleagues and friends. Recently, I spoke with Rollins and one of K.O.S.’s longest-standing members, Angel Abreu. Afterward, Abreu and I had the following conversation via email. It is fitting that Abreu, an artist bearing little resemblance to his teenaged self in early days of K.O.S. and now with a degree in philosophy and an appointment as senior professor at the School of Visual Arts in New York, chose to quote Heraclitus in his closing response for our exchange.

*Scott Thorp – Since we met the other day at the SCAD Museum, I keep thinking about your unusual experiences as an artist. From age 11, you essentially grew up as a member of a professional studio. Unlike traditional artist studios, however, where apprentices learn under an established artist, K.O.S.’s relationship with Tim has always been more collaborative. Also, in your case, the artist*

*came to the students—not the other way around. Maybe there is another example like this in art history, but I can’t think of one.*

*Starting at the beginning, can you describe that day when you first met Tim Rollins?*

**Angel Abreu** – As I might have mentioned in Savannah, my experience with K.O.S. has always felt organic and natural. As if it was the way it was supposed to happen. From the onset I knew that we were doing something special, but I didn’t realize the magnitude until I was older.

I first met Tim on my first day of school at Intermediate School 52 in South Bronx. After I finished the fourth grade, I.S. 52 was my assigned junior high school and I was supposed to attend it from fifth through eighth grades, but I avoided going there for two years, instead opting to attend one of the first charter schools in the Bronx, the Evergreen School. I did this because of 52’s extremely bad reputation, and the four-block walk to 52 from my apartment building was a minefield of potential danger, littered with drug dealers and gangs. It was worth it for me to take the two public buses to attend Evergreen, but that school only went through sixth grade. Once I got to seventh grade I had no choice but to go to 52.

I give some background on how I got to 52 to show the lengths I went through to avoid being there. I felt very anxious my first day. I remember walking into Tim’s classroom, room 318. For most of the day, everyone in my class had been pretty rambunctious, but as we walked into Tim’s classroom there was a collective hush. The level of respect for Tim was palpable. He insisted that we sit down quickly because we had work to do. He proceeded to hand out what looked like a test. The collective hush quickly turned into collective groans. Tim just told us to do our best to get through it. I was always into art so I was looking forward to the class, but I didn’t know what to think about this—a multiple choice test with about 50 questions that asked things like, “Which one of these artists is not a Cubist?” and “What year was first Surrealist Manifesto written?” I remember feeling frustrated, but also intrigued, because I was accustomed to doing well. After we finished, Tim collected the tests and acknowledged that we most likely didn’t do well, but assured us that this would be the exact mid-term test. Based on what we were about to learn, he guaranteed that we would all get A’s.

It was Tim’s class that put me at ease at 52. It gave me something to look forward to. Two months later, Tim met my parents at a parent/teacher conference where he told them about K.O.S. I was invited to go to the studio the next day. At that point, I was part of my own type of gang. It was in the studio, every day after school, that the real learning began.

*S.T. – A long time ago as a high school art teacher, I would sometimes hear students talk about the art room being an escape—a place where they could be themselves. Art to them represented a certain freedom to be different. But for you, a child who had just*



TIM ROLLINS and K.O.S. *Asleep on the Raft (after Mark Twain)*, 2013-14, indigo watercolor, matte acrylic, book pages on canvas, 72" x 96." Courtesy the artists and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.

*found a haven from violence and drugs in an art studio, art must have meant much more than freedom of expression. Looking back, how do you think your definition of art, or appreciation of it, differed from kids growing up in safe, suburban neighborhoods?*

A.A. – I'll be honest: growing up in that environment, the studio was indeed an escape from the violence and danger waiting for us outside. It was a means of survival, which is why we came up with the name "Kids of Survival." But survival came from so much more than just the act of making art. Art making afforded us a way to experience things that others may take for granted, such as exposure to nice restaurants, museums and travel to places I couldn't have imagined. This exposure is reminiscent of the great John Dewey's premise in *Art as Experience*.

Exposure to new things is a powerful tool. It builds confidence, promotes transcendence and helps materialize potentiality, no matter one's socio-economic condition. Through the workshops we've conducted, and through my academic career as a student privileged to attend some pretty great schools with cross-cultural student bodies, I learned that rich or well-to-do folk can be poor and in need as well. Certainly their circumstances are different, but art ultimately is about possibility and bringing folks together. That's the way I see it.

S.T. – *Dewey's philosophy—the concepts of learning by doing and art as experience—seem deeply ingrained in the mindset of K.O.S. Plus, the authors from whom K.O.S.'s art was derived,*

*like Kafka, Melville and Orwell, were all heavy thinkers. At the time, did Tim talk much about philosophy or aesthetics? If so, how was it received by the students?*

A.A. – During those early years in the studio, we didn't necessarily discuss theory or philosophy. The learning occurred more through practice, observation and our interpretation of the authors' texts. As I matured, the lectures and interviews in which Tim discussed the influences on our collective practice became my point of interest. Stemming from this interest, I went on to study philosophy with a concentration on American pragmatism.

S.T. – *When you joined K.O.S. in 1986, it was gaining attention from New York's art scene. By the late 1980s and the culmination of the Amerika series, Tim Rollins and K.O.S. had become genuine art world sensations. The pinnacle of all this seems to have been the Amerika exhibition at the Dia Art Foundation in 1989. It must have been euphoric. But only a few years later, the wheels came off and everything changed. The art world collapsed and shortly thereafter, K.O.S. suffered an incredible loss when longstanding member Christopher Hernandez was murdered. Can you discuss what that time was like?*

A.A. – Chris' senseless murder was a tremendous blow to all of us. All I'm going to say is Chris' intuitive sense of humor and gentle



**TIM ROLLINS and K.O.S. *Amerika - A Refuge*, 1990-1991**, acrylic on printed paper, mounted on linen, 66.25" x 158." Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Joseph H. Hirshhorn Purchase Fund, 1991. Courtesy the artists and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.



The making of *Amerika IX* in 1989 at Mint Museum in Charlotte, NC in collaboration with local high school students. Courtesy of the artist.

way of being was infectious. We still very much miss him, but to this day he inspires us to continue.

The few years leading up to Chris' death were a roller coaster ride. The Venice Biennale in 1988, The Dia show in 1989, along with our second inclusion at the Whitney Biennial in 1991 led to us work with Mary Boone. These were pretty amazing years. We had a fantastic 9,000-square-foot studio in the Hunt Points section of the Bronx. In the summers of 1989 and 1990, San Francisco's prestigious Crown Point Press invited us to make prints. There, we had the honor of meeting the great John Cage while he was working on a suite of prints in the studio next door.

It was euphoric indeed, but vitriolic press feeding off of the skepticism of the group's makeup, along with the art market crash, brought us back to reality. We weren't used to these things anyway, so we didn't let it bother us too much, but once the novelty of our collaboration wore off, we couldn't believe the number of skeptics that came out of the woodwork. I think people assumed, or hoped, we would be some sort of one-hit wonder.

*S.T. – I'm sure that was hurtful. Along with all the emotions associated with being adolescents, the complexities of that time must have been difficult for anyone in the group. In time, however, you proved the group was more than lucky. And now, 20 years later, the work of Tim Rollins and K.O.S is still highly sought after. This year alone, you've been all over the United States and Paris exhibiting and conducting workshops.*

*I'm continually inspired by how K.O.S. involves students from middle schools and high schools. It's so natural now that it is difficult to determine where the collaboration starts and stops. Plus, the work these students create is museum quality. From your talk at SCAD, some of your comments made it obvious you are passionate about education. But why have you chosen to involve young artists to such a degree? In the exhibition I saw, a whole wall was dedicated to the students from Garrison School of Visual and Performing Arts in Savannah, Ga.*

*A.A. – I have to say that my favorite part of any collaboration with young artists is seeing the look on these young folks' faces when*

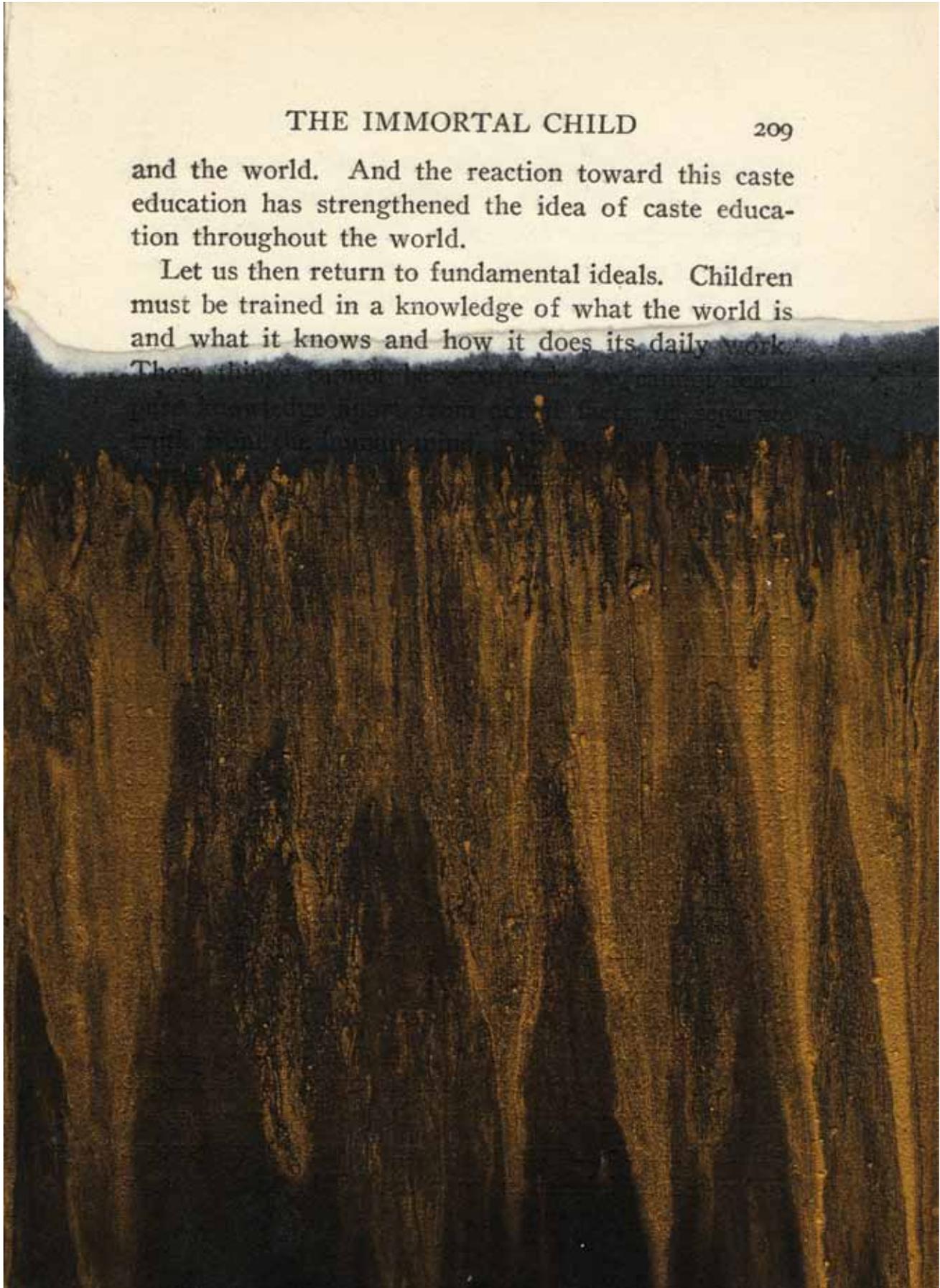
THE IMMORTAL CHILD

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and the world. And the reaction toward this caste education has strengthened the idea of caste education throughout the world.

Let us then return to fundamental ideals. Children must be trained in a knowledge of what the world is and what it knows and how it does its daily work.

These things are fundamental.



TIM ROLLINS and K.O.S. *Darkwater III (after W.E.B. Du Bois) (detail)*, 2013, furnace black watercolor, gold acrylic on vintage book page on panel, 12 panels, each 7" x 5." Courtesy the artists and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.

they walk into the gallery or museum and see their finished work up on the wall. I love being a party to and witnessing a world of opportunity and possibility unfold in their eyes. You can see a switch go on and it confirms for me why I love doing this.

We create a system where there is no failure, but the only way to get there is by demanding the participants' very best and their highest concentration. The key is respect. Respect for materials. Respect for the subject matter and, most importantly, respect for the young artists themselves. A true collaboration is reached when every voice is made to feel valid, important. It's this egalitarian and didactic ethos that promotes success within our studio and the workshops. As a result, the work tends to take care of itself.

*S.T. – The level of dedication from both the students and K.O.S. shows in conceptually and aesthetically rich works. I am interested in one such 2013 collaboration—the Darkwater series. Students painted on pages from a 1920 W. E.B. Du Bois novel, Darkwater, Voices from within the Veil. The dark paint rises up from the pages, swallowing most of the text in a fluidity that refers to the book's title.*

*What were the concept and methodology behind the series?*

A.A. – Loretta Yarlow and Eva Fierst from The University of Massachusetts Amherst Museum of Contemporary Art invited us to be a part of the 2013 exhibition “Du Bois In Our Time,” which coincided with the 50th anniversary of Du Bois' death as well as the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. This project was particularly important to me because Du Bois' work and life have always been extremely influential, but we never had the opportunity to engage directly with his work. We thought it absolutely necessary to collaborate with young students on this one.

Initially we figured we'd do something with the seminal *Souls of Black Folk* but we reconsidered and thought we should do something different, perhaps unexpected. Although we had both read Du Bois extensively, neither of us had read *Darkwater*. When we did, we were blown away. One chapter, “The Immortal Child,” sealed the deal. In it, Du Bois describes the plight of children and our societal obligations to promote their development for the common good. I was struck by how the issues he brought up a century ago are still relevant. So, at this point, we had the text, but then ensued the months of “mining” it for clues about how the work and workshop would manifest. After several months of research, we tested what we came up with at a three-day workshop with sixth, seventh and eighth graders at the Renaissance School in Springfield, MA. Fortunately, the workshop was a great success and the *Darkwater* series was born. We decided it was appropriate to donate that work to the UMass collection.

*S.T. – It seems that many of K.O.S.'s newer works share the common theme of rivers. The group has produced a series of works related to Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn. More recently though, the river appears to be growing into a dominant metaphor for the group. There is a series actually called The River that's based on a composition by Duke Ellington, plus the Darkwater series you just described. Can you speak to the significance of the river metaphor and K.O.S.?*

A.A. – The philosopher Heraclitus said, “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.” Tim uses this quote often to explain the significance of the river in our work. It represents a journey, a mode of self-reflection and a measure of growth. We have not necessar-

ily consciously thought about using the river motif in the newer work, but we have always chosen pieces of literature or music that speak to us. We gravitate towards works in which we can add to the conversation, not illustrate in any way, so I suppose it's more coincidence than anything that the river has been central to us. But we do say this all of the time: the bottom line is that *we flow*. With all the ups and downs through the years, we wouldn't still be doing this if we didn't flow.

Along a similar coincidental vein, though, I've been personally working on a series of paintings after Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*, which has the flooding of the Mississippi River as a central theme. Again, not a conscious choice, but one cannot deny the common threads and tendencies that develop throughout an artist's career.

*Angel was 11 when I first met him in a very hostile public school environment on Kelly Street at Junior High School 52. He was in a gifted and talented afterschool program that I was assigned to for the kids who loved art and art making. I recall his very young sincerity and ... his eyes. These large warm visionary eyes - duende - that he retains to this day.*

*When I began the afterschool program called Art and Knowledge Workshop in a community center nearby, Angel was one of the most consistent and faithful members and attended almost daily. You have to know that the neighborhood was incredibly dangerous back then, we're talking 1983, and the workshop was a safe haven for a lot of kids who just wanted to be creative and not destructive. I will never forget the train trip we took to the Philadelphia Museum of Art to look around and he encountered the work of Marcel Duchamp and got it immediately—especially Etant Donnes. When Angel was 14 he was offered a scholarship to Deerfield Academy and after long conversations with his mom and dad, we agreed that we had to let him go. Nevertheless, we remained in constant contact and he worked with us on breaks and in the summertime in South Bronx. For his 16th birthday I gave him a print by Marcel Duchamp.*

*Always engaged with the work of K.O.S., even if he wasn't physically present, Angel moved to the University of Pennsylvania, then NYU, then the University of Washington, having constant conversations about American pragmatist philosophy and the artists that inspired him. When he moved to Seattle for about 10 years there still was never an absence. What is most exciting is that Angel and his beautiful family moved back to the area a few years ago and he committed to painting. I'm not a stage dad, but just yesterday I saw his new body of work inspired by *The Wild Palms* by Faulkner and I was blown away.*

*That sincerity. Those eyes. - Tim Rollins ■*

**"Junkies, beats, smugglers, punks, dealers, lowlifes, artists, it's a look behind the doors of the Chelsea Hotel in its final glory years - fascinating and riveting."**

**GILLIAN MCCAIN** co-author (with Legs McNeill) of *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk*

# THIS AIN'T NO HOLIDAY INN

Down and Out at the Chelsea Hotel 1980-1995

## An Oral History By James Lough

"Exuberant oral history...Drug-fueled debauchery and artists living 'close to the bone' in service to their work fill these reminiscences along with nostalgia for the enclave of 'freaks and weirdoes.'"

**PUBLISHER'S WEEKLY**

**O**VER THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES, New York's Chelsea Hotel has come to epitomize the lively and decadent world of the city's artistic fringe, providing a safe haven for writers, artists, musicians and eccentrics of all stripes. With *THIS AIN'T NO HOLIDAY INN: Down and Out at the Chelsea Hotel, 1980-1995*, author James Lough



has provided a multi-faceted portrait of the Chelsea in a unique oral history format which draws together a vast

array of creative individuals who made the hotel their home in the 1980's and 1990's.

Here are fascinating portraits, from the basement to the penthouses, of its notorious denizens such as Beat poets Gregory Corso and Herbert Huncke, former Andy Warhol star Viva, rockers Johnny Thunders (of the New York Dolls) and Dee-Dee Ramone (the Ramones) as well as lesser-known figures, newly arrived on the scene, eager to make

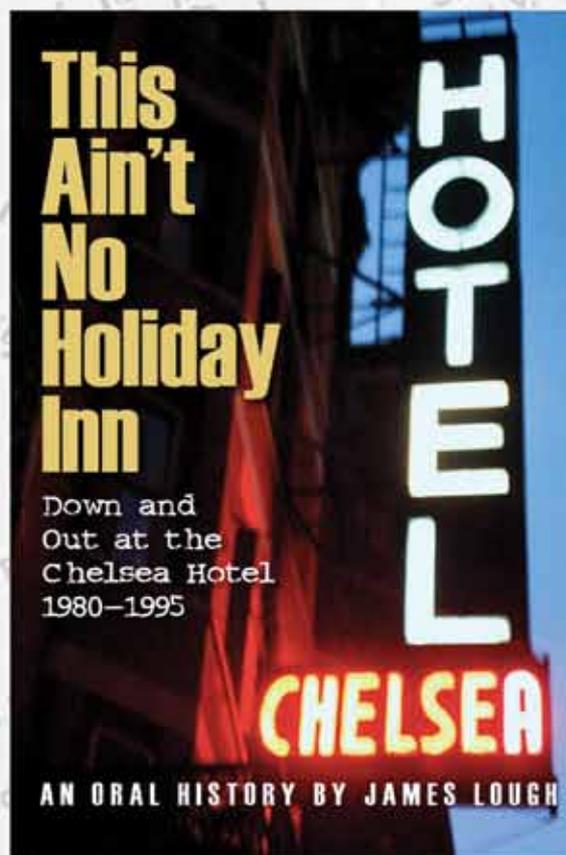
their mark, who found in the Chelsea a home away from home under the watchful eye of Stanley Bard, manager, landlord and "pater familias" to the motley household. Moreover, while exploring the myths, tall-tales and wild yarns that have emerged from behind these "Chelsea Walls," this book provides a Rashomon-like perspective on urban legends surrounding the death of punk rocker Sid Vicious, the mystery of Jimi Hendrix's demise, Dee Dee Ramone's post-Ramones re-emergence as a bleached blond bluesman, and vivid portraits of the various and nefarious characters from pimps to drug dealers, aging drag queens, dominatrixes, gamblers, gurus, and gangsters who thrived there in the waning days of New York's Bohemia at the end of the 20th Century.

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# POETS, PAINTERS, AND SERVANTS

## An Interview with Craig Drennen

Craig Drennen is a painter of unpopular culture. For five years he made work based on the 1984 movie *Supergirl*, a spinoff largely regarded as a failure and left out of the Superman canon, and from 2008 to the present he has worked with *Timon of Athens*, a rarely produced, unfinished play by Shakespeare. Drennen is realizing *Timon of Athens* character by character through works built from references that are temporally and geographically at hand, suturing the works more tightly to the artist than their source text. A broad range of illusionistic devices and drawn and painted marks are gathered together to create personas in a way that is neither explicitly pictorial nor plainly descriptive. The character Poet is represented by a painting of the word “Hello,” a basketball and a 24-second clock, while a photograph of a vampire and a monochrome painting become the character of the Old Athenian. What we are left with is less a reimagining of the play than a representation and performance.

I had the opportunity to interview Drennen while he was preparing for his shows “Poet & Awful,” at Samsøn Gallery, Boston, Mass. (Oct. 31-Dec. 17, 2014) and “We Should Talk to Each Other, The Cloud and I,” Byrd Gallery, Georgia Regents University, Augusta, Ga. (Oct. 30-Nov. 21, 2014)

BY COLLEEN ASPER

*Colleen Asper - I'd like to begin where you begin, which is in selecting a preexisting cultural production as a point of departure for making work. You've described this as, 'an empty cultural bandwidth within which to house my own subjectivity,' and I totally get that, insofar as the subject of a work for a lot of artists is a somewhat arbitrary place to stage something, and that something is always at least going to have a relationship to our subjectivity. But what does it mean to house your subjectivity in particular characters?*

**Craig Drennen** - There's an openness that comes from starting with something that already exists. And also—and this goes against my nature slightly—it meets the audience halfway, in a sense, because my subject is something they've at least heard of. If they don't know *Timon of Athens*, they've at least heard of Shakespeare. So the work becomes a meeting place where the audience and I can learn things at the same time, since I don't arrive in the project with any superior status necessarily. And I like that as a starting point.

*C.A. - And yet your sources aren't populist—if anything they are iconic for their lack of popularity. Why work with what culture has produced only to reject?*

**C.D.** - No you're right. The sources aren't exactly populist sources, and they were never popular in the way that you're describing. It was always really important to me that sources I use be abandoned. I think of it architecturally. Both *Supergirl* and *Timon of Athens* seem like abandoned buildings that I inhabit for a while. That sounds odd, but it's how I imagine it.

*C.A. - So I know with Supergirl you claimed to have only watched it once.*

**C.D.** - That was a valid claim! I really only watched it once.

*C.A. - Ok, ok—I believe you. With Timon of Athens, was there a similar attempt to limit your engagement with the source?*

**C.D.** - Just the opposite. I read *Timon of Athens* constantly. I've

easily read it 25 times, and on every plane trip of more than two hours I read it again. That helps me prepare for developing new characters. I need to reread what that character actually does.

*C.A. - Can you say something that came out in, say, the 25<sup>th</sup> reading, that didn't appear in earlier readings?*

**C.D.** - Yes, the most recent character I started up this year is Poet, who has some of the first lines in the play. I've read the play so many times and I always slip right past the beginning, but this most recent time I read it, it hit me how the characters say hello to each other in an overly friendly way, an obsequious way. And I live in Atlanta, so I might say a very Southern way. Suddenly it became crystal clear to me that the Poet pieces should say hello to viewers.

*C.A. - Poet is a character you described as having a 'trophy case aesthetic.' How did you arrive at that?*

**C.D.** - I'd say it's twofold. One is that I like how welcoming the vernacular of sports seems to be. So when you enter a new town you might see signs that say 'Hello from' the local high school basketball team. I like how that's an accepted way of welcoming strangers into a community. So again, it goes back to Poet and how to be welcoming, almost in a small-town kind of way. But I live in Atlanta, close to where the Atlanta Hawks play, so there are lots of ephemera saying 'Hello from the Hawks' or 'Hello from Atlanta, home of the Hawks.' I find that gesture analogous to Poet's behavior in the early part of the play.

*C.A. - Was Poet in your recent show, 'Awful & Others' at Florida Mining?*

**C.D.** - No, Poet has only been shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Georgia, where it was in a show curated by Hope Cohn that opened in January. The show's theme was sports, which turned out to be interesting.

*C.A. - How so?*



Craig Drennen, *Awful Inside, Florida Mining*, 2014, performance, 30 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

C.D. - Those moments when art and sports overlap are interesting to me, like David Hammons' basketball rims or Koons' equilibrium tanks. Actually, as much as I like the equilibrium tanks, I really love Koons' early Nike poster pieces, because I think the world of art and the world of sports are both controlled by money, but the world of sports has something different in that it has a clear meritocracy in place. If an athlete or coach can't deliver the goods, they get kicked out. If they can deliver the goods, they get rewarded. That value system is very appealing to folks out in the world who don't feel like they experience a meritocracy anywhere in their life. Sports present a parallel fantasy world where participants are rewarded according to what they can actually do. The art world does not have that same value system. And when I hear anyone moan about the 'crisis of criticism' I think it's because they want the critical establishment to assert a value system for them. Maybe that's what good critics do, although a singular value system would be a huge step backward as well.

C.A. - *Could you make that specific to your work? If there were a value system there, what would it be?*

C.D. - Well played ma'am. I'm acting like I'm getting a drink but actually I'm just stalling for time to think of an answer. A physical habit starts to seem like a value system. If you do something every day it's because in some way you must value it. So I learned how to paint the same way I learned sport skills as a kid: practice in isolation. I didn't have a sweeping panoramic training in painting, so I would just learn how to do whatever the next thing was that I wanted to accomplish. I just

taught myself what I needed to know next. I think I remember hearing an interview where Matthew Barney says something similar, in regard to his early football training. It was about taking inanimate material—whether it's a football or a sculptural material—and bringing life to it.

C.A. - *That makes me think of the way you use trompe l'oeil in your work.*

C.D. - Well, it really comes from my work in the early 1990s in New York City where I used found objects and assemblage. I was used to using real materials, and when I switched to full immersion in painting I maintained that desire for the experience of a real, actual-size thing. It comes from trying to give the impact of the real, at the actual size of the real, in a way that might outlast the real. But it's always within a larger framework where I try to make the paint do lots of different things. I'll try to make the paint be decorative, or painterly, antiquated, illusionistic, and so on. Both *Supergirl* and *Timon of Athens* are based in acting because they are both theatrical, and that's very important to me. Whenever I can get the paint to do a wide variety of things successfully, I feel like that's acting, as if an actor comes out onstage and presents four or five different characters with four or five different accents and personas using only the instrument of their body. I want to get the paint to act convincingly. So the use of *trompe l'oeil* is part of a larger agenda to be a really good actor.

C.A. - *Would you say the same thing about the looser gestures in the work?*

C.D. - Oh absolutely.



Craig Drennen, *Hello From Hawks 1*, 2014, oil, alkyd, pencil, crayon, and spray paint on canvas, 7" x 64." Courtesy of the artist.

C.A. - *So you will pick up a brush and say, 'Now I am a gesture painter?'*

C.D. - The short answer is yes. I treat it like any other sensibility that I can inhabit.

C.A. - *Do you feel that the painting is in quotes then?*

C.D. - No, I don't think so, because that seems distancing and ironic and I want just the opposite. I want a sense of closeness similar to what a great actor can provide, where it feels real every night when they're performing the same script.

C.A. - *It's a funny inversion, this idea that a gesture can provide immediacy without having to be 'authentic.'*

C.D. - Well artists our age were taught to distrust all that. And maybe rightfully so, because the generation just before us might have made poor use of what was at their disposal. I still think that with all of it you can actually be a painter without any part of it being in quotations. That's my hope anyway.

C.A. - *Can you relate that to one of your paintings, at how you arrive at the different elements? For instance, what about the separate panel with 24 in the Poet pieces?*

C.D. - It's a 24-second clock. The discourse of painting gets to set up a new offense! Not sure if that means I wanted to produce my work faster or not. I put 24-second clocks on this first batch of Poet paintings. But the next batch may or may not have them. Maybe the next will be a 23.

C.A. - *What can happen in making the painting in 24 seconds?*

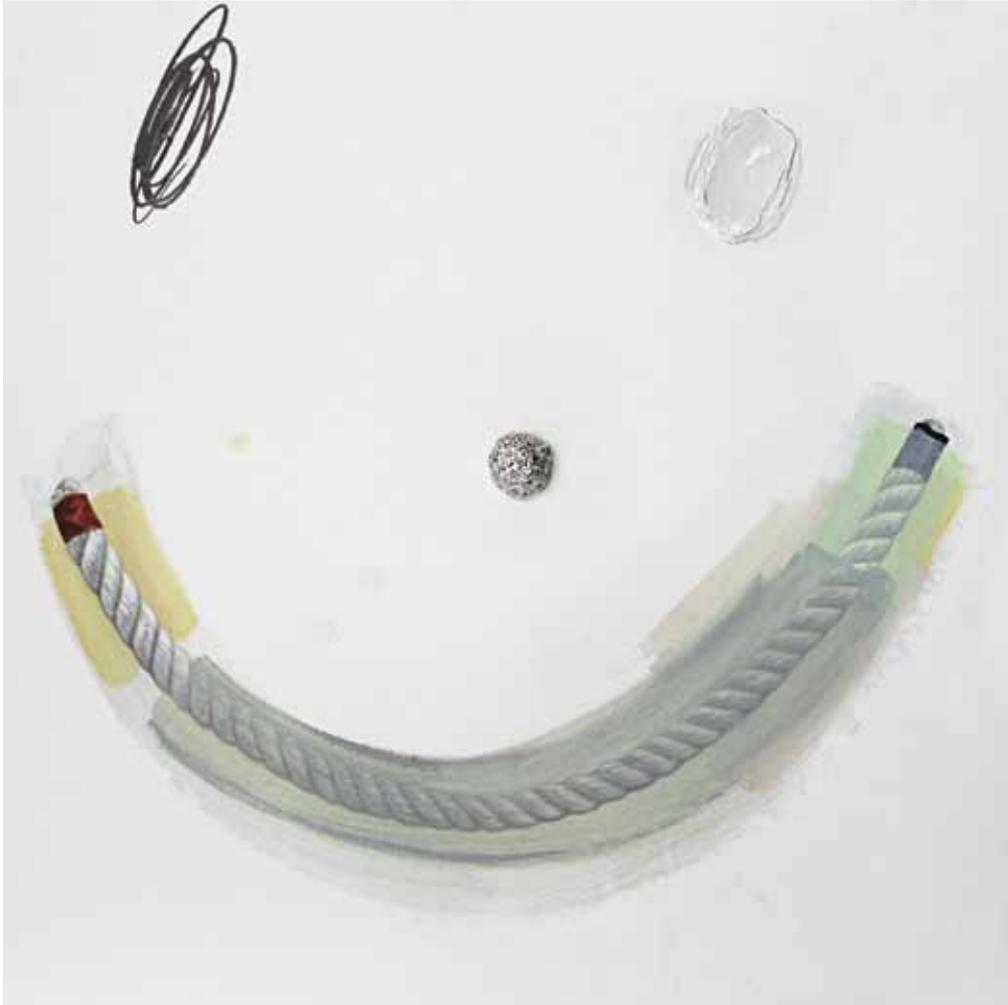
C.D. - It's a mental exercise. It's not literal. At first I was thinking of using actual electronic 24-second clocks, but that seemed like too much of a one-to-one correspondence. I really like it better as an image. It is very specific, but if viewers know none of this and just see it as a number at the top of a painting that's fine too—as a registrar's number or random counting system—that's equally satisfying to me.

C.A. - *Can we talk about the work in the Florida Mining show? What characters did you take to that show?*

C.D. - Well I agreed to that show, which came about quickly, because I was interested in doing another performance dedicated to Apemantus, a 'churlish philosopher' in the play. I've done versions of the performance before, but this time I wanted to really make the performance fit into the overall texture of the exhibition. Florida Mining was totally on board with that. And I wanted to do new versions of the Old Athenian character too, which requires wall painting in conjunction with a vampire image. Old Athenian is always a vampire plus a monochrome. Those were the key pieces I wanted to show. It was in my head that I needed to work through those characters more thoroughly, so I needed a venue to do that. I was very pleased with how the exhibition turned out.

C.A. - *Your paintings are often made up of areas of dense rendering or mark making and then expanses of empty space, but the Old Athenian is particularly extreme in this regard—why is he always a vampire plus a monochrome?*

C.D. - I think the terms of Old Athenian were always much more clear to me. I wanted to combine three things that were old and difficult



Craig Drennen, *Servant 6*, 2012, graphite, acrylic, oil, aluminum foil on paper, 25" x 25." Courtesy of the artist and Saltworks Gallery.

to extinguish—digitally reproduced images, vampires and monochromes. The vampire image is Udo Kier from Warhol's *Blood of Dracula* and it's a digital photograph taken from a TV screen of the DVD of the original film. And I wanted to see that heavily mediated image connected to a monochrome painted directly on the wall. To be honest, I'm really attracted to monochrome painting. This might just be a way for me to rationalize my interest in it.

C.A. - *Someone told me that monochromes are the works most often defaced, which makes sense, both because they are most likely to irritate viewers expecting an image and because the open space is a sort of invitation to graffiti...*

C.D. - Well maybe they think they're driving a stake through the heart of that vampire.

C.A. - *And what about the philosopher Apemantus? This is the only character you have realized as a performance. In it, the performer wears a large papier-mâché head while playing Courtney Love's Awful on guitar. If I understand correctly, the first couple times this was performed you were the performer, but not with the more recent performances.*

C.D. - The two times I've included the performances as part of gallery exhibitions, I did not perform. I liked being free to move around and experience the performance as an observer, which feels more like painting, where I can see it while it's happening. When I'm the performer my awareness is completely different and I can't perceive the formal elements, like whether I'm still lit properly or if the sound is deteriorating. It still feels like me even when it's not me. I've had great performers

collaborate with me the two times I've done indoor performances, and I think my degree of satisfaction stems from how well they did. But I have done all the outdoor performances.

C.A. - *One of the translations in your works is typically between a film or text that is intended for performance and the static world of paintings and objects. Does it feel strange to be doing performance?*

C.D. - Yes. It's a huge jump for me, an unsettling jump. But it seemed necessary for the work. The character Apemantus just wanders in and out of the play making devastating comments to the other characters. Because his character is so public in the play, I thought it should be performative in some way. So the decision to bring performance art into the mix was a response to the character, not because I had any latent desire to be a performance artist. I admire performance artists and have huge respect for anybody who takes that on.

C.A. - *Are there characters in the play you identify with more than others?*

C.D. - I think you have to identify with all of them. That's where the acting comes in. But the characters I've made the greatest number of are Painter and Servants, which might mean that's who I identify with the most. With the very first characters I did, the Mistresses, I started out not identifying with them, but by the time it was done I could identify with them much more. But that was the beginning of the whole project, so I was learning what to do.

C.A. - *Are you saving Timon for the end?*

C.D. - I kind of like the idea of him being second to last. ■

# MODELING THE INTERFACE OF SCIENCE AND ART

## A Conversation with Kendall Buster

BY STEPHEN KNUDSEN

Kendall Buster first studied microbiology and received a BS degree in Medical Technology before pursuing an education in art. She earned a BFA from the Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington, DC, and an MFA in Sculpture from Yale University as well as participating in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Studio Program in New York City.

Her large-scale "biological architecture" projects have been exhibited in numerous venues nationally and internationally including The Hirshhorn Museum and the Kreeger Museum in Washington, DC, Artist's Space and The American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York City, The Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh, The Haggerty Museum in Milwaukee, The Boise Art Museum in Boise, Idaho, Suyama Space in Seattle, Washington, The Indiana Museum of Art, Indianapolis, the Bahnhof Westend in Berlin, and the KZNSA Gallery in Durban, South Africa.

Kendall has also created large-scale permanent commissions for The Frick Chemistry Building at Princeton University, Gilman Hall at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, The Health and Biosciences Center at The University of Houston, and the US Embassy in Rabat, Morocco.

Buster has been interviewed by Neda Ulaby on NPR's *Morning Edition* as part of a series on art and science and in 2005 was the recipient of an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in the Arts. She lives and works in Richmond, Virginia, and teaches in the Department of Sculpture and Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University.

*Stephen Knudsen - Thank you, Kendall, for this interview. I feel a kinship to you and your story because, like you, I too had my start in microbiology, with a B.S. in that field and a career in a lab only to eventually find my way into the fine arts. Do you recall the moment in the lab when you realized that you were meant to dedicate your love of science within the artist studio and university art classroom?*

**Kendall Buster** - From the beginning I never really separated the two fields in my mind. I was drawn to microbiology out of the same interests that led me to make sculptures. My attraction to microbiology was in large part a totally visual experience. Microscopic work was especially compelling in that things invisible to the unaided eye, when viewed through magnifying lenses, became monumental. I had the odd sensation of looking into another world from afar while at the same time imagining I could project myself bodily into that world. I liked the fact that the term *cell* in biology can refer to the smallest structural unit of an organism or an enclosed cavity, but is also how we name a small room or chamber. This resonated with my thinking that single cell organisms were in some sense ar-

chitectural. My studies in microbiology made me very conscious of scale and marked what would become a growing awareness of the architectural character of the biological.

*S.K. - Do you still pick up a scientific journal now and then?*

**K.B.** - I confess that I do not. Scientific journals are so specialized that I am more likely to read art journals, theory and philosophy, or what I would call cultural magazines. In reading those publications I find myself often going first to articles that address issues in medicine. A recent piece in the *New Yorker* on Ebola was heartbreaking in its descriptions of the human suffering caused by the current outbreak. But I was also deeply interested in the detailed reporting on the efforts to identify the genetic codes and the use of terminology that likened the behavior of the virus to that of a 'swarm'—not a singular discrete thing, but a multiplicity. Viruses are so fascinating and frightening in the ways they challenge the certainty of what is a whole organism and what is a fragment of an organism. This stretches us to reconsider definitions of what we call living and where we as humans stake our corporeal boundaries.

*S.K. - Speaking of hostile microcosms, one of your older pieces, Garden Snare, 1998, allows spectators to trap themselves inside a kind of dual structure somewhat like a cell body undergoing division.*

**K.B.** - *Garden Snare* was one of my first sculptures designed and built for an outdoor site. It was a shade house sited in a sunny clearing built with a skeletal steel frame and a transparent membrane of agricultural shade-cloth forming two accessible chambers. I was at first hesitant about the project, certain I did not want to intrude into what was an intimate garden space on the grounds of the museum. So from the beginning I was clear that I wanted views of the trees and plantings to be minimally obstructed by the work, for it to be visually pourous. The sculpture had to function in a way that went beyond its being an object in the landscape. I regarded *Garden Snare* from the start as an architectural structure creating a kind of counterpoint to the rigorous horizontality and verticality of the museum as Phillip Johnson designed it.

The notion of its being a snare as well as a shadehouse come out of my thoughts around how enclosure implies the contradictory promises of embrace and threat. Am I protected or trapped? Am I the empowered inhabitant of an architectural space or am I controlled and imprisoned by it?

*S.K. - I read something once, that as a child, you saw the beautifully quirky 1966 Sci Fi film The Fantastic Voyage, and it planted something critical into your imagination. What is your favorite scene in that film and do you mind if I bring this to the*



Kendall Buster, *Resonance*, 2010, steel, shadecloth, Chemistry Lab Atrium, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ. Photo courtesy Bruce M. White.

*table in talking about Resonance, 2010, the site-specific work at the Frick Chemistry Lab at Princeton University?*

K.B. - Yes, I mentioned the film *Fantastic Voyage* in an interview as an example of an early experience that later informed my work. The film's premise is that a group of scientists are miniaturized and injected into the body of an acclaimed researcher in order to perform micro-surgery. It delighted me when I first saw it and continues to interest me on a number of levels. I can't recall a specific scene, but the idea of becoming small in a magical, *Alice in Wonderland* sense, by way of a technological apparatus intrigued me then and still intrigues me. The film really captured the reality of the human/animal body as a complex assembling of chambers and passageways. Its main action was a journey, a progression through what I saw as distinct architectural spaces.

This ties into my interest in scale and how architectural models operate. A kind of miniaturization occurs, where the eye leads one to move (with an imagined body) through a space. A number of my works operate in this way. *Miniature Monumental* is an ongoing project that suggests a model for some imagined, ever-growing cityscape. The *Highrise Vessels* all have accessible interiors, and upon entering, one's scale shifts in two opposing directions, at once growing to stand within the center of an atrium of a multi-level highrise or shrinking to enter an urn. So it is both

object and site of enclosure.

With *Resonance*, created for the Frick Chemistry Lab at Princeton, I did see the sculptural components dispersed and aggregated in the huge, five-hundred-foot open atrium as molecules. The fact that molecules are so small they are not visible, but rather understood through models that approximate their structure and behavior, made the potential for play in scale all the more engaging for me.

S.K. - *I was hoping we could open up some space for discussing beauty, primarily because your work is beautiful, but also because the great challenges of talking about the topic today often engender silence. David Humphrey's essay "Describable Beauty" talks about those "rhetorical demands" in trying to define beauty: "For critics more to the left, beauty is a word deemed wet with the salesman's saliva." One could also invoke here Roger Scruton's lamentations on the contemporary turn away from beauty as he sees it. Shall we tread on beauty's precarious territory?*

K.B. - If I were to define beauty as a superficial dressing, only skin deep, and as being complicit in some objectionable ideological position, or as an easy seductive strategy meant to distract from more serious heavy lifting, then I might squirm at the idea of discussing beauty as it might apply to my work! I accept the suspicion of 'mere' beauty and any claim to universality in how one might de-



Kendall Buster, *Garden Snare*, 1998, steel, shadecloth. Kreeger Museum, Washington, DC.

fine a thing as beautiful. But beauty is a complex concept not easily dismissed. Never set, it is constantly being renegotiated.

Beauty is too changeable a thing for me to try and lay absolute claim on how it operates in any work of art, including my own. But I am attracted to precision and to forms suggesting that an underlying pattern or internal logic has driven the process of design. I appreciate what I would call “the generous” in a work of art and am a true believer in the notion of the indescribable. I also think a great deal about the notion that visual pleasure is not necessarily a superficial experience but can be the source of a deeper connection to our environment and to each other. I am also interested in how what we might term as beautiful can evoke unease.

Resistance to using the term beauty to describe a work of art makes me think about how the word is employed so unselfconsciously in other fields to pair what sounds like subjective delight with objective observation. For example, one can say without irony that a certain formula is a beautifully elegant solution to a given mathematics problem or that a honeycomb is a beautifully economic construction to achieve multi-cell chambers.

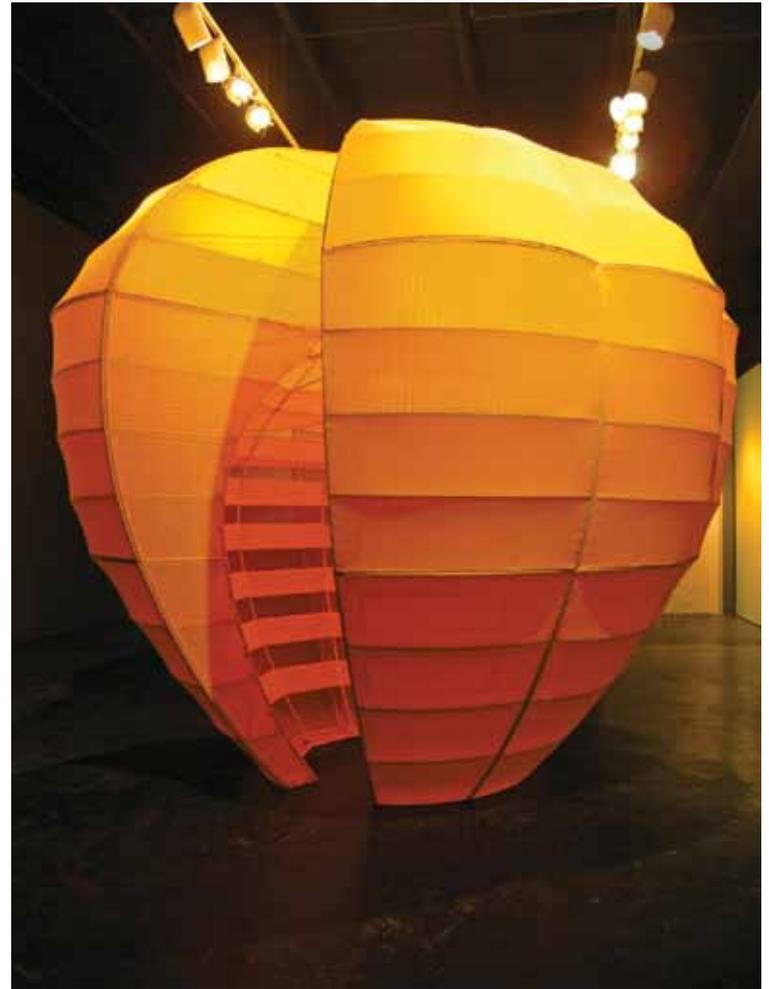
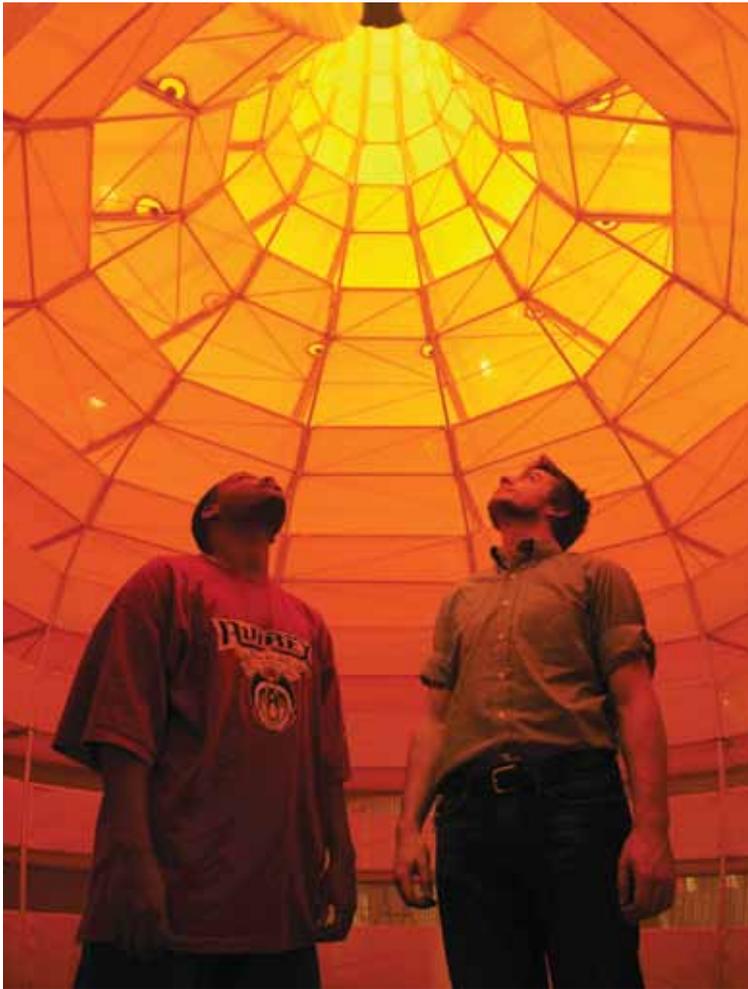
*S.K. - I think I unselfconsciously said, “beautifully quirky film” earlier! So glad you brought up the notion of the indescribable as a form of intensity. Though Kant’s ideas of beauty do not hold up for everyone, I think his ideas about the crashes of imagination as we cross the limits of the knowable are practically bullet proof. Beauty is a good place for art and science to meet, I think. At times I do see some of your works, and especially Resonance, as regarding the sublime. Your thoughts?*

**K.B.** - If we define the sublime as an experience that evokes wonder and awe, something that takes us to the threshold of what we know, then I agree this is a place where artistic production and reception might meet scientific inquiry. The emphasis in both for me is still on subjective experience, and threshold is a good term because it defines the sublime as the marking of a limit. That may sound pessimistic, but on the contrary I embrace the notion of an independent natural world that acts upon me as much as I act upon it, a material reality that is beyond my perception and total comprehension. And the threshold is an unstable boundary. Other concepts that we associate with the sublime such as grandeur, unimaginable complexity, and the transformative are for me critical to a sense of infinite renewal.

**S.K.** - *Would you unpack the meaning of the title Resonance?*

**K.B.** - I liked that resonance is a word with related, but distinctly varied, meanings. In chemistry the term, as I understand it, describes what is called a “delocalized” electron. I loved the word “delocalized,” referring to molecules where “contributing” rather than single structures are necessary to model how the electron behaves. Contributing structures are not singular but always in relation. In physics, resonance is commonly defined as an oscillation, a reinforcement of sound reflecting from a surface. And also, if I want to describe a fluid connection of ideas in visual terms, I might say that something resonates with my own thoughts on a given subject.

I wanted the forms in *Resonance* to operate as discrete, but not modular units that resonated, figuratively speaking, one with another. But at the same time, the ways they aggregated and dispersed in the space as the viewer moved around them, and the way they



Kendall Buster, *Yellow Highrise*, 2005, steel, shaded cloth, 12' x 12' x 12.' Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, Houston, TX.

multiplied through reflection to prolong and intensify the visual effect, was to my mind an example of literal resonance.

*S.K. - Many of your pieces are open to sky light. They shift perceptually through light cycles. Would you talk about one of your favorite examples of perceptual shifting and its meaning in one of your sculptures?*

*K.B. -* The shade cloth I use as a skin over the skeletal frames is a knitted material that appears either transparent or opaque depending upon the direction of the light. I frequently use white, which reflects light and takes on subtle shifts in hue as the day changes from dawn to dusk. *Vessel Field*, at Johns Hopkins University, is a configuration of nine large vessels suspended from a skylight in the atrium. These forms were meant to operate as an inventory of vessel types and to refer to the University's collection of artifacts displayed on the floor below the atrium. The vessels were large-scale models of ancient clay vessels downstairs but made apparition-like, weightless, and transparent.

By day, you can almost see through the forms. When you look up from the atrium, the mouth of each vessel creates a kind of oculus that frames the changing sky. When you look down from the upper floors, the vessels appear more opaque and solid, their interiors less pronounced. Throughout the day, the color of the forms shifts from cool to warm.

Perceptual shifts also occur in the work and are enhanced by the physical properties of this semi-transparent skin. With this material I am able to realize sculptures that have forms within forms and play interior space against exterior shape.

Another example of perceptual shifting is found in the *Stratum* series of works. Constructed with stacked planes, when viewed from above the works resemble topography maps. Viewed from eye level these horizontal levels decompress and expand to suggest accessible spaces. From below they compress again and seem to flatten into a schematic gridded drawing.

*S.K. - Vessel Field can flatten out as well but into circles. Looking directly up under Vessel Field's largest vessel reminds me of the Roman Pantheon's concentric circles enclosing the oculus. But in Vessel Field, I get an added note of transcendence because light passes both through space—the oculus—and through matter—the penetrable material forming the oculus.*

*Viewed in this way, something modeling the celestial plays out on that background grid. Is there a kind of miniature/monumental shift going on here as well, perhaps within a more grand, celestial scope?*

*K.B. -* One of the reasons I use transparent skins so consistently is the way this allows light to pass not only through the cut-out openings in the forms but also through the forms themselves. I like that you talk about the work in terms of empty space vs. matter. Vessels, like architectural structures, are matter shaping empty space. And a container or building, if solid, would be something other than a container or a building.

The eye, or the body, navigates interior and exterior spaces by way of openings piercing the membrane that comprise the material form. In *Vessel Field* or *Dual Apparitions*, those openings in the forms that frame the sky (or skylight grid shell) do perhaps evoke a built dome within the celestial dome.



Kendall Buster, *Pattern Flow*, 2014. U.S. Embassy, Rabat, Morocco.

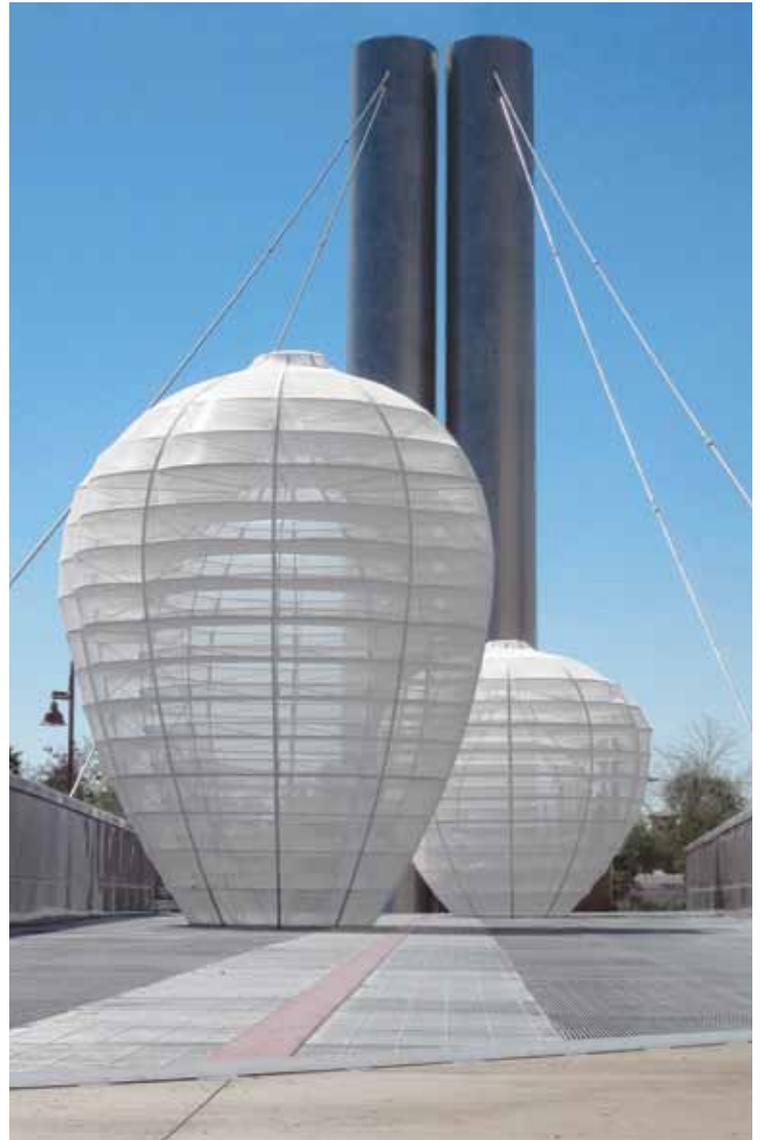


Kendall Buster, *Dual Apparitions*, 2014. *Solari Bridge*, Scottsdale, Arizona.

In *Dual Apparitions* there is an oculus, but also a section is removed to allow entry into the inner chamber's empty space. The knitted shade-cloth is also full of empty space, but on a tiny grid. So these sculptures are porous at vastly different scales.

*S.K. - I cannot let you get away before talking about the popular text that you and Paula Crawford authored: The Critique Hand Book/ The Art Student's Sourcebook and Survival Guide. I revisited it for this interview and noticed how you debunk the myth that artists cannot write. History, as you state, "is full of artists who have thought deeply and written beautifully" (there is that "b" word again). How do you instill in students—perhaps through assignments—how important good writing might be in their careers as artists? You certainly do it by example... but any other thoughts?*

*K.B. - As part of my teaching in visual arts, I have always used writing. My emphasis is less about producing artists who are better writers—though I think this happens in the process—than it is about encouraging writing as a conceptualizing tool. I typically begin critiques with writing. It slows everyone down to really look at the work and get in touch with their responses before beginning the very different dynamic of verbal discussion. I sometimes suggest free writing. It enables an artist to better access words to describe concepts that are in operation but not necessarily articu-*



lated. Studio journaling is a way to take inventory but also to look back upon and review the journey. At times I use an interview format, much as what we are doing now, between participants in the class to open a space for dialogue.

*S.K. - I am told that you just finished a project for the US Embassy in Rabat, Morocco. In closing, would you summarize your thoughts on that project?*

*K.B. - I designed *Pattern Flow*, like all my large-scale commissioned works, to converse with the particulars of the architectural space both formally and conceptually. The project was part of a larger program through Art in Embassies, which seeks, through art, to humanize the experience for those who visit and work in high security buildings. The sculpture was built with a configuration of topographical planes to suggest a shifting, dynamic landscape. In this context, the shade-cloth echoed the effects of stucco and tent structures while also offering a geometric grid pattern that changes with viewing perspectives. *Pattern Flow* is a sculpture operating not only as a complex, three-dimensional landscape model floating within the building's tall, expansive main entrance, but also as a portal into an infinite open space beyond.*

*S.K. - And that takes us full circle back into the sublime. Thank you. ■*

# ART FAIRS AND THOUGHT-SPACE

BY OWEN DUFFY

Major art fairs promise a lot to those who attend them. At a pavilion or convention center, one can come to know all the world's art in a contained, concentrated, and easily accessible singularity. That promise attracted over seventy-five thousand visitors to Art Basel Miami Beach in 2013, where over two hundred and fifty galleries from thirty-one countries convened. It is difficult not to summon Jean Baudrillard, and a comparison to his analysis of Disneyland, in order to assess this situation. As the French philosopher implied, the simulacra constructed by Disneyland's different "worlds" exist to hide the fact that there is no reality. While it could be contentious to suggest that art fairs, such as Art Basel, exist to conceal the utter *absence* of an art world, they certainly do not engender an easy understanding of it. Eric Fischl's recent painting, *Art Fair: Booth #1 Play/Care* (2014) presents viewers with an acute assessment of how disjointed, vertiginous and exhausting the experience of the art fair can be. "Character types" populate the painting and ask viewers to make assumptions about the types' identities, social status, and motives. But, after coming to terms with the overtly artificial image of the slender, bespectacled, fedora-sporting, gender-ambiguous person's doppelgänger, and trying to identify the actual works of art that are also painted into the scene, one begins to make sense of what Fischl's painting proposes. Critic Martin Herbert notes, it "reflect[s]...how jangled perception can become while moving through a fair and reflexively assessing...the unstable meld of art and audience, the clustering and uncertainty of classes and attitudes and even levels of reality."<sup>1</sup> Even the most discerning *flâneur* could agree that at a fair, art tends to blend together. Out of the fair's vertigo-inducing haze, a kind of visual leveling occurs. The meaning of a work of art, and any serious consideration of it, becomes secondary to other concerns. And to ignore the severe limitations of a fair negates what a work of art could be in another context more conducive to contemplation.

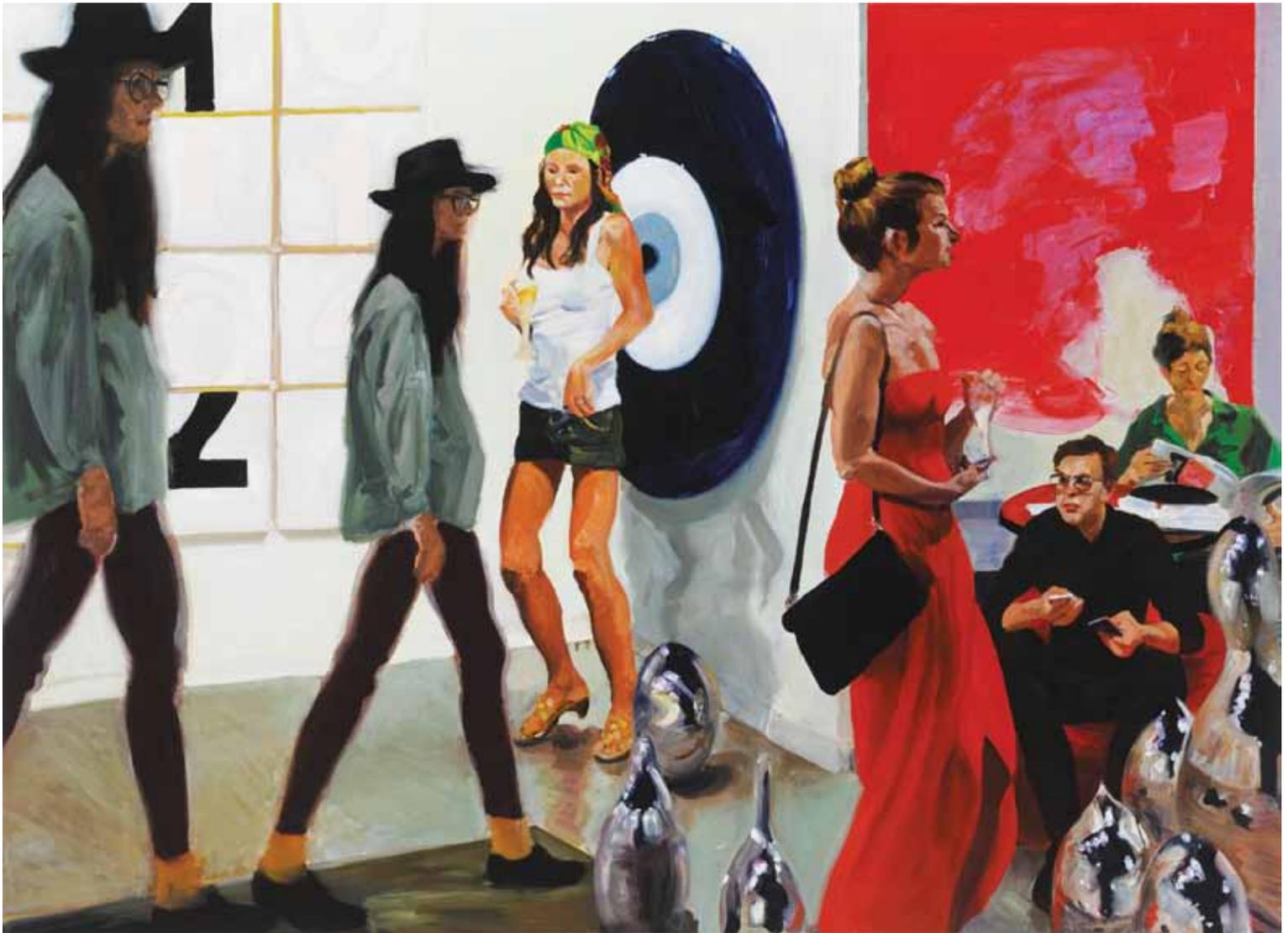
Fischl's painting raises serious questions about works of art and the fairs in which they appear. In what follows, I hope to address what can happen to works of art—and our relationship to them—at art fairs of such grand, Dionysian magnitude as Art Basel and Frieze. It's clear that the experience and the narrative constructed by these entities differ significantly from those offered by a museum. The powerful experience of being at major fairs, these concentrated stations of the global art network, denies us the possibility of what art historian and cultural critic Aby Warburg called "thought-space" (*Denkraum*), the sense of distance from our environment needed for contemplation. This diminishment of thought-space can be charted with the art fair's emergence and the effects of the apparatuses of our late capitalist condition.

At one of today's fairs, it is not uncommon to encounter an array of works from across the art historical spectrum. Take, for instance, the photographs from the booths of Lisson Gallery and Galería Elvira González at the 2013 Miami Basel. One can see Anish Kapoor's polished and dizzying *Turning the World Upside Down* (one would be hard pressed to find a more fitting work for an art fair), flanked by one of Ai Weiwei's puzzling bicycle sculp-

tures. In the booth of Galería Elvira González, biomorphic shapes of an Alexander Calder mobile hover over an Adolph Gottlieb painting. People congregate and mill about the booths, conversing, but no one seems to think twice about the art around them. Maybe they do not have to. Perhaps it is because these works, by simply being present at a fair, command a certain degree of authority. They would not be there if they had not already been validated as signifiers of cultural capital and economic value. While many factors determine which works are presented at a fair, recognizability provides a distinct advantage: the viewer, without time or space to think deeply about the work, does not have to. According to art historian Terry Smith, this experience of the "coexistence of distinct temporalities, of different ways of *being* in relation to time, experienced in the midst of a growing sense that many kinds of time are running out" is a decidedly contemporary one.<sup>2</sup> What enables the different moments in time that each Ai Weiwei, Kapoor, Calder, and Gottlieb represents to cohabit at a fair? What is it about our era that makes it possible for an art fair to assemble together hundreds of galleries, styles, and time periods as it does?

A pervasive condition of the world since the 1970s has been the compression of time and space. The impacts of this, as the British theorist David Harvey notes, have drastically altered political, social, economic, and cultural aspects of life.<sup>3</sup> Enhanced networks and the increased flow of data and information have allowed commodities, communications, and capital to move at unprecedented speeds throughout the world, accelerating production, consumption and exchange. Harvey suggests space-time compression compacts time "into some overwhelming present."<sup>4</sup> This new present entrenches itself in all aspects of life: Japanese beers almost instantly find themselves transported to and served in Manhattan bars; images of experience from all over the world gather into the single domestic space of our living room TV. In this new present, time is accelerated exponentially and the physical distance between things contracts. An art fair exemplifies this phenomenon by condensing an incomprehensibly vast global art network into a single locale. The visitor encounters a sampling of galleries, artists, and works of art brought together for a few fleeting days in London, Miami, or Hong Kong. It presents a spectacular, superficially comprehensible look at what the art world is at that *present moment*, a shifting reality that hastily disperses back into the phantasmagoric systems of global capital from whence it came, only to reconstitute itself, in an altered form, in a different location and time. Therefore, provided Harvey's historical model of the world, it makes sense that an international fair such as Art Basel came into being during the 1970s—the world was primed for this distorted way to experience and consume art.

Compressing space and time is not without consequences, Harvey reminds us. It inhibits our ability to interpret and deal with the realities "unfolding around us."<sup>5</sup> As geographical and temporal artistic spaces of the world are collapsed, the fair itself remains vast, vertiginous, and ultimately incomprehensible. As a consequence, our ability to come to terms with the phenomenon of the fair and the works art that comprise it—our thought-space—is impeded, diminished, and deemphasized.



Eric Fischl, *Art Fair: Booth #1 Play/Care*, 2013, oil on linen, 82" x 112." Courtesy the Artist, Mary Boone Gallery, New York and Victoria Miro, London. © Eric Fischl.

The work of art historian Aby Warburg was guided by his own idea of “thought-space,” as a kind of critical distance. As Warburg saw it, thought-space is integral to a “life-affirming and tolerant culture.”<sup>6</sup> Thought-space is not only important, but also fundamentally human. It is a product of logic, enabling us to comprehend and analyze history, objects, and even our own perspectives by recognizing the mediation between what the thing perceived and ourselves. Dovetailing with Walter Benjamin’s concept of the “aura,” thought-space—Warburg worried—could be annihilated by the world-altering apparatuses of modernity and its technologies.<sup>7</sup> “The culture of the machine age destroys what the natural sciences, born of myth, so arduously achieved: the space for devotion, which evolved in turn into the space for reflection,” writes Warburg.<sup>8</sup> During Warburg’s lifetime (1866 – 1929) the instantaneous connections enabled by the telegram and telephone were assaults against thought-space. No doubt, Warburg would view our accelerated networks of digital and computational connectivity, deployed alongside neoliberalism, globalization, and the postmodern condition, as dramatically reducing our capacity to benefit from thought-space. And in the 1950s, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger echoed Warburg’s concerns, predicting that the march of technological progress (today operating under the auspices of “innovation”) could so “captivate, bewitch, dazzle, and beguile man” that “calculative thinking may someday come to be accepted and

practiced *as the only* way of thinking.”<sup>9</sup> More recently, the art historian Karen Lang has identified with this tradition and expressed our continued need to develop a contemplative mental space in order to have an aesthetic experience—and, similar to Warburg, understands this as something fundamental to being human.<sup>10</sup>

The public dialogue surrounding art fairs that is overly fixated on numbers illustrates the dominance of calculative thinking and the shrinking of thought-space. (How many visitors attended? What sold for how much?) It is expressed in headlines like “Record Sales, Crowds At Art Basel Miami Beach 2013,” “Richter, Twombly lead \$2 Billion Basel Art Fair,” or Morley Safer’s *60 Minutes* segment touting “Even in tough times, contemporary art sells.”<sup>11</sup> Critical engagement with the art itself, or contemplation of it, is replaced by assessing its market value. Recalling what Fischl’s painting shows us and the effects of space-time compression described by Harvey, these statistical approaches to art fairs are logical outcomes.

In response, critics and art historians have come to grips with the consequences of the art fair system. *New Yorker* critic Peter Schjeldahl, (whose essay on another topic appears in this issue) suggests that fairs have altered how art is distributed and produced.<sup>12</sup> Schjeldahl points out that in order for gallerists to survive, they need to export their art and employees from their museum-like white cubes to “flimsy-walled, cacophonous fairs,” and suggests that works of art tend to conform to this format, while media such as performance are



Lisson Gallery's booth at Art Basel in Miami Beach 2013. Courtesy of Art Basel.



Frieze London 2014. Photo: Linda Nyind. Courtesy of Linda Nyind/Frieze.



Galería Elvira González's booth at Art Basel in Miami Beach 2013. Courtesy of Art Basel.

rare.<sup>13</sup> Art historian Jane Chin Davidson has argued that the origins of the art fair structure can be traced to nineteenth-century colonial expositions.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, she contends the origins of the Venice Biennale, which began in 1895, can be connected to the age of empire's need to showcase national artistic achievements. Thus, art fairs are not as "new" as we might assume. *New York* magazine's art critic Jerry Saltz has come to terms with the overwhelming nature of art fairs in his own way as sites to "gauge group tendencies" and "glean what's going on in other scenes," but not to look at art.<sup>15</sup>

When an art fair reduces thought-space to the point where only calculative thinking survives, economic value takes precedence. However, what is problematic about a fair is not necessarily that it accentuates or heightens a work of art's commodity value. A work of art is already a commodity before it comes to the fair. Rather, what can be seen as more pressing is the work of art's diminishment of historical meaning and metaphor as it starts to become swallowed up by a more accessible contemporary moment. In certain cases, fairs have indeed attempted to establish more thought-provoking contexts (see Miami Basel's art historically-minded sector "Survey"). But by and large, when one enters the experience of an art fair one walks into an overwhelming concentration of a globalized, capitalized art world whose properties are hard to resist. Recalling Baudrillard again, an art fair may very well conceal the fact that we cannot actually know and experience the reality of the art world. With these thoughts in mind, one can revisit

Fischl's painting, and understand why subtle, nuanced works like Darren Almond's black and white grid painting recede into the background. At Miami Basel, Frieze, or wherever the art world congregates to reaffirm its existence and status, works of art become shallow caricatures of themselves, and lose their depth. ■

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3. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989, pp. 286.
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8. Aby Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995, pp. 54.
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10. Karen Lang, "Response: The Far in the Near," in *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 89, No. 1 (Mar. 2007), pp. 32.
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# AT PLAY IN THE RUINS OF MODERNITY

## Buildering: Misbehaving the City

BY JENNIE KLEIN

*The action which we call artistic then has to deal with the fact that it exists in the interstices between senses of the self's relation to the world: one possessed of infinity and plenitude and another conducted in response to constraints and limits.*

Raqs Media Collective<sup>1</sup>

The art—and artists—included in “Buildering: Misbehaving the City” (February 28 - August 18, 2014, Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati), are all about the interstices of contemporary urban life—the places that remain uninhabited even in a densely populated city. The term ‘buildering,’ an amalgamation of ‘building’ and ‘bouldering,’ refers to the illegal act of climbing buildings without safety equipment. Buildering has been around for more than 100 years and is often undertaken secretly at night. Like builderers, the artists in the exhibition use urban environments in non-traditional, extralegal ways. Curated by Steven Matijcio, “Buildering” draws upon the legacy of the Situationist International (S.I.). In the second part of

the 20<sup>th</sup> century the S.I. again moved through the streets of Paris, this time with the intention of undermining the mindless flow of people and commerce in large urban centers by deliberately interrupting the paths laid out by the city planners that were designed to facilitate capitalist exchange while maintaining class segregation. This process, which S.I. leader Guy Debord called *dérive*, or drift—an unplanned journey through an urban space in which the surrounding architecture and geography subconsciously directs the walker—created an authentic experience that stood in opposition to the inauthentic, alienated experiences of late capitalism. Known more for their writings than their artwork, the ideas of the S.I. in turn influenced artists working at the turn of the millennium who were interested in political intervention, coalition building, and collaborative work through aesthetic and performative interventions into the urban fabric of the city. The S.I. espoused play and whimsy to counter modernist capitalism. As it was with S.I., the artists included in “Buildering: Misbehaving the City” are also interested in play and whimsy. The



Cie Willie Dorner, *Bodies in Urban Space*, 2014. Performed in Downtown Cincinnati. Courtesy of Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati.



Kamila Szejnoch, *Swing*, installation, Memorial to the Berling Army Soldiers, Warsaw, September 20th, 2008. Courtesy of Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati.

exhibition is comprised primarily of performance documentation although there are some surprising sculptural objects that were once used as chairs, fences, cardboard and bicycles. “Buildering” is less concerned with the S.I. aim of overthrowing capitalism than it is with exposing its cracks and fissures as liminal spaces of play. Also missing is overt political engagement with urban social experience, a hallmark of Social Practice art. While much of the work in “Buildering” is anti-capitalist, it proposes no solutions or revolutions.

Yet, as the New Delhi-based artist group Raqs Media Collective argues, work that resists the assumed fungibility of human beings, that insists on every human being’s unique agency, is politically important precisely because it takes us beyond the political.<sup>2</sup> Kamila Szejnoch’s *Swing* (2007) accomplishes this aim by insisting on the importance of individual *jouissance* and agency as a form of resistance against a repressive socialist past. The intent of *Swing* was to re-purpose Communist monuments in Warsaw. With *Swing*, located at the Memorial to the Berling Army Soldiers, Szejnoch hung a large swing from the outstretched arm of the colossal Berling soldier and invited people to swing. Its video documentation on YouTube shows flummoxed police unable to stop people from climbing joyfully onto the swing and kicking their feet in the air while the artist and her crew documented the event.<sup>3</sup> For Szejnoch, Warsaw’s communist past is always present. Szejnoch suggests that “although such memorials have been consigned to the historical scrap heap, we can still meet them in the streets and parks . . . the idea of *Swing* is based on a contrast between the monumental bronze Berling Army Sol-

dier and a tiny individual swung by a big hand of history.”<sup>4</sup>

Play pervades the exhibition. The critic Phillip Prager, referring to Dada, has suggested that “improvising—that is, exploring ideas, objects, materials, and people without considering sense, purpose, or function—is one of the key features of play. Play, in turn, is not the evolutionary recipe for only the success of our mammalian class and human species but also for the origin of creative innovation—the recipe for our social cohesion, our mental facility, and our physical health.”<sup>5</sup> The collective Bestué-Vives (David Bestué and Mark Vives), in their video performance *Actions at Home* (2003/2005) uses its tiny Barcelona apartment as a site for minimalist, fantastical performances—part science experiment, part prank—a vase falls to the floor and a white dove emerges from the wreckage, disappearing out the window. A fountain is made from plates, cutlery, plastic spoons and a cork in the kitchen sink. When a book is removed from a bookcase, multiple books pop out. Heads emerge from walls. A turd in the toilet sprouts a palm tree. A man walks on bars of soap, wets the floor, and proceeds to careen through the room. The tiny, two-bedroom apartment reveals itself as fertile ground for a wildly imaginative alternate world.

For Allard Van Hoorn’s two-part situational dance piece, *2014\_020 Urban Songline | Latitude: 39.102759° N - 39.102907° N | Longitude: -84.511896° W - -84.512164° W*, Van Hoorn joined Mamluft & Co. Dance and the Heather Britt Dance Collective and created the musical score by recording the sounds of the dancers interacting with large white helium balloons alongside the CAC’s distinctive curved wall, designed by architect Zaha Hadid. Then the dancers improvised according to the score, embodying the sounds of the building.

Lee Walton’s video documentations of micro interventions into the fabric of urban life, *Making Changes* (2005) playfully rearrange the displays outside bodegas littering the neighborhoods of Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Walton moves display racks so they become sculptural installations. He places bananas among the onions to set off their bright yellow coloring. In *Getting a Feel for the Place* (2007), Walton literally runs his hands over the urban landscape of Belfast, feeling benches, buildings, signposts, mailboxes, doorframes, phone booths and occasionally people.

Ivan Argote’s humorous and poignant urban interventions, performed in New York subways, show him approaching people on public transport to give them money *I Just Want to Give You Money* (2007) or narrate imagined anecdotes about supposed family members he films on the bus *We Are All In the Bus* (2007). People’s reactions to Argote’s sincere attempt to relate to them range from puzzlement to hostility. Through it all, Argote appears to remain blithely unaware of his transgressions against acceptable boundaries and conduct.

From monuments to kitchen cutlery, a great deal of repurposing occurs in “Buildering.” Unlike the recent trend in which discarded objects are recycled into objects simultaneously beautiful and utilitarian (such as the work of Michael Rakowitz, Marjetica Potrč or Andrea Zittel) Michael De Broin transforms functional objects into useless yet beautiful sculptures that seem to defy gravity. In *Anxious Stability* (1997), four sheets of drywall and brick balance perilously on a metal hoist. Didier Faustino’s *Point Break* (2009), a precariously installed chain link fence bifurcates the gallery, creating an artificial border within its walls. *El Barrio* (2007) by Los Carpinteros, a Havana-based collective, takes the cardboard, plywood and metal houses of the barrio—most of them built on top of each other to maximize space—and recreates them in highly finished wood. Warsaw-based



Carey Young, *Body Techniques (after Lean In, Valie Export, 1976)*, 2007, lightjet print, 48" x 59 3/4." © Carey Young. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Monika Sosnowska distorts metal stairs and window frames into large-scale installations. While her work is abstract, her use of materials draws from Warsaw's built environment of defunct or re-purposed Soviet architecture, its industrial history, and even a recreated historic neighborhood that was destroyed during World War II.

While there is quite a lot of building and rebuilding in "Buildering," there is no actual buildering as it is depicted in the photographic work of Alex Hartley, author of *L.A. Climbs: Alternative Uses for Public Architecture* (2003). The spirit of 'buildering,' defined by Hartley, as an act of individual or collective urban derring-do, pervades the show. Approaching the third floor via the agency of Hadid's shallow, sharply angled stairway, the viewer confronts a video of Sebastian Stumpf sliding down the railing of the same staircase. Elsewhere, videos of Stumpf's performances highlight his athleticism and timing. In *Underground Garages* (2008), Stumpf dashes towards garage doors as they close, diving and often rolling under the doors at the last possible second. In *Bridges* (2011), he waits for the perfect moment—a moment when he will not be stopped or detained by authorities—to leap off city bridges into a polluted river. Etienne Boulanger, as part of his video piece *Plug-in Berlin*, lived what he termed a "nomadic existence in an urban environment,"<sup>6</sup> mapping the voids, interstices, crevices and forgotten parts of three Berlin districts, where he then built makeshift shelters from scavenged materials. He lived for a time in these shelters, which were all but invisible to the uninitiated passersby. Five pieces in the exhibition—*Berlin Map* (draw-

ing, 2001), *Interstices* (slide projection, 2001), *Mesures* (photo series, 2001), *Shelters* (video, 2001) and *Playground* (CD Rom/video, 2002-2004), document *Plug-in Berlin* (2001-2003).

Like Boulanger, Egle Budvytyte, in her video *Leap* (2009) documents the interstices of the city that resist the constant surveillance of Google Earth and the standardization of industrial time. *Leap* follows a group of young Dutch boys who practice Parkour, a military-inspired obstacle course, through urban environments that demand difficult feats of agility and strength. Part documentary, part fantasy, *Leap* is narrated in a deadpan *National Geographic* style. The narrator (Hannah Lippard) explains that these boys are "jump children—a mixture of bird and human." Avoiding heavily-trafficked areas, the jump children meet in uninhabited zones such as rooftops and underground spaces, transforming the cities, according to the narrator, "into zones of transparent happiness and joy." By exhausting their muscles, the narrator tells us, the jump children enter mental zones of non-thinking—which mirror the unforeseen, unused gaps Boulanger was able to find in Berlin's urban spaces.

It is easy to romanticize the young male "jump children" (known as *traceurs* in traditional Parkour language), especially as their youth and strength render them conventionally beautiful. But it should be noted that Parkour is a quite popular practice, particularly among young, athletic boys and men. (I live in a rural college town where young men gather every weekend to practice it in the tiny downtown area near the university). In fact, much of the work in "Builder-



Carey Young, *Body Techniques (after Encirclement, Valie Export 1976)*, 2007, lightjet print, 48" x 60." © Carey Young. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

ing," particularly in the riskier pieces, is executed by white, first-world men. Urban interventions are most successfully executed in first-world countries where the metaphorical freedom and agency of the individual human action are less prone to getting the builderers penalized and incarcerated. As exemplified by Didier's border chain link fence and Los Carpinteros's replication of the slums of Havana *El Barrio* (2007), the deregulation and free trade associated with neo-liberalist doctrine have produced an ever-widening gap between those with capital and those without.

The vast gulf is best conveyed in Carey Young's re-performance of two canonical works by Valie Export: *Body Techniques, after Encirclement, Valie Export* (2007) and *Body Techniques, after Lean In, Valie Export* (2007). When Export first performed *Encirclement* and *Lean In* (1976) as part of the series *Body Configurations*, she was attempting to demonstrate the tension between her female/feminist body and the rigid ideological and social forces shaping Vienna's postwar economy. More than 30 years later, Young's performance of these pieces takes on a completely different meaning, as her "techniques," as she has re-titled them, are set against vast, unfinished building sites of Dubai's and Sharjah's futuristic corporate landscapes. Wearing a business suit and heels, Young, like Export before her, tries in vain to reconfigure her female, westernized body to this landscape, at once so familiar and so strange. Young's work, part of a series in which she re-performs canonical conceptual work in unfinished urban settings whose architects seem to have embraced

the most egregious examples of postmodern capitalist architecture, underscores the need for individuals to assert their humanity in the face of the increasing fungibility of human beings and actions.

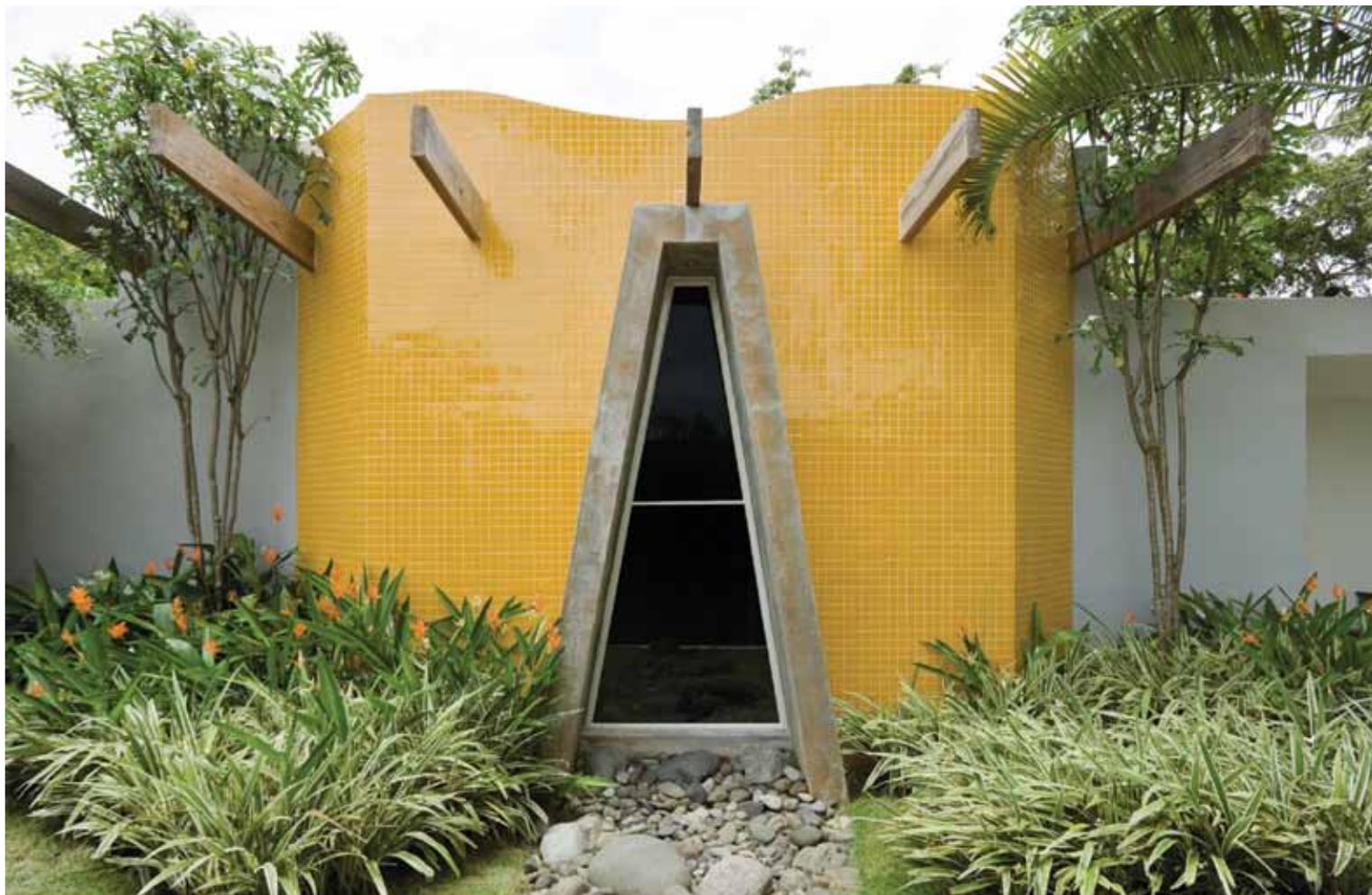
The spirit of the exhibition is perhaps best summed up in the work of Willi Dorner, Austrian choreographer and founder of the dance group Cie Willi Dorner. In the spirit of urban intervention, Dorner created an iteration of his ongoing piece *Bodies in Urban Spaces* especially for the exhibition. Working with local dancers, Dorner choreographed two walks through downtown Cincinnati. At pre-determined *parcours*, a colorfully dressed group of dancers, Parkour runners and performers move through city centers, carefully piling up their bodies into interstitial spaces that are often overlooked and underused, creating bizarre body sculptures that changed the quotidian into the marvelous. Although perhaps overly optimistic, the work in "Buildering" suggests that art-as-process still has the potential to change the world, or at least resist the pervasiveness of global capitalism. ■

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3. Kamila Szejnoch, *Huštawka (Swing)*, 2008. YouTube: Video. May 25, 2014.
4. Idem. "Projects: Swing." <http://www.kamilaszejnoch.com>, May 25, 2014.
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# GROUNDS FOR ART

An Interview with Carolina Stubbe of arte\_FIST FOUNDATION



arte\_FIST FOUNDATION's offices at Dorado, Puerto Rico.

Since its inception in 2008, Puerto Rico's arte\_FIST FOUNDATION has transformed the area around the seaside resort community of Dorado Beach into an open-air exhibition space containing an everchanging series of site-specific land art projects. In the following interview, we spoke with arte\_FIST's founder Carolina Stubbe about the organization's history and mission, some of the artworks and educational projects it has sponsored, and her own interest in using land art to foster deeper contemplation of humanity's complex relationship to nature.

BY JEFF EDWARDS

*Jeff Edwards – I'd like to start with a question on the history of arte\_FIST FOUNDATION. What inspired you to found it, and how did the organization come together?*

*Carolina Stubbe –* As a museologist and art worker I am always thinking about art, its consequences and effects in every space and place. When I moved to Dorado Beach I fell in love with the surrounding nature, the *Pterocarpus* reserve, the beach at the end of each trail, the tunnels made by trees and bamboo, etc. I thought it was a good idea for the place to retake the concept of land art. Dorado Beach offers many settings, some more visible than others, for

the development of land art and nature art proposals. It has lakes, sand, water, soil, grass and a profuse rainforest.

At first we did an event called Art Week at Dorado Beach with land art as a main theme, in which we had help from many organizations and individuals such as CIRCA 09, Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, Architect Otto Reyes, among others. We established ourselves near the office building of Dorado Beach, with a humble building, and then started to build a better, small, but beautiful building made with recycled materials and designed by Otto Reyes.



Vientre Compartido, *Sandtrap*, 2010, mixed media. Photo: Johnny Betancourt.

*J.E. – In a statement on the foundation’s website (artefist.foundation), you speak a little more about your daily walks around Dorado Beach and the powerful effect they’ve had on your perception of nature. How has that routine helped shape your views on land art?*

*C.S. – I think that, when you live here, you realize nature gives you liberty, or at least the idea of liberty. It is always accompanied by the element of surprise. The climate here invites you to work with your surroundings. Daily walks reminded me of the work of Robert Smithson and Richard Long. Besides, daily walks make you see how nature takes its own path, changing everything on its way, and reminded me how land art works are destroyed by the same natural forces.*

Dorado Beach’s ecological landscape is almost completely intervened with human hand, and that makes it the perfect setting for land art. The art works are not going to get lost into the woods with nobody except for the artist having seen them. These forests and natural parks are filled with trails and golf courses, which creates a flow of viewers every day. The setting has given us the opportunity to invite artists that come from other kind of experience and mediums. Not all of the artists that work with us are land artists.

*J.E. – How large is your operation, and how are you funded?*

*C.S. – Our operation is not very large. We work with few but very good and well-established artists. We are funded through private funding and alliances with private investors. Sometimes the alliances are not about money but about materials needed to build the installations.*

*J.E. – arte\_FIST’s major land art projects fall into two main categories:*

*Art in Nature and Art in Golf. What does each do, and what purpose do you want them to serve for viewers and for the community on Dorado?*

*C.S. – Art in Nature is the main theme for a series of events in which we invite artists from Puerto Rico or from the rest of the world to intervene the landscape of Dorado and Dorado Beach with nature and land as a main theme. Artists can work with the artificial as well as the natural landscape. For example, Pseudomero’s work on Road 693 uses trees as a main theme but is a mural, painted on a wall near the entrance of Dorado Beach.*

Art in Golf is a triennial that offers artists the possibility to insert their work in any of the golf courses of Dorado Beach. This year’s second edition of the triennial is conceived to continue for the entire three years. For the first time in Puerto Rico, Art in Golf Triennial first edition in 2012 organized a permanent event that established a relationship between golf and contemporary art.

*J.E. – How do you find artists to work with? Do you go out looking, or do people approach you?*

*C.S. – Both. We have an open call in our web page, and we receive very good proposals every year. We select some of them, and the others are projects we propose to artists that have an established career here in Puerto Rico or as land artists around the world.*

*J.E. – What kinds of things do you look for in a proposal? For example, do you like to work with artists who have past experience with earth art projects, or is that not a big concern?*

*C.S. – I prefer artists that do have experience with nature and earth*



Takashi Hinoda, *Unsounded Voices*, 2013, mixed media. Photo: Lorraine Young.



projects. But I also like to challenge artists, especially local artists, to develop an art work with nature and around earth art even if they haven't worked with land art before. Artists with experience know how to administrate their materials and know about the dimensions in land art. We evaluate the requirements for each proposal to see if they take reality into account.

**J.E. – How do you select sites for your land art installations? Do your artists design works for specific locations that are available beforehand, or do the ideas come first and the locations after?**

**C.S. –** We know our surroundings and Dorado Beach's natural settings. When we study the proposals we can imagine the finished work in one setting. We send photos and measurements of the place to the artist and she or he has the final decision. Even when the setting is selected, it can be changed at any time during the process.

We have had a variety of works, and for some of them we have selected the site first and then the artist installs the art piece, and for some other projects the artists have studied the place first and become inspired by the landscape and the possibilities it offers.

**J.E. – Is it important to you that the projects you choose relate closely in some way to the location or to the local ecology/environment of Dorado?**

**C.S. –** It is important that the art work relates in some way with the setting and the landscape, but we are lucky the artists that work with us have enough experience to integrate the environment in the art piece.

**J.E. – Does arte\_FIST own the land where the works are displayed, or do you use land that belongs to other people? If the latter, how has your experience been in working in partnership with other organizations or landowners?**

**C.S. –** The land is owned by Dorado Beach. It has been a great experience for us because the neighbors and visitors have welcomed our projects. The community of Dorado Beach has also offered help in the installation of Art in Golf art pieces and assisting with the events.

**J.E. – You've also hosted several conferences and exhibitions about land art, including lectures by art historians and some of the artists you've worked with. How do events like that relate to your outdoor**

**installations, and how do you think they enrich viewers' experiences of the artworks?**

**C.S. –** In August 2013 Japanese artist Takashi Hinoda visited Puerto Rico and offered a conference at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico. It is for us a pleasure to bring international contemporary artists that can share their experience with the public in general. Before that, in 2012, we had the visit of Spaniard scholar Tonia Raquejo, expert in land art. She shared the microphone with Laura Bravo, Ph.D. in art history and professor at the University of Puerto Rico, and local artists Javier and Jaime Suárez, who work almost exclusively with land art. Not only it is important to have in Puerto Rico world-renowned scholars who have worked with earth art, but it is also a great experience for local artists and scholars to share visions with them in the aspect of contemporary art and art with nature.

**J.E. – In her lecture, Tonia Raquejo addressed the larger history of land art, including iconic works like Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty. How do you see the work that arte\_FIST does relating to that history, and what underlying themes or concepts do arte\_FIST's projects share with other iconic works of earth art?**

**C.S. –** What most of our projects share with the beginnings of land art is the ephemerality they have. Not all of the pieces created with arte\_FIST FOUNDATION are ephemeral, but some have evolved with nature around them, like *Sandtrap* by Viente Compartido, and *Muñeca Viajera* by Cristina Salas. We also feel we are contributing to land art creating a landscape. We have changed the nature around Dorado Beach with our interventions. Art in Golf is maybe our most distinguishable project. It is a different setting for land artists to work on.

**J.E. – That ephemeral aspect of land art is a defining feature of many of the projects you've done with artists. For example, Sandtrap, which you've already mentioned, and Miya Ando's Obon (2012), both derived much of their meaning from a slow dissolution back into their surroundings. How do you view ephemerality in land art?**

**C.S. –** Earth art does not have to be necessarily ephemeral, but when a work of art that uses natural elements eventually fuses back with nature it's an ecological, political and contemporary statement we appreciate.

**J.E. – I've also noticed that many of the Art in Nature works highlight**



Miya Ando, *Obon*, 2012, mixed media. Photo: Lorraine Young.

*the human impact on the environment and the imposition of the artificial into the natural sphere. To cite two examples, Hinoda's Unsounded Voices (2013) and Teresa Mulet's en(re) (2012) presented very blatantly human-made, synthetic objects intruding somewhat brashly into their surroundings as a comment on the human presence in nature. What message do you see such works delivering to viewers?*

C.S. – They deliver an ecological message that we have to take care of our home and our surroundings, but they are also intended to make people think about the feelings a natural environment can inspire.

*J.E. – In relation to that, I'm also interested in hearing about how the projects for Art in Golf work in context. For example, there's a project by Carlos Mercado that features illustrated mirror boxes scattered around the golf course, which I'd assume has a significant effect on game play. Is it important to you that your artists take the site's regular patrons into account when they design their projects, or do they just tend to consider the site alone as a sort of blank canvas for their work?*

C.S. – Definitely artists do not work in the golf course as if it is a blank canvas. They take the design of the course and the game mechanics into account. It is also important for them to use the game as a theme. In order to feel safe about the placing of the artworks and make sure they don't interrupt the game, we consult the administrators of the course to tell us where it is safe to install the pieces.

*J.E. – The projects for the ongoing Art in Golf Triennial are being rolled out gradually over a three-year period. What led you to decide on such an extended time frame?*

C.S. – For us, the three-year period is the more effective way to have art

projects always on the golf courses. For the first edition of the Triennial we installed all the works at the same time, but for this second edition we are installing them every six or seven months so we can have activities and events around the new installations. That way, we make sure at the closing of the Triennial the golf courses will be a complete art exhibition.

*J.E. – What do you see as the long-term goal of arte\_FIST, and how do you envision the foundation evolving over the next few years?*

C.S. – Experience has shown us that artists need administrative skills. That is why one of the projects we are envisioning for the future is a series of courses that teach artists to administrate an art project, maybe like a masters in art administration. We would also like to grow and be a bigger foundation, one that has been a pioneer in the Caribbean. We would like to have a research team around land art and continue to contribute to the area of expertise. That way we can also gain a deeper philosophical understanding of what we do.

*J.E. – Finally, what kinds of projects are you working on for the future?*

C.S. – Next year we will be working with Jesús "Bubu" Negrón and artist Mu Blanco with two Art in Nature projects. We have also two publications that are being printed right now, and we are also working with the city of Dorado. The town has an abandoned building that we would like to set up for exhibitions.

We are also working so more people can know us. We are working on a branding campaign that is heading toward sports gear so we can promote health and exercise and at the same time have people know what we do. ■

# THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

## The Art of Jorge Perianes

Jorge Perianes is a Spanish artist mostly known for his site-specific installations. The ‘scenic’ displays contain a particular symbolism mostly inspired by literature and philosophy. His work is focused on the constant exploration of humanity and its interaction with the natural environment. Perianes recently received an important award in his country, given by the prestigious Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Gas Natural Fenosa (MAC), A Coruña, and we took this opportunity to talk to him about his work and future plans.

BY IRINA LEYVA-PÉREZ

*Irina Leyva-Perez- Your work is characterized by the assembling of surreal scenes from extremely realistic elements, conceived with an almost obsessive attention to detail. The end result is a work of art that is intensely symbolic but ambiguous at the same time. Is that your intention?*

Jorge Perianes - ‘Intention’ is never a subjacent concept in my work (at least not at a conscious level); neither in its conception, nor in the process of creation, nor the final result. I’m perhaps interested in it being received in the simplest and most direct way possible, and that the metaphors or symbols that appear in it be very ‘pure’ and simple in appearance. Let’s say that I tend to strive for a minimum that expresses a maximum of possible combinations or meanings—never closed, though, but instead open for each and every person or aesthetic experience.

For me, obsession to detail is almost pathological, a personal mania for the well-finished work, a search for perfection and for a final result polished and precise—in every aspect of life, by the way.

*I.L.P. - Most of your previous work—I’m talking in particular about the insect series—is based on a principle of attraction versus repulsion, in which we feel attracted by the decay and destruction that you show us. In some of them, it’s the aversion we feel when we discover that the ‘work’ is sometimes full of insects, sometimes of broken glass. There is a representation of the cycle of life and death. How do you see this connection?*

J.P. - It’s possible that such representation is there, although lately I have been more interested in the concept of presentation, and in a not-so-veiled form in the first series, to tell you the truth; at least that’s how I see it. Lately I’m mostly interested in the concept of *time*, on tackling it in a manner that’s more abstract and incisive. One way or another, *vanitas* is always the base of almost all my pieces, their background murmur. We should not let ourselves be fooled by color and beauty; they reflect only a struggle for life, the violence of being.

*I.L.P. - You never represent the human being per se in your work; instead, its presence is made implicit through elements such as birdhouses, or objects such as cups, wine glasses, cigarette butts. Why this parabolic approach?*

J.P. - I believe that for many contemporary artists it is impossible to represent the human being directly, in a rotund, frontal, seamless way. Maybe this has to do with a loss of values and a distrust of being that we experiment in circumstances of change and crisis.

It’s a figure that it’s hard to put a face to; such an ideal does not exist nowadays. Anyhow, I think that in the end all art is always a search for representation and meaning, similar to Heidegger’s *Das-ein*. How? Through their peripheral elements—objects, humanized animals and so forth. It’s a whole sort of metonymy of being, an ontological need to circumvent it.

*I.L.P. - Right now, works of yours are included in the exhibit “Welcome to the Jungle” at Pan American Art Projects in Miami. The thesis of this exhibit is based on the relationship between nature and the human being—on how there is a symbiosis to a certain point, but also an invasive attitude on the part of the human being, who, in the end, however, is always reclaimed by nature. Do you address something similar with your work?*

J.P. - A central topic in my work is the relationship of the human being with the environment, especially the relationship of humans with their instinctive and animal essences. The human being is torn halfway between animal and God; a being that’s essentially lost, but in a way that’s tragic and beautiful at the same time, a theme that’s classic in the end. This, on one side; on the other, in my visual and conceptual line, the topic of ruin and of the final victory of nature is always present. Any construction or civilized project is always in the long run swallowed by *natura*, indifferently and sans pity. All of this inevitably leads to melancholy—curiously, according to the poet Ippolito Pindemonte (in his 1788 work *Poesie Campestri*), Melancholy is a nymph that represents the ideal frame of mind to contemplate nature fully and in depth, revealing to us the vain illusions and the decadence of human beings.

*I.L.P. - Many of your works are made keeping in mind the precise place where they are going to be exhibited. For instance, Categorías (Categories), the installation you exhibited at the Matadero in 2011. For this piece, you created a whole architectural structure, splitting the space in half, an upper part and a lower, establishing in this way, as the press statement rightly put it, “a setting of opposites, two symbolic concepts or categories that could very well correspond to a basement (where life is gestated, where roots are) and an attic (where memories and knowledge are kept, a place of cogitation and death).” Is this piece based on the theories exposed by Bachelard in his Poetics of Space, in which he urges architects to consider the experiences that their works could provoke?*

J.P. - Bachelard is a direct influence on this piece, yes. He has always



Jorge Perianes, *Categories*, 2011, wood and synthetic fibers, dimensions variable, installation view at "Abierto x Obras," Matadero, Madrid, Spain. All images are courtesy of the artist and Pan American Art Projects, Miami.

been a key theoretician for me, especially when it comes to tackling concepts of space. His poetic/symbolic worldview is absolutely inspiring; I consider him a model, and, why not, a genius.

*I.L.P. - Going back to the idea of a duality of opposites that you explore in *Categorías*, that's something that is almost constantly present in your work. I'm talking about antithetical positions that you 'illustrate' in the narrative of your works, such as the patched painting, the worm-eaten wall, the column bearing the stone, and so forth.*

J.P. - The theme of understanding the world through a system of unity of opposites is usually present in them. It's the most classic system of thought in philosophy, the key concepts that philosophers call 'categories.' Aristotle, Leibniz, Kant and Tournier have worked with them. Ideas are shown in a masterful light when they appear in opposition.

*I.L.P. - Do you feel that your work changed after this installation you made for the Matadero? What I mean is that, before, your work used to be more 'baroque,' if you will, with more color, more elements, more details. Afterwards we are seeing pieces that lean more toward the minimalist.*

J.P. - Yes, of course. There's no doubt that right now I'm interested in eliminating all interferences. Working with essences is my ideal, as far as my talent and intellect permit, naturally.

*I.L.P. - What is your work process? Do you do drawings first, or do you work from notes?*

J.P. - I always work from ideas that I try to put down on paper. I supposed those are mental connections linking images, objects, scenes, etc., seen or imagined, among themselves and with others. It's a constant process that never rests; a way in which the brain works, and which should be made to stay swift through extracting a constant flow of information from all possible realms. I guess that curiosity and zest for life are behind all that.

*I.L.P. - You started as a painter, but your work has been shifting more toward sculpture, or toward architecture in many cases. What's the reason for that shift toward tridimensionality?*

J.P. - I have reflected a lot about this, and I'm not sure I have the right answer for that. In any case, it seems coherent that in a world overcrowded with images the *imposition* of the work of art, the



Jorge Perianes, *Untitled*, 2007, acrylic on wood, clay glued, wire and varnish, 5.6' x 3.7.'



Jorge Perianes, *Untitled*, 2008, mixed media, 15.7' x 33' x 16.8.' 7 + 1 Projects Rooms. Installation view at MARCO, Vigo.



Jorge Perianes, *Love Story 2*, 2012, mixed media, variable dimensions.

fact that it is physically present and you can even bump into it, or step on it, that one would seek a type of art creation that somehow claims its space and appeals directly and without concessions to the viewer, even if it is through its mere physical presence. Delving into the depth of a painting requires time and patience, something that in this day and age almost means rebellion. Surely in the near future I will meander back to it; it would be the next logical step.

*I.L.P. - In your latest pieces you use glass and mirrors, very fragile materials. The latter are often associated with hedonism. Is that what you want to comment on with these pieces? Or do you see them as catalysts for introspection?*

*J.P. - The wine glasses, glass and mirrors ever-present in classic still life paintings allude to pleasure and hedonism, and thus remind us of the caducity of life. I see a whole lost generation in them, in their reflections and gleams, in their intoxicating contents. To forget being is, without any doubt, a contemporary leitmotif. When I see a wine glass, I see a trace of a feast. I also see an image of melancholy.*

*I.L.P. - It seems to me that you play a lot with the viewer's perception by creating the illusion of something that is not possible in reality. I'm talking about the pieces on insects, about another one that you exhibited at ARCO 2013, the 'rock' that defied gravity, the mounds. You succeed in all of those in intriguing the viewer, in luring him as if to a trap. Is that part of your strategy for a 'dialogue?'*

*J.P. - Of course. It's a game I'm playing with the viewer, but also with myself. Reality is a trap. Disguising the materials, using an element of illusion or surprise, allows the piece to surprise us at a poetic level, or at least that's what I feel. I seek the poetics of the object, often through the improbable or the oneiric. The world of dreams is fundamental in my work. Jung's influence is essential.*

*I.L.P. - Irony is an essential component of your work. For instance, pieces like the one in which the woodpecker brings the tree*

*down with the birdhouse (2007), the one with a naked tree from which hangs the image of a leaf (2008), or Love Story 2 (2012), in which there's a shoe embedded in the wall, have an implicit narrative that borders on sarcasm. Is that a strategy to tackle themes that are apparently more serious?*

*J.P. - This poetics may be a legacy of a part of Surrealism, the most authentic and pure part of Surrealism, that which sought to create a new order based on art and aesthetics. The perception of a more open world from a gaze that is purer and more open, and also more cultured. A great enterprise that was truncated, but that still lives on—just look at the way the international public has received recent exhibits of this art movement. I always bear in mind Lautréamont's phrase: "beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella."*

Sarcasm, by the way, is something I try to avoid. It even repels me. I'm solely interested in irony, and always as a beginning point, never for its own sake. Sarcasm and cynicism are like salt on grass.

*I.L.P. - You just received the award '25 Years of Creative Energy' given by the Museum of Contemporary Art Gas Natural Fenosa (MAC) in A Coruña, Spain. What does that mean for you?*

*J.P. - It is an honor and a responsibility toward all those who, often without your knowledge, follow your work from the shadows, believe in what you do and trust the value of a craft as complex as this one. It's a bet on the future; I hope that initiatives of this kind will also benefit many other colleagues of mine.*

*I.L.P. - What are your plans for the future?*

*J.P. - In the immediate future I have exhibits arranged for 2015 in Colombia, Portugal and Spain, as well as stuff pending in Mexico and Cuba, several fairs in North and South America, also in Europe, and commissions by private collectors. And, above all, there's the imperative of reading, everything I can, at all possible times. ■*

# INTERVIEW WITH ENRIQUE MARTY

**“As an observer, I am in a constant state of tension against the superstitions of society.”**

Spanish artist Enrique Marty (1969, Salamanca) presents his mid-career retrospective “Enrique Marty: Group Therapy, Act of Faith, Dark Room” at Domus Artium (DA2). The show spans 20 years of work and features a variety of formats and mediums—from sculpture, painting, installation and video to photography and watercolor. We’ve spoken with Marty to delve into his obsessions, relationships and beliefs about the contemporary subject.

BY PACO BARRAGÁN

*Paco Barragán - “Enrique Marty: Group Therapy, Act of Faith, Dark Room” is the most comprehensive exhibition of your work to date. It covers 20 years of work, even works from your childhood. What can a visitor to the exhibition expect to see?*

*Enrique Marty* - I should confess that, initially, I was somewhat uncomfortable with the idea of having a ‘retrospective,’ as I see my whole body of work as a single work, a core formed by the smaller parts that make up the interconnected series. I’m even reluctant to date the works because I see them as a single entity that’s unfolding in time. There is an evolution in the work, though it’s similar to when we look at the end of the branch of a tree, the leaf is attached to the branch, to the trunk, all the way to the roots, even though time and growth separate one end from the other. However, the viewer’s interpretation of the work can be altered if the exhibit is structured according to a scripted, conceptual, thematic framework. This gives the project a more complex meaning, allowing for other conceptual premises and narratives to unfold outside of simply displaying the works in chronological order.

*P.B. - The concepts of family and the home lie at the heart of your artistic practice. Why has family been such a fascinating topic for you? It reminds me of the saying that we get to choose our friends but we cannot choose our families.*

*E.M.* - I am very interested in family as a universal symbol that everyone understands. I’ve based a lot of my work on this idea, though I have recently focused on other targets.

*P.B. - We associate family with comfort and security, but in your depictions we find the ‘unheimlich,’ the sinister, the obscene, the grotesque and even the indecent. The viewer is drawn into these disturbing scenes and confronted by the gaze of your creations. Why?*

*E.M.* - The term ‘unheimlich’ refers to the unexpected, the sinister or grotesque that appears when it shouldn’t. That’s when it leads to catharsis. The role of the god Pan was first to cause chaos, terror and then followed the cathartic moment. Pan appeared from the bushes with his terrible appearance and changed the life of the onlooker. Which brings to mind Artaud’s Cenci family, theoretically based on a true story. There are families that have actually exterminated themselves.

## NIETZSCHE AND THE ETERNAL RETURN

*P.B. - Your oeuvre is rhizomatic and holistic in nature. Like a big Gesamtkunstwerk that keeps growing along forking paths but ends up at the same shore. Likewise there are many themes and characters that recur over the years in different settings.*

*E.M.* - The eternal return yes, and the total work of art. Here we go back to Wagner and Nietzsche. Surely if I was not an artist, I would be a psy-

chopath, but a psychopath in Nietzsche’s style, an insufferable man. Or I maybe already am! Or I might be a character like Artaud, a runaway and extreme guy. While I make my work, it imposes limits within me, and as Nietzsche said, a bridled mind flanges better than a runaway mind. I always have a desire use images to write a philosophical treatise about chaos, trying to bring it to order or trying to understand I don’t know exactly what. Sometimes I feel like a real fucking nihilist.

*P.B. - How do you choose your mediums within your artistic process? Everyone seems appropriate in your work, from painting to drawing, sculpture, photography, video, installation, animation. Are they all equal to you, or is there a hierarchy?*

*E.M.* - I don’t think I have ever consciously chosen the medium I was going to use. The medium does not matter to me; I have never identified as a painter, sculptor, video artist or what the hell else. Every day provides a different answer. If I’ve been painting, I am a painter. It also happens with the materials. I do not care at all.

## CONTRADICTION AS AUTHENTICITY

*P.B. - The exhibit has been divided into three thematic blocks. In the first, Dark Room, we find works that address our ‘obsessions.’ Here we sense a strong interest in Nietzsche (nihilism and his will to power), in Freud (the unconscious and the repressed) and in Artaud (theater of cruelty). Fear, anger, uneasiness, power, insanity.*

*E.M.* - As I said before, I feel nihilistic, but I also deny nihilism. I could even say that I consider the materials I use as essential. I’m attracted to extreme characters who defied society and won, such as Artaud and Nietzsche, but also Aleister Crowley. And above all, it is important to be contradictory. I find authenticity and truth in contradiction.

I like to depict philosophers in comic and grotesque forms, making nonsense. I’ve shot many videos with people wearing masks representing Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Foucault, etc., and in our show these masks are exposed in a piece entitled *Models* of easily offended people in descending order. To display the masks, I created a few bodies with extremely long feet. There is a saying in the Netherlands referring to a person who is easily offended: “You have very long toes.” In the case of Nietzsche, his hands are also feet. I like to see philosophers as actors in a play of the theater of cruelty (or nonsense). I love Nietzsche and hate Kant.

*P.B. - In this section we find earlier work from the 1990s and also recent work like Revealed Outdoor Scene (2014), which connect conceptually with The Rape of Europe (2014) and earlier works.*

*E.M.* - The series *Revealed Outdoor Scene* is the result of my obsession with the *Étant Donnés* by Duchamp. It fascinates me in many ways. Duchamp, who in theory had stopped working for nearly 25

years, and whose work was dematerializing itself to become pure ideas, suddenly, after his death, materialized in a work like this. Deeply carnal, narrative. Pure visual experience.

This is my reply to Duchamp. The viewer is not a voyeur anymore, but death itself, which kicks in the door and pounces on the woman. For this representation of death, I borrow the archetypal medieval skeletons: dancing, courting women, laughing and drinking. The *Étant Donnés* talks about Eros and Thanatos with extreme harshness. And I always wondered would happen next in Duchamp's storyline.

At first impression, the woman in Duchamp's work looks like a corpse, but this appearance is contradicted by the fact that she is holding a lamp with an upright arm. She shows her body 'full frontal,' but not her face. I wanted to follow a similar strategy. All women appearing in the *Revealed Outdoor Scene* series show their bodies openly but their faces, although they are in sight, are somewhat blurred. These are not realistic portraits but rather types; they could be indeed any woman. The complete series consists of five pieces, two of them shown in DA2.

Indeed, this series connects with *The Rape of Europe*, a piece that represents the mythological 'Rape of Europe' by Zeus transformed into a white bull. In this case, Europe is a skeleton, a kind of horseman of the apocalypse. That is where Europe is heading.

**P.B.** - *The second section delves into the realm of our social relationships: Group Therapy. The tense relationship of the contemporary subject in relationship with society, be it his family, his friends or a stranger. You're dealing here with—as Foucault would argue—"the economy of power relations."*

**E.M.** - As an observer, I am in a constant state of tension, a tension of permanent vigilance against the superstitions of society. It's like these soldiers guarding the border of North Korea. They are always in a state of high tension, so firm and vigilant that their whole body seems a pure contraction; the funny thing is that they are all situated with their backs to the border. They are not guarding the border in case someone wants to enter the country, but to keep people from leaving.

**P.B.** - *This section has been built up around the ongoing installation *Stalker* (2010-14), which in a sense works as the engine of the show, displaying installation, sculptures, paintings, videos and so on.*

**E.M.** - *Stalker* was first built in 2012, in Cuenca, at the Antonio Pérez Foundation. I rebuilt bigger and more complex for its installation in DA2. This piece is based on the concept of the spectator as a stalker. I was strongly influenced by Jung when I did it.

The piece is contained between *The Study of My Shadow*, a new work, the Jungian term 'shadow' referring to the dark side we all have and we project onto others, as in a mirror, and a piece called *Cataract Operation*, an old piece in this case, from 1996-99, that I have remade completely, in which we see the eyes of my mother and father undergoing cataract surgery. We see this reflected in a distorting mirror. The paternal gaze being repaired. The raw image is quite hard to look at, close-ups of eyes being operated on. A lot of people find it too extreme. But here, the reflection in the distorting mirror transforms the image into something even beautiful.

In the midst of these pieces, the viewer wanders through a small town composed of houses of different sizes. As a rogue spy who must take a look within each house, where inside, the viewer-spy always sees a recent piece in dialogue with some of the paintings I did as a child, between 10 and 13 years old.



Spanish artist Enrique Marty is presenting his mid-career retrospective "Enrique Marty: Group Therapy, Act of Faith, Dark Room" at Domus Artium (DA2), Salamanca, Spain. All images are courtesy of Deweer Gallery, Otegem, Belgium. Photos: Quique Acosta.

I want the viewers to feel they are glancing inside my head. Inside these installations there are others installations, *Magic Lantern*, a video installation where four videos comprise my self-portrait, and the video *All Your World* is pointless, which has become a central core in my work. And other pieces, like *Fiedrich and Michel in Hell*, *My Most Terrible Fear*, etc.—I always think of this whole area of the show as the phantasmagorian place, made of shades and fears.

**P.B.** - *We also find here the installation *Pray Pray P.I.G.S!* (2012-13) which people in some countries have considered offensive. Do you really think it's offensive? Or is what's going in Europe actually more offensive?*

**E.M.** - This is actually the first time I've managed to show it. Every time I have been invited to an exhibition, and the subject has fit well, I proposed this piece to the curator, and every time it has been rejected on the grounds that showing it could be problematic.

It's funny how each person interprets this piece differently. I made it as ambiguous and open as possible. The title *Pray Pray P.I.G.S!* refers to the sarcastic way some Anglo-Saxon banking circles refer to certain countries, Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain. Countries that have been victims, not executioners, of the supposed economic collapse. Anyway, no problem. Everybody sees in others what they really think about themselves.

# DIALOGUES FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM



"Enrique Marty: *Group Therapy, Act of Faith, Dark Room*" at *Domus Artium (DA2)*, panoramic view, foreground *The Rape of Europe*, 2014, synthetic materials, dimensions variable.



Enrique Marty, *A Fork in the Brain*, 2009-2012, 6210 watercolors 5.1" x 6.7", each and 1 video 5'32" (a 360 degree vision of the installation).



*Enrique Marty, Random Scene, 2104*, synthetic materials, 6 sculptures, 35.4" high each.

People often associate the piece with the Muslim world. It is true that I have used a form of prayer that recalls Muslim prayer, but the figures are dressed in Western attire. They are actually self-portraits. I am fascinated to see how spectators reflect themselves, creating their interpretations which then take on their own lives.

*P.B.* - Another huge installation is *A Fork in the Brain*, consisting of 6,120 watercolors and measuring 13 by 17 centimeters (5.1 by 6.7 inches) with a video that have been installed for the first time ever. Tell us about both the process and the concept behind it.

*E.M.* - I have made several animations in the same type, but this is the longest and most ambitious. Basically it is the portrait of a person I know. The physical and psychological portrait. He has a number of problems, caused in part by a strange relationship with his mother, very dominant.

Once he said that talking to his mother is like someone digging in his brain with a fork. This brilliant sentence convinced me to make the piece. The process was first shooting a video in which this person, Luis, wanders through a fairground. His weight makes him move very slowly, and this was an important part in the narrative. Everything moves around frantically, but he remains nearly stationary, moving heavily. At a certain point, he has a pointless duel with a boxing machine, which, as we finally see, does not take him or the plot anywhere, in a total anticlimax.

Once filmed, I separated the frames to get an animation of 12 frames per second. I then copied the frames in watercolor on paper in a traditional format of 12 by 18 centimeters (4.7 by 7 inches). It took about three years to complete the project. Once you show the whole group together, the piece becomes an optic installation, very immersive. In a way, if you stand in the middle of the space, you feel that you are diving in a sea of uncontrolled thoughts, thoughts that you cannot stop.

### CRUELTY AND ARTIST'S ENGAGEMENT

*P.B.* - Finally, the third section has been articulated around the concept 'Act of Faith,' dealing with ideas of the spiritual, the superstitious, the monstrous and the grotesque.

*E.M.* - The grotesque exists in everyday life. But that's not the case in my work. I identify with the theater of absurdity and cruelty in that same sense—cruelty not as a form of violence, but as an artist's radical commitment to mercilessly represent the world. Cruelty is not in my work; it is on the outside. I'm not interested in art that does not have this commitment, art that is neo-decorative or has a false intellectual varnish that falls at the first hurdle.

*P.B.* - The idea of the mirror and the double is always present in your work. The use of masks—in your self-portrait or portraits of characters like Freud, Foucault et al—reminds me of Artaud's idea of the human face as the space where one can observe the struggle against the forces of death.

*E.M.* - And again we return to Nietzsche. Regarding Artaud, I have in mind a famous anecdote about Jacques Rivière, when he was the director of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. As you know, his correspondence with Artaud was published periodically in this prestigious magazine. The first letter Rivière published was the one in which he explained to Artaud why he would not publish Artaud's poems, which he felt were too wacky, abstract and loose. But anyway, he wanted to know the person behind the poems and start a correspondence with him that would be published. Rivière thought Artaud's mind was too rampant. This mind, he believed, when left free, suffered from pure digression. Rivière believed it could perform better when focused on writing something concrete like a letter. That was what he said to Artaud, who christened his mind a war machine! The Double and the Shadow are perhaps products of that loose and uncontrolled mind. The Shadow as spoken about by Jung, the one we all feel at our backs, is the shadow that lurks in my *Stalker* piece in the show. It is the city in which the shadow prowls and spies.

*P.B.* - I would like to finish with the following question: How has Enrique Marty changed in relation to the Enrique Marty at the beginning of his career in the 1990s?

*E.M.* - I feel safer, that's all. ■



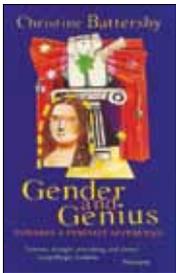
# MAX RYNNÄNEN

Max Rynnänen, a Helsinki-based scholar, curator and critic, directs the master of arts program of the ViCCA (Visual Culture and Contemporary Art) at Aalto University in Finland, where he also teaches aesthetics, art theory and academic skills. Rynnänen has taken part in establishing and running two Helsinki galleries (ROR and Kallio Kunsthalle). Currently, he explores the limits of the white cube with his suitcase gallery KLEIN, where he exhibits this coming winter with Melinda Abercrombie and Lily Skove. He has published reviews and articles on contemporary art in *ARTPULSE*, *Flash Art*, *Atlantica Internacional* and *Kunstkritikk*.



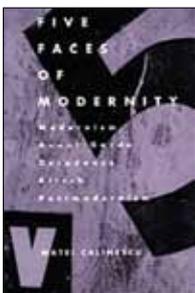
**Mario Perniola. *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing (Athole Contemporary European Thinkers), 2004.**

We have already discussed thoroughly the way Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari conceive human beings as “animals” and/or “machines.” But I got back to reading these classics while pursuing a related interest: our experience of ourselves as “things.” This issue is the major contribution of Mario Perniola’s *Il sex appeal dell’inorganico* (1994, in English 2004), when one suddenly realizes how fascinating it sometimes (but not always) feels to be just a tool of someone else’s sexual satisfaction. Sometimes art stimulates similar experiences. David Cronenberg’s films makes me feel like an extension of his cold cinematic apparatus. In contemporary art, this theme finds a productive context in the work of “abject artists” such as Ron Mueck, who work with uncannily realistic dolls, or Paul McCarthy, who performs with masks to decentralize human feeling.



**Christine Battersby. *Gender and Genius. Towards a Feminist Aesthetics*. London: The Women’s Press, 1994.**

I have lately been interested in authorship and agency in art. My first point of departure on this odyssey was Foucault’s text “What is an Author?,” but I soon discovered that the idea of originality and authority in art is rooted in the myth of the genius. From Plato’s *Ion* to the first books from the Renaissance about the lives and works of the artists (Vasari), one finds the theme of the genius developing, just in time to hit the early evolution of the modern system of arts. Christine Battersby’s witty *Gender and Genius* extends its discourse from sex and gender issues to contemporary commercial culture (e.g. pop music) and is insightful about the history of the problems associated with authorship and agency. Our current problems “as authors” stem from a long and complex history.



**Matei Calinescu. *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Post-modernism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1987.**

*Five Faces of Modernity* tells five scholarly tales about how modernity developed in art and culture. Calinescu does not overlook the shady margins of cultural hierarchies, and so he escapes the vice that has been typical for nearly all “archeologists” of modernity (Andreas Huyssen being an exception.) The most fascinating chapter of *Five Faces of Modernity* is Calinescu’s in-depth analysis of the development of the concept of kitsch, its origin and the hierarchical stance possible only in the 1910s and 1920s, once the culture of art was already well developed—so well developed, in fact, that high culture, in order to continue expanding, needed an enemy. For me, the most important message of Calinescu’s book is that as artists worked to reach middlebrow culture, kitsch has governed much production of art. A must for anyone interested in the great divide between art and popular culture.



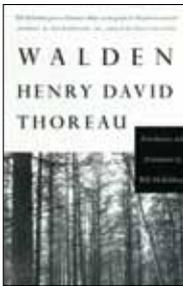
# EMILIANO VALDÉS

Emiliano Valdés is chief curator at the Museum of Modern Art of Medellín, Colombia. He recently co-curated the 10th Gwangju Biennale and was co-director of Proyectos Ultravioleta, a Guatemala City-based multifaceted platform for experimentation in contemporary art. Valdés also was curator and head of visual arts at Centro Cultural de España in Guatemala, where over the course of five years he developed an exhibition program that reshaped the national artistic scene. He has also worked for DOCUMENTA(13), in Kassel; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, in Madrid; and *Contemporary* magazine in London, among other international institutions.



**Gaston Bachelard. *La poética del espacio*. Spanish Edition, translated by Ernestina de Champourcín. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1965.**

A gift from my father in my youth, *La poética del espacio* (*The Poetics of Space*) meant the entry door to the many possibilities Bachelard unveiled to me, in respect to his literary output as well as the world of images and other units of meaning. In this 1957 work, Bachelard expounds on different topics through which he tries to understand the basic but always complex relationship of human beings with their world. The house, for example, is studied from a phenomenological point of view, and it is composed of a compilation of memories and images from all the houses we have lived in. His way of approaching the relationship between “inside” and “outside,” which is also explored later in the book, was the key trigger for my own definition of architecture.



**Henry David Thoreau. *Walden*. First published in 1854. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004.**

At a moment when the undertow of the Enlightenment finally seems as if it is starting to recede, the works of Henry David Thoreau assume a renewed validity as an alternative to a life defined by the Idea of Progress. At the same time that intellectuals are becoming reconciled to non-rational ways of understanding the world and the options for a life less concerned with productivity are suddenly starting to multiply, observation and feeling are proposed as renewed ways of relating to the world. Rather than a glorification of solitary life and the contemplation of nature, *Walden* is a profound meditation on the destiny of our time and on the rules, implicit or explicit, that govern everyday life. I read it a little more than a year ago, at a time that I was working with feverish intensity. My recent personal choices have seemed to respond to some of the ideas expounded in this book.



**Kevin A. Lynch. *La imagen de la ciudad*. Spanish edition. First published in 1960. Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2014.**

In *The Image of the City*, Lynch analyzes three American cities (Boston, Jersey City and Los Angeles), trying to understand the ways in which a city imprints itself in the experience of its inhabitants and what the mechanisms are through which a city dweller generates an image of his or her environment. According to Lynch, nothing is experimented with by itself, but always in its relationship to its surroundings, to the sequence of events that lead to it, and to the memories of previous experiences. That is the way we establish links with parts of the city, whose images become suffused with memories and meaning, hints and reveries. This book has always made me think about my own relationship with the city and about the way in which the physical surroundings define the psychological and emotional experience of living in urban areas. This book was a great influence on my training as an architect and formed the basis for exhibitions like the project of commissions for the public space *Habitat*, which I did in Nicaragua in 2011.

**UNDER THE SAME SUN: ART FROM LATIN AMERICA TODAY**

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum – New York

Curated by Pablo León de la Barra

**The [Latin] American Dream**

By Othiana Roffiel



Alfredo Jaar, *A Logo for America*, 1987, public intervention, digital animation commissioned by The Public Art Fund for Spectacolor sign, Times Square, New York, April 1987. Courtesy the artist, New York.

This past summer, amidst the commercial exuberance that plagues Times Square, iconic billboards once again shone with the words “THIS IS NOT AMERICA,” reenacting Alfredo Jaar’s 1987 project *Logo for America*. This 2014 iteration was a key link in the Guggenheim’s exhibition “Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today”.

Jaar’s piece reflects the Guggenheim’s intentions to highlight the other “Americanas” those relegated to historical shadows, eclipsed by the United States. Of course, with *Logo for America*’s first appearance in the 1980s, the eyes of many were already turning to Latin America. So the 2014, “Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today,” provoked a much awaited and renewed conversation, a dialogue that created a ripple effect that is opening doors to new ways of not only relating to the region but of speaking with it.

Jaar is not the only artist in the show reenacting a former piece. Puerto Rican Rafael Ferrer is restaging his *Artforum*, originally presented in neon letters in 1971 at the Whitney Museum of American Art. This time it features bold, black capitalized letters stretched across the stark white railing in the gallery’s atrium, visible even to those on the lower levels. In the background one can see Cuevas’ *Del Montte-Bananas* to Prieto’s *Yes/No* electric fans. *Artforum*’s linguistic portmanteau

humorously alludes to the fabled art magazine *Artforum* while referring to the relationship between the object, market and maker, often comprised of and defined by close-knit circles.

This sharp wit not only sets a context for the other pieces but speaks to them, asking for whom do they exist. This question is relevant for many, if not all, of the artists exhibiting in the show, who are working in a context of intricate historical, political and economic realities. Are the pieces made for those often oppressed populations in the artists’ home countries? Or for a small circle of the artistic “elites”? Or rather, for the masses of visitors who nonchalantly walk the galleries of the exhibit? Art for whom?

A video documentation of *Tatlin’s Whisper #6, (Havana Version)*, a 2009 live performance orchestrated by artist Tania Bruguera for the Havana Biennial, is a key player in the Guggenheim’s “Participation/ Emancipation” section of the exhibit. In the original live enactment of the performance, two actors dressed as guards stand next to a podium with microphone and speakers. A Live white dove is present, an element appropriated from Castro’s 1959 speech after the revolution. Bruguera sets up an imagined environment in which the citizens of Havana are allowed complete freedom



Installation view: "Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today" Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, June 13–October 1, 2014. Photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.

of speech, each for just a minute, giving them a platform to express their difficult realities in Cuba's turbulent sociopolitical context. Before a large crowd men and women of every age take turns in the spotlight in front of a deep mustard-colored curtain. The guards place a white dove on each speaker's shoulder. Some speakers weep before the microphone for their entire minute; others speak with an admirable confidence, as if they had done this hundreds of times, making overtly political statements. Still others speak longingly of their dreams for Cuba, all amidst the fervent cries and cheers from the crowd. Ferrer's question reasserts itself: "Art for whom?" Bruguera's piece is powerfully poignant precisely because it is reaching a diverse audience. The video representation is for museum visitors, who may, upon viewing the piece, feel liberated from their own personal and historical constraints. The live performance was intended for Cubans, whom it empowered with a voice long silenced by the country's oppressive circumstances. It brought art closer to the people and made it a tool for change—of course, limited to the biennial's artistic circle-- "With the hope that one day," as one of the speakers said, "liberty in Cuba is not just a performance piece."

In a more playful, yet equally powerful approach, Carlos Amorales' installation *We'll See How Everything Reverberates* (*Ya veremos como todo reverbera*) (2012) allows viewers to participate in their own emancipation by interacting with the piece. The strident, rhythmic sound of what seems to be some sort of musical instrument floods the adjacent rooms, luring viewers to follow the sound. Cymbals hang from an intricate metallic structure covering a significant portion of the gallery space, echoing Calder's mobile sculptures. The piece invites the audience to interact with it, but many hesitate, having been taught not to touch the art. Yet, a member of the museum staff often quietly invites viewers to participate and acts as a sort of mediator, making sure order is maintained. When viewers relinquish their museum etiquette, they often go wild. Liber-

ated from the constraints of the institution's setting, they create an interaction that reverberates across the entire exhibition space, generating harmonious melodies that at times turn into symphonies of chaos, creating a surreal climate within the traditional museum environment. The work highlights the intricate relationship between institution, viewer, and the socio-political boundaries we live within. In the process, it brings down some walls but creates a foundation for others.

Jaar's and Ferrer's return to pieces created decades ago prompts us to reassess how much things have really changed in the last decades. More than 20 years later, are the works still timely? Is the conception of America that Jaar denounced still present? At first glance, one could read the reenactments as nostalgic glimpses at a stagnant society permeated by social predicaments. But it is quite the contrary. It is a proactive historical reappraisal of the road traveled, recognizing that some questions need to be addressed over and over. A constant questioning and reassessment allow new questions to arise, opening paths that lead to new connections.

Amorales and Bruguera both call us to engage in proactive change. Exhibitions such as this will continue to remove confines and forge links between past and present, between countries, curators, critics, artists and viewers. In the end, this movement will enhance the human connection so that it may no longer be about the "American Dream" or the "Latin American Dream," but about the human dream. ■

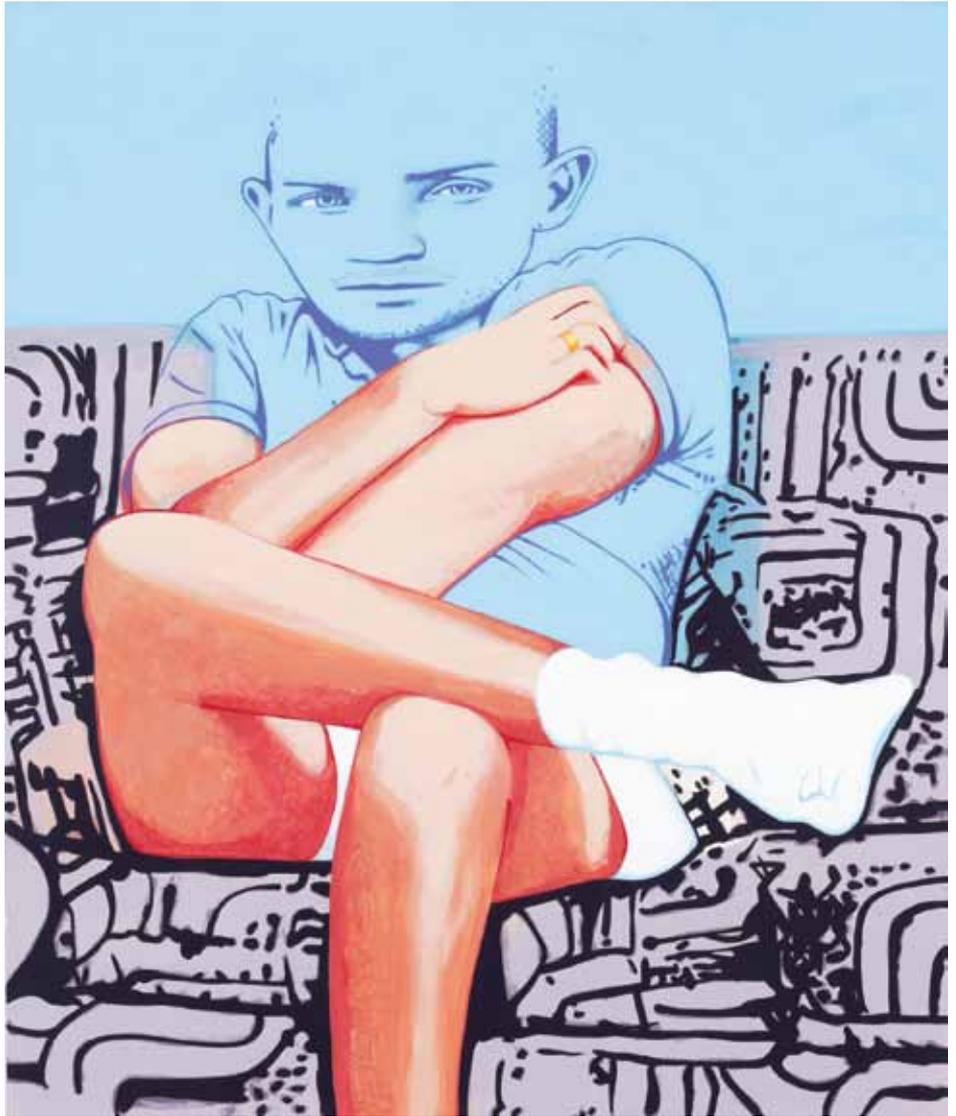
(June 13 – October 1, 2014)

*Othiana Roffiel is an artist and writer based in Mexico City. A fine arts graduate of the Savannah College of Art and Design, in 2012 she participated in the Masur Museum of Art 49th Annual Juried Competition and has also collaborated in the curatorial department at the Telfair Museums in Savannah, Ga.*

**DAVID HUMPHREY:  
WORK AND PLAY**

Fredericks &amp; Freiser - New York

By Peter Drake

David Humphrey, *On the Couch*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 60."

Over the past three decades David Humphrey has shown an admirable tendency to grow bored with his studio practice; this can be a blessing and a curse. At the very least it results in a regular re-examination of his creative life.

In the 1980s, Humphrey achieved early recognition for a series of biomorphic, surrealist narratives whose formal inventiveness was at times overshadowed by a Tanguy and Bazziotes-like familiarity. Their ties to surrealist precedents thankfully kept them out of the neoexpressionist firmament of the time and established Humphrey as an artist to watch.

The 1990s saw Humphrey delve more deeply into his own family psychodrama by superimposing the flotsam and jetsam of popular culture onto reproductions of family photos. These pieces created disturbing frissons that spoke vividly about barely repressed desires and the need to break from convention; cartoons could become thought bubbles, abstract gestures could imply emotional violence. They were some of the best paintings being done in the United States and were underappreciated at the time. And while his works owed a debt to Polke and Salle, Humphrey was always more interested in creating new meaning rather than disassembling existing signs.

Interestingly, around 2000, Humphrey's switch from oil to acrylic ushered in a more complete embrace of the low end of popular culture. This material and iconographic shift encouraged Humphrey to experiment with flat paint, reticulation and the shorthand of advertising and illustration to explore his deep-

est desires and fears while keeping sentiment at bay through his full on bear-hug of Hallmark emotionality. After all, who's going to take flying dolphins, horny snowmen and smitten kitties seriously? This is where the artist shines, finding real meaning in the most unexpected and debased places.

In his current show, "Work and Play" Humphrey keeps all of these paradigmatic balls in the air while continuing his—at times—scathing self-examination. As in his earlier work, absurdly cloying Hummel statuette sentiment gives Humphrey the critical distance to sniff around the origins of that sentiment. In *Horsey Love* a pink polka dot colt is stuck in a scatological puddle of mud. It nuzzles a faceless, yellow parental horse casting a warm glow on its cheek. This painting couldn't be more ridiculous and yet there is real fear, tenderness and anxiety under the layer of dripping treacle.

*On The Couch* sees a glowering teenage male seated on a couch (presumably therapeutic) made of what appears to be Philip Guston drawings. He is itching with contempt; his forehead lopped off suggesting thoughtless rage. He looks like he just stepped off a tennis court for the strictly enforced weekly therapy session where he has never uttered a word. The Guston reference is a telling one as Humphrey has a piece of Guston's in his own collection and may identify with the artist's unbottled anger. But whereas Guston's rage ended in a cathartic, nightly booze and cigarette binge, the familiar dots and dashes of his drawing style has, in this case, been tamed into a textile for a pullout couch leaving the depicted young man with no real release.



David Humphrey, *Paddock*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 60" x 72." All images are courtesy of Fredricks & Freiser.

*Paddock* offers a half-naked woman from behind looking down on a paddock of toy horses. The scale of the figure to the toys suggests Frank Moore's AIDS elegies with their American Bison grazing across absented hospital beds. However, the woman appears disengaged as if her own crisis doesn't measure up to Moore's. Or perhaps the corralled horses are as domesticated and limited as her own longing. What the woman is left with is a kind of bored disappointment, a gulf that in this case is filled with strident swirls of nearly distracting paint. Her predicament would be just another moment of *weltschmerz* if she wasn't also bathed in a cool spotlight suggesting that her stage is, at least in her own mind, a bigger one.

In all of Humphrey's work color plays a key role. Somewhere between the pastels of an Easter egg hunt and the hallucinatory snap of a Looney Tunes animation, the palette lures you into the origins of the imagery and then pulls a visual bait-and-switch like the "meep-meep" right before Wile E. Coyote plummets to the canyon floor. A simple pink can have an acid edge to it, a cerulean blue that shows up in many of the paintings appears a bit frosty on closer inspection, all of which encourage a reappraisal of his entire operation.

The weaker pieces in the show are either underdeveloped, asking the viewer to come along on a ride that is only half finished, or are the result of a process that is hit or miss by nature. This is the collagist's conundrum: maybe two out of five pieces are amazing and the rest less so. Humphrey throws a lot of stuff around. When the paintings

work they are disarming, evocative and elegiac. The co-mingling of high and low, the beautiful and abject all call for one another. When they don't, they are just stuff. The three sculptures in the show hint at future meaning but never quite arrive. Humphrey's natural gifts as a painter and his willingness to try just about anything are all contained within the proscription of painting. The open-ended nature of sculpture (from the ready-made on) seems to prevent the artist from finding the connective tissue between image and emotion, maker and viewer, thing and meaning. What would be transformative in painting frequently remains stuff in the sculpture.

In his best work Humphrey makes completely unexpected links between what he says and how he says it. The sweep of a loaded brush connotes the end of a relationship; reticulated paint stands in for hormonal, teenage lust; stain painting implies ennui. Inside of its closed set, painting with its endless arsenal of articulation leaves an artist like Humphrey with a limitless field of play. With all of these options open to him one walks away from "Work and Play" knowing that the artist's best days are ahead of him and that is a remarkable thing to say after 30 years. ■

(October 8 - November 8, 2014)

*Peter Drake is an artist, curator, writer and the Dean of Academic Affairs at the New York Academy of Art.*

## REVIEWS

### ZHANG DALI: SQUARE

Klein Sun Gallery - New York

By Taliesin Thomas



"Zhang Dali: Square" installation view. Courtesy Klein Sun Gallery, New York. © Zhang Dali, 2014.

The Buddha taught that life is suffering. This definitive council was not intended as pessimism, but rather as a realistic assessment of the human condition, that all beings must experience pain. Contemporary Chinese artist Zhang Dali's recent solo exhibition at Klein Sun Gallery in New York presents a graceful encounter with cultural anguish. *Square*—a reference to Beijing's Tiananmen Square—embodies hardship, tempered and transposed into holiness.

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1989 protests in China, when student-led demonstrations in the capital ended in massacre. The Chinese government condemned the uprising and has since prohibited all forms of its remembrance. Many facts about the Tiananmen tragedy remain unconfirmed, leaving the Chinese people in a state of speculation and suspended grief. Zhang's show, comprised of sculptures, cyanotypes and paintings, provides a thoughtful reflection on the specters that still populate this significant public landmark.

Born in Harbin in 1963, Zhang has exhibited regularly since 1987. Early in his career he traveled to Italy, where he discovered graffiti, which had a major impact on his style. During the 1990s he was the only artist in Beijing practicing street art, and a large baldheaded profile became his signature tag as demonstrated in hundreds of colorful photographs documenting Zhang's encounters with buildings slated for demolition. While Zhang's older works reflect his commentary on Chinese society, his current exhibit offers an even sharper focus on cultural inheritance, devastation, and the observation of loss.

Zhang's white sculptures of human figures and flying doves graciously populate the gallery space while cyan prints of overlapping, fluttering birds adorn the walls, and together they create a dream-

like ambience. The sculptures—a nod to the work of George Segal—are stern yet serene; the doves nest on and above their frozen bodies. On the one hand the interplay between the birds and figures suggests a divine encounter with the precarious nature of peace, and on the other, the muted silence between both sentient beings alludes to the acquiescence that has taken place in Chinese society, Tiananmen being the strongest example of censorship in recent history. Yet in Zhang's work both man and animal appear to be in state of meditation, existing somewhere beyond the uncertainty of this temporal life—the interplay between them conveys transcendent serenity in the face of heartache.

Klein Sun Gallery (formerly Eli Klein Fine Art) remains committed to contemporary Chinese art, and this exhibition is another fine example of its dedication to presenting cutting-edge visions from this complex field. Despite the Chinese government's continued suppression of the "June Fourth Incident," artists such as Zhang Dali still honor the memory of its victims, this exhibition providing an elegant homage to their collective spirit and the power of reshaping grief into grace. ■

(June 26 – August 30, 2014)

*Taliesin Thomas has worked in the field of contemporary Chinese art since 2001 after living two years in rural Hubei Province, China. She is the founding director of AW Asia, New York, a private organization that promotes contemporary Chinese art. Thomas has an MA in East Asian Studies from Columbia University and is currently a PhD candidate in art theory and philosophy with the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts.*



Ai Weiwei, *Cosmetics Jade* 2014, dimensions variable. Installation view. Courtesy of Chambers Fine Art and Francis M. Naumann Fine Art.

## AI WEIWEI

Chambers Fine Art and Francis M. Naumann Fine Art  
New York

### By Taliesin Thomas

These days Ai Weiwei's name is often appropriated to reflect his status as a dissident artist confined to China. When yet another major exhibition of his work opens at yet another leading international art venue, the press lights up with widespread puns of support: the latest quip is that "Ai Can't Be Here." Despite his exile, the motley Ai—artist, architect, cultural commentator, curator, occasional rocker, and veritable emperor of contemporary art—manages to keep himself at the forefront of the art world. He is lionized for his efforts to push his timeworn manifesto concerning "freedom of expression" into mainstream culture via his omnipresence on the Internet. Ai remains slightly above the law, even as the law remains literally above him in the form of government surveillance cameras surrounding his home-studio, clocking his every move.

Despite his presence in the media and recognition through numerous shows around the globe, Ai remains in a category by himself. Two New York exhibits this fall reflect his stature as one of the most unconventional artists working today. This coupled exhibition, at both Chambers Fine Art in Chelsea and Francis M. Naumann Fine Art in midtown, offer the Ai aficionado a vision of his iconoclastic past and his dubious present. While Ai remains detained in China, his work speaks for him. Yet neither exhibit presents a clear path to interpreting his art as a coherent *oeuvre*.

Francis Naumann has curated an exhibition of Ai's best-known older pieces—objects reflecting the convergence of Ai's conceptual and politically engaged art, such as his infamous "f-off" gesture photographs and ancient Chinese urns covered in garish industrial

paint. The most compelling piece is a medium-sized clay study for his "S.A.C.R.E.D" detention series that includes an armless sculpture of the portly artist, naked, being watched by an expressionless guard. The frozen moment between them is haunting.

While the Naumann show reads like a mini chronology of Ai's past, the Chambers exhibit might be understood as a kind of historical *non-sequitur*. This part consists of new works with obvious commercial polish: a set of oblique wood sculptures redolent of coffins, a large square chunk of ceramic tofu, and two vitrines filled with jade objects (sex toys and women's cosmetics). Much like the polyglot artist himself—who is at times a vociferous critic and a misfit hairstylist at others—these works suggest a discursive train of thought. The tofu piece, for example, is a reminder of the shoddily-built "*dofu zha*" schools (implying supple and unstable) that collapsed in the devastating Sichuan earthquake of 2008, while the peculiar wood caskets imply a proper burial for those lost. The distorted shapes of these coffins hint at the "crookedness" of the event itself—the Chinese government still refuses to release the names of the dead—while the white rebar on top of the work suggests a possible divinity lost in chaos. But the glossy jade items housed in glass vitrines offer contrast rather than continuity, a pairing of the deadly serious and the frivolous.

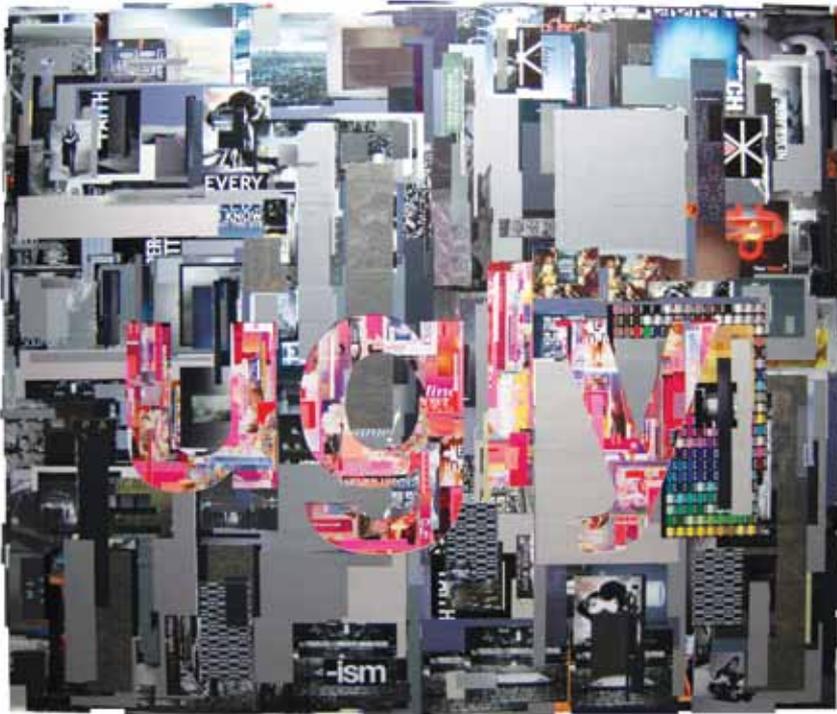
While Chinese authorities keep Ai detained under house arrest in China, they nevertheless allow his critiques of Chinese culture out of the country, off to far-flung lands, enabling exhibits like those at the Chambers and Naumann to speak on the artist's behalf. In the case of this two-part exhibition, what exactly does the "I" of Ai Weiwei say about the state of China today? If this show is any indication, Ai's work seems to convey cultural disarray converted into candid aesthetic commentary. ■

(September 11 – November 1, 2014)

## TM GRATKOWSKI: NOTHING SHOCKING

Walter Maciel Gallery - Los Angeles

By Jill Thayer



Tm Gratkowski, *Ugly*, 2014, collaged paper on paper, 90" x 106." ©2014 Tm Gratkowski. Courtesy Walter Maciel Gallery.

In our quest to assimilate mass communication in a 24/7 news stream, Tm Gratkowski serves as a cultural observer and social navigator to channel and question the current. His paper collages and concrete sculptures reveal a subtext of social commentary amidst the white noise of society.

"Nothing Shocking" at Walter Maciel Gallery presents two and three-dimensional works in Gratkowski's first solo exhibition. The pieces are mischievous explorations into semiotics that offer immediate and buried meanings from an encounter with image, pattern, and text. Gratkowski compiles these elements through meticulous layers of paper collage in a confluence of linguistic reference and cultural vernacular. High gloss, matt, and textured papers from magazines, posters, other print material, and cast concrete are all collateral in his juxtapositions that push the viewer to consider what Gratkowski refers to as "getting to specifics of words rather than the generics of words."

The front gallery displays *Good*, *Bad*, and *Ugly*, three large works that challenge the notion of what we perceive through context and association. The artist sees these words as subjective, almost meaningless in today's culture even as the Sergio Leone film title remains in our vernacular. Gratkowski acknowledges the movie reference but notes that the genesis of the idea is more about the *words*. His subtext is intentional. He states, "Some of those words would question or enhance the title, which was based on a specific subject or idea. The subject or idea is the actual word so I am kind of flipping that process and the imagery around... What's ugly to you is not ugly to me and in vice versa." The words used are those people share an understanding of—how they have been used throughout time and how they are used today. "They don't mean anything to anyone anymore." He adds, "The epistemology of the language goes away, because you can't go back and find its origins. But it's so far removed that now, what does that mean? You have to go to the urban dictionary to understand the current reference."

Identifiable in syntax over time, the meaning of the words becomes inconsequential. "Bad," is cut out and centered on superimposed images of warm and cool greys. "TIME," "NEXT," "COL-

LISION," "SALUTES," "CLASSIC," "SOLUTIONS," "BIG OIL," "INTERCOURSES," "LOOKING UP," "DANGER," and "MESSAGE MEDIA" are words positioned haphazardly that provoke the viewer to define a possible relationship in the juxtapositions. The middle panel, "BAD," creates yet another layer of inquiry composed with yellow, green, and blue print media. Is "Bad" good or "Good" bad? It's all in the viewer's discretion and a matter of context. Gratkowski wants to push people in the understanding of communication and intent. Are these colloquialisms or formal references in the English language?

The exhibition includes a series of large vertical panels that explore the power of image over words. A smaller series displays silhouettes of human interactions and behaviors atop graphic layers of media text with comparisons drawn in the visual sequence of the subjects depicted. In contrast, small sculptural works of paper and pigment concrete from his *Paper Crete* series occupy the space as the textural dialogue continues. Crumpled paper from his print material is sandwiched between blocks of concrete inviting inquiry, as one might ask... Are we trapped under the weight of a media-saturated culture? Are words used today archaic tomorrow? Is our language compromised by a hierarchical society?

The constant change of information and trends in graphics, colors, and stories reflect the nature of the material that the artist sees as evolving. Gratkowski deconstructs our lexicon in a cut and paste landscape of meaning and message while his process-driven works contextualize image and text for the viewer to decipher. In "Nothing Shocking," Gratkowski finds nothing unusual about our quotidian misinterpretations or assumptions in a discourse of selective meaning. He does however find that anomaly and disseminates it through a language of visual perception offering engaging narratives in contemporary culture. ■

(September 10 – November 1, 2014)

Jill Thayer, Ph.D. is an artist, educator, and curatorial archivist. She is online faculty at Santa Monica College in Art History: Global Visual Culture.



Miaz Brothers, *Untitled*, acrylic on canvas, 78" x 149." Courtesy of Fabien Castanier Gallery, Culver City, CA.

## MIAZ BROTHERS AND THE MASTERS

Fabien Castanier Gallery – Culver City, CA

By Megan Abrahams

The express intent of portraiture is to document the features of an individual, creating a visual likeness that freezes a moment, defying the passage of time. The most insightful portraits transcend the mere physical traits, capturing some essence of character and personality between the brushstrokes.

The Miaz Brothers offer a new take on portraiture, with the deliberate intention of conveying no likeness at all. These un-portraits, which the artists refer to as their *Antimatter Series*, portray only a vague suggestion of the human face and figure. In a visually oxymoronic *tour de force*, the paintings are, in effect, the antithesis of portraiture. Composed to conceal, more than reveal, they are subtle glimmers, which leave virtually all clues to identity veiled in a haze.

Rendered in layers of aerosol paint, some of the paintings apparently reference actual classic paintings—a Rembrandt self-portrait may be one—thus the allusion to the masters. Others in this series may be extrapolated from generic notions of classic works. All are based on classic or Renaissance period pieces. They are muted, out of focus, seemingly transitory—as if the past is fading away—perhaps to suggest, in time, the images will disappear completely. If portraits were originally intended to record the existence of the subject for perpetuity, the Miaz Brothers don't concur.

In the hazy aura within these works, it's possible to discern a few vague clues. In *Young Man 4*, there is a dim suggestion of youth. Among the hints is a slight area of pink where the lips might be, a suggestion of brown hair, maybe a hat. In the blue background, some paint drips, incongruous. More clues are evident in *Old Man*

4. A brownish area at the base of the face denotes a beard. A soft, white semi-circle above the apparent shoulders indicates a ruff.

Most of the paintings represent males, but there are clearly females in the series, as evidenced by the vague allusion to a white shawl and brown blurred shapes, perhaps two elongated buns as in an antiquated hairstyle in, *Young Woman 1*. For its part, *Untitled*, the largest painting in the exhibit, is a reclining female nude—conveyed by the nuance of rosy-white flesh tones and warm red-brown shades in a vague curved shape. The figure is described with lush subtlety. A modulated green background suggests an outdoor setting. A series of elongated drips in the right foreground adds immediacy, bringing the composition into the present moment.

With the advent of photography, portraiture lost some of its importance. Cubist portraits famously scrambled the face. Still ingenious, such witty simulacra did not represent a true likeness. The subtle and evasive paintings of the Miaz Brothers leave it to the viewer to recognize the haunting features coming out of the dark background haze. In deliberately refuting the conventions, they convey the fleeting nature of human existence. ■

(September 13 - October 11, 2014)

Megan Abrahams is a Los Angeles-based writer and artist. She received her M.A. from the University of Southern California School of Journalism. A contributing writer for *WhiteHot Magazine* since 2009, her writing has appeared in a number of publications. She is currently writing her first novel.



Roberto Fabelo, *Malecón Barroco (Baroque Seafront)*, 2012, oil on canvas, 64" x 114." All images are courtesy of the artist and the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA), Long Beach, CA.

## FABELO'S ANATOMY

Museum of Latin American Art (MoLAA) - Long Beach, CA

Curated by Juan Delgado-Calzadilla

By Megan Abrahams

Lush fleshy female figures—nude except for the requisite high heels and ornate bird helmets—ride giant, resplendent, feathery roosters on textured backgrounds with muted references to landscape and sky. Their destination might be indicated in a cryptic title, such as *Fantastic Voyage to Key West* (2013), a symbolic journey, especially as the rooster is depicted perched standing still on a platter.

This is just one among many fantastic voyages and surreal flights of fancy on which Roberto Fabelo takes us in a body of work that includes sculptures portraying such whimsical Kafkaesque visions as cockroaches with human heads, though those are not included in this exhibit.

Fabelo has created a world of the unexpected. His mythological landscape is inhabited by exquisitely rendered part-human, part-bird creatures, a derivation of the singular experience of growing up in Cuba—an isolated island in the Caribbean with all its accompanying historical resonance—combined with the technique, humor and imagination to leverage a gloriously unfettered sense of fantasy.

What makes Fabelo's boundless vision so mesmerizing is that it is grounded in the anatomical precision and technical mastery ingrained in him during his years of formal study at the Escuela Nacional de Arte (National School of Art, ENA) and the Instituto Superior de Arte (Higher Institute of Art, ISA), both in Havana.

Glancing at even the artist's larger scale pieces, the fine details of his draftsmanship stand out, such as the impeccable delicacy of line

in *Meditation in the Garden of the Night* (2014), particularly the contours of the crouching nude female figure, the tips of the feathers on the wings attached to her back with a harness and the finely wrought profile. This is one of Fabelo's works painted on embroidered silk. Articulated in gray tones, the figure emerges from a background the artist has darkened without obscuring the colorful pattern of the stems, leaves and flowers sewn into the fabric. This network of embroidery crisscrosses both background and figure, adding a veil of texture and mystique, as if viewing the subject through a sheer curtain. Working within the classical anatomical vernacular, the artist employs a special fluency in expressing matter, mass, flesh and form.

A frequent icon in Cuban art, *gallo*, the rooster, is a subject in Fabelo's imagery. Ubiquitous in much of the Caribbean, the rooster is a symbol of power and machismo in Cuban culture. In *Great Blue Rooster* (2010), the nude female figure on the left strokes the rooster's feathered breast. Fabelo plays with scale, as if it were arbitrary. Almost face-to-face, eye-to-eye, human and bird forms are close to the same height. The second female figure, mounted on the rooster, is armed with a spear, as if about to ride into battle. While the rooster may represent machismo, as Fabelo suggests, the females are riding it, and by implication, they are in control.

The core and central section of the exhibit is devoted to *Fabelo's Anatomy*, elaborate and fantastic drawings superimposed on the torn-out pages of the classic medical anatomy text, *Anatomia Humana*. Displayed as if in a library, these works were originally intended to comprise the entire exhibit before the opportunity arose to include representative paintings by the artist, loaned to the museum by private collectors, much enriching the survey.

These images evolved out of drawings Fabelo made at the ISA as a young art professor in the 1980s, at a time when a prevailing interest in Arte Povera and the use of recycled materials was

in vogue there. The artist uses the diagrams in the anatomy text as a point of departure for his own visual interpretation of human behavior, psychology and desire. In these drawings, curious figures morph out of anatomical diagrams, acquiring magical appendages and the features of birds and other creatures. Fabelo allows his pen to roam without boundaries, employing color, form and texture at meticulous whim. His statement about these series appears on the wall of the museum and summarizes his experiences with this body of work: “These media incite me to violate their condition a little bit. The anatomy book pages are attractive in and of themselves. They contain solutions, tremendous creativity. It would almost be a sacrilege to manipulate them, or intervene in them, but in the end that habit of mine that drags me to perdition was more powerful, and I drew on top of those images, creating new ones.”

Exploring the psychological foibles of humanity, Fabelo endows his figures with masks, exotic characteristics and blatant displays of lust. Many of the drawings are infused with erotica, as in *Untitled* (2013), in which a male wolf in an apparent state of arousal grasps, somehow in its paw, the hand of a winged female nude adorned with a Mohawk haircut.

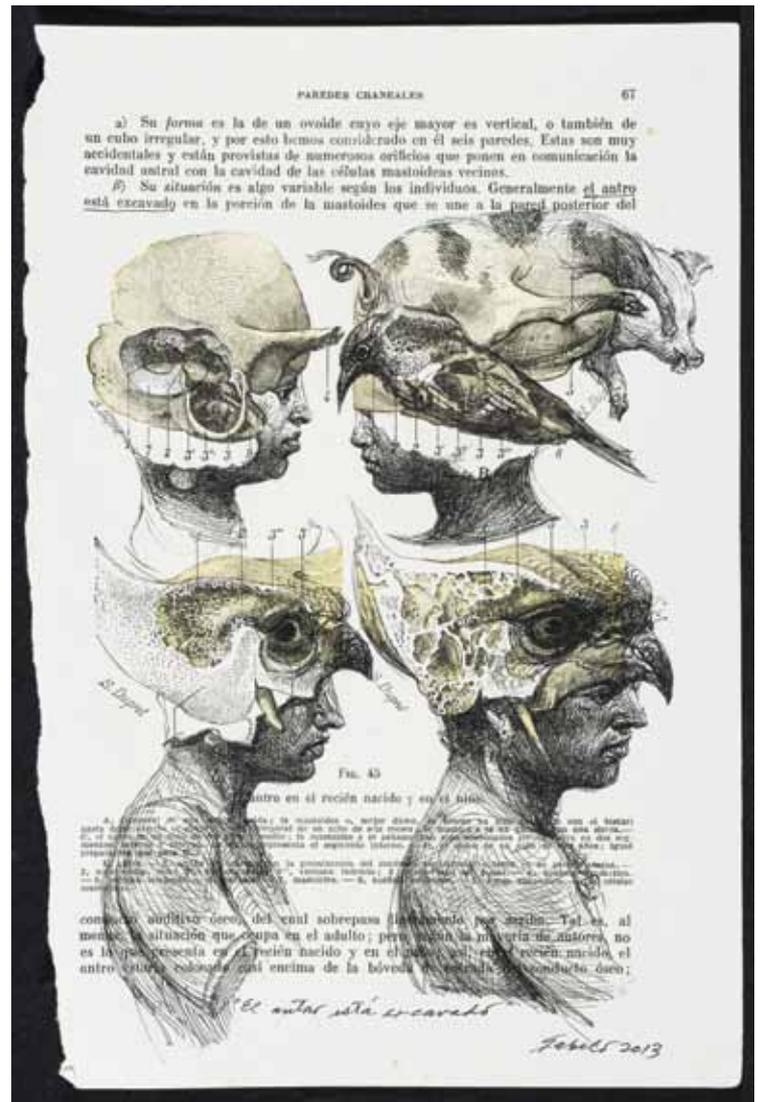
Fabelo’s work is fueled by the inspiration of his wife, Suyu. When MoLAA president Stuart Ashman visited the artist’s studio in Havana, he noticed Fabelo had painted the words “*Sin Suyu, no hay Fabelo*” (“Without Suyu, there is no Fabelo”) on the bathroom wall. Ashman arranged to re-create the inscription on the wall of the gallery as a way to dedicate the exhibit to her. “Fabelo credits Suyu as his primary muse. He also uses her image as a model for some of his female figures. In his mind, Suyu provides a standard of beauty that he aspires to reach in his depictions of female nudes, and she is his reason for being. She is definitely the protagonist, literally or figuratively, in many of the images,” said Ashman.

In some of the anatomical drawings, Fabelo has written little love notes to his wife, or alluded to her, as in *Suyu me vuelve loco* (2013), in which the artist has divided the page into composite rectangles, three of which frame the heads of male creatures, some wearing masks, and one, the profile of a female, gazing downwards.

Fabelo’s imagery spans the spectrum from beautiful to bizarre, playful to macabre. He reinterprets the female figure as flavors in *Vanilla, Strawberry, Marshmallow and Mint* (2012). In *Three Meat Skewer* (2014), three nude female figures are folded in a stack, pierced by a skewer, high heels intact, as if part of their anatomy.

He has been called the Cuban Daumier, a comparison to the French artist’s satirical caricatures, which provided a revelatory commentary on 19<sup>th</sup> century social and political life in France. Similarly, Fabelo’s imagery is rich with allegory, infused with a symbolism of his own design. There is profound narrative resonance—a sense of the theatricality of life—in Fabelo’s work. His figures are characters, sometimes in the midst of transformation or metamorphosis, most evident in paintings such as *Malecón barroco (Baroque Seafront)*, one of the largest canvases in this exhibit.

In *Baroque Seafront* (2012), Fabelo presents a fantasy vision of the Malecón, the sea wall in Havana. Nine figures are represented in gray tones, one with the head of a fish, another, the head of a sea urchin, all with head gear—hats, a shell helmet, a bird helmet. Costumed like actors in an otherworldly drama, they stand in a place where land meets sea. One sports a tail. A mermaid perches on top of a barrel. A possible self-portrait of Fabelo’s head and torso reclines in a tire inner tube depicted in the foreground.



Roberto Fabelo, *El antro está excavado (The Joint is Excavated)*, 2013, mixed media on paper, 6 ½" x 9 ¾."

“These beings embody characteristics from all of the people in Fabelo’s actual and imagined life. He brings them to life in commonplace locations. The Malecón is known as ‘Havana’s living room,’ a place where everyone goes—a cross section of humanity. He is all-accepting, without judgment, and sees the beauty in all of these beings,” Ashman said.

In Fabelo’s dreamlike painting alluding to the famous novel by Gabriel García Márquez, *Women of One Hundred Years of Solitude*, (2007) 11 nude female figures with assorted plumage and avian paraphernalia stand in the background, each in a different pose, like generations of women spanning time. The heads of seven mysterious bird creatures populate the foreground. There is a deep synergy between the art of Fabelo and literature of García Márquez. The two men were good friends, and each has conjured irresistible magical universes from the fertile vistas of their imaginations.

Curated by Juan Delgado-Calzadilla, this is the first solo museum exhibition of the artist’s work in the United States. Laden with mystique and soaked in narrative, what is so compelling—captivating—about this artist’s oeuvre, is the marriage of a virtuoso technical mastery to a remarkable vision. Extrapolating from history, culture and the quotidian, Fabelo orchestrates a dramatic fusion of surrealism and magical realism with an underlying classical fluency, anchoring his fantasy world in an intriguing aura of verisimilitude. ■

(June 28 - November 9, 2014)

## REVIEWS

### **BOURQUE, BONDGREN AND BOURBON**

Linda Warren Projects - Chicago

By Jeriah Hildwine



**bourbon, Hack, 2014**, photo transfer, collage, acrylic, oil, ink, spray paint and polyester film on flag, 15" x 16."  
Courtesy of Linda Warren Projects, Chicago.

There is something gonzo about Loretta Bourque and Rob Bondgren's work in the sense of Hunter S. Thompson's gritty, in-the-trenches approach to journalism. Their work, both individual and collaborative, is refreshingly free of pretense. Their subject matter is uniquely American as John Waters is uniquely American. That about our culture which often seems disgusting, heavy, and sickly sweet is fertilizer for work that isn't afraid to look beneath the tacky polyester couch cushions for the fascinating detritus of our society.

Bourque and Bondgren are longtime friends, colleagues, and collaborators. Their collaborations began in the 1990s with the two artists mailing small works back and forth; those in this exhibition range in dates from 2012 to 2014. Their collaborative works are presented under the name "bourbon," a hybrid of their surnames which is, appropriately, a uniquely American liquor, with its connotations of peanut-strewn roadhouses and back-alley knife fights. The name also evokes Bourque's history; she grew up in the French Quarter of New Orleans, of which Bourbon Street is the most famous, or infamous. The exhibition presents works by "bourbon" as well as Bourque and Bondgren's individual works. It is, in essence, a three-person show.

Elements of this history emerge in bourbon's collaborative work. One piece, *gris-gris*, takes its name from the protective totems of the voodoo tradition. Another, *Martini Stripper*, channels Bourbon Street's seedy charm, combing a martini glass sloshing gemstones, a male stripper, and an American flag. Yet another, *Hack*, evokes a Rob Zombie-sort of American horror; a clown in patriotic boxing trunks menacingly wields a chainsaw against an American flag backdrop.

Bourque and Bondgren, whether working separately or together, take an eclectic approach both to their subject matter and to their materials. The materials lists of their work vary widely, but include varying combinations of photo transfer, collage, acrylic, oil, ink, spray paint, tape, polyester film, paper and glass. Their subjects are equally wide-ranging, but often include combinations of (frequently queer) sexuality, costume and performance (particularly clowns, strippers, and drag), religious iconography, and Americana. The flag is omnipresent.

Thematic threads run throughout the exhibition, appearing, disappearing and re-emerging. Identity, manipulated and expressed through costume, makeup and performance, plays a central role. Sexuality, and a more general desire for pleasure, is a recurring theme. As tends to be best, these heavy subjects are treated with a good dose of humor: the clown has a chainsaw, the flowers are set against a backdrop of pubic hair. Like Heath Ledger as the Joker, bourbon ask us, "Why so serious?" After all, America is a nation of dirty pleasure-seekers, manipulating our appearances through costume and makeup, staging selfies and pursuing the approval of others; and that's okay, and it's funny. We can acknowledge our flaws while still enjoying our martinis and strippers. Humans, they suggest, are comic figures, buffoonish apes in circus outfits, quaffing gin and rutting in the gutters, and that's okay. In fact, as this exhibition shows us, it can be beautiful. And it is. ■

(July 11, 2014 – August 16, 2014)

*Jeriah Hildwine is an artist, curator, writer and educator based in Chicago. He is a regular contributor to the Bad At Sport art blog.*



Thomas Burkett, *Sample From James*, *James River Watershed Archive*, Drawn from the tributaries of the James River, The Lower Jackson to the Chesapeake, 2014, 72 55ml water samples in solar temperature controlled incubators. Courtesy of the artist and Arlington Arts Center.

## THOMAS BURKETT: YOU ARE A SPRING OF WATER

Arlington Arts Center - Arlington VA

By Owen Duffy

This past summer, over the course of several weeks, Thomas Burkett intermittently kayaked the entire length of Virginia's James River. The voyage took the artist from the Appalachian headwaters to the Atlantic Ocean and in the process he gathered dozens of samples of water from the James and its numerous tributaries. Burkett's individual journey of endurance—using human power in a river that runs parallel to coal trains and is marked by a history of English settlements and slavery—establishes a foundational context for the works in his exhibition “You Are a Spring of Water.” The show asks timely, provocative questions about living in a time of post-environmental politics, a time which posits that ‘environmentalism’ as we come to know it cannot cope with climate change and should be replaced with a new conservationist paradigm that includes humans, technology, and economic development in its redefinition of environment.

To create the core works of his show, Burkett modified objects from his arduous expedition. The work *Organ* consists of the artist's gray kayak, its top surface now decked with solar cells. Given a newfound purpose, the kayak charges a battery, which in turn powers another work of art, *Sample from James, James River Watershed Archive*, which consists of two rectangular Plexiglas incubators hanging on the wall and containing 72 glass vials of water samples. The energy provided by *Organ* regulates their temperature. Most of the vials' fluids appear clear enough, yet small piles of sediment have collected at their bottoms. Some samples have an off-putting brownish tint, which raises questions about what Burkett has presented. What, actually, is contained in this archive of water that cannot be seen with the human eye? Can the data in these vessels teach us anything about the condition of the natural world? Why even collect these samples at all? Although Burkett does not provide answers to such queries, a clear relationship exists between *Organ* and *Sample from James, James River Watershed Archive* that identifies not only the precarious balance of these ecologi-

cal objects, but also the politics of massing a cultural archive in the first place. This work also presents an object role reversal: the kayak normally depends on water to float and function, but here the water depends on the boat, needing precious energy for continued preservation. This reversal points to the fluidity of such binaries as those constructed between humans and nature, as well as agent and object, questioning their *status quo* in the process.

Like a not-so-distant illuminated horizon line, *Transpaddle*, seeming to hover on the gallery wall, emits a mesmerizing glow. Burkett elongated the handle of the paddle that powered this lengthy journey with a radiant LED bulb. Connected to a battery, this once sovereign paddle now depends, like *Samples from James, James River Watershed Archive*, on electricity to fulfill its new function as a work of art.

The only piece Burkett did not create from transfigured objects, *Post-Environmental Synchronization, Charging Bodies without Organs*, provides a lens through which to further understand the nuanced political dimensions of the other works. A Google Nexus tablet, attached to a window and powered by another battery, plays a looping video of a landed Goby fish as it struggles for oxygen. As we stare at the tablet screen, and are left to ponder the Goby's fate, the fish is positioned in the video so that its eyes look out of the gallery window, gazing at the sun, as if searching for something in the outside world. Given the issue of climate change, the Goby becomes a metaphoric lamentation for the uncertain future that faces the earth and its inhabitants.

“You Are a Spring of Water” demonstrates the interconnectedness, instability, and fragility of ecosystems. Everything in the exhibition, like an ecosystem, depends on something else. Nothing is autonomous, and if one component in Burkett's aesthetic ecology were to falter, the whole system would fail with it. Burkett's exhibition asks: in dealing with climate change, what do we do now for planetary homeostasis when environmentalism as we have known it is more tenuous and uncertain than ever? ■

(October 18 - December 21, 2014)

Owen Duffy is a Ph.D. candidate studying contemporary art history at Virginia Commonwealth University.

**BRIDGING THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE:  
RECENT WORKS BY SANDRA RAMOS**

American University Museum, Katzen Arts Center – Washington, D.C.

Curated by Diane Camber

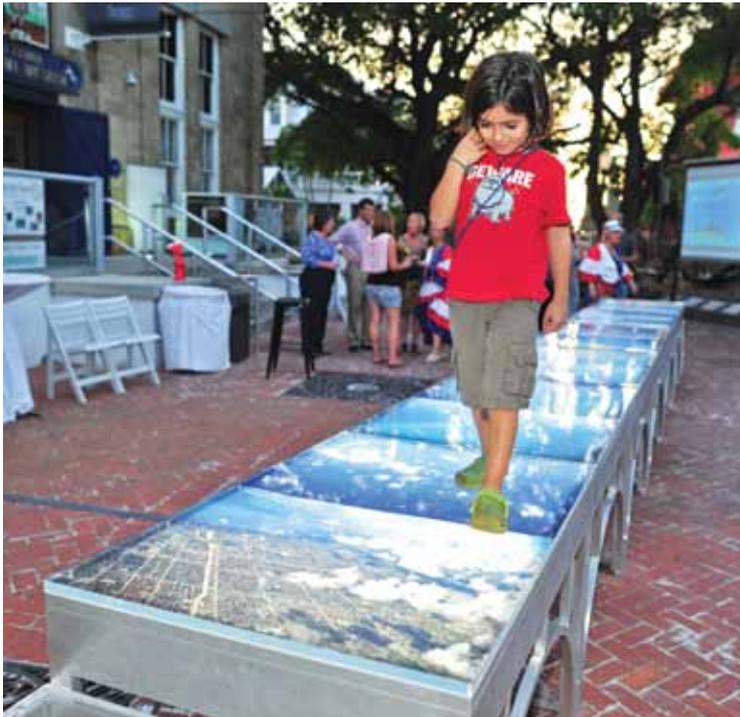
By Anelys Alvarez-Muñoz



Sandra Ramos, *Transitory Identities*, 2013, light box installation, photograph, acrylic, wood, 90"×19." All images are courtesy of the artist and TUB Gallery, Miami.

Sandra Ramos' recent exhibition at the American University Museum presents a broad selection of her recent works. Comprised of a variety of media, ranging from engraving and painting to installation and video animation, the show continues adding reasons to talk about Ramos' technical skills working with a myriad of mediums and her particular sensibility to interpret Cuban culture and its dilemmas. With a strong and sustained presence both on the island and international art scene, she is one of the leading voices of Cuban contemporary art. Considered part of the 1990s generation, which curator and essayist Gerardo Mosquera

named "*Las malas hierbas*"—the bad weeds—for their capacity to survive and create under the dire economic and social crisis Cuba faced after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ramos began her career in printmaking but showed very early on the ability to simultaneously dialogue with other disciplines. Such talent, whose consecration point was probably the emblematic installation of 10 oil-painted suitcases at the Havana Biennial in 1994, now has a double opportunity: to deploy extensively in a large solo show of more than 70 pieces and add fresh nuances to the issues frequently explored by the artist.



Sandra Ramos, *90 Miles (USA – Cuba)*, 2011, light box installation, photograph, acrylic, aluminum. 24" × 36" × 29.5." Installation at Mel Fisher Museum, Key West, 2014.

“Bridging the Past, Present, and Future: Recent Works by Sandra Ramos” does not propose a solo-subject perspective; it is more a survey of the series Ramos has developed in recent years. Except for some of the engravings, most of the pieces were made after 2010, many of them in the United States, where Ramos has been traveling regularly since being awarded The Fountainhead Residency in 2011. Despite the range of dimensions, media and specific themes addressed in each series, the main topics of the artist’s work are clearly consistent: the experience of migration and its physical, economic, social and emotional implications, as well as reflections about the island/nation duality, its contradictions, paradoxes and uncertain destiny. Both ideas seem to be connected by the experience of travel as a notion, travel as an experience that can be at the same time a real action and a cultural metaphor. Similar to other artists from the 1990s such as Antonio Eligio Fernández (Tonel), Alexis Leyva Machado (Kcho) and Ibrahim Miranda, migration, travel, insularity and diaspora became a central obsession in Ramos’ work, a theme which she continues to explore in her practice. Migration has a biographical connotation in her work since she is not just the spectator of a drama, but the central character of her personal narratives and stories. Using her self-portrait as *La pionerita*<sup>1</sup>, Ramos explores the psychosocial dimension of the phenomenon. Who are we? What defines us as individuals? How linked are we to the place where we were born and in which we grew up? In her work, there is not a superficial answer to those questions, nor even an answer; Ramos is re-creating her own story, contradictions, options, fears and uncertainties as a human being.

Challenging the idea of identity as a static notion, the young girl—Sandra’s alter ego and archetype of more than one generation born and raised under the utopia of the Cuban Revolution—is constantly on the move. Her identity is always unfinished; it is a becoming, a process of transformation and choices, a correlation between the individual and the community, and sometimes a trick of chance and fate. In *Transitory Identities* (2013), Ramos uses God’s eye as a symbol of the complex imbrications between destiny and free will. Two counter-posed light boxes depict a different ending for the girls who

are crossing the bridge: one makes it across and achieves success while the other falls off and dies. The eye of God, which observes and is observed at the same time, represents the two sides of the drama that so many Cubans who have left the island have experienced, a battle between realistic or unrealistic expectations. Between these opposite ends—success versus death—are implied a countless list of personal stories concerning the experience of migration and the decisions it involves for everyone.

*La Pionerita* and Sandra’s self-portrait in the form of the island are not the only recurring motifs in the exhibit. In a clear allusion to the Cuban landscape, the sea remains present as a metaphor for evasion, fears, nostalgia, life and death. The sea is the mirror from which the female island contemplates her own image with a narcissist attitude (*Narcissus*, 2013), which does not let her perceive that reality is far from that sweetened and chauvinist reflection on the water. At times the sea represents the idea of crossing, as suggested by the presence of bridges in many of the works. The notion of crossing seems to evoke a symbolic—though not necessarily real—experience. Broken, and therefore deprived of their functionality, the bridges represent a potential and psychological crossing, an encounter that never came to be, despite its potential (*Havana Mirage* series, 2012). The bridge in *90 Miles* (2011) uses the similarities of the tropical seascape to comment on the possibility of overcoming the separation of the Cuban communities living on both sides of the Florida Straits. Crossing the bridge turns into a participatory experience in which the artist shows her ability to combine cultured parody and drama while addressing polemic issues. This sharp, biting sense of humor is evident in the video animations in which Ramos dialogues with the linguistic resources and characters in her work in an intertextual dimension that breaks all linearity.

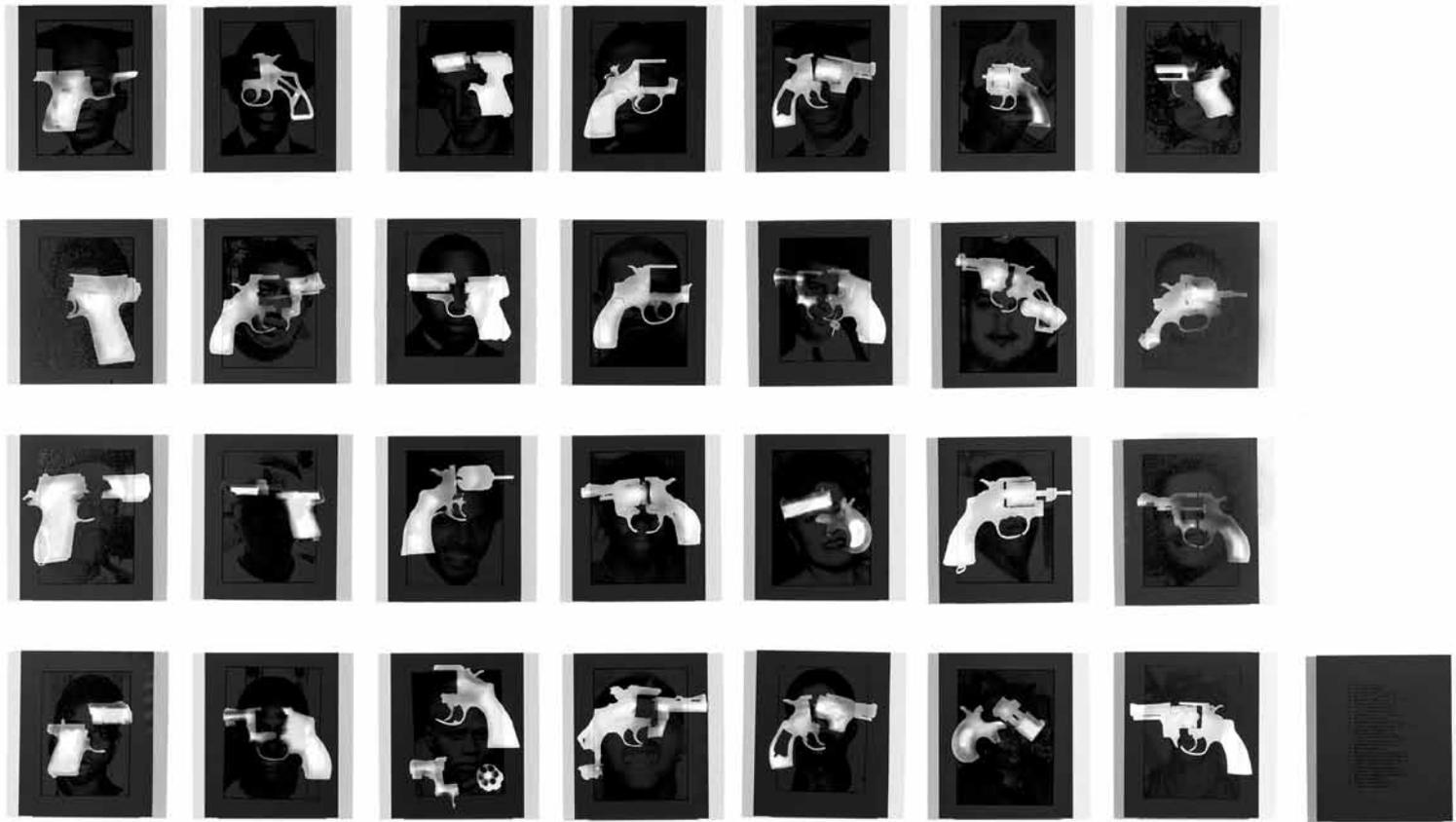
In spite of the visible continuities throughout her work, including the clever dialogue with Cuban history and the references to literature and mythology, Ramos’ viewpoint has changed subtly in her recent work. Series such as *Lotto Dreaming* (2014), or paintings such as *Money Tree* (2014) and *Miami Ukiyo Dead* (2014), examine the same topic from a different perspective. Though still treated as painful experiences, migration and international mobility are now approached from outside of the island, from the perspective of an immigrant who is facing the reality, exploring the possibilities of a new context and dismantling long-standing myths. Having lived in Miami for the past year, Ramos now does not hesitate to incorporate contextual elements in her work, including Florida’s flora in its spring exuberance. Were they inserted into different circumstances, Ramos might continue adding new elements to her work, which could enrich, expand or even change its scope. In this case, the current exhibition in the nation’s capital might be remembered as a bridge that connects, surveys and appreciates Ramos’ art on its own terms and as a platform for future exploration on her career as an artist. ■

(September 6 - October 19, 2014)

NOTE

1. *Pioneros* is the name given in Cuba to the students of Elementary School (1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> Grade). This title means a commitment to follow the ideas of the leaders of the Revolution.

Anelys Alvarez Muñoz is a Miami-based art historian and art critic. She has extensive experience in researching, writing and teaching, with a special focus on Latin American and Cuban art. Alvarez Muñoz is a regular contributor to ArtOnCuba and ArtCronica.



Generic Art Solutions, *One Hot Month*, 2014, silkscreens on photogram. All images are courtesy of Jonathan Ferrara Gallery, New Orleans.

## GUNS IN THE HANDS OF ARTISTS

Jonathan Ferrara Gallery – New Orleans

### Disarmed

By Tori Bush

New Orleans, LA has a tragic reputation. In 2011, New Orleans had the highest murder rate per capita in the U.S., and it is the only city in the U.S. with the dishonorable distinction of having had the nation's highest murder rate twelve times since 1985.<sup>1</sup> As of September this year, there have been 101 murders in the city, a number that is on pace to exceed last year's total of 156 killings.<sup>2</sup> A sense of loss can overcome one when you consider how much must radically change to avert this catastrophic course. Jonathan Ferrara Gallery addresses this endemic issue through "Guns in the Hands of Artists," a group exhibit that opened October 4th, 2014.

For this exhibit Jonathan Ferrara Gallery distributed disabled guns to thirty-three artists to create a range of art works, from monoprints to animation to sculpture. Artists commissioned for this exhibition include: Neil Alexander, Katrina Andry, Luis Cruz Azaceta, John Barnes, Ron Bechet, Brian Borrello, Mel Chin, Andrei Codrescu, Club S+S, Michel de Broin, R. Luke Dubois, George Dureau, Margaret Evangeline, Skylar Fein, Jonathan Ferrara, Rico Gatson, MK Guth, Generic Art Solutions, Heathcliffe Hailey, Marcus Kenney, Deborah Luster, Bradley McCallum, Adam Mysock, Ted Riederer, Peter Sarkisian, Dan Tague, Robert C. Tannen, Nicholas Varney, William Villalongo, Sidonie Villere,

and Paul Villinski. While the works were all made from a common material, each piece addresses a different dialogue within the very loud conversation on gun control. Many of the works highlight specific killings; others address violence in more personal manner; together the works are a ringing indictment of the state of violence in our country.

Generic Art Solutions pays homage to the violent history of New Orleans with their series of silkscreens, *One Hot Month* (2014). The artists used the obituary photos from the deceased victims of gun violence in August 2002, a month when there was nearly one homicide per day. These photos become silkscreens that merge obit photo and handgun, create a masking effect, as if one is looking through smoke at the victims. Seen all together, the twenty-seven images recall a very dark version of Andy Warhol's screenprints, but this time the pop reference is a murder victim and a handgun. Another work that addresses gun violence specific to New Orleans is by Ron Bechet. *Why! (Is it Easier to get a Gun than an Education, A Gun Instead of Help?)* (2014) is a meticulously made work that places pins along with the names and ages of each person who has been murdered in New Orleans in 2014. The text covers the entire map and is written in an aggressive red. Bechet's encyclopedic remembrance depicts the reality that New Orleans has one of highest per capita murder rates in the United States. This map of bodies continues to grow.

Both Katrina Andry and John Barnes address the racial implications of gun violence.

John Barnes' *Marigny Warning* (2014) is made of wood, shotgun barrels and children's toy letters. The work depicts a home in the Marigny neighborhood of New Orleans where a young



John Barnes, *Marigny Warning*, 2014, decommissioned shotgun barrels and mixed wood, 22.5" x 62" x 5."

African American male was shot in July 2013 for trespassing on the property. Barnes' depiction of the shotgun barrels within the architectural form is a reflection on power dynamics and conflict of those with over those without. The work includes text written in children's toy letters, "Get Off My Property," "Turn Down the Music" and "We Are Here Now". Each of these saying illuminate how stand your ground laws make a home a fortress. Katrina Andry's monprint *Disappear* (2014) explores the effect of gun violence on the African American community. Through violence or the prison system, Andry's work suggests that the disappearance of African American males has become normalized. Victims become suspicious of their own deaths. Or as Andry states, "Who cares if they disappear?"

*Forms of Correspondence, I. (Yes, No, Goodbye)* (2014) by 2013 Guggenheim winner Deborah Luster is one of the most poetic works in the show, addressing the lasting communications between the living and those that have passed. A cypress table is painted with numbers, letters and yes, no, good-bye in each corner. The planchette, or heart shaped finder is chained to the board, rendering the communication tool somewhat mute. How many nights have been spent whispering to a lost loved one? Luster says: "This Talking Board is a chained oracle, an illusion machine, a desperate promise... It is a machine of self-fulfilling prophecy." Andrei Codrescu, NPR Correspondent and writer, contributes another poetic work, *A Southern American Story*, (2014) a text about a carpenter who shoots himself in the rear while building a bookshelf made for tomes on artillery. Codrescu seems to imply that the impenetrable repository of knowledge is remote from the reality of shooting yourself in the ass.

Speaking of shooting yourself in the ass, the Governor of Louisiana, Bobby Jindal, recently signed a law that will allow people in Louisiana with concealed handgun permits to carry their weapons into restaurants that serve alcohol. If "Guns in the Hands of Artists" creates a dialogue about the state of gun violence in Louisiana, then I hope state lawmakers hear it clearly. I admire Jonathan Ferrara Gallery for addressing one of the city's most profound issues. Not only is Ferrara creating public discussion but also addressing the problem in a more direct sense by donating funds back to the The Greater New Orleans and Jefferson Parish Gun Buyback Coalition Program. Maybe next year Jonathan Ferrara Gallery should consider taking on *Gun Laws in the Hands of Artists*. ■

(October 4, 2014 – January 25, 2015)

#### NOTES

1. Desilver, Drew. "Despite recent shootings, Chicago nowhere near U.S. 'murder capital'" Pew Research Center. Web. Accessed on November 2, 2014. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/14/despite-recent-shootings-chicago-nowhere-near-u-s-murder-capital/>
2. Lawton, Dan. "Five weekend homicides push city's murder rate above 2013's" The New Orleans Advocate. Accessed on November 2, 2014. <http://www.theneworleansadvocate.com/home/10156212-123/five-weekend-homicides-push-city>

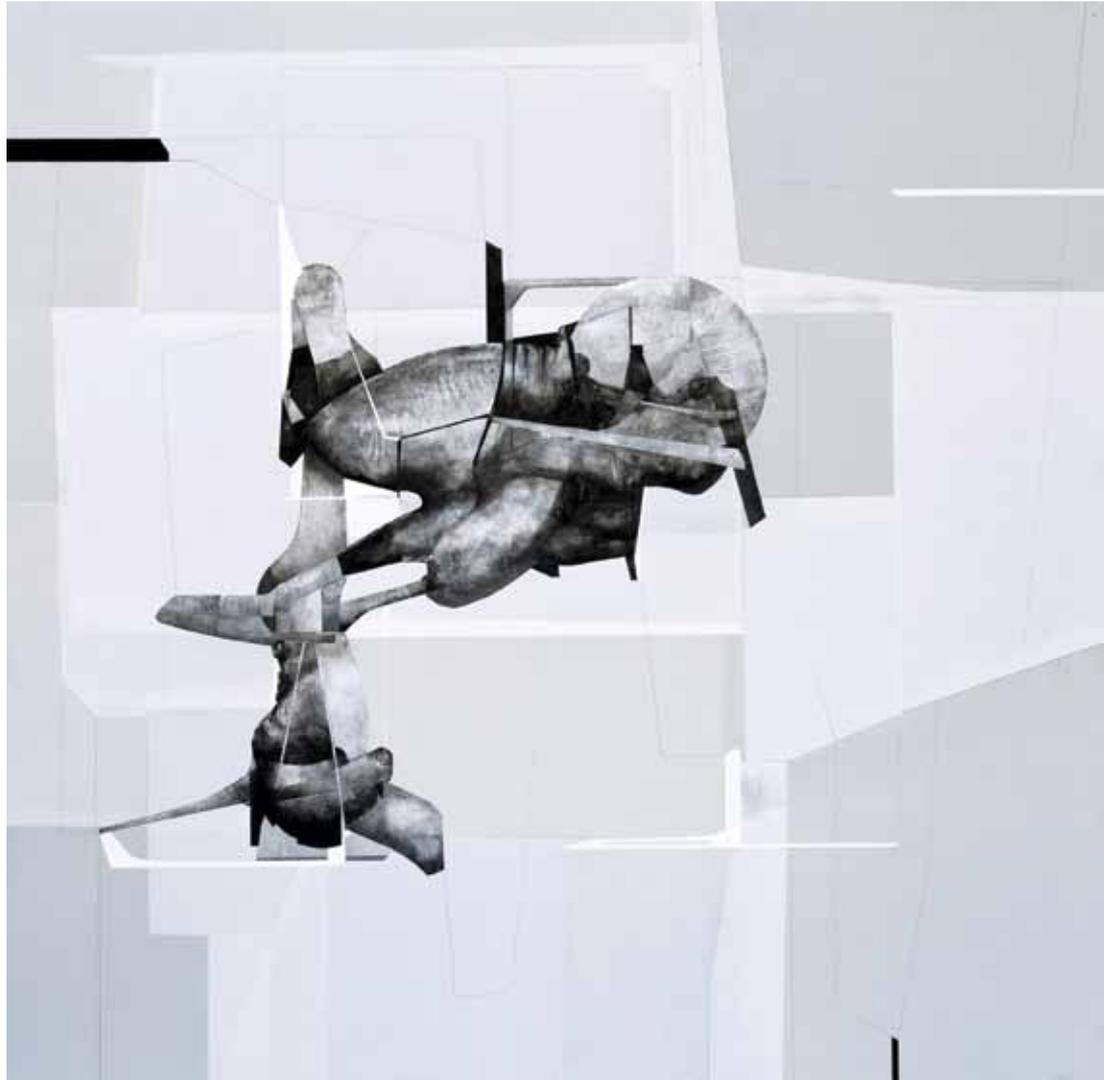
*Tori Bush is a freelance writer for arts publications such as Art in America, ArtVoices, Daily Serving, Pelican Bomb and The Art Newspaper. She has contributed to multiple exhibition catalogues including most recently the New Orleans international arts biennial, Prospect.3 Notes for Now. Tori is also a member of the artist group New Orleans Airlift.*

## REVIEWS

### JAMES KENNEDY: MORPHOSIS

Mindy Solomon Gallery –  
Miami

By Irina Leyva-Pérez



James Kennedy, *Fiction 2*, 2014, acrylic polymer and glazed graphite over gesso on eucalyptus masonite panel, 60" x 60." Courtesy of Mindy Solomon Gallery.

“Morphosis” is the second solo exhibition of James Kennedy in Miami, and as the title suggests, it explores the transitions occurring in his work. Perhaps the most noticeable transformation is his palette. In his earlier works, color was one of the main elements. In those pieces, Kennedy favored the use of a wider spectrum of colors, sometimes juxtaposing bright ones. His latest pieces in the series *Anatomical Fiction*, however, are becoming almost monochrome, made in a range of grays and whites. *Impetus* illustrates this concept well, featuring some of those bright colors. While the background is comprised of muted and neutral tones, the first plane and the center are taken over by a bright red figure. Another difference is the inclusion of figurative elements, contorted figures that surely are inspired by his experience as a professional dancer. The suspended characters, half-human and half-machine, are surreal creations that seem almost otherworldly.

Kennedy was born in Northern Ireland and educated at the Royal Scottish Academy in Edinburgh; the Rhodoc Academy of Design in Brighton, England; and the London Contemporary Dance School. His early works, particularly his series *Moodscapes*, which occupied most of his professional life between 2000 and 2006, show the influence of Joseph Turner (1775-1851). In these pieces he used an expressionistic style, influenced by the emotional landscapes of Turner, whose violent renderings were a departure from traditional landscape painting.

In 2007, in his exhibition “Architecture and Choreographies,” it was evident that Kennedy’s work became more abstract, perhaps

as a reaction to the work of artists such as Gerhard Richter. He was also interested in the legacy of Russian Constructivism and the Bauhaus. This change can be seen clearly in his series *Spatial*, on which he worked from 2006 to 2012. The works in *Spatial* stand out as a result of his intriguing use of space. In these paintings, the artist created the effect of multiple levels “moving” within the same image. *Spatial* is, in a way, a preamble to *Anatomical Fiction*, the main series in his current exhibition.

In the paintings of *Anatomical Fiction*, Kennedy continues exploring space in the same direction, creating the illusion of real depth in a two-dimensional surface. He achieves this effect through complex compositions structured in several planes. This then evolved into three-dimensional pieces, represented in this show by sculptures. This is the first time that he has exhibited sculptures, certainly a result of his interest in architecture, since these pieces are articulated assemblages that resemble buildings and machinery.

There is a considerable sense of experimentation in his works, especially in the technical part, which involves lengthy preparation. He is also interested in textures, which he translates to the surface of his paintings. Conceptually, his work is evocative, aiming to express inner transformation through his contorted and faceless figures. The result is a unique and intriguing imagery that levitates between meticulous precision and free expression. ■

(November 14 – December 26, 2014)

**LISA C. SOTO**  
TUB Gallery - Miami

By Janet Batet



Lisa C. Soto's "Mi tormenta," her most recent solo exhibition at TUB Gallery, Miami. Installation view. Photo: Anselmo Sias.

As one of the mythical Moirai, patient, relentless, Lisa C. Soto plays with the strings of existence, delving into the past, venturing in the future. This painstaking process is a capricious one. Starting with a self-renunciation that leads into the incarnation of otherness and back, Soto articulates fascinating universes in which chaos and harmony go hand by hand. The result is that delicate, frightening balance that has the ominous portent of the calm in the eye of the cyclone. Such is the tension underlying her storm.

"Mi tormenta" (My Storm) is the title of Soto's solo show on view at TUB Gallery in the Wynwood Art District. Continuing the artist's interest in the exploration of extreme natural forces as allegory of social content and emotional tension, "Mi tormenta" is a history of despair and hope, disarray and renewal.

The hectic yet beautiful atmosphere that greets the viewer is filled with debris that, articulated in organic structures of graceful harmony, suggests paths of violence, suffering, oblivion and reconciliation. The works reunited in this show are based on Soto's material findings while exploring the ruins of closed-down drug dens in Miami during the artist's residency at Fountainhead in June 2014. Frenzied barbed wire, intriguing seeds, broken mirrors, salt-water crystals, tangled fishing lines, menacing fishing hooks, crack bags, steel re-bars and cement are woven into new entities, exponents of personal and collective histories, dreams and disappointments, fragility and strength.

At the gallery entrance, *Can you hear me now?* offers a meticulous arrangement of small plastic bags organized on a 14-

6-foot table inside a glass display. The typical baggies of crack cocaine sold by street dealers are arranged in a variety of patterns—for instance, some of them are stuffed with seeds while others are empty, and on the left side of the display, a contact cell phone. The installation acts at once as prelude to the show and premonition of the disaster. Interestingly, this piece is the only one in the show that responds to a structure of order, being also the foundation of chaos.

Situated at the end of the gallery is *LCDC 20414*, a web of fishing lines with hooks interspersed stretches—suspended like a hammock—from one end to the other of the room. The viewer is prompted to play with the wires by swinging the structure, which seems animated by the breeze, while the shifting shadow drawings resulting from the exposure of the structure to the lights pale or intensify as we go. *LCDC 20414* is a tie to the artist's early years when she was attracted to the fishing paraphernalia of her grandfather. This poetic installation symbolizes a hopeful sign that promises rebirth after the catastrophe.

Tireless, repetitious, stubborn, Soto repairs broken stories, connecting isolated fragments with new possibilities, restoring life where chaos reigned before. ■

(September 27 – November 17, 2014)

Janet Batet is an independent curator, art critic and essayist based in Miami.



Marisa Tellería, *Still*, 2014, installation detail, mesh, tulle fabric, wire, dimensions variable. Photo: Anselmo Sias. Courtesy of the artist and TUB Gallery, Miami.

## MARISA TELLERÍA: STILL

Frost Art Museum – Miami  
Curated by Klaudio Rodríguez

By Irina Leyva-Pérez

“Still,” Marisa Tellería’s solo show at the Frost Museum, brings together a group of pieces made specifically for the occasion. The artist has been working for a while with the concept of perception and how it affects the way viewers relate to artworks. Tellería relies on the potential that materials offer her and chooses to work with simple ones. She is looking for qualities such as transparency, which she found in tulle, or the capacity to generate reflections with the shine of light, with fine wire. In a way, the material becomes a source of inspiration.

The main installation in the show is a wall piece in which the artist used mesh, tulle, wire and fabric, arranged in a sinuous organic form that simulates growth from the surface. The fabrics are juxtaposed in forms that remind us of flowers, perhaps because of the use of delicate materials in pastel colors. The combined layers of tulle create an oneiric sensation, reinforced by the soft light.

The second wall installation is made of fine wire placed in a circular manner. Following a similar principle to the one used in the previous piece, Tellería placed the wires directly on the wall. The superimposition of silver, gold and copper wires and the light reflection from them creates a soothing effect, almost hypnotic.

She has been experimenting with floor pieces for a while, and for this exhibition she also made one using circular forms. In this instance, the installation is made of wood circles with a spike on the back, which raises them from the floor, arranged on the surface in an uneven pattern. The color blue and the duplication of the same element over and over create a wave effect, as if it is water. The fact that it is placed on the floor reinforces that impression.

Tellería was born in Nicaragua in 1963 and moved to Miami, where she currently lives and works, when she was 15. She earned a bachelor of arts at Florida International University in Miami in 1993. In 1996, she earned a master of fine arts in sculpture at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA. Her work can be found at, among other institutions, the prestigious Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. She was also the recipient of The Fountainhead Residency, among other awards.

All site-specific installations in “Still” are untitled, which allows the viewer to enter free of preconceptions, since there are no clues, only the possibility of relying on the experiences that each brings to the space and their sensorial perception. As the title suggests, Tellería is implying that through a contemplative state of mind the viewer can establish a personal dialogue with the pieces, and ultimately with himself. Appreciation of this intimate and cathartic experience is, after all, in the eye of the beholder. ■

(September 10 – October 19, 2014)

## KEITH LONG: ENIGMATIC FIGURES

Lélia Mordoch Gallery – Miami

By Irina Leyva-Pérez

Keith Long prefers to use recycled material for his works. He collects wood pieces and fragments of objects that had a life before to later transform them into sculptures. In the early 1960s Long attended the Art Institute of Chicago, where he obtained his BFA. Then, he went on to study at the University of Wisconsin, in Madison, earning a MS and MFA. His artistic career began as a painter, working during the 1950s and 1960s in an abstract expressionistic style. Later on he was attracted to minimalism, and then to sculpture.

His most recent solo show, “Enigmatic Figures,” was on display this fall at Lélia Mordoch Gallery in her Miami space. This was his second exhibition there; the first was in 2010 and titled “Constructed Reliefs.” His previous works, exhibited back then, were more like assemblages of objects he found, taking advantage of random elements that went together. They were all wall pieces and almost bi-dimensional, most likely a result of this initial approach to art through painting. Known as “constructed wall sculptures,” he has been doing them since the mid-1970s.

However, his latest series shows a different working method and a new look. Although he continues with constructed wall sculptures, in these new pieces he gathers the components and rearranges them like parts of a puzzle. He is using as a starting point a symmetric form similar to a human silhouette that he then “fills” with other “parts.” The result is these pieces, which are visually uniform and far more complex.

In this exhibition, the artist presented 15 wood sculptures, most of them part of the series that gives it its title. The pieces in “Enigmatic Figures” remind us about totemic carvings, perhaps due to the vertical format and the way it has been constructed. It’s also possible that the fact that they are made of wood also contributes to make this association.

Formally, there is a staggering similarity to Egyptian art, something that Long realized occurred progressively and not as a conscious decision while he worked. A good example of this influence is *Enigmatic Figure 4*, which is reminiscent of the outside part of a classic Egyptian sarcophagus. *Feral 14* is another piece that seems to have been inspired by the same source, especially the upper side of it, which simulates a wing. It resembles those attached to the archetypal winged creatures distinctive of the funerary iconography of this culture.

There is also a notable connection to prehistoric and tribal art in pieces such as *Mask 9* and *Mask 11*, in which simple and clean shapes define the object. Long takes elements from these ancient cultures and turns them into abstract compositions, evidence of human nature, of its destructive capability but also of its potential for redemption. ■

(September 11 – October 31, 2014)

Irina Leyva-Pérez is an art historian and writer based in Miami. She is curator of Pan American Art Projects.



Keith Long, *Feral 14*, 2011, wood, paint, varnish, 92" x 29.5." Courtesy of the artist and Lélia Mordoch Gallery, Miami.

**JULIE BUFFALOHEAD: UNCOMMON STORIES**

Bockley Gallery - Minneapolis

**An Epistemology of Uncertainty**

By Christina Schmid



Julie Buffalohead, *The Stampede*, 2014, acrylic, ink, and pencil on Lokta paper, 20.5" x 31." Courtesy of the artist and Bockley Gallery.

Julie Buffalohead's paintings capture strange encounters between fact and fiction, the political realities of Native American life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century United States and the timeless world of stories. Devoid of backgrounds, her scenes unfold on monochrome planes, ranging from rich reds to deep blues to cool grays. Thus Buffalohead situates her characters, human and non-human, in a space apart, defined only by the mood evoked by color. Fox, rabbit, raven, turtle, deer, coyote and many more creatures mingle in the paintings, arrested in moments and poses that inevitably conjure an unfolding narrative, glimpsed through the artist's eyes.

Unlike myth, which Roland Barthes famously described as "frozen, purified, eternalized," Buffalohead's stories inhabit a curious present; they are ongoing. In *Merry Feast* (2012), a girl wearing a set of antlers shares a meal with a raccoon, her white dress matching the tablecloth. A fox observes the two, ears folded back, mouth agape, standing on its hind legs and gesturing as if in futile protest at such domestic cross-species intimacy. What the paintings suggest is a slight shift in perception, a re-alignment that looks at both reputedly mundane moments and politically charged encounters through the lens of stories. In *Stampede* (2014), Fox and Rabbit lie on their backs and manipulate a cast of shadow puppets with their paws: a cowboy, guns drawn, postures next to buffaloes, a skunk, squirrel, and bikini-clad cliché of an "Indian princess" in a feather headdress. Buffalohead's paintings cast doubt on the stereotypes widely accepted as truth and reduce to them to mere shadow puppetry.

Far from occupying a mythical space outside of time, the paintings invite an epistemological re-orientation in the here and now. Buffalohead's stories offer a way of looking at, of knowing, the world through a cast of characters that includes shape-shifting tricksters, mischief-makers whose actions are as likely to cause harm as to—sometimes inadvertently—benefit the people. Her stories refuse to stay put. In one of her largest paintings to date, *Deer Woman*, notorious for her siren-like behavior, appears in a painting of the same name (2014). But unlike her traditional cousin, who is said to flee once unmasked for what she is, Buffalohead's Deer Woman dances in front of a row of smaller animals, all but the most eager one masked with antlers. The older tale's deceptive seduction gives way to a different scene of transformation, casting Deer Woman in a more sympathetic light. *The Song of the Ravens* (2014) shows Coyote in a pink dress, a dead rabbit and lamb lying at her feet, hands upturned in a protest of innocence despite evidence, while a man on a couch aims a gun at her. All over the scene, ravens peck, soar and swoop, a murder not of crows but black avian tricksters. Whose subterfuge do we see and to what end? The paintings do not tell. They embrace uncertainty, a degree of mystery, and sparks of a resilient, dark humor. ■

(September 19 - October 25, 2014)

Christina Schmid is a writer, teacher, editor, and critic, who lives and works in the Twin Cities. She is a regular contributor to *Flash Art* and *Afterimage*.



"Mathew Zefeldt: *Repetition, Simulation, Repetition*," installation view. Courtesy of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

## MATHEW ZEFELDT: REPETITION, SIMULATION, REPETITION

Minneapolis Institute of Arts

### Accidents Against Absurdity

By Christina Schmid

You enter a room that is also a painting. Three walls are covered in custom-made wallpaper: bricks in the style of computer game interiors, immediately recognizable to a generation raised in the pixelated worlds of *Wolfenstein*, *Halo* and *Doom*. Originally painted, then scanned, then printed on vinyl to replicate the digital environment in the gallery, the wallpaper sets the mood for Mathew Zefeldt's latest paintings: a series of portraits that mixes bearded faces gleaned from ancient Greek funerary reliefs with the iconic visages of the heroes of first-person shooter games, invariably white, strong-jawed, and conventionally masculine. Six smaller-scale paintings interrupt the cycle of portraits: three old-fashioned safe doors, gateways to treasure in the world of games, and three mirrors, feigning to reflect the brick pattern of the respectively opposite wall.

Initially, the mood is bright: a touch of candy-colored nostalgia for a generation of boys who grew up glued to screens, fighting interchangeable foes—Nazis, aliens, evil military dudes. Zefeldt's juxtaposition of mourners and shooters conveys a putatively postmodern irreverence, a playful blending of esteemed art history with early digital brutality as popular entertainment. The delight in such irreverence becomes most palpable in the graffiti and cartoon-style marks in *Days of Future Past* and *Consistency Consistency*, where august heads float to form smiley faces above tables adorned with little turd piles. The portraits of game characters, too, borrow motifs familiar from art history. To illustrate their declining "health status" through the series, Zefeldt employs *memento mori* imagery to mark their affliction. As noses bloody and red squares leak from eyes, reproduc-

tions of *vanitas* paintings appear in the paintings' corners.

Yet the ostensible fun of art history as playground masks a laborious, not to say torturous process. Zefeldt projects his motifs on canvas and paints the same head, by hand, over and over again. Far from expressive, the paintings rely on a quasi-mechanical mode of production. The painter becomes a human copy machine. Rather than employ repetition as a tool for mastery, Zefeldt's process casts repetition as a means of undoing, emptying out signification, as a slow slide into the arms of absurdity, where anything as quaint as meaning no longer matters. In the paintings, the drift toward absurdity is visualized as bright-colored blobs seemingly seeping from the regiment of brick backgrounds. As the health of his characters wanes, the expertly painted drips proliferate until, in *Cartoon Painting #3*, they are all that remains.

Gleeful and sinister, the metaphoric potential such seepage offers is rich. Painterly languages leak into each other, revealing their idiosyncratic armatures. In the process, simulations become transparent. Zefeldt does not allow his paintings to serve as windows to other worlds; his door paintings effectively block imaginary exits. Yet the box of a room that is also a painting does not dissimulate separation: steeped in popular culture, "Repetition, Simulation, Repetition" thrives on a network of connotations and references. Glitches in particular, those moments when a trace of the hand spoils the illusion of perfect repetition, serve as reservoirs of meaning, of accidents against absurdity. ■

(October 16 – December 28, 2014)

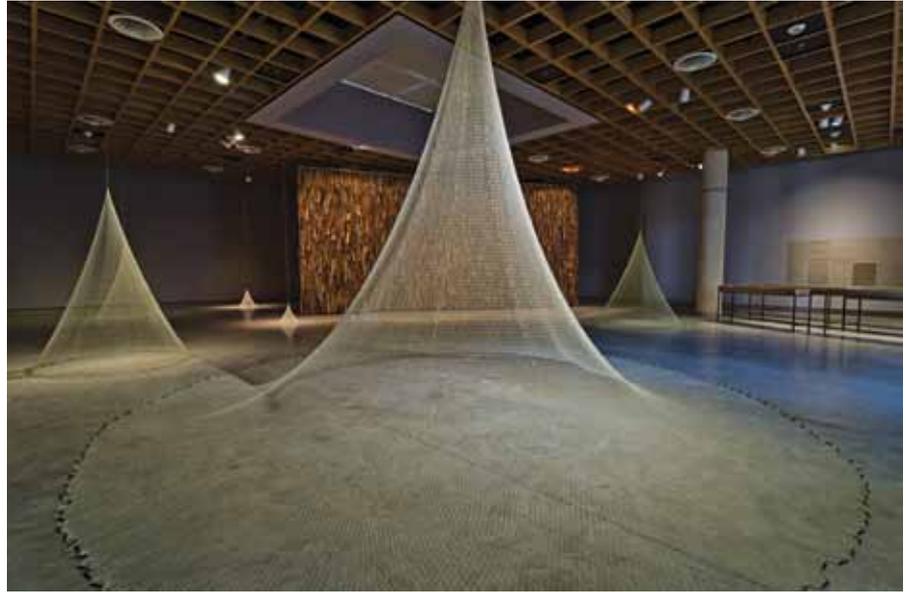
## REVIEWS

### JOSÉ MORALES: ABECEDARIO AFECTIVO

Museum of Art of Puerto Rico – San Juan

Curated by Adlin Ríos

By Carla Acevedo-Yates



José Morales, *Arte-sano*, installation view. Photo: Johnny Betancourt. Courtesy of Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico.

In the catalogue text for the 1999 exhibition “Asamblea,” curated by Adlin Ríos at the University of the Sacred Heart, Antonio Martorell used the phrase “affective alphabet” to describe the work of artist José Morales (New York, 1947). At the time, Morales was mostly known as an expressive painter, part of the “New Latin American Figuration,” working with the cultural, sociopolitical and syncretic iconography of Puerto Rico. While visiting his studio in New York, Ríos approached the artist about exhibiting the objects she saw in the hallway of his studio. “Asamblea” introduced audiences to a private facet of Morales’ oeuvre: assemblages of quotidian objects that express a quiet and elegant violence, chairs propped up on sharp machete stilts (*Sillas V*, 1998) and a worn metal bed frame laced with machetes at each side (*Somier*, 1997). Objects such as these comprise Morales’ affective vocabulary, which in their reconfiguration and manipulation become semiotic vessels, combining and confounding the personal and political with formal eloquence.

“Abecedario afectivo” at the Museum of Art of Puerto Rico (MAPR) further examines the artist’s relationships with objects and the ways in which they are inextricably tied to memory, personal histories and, in this case, official art discourses. The exhibition features three new installations by Morales: *We loved you so much*, which establishes the personal tone that runs through the exhibition, *The Wall*, and *Arte-sano* (roughly translated to both “artisan” and “art-healthy”).

*The Wall* is set up as a binary relationship between the space in the street and the institutional white cube through the juxtaposition of flyers distributed around *el barrio* and the academic, and at times overly intellectual, theoretical jargon ubiquitous in art publications. Here, the emphasis is not only on form but also on language and text, intellectual labor, and the hierarchical relations developed around certain registers of language and the site of their presentation. Flyers soliciting services and announcing events are laminated and neatly mounted by the artist around the perimeter of the space to form a straight line. Inside, Morales has constructed a white cube only visible and accessible when walking around it. What *is* visible from the entrance of the space is the labor, materials and process of its construction. The white cube hides the labor behind the production of

an exhibition. Here, it reveals itself as a temporary constructed device, a drywall structure sustained by sandbags, crates and boxes. Inside, the phrase “bla, bla, bla” is written among the assembly of more than 4,851 pieces of art magazines. *The Wall* is strongly rooted within the legacy of institutional critique but remains rather literal in its attempt to complicate the linguistic codes of the street against the institutional parameters of the white cube. After all, the space of art remains sanitized in its condition as pristine exhibitor of art objects.

The concept of labor as it relates to art production and its hierarchies is also manifest in *Arte-sano*. Here, a more complex set of relationships are established between objects and their spatial configuration. Most of them are culled from the life and work of Morales’ uncle, Manuel Rivera Ripoll, who was a fisherman and an artisan. Fishing nets are extended upwards from a singular point. The elasticity of these nets create conic volumes—light, airy, and yet with a commanding presence—that resemble a sacred space or refuge. Treated as anthropological artifacts, four display cases present the personal objects of Ripoll; wooden needles, lottery tickets, an almanac; handmade fishing boats made of wood, among other curiosities, map a life’s labor, personal obsessions and relationships with both made and found objects. A curtain of 5,000 wood machetes and knives standing 14 feet tall feels monumental. But here, the machete, a recurrent theme in his work, is sculpted in wood rather than readymade.

Two themes are highlighted in this exhibition: art as craft in opposition to the aesthetic models of contemporary art, that is, the hierarchical categorizations between popular culture and high art, and, on the other hand, the derision of art as immaterial labor. And yet, perhaps the most salient theme is the affective labor involved in the production of each of these installations, with each object carefully selected and displayed to call attention to our own affections and attachments to the things that surround us. ■

(August 14 · December 28, 2014)

Carla Acevedo-Yates is a curator and art critic based in San Juan, Puerto Rico and New York.



Mario Merz, *Spostamenti della terra e della luna su un asse (Movements of the Earth and the Moon on an Axis)*, 2003, metal tubes, glass, stone, neon, clamps, clay, 33' x 19.7' x 9.84.' © Mario Merz by SIAE. Courtesy Fondazione Merz.

## MARIO MERZ

Pace Gallery - London

By Laura Burton

Mario Merz (1925 – 2003) is well-known for his key role in the Arte Povera movement. Arte Povera is considered to be one of the most important Italian contributions to contemporary art where artists explored the symbolic meanings of everyday materials to create works that explore the human connection to nature and break down the barriers between art and life. Pace London director and curator, Tamara Corm, collaborated with Fondazione Merz to bring together thirteen works that span the length of the artist's career, stressing his interests in relationships between the organic and inorganic. It also engages our perceptions of time and infinity, referencing geometry and mathematics to elucidate these constructs.

The two doors through which one can enter to view Merz's *Spostamenti della terra e della luna su un asse (Movements of the Earth and the Moon on an Axis)* (2003), offer differing perspectives of his ambitious iconic domed structures—often referred to as igloos. From one entrance, the view is of a dome made of glass and metal tubes nested within a larger dome of the same materials. Their surfaces, perhaps once smooth and uniform, appear as if they have been subject to a destructive force—splintering the shells into shard-like crystalline shapes. A trinity of cylindrical neon lights appears responsible. These erupt from the base of the smallest dome, piercing and illuminating the boundaries of both igloos that seemingly attempt to contain them.

Entering from the other door, the viewer's line of sight is dominated by a mid-sized igloo plated with thin irregularly shaped sheets of brown-marbled stone. At first glance the grain of the marble causes the stone to appear as if it were a tanned hide or a sheet of bark, but quickly the glare from the highly polished surface betrays its rigid qualities. The two larger domes margin-

ally overlap, creating an in-between space, as would a Venn diagram. The commonality one finds in these structures' shared zone is a sense of absence. If Merz suggests absence is the connecting thread, what, then, do these structures have to do with one another? Even though Merz's domed sculptures are commonly described as igloos, perhaps it is their ultimate ambiguity, their mystery, their otherworldly-ness that binds them. They resist easy categorization and seem to allude to any number of associative objects, creating an openness that establishes a precedent for the other works in the exhibition.

The cosmic atmosphere of power and timelessness produced by *Spostamenti della terra e della luna su un asse* intensifies when the viewer turns to see *Linea* (line) (1991). Residing within a metal frame, a piece of raw canvas is pierced by twirling neon tubes forming the first nineteen numbers in the Fibonacci sequence—an infinite numerical series in which each subsequent number is the sum of the previous two numbers. Above each number, a charcoal drawing of an abstract shape mirrors the sequence's progression. The outline of a seed floats over the first “1” in the sequence. As the series progresses, the image of a seed evolves into a leaf, perhaps a reference to phyllotaxis. One can imagine the infinite progression as it continues beyond the canvas. The Fibonacci sequence relates to the progression from seed to leaf, branch, and tree.

While we can speculate that the seed in *Linea* will grow into a tree and eventually die, Merz's introduction of the Fibonacci sequence prompts an exploration into the ultimately unknowable possibilities of a true infinite eternity. As the mind strains to better grapple with such a concept, one needs only to take a glance around the gallery to be reminded that while our earthly existence may seem overwhelmingly insignificant when compared to the vast expanses of space and time, it can be beautiful, nonetheless. ■

(September 26 – November 8, 2014)

Laura Burton is a gallerist and writer currently living and working in London.

**HELIDON XHIXHA: SCULPTING LIGHT**

Galerie Lausberg - Düsseldorf, Germany

By Jill Thayer



Helidon Xhixha, *Reflections*, 2013, mirror polished stainless steel, and *Oblong*, 2013, corten steel, 98 1/2" x 23 2/3" x 6" each. Installation view at Galerie Lausberg's garden, November 2014. Courtesy of Galerie Lausberg, Düsseldorf.

The way we see things reflects our perception of the world, as the cultural confluence of social and environmental forces inform it. John Berger writes, “We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are.”

Albanian sculptor Helidon Xhixha incites the power of visual perception through his vast oeuvre of monumental installations and smaller-scale, stainless-steel works. The surfaces reflect and refract an ever-changing environment and act as a transformative conductor of light and energy. The enigmatic properties of this phenomenon react to the degree of light exposure and function as a mirror revealing altered landscapes for the viewer to consider.

Xhixha’s inherited his artistic influences from his father Sale, and his studies at Kingston University in London and Accademia di Belle Arte di Brera in Milan forged an early ascent into the

realms of contemporary sculpture. His work draws upon formal constructs and experimental investigations that reveal a new language of abstract and non-figurative forms. The artist’s penchant for innovative processes and deft treatments in bas-relief are mechanisms in his complex methodology.

“Helidon Xhixha: Sculpting Light” at Galerie Lausberg presents approximately 10 steel works that capture and rearticulate light in its luminescent qualities. Opaque and high polished finishes intensify the brightness of the steel, as the twisted folds and dents of each piece create narratives of highlights and shadows. At first glance, the wall reliefs appear similar with surface undulation, but a unique aesthetic emerges upon the viewer’s gaze.

*In Energia Attraverso Il Nero* (2013), the satin black polish enveloping the piece casts a subtle sheen. A graceful articulation gives the impression of a wrinkled black tie after a formal affair. There is elegance to its mass and a refinement to its edges.



Helidon Xhixha, *I Tre Monoliti*, Montanstahl, Stabio, Switzerland, 33' height. Courtesy of the artist and Valli Art LLC.

*Energia Rusty* (2013) has a non-reflective, brown-colored finish with its shape resembling a chocolate bar. The surface indentations look like that of its packaging wrapper, crumpled and discarded in the duality of its function. *Energia Attraverso Il Rosso* (2013) offers a lipstick-red, matte-polished façade that features a random abstraction contained at its core. The concave and convex characteristics of the piece are sensual in appeal, as this illusionary impression begs a second look.

In *Reflections* (2013), oval sculptures of mirror-polished stainless steel are placed at either end of the gallery's Zen-like garden. The pieces interact with the environment as the viewer's perception is challenged by nature, reflected and deconstructed on the surface inconsistencies. In these works, Xhixha shared that he was inspired by "the luminosity of the sky and modeled the steel sheet into a free and sinuous form that will fill the eye of the observer with a cascade of tones and shades, reflections and gradations." The brightly colored effects explode in an array of light dancing on the molded areas in a resplendent sublimity.

Xhixha cites Henry Moore as inspiration. "He introduced a new form of modernism and was able to combine past to present through the plasticity of his works." He also references Jackson Pollock as an abstract expressionist, with his rhythmic use of paint and fierce independence.

His pieces are reminiscent of the Light and Space and Finish Fetish artists who achieved phenomenological results incorporating high-tech processes into their works. Larry Bell comes to mind in his reflective processes and keen attention to detail as an example of this approach. Similarly, the polished sculpture of Constantin Brancusi, the dynamism of Umberto Boccioni, the abstract geometries of David Smith, and the contemporary motifs of Anish Kapoor, Joel Morrison and Brad Howe draw parallels to his work.

Xhixha's monumental works are majestically imposing yet balance the intricacies of his surface treatment. His techniques create nuances in cause and effect that engage a broad audience. The artist notes, "I

was born as a monumental artist, and I always considered art with a sense of greatness and vastness, as it is the ultimate expression of the human mind and soul. Even when I work on a smaller sculpture, I mold in it the concept of immensity." Most notably, some of his permanent installations include: *Steel Monolith*, National Museum of Science and Technology Leonardo da Vinci, Milan, Italy; *Historical Reflections*, Presidential Palace of Tirana, Albania; *Sound of Steel*, the Violin Museum at the Palazzo dell'Arte, Cremona, Italy; *Sun Light*, Saint Jean Cap Ferrat, France; *Sky Reflection*, Lombardy Regional Government Building, Milan, Italy; *Elliptical Light*, The Hall of the Melia Hotel, Dubai, UAE; *Vitality*, Santa Maria Novella, Florence, Italy, and *The Three Monoliths*, Montanstahl, Stabio, Switzerland.

As viewers, our perception is informed and affected by what we know and believe. Seeing brings awareness and reflexivity into the visceral experience. As Berger asserts, "The painter's way of seeing is reconstructed by the marks he makes on the canvas or paper." For Xhixha, the marks are of his own making—modeling, shaping, folding and sculpting with inherent forces that relinquish a radiant energy from the practice he employs. These unique interventions manipulate the material and embrace the surrounding landscape in a consistent approach that push the boundaries of contemporary sculpture. Says Xhixha, "My creative process is mostly organic. I'm flexible and open in my life and value innovation over tradition." Each piece is contemplative, articulate and beguiling in fabrication and aesthetic. The works reflect not only a multifaceted world of our interpretation, but also the artist's masterful process. Seeing *is* believing. ■

(September 5 – November 7, 2014)

*Jill Thayer, Ph.D., is an artist, educator and curatorial archivist. She is on-line faculty at Santa Monica College in art history: global visual culture; Southern New Hampshire University in humanities/art history; and post university in MBA marketing for the Malcolm Baldrige School of Business.*



Chto Delat, *The Excluded. In a moment of danger*, 2014, installation view, October 5, 2014. © Leo Eloy. Fundação Bienal de São Paulo.

## 31ST SÃO PAULO BIENNIAL

Ibirapuera Park - São Paulo, Brazil

### How to look for things that don't exist...

By Paco Barragán

It seems by now that the São Paulo Biennial needs its biennial doses of mayhem. This year's edition started with the boycott of a number of artists just days before the opening to protest the presence of Israel as one of the sponsors, which was considered inappropriate given the rage with which they had been bombing the occupied territories in Palestine. The curatorial team headed by Charles Esche signed a letter stating that they supported the artists' position in this conflict. Nothing new. On the contrary, it's just one more bureaucratic and meaningless statement so common in the art world that I now prefer they just remain quiet.

What was new, however, was that during the press conference Esche insisted at least three times that he would not talk about the conflict, that it was strictly between the artists and Biennial Foundation. This strange, formal idea goes against the very essence of curatorship: to be a mediator between the artist's needs and institutional framework.

A brief note about the curatorial team: The São Paulo Biennial has traditionally been run by a Brazilian curator (except for Venezuelan curator based in New York Luis Pérez Oramas in 2012), so this edition was really daring for its appointment of European curator, who in turn created a team consisting of Spaniards Pablo Lafuente and Nuria Enguita and Israelis Galit Eilat and Oren Sagiv.

If the opening of the São Paulo Biennial was overshadowed by this conflict, its poetic theme, "How to (...) things that don't exist," was a perfect continuation of Esche's preoccupations and connected somehow to his Istanbul Biennial in 2005. Basically, for Esche, it's about projecting art and its possibilities into the political sphere in an imaginative manner. As a matter of fact, the concept of 'pos-

sibility' becomes key in his framework as it enables (us) to think about the world differently, departing from the existing economic, sociopolitical and artistic structures—to actually look for those things that don't exist...

Although attractive, it becomes a very limited discourse, especially if it's not framed within a strong narrative. And in this sense, the São Paulo Biennial was a deception because there was no grand narrative that sustained the artistic and political conversation. We found many new commissioned works—about 70 percent—that dealt with politics, gender, identity, social issues, citizenship, democracy, capitalism, but as the show was not articulated around subsidiary narratives the whole show became rather chaotic in an already complicated setting like the Niemeyer Pavilion. We found some quite interesting individual works, including those by Voluspa Jarpa, Asier Mendizábal, Yael Bartana, Sheela Gowda, Walid Raad and Jonas Staal, but the lack of a clear grouping based on themes hurt the overall concept.

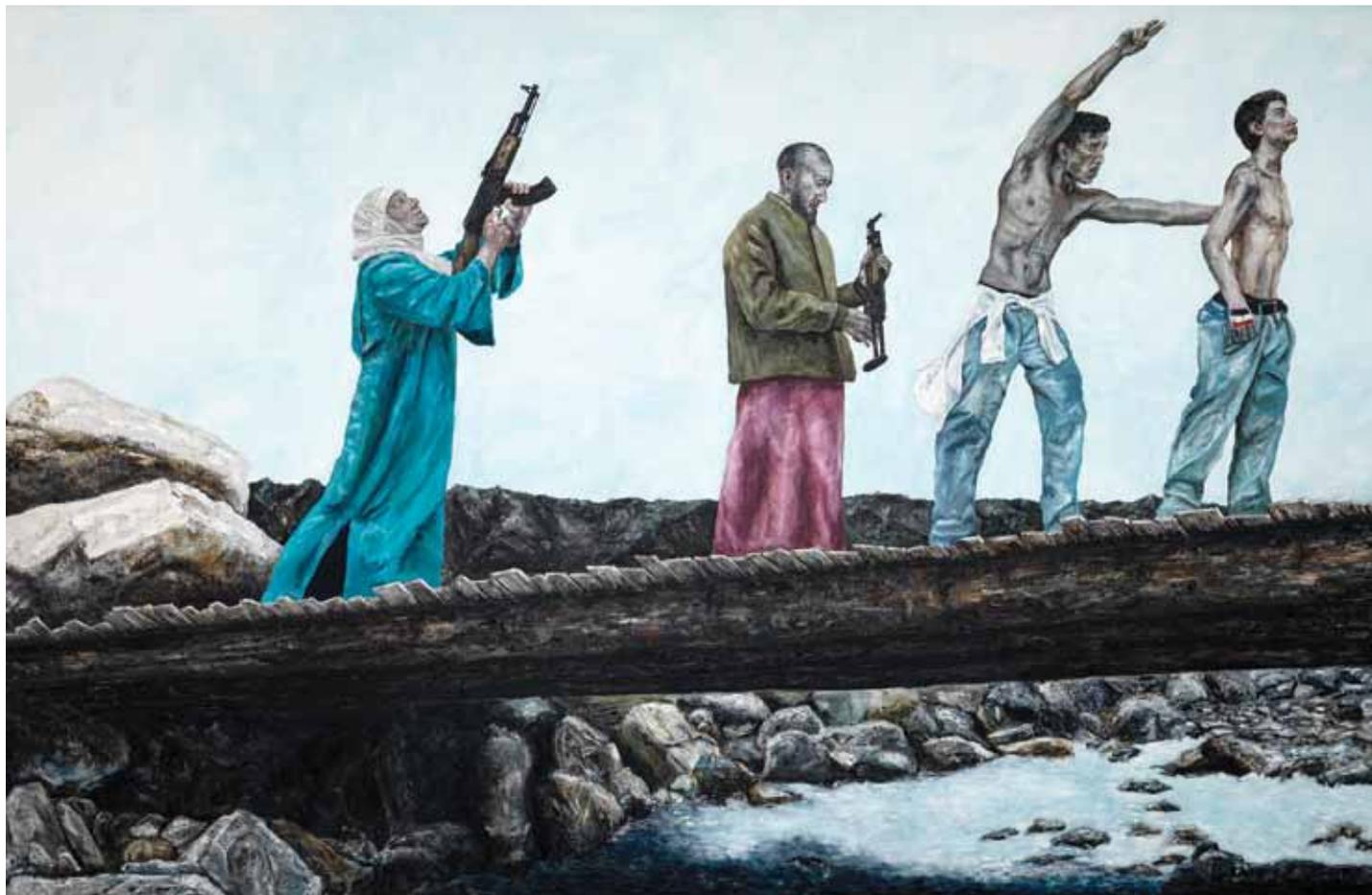
A biennial like São Paulo, with its great tradition, is like Venice and Documenta: a big exhibition that has to engage with the 'grand narratives' of our time. You can do that either by codifying the failure of these grand narratives and their supporting structures or by prefiguring 'alternative narratives' or micro narratives that help us reframe citizenship, capitalism, democracy, ecology and so on. But I'm afraid this has not happened. Or maybe the idea was there but it hasn't been explained properly, both from a conceptual and formal point of view. ■

(September 6 – December 7, 2014)

## RONALD OPHUIS

Galerie Bernard Ceysson - Paris

By Paco Barragán



Ronald Ophuis, *Arab Spring. On their way to the Revolution. Syria 2011, 2014*, oil on linen, 11.15' x 17.7'. Courtesy Galerie Bernard Ceysson, Paris.

Dutch artist Ronald Ophuis (1968, Hengelo) is a man on an idiosyncratic mission, perhaps to rewrite history painting with a contemporary take. This is rather unusual as history painting—once the most important genre in art history—suffered, after its heyday in the 19th century, a total discrediting between the two world wars at the hands of Fascism, Nazism and Communism. Furthermore, the genre faced substantial ‘*intramuros*’ competition from photography, video, installation and even performance art. ‘*Extramuros*’ competition took a toll as well with 20th century cinema, television, documentaries and later with Internet, videogames and even soap operas.

At the Galerie Bernard Ceysson, Ophuis presents about a dozen paintings and approximately 20 works on paper and photographs, along with a series of new versions of an older, now iconic piece, *Miscarriage*. The works gathered here add up to a powerful synopsis of his career since the mid-1990s, when Ophuis began to gain attention with hard, violent works like *Execution* (1995), *Soccer Players I* (1995) and *Sweet Violence* (1996). Representations of war—think of the Balkans, Rwanda or the more recent Arab Spring—are at the core of his pictorial practice, but so too are personal dramas and conflicts, sometimes offering a poignant mix of violence and sexuality. Ophuis once said, “When you look at an image in which violence and sexuality is depicted it won’t be so easy for you as spectator not to engage even if it’s not your own fantasy.”

In the basement we find a series of skulls carried out with oil on

photographs and one of flowers with the still-strong smell of paint. In these smaller works, especially the flower series, Ophuis pushes the boundaries between abstraction and figuration and provides a hint of new directions within his pictorial practice.

In the main room two major works command our attention: one depicting a boy pointing a gun at his head; the other, a large mural (11.15’ by 17.7’) showing a group of people crossing a bridge, including an old woman and a man, both carrying Kalashnikovs.

These narrative scenes are highly disturbing. We aren’t shown what’s outside the field of action, so we are unable to reach closure about what’s going on. Ophuis further complicates matters with precise, delicate strokes that enhance a certain slowness and absence of *dramatismo*—see for example the water under the bridge, painted in contrast with the rest of the mural’s landscape.

Are these terrorists? Freedom fighters? Does it matter? How do we engage with these images?

Ophuis rewrites history by seamlessly mixing reality with fiction—departing from photography with life stagings—constructing contemporary images of society that compete with the dozens of images we see daily on the Internet, television and social media. In front of this mural depicting the Arab Spring we can’t but look in awe and say to ourselves: “Silence, history is at play!” ■

(October 23 – December 7, 2014)

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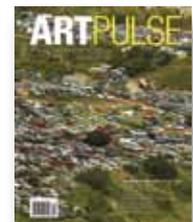
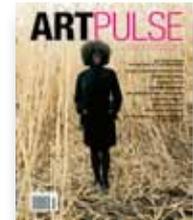
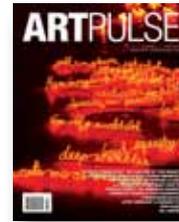
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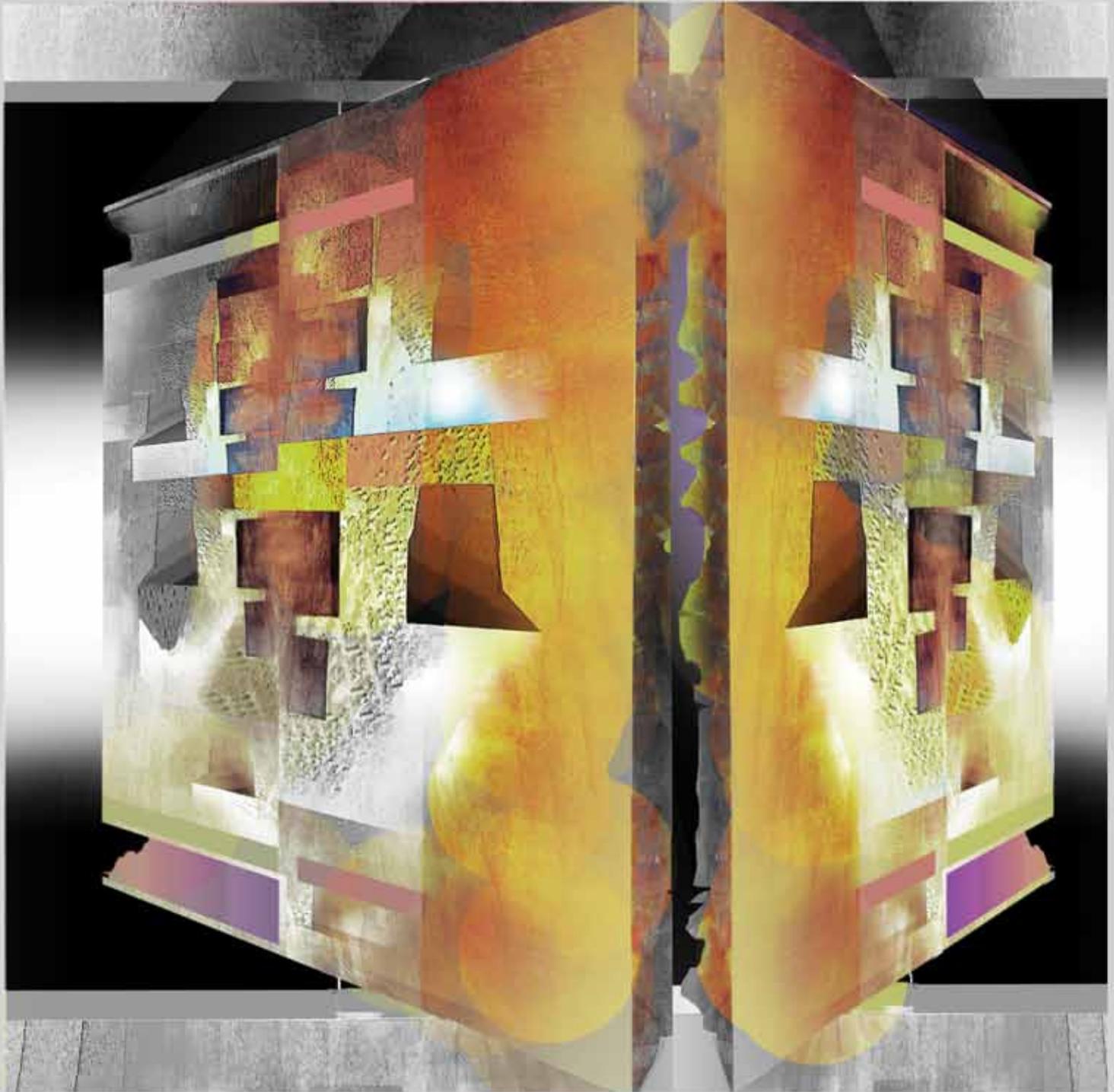
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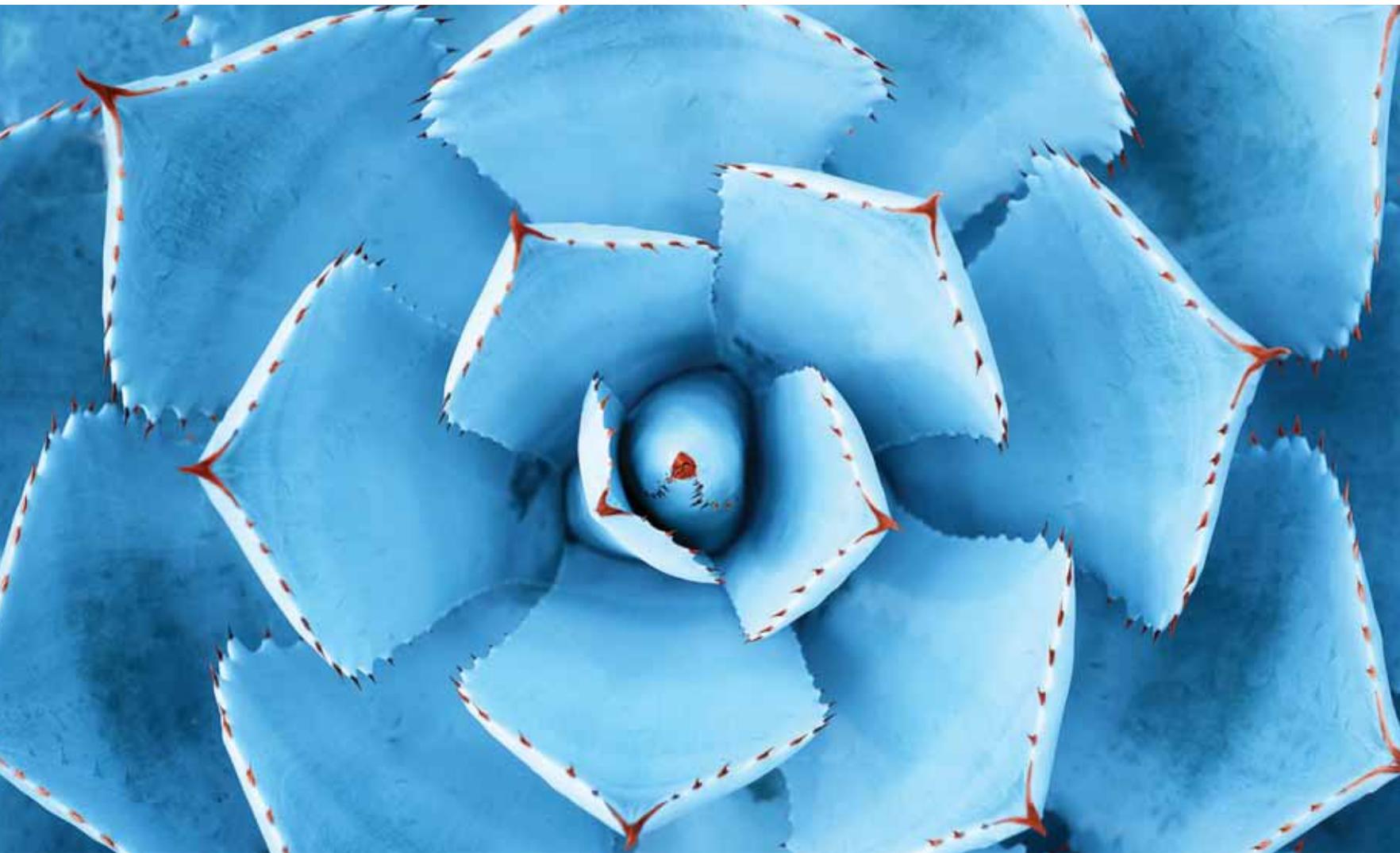
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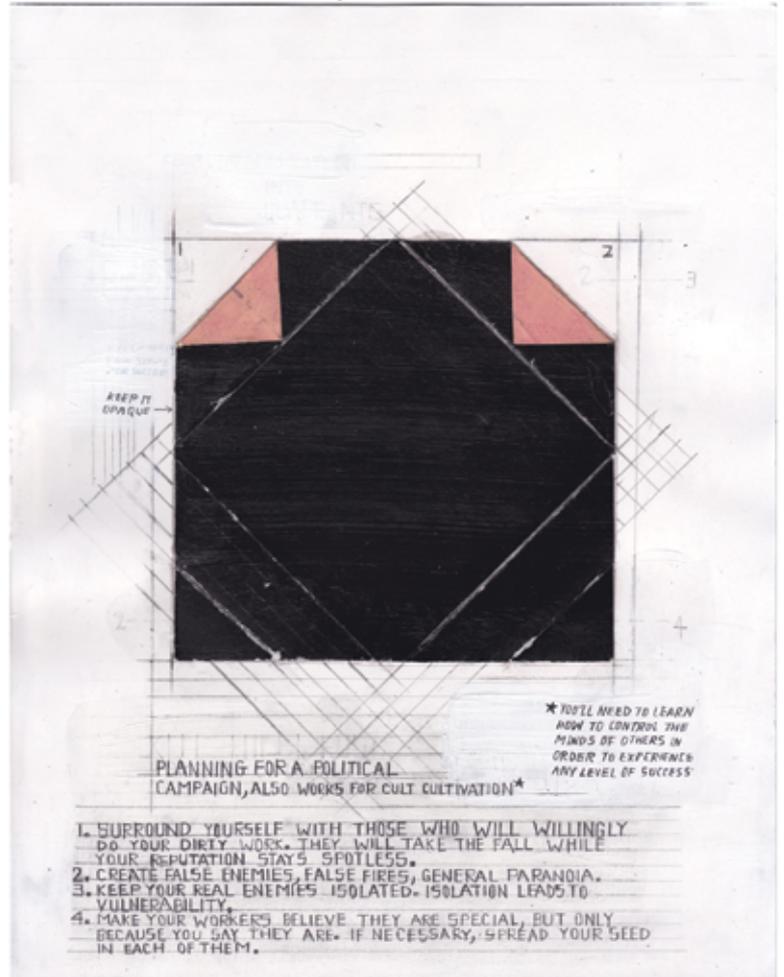
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