

Cotter, Holland, *Quirks and Attitude to Burn*, New York Times, June 8, 2007

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ART REVIEW

Quirks and Attitude to Burn

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Correction Appended

New York galleries are in the habit of saving their best — their newest, boldest, oddest — for last, for the annual blitz of end-of-season group shows that give exposure to underseen artists and freelance gigs to promising curators, while the commercial heat is down.

Usually these things are summer fare. But this year, as art-world eyes are turning to Europe — the Venice Biennale, Documenta12, and the Sculpture Project in Münster, Germany, are all set to open — a few group shows have jumped the gun with a splash of stylish fizz, a knotty theme, a soak in strangeness, something special to catch the eye at season's end.

You'll find the fizz in "Beneath the Underdog," a multigenerational ensemble, with a smaller show tucked inside, at Gagosian uptown.

So prevalent is talk these days about the harmful effects of the boom market on art that presumably even this blue-chip citadel had to take notice. Maybe that's why it's featuring an exhibition about (I quote the news release) "alienation and marginalization" in "the towering vertical landscape of late capitalism."

The other reason would be fashion: this is an ultra-cool downtown-comes-uptown affair.

Whatever — it's one of the best gallery shows of the year. Full credit goes to its artist-curators, Nate Lowman and Adam McEwen. They've turned Gagosian's six-room space into a mini-museum of objects that speak of the base, the gross, the fallen, the ruined, the failed.

The effect starts in the first gallery, a kind of anteroom to abjection, with a treacherously pitted "concrete" floor and the words "Buy a Condo or Die" scrawled on a wall.

The floor, which is really plaster, is by the German artist Monica Bonvicini, a specialist in such subversions. The graffiti is a re-creation of a piece by Jessica Diamond done in 1985, during the last art boom, when Manhattan was turning into the preserve of the rich that it has become.

Beyond this point, we're in some low-rise, post-Trump city of the future, in which no line is straight, no monument respected, no surface undefaced. It's a place of artful junk: a stack of shattered glass by Barry Le Va; a stray car bumper exquisitely shaped and painted by Kaz Oshiro (who currently has a solo show at Yvon Lambert in Chelsea).

And then there are odds and ends that have lost, or not yet found, a meaning. A 1960 sculpture by Lygia Clark, with sharp, bladelike movable parts, is one. Emily Sundblad's mulch-dark painting "Grindhouse" is another. A video by the sister team of Hanna and Klara Liden, in which the two women play vigorous kickball with pieces of commercial hardware, is a third.

The proposed city has its share of crime, mostly confined to "Mafia (or One Unopened Packet of Cigarettes)," a one-room show imported from Standard (Oslo), a gallery in Norway. This high-concept take on low life includes a concealed lethal weapon (by Claire Fontaine); photographic evidence of a rubout (by Torbjorn Rodland); and cryptic, possibly sinister messages galore from Tauba Auerbach, Daniel Knorr, David Lieske and Matias Faldbakken.

But even with this "wrong element" in the mix, healthy anarchy rules in the alternative city Mr. Lowman and Mr. McEwen have conjured. Eleanor Antin's cadres of empty boots — seen in her 1973 photographs — patrol its streets. Big-boy heroics are banned. Singularity, whimsicality, crankiness are nurtured. As evidence there is a beautiful mobile by Agathe Snow, hung with job lot charms and fetishes and glitter-filled bullets. Ms. Snow calls the piece "Knock Yourself Out"; I call it a knockout.

But despite the outsider-art feel of this work, how removed is it from the mainstream? Not very. In fact, this entire showcase is a chic insider affair. Still, its curators ask good questions and acknowledge the bind that artists find themselves in now as they try to figure out a way both to accept the market's embrace and stake out resistant ground, share values and create values.

Value in Context

Marcel Duchamp built a career on such questions. And he hovers, like a damaged angel, over "The Price of Everything: Perspectives on the Art Market," a think piece of a show at the Art Gallery of the Graduate Center, the [City University of New York](#).

With his ready-mades — the mass-produced items he designated as art — Duchamp tried to redefine what art was: an active tool for thinking, rather than a passive object of looking. He also tried to demonstrate that its value was not inherent but assigned; was, in effect, completely arbitrary. So everyone was, potentially, an artist. Anything could be art.

Once Duchamp's ready-mades started to be bought by museums, though, and he was inducted into the 20th-century canon, the power of his art was over. Resistance had itself become a commodity. Artists today are still sorting through all this. Some are still fighting Duchamp's fight, in brainy, zany ways that he would have enjoyed.

This is evident in the Graduate Center show, put together by Martin Braathen, Stéphanie Fabre, Minnie Scott and Mike Sperlinger, all graduates of this year's Whitney Independent Study Program.

Take Karl Haendel's "\$56,055, 2005." Basically, it's just a very large drawing of a fancy car, a Cadillac S.U.V. But to it Mr. Haendal added a very specific, some might think

exorbitant, price tag: \$56,005, the exact list price of the car itself when new.

Then he added something else: a stipulation that the drawing's future resale value would depreciate in exact proportion to the car's value, meaning that eventually the drawing would have no value at all. Needless to say, the art market depends upon thinking exactly the opposite way.

The team known as Elmgreen & Dragset approach the question of art value differently. They made a sculpture in the form of a fake and empty Prada outlet and installed it in the middle of a Texas desert. Looking spiffy but forlorn in photographs in the show, the piece prompts Zen-like queries: What's a brand name's worth if there are no shoppers? What's art worth in the middle of nowhere, without an audience?

Actually, the Prada store wasn't in the middle of nowhere, and it did have an audience. It was installed near Marfa, Tex., home of the Donald Judd Foundation, and a much-favored art-world mecca. Even so, it makes a shrewd point about the arbitrariness of value, which is one of the points of the Graduate Center show.

Importance of Being Earnest

But enough with all this cogitation, you say. A smart, prickly group show, "In Defense of Ardor," at Bellwether in Chelsea, designed, say its press materials, to counteract "insipid notions of irony, unremitting cynicism and pessimistic detachment," could not agree with you more.

Not that its stance is all that daring. For most of the 2000s, art pundits have campaigned to replace kvetchy postmodernism with a New Sincerity. By why an either/or proposition? Can't irony be ardent? Can't ardor be critically self-aware? Can't passion and reason coexist? At Bellwether they often do.

Johanna Billing's "Project for the Revolution," a looping film of comely young people milling about, is a remake of a scene from [Michelangelo Antonioni's](#) 1970 "Zabriskie Point," but with the radical politics left out, and, Ms. Billing seems to suggest, sorely missed.

A sculpture by Colby Bird, who has a show with Joshua Fields at CRG in Chelsea, treats both hip-hop culture and Minimalism with tough but palpable love. A graffiti placard by Julieta Aranda doesn't have the punch of Ms. Diamond's do-or-die command at Gagosian, but gives the impression that it feels that it should.

At first glance, Kirsten Stoltmann's still-life assemblage of tumbleweed placed on a faux-Navajo rug seems to give off New Age vibes, except that tumbleweed, painted with automotive chrome, suggests barbed wire. Three pretty collages by Jacob Robichaux are made with kindergarten materials, but the results look slightly deranged.

Finally, a Claymation video by Nathalie Djurberg has a feel-good ambient score that pulls you into the viewing room. But the story itself, about a girl and her pet cat, is a horror show of sado-masochistic affection. This is strong, weird, rapturously subterranean stuff.

God and Crime

For an entire show with something like this sensibility, try “The Museum of Crime and the Museum of God” at Apexart in TriBeCa. This, too, is a group exhibition, though I suppose, strictly speaking it isn’t an art show. Much of the material is mass-produced. All of it is from the collection of the writer Luc Sante, who assembled it here essentially to tell the story of his life.

In a vivid brochure essay, he describes being raised Roman Catholic by a Belgian mother whose faith was “absolute and unquestioned, dark and punishing, image-ridden and all but animistic.” The earliest art he saw was church art that presented the world in joltingly contrasting absolutes: life and death, heaven and hell. From this background he developed a fascination with images of violent crime and religious conversion.

This is what he gives us: holy cards and vintage mug shots; protective amulets and 1930s crime novels; photographs of murder scenes and of river baptisms. Arranged by themes — “The Dead,” “The Family Chapel,” “Stones of Law” — the objects feel deeply, obsessively personal, like mementos long hidden in attics and buried in basements.

All but forgotten, maybe best forgotten, they are truly underground things, the underground in this case being the subconscious. And they make a transfixing show, like nothing I’ve seen anywhere else all year.

“Beneath the Underdog” and “Mafia (or One Unopened Packet of Cigarettes)” remain at Gagosian Gallery, 980 Madison Avenue (at 76th Street), through June 16; (212) 744-2313. “The Price of Everything” is at the Art Gallery, City University of New York Graduate Center, 365 Fifth Avenue, at 34th Street, through June 24; (212) 877-7386. “In Defense of Ardor” is at Bellwether, 134 10th Avenue, at 18th Street, through June 30; (212) 929-5959. “The Museum of Crime and the Museum of God” is at Apexart, 291 Church Street (between Walker and White Streets), TriBeCa, through June 23; apexart.org.

Correction: June 13, 2007

An art review in Weekend on Friday about group shows at New York galleries referred incorrectly to a show at CRG in Chelsea that includes the work of Colby Bird, who has a sculpture in one of the group shows reviewed, “In Defense of Ardor,” at Bellwether in Chelsea. The show at CRG is a two-man show of work by Mr. Bird and Joshua Fields, not a solo show by Mr. Bird.