

THE WINDY APPLE

by Abraham Orden



Chicago is a kind-hearted town, but this season its art dealers have indulged their taste for edgier, less friendly fare. In a chance alignment of dark stars, an assortment of provocative out-of-towners recently showed up to meet the city's unvoiced desire for avant-garde impertinence and dandified, aloof solipsism. What's more, several of the artists are all about "branding" themselves as bona fide art celebrities. How much self-obsession can the audience bear?

Jay Heikes at Shane Campbell

Start with last month's exhibition at the newly opened Shane Campbell Gallery space on Chicago Street by Jay Heikes, the 31-year-old Minneapolis-based Yale MFA who was one of the discoveries of the 2006 Whitney Biennial. Titled "The Sixth Retelling," Heikes' installation at Shane Campbell was a joke -- that is, it supposedly consisted of the fractured residue of a joke that had been told six times, about a pirate's troubles with his foul-mouthed parrot sidekick.

The series of "Retellings" started with a 2005 work titled *So There's This Pirate*, which in turn originated in a video Heikes made of himself recounting the already well-worn yarn. "By telling the same joke over and over," Heikes said, "I've realized that its rigid structure allows me to find totally new directions every time I make the delivery." Move over, Richard Prince!

The "performative" space in the gallery featured several odd elements, notably a row of black-and-white grimacing self-portraits of the artist, presumably telling the joke, made with enlarged photocopies. The walls of were punctuated with rather repulsive supergraphics of spatters and drips, black-and-brown images that looked like moldy overflow from the plumbing upstairs, or perhaps like oversized splats of rotten vegetables thrown by the audience.

Heikes also installed in the gallery a low and ugly drop ceiling, another one of his signature motifs. The installation was rounded out by a selection of sundry objects. Leaning against one wall was a three-foot-tall plywood disk, painted matte black. From its center dangled a bronze coconut, a real coconut painted black, and a weight from a cuckoo clock, all tied on a single black string.

A kind of totemic phallus, the object suggested an eroticized play on words (coco, cuckoo) that symbolically conflates the raw tropics and the refined West. The disk and its kinetic trinkets also turned the gallery into one big Rauschenbergian Combine, though with a decidedly Neo-Gothic cast. The disk is \$6,000, while the wall installation is \$14,500.

Heikes' works have also turned up at Perry Rubenstein and Marianne Boesky galleries in New York, and at the Walker Art Center, which is among his collectors. For all its vague metaphysics, Heikes' popularity could just be based on its "look," which has real avant-garde strangeness and verve.

Josh Smith at Skestos Gabriele

Provocation has been a hallmark of vanguard art for 150 years or more. The only difference today is that everyone wants a piece of the action. Take the Tennessee-born New York painter Josh Smith (b. 1976), who has made a name for himself with spirited, expressionist paintings of. . . his own name. Smith has shown at Reena Spaulings in New York, the Saatchi Collection in London, Hiromi Yoshii Gallery in Tokyo and Air de Paris in Paris, among other hip venues.

He has now brought his act to Skestos Gabriele Gallery in Chicago, where he struck gold. Eight large paintings, priced at \$16,000 each, were sold, while 20 small black-and-white canvases, each simply silk-screened with his exhibition announcement, were flying off the wall at \$3,500 each. The show also included five detritus-filled collages, also priced at \$16,000.

Despite the familiar egotism of the gesture -- David Salle was mocked for a similar move in one of his diptych paintings at Mary Boone Gallery in Chelsea, nearly 25 years ago -- Smith's messy, muddy-colored paintings do begin to come alive and repay any attention given to them. What at first seemed destined to meld into a soupy half-memory begins to stake out distinct characters. There's touch and character here. Judgments begin; preferences emerge; an esthetic experience blooms.

Of course, such a receptive approach does carry its dangers -- one can feel ridiculous. Would almost anything placed within this white cube find itself transformed into a thing of esthetic merit? Smith left me unsure, in the end, that I could tell shit from shinola. And with this I felt that Smith had succeeded.

Gavin Turk at the Suburban

At the Suburban, the exhibition space in Chicago's Oak Park suburb run by artist Michelle Grabner, the still plucky YBA Gavin Turk installed a show titled "LONDON Wanted." As is well known by now, Turk's practice also revolves around his own identity as an artist, and ranges from fetishizing his own signature as an artwork to turning out glitter-covered Warhol-like self-portraits wearing a Joseph Beuys-type hat.

The centerpiece of his Chicago show was a creepy life mask of latex, with eyeholes cut out, which Turk has used for his performances. Also included were two protest signs done in black paint on yellow board -- a reference to the 1972 piece by Joseph Beuys, also a pair of yellow signs, in which he proposed giving the Baader-Meinhof gang a tour of Documenta V. One sign reads, "Strict cognitive nihilism," which is as good a statement of a prevailing avant-garde doxa as one could want. The show was rounded out with "mind map" drawing, a take-away "wanted" poster of the artist in the mask, and a cracker (biscuit, to the Englishman) with a very perfect bite taken out of it, signed by the artist and placed in clear acrylic display.

Turk takes the position of jester to the art court, spinning artifacts like those on view at the Suburban into a comic inquiry into the institutional construction of the notion of "the artist." This investigation is given voice prominently via the mask. "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person," said Oscar Wilde. "Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth." But this particular mask is cast in the image of the artist himself, so you know that what you see is what you get. Or is it?

Mel Bochner at Rhona Hoffman

Back in the 1960s and '70s, Mel Bochner (b. 1940) made compelling conceptual artworks with stones, numbers and measurements. In the 1980s, he became an abstract-expressionist of sorts, painting large images of tumbling cubes. In the last decade or so he has once again been producing works that could be called conceptual -- rows of words, like entries from a thesaurus -- except that they're paintings, done in sensuous, seductive, bright colors.

In the Conceptual Art heyday, the random disposition of random words was the trademark of Robert Barry, though he favored terms that seemed fairly neutral. Not so Bochner, whose new show at Rhona Hoffman Gallery was titled "Mel Bochner: "OBSCENE", "MONEY", "STUPID", "MEANINGLESS", and filled with luscious new paintings on black velvet, priced at about \$12,000-\$80,000. (A career-survey of Bochner's language-based work recently closed at the Art Institute of Chicago.)

Bochner has clearly become intoxicated with words. In his paintings, some of the weightiest words in the English language are devolved into their basest, most guffaw-wrenching expressions. In Stupid Mistake, for example, the term "stupid" is linked to "Asshole Dead From The Neck Up," and "Mistake" ends in "Step On Your Dick." It might not exactly be cutting-edge, but it certainly is an edge of some kind.

Philip Vanderhyden, Matt Stolle

What this report lacks is now painfully apparent -- both Chicago artists and women artists. So begin with the new Rowley Kennerk Gallery, which for its second exhibition presented abstractions by two Chicagoans, Philip Vanderhyden, 28, and Matt Stolle, 26. Though in the modernist tradition, their paintings are certainly fresh as can be.

Vanderhyden, who also shows with Hudson Franklin Gallery in New York, makes concentrated, atmospheric, curtain-like paintings that owe a debt to Morris Louis and his painted veils. Vanderhyden is partial to a Spanish palette, all somber grays and light-absorbing, velvet violets. Vanderhyden says he borrows both scale and tones from Spanish portraiture.

Vanderhyden's paintings give the impression of having an aura, an illusion of inner life, produced by subtle glazing and the cultivation of a delicate range of interior pigmentations. In this case the power of this effect is sealed by the painting's flat, final color, purer than the others, which is laid down and then mostly wiped away, acting as a mask through which underlying colors seem to glow.

In dramatic contrast, Stolle's paintings are mechanically executed, screen printed in black and white. Though the work seems to admit that it is dead on the inside, it offers a surface that teems with life. Stolle's three canvases are fields of Ben Day dots, two done on black grounds and one on white. Within the mechanical pattern of dots is considerable variation, however, with their shapes varying from a straightforward ellipse to a kind of fat curl.

Done in multiple coats, the black-on-black works build to a subtle surface -- nothing too complex -- that alters from minute to minute, depending on the light and the position of the viewer. Warhol's beautifully ominous shadow paintings

come to mind, as do Rauschenberg's 1951 White Paintings, which John Cage described as "landing strips" for light and shadow (these paintings, legend has it, inspired Cage's famous composition 4' 33"). Vanderhyden's works are \$4,000, while Stolle's are \$1,500.

Leslie Baum, Melanie Schiff

The dress code of the professional art world ranges from "business black" to "haunted house." In such a goth-friendly industry, perhaps the most provocative gesture of all -- especially in Chicago -- is to be upbeat, warm and Midwestern. Thus, Leslie Baum's recent show of new paintings at Tony Wight Bodybuilder & Sportsman Gallery nakedly partakes in the pleasure of visual pleasure. For the past few years, Baum has taken as her muse that most dismal of subjects, the public zoo, but one finds no cause for pity in her colorful, luscious oils, which deftly combine Color Field-style swaths of poured pigment with strong, graphic figurative details painted by brush.

Each of these fields of blurry, distant color is home to a foreground of "rockatecture," a name the artist has given to the artificial environments of the zoo. These are scattered with animals: isolated, reflective heroes who call to mind Caspar David Friedrich's melancholy perambulators. Asked why she chooses to depict the zoo, Baum answers, "It's not that painting is the medium in which I make pictures of the zoo; rather, the zoo is the medium by which I make paintings." "I think it would be easy to make 'beautiful' abstractions all day long," she continues; "the animals and the graphic elements make my painting harder for me." All that sweetness looks hard to manage indeed.

At Kavi Gupta Gallery, the 29-year old Chicago photographer Melanie Schiff presents large (30 x 40 in.) pictures that are witty and conceptual, feel-good photos about love and music from American beatnik life. A studio still-life mixes brightly colored seashells and small hash pipes, for instance, or shows the artist holding up an old Neil Young album so that the illustration of the crooner's head and shoulders on the album sleeve lines up perfectly with her own shoulders and torso.

Schiff showed similar work at the gallery two years ago, and the enduring cleverness of her eye is impressive. But some of the electric pop of her work has been drained; the pictures are ballasted quite suitably by the richness of their light and imagery. One gets the feeling that, having shown something unique about modern life in her debut work, the artist has less to say this time around. The photos are \$4,000 each in editions of three.

Deb Sokolow, Mitzi Pederson

At 40000, which founder Britton Bertran recently moved to the city's West Loop gallery district, the artist Deb Sokolow -- another Chicagoan -- has installed a sprawling text and image piece titled Secrets and Lies and More Lies. Cute and nothing else, this work is a choose-your-own-adventure-style narrative that wraps around the gallery walls. The tale of intrigue takes place at the Winchester Mystery House in California, and the story unfolds in a style that is a blend of New Yorker cartoonist Roz Chast and novelist Thomas Pynchon circa The Crying of Lot 49.

As a work of art, Secrets is remarkable in its total lack of pretension. The modest materials -- cheap paper, pencil, pen and acrylic paint -- connote a sort of planned obsolescence, a willingness to decompose, to not stand the test of time. Likewise the narrative form, which is often addressed to "you," making the reader the hero of the tale, seems to speak person-to-person, making the reader forget he or she is part of the public and thus eliminating the distance which that knowledge engenders.

Partially because of this quality, and partially because the piece falls short in certain regards (the story it tells is in no way unconventional), the work seems undeveloped or like a prototype that may or may not ever make it to the assembly line. This order of experience seems to be less and less available to today's gallery-goer, so get it while you can.

The San Francisco-based Mitzi Pederson put together a spare, mobile-like sculptural installation at Duchess, the apartment gallery of Katie Rashid and Kat Parker, who were directors at Rhona Hoffman Gallery. The untitled work is comprised of arched slats of thin wood, held in tension and tied together with filament.

The work looked vaguely Southern Californian and perhaps emptily formal at first. But the sculpture -- which is priced at \$3,800, plus installation expenses -- is very much a part of its environment, doubled in the reflection of the window it is built around, and cast on the walls in shadow (by sun in the day and headlights at night). In fact, the work echoes the curves of a complex highway exchange visible nearby.

A specific object woven into the world around it; it takes on a quality of inevitability. The effect is a stroke of luck, to be sure, but Pederson is proving to be one of those sensitive artists who seem unusually prone to such luck.

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