

GREENE NAFTALI

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 25 – August 14, 2015

Robert Bittenbender
with Joseph Geagan
Julien Ceccaldi
Andrea Fourchy
Valerie Keane
Bradley Kronz
Maggie Lee
Taocheng Wang

Curated by Robert McKenzie

“Don’t play what is there. Play what’s not there.”
Miles Davis

When people in the art world meet in the street or at social gatherings they typically inquire after shows the other might have seen since their last encounter. It is mostly a routine exercise, like talking about the weather. But sometimes lightning can strike. Only the other day I was comparing notes with someone when I suddenly realized that I knew very little about the art I professed to find the most interesting.

Many things about the art world are taken for granted. Its Brownian-like movements are quite ethereal, as insubstantial and untraceable as swirling mist. As Roberta Smith once ironically remarked, “Art adores a vacuum.” It is indeed fascinating how artworks “travel” through the art world, small planet that it is, and eventually find their audiences. Take what generally passes for curated shows: in most instances, the selection of the artists is based on word of mouth or personal contact, and their work only gets pressed into shape after the fact, like Play-Doh. This technique, such as it is, is universally adopted by default, yet of course accidents can and do happen, sometimes leading to unforeseen consequences.

In the present case, all the artists are based in New York City and are personal acquaintances of mine, though with different degrees of intimacy, except for Taocheng Wang who lives in Amsterdam, to whom I was introduced by an intermediary. I had already run across the work of Robert Bittenbender, Andrea Fourchy and Bradley Kronz in various group shows, and I wanted to find out more about them. A chance visit to Valerie Keane’s collaborative show with Jeffrey Joyal, at the project space Bed-Stuy Love Affair last April, encouraged me to look deeper into her work. Artists like Taocheng Wang, Julien Ceccaldi and Maggie Lee had certainly floated across my radar screen, but there were no confirmed sightings. A friend of mine had gone to art school with Taocheng Wang in Frankfurt, and spoke highly of the work, though I had seen it only in reproduction, and thus not at all. One of Julien Ceccaldi’s illustrations appeared on the June 2014 cover of *Artforum*, but it wasn’t until he mentioned his desire to start painting that he caught my attention. I was aware of Maggie Lee’s photography and ‘zines, but it came as a total surprise to me when two mutual friends gushed about a film called “Mommy”--one I had never heard of, let alone seen--that the artist was making for the production company Beta Pictures.

But what initially drew me to these different bodies of work was how much they reminded me of 1990s-style "Identity Art," causing somewhat of a conundrum, or consternation. Despite the fact that all the artists here might variously be labeled "queer," "feminist" or the like, they all nonetheless revoke the accepted notion of a collective "minority experience." In its place, for me, is something far more molecular, where identity art per se, though "post-humanism" is, or was, the generally accepted terminology, is treated to constant reconfiguration, as changing circumstances and the atmosphere decree. No artist worth bothering about today can or even wants to pretend that art communicates anything other than the degree-zero of selflessness (in the philosophical sense), in art as in all other sectors of polite society.

It is all the more germane therefore, as an adjunct to the above, to discuss some aspects of the individual contributions to this exhibition, all of them new commissions.

Robert Bittenbender makes junk/trash sculptures, which function as art historical memories of the so-called glory days of gentrifying New York--SoHo in the 1970s, say, or the impact of AIDS, in the figure of David Wojnarowicz, Keith Haring and all too many others, in the East Village in the 1980s. The result is a somewhat unsettling amalgam of found photographs, safety pins, glue, ribbons, rubber tubes, as well as actual garbage, the totality of which tend to evoke, or rather to symptomize, various sentimental-heroic views often projected on the past, knowing full well that the general run of them are bogus or self-serving.

Julien Ceccaldi's highly stylized figures, developed originally for use in his 'zines and fashion illustrations, narrate and render visible internal, pseudo-psychopathic monologues. By means of campy exaggeration, angst-ridden "problems" are here given candid expression, thus revealing the truly nebulous proportions of our forever bleeding hearts.

Andrea Fourchy continues this dedication to the downtrodden and broken in her drawings, which take as their subject matter Picasso's famous Blue Period paintings. After treatment in her studio, the original imagery somehow gets rebooted, as if she had pushed the refresh button. In the process, Picasso's figures, however lovingly recreated, become Fourchy's own; and indeed they are, not surprisingly, what they would have more or less been initially--simple acts of sympathetic identification, and hence a bit suspect. The people in Picasso's paintings are thus once more recognizable as dirt poor, or sexualized, or submissive, as objects of voyeurism rather than as some sort of "branding" meme.

Brutal in their fabrication yet stylistically fragile, Valerie Keane's Perspex-and-metal sculptures seem deliberately whimsical. Perhaps like the political parties and corporate entities of the United States itself, they hang, lean, and stand on their own with many questions left dangling, such as the possibility of imminent collapse. Indeed, these grand designs are both impressively engineered and so contrived as to suggest an improvised, "take-it-as-it-comes" approach to the threat of catastrophe.

The work of Bradley Kronz, on the other hand, operates by means of afterimages of objective existence, such as a particular lithographic print, made when a teenager, that was left behind in his childhood home for many years, dormant and asymptomatic. Showing a small white cat jumping over a grassy field, it recently turned up again on a trip back to his native Wisconsin, which prompted Kronz to release this piece of youthful reverie from its domestic trappings and give it a new exposure.

In her film, Maggie Lee pays tribute to her recently deceased mother. This 45-minute montage of archival sound and images, mainly sourced from family photos, videos, and recordings of phone calls to her mother, is divided into individual chapters. The film is a stylish, yet sometimes unnerving homage to amateur YouTube videos, CGI effects, and so forth. It pinpoints certain key events in its recollection of memories linked to her mother, from the 1970s (before Maggie Lee was born) up to the present, all of which whirl across the screen at breakneck speed. Lee tries to understand why the past can never be successively consigned to the trash bin of history, for such is the romance of redemption, but is always something raw, living, and irremediably now.

The drawings and videos made by Taocheng Wang may appear the most phantasmagorical of the lot, yet included in the work are quite specific references to her own life. For instance, one drawing, which for the most part is composed of a field of intensely detailed and hallucinatory small colorful marks and rougher line work, includes the small detail of a petite masseuse and a prone naked body. This delicate self-portrait is positioned within what can only be described as a cosmic gamma-ray burst.

Deleuze wrote: "There are catalepsies, or a kind of sleepwalking through a number of years, in most lives. Maybe it's in these holes that movement takes place." Putting this show together at Greene Naftali has given me a better understanding of these beautiful words. Not only did my travel companions outdo any expectations I may have had at the outset, giving me much more than what I bargained for, but discovering their work has also helped to flesh out certain ideas in my mind--mainly that, when all is said and done, philosophical constructs like the self and identity are shot through with holes, like continuity errors in the sequencing of the selfish gene, or, at least in the art historical equivalent of Richard Dawkins' sociobiological concept. Warhol certainly knew a thing or two when he said, "Empty space is never-wasted space." It tells us that what the art world needs more than anything else right now is to crack the genetic code of selflessness.

I wish to thank Paul Foss in Los Angeles for reading my press release and making a number of small suggestions, principally concerning the quoted sources.

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