

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

ArtSeen

Your Gold Teeth II

by Becky Brown

Marianne Boesky Gallery June 19 – August 14, 2009

The group exhibition *Your Gold Teeth II* presents a whopping 73 works by 43 artists in two rooms and two hallways at Marianne Boesky Gallery. Remarkably, there is no particular theme (or medium, subject, generation, nationality...) that ties it all together. There is a fiery statement by curator Todd Levin—denouncing “facile irony...laziness and expediency” in the contemporary art world—and an “answer” (courtesy of Steely Dan) that “life is unreal” as shown by a set of rolling, discarded gold teeth. Instead of forming a neat framework for the works on display, these supplementary materials set a whimsical stage of freedom, openness, adventure and unlikely unions: high and low culture, the strange and the familiar, intellect and feeling, concept and craft. From here, we encounter a sprawl of painting, drawing, sculpture, collage, assemblage and video works by artists of the Modern and Postmodern canons (Joseph Cornell, Yoko Ono, David Hammons, Rodney Graham), craft innovators (George Ohr, Toots Zynsky, Diane Itter) and a handful of less familiar names (Robert Elfgen, Titus Kaphar). These artists are as diverse as they could be in all categories of identity, yet the works feel intrinsically connected—each one an important stop on a meandering expedition. In contrast to shows that simply display the fruits of artists’, curators’ and collectors’ discoveries, this show enlists each viewer to do his/her own discovering.

We may even participate in physical construction: Yoko Ono’s *Painting to Hammer a Nail* hangs by itself on a long, pale blue wall, a Ryman-esque white surface with a bin of nails beneath and a hammer hanging from a chain. The pounding of nails can be heard from the next room, a sign that the exhibition



Your Gold Teeth II installation shot. Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York

is still in the process of “becoming.” Here is a meditation on the parts and processes of art exhibition that demands specific action, and thereby changes the dynamic between the active and the acted upon. The recent Guyton/Walker collaboration addresses this same subject, producing a lot of material and a lot of attention, but very little change. By preaching at its audience instead of mobilizing them, their presentation remains entirely inert.

Ono’s piece is set in a clearing within an otherwise extremely dense, Wunderkammer-style exhibition. Along this oneiric scavenger hunt, artworks are arranged in intimate clusters, as though they weren’t *installed* in the space, but sprouted up naturally of their own accord. Levin creates a community of works: like the “community of artists,” these objects live together in the same place, feed and fuel one another, and generate new ideas through dialogue and juxtaposition. It is an unlikely but highly potent coalition based on genuine relationships of form and content.

The space of these objects—how much is needed, how it is marked, what is hidden, revealed, public, private, contained, or overflowing—is a running theme. On the classic end of the spectrum, there is Joseph Cornell’s *via Parmigianino (Villa Allegra)*—doubly framed in wood and an outer layer of blue-tinted glass—where the painted face of a woman-muse is, like most of Cornell’s fantasies, preserved and protected in its own confined environment. Yoko Ono’s *Sky TV* captures a piece of the ultimate “public space” on a live-feed television monitor smartly installed just below the gallery’s high ceiling.

Opposite these works is the pairing of Paul Outerbridge’s large-scale photograph, *Interior with Luggage*, and *Schubblade/Drawer*, a black rubber cast of a single drawer by Fischli & Weiss. It is a physical container stripped of its ability to contain—without the bureau that contains *it*—in front of an image of a group of portable containers roughly the same size. These slim, rectangular boxes (the same shape as Cornell’s) are built to house and organize our belongings for various purposes. What meaning do they carry when their contents are invisible or absent? And how does their status shift when they are here on display, outside the private home (the ultimate container-interior, shown by Outerbridge) or one’s personal in-flight luggage compartment? Do they become the bare, dispassionate boxes of Donald Judd, or do they retain traces of the stuff of life they may have once, or could still, contain?

Other models of containment include Demetrius Oliver’s suitcase overflowing with large rocks and lightbulbs, the chunky ceramic vessels of Sterling Ruby and Rosemarie Trockel, and the eccentric pots, bowls and vases of George Ohr, Ed Moulthrop, Toots Zynsky and Peter Voukos. All of these works create a partially-enclosed space—some kind of interior suggesting separation or protection from the outside world. A number of artists reflect on alternative interiors: Hannah Greely imagines a mechanical puzzle behind the facade of a muffin. Steven Parrino creates an inaccessible interior within the surface of a painting by allowing excess canvas to ripple and bulge. Both of these works reveal interiors we are not expecting, showing that familiar surfaces (breakfast pastry, oil painting) may belie hidden truths.

Franz West and Robert Elfgén both create chambers with small holes, suggesting passage in and out. West's *Paßstück*, intended for handling by its audience, gives the impression of a one-eyed mask on a stick, a prop for a performance or ritual. Elfgén draws on West's vocabulary—dripping paint, makeshift construction—in *Versuch 1* (in English: attempt or experiment), a mysterious object hovering in orbit just above our heads. It suggests the storage or transport of some important cargo, but offers no clue what that might be—living, dead or inanimate; here, gone, or about to arrive? The only opening is a piggy bank-like slit leaving the viewer to wonder what kind of material, or non-material, might pass through.

The purpose of Elfgén's space remains obscure—the creation of an interior often indicates some level or need of obscurity. The function of an exterior is to hide and protect an interior: homes for our belongings, bodies for our organs, masks for our faces, vases for our flowers. The marking of distinct spaces is also a means of organization—to enclose and compartmentalize, as in the set of drawers. Todd Levin creates an exhibition of infinite compartments—within works themselves, within each pairing of works, through every cluster and through the entire two rooms and two hallways. Instead of giving each work its own space, he allows them to share space—communal living for the art object.

Contact between artworks leads to frequent overlap and occasional obscurity: one of Marvin Lipofsky's glass pieces (and its pedestal) hide the bottom section of Ed Rossbach's woven grid. Looking around the show from any angle, one sees works in front of other works—a Voukos vessel in front of a Barkley Hendricks painting; a Lipofsky twisted limb in front of a Sergej Jensen fabric collage, beside Mary Heilmann's *Pal Joey*, behind two knit sculptures by Rossbach and Alexandra Bircken. All of these works are activated through new association—I've never been as interested in a Heilmann painting as I am here—and in some cases, partial obscurity. As Levin reveals at all levels of the show, hiding (veiling or enclosing) certain parts may bring the whole into greater, deeper, focus. One example that takes up very little space is Titus Kaphar's *Reclining Nude*: a postcard of Ingres' *Grande Odalisque* folded up from the bottom and sewn in place 1/3 of the way from the top. The jagged, tightly rolled edge forms a hidden interior as the image folds in on itself and the famous elongated body disappears. All else gone, we finally meet the model's mysterious gaze head-on.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Becky Brown is an artist and writer based in Brooklyn.