

# NEW ART examiner

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THE INDEPENDENT VOICE OF THE VISUAL ARTS

Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York

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## Chicago Galleries on the Move: Gallerists Tell Us Why

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Gallerists Pioneer a New Art Neighborhood  
While Others Are Content to Buck the Trend

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\$8 U.S.

## New Art Examiner

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## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The *New Art Examiner* is a publication whose purpose is to examine the definition and transmission of culture in our society; the decision-making processes within museums and schools and the agencies of patronage which determine the manner in which culture shall be transmitted; the value systems which presently influence the making of art as well as its study in exhibitions and books; and, in particular, the interaction of these factors with the visual art milieu.

## EDITORIAL POLICY

As the *New Art Examiner* has consistently raised the issues of conflict of interest and censorship, we think it appropriate that we make clear to our readers the editorial policy we have evolved since our inception:

1. No writer may review an exhibition originated or curated by a fellow faculty member or another employee, or any past or present student, from the institution in which they are currently employed. The *New Art Examiner* welcomes enthusiastic and sincere representation, so the editor can assign such an exhibition to other writers without the burden of conflict of interest.
2. There shall be no editorial favor in response to the purchase of advertisements.
3. The *New Art Examiner* welcomes all letters to the Editor and guarantees publishing. Very occasionally letters may be slightly edited for spelling or grammar or if the content is considered to be libellous.
4. The *New Art Examiner* does not have an affiliation with any particular style or ideology or social commitment that may be expressed or represented in any art form. All political, ethical and social commentary is welcome. The *New Art Examiner* has actively sought diversity. All opinions are solely of the writer. This applies equally to editorial staff when they pen articles under their own name.
5. The general mandate of the *New Art Examiner* is well defined in the statement of purpose above.

## WANTED: WRITERS

The ***New Art Examiner*** is looking for writers interested in the visual arts in any major metropolitan area in the U.S. You would start with short reviews of exhibition in your area. Later, longer essays on contemporary visual art issues could be accepted.

Please send a sample of your writing (no more than a few pages) to:

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Editor-in-Chief

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# West Town: New Art District

## Why Dealers Move or Stay

Chicago's art world is steadily shifting westward. A series of gallery moves over roughly the past two years shows signs of a new art district in the making. Those actions represent the fourth iteration of Chicago's gallery scene since the 1950s.

One can say these dealers are migrating to a destination or a district, using the latter term loosely. Unlike earlier districts, such as River North and West Loop, the newest pioneers are not clustered within a narrow area. West Town, the new art neighborhood, is spread out over a two-mile area.

Starting at Chicago Avenue, in the 1600 and 1700 blocks, are the newly-arrived Catherine Edelman and Rhona Hoffman galleries. Proceeding south and west, one finds Gray Warehouse, Chicago Artists Coalition and Corbett vs Dempsey in an industrial corridor (2000 and 2100 area) of West Carroll and Fulton.

Such a dispersion is not strictly a new district but more of a starburst. Galleries appear to be claiming a "destination" status for artists and collectors to seek

more of a personal art experience. This seems to be a key factor behind the moves by Gray and Corbett, along with a desire for more space to show large-scale work.

Gallery owners, both moving and staying, say they don't need the security and buzz of being huddled together anymore. Their business model has moved away from local walk-in sales to striking deals at art fairs and over the internet. Local trade now accounts for 20 percent or less for many name-brand gallerists.

The *New Art Examiner* salutes this new spark of creative energy as a welcome sign of renewed life and direction while also taking note of an equal burst in the even-farther Bridgeport and West Cermak Road outposts.

Our second cover article also examines several gallery owners happy to remain in their current homes. Those interviews reveal the thinking of long-standing dealers about the current gallery market and are worthy of your attention.

**Tom Mullaney**



A CHICAGO TRADITION

# ANN SATHER

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## Letter to the Editor

Dear New Art Examiner,

The Override project in Chicago puts a small amount of art amongst the advertisements on digital billboards—reversing the relationship on TV where there is more program than ads.

What about having lots of art, 500 artists not 50 or all art not a miniscule fraction?

In the '80s, I saw Soviet propaganda in the streets on a visit to Moscow. Returning I saw clearly in Piccadilly, London, for what it is, non-stop ads, capitalist propaganda in neon.

Mary Fletcher, artist in Cornwall, UK



# Chicago's Changing Gallery Scene

*by Bruce Thorn*

**T**he two most prominent art districts of the last three decades, River North and the West Loop, have witnessed a substantial decline in galleries over the last five years. The plunge in both neighborhoods was widely acknowledged to be due to skyrocketing rents and real estate prices.

River North still boasts the presence of longtime stalwarts including Carl Hammer, Zolla/Lieberman, Jean Albano and ZG galleries. The West Loop has also kept some longtime favorites like Thomas McCormick, Kavi Gupta, Carrie Secrist and Andrew Rafacz.

The River North and West Loop scenes had a long run. In the beginning, rents were affordable, and one could even find street parking. Unfortunately, art districts become victims of their own success every time.

Galleries traditionally clustered together in specific areas. This has not been the case in recent years, as some chose stand-alone locations. What's been fueling this dynamic? Is a gallery district still important?

While rents were squeezing art businesses out of River North and West Loop, in the last few years, and particularly since 2017, a gradual but growing concentration of galleries has migrated to West Town on West Chicago Avenue and pushing into Ukrainian Village toward Western Avenue.

First, Richard Gray Gallery opened Gray Warehouse on West Carroll Street. Then, Western Exhibitions decamped for a Chicago Avenue location. DOCUMENT, Volume and Paris London Hong Kong followed. Chicago Artists Coalition found a new home on West Fulton Street and Monique Meloche relocated from Division Street to a stand-alone on North Paulina Street.

The exodus gained added momentum this year with major openings by Corbett vs Dempsey (near CAC on Fulton) in January, Rhona Hoffman Gallery in April and Catherine Edelman in May.

At the moment, Chicago looks to be abandoning the art district model for a destination identity.

I visited four galleries located in newer territories—Shane Campbell, Monique Meloche, Catherine Edelman, and Matthew Rachman—to find out what's going on

## Matthew Rachman Gallery

I started at Matthew Rachman Gallery and asked Matthew about his experience as owner of the longest-running gallery in the West Town neighborhood.

In 2014, when he opened a gallery at 1659 W. Chicago Ave., there wasn't much of an art presence in West

Town. Maxwell Colette Gallery was on Ashland Avenue, and The Mission was a little further east. The Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art was west on Chicago Avenue, and Corbett vs. Dempsey was a half-mile north on Ashland.

Matthew landed the location by chance, helping friends move items into a pop-up space that he subsequently helped run. When the pop-up ended six months later, he kept the corner storefront and opened a gallery. "Then, the first coffee shop in the neighborhood opened next door."

"We have people come in from all over. The location is not too congested and offers relatively easy parking. It's close to public transportation, even though most people drive. The majority of our clients are not in Chicago, but we're getting Chicago clients now that we didn't expect before this growth. Each gallery has a unique personality, methods and focus. We're all different, so we're not really in direct competition. Most of our business is over the internet. We don't do art fairs yet."

Rachman thinks that the West Town art district will continue to expand. He also expects growth in other areas on the north and south sides of the city. "Chicago is pretty big and has room for several arts districts."

Will galleries be priced out of West Town? "Ukrainian Village is one of the hottest urban real estate markets in the country right now," says Rachman. "I now have a long term lease."



## Catherine Edelman Gallery

By December of 2018, the Catherine Edelman Gallery had reopened just a few steps from Matthew Rachman, settling into a bi-level, 4,200 square foot space at 1637 W. Chicago Ave.

The gallery had originally opened in River North in 1987, Edelman recalls. “The 1989 River North fire completely changed the energy of the gallery market in Chicago. River North is no longer a vibrant gallery destination. The building I was in for 31 years was sold to a group from New York who did not care about the tenants.”

Edelman chose West Town because she wanted “to be among established and new galleries, in the hopes of creating a destination neighborhood, similar to what River North was in the late 1980s before the fire. I definitely wanted to be among other galleries.”

She wanted “an open floor plan to host dinners, lectures and workshops. I also wanted a dedicated video room, and offices for the director, the gallery manager and myself.”

Edelman estimates that 90% of her business is off location, via the internet or at art fairs, and only 10% of her business involves local clients. “The economy has also been quite difficult for many galleries. It is my hope that a more focused area, like West Town, will revitalize the gallery scene, and more Chicagoans will visit.”

For Edelman, necessity demands a brick and mortar location: “With the internet taking over a great deal of the art business, people ask why is it important to have a physical gallery space?

“First, it gives the artist a space to see their work presented, outside the confines of their studio. Our new space also allows artists to experiment with presentation, utilizing numerous exhibition spaces within the bi-level gallery. Secondly, I need a physical space in order to attract the artists I want to work with. All artists want to see their work on a wall. It also gives local folks the opportunity to see how an artist's vision is realized.”



## Monique Meloche Gallery

Half a mile south of Matthew Rachman and Catherine Edelman, Monique Meloche Gallery reopened at 451 N. Paulina St. in June 2018.

Meloche recounts her thinking behind the move. “We moved from the West Loop to Division Street in 2009, due to the economic downturn and a need to streamline our expenses. By 2015, we started talking about moving to a larger space, possibly buying a building.”

“We wanted to increase our square footage to accommodate our artist's ambitious practices and to consolidate our gallery infrastructure under one roof. We doubled in size and Dirk Denison Architects helped us maximize our unique L-shaped space. We opened in June 2018. There was still construction being done between exhibitions through early 2019!”

“It was great that Rhona Hofmann and other galleries in the 1709 building on Chicago Ave., and Gray Warehouse, all opened up during the time we were looking for space. We signed a long-term lease at our new Paulina location in late fall of 2017. My husband and gallery partner, Evan Boris, is in commercial real estate so he put the landlords to task (in all my locations and this is my fourth) to include an allowance for building-out the space along with other concessions.”

“When I was on Peoria St., next door to Rhona for five years, it was good to be near other galleries but I often felt that folks would pop in to say hello and not spend as much time with the art, since they had a handful of other galleries in close proximity that they needed to visit.”

“It is great that Rhona et.al. are a five-minute walk; Corbett vs. Dempsey and Gray Warehouse are nearby too, though we are not next door to one another like we were in the West Loop.”

My colleague, Marianne Ibrahim, is moving her eponymous gallery from Seattle to Chicago and has been exclusively looking in our neighborhood.”

“We do most of our business in person at the gallery, at fairs, and during a lot of one-on-one visits with collectors and institutions. We have a lot of terrific local supporters and I think they make up around 25% of our sales. We have a very global client list.”



## Shane Campbell Gallery

Shane Campbell Gallery left West Town for Motor Row in 2015. Campbell “needed more exhibition, storage, and office space, as well as natural light, and we wanted to own the building.” He’s been in the art business long enough to know what kind of building features facilitate the day-to-day work of running a successful gallery.



“Our goal was to show work in a clear-span space, flooded with natural light. We looked for a few years, primarily on the West Side of Chicago and found our current location at 2021 S. Wabash Ave. for sale on [Craigslist] in 2014. Initially, the South Loop was not on our radar but the space met everything we were looking for.”

“We were primarily looking for close proximity to public transit and availability of street parking. The South Loop reminds me of what the West Loop was like in the mid-'90s; lots of new housing stock but scarce on interesting retail, restaurants, or services.”

The neighborhood is mostly condos now and only a half-mile from Chinatown. The National Veterans Art Museum left Motor Row for Portage Park in 2012. Shane Campbell Gallery is definitely a destination location. The exhibition space is spectacular, among the best in town and well worth the visit.

“I’ve always preferred galleries that are destination spaces. I’d much rather someone make an effort to come to the gallery to specifically see the work that we show rather than just coming in to look at art in general. There really aren’t enough galleries in Chicago to create any substantive density.”

Campbell shared the nitty-gritty: “Approximately one-third of our business happens at art fairs and twenty percent of our business is with local collectors. Without a physical space, you would be hard pressed to call it a gallery. Clearly, the space serves as a platform for gallery and visiting artists to exhibit work and most of these practices are predicated on exhibiting in physical spaces where the work may or may not respond to the space.”

## Conclusion

My conclusion from my visits is that affordable rent is not the only criterion for nurturing an art district, though it is near the top along with increased space.

Each urban neighborhood has its own evolving character that will suit different businesses and clientele and one size never fits all. A gallery that features large-scale works will have different needs from those of a photo gallery. Each gallery owner has to find what works best for them.

Some will benefit from the synergy of new clients spilling over from nearby galleries, while more established dealers like Gray, Gupta and Campbell might find those walk-ins to be an expensive distraction.

The art world is elitist and turned off by excessive commercialization, whether it’s in Soho or River North. The historic charm and pedestrian-friendly character of neighborhoods like West Town provide just the kind of vibe that suits the leisure time comfort zone of art denizens, who like to walk about between small talk and drinks. It’s still impossible to get around to all the art events going on throughout Chicago.

Galleries report that local clients account for less than 25% of business. How much of the budget should be allocated for an impressive showroom, when an affordable and functional warehouse space would do?

The major, underlying concerns are cultural: society values consumerism and shuns intellectualism. Accordingly, financial and political models feed on volatility. Galleries and artists get used like tools that spawn investment and force their own displacement.

Buy your real estate if you can and hold on for the ride.

**Bruce Thorn is a Chicago-based painter and musician. He has degrees in painting and drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is a Contributing Editor with the *New Art Examiner*.**



# Missing: An Art Community

*By Phillip Barcio*

**I**t's a crisp, early summer Friday night in 1999. There's a buzz in the air as you wander from gallery to gallery in the trendy River North neighborhood of downtown Chicago. You're dressed in your finest denim-on-denim, hitting the dozen gallery openings within a couple of blocks of each other. The crowd includes artists, museum curators, and scores of serious collectors, many of whom will pull out their checkbooks tonight and actually purchase works of art. Punctuated by booze, hors d'oeuvres and, occasionally, sophisticated conversation, you feel the excitement of being part of a scene; part of a community; part of a culture.

Flash forward 20 years. Most of the River North galleries you used to visit have either closed or moved to another neighborhood, just as they left Michigan Avenue back in the 1980s, when that was the hot spot.

It's a story as old as the art field itself: galleries establish a presence in an area; hip crowds descend to see and be seen; restaurants and bars open; property developers buy up the surrounding buildings; rents soar; the galleries leave; and the cycle starts over again.

But something is different this time around, at least in Chicago. There no longer is an "art neighborhood" or district. Galleries are scattering all over the city. Even where a few concentrations of galleries remain, they rarely open shows on the same night. That sense of a scene—the community that used to define Chicago visual arts—is missing.

## Zolla/Lieberman

Zolla/Lieberman was a River North pioneer. One of nine art galleries destroyed in the legendary River North gallery fire of 1989, it reopened after the fire and remains a strong presence in the neighborhood today. Lieberman represents established artists like Deborah Butterfield, whose iconic found-object horse sculptures are



currently on view in the gallery. The gallery's reputation allows it the luxury of being able to operate successfully anywhere.

"I am definitely a destination after 45 years in this business," says owner William Lieberman. "I have a strong collecting base that still comes to my gallery. I also do a lot of dinners. Tonight, I'm entertaining. I'm entertaining all week."

The gallery also does a few major fairs. It's a staple at Art Miami. But since so many galleries have left River North, Lieberman says the feel of his business is not the same.

"Do I get enough foot traffic? No. On Saturdays it's really bad here. I miss Catherine Edelman Gallery and Rhona Hoffman and the others. I miss having a lot of galleries, especially for the opening. I work the phones to get enough people here."

But Lieberman has no plans to move. "I like the fact that I'm ten minutes from home," he says. "I like River North. The neighborhood has importance. There's parking, there's restaurants. I love my space. If I wasn't 65, I would have some other options. I'm staying put."

## Jean Albano

A couple blocks away, Jean Albano Gallery has occupied its current location in River North since 1995. "River North used to be filled with nothing but galleries," says Albano. "It was really fun. When we would have a Friday night opening, we would have hundreds of people come in. I'm not saying they were all buyers, but it was a happening thing to do. Then there was the fire. It burned tons of galleries. The amount of art that was lost was terrible. That was '89. But still everyone moved over here. When I came here, it was because I wanted to be where everybody else was. But now it's been like 10 little teddy bears."

One by one, Albano's art colleagues have left.



"A lot of the galleries are gone totally. Or they're moving west. If I was 15 years younger, I probably would have moved. For a gallery to come into this neighborhood, right now, they would be crazy. But we've been here a long time. We got known for showing a lot of the Imagists early on. So, I have become sort of a destination gallery."

Some of the change, Albano believes, is generational.

"Younger people, with some exceptions, are not as turned on to the art world as the generation before them," she says. "I'm not talking about financial, that they can't do it, it's just not what they're interested in. They don't teach art in schools, so nobody has exposure to it. They grow up and get money and go to basketball games and sit on the floor."

Albano says technology and the increase in art fairs have also affected the business.

"We started pre-internet," she says. "I'm laughing that when I used to send out a postcard, I had this system where you would Xerox the labels and put them on 500 cards and mail them out. Now you push a button. Ten years from now it will be different. And there are so many art fairs. It's easier for collectors to go to the art fair than go to individual galleries. We did Art Miami last year and 85,000 people walked through there. Even EXPO Chicago gets 35,000 people. It's considered the thing to do... I know a lot of people who go and who never have bought a piece of art and never will, but you're supposed to be there."

## Stephen Daiter

Across the street from Albano, Stephen Daiter has watched River North evolve. From his gallery windows on the fourth floor of 230 W. Superior Street, he overlooks the Brown Line and Purple Line CTA tracks.

"In the last gallery guide, there were 19 members listed here," Daiter says. "Now there are 13. Six left in a two-year period."

Daiter deals in what he calls "classic focused" photography, meaning photographers who take a masterly approach to their craft. Marvin E. Newman's work is currently on view in the gallery. Daiter also represents Dawoud Bey, whose acclaimed exhibition, "Night Coming Tenderly, Black" recently closed at the Art Institute



of Chicago. When he opened, Daiter says, the costs of running a gallery were lower, so smaller players could afford to put in the time to build a reputation.

"It's always been the case in the arts community that to make good, cover your expenses and take a few dollars home, it takes a while. I was lucky to establish myself in the '90s. A lot of younger galleries that started 15 or 10 years ago, they did interesting things, but they still closed in a few years."

Despite watching his colleagues leave River North one by one, Daiter intends to stay. Only about two percent of his business by volume is local. "We wouldn't stay open a month for what we sell through the door," he says. "For the past five years, our business has been more than half museums and institutions. The other half is serious collectors. Since I'm not dependent on inside sales, I have no desire to move out of this neighborhood, even though there's more closures than openings. The location is easy to get to when out-of-town people come through. Plus, my staff gets here by public transit. It's nice to have people come and take a look; I like having other galleries here; but does it increase our sales? No."

## Carl Hammer

One block east from Daiter, Carl Hammer Gallery deals in outsider art. Though also a destination gallery, its owner, Carl Hammer, feels something has been lost as galleries have dispersed throughout Chicago.

"I'm in my third location," Hammer says. "I opened in 1979 at the 620 N. Michigan location where all the major galleries were. It was a great building. All the established galleries were there. I was teaching high school at Evanston High. My wife and I met there. She was restless and didn't want to teach any longer. We had been collecting and selling out of our home for years. I said, hey, if you're not happy teaching, let's open a gallery where all the other galleries are. I wish that particular situation still existed."

"I used Richard Gray as a role model in terms of how he conducted himself and interacted with the public. He was so kind and generous. He would always ask my opinion. I was nobody back then, but he still asked."



I wish we still had that kind of community connection, with galleries who knew each other and respected each other. I learned to be a gallerist by that kind of exposure, and that kind of experience of having other gallerists around to talk to and learn from. Community was a true characteristic of those early days.”

That community also extended to collectors, says Hammer.

“The collecting community doesn’t come flocking in as they used to. They catch up over the internet. I’ve always felt going to the gallery is much more rewarding. The internet loses something of the magic and the romance of getting involved with a body of art. I’ve always had the philosophy that you have to see it in person.”

Despite the changes he has seen, however, Hammer has no plans to move. “I could operate anywhere, I’m comfortable where I am.”

### Tom McCormick

A mile west from River North, in the West Loop, there is a micro-universe of contemporary art galleries co-existing at 835 West Washington Blvd. Tom McCormick and Kavi Gupta bought the building decades ago and both run galleries in the space. When they first invested in the neighborhood, property was cheap—a huge draw for art dealers.

“Twenty years ago, when we opened this place, you could walk to 20 galleries in the West Loop,” says McCormick. “You could get some synergy on opening night. There was a sense of community, which was terrific. Then all this monkey business in development started. All of the stuff that made the area neat is being destroyed by 14-story buildings that are cookie-cutter and look the same as any other neighborhood on the face of the planet. I hate what’s happened to the West Loop. It’s just a developer’s wet dream and the byproduct is there’s not really an art neighborhood anymore. Art galleries need affordable rent, because it’s hard to make money in the art gallery game. So, everybody got forced out. It’s pure economics. I’m here because we own the building. If I didn’t own this building, I’d be over in West Town. I think very few art galleries are



fortunate enough to own the building in which they have a gallery.”

Unlike many dealers I talked to, McCormick’s bread and butter comes largely from local buyers. It’s a niche he has nurtured.

“Starting out, I had a pickup truck and a hundred bucks, and I tooled around the Midwest buying things and selling things. I didn’t make much money, but I learned a shitload and it was fun. Chicago has never been a gangbuster place to do retail but, if you knuckle down and pay attention to what your strengths are and know who your audience is, you can do alright.”

As for art fairs, McCormick says that world has also changed.

“I’m sick and tired of doing art fairs,” he says. “They’re not productive any more, they cost a fortune, and they take ten days of your life you never get back. Last year, we did Art Miami, and I could have made more money staying home in bed than I did going down there and putting up with that horse shit. We’ve put a lot more effort into the fact that we have a very nice destination location in the third biggest city in the country. I’ve gone back to the old brick and mortar model, and I’m really happy with it. I do all of this with one full-time employee. I always have. If the trash needs taken out, I take it out. I’m just kind of old-fashioned, I guess. You probably have a whole different mindset if you’re in your thirties. You probably do all your business on your phone.”

### Kavi Gupta

Upstairs, Kavi Gupta also has no plans to move. The gallery also operates a project space on nearby Elizabeth Street and, based on their well-attended openings in both locations, it is definitely a local destination.

Unlike McCormick, he wholeheartedly embraces the art fair ecosystem. So far this year, the gallery has participated in Felix LA, the Armory Show and Frieze New York and supported three of their artists from AFRICOBRA in an exhibition at the Venice Biennale. In the coming months, Gupta will be at EXPO Chicago, Frieze London, Frieze Masters, and Art Basel Miami Beach.



“Our gallery from the start was always focused on building a national and international collector base. We wanted to be a global gallery located in Chicago,” says owner Gupta. “A lot came from looking at failed galleries here. They were waiting for someone to do something for them. I wanted to be proactive, to go find the collectors who wanted to buy Chicago art. That tended to be collectors in LA, New York and Europe. Chicago has been our smallest market, but we used the advantages of being here, such as affordable real estate and large spaces. We’ve been able to publish a lot of books and catalogues to help disseminate information, because we had the financial means to do it.”

Gupta’s international reputation was aided by his co-founding of Volta, a collateral fair to Art Basel Switzerland, in 2005. “Back then younger galleries weren’t being shown at major art fairs,” Gupta says. “Being able to produce art fairs in Europe helped build our international base. I never even thought of us as being a regional gallery. Nothing against Chicago. The art world just became global and we were global from the start.”

## Carrie Secrist

Sharing the building with McCormick and Gupta is Carrie Secrist Gallery. Owner Secrist calls herself “one of the youngest old dealers around.”

“We opened in ‘92,” she says, “Originally, we were in River North. We moved here in 2003. In the 27 years I’ve seen this business, it barely resembles what it was. It was really focused on gallery programming back then, on exhibitions. When I opened, there were only three art fairs in the world, and Art Chicago was the only contemporary one. Also, the internet was not as prevalent. So, it was really about the community and people coming to see the exhibitions, and the dialogue between the artist and the space. Quite frankly, I prefer it that way.”

“The community now is more spread apart. In a way, it kind of reflects how the rest of the art world is behaving. It’s much more of a fair-driven, internet-driven situation. But there’s fair fatigue, and that model is starting to break. But I, being the old relic that I am, still have an AOL account. I’m trying to keep the

focus on the gallery exhibition, for the artist. It’s the idea of a longer look than three days at a fair. The artists we work with appreciate that, taking a breath and focusing on the progression of the work and not just the market.”

This, Secrist says, helps make hers a destination gallery. People have learned over the years that they have to come to the space in order to really appreciate what she is doing.

“I make a joke that the art I show looks like crap online because you can’t begin to see what I do unless you see it in person,” she says. “There’s an experience that happens when you’re in front of it that cannot be mimicked online.”

As for moving, Secrist has a deep affinity for her current location. “I like our space,” she says. “This building is very much a place to be. The space is large and it’s one of the nicer ones in the city. We’ve been able to use it to expand and contract around different exhibitions.”

Secrist also has a positive relationship with the development happening in the West Loop. She was asked to curate work in 22 luxury units being developed at 900 West Washington, a new high-rise across the street.

“On every other floor I’ve done a solo presentation or a strongly curated exhibition,” she says. “People who have seen it say it’s like having a secret museum in the city. I also plan on doing some programming there during EXPO. The units have cement floors and white walls, like beautiful gallery spaces. It’s kind of like the notion of a new salon.”

If more people can embrace the essential idea—that it is important to get out and see art in person, face to face, and to interact with the people who make, sell, collect and show art—perhaps the idea of a true Chicago art community might one day re-emerge.

**Phillip Barcio is an art writer and fiction author whose work appears regularly in *Hyperallergic*, *IdeelArt*, *La Gazette Drouot* and the *New Art Examiner*. His fiction has appeared in *Space Squid* and the *Swamp Ape Review*. He has work forthcoming in *Western Humanities Review*.**





# About Face: Stonewall, Revolt, and New Queer Art

## Introduction

The sprawling show now on view at Wrightwood 659, "About Face: Stonewall, Revolt and New Queer Art," and extended through August 3rd, is so large that the term "exposition" is more accurate than "exhibition." Given its expansiveness, the *Examiner* thought having two reviewers write about this nearly 500-work expo would give readers a fuller picture.

This dual approach is not a first for us. We imagined two submissions might diverge in a number of respects. Surprisingly, both writers agreed more often than not. Each offers pointed remarks questioning what curator Jonathan David Katz's intent was in mounting the show, the language employed for the diverse works' presentation and the concept of "collective queerness" for encompassing this state-of-the-field survey.

The show uses the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion to reframe the traditional view of the historic uprising away from being the origin of the gay and lesbian liberation movement and on the key role played by trans persons.

In its use of the term, "About Face", the show signifies a reversal and a transcendence beyond the standard, prevailing binary views of gay and straight around sexuality and gender identity. Throughout the exhibition, according to the show's release, those two core issues "bleed and overlap to the point that 'queerness' becomes a verb, not a noun."

Read both impressions that follow, then go and form your own opinion about the issues "About Face" explores in all its messy diversity.

**Tom Mullaney**

## LGBTQ Pride: Are We Growing Too Comfortable?

*by Sara Rouse*

"About Face: Stonewall, Revolt, and New Queer Art," on view at Wrightwood 659 through August 3rd, commemorates the 50th anniversary of the 1969 riots at the Stonewall Inn, widely considered the flint-strike of the gay liberation movement.

The Stonewall Inn, a Greenwich Village gay bar, like other LGBTQ spaces around the nation, was a target of regular police raids and violence against patrons. The bar served as a gathering space for some of the most marginalized people in the queer community, including drag queens and transgender people of color. They were often assaulted and terrorized due to perceived infractions as arbitrary as wearing clothes that were considered gender inappropriate. On June 28th, 1969, when police harassed patrons, they responded by violently resisting in ways that broke norms of passive protest.

Now, we look to the three days of riots that followed as catalyzing the contemporary American gay rights movement and its gains many years later. It is important to remember that the fight for equal rights and basic safety for members of the LGBTQ community persists today.

The exhibition itself reads like an essay bursting at the seams with work meant to support its arguments. It attempts to be a survey of LGBTQ art before and after Stonewall, to spotlight overlooked artists, and serve as a 50-year marker that we can use to see both progress and a lack thereof.

Jacolby Satterwhite (American, born 1986) *Blessed Avenue*, 2018. 3D animation and video, duration: 19 min., 19 sec. © Jacolby Satterwhite; courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. Photo courtesy of Wrightwood 659.





Curator Jonathan Katz arranges almost 500 works into a smart structure, circling the idea of "trans-ness." The show evolves across four sections: Transgress, Transfigure, Transpose, and Transcend. His thesis focuses on the complexity of identity, suggesting that rather than bolstering the LGBTQ as an isolated community, the ultimate legacy of Stonewall is the movement of our entire culture towards embracing individual specificity that breaks gender and sexual binaries—female/male, gay/straight, etc.



Tianzhuo Chen (Chinese, born 1985), *Light Luxury / 光华 - Aisha Devi*, 2018. Single-channel video, 5:12 minutes. Courtesy of Tianzhuo Chen and Long March Space. Photo courtesy of Wrightwood 659.

Most of my time went to Transfigure and Transpose. Here are some of the most mesmerizing works but also the most challenging questions. These sections point toward reorienting how we identify and classify bodies and the exchange between queer and heteronormative culture.

Tianzhuo Chen's videos grip the room. *Light Luxury / 光华 - Aisha Devi*, 2018 and *G.H.O.S.T.*, 2017 are arranged facing one another with interlocking sound. Chen mixes mythological and political symbols to create dreamlike situations where bodies feel animal-like, god-like, and powerful. It's with these works that I see

the potential in the show to trust the audience with the ineffable and unclassifiable quality of queerness. In another instance of this, Jacolby Satterwhite's *Blessed Avenue*, 2019 switches between footage of the artist spontaneously dancing in public places and a 3D-rendered sci-fi landscape where the limitations of site and body are left behind.

There is plenty of artwork on view that is exceptional, but the show's ambition suffocates many. The viewer is so inundated with photographs, bodies, and histories that inserting breathing room could have benefitted any one of the mini-retrospectives. But this packing in, the ever-present explanation and anxious guidance of the viewer through the show by didactic text seems born of ecstatic energy. As many artists are included, just as many more could have possibly been included as well. Who wouldn't want to maximize the opportunity to show as many artists that have been ignored or overlooked as the museum could hold? There is so much to say that the show is breathless.

Across the exhibition, local names and largely unknown artists shine among blue-chip heavyweights. Leonard Suryajaya's cacophonous and colorful photographs *Hold*, 2016, and *Greetings*, 2015 are perfectly tuned moments filled with emotionally charged figures

Leonard Suryajaya (Indonesian, born 1988), *Hold*, 2016. Archival inkjet print, 36 × 28in. Courtesy of the artist. Photo courtesy of Wrightwood 659.



but also an uncanny silence. Attila Richard Lukacs's *Lady and her lover on a night of storm*, 2015 holds its own, front and center, at the entrance of the exhibition, directly across from a site-specific Nick Cave commission.



Leonard Suryajaya (Indonesian, born 1988), *Greetings*, 2015. Archival inkjet print, 40 × 32 in. Courtesy of the artist. Photo courtesy of Wrightwood 659.

Meanwhile, the Tadao Ando-designed interior signals immediately—this place is a museum, and it draws on the architectural legacy of many museums that have come before it. Aesthetically, the building carries with it the weight of authority and the complicated aftertaste of an institutional voice. I'm divided on the merits of having a show that had potential to embody queerness in this space.

On the one hand, the privately-owned Wrightwood 659 is funded by the Alphawood Foundation, which promotes the protection of LGBTQ rights and describes itself as an advocate for "an equitable, just, and humane society." In that light, this space should feel permissive, vigilant even, when compared with the many boards of trustees across the art world that benefit from liberal facades while maintaining the status quo in business. But I also worry that queerness is visually constrained in this space and somehow the aspiration that we will one day disregard gender and sexual orientation as



Attila Richard Lukacs (Canadian, born 1962), *Lady and her lover on a night of storm*. Oil, asphaltum, and polyurethane on canvas, 106 × 79 in. Courtesy of the artist. Photo courtesy of Wrightwood 659.

measures of difference flatten a voice that has been hard won.

It feels like many of the questions I've been asking myself during LGBT Pride Month are present here—some of them more comfortable to answer than others. How is pride commodified, or, in this case, what is the relationship between queer pride and the institution? How do art institutions and, more broadly, any entities with power avoid shallow performance of awareness and instead contribute to the equality and safety of LGBTQ people? Is the goal of pride to eliminate markers of difference or to recognize the right of difference to exist—to demand that it have space? How do we situate this conversation today within a resurgence of authoritarianism and fundamentalism around the world, most vividly during the presidency of Donald Trump? As every corporate logo goes rainbow this June, are we too comfortable?

"About Face: Stonewall, Revolt and New Queer Art" is on view at Wrightwood 659 through Aug 3, 2019. The space is located at 659 W. Wrightwood, Chicago, IL 60614.

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## Are We All Growing Queerer and Queerer?

by Noa/h Fields

Stonewall is fifty years young, as good an excuse as any for the institutionalization of Queer Art (capital Q! capital A!). The fervor has rippled out from New York's epicenter even to our Second City. 659 Wrightwood's massive summer show, "About Face: Stonewall, Revolt, and New Queer Art," curated by Jonathan Katz, includes nearly 500 works by over 40 artists in an ambitious attempt to survey queer art's contours amidst shifting sociopolitical contexts. His conclusion? "In the main, we all are growing queerer and queerer."

Are we?

There's no question that, on the dawn of the golden anniversary of gay liberation's most famous (but by no means only) flashpoint, LGBTQ visibility in the mainstream is peaking. Corporations are coming out with their rainbow pride campaigns, the Metropolitan Museum's gone camp, RuPaul's now a household name, same-sex marriage is legal in all fifty states... faggotry is more or less sanctioned, normalized.



Marlon Riggs (American, 1957–1994), *Anthem*, 1991. Single channel video, 9 minutes. Photo courtesy of Wrightwood 659.

It's easy to forget that "queer" was a loaded term, a reclaimed slur. Given how carelessly the word can be thrown around in the art world, I find myself skeptical of how and when "queer" is leveraged, protective of its anti-normative political roots.

I take after Ariel Goldberg's line of questioning in *The Estrangement Principle*: "When wall texts, press releases, and artist statements are littered with the word 'queer,' I start to grow suspicious of what the word is trying to say, as if temporarily fooled into the word



Peter Hujar (American, 1934–1987), *David Wojnarowicz; Manhattan-Night (II)*, 1985. Pigmented ink print. Image size: 14 3/4 × 14 3/4 in. © The Peter Hujar Archive, LLC; Courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, NY, Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, CA. Photo courtesy of Wrightwood 659.

functioning as a measuring tool. The word 'queer' easily loses its gunpowder when used effusively. In what ways can language persist as 'radical' when the language is being used in a predictable routine?" Something's lost, something's missing in this naming game. I'd prefer to prescribe to José Muñoz's prophecy that "we are not yet queer."

Seeing how queer has become somewhat emptied, I fear a similar oversaturation of "trans"—especially when it's appropriated by people who do not themselves identify as trans (here, I'm invoking trans as a capacious umbrella term, constellating gender-queer, non-binary, transgender, intersex, Two-Spirit, and various other non-cis identities).

Reading Katz's curatorial framing of the exhibit, I was cautious from the jump. Citing "metamorphosis" as thematic and organizational strategy, Katz cordons the exhibit into five sections, each of which is titled by a "trans"-prefixed verb: Transgress, Transfigure, Transpose, Transform, and Transcend. This is not to describe an exhibition of trans artists—though there are trans voices present here—but a representational choice of how to survey a half-century of LGBTQ art.

Considering the history of trans-erasure in LGBTQ organizing, centering transness is, well, an about face.

But trans politics here seems to entail conceptual play—a metonymic vehicle to narrate a history which has othered and excluded us. So, while it's nice to see trans voices at the table, something rings false about this trans representation as a “facelift” for About Face. A facelift operation that looks new but fails to decenter and in fact reifies familiar and facile metanarratives of “acceptance” and “overcoming.”

But I want to talk about the art. At its best, “About Face” is a joyful intergenerational contact sport. Forgotten artists and lesser-known, emerging Chicago artists rub shoulders with established icons. At its worst, it is a dizzying, infuriatingly overwhelming map of what it calls “New Queer Art.”

It is easy to get lost at “About Face.” Three sprawling floors and no clear visual exhibition guide had me all turned around. The messy, maximalist layout didn't help either. There were some baffling curatorial choices: burying the show's sole Keith Haring in the corner of the top floor, and a general lack of seating options throughout the exhibition, even near the video art.

Every corner of the space was utilized, to the last inch. Many of the artists have not just one or two representative works but unspooling portfolios in mini-exhibitions—I counted, for instance, twenty-five

John Dugdale (American, born 1960), *Parlor Figure*, Stone Ridge, NY, 1994. Cyanotype, 20 × 16 in. Nature and Spirit Gallery. Photo courtesy of Wrightwood 659.



Greer Lankton (American, 1958–1996), *Timmy and Tommy*, c. 1980. Papier-mâché, fabric, wire, and glass eyes. 22 1/2 × 13 3/4 × 9 in. Collection of JoJo Baby. Photo courtesy of Wrightwood 659.

Peter Hujar photographs (including a portrait of lover David Wojnarowicz). This depth of coverage is at times a great introduction to some of the lesser-known artists' larger bodies of work. Most of the artists, however, had insufficient wall space for viewers to fully appreciate their projects. I would have preferred to see more selectivity in what pieces were shown, or a paring back on the number of artists shown.

The show could also have benefitted from more variety of mediums. The exhibit leans heavily on the two-dimensional and, in particular, photography overruns the exhibit. Some seemed to be included more for historical purposes, such as photos by Harvey Milk. I was more compelled by the photographs that experimented beyond documentarian modes. To wit: the poetic 19th century-style cyanotype portraits of John Dugdale (completed with the assistance of friends and family after he lost his sight to HIV-related complications); the brightly colored, pattern-happy, surreal queer family portraits of Leonard Suryajaya; and the chemically decayed and distorted photographic experiments of Gail Thacker.

I'll single out a few more highlights. Greer Lankton's compellingly eerie dolls made an impression. Picture if



the Muppets were designed by Egon Schiele, long and skeletally thin, heavily made up, and conjoined by the limb. A member of Warhol's Factory and a collaborator with Jim Henson, Lankton captures the spirit of the '80s East Village, with work celebrating drag queens, anorexics, speed-punks, club kids, and self-proclaimed freaks.

I was also engrossed by Jacolby Satterwhite's *Blessed Avenue*, an other-worldly Afro-Futurist 3D animation/video featuring voguing and BDSM. Its jaw dropping, wall-to-wall world-making was almost immersive, like an intergalactic, fetish-themed update of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. I wish the video had received its own room. Instead, it clashed aesthetically with the multimedia installation it shared space with.

*Anthem*, a scandalously under-shown video poem by Marlon Riggs (better known for *Tongues Untied*) was another highlight. "Pervert the language... conjugate my future": with its close-ups, remixes, repetitive loops, and poetry reading, *Anthem* is a masterclass in new queer cinema, notable for its intersectional juxtaposition of Pan-Africa and ACT-UP organizing—coalescing with an overlay of the pink triangle and the stripes of the Pan-African flag. But its display on a small video screen, in a busy gallery setting, failed to give it proper justice.

Curatorial qualms aside, the art is by and large engaging and compelling, if full of blind spots. Do come and see "About Face" (if you're short on funds, take advantage of Wrightwood 659's Monday free tickets scheme). Give yourself sufficient time to soak it in, even if you only focus on a few artists' work. You



Gail Thacker (American, born 1959), *Untitled*, 2009. Chromogenic print as framed: 24 × 20 in. Courtesy the artist and Daniel Cooney Fine Art, New York. Photo courtesy of Wrightwood 659.

probably won't walk away with a changed perception of Stonewall, Revolt, or New Queer Art. But you may walk away inspired by the art and stories of a new face.

**Noa/h Fields is a nonbinary poet and teaching artist living in Chicago. Their chapbook *WITH* is out from Ghost City Press, and they are writing a book on the poetics of queer nightlife.**

Leonard Suryajaya (Indonesian, born 1988), *Deafening Silence*, 2016. Archival inkjet print, 40 × 50 in. Courtesy of the artist. Photo courtesy of Wrightwood 659.





# Art Transcending PC Propaganda: Whitney Biennial 2019

by Michel Ségard

**T**he Good News: 2019's Whitney Biennial did not provoke political controversy as did the previous Biennial with its painting of Emmet Till. That is not to say that the show was devoid of such content. It's just that, in this exhibition, the content was politically popular, at least within the pc liberal community. (Most artists in the show had a "cause" that they were promoting.) The issue for this viewer then became: did the work transcend the propaganda? Not always. And why must a work of art carry a political message to be taken seriously?

Starting with what this viewer considered "Best of Show," the work by Diane Simpson rose far above the rest of the exhibition. Her sculptures are based on pieces of clothing worn by women. Enlarged to monumental proportions and reduced to strict geometric forms, the pieces have a solemn dignity. There is more than a little Asian influence in her forms that helps solidify that dignity. Yet, there is also a subtle feminist message in the choice of subject matter but it does not shout. It is like the chord progressions of a Baroque piece of music or a subtle spice in a dish that gives depth to the work.

Tomashi Jackson, *Hometown Buffet-Two Blues (Limited Value Exercise)*, 2019. Mixed media. 72 x 156 in. Collection of the artists. Courtesy Tilton Gallery, New York. Photo courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art.



Diane Simpson, *Window Dressing: Background 4, Apron VI*, 2003/2007, Foam board, wood, enamel, wallpaper, marker, spunbond polyester, aluminum, and Mylar fabric. 104 x 120 x 28 in. Collection of the artist; courtesy Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago; JTT, New York; and Herald St, London. Photo courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Simpson was given an entire gallery on the first floor of the museum, basically treating her work as a one-person show. Particularly noteworthy were *Window Dressing: Background 4, Apron VI* from 2003/2007 and *Lambrequin and Peplum* from 2017. The latter, just over nine feet tall, sets the tone for her show-within-a-show by establishing her themes of clean geometry and monumental scale. But *Window Dressing: Background 4, Apron VI* dominates the gallery. Presented like a department store window, the 8 1/2 foot by 10 foot by 28 inch piece most captures the Japanese aesthetic in her work. Yet it also feels like an altar.

Tomashi Jackson is one of several artists whose work eclipses the political rationale described in the wall label. *Hometown Buffet-Two Blues (Limited Value Exercise)* rises above the writing about housing displacement in New York City and the history of Seneca Village. The piece is fundamentally a beautiful mixed

media abstraction that does not need all that political rationale to be appreciated. Even as one becomes aware of the imagery and objects embedded in the piece that refer to that history, the viewer may or may not be further enlightened by that awareness. One is reminded of the position that Matisse took about decoration—that a work of art should have a decorative quality above and beyond its social content.

In Curran Hatleberg's photographs, on the other hand, the social content is inescapable and paramount. Hatleberg was given the entire third floor display space, the lobby to the Laurie M. Tisch Education Center and the Susan and John Hess Family Theater. His 16 inkjet prints primarily depict poor white, semi-rural environments, but they do not have Kollwitz's sense of despair or Weegee's raw brutality, for example.

**Top:** Curran Hatleberg, *Untitled (Girl with Snake)*, 2016. Inkjet print; image: 23.25 x 29.25 in. Collection of the artist; courtesy Higher Pictures, New York.

**Bottom:** Curran Hatleberg, *Untitled (Hole)*, 2016. Inkjet print; image: 23.25 x 29.25 in. Collection of the artists; courtesy Higher Pictures, New York.



Nicholas Galanin, *White Noise, American Prayer Rug*, 2018. Wool, cotton; 84 x 120 in. Collection of the artist. Photo courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Rather, Hatleberg shows us a sense of acceptance and resignation. He uses his aesthetic to bring out the social content, rather than using social content to justify the art. In *Untitled (Girl with Snake)*, a little girl sits amid the ruins of a building while playing with a snake, weaving a story of poverty, destruction and making do. *Untitled (Hole)* shows five men digging a hole in an auto junk yard, their stances in ambiguous positions, almost as if they were praying for the deceased before filling in a grave. The hole is clearly too small for a car, so what or whom are they burying?

Nicholas Galanin, of Tlingit/Aleut and non-Native ancestry, is another artist that successfully merges aesthetic and social content. His large tapestry *White Noise, American Prayer Rug* simulates the white noise from the screen of an old CRT-TV. It speaks to our devotion to mass media and its propensity to obliterate unique content. And (according to the artist) the work, along with its title, alludes to the dominance of white culture in the world and how it drowns out other points of view and cultures. Viewing Galanin's carefully considered image combined with his biting but subtly portrayed social commentary makes for a rewarding art encounter.

Nearby Galanin's piece was the work of Daniel Lind-Ramos. Once more, the aesthetics of the piece are so strong that it is not overwhelmed by the



social content. His sculpture *Maria-Maria* is inspired by the 2017 hurricane Maria. But, as its title and form suggest, it also refers to the Virgin Mary. Partly made from bright blue tarps used by FEMA to cover damaged buildings, the work also contains a blender, multiple coconuts, and what look to be two large whale(?) ribs. The 90-inch tall piece hovers eerily between being an object of veneration and a memorial to a tragedy. The work inspires one to ask: are the U.S. government and the Catholic Church both guilty of colonialism and exploitation of the people of Puerto Rico? But one can also admire the work for its sheer beauty.

Ragen Moss is an artist and attorney who lives and works in Los Angeles. She creates torso-like shapes from transparent plastic that are suspended from above on wires so that they appear to float like balloons. The exhibition contains ten of these shapes. The pair that were particularly interesting were *Romanettes (with double hearts)*, a kind of couple suggesting possible intimacy.

Daniel Lind-Ramos, *Maria-Maria*, 2019. Mixed media, 90 x 45 x 45 in. Collection of the artist; courtesy Embajada, Puerto Rico. Photo courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

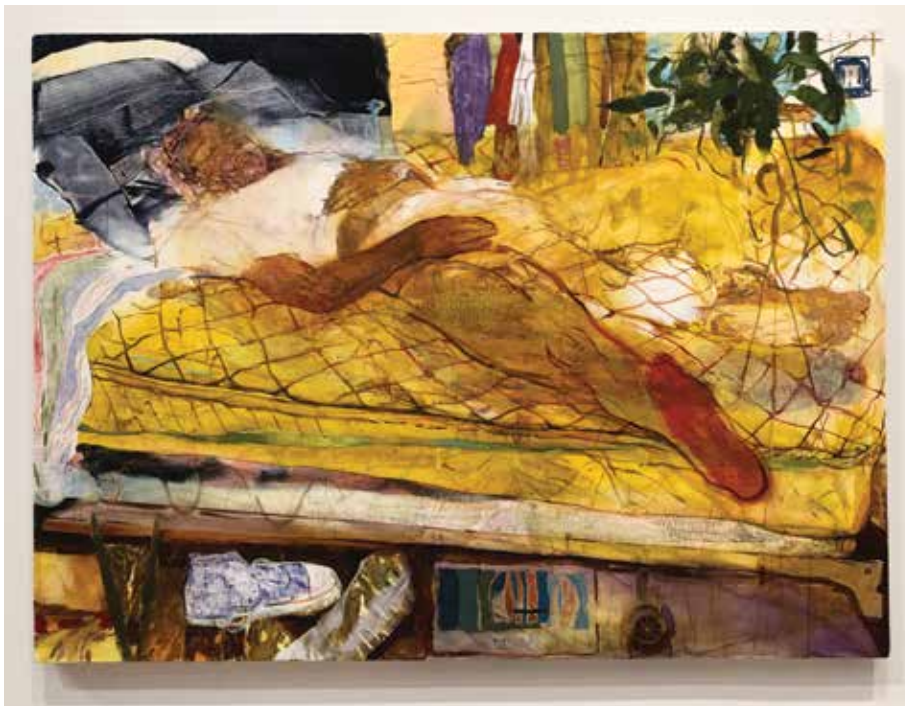


Ragen Moss, *Romanettes (with double hearts)*, 2018. Acrylic, polyethylene, aluminum, and steel hardware. Two components, 24.5 x 15 x 8.5 in. each. Collection of the artist. Photo by M. Ségard.

Her work is not bogged down with any overt social or political message. She “just” explores the human condition—a centuries old pursuit—using contemporary modes and materials.

Jennifer Packer follows a similar path, although using the traditional medium of oil on canvas. She uses her friends and family as models, and her sketchy style (with a Matisse-like flavor in this work, *Untitled*, from 2019) is intended to not reveal too much about her subject, preserving some sense of individual privacy. In this painting, the subject is asleep on a disheveled bed. We are witnessing her slumber but not intruding. Again, one can bask in the outright abstract beauty of the work, especially the colors of the curtains behind the bed and the shrewdly placed items below the bed.

Kyle Thurman has a style that is superficially similar to Packer’s in its sketchiness, although much tighter. What is compelling about *Suggested Occupation 30* is the connection between the two individuals in the painting. Based on a news photo, one man holds another while seemingly reacting to some tragedy. This sense of human empathy and connectedness stands out and is not found in the work of any other painter in the show. (Time did not permit this writer to view the videos or performances where this kind of sensibility might have been included.) Most human subjects in the show stand in isolation. Is this a curatorial bias?



Jennifer Packer, *Untitled*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in. Collection of the artist; courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York. Photo by M. Ségard.

Wangechi Mutu's female form, *Sentinel I*, evokes the impression of an earth goddess. But this is a contemporary interpretation that alludes to the tension between civilization and nature. One is superficially reminded of Deborah Butterfield and Magdalena Abakanowicz when viewing Mutu's sculptures (there is a second one in the show, *Sentinel II*). Yet her work is in no way derivative. Mutu's pieces are deeper and her content more complex. And the message does not overwhelm the work! It stands on its own as a finely conceived piece of sculpture and easily bears the weight of its social content.

As in most large group or survey shows, there were some misfires. One was the 20-piece suite by Alexandra Bell about the *New York Daily News* coverage of the 1989 Central Park Five case in which five African-American youths were wrongly convicted of the assault and rape of a white female jogger in Central Park. This is a powerful piece of political and social criticism in visual rather than verbal form. But it has nothing to do with art. This series simply does not transcend its message as does Gran Fury's *Kissing Doesn't Kill* poster, also from 1989.

The other work that, for me, was a miss was Agusti-na Woodgate's room full of wall clocks. The Whitney Museum website describes this installation as follows:

"A single digital master clock sends power signals to a series of analog slave clocks, commanding

synchronized measure across an entire institution. ...In her work, the hands of the slave clocks have been outfitted with sandpaper. ...the minute hands of the slave clocks scrape away the numerals on their faces until they are completely erased. Conditioned by the current state of labor and power, the slave clocks progressively erode their functional value, collectively reclaiming autonomy in the process of disintegration."

I found the concept trite and a waste of time.

John Edmonds got, perhaps, the least desirable space in the entire exhibition. His 17 ink-jet prints were crammed into a corridor that leads to one of the building's outdoor patios. There

was no way to let individual pieces "breathe" and be contemplated on their own merits.

Kyle Thurman, *Suggested Occupation 30*, 2019. Charcoal, ink, and pastel on seamless paper with wood frame, 75 x 48 in. Collection of the artist; courtesy CENTRAL FINE, Miami Beach. Photo courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art.





With so many “post-Stonewall” shows up at this time, it was inevitable that there would be overlaps and thematic duplications in the Biennial. For example, Elle Pérez’s inkjet print *Bloom* from 2019 shows the tattoo of a rose on a young man’s chest and echoes Stanley Stellar’s *I got birds, too* of a young man’s tattooed chest with two birds on view at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in their show “Art After Stonewall 1969–1989.”

Also, Peter Tomka’s photo, *Friday, May 25, 2018* of nude men working in a photo studio repeats the theme of Joan Biren’s 1980 photo *Photographers at the Ocular, a feminist photography workshop at Rootworks, Wolf Creek, Oregon* that depicts nude women working in a photo studio. That piece is included in the exhibition “About Face: Stonewall, Revolt and New Queer Art” on view in Chicago’s Wrightwood 659 gallery.

The other problem with this show is its ongoing bi-coastal provincialism. Hyperallergic gives a detailed analysis of where this year’s artists come from in their article, *How Do Artists Get Into the Whitney Biennial?* In summary, 49 of the 68 artists live on the Eastern seaboard and four more live on the West Coast. There are only seven artists who live in the United States and do not live on either coast. They live in Birmingham, Alabama, New Orleans, Louisiana, Pineville, Louisiana, Chicago, Illinois, Wilmette, Illinois (an upper-class suburb of Chicago), Detroit, Michigan, and Sitka, Alaska. The rest live and work outside the United States.

One must realize that these kinds of survey exhibitions do not reflect what is being sold or collected. Rather, they are a reflection of what the institution’s curators (in this case Whitney staff curators Jane Panetta and Rujeko Hockley) think is trending. The shows are colored by the personal preferences and biases of those curators and their institutions.

Nevertheless, they are a useful platform to inform the public about part of what is developing in the contemporary art world. In that sense, this Biennial is no worse or better than the 78 exhibitions that preceded it. The Art Institute of Chicago once held such a survey show called the Chicago and Vicinity show. That institution eventually found the exhibition so politically difficult that it stopped mounting it more than three decades ago after having assembled 80 shows between 1897 and 1984. So, the Whitney is to be lauded for having the courage to continue its Biennial even in the face of the art world’s increased politicization.



Wangechi Mutu, *Sentinel I*, 2018. Mixed media, 87.75 x 17.75 x 22 in. Collection of the artist; courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York. Photo by M. Ségard.

**Michel Ségard is the Editor in Chief of the *New Art Examiner* and a former adjunct assistant professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.**



## DETROIT VIEW

# The World to Come: Art in the Age of the Anthropocene

by KA Letts

The day after I saw the University of Michigan Museum of Art's current exhibit "The World to Come: Art in the Age of the Anthropocene," I saw this headline on the front page of the New York Times: *Report Details Global Shrink in Biodiversity*. It was accompanied by images of bleached coral and strangled sea turtles. On the same page I saw a picture of Lady Gaga in black lingerie on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, vamping for the cameras on the occasion of the annual Met Gala.

I like to think I would have been shocked by this juxtaposition of the catastrophic and the trivial before I saw the exhibit, but I'm not sure. We live in an age of distraction and it's easy for us humans—famous for our short attention spans—to lose sight of the enormous challenge posed by global warming. "The World to Come" makes the point, devastatingly, incontrovertibly, unforgettably, that we live in an era of rapid, radical and irrevocable ecological change.

The show, curated by Kerry Oliver-Smith of the Harn Museum of Art at the University of Florida, hits you right between the eyes with images of humanity's effect on the natural environment, and it keeps on hitting. Sections of the show are broken down into categories such as Deluge, Consumption, Extinction, Imaginary Futures and the like, categorizing the environmental outrages to make the enormity of the subject (and the size of the show) comprehensible.

It's ironic that an exhibit devoted to destruction and climate disaster should be so very beautiful but ... well, there it is. Photography and video provide the lion's share of the selections, although more traditional modes of expression, such as fiber art, ceramics, drawing and bronze sculpture are also represented. Even these more handcrafted artworks, however, are smoothly textured and coolly dispassionate. As an example, the Japanese ceramic artist Kimiyo Mishima has meticulously crafted trompe l'oeil stoneware objects that mimic the crushed soda cans that clog landfills and waterways. Likewise, the diminutive and ghostly needlepoint images of American artist Noelle

Mason record a different, more human, ecological cost, depicting infrared images of undocumented climate refugees crossing the U.S.-Mexican border. William Kentridge's procession of bronze figures, part man and part machine, add a welcome touch of the artist's hand to the smooth aesthetic of the show.

Many of the artworks, though excellent, come at the subject in a way that has lost its ability to shock; aerial shots of housing subdivisions, and feedlots with their bloated lagoons are very much in the public domain now. The proliferation of environmental atrocities has made it almost too easy to capture indelible images of the devastating effect of our species on the natural world.



Liu Bolin, *Hiding in the City, No. 95, coal pile*, 2010, chromogenic print on plex. Photo courtesy of UMMA.

Chinese artist Liu Bolin's photograph of a sooty figure, nearly invisible against a background of piled-up coal, comments on the environmental and human cost of coal extraction. Chris Jordan's photo of the remains of a juvenile albatross, its stomach filled with plastic waste, illustrates the damage to wildlife from our thoughtless consumption of disposables. Mary Mattingly has created a lovely and telling nude photo of herself lying prostrate under a bundle made up of her household possessions. All these images are beautiful and memorable, but risk becoming the environmental



Gideon Mendel, *Drowning World Series*, 2008-2014, chromogenic prints. Photo courtesy of UMMA.

equivalent of “ruin porn”, aestheticized portraits of ecological carnage.

The portraits of people displaced from their flooded homes by Gideon Mendel in his series *Drowned World*, document a phenomenon that has become sadly routine. The photographs are saved from banality by the artist’s connection to the English, Haitian and Indian subjects. They stare into the camera, undone by the destruction of their homes, geographically separated from each other, but united in their common predicament.

Some of the most effective works in “The World to Come” have found new and inventive ways to change our minds about humanity’s relationship to nature. Two images by Trevor Paglen come to mind. A panoramic photograph of a scenic beach near Miami Beach, Florida, is paired with an adjacent map of the same area. The map shows underwater NSA-tapped fiber optic cables, sea routes and other evidence of human navigation, products of human technology that are invisible to the human eye. A cryptic and open-ended video by the Portuguese artist Pedro Neves Marques is entitled *The Pudic Relation of Machine and Plant*. In it, a robotic

arm is seen reaching for a sensitive plant, which recoils at its touch. The relationship of plant to robot invites speculation as to present and future interactions of technology and the natural world.

The 35 global artists represented in “The World to Come” have persuasively made the case that climate change is a worldwide existential threat. The introductory statement in the gallery states that “Contemporary art plays a crucial role in negotiating the rapid changes observed during the Anthropocene by reconceptualizing the traditional ways we think about nature and culture.” I hope this is true, but the question follows: what should we do now?

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“The World to Come: Art in the Age of the Anthropocene” will be on view in the A. Alfred Taubman Gallery at UMMA until July 28, 2019. For more information, go to <https://www.umma.umich.edu/exhibitions/current>.

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Trevor Paglen, *NSA Tapped Fiber Optic Cable Landing Site, Miami Beach, Florida, United States*, 2015 chromogenic print and mixed media on navigational chart. Photo courtesy of UMMA.



# The Importance of Small Moves

## James Nares at the Milwaukee Art Museum

The new exhibit at the Milwaukee Art Museum (MAM) featuring the art of Jamie Nares (formerly James) is an intriguing retrospective covering five decades of work by an experimental, playful, curious and inventive artist. “Nares: Moves” also marks the first MAM exhibition curated by the museum’s director, Dr. Marcelle Polednik.

In the accompanying catalogue introduction, Polednik defines the challenge of presenting a retrospective of Nares’ work. “These objects,” she writes, “have little to suggest that they are the works of a single artist, much less that they are connected to a sequential biographical or art historical narrative.” Her solution is to present the works, not in strict chronological order, but rather in thematic sections.



Jamie Nares,  
*I Don't Got  
Nobody*, 2008.  
Oil on linen.  
Carlene and  
Andy Ziegler.



Jamie Nares, *Jim*,  
2015. Video still. Image  
courtesy of Kasmin  
Gallery.

Polednik’s curatorial approach emphasizes three concepts—gesture, time, and movement—which are interwoven throughout nine sections of the exhibition. These nine “chapters” are also explored in an accompanying catalogue and a gallery guide. Additional programming—film screenings, a dance performance and discussions with the artist, collector Julian Schnabel, and musical collaborator Thurston Moore—will expand upon the gallery experience.

Embedding the display within such rich programming and publications is an important choice for this material, as there is not much explanatory text within the gallery. It is helpful, for example, to more fully understand the impact of the artist’s defining personal experiences, such as the artist’s youthful move to New York City in the 1970s.

Details about unusual methods and materials are also informative and lead to a fuller appreciation of the works. The deeper dive not only provides more opportunities to grapple with the complexity of this work but also provides strong reinforcement of the exhibition’s premise, that the lines of exploration threading through Nares’ long career are consistent across surprisingly varied media.

The exhibition’s organizational scheme is successful in demonstrating visual and conceptual relationships between works in disparate media from different periods of the artist’s life. The introductory room, which also serves as the exhibit’s conclusion, presents a pair



of works: the 2008 video *Riding with Michaux* and an untitled high-speed drawing from 2014. Although not far separated in time, the works intersect in multiple ways. The video's imagery of sunlight on water has visual similarities to the linear forms of the untitled drawing but, more importantly, they share process. This illuminates the relationship between the artist filming with a camera on a moving train and the artist holding a brush to a rotating sheet of paper. Motion, not only in the visual field but also as part of the making, is central to the artist's practice.

Film and video have a strong presence throughout the galleries. From early works like *Giotto Circle #1* or *Game*, shot in 1970s TriBeCa, New York City, to *Element #1* (2009) and a series of *Portraits* (2016), Nares' long-standing passion for moving images is clearly evident. The subjects may seem at first unrelated—the artist drawing a circle on a wall, small hand movements, a heavy ball swinging over an empty street, the slow eruption of a bubbling mixture—but all have important elements in common.

*Pendulum* (1976), with its groaning sound and almost dizzying, hazardous motion, explores the movement of an object through an eerily empty urban space. In the luminous *Street* (2011), made with a high-speed camera, scenes of now-occupied city streets have been slowed to a glacial pace. The camera, instead of focusing on moving objects, is here itself in motion, driven along city blocks, capturing unstaged images of people, the details of Manhattan daily life, made graceful and dramatic via slowed motion. Both works chart time and movement to very different ends. Nares' innovative use of a high-speed camera is only one example of the artist's intellectual curiosity.

The monumental paintings presented in the exhibition fully display the artist's capacity for invention. Nares has created luscious works with various strokes: thick and lumbering, made from tiny glass beads, thermoplastic "paint," and a street-marking machine; or the single stroke paintings, delicate and graceful, made with elaborate, homemade brushes and, at times, interference pigments. At first glance, they bear no relation to each other—heavy, textured, black and white or gorgeous, delicate, ribbons of color—yet all refract light, suggest motion, and basically disrupt the expected experience of looking.

The show's most recent works are a series of large-scale images with gold leaf. Originating as rubbings of cut-stone street surfaces in the artist's old New York neighborhood of TriBeCa, the works incorporate both

a technological interest—with Evolon, a non-woven, high-tech microfiber paper—and a social acknowledgement unusual for this artist. The stone surfaces are described as having been cut by immigrant labor in the city's early days. When thermoplastic street markings become abstract paintings and 19th century street stone is transformed into shimmering gold, the artist is not only an inventor but also earns the title of alchemist.

It is clear that Nares has been grappling with movement for a long time. A note from a sketchbook, "things in motion; motion in things," captures the artist's interest in a playful way. The phrase provides an opportunity for exchange, a back and forth, a circular form that is mirrored in the intentionally circular path within the gallery. The exhibition ends where it begins: with a video and a drawing, both exploring motion and time, with directness and grace. Nares celebrates small moments in her work, transforming simple gestures into fascinating experiences worthy of our time and consideration.

**Ann Sinfield**

The exhibition is on view at the Milwaukee Art Museum until October 6, 2019.

**Ann Sinfield is an independent curator and writer. She is also Exhibits Lead at the Harley-Davidson Museum in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.**

Jamie Nares, *Crosstown Traffic*, 2013. Thermoplastic on linen. Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery.



## "Time Share" and "Warm Welcome" at Monaco Gallery, St. Louis

"The conception of space that has been developed here suggests that a model of political culture appropriate to our own situation will necessarily have to raise spatial issues as its fundamental organizing concern."—Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, July–August 1984, p. 89.



Frances Lightbound, *Overlay (Sites of Exchange)*, 2019. Vinyl tile, plywood, acrylic, pine, masonite, stainless steel chain, security envelope, polyurethane, padlock, latex paint, US and EU currency, jacquard weaving, salvaged concrete, dimensions variable. Photo by R. Freeman.

"We have come to realize that 'just looking' is not just looking but that looking is invested with identity: gender, socioeconomic status, race, sexual orientation. Ask a few simple questions to define *aesthetics*: Whose aesthetics? At what historical time? Under what circumstances? For what purposes? And who is deciding quality, etc.? Then you realize suddenly and very quickly that aesthetic choices are politics."—Félix González-Torres, *Félix González-Torres*, (New York: A.R.T. Press, 1993), p. 21.

As Jameson and Gonzalez-Torres taught us, looking is no simple act. Even tiny, humble artworks have much to teach us. "Time Share" and "Warm Welcome" are paeans both to Monaco Gallery, an artist co-op, and the textual operations and activism of artist Sage Dawson. Artist-Curator Jeff Robinson's curatorial statement for "Time Share" declares that it "makes reference to those dwellings with shared ownership as a lens for considering artist collectives like Monaco, and to engender a spirit of mutuality that is required in such communal spaces."

Fourteen works of varying codes of abstraction vie to construct the curatorial narrative mapping private

and social terrains. The exhibition spaces divide two themes of "Time Share," the larger and lead theme, with the smaller, related exhibit, "Warm Welcome."

Identities of space here are measured in a multitude of aspects: personal, geological, architectural, intimate, humble, beautiful (or at least elevated), humorous, eccentric, as well as time- or event-based.

Organically, both exhibits suggest various domicile signifiers, including a literal chair, fireplace, textile fabrics (drapery, carpet), clothing, and, perhaps, even artworks on the wall of a home. The installation layout of the artworks aids its interpretation. Front and center is Frances Lightbound's *Overlay (Sites of Exchange)* which most resembles an architectural model. *Overlay*'s gallery positioning indicates the exhibition's overall theme and relates to all other artworks. Lightbound makes use of several curious icons—a combination lock, a wad of discarded paper, alphabetic symbols and, philosophically, real currency imbedded into the model's foundation.

Colorful woodcuts exquisitely printed and framed by Kelly Kaczynski suggest architectural spaces and uplifting moods. These prints, along with those of Mark Joshua Epstein, broaden the exhibition's thematic definition. Epstein sets the pace with

Kelly Kaczynski, *Stages (eclipse, still)*, 2018, woodcut monoprint, 11 x 15 in. Photo by R. Freeman.





colorful, multi-dimensional paintings of mixed media as the quintessential map icons of the exhibition. His supremely labored efforts at distinct, varying textures within the terrains suggest the diverse communities within a democracy. He echoes “Time Share’s” theme of diversity, collaboration, negotiation, and compromise within a shared space.

SaraNoa Mark and Tom Burtonwood offer the most archly rigorous aesthetics. SaraNoa Mark’s *Holy land, holding sand*, a carefully organized series of small multiple Ziploc baggies of variously textured and colored soils, conveys the sense of an archaeological dig while simultaneously mapping varying strata of geologic space. Burtonwood, with a playful sense of the abject coupled with humor, reimagines the home hearth as industrial sign in *Re Inverso Exterior*. Burtonwood’s title implies he has made an inverse or contrary use of exterior materials.

Mary Laube establishes a different sensibility of home space with meticulous, sensual paintings. *Hanbok* may reference traditional Korean clothing, and *Perfume* figures as the latest little black dress, while the wildcard *Urn* relates etymologically to the ballot box.

Melissa Leandro anchors the exhibition aesthetically with richly colored, sumptuously handcrafted textiles. Intensely stitched and thoughtfully differentiated texturings, these abstractions stand alone without concern for content or interpretation. Titles may or may not offer guidance.

SaraNoa Mark, *Holy land, holding sand*, 2019, detail. Sand, plastic, dimensions variable. Photo by R. Freeman.



Melissa Leandro, *Untitled*, 2018. High back chair, wood, canvas, woven cloth, dye, embroidery, stitching, applique. 51 x 25 x 24 in. Photo by R. Freeman.

“Time Share” functions on one level along the same lines as Fredric Jameson’s “cognitive mapping” concept, which conceives of artworks as way-finders in today’s world. On another level, this exhibition rigorously uses abstraction for its representations of “domesticity, architecture, and an overall concern for the identity of space.” I would have liked to have seen the written word interceding on the abstract symbolism’s behalf. For who else might this artwork reach? Who might be acculturated to read it?

Democracies are communal spaces, and Monaco’s artist collective is an interpretive microcosm for those diverse constituents.

The coda to “Time Share” is “Warm Welcome,” which features three artists and Sage Dawson supplementing the front room exhibition. “Warm Welcome’s” works codify structures within structures. Installed in a long and narrow space, the exhibition creates a forced intimacy with the works. The eight objects are humble and related material-wise to homes and buildings. At the room’s end, a Sage Dawson collagraph, *Outmoded*, emulates a narrow swath of wallpaper

with hand-painted black bricks interspersed with perhaps clouds and redline details. Placed carefully in the lower corner of the brick wallpaper is a building fragment of concrete and mosaic tiles with no obvious pattern. Just above *Outmoded*, but in tight proximity, a digital print-supplemented wall clock by Masumi Shibata humorously urges one to alternately exhale and inhale every other hour. Not so humorously, there is only a sweeping second hand in motion. Their mood is somber, but they suggest time and space as structures within structures of the home.

Jarrett Dawson built an elaborate homage, *Shrine to an Unknown House God*, out of ordinary rubble from perhaps a demolished or remodeled home. Despite its materials, its mood conveys deep reverence. Jarrett and Sage Dawson teamed up for *Todd's Birthday*, which consists of more found abstract building materials, but animated with a pair of plastic googly eyes that would delight any child.

Dwaine Crigger's pair of drawings set negation against negation with *Cancelled work series—Drawing for never realized work IX and X*. The exquisite drawings and meticulously sewn-in metal parts date socially and politically from 1975. The drawings are historic touchstones for the exhibition's themes of coded abstractions.

But it is the art of Sage Dawson which guides this space. Dawson's art-making philosophy exemplifies "dwelling rights

[i.e., the human right to a home; legal protection from housing discrimination], domestic labor, and the identity of spaces." Two Dawson works, *A Cloud*, *A Pull* and *Soon Comes Night* establish direction and one central theme of the works on display. The direction is the careful representations of structures within structures, particularly

using home or building materials. That central theme might be considered the found beauty in the humblest of materials.

For this writer, the fundamental motif is found in *Soon Comes Night*. A long strip of molding with a sort of floral design that has long since been painted white featuring a small, exposed hinge section of wood, where two screw holes once held, perhaps, a latch in place. Inside that space are two abstract squares with green and white paint. This small structure within the larger molding structure echoes the entire exhibition's theme. The theme is something like the endless stories within stories of our homes and habitats that speak *ad infinitum* throughout these structuring absences and presences. We just need to look for them.

### Rusty Freeman

**Rusty Freeman is the Director of Visual Arts, Cedarhurst Center for the Arts, Mt. Vernon, IL.**

Sage Dawson, *Soon Comes Night*, 2019, detail. Acrylic on paper, wood, collagraph on dyed canvas. Photo by R. Freeman.



Jarrett Dawson, *Shrine to an Unknown House God*, 2019. Wood, brick, stone, dust, archaeological finds and other found materials. Photo by R. Freeman.



Masumi Shibata, *Masumi Educational*, 2008, digital print, clock. Sage Dawson, *Outmoded*, 2019, collagraph, marbled paper, mosaic wall fragment. Photo by R. Freeman.





# Encountering “William Counter: Simple Spells” at Firecat Projects

“Simple Spells” is an enchanting and quirky exhibition and anything but simple! The one-man show of Kansas artist William Counter at Firecat Projects gallery transports visitors back to the days of wooden yardsticks and cut-out coupons. Showcasing a wide range of work, from drawings to paintings to intricate wooden constructions, the exhibition illustrates how even the most common and inane commercial objects can be turned into unique works of art.

Firecat Projects may only be a small, one-room exhibition space with off-white walls and a creaky wooden floor, but its cozy ambiance pairs perfectly with Counter’s down-to-earth aesthetic. The Midwestern artist employs everyday materials, such as rulers, stamps and magazine advertisements, and explores their artistic potential. The gallery walls are filled with examples of Counter’s experiments in sculpture, drawing and painting, providing a sweeping look at his body of work. Uniting these artworks is a fascination with shape and materials, which Counter examines through a variety of media. Drawings and preliminary sketches complement larger works on canvas, while complex collages harmonize with intricate wooden constructions.

The gallery space itself reflects the exhibit’s exploratory feeling. Works on paper are displayed somewhat haphazardly, held in place by small binder clips dangling off nails with slightly curling edges. Paintings are loosely fixed to the wall, placed at various heights and angles, and sometimes askew. But overall, the casual attitude and nonchalance of the exhibition is charming and inviting. The works beckon to be approached and examined.

This dichotomy between close inspection and visualization at a distance is an important feature of Counter’s work which Firecat’s layout suits particularly well. From far away, these works are bright and cheery displays, filled with stars and shapes and popping colors. Stepping back, one can view the whole exhibition and trace the various themes and connections between works.

However, Counter’s creations are not always what they seem. Up close, these objects contain remarkable details that tell a very different story. Some of the most interesting works are Counter’s wood constructions. From afar, these works are striking geometric designs that capture the imagination. Only upon close

inspection are these bold pieces’ true complexity revealed!

These seemingly one-dimensional works are actually made from yard-sticks, carefully pieced together to create a seamless and intricately designed surface. Certainly one of the most complex is *Sunflower*, the largest of Counter’s wooden creations. Featuring dynamic stars brought out by bright yellow accents, it is made up of hundreds of carefully cut yardsticks held together with beeswax to create a smooth, tile-like surface.



William Counter, *Sunflower*. Image courtesy of William Counter and Firecat Projects.

Counter’s wooden works are not the only ones that deceive the eye. His paintings likewise contain hidden elements that take on new significance when carefully scrutinized. In *Meta #7*, for instance, Counter layers the canvas with pages from magazine advertisements to create a complex collage of consumer content. However, he paints over these ads with thin white paint, partially obscuring the original forms so that these details can only be distinguished up close. Through a literal ‘white-washing’ of these coupons, Counter neutralizes their commercial message.



William Counter, *Meta #7*. Image courtesy of William Counter and Firecat Projects.

Counter shrewdly obscures many of the words, numbers and symbols that once decorated his materials through his collaging and puzzle-making. However, little hints remain as to these objects' previous lives and their original functions.

In *Meta #7*, he leaves behind numbers and colors that act as a clue to the canvas's underlying surface. In his wooden works, his material reuse is even more obvious. His construction *Woodman #4*, for example, bears numerous references to Midwestern companies, like "Hastings Steels," and cities, such as "Lincoln, Nebraska," where these yardsticks would have been

made and used. "Performance Use" and "Safety" appeal to another time and place, when these objects were common tools in the workplace. Counter's re-use of these materials provides a glimpse into the intersection between object and art and how technology has changed their nature.

"Simple Spells" is all about hidden complexities that lie just under the surface of such simple, small objects. Returning to old-school objects like yardsticks, magazine coupons, and stamps, Counter endows these items with newly-found aesthetics and value, leaving a gentle reminder of their original purpose and significance. The show provides a new take on the classic discourse surrounding commercialism and material reuse. While far from simple, the show will cast a spell over every visitor.

**Emelia Lehmann**

"Simple Spells" was on view from May 31 to June 21 at Firecat Projects, 2124 N. Damen Ave., Chicago, IL 60647

**Emelia Lehmann is a recent graduate of the University of Chicago and an aspiring arts professional. An avid writer and researcher, she loves exploring the incredible arts and cultural opportunities in Chicago.**



William Counter, *Woodman #4*. Image courtesy of William Counter and Firecat Projects.



## "Joel-Peter Witkin: From the Studio" at Catherine Edelman Gallery

*Who among us is free to make art?*

Softened as it often is by vague appeals to "nuance," this narrowly scripted but highly charged drama played out during the June 1 panel discussion of "Joel-Peter Witkin: From the Studio" at the Catherine Edelman Gallery. The principals, plot, and resolution are dreadfully familiar—so familiar, in fact, that it might as well be a professional wrestling match (or perhaps a low-stakes show trial).

In this corner: *the oppressed*—the armless, legless, or otherwise physically anomalous models that have appeared in Joel-Peter Witkin's controversial photographs, along with any disabled artists who might be eyeing the money and attention that Witkin has generated.

And in this corner: *the oppressor*—Joel-Peter himself, a joyfully prurient, death-obsessed aesthete, whose consistent, apparently sincere professions of a strikingly Platonic Catholicism give him credible entrée to the network of classical European artistic references and motifs that animate his suppurating *corpus*.<sup>1</sup> Having first entered the scene with art designed to outrage conservatives, Witkin has lived long enough to be eaten (nibbled, anyway) by the Left.

Why evaluate Witkin on such boring, predictable terms—friendly though the venue may be? Have a little imagination, for Christ's sake! Picture instead some Church of the French Decadents, in whose altarpiece *Pornocrates* (Félicien Rops, 1878) one glimpses Witkin's

*Christ Driving Out the Money Changing Artist From the Temple of Art*, 7/13/2016 © Joel-Peter Witkin. Image courtesy Catherine Edelman Gallery, Chicago..



spiritual ancestor, and try him by their half-profane, half-sacred standards of artistic justice.<sup>2</sup> One venial sin? That original error of the too-clever kid from Brooklyn, sifting through the ruins of high culture with a grin sometimes verging on a smirk: sharpness that sometimes looks more like thinness, and ironies that might just be lapses in self-awareness.



*Siamese Twins, Los Angeles*, 1988 © Joel-Peter Witkin. Image courtesy Catherine Edelman Gallery, Chicago.

(Exhibit A: one of Witkin's preparatory sketches for a photograph, *Christ Driving Out the Money Changing Artists From the Temple of Art* (2016), after El Greco's 1568 painting. Witkin has, of course, signed and dated it, thereby increasing its monetary value.)<sup>3</sup>

But back to our liberated Puritans and their parody Star Chamber. Under the current dispensation, Witkin may be more virtuous (and is certainly more sympathetic) now that he has entered the early stages of dementia. His status as a biological twin (to another noted artist, painter Jerome Witkin) is likewise redemptive.<sup>4</sup> Images such as *The Kiss* (*La Basier*), *New Mexico* (1982) and *Siamese Twins, Los Angeles* (1988) are thus not merely disturbing or exploitive—they're supposed to be seen as extensions of Witkin's own socially acceptable form of freakishness. Witkin's dark, deliberately anachronistic aesthetic, which recalls Diane Arbus as filtered through Southworth & Hawes, E.J. Bellocq, and Weegee, comes with an origin myth that

has long served to legitimate his practice: at age 6, he witnessed a brutal car accident in which a young girl was decapitated. During the panel discussion, Catherine Edelman read aloud from a letter sent by someone who believed their father had seen the same accident.<sup>5</sup>



*Las Meninas, New Mexico, 1987*, © Joel-Peter Witkin. Image courtesy Catherine Edelman Gallery, Chicago.

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In the age of LiveLeak and Pornhub, Witkin's ritual transgressions have ceased to shock. This frees the younger viewer to interpret them somewhat more dispassionately. Though he and his brother both emphasize that Joel-Peter's images are deeply personal and, in some way, reflective of an inaccessible space within the artist, it seems obvious that his work is only as powerful as the intellectual or emotional reaction it elicits.<sup>6</sup> That reaction is predicated on our sharing, or at least deeply understanding, the fears, lusts, and powerful Ideas that Witkin renders in light, shadow, and furious scratches on his negatives.<sup>7</sup>

The diminishing artistic returns on nudity, hermaphroditism, sadomasochism and the like also free one to take Witkin's Catholicism more seriously. For all that he relishes ambiguity, Witkin lives in a universe of fixed absolutes. Perhaps that is why he loves ambiguity. Therefore, and contra Jérôme Cottin, who calls him a "postmodern Catholic" in his essay for the book *Heaven and Hell*, Witkin is no postmodernist.<sup>8</sup> This leads him to invert contemporary mores in unexpected ways. The sketch *Couple in the Age of Moral Relativism* (2015), for example, features a pair ("Hercules and

the Hellenistic Beauty") in which the male is weighed down by what Witkin describes as "sculpture suspended from [the] back." This replicates and yet reverses the experience of a character in Luis Buñuel's and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou*, who is weighed down by a load of personal and societal baggage that includes a pair of priests. The absence of certainty does not make life any less tragic, though it may make it more absurd.<sup>9</sup>

Since being diagnosed with dementia, Witkin has stopped producing work for public consumption. Edelman's show thus has a claim on finality. It even displays Witkin's putative last piece, *A Mermaid's Tale* (2018), as well as a reconstructed version of its set.

Evoking any number of Madonna and Child paintings, as well as Prospero's renunciation of "rough magic" in *The Tempest*, *A Mermaid's Tale* seems to end Witkin's career on a rather conventional note of mother love/Marian devotion—that is, until you notice the mother's tiny phallus. In the long film accompanying this exhibition, Witkin explains that he conjured up this subtle hint of psychosexual domination by preparing a larger latex penis and, uh, truncating it. Even in old age, Witkin remains Witkin—the same artist who



*Couple in the Age of Moral Relativism*, 2015, © Joel-Peter Witkin. Image courtesy Catherine Edelman Gallery, Chicago.





*A Mermaid's Tale*, NM, 2018, © Joel-Peter Witkin. Image courtesy Catherine Edelman Gallery, Chicago.

dedicated one of his most famous images, *Las Meninas*, to “Spain and Foucault.”<sup>10</sup>

Whatever Witkin's intentions may be, his work is generally engaging and worthy of further study. I hope future Witkins do not run scared from their future inquisitors.

**Nathan Worcester**

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1. One indication of Witkin's consistent and complex engagement with religion comes from his 1976 master's thesis, which is reproduced in the 1995 exhibition catalogue *Witkin*. There and in Witkin's 1998 retrospective, *The Bone House*, Witkin quotes a couplet from Yeats, though in the latter work without attribution: “I'm looking for the face I had / Before the world was made.” In his thesis, Witkin reveals that Batman functions as his Antichrist, “Lord of the Bird world and Darkness” (Celant, pp. 51—Platonic capitalization in the original). He further asserts that his first sexual experience was with a sideshow hermaphrodite named Albert Alberta (Ibid., pp. 50). Adding to the psychosexual mystery (consciously, like a young actor crafting a *persona* to cover his face?), an almost Luciferian Witkin compares himself to Jacob wrestling the angel/God, writing, “I revolt against the mystical in order to be overwhelmed and won over by it” (Ibid., pp. 52). Do not be fooled by his name—while Witkin's Jewish father was a minor presence in his life, his Catholic Italian mother was a dominating force.
2. Indeed, the book *Heaven or Hell* (2012), which juxtaposes Witkin's photographs with images selected from the archives of the National Library of France, features Rops' *Les Sataniques: L'enlèvement* (*The Abduction*) (1882).
3. Witkin, incidentally, is not averse to flatly stating his intentions and metaphysical commitments. Writing on the drawing *Woman as the Dead Christ by Caravaggio* (2014), Witkin says, “I want the viewer to realize that the soul has no gender.”

4. The other Witkin also delights in art history references. The exhibition catalogue *Notes from Twin Visions: Jerome Witkin and Joel-Peter Witkin* (Jack Rutberg, 2014) includes a painting depicting Vincent Van Gogh in a straitjacket. These similarities are all the more interesting when one learns that the siblings were estranged for many years. Witkin elaborates on the value of his twin-ness in a long video accompanying the Edelman exhibition, claiming that it has allowed him to view himself more objectively. This indirectly raises the question of whether the dog's gaze serves a broadly similar objectifying purpose in some of his tableaux; in the sketch *Woman and Dog in a Garden* (2014), he writes, “I like the idea that the dog's vision of the ball is behind the woman's legs!” (capitalization altered, underlining in original).
5. In defense of the relativist moralists (moralistic relativists?), Witkin has admitted to treating people as means rather than ends in his early photography. In his master's thesis, which at times resembles a confessional booth, he writes, “I used people” (Celant, pp. 53). He also describes a “voyeuristic process of stalking” in the recruitment of female models (Ibid., pp. 56) and states that, in New Mexico, he was “careful to choose only the people who seemed the most damaged and malleable who would show their pain, for me” (Ibid., pp. 58). Witkin's copout, which is always available to the artist accused of exploiting some relatively less powerful Other, is to read his subjectivity back onto the people he has objectified. He thus concludes, “The people in all these images were myself” (Ibid., pp. 62). Mere casuistry or self-administered absolution? At any rate, a neat trick, and a testament to the rhetorical skill that has helped elevate Witkin to his position of eminence as a visual artist (you ever notice how the most influential contemporary artists are often, and totally coincidentally, the best talkers?). As an aside, it is a little disappointing that Witkin, diabolical arranger of cadavers, has said he cannot imagine his own body being used to make a work of art (Rutberg, pp. 53). This does not qualify as full-on hypocrisy, but it does smell a little funny.
6. Jerome Witkin, quoted in Rutberg in an interview with Louise Salter, echoes Hamlet on the “undiscovered country” that is death: “Here [Joel-Peter] was with his fears and beliefs. Where did these images come from? And how could he exist in this hell, this odd and deep country, *known only to him?*” (pp. 46). In his master's thesis, Joel-Peter Witkin says he creates images rather than pictures—“images of things not actually present in reality, *other than my own reality*” (Celant, pp. 52).
7. Why, after all, do tourists like the Bean? Because they can photograph their own slightly distorted reflections in it.
8. Witkin has explicitly distanced himself from postmodernism in photography, writing, “I am not part of the ‘post-modernist’ tenet in photography whereby it is believed that all images are fictitious entities and that accepting them as representations of external truth is visually naïve. My life is not fiction; therefore, my work is not fiction!” (Celant, pp. 62). Eugenia Parry also distances Witkin from postmodernism in her essay in *The Bone House* (Witkin, 1998, 183-184).
9. Parry too notes the affinity between Witkin and Miguel de Unamuno's *Tragic Sense of Life* (Witkin, 1998, pp. 188).
10. Witkin, 1998, pp. 188. Consider too Witkin's selection of works such as Johann Sadeler I's *Phyllis and Aristotle in Heaven or Hell* (2012). To the cross-pollinating mind, the set of *A Mermaid's Tale* also suggests Witkin's past meditations on death and biological decay; an oval shell yawns wide, disclosing a spiky conch and recalling Jacques-Louis David's open skull in Witkin's *Portraits In the After-world* (1994).



## “LEGENDARY” at Carl Hammer Gallery

In the 1970s, art dealers began opening galleries in the River North neighborhood. Among those pioneers of Chicago art culture was Carl Hammer. This fall marks the 40th anniversary of his eponymous gallery. “LEGENDARY,” the exhibition currently on view, includes works from Hammer’s collection curated to tell a broad story of Chicago art as it has grown through the years into a unique pocket in America’s Midwest.

Carl Hammer Gallery deals primarily with outsider art, but it also represents several career artists. “LEGENDARY” does a good job of mixing outsider and formally trained artists throughout the main gallery and second floor.

The ground floor space shows off some of the heavy hitters: Darger, Paschke, Traylor, Yoakum, Yoshida and Rosofsky. There is a wide range of experience and education among the artists, but the level of training does not dictate the impact of the work. By juxtaposing Paschke and Yoshida with Darger, the show allows viewers to compare the use of found materials and appropriated imagery.

Darger’s work is masterful and horrifying. The rawness of the subject matter and underlying themes of child abuse combined with intricately composed imagery and storytelling elicit an abject reaction to the work. It was created without the boundaries of audience judgment in mind because it was never intended to have an audience. That freedom of the artist from the audience created a space for Darger to work out some dark and disturbing demons.

Joseph Yoakum, *Southwest Point of Ozark Mtn Range Near Carthage Missouri*, c. 1960-75. Colored pencil and pen on paper, 12 x 17 3/4 inches. Photo courtesy of Carl Hammer Gallery.



Bill Traylor, *Untitled woman pointing*, c. 1940-45. Pencil and watercolor on found cardboard, 14 x 11 inches. Photo courtesy of Carl Hammer Gallery.

The biggest outsider art star in the exhibition next to Darger is Bill Traylor. Traylor’s work was recently on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. “LEGENDARY” includes two of Traylor’s mixed-media paintings on found cardboard. The figures in both pieces are gestural and narrative, telling a story about a man in a hat and a woman who is pointing at him. There’s humor in the playful way that space is used in these works. In *Untitled woman pointing*, the man, though standing at eye level, is a full head shorter than the woman. Although his gesture, hands on hips, is one of confrontation, the woman is the more dominant figure.

Traylor’s dark, gestural figures are influential in works of several American artists like Chicago muralist William Walker and in Kara Walker’s (no relation) black paper silhouettes. All three artists make art that reflects a narrative of black experience in America.

Joseph Yoakum is an artist’s artist. Although lesser known, his work can be found in the collection of artists like David Sharpe, whose work is also exhibited in “LEGENDARY.” Yoakum’s landscapes are graphic and almost cartoonish, with a richness in color that makes

the work read as a hybrid comic book panel and naturalist sketch. The location of the scene is included in ink on the front of the piece.

The drawing *Southwest Point of Qzark Mtn Range Near Carthage Missouri* is on brown paper in colored pencil. The highlights and colors of the clouds and trees are developed through the addition of white pencil to the mid-tone of the paper's surface. The paper becomes a player in the landscape rather than simply the base on which the image rests.

With the works hung next to each other, a connection can be made between Yoakum's style and color and Sharpe's *Untitled, Landscape*. In contrast, Sharpe's abstracted landscape gives the sense of space between the elements that compose the work, as though it were a map. The surface quality of the painting becomes an element of the piece. The rocks and trees become parsed down into dots and lines of color that are organized atop the surface of the canvas.

The second floor is packed with a much more varied collection of art objects and artifacts that connect history and culture. A sideshow banner by painter Snap Wyatt, which is over 10 feet tall, advertises the Lobster Boy "Alive!" The lobster boy is depicted on the beach, with the torso of a child and the tail of a crustacean. He reaches his red claw up towards a beautiful woman in a red bikini.

The works on the second floor follow themes of transformation through the artistic process. In the case, Wyatt's sideshow banner changes the context in which the audience approaches this human: both as a curiosity and a wonder rather than as a genetic anomaly.

Grady Stiles was the real name of the Lobster Boy. He toured with traveling carnivals as the Lobster Boy along with his family well into the late '80s. Stiles, a notorious alcoholic, was convicted of murdering his daughter's fiancé in 1988 but sentenced to only 15 years of probation due to his physical abnormalities. Enraged by this turn of events, his wife allegedly hired a hitman, and Stiles was murdered in 1992.

Legendary Chicago outsider artist Lee Godie has a spot of wall that includes a painting and two photo booth portraits. Unlike Darger, who was eccentric but reclusive and highly secretive about his work, Godie was anything but reclusive. She became something of a staple on the steps of the Art Institute of Chicago.

A self-proclaimed impressionist painter, Godie's work is also embodied in her personality and feral lifestyle. She hated being indoors and would often be found

sleeping outside in sub-zero temperatures despite having saved enough money from art sales to afford a room. In one of the photo booth portraits, Godie wears a white sweater and a Victorian-style cameo. Her ragged hand pulls back fine blonde hair, revealing a demure smile. In this moment, we catch a glimpse of the woman she could have been had that lifestyle suited her.

An overall sense of Americana runs throughout the show, especially on the upper floor, which also features sculptural works by Vanessa German, Neil Goodman and S.L. Jones. Although it does not completely shed its gallery persona, the exhibit has the air of an antique or curiosity shop.



Lee Godie, *Photobooth self-portraits*, c. 1970-75.  
Lee with a cameo and chain, 5 x 3 3/4 inches.

"LEGENDARY" is not the gallery's 40th anniversary show. That particular exhibition will open in September. This seems more of a tribute to something quite unspecified. It could be redundant to have this exhibition before the anniversary show. The turn of the fall season will tell the tale. The bar is set high but, after 40 years in the trade, there's bound to be even more remarkable work in Hammer's collection.

**Rebecca Memoli**

LEGENDARY is on view through August 17th at Carl Hammer Gallery, 740 North Wells St., Chicago, Illinois.

**Rebecca Memoli is a Chicago-based photographer and curator. She received her BFA from Pratt Institute and her MFA in Photography from Columbia College. Her work has been featured in several national and international group shows. Her latest curatorial project is "The Feeling is Mutual".**



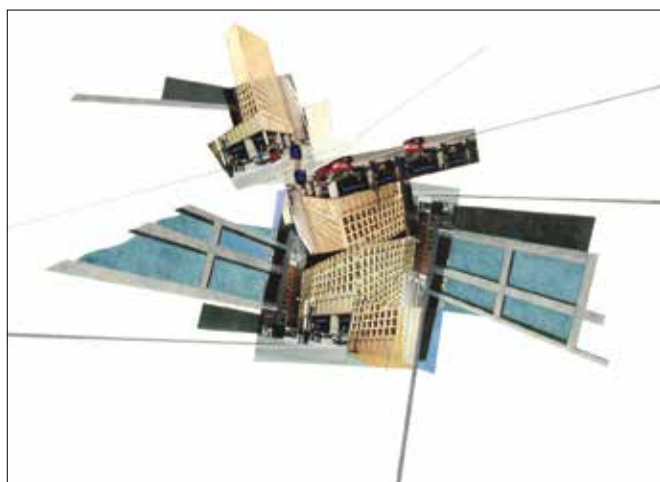
# Works That Caught Our Eye



**Above Left:** Cai Gjo-Qiang *Non-Brand*, 2019. Gunpowder on glass and mirror. At the NYC Guggenheim's "Artistic License: Six Takes on the Guggenheim Collection." Photo by M. Ségard.



**Above Right:** Marvin Newman, *Rue Saint-Denis, Paris*, 1960. Gelatin silver print. 13 5/8 x 17 7/8 in. © Copyright Marvin E. Newman. Courtesy of Stephen Daiter Gallery, Chicago.



**Above:** Dennis Kowalski, *Chicago*, photo, colored pencil on paper, 22x 30 in. Courtesy of Studio Oh!, Chicago.



**Below:** Melville Price, *Black Warrior II*, 1962-64, oil on canvas, 73 x 115 in. Courtesy of McCormick Gallery, Chicago.



**Right:** Jesse Howard, *Lady with a Red Ribbon*, charcoal, acrylic paint. Courtesy of Hofheimer Gallery, Chicago.



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