

Gran Prix reviewed by Ian MacLean Davis

One of the promotional images for Gran Prix shows the H&H Building at Franklin and Eutaw Streets: incongruously fancy sports cars heading south, contrasted with more pedestrian vehicles moving north. The implication is the photo was taken during the 2012 Baltimore Grand Prix. This visual convergence of economy, style and status is a canny and humorous comment on the relationship between New York and nearly any other major city on the eastern seaboard. Co-organized by Baltimore's Nudashank Gallery & New York-based roving curatorial project Gresham's Ghost, Gran Prix features twenty-nine artists in an exhibition that attempts to build conversations between the emerging art of the two cities. For this show, Nudashank expands beyond its small 3rd Floor gallery to multiple satellite locations: upstairs to the venerable Gallery Four collective gallery space, and also across North Eutaw St. to repurposed storefronts at #425 and #429.

Upon entering Nudashank Gallery, I was immediately struck by Erik Parker's psychedelic phantasmagoria – a standout example of painting in an exhibition heavy with installation and sculpture. The painting is a cartoonish spacescape populated with figures that explode and reconstitute; this artist has an aesthetic that suggests equal parts Francis Bacon and Funkadelic cover artist Pedro Bell. The humor and viscera of the image set an appropriate tone for the overall exhibition.

Alisa Barenboym's sculptures are shown in both the main Nudashank Gallery and Gallery Four. Her intimate and frank objects combine unglazed fired terra cotta with smooth cables and straps. The clay has a flesh-like quality that informs the manufactured binding in various ways. In one piece, doughy folds of clay are twisted like a rag and loosely bound with a grey USB cord, two materials at apparent but passive odds. In another, a sheet of clay softly impressed with the relief of basement plumbing evokes a human back and spine. This form interacts with woven nylon and plastic straps and buckles to evoke something at once sensual and utilitarian.

Work that depends on light technology reappears throughout the exhibition, to pleasing results. Justin Kelly's projection at Gallery Four, as short (30 seconds?) as the looped projected video was, required repeated viewings to decode. The LCD video projection of organic shifting patterns is so washed out by ancillary lighting that only the most vague impression of the action is clearly read. It's a clever example of deliberately undermining one application of light to another for meticulous effect. Adjacent, Jesse

Greenberg's post-and-lintel gateway, composed of internally-lit cast resin panels, welcomes entry and examination. The outer sides and top of the structure are covered in vinyl similar to a car interior. This contrast between flat, automotive quality "safety" surfaces with colorful, crafted illuminated blocks stands as an attractive entryway to nowhere in particular. A few feet away, Dan Conrad's backlit cabinet quietly glows and shifted, augmenting the groovy quality to the room.

Light informs Shawn Flynn's ode to garbage and recycling in a surprising way. Installed in the corner retail presentation window at #429 Eutaw, passersby are offered a composition of plastic and cardboard containers. A yellow and blue recycling bin dominates, scattered around with cardboard beer cases and scraps of building materials. It looks like a small-scale construction job that hasn't been cleaned up yet. Unexpectedly, these materials are encrusted with a plastic shell that provides an attractive high-gloss sheen to the initially pedestrian found-object experience.

Next door at #425, the narrow space was smartly curated with little work hung on the walls, and several tall, narrow standing sculptural works, which mitigated the potential claustrophobia of the space. Dustin Carlson's sculptures, three identical droning, squawking receivers that appear to be fashioned from small fire extinguishers, stood at the end of the far end of the space. There is a confluence of clean industrial design and science-project engineering in this piece that makes it enormously appealing. However, the small crowd that had formed to interact with the piece, combined with the noise, kept me from getting too close. I think that might have been the point, actually. Beyond the main gallery space, another room featured a multi-media work by Lesser Gonzalez Alvarez. The brightly-colored combination of low-fi video production and installation sculpture reads like a room designed for the worship of the rubber auto tire. However, that symbol can represent many things – I didn't feel like I was being offered enough to guide me through the artist's idea.

Evaluate any group show and it's natural to recognize the artistic DNA/homage of certain works. Richard Artschwager in particular appeared to be a touchstone for several artists, joined occasionally by Robert Gober, Roxy Paine, and Franz West. To dismiss these pieces offhand with quick associations would be a mistake, as some are highlights of the show. This work, which is more recognizably inspired by museum-grade art styles, elevated the overall effect of Gran Prix – moreover, the way it counters the more challenging work occasionally results in a dynamic. For instance, at the entrance to Gallery Four, Lisa Dillin's floor installation is easily accepted as Art. I understand it that way. However, I'm not so sure about Caitlin Cunningham's adjacent action painting corridor, despite my understanding that it clearly IS Art. Notions of craft, content, and value are in conflict throughout the show. This friction between polished and ragged materials and concepts repeats throughout as its most compelling theme.

As a survey of contemporary emerging art in the two cities, Gran Prix is an excellent example of the breadth and occasional depth of that pool. It should be said, New York is

not a sports car, and Baltimore is not an economy sedan – such categorizing is cliché and laughable, which is why the promotional image is funny. Within its mix of high/low materials and concepts, and the many potential conflicts they offer, investigation into Gran Prix is sure to make you reconsider what you find valuable in Art.

Gran Prix is curated and hosted by Nudashank Gallery & Gresham's Ghost, including adjacent spaces

405 West Franklin Street, 3rd Floor, Baltimore, MD 21201

Currently running through December 17th, Open Hours Saturdays 12-5pm

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