

The Boys (and Girls) of Summer: ‘Context Message’ at Zach Feuer and ‘Side Show’ at Greene Naftali

A who’s who of young talent, plus how everyone knows everyone else

By Andrew Russeth 7/31/12 5:31pm

The critic Dave Hickey once cited his friend and fellow critic Peter Schjeldahl’s prescription for making it as an artist: “You move to a city. You hang out in bars. You form a gang, turn it into a scene, and turn that into a movement.” Movements may be a thing of the past, but social networks are very much a part of the present, and two current group exhibitions at Chelsea galleries, “Context Message” at Zach Feuer and “Side Show” at Greene Naftali, offer an opportunity to check in with some promising young artists who are in the midst of fomenting vital scenes.

With work by more than 30 artists, **the jam-packed show at Feuer** is by far the larger of the two, and it’s a rollicking, albeit hermetic guide to the interests of a gang of emerging talent, beginning with its two curators, artists Tyler Dobson and Ben Morgan-Cleveland, who together run the scrappy Greenpoint gallery Real Fine Arts. A willfully obtuse news release riffs on the critical-theoretical concept of “networked painting,” but the show, it quickly becomes clear, is at least as concerned with the messy, multigenerational social bonds of today’s art industry.

British artist Merlin Carpenter’s 2005 painting of a screenshot from *Artforum* magazine’s website is an object lesson in the art world-obsessed art on view. It shows a review of an exhibition by Reena Spaulings, the pseudonymous artist who shares the name of Mr. Carpenter’s New York gallery. (Spaulings herself has on view two hackish Pointillist paintings; if you dare to examine them too closely, a nearby speaker lets out dog barks.)

Norwegian artist Bjarne Melgaard has reproduced a portrait of artist Kelley Walker from *Interview* magazine in two paintings and scrawled on one the words “Fuck me John Kelsey”—Mr. Kelsey being the artist-critic who is part of the Spaulings enterprise, which has shown Mr. Melgaard—as a peculiar celebration of the psychosexual tension between dealer (or writer) and artist.

Elsewhere, a breezy painting by the mid-career German artist Michael Krebber, who has steadily gained a cult following among young artists over the past two decades, features a reproduction of the text of a blog post by another artist about painter Alistair Frost. It hangs directly across from a 2011 piece by Mr. Frost, a bright orange canvas with a patch of white and a sketch of a keyboard. It’s called *Do not use as a bulletproof vest*.

The incestuous links among critics, galleries, dealers, artists pile up. Everyone is name-checking, ripping off, toying with or joining forces with one other. (Note the balloon by Grand Openings—a collective that includes two of the artists here—that bears their repetition of Niele Toroni's trademark paintings.) As delightful as these in-jokes can be, when you recognize them, the ultra-safe, clubby tweaks on established formulas become tiresome.

The godfather of these freewheeling intramural hijinks is the late German artist Martin Kippenberger, who's the show's eminence gris, though he has only a single painting here (fittingly, it's screwed to the wall like an Old Master painting). He was an associate of some of the show's artists, including Mr. Krebber and Jutta Koether, and executed these art dramas with extreme panache. He once transformed a very serious Gerhard Richter painting into a table: an extreme form of the artistic patricide that is too scarce these days.

Happily, a handful of artists eschew cute quips for real aesthetic brio. There's Andrei Koschmieder, whose six-foot-tall sculpture *Android 1* (2011) is a tall swirl of resin that looks like frozen lava and has a huge image of a hand hidden inside. Michele Abeles and the art dealer who helps represent her, artist Margaret Lee, offer a slapdash but attractive abstract painting. And the curators have hung two vivid blankets—one by Mary Lee Bendolph and Ruth P. Mosely, the other one by Lola Pettway. They're members of the Gee's Bend, Ala., quilting community, another social network focused on honing craft and exchanging ideas.

The high point of the show arrives in the form of two paintings by Mathieu Malouf that are each titled *Over Your Cities, Grass Will Grow*, the name of a recent documentary about the celebrated German artist Anselm Kiefer. Their thick surfaces are embedded with glazed shitake mushrooms, fake cobwebs and thin metal transistors, and they seem to simultaneously revel in and mock the earthy solemnity of Mr. Kiefer's art. In an otherwise pleasant but predictable array of work from today's best and brightest, and their forebears, Mr. Malouf's pieces are the exotic, as-yet-undiscovered species.

Those interested in art by the show's curators can consult the website of Soho's Renwick Gallery, which hosted Mr. Dobson's **most recent exhibition**, a collaboration with Megan Marrin that just closed and involved tiny birds' nests, white paintings and lots of splattered eggs. Mr. Morgan-Cleveland's latest, open through Aug. 5, is **a two-part affair**. On Fridays and Saturdays, he has work out on Fort Tilden Beach in Queens (disclosure: we have yet to visit), and on Sundays he's at RFA, which he's turned into a **haunting, elegant camera** obscura. A tiny hole in the blocked-out windows projects the action from the neighboring BQE upside down onto tall plastic walls in the pitch-black gallery—an epic, neverending video work drawn directly from life.

Mr. Malouf's mushroom paintings also appear in a moody, tightly organized exhibition of six promising artists in the back galleries of **Greene Naftali**, though they are not quite as dominant a force there, given the presence of two laser lights by Sam Pulitzer (who has a nearly invisible co-authored piece in the Feuer show, runs a vitriolic **blog** with Mr. Malouf and others, and is also a dealer, again with Mr. Malouf, operating the William gallery out of a garbage can in a Chinatown building).

Two green lasers shoot across the show's first room and land with a sharp glow on two short white cylinders (actually ear gauges that Burning Man-types might use to stretch their lobes). Like Dan Flavin light pieces turned menacing, they suggest the faux-high-tech security systems of blockbuster heist films. They may be guarding Davina Semo's tiny work, black silicone bronze buried in the white wall in the shape of a diamond. As with those sinister-looking black holes in Ken Price sculptures, it's impossible to tell how deep it goes. Together, the works subtly destabilize perception while offering an arch form of gothic terror.

The second half of the show has small paintings (and photos thereof) in the dandyish mode in vogue at the moment—Tim Eastman's swaths of linen adorned with sketchy flowers, Alissa McKendrick's pale mint and peach abstractions (hung next to a wall drawing of a small cat made with faint paint) and Cliff Borress's photographs of abstract paintings in plushly appointed rooms.

The title of the Greene Naftali exhibition, "Side Show," is literal—the better part of the gallery is taken up by a noisy solo outing of speakers and lamps by Josef Strau. But keep your eye out. The way these things go, some of these "Side Show" artists will soon be the main event.

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