

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

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THE HORROR, THE HORROR (A FRIGHTFUL JOURNEY INTO THE ART OF DARKNESS)

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On a muggy Thursday night in the District, clusters of ragtag art urchins bummed cigarettes from swank passersby under the awnings of tony design and furniture shops. The youthful angels of nihilism shrugged their shoulders in sang-froid detachment as their flyers for art shows were casually tossed to the ground. Teen despair was the curdled-milk veneer glossing this cultural moment, and the trash in the gutter was their ticker-tape parade.

I stepped into the Moore Space on NE Second Avenue for the opening night of the "Scream" exhibit and bumped into artist Bert Rodriguez, who was heading out from the Moore to look at more "crappy art" before folding it in. He's a keen observer, but his statement underscored how art-critical this town has become -- even grocery baggers, mechanics, and cab drivers are slinging acid like Robert Hughes.

A Byzantine cloud hung inside the gallery, and one could sense the heated pockets of discourse among the various scenesters. The usual suspects were giving high-stakes collector Rosa de la Cruz the treatment, performing the hind-lick maneuver and praying she would cough up a commission.

Curated by Fernanda Arruda and Michael Clifton, "Scream: 10 Artists x 10 Writers x 10 Scary Movies" was the evening's box office ticket and addressed a variety of horrors influencing contemporary art. In addition to the work in the exhibit, which traveled here from New York, the curators had invited ten writers to contribute essays on the participating artists, published in a catalogue that also listed a horror film chosen by each artist. The films were available for on-site viewing. "Scream," in the conceptually twisted words of the curators, "exists as a scab on the curatorial framework of Cream projects by Phaidon and remains a crusty, ephemeral proposal."

David Altmejd's mangled-werewolf sculpture harked back to the unsolved Black Dahlia murder from 1947, when the nude body of a 22-year-old woman was found in a vacant lot in Los Angeles. An aspiring actress, she had been horribly battered, sodomized, and cut in half with a butcher knife. The werewolf's grisly sex appeal was enhanced by a glam coating of rhinestones, rotting stardust, and garish jewelry. I had difficulty prying my eyes from it. The whole confection looked as if a gaudy socialite and her Afghan hound had been crushed together in a trash compactor, then served up in a cut-crystal bowl at a Leona Helmsley Halloween party.

Michael Betancourt, a local "conceptual forensics" expert, interrupted me while I was examining Cameron Jamie's drawings, which were pinned to six plywood sheets. Jamie's piece looked like lids for paupers' coffins. "These drawings are Hans Bellmer knockoffs -- I can point out the specific ones," he sniffed. Michael was looking ripe, and I wondered how he would taste in a stew with potatoes and carrots. I wrote myself a note to buy some Alka-Seltzer on the way home.

De la Cruz walked by with glassy eyes and eyebrows in a knot, her nose upturned as if someone had loosed a petard in her presence. (She and her husband Carlos helped to underwrite the show.) Behind her a mob was kicking and ripping at an installation, and yelling at a masked man on a video monitor. It was artist **Brock Enright**, performing on an interactive, live video feed from Brooklyn as part of his "Extreme Kidnapping Project." The kidnapper had been taunting de la Cruz and the crowd all evening, and near the bar there was talk of pitchforks and poleaxes.

Earlier the kidnapper, who had a Webcam trained on those observing his antics, had dropped his skivvies and poured ketchup on his French fry in an attempt to goad chef Montse Guillen, wife of

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artist Miralda. But Montse is a seasoned cook who has put miles of chorizo through the meat grinder. She remained unfazed.

Conceptual artist Cesar Trasobares also emerged fairly unscathed from his encounter with the kidnapper, who appeared on the monitor with his cheeks spread, perhaps rehearsing for a cavity search. De la Cruz could be seen in a huddle with Moore Space curator Sylvia Karman Cubiña. It appeared heads were going to roll.

Amy Sarkisian's *Toy Skull Reconstructions* stood off in a corner, a quintet of Down syndrome victims sacrificed at a black Mass. Propped up on pedestals like the busts of pompous Roman senators with bad skin, bad teeth, and ridiculous hairpieces, these figures reeked of a pathetic *Dumb and Dumber* squalor that made me want to knock them over and stomp their brains out. Gruesome, repulsive, and despicable, they were reminiscent of those high school geeks everyone hated and wanted to smash with a shovel.

The evening was full of interesting characters, particularly these Goth heads, an unfashionable little clique that kept to themselves and absolutely did not fit in. One of them looked like the artblog guy.

De la Cruz vacated the premises and Karman Cubiña established a post at the video live-feed installation, where Enright was pulling his wilting modus operandi, quickly approaching genital meltdown. The kidnapper's thingy was starting to look like a stale piece of roadkill. And he'd run out of ketchup. Curfew was approaching for the kidnapper, and the hangers-on at the gallery gathered under Enright's gaze for one last poke. He locked eyes with performance artist Jasmine Kastel, wretched up a torrent of obscenities, and suddenly she was all over him like a hobo on a ham sandwich.

Kastel yanked the plug on the video signal, knocking the kidnapper out of the picture. Karman Cubiña clapped her hands like a schoolmarm and the credits rolled at the Moore Space. "That's what I love about this type of work," she sighed. "It's so -- open-ended."

Pick a scab and it bleeds, I thought.

I headed over to the Collins Building for an art nightcap. Dacra had loaned the space to artist Jenna Balfe, who organized the "It's Been Ten Years Since Kurt Cobain Died" show for this installment of the Miami Design District gallery walk. Inside the space hundreds of angst-addled cherubim swarmed like flies atop a steaming pile of the abject. This was a scene out of *Night of the Living Dead*.

Artist Dustin Orlando peppered the walls with headshots of Cobain and strung up a shotgun over them. Luis Ruiz spray-painted over the vulvas of Barbie dolls and nailed them up in festive collages against the cinderblock walls. The words "Rape Me" could be read over one of the vulvas, together with glued Marlboro butts, razors, and lithium pills in a rainbow arrangement.

Luis Garcia hung photos of a bleary-eyed boy, sitting in the front seat of a Chevy, pulling on a roach in hemostats. Another photo showed someone finger-tapping a syringe before going mainline.

Wyndam Bucknell III displayed a piece of gum, a graveyard bouquet, a collection of diaries, and sundry memorabilia he associates with Cobain. Bucknell held forth, pitching his upcoming show at OBJEX artspace, "Why I Think I Am So Fucking Special," and comparing himself with William Blake.

Ed from the band SkiiMaul smashed a guitar on the concrete floor, inciting a riot of approval from his public. Artist Otto Von Schirach conducted a séance with a Ouija board and channeled the spirit of Cobain into Balfe. She made a sculpture from the guitar's remains and wrote on a mirror: "I love Kurt Kobane."

Outside the building, a huge sign on the wall read: "Commercial space for lease."

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