

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

ART LIES

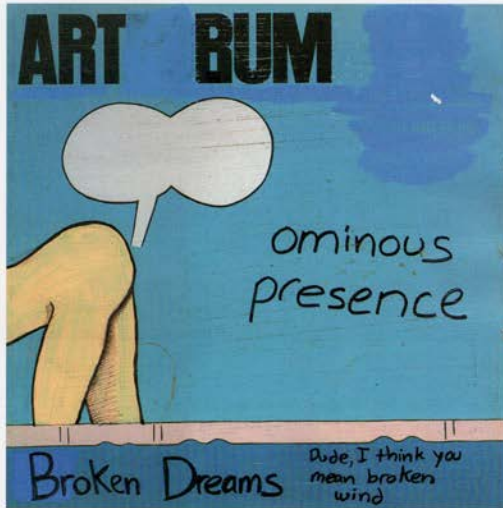
A Contemporary Art Journal

BOOKSMART

OKAY MOUNTAIN

ANDY CAMPBELL

SPRING 2010



L. Erick Michaud, *Hot Air*, 2003; acrylic and sharpie on *Artforum*; 10½ x 10½ inches; courtesy the artist

R. Gareth Long, *Platoon / Manual for Draft-Age Immigrants to Canada*, 2007; DVD; 1:59:30, the first 14 minutes of the film with subtitles; courtesy the artist

AUSTIN

booksmart
Okay Mountain

All the work in Okay Mountain's recent exhibition *booksmart* could fit neatly into a medium-sized shipping container. Curator Josh Rios, a member of the Okay Mountain collective, designed the show so that works could be cheaply shipped and installed. Traces of these transactions are everywhere: paper is folded and posters curled. The organizing principle of the show is "artistic outputs that re-order, deconstruct, or alter the book as cultural system, either for critique, humor, formal investigation, or all three." It is clear that Rios is thinking beyond artists' books, although they are considered as well. He explores the multiple ways that artists respond to books and the knowledge they purport to contain. Each artist's contribution to the exhibition is illustrative of a different kind of relationship to books—a different way of understanding a tome's use. Some are iconoclastic, like William Hundley's toddler-scaled skateboard made out of *The Business of Art* by Diane Cochrane. Some are generative, like Neva Elliott's *Mellon Homes*, where the purchase of Elliott's text contributes to the building of low-income housing projects.

The installation at Okay Mountain is bare bones, and certainly not as visually engaging as some of the gallery's previous shows, but the range of varied methodologies and media is notable. And, for such a small show, the works have much to say to one another. Grappling with each is difficult because the "texts" are multilayered: one has to consider the source material. In this way, *booksmart* forces intellectual engagement and counters any notion that the art object itself should be enough.

Erick Michaud's reworked issues of *Artforum* are the progeny of pathetic artists. "Artforum" becomes "Art Bum." Elsewhere, announcements for

blockbuster exhibitions like *Matisse/Picasso* are emblazoned with hand-drawn logos of metal bands. A black woman in a Civil Rights-era photograph by Bruce Davidson is made to say, through a cartoonish word balloon, "Wow! This picture is really loaded." The result is a puerile rejection of art-world sacred cows. In this way, Michaud's work is eerily reminiscent of the art of Sean Landers. Interesting, then, that one of Michaud's objects is the April 1994 issue of *Artforum*, which features Landers' work on its cover. Michaud rewrites the cover in Landers' imitable style, filling it with names of artists who might also be in on the joke, like Michael Smith, David Shrigley, Chris Burden, Ed Ruscha and Jim Henson. The same issue of *Artforum* features an article by artist Lorraine O'Grady, who lambastes Landers' slacker style as whiny white-boy art. I'm not sure I would extend the classification to all of Michaud's output, but certainly, O'Grady's comments apply to his work on display here.

On an adjacent wall hang five poster-size book jacket designs by Heman Chong. Following the lead of publishers who release an author's catalogue with a cohesive design schema, Chong picked five books to redesign jackets for. Included in Chong's imaginary series are Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, Stanislaw Lem's *The Futurological Congress*, Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's *Roadside Picnic*, Michel Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* and José Saramago's *Seeing*. Chong's jackets are sober designs, considering the wealth of visuality contained in the books he has chosen. In *The Futurological Congress*, for example, readers follow the main character into a dystopian future where everyone is on hallucinogenic drugs. Chong's jacket design? So square. Visuality is left to what is, in this case,

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L. Anthony Romero, *Untitled Shaman Dance #1 (After Paul Rudnick)*, 2008; performance; duration variable; courtesy the artist

R. William Hundley, *This Business of Art*, 2008; book, screws, nuts, trucks; 5 x 9½ x 6½ inches; courtesy the artist

absent—the text itself. For Camus' *The Stranger*, a multitude of tiny dots floats in a void of dark gray, conveying the abstracted and alienated consciousness of the novel's protagonist.

Two stellar works in the show are both videos. The first, by Gareth Long, is a re-subtitling of Oliver Stone's 1986 film *Platoon*. The text he inserts comes directly from the 1970, "Fourth Revised Edition" of the *Manual For Draft-Age Immigrants to Canada* edited by Mark Satin, on display beside the video monitor. The book itself provided a handy guide for those who dodged the draft and fled to Canada during the Vietnam War. Precise and unemotional, the text is the inverse of the passionate screed on war portrayed in *Platoon*. Subtitling *Platoon* with the *Manual's* text, Long's appropriation is a jarring and contradictory object, fascinating because of its gross disjunctures. Instead of discussing battle plans, characters give advice to one another about how to fill out government forms. Long's video is frightening, particularly at a moment when another draft is not outside the realm of possibility. If the text weren't so old, I would've taken notes.

The second video work is Anthony Romero's interpretation of the 1999 play *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told* by Paul Rudnick, which is itself a "homo-centric" retelling of the Book of Genesis. Rudnick's plays are funny and lame, and are, at this point, incredibly dated by the "good" feelings of the multiculti, neoliberal 1990s. None of that is here, however. Romero literally plays God with Rudnick's text, excising the stage directions and performing them in a bare, spotlit room. Romero is sheathed in a white bedspread and dons a distractingly synthetic white wig and beard

splattered with blood. In Romero's hands, God is an epileptic masturbator, bushy and bloodstained. Through his performance, Romero actually comes closer to Genesis than Rudnick, and I have to say it's the best interpretation of the Old Testament I've ever seen. The video begins with Romero's shadow bisecting the spotlight, literally cleaving lightness from darkness. It's a powerful way to begin a video—and a religion.

While Rios was holding the fort in Austin, other members of Okay Mountain picked up the PULSE Prize at the 2009 PULSE Contemporary Art Fair in Miami with their ticky-tacky *Corner Store*. The project has been getting a lot of play in the art press, and deservedly so. What makes Okay Mountain's projects, whether curatorial or artistic, so intriguing is the kind of critical depth and range they are able to achieve. Rios' show is a prime example. It's tertiary and exploratory—a heady concept for a usually non-heady art crowd, which is really the joy of it. There's more than one way to be smart. Rios' show is truly book smart, the product of an intellectually engaged mind, while *Corner Store* is street smart, immediately engaging and flip to art-world economies. Fortunately for the collective, both are needed in good measure.

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