

Art in America

September 2008

Steven Brower

Parker's Box

For his latest show at Parker's Box, Steven Brower brought together some eight years of work, filling the gallery with models and gadgets in vitrines, and lining the walls with corporate memos, documentary photos and project archives, all presented under the aegis of Brower Propulsion Laboratory (BPL), the artist's one-man corporation modeled on NASA. With his recent founding of BPL (its inauguration was backdated to include all his NASA-inspired projects), Brower joins artists who purposely obfuscate the distinction between fiction and reality, such as Walid Raad (who, under the moniker Atlas Group, documents events associated with the Lebanese War that could have happened but didn't) and Jim Shaw (who created the paintings and detailed the life of the fictional Adam O. Goodman, failed modernist painter and O-ist disciple).

When I arrived at the gallery, Brower was making unexpected repairs at his "mission control" desk—a compact hand-built module painted gray and outfitted with a computer, a surveillance camera and various other contraptions (e.g., a lamp with Carl Sagan's head as its base). The primary purpose of the control center is to broadcast live-camera feeds from and manipulate the functions of a model spacecraft that looks very much like the Mars Sojourner Rover. Brower based his Rover, named LIMPER (Limited Intelligence Marginally Produced Exploration Rover), on information gathered from sources including the Internet, aerospace museums and NASA libraries. The corporate press kit attached to the vitrine containing LIMPER explains its mission and mechanisms in a tone echoing that used by the space industry. While, in fact, LIMPER is an actual semi-autonomous robot programmed to accomplish several basic tasks, the press kit admits that the "alien environments" LIMPER will explore are "exclusively terrestrial."

Since the exhibition was something of a retrospective of Brower's NASA-based projects, previously shown works were included. "MUNIN and the Search for Life on Earth" was exhibited at Michael Steinberg Gallery in 2007 and takes its inspiration from the Mars Viking mission, the goal of which was to detect signs of life on the red planet. Brower proposes a series of tasks for the robotic spacecraft MUNIN that he claims just might prove there is no life on Earth.

Brower also displayed a glossy poster that recounts the story in words and pictures of his Lunar Excursion Module (LEM). Money is one item on his list of otherwise standard building materials for the rocket-to-surface vehicle. Not unlike NASA, Brower is constantly in need of funds for his projects. The life-size object features detailed reproductions of the exterior and the interior of the spaceship. It was shown in 2004 at Parker's Box and at Art



Steven Brower: *LIMPER*, 2007, mixed mediums, 12¾ by 31 by 21 inches; at Parker's Box.

Omi (a sculpture park in upstate New York). The accuracy of Brower's LEM came to the attention of people at Seattle's Museum of Space Flight, and it now resides there as a permanent exhibit. Considering Duchamp's provocation that something becomes art through its presentation, what do we make of Brower's LEM? Is it both art and science?

—Cathy Lebowitz