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ARTSEEN

Brooklyn Dispatches *Authentic Beauty, or The Real Phony*

by James Kalm

Sometimes as I peddle to endless art openings, studio visits, multi-million dollar museum extravaganzas and the ever-expanding galaxy of art fairs, I'm occasionally struck by parallel sensibilities or common developments. As a spate of recent shows here in Brooklyn seem to indicate, a subtle shift seems to be taking place with regard to culture's perception of beauty. Whether or not the exhibits of a few disparate artists constitute a movement or trend, they do serve as a gauge for the very contentious subject of "authenticity" and its apparent ascension over beauty in the hierarchy of aesthetic experience.

Previously the designation of the authentic was reserved for the "Outsider" or the exotic "other," usually defined by ethnicity, class, psychological state or sub-cultural enclave. With the assimilation of Art Brut and a broadening awareness of global culture, these areas have become just other fields within the greater art market, aped by professionals and routinely taught in art departments everywhere (just check out the number of wannabe Dargers and Wölfis at the next grad student show). Ironically, the new outside is actually inside, a place so bizarre and uncharted that the thought of actually going there scares the shit out of East Coast artsy types and their international cronies as well. That place is back-road, red state America.

This isn't your father's Americana of folksy flags, eagles and baseball, but a dark mirror image of Norman Rockwell's America as depicted in movies like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Sling Blade*, a low-rent world of dinged-up trailer parks and skuzzy truck-stops inhabited by toothless mouth-breathers



Brent Owens, "Taxpayer," (2007). Operational Moonshine still.

and failed nut-case eccentrics, the incestuous progeny of crank-fueled unions in Monkey Wards parking lots. These bozos actually worship God, not the New York Times.

“Knucklehead Blues” a double solo show by Jason Eisner and Brent Owens, at English Kills, is a humorous yet disturbing demonstration of “back-roads” style. Of the two, Jason Eisner seems more concerned with the iconic roads part. His constructions, fashioned from knotty-pine (a prime signifier of hick-stick) and plywood, are set on low rolling “trailers” with crude, hand-cut wooden wheels highlighted in toxic pink, matching sheets of Styrofoam insulation (another pathetic material) decorating the sculptures’ surfaces. They’d look right at home hooked to tow bars behind rusting Nissan pickup trucks in a Jefferson Davis Day parade. Eisner’s other offerings include a portable mock-billboard painted in simulated wood grain, tree stumps, high-voltage towers, and a small mixed-media drawing of three olive green figures in baseball caps chopping down and dismembering trees—an image that pays homage to that most knuckleheaded of art tools, the chainsaw. Loud as hell, dangerous and belching oily, stinking exhaust, the chainsaw is the epitome of the Dada-lumberjack mentality as well as a symbol of an environment under assault.

“ONCE YOU PASS THE MODE RATIONAL MARK YOU’VE PASSED IT, AND THE GYRATION YOU FEEL WORKING DOWN FROM THE TOP OF YOUR BRAIN’ HE SAID ‘THAT’S THE HAND OF GOD LAYING A BLESSING ON YOU. HE HAS GIVEN YOU YOUR RELEASE.’” This barely comprehensible “poem” is routed into a largish panel of thick planks by Brent Owens in a ham-fisted backwoods style recalling the signage of national parks or rustic souvenir shops. It sets the tone for a series of hayseed “inspirational plaques” with sentiments like “Lord let me die with a hammer in my hand” or “If I could fuck a mountain, Lord I would fuck a mountain.” A grouping of saws with hand-carved handles and painted blades share space with a medieval mace and chain carved from a single log, another manifestation of the woodworkers’ aesthetic running through both Eisner’s and Owens’ output. The pièce de résistance of “Knucklehead” was the fully operational still titled “The Taxpayer” (2007) dripping moonshine whiskey over the run of the show. Cobbled together from a secondhand propane grill, a large pressure cooker, various tanks and copper coils, the still is an updated version of a design that Owens inherited from his grandparents. Visiting the show the day after the opening, I spoke with the bleary-eyed Mr. Owens, who was recovering from the previous night’s “white lightning” binge, and sampled a glass of fresh booze.

These artists are presenting a view of an alternative America, not an alien “other” but the “other” within us, an authentic, visceral vision

uncontaminated by Northeastern liberal guilt and the chaffing shackles of political correctness. With its hot-rod hood sculptures and biker chick photos, Richard Prince's massive *Spiritual America* retrospective at the Guggenheim mines a similar vein, and it set off howls from New York's critical establishment. Jason Rhodes' bombastic *Black Pussy* installation at Zwirner, likewise, seeks a Post-Duchampian buzz from a gallery-filling accumulation of trading post tchachkas and cowboy druggy paraphernalia all interspersed with 180 neon "pussy words." Though the "Knuckleheads" don't enjoy similar budgets or institutional support, they are clearly junior members of this anti-aesthetic "take this art and shove it" good old boys network.

Another iconic American "other" is the lone tinkerer, the eccentric over-the-top hobbyist laboring away in the family garage, another variation of the American Dream gone slightly awry.

With "BPL," the "Brower Propulsion Laboratory," Steve Brower brings together the remnants, models and memorabilia of several projects

under one roof. According to "recently declassified documents," BPL was the bastard stepbrother of NASA. Like a collection bucket under an overflow release valve, it became the final repository for ideas deemed too outlandish or nutty for NASA, as well as for personnel who didn't make the final cut. A series of drawings with text record the comically pathetic story of one Conrad Carpenter, an astronaut washout. Never able to live up to expectations, this poor schnook spent a lifetime regretting the fact he'd missed his chance to make it into orbit. Even after his premature death the attempt to rocket his ashes into space is flubbed. A case with the space launch funerary apparatus is displayed in front of the drawings.

The well-crafted "LIMPER" (Limited Intelligence Marginally Produced Exploration Rover) (2007) is a beautifully tooled simulation of a slacker Mars Rover, filling an official-looking Plexiglas case with its aluminum wheels, stainless steel axel-struts and gold tinted foil cowling. On closer inspection it's obvious that this contraption couldn't make it to the gallery door, but its phony scientific assertiveness will power it for light-years in the minds of viewers. Brower's intense efforts to simulate "authenticity" are on warp-drive in the fabrication of "Child Astronaut Test Suit" designed for either "a chimp or an orphan." The scale is right, hose ducts and snaps are expertly installed, identification patches and seams are flawless. There's even a patina of "space



Steve Brower, "LIMPER (Limited Intelligence Marginally Produced Exploration Rover)," (2007).

dirt” for that grimy touch of real-life wear and tear.

As with the above-mentioned shows, Brower has eschewed the quest for formal beauty in favor of an off-balance ecstasy by combining an almost-credible narrative with expert craftsmanship. Devices such as glass display cases and photo documentation add another layer of faux authority, persuading the viewer of the work’s “authenticity” while simultaneously subverting it.

Is the demotion of beauty just another fashion generated by the popularity of “Outsider Art” and the increasing appreciation of artifacts by the eccentric and insane? Or is it the last gasp by a bunch of “angry white guys” sticking it to the art world man, the last of a waning breed of aesthetic “bad boys”? Have the perfect simulations of the computer-generated world made the “ugly real” more desirable than the “synthetically beautiful?” Perhaps a more provocative question would be: if authenticity can be faked, at what point does the sincerity of its simulation raise it to the level of the authentically authentic? The jury’s still out, but in the meantime, I’ll be in the garage pondering this dilemma as I sip moonshine out of a tin cup and sharpen my chainsaw.

A video tour of the exhibition "Knucklehead Blues" with a Brent Owens interview is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkNFeuIFtoU> A video tour of Steve Brower's "BPL" is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9knaptvrwqI>
