

**“Mice and their Million Hordes” (review of Carnegie International) *artUS*,
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On the heels of the decidedly sci-fi Orange County Museum of Art's California Biennial (2006), "Alien Nation" at London's Institute for Contemporary Art (2006-07), Toby Kamps and Alex Baker's Independent Curators International traveling show "Space is the Place" (2006-08), and the Barbican Art Gallery's "Aliens and Art" (2008), Carnegie Museum of Art curator Douglas Fogle brings us "Life on Mars," the 55th Carnegie International (May 3, 2008--January 11, 2009). Given its title, one might infer Fogle's plan to explore "scifi historicism," a movement L.A. critic Jan Tumlir (in *Flash Art*, March-April 2007) frames around its central question: "How should one go about reconstructing a civilization from just a few broken, cryptic clues? And ... what if the information were itself corrupted?" Visually, the mainstay of Fogle's show instead tracks another trend, that of goth art. Although key goth adherents David Altmejd, Jeremy Blake, Francesco Vezzoli, or Banks Violette are absent, their tactics--moods of horror, morbidity, darkness, or the supernatural, as well as a sense of camp and self-parody--prove plentiful.

Adjacent this exhibition's exit, Mark Manders has assembled *Assignment* (2008), an alignment on the floor of old pants, shirt, underwear, and contact lenses that eerily evokes deceased Jeremy Blake's last gesture, just as Sam Brown's music video for James Blunt's "You're Beautiful" (2004) uncannily anticipated it. However spectacular the works included by Mario and Marissa Merz are here, it's inexplicable how the noir-like "Life on Mars" finds its historical footing in their buoyant practices, rather than in those of Bruce Nauman, Louise Bourgeois, or Andy Warhol's *Disaster* series, except that curators have done that show to death, starting with MOCA's "Helter Skelter" (1992). Despite this exhibition's stated questions ("Are we alone?," "Do aliens exist?," and "Is life possible elsewhere?"), "Life on Mars" owes far more to David Bowie's 1971 song of that name bemoaning capitalism's routine products and bored consumers in search of a post-apocalyptic escape plan. But wasn't the hyper-glam, pastel palette of Bowie upending mainstream prospects a key goth inspiration?

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Not since Adam Weinberg installed the 1998-99 Mark Rothko survey at the Whitney Museum of American Art has an exhibition so simulated a cinematic odyssey's festive overture, bloodcurdling climax, and sunny termination. Hands-down one of the most important sculptures of the twentieth century, Mrs. Merz's otherworldly *Untitled (Living Sculpture)* (1966), a hovering multi-chambered sea anemone-like creature fabricated out of layers of aluminum foil presages Eva Hesse's floating webs, *arte povera* itself (circa 1967), post-minimal formlessness, feminism's anti-heroic posture, open systems, and the recent "unmonumental" trend. Greeted by Rudolf Stingel's luxurious pair of luminous paintings; captivated by Merz's planetary suspension; charmed by Cao Fei's music video, *My Future is Not a Dream* (2006), featuring factory workers at play; energized by Barry McGee's pregnant walls, stock of stacked taggers, and irregular Op panels; and encouraged by Rivane Neuenschwander's community-building *I Wish Your Wish* (2003), I was off to a running start. Neuenschwander's work requests visitors to leave written wishes in exchange for wearing a colorful ribbon whose declared wish comes true once the ribbon falls from the wearer's wrist.

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For some reason, Carnegie Internationals are plagued with unavailable works. I came too early--before closing--to experience Doug Aitken's video *Migration* (2008) projected on the building's facade. Sharon Lockhart's daily screening of *Pine Flat* (2005) was cancelled due to day camp performances; Susan Philipsz's untitled sound piece only plays Tuesdays and Thursdays in the Carnegie Music Hall; and Mark Bradford's rooftop piece spelling "HELP US" is only aerially visible (recalling MoMA's failed Ken Smith roof garden). Even Philipsz's *Sunset Song* (2003) broadcast on a loudspeaker in the Sculpture Court was barely audible. It's probably incredibly un-empathetic to describe the subjects of Lockhart's *Pine Flat* (2005) film and photography--guntoting, tattooed, and tough prepubescent kids--as scary, but some of them look like haters-in-training. One is armed to the teeth, but pacified with a Tootsie Roll Pop. Maybe the film revalorizes the features of the inhabitants of this Sierra Nevada town that just look wrong here.

On schedule and filling the museum's Hall of Sculpture, darkened to accommodate multiple projected videos of colorful windstorms, welding sparks, and turbulent water housed in bell jars, is Mike Kelley's *Kandors* (2008). Finding his birthplace shrunken as a bottle-city, Superman supposedly hooked it up to gas tanks to maintain its atmospheric pressure, thus preserving Kandor until he could determine how to expand it again. This story of superhuman efforts to save one's civilization doubles as Kelley's spectacularized tribute to neo-geo, the movement his early works toppled. Eager to soften these solid, glossy glass and resin surfaces, Kelley placed a fabric clump, a wicker basket, and pillows, tossed in lots of atmospheric haze, and floated it all in cascades of colored lights. Just as one connects the music playing on a computer to the Windows Media Player's visualization, my brain, like in some lab experiment of cognitive dimension, imagined some correlation between each of Kandor's projected images and its corresponding bottle-city, while at the same time determining that none was there.

Passing by Manfred Pernice's *deja vue 12* ([sic] 2008), a homespun sprawl of post-consumer construction materials (particle board, concrete, steel, and cardboard), I realize how the moniker "environmental" only matters if someone else cares. Once upstairs, the works' content prohibited me from pondering the possibility of other worlds, let alone utopian places, as Fogle fantasizes viewers might. Rosemarie Trockel's nearby *landscapian shroud of my mother* (2008), a black shroud grazing white ceramic plinths, was encircled by Maria Lassnig's proto-Cubist, apparently self-effacing self-portraits, and Daniel Guzman's disturbing swirls of Pop imagery and Mexican icons. Such paintings play directly into Bowie's lyrics, "It's on America's tortured brow/ that Mickey Mouse has grown up a cow./ Now the workers have struck for fame/ 'Cause Lennon's on sale again," except that in these painters' cases it is Picasso, Kirchner, Kahlo, or Orozco who are the Lennon we're expected to buy. Kai Althoff's *Untitled* (2007), a dream-inspired 3-D sprawl encased in a red cylindrical shelter, features an over-perfumed, armless, and stuffed painted lady sporting a 1970s-era coral gown guarding bolts of cloth and a man's suit, ensuring that visitors admire a resin table. *Aktive Stagnation* (2008), Katja Strunz's poster advertising her post-Euclidean constructions, says it all, recalling early 1990s forays into process-inspired minimalism.

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The biggest surprise here is Phil Collins's video *zasto ne govorim srpski (na srpskom)* (2008). Though still one edit short of a finished video, this is by far the most profound work in Collins's oeuvre, if not this exhibition. In juxtaposing multiple Kosovo citizens'

perspectives regarding language's coercive capacities within a pan-European context, Collins provides a balanced setting for a nuanced discussion that is ordinarily so mired in class, race, or religious differences that it obscures language's role in the oppressor's reign of terror. Taking the Lascaux caves as Western culture's pre-linguistic origin (TV monitors display Lascaux scrawls), *Cavemanman* (2002), Thomas Hirschhorn's multi-chambered cardboard cave, appears rigged to dynamite the West's post-Renaissance canon, including texts by or about Thomas Hobbes, Thomas Paine, Marx, Nietzsche, and Chomsky. Such books are presumably to blame for contemporary antagonistic attitudes and self-destructive tendencies or have proven incapable of thwarting them, suggesting political philosophy's failure to influence the masses (Jurgen Habermas is bizarrely spared humiliation here). Whether the cave's inhabitants suffer bondage or are linked by interdependent systems, they are drowning in consumer goods that overflow golden trashcans or media crap occupying their mental space. Floating in the adjacent gallery are this caustic species' ghosts, Bruce Connor's *Angels* (1975), a-camera photograms created by performing before the beam of a slide projector on a stage made from light-sensitive paper. Surrounded by Warhol-like drawings, Andro Wekua's life-sized, partly dressed guy seated at a table has been blinded to the surroundings by bandages over his eyes that let him see otherwise.

Several works, such as Richard Wright's all-over optical wall painting and Ranjani Shettar's suspended grid of bluish beeswax pearls are lovely to behold, while Vija Celmins's commanding portraits of the night sky explain man's faith in super-human powers. (The National Gallery has foolishly encased their Celmins in a Plexiglas sheet bolted to the wall, eliminating the viewer's ability to perceive the surface's subtle variations.) One of the exhibition's most inventive works is Ryan Gander's *A sheet of paper on which I was about to draw, as it slipped from my table and fell to the floor* (2008). If one looks closely at the dozens of glass spheres floating on the floor, one finds miniature sheets of paper magically drifting at all different angles. Thomas Schutte's fruit drawings accompanied by dismembered bronze zombies, Trockel's bulky ceramic and glazed platinum painting *Less savage than others* (2007), and Philipsz's songs emanating from loudspeakers resume conversations begun at Skulptur Projekte Munster: a floating fruit sculpture, a hewed hedge of the same title, and a song slung under a bridge.

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It cannot be accidental that after all of this Sturm und Drang, this "longing and memory," dread and melancholy, the exhibition's most optimistic works pop up at its tail end. One of the most "alive" artists of all time is Paul Thek, whose *Untitled* (Lufthansa notebook) (ca. 1975) lists "96 Sacraments." The remaining galleries of "Life on Mars" inspired me to compose four additional sacraments: (97) to experience the glorious and magical night sky (Vija Celmins); (98) to revere the sun's vigilance (Noguchi Rika); (99) to marvel at five pairs of forgotten children's galoshes (Fischli & Weiss); and (100) to realize the beauty of dancing at full throttle (Apichatpong Weerasethakul). There one would also find Richard Hughes's surprising bequests: peeling psychedelic walls, suspended shoes, and mattresses sprouting magic mushrooms. Fogle has commented that we inhabit an unmoored world "spinning out of control." I consider our lives infinitely more secure than those of our predecessors. We just carry the extra psychological burden of realizing that we have also made lives worse for others. Yes, we risk being fired at random, losing our health insurance, watching our life savings get wiped out in a single day, or having our loved ones deceive us, but we live longer lives, are afforded adventures once limited to a

privileged few, and have ready access to life's rich pageant (world cuisine, traveling exhibitions, cultural traditions, novel languages).

On leaving "Life on Mars," I felt some vague parallel between all of these artists pointing out how rotten we are and this summer's obsession with superhero flicks (five to date), as if only a superhero can rescue us from the madness that is us. In rethinking this, I realize that Disney's Wall-E is the more relevant film here. Even if there's life on Mars, it will not save us from our self-destructive, consumptive copycat lifestyles. We will still be "mice in their million hordes," as Bowie warned almost 40 years ago. Even stranger, we will do whatever we can to return to our mess (the Hirshhorn/Plato slave cave), because we are submissive earthlings through and through. No one can save us and utopias are escapist distractions. Take Thek's lively advice, "Just love what you're doing." Our only option is to live the life we respect, to build the world that we believe in, to hang out with those we admire, and to hope that a Marisa Merz retrospective travels here very soon.

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