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DIET 09

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GALLERY DIET 2009

Paul and Estelle Berg started collecting contemporary art on their honeymoon forty-seven years ago and haven't stopped since. The couple is a regular feature at fairs and galleries all over the world but always hold a special place in their schedule for openings at Gallery Diet. "I always look forward to seeing what [Director Nina Johnson's] done," Paul Berg says. "Nina surprises you. She's fearless." Despite the Bergs' commitment to taking chances with young artists, they like their dealers to be consistent. "If a dealer has one good piece, that's just luck," Paul says, whereas he feels Diet-whether he likes all the work or not-always makes a statement with every show. "[Nina's] doing things that a lot of staid galleries never do," he says.

Visitors to the gallery notice that Johnson's consistency extends to every aspect of management: the office hours (which, in contrast to many galleries, are strictly kept), her responsiveness to inquiries, and, as Berg notes, her thorough knowledge of the work presented and its history. Diet is a place where artists drop by to hang out and is always swamped during the Second Saturday Wynwood art walk, the area's once-a-month open house. Carlos Suarez de Jesus, longtime art critic for the Miami New Times, says he always makes a new show at Diet a priority and credits Johnson for the gallery's exciting aura. "Nina's one of the more personable dealers I've met," he says, "in addition to being one of the most provocative." Or, as resident artist Charley Friedman puts it, "Diet is Nina, and that is a good thing."

Including Friedman, the Gallery now represents Brian Burkhardt, Abby Manock, Richard Höglund, and Daniel Milewski, in addition to showing work by a host of oth-

ers via it's invitational program. In 2009, all five showed their work at Diet, either through individual pieces, a solo show, or, in the case of Burkhardt, as a guest curator. According to Johnson, if the year's slate of shows had a theme, it would be that each questions the underlying structures of objects, narratives, and/or ideologies. "Collectively, [it's] an introspective look into things we take for granted," she says. But while all five of the gallery's represented artists deal with the theme of structure, their individual approaches couldn't have been more diverse.

Abby Manock's work in "Counters", mounted in January, restricted itself to iterations of five colors: red, blue, green, yellow, and pink (with the occasional negative space of black and white), all uniformly shaded with corporate exactitude. The objects ranged from the seemingly innocuous (luggage) to the strange (airplane seats) to the disturbing (pistols), and each had the surreal quality of being pulled from the set of a live children's television show from an earlier era. In other words, they appear falsely optimistic, evenly exuberantly so.

Manock's constructed world-drawings, sculpture, installation, performance, and video-attempts to bridge the gap between the personal and political, the idealized memories of the artist's past and her feelings of ill-at-ease with the landscape of contemporary society. Through the hermiticized use of color, Manock inserts her interior self into the modern world, thereby making a robber's mask seem like child's play and a cash register like the insidious tool of an evil laboratory experiment. A stark honesty carries through the work, a refusal to trick the viewer into believing any of these objects are more than representations. Unlike society-at-large, Manock's work contains no false advertising.

The same can't be said of Daniel Milewski's "The Best of Intentions", where artifice takes center stage but serves a different function. Equally diverse as Manock's in terms of technique and material, Milewski's first solo show at Diet incorporates a variety of found or constructed materials with pop sensibility nun-chucks, plastic figurines, and varsity letters-but in robbing them of context, form, and usage, Milewski transforms

them into miniature investigations of the mental landscape.

Three piles of homemade nun-chucks, favorite tools of 80's Ninja films, sit inside formally constructed frames. Propped on a pedestal, a conglomeration of screws, nails and anchors seems like a ready-made, but each is actually a fragile imitation constructed from polyurethane. "Black Square on White Ground" turns the chenille of varsity letters into a badge for nothing, and "Day Sky + Night Sky" seems at first like an exercise in color but is actually high concept. For several months, Milewski cut out every piece of sky he saw in a magazine, then assembled the day sky clippings on one canvas and the night sky on the other. What results-the day clippings far exceeding the night-could be optimism, or optimism's greatest critique.

Sonya Blesofsky also has a predilection for reconstructing common objects. Her March show at Diet, titled "New Work", featured cinder blocks, razor wire, milk crates, and fences. None however were the objects themselves; instead, each was made from the delicate triumvirate of vellum, glue, and tape. Their stark whiteness, especially against Diet's white walls, served to privilege the amazing skill involved in their construction. The objects were chosen to represent the Wynwood District surrounding the gallery, an urban landscape of crude self-protection, but the fragility of their paper-made shapes somehow became edifices of abiding strength.

Although Brian Burkhardt's solo show doesn't go up until next year, the artist facilitated a show at Diet in June and July: "Oh Nancy," a collaborative show by over twenty Boston artists. Burkhardt met the curators, Fionn McCabe and Nate Wellman, through a previous project he organized called "Word of Mouth", in which Burkhardt openly solicited work through the grapevine. The only rules were that the art had to fit in a flat rate priority box. McCabe and Wellman at the time were working on "Oh Nancy," their own collaborative project based on a loose narrative that takes place at an imaginary high school, and Burkhardt admired the spirit of the collaboration so much that he asked Johnson if he could bring it to Diet over the summer.

"To me the narrative is not important," Burkhardt says. "It's about getting other people involved and sharing the stage." The show, which ranged from sculptures of football helmets, to paper mache gravestones, to paintings, to action figures, represented a diverse range of scale and style in the interpretations of the narrative, as well as in the age of the artists, who were as young as 16 and as old as 39. The artists also made an audio tour to accompany the show, pulling "Oh Nancy" one step farther away from what Burkhardt describes as the typical solo journey of each artist. "I tend to admire when people can take this adventure [of making art alone] and make it collaborative," Burkhardt says.

A solo show by Charlie Friedman can often feel like a collaboration. "The themes running through my work are the vastly absurd, contradictory and humorous aspects of life experience," he says, and that variety is matched by the materials involved: balloons, sponges, carpet, lobster shells, eggs, used Q-tips, children's toys, etc. Friedman previously mounted a solo show—a collection of four years of work—in 2008, and will mount another one in January of 2010. He also exhibited work in the last show of the year at Diet, Second Skin, which incorporated work from he, Burkhardt, Höglund, and Manock, in addition to Liz Cohen, Jim Gladstone, Julie Lequin, Shana Moulton, and Clifford Owens. Mounted in anticipation of December's Art Basel Miami week, Second Skin addressed questions of appropriation in contemporary art.

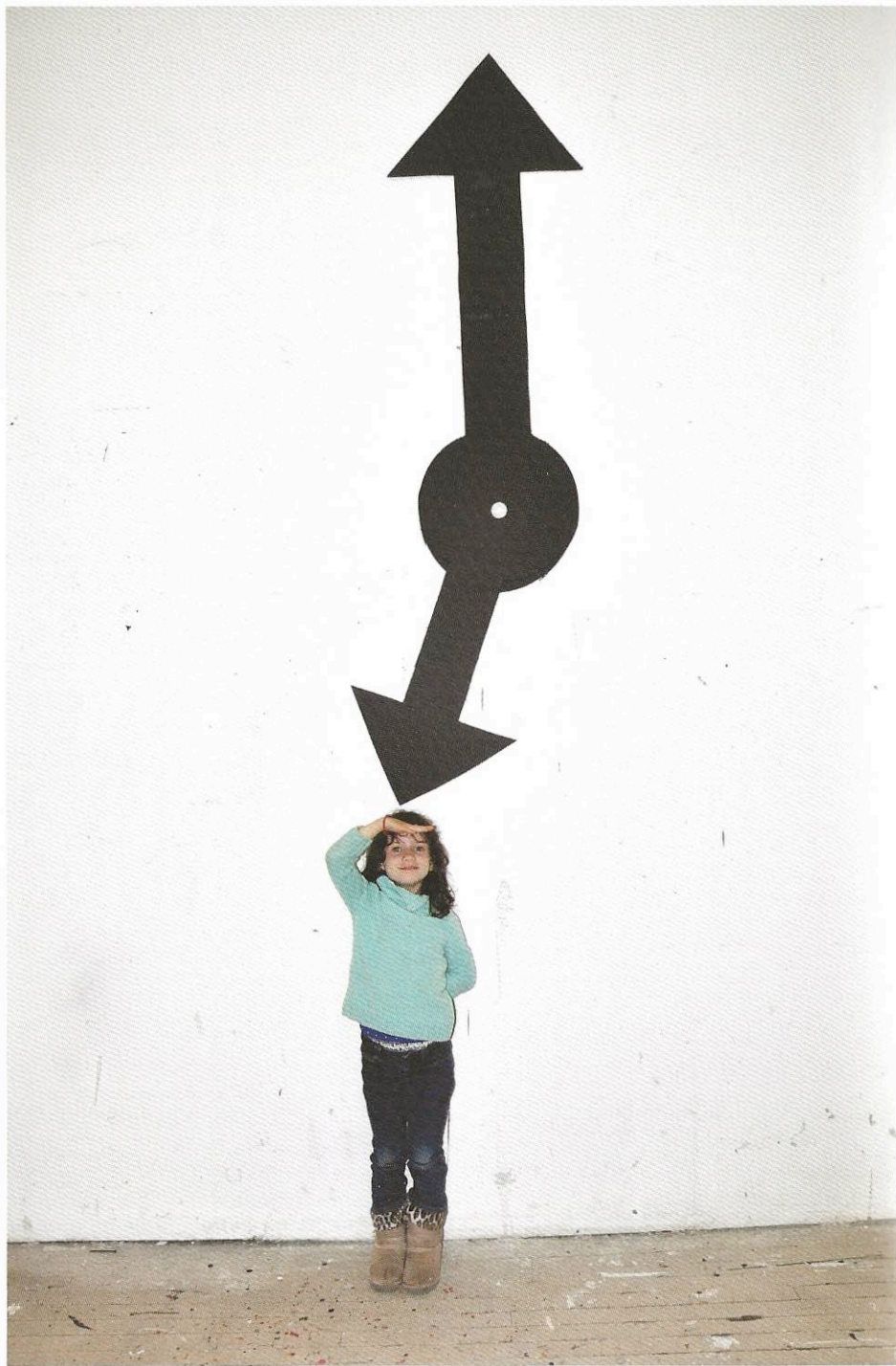
That show was preceded by Richard Höglund's solo show titled "Fieldwork." A voracious reader with a taste for poetry's and philosophy's evocative obscurities, Höglund makes drawings that nevertheless display a cartographer's exactitude. "Out of all artistic mediums, drawing best exteriorizes the primitive will to communicate," Höglund says, whose work often comes from a place of deep inquiry into language. Höglund has a healthy obsession with the human actions of speaking, reading, interpreting, and the sustenance of an artistic practice, these things, as he explains it, that people do in order to create value in the face of impending death.

The series of drawings is part of a larger project sequence titled, *The true definition of Man does not involve any consideration of the number 20* which also involves a narrative video suite, a road race, and a boxing match—more conceptual elements that are taking place next year in Europe. A dedicated nomad, Höglund lives out of a suitcase, speaks fluent French and functional Latin, Bulgarian, and German, and is passionately committed to engaging every culture he finds himself immersed in, a catholic generosity reflected in the intellectual scope of the work.

But Höglund's stay in Miami isn't unique. Diet's invitational program brought a number of visiting artists into town for four separate shows in 2009. In April, the gallery exhibited *The Benjamin Project*, by the German collaborative, Empfangshalle and Thomas Adebahr, a series of painted recreations of pages from Walter Benjamin's seminal text, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." May became a forum for new paintings by New York artists Kristopher Benedict and Peter LaBeir. Called *Citygarden and Microscope*, the show boldly called for a return to neo-realism. In September, Johnson hosted both Hills Snyder (in the project room), and an exhibit by the Chicago-based artist team Miller and Shellabarger. Titled "Dolos", the show by the husband-and-husband team incorporated both static objects and live performances in an effort to materialize the relationship between the two men.

The gesture-making corporeal the relationships between people—could be a definition for art in general, and an underlying mission statement of the gallery itself. Burkhardt, one of the least emerging of the five resident artists, has worked with many galleries but currently only shows with Diet because he says Johnson privileges the relationship with the artist and his or her work over the relationship's commercial value.

"She just wants you to put your best foot forward," he says.



CHARLEY FRIEDMAN

CHARLEY FRIEDMAN'S MIND

What is it bearing down on, now, I wonder?

Charley Friedman looks for limits. He sets up little time bombs of humor under every chair. He does it with deadpan, mordant reserve. It's been said artists wrestle with truth and lying truths. Few artists, however, are possessed of the paradoxical frame of mind that inhabits Friedman's soul. To be a born comic is to see the infinite sadness of things people, I think.

Paradox.

Derived from the Greek *para + doxa*. It means going beyond the limits of public opinion or of known things. This penetrating re-framing of mind is what Friedman treasures and trades on in his work. It is his currency. He is the perpetual seeker of the problem, looking to the sun all types of fixations, worries, complexes or neuroses of the private and collective type. Often his art addresses feelings of inadequacy or powerlessness (*World, 2004-6, G-O-D, 1999*). At other times his work addresses the body and its functions (*Lymphatic/Hormonal System, 2005-6*). In still other works Friedman deals with art practices (*MOM, 2004*), social pathologies (*Fall Swastika in Cornish, NH, 2000*), and offerings of the conventions and values of an art world that persists in making high-priestly claims for itself (*Felix, Flowers, Flags & Poems, 2001*). What is good with Friedman is that he is a rigorous thinker and he is mindful of materials and surfaces and textures and colors. This walking visual think-tank is also good with his hands. He'll take on any material or substance (*Lobster Clock, 2006*) as well as his own body (*Nipple Eyes*), and the attention that is required in the service of addressing issues that clearly can't be resolved by attending to.

I visited his studio in late July to see what he was up to see the various projects he was working on (or, rather: playing with). All of them in the planning or re-working stages. As usual there is a gentle humor in all that he does. His comedic take on things is generous and warm, deeply humanistic like a Sempè drawing. His frame of mind wants to get to the core of something human whether it is a pleasure, a situation, a dilemma, a habit, an attitude. Usually what triggers his drives is something (... curiosity... vexation ... interest ... comment?) that is personal, even private. The important thing to know about Charley is that whatever it is that he is drawn to he will be open and generous in sharing his

tional truth. It is this commitment to the search on Charley's part that makes all of his diverse art works freshly unpredictable.

He's working right now on his attraction to arrows and what they mean or signify as a graphic signifier. Infinite extension in some sense, delimitation in other contexts. His device that includes two giant handmade three-dimensional arrows, one quite a bit larger than the other, both of them attached at their base and set on a timer. The object hugs the wall as much as it can, but it's clumsy and awkward hands makes it look anything but sleekly authoritative. If it is telling me the time, it is hardly only informing me of an empirical fact. Instead it seems to be addressing the temporal condition, and its temporal condition as well.

I know that one of the rules of joke making is that if you explain a joke or analyze humor you kill it. That's how fragile it is. In that sense it is a bit like art. That being said let me also say this: I am always amazed and enchanted at how wise our leading comic charmers are, whether they come from the world of entertainment, the visual arts, literature, or philosophy. One of my favorite commentators on humor's fabrication (along with Sigmund Freud, Mark Twain, George Carlin, Groucho Marx, Steve Martin and Simon Critchley) is the early twentieth century philosopher Henri Bergson. In his seminal study *Le Rire* (translated as *Laughter- An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*) he writes:

"Let us go on to society. As we are both in it and of it, we cannot help treating it as a living being. Any image then, suggestive of the notion of a society disguising itself, or of a social masquerade, so to speak, will be laughable. Now, such a notion is formed when we perceive anything inert or stereotyped, or simply readymade, on the surface of living society. There we have rigidity over again, clashing with the inner suppleness of life. The ceremonial side of social life must therefore always include a latent comic element, which is only waiting for an opportunity to burst into full view. It might be said that ceremonies are to the social body what clothing are to the individual body; they owe their seriousness to the fact that they are associated in our minds with the serious object with which custom associates them, and when we isolate them in imagination, they forthwith lose their seriousness. For any ceremony to become comic, then, it is enough that our attention be fixed on the ceremonial element in it and that we neglect its matter as philosophers say think only of its form...Any form or formula is a ready made frame into which the comic element may be fitted." [1]

In the tradition of some of our greatest pranksters and obscurantists (Marcel Duchamp, Maurizio Cattelan, Gino De Dominicis are ideational placeholders for the artist) Charley Friedman analyzes those forms, formats and formulas that surround and permeate the life of a socialized hominid. He has been quoted by the media as saying "I'm very interested in how humor plays out...I think of humor as my raw material." Friedman looks at material environments or social circumstances that underlie the "ceremony" as Bergson puts it, of the life-world. It is not surprising that Charley enjoys looking at stereotypes and clichés, those default air-bubbles that keep us alive, that pre-condition us to accept things as they are.

OK.

I am here to report that Friedman is also investigating the theme, subject, idea and content of the term "super powers" that belong to and make the superhero a "superhero." He's making models now of an arm and hand out of which projects some emanating force. And he is doing so using common materials such as paper and wood and glue and a lot of felt of many colors.

He is reworking his *I Like Moist Things* sculpture. That's his hanging words artpiece consisting of the sixteen letters making up this sentiment carved out of thick sponges that are suspended from a circulatory framework that keeps them saturated with water. The excess H2O drip into a children's pool. I asked him if the words were meant to be taken as a metaphoric exemplification of Nature herself making a pronouncement of some sort (yeah, just ask a critic, he'll know.). Friedman replied, "No, this is about me. That's how I feel about things. I like moist things."

Finally I almost stepped on several flat pieces of metal and bars on the floor, an unfinished work. "That's my 'Authentic Fake Calder' ", he said. And indeed it looked like a quite graceful and gen-u-ine little Calder-in-the-making being primed for the Big Stage of human admiration and envy. I mentioned to Charley that as a reporter I had attended an art investor's conference recently sponsored by a large finance house. The news was generally glum but one of the gentlemen on the podium mentioned that Calder's works were considered an absolute solid investment because of factors such as limited production (he's dead: great career move), great catalog raisonné, and a very together Calder Foundation that had, apparently, a reputation for being reliable when provenance questions needed to be answered. I asked Charley Friedman, the artist, what he thought of that. He smiled.

- Dominique Nahas
August 2009
New York City

Dominique Nahas is an independent critic and curator. Most recently he curated COMMUNE (May 21-June 27, 2009) for the Black & White Gallery in Manhattan's Chelsea District. Nahas teaches critical studies in the fine arts department at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and he is a critique faculty member at the New York Studio Program. He is the 2009-10 Critic-in-Residence at Maryland Institute College of Art's Hoffberger Graduate School in Baltimore. His upcoming monograph for Vendome Press "The Worlds of Hunt Slonem" is due Spring 2010.

[1] Henri Bergson, *Laughter-An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. (Kobenhavn & Los Angeles: Green Integer Books, 1999),p. 45. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell, translators.