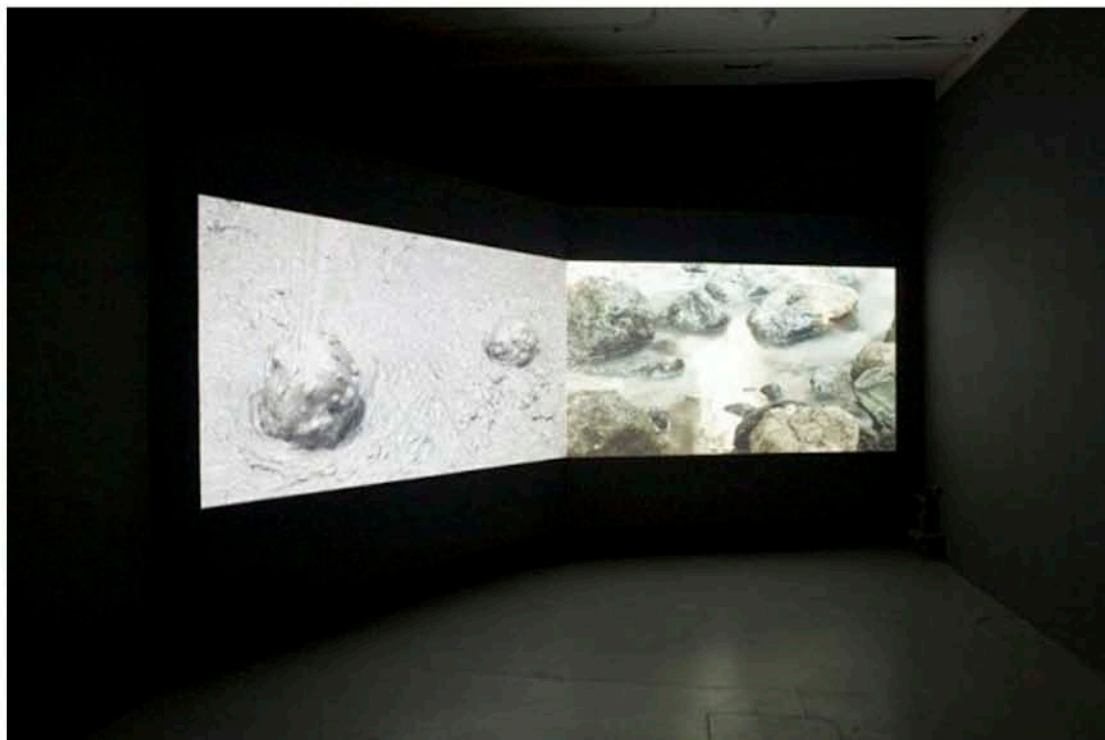


EXHIBITIONS | MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

Greater New York

By John Mollett | June 29, 2010



Gilad Ratman, The 588 Project, 2009, 2-channel video installation, HDV, 8 min 11 sec, Photos by Matthew Septimus, Donald Rothfeld Collection of Contemporary Israeli Art. Courtesy of Braverman Gallery, Tel

The quinquennial show “Greater New York” at MoMA PS1 in Long Island City, New York features the work of 68 emerging artists that are living and working in the greater New York area. When viewing the show, it is important to keep in mind that the intention of the show’s curators, Klaus Biesnbach, Connie Butler, and Neville Wakefield, is not to present these works as the artists’ magnum opuses, but to showcase a broad variety of artistic processes and practices used by artists today. By showing works of 68 artists, versus the much more tightly packed 2005 exhibition, which featured 162 artists, the curators give viewers the space to watch as the artists navigate through various media and blur the commercial lines that exist between fine art, photography, performance, and video.

Not every work in this exhibition is deeply impressive, and nor should that be the expectation; the artists are young and still in the process of developing their artistic languages. There are some pieces that could be confused with works left over in the art room closet from back when the space was a functioning elementary school, such as Leidy Churchman’s *Table Top*, a collection clay objects such as a strawberry, a rock, a Gordon’s fisherman bust, and a wedge of blue cheese. The room featuring Brody Condon’s colorful steel and screen printed fabric cubes looked like a beat-up campsite at Burning Man, with video pieces that amounted to a kind of Renaissance festival mockery. Whether Condon’s work is serious – or highly developed humor – it was all a bit schlock.

But Churchman, the Puck-like ambiguous transgender, also exhibited more interesting homoerotic oil on wood pieces that contrast taboo sexual situations with familiar colors and patterns. In one such work, two bearded men – one with a baby blue penis and the other with a bubblegum pink penis – insert themselves

into a third bearded man who is wearing the kind of striped shirt made iconic by Pablo Picasso. The patterns in the work reveal Churchman's understanding of geometric abstract artists like Vasaraly and, equally, the familiar branding of the Burberry tartan. With a paint-by-numbers approach to pop sexuality in the vein of Alex Katz and David Hockney, the cleanliness of line and the Crayola box-bright colors tease the viewers' senses as the mischievousness push-and-pull of each piece tests ones comfort level. You are not sure whether to be elated by their innocence and sweetness or disturbed by the nasty.



Leidy Churchman, Tabletop, 2009, Oil on clay, rock, apple, and sock on table, 35 x 35 x 48", Photos by Matthew Septimus, Courtesy the artist and MoMA PS1

And speaking of the nasty: there's Leigh Ledare, the artist whose room at PS1 gets the tiara for "Most Disturbing." If you are not paying close attention, you may not realize that the two figures featured in a number of his photographs (a young man and a past-her-prime, former beauty queen with spread legs

tussling together in the nude) are actually Ledare and his mother, Tina Peterson. The two are closer to being an artistic team than artist and subject. Perhaps Ledare is a one trick pony whose exploration of his relationship with his mother is like a flimflammer circus freak biting the heads off of chickens – how far does one need to push the boundaries to get attention, and when does art become more about pushing boundaries than the actual visual product? But then again, it is the psychological proximity and genuine intimacy between Ledare and his mother that enables him to capture images that are both beautiful to the viewer and emotionally authentic, even while he challenges the boundaries of privacy and candor. With developments such as the Patriot Act and Facebook, television shows like *Wifeswap*, and celebrities using crotch shots to get tabloid fix, Ledare has succeeded in analyzing the relevant realm of disappearing discretion.

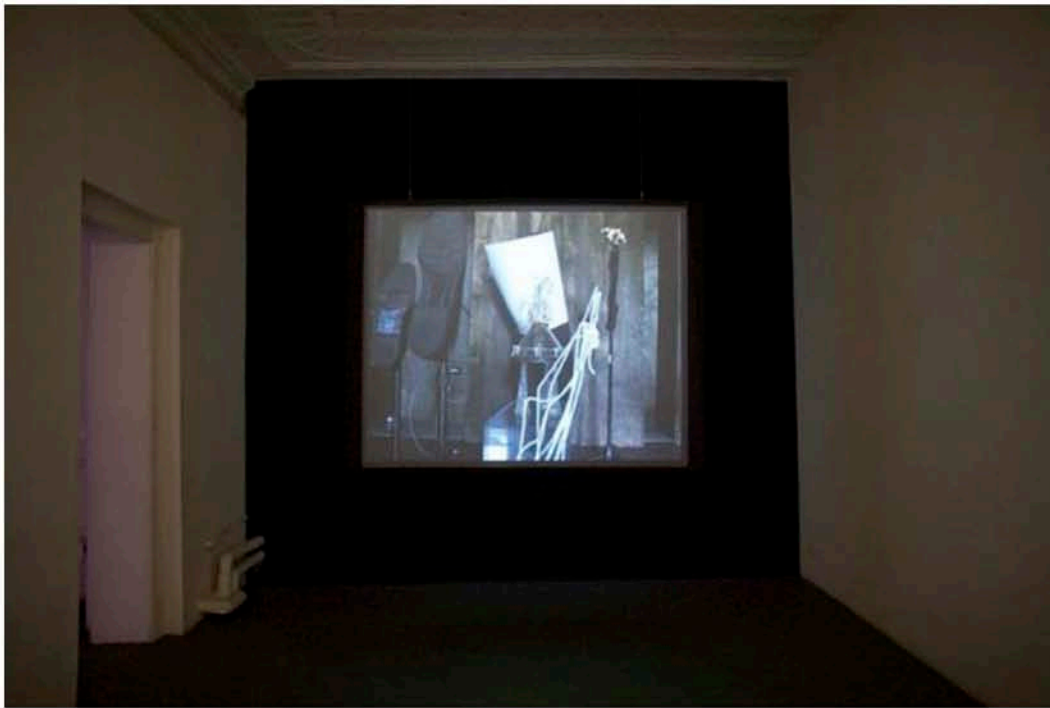
The sculpture of Debo Eilers caught my eye quickly, but it took me a few stare downs to surrender and roll over (though, other PSI museum attendees were won over by his work much more quickly). One young artist drifted away from conversation in awe at one his Eilers' pieces, repeating at least three times, "I really like this work." An elderly woman with a pen and paper in her hand remarked that the work was fantastic – like nothing that she had ever seen. Eilers's work is comprised of various Styrofoam forms, some cut into the sewage grates, others in crude elementary shapes, and all in shades of neon from a spray can. The simple, elementary images of edible animals, fruits, vegetables, are created from plastic pastel shade resins and contrasted to subtle bathroom and sewage references such as resins bowel's and a Robert Rauschenberg-esque abstract decoupage of a bathroom. Eilers' reminds the viewer of the process of consumption – the hormones and chemicals in food that the body must process. The connection between the apple, that mainstay of elementary school brownnosing and the PSI exhibition space is quite apropos.



Debo Eilers, Instillation view, Photos by Matthew Septimus, Courtesy Of Stellar Rays Gallery and MoMA PSI

Some of the work in the exhibition is truly great. I have taken four trips to “Greater New York” and with each visit I become more entranced by Gilad Ratman’s two-channel video installation *The 588 Project*. Ratman’s piece, a meditation on the environment, forms a symbiotic relationship between grime and elegance and reveals the muddy area between nature and the forces within its bounty that may destroy it. An alien presence emerges from a mud pit hibernation in a kind of vernal awakening that produces unique, meditative recorder music by expelling air and waste into tubes. The sounds are reminiscent, perhaps, of a kind of shamanism. Ratman is not the only artist to address environmental concerns in the show, but he does so with the most thoughtful subtlety. David Brooks, whose work is a comment on deforestation, features a portion of once-living forest now suffocated by concrete, is much more direct.

In the room next to Ratman is the work of artist Tommy Hartung, among the best in the show. Hartung’s video, *The Ascent of Man*, employs stop motion to animate machete sculptures in a narrative on the rise and ultimate fall of humanity. The contradictory movements of flow and hack give the piece its own language, and Hartung’s sculptures in the video were an impressive achievement not even approximated by most of the other sculptural works in the survey. I only wish that I were able to see these machetes in person and experience them as objects, as one can with Calder’s *Circus*.



Tommy Hartung, The Ascent of Man, 2009, Video (color, Sound), 15:36 min, Photos by Matthew Septimus, Courtesy the artist and Of Stellar Rays and MoMA PSI

“Greater New York” is, ultimately, a show about the artists’ processes and explorations, both within the scope of their work and in terms of their growing careers. They grapple with intense subjects and ideas that are very current and which we, as viewers, cannot yet view in hindsight. The show also offers a glimpse into how these artists work as a community of young creators and the grassroots artistic trends that are developing in New York as a result. In a survey that includes the works of 68 artists, it would be impossible (and rather moronic) to love or hate them all and certainly, there were some specific pieces and artists that I would have omitted from the show, but there are many others whose work I am very happy to have viewed and look forward to seeing further develop.