

IVAN GASKELL

INCHOATE THOUGHTS

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"THIS IS KILLING ME"

Mass MoCA,
North Adams, Massachusetts
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Comprising work by eight American artists, this is a youthful show organized by Diana Nawi while a Clark-Williams Graduate Program in History of Art student intern at Mass MoCA. Unsurprisingly, it is about trying to make it in an artworld in which few do. Celebrity is their goal, but just getting noticed would be a start. This is so for curators as well as for artists, so Nawi is in the same boat as those she has chosen. Nawi, the arbiter of the artists' fates during the selection process, is the youngest of those involved. Among the artists, Shana Lutker and Marco Rios, date from 1978,

whereas the oldest, Sean Landers, was born in 1962.

Solipsism in art takes many forms. Let us get a flavor of the artists' approaches in descending age order.

Sean Landers presents canvases painted with phrases encapsulating his anxieties as an artist. *Le'Go My Ego* (2007) does anything but what its title urges, being a flow chart of interconnected notions, such as "I'M NOT SURE OF ANYTHING"—"BUT I HAVE A LOT OF HOPE FOR SOMETHING"—"which means next to nothing." One could spend a lot of time wandering this often amusing stream of consciousness with its many rapids and eddies.

Joe Zane has a serious case of the wannabes. He inserts himself and his work into convincingly falsified copies of contemporary art publications. Faked issues of *Artforum* and *Parkett*, and books such as Ursula Meyer's *Conceptual Art* (1972) are arrayed in a counter case under the title *I wished I was a Giant* (2006). He does not belong in this company if only because he was a mere infant when several of them appeared. Yet the brilliance of the conception and its faultless execution earn him the place he covets—or does it? The double irony turns out to be triple, for knowing that few artists get so much attention, he registers the futility of success by applying a layer of dust to the surface of the case, which he has inscribed with idle finger scribbles. The evidence of fame, whether real or faked, is sure to be neglected—a final twist.

If within the vainglory of Zane's work there is at least a scrap of amusement, Whitney Bedford's paintings lack so much

as a trace of humor. She presents her anxieties through large painted depictions of mutilated, bloodied and partly bandaged hands with unambiguous titles such as *Broken Hand 26* (2005). Perhaps anticipating the condition in which she could not work has an apotropaic effect, or at least intent.

Karl Haendel has arranged a group of thirteen of his own large, highly realistic pencil drawings in overlapping stacks against the gallery wall. Some are representational, such as *Studio Still Life #3* (2004), depicting studio tools and various odds-and-ends. Others are textual, such as *ANOTHER FUCKING MITVAH* (2007), comprising that phrase repeated in a single column again and again. Weltschmerz? Ennui? Perhaps, but at least if the adolescence is arrested the technique is arresting.

Andrew Kuo constructs diagrams including pie and bar graphs to illustrate topics such as *My Relationship to Art as of May 10, 2008 [Crooked-Mouth Face]* (2008), which includes a bar graph setting out, in descending order of his admiration, "Twelve artists that I wish I was (solely based on their stuff)." The tallest bar represents Sophie Calle, the shortest Andrew Jeffrey Wright, both pranksters in their different ways.

The most hilarious exposition of artist's angst in the show is a video by Kuo's exact contemporary Kalup Linzy. In *Conversations wit de Churen V: As da Art World Might Turn* (2006), Linzy, a strapping African American, plays Katonya in tight and skimpy women's clothes and a ridiculous blonde wig. Katonya is an aspiring

artist searching for a gallery show, critical attention, and a meaningful relationship. Drenched in the irony of an improbably happy ending, all her dreams come true.

Shana Lutker is one of the two youngest artists in the show. Her dreams are the raw material of her art. Her typescript books, presented for inspection, *Dream Book 2003 (Word Version)* (2004), and *Dream Book 2004 (Word Version)* (2005) are, frankly, unreadable. They come to life in *House (1986-1996) with Art That I Dreamt That I Made* (2005-2009), an open maquette of a building—her childhood home—containing small-scale models of artworks from her dreams, among them a concentration camp tower, and a bulging black garbage bag on a fluted pedestal. Here we seem to have strayed from the worlds of Jacques Lacan and Melanie Kline into those of René Magritte and Susan Stewart, earnestness giving way to humor.

In a video set in a gym, with cheerleaders, two musicians thrashing drum kits, and a referee, Marcos Rios, clad like a weightlifter, struggles to lift a giant spirit level onto his shoulders, and to hold it perfectly horizontal. Like all art-making, this is an impossible task to achieve perfectly. His efforts are futile yet heroic.

The critical theory of an earlier generation, presumably absorbed by these artists and their curator, sanctioned the deconstruction of artistic endeavor, encouraging meditation on method and motive masquerading as unmasking. In considering their predicament—getting noticed, then sustaining that notice—few aspiring artists

seek to define accurately where self-irony ends and self-pity begins, where pathos gives way to bathos. By exposing the mask behind the mask, and the mask behind that again, Andy Warhol constructed a viable alternative to sincerity, a version of fame and success that made an apparent virtue of solipsism, yet was profoundly private and self-concealing. No wonder it is difficult to be an artist in his wake. Others artists and curators succeed in avoiding faux profundity, but sometimes an avuncular chuckle soothes the soul.

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