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Group Material

P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center

One aspect of recent painting that has not yet been much discussed is its obsession with collecting, and with the display of such activity. It is not simply that the work is collectible, but that in its very structure it is concerned with collecting, with amassing a fortune of detail and information with which to dazzle us. Images and styles, materials and methods, clichés and quotations are piled dazzlingly on top of piles. These great collections are then spread across a great deal of space, and in as many galleries as can be arranged at once, so that we may admire their accumulated power. On the face of it the results are impressive, as all such shows of force are meant to be. But the impression soon sours, resistance builds, and discerning viewers begin to notice a certain hollowness to it all.

Group Material has been addressing this empty rhetoric of property relations over the past few years, coordinating large group shows that purposefully downplay the value of individual contributions in favor of an interplay of ideas between theme and context. Their contribution to this winter's broad-based action "Artists Call against US Intervention in Central America" was a display of collectibles, a display of power and ownership. Some of the commodities that were on show have directly enriched a few landowners and enslaved everyone else in the region—coffee, bananas, copper, cotton, tobacco. Others were more indirect, but equally devastating—the commodities of cultural exchange; art work of all kinds. There were satires from Honoré Daumier to George Grosz to Barbara Kruger, paintings of all kinds, up-to-the-minute contemporary art and dopey agitprop, documentary photographs and more arty ones, even appearances by Tina Modotti and Diego Rivera. Some of the art could be seen as liberating, some clearly was not. Some of it came through clean, some looked compromised. This unsettling contradiction was the point of the show; no answers were posited, the authority of any solution was shunned. Instead, Group Material took a variety of objects, ideas, and representations and

placed them together in such a way that they might begin a discourse on power as it has developed in a particular place. This context was provided by a red line that encircled the room at eye level, a line marked with dates when U.S. domination of the area reached a crisis and military action was taken, from Uruguay in 1868 to Grenada in 1983. Festooned with its commodities, the line was an image of the continuity of power, an enveloping image that was broken only intermittently.

Those seeking exact correspondences between dates and display items would have been disappointed, for the evidence was put to a different use. A point-by-point demonstration would simply have been another accretion of power, another construction of influence. Group Material attempted something else, attempted to bring the viewer to an understanding that any accumulation of assets, be they dollars, arms, objects, or images, is necessarily accompanied by a need to dominate those with less; and that the politics on West Broadway are little different from those on Pennsylvania Avenue.

James Brown

Tony Shafrazi Gallery

These paintings are so deliciously ripe that there's a danger they'll turn rotten. A perfect match of European touch and American *brut*, they reek of high fashion, and indeed, since this successful show, James Brown's disdainful masks have peered at us from the pages of many a fashion spread. The decadence is palpable as once again the genuine life forces of the Other are tamed within the confined area of fine painting. This time primitive rhythms are spiced with street jive as the white boy steals something from black culture (again), and renders it piss elegant in the "sensitive" manner of the European schools. The work looks good, there is no denying it—but.

I may seem unduly harsh; after all, Brown's work is undeniably lightweight. But it is precisely its lightness that makes it so dangerous. The paintings have a kind of sexiness, but it is a petrified eroticism, prurient and yet aloof. It is the eroticism of distance that is pictured, the mystery of power, the distance of control. These works are formally and emotionally simple; they may not even know what they mean. But what they mean, what lies behind the blank cold eyes of Brown's idols and masks, is an esthetic of power, the esthetic of fascism.

This is obviously an extreme reaction to rather inconsequential work, but I am deeply troubled by something I sense nestling within it. That something is difficult to pinpoint—perhaps because it is barely formed, perhaps because it appears so ordinary. But it is that very ordinariness that is important, the ordinary way in which the work promotes an ideal image of perfection, an image that is sexy and yet sexless; male, but sadly, beautifully so. The work celebrates a banal servility before an inscrutable, mysterious power, the power of the pure man. In this it is deathly. It brings to mind, with an insistence that cannot be silenced, Leni Riefenstahl's elegiac celebration of the death-haunted Nuba, the tribe who sought to rid themselves of imperfections through bloodshed, who shunned women as not only the source of impurity but also the source of weakness.

—Thomas Lawson

campy. Despite analogous tactics they have a stark, funky, cabalistic luckiness about them. They are bound to inspire numbers players somewhere down the line. They seem to reveal the hidden, mystical consequences of the arbitrary. These are not found but forged objects.

The geometric groupings in the black and white acrylic paintings are like plans for ideas—hieroglyphs in progress. There were eight paintings in the show, all but one from 1983—four untitled, three titled *Death of the President*, one *Buy One, Get One Free*. The latter title would seem to refer to a bonus color panel added to a black and white diptych; this “free” panel is a blue and pink WPA-ish expressionist rendering of a fedora-hatted man facing a volcano, his arms open. The left black and white panel is a close-up fist done in David Salle-style tracing, and the central panel is a metaphysical cartoon, a sort of Francis Picabia-esque heckling of the muses in which a statue on a pedestal, blasted apart at the shins, gives up a diagrammatic ghost. The pedestal is imperfect and it bears a stock number.

The largest *Death of the President* also features a blasted statue—this one decapitated, with a hand and a sword missing too. Above the stock-numbered, ruined statue is a panel that’s like M.C. Escher without the tricks—a masonry canal filled with shattered tree trunks in which a cylinder and a prism seem to float, their geometric perfection unnatural among the dead wood.

I’m not really sure why I like these paintings, which may be a reason in itself. They have a deadpan charm that’s hard to pinpoint but easy to elaborate on. I guess they’re diagrams for departure—resonant hieroglyphic puns and cross-referential rebuses. They aren’t answers but good, all-purpose questions.

JAMES McGARRELL

James McGarrell paints with dream logic. Time and space are flexible. Landscapes are stacked in emotional perspective. Symbols are served smorgasbord in these internally mobile feasts, symbols relieved of responsibility by their charm and good looks.

In *The Grand Mediterranean*, 1982, McGarrell himself appears as a headwaiter (well, it looks like McGarrell) posed invitingly at a buffet table. His upraised tray appears to be gesturing toward two rainbows—one just inside the window, one just outside. Perhaps this is the pot of gold within the pot of

gold. Scooting off the plate the artist/headwaiter is raising from the buffet table is a lobster—the unkoshher creature Gérard de Nerval kept for a pet because it knows the secrets of the depths. On the raised, rainbow-oriented plate is a fish in the posture of leaping, as if headed for a brief glimpse of a more ethereal realm. Nature seems poised over a trellis ceiling and improved upon in the wallpaper. To one side a young woman is seated at what is either a writing desk or an upright piano. She is topless. The wall in front of her is either a painting of fish or an aquarium, but logic has been doubly suspended because the fish swim over the rainbow’s reflection on the aquarium glass. It’s one of painting’s jobs to play with the laws of nature and it seems to be a job McGarrell relishes.

In *Drifting Move and Crossing Move*, both 1981–82, McGarrell makes landscapes like quilts or collages, defying geography and perspective but making perfect beauty sense. In *Crossing Move* McGarrell builds a narrative landscape, a rust-colored train is a wall in a field which ends in orange trees, a field of deep blue.

McGarrell puts flesh back on cubist skeletons in cubist space. In the self-portrait *Double Double Espalier*, 1982, McGarrell is multipresent, poised at his easel in life-on-canvas and in canvas-on-canvas; the construction reflects a maze of funhouse mirrors. Every corner of these paintings is beautiful, especially the micro-abstractions: wallpaper, fabric patterns, clouds. McGarrell makes perfect paralogical order from what should be riots of color and texture. He presents classical iconography as entertainment, and vice versa. He amuses while inspiring awe. He proves, finally, that in the hands of a master more is really more.

—GLENN O'BRIEN

GROUP MATERIAL, “Timeline,” P.S. 1; JAMES BROWN, Tony Shafrazi Gallery:

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One aspect of recent painting that has not yet been much discussed is its obsession with collecting, and with the display of such activity. It is not simply that the work is collectible, but that in its very structure it is concerned with collecting, with amassing a fortune of detail and information with which to dazzle us. Images and styles, materials and methods, clichés and quotations are

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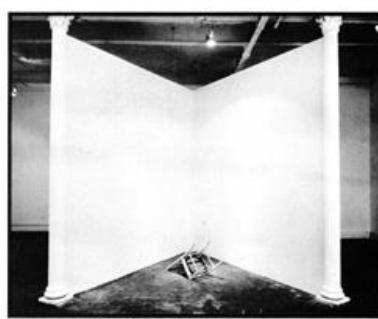
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James Brown. Wooden Spotted Figure. 1963. enamel, oil, and pencil on canvas. 84 x 76".



Raymond Hood. Sketch for Chicago Tribune Tower. No. 11. 1922. pencil with sepia on board. 29 x 20".



Terry Fox. Triplex. 1983. installation view.

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—THOMAS LAWSON

RAYMOND HOOD, Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris; TERRY FOX, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts:

RAYMOND HOOD

For decades the skyscraper has been a keystone in architectural practice, at once defining the scope of its ambition and determining the urban skyline. Architects have measured their aspirations against the yardstick of its forms, finding in them an image of contemporary city life. Among these individuals Raymond M. Hood occupies a central position, for it was Hood who, in 1922, won the competition for the Chicago Tribune Tower, rising from obscurity to the position of the '20s most celebrated skyscraper designer. Over the next decade he was to introduce four buildings that altered mid-Manhattan's configuration and consolidated the architectural and commercial image of the burgeoning pre-Depression metropolis. He was also to contribute to the theory of the tower's form and function, both through existing buildings and through his proposals for futuristic towns.

Presented in conjunction with the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, this small exhibition included drawings and photographs from all Hood's major projects, among them the Tribune Tower, the Daily News Building, the American Radiator Building, the McGraw-Hill Building, and the RCA head-

quarters in Rockefeller Center, along with several studies for skyscraper cities. As such, it was a significant study of skyscraper form, showing the evolution of the vertical, uniform shaft over setback, "slab" design. It indicated important ideological transitions, as in the movement from decorative external detail to unifying structural pattern, much as it illustrated, through Hood's city schemes, the impetus of urban thought. Perceptible throughout was the debate of the time on the tower's regulating power in future city life, and on the relation of massing, verticality, and "needle" design to traffic patterns and zoning rules. Yet Hood was, most importantly, a commercial architect, operating in business spheres, and it was on the level of corporate presentation, or representation, that this show's shining lights emerged. For if there were stunning charcoal sketches (as for the Tribune Tower), what were more salient were the blueprints, renderings, and working drawings used to appeal to the client. Hood was a skillful navigator in industrial waters, and in drawings like those for Rockefeller Center, executed by an illustrator in color and naturalistic technique, he commissioned prime examples of corporate persuasion. His models, too, were both "comprehensible forms" and studies in proportion and mass, indicating the strategies requisite to the fusion of business and architectural success. Secreted in this diminutive show of some 20-odd drawings and prints, then, was an index to the forces that have shaped metropolitan New York.

TERRY FOX

This recent exhibition by Europe-

based performance and sound artist Terry Fox consisted of two parts, a suite of 21 drawings/constructions and an installation. Both seemed concerned with the issue of language, as if exploring its trajectory through social, political, and artistic spheres, and tracing the transmutations thereby incurred. The former works, entitled "Catch Phrases," are mixed media objects in each of which three layers of phrases are superposed. The first layer, penciled over a 3-by-5-foot paper sheet, transcribes the emanations of newspapers and radio broadcasts; faint checkerboard squares each contain, and retain, one letter, the grid as a whole spelling out such loaded if vernacular messages as "death squad," "electronic evidence," and "friendly authoritarian regimes." Over these Fox superposes felt-pen images of graffiti found on the walls of different European cities, and, in the third layer, variations of the latter drawn in linear steel. In this manner, through a visual and conceptual palimpsest, Fox sketches a transformation from the etiolated absence of the word to its hardened, physical presence.

What Fox seems to imply in this work is the process by which such chilling words become predictable phrases; through linguistic transubstantiation, they become media drone, as common as the graffiti's scrawl. And, just as graffiti possesses its own political power, so it is through such social "hardening" that "catch phrases" can be "caught." In the installation, *Triplex*, Fox extended this process of objectification, employing different objects in interactive situations to suggest such transit through time. In an open space two

walls, painted institutional green, were set to comprise an equilateral triangle open on one side. Its interior and surround were arrayed with carefully chosen forms. One was a red cradle, another an overturned chair, a third was a black coffin, suspended from the wall by ropes and supported by sticks. Again, each object supported a penciled verbal play, ranging from a sentence ("Who shall harm me?") to a homily ("A headless man had a letter to write/it was read by one who lost his sight...") to an arrangement of discrete words ("army," "hot," "ash"). This roundelay of objects, moving from birth to death, was thematically reinforced by the headphones appended to one wall, from which an audiotape emanated music that filled the space with circular and encircling sound. Just as the sound "shaped" space in a circular pattern, so the objects energized and articulated their surround; much as one moved through the installation in a circular motion, so this continuum was reinforced in the music and in the implicit transit from birth to youth to death. In this manner Fox established time and space as the media of transformation, shifting words and objects in continuous flux, and focused on those processes through which such perceptions are conveyed.

—KATE LINKER

THOMAS FAULKNER, Bryant Park; DARIA DOROSH, A.I.R. Gallery:

THOMAS FAULKNER

An art installation in Bryant Park must coexist with an urban space in metamorphosis which offers many identities yet seeks just one. Stretching behind