

ART PAPERS

STRIKING IDEAS + MOVING IMAGES + SMART TEXT

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OF REAPPEARANCE:
TREVOR PAGLEN

ACTIVISM
AND ITS APPARATUS:
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REALITY
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GEORGE LAZONGAS

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ALEX DA CORTE BOSTON

Alex Da Corte makes a really great bong. A grad student at Yale, he's not a bad sculptor either. *Casual Luxury*, his recent solo exhibition of sculptural collages, might resemble *Better Homes and Gardens* on mushrooms, and under incredibly modest circumstances [LaMontagne Gallery; June 18–July 31, 2009]. The show occupies a small rear gallery, sandwiched between a larger solo show in the main space and a showroom-like group exhibition of gallery artists in the adjacent project space. It's a pretty tight fit, which would be bothersome if the work somehow suffered as a result—but it doesn't.

Gods and Monsters, 2009, rests in one corner of the room: a coffee table of stacked CD cases blanketed by a Cherry Coke-dyed cotton drug rug, which serves as a pedestal for a Fiji-bottle vase stuffed with lucky bamboo and semen, and three bong-like sculptures so delicate that they might be made of cotton candy covered in shellac. These three pieces are composites of several found objects cast in rubber, plastic, and enamel respectively. The baby-pink sculpture is the most unembellished in its likeness to a real water pipe, complete with a bulbous base cradled by two skeleton hands beneath a tall, rosy shaft. The other two—in glossy white and gold—are nearly as phallic and just as ornate. Two found photos rest on the surface of the table—a candid photo of a naked man, and an image of the phrase "HOME SWEET HOME" spray-painted across a wall. *Gods and Monsters* casts an intentional drug-den glow over the entire space and is the most literal in Da Corte's exploration of sex within stuff. More importantly, however, it transforms the gallery into a kind of psychotropic living space where suddenly everything is equal parts domestication and hallucination.

Driving that point home is *Home Glorious*, 2007, a recreation of a wallpaper pattern from the New Jersey residence of the artist's youth, framed in mahogany and hung on a nearby wall. Composed almost entirely of contact paper and cast in resin, the piece features the repeated form of a sequined Chinoiserie pheasant

perched on a branch, surrounded by glitter enamel leaves and neon-toned flower buds. It is surprisingly refined from afar. But up close, it reveals its handmade aesthetic, in keeping with the DIY quality of the other works on view. The previous residents of this house were the Stouffers—of frozen food fame—whose longtime slogan, "Nothing Comes Closer to Home," now seems more appropriate, and macabre, than ever.

In an opposing corner, *Brideshead*, 2009, the garden counterpart to Da Corte's sculptural opium den, is a tower of stacked plastic China pots atop a large, mossy bouquet of silk flowers. A shoehorn duck rests at the base of the column, as does a bunny, whose ears are the fastened fingers of a glove atop a garden sculpture of a dog. Da Corte's eagerness to mutate the domestic as well as his commitment to simplicity are staggering and unyielding. *Untitled*, 2009, stands in the corner, a broom bearing a cartoon-character mask and banana nose, covered in dripping plastic as if melting before our eyes.

At every turn in the show, elements of refinement reveal themselves behind layers of colorful and inescapable disorder. Da Corte's wit is delivered with surgical precision. In a cramped and otherwise occupied gallery, he shares his fascination with the seductive escapism of material objects—and drugs—with profane subtlety.

—Evan J. Garza

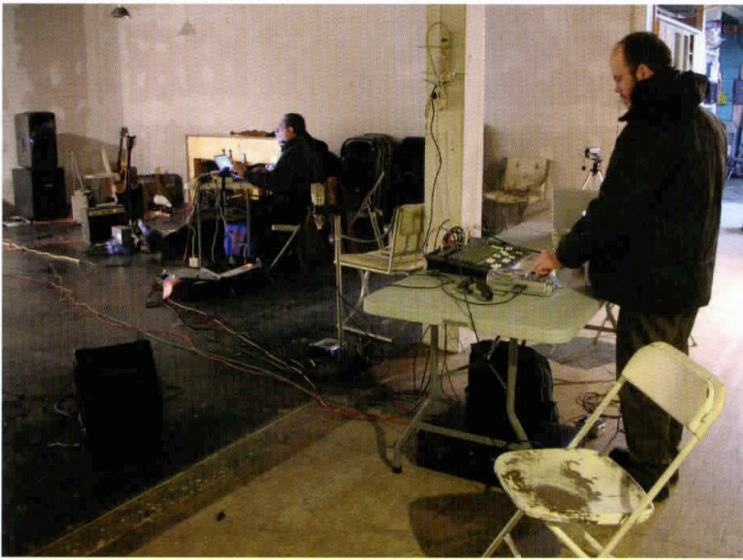
ASPEN MAYS CHICAGO

Fireflies' lights glow yellow-green if you capture them on film with a four-by-five camera. And if you crack open a Magic 8 Ball and photograph it, as in *Dissection of a Magic 8 Ball*, 2008, the mysterious blue liquid inside resembles a slice of outer space. Aspen Mays shows us wonders such as these in her first solo show, *Concentrate and Ask Again* [Golden Gallery; June 19–August 2, 2009]. Using photography and video to document her experiments, Mays acts as both an amateur scientist and explorer. Her work stands in deft opposition to the technology that we've come to rely on for answers—iPhones mapping our routes from point A to B, Google's rewiring of our brains to think in terms of keyword searches—putting faith not in complex databases and rapidly evolving technology, but rather in the ability of everyday objects and materials to spark our imagination.

In *The Future of the Future (Spaceman)*, 2009, an eerie, tin-foiled spaceman stands in a room covered with the same material. There's no face inside the shiny silver cardboard-box helmet. Instead, like the carnival prop that allows people to play the character painted on the opposite side by sticking their heads through a hole, anyone looking at this photograph places him- or herself in an otherworldly space, and prepares for lift-off.

Flight occurs in Mays' *Larry*, 2008, a video homage to Larry Walters, a.k.a. Lawn Chair Larry, who attached forty-five helium-filled weather balloons to his Sears lawn chair and soared to an astounding sixteen thousand feet above the Earth. Mays constructs a mini-version of Larry's chair, ties five balloons to it, and then attaches it to a high-altitude balloon that amateur scientists from Chicago's Adler Planetarium launch into the atmosphere. She charts its journey, from blast off in the middle of Midwestern farmland to the deep blue of "near space"—nearly ninety-six thousand feet above Earth—a place that, perhaps not so coincidentally, resembles *Dissection of a Magic 8 Ball*. Winds jerk the miniature replica about, instilling a sense of adventure into the

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Alex Da Corte, *Gods and Monsters*, 2009, jewel cases, Cherry Coke-dyed cotton drug rug, plaster, plastic, dust, found photos, Fiji water bottle, lucky bamboo, acrylic, enamel, shellac, aluminum foil, porcelain, rubber, honey, semen, resin, foam, felt (courtesy of the artist and LaMontagne Gallery, Boston); Aspen Mays, *The Future of the Future (Spaceman)*, 2009, archival inkjet print, 53 x 68 inches, ed. 3 +1AP (courtesy of the artist and Golden Gallery, Chicago)



CHICAGO PHONOGRAPHY CHICAGO

valiant flight of this small object; at some point, one of its little balloons bursts, sending millions of rubber bits zipping through the atmosphere. In her show, Mays preserves the lawn chair artifact by placing it inside a thick glass case, imparting a sense of importance—and humor—to an otherwise insignificant object.

Continuing her exploration of the Magic 8 Ball, Mays dismembers the twenty-sided icosahedron die she finds inside of it, then cuts and flattens it into the shape of Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion map. She photographs the die's white triangles with their vague, cheeky answers molded onto the surface—"cannot predict now," "outlook good," and "concentrate and ask again"—and places them on top of a clean white piece of paper, creating a crisp, three-dimensional effect. The piece is aptly titled *Map of the World (after Buckminster Fuller)*, 2008. Like the Dymaxion map, Mays' map has no right side up; as such, the artist reflects on Fuller's idea of looking at the Earth in myriad ways despite scientific advancements to accurately map every inch of it.

Mays' ambitious solo show comprises a rich body of conceptually poignant work, demonstrating the artistic abilities of a bold emerging talent who happily treads into the unknown. Will we see more of Mays' work? One shake of the Magic 8 Ball says, "As I see it, yes."

—Alicia Eler

Speaking about her 2005 series *Seven Easy Pieces*, during which she re-enacted well-known performance pieces from the 1960s and 1970s by artists such as Gina Pane, Joseph Beuys, and Valie Export, Marina Abramović expressed her desire to open a discussion regarding the preservation and documentation of performance art and the conditions under which a performance might be repeated. Similarly, the Museum of Contemporary Art's month-long exhibition *Here/Not There* [June 30—August 2, 2009] explores the possibility of merging visual and performative art through a series of five performances by different artists or groups, and the subsequent one-week display of "remnants" from each work in the McCormick Tribune Gallery.

Fourth in the series, the sound art collective Chicago Phonography performed an improvised sonic composition using recordings of found sounds from both the surrounding urban environment and the institution itself [July 21—26, 2009]. For the Tuesday evening performance on the fourth floor of the museum, core members Brett Ian Balogh, Chad Clark, and Eric Leonardson were joined by Todd Carter, Chris Hammes, Joshua Manchester, Greg O'Drobinak, and Aaron Zarzutski. Seated at a long table with a view of the Chicago cityscape behind them, the performers used laptop computers, a small mixing board, and hand-held recording devices to produce an acoustic experience lasting approximately forty minutes for an audience seated on nearby chairs and benches, and on the floor.

From the opening muffled chant of a group protest—"All we want is our fair share"—to the final moments of chirping birds, the performers pieced together a continuous aural experience that approximated the soundscape of urban Chicago. While it is typically easier to distinguish discrete sounds in rural environs, there were several moments during the performance when particular city sounds—including the honking of geese, loud bangs evoking a construction project, and a church bell's piercing chime—emerged from the overall drone of traffic. Without visual references to guide our inter-

pretation, many of the sounds become deceptive, at least momentarily. After several minutes of airplane noise, the rumble of bus and automobile traffic, the enclosed roar of subway trains, and the faint sound of water spilling over a fountain, what at first seemed like the massive pounding of machinery turned out to be the repeated bouncing of a basketball.

While the duration of the performance, extending well beyond the time most viewers spend with a single work of visual art, made it difficult to maintain a consistent level of attentive listening, the sporadic lapses in concentration had the effect of returning the sounds to the status of background noise, as experienced on the street. During those moments, the surrounding conversations within the museum and our own thoughts and daydreams snapped into prominence, fading again as soon as we realized the drift in attention. These shifts in perception reveal how the body copes with its lack of "earlids"—to use soundscape pioneer R. Murray Schafer's term—or the inability to close off sound at will. We become open to the perception of a landscape as "scenery" only when we are not directly engaged with it, in the sense of navigating a path, watching for predators or extracting a resource. Aural experience within museum walls allows for a similar phenomenon: we are free to listen to the sounds of the city without concern for bodily safety, to recognize them or not, and to focus on the combinations and overlaps.

In answer to the challenge of the *Here/Not There* series—that is, the translation of an ephemeral performance into something more lasting—Chicago Phonography produced an installation featuring a computer-driven video projection of an architectural rendering of the Chicago cityscape and a four-channel playback system, designed by Balogh. While less remnant than parallel installation, the work did provide, in some sense, a continuation of the immersive experience, with the black-and-white, slowly panning imagery of the cityscape standing in for the actual city visible through the fourth floor windows during the performance. Placed

ABOVE: Chicago Phonography, performance at Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago [courtesy of the artists]