

Reviews – I

Karen Archey

The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World

Museum of Modern Art, New York

December 14, 2014 – April 5, 2015

Reena Spaulings: Later Seascapes

Galerie Neu, Berlin

February 6, 2015 – March 7, 2015

2015 Triennial: Surround Audience

New Museum, New York

February 25, 2015 – May 24, 2015

I remember a time in the early naughts when a fictional New York artist was the height of cool. She worked as an administrative assistant in a low-end Chinatown gallery and was often drunk, sometimes slutty, and always awash with ennui. Her name was Reena Spaulings, and she has taken on various personae over the years. The Reena I just described was the slatternly chic gallerina protagonist of a collaboratively written novel, masterminded by Bernadette Corporation (an associated artist group including Bernadette Van-Huy, John Kelsey and Antek Walczak) and 150 other contributors, published in 2004. But Reena is also an artist, whose strings are controlled by John Kelsey, Jutta Koether, and Emily Sundblad. First and foremost, Reena Spaulings is a gallery: a gritty Chinatown gallery that has upheld its give-no-shits brand of cool for over a decade.

One of the first Reena Spaulings openings I went to was K8 Hardy's *Positions Series*, in 2009. A grumpy gallery artist tricked me into thinking there was no more beer, likely because I looked like the wayward suburbanite off the street that I was, yet I stuck around sober until I followed the crowd to the afterparty. As soon as everyone filed into a nearby Chinatown karaoke bar, Hardy jumped on top of a small, rickety table, screaming something to the effect of, "TIPS FOR TITS! I SHOW WITH REENA SPAULINGS AND CAN'T PAY MY RENT!"

Six years later I'm at the same bar—now, of course, I'm pleasantly knowing and aplomb in my funereal Lower East Side gallery openingwear—for an afterparty in honor of the German video artist Loretta Fahrenholz. (It only took me four of those six years to figure out that the Reena Spaulings contingents are either suburbanites or aristocrats, and that their administrative ineptitude comes from rich-kid laziness rather than a punk fuck-you to the system.) I hadn't even seen Fahrenholz's exhibition, but at the afterparty the East New York Ringmasters were performing. The Ringmasters are a dance crew from East New York, a Brooklyn neighborhood with a penchant for crime, who performed in Fahrenholz's video. Ringmasters' dancing is playful, captivating, but also somewhat grotesque—amid a Michael

Jackson-style glide, they'll frequently dislocate their shoulders or elbows in a technique called "flexing." It also may come as no surprise that the audience at the afterparty was almost entirely white and the performers were all black. And only a few of us seemed weirded out by the whole thing.

While the white suburbanite appropriation of black culture is nothing new, it was crystallizing to see it in this context. It brought to mind Daniel Harris's thoughts on the consumer aesthetic of cool, one that Reena Spaulings has mined for years. "Far from reflecting confidence," Harris argues, "coolness grows out of a sense of threat, of the strain of living in metropolitan war zones where our equanimity is constantly being challenged, giving rise to a hyper-masculine folk religion that fetishizes poise and impassivity.... Attracted by the menacing nonchalance of coolness, prosperous white youth have turned a form of behavior adapted for a very specific social milieu into an aesthetic plaything, mimicking gestures and facial expressions designed as deterrents to attack even in situations in which there is no threat."¹ Remind you of anyone you know?

Ten years ago everyone was clamoring to buy receipts and empty shopping bags, the output of a now rather overshadowed Reena Spaulings artist named Merlin Carpenter (*Make Your Own Life* [2006]). Today, everyone wants a shiny electroplated silver monochrome by Jacob Kassay, or a canvas painted with the sprays of a fire extinguisher by Lucien Smith. This newly popular breed of painting is whimsical, in the way that an Anthropologie peasant dress made in a Chinese sweatshop can be whimsical, but it's certainly null and void for anyone with a basic command with art history; usually, what holds it together is the artist's personality, the auteur as relatable bro with a gee-whiz conceptual cause. And while contemporary art neologisms are often the stuff of the same impotent, land-grabbing minds (the artist Brad Troemel is trying to make "aesthlete" happen), the painter and critic Walter Robinson penned a good one to describe such work: Zombie Formalism. The term has picked up so much traction that *The Forever Now*, Laura Hoptman's exhibition of contemporary painting at MoMA this past winter, has come to be popularly known as "MoMA's Zombie Formalism show." While there are some great artists in this show that don't deserve the Zombie Formalism moniker, such as Amy Sillman, Kerstin Brätsch, and Laura Owens, much of Hoptman's exhibition was a showcase of how much an artist cannot achieve with limitless resources and a rich intellectual history extending back thousands of years. The worst offender here is Oscar Murillo, whose dropcloth abstractions are emblazoned with simple "ethnic" words like "yoga" or "burrito". Murillo was born in 1986 in Colombia and, if you squint your eyes, looks somewhat like the deceased art market-darling Jean-Michel Basquiat (whose inventory has run dry). Murillo, whose work clearly doesn't hold up to the prices it commands, has become the butt of every art world joke, and, spare MoMA, has gone unnoticed by contemporary art's critical faculties. Yet the bronco of the art market, an unpredictable, temperamental beast

¹ Daniel Harris, *Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism* (Basic Books, 2000), pp. 52-53.

that could buck you at any moment, still gets ever more artists saddling up for the next ride.

Unexpectedly, Reena Spaulings, the original 2000s cool cat, has become a Zombie Formalist herself. For her recent exhibition at Galerie Neu in Berlin-Mitte, titled *Later Seascapes*, Spaulings painted penthouse-sized canvases with floor-scrubbing robots called iRobot Scooba 450. Painted with Farrow & Ball Estate Emulsions with comically bourgeois names like “Smoked Trout” and “Blazer,” the *Later Seascapes* are meant to reference J.M.W. Turner’s late paintings, which became increasingly abstract, while also making fun of WASPs, the likely clientele for their work. It pains me to admit it, but there are brief moments of beauty in these paintings, particularly in the sunset palette of the smallest one, hung over a doorway. Some critics have dared to position this work in a lineage of paintings created with mechanical assistance, such as the remote-control abstractions of Gutai artist Akira Kanayama, Harold Cohen’s painting robot AARON, or Cory Arcangel’s plotter drawings—but I can’t. Spaulings’ work is too inane. It’s difficult to ignore how much of a puerile one-liner it is to paint with Roombas, how conspicuously expensive and salable these paintings are while they simultaneously poke fun at the 1%ers who can afford them. What’s disturbing is how seamlessly Spaulings shakes, rather than bites the hand, that feeds her, even while disavowing she’s doing so.

Berlin, twenty-five years after reunification, has retained its reputation as a bohemian-cool haven, rife with cash-poor recent art school grads and reasonably priced real estate. Reena Spaulings the artist may love it here, but Reena Spaulings the gallery would probably not work in Berlin as seamlessly as it does in New York – if only partially for Berlin’s relative shortage of aristocrats. In Manhattan, Reena Spaulings and Bernadette Corporation are part of the co-dependent industries of fashion and art; they’re press darlings, and all of these things drive hype and sales. Those industries don’t have such a strong presence in Berlin, where capital runs through the city much more slowly. The strong academic background of German culture also trickles down to art, and—thank god—intellectual merits at times outweigh the hip and new in visibility.

You feel that at the scrappy New Theater, owned and operated by American artists Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff. New Theater grew out of Henkel and Pitegoff’s experience running a bar in Neukölln, called Times, with fellow American artist Lindsay Lawson. It was open for about a year and a half, beginning in summer 2011, and attracted a regular cast of characters—musicians, artists, writers, I’m-not-sure-what-I’m-doing-with-my-lifers. Henkel and Pitegoff opened New Theater in Kreuzberg in August 2013 with a deep spirit of collaboration with the community that developed at Times. Staging amateur plays produced by and featuring their extended social network, Henkel and Pitegoff continue to fully fund New Theater through their own income and donations of friends. They’re entirely autonomous from the German public funding system, and until they close in June 2015, they refuse to stage plays in other galleries or museums. In fact, Henkel and Pitegoff came to the structure of theater as a way of organizing space and attention—seated plays

tending to convert their audience into spectators much more than performances in galleries. But coming to the idea of theater seems as ingenious as it does far-fetched. Plays and contemporary art venues have little to zero audience overlap (though Berlin's lively theater scene is admittedly more of a draw than moribund Broadway, with its \$500 tickets to *Spider-Man*) – and as resuscitating alternative art forms is one of contemporary art's favorite pastimes, New Theater has gained traction for working in a format that is not marginal so much as out of fashion.

There is something astonishing about a New Theater play: they're total, converted environments on an obviously ragtag budget. Aesthetically, they hit somewhere between the busy zaniness of a Pee-wee Herman stage set and the sparse domestic beauty of a repurposed *Altbau* with crown molding. Artists such as Vittorio Brodmann or Skye Chamberlain have painted backdrops while Olga Balema, Yngve Holen, and Lucie Stahl have designed props. Anything seems possible. You want a library as a backdrop? Let's paint it. Want to set a play in a restaurant? Let's buy some ramen. New Theater's economy of means has a certain throwback chic, but something is very different about their modesty in comparison with, say, Reena Spaulings' Chinatown digs. They're not suburbanites attempting to shield their authenticity from being tainted by earnestness or money, but hardworking individuals who, though keen to avoid the market game, are genuinely destitute after graduating into the Great Recession.

Europe of course remains mired in economic malaise, so much so that New Yorkers renting Airbnbs in Neukölln are finally thrilled to be paying in euros. Given the relatively speedy return to boom time in the United States, particularly in the art world, you might have feared that the New Museum's tech-obsessed triennial would have privileged flash over substance. And indeed there are a couple moments of over-the-top slickness in the triennial, such as DIS Magazine's alienatingly sterile installation *The Island (Ken)* (2015), featuring a kitchen island-cum-shower manufactured by an ultra-luxe German faucet company. Happily, the triennial – curated by Lauren Cornell, a veteran of the New Museum's digital outfit Rhizome, and the artist Ryan Trecartin – generally spurns this aesthetic in favor of a measured collective inquiry into the politics of a wired life and its effects on the body and language.

Cornell and Trecartin show that coolness need not be allergic to substance, and in comparison with Eungie Joo's previous triennial at the New Museum, which relied heavily on documentary strategies, this one might actually be more successful in giving form to politics. Laudably, queer and transgender politics make a concerted appearance. Take, for example, transgender artist Juliana Huxtable's print series of self-portraits and prose, *Universal Crop Tops for all the Self Canonized Saints of Becoming* (2015), which double as headlining images for the exhibition. Huxtable, a transgender artist who came up with the queer hip-hop collective House of Ladasha in the long-gone days of MySpace, appears nude in one image, her highlighter-yellow braids stretching to her bottom. She's nude, too, in a 3D-printed scan of her body by the artist Frank Benson, her breasts and penis proudly on display. Like the

fictional Spaulings, the very real Huxtable is at all the right parties downtown. If her politic is a new version of cool, though, it seems a worthwhile brand to promote. Her coolness-with-a-purpose seems distinctly at odds with Reena Spaulings' bratty coolness-for-coolness'-sake of yesteryear.

CAPTIONS

The Forever Now, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: John Wronn.

Reena Spaulings, *Later Seascapes*, at Galerie Neu, Berlin. Left: *Untitled* (2015), Farrow & Ball's Estate Emulsions on canvas, 270 x 500 cm. Right: *Untitled*, (2015), Farrow & Ball's Estate Emulsions on canvas, 250 x 250 cm.

2015 Triennial: Surround Audience, New Museum, New York. Photo: Benoit Pailley.
[7423] Josh Kline, *FREEDOM*, 2015.
[7537] Foreground: Frank Benson, *Juliana*, 2015.