

# *The Midwest Art Quarterly*

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“But meanwhile we’re talking about art.”

—Clement Greenberg

## **Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis**

*Jon Young: The Other Side of Quicksand*

September 9-February 12

Young adopts bad tendencies from artists who were too smart to make work that is very good. His wall works and puffy sculptures loiter in the gallery like Judds; they have the glitz of Pop at its most tactless; and their symbology, like that of much art that takes indigeneity as its theme, is canned. But Young has strained the latter through the middle to produce a weird milky substance for spreading over the former (metaphorically speaking: the works themselves are iridescent) to give his art more than just a strong physical presence, but a spiritual dimension, too. Let me explain.

In the vein of Minimalism, the power of Young's artworks derives not from the way that they cut a figure in three-dimensional space, but from how they impose themselves into an environment that is felt to be the province of the viewer. Young's two floor pieces domineer handily, but even the half-dozen hanging works, with their bulbousness and glimmering, almost make themselves felt more than seen. But only almost, because unlike Minimalist art, Young's, at its best, vacillates rapidly between this simply being there and a reticent inner meaning. This vacillation is a result of its evident craftedness cutting against its sterility, its jarring coloration, and, especially, the symbols it bears.

These symbols — cactuses, scrubby flora, birds in flight, arachnids — are visual truisms about the southwestern landscape. Refigured within Young's depthless visual format to the point nearly of silliness, they don't lose their value but instead start to seem laundered of all simple meaning: they become signs not of anything in particular, but of something absolute. When Young's work looms, it's with the distant authority of a god.

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## **Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis**

*We didn't ask permission, we just did it*

September 9-February 12

Artists' urge to justify their existence by billing their work as "educational" is symptomatic of a degradation of inventiveness and a debasement of what we believe art can do for us on its own terms. Jorge González Santos, an educator, is the creator of

*Escuela de Oficios*, a “space for collective learning” that by volume is like half of this 50-work show. It’s a plinth where you’re supposed to kick back and read overproduced exhibition catalogs; just what aspect of this is meant to become reflection-worthy once it’s contextualized as art is entirely beyond me.

The rest of *We didn’t ask* is hardly more aesthetically potent. A compendium of works that were first included in one of several aughtie Puerto Rican exhibition series, the show speaks to the sorry state of boricua creativity over the last couple decades. It celebrates its artists for having overcome privation, but it’s the way they aestheticize lack that is precisely the source of their work’s weakness. Deliberate sloppiness amounts to little more than a nose thumbed at institutions, and becomes an end in itself: it becomes educational. And since this stuff is being shown at CAM — an institution — its critical kvetching seems not only trite but also disingenuous.

When you’re done applauding this work for being homespun and agitated, what are you left with? Vapid conceptualism, shoddy photographs, vague politicking, and faux-kitsch kitsch without enough edge to dekitschify itself. (Several videos, particularly Daniel Ramos’s *Jocones*, rise above by finding an energy in their limitations that’s not entirely defined by them.)

*We didn’t ask* is exemplary of a styleless global style that would moralize us into believing that nipping at the heels of reality is the best our artists can do. We must expect more from them, whether we’re in Puerto Rico, New York, or Missouri.

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## **Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis**

*Yonshien Kuo: Suffering Politely*

September 9-February 12

The atmospheric elements of this show — there’s shag carpet and ambient sounds; the paintings are colorfully backlit — contribute only negatively to the meaning and effect of Kuo’s paintings. My estimation of his work would be significantly lower if I considered it as installation. Since Kuo is a painter and the *mise-en-scène* he’s provided

seems secondary, I'll dismiss it entirely and say that, in his paintings themselves, he goes in for what's fun without ever convincing us that it actually is.

Kuo's paintings are a bit vaporwave, a bit Mickalene Thomas, a bit DeviantArt. They take much that's bad and some that's good from each of these things. What's good in them is their colors, which pull off gaudiness quite well, and their strong lines. Ultimately, though, this all dissipates into cartoonishness. Cartoonishness itself, however, isn't these paintings' problem so much as Kuo's inability to wield it. The voluptuous linearity of his style demands a commensurate tightness of design to make it come off as anything other than soft and easy, but Kuo's paintings are instead pretty sprawled. This results in pictures that feel busy rather than teeming, and is indeed the reason the paintings merely suggest but fail to deliver on their "funness."

This boils down to a simple problem of composition, or rather a problem of simple compositions: for all their busyness, Kuo's paintings are in fact schematically and quite naively set up, pyramidal masses in the dead center of each with symmetrical staffage around and readymade horizons behind them. All the bared pussies and cosmic sludge don't, as they should, work against this structural plainness, but nervously try to cover it up.

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## **Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis**

*Yvonne Osei: Brainchild*

September 9-February 12

Osei's show for the Great Rivers Biennial is six screens hanging in a circle from the ceiling of a dark gallery. They're showing a suite of still shots, wherein the artist and an occasional scene partner, both black women, mostly stand or sit and gaze or gesture near historic sites in American cities. The work's implicit claim is that the presence of these women near these landmarks is of itself profound; the wall text says something abstruse about the persistence of the past in the present and "disrupt[ing] dominant narratives."

Nowhere in *Brainchild*, besides perhaps in how it's been cast, is any of this instantiated — not in the composition of any particular shot, or the cuts between them, or the

subjects' vague actions, or the arrangement of the screens in the gallery. Anything at all that contributes to the work's visual or spatial dimensions (i.e., what we experience when we experience *Brainchild* as a work of art) seems to have been passively executed. Either Osei's political sensibility has altogether consumed her aesthetic one, or she truly doesn't care about making art with anything to it.

That the medium of video is simply Osei's vehicle for peddling hypertheory is somewhat contradictory: her work's antiformal character actually obfuscates the fact that filmed spaces and subjects are structured ideologically. Not only is this politically suspect, but it is also aesthetically shortsighted. Film and video have been used before to expound the relationship between moving images and concepts of blackness, occasionally to great effect. Isaac Julien and Edward Owens come immediately to mind. What these artists grasped that Osei does not is that what an artwork conveys is intertwined with how it does so.

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## **Cunst Gallery**

*Joshua Peder Stulen*

November 4-Winter 2023

Pop art paintings about St. Louis pizza brands: not a conceit that would fly anywhere in the world but the basement of Cunst. But there? Fuck it, it works.

It looks like Stulen tried pretty hard at these paintings, but it's not like he broke his back, which I guess is the balance you have to strike to make joke-art come off. The colors are close but not quite, the lines all list a little, the proportions are just a bit uncannily off. Dude even used Wite-Out to fix a couple things up. The paintings sort of look like how it feels to eat Provel cheese. But it's hard to hate on such pitch-perfect St. Louis jingoism.

Why would anyone do something like this? I don't know. Why do we make art at all? I'm sure as shit that the answer has nothing to do with these stupid paintings, but maybe it's that gaping absence of pretension that gives them all their charm. Their Imo's Pizza boxfuls of charm...

## **Dragon, Crab & Turtle**

*Jerry O. Wilkerson: I Can't Believe It's Not Butter*

October 8-December 10

Pointillism was already a bit ruttled by the time Signac took it over from Seurat in the 1890s. So it seems unlikely that a St. Louisan in the 1970s would have been able to wring from it anything fresh, especially by making pictures of snacks. But Jerry Wilkerson's still lifes, which feel wood-paneled and warm, carry themselves with a plainness and an affective precision alien to their sources and uncommon for their time.

Wilkerson was at his best painting at a small scale. In his bigger works, he made the mistake of enlarging his dots by about as much proportionally as he enlarged his canvas, giving his depictions a clunky appearance in moments of detail and an empty, ungraded one during quieter passages, as well as dissipating colors which in the smaller paintings jostle dramatically. His sculptures, too, lose out on the calm focus of his still lifes by chasing after Oldenburg-ish uncanny effects that are, at best, merely curious.

But in his smaller paintings — and, to a lesser degree, in his smaller prints — Wilkerson took the pointillist method of modeling by means of pure color to a point of emotional density somewhat withheld from the neoimpressionists by their political and empiricist hang-ups. His best paintings, though they cop Seurat's style, don't have anything to do with scientific abstractness. Nor, though they share with Pop an affinity for what's commercially all around us, are they interested in commercialism. Rather, Wilkerson recognized that his little banalities — Sprite bottles, supermarket fruit, Camel cigs — are the things which people build their senses of themselves through. That his paintings are untriumphant and drab is not their own failing, but that of their times.

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## **Kemper Art Museum**

*Katharina Grosse Studio Paintings, 1988-2022: Returns, Revisions, Inventions*

November 11-December 10

There are artists who proffer no especially new vision of the world, are reactive, and have either no theory or a dogmatic commitment to one that's prescribed, but who

nevertheless understand the machinations of a work so intuitively and absorb what's good in other art so thoroughly as to make stuff of an uncommonly high but dead-ended quality. These are the archpoets of stagnation, the cream of any academic crop. Ingres is the paragon.

Grosse is famous for giant “painting”-installations that, grandiloquent and involved, are like the death throes of a certain contemporary variety of the Ingres-type artist. *Returns*, however, contains Grosse's works on canvas almost exclusively. The show is of historical interest insofar as it demonstrates that there was little in Grosse's early development that demanded her paintings' expansion into meta-paintings. Instead, wanton experimentalism led her to progressively further extremes and weaker conceptions. The paintings which she buried in dirt, for instance, fail to make good on the aleatory designs their submersion introduced. Some of those gotten at by slapping the canvas with seaweed, however, find in the formal interruptions this provided a novel and effective means of breaking up their otherwise insufficiently differentiated surfaces.

Grosse's energized lack of direction, her contemporary-ness, is connected with what we call the “end of history”: she did *Returns*' oldest paintings in Germany in the nineties. These early works, which are her most consistent, are like history paintings about the history of late-modernist painting: bright perversions of Newman, Stella, Poons. She eventually settled on a spray-style derived from Olitski. The way she's applied the tricks she borrowed from Olitski in the direction of literalizing her picture planes, however, tends to abrogate rather than transcend his charge. That is, her paintings break illusionism to bits without replacing it with much worthwhile.

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## **The Luminary**

*Kelly Kristin Jones: nwl*

October 8-December 10

I have a hard time believing that self-help books marketed to guiltstruck suburban moms could ever on their own provide a sufficient literary foundation for the production of advanced art. The initialism “nwl,” nabbed from a book whose first chapter is titled “Karens,” stands for “nice white ladies.” I guess these are the addressees or the subjects



of Jones's show. One wouldn't be able to tell, though, by looking at her photos, which are wrought way past the point of conveying anything at all.

The work (per an exhibition guide) provides tools for "dismantling" female white supremacy, a notion as strange as it is politically ambiguous. However, what's far more damaging to Jones's photos than their ideology — art of value is always born out of conviction, and it's frequently wrongheaded — is their refusal or inability to locate inside their beliefs anything that connects to actual worldly experience, and to relate this to us viewers through deliberate visual means.

The show's written materials explain that white women "subconsciously uphold the aesthetics of white dominance, spatialize their supremacy, and place themselves in proximity to power." The psychological condition this implies would, I imagine, be so intensely and irresolvably contradictory as to befit a painting by Breughel or Bacon. But Jones's pictures convey none of this. They are photo-tricks whose sense of visual order is, in the manner of almost all activist art, handed over entirely to concepts: a white screen or a bust, always dead-center in the frame to mitigate confusion, stands for domineering whiteness; reflections signify duplicity. Perhaps counterintuitively, the passive way they articulate their visual logic makes these photographs entirely continuous with the social order they claim to critique: imagine the monument pictures on billboards in a liberal city, the shots of hands centerfolded in an issue of *Vogue*.

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## **Monaco**

*Kalan Strauss: Only in My Dreams*

November 11-December 10

It would be an inaccuracy derived from my dislike of these paintings to say that they're anything but well-made, or even that there's nothing to be learned from them. Strauss can handle his brush (though he chooses to paint post-kitsch trivialities with it), and he has a knack for making things look the way he apparently wants them to (though, again, the worlds he renders well are dumb, full of rainbows, palm trees, and bellicose apes). That he puts what talent he has — which doesn't from these works seem to include arrangement, but may in a small way include coloring and, in a slightly larger way, overall

conception — to dashing off the pictorial equivalents of glittered dragon figurines suggests that he would rather make points than pictures. His point seems to be something hackneyed about the wiliness and mutability of images today. But pictures make points invariably when they're good, typically points more expansive and interesting than the ones that get wheatpasted to their surfaces through strained intent.

As I mentioned, though, there is something that could be productively lifted from Strauss's acrylics: their fuzziness. Just as their subject matter is sampled from digital imagery, so the tissue of their style is borrowed from digital imaging. Strauss has painted pictures that, in places and occasionally in sum, look convincingly blurred, like they're low-res. This is less effective when it's all-over, and more so when it's been kneaded into the scene to the point just before total integration. These paintings, in fact, tend to look better on a screen than they do in actual front of you. One gets the sense that this was adjacent, at best, to the artist's purpose, but one also sees how, paired with the raw promise of his interesting distortive technique, it could yield results.



## **Pulitzer Arts Foundation**

*Barbara Chase-Riboud: Monumentale*

September 16-February 5

If abstract art, in its trajectory through the twentieth century's first half, was bifurcated into its more rigorous and its more spiritual strands, then much of the century's second half can be seen as a series of failed attempts at synthesis. In Chase-Riboud's bronzes, which she started in the sixties and continues to make, these two strands are typified and forced to coexist in all their contradiction. They do so, if not awkwardly, then in a state of elided tension which the artist, more or less correctly, identified early on as sufficient grist for a career's worth of variations.

In the metal halves of her sculptures, the rigorous, unfeeling, and objective is given form; the spiritual, sensuous, and subjective finds expression in the knots and strands of rope and fibers which flow mostly under, but occasionally above, around, within, or out from planes of cast bronze. I say "planes" because, though a sculptor, Chase-Riboud seems to have had hang-ups working in the round. Nearly all of her sculptures, excepting a

series begun late in her career, are fully frontal. This gives her stuff an air more of painting than of sculpture, the worked textures of bronze massing like impasto and the strands of fiber reading somewhat like strokes. Consistently, too, her works reference their own overall shape and directionality in the movements of their parts, a technique common in late modernist painting.

This makes Chase-Riboud's stuff feel slightly hemmed in by its own design, though it tends to survey the cell it's locked itself inside thoroughly. The average work of hers, then, is magisterial but mannered: what falls below this line lapses into mawkishness and literality (*Africa Rising*), while what climbs above it pitches its limitations to a point of controlled absurdity, *à la* Eva Hesse (*Nursery #3*).

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## **Saint Louis Art Museum**

*Currents 122: Meleko Mokgosi*

September 30-February 19

The French theory-derived title of Mokgosi's current project — *Sites of Subjection*, a pungent blend of Michel Foucault and Saidiya Hartman — primes one for something entirely, incurably academic, which about half of this exhibition is. The other half is entirely, but not incurably so.

Mokgosi's big text-based "mammy" paintings are laden. The suite of prints that accompanies them appear amateurish, and since Mokgosi has tenure at Yale I'll assume that this is born from navel-gazing rather than incompetence. Neither series is any good, in part because they both just breathe smartness and admonitions. Good art is allowed to enjoin, sure, but its directives have to be equal parts immediate and tough to put into words. That I can sum up the ponderous intent of these essays with just a few — *in a way that divests Black people of agency in the present, our histories of language are structured by antiblackness* — suggests that maybe they're a bit contrived.

The rest of the paintings in this show seem to be making the same point, or at least a similar one, but through markedly less restrictive means. Huge and black and white, they still have the mortared tightness of conception appropriate to an artist who's fastidious

about updating his CV, but some lovely cracks appear which allow Mokgosi's sadness and sleights of drawing to shine through. These compositions are anti-compositions, executed with photographic precision but full of stilted empty spaces and figures who look, rather than posed, like they're caught in a duration of the second that finds them unposing. This, along with Mokgosi's device of overfinishing passages which don't require it and abandoning at the point of quick strokes ones which do, gives the paintings an intensely calculated feel, but one which periodically collides with moments of both painterly delight and conceptual deviousness.

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## **Saint Louis Art Museum**

*Samson Young: Sonata for Smoke*

September 16-April 9

It's a big issue that artists today are so compulsive about subordinating execution to idea. *Sonata for Smoke*, which is fine-looking and exact, is a case in point. Young's video is immaculately arranged, and it delivers few but surface pleasures. Its style is sort of Buñuel-getting-his-PhD-in-CompLit, which is occasionally of interest but uniformly stiff. It follows a guy with a boom mic recording various things we don't usually hear, mostly smoke. Each shot or action is connected to the others by an associative dream-logic that's set against the proudly surgical swoops and surges of the camera. This is at times a nice juxtaposition, but comes to suffer especially during the long penultimate shot, which relies on cinematic chops — framing, mostly — which Young clearly lacks. He elected to make *Sonata* a video (rather than a performance, installation, essay, etc.) not, it seems, because of any clear affinity between its subject matter and this medium, but because moving images show things, and he had things to tell.

Telling gets tiresome. Seeing *Sonata*, I feel told that cultural heritage is both intangible and enveloping, like smoke, but I don't exactly feel this to be true. And about this, at most, I feel tinged ambivalence. This is because Young's technical precision is often so muscular as to reformulate the paradoxes and slippages he locates behind things — the patent illogic his work tries to convey — as an impregnable new logic. Historical Surrealism attended to illogic as ineffable and unavoidable, an aporia at reality's core like

a thorn in understanding's side. The contemporary Surrealism in which Young participates feels imprisoned rather than perversely liberated by this, and so scrambles to articulate, not an understanding of illogic, but illogic *as* understanding. Our intuition that this is a fool's errand conditions our cool reception to his work.

Corinne Wasmuht, *Llanganuco Falls*, 2008, Oil on panels

On view at the Kemper Art Museum

Wasmuht's painting — designed through digital means but done entirely in oils — might have come off similarly had it been made by a 1912 Picasso who'd just been given a laptop. This is to its enormous credit. Cubistically, it seems to be trying to capture every visual aspect of its titular falls. Rather than edging towards the picture plane, however, the whole scene bursts back from it, compelled by the realistic and intensely perspectival road in the foreground. If the painting's spring colors and luminosity occasionally lapse into prettiness, it's a prettiness justified by Wasmuht's sense of arrangement. Every one of the painting's components simultaneously asserts itself as a discrete formal unit and corresponds, mostly by means of color and placement, to some element of the road at bottom. The result is a fractured flatness to seven eighths of the painting which serves confusingly to emphasize the intense recession into space of the other eighth. The effect is dizzying like info overload.

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Joachim Anthonisz Wtewael, *Cephalus and Procris*, c1600, Oil on canvas

On view at the Saint Louis Art Museum

One can tell why the name we use for the style in which Wtewael painted — Mannerism — is also, with a lowercase “m,” one of criticism's key pejoratives. Though certain Italians had elaborated Michelangelo's distortions and subjectivity into the first great decadent style of the modern period, their copycats to the north largely lost themselves in either complicatedness or (as here) folkish melodrama. Cephalus' and Procris' cloaks are manneristically yellow and pink, but unlike the jarring high colors of Wtewael's southern inspirators they're dulled almost to the point of seeming earthen. The central knot that the characters make, too, is caught somewhere between stately posture and lifelike motion. Like the inverse of Procris herself, who hid in the brush to monitor her man and got arrowed for it, Wtewael seems to have had a heart for the simple relations of the natural world but a head for transcending them. His painting, all artifice, registers the difficulty of being so disposed.

# *MAQ*



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