

FOUR EXHIBITIONS AT BRUNO DAVID GALLERY

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The four exhibitions which recently closed at Bruno David's gallery in downtown Clayton, Missouri all shared an inclination towards a bottomless sort of experimentation which is common in the arts today. Although all of the works on view were rich in local explanations for the way they looked, most lacked the deeper justifications which can emerge from the interaction between an object's conceptual apparatus and its formal execution. Largely – but not uniformly – those works on view which engaged themselves in formal exercises did so a bit hermetically. Those works which were driven instead by extra-artistic ideas often failed to register through their appearance the force of these ideas.

The combined effect of these complementary failures was that much of the work at Bruno David had a character of stiff *experimentalism*: an approach to making things look wild or feel prickly for the seemingly unsupported sake of making things look wild or feel prickly. There were, however, more than a few significant exceptions to this prevailing impulse, which were most abundant in Jill Downen's meticulous two-room installation *Speak Truth* and, to a lesser extent, in Damon Freed's jocular painting exhibition *Town & Country*. The pleasures which the best parts of these two shows provided were more than enough to have made my trip to David's gallery worthwhile.

Of the four shows, the only one without a moment of success was Daniel Raedeke's. Called *Playlist*, it had thirteen small glossy abstractions, each built into a thick white frame that made it look like a light box turned off. Ten of these panels crowded the walls, while another three with slightly variant frames stood on pedestals in the middle of the room. Coupled with the surfeit of two-dimensional hung pieces, the presence of these more sculptural works at the exhibition's center, rather than adding a layer of intermedial complexity to Raedeke's program, suggested that the artist didn't trust his capacity for composition enough to let his erratic designs fight for themselves simply as pictures.



Damon Freed

in the middle of a process of deterioration, its straight lines fading and tilting and bleeding and its surface sometimes overlayed with foreign shapes or colors. The pictures' disintegrative aspect was simultaneously overplayed and underdeveloped: Raedeke's images were too abstracted to serve as fulfilling referents for the ideal grids they were aberrations of, but too mired in this process of reference to let themselves become pure design. The result was a displaced emptiness of both form and feeling, as if the paintings were copies of copies of copies, *ad infinitum*.

The digital permutations were literal rather than metaphoric in Monika Weiss's video installation *Metamorphosis [Nirbhaya]*. Comprised of a pair of single-shot movies played back-to-back and scored by the artist's atmospheric piano improvisations, *M / N* showed solo performers moving languorously through a green-screened murk of fabric. Both videos opened onto views so softly constructed and apparently guileless as to seem almost boring. But as they proceeded, Weiss's films shrouded themselves ever more completely in the mystery of how exactly they were made; shapes and colors atop the slowly shifting tapestries became projections becoming reflections becoming emanations becoming objects. The effect was thick and confounding in a quite pleasing way. *M / N* is the younger cousin of a monumental international project of Weiss's called *Nirbhaya*, which, based both in Poland and the United States, memorializes victims of gendered violence. According to Weiss, the video installation at Bruno David was meant to evoke this theme by referencing the Greek myth of Daphne and Apollo. Without having read about this afterwards, however, I never would have known. Perhaps the fact that the austerity and plaintiveness of Weiss's larger project failed to register in *M / N* as much more than a darkly well-executed technical experiment in video suggests that Weiss's work – enthralling but overwrought – is insufficient to this large commemorative task.

Compared to *M / N*'s headiness, Damon Freed's exhibition of loud, spastic paintings had a welcome levity. Freed, whether more or less purposefully, is a participant in the current industry of flippantly representational painting. Like many of his contemporary ilk, he seems interested in reducing technique to childlike essentials of thick strokes and sloppy perspective, making designs that fill the canvas and tackle the eye. A pendular response to the previous decade's glut of dull abstractions, this is a tough game for any painter to play: as the excellent failures and garish successes of *Town & Country* prove, screaming



Monika Weiss



occasionally pretty good. His canvases appear absolutely brimming with paint, even when his terse brushmarks dilate and pull apart to reveal slivers of untouched white ground. Sometimes, these smiling whites are there in Freed's compositions to represent something, like a sidewalk sign or the lines of an American flag. Other times, the slivers serve as visual respites from the onslaught of Freed's brusque daubs of color – as if his pictures, with their rushes of urgently signifying marks, would simply be too busy without the blankness they provide. At Bruno David, this was especially the case in the motile *The Last Dandelion on Earth*. Through a steady dilution of pigment at the right side of the canvas, this painting evoked a bleary sense of loss productively at odds with its teeming coloration. As also happened in *Cloudscape* and *The Raven*, it was in moments of such confluence of scenography and technique that Freed found his voice as an expressive painter.

Considering how deceptively slapdash were Freed's achievements, it is fitting that the other show of merit at Bruno David was as cerebrally exact as Jill Downen's *Speak Truth*. The few dozen discrete objects in Downen's exhibition, spread over two noncontiguous rooms, were presented in four or five groupings, whose logics for inclusion were by turns conceptual and formal. Deliberately, the distinction between any two of these groups was porous, with all of the objects averring thin affinities for most of the others. Indeed, although the show appeared to have been divided rather precisely into discrete "moments," it was likewise clear that a portion of its intent, as a totalizing work of installation art, was to foster such affinities and undercut any sense of separateness. Each object, somewhat eerily, seemed like a vague mnemonic for every other. This monism of Downen's practice – her interest in cultivating all-encompassing aesthetic systems – held a promise of success which in fact went unrealized. Instead, her show's most gripping moments were delivered more traditionally, in the form of small boxes hung on walls playing with the illusion of space and depth. While Downen's stalactic sculptures were unimpeachably assertive in the room they filled, it was a less assuming series of five little rectangular constructions in the other gallery which shone. Made of plaster caked onto wood frames and marred by thin, scratched lines of blue, these small objects looked like Twomblys erased down to their smallest essentials. They were sparse and definitive, like rowboats on ponds.

This idea that vital imaginative material might be found in the plainest, basest, least developed reaches of art's irreducible



Jill Downen

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greatest hope for ending its long-term affair with distorting theory. That certain of Downen's individual objects put this notion into practice is something to be grateful for. Her strength as an artist suggests that she might in the future do something similar at the level of a more integrated and total installation.

Del O'Brien

Del O'Brien is an art critic based in St. Louis, MO.

CAESURA

editor@caesuramag.org



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