

DO ARTISTS MAKE THE BEST CURATORS? Two shows seem to suggest they might

by Ryan Steadman



Walter Price, *Pleasant hill dr.*, 2016. Photo: Courtesy of Rachel Uffner Gallery

Politician, salesman, party planner, scholar, janitor. A young art dealer wears many hats these days, so it's nice when you can job something out to someone else.

For sanity's sake, galleries will sometimes hire professional or independent curators to put together group shows for them when they're feeling overwhelmed. But sometimes a dealer's rapport with one of their artists is so solid, he or she just hands over the reins to them instead.

This is often when the most curious, inspired or unexpected things happen in a gallery space. What an artist might lack in objectivity, he or she makes up for in passion and on-the-ground knowledge—the kind a professional curator couldn't possibly have at their disposal. After all, who knows more about collage, for instance, than someone who has been manually cutting and pasting for over 20 years while soaking up all the collage-based works they can get their eyes on?

Two shows curated by artists this month in the Lower East Side shine with just this type of confident know-how and earnest admiration.

“Low”, which was curated by the artists Ethan Greenbaum and Michael DeLucia at the less-than-a-year-old gallery Lyles & King, brings a focused specificity to the table, in this case, an insider's view of work that turns the images we see all day and everyday—electronic or printed media—into objects. It's a sweet spot that's near and dear to the curators' own practices, and as expected, technology plays a large role in the works produced for this show. Flatbed printing, 3-D scanning and CNC

(Computer Numerical Control) milling are some of the processes used by these artists, but there is also a decided humanity that can be found in all of the works, either via human representation or through the relics of our daily existence.

One of the more bizarre objects in the show is from the underrated sculptor David Kennedy Cutler, who checks in with a fantastic pile of 3-D masks that were printed onto plastic and then formed from a mold of the artist's face. The bulge of what looks to be upward of 50 faces is interspersed with printed and diced "hair"—which spurts out between the faces like seaweed—and is then surrealistically sprinkled with replicas of moldy bread slices (which are also printed and formed in the same manner.)

The piece, titled *Sick Bacchus (Head and Bread Repeat)*, 2016, is beautifully echoed by a much more minimal artwork in the back of the gallery: a subtly painted aqua-resin wall work by Anissa Mack titled *Gypsy Janus*, 2011. This single, all-white cast of a Halloween mask is inset into the wall but is painted so that it alternates between looking like a cavity and a protrusion—a magical effect to say the least.

The beauty of this show is how the curators seamlessly blend the work of older artists—from an architectural blueprint created by Claes Oldenburg in 1980 to new fiberglass works by original Neo Geo artist Peter Halley—with the work of younger artists who were heavily inspired by the original spatial investigations of these elder statesmen.

Not only do Mr. Greenbaum and Mr. Delucia connect the historical dots for us with this show, but they also bring new talent to light, such as the young internet artist Sara Ludy, who offers a futuristic projection of a digital pattern made from a white cat that's part Matrix, part *Alice in Wonderland*.

A decidedly different show, which just opened a few blocks away at the Rachel Uffner Gallery, was also more or less artist-curated. "Hill of Munch," a goofy collection of artworks exploring child-like views of the quotidian, was actually "co-organized" by the prolific multimedia artist Brian Belott and Ms. Uffner. But the show is clearly spun from Mr. Belott's distinctive aesthetic, and even includes the Brooklyn-based artist's own work. Mr. Belott is represented here by his low-brow pastiches that dance across the artist's signature reverse-glass paintings. Tin foil, Froot Loops cereal and discarded socks, among other unusual accoutrements, square off in Mr. Belott's unique compositions, which have slowly gained a strong following as his work has matured.

All of the other artists in the show eschew Mr. Belott's brand of found object collage for the most part and tend to focus on youthful forms of drawing and painting as a means of communication. Brooklyn-born painter Walter Price stands out as particularly impressive in this context, with a selection of small skewed and abstracted figure-in-landscape paintings. Mr. Price's touch is especially seductive in *Pleasant Hill dr.*, 2016, where he takes the figurative inclinations of Jacob Lawrence, bends them wildly—almost past comprehension—and then soaks them in a radiant orgy of yellows, pinks and reds.

The landscape painter Shara Hughes, who currently has a solo show on display at Marlborough Chelsea, also puts forward strong work that conflates the abstracted landscapes of Richard Diebenkorn and the familiar curlicues of tween doodling. Ms. Hughes' whorling environs and blasts of color touch upon the amped up glory of the Hudson River School landscapes and how their artificial majesty can merely be viewed as staid, grown-up version of the dream-memory fusions that originate in the childhood mind.

It's hard to imagine a professional art curator, with scholastic or historical intentions, ever being able to acquire the in-depth and intimate understanding of specific materials, visual sources or local scenes needed to produce shows like these, which is why artist-curated shows serve a vital purpose to even the most casual art viewer. It's a perspective that offers a view of the nuts and bolts within artist practices—something you can rarely find in any other type of gallery or museum show.