WHAT TO SEE IN NEW YORK ART GALLERIES THIS WEEK
by Will Heinrich

Urs Fischer's "Faules Fundament" ("Rotten Foundation") at Karma.
Credit Mats Nordman/Karma, New York

Urs Fischer

Through Sept. 10. Karma, 188 East Second Street, Manhattan; 212-390-8290, karmakarma. org.

To make the latest iteration of "Faules Fundament" ("Rotten Foundation"), a distressingly timely piece he originated in 1998 but that has never before been shown in the United States, Urs Fischer drove his truck to the Bronx to buy about a ton of fresh produce. He laid it out on the floor of Karma Gallery in one broad horizontal line, with two short perpendicular projections, like the Greek letter pi. He started with potatoes for stability, and then added apples, lemons, cabbages and carrots. A few green Granny Smiths sprinkled among mostly red apples create a superficial appearance of diversity, but otherwise, the fruits and vegetables he chose look like government clip art: The potatoes are russet, the onions yellow, the cabbages green. Atop this monocultural edenic bounty, with copiously sloppy handfuls of grainy gray cement and nine unevenly staggered rows of light beige cinder blocks, he built a slightly listing and occasionally gaptoothed but unmistakably solid wall.

Since the piece's installation, time has withered cabbage leaves into dingy yellow paper and blackened some carrots, while bleaching others white as parsnips. The gallery smells musty and has begun to attract flies and ants. Even if the food fully liquefies, though, the wall's weight and shape mean that it's not going to fall over anytime soon. And whether you read that as a metaphor for industrialism's crushing impact on the natural world, for the white power structure of the last few hundred years, or simply the persistence of any entrenched idea, it seems pretty discouraging.

But the piece's own broadly medieval insight cuts the other way: The rotting fruit and vegetables are a reminder that in the very long run, the wall will fall down, as will everything else humans build, and there's something pretty funny about that.