

GOTHAM ART & THEATER

by Elisabeth Kley



Carrie Moyer, *Rebus*, 2009. Canada

At 77, Malcolm Morley is as enthralled by daredevil destruction as a little boy crashing his toy trucks. In fact, an elaborate warship model destroyed by a German bomb during the WWII London blitz may have inspired his entire body of work. Early paintings of ocean liners copied from postcards and travel brochures seem to recreate the lost toy boat, and recent depictions of colliding racing cars and half-demolished buildings could be flashbacks to the 1944 explosion. Morley's latest

images of motorcycle racing, another method of courting danger, are on view at Sperone Westwater Gallery, Apr. 16-June 20, 2009.

The showstopper is *Ring of Fire* (2009), a mud-splattered life-sized sculpture of a man on a motorbike jumping through a burning hoop. Constructed from heavy watercolor paper and supported by a framework of steel, he resembles an oversized toy soldier with a tubular body and flat paper lips. Colorful logos cover his clothing, and every detail of the bike is painstakingly reproduced, including the treads on the wheels. The orange flames are beautifully painted in loose watercolor washes.

Blue Boyz (2008), the phantasmagorical relief tucked away in a back gallery, is another contender for stealing the exhibition. Bouncing over mountainous brown terrain with the texture of actual dirt, ten painted motorcyclists rush from all directions towards the viewer, led by a fully three-dimensional paper rider bursting from a hole in the center of the canvas. Small paper flags are pasted here and there, and a tiny balloon floats in a sky that is rapidly shifting from day to night, accompanied by fluffy white clouds, a crescent moon and a sprinkling of stars.

The rest of the paintings seem hyper-real from a distance, but close-up they are engagingly handmade. Methodically representing chaos, Morley copies photographs from sports magazines and transfers them to his canvases with grids. By turning the paintings upside down, he can lovingly paint every detail, square by square, without getting bogged down in representation. The image materializes by itself when the canvas is turned right side up.

Summoning up a vision of a motorcycle crash, *Hubris* (2008) is a two part vertical painting that features a pair of racers making a sharp turn, placed above a still life of fragments of the original magazine photo after it was torn apart by a dog.

In *Thor* (2008), a single racer appears above more painted bits of paper, but this time the boundaries between whole and torn images disappear, as if the subject is literally disintegrating from the bottom up. The penciled grid left bare at the edges undercuts Morley's photorealism, and an actual racing glove pinned to the painting's lower right corner also draws attention to the racer's immateriality. Prices range from \$250,000 to \$400,000.

Oliver Herring, "Teens with Masks"

Make-believe combat is the subject of "Teens with Masks," Oliver Herring's exhibition of photographic collages at Max Protetch, Apr. 25-June 13, 2009. Known for ominously glittering knitted Mylar sculptures of flowers, blankets and clothing, Herring has also made wildly imaginative stop-action videos, and life-sized Styrofoam portrait sculptures covered with cut-out photographs of the subject's body.

For the last few years, Herring has also been organizing *Task*, a series of Fluxus-related, community-based group performances. Participants jot down imagined

activities and place them in a jar: "make a dragon" or "pull someone's hair," for example. Tasks are selected at random and enacted with materials including tape, tin foil, paper and cardboard. The experience can be transformative for people who haven't made art before.

The works at Protetch came out of a ten-day workshop Herring conducted in his studio with a group of teenagers. The task -- "take a knife and kill someone" -- incited a ten-minute-long pantomimed massacre carried out with handmade masks and weapons of cardboard and aluminum foil. After the mayhem died down, Herring photographed the costumed teens and embellished the resulting enlarged C-Prints with additional masks and daggers of metallic paper. Sometimes the masks are seen as photograph and collage in the same image, redoubling the play between real and illusory disguise.

Herring's elaborate additions only partially hide his photographs of living flesh. Eyes and mouths can be seen, looking all the more youthful in contrast with the artificial metal, as if they are covered with a magical fungus. Enthralling combinations of inner city kids and outer space jewelry, Herring's portraits transfigure ordinary faces, revealing the beauty that passes unnoticed each day. Prices range from \$4,000 for some small works hanging in the back of the gallery to \$22,500 for the largest pieces.

Betty Tompkins "Fuck Paintings"

Representations of metal in more secret places can be found in Betty Tompkins's cinematic close-up acrylic paintings of genitalia, at Mitchell Alpus Gallery until June 6. Two of the works, *Cunt Painting #10* (2007) and *Cunt Painting #11* (2008), are pearly grisaille studies of female sexual organs featuring multiple piercings -- armor for pleasure rather than protection.

Tompkins began her series of "Fuck Paintings" in 1969, looking for a subject that would hold the audience's attention longer than the Minimalist artwork prevalent at the time. Too shocking for the 1960s, the paintings were a critical and financial failure, confiscated by customs officials and compared to medical textbook illustrations.

With a recent solo show in Zurich and a painting acquired by the Centre Pompidou in Paris, Tompkins's time has finally come. Prices range from \$8,500 for drawings to \$42,000 for a 72 x 64 in. painting. Four of the works have sold, including *Fuck Painting #24* (2007), an especially fetishistic image of a naked foot caressing an erect penis.

Carrie Moyer, "Arcana"

Female power is also evoked in Carrie Moyer's "Arcana," a solo exhibition at Canada, May 7-June 7, 2009. In addition to being an artist, Moyer is co-founder of the lesbian agitprop duo Dyke Action Machine. Her ostensibly abstract acrylic paintings

feature shapes reminiscent of prehistoric goddesses and primitive chipped knives. Textures range from thick and sandy to thin stained washes, and glitter is sometimes added.

Rebus (2009) is a portrait of a musical instrument or figurine with blood red strings, breasts instead of a head and a transparent stomach revealing her cloudy internal organs. And *Frieze* (2009) is a line of stone-age idols seemingly removed from a painted cement-colored background and connected by another trompe l'oeil line of red paint that resembles an umbilical cord. Veils of orange and yellow smoke undulate behind them, rising from antediluvian rituals, perhaps. The works are priced from \$3800 to \$18,000.

Basim Magdy's "1968"

Prehistory is also the subject of Egyptian artist Basim Magdy's "1968: Memorial to a Rising Continent," an installation at Newman Popiashvili Gallery that refers to the mythical sinking of Atlantis while conjuring up a present day flood. A black robed mannequin angel of death wearing goggles and flippers perches on the roof of a half submerged house painted in a variety of colors, making it seem to be cobbled together from salvaged detritus.

The satellite TV dish on the roof and the sandbags with scattered seashells, sand and seaweed bring floods in New Orleans and Fargo to mind. A clear plastic skylight in the corrugated roof reveals an oxygen tank hanging inside, as if the hut is an island of survival in an inundated world. Projected from inside the house on the gallery wall through another clear plastic corrugated window, a slideshow of distorted photos of car wrecks and flood damage seems to be viewed from under the sea.

Readings from Edgar Cayce's history of Atlantis provide a portentous soundtrack, with descriptions of flood preparations by the island's inhabitants before it sank into the sea -- supposedly sending delegations carrying civilization to Bimini, Egypt and Yucatan. Cayce predicted that Atlantis would rise again in 1968, but the year passed and nothing happened. Magdy seems to be asking if our culture will have anything to share before it too disappears beneath a flood. A related small painting can also be seen, priced at \$4,000. The show is on view until June 20.

Glen Baldrige at von Nichtssagend

Glen Baldrige, whose solo exhibition is at Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery in Williamsburg until June 7, is also concerned with impending disaster. In *Lucky Sevens*, a series of screen prints was coated with silvery scratch off material, which Baldrige removed to reveal images of coffins from an undertaker's catalogue -- thus noting that death is the only prize everyone's certain to win. Model names include "perfection" and "aspen," and styles range from a plain closed rectangular box (#40) to "titan," an elaborate satin-lined number with an open lid.

More temporary disappointments are memorialized in *collection* (2004-2009), a five gallon water bottle stuffed with losing lottery tickets, while the fire next time is evoked in *Jenga*® (2009) a miniaturized “endless column” of scorched wooden blocks that brings to mind notions of “disaster modernism,” and *falling_ash.jpg* (2009), a beautiful graphite drawing of a silvery ash-covered tree at night. Prices range from \$600 for one coffin print to \$3,000 for the bottle of defunct tickets.

Michelle Handelman at Participant

Dorian, a wildly theatrical four channel video installation by Michelle Handelman, can be seen at Participant until June 3. The voluptuous Sequinette appears as a female version of Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray (the ever youthful character whose aging only takes place in his portrait), along with the beautiful Irani-Armenian Theremin virtuoso Armen Ra as her escort Lord H, and artist K8 Hardy as a nightclub performer.

A blood-curdling cameo by Mother Flawless Sabrina (star of the 1968 drag documentary *The Queen*) features Dorian decayed as a violin-playing, skull-faced fiend ripping paper stuffing out of her brassiere. Costumes, wigs, drawings and production stills are also on view. The video installation is \$45,000, photos are \$3,000 (both in editions of five), drawings are \$1,500, and wigs and costumes are from \$1,500–\$3,000. Flawless Sabrina will perform at Participant on May 24, along with soundtrack musicians Stefan Tcherepnin and Nadia Sirota.

ELISABETH KLEY is a New York artist and critic.