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05.24.05 Candy's Dandy

New York



Left: Michael Ashkin and Leslie Brack. (Photo: Ruth Root) Right: Unidentified bearded gallery goer; Cary Leibowitz; Fritz Karch.

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Cary Leibowitz, the only artist who boasts he was "discovered on 'The Gong Show,'" proved that he has survived his respectable gig in Christies' Print Department with low self-esteem and sense of humor intact. Friends and well wishers flocked to his opening last Thursday at Andrew Kreps. An inordinate number of them had large beards. (Don't ask me why. I pondered most of the evening, "What was *up* with that?")

Foregoing his usual pattern-on-pattern signature style, the artist formerly known as Candy Ass was a classy springtime vision sporting a solid tan suit, canary yellow shirt, blue gingham tie, and fabulous tan vintage loafers acquired from an old queen in Harlem selling his clothes on the street. "I think he had them since the '70s," Leibowitz speculated.

The former Mr. Ass continues to inspire his fans with motivational pieces such as the diptychs "i'm sick of making art/get up you lazy bum" printed on cheerful rainbow-bleed paper. An oblong "abstract" tableau states, on the left end, "those shoes are hideous," and, on the right, "they go with my belt." Several multiples—scarves, mittens, and hats—explored the artist's fascination with race and with machine-generated knits. They became wall pieces, as well as accessories, installed with Leibowitz's endlessly inventive genius for display. Old-fashion golf-styled knit hats with pom poms, machine-knit "Goddam Mississippi," spelled out "N I N A" on one wall (in an homage to Nina Simone); "gay colored" lavender knit "Abraham Lincoln" scarves formed an A (for Honest Abe?); and mittens honoring black female legislators such as Shirley Chisholm, Barbara Jordan, and Oseola McCarty made me proud to be an honorary black woman (just kidding!).

The race- and fashion-conscious art was a crowd pleaser. Chatting with Fritz Karch (Leibowitz's gentle doppelgänger, a fellow bearded style maven who is also frequently seen in plaid), the artist gestured at the pom pom hats, and explained, "I kinda sort of had a concept going here..." before trailing off and just wincing. Fritz admired the snappy colors.

At the after party at Bongo Fry Shack, everyone enjoyed a large variety of fried foods and congratulated the man of the hour. He was clearly relieved. Few artists manage to be so sophisticated, so funny, and so real at the same time.

—Rhonda Lieberman

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