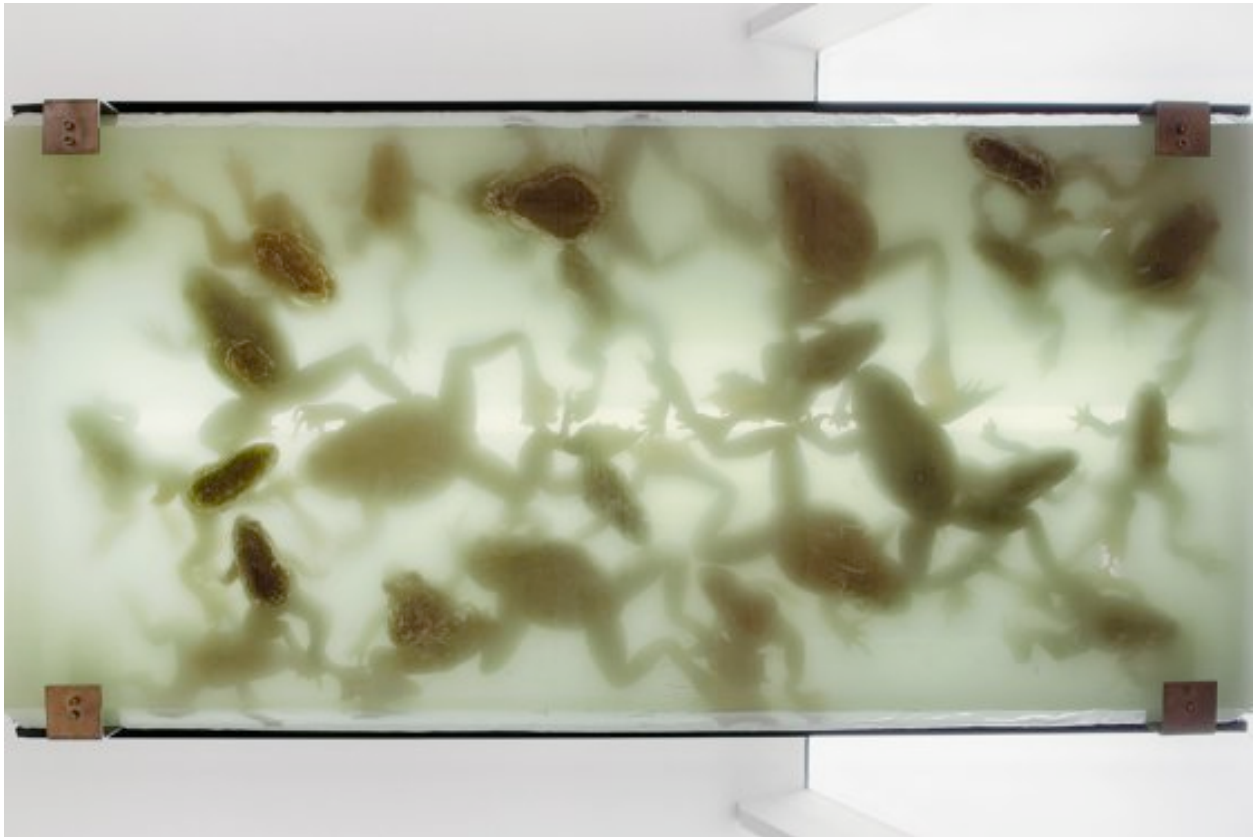


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VULTURE

Jerry Saltz Dives Into the Lower East Side Art Scene and Emerges Optimistic

By Jerry Saltz, 9/12/2014



Last week on the Lower East Side, the art galleries opened the 2014-2015 season in a bigger, more viable, and better place. New arrivals have landed; start-ups of the past few years have taken wonderful root; artists are sticking with their galleries rather than going to the burly shores of megagalleries. At this stage in its development, the 1980s DIY East Village scene saw mass artist defections to Soho powerhouses, and galleries decamping there as well. But here in the Lower East Side, shows and spaces have improved in the past year or so.

This may have less to do with the art getting better than that the type of work shown here has started influencing taste and ideas across the map — indeed, one of the most annoying recent trends, the muted abstract look-alike painting I've been calling zombie formalism, got a start in this hothouse. This phenomenon tells us that the Lower East Side is now far more than just not Chelsea. Art isn't better here than everywhere else; the neighborhood isn't purer; in fact, the rents are higher on the Lower East Side than on the Upper East Side. Still, the clouds of commerce don't feel as portentous here. And yet two days ago, standing outside his Broome Street gallery, Canada, Phil Grauer

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mused, "Can we keep going? Is this phase over? When will everyone start hating this scene?" Snickering, I said, "We've already starting hating you. Which tells you that you all must be doing something right."

The most interesting thing about the artists showing in Lower East Side galleries this September is how many of them are reckoning and wrestling with how limited and limiting things have seemed there in previous years, and how the security state, unreality, and overcoded stored information are embedded within all of us. Andy Coolquitt's show at Lisa Cooley tells us that a number of artists now showing in this neighborhood for the third and fourth times are finding ways through what had looked like ominous signs of aesthetic ossification. Along with so-called zombie formalism, this hood has helped foster a couple of other possible zombies. You could call one zombie sculpture — usually consisting of a batch of sticks or poles, found pipes, pieces of sheetrock or curtain rods, light fixtures, plywood, black garbage bags, plastic sheets, maybe some buckets, all arranged or leaned against gallery walls. It's Neo-Dada and Constructivism meets Arte Povera, Rauschenberg, and Cady Noland with massive injections of art-school-learned 1970s Post Minimalism peppered with what in the 1990s was called Scatter Art and in 2007 got dubbed *Unmonumental*.

If you don't like zombie sculpture, one of the artists to blame is Coolquitt. When his piles of sticks and stuff were first shown around seven years ago, they looked different, strange, and loaded with newish content and structure. But after his second show, Coolquitt seemed trapped by his form, too reliant on just being a pack-rat magpie who happened to live in a place where his junk was way more interesting than ours. In this show, he found new parts of himself. Coolquitt creates a kind of abstract gesamtkunstwerk house and garden. All the works have become domestic surrogates filled with the karma of past usage: Shag rugs repurposed as paintings flip-flop your mental orientation from floor to wall; bluejeans hug from the ceiling make it feel as though you're seeing inside defunct closets. This artist isn't being caught in the trap of his own making. He's breaking free.

Sadly, the same can't be said for Andrea Longacre-White's exhibition of photographic-based work at Nicelle Beauchene, which you could describe as an instance of zombie photography. Formalist to the core, this kind of photo-based work is always about the means of its own making. I imagine the ghost of Clement Greenberg rising up from his grave to stop all these people from obsessing over ideas he devised in the early 20th century. Worse, these are the *exact same issues* about the techniques of photography, reproduction, and appropriation. Now we get work about inkjet printers, lenses, cameras, scanners, and other photographic tools and technology — that the teachers of these artists (acolytes of Minimalism, Post-Minimalism, and Pictures Generation artists, writers for *October* and *Artforum*, and other dead-enders) came of age dealing with. Now they've infected two or three younger generations of artists with the same dead-end arguments. Everyone has become the best art-history student in the class. And all the work looks more or less the same, a cross between Christopher Wool, Wade Guyton, some constructivism or minimalism, all by way of the abstract drips and speckle patterns of zombie painting.

Longacre-White's large works meet all of this criteria, albeit with a determined physicality and grittiness. But the work doesn't escape the weight of unoriginal ideas of composition, scale, color, application, and presentation. Except for two strange, shiny, black rectangle shapes on the floor. The checklist tells us they are made of "lube." Reading the press- release tells us this artist has *a lot* more on her mind than she's transmuting to her work. In addition to the usual cant about Epson printers, inkjet, logos, hard drives, and overloaded digital information, there's this: "drip and sweat ... latex lubed ... getting fucked, fucking the floor, on my knees, on its back." This tells us that all this artist has to do is embed these thoughts into her next work and she'll be a force far more powerful than formulaic post-formalism. The physicality of her work suggests that this is possible. Let's hope so.

At Salon 94, David Benjamin Sherry is trapped between zombie photography and old-school Romanticism. He gives us a Wolfgang Tillmans-like array of staggered framed photographs of panoramic landscapes, icebergs, mountain lakes, the artist with an erection, a self-portrait in a platinum wig, and, of course, a picture of the camera he uses. Much of this work is seen through what might be monochromatic filters. All the work has a handsome formality and intellectual grounding — technically, this guy is a whiz. And we all understand the urge to be something like a modern-day Ansel Adams venturing into the wilderness to document the grandeur of nature and delving into the mysterious of the self. But Sherry's pictures have no genuine depth of examination. The work itself has to plumb deeper and look less familiar before it strikes psychic *and* contemporary pay dirt.

But now for the really good news. In his squirrely but serious semi-documentary video at Simone Subal Gallery, Frank Heath actually goes to K-Mart with a cameraman and a boom microphone, asking costumers about the origins of the universe and splicing these shots with actual scientists from the CERN collider in Switzerland. The effect is something like seeing a bunch of monkeys starting to type out *Hamlet*.

The best group show of the moment is *Flat Neighbors*, the four-person bull's-eye organized for Rachel Uffner by crackerjack artist Ajay Kurian, who includes three of his own works — one a kind of mini museum meets a techno Boom-Boom Room from the future. Kurian is creeping into the crevices of a new digital-analog space, partly two- and three-dimensional, partly paranoid, romantic but ironic, self-aware and still filled with yearning, redolent of banality. And with the help of other artists: There's Elaine Cameron-Weir's futuristic cave art, consisting of a giant clamshell that acts as a incense burner (I love this thing), Dora Budor's overhead slab filled with fake frogs reminiscent of those that fell like a plague in the film *Magnolia*, and Daniel Keller's tower sculpture made of a solar panel, fake rocks, and the kind of foodstuffs used by survivalists. Decoding, recoding, art as external hard drive, sculpture as uploaded object into the material world: all of this is coming into play.

Hands down, the most promising young artist I saw last Sunday was 25-year-old Darja Bajagic at Room East. We get shaped asymmetrical assemblages that use painted and printed canvas, letters of prisoners who write to young women who write to them, and clipped images from *Brat* magazine that cater to men who fetishize pubescent girls and the girls who want to be fetishized. There's a drawing from a serial killer and decals of busty she-devils firing guns and buxom angels who only hold them. It's hellfire voodooed beautiful and a delve into the cursed and excommunicated who still live in society looking for ways to express their yearnings. These yearnings can rub people raw or the wrong way, as Bajagic knows. In a recent interview, she said that after meeting with Robert Storr, dean of the Yale Art School, "he literally told me I was crazy ... that Yale would pay for all of my counseling and therapy ... to seek help for my obsessive-compulsive behavioral habits of collecting images of girls and porn ... that I should look deep inside of myself to figure out what are the problems I have with myself, as a woman, for being O.K. with these kinds of images even existing in the world, let alone propelling them in paintings and in the gallery system."

Storr was right in one respect: Bajagic is harnessing a dark force that is with us all the time, an image world never more than a click away, one that shadows everything we do, a world of predator, prey, the haunted, transformative forces of sex, violence, loneliness, fantasy, and imaginations that can't formulate spaces not threatening. With this show, Bajagic is joining fellow female artists Cameron-Weir, Andra Ursuta, Dawn Kasper, Lucy Dodd, and others too numerous to mention; a beautiful strain of feminism that takes no prisoners is upon us.

Which brings us to the Hole's *Future Feminism*. This challenging show coincides with, and seems likely fueled partially by, so many starlets declaring themselves "not feminist" while neglecting even to define feminism. For this show, notables Antony, Kembra Pfahler, and others have conceived and etched into large rose-colored quartz circles "13 Tenets of Future Feminism." Among others there's *Feminize Male-Centric Language* and *Deconstruct the Mythology of Male Spiritual Supremacy*. The lot of them should be installed in the Capitol rotunda. Each is as complex as misogyny and feminism themselves. Before I patted myself and the art world on the back for not practicing this sort of institutionalized misogyny, I remembered that only about 13 percent of the current shows in New York galleries are by women. Which only made me more grateful for this one.