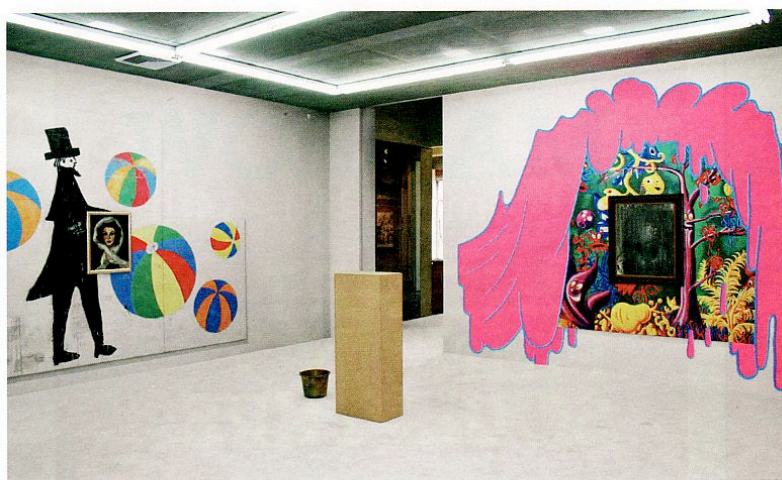


WHO'S AFRAID OF JASPER JOHNS?

TONY SHAFRAZI

Everyone knows Urs Fischer as the purveyor of fourth-generation institutional critique, taking deconstruction to its literal ends by cutting holes through the walls of the Whitney Museum of American Art or by blasting a pit in the floor of Gavin Brown's Enterprise, the ur-fashionable gallery in New York. Fewer remember Brown himself as an artist who made installations with secondhand paperback books before

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Installation views of "Who's Afraid of Jasper Johns?" Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York, 2008. Photo: James Walton. Courtesy Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York.

willing himself into a career as a successful dealer. Tony Shafrazi's history as an artist is more checkered; his one act of note was vandalizing Picasso's *Guernica* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1974. A photograph of the future impresario of 1980s art stars being led away from MoMA by police graces the poster for "Who's Afraid of Jasper Johns?" an installation-cum-group exhibition by Fischer and Brown, intended as an homage of sorts to Shafrazi. The show has nothing to do with Johns, or with Barnett Newman—who originally coined its title, the press release alleges, for the painting we know as *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* (1966)—but much to do with the collective recall

of a self-referential artworld, the accumulative institutional memory of paces, and lingering questions about the nature of photography, representation, and art.

Rob Pruitt, a regular of Brown's, greets the visitor with *Viagra Falls*, a chute of water supposedly laced with Bob Dole's favorite little helper, rushing in a trough of clear plastic sheeting and sandbags down the stairs of the gallery. But the real fun begins upstairs, where Fischer and Brown have papered the walls and ceiling of the gallery with a full-scale photomural of Shafrazi's preceding exhibition, *Four Friends*, a long-running hanging of secondary-market merchandise by Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Donald Baechler. Every detail has been reproduced in full color and actual size—the paintings, a few sculptures seen as if still in front of the walls, even two of the security guards, who remain on duty, occasionally wearing the same suits seen in their wallpaper facsimiles. A badly stained off-white wall-to-wall carpet by Rudolf Stingel covers the floor. Walking into this space feels a bit like entering an enormous diorama or a virtual-reality game, an ersatz gallery preserved in aspic.

Painted and hung on this life-size tableau are works that sometimes make references to Shafrazi's career—an unfinished 1949 canvas by Francis Bacon (whose estate Shafrazi represents), for instance, sits over the reproduction of a boisterous Scharf, which has already been half covered by Lily van der Stokker's hot pink cartoon blob, painted directly on the wallpaper; and a great Malcolm Morley (apparently an early associate of Shafrazi's), *Age of Catastrophe*, from 1976, smashes together an airplane, an ocean liner, and a submarine, and hangs smack dab over the photograph of a painted tarpaulin by Haring—while others seem merely to rhyme formally with the works pictured in the photomural, for example a small Robert Ryman canvas of white strokes on a black ground that hangs on top of the image of a black-and-white Baechler. Works by Cindy Sherman, Jeff Koons, and Mike Bidlo mounted over those of Shafrazi's 1980s artists seem like an embodiment of the supersession of neo-expressionism by the generation of appropriation art, while Sarah Lucas, Christopher Wool, Sue Williams, Rirkrit Tiravanija (like Fischer, a member of Brown's stable), and Cady Noland represent the 1990s. One could be forgiven for reading the show as a backhanded compliment, a sly corrective to Shafrazi's retardataire tastes. Few of these works, however, seem to relate meaningfully to each other or to their backdrops—and nearly all of them have looked better in other contexts. Tiravanija's performance relics, *Untitled (tom ka soup)* from 1991, get lost in the middle of Stingel's carpet, while Noland's once gripping aluminum panel, *SLA group shot #1* from the same year, loses most of its charge leaning between fairly garish images from Haring and Scharf. In the end, the curatorial choices feel rather arbitrary, perhaps a mere pretext for the larger concept of the exhibition.

Yet that concept does not lack for complexity or interest. The photomurals form a giant palimpsest of the gallery's recent past, entirely present but partly obscured by the new show overlaid on it. "Who's Afraid of Jasper Johns?" engenders a sense of déjà vu, while Fischer and Brown add another layer, exposing the sediment of exhibition histories within a gallery and the accretion of narratives within the overlapping networks of the artworld.

In a rear gallery, a large Baechler is reflected in the photographed glass of two Haring drawings. The camera, too, can be seen in the glass it pictured. A real Haring hangs between the pair of wallpaper images, preserved in its original subway poster frame. In its actual reflection, we can see ourselves. Fischer and Brown have set up a metaphorical hall of mirrors that traps us between the real and the virtual, the present and the past. Their exhibition constitutes a *trompe l'oeil* mechanism for the transformation of spatial and temporal perception, and for the miscegenation of objects and images. It works like art. —JOSEPH R. WALIN