

LOOSE ENDS

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Perhaps one of the most interesting questions that may result from this exhibition is “at the end of these artists’ tenure in this artist collective what should their exhibition look like?” Specifically, are there overarching themes that result from an emerging collective intelligence? Or is the creative process usurped by the drive for self-consciously realized works that stem from an autonomous studio practice? Ultimately, this exhibition highlights the paradoxical interplay between collectivism and the individual in the work of the five artists currently in Sparkplug: Chajana DenHarder, Joe Hale, Chandi Kelley, Matt Smith and Dafna Steinberg.

The Dialectic

It is no surprise that dialectics are a recurring dynamic in the individual works of five ambitious artists that have chosen to immerse themselves in a collective for three years— this situation is in itself a dialectic.

For the five artists in this exhibition their interest in navigating and unseating the canons of their chosen disciplines is apparent. Matt Smith utilizes techniques originating from the craft of quilt making within the convention of minimalist post-painterly abstraction to make pictures that look like paintings but are ultimately stitched fabric. Chandi Kelley uses digital photography, a medium associated with the obsolescence of photography’s authority on the truth [1], to document museum-constructed environments that emulate a disappearing natural world. Chajana DenHarder compromises the indexical nature associated with photography by not only physically tearing through pictures and disrupting them with paint, but she also re-photographs the aftermath, self-consciously reigning materiality back into the realm of illusion. Dafna Steinberg tries to make sense of the present by piecing it together from the future. Joe Hale raises his subjects to epic status with painterly gestures to break them apart using a machine.

Shifting Frames

For some artists in the show playing with the frames in which we see their work both physically and conceptually are specific concerns. As Chajana DenHarder states, for her “all of life is a matter of insides and outsides”. In the video “singularity” we see the environment slip from being romantic subject to the experimental backdrop of a documented performance. This restlessness of context and therefore meaning represents philosophical interests that lie at the intersection between quantum mechanics and existentialism.

In Matt Smith’s quilt works, the fabric physically extends beyond the frames in which he sets them. His meticulous palette, minimal composition and placing of the works in wooden frames take the pieces out of the institution of craft and place them firmly into the history of contemporary art. It is through these deft

nuances that Smith's images, which are reminiscent of the paintings of Frank Stella and Kenneth Noland— both heroes of male dominated canons in art history, bend gender classifications of craft and abstract painting.

Deconstruction

Several of the artists physically break apart systems of meaning in their chosen medium to various ends. Joe Hale cuts his paintings, in which he has previously rendered the subject in a painterly fashion to mythic glamour. Through the absence of portions of the surface and the subject, Hale's paintings ask what the limiting factors are for achieving an aura of iconic status in the subject, while physically redefining the space.

Dafna Steinberg takes apart images of women in fashion magazines and assembles them into a mishmash of body parts. Notably, she also breaks the images away from any type of environment. We are left with humanoid chimeras floating in white space, isolated and removed from any system. Although each is composed as a whole person, these collages call our attention to the individual body parts that were previously imbued with supermodel stature but now have none of their original allure. The pieces leave us questioning what it was exactly that was so desirable about these particular bodily features in the first place.

In "Meteor" Chajana DenHarder projects a photo of the sky onto paper and digs through the picture plane to expose a black hole that is then re-photographed. In this piece, reminiscent of Nikki de Saint-Phalle's gun works in the 1960s and Lucio Fontana's "Spatial Concepts/ The End of God" [2], DenHarder physically attacks the substrate of her work to create a disrupted image that suggests larger conceptual themes of relativity and an inescapable nothingness.

Neo-Romantic Tendencies

It could be argued that anxiety stemming from a rapidly changing and increasingly web-based world has led to a yearning to connect with the physically real environment [3,4]. Within Sparkplug this anxiety runs particularly deep in the work of Chandi Kelley and Dafna Steinberg, and has undercurrents in that of Joe Hale and Chajana DenHarder.

By documenting the artificial, Chandi Kelley's photographs project a longing for the natural world. In "Howl" a preserved and stuffed wolf appears to be futilely crying to an artificial moon. It is Kelley's careful juxtaposition and framing in this piece that suggests a sense of wistfulness. By photographing the wolf from below, she brings a circular patch of the ceiling over the head of the animal activating it as the moon. Others of Kelley's works are more indexical and point to the museum's role in ineffectually masquerading the artificial as the natural, such as in "Waves crashing against a locked door" that depicts a seascape inadequately concealing a service door. Longing for a return to the wilderness also presents itself in Chajana DenHarder's video "singularity" as her choice to

use a pristine lake for the backdrop in her futile attempt at oneness with what looks like an orb but is in fact an inflated ball.

Dafna Steinberg imagines a post-Apocalyptic world in which a fictional population from the future creates beauty ideals out of sparse magazine remnants of a bygone era (our now) in their attempt to understand history. However Steinberg herself is using models of historical figures, the Medici family specifically, to establish a standard of hierarchy. "Her Royal Majesty..." reflects regal Renaissance portraits of members of the Medici family in Steinberg's presupposed 23rd- Century style. In this portrait the royal is made up of bits and pieces from the 21st Century.

In Steinberg's invented future her untitled sculpture piece serves an altar dedicated to what she deems "the rather extinct idea of traditional marriage". As a conceit for the erosion of this institution a raccoon and a lemur stand in matrimony, overlooking broken golden miniature angels at their feet.

Steinberg's distant reminiscence of a culture that still exists as the mainstream today speaks to discomfort with the accelerated rate of cultural change characteristic of contemporary society. This discord can also be seen in Joe Hale's work through his seemingly casual juxtaposition of a wide range of judiciously rendered subjects.

Threads

The curatorial form of *Loose Ends* aims to engage viewers at the juncture in which these artists operate—between independent practices and collectivism, and the *irresolvability* of the two. Using this format I hope to highlight the dynamic of shared threads that link artist to artist, but never tie all of them together. Each of these artists operates as open systems within the mutable environment of Sparkplug.

1. Jordan Troeller, "Against Abstraction: Zoe Leonard's *Analogue*," *Art Journal*, Winter 2010, 109
2. Sarah Whitfield, *Lucio Fontana* (London: Hayward Gallery, 1999), 41 – 48.
3. P. R. Hay, "The Contemporary Environment Movement as Neo-Romanticism: A Re-Appraisal from Tasmania", *Environmental Review: ER*, Vol. 12, No. 4, Winter, 1988, 39- 59
4. P. R. Hay, *Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought* (Indiana University Press, 2002), 4 – 6.