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ART

Giving an Artistic Voice to a Neighborhood, Northside Art Attempts Many Conversations

Claire Breuke | June 18, 2012



Curator Peter Gynd holding a sculpture by Tom Bevan

As the official group exhibition of the Northside Art Festival, *Many Conversations* was a multilayered dialogue between 26 artists who either live or work in North Brooklyn. Curated by Peter Gynd, the show aimed to formally introduce the local community of artists to each other and to their audience, in order to create exchange and encourage interaction. With approximately 100 artworks, *Many Conversations* could have easily felt like one of those vapid, mishmash community-center exhibitions that result from an open call for submissions. Adding to this worry, the press release simply stated that the exhibition “explores

the contextual relationships that exist when artwork interacts with artwork,” which feels open-ended. Understandably, I was feeling reticent when I knocked on the heavy metal door of the space.

Entering into Present Company’s sexy white-walled warehouse, however, the first room offered a neat and tight selection of work by five artists. I quickly realized that the press release description was, in fact, exact, and that the exhibition, to my delight, was a thematically complex and formally layered exploration of possible relationships between artworks of various media.



Kerry Law's Empire State Building paintings surrounded Michiko Shimada's organ vases at Northside's group exhibition, "Many Conversations." (click to enlarge; all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Kerry Law’s *Empire States*, a series of night paintings of the Empire State Building depicted from the vantage of North Brooklyn, hung above four white, slip-cast, vital-organ-inspired vases by Michiko Shimada. The direct analogy may seem trite, but Gynd’s placement was so precise that one looked at the two series as much for their shape, form and materiality as for their content. This led on to other thematic moments that, instead of feeling isolated, overlapped and flowed, revealing Gynd’s penchant for constructing conversations. I ask him if his own practice as an artist influenced the way in which he curated the exhibition. He replied that his interest in painting and ceramics gave him a natural affinity for craftsmanship. This made sense, as most work of the work in the show harbored a strong sense of materiality.



Chris Fernald's volcano sculpture and drooping canvas became activated in front of Chris Motallini's photograph of a teepee construction (click to enlarge).

Entering the second and third rooms, I noticed that the exhibition was hung in a kind of thematic exquisite corpse, ensuring that each person's work was contextualized with in two or more visual conversations. In fact, Gynd described each room as an act within an opera, with the first room offering the overture and the top floor the finale. Here, in the middle, Chris Fernald's canvas volcano sculpture and hanging, drooping canvas (apparently the same length of material as stretched over the volcano frame) became activated in front of Chris Motallini's photograph of a teepee construction of wood. Aside from sharing a peak-like form, the works harkened back to a lost time when primitive structures and barren landscapes dictated human interaction. In this context, a nearby wall of four images — Tommy Kwak's local street corner "Greenpoint Ave + Franklin Str.," Matt Lambros's rundown "Loew's Palace Theater," Michelle Mackey's folkloric landscape "Rendevouz," which shows a place where Bonnie and Clyde once resided, and Suzanne Sattler's "Passive Poker" — became an ode not only to the notions of site and memory, but also to a nostalgic sense of possibility.



A nearby wall of four images by Tommy Kwak, Matt Lambros, Michelle Mackey and Suzanne Sattler

Gynd picked up a fabric, pretzel-shaped, soft sculpture from a pile on the floor and playfully placed it on his head. Collectively titled “Object without meaning, to be handled,” by artist Tom Bevan, the sculptures were the only physically interactive pieces in the show and cemented Gynd’s idea of creating a social space.

The top floor certainly was the finale. Gynd told me it was a space for people to have a conversation; however, I wasn’t sure how conversation was supposed to unfold as I strained forward to catch every word coming from the other-worldly blonde fortune-teller, which is a work by Elizabeth Smolarz, that was prophesizing the destiny of mankind on the screen in front of us. To the right, three of Pessi Margulies’s wax-covered heads and torsos — “Bela,” “Herta” and “Rachel” — looked on, as if deliberating this woman’s words themselves. Behind was a table of Fanny Allie’s artifacts: paper-mache recreations of objects, including knives and severed body parts, brought to life from descriptions found in a series of newspaper articles. A fourth head by Margulies, “Toa-le,” stood off to the side alone, taking in the theatrical spectacle. It seemed to be filled with envy, but it may also have been dismay. This room, with its thematic as well as spatial interaction between artworks, represented the epitome of social space. In some ways, it could have stood in for the entire exhibition.



The finale on the top floor, with a video by Elisabeth Smolarz of a blonde fortune-teller and works by Pessi Margulies and Fanny Allie

Gynd proudly asserted that the show was a survey of contemporary art being created in North Brooklyn. For a curator to claim a survey is always deathly risky, but here the exhibition represented a community where art objects worked together beyond the hierarchy of each artist's place in his or her career, beyond restrictions of media — where the artworks were not about individual expression but rather formed notes in the overall melody. There is something sickly sweet about that thought, but Gynd's deeply poetic choices were able to traverse the sentimental and instead offer a subtly provocative, formally sound and exquisitely executed series of conversations. As a result, his own analogy to an opera falls short: *Many Conversations* transcends passive watching, instead becoming a social space that encourages discovery and allows topics of conversations to overlap and flow freely.

Many Conversations was on view at Present Company (29 Wythe Street, Williamsburg, Brooklyn) as part of the Northside Art Festival from June 15 to 17.