

Brooklyn Dispatches: Tough Time, Don't Whine, Get With a "Project"

by James Kalm

If you're lucky enough to be in a relationship, one that has begun to stretch, before you know it, into an ever-higher percentage of your life, then you've been privileged to witness what the ravages of time can do. The same kind of decrepitude can creep into a neighborhood or a community, with equally off-putting results, but without the option of cosmetic intervention to restore suppleness to sunken eyes, blush to the cheeks, or tighten the wrinkles at the neck. With this latest economic downturn, things around the Williamsburg Bed/Met nexus have begun to look downright tired, at least as far as the gallery scene is concerned: re-dos of projects that got attention three or four years ago, and sequel shows by artists who seem trapped into complacency, producing their signature stuff for a market paralyzed with fear. A whiff of desperation tinges the air, and for those trying to survive this crunch, a rush to the slick, safe, entrepreneurial shop owner side of the avant art boat just might cause the whole thing to finally capsize. Official announcements of gallery closings are coming in. Brooklyn Fire Proof has folded its tent and Aron Namenwirth's Art Moving is under pressure from encroachment. Even much-envied escapees from the 'Burg, like 31 Grand, have fallen by the wayside, and rumors of others in dire straits are floating thick and fast around the blogosphere. Some local venues seem to be backsliding into the kinda, sorta, maybe-we'll-be-open status, recalling the pre-"Elsewhere" period of the mid-nineties. Blue plastic tarps lashed to the side of a gallery snap in the wind like arctic sails, while week-old notes of apology festoon its glass door.

The subprime catastrophe has put many local construction projects on hold, leaving long stretches of the nabes looking like a fractured smile with a bloody, half-finished root canal. Despite the developers' "gold rush fever," by last fall you could bet on the direction things were going. Even the latest episode of "The Burg Show" (the locally produced YouTube comedy at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIPmqUO_2FA) was spreading the grief with its dysfunctional Christmas celebration that ends with the cast of artsy, lovable, neurotic slackers lining up for handouts at a Driggs Avenue soup line. Now that the future ain't so bright, maybe you can take off those shades. But if, as in the old Kris Kristofferson song, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose," then maybe this isn't such a bad situation, maybe we're just free. All it takes is some creative collagen, injected into the right places, to smooth out the situation and at least give the appearance of getting the groove going again.

Schlepping through my latest tour, I stopped in at Pierogi to catch a glimpse of David Kramer's "Snake Oil" and, in the front gallery, a selection of very impressive Surrealist graphite drawings by Michael Schall. Once upon a time Schall and I had shown with the same "gallery" for about three seconds before he was snapped up by Williamsburg's most revered venue. These pieces showed a solid development in both scale and ambition. "Battle at Sea" (2008), at about six by eight feet, is the largest piece in the show and reflects most of the characteristics of what I've dubbed "Meta-drawing" (a perennial Pierogi favorite). It features a panoramic view, so broad that the curvature of the earth is visible, filled to the horizon with cruise liners battling fully loaded supercargo ships. These huge vessels have none of the grace of classic schooners, and Schall's detailed rendering captures the thick, blocky nature of these "floating cities" with relish. Ice floes cover the ocean surface, enhancing a sense of comic slow motion, not unlike whales dancing ballet in ruffled tutus. At roughly half the size of "Battle at Sea," "Remaking the Night Sky" (2008) is technically the most challenging piece in the show. On a velvety black ground, Schall depicts what appears to be a sophisticated industrial site, perhaps an oil refinery, at night. A pair of brilliant, ground-hugging orbs, one in left foreground the other toward the upper right corner, illuminate a mindboggling mass of scaffolding and pipe works, casting shadows like a Georges de La Tour, then quickly fade into the all-encompassing dark

void. As much as one might enjoy these displays of drafting prowess, I found myself getting a headache just contemplating the tedium of grinding out every strut, elbow-joint and concrete wall these pieces required, and wondering whether this kind of commitment would be more durably preserved as a painting on canvas or board rather than a drawing on the fragile surface of paper?

Entering Kramer's show in the rear gallery, we're confronted by a pair of wacky back road store signs, their utilitarian backlit plastic letters reading "Free Kool Aide" and "Snake Oil." The implied impermanence of the removable letters, which could just as easily have been "Night Crawlers" or "Discount Rims," is contrasted by the light bulb-festooned metal arrows on top of the pieces, which point at each other like two frozen gunslingers. On the signs' rippled plastic backs, in a chunky brush script, Kramer has written brief anecdotes of art world hijinks (the anxiety of getting involved with a rich but naive dealer) and his conflicted feelings about letting his son watch cable TV. A grouping of watercolor and ink drawings on the front wall continue the artist's hapless tales of unmet expectations, including some apparently based on illustrations from popular 1960s lifestyle magazines. For years Kramer used funky typewriter texts that could only be read close up, at arm's length, which appeared more as literature with drawings added. This current batch's use of hand-lettering is a move into full-fledged painting, with a direct gestural quality that juices up the color, and entertaining erasures and edits that recall movie posters or paperback book covers inspired by the crisp graphic style of 1950s Stuart Davis. For fans of Kramer's work, his Rodney Dangerfield "I don't get no respect" routine is pretty familiar, but these new monologues announce an even more pathetically mundane set of concerns—a poetry of broken promises, disappointing business deals, and the mind numbing, churlish slog a middle-aged professed artist trudges through day to day. I'd be sniveling if I weren't giggling.

On my slink out, stopping to forge a signature in the guest book, Joe Amrhein buttonholed me for a brief chat. With the European economy suffering even worse than New York's, Joe has decided to scale back operations in Leipzig and refocus energy on the gallery's core local, right here in good old Williamsburg. "The Boiler" is Pierogi's latest venture. Situated in an ancient factory's steam plant, at 191 North 14th Street, between Berry and Wythe Streets, "The Boiler" will be a cutting-edge project space. This kind of facility, with its forty-foot ceilings, will lend itself to lots of possibilities, from in-site constructions to film projections, musical performances and maybe even bungee-jumping. Joe's planning to debut on March 7th, to coincide with the run of the Armory Show. The opening will feature works by Tavares Strachan, Jonathan Schipper and a twenty-foot painting by Yoon Lee. On the night of the opening they'll close North 14th Street to traffic until 3:00 a.m., allowing revelers to drift freely between "The Boiler" and Gutter, the bowling alley/bar across the street. As Joe said, "This is like the old neighborhood, before the developers, they've still got weeds growing through the sidewalks up there." Stay tuned for further updates.

Back on the street I pondered as I peddled. I was beginning to see a pattern here. Just around the corner from Pierogi is Black & White Gallery's Brooklyn branch. I'd been informed several months ago by Tatyana Okshteyn, B&W's director, that their Driggs Street gallery, with its wonderful open sculpture garden in back, was in the process of becoming a not-for-profit "project space." As a practical matter, Tatyana calculated that the difference in foot traffic between the Chelsea and Brooklyn galleries made it a clear business decision to alter the mission of the Brooklyn space. They now have a five-member curatorial board that will select two artists or artist collectives a year for a residency program, which entails creating site-specific works on a rotating schedule. The winter term's production will be exhibited for three months in the spring, and the summer output during the fall season. Funding has already begun with a successful benefit auction and a NYFA grant. The inaugural exhibition, *Casual Conversations in Brooklyn* by Alina and Jeff Bliumis, will open March 5th.

Cruising south on Driggs, I turned west on Grand and jumped the curb to peek in at Parker's Box. For a couple of weeks now I've been watching the progression of John Bjerklies's "evolving solo group residency

project,” *When A River Changes Its Course*, through window gates from the street. The pile of painted debris, hand-lettered signs, and flickering video monitors seemed to get bigger and more colorful every time I passed by. “We didn’t want to do what they’re doing in Chelsea, putting up tiny precious things on the wall and hoping they sell. We decided we wanted to get back to what our original intent was, to be as experimental as possible,” stated gallerist Alun Williams during a phone chat. “With our international sales it doesn’t seem to make that much difference whether we show commercial stuff in the gallery. It’s counterintuitive, but with the economy slowing down we wanted to do the opposite, show crazy unsalable stuff. We’re not going to do just projects, but we want to be more flexible, expand the program, give the artist more time to let things grow organically.” To this end, the Bjerklies project will take a couple of months to install, and will involve “Real, Fictional and Virtual Time and Space, Politics and Anti-Politics, Construction and Demolition, Interviews, Discussion, Debate, Demonstrations, Incidents, Sculpture, Drawing, Painting, Video, Installation, Performance, Poetry, Speeches, Anti-Performance, Dancing, Jokes, Auctions, Sales.”

Will this cluster of “projects” provide an outlet for underexposed artists and tap back into the critical attention that seems to have shifted from the ‘Burg to the New Lower East Side in recent years? I’ve certainly been impressed with installations I’ve seen out east in the MoJo district, like Andrew Ohanesian and Tescia Seufferlein’s *Blind Spot* at English Kills (a video tour is available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1Ewhpxryro&feature=channel_page), and I’m heartened to see risky, innovative ideas being tested when most people are pulling back into security.

Finally a brief note of interest: *Attitudes of Magnitude*, the latest exhibition by Carri Skoczek at Ch’i Contemporary, is worth an ogle. I’ve known Carri for quite a while; she’s a local spark plug who organized the “Mermaid Show” that ran concurrently with the Coney Island “Mermaid Parade” shindig, as well as a benefit auction for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. I’ve always enjoyed her hyper-decorative work and its sometimes over-the-top elements of kitsch. With *Attitudes*, a visibly new level of maturity has been reached. Despite her self-admitted influence by and homage to Egon Schiele, and his own derivation from Klimt, these single figures, ensconced on their off-white grounds, make a simple, punchy statement. What Skoczek’s women lack by way of Schiele’s Freudian angst and emotionally tortured expressionism, they make up with a kind of comically self-satisfied vamping that places them somewhere between the denizens of a local rock club and not-so-high-fashion models with plump, pouty lips. Her unique technique, employing printer’s ink and pearl powders, is like a reversed Byzantine icon: the flesh is a shiny metallic bronze while the backgrounds are dry and modeled as blanched skin. But the real surprise is the power of Skoczek’s new series of linocuts, a rogues’ gallery of art stars rendered in bold black and white, with graphic decisions that reduce recognizable features into blocks of hard-edged abstraction. With this group of prints, Skoczek’s gifts have found a perfect medium.

February, 2009