

Gallery Crawl: Chelsea by Wendy Vogel

The Mall-ification of Manhattan

June 28, 2017



Robert Longo *Untitled (Nov. 8, 2016)*, 2016, charcoal on mounted paper. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

Summer in New York makes me languid—and not in the sexy, rooftop-party way. Once the temperature consistently gets above 80 degrees, I plan my days around the best air-conditioning this city can offer (cafes, libraries, museums; movies if I want to splurge). My gallery-going stamina plummets, especially for the unforgiving concrete expanse west of 10th Avenue in Manhattan. So, before my brain turned to mush and the galleries rolled out their breeziest summer shows, I devoted an afternoon during Art Basel week to Chelsea. The heat wave had burned off and the majority of the art world had left for Europe. With its empty streets, the neighborhood felt like a strange mix of '90s throwback and a post-art future.

I always start on 14th Street and work my way north. Fort Gansevoort, housed in an 18th-century townhouse smack in the middle of the Meatpacking District, showed Los Angeles-based Anthony James's sculptures. His new work has progressed from riffs on modernism, like his *Mondrian Box* of 2004 that rendered the Dutch painter's signature grids in neon lights, to large steel-and-bronze disks etched with lines or symbols. The press release describes the works in spiritual terms, careful to avoid any mention of non-Western art—though its influences can be discerned. As much as cultural appropriation is a hot-button issue, James's nonspecific references to mysticism and liminality are troubling in a market quick to colonize difference.

I swept up 10th Avenue, stopping to peek in the window at Steven Alan. (I'm in a strangely acquisitive mood, but my bank account is not.) It felt like a real sign of the times when the store opened its Chelsea branch: an aspirational, direct appeal to the High Line tourist or neighborhood bruncher, beckoning shoppers who may not have a taste for art. Reflexively, I walked up to Koenig & Clinton, forgetting that the gallery had moved to Brooklyn. It's the latest in a handful of solid spaces that closed or relocated in the last year, following Murray Guy, Bortolami, and Anton Kern. As galleries disappear, I wonder what this area will look like in a few years—and how sustainable the gallery model will be.



Installation view of Anthony James: *Fabulism*, Fort Gansevoort, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

I made a quick spin through Raymond Pettibon's exhibition at David Zwirner on 19th Street, still overwhelmed from his New Museum survey this spring. His nihilistic humor suits our times, but the floor-to-ceiling installations tend to discourage actual reading. One drawing stuck out, with a line of text at the bottom reading "I HAVE SEEN OLD AND NEW ROME." I interpreted the series of illustrations as a circle jerk between cultural custodians and European cultural icons, from Michelangelo's David to Marcel Proust. This blind adherence to patriarchy suggests our current political mess.

In Paula Cooper's second-floor space, on 21st Street, the group show Group Exhibition leans toward the agit-prop end of the political spectrum. In the reception area, Andres Serrano's 1990 photograph *Klansman (Great Titan of the Invisible Empire)* captures a white supremacist in profile, his white cape adorned by a swath scarlet red. In one of Peter Moore's photos documenting the 1964 March for Freedom of Expression, Alan Marlowe holds a handwritten placard: "NEW YORK IS A SUMMER POLICE STATE."

Charles Gaines's series of "Librettos" layer a musical score by Spanish composer Manuel de Falla about star-crossed lovers divided by class, printed on clear acrylic, over a speech by Civil Rights activist Stokely Carmichael. The #resistant premise hearkens to Cooper's roots—her first exhibition, in 1968, was a Conceptual art show benefiting an anti-Vietnam War student group. It would have been even more powerful to see this work in her hangar-like ground floor space across the street. But nearly fifty years after that revolutionary spring, Minimalism and explicitly political art inhabit different rungs of the commercial art ladder.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres's practice, however, is an exception to the rule, and is heralded for syncretizing quiet Minimalism, sexual politics, activism, and personal loss. David Zwirner's 20th Street space presents their first exhibition of Gonzalez-Torres's work since they took over co-stewardship of his estate, with Andrea Rosen (another Chelsea stalwart whose space closed under mysterious circumstances). Twenty-one years after his death from AIDS-related complications, Cuban-born Gonzalez-Torres's work acutely speaks to our current healthcare crisis and acrimonious battles over civil rights for LGBTQIA+ populations. On this visit to the show—my third—I sat down to watch "*Untitled*" (*A Portrait*), 1991/1995, a rare video work. White text flashed on a black screen, the lines eerily germane to Trump's America: "silver ocean / a distant war / a hateful politician / a simple death."



I realized I hadn't seen a single solo show by a woman as I headed to the next block. At Hauser & Wirth, Roni Horn (a friend of Gonzalez-Torres) showed Minimalist art through a lesbian-feminist lens. Her beautiful optical-glass "Water Doubles," big enough to swim in, would be cruel on a hotter day. More touching was a photographic series depicting gifts the artist received over 40 years, from a Gonzalez-Torres print to meatballs to *The Book of Repulsive Women* (twice).

Andres Serrano, *Klansman (Great Titan of the Invisible Empire)*, 1990, cibachrome, silicone, plexiglass, wood frame. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Photo by Steven Probert.

Up on 26th Street, Alexander Gray mounted a survey of art by renowned gallerist Betty Parsons. The work spanned from early watercolors to late abstractions, some of which appear to be in dialogue with central-core feminist imagery. Though she dreamed of being a sculptor, the three-dimensional works—early carvings and late assemblages—felt secondary to the show's painterly focus. I questioned whether Parsons would approve of her posthumous re-categorization as an artist, or if the show attempts to capitalize on the confluence of her legacy with the vogue for "rediscovered" feminist art. I preferred the more oblique show upstairs,

at Greene Naftali's 8th floor space, by Hilary Lloyd. Her vaguely 90s-stoner tie-dye tapestry installation, Photoshopped pictures based on pet photos, and video installations starring women, brought a Tumblr-esque female(-coded) mode of looking and self-presentation to the gallery space.

Two shows eschewed feminine looking for female abjection. Judith Barry's video installation at Mary Boone, *imagination, dead imagine*, 1991/2017, depicts an androgynous actor's head projected on a huge five-sided cube, atop a leg-height mirrored platform. The head is spattered with multicolored materials, ranging from chunky red jelly to substances resembling cum and shit. When maggots crawled over the face, I reflexively crouched down low—only to see my own reflection. At Marlborough Contemporary, artist Ivana Bašić—a generation younger than Barry—shows spindly sculptures that look like aliens bursting from yellowish placentas. Punctuating the works are gunshot-like sounds, as two pieces of quartz get pummeled every few seconds.

Nerves already rattled, I headed next door to FLAG Art Foundation, to a group show called *The Times*. This crowded exhibition includes works by more than 80 artists based on issues of *The New York Times*. The paper mostly serves as the backdrop or source material for collage practices; artists like Agnieszka Kurant and the Yes Men construct speculative issues. While the curatorial framework is a one-liner—newspaper-based works for a post-fact era—the exhibition features an intergenerational range of practices, from Group Material to Lorraine O'Grady to Carmen Winant. Each Thursday, Tora López activates the space with performers, who read aloud and cross-stitch a life-size replica of the paper's front page.



Hilary Lloyd, *Drunken Sailor*, 2017, video installation, plywood, laminated plywood, oriented strand board, ostrich feathers, ribbon, hemp rope. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

After seeing all the appropriated news imagery, I made my final stop at Metro Pictures, to see Robert Longo's *The Destroyer Cycle*. A tall blonde marched up to the door and stopped, her hand on the door. Three camera-people crouched on the ground in front of her. "Try it again, walk more quickly," they said. She repeated the walk three times, all parties ignoring me, until I pushed past them. Was this a clueless lifestyle blogger, or a guerrilla performance related to Longo's "Men in the Cities" series of 1979, showing young professionals spazzing out in business clothes? I asked the gallery attendant what was going on outside. He shrugged. My eyes adjusted to the low light. Longo's looming, photorealist drawings depicted pixelated Teletubbies, police in riot gear, and prisoners ushered from a Kandahar prison. All worthy political subjects, all depicted through the lens of various media, from X-rays to TV. But they remain strangely unengaged with social media, the perpetually surveilled site of self-branding and performance.

Back outside, I asked a woman standing behind the model what was going on. "I'm an artist!" she said cheerfully. "Oh, do you show here?" I asked. "No, I make handbags." A photo assistant informed me, with no small condescension, that "photo shoots happen all the time in New York City." I replied, "Not usually in front of shows of political art." The clapback fell flat. They returned to their styling cart, unimpressed.

Group Exhibition is on view at Paula Cooper Gallery until June 30, 2017; Anthony James: *Fabulism*, is on view at Fort Gansevoort until July 8, 2017; Felix Gonzalez-Torres is on view at David Zwirner until July 14, 2017; Roni Horn at Hauser & Wirth and Judith Barry: *Imagination, Dead Imagine* at Mary Boone Gallery are both on view until July 28, 2017; and *The Times* is on view at FLAG Art Foundation until August 11, 2017.

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