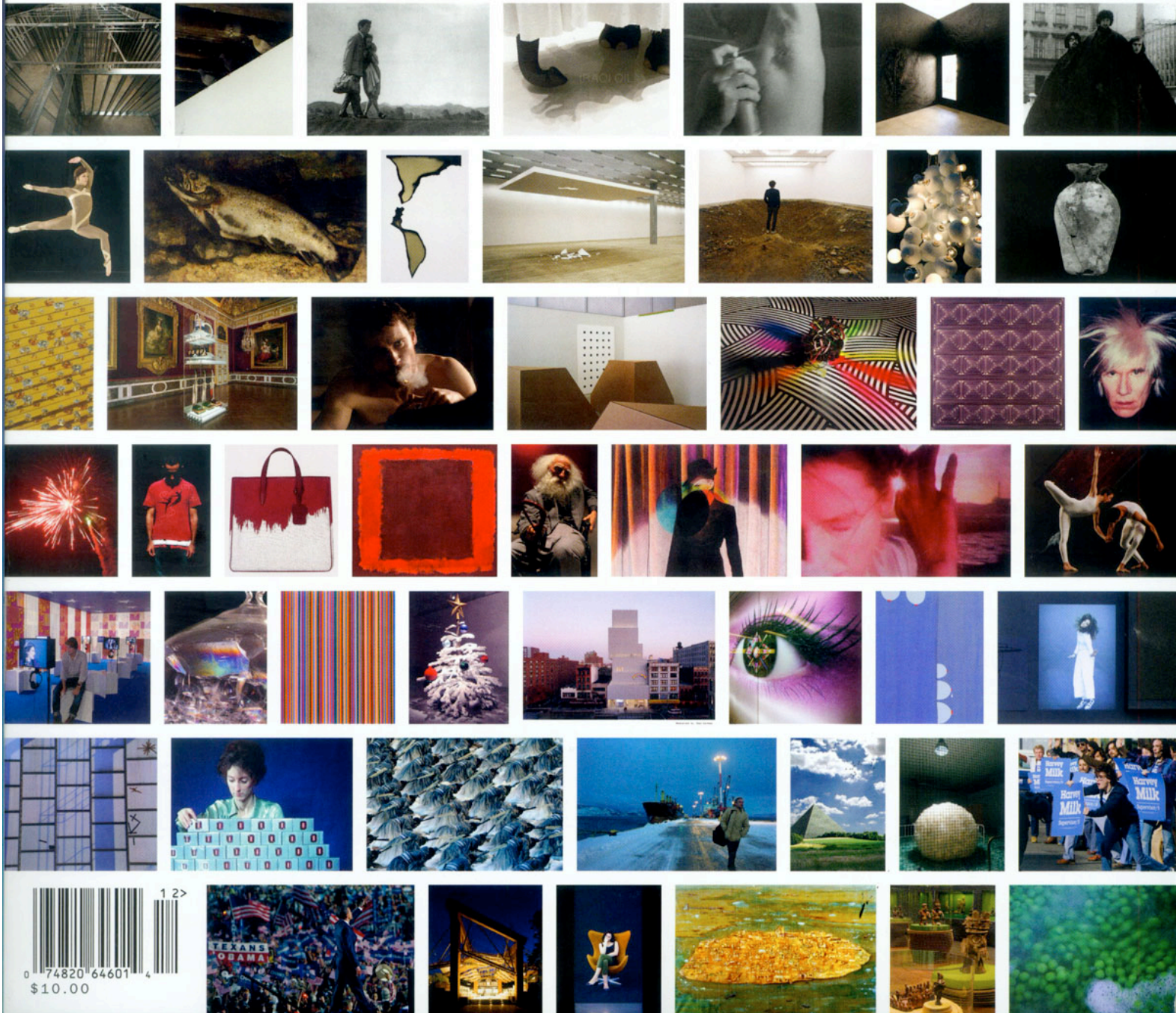


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REVIEWS

Cosima von Bonin

FRIEDRICH PETZEL GALLERY

As the diminutive ending of its title, “The Pierres at the Petzellette,” made clear, Cosima von Bonin’s third solo show at Petzel was meant to be intimate. Encountered in the anteroom of the gallery space, the forlorn twenty-inch-high *Doorstop (Concrete Mushroom #1)*, 2007, which also resembles an enlarged pincushion, further emphasized this deliberate scaling down of mise-en-scène, since it signaled that the toadstool, one of the artist’s enduring sculptural motifs, might be less prominent in the exhibition. The encounter proved a striking counterbalance to the artist’s last outing at the gallery, in 2006, “Relax, It’s Only a Ghost,” an elaborate installation reprised wholesale in Documenta 12. By contrast, this more recent show parceled out an arrangement of eight works and resembled nothing so much as a showroom redaction of the artist’s output over the past three years.

Von Bonin’s play off of barriers and entrances, discipline and comfort, security devices and luxury items, was largely reduced to a controlled exchange between the gleaming and matte surfaces of interior and exterior design: A white powder-coated-steel gate, of the type

that secures an exclusive property or gated community, confronted the visitor (*Gate*, 2007); a Juliet balcony was installed on the wall behind it, with a pair of spent Dunlop Formula One racing tires propped up behind its railing (*Off Mirror [Balcony & Tires]*, 2007). Similarly opaque witticisms were located in a white lacquered wall-mounted chair with cowhide cushions, *Reference Hell #1*, (*YSL Fauteuil*), 2007,

and in an “anti-authoritarian kindergarten” bench—two movable seats hinged together end-to-end with sheet steel—relegated to the gallery’s back office (*Antiautoritaerer Kindergarten [Zollstock/Rule #2/Bipartite]*, 2007). Nearly all fabricated for the artist’s compelling midcareer survey last fall at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, “Roger and Out,” the sculptures here suggested a sample sale in their placement alongside von Bonin’s figurative and two-dimensional works; the items, already imbued with the absurdist patina of plush set pieces meant for a performance forever postponed, took on an aura of discontinued stock.

Isolated from its brethren, the outsize line of stuffed animals populating von Bonin’s recent installations was likewise reduced, limited to a gray Saint Bernard whose droopy visage and accommodating keg find an equivalent domestic emblem in the gingham apron the dog wears—a classic housewife accessory ironically offset in this instance by a fashionable floppy hat and, in place of the animal’s collar, four scarves. Even the artist’s *Lappen* (or “rags”), canvaslike textile pictures often shown in groupings, were pared down to one piece: *Hand von rechts* (Hand from the Right), 2008.

With a trajectory of influence that extends from Sigmar Polke’s early paintings on cheap fabrics and Blinky Palermo’s fabric paintings from the mid-1960s and the early ’70s, through Martin Kippenberger’s checkered “price” or “prize” paintings (“*Preis Bilder*,” 1987–94), von Bonin’s

bannerlike works often feature gnomic fragments of borrowed text alongside cartoonish figures; in *Hand von rechts*, the patchwork backdrop foregrounds—in white stitched outline—a band of simian musicians perched atop mushroom caps, the balled fist of an entertainer’s white-gloved hand, and the phrase *HARMONIE IST EINE STRATEGIE* (“harmony is a strategy”), which has been crossed out. An earlier textile work not included at Petzel, *Shirt/Fluff/Same Day*, 2007, also features the phrase, which is a lyric by longtime collaborator Dirk von Lowtzow, singer of the German band Tocotronic—an appropriation canceled by this more recent work. Made by an artist with a protean formal sensibility and a habit for making hermetic references, this particular revision suggests, especially in the exhibition’s remaindered economy, a turning of the stylistic page.

—Fionn Meade

Chris Johanson

DEITCH PROJECTS

Comprising paintings and one large installation, Chris Johanson’s second solo exhibition at this gallery was equal parts cryptic and clear-cut, lighthearted and sarcastic, comic and tragic. Most of the artist’s new works employ a Crayola palette and are composed of wood he gathered from Brooklyn Dumpsters and discarded art-shipping crates. While recycling and revitalization were evidenced throughout the show, Johanson did not apply such strategies to his own output. Indeed, the elements that one might most readily associate with the artist’s earlier work (cartoon thought bubbles, copious handwritten text, crudely rendered figures languishing in urban and suburban environments) were almost completely missing. In their place, the new series of abstract paintings offers ecological visions of the past, present, and future, Johanson now directly confronting themes he has only flirted with before.

Visitors entered the exhibition via an enclosed gray-painted ramp, a metaphoric birth canal, which led into a large dome featuring nineteen rectangular paintings on interconnected billboardlike supports. In this awkward, labyrinthine art-yurt, the recorded sounds of a drum circle (Johanson’s band, *Is*) gave the space a primordial feel; likewise, a few primitive-looking figures lurk in the paintings. Several of them display imagery the artist has employed since the 1990s, such as bodies kneeling and praying, multicolored bricks, and circles resembling abstract heads. The paintings here faced a massive gray rotating mobile resembling a meteorite with a mirror shard stuck to its side. The arrangement imparted a fractured narrative, as if a comic book’s frames had been rendered in three dimensions and dispersed; the

View of “Cosima von Bonin,” 2008.



environment was all-encompassing and experiential, conveying a sense of unity supported by the exhibition's title, "Totalities."

Exiting the installation into the gallery's bright lights, one encountered an angled minimalist plank covered in blue carpet remnants that extended to a wall where a yellow orb, perhaps a representation of the sun, was installed above a painting featuring various splotchy circles, suggesting faces in a church congregation, with built-up surfaces and interconnecting lines. Across from this area, rows of wooden chairs faced three colorful panels, the first depicting another abstract headlike circle, the second a psychedelic swirl of colors, the third a network of paint globules. With a meditative tone imparting a feeling religious and ceremonial, these works hint at something beyond aesthetic contemplation. The two installations seem to emphasize different devotional modes: one active, with forward movement, suggesting a pilgrimage; the other passive, and seated, with obstructed views. Both works stress organization and individuality, crunchy New Age schmaltziness and something much deeper, more sincere and personal.

The upstairs gallery housed paintings on paper reminiscent of Johanson's earlier work. Standing atop the staircase, one had a clear view of the entire exhibition landscape, wherein all the installations, the "totalities," as it were, seemed just as, if not more, important than the individual works. Here it was apparent that Johanson has grown increasingly adept at translating, with considerable resonance, his narrative figuration into abstraction, following an experimental and energetic trajectory that has served his work well. The exhibition also showed the artist carefully balancing lofty, enigmatic subjects and cultivating, as he tends to do, a personal garden to thoughtfully develop his practice and preferences. Yet, as idiosyncratic as it looks, Johanson's work continues to tap unassumingly into a collective unconscious of fears and anxieties, hopes and dreams, allowing the unknowable and intangible to feel as salient as the everyday.

—Lauren O'Neill-Butler

Betty Parsons

SPANIERMAN MODERN

The biographies of New York School artists are often sprinkled liberally with the name of Betty Parsons, who is acclaimed for staging groundbreaking shows of their work at her Fifty-seventh Street gallery. She is less well known as an artist in her own right, or rather, while the fact that she was an artist is quickly learned by those interested, the chance to see her work in depth remains rare. This show was accordingly welcome.

Parsons trained in painting and sculpture in the Paris of the 1920s, and the show included both media, though the paintings were outnumbered by reliefs—wall-mounted and freestanding constructions of found wood fragments, fitted together jigsawlike and painted with a candidly unvirtuosic hand. To the extent that Parsons's art has a public image, these are the works that define it. They are a long way from the sculpture of her teacher, Antoine Bourdelle, who had himself been a student of Rodin's, as his well-muscled bronzes attest. Their deliberate modesty also distances them from the best-known works of such artists in Parsons's history as Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman, who worked grandly on the scales of both physical size and artistic, nay, cosmic ambition. Yet Parsons's work shows traces of Abstract Expressionism's intellectual stew. The paintings may remind you here of Clyfford Still, there of Adolph Gottlieb, though they are, unfortunately, more static in their compositions and less distinctive in their surfaces; in the sculpture, meanwhile, the way to Parsons's use of found materials was opened by the Surrealists and before them the Cubists, all large-

shadowed ancestor figures in the AbEx genealogy. More specifically, the use of the word *totem* in one of Parsons's titles here (*Totem Materia-R*, 1980) recalls Pollock, who used it, too (in *Easter and the Totem* of 1953, for example, and elsewhere), and reinforces the feeling that Parsons shared his interest in Native American art and his sense of the power of Jungian symbols and dream images.

Again, though, the sculpture's modesty and playfulness imply altered motives. Its wooden parts, which Parsons often gathered during beach walks near her house on eastern Long Island, show their worn surfaces in places but are also painted in uneven bars and stripes. The colors—oranges, dark blues, brownish reds—are flat and dull, with *dull* meaning not "uninteresting" but "not bright," as though a little black or sand were mixed into them all, or else as if the dried, sun- and tide-bleached wood on which the paint lies had absorbed its vibrancy and shine. Parsons preferred discarded lumber scraps to unshaped driftwood, so that each piece has a junky geometry. Combined in composites whose rhythms are complicated by patterns of paint, they may suggest totems, yes, or stylized biomorphs, and their materials carry a burden of history and use. Where the artists in Parsons's stable shot for the sky, she herself looked to abstraction for a cultivated impurity.

Looking at this show, I thought of friends of my parents' generation, inspired by Miesian and Scandinavian design, who sparsely decorated their modernist homes with collections of pebbles, Noguchi lamps, Japanese textiles, the odd seashell—a kind of reductivist *Wunderkammer*. In its artfully altered found-object quality, Parsons's sculpture would fit right in here, evoking both the outside weather of nature and a feeling of social context and history, remote, perhaps foreign, yet familiar because human. Shades of the powerful spirits intuited and forces aspired to by Picasso and Pollock drift through the works, but the overall manner is friendly and domestic—decorative in a fine, nonpejorative sense. One suspects it was with relief that Parsons turned to her own work after days spent dealing with the ambitions and temperaments of her friends.

—David Frankel



Betty Parsons, *Round About*, 1974, mixed media on wood, 22 x 20 x 1½".

Lorraine O'Grady

ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES

In 1980, at Just Above Midtown Gallery in New York, Lorraine O'Grady presented her first official (which is to say first *invited*) public performance piece, *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*. The work followed closely on the heels of the artist's more (in her words) "hit-and-run" foray into performance, *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*—in which she showed up at New York art openings as the title character, unannounced and uninvited, calling attention to those deeply raced, gendered, and classed environments—and likewise concerned itself with issues of representation.

But *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* made unapologetic strides into more overtly autobiographical terrain. Indeed, it was, in part, a working through of a painful event: Two decades prior, when the artist was in her late twenties, her older sister, Devonia, with whom she'd had a strained relationship, had suddenly and unexpectedly