

DETROIT: MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
Meditations in an Emergency
28 October 2006 – 29 April 2007
www.mocadetroit.org

'Meditations in an Emergency', curated by Klaus Kertess, which presents the work of nine mid-career artists, is the inaugural show of the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit – a raw, cavernous exhibition space carved out of an abandoned midtown car dealership. Although there is only one Detroit artist in the show – the newcomer Christopher Furcht – the exhibition was clearly created with this Midwestern city in mind. A number of the works were produced specifically for the event and all deal with subjects that relate strongly to this troubled metropolis: race, identity and the mass media; scavenging; the loss of the urban center; and the promises and perils of technology.

Roy Paine's SCUMAK No. 2 (1998) is a complex machine for producing Linda Benglis-like sculptural blobs made from flowing layers of bright red plastic. An array of machines attached to a computer heat and extrude sculptures onto a conveyor belt where they are allowed to cool. Five completed works sit on pedestals nearby. A Duchampian meditation on the end of art through its mechanisation, Paine's machine also evokes the assembly-line practices of Detroit's automobile industry – once a major symbol of American ingenuity and economic dominance, but today a grim reminder of the transformation of commodity production in a post-Fordist, global economy.

Paradoxically, however, the sculptures also project a ray of hope by suggesting that at different moments the same mechanised process can produce radically different results – a consequence of the influence of context on even the most programmed of activities. Furcht's The Rock Box Sound System plays The Mental Machine (2005) offers a more redemptive view of technology. A sculptural stack of boom boxes and speakers attached to a mixing console, it evokes the heroic era of Jamaican sound systems during which reggae, one of the classic forms of musical protest, developed. Designed to mix cassette tapes, it stands unused in the space while Furcht's reggae-inspired dub play on the museum's speaker system. When used by Furcht in DJ, as was the case at MOCAD's opening, the work becomes a simultaneous means of voicing protest and creating a party, thereby perhaps forming a community of like-minded individuals.

Jonathan Pylypchuk's Press a weight through life and I will watch this crush you (2006) is a depressed shantytown of old wooden boards and other debris, populated by an eclectic collection of half-human, half-animal figures made from socks, ping-pong balls and other found items – materials that the LA-based artist scavenged while visiting Detroit. These patch-together characters congregate in groups drinking beer, staggering about by themselves or stand in family clusters staring anxiously at one another. A warped Sovieto for moppets, Pylypchuk's installation reminds the spectator of the dispossessed masses living on the edges of affluent urban societies, subsisting on cast-off remnants. In Detroit, where the urban centre in places become a decaying ruin while the suburbs have grown increasingly affluent, this installation is particularly provocative and points to a problem that MOCAD itself is attempting to remedy.

Similar themes of urban decay and scavenging are juxtaposed with a meditation on the mass media in Mark Bradford's Double Stretch (2003) and Untitled (a.k.a. Gwen) (2005) – large-scale, collage paintings of weathered and torn posters and paper. Grid-like modernist explorations of form and colour, the works reveal themselves, on closer examination, to be stereotypical signs of 'black' life promoted by the fashion and culture industries. Nylon mesh – the main material that composes the surface of Double Stretch – suggests basketball jerseys, while irregular cardboard shapes pasted on top of the nylon refer to black hairstyles. Untitled, (2005) on the other hand, uses scraps of torn text that evoke the advertising of athletic shoes. In both cases, Bradford's paintings address the construction of identity through the consumption of material goods.

Nari Ward's White Flight Tea Bar (2006) consists of a circular array of low tables and chairs made from white acoustic tiles scavenged from MOCAD's original ceiling. The Japanese-inspired objects surround a fountain-like reconstruction of a sculpture that Ward discovered in a local park, a work made to commemorate the Detroit riots of 1967. Thermoses of green tea and paper cups sit on each table, while empty cups surround the reproduction sculpture in the center. As suggested by its title and sculptural reference, Ward's Tea Bar deals with the mass exodus of white Detroiters to the suburbs in the wake of civil unrest brought about by poverty and repression. By evoking the city's subsequent decline through its use of broken and mundane materials, and by creating a context in which people can both congregate and converse, Ward's installation attempts to promote dialogue about this fundamental disaster in the city's recent history.

Paul Pfeiffer's video installation, Live from Neverland (2006), juxtaposes two separate audio-visual streams: an appropriated video of Michael Jackson on television describing his addiction to prescription medicines and his recent legal woes, and a video projection of Philippine boys and girls standing in rows on a set of bleachers. Although Jackson's lips move, his voice is inaudible, and, instead, the children repeat his public defense as a chorus, transforming it into something that sounds like a prayer or the American pledge of allegiance. As the tempo of Jackson's image increases and decreases to keep time with the speech, the spectator is caused to think about the destructive nature of fame, the ways in which the mass media promotes role models and the masculine and feminine parts of the human psyche.

Kara Walker's 8 Possible Beginnings or: The Creation of African-America, a Moving Picture (2003) is a 15-minute, black-and-white, animated video projection that examines African-American history. Mixing conventions from both sound and silent films, Beginnings depicts a series of episodes: blacks being thrown from a slave ship and drowned by a representation of the new world; a white master raping and impregnating his black male slave; the male slave giving birth to a baby; a young girl being molested by her master; an old man telling a child a tale that ends with multiple Lynchings. Violent, sexual and
shockingly ambiguous, the video employs Walker’s characteristic black silhouettes, now with jointed limbs and moved by sticks as if they were Balinese shadow puppets. By synthesising different cultures and comparing multiple types of narrative forms — silent and sound films, puppet theatre, oral storytelling and popular songs — Beginnings presents a compelling vision of African-American history, which suggests that the tradition of linear historical narrative has now been replaced by other modes of representation through which memories can be transcribed and passed on.


MOCAD has got off to a very impressive start. Although one can quibble with certain aspects of the exhibition — its extremely long run time, the dominance of New York and LA artists and the problems of presenting work on rough and pounding gallery walls — for the most part the show succeeds startlingly. In addition, by bringing provocative contemporary art to Detroit, ‘Meditations’ has revealed something strange: although Detroit is not yet a centre for contemporary art production, the issues that affect the city most directly — racism, mass production, urban decay and the hopes and promises of the mass media — lie at the heart of many of today’s most important works.

Matthew Bro

NEW YORK: SPENCER BROWNSTONE GALLERY
JAIME PINCH: SOME ALMOST BROKEN THINGS . . . .
10 November — 22 December 2006
www.spencerbrownstonegallery.com

Two notices were posted at the entrance of Jaime Pinch’s recent exhibition at Spencer Brownstone. The first warned visitors that they entered the gallery at their own risk, informing them that ‘a dangerous condition exists inside.’ The second counselled against touching the sculptures, invoking the Pottery Barn rule — if you break it, you buy it. Effecting a tone that laced tongue-in-cheek with an underlying sobriety, the notices also indicated two of the central qualities of Pinch’s work: danger and fragility. Signalling the vein of trickery and humour that runs through his practice, they provided something of a partial preview to the exhibition within.

Inside the gallery, Pinch’s work was presented with show-stopping flair and brilliance. Simultaneously whimsical and aggressive, full of virtuoso turns and inversions, the gallery resembled nothing so much as a particularly elegant cabinet of curiosities. Ranging from minute installations to soaring sculptural constructions, each of the self-contained pieces worked like a perfectly crafted joke.

One-inch steel letters propped against the gallery wall spelled out ‘LEAN’ (Lean, 2006). An electric guitar rested on the floor, neck warped and twisted into a graceful arc, presenting another perfect visual play. Pinch’s titles are almost as significant as the physical works themselves; the guitar sculpture was tellingly titled Play Hard (2006), while an empty box of bird feed, carefully sliced into slivers, was called Nest (2006).

Pinch’s work contains multiple layers of jokes, both visual and linguistic. Its core, however, lies not in the artist’s use of whimsy or wit, but rather in the palpable strangeness of the objects he creates. Deconstructing everyday objects — from decks and chairs to the meticulously shredded food boxes — Pinch cunningly transforms the domestic universe into a world of subtle menace and oppression. While the exhibition’s small-scale sculptures (from the food boxes to the metal letter pieces) retained an overall tone of gentle wit, the larger scale sculptures and installations achieved a marked ferocity and force.

Pinch is clearly interested in the aesthetics of physics — in the interplay between velocity and force, in the rhythm created by balance and counterbalance. In Meter (2006), a tape measure was stretched and knotted into a swirling work of sculpture. And in his ‘Momentum’ series — a set of works that functioned like minor miracles of physical measure and balance, presenting such improbable structures as a deconstructed chair resting along the rim of a coffee cup (Momentum #14, 2006) — Pinch mixed visual audacity with technical precision.

Suspended in the airy space of the gallery, the sculptures seemed like tricks achieved with wire and glue, mere visual sleights of hand. In reality, these pieces were precisely what they appeared to be — ordnanz feats of construction and balance. Meticulously arranged, the perilous fragility of each was unheeded — hence, presumably, the underlying tone of sincerity behind the rule against touching, posted at the door.

Equally striking was From Nowhere to Nowhere #2 (2006), a work parlaying a physical durability that provided a nice counter to the delicacy pressing elsewhere in the gallery. Here, a wooden door was deconstructed and then reconstructed again in the form of a solid, impermeable plinth. Stripped of function (a recurring motif in Pinch’s work, from the bent guitar to the knotted tape measure), the construction also stood as a menacing rebuff to the symbolic significance of the door, a kind of visual articulation of the Sartrean phrase, ‘No Exit’.

The exhibition’s undercurrent of menace was most obvious in The Velocity of Freefall (2006), undoubtedly the ‘dangerous condition’ referred to in the notice at the door. Though it perhaps lacked the wonderfully subtle menace of From Nowhere to Nowhere #2, the installation was shivering effective nonetheless. Above the corridor leading into the gallery, dozons of kitchen knives were suspended, their blade points jammed into the plaster ceiling. The piece worked best in dialogue with the whole of the exhibition; recollecting the sign posting at the door, recalling the knowledge fragility of the ‘Momentum’ works, it was impossible to stand beneath the installation without succumbing to a feeling of distinct unease, and moving quickly on.

Kate Kimmura

LONDON: ASIA HOUSE
THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS
23 November 2006 — 3 March 2007
www.throughthelookingglass.com

Since the end of the military regime in the early 80s, South Korea’s energy has been channelled towards boosting its economic and cultural growth. The country now counts as one of the world’s richest economic powers. By providing the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki moon, it places itself at the centre of the international political scene. The country’s rebirth from a once warraged condition has also been reflected in the art scene. Korea in fact, for the past two decades, has been host to some international and very expensive art events. Whereas the 1980s were a decade of intense political struggle, the past two have seen the explosive rise of mass culture. This era witnessed the skyrocketing of gallery sales and profits, the arrival of two international auction houses, Christie’s and Sothebys, and the pilgrimage of millions to the Kwangju Biennales. On this side the world, however, contemporary Korean art has largely remained unexplored.

English literature is populated by stories of children who escape the afternoon boredom of their domestic surroundings by discovering unfamiliar worlds; sometimes this is done through a wardrobe, a rabbit hole or a mirror. Through the Looking Glass, one such story, titles the first show on Korean Art to be presented in London. The choice of venue — the newly refurbished Georgian Asia House — carefully mirrors Jiyoon Lee’s curatorial desire to choreograph the show around the book’s theme. Like Alice, who pondered