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ARTNEWS

The Season Begins: A Rough Start in Chelsea, Joys Abound Downtown.

Robert Grosvenor, Gina Beavers, and a few group shows brought the heat on the Lower East Side

By Andrew Russeth, 09/09/14



West Chelsea looks very fine as you approach the neighborhood from the south on 10th Avenue, so long as you can ignore the glut of fast-rising condos. A photograph by Louise Lawler, shot in a Sotheby's showroom and stretched to fit the dimensions of the High Line's billboard, reigns over the area. It's elegant and funny, a touch trippy, and even a little menacing in its deadpan weirdness. It offers a brief respite from the area's monied hedonism and the galleries that exemplify it right now.

Indeed, the first wave of high-profile Chelsea openings last week largely disappointed, ranging from the barely passable (B-roll sculptures from Nick Cave at Jack Shainman) to the ponderous and predictable (Walead Beshty's bland copper desks-turned-sculptures and wall pieces at Petzel) to the very poor (Dan Colen's laughably wan "Miracle" paintings at Gagosian). Even the usually excellent Lily van der Stokker

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The sculpture, sitting in the center of the gallery, looks like a skeletal, experimental go-cart—lime-green metal rods in the shape of a triangle hold three small rubber wheels, and a white propeller, perhaps commandeered from a single-engine airplane, is affixed to the back. Can this thing drive? Take a close look and walk around it. There are some odd things going on. The propeller has no gas tank, and the car actually appears to be in the shape of a right triangle. There’s a seat at the far left and a handle to its side that, just maybe, could steer the thing, though it looks rather precarious. The metal is also fluted on one side, suggesting it’s not a car but maybe an instrument of some kind.

Grosvenor engineers that delicious but unsettling feeling when the appearance or use of an object changes before our eyes, when something we thought we knew turns out to be something else, when we can’t quite attach a meaning or a name to an object, and so it dances about in our head, unresolved. (His tiny photographs also provoke this piquant uncertainty. A new book from Karma shows 32 of them.) With the most barebones materials, and not a little wit, he’s slipped a renegade, almost-lost strand of 1960s and ‘70s sculpture—gritty and rigorous, but also charming—into the present moment. Don’t miss it.

Further downtown, another stunner. New York’s Gina Beavers came out swinging for her sophomore show at Clifton Benevento in SoHo, taking her already ridiculously inappropriate painting style into delicious new areas. Using snaps of food porn, body art, and other absurdly consumable digital images as her sources, Beavers has for a few years been piling acrylic onto her canvases, thick and hot and heavy. Her paintings bulge with paint. They give you a gratuitous burst of pleasure while also potentially grossing you out. Like Robert Arneson’s sculptures, they offer to challenge your taste while at the same time suggesting, with infectious charisma, that you go throw out your standards and just revel in the action.

Her new works are based on collaged photos from Instagram, like a 12-panel number in which each frame holds a giant eye, and we’re walked, step-by-step, through a session with eye shadow, eyeliner, and mascara. It’s dirty and sexy. Another has eight giant mouths licking their red lips, showing off their braces, and reaching out for a smooch. Beavers manages to channel both Tom Wesselmann’s luscious soft porn and the horrifying mouths (vaginas dentate?) of early Lee Bontecou constructions. There are also gargantuan Marlboro cigarettes stubbed out in what might be purple catnip, and some very impressive painted nails. And penises. (Five of them.) Something for everyone.

Even some of the group shows downtown are looking good. The artist Ajay Kurian has organized a tight four-person display of techno-inflected new sculpture at Rachel Uffner called “Flat Neighbors” with Dora Budor, Elaine Cameron-Weir, Daniel Keller and Kurian himself. Kurian’s own works—paranoid sci-fi, diorama-dollhouse boxes that you really just have to see (one features a toy Power Ranger)—win the show (smart curatorial move there), but they’re trailed closely by one of the baffling pieces that Cameron-Weir has been fashioning recently by adorning giant clamshells with ghostly blue neon and candles. They radiate the sensation of dry ice—searingly cold objects that somehow invite intimacy.

Next door, JTT also has a characteristically smart group show called “Move the world back from the abyss of destruction,” with a miniature 1990 Mike Kelley fabric house sculpture that will break some hearts, plus works by, among others, Alfonso Ossorio and John Outterbridge.

Other shows that are worth a peak nearby: Andy Coolquit keeps it cool at Lisa Cooley, with the reliably pleasant, scrappy, hippie chic bric-a-brac on which he’s made his name. Too much work? Too scattershot? Too polished? Depends on your tolerance for such things, but I’m on board. And for her first show at Brennan & Griffin, Heather Guertin has a full spread of large new paintings that sneakily inject bits of cartoon figuration—and narratives—into fields and forms that, just maybe, riff on Günter Förg, Barnett Newman, and other standbys.

Lastly, I finally made it back to Chelsea today and found what has to be the brightest glimmer of light in the neighborhood at Michael Rosenfeld, which is doing its second show with the ace figurative painter Irving Norman (1906–1989), titled “War & Peace Monumental Paintings, 1969-1986.” You could call it the sleeper hit of the season, but that would be trite since these are sprawling scenes that show scores of bodies being tortured, enchained, forced into labor, and sent into combat. It’s Bruegel and Bosch turned toward the dehumanizing horrors of the military-industrial complex—dark, mad, and unfortunately on the nose.

“Art of the City” is a weekly column by ARTnews co-executive editor Andrew Russeth.