

BRIC Contemporary Art

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Greater New York at MoMA PS1

This is the first in a series of posts by BRIC Contemporary Art summer interns who will be making weekly trips around the city to see artwork on view. Through these posts, Shannon Mulshine and Esther Howe will be responding to each other and developing their curatorial vision.



Ryan McNamara, I Thought it Was You

MoMA PS1's current quinquennial exhibition, [Greater New York](#), has been on a roller coaster ride with the critics. After viewing the show with fresh eyes, I gathered my thoughts and then set out to compare them others. Overall, I found that there was a tendency for critics to "throw down" when they disliked the show, but merely to express pleasant surprise when they loved it. Maybe it's not "cool" to gush. While many criticized the show's vastness and found the artists' debuts premature, I found *Greater New York* to be a worthwhile visit. It harvests gems and offers almost too many interesting, if not fully formulated ideas for one trip (Esther and I needed to rest our minds and refuel on coffee and Italian ice after three hours and then officially declared ourselves "burnt out" after another two and a half). Topics range from social and environmental concerns, race, sexuality, amateurism, emotion, to art and the artistic process itself. Media was everything but traditional, often mixed and sometimes loud. Esther and I will be in dialogue about this exhibition until our next trip, when we hope that our conversation will transition with ease onto new artists. Here, I'll talk about what interested me. Let

the gushing begin...

Overall, I found myself highly attracted to the artworks that were most unabashedly sincere, even personal or indulgent. I attribute this to the remnants of my youth still clinging to that faith that believes in passion as the secret ingredient to good art. I think Jerry Saltz sums it up best as a train of thought, reading, “*I know that the art I’m creating may seem silly, even stupid, or that it might have been done before, but that doesn’t mean this isn’t serious,*” in [his review](#) of *Greater New York*. Artist Ryan McNamara’s [I Thought it Was You](#) is comprised of two video recordings of the artist dancing to Herbie Hancock’s groovy lament, also entitled [I Thought it Was You](#), which plays from his stereo in an empty night club with strobe lights; also, on a separate screen, on an abandoned path in the country. Ryan wears his heart on his sleeve, dancing in spasmodic and stuttering episodes; eerie, ecstatic, exhausted; reminiscent, for me, of The Cure’s Robert Smith. So much raw emotion, flailed and gyrated under disco lights to a synthetic jazz number is a rare find in most Contemporary Art Centers (for a reason... isn’t that what youtube is for?) and MoMA PS1 doesn’t forget that. The glam and the torment in Ryan’s piece that make it so emotionally satisfying and dangerously seductive are only a launching pad for the greater project that the artist has undertaken throughout the entirety of the *Greater New York* exhibition, entitled, “*Make Ryan a Dancer*”. McNamara has gathered a multitude of professional dancers and performers to teach him daily dance classes in the MoMA PS1 building in which visitors are invited to partake. His mission is to end the training process with his “Finale;” a performance at the culmination of the exhibition that will utilize all of the MoMA PS1 space (I *must* witness this). His project exemplifies a trend amongst artists, observable throughout the exhibition, to consider process as a significant part of their works of art, or comprising a work as a whole. We also observe the transition from amateur to trained-professional, which sparks questions about what it takes to make an artist. Is it that youthful passion and sincerity that we observe as we watch novice dancer McNamara stumble and seize artfully to his breaking heart, or is it the second wind that drives a fury through us, tortured to educate, train and fine-tune our talent? We will have to wait for the Finale to find out...



David Benjamin Sherry, Blueballs

Similar for its sincerity and instantaneous emotional quality are David Benjamin Sherry's luscious, candy-coated landscapes and spiritual self-portraits, including, *Blueballs*, *Soaring Yellow Morning Breath* and *Self Portrait as the Born Feeling Begins*, all of which can be seen [here](#). Sherry's fine art photography is unapologetically playful, sporting smart titles 'neath technicolor nudes (almost always himself), referencing S&M in Fisher Price primary color and representing rebirth metaphorically as a perplexing emergence from a green bog. His symbolism is easily legible and breaches all realms of human experience in a humorous, yet touching manner. I left Sherry's exhibition space with the same feeling of uncanny alien excitement that I'd experienced after seeing The Blue Man Group in Boston last winter. It may have been the colors, the spiritual undertones, the painted bodies... or maybe *Blueballs* just had a great impression on me. [Leidy Churchman](#), like Sherry, attracts the viewer with whimsical imagery and dashing colors, but he chooses a less democratic aspect of human society, targeting woodsy and flannel-clad, homosexual, manly-men with dogs. Okay, so there is one cat... Churchman left me wide-eyed and wondering: is he working in the medium of guilty pleasures or exposure, or could there actually be something I'm missing? And what are those two-headed Jesus gnomes all about? His painting style is flat and bold, which, on top of the fact that he's painting on wood, harkens folk art and tradition in an exhibition heavily stocked with new media, video and installation, making Churchman one of only a few exhibiting painters out of some 68 artists.

MoMA PS1 reputedly captures today's artist's tendency to value and highlight the artistic process in a radical way; it seems

to become the artwork. I spoke about Ryan McNamara's project, "Make Ryan a Dancer", above. Years ago we might have laughed and pointed out that Ryan probably just wanted to learn to dance on a MoMA budget, but today he is taken very seriously. The journey from amateur dancer to trained professional is considered a work of art in itself that tackles metamorphosis and expertise and changes the PS1 space from exhibition space, to public dance facility, to center stage. A series of works by artists invited to use PS1 space as a studio and to create installation pieces throughout *Greater New York* on their own time, emphasizes the importance of the artistic process. PS1 hoped that viewers might get a glimpse at the artists' "studios" in limbo. In the same train of thought, Lucy Raven's snapshot animation [documentary](#) of the production of copper wire, is supplemented by a glass display case full of notes, photographs and informational pamphlets Raven collected on her artistic journey.



Hank Willis Thomas, *Unbranded* (part of the installation)

Generational factors deeply influence what I appreciate in art. There are profound and lasting affects of growing up with high-speed internet. Unlike my parents' generation, I learned early that I could create a hip and sexy identity if I posted self-portraits from high angles and the latest MSTRKRFT remixes on my Myspace *before* anyone else. Today, YouTube only confirms, as we see phenomena like Lady Gaga, that identity, perhaps even gender, can be socially constructed. I only recently thought about how the media and popular culture affected my self-image, after reading Ewa Lajer-Burchard's *Real Bodies* for a Contemporary Art class at college. My simplest understanding is that Burchard talks about our "gaze" at the body, as something continually and inextricably filtered through a "lens" of mass media and text. We will never see the world through innocent eyes, from the moment that we are aware of ourselves in the context of society – gendered, aged, etc – from the moment French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls the [mirror stage](#). The fact that one can socially construct one's identity, complicated by the idea that society plays into one's image of oneself, is very interesting to me. So, naturally, I found myself attracted to work exploring socially-constructed identities, including Hank Willis Thomas' [Unbranded: Reflections in Black By Corporate America: 1968-2008](#) and Rashaad Newsome's video mashups to the dark and operatic [The Conductor](#). Both artists explore the way that African Americans are represented to society. Thomas has chosen color advertisements printed from 1968 through 2008 and edited them so that all textual information has been removed and only the images remain. Below each image he inserts his own witty titles that range in effect from laughable honesty to horrifying irony. The result is the exposure of generalizations in the portrayal of African Americans in marketing. Rashaad's video compilations don't try to look like "fine art", but are simply clips of low res YouTube music videos of rappers from the eighties through 2008, edited to match up to a dramatic opera song. Images of drugs, dollars, and "bling" flash on the screen in what could be a montage of popular and coveted rapper lifestyles, but the didactic music adds a tinge of severity pointing it in the direction of a cultural critique. Overall I got the feeling that I was witnessing a cult. However, when I observed closely and detached myself from the music, I noticed that these were the same videos I watched over and over in middle school because this or that rapper was cute and I had to learn those dance moves. It's worth a watch – you'll find yourself in a double take...



David Adamo, Untitled (The Rite of Spring)

Other notable pieces include David Adamo's floor installation of perfectly aligned baseball bats from wall to wall, entitled *Untitled (The Rite of Spring)*, for its ability to *make* you play (if you want to get into the next room). I tapped my feet around it before asking the guard if I could walk on it (affirmative!) and proceeded to deviously trot across. Adamo expects the work to be an entirely new color by fall. He provides a welcome respite after the tour through Leigh Ledare's photographic [documentation](#) of his mother's sex life and the haunting and perverse psychological baggage that you'd expect to come with it. David Brooks' rainforest [installation](#) of real, tropical trees decaying under poured cement really hits home with the oil spill in the air and nature constantly at odds with industry. Raising questions about gender and the human condition, Deville Cohen's eighteen minute, [Grayscale \(A video in three acts\)](#), keeps viewers mesmerized by lanky-legged men in decrepit heels, wandering dark deserts for office supplies that become motifs throughout symbolic narratives and car washes. What? While I'm still scratching my head over this one, Cohen certainly caught the interest of his viewers. Personally, my heart went out to the poor, stumbling men, searching blindly for means to get by, even though their ways were alien to me.

Greater New York has a lot to offer. Without a centralizing theme other than productive artists in New York boroughs, the viewer is allowed to fixate, as I have, on many themes and spectacles of interest. For those in favor of a big selection, *Greater New York* doesn't have to be overwhelming, but challenging. If you're interested in gaining a coherent notion of different dialogues between artists in the New York metropolitan area, you should go with the eyes of a curator, open to spot radical connections. You won't be hand-fed. I'm excited to compare my interests to Esther's (I already know that she'll be delivering an unrivaled eulogy on maps and their immutable subjectivity – a subject I know very little about). I say ditch the crits and go explore it for yourself..

Greater New York closes on October 18, 2010. More information [here](#).

Shannon Mulshine, Intern

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