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if walls could talk

PERFORMATIVE PRACTICE

curated by Ryan Steadman
at HALSEY McKAY



Donna Huanca, *MOM*, 2015, Paint and latex on reflective material, 47 x 39 x 2 in

If I were a wall, I can't imagine a fuller purpose than to be the thing that artists push against in the creative act. To feel all that psychic and intellectual muscle rubbing against, bearing down on, crushing into one's surface -- what a marvel that would be. Even better if evidence of the act, no matter how simple, was left in its wake, like a vestigial stamp -- neither past nor present -- an indicia robust enough to be both representative of itself and of its own creation.

Distinct from performance, the performative in art implies a relationship to the viewer as well as to action, reaction and result, and it asks the audience to engage in a different kind of discernment. Of action painting, Harold Rosenberg famously

called the canvas "an arena in which to act," noting its inherent theatricality. The canvas is an apt metaphor for artists working in a closed system where aesthetics and methodology are so closely linked.

Recently, a young artist talking about his work said to me, "the content is that I do it." So there. Situational, event driven, documentary; the new performative is not parenthetical, it is the parentheses.

At **Halsey McKay** in East Hampton, the nine artists in ***Performative Process*** offer works focused on the provocations, signifiers and trace elements resulting from actions inside distinct sets of circumstances. Organized by the artist, writer and independent curator **Ryan Steadman**, the show delivers a lively examination of process, theater and action.



Donna Huanca creates installation-based works that draw from her travels, and from memory, motion and gesture. Huanca's *MOM*, installed in the upper level gallery, included an interactive performance by a pigment-drenched model. As in other works by this Chicago born artist, the human form embedded in the installation functions more as a collage element than than a theatrical one, but it is dramatic, nonetheless.

Mostly still, when the model did move she pushed against a gallery wall leaving behind a soft violet pentimento. The live painting is a sort of paean to the collaborative process, and its nuanced afterglow offers a glimpse of the intersection of visual art and performance.



Keltie Ferris, L: *Venus of Tan-Tan*, R: *Animal*; both 2013-2014, oil and powdered pigment on paper, 40.25 x 26.13 inches

It's refreshing to see **Keltie Ferris** step away from the fantastic, hallucinatory abstractions for which she is known. Here she addresses figuration in body prints that recall X-ray technology, Rorschachs and the snow angels we made as kids. Raking inky body parts across broad sheets of paper, she leaves behind shadowy after-images of thighs, bellies, breasts and torsos. The results are life-size, ghostly and transformative, calling to mind Yves Klein's "Anthropometries" and the popular death masks of the Quattrocento.



Ben Morgan-Cleveland, *Western Rat*, 2014, Dirt, debris, binder on burlap, 55 x 120 in

Ben Morgan Cleveland virtually throws himself under the bus to achieve works that exude the grit and pace of city life. Cleveland places assembled sheets of burlap along the busy cobblestone roadways of industrial Brooklyn. As non-stop traffic pounds over the sheets en route to the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, the fabric absorbs weeks of non-stop traffic and brutal weather. By the time Cleveland retrieves them they're painted with an urban slag that feels ancient, as if pulled from the hands of the cave-dwellers and poets that live underground. Their patina carries in it an aspect of the urban psyche, and on the white wall they feel like a memento mori or an ode to urban decay.



Kate Gilmore, *Break of Day*, 2010, Video, 18 minutes 24 seconds, ed. 2/5

Similarly excruciating and yet sublime, the artist **Kate Gilmore** slogs through absurdist situations of her own design in performance and works in video, sculpture and photography. In her work, the artist devises ridiculous, often insurmountable physical challenges. Then, dressed in a stylish cocktail dress and pumps, she takes on these self-imposed objectives, often at her own peril. With her allegiance divided between exhaustion and devotion, she embarks on dueling resolutions that anxiously tyrannize the politics of gender, equality and correctness.

In *Break of Day*, the artist transports gallon after gallon of fuschia paint up a precipitous set of stairs, only to throw each container overboard into a void of structural beams below. Everything breaks, all the paint flies, and the artist, clearly exhausted, is triumphant, if only in the futility she achieves while meeting the directives in a predetermined set of circumstances.



Elise Adibi, *Gold and Osage Aromatherapy Painting*, 2014, Rabbit skin glue, gilding glue, 24-karat gold leaf, osage pigment, oil paint and myrrh, bergamot and cedar wood essential plant oil on canvas, 20 x 20 in

Responding to the lack of natural smells in the Bushwick neighborhood **Elise Adibi** lived in some years ago, she began an investigation of aromatherapy. Her paintings, an amalgamation of grids, oil paint and plant oils, not only smell good they are evocations that carry the process and the act within. Adibi doesn't think of herself as an abstract painter; her works attempt to be nothing more than a record of her pourings.



Brie Ruais, *Two Gather (Two Pushes Merged)* 268 lbs., 2015, Glazed ceramic, hardware, 84 x 43 x 15 in

Brie Ruais's voluptuous *Two Gather (Two Pushes Merged)* 268 Lbs, towers among the ground floor installation. Its surface, a briny melange of metallic sheen, footprints and raw physicality yields to the afterglow of what looks like a mammoth struggle between human endeavor and wet clay.



Ruais also employs a rule-based system that functions within strict boundaries (only so much clay; only a specific angle; just to a certain height, etc.). The creative act takes place inside these margins, complying with the instructions of its making. For instance, the work above references "two" individuals, their combined weight a mere "268 lbs;" each pushing their own mound of clay upward and then merging both elements into an upside down "V." The results chronicle a peer to peer search for the self, as if the two artists were pushing on the earth from the inside out.

Like other artists that have worked in and around instruction-based media -- Susanne Lacy, Sol LeWitt, Kate Gilmore -- the environment Ruais creates folds into itself to become a third thing, the way a glacial rock forms under pressure.



Reuben Lorch-Miller, *Untitled*, 2011, ceramic, 11 x 5 x 6 in

Reuben Lorch-Miller and **Adam Marnie** also impose an artistic autocracy on works that possess aspects of formal precision, balance and austerity before havoc is wreaked on them. Lorch-Miller's ceramic sculptures feel like ritual objects, their planar structure sharing formal concerns with the likes of Richard Serra and Anthony Caro. Scorched in a cinderblock kiln, the small sculptures appear ancient, and yet for all their formal balance and materiality they exude a restless ambiguity.



Adam Marnie, *Last of the Mohicans*, 2015, Hardwood maple, wood putty, spray paint, 63 x 3.5 x 5 in

Likewise, with its precise geometry collapsed at the site of a decisive clobbering, Adam Marnie's *Last of the Mohicans* offers a glimpse of the artist's DIY minimalism and architectural intervention. Its clean lines shattered, the diagrammatic calm is torn asunder.



Back to the sublime, Milwaukee-based artist **John Riepenhoff** paints the night sky in real time, with little more than a small lantern to guide his eye and hand. *Plein Air (East Hampton)*, shown below, was painted here on the East End in the dark of night. As Riepenhoff channels the natural world and its 19th century proponents, the scumbled surface and loose gestures also conjure Dadaism, automatic writing and a painterly choreography that is based in the performative.



John Riepenhoff, *Plein Air (East Hampton)*, 2015, Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72 in

Halsey McKay is located at 79 Newtown Lane in East Hampton

<http://www.halseymckay.com/>

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