



GREETINGS FROM ROME

“WHY ARE YOU WRITING about that?” and “That was a tiny gallery,” commented my 12-year-old companion with whom I visited the new Gagosian Gallery in Rome this month. Though I don’t agree with the adjective — actually the oval-shaped main gallery designed by Farouz Galdo and Caruso St. John is an expansive and impressive space — the grand gesture that the latest conquest of the Gagosian Empire attempts with this space falls a little flat. There is certainly a need for contemporary art in Rome, and the city is answering its duties to present-day culture with both MACROS and the Zara Hadid contemporary museums.

GGR is located on one of the upsweeping streets near Via Veneto (of ’60s *Dolce Vita* glamour days) and the eternally touristy, yet seductive Spanish Steps, thus overshadowed by the colossal and magnificent living history that is central Rome’s paradoxical appeal. It is in a refurbished Neoclassical bank building, with a grandiose staircase going up to its showy reception area. But again, the volumes and ambience of so many buildings in Rome are hard to compete with. The very tall ceilings and two-story curtains I imagined and secretly hoped hid something more, but was told they were windows (stupid).

Cy Twombly was a logical choice for the opening show as a super A-list artist represented by Gagosian and a former resident of Rome. While the three large paintings follow a certain coherence with earlier work, and they are showcased well as the only works on display, there is a sense of something slapped together for the occasion of the opening — he had done a special painting for Larry in the same style of the triptych, which served as an announcement for the show. The exotic sounding “Three Notes From Salalah,” referring to an Arabian oasis, consists of three similar paintings of pale, Arabic-like letters, washed and dripped on canvas; the piece though, does little to transport the viewer who may have happened into the one of the hundreds of sublime spaces in frankincense-infused churches or Latin inscripted temples and more prosaic ruins littering the city.

The offerings of today’s art world bigwigs tend to get lost in a city where the throes of Stendhal syndrome have already too much infected audiences, and render paltry the charms of the latest protégé of comparatively puny fiefdoms.

— **Nadia Lili**

REVIEWS



Walker Evans, *Alabama Cotton Tenant Farmer's Wife*, 1936

WALKER EVANS Stephen Cohen Gallery

BY THE TIME YOU READ THIS, if economic conditions remain as they were in February,) it’s likely we’ll be in the middle of the second Great Depression, and you’ll either be adding this shredded magazine to meatloaf or reading it while waiting in a bread line. Presciently, the Stephen Cohen Gallery has mounted a retrospective of the photographs of Walker Evans. One wonders how many will actually sell (a single photograph costs more than any of the subjects within them saw during the entire 1920s and ’30s).

These are photographs that have transcended their moment of shutter flash and become markers of time, where the symbol and what is symbolized become inseparable. Witness Eddie Adams’ Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing Viet Cong officer Nguyen Van Lém. Talk of the war and our consciousness taps this picture. Similarly, to discuss The (original) Great Depression is to access Walker Evans’s photo of Allie Mae Burroughs (*Alabama Tenant Farmer Wife*, 1936) from America’s collective unconscious. Burroughs looks into Walker’s camera — and us — through time, a smile hidden somewhere in the gestalt of her face. The mouth is straight, there’s no light in her eyes, wrinkles ripple across her brow — yet, somehow, there’s hope conveyed. Her portrait may hold the definition of Evans’s phrase “lyric documentary.”

Evans was employed by the Farm Security Administration to document The Great

Depression between 1935 and 1936, and about 40 of his photos, ranging from 8 ½ x 11 to 32 x 72 were displayed. Most of us saw Evans’ work relegated to a small box in our American History textbooks from grade school. In *Joe’s Auto Graveyard* (1935) fusty jalopies rest in pieces in an empty field, dead or dying trees on the horizon. Traditionally printed 11 x 17, many of the prints in this exhibition were made from high-resolution scans allowing for enlargement, and *Joe’s* has grown to 32 x 72 — the extra cars and weight-in-space of the photograph confirms your, or at least my worst fears: size does matter. On this scale, the lifeless automobiles, every dent now readable, are infused with a transcendent human quality, alluding to the owners and makers of the cars whose own fate was probably not much different than their mechanical horses. The gravitas of these images cannot be understated: to move from a sharecropper’s family, legs bedazzled with sores, to any of the other current Pop Art exhibitions occurring around town is a sobering and, yes, depressing experience.

As I walked through the exhibit, a woman with wrinkles borrowed from Allie Mae and dirty knuckles from the 40 x 50 *Sharecroppers Family, Hale County, Alabama* (1936) attempted to sidestep viewers’ ways as she cleaned and dusted the gallery. Witnessing her on hands and knees, in an outfit that could have been taken from Allie Mae’s closet, with a bag hanging from her worn pocket, attested to contemporariness of these images and that it may be time for a Newer Deal.

— **Josh Herman**

BETTINA HOFFMANN Kristi Engle Gallery

AS NASA’S MESSENGER PROBE spirals towards its final orbital insertion around Mercury — a familiar and yet largely mysterious planet — the German-born Montreal artist Bettina Hoffmann presents three video works that offer similar looping reconnaissance strategies, of people rather than wandering stars though. In each of her three video pieces, domestic landscapes unfold by means of a video camera in orbit, as it were, around the occupants. Think *The Matrix* with its infamous stop-action special effect whereby characters “freeze” and turntable around for the viewer’s hypnotic scrutiny. Hoffmann achieves a similar visual effect, sans popcorn and violence, by reducing populated time and space to a voyeuristic material frozen for analysis.

But Hoffmann’s subjects are only imitating

freeze-frame technology (to such perfect effect that I had to ask the gallerist about it). All the men and women in the videos succeed in holding their breath and not blinking to the point of inciting a kind of perceptual crisis for the viewer: are these people existing in real time, or does the artist actually have the kind of money that buys the Wachowski Brother's optical gimmick? This persistent question of "is it live or is it Memorex?" creates a double-edged sword: On one hand you're captivated by analyzing faces and bodies for the slightest betrayal of movement; on the other hand, this impromptu analysis becomes an end in itself, so that larger questions about domestic sociology or psychosexual tension are never raised.

The three video loops in the exhibition are presented separately: *La Ronde*, the storefront display monitor; *Momentum*, a single-channel wall projection; and *Décalage*, a 2-channel wall projection: each encapsulate three distinct chapters or character scenes. A number of men and women hang out in various rooms of a home and stare at each other or into space. Much like the planet Mercury, these intimate, domesticated scenes are paradoxically familiar and unknown: Familiar to us in that we recognize ourselves acting out these daily social vignettes with friends and lovers in bedrooms, living rooms and around dining room tables; unknown to us in terms of a heightened drama, a certain razor-sharp tension that completely inverts the viral ennui of our actual lives.

With a recent history of working in still photography, it's not surprising to see Bettina Hoffmann applying such frozen effects to video, though in a manner both unexpected and fresh. Her characters lie, sit or stand like statues in some ancient Greek tragedy without the benefit of a chorus to explain why. Of course Hoffmann's home-loving actors are happily framed by modern clothes, furniture and the ubiquitous 1.5 liter water bottle. And of course superficial speculations arise as to who's sleeping with who and to what satisfaction. Notions of surveillance ever encroaching on our private lives and the growing impact of advanced computer imaging coax us into benign musings about the future as we finish that last glass of wine and take a lover to bed. But at their core, these lost souls exist in no time and no space. The entire cast exists only as some cosmic mirror that reflects a terrible question back to us: What are we becoming?

— **Darrin Little**



Bettina Hoffmann, *Décalage*, 2007

CHOI JEUNG HWA REDCAT Gallery

THOUGH SOUTH KOREAN ARTIST Choi Jeung Hwa is well-known internationally, "Truth" is his first U.S. solo exhibition. It's one of those shows that strives to make a statement — it tackles big ideas, blurs boundaries, and challenges art world conventions. Prevailing interpretations of Choi's work emphasize how it comments on the fine line between high and low art, the shakiness of the notion of "Truth", and the impossibility of making "Art." During my sojourn in the gallery, I chose to shrug off the burden of interpretation and instead gave in to the sensations and sensationalism of the show — the riot of color, the play with space and scale, the sheer abundance of objects of various shapes and materials.

Most impressive is just how much Choi manages to stuff in one room. In the widest perspective, the show resembles an outdoor flea market on steroids. It is a series of staged groupings of objects, mostly collected, some made or altered by the artist. Most items are for sale. The predominant color is red, the volume loud.

My desire was to enter into this labyrinth, and inspect each object on its own terms. Yes, I noticed the replicas of icons of western art — the *Winged Victory*, the *Venus de Milo*, *David*. And, I registered the irony of their placement alongside the profane, everyday objects such as toy robots, ceramic elephants, and artificial flowers. I got the joke about creating a shrine to Andy Warhol and juxtaposing his silver busts with two Victorian-costumed dolls. But these displays of cleverness did not hold my attention. They felt forced and cynical. I kept wondering: which items did he actually make, which did he alter, and which did he merely collect? Where is the skill and creative authorship in collecting and assembling a hodge-podge of objects?

More memorable are the pieces obviously of Choi's creation. Amidst surrounding clutter is something sublime: a cluster of red-flocked

piggy banks hanging from the ceiling like a chandelier. Choi painted black eyes and symbols on each, as if to grant them individuality.

The center piece of the show is a set of eight tree-like sculptures, each constructed of three tiers of common objects. Each tree takes on a different theme and uses a range of mostly man-made materials to express it: There is a tree of Korean snack food packages, one of vintage shoes, and another of colorful latex gloves puffed up like the hands of cartoon characters. The whimsy and humor of these pieces make them accessible, a pure visual delight.

"Too clever by half" was the phrase pounding in my head as I left the show. Despite the artist's various attempts to blot out the idea of creative authorship, his intention was front and center. It's so cleverly displayed and highlighted that the viewer can't escape it. I found some space to breathe by enjoying the show as "pass-over" art: it stimulates the senses in the moment, but its effect won't last.

— **Elizabeth Anderson-Kempe**

"WILL RISE"

Robert Berman Gallery

GRAFFITI COMES IN TWO distinct forms. Letterist Graf is fundamentally about making words, with the more advanced artists exploring the area between legible and indecipherable lettering. Imagist Graf is concerned with recognizable images, sometimes pushed to

Choi Jeung Hwa, *Truth: Choi Jeung-Hwa*, installation view, 2008

