



SIGNS OF INTELLIGENT LIFE

SET THE TRICORDER TO TEMPORAL DISRUPTION MODE, MR. SPOCK

BY DOUG HARVEY

Since his first solo show at various L.A. project spaces in the late '90s, Sean Duffy has produced a series of quirky, interdisciplinary bodies of work that address the ways in which masculinity is constructed in contemporary visual culture, and how these constructions are used to define the boundaries between high art and popular culture, industrial design and craft. Those first shows consisted largely of Duffy's re-creations of scenes from the original *Star Trek* — utilizing materials such as collaged fun-fur under clear upholstery vinyl — with Captain Kirk positioned as a superimposed absentee role model for the slacker generation.

Since signing on with Susanne Vielmetter in 2001, Duffy's subsequent reinterpretive icon-tweakings have included an array of high-modernist furniture (most notably George Nelson's Marshmallow Sofa, subjected to repeated affectionate indignities), the Who, and most of the post-painterly abstractionists — not to mention less specifically identified (though often local) contemporary art peers with whose work Duffy continually engages — the design appropriation of Jorge Pardo and Jim Isnerman; the record-sleeve art of Dave Musier and Kevin Sullivan, among innumerable other props and citations. Above all else, Duffy's practice consists of stuffing the decks of his personal and shared cultural referents, inviting all comers to sit in on the game.

This was perhaps made most explicit in *The Grove*, Duffy's 2007 installation at Cal State L.A.'s Lockman Gallery, consisting of bins of thrift-store vinyl to be played on 18 separate turntables connected to 360 dangling speakers by a jangle of wires — an anarchic audio-collage playground, which is simultaneously nostalgic and utopian, a rhizomatic usurpation of the traditional hetero-patriarchal infrastructure of DJ culture, and arguably a lowbrow rendition of one of stablemate Steve Roden's sound art installations.

For "Can't Stop It" — his latest show and the last for anyone in Vielmetter's current

Washington Boulevard space before the gallery relocated four blocks west — Duffy has continued on the recent downward spiral that has taken him from the heights of immaculate high-design showrooms rifts through the post-apocalyptic cargo-cult office space deconstruction of his 2006 show "Temporary Worker" into the dirty boy's world of the shop, the basement and the garage.

Following his meticulously realistic over-painting of every surface of a Yamaha YZ80 dirt bike and a 1964 Toyota Land Cruiser — and in conjunction with a mysterious ongoing side project involving becoming a for-real race car driver — half of "Can't Stop" revolves around the formal functional fetishism of the automotive shop, including a surprisingly effective, assisted readymade consisting of two backlit car doors scavenged from Duffy's abandoned first attempt at professional NASCAR customizing, 20 electric fans, and a lightbulb mounted on an engine hoist to become a ridiculously cumbersome light fixture, and a completely overpainted Chevy small-block engine. Adjacent to the engine is "The Palette," in which one of Duffy's signature instant multi-tone turntable sculptures (playing *Dusty in Memphis* during my visit) is used as a paint-mixing surface.

Further articulating the tooled ironography is a series of wooden railings with an array of screw-top jans mounted to their bottom surfaces — a common handyman solution for organizing small parts, which, in Duffy's hands, becomes an autobiographical archive, another potential audio-collage mechanism (judging from the quantity of vintage transistors for radios and windup music-box mechanisms included), and a site for relational imbrication — the railings are hung at the perfect height for resting a beer bottle, and several such artifacts have been left intact from the opening reception.

The other half of "Can't Stop" mines the realm of the adolescent record geek — Duffy's longest running leitmotif, but again abandoning the precision and slickness of his earlier oeuvre for a rough-hewn industrial trade-school aesthetic. The title piece, deriving from the (English) Beat's 1980 debut album "I Just Can't Stop It" is typical of the group of large, modular paintings that occupy most of the gallery's wall space. Ninety-one individual, 12-inch squares of scrap wood painted with

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rough, silk-screen-like renditions of album covers, in this case multiple variations on just two — the titular slab and Kenny Rogers & the First Edition's very similarly designed "Tell It All Brother."

These challenging paintings capture a kind of middle-school art-class strain of compulsive devotional artmaking, where the artist attempts to reify his identification with a mass-produced cultural commodity by mimicking its means of production, churning out heartfelt but imperfect copies. Never have the psychological roots of Warholian pop been laid more bare. As with the spooky off-register loops of Duffy's turntables, time is knocked off its pedestal. Minus the patrilineal inheritances of art history, minus the pecuniary genealogies of intellectual property privileges, minus the imprimatur of class, taste or gender — who's your Daddy?

A slightly darker take on pop seriality and gender can be found in Michael Arata's latest group of paintings, collectively titled "Remember," on view at Kristi Engle Gallery in Highland Park. Arata, whose work often hinges on outrageous humor or (as with his wall-creeping modular contribution to the "Some Paintings" L.A. Weekly Biennial) playful interactivity, has shifted into a more solemn — though hardly less edgy — mode, appropriating the images of 54 anonymous women whose photos were found in the apartment of L.A.-based serial killer William Bradford in 1984. Bradford had lured several other women to desert campsites with the promise of producing fashion photography portfolios, then raped, strangled and mutilated them.

The 54, all photographed by Bradford, were understandably seen as further possible victims. In 2006, the LAPD finally released the photos on the internet, leading to some identifications — and attracting the attention of Arata.

Arranged on one wall in a lozenge-shaped cluster, the 54 small acrylic-on-panel paintings give an almost-innocuous first impression, even if you are aware of the source material. With their features blanked out, leaving only their distinctive period hairstyles — ranging from Farrah Fawcett to Mary Lou Retton — "Remember" possesses some of the handmade taxonomic charm of West African barbershop signs, a large part of which derives from the reclamation of mass-produced visual language into the realm of the conspicuously handcrafted.

In Arata's case, this erasure of quotation marks takes on further, less congenial complexities as the already problematic scenario of the pictorial framing of a female countenance for possible consumer distribution (talkin' 'bout the Gaze) collides with the actual circumstances of the creation and ultimate distribution of the source photographs, and the unsettling literalness of the subjects' "removal."

The removal of (non)identifying facial features from the source photos further translates conceptual motif of framing into a literal one, as the fussily rendered coiffures become ornate filigreed borders for negative spaces. You almost expect to see a little card in the middle of each, reading "Removed for Preservation." Which is, in a sense, what Arata's work does, channeling a new embodiment for the complex and heartbreaking contradictions of these erased identities, disincorporated victims of systems of visual representation gone very wrong, passing them through his own eye and hand, daubing at their absence with tinted unguents on discarded scraps of wood to condense into a cloud of haunting, evaporated humanity. ■

SEAN DUFFY: CAN'T STOP IT

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MICHAEL ARATA: REMEMBER

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