

## Honeydew at Michael Thibault

September 26–  
November 8, 2015

*Intervention* is a term we hear a lot, one that often doesn't mean much. We're asked to look upon a work of art and see it as somehow disruptive to a narrative or a market that is, in fact, rather acquiescent. Still, I'm tempted to use the term here, to describe the work on view at *Honeydew*, Bill Jenkins and Chadwick Rantanen's two-man show at Michael Thibault, if only because of how absurd it sounds. (*An urgent intervention into the distribution of light at a particular address in West Adams and the electrical currents in a collection of off-brand consumer commodities.*) While the modifications that comprised the artists' respective contributions perhaps suggest something a bit closer to a *hack* (as in a life hack or an Ikea hack)—refashioning the crap of contemporary material culture—they did so with a definite sense of the absurd, staging a pageant of shoddiness that seemed to deride the artistically precious and the discursively pompous.

The sleekest thing in the show—a long wooden construction like a sharp-angled trough—stood in the center of the front room. The interior walls sloped down to a plane, along the middle of

which ran a slender gap designed to swallow dead AAA batteries, produced by a collection of chintzy electronic goods procured by Rantanen. Motion-activated chirping birds, spinning globes, and a filigreed LED sconce, were haphazardly displayed in the trough, their packaging strewn about, like a rejoinder to fastidious modes of display.

And all those tchotchkes, as it happens, take AA batteries. Rantanen cast plastic casings that give AAAs a little extra length and girth, allowing them to fit AA holders. The casings are strangely emphatic objects, an impression no doubt heightened by the discarded bubble wrap, cardboard, and whining electronics. Though it probably has more to do with a curious, extraneous feature: each casing possesses a couple of flat, round protuberances, like a pair of wings that—whatever their ornamental function—prevent the battery compartment from closing. In fact, those wings made it hard for these items to even sit up straight or assume whatever their proper deportment. The birds were forced to lie on their sides. The globes were disassembled, their Southern Hemispheres steadily whirling, top halves inert. It turns out that doing the work of their big brothers puts quite a strain on the little AAAs. They were expiring at an alarming rate, plunking down into the belly of the trough.

Descent was the defining movement of the installation: the sloping

walls of the trough, the abyss of spent batteries, and—from above—Jenkins's elaborately ramshackle ductwork of plastic sheeting, Mylar, and wood, completely covering the gallery's skylight and fixtures, slouching down from the ceiling and funneling illumination toward the buffet of whining birds. As objects, the ducts are both imposing and flimsy, their effect theatrical and sardonic. While disorienting the visitor and reorienting the space, Jenkins's re-directions of light—that element essential for (among so many other things) photographing art—seemed concerned as much with the would-be online viewer as the gallery visitor. Reallocating light into dim puddles, Jenkins manufactured a kind of resource scarcity—not so much an imagining of the possibility of the unphotographable, as a prickly concession to the inevitability of install shots: *might as well make it tricky.*

In the second room, light again filtered through a plastic tarp, and again consumer crap ran on AAAs in AA drag (with protruding wings). Only here the light source was an eye-level window and the gizmos consisted of motion-sensitive outdoor cameras, a row of sconces, and a couple of inflatable fat suits. The latter hung from the wall, while down on the floor, the cameras and lights sat atop the boxes they'd been sold in, like pedestals.

Rantanen and Jenkins's projects work rather well

together—perhaps an odd choice of words for a show built on things not working well. The press release consisted of a list of instructions for dealing with inevitable problems: replacing batteries, taping up light leaks in the ducting. Still, Jenkins's conduits of light and Rantanen's readymades and winged casings each enlivened the other, teasing out drama from works that on their own might skew deadpan. The artists also, of course, share a sense of materiality, an engagement with the physical dregs and artifacts of our historical moment, both the ubiquitous and the overlooked. These are the surpluses of an advanced capitalist society, glossed for us always in a technophilic hymn. *But if the future is here, why is it so shitty?*

## Fred Tomaselli at California State University, Fullerton

September 12–  
December 17, 2015

Before moving to Brooklyn, Fred Tomaselli grew up and studied in California—and not just anywhere in California. Tomaselli hails from Orange County, in “the shadow of Disneyland,” as curator Mike McGee writes in the catalog for this unexpected survey of formative sculptures, kinetic installations, and mixed-media paintings at

Tomaselli's alma mater, Cal State Fullerton.

So many telltale archetypes of SoCal culture are present in Tomaselli's oeuvre (aside from the drugs, which the artist has been including in his media since around 1990): his use of glassy, poured resin (a technique learned while shaping surfboards); his exceptional craft skills (he was also a woodworker); his inclination towards Baudrillardian states of artifice and unreality; and the tangible influences of both the exuberant California Funk aesthetic and the transcendent minimalism of 1970s Light and Space.

The collision and subsequent disentanglement of these latter two influences is charted in the Fullerton exhibition. Titled *Early Work or How I Became a Painter*, the show gathers over twenty works, many of which have not been exhibited since they were made in the 1980s and early '90s. It is not organized chronologically, so attention must be paid to the checklist to understand how Tomaselli got from an untitled watercolor study of succulents dating from 1978—the earliest work in the show, made when he was 22—to *Brain with Flowers* (1990–97), a later, psychedelic resin panel featuring pills, pot leaves, and blotter acid.

Aside from the botanical watercolor, only one piece was reportedly made in California before Tomaselli relocated to New York in 1985. *Current Theory* (1984) consists of

a blue tarp spread out on the floor, on which maybe a hundred Styrofoam cups are tethered on short pieces of string—the kind of effortlessly effective installation that every art student wishes they'd thought up. Two large fans cause them to rock back and forth, creating an effect not unlike the bobbing waves of the ocean. The piece sets in motion a pleasing sequence of ironies: containers for liquid, containing only air, create the illusion of moving water due to the movement of air around them. Then there's the punning title and the image of cups floating, their chemical artificiality in toxic opposition to the saltwater that seems to carry them.

In the catalog, Gregory Volk observes that hung vertically, *Current Theory* would be analogous in its effect to one of Tomaselli's more recent, optically roiling compositions. Other three-dimensional works make clear the artist's journey through this period, from painting to object making and back again to pictorial flatness. In *Cubic Sky* (1988), he transferred a detailed map of the night sky onto six boxes, and scratched holes in their surfaces where stars were located. Each box has a light fixture inside, and when hung in a darkened space, they seem to “containerize the infinite,” as Tomaselli puts it in the catalog.

*Cubic Sky* is well executed, and notwithstanding the thinness of its philosophical observations,

it works in a way that most teenage stoners would appreciate. Elsewhere in the exhibition is a partner piece, a work made two years later, which is less successful. Nevertheless, it may have marked something of a breakthrough for the artist. *Box for Your Head* (1990) is a wall-mounted cube, lacquered in brown, resin-coated Ailanthus leaves, with a round hole through which viewers are encouraged to poke their heads. Inside, in the darkness, countless pinpricks of light twinkle like stars. But the work does not transport you into a state of heavenly wonder. Instead, you hear the hum of a fan, your eyes adjust to the gloom, and your hunched back starts to feel uncomfortable. The box smells a bit musty.

Tomaselli has, from this period on, seemed markedly ambivalent about the potential of transcendence or escape in his work. While his paintings—which often incorporate snippets of collage, pharmaceutical drugs, and parts of psychoactive plants as well as painted areas—can be exquisitely detailed and immaculately finished, their airless enclosure in a thick layer of polished epoxy resin keeps them at a remove. The effect is like looking through a window and being distracted by the glass. In front of his work, there is little hope of becoming the “transparent eyeball” that Ralph Waldo Emerson described in *Nature*, his treatise on disembodied, undifferentiated transcend-

ence. That is also where Tomaselli departed from Light and Space artists like James Turrell and Eric Orr. Instead of demanding our surrender, he offers visual pleasure as just another sensory stimulus, a drug that should be ingested knowingly and with caution.

## Trisha Donnelly at Matthew Marks Gallery

September 26–  
November 7, 2015

“Non-objective art as I see it removed the referential (idea-identity) from painting—demanding personal sensual involvement as the only accurate human communication.”

—Robert Irwin<sup>1</sup>

Trisha Donnelly does not give away much. Known for her enigmatic images, performances, and installations, she does not allow reproductions of her work to be published. In the case of her recent exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery in West Hollywood, she insisted on skipping the traditional press release as well. Donnelly has earned a polarizing reputation as an artist known for creating moments of doubt, moments of confusion, and most importantly, moments of wonder. In a time when most art is instantly posted, shared, double-tapped, and swiped, Donnelly’s work demands a refresh-

ingly direct engagement with her audience. She maintains a clear consideration of the viewer throughout her practice; she does not make art merely to be looked at or mused over. Her work is meant to be felt.

Describing an experience with words can undo it; abstracting a feeling with language can result in failure. Donnelly’s ephemeral installation presents a similar challenge. Split between two gallery spaces half a block apart, the show forced the viewer to leave the confines of the gallery as they traveled between spaces. One gallery was a vast, dark space dimly lit by abstract images that were projected on the walls at oblique angles. The room was accompanied by a soft muzak that played through large, casually installed speakers. Blacked-out skylights caused columns of darkness to rise up to the ceiling. Daylight bled in around a roll up door while fleeting rays of light mysteriously pierced the space at irregular intervals. Walking out of this dramatically darkened space, with its subtle tricks of light, the warmth and light of the outdoors were a shocking interval between the two gallery spaces. Naturally lit via subtle daylight diffused through scrimmed windows, the second gallery offered a refreshing complement to the first. The space felt softer and less confrontational than the first and offered a more traditional experience: Two vague photographs that appeared to be accidental exposures, a medium-sized abstract

drawing, and a looping animation of clouds projected onto a wall. The projected image slowly rolled towards the ceiling, mimicking the vast columns of darkness in the previous space which called the eyes upward. The works offered little concrete information, aside from the mood they evoked. Further description of the work would compromise the experience, something that Donnelly strictly avoids. She is a powerful aesthetic teacher, unyielding in her vision. She teaches by way of sensual experience—her solution for the shortcomings of language—and she articulates her method well.

By setting up a series of Dualistic relationships throughout her exhibition, Donnelly continually reminded me of my position relative to the work, to the space, and to myself. While walking through the exhibition, I experienced various of states of viewing: inside of the gallery, outside of the gallery, in front of the work, within the work, looking down onto the work, peering up to the work, standing next to the work, understanding the work, and not understanding the work. Each transition between these modes of viewing disrupted my expectations of the usual reserved remove that is often felt in contemporary art galleries. Instead the work involved me on an emotional level; the dynamic experience was empowering. It is within these perceptual shifts that Donnelly acknowledges the viewer and invites them into a conversation; a

conversation that began right here in Los Angeles circa 1965.

In Robert Irwin's "Statement on Reproductions," which first appeared in the June 1965 issue of *Artforum*, the Light and Space artist stressed the primacy of the direct experience of the work, a preference that would influence a generation of artists and help introduce a new phenomenological approach to contemporary discourse. For Donnelly, this notion rings as true as ever in a world ruled by emotionless technology: she rejects screens and their digital reproductions wholesale and reminds the viewer of the value and potency of the in-person aesthetic experiences.

Donnelly articulates various emotional states of being in deft detail while allowing variance and chance to illuminate deep truths. In one particularly moving moment while sitting in near-total darkness, I was beholden to a vast yet comfortable void, only to be suddenly and ecstatically engulfed in daylight. The mechanisms involved—a plastic sheet loosely draped over a skylight—were as simple as they were effective; the experience they created far surpassed their humble means. It caused me to question the location of "the work": does it exist in the materials, or in the experience? I was confounded by the theatricality of the moment, it was simultaneously off-putting and enrapturing. The work seemed to call into question the limitations of the

average art object in the face of the natural world. In a universe ruled by powerful natural forces and random chance, the static art object in contrast can feel vulnerable and mute.

It is Donnelly's subtle surrender to these unknowable forces that accentuated this series of surreal experiences and elevated the grouping of objects, images and spaces into a realm of spiritualism rarely associated with austere blue chip galleries. While taking in the show one may have found themselves repeatedly looking upwards, towards the clouds and towards the light. Maybe there are answers up beyond the skies, or maybe there are more questions.

## **Bradford Kessler at ASHES/ASHES**

**September 19–  
October 30, 2015**

Fantasies of societal ruin are an aesthetic well that never runs dry. Apocalyptic predictions seem inevitable, particularly in the contemporary era—a dire future arcing out of the terror and frustration of the present. Ruminations on the end times saturate artworks with speculative science fiction and predictive environmental disasters. More generally, "Y2K" fears echo back: in the lead-up to the year 1000, similar choirs of doom sounded at the prevailing theological thought that "mundus senescit," or "the world grows old."<sup>1</sup>

**Aaron Horst**

Bradford Kessler's *Anxiety Social Club* at ASHES/ASHES concerned itself with the contemporary terror and vertigo of all-pervading ideology rather than the year 1000's damnings of an angry God. The show's press release quotes Žižek: "The ruling ideology today is basically something like a vague hedonism with a Buddhist touch."<sup>2</sup> Kessler stepped on the gas pedal of this notion, portraying a wrecked world that, if not post-apocalyptic, was caught irretrievably in accelerating decay.

Kessler's graffiti murals, sleek, white mannequins in bullet-and-stab-proof body armor, and Photoshopped wall collages were framed as a "Žižekian horror" that "explore[d], if not admire[d], the violent beauty of man's *natural descent* into savagery" (emphasis mine). Civilization, what's left of it in the projected world of *Anxiety Social Club* anyway, is framed as an *unnatural ascent*, resistant to the savagery inherent in both ideology and humanity itself.

Kessler tempered his own work throughout with pieces by a handful of other artists. These flourishes of an almost-Buddhist sort—the relative calm of Ajay Kurian's Modernist houses-cum-fish bowls, a gently folded pile of fleshy material by Ivana Basic—marked the distorted landscape, offering a teaspoon of contrast amidst Kessler's harsh aesthetic.

However convincing Kessler's critique, ham-fisted allusions were the rule: from corrupted innocence in the gun-wielding child

of *Maybe It's Only Us*, to class in the bloody handprints stalking out of a pair of broken wine glasses in "*May we live in interesting times*." Is the latter an indictment of high society or a Bane-like manifesto to violently dispense with the rich? Whether literal punishment or metaphorical decadence, the viewer was caught between fatiguing mixed messages.

The tangible mania of current events is directly referenced in Michael Assiff's *Vent (Santa Barbara Spill, #ShellNo)* (2015), a vinyl print applied to a steel vent grate low on the wall. Its hodgepodge subjects range from the environmental disasters of GMO technology and the Santa Barbara oil spill to the sociopolitical force of Caitlyn Jenner. Kessler, meanwhile, conjured tempered foreboding out of a predictable juxtaposition between advertising's inflationary false promises and a tribal militarism, steeped in Hollywood-style terror.

Despite all of the work having been made in 2015, an uncanny datedness marked the exhibition, echoing out of '80s horror touchstones: schlocky special effects (the false flesh of Basic's piece,<sup>3</sup> the Chucky head from Kessler's *In the Belly of the Gar*) and the doomsday ideology of *Mad Max*. Shiny mannequins clad in body armor and bearing clawed weapons (*Soft-Bodied Story* and *David [Trust Fiend Baby]*) struck with potent, chilling and understated effect, in sharp contrast to the hysteria of *Maybe It's*

*Only Us*'s gun-toting preadolescent; the hybrid human-arachnid motif stamped onto their suits resembled a pseudo-religious totem for a new post-apocalyptic culture. The detritus strewn about their feet presented an image of civilization effectively frozen in decline.

Žižek argues elsewhere<sup>4</sup> that, whatever ideology's internal contradictions, attempts at resolution only tear away at the distortions of reality that form our very ground of existence. Beyond ideology lies the horror and dissolution of The Real, or what Tricky might call the "Really Real."<sup>5</sup> In Kessler's bombed-out world, the instability of ideology has come to fruition, wreaking a havoc survived mainly by insects and caricatures.

The apocalypse is perhaps most potent when it looms on the horizon, less as a reality than a myth. So long as it never actually arrives, its power to evoke and terrify becomes exponentially greater. Kessler's approach favored visual chaos over a nuanced understanding of entropy, a principle that draws its destabilizing power in part by sharply contrasting with order. This contrast forms a central characteristic of civilization itself—something ignored in *Anxiety Social Club*'s language of extremes, in which humanity itself, struggling through its own demise, is little more than an eerie silence.

reproduce itself without this so-called ideological mystification. The mask is not simply hiding the real state of things; the ideological distortion is written into its very essence." Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London; New York: Verso, 1989.

5. Tricky, "Really Real." *Mixed Race* [CD]. London, England: Domino, 2010.

1. Lacey, Robert, and Danny Danziger. *The Year 1000: What Life Was like at the Turn of the First Millennium: An Englishman's World*. Boston: Back Bay/ Little, Brown, 2000.

2. Žižek, Slavoj, *Demanding the Impossible*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013.

3. In my scarred fevered skin you see the end. In your healthy flesh I see the same.

4. Žižek, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, states: "In the more sophisticated versions of the critics of ideology... the main point is to see how the reality itself cannot

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## Review Contributors

Eli Diner is the U.S. editor of *Flash Art*. He has written for numerous publications, including *Art Forum*, *Book Forum* and *Bulletins of the Serving Library*, and has curated a number of fine shows. In 2015 he initiated the project-space sculpture garden and serialized novella *Hakuna Matata*.

Jonathan Griffin is a contributing editor for *Frieze* magazine, and also writes for publications including *Art Review*, *Art Agenda*, *The Art Newspaper*, *Cultured*, and *New York Times T Magazine*.

Born in Bremen, Germany, Don Edler is an interdisciplinary artist working between sculpture, photography, and video. Edler founded the *Skowhegan Interview Project* in 2014 and has contributed to *Hyperallergic* and *Carets and Sticks*. Edler received an MFA in studio art from New York University and attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. He currently lives and works in Los Angeles.

Aaron Horst is a writer and freelance designer living and working in Los Angeles.

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Bill Jenkins and Chadwick Rantanen, *Honeydew* (installation view) (2015). Image courtesy of the artists and Michael Thibault Gallery.

3

Fred Tomaselli, *Brain with Flowers* (1990–1997). Pills, blotter acid, leaves, acrylic, photo collage, and resin on wood panel. Image courtesy of artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai.

3

Trisha Donnelly, press photograph. Image courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery.

4

Bradford Kessler, *Anxiety Social Club* (installation view) (2015). Image courtesy of the artist and ASHES/ASHES.



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