

Routine Pleasures at the MAK Center

May 25–
August 14, 2016

How would you like to be labeled a termite? Or rather, to cite the term that Manny Farber coined in 1962, a “termite artist”? Farber—the San Diego painter and film critic who died in 2008—was writing in the now defunct magazine *Film Culture*, expanding on his opposing terms “termite art” and “white elephant art.”

Termite art, he approved of. “This way of working,” he writes, “is a bug-like immersion in a small area without point or aim, and, over all, concentration on nailing down one moment without glamorizing it, but forgetting this accomplishment as soon as it has been passed; the feeling that all is expendable, that it can be chopped up and flung down in a different arrangement without ruin.”¹ Though he was ostensibly writing about film, he gave examples in other fields too, from journalism to television dramas to crime novels. But really, he was talking about his own painting.

“White elephant art,” on the other hand, is everything that Farber’s modest, circuitously autobiographical,

tabletop still-lives are not. Pointing an accusatory finger at “painting tycoons” of the time including De Kooning, Warhol, Motherwell, and Jim Dine, he defines “white elephant art” as “a yawning production of overripe technique shrieking with preciosity, fame, ambition; far inside are tiny pillows holding up the artist’s signature, now turned into mannerism by the padding, lechery, faking required to combine today’s esthetics with the components of traditional Great Art.”² (How does one shriek with fame? Farber’s bluster sometimes reads a teensy bit like envy.)

One of Farber’s paintings hangs at the heart of the Schindler House in curator Michael Ned Holte’s current exhibition, *Routine Pleasures*. Titled *Birthplace: Douglas, Ariz.* (1979), the painting is a switching station (to borrow one of Holte’s many railroad-based metaphors from the catalogue) for several themes in the show. Actually, as Holte proposes, the real switching station here is the 1986 film by erstwhile Godard-collaborator Jean-Pierre Gorin from which the exhibition takes its title. Gorin’s *Routine Pleasures* is a documentary about a group of model railroad enthusiasts, although really it’s a portrait of Gorin’s friend Farber. The members of the Pacific Beach & Western Model Railroad Club are prime examples of termite artists: they are obsessive, unconcerned with recognition or their position in the wider culture, laboring to expand the density and scope of their looping, closed system. In his narration, Gorin explains his fascination with these men through Farber’s theories of art.

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Too much backstory? Gorin's film does not actually play in Holte's exhibition, but a brief exhibition text provides an outline. Holte developed his ideas around Farber's notion of termite art and Gorin's filmic response in an essay in 2009; in 2012 he taught a seminar class on the same theme, which reportedly took an appropriately circuitous path. Which is to say, there is a lot here: a semester's worth of ideas and related research, from the post-May '68 Marxist discourse around labor in the collaborative films of Godard and Gorin, to the dynamics of collectivity and collaboration, to the value of close observation and listening, to the function of the essay.

There is a lot in the exhibition too. Sixteen artists (or duos, or collectives), over three hours of video, a sound piece, a text work, a book, a touchscreen display, a daily event, and a radio broadcast. Not to mention the extensive catalogue designed by Mark Owens, described by Holte as a reader for his seminar class. The event and radio broadcast is the work of the Newspaper Reading Club, a collaborative venture set up by artists Fiona Connor and Michala Paludan, in which participants are invited to share their observations of the day's paper, on record. The simplicity of dealing first (and, perhaps, only) with what is directly in front of oneself is, for Farber, the only sensible way to proceed.

In his catalogue essay, Holte admits that to a certain degree, his curatorial choices were guided by wanting to return to artists he had worked with before. (Again, that which is closest at hand.) Across the room from Farber's painting is a plywood plinth bearing four ceramic works by Michael Frimkess and Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, made between 1992 and 2016.³ *Condorito Luz* (2016) is a handsome stoneware

vase thrown by Michael and glazed by Magdalena with zany scenes from a famous Chilean comic. Another tray, by Magdalena alone, reproduces a cartoon strip featuring a dog and a cat.

The Frimkesses' strategy of appropriation, and their fondness for melding fine craftsmanship with pop imagery, is reflected too in Farber's painting. A putative bird's-eye-view of the town where he was born, the picture actually shows model railroad tracks winding around open books, flyers, newspaper clippings, and gaucho figurines. Farber's hand is subtle and precise, although the composition is scattered and much of its content illegible. "Farber always played high and low with his own culture," observes Gorin in his film. "He always picked as a subject something he could hold on the head of a pin, and got his kicks from multiplying infinitely the entries and exits into it."

The painting is flanked by other subjects you could hold on the head of a pin: Roy McMakin's photographic diptychs showing both sides of a ribbon and a scrap of calico fabric, crisply and simply against white backgrounds, and Steve Roden's video *everything she left behind that fit in my hand* (2012). As a hand opens and closes, revealing small shells or beads or carvings, the obvious thought is that these are the relics of a departed lover. The catalogue, however, discloses that the objects once belonged to the choreographer Martha Graham; the lesson, perhaps, is to guard against obviousness and to pay attention to what is present, not what is speculated.

Fittingly, considering its pedagogical provenance, there are plenty such object lessons in *Routine Pleasures*. James Benning, a colleague of Holte's at CalArts known mainly as a filmmaker, is represented in the exhibition by two uncharacteristic

1. Farber, Manny. "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art." *Film Culture* Feb. 1962: n. pag. Print.

2. Ibid.

3. Magdalena Suarez Frimkess and Michael Frimkess were included in *Made in L.A. 2014*, curated by Holte and Connie Butler.

4. Farber, op. cit.

works. *After Bess* (2014) is part of a series of remakes by Benning of paintings by self-taught artists, in this instance Forrest Bess whose small canvas he reproduces faithfully down to its thick handmade frame. *Untitled Fragments* (2016) is a diffuse meditation on violence and power through found objects including a stone Diné spearhead, shredded aluminum from a B-52 bomber, and a framed postcard of Ché Guevara.

In all of these examples, the metaphorical termite is shown to be a creature of measured sagacity and patience, a consumer of culture, and observer of the world unparalleled in its attention and thoroughness. But in reality, a termite is also a parasite, a destructive pest that ploughs mindlessly through whatever is directly in front of it with neither plan nor purpose. Farber acknowledged this in his 1962 essay, though he did not see it as a failing: “it goes always forward eating its own boundaries, and, likely as not, leaves nothing in its path other than the signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity.”⁴

I wonder how certain artists in this exhibition feel about Holte’s designation (admirably, one assumes) of their practices as being akin to the gnawed and indiscriminate paths of termites. Farber left us with an example of how his method could result in a cohesive and beguiling body of work, but it is hardly applicable to all artists. Carter Mull, for instance—represented here by three sculptures from 2014 in which printed tulle fabric shrouds vases filled with fresh (then wilting, then dead) flowers—has been working for over a decade with a consistency and consideration that comes from his vigilance of currents in contemporary art and culture. His work is hardly “unkempt,” or “without point or aim,” as Farber wrote. Other contributors too, such as Harry Dodge,

Judy Fiskin, or The Center for Land Use Interpretation, have always struck me as operating with clarity of purpose and vision.

And what, finally, of “pleasure”? Of all these artists, Farber seems to be having the most fun with his “termite’s advance,” to borrow the title of Holte’s catalogue essay. He seemingly relished his place in the margins of the art world, and enjoyed making his intricate, circumlocutory paintings. Like the members of the Pacific Beach & Western Model Railroad Club, all these artists take their pleasure seriously. Whether in Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer’s assiduous indexing of Lee Lozano’s notebooks (a monumental ongoing project) or Benning’s replication of another artist’s painting, the satisfaction apparently taken by the artists in their work seems to indicate that it is not work for its own sake only. These artists are conscious of a direction, and anticipate reaching a destination, even if they do not yet know where that will be. It is not ambition alone, that produces “white elephant art,” but rather the ambition to arrive at “Great Art” via the shortest route possible. There is no shortage of ambition in *Routine Pleasures*, even if it is shrouded beneath the tulle of humility.

1

Routine Pleasures (Installation view) (2016). Image courtesy of the MAK Center. Photo: Joshua White.

2

Manny Farber, *Birthplace: Douglas, Ariz.* (1979). Oil on board. Image courtesy of the MAK Center and Doug Simay. Photo: Joshua White.

