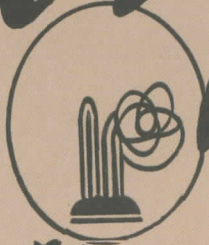
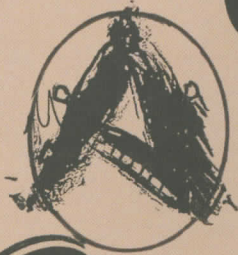


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Issue 8

Contempor-
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REVIEW

Los
ANGELES



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Brian Randolph, *Blue Box Stack*
(2017). Cardboard boxes,
found objects, and paint,
37 x 39.5 x 22 inches. Image
courtesy of Ms. Barbers.

historical and literary figures, philosophical concepts, the artist, and the artworks themselves are literally inscribed onto the works. *Caliban Codex* (1992) is a suite of 12 drawings, each taking the form of a diary entry written by Caliban, the native slave to Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In creating a dialogue between Caliban and his imagined diary, Durham makes the viewer a mute witness to Caliban's heartbreaking attempts to understand Prospero's disgust toward him and his eventual internalization of Prospero's hatefulness in the voice he uses with himself.

Durham's inscribed texts sometimes speak directly to the viewer and/or are presented as internal dialogues. In *The Guardian* (free tickets) (1992), a placard on the sculpture declares, "I am a representation of Janus, the two-faced god," and later, "Sorry folks! This is the artist Jimmie Durham interrupting here. As soon as Janus mentioned opposites, I could see he was going in the wrong direction... May I suggest that we imagine systems in opposition to any concept of opposites?" This approach calls into question the possibility of a master narrative, replacing singularity with multiplicity and multi-directionality. It asks the viewer to constantly reorient herself in relation to who is speaking and what is being presented or embodied.

Durham took a break from making art from 1973–1980 to work as an activist with AIM (American

Indian Movement), but he ultimately came back to art making. Perhaps this is because art, as a non-linear, felt, corporeal mode of apprehending the world, posits a different form of knowing against the logic and rationality that is privileged by Western culture. Art encourages knowledge that is embodied, based on looking and listening instead of ratiocinating. A deep engagement with a work of art requires being fully present in one's body and senses, and allowing thoughts generated by the artwork to come from this place of deep perception.

In many ways, this kind of engagement is akin to ritual. A primary form of the transmission of knowledge in many cultures, ritual requires being present for a multi-sensory experience that occurs at a specific time and place. Rituals are dynamic events that reinforce connection between the participants, the objects used in the ritual, the environment where it takes place, and the bodies of knowledge that the ritual affirms. Both art viewing and art making have aspects of the ritualistic that are not always acknowledged in art discourse.

Durham's works are rituals in that they are concerned with the energetic transactions that take place during the making. He brings the viewer into his process not only with the physical resonance of his materials, but by also inscribing the voices that inform his many identities: a polyglot, a Native American, an activist, a

peripatetic traveller, a poet and voracious reader, and an acute observer of history. Durham's assemblages make space for this kind of multiplicity, and the different forms of knowledge that are engendered when we inhabit our contradictions.

Parallel City at Ms. Barbers

March 18–
April 15, 2017

In a storefront on Adams Boulevard a city slept. With the flick of a light switch, *Parallel City*, an exhibition organized by Nick Kramer and Erik Frydenborg, lumbered to life. The sparsely hung, one-room gallery held a smattering of bodies, ghosts, and grids. All these things collectively *could* be a city; after all what is a city if not a collection (dense or otherwise) of bodies and specters milling about the grid? But *Parallel City* offered more than the architectural echoes of urbanity—it proposed a body double to the one humming and rumbling outside of the gallery doors.

On a monitor beside the reception desk, an ambiguous form (a torso?) spun ad nauseum. The work, *Unrested Image* (2013), by Shannon Ebner, has undeniable allure; the process of deciphering the work produced a kind of highway hypnosis. It induced a neurasthenic reaction: an unshakeable anxious, depressive lethargy

Hana Cohn

symptomatic of a 19th-century medical theory of a nervous exhaustion exclusive to city dwellers. (The foremost physician on the subject, S. Weir Mitchell famously asked: "Have we lived too fast?") The theory of neurasthenia was broadly based on the premise that the human body was an electrical machine and the condition's onset was due to a depletion of its nervous energy—an idea which even centuries later still seemed to hold metaphorical water in *Parallel City*. The pin-wheeling image of Ebner's work offered us a body literally produced, bound, and charged by electricity.

In the corner to the right of the monitor, were two tiny bodies, pointing accusingly outward. Joey Frank's *Bulletin Laughing Man* series (2017) depicts two generic visages, their limbs and torso congealed into single rectangular blocks. The words "Cell! Cell! Cell!" across one of the works elicited cells that we experience on a daily basis: computer screen, cubicle, car. Its gilded companion featured an image of a GPS Navigation screen at its base. Where are you going? Are you going the right way? Are you driving too fast? "Have we lived too fast?" Frank's figures have become one with technology; their connections extend outside of their bodies from human to machine and machine to human. Here the "internal compass" as a moral and directional concept took on a clever and pointed renewal.

Arguably the most seductive work in the

exhibition was Amy Brener's *Flexi-Shield (Spring)* (2016). Its gel-y pink, membranous body, impregnated with flora, hung from the ceiling. It is unabashedly decorative: snippets of ferns and flowers are suspended in the silicone like Victorian pressed papers of yore. Mylar crumples and subtle patterns imprinted at the edges visually buzz. Suspended, it stopped and conflated time and space in a way that was utterly arresting. Jay Heikes' *Gluttony* (2015) manipulated time too; the "fossilized" shells became historiographic—a metonym for a fictional prehistory of *Parallel City*. Sonja Gerdes' 2017 work *Pie of Trouble. Let's Hang. You look at it but it doesn't exist. Rising.* too disposed of the traditional human body and instead was a composite of the industrial and the natural: a fleshy torso replaced by a pillow bearing an outward looking eye, fused to an engine and a daffodil. These bodies have morphed into something hybrid and almost unrecognizable. They, undeterred by industrialization, are subsumed by it. Bodies of human history fell away between Brener, Heikes, and Gerdes—they get lost, they become hybrids, all caught between tech-future-flesh and preserved muck.

Heather Cook's *Fluorescent and Blue Shadow Weave Draft Graph* (2015) brought corporeal meditations to a halt. Instead of complicated flesh we were confronted with what looked like data. Atop Cooks' neatly woven

grid were meticulously applied numbers cascading beside a fractal-like pattern in shocking blue and orange. Cook's work was an oddity here—it was the only work that refused a completely coalesced body. It only offered us the molecular. *Draft Graph* became a quiet protest against the fully-formed; in lieu of the mystical gestalt (of a city, a body, or full hybrid), we were offered only the most elemental of these things: systems, patterns, and numbers.

These elements also constitute the complicated algorithms that coordinate our streetlights, render our cities, and trace the paths of our firing synapses. Cook's *Draft Graph* greeted us as forcible rest—the cure for the neurasthenia induced by the flurry of encountering electrically-charged and industrially-fused existences. Her work in *Parallel City* was a reminder that our bodies, our cities, and everything in between, are not at odds, but at their most basic, are quite the same: completely abstract.