reviews

out (sometimes it’s hard to tell one from the other), while a selection of often pornographic collages, doodles, and droopy fantasy paintings, connected the scatological visual impulse that developed in tandem with LAFMS’s manually cultivated “lowest form” of music. All of this was, however, only a footnote to the show’s main draw, a series of weekend performances in the exhibition space by core LAFMS bands Le Foret Foure, Doo-Dosettes, and Airway, among others.

Like the best free improvisations, in which individual contributors work pragmatically and democratically to shape one cohesive sound, these various retrospective views jelled into a singular coherent style.

In this context, the sudden passing of LAFMS stalwart Mike Kelley was acutely felt. This milieu shaped his aesthetic outlook as much as he influenced its contours, and hints of Kelley’s own genre-bending bridging and other investigations of authorship could be detected in the group’s borrowing from whatever unusual records they could get their hands on, whether Cornelius Cardew and the Scare Orchestrta’s 1971 LP, The Great Learning, or the Smithsonian Folksways 1958 compilation Sounds of North American Frogs. A performance on February 11 by Extended Organ, in which Kelley had been expected to play with Nilsen, Joe Potts, Tom Recchion, and Paul McCarthy, took place regardless, becoming a fitting memorial to the greatly missed artist.

—Ben Carlson

Brian Bress
CHERRY AND MARTIN

Self-described Abstract Expressionist painter Agnes Martin spent the last three decades of her life in the seclusion of her New Mexico studio. Though she often exhibited alongside Minimalists such as Sol LeWitt and Donald Judd, Martin famously insisted that great art responds purely and unthinkingly to inspiration—a way of working only possible with a vacant mind. Such a notion may seem quaint in the context of much idea-heavy art, but it is only partially alien to the work of Los Angeles-based artist Brian Bress. In his most recent show, the requisite references, slickness, and self-reflexivity of Conceptualism posed awkwardly with the more intuitive, “authenticizing” aspects of the artistic process. Art serves as a painfully literal expression vehicle in the video Creative Ideas for Every Season, 2010, in which a prep car pilot followed by a Martin look-alike crawls through a car-and-posted, chrome-keyed desert. The driver speaks in leaden Martin quotes pulled from various sources—1957 interview, a 1987 Skowhegan lecture, the artist’s published writings. Her aphorisms glance off the Mirror like figures that pop in and out of the passenger seat. A jump-cut human mechanic, emerging from a panel in the dashboard, is her faux-naïve, pragmatic straight man. “You know, I have a hard time giving up some of them—all of the ideas,” says the driver. “Like evolution.” “The mechanic’s grey face falls as he whispers in response, ‘You don’t believe in dinosaurs’.” The characters’ insecurities are the artist’s own; their philosophical non sequiturs reveal a relaxed and shaggy sincerity.

Out the windows of the car, rich pariahland badlands scroll by—a peach-and-gray marble sky collapsed with black-and-white mountains, shells, fingerprints, Joshua trees, and Surrealism junk. Timeless, immobile, and vacant, the barren landscape is once more the site of existential contemplation. But in Bress’s video, the greater desert is the emptiness of art. The character-driven visual language developed in his earlier work is reduced here to the diffused projections of a resurrected modernism embodied by Martin. Bress’s creatures exist in one scene, only to disappear in the next, burdened, perhaps, by their own super-ficiality. The wooden car is crudely upholstered; the costumes are chunky and handcrafted. The source of the illusion becomes corporeal but limited—when, for instance, the driver reaches the beamed sewn to her passenger, pulls one off, and ears it. Sparse vibraphone and piano twin-life, a wistfully wind rustles the car plunges on.

In a series of framed video portraits in the next room, Bress's oddball figures skinned or rotated in front of painstaking backdrops (the Martin-esque grid of Cowroy, 2012, for example), appearing as adorable and lifeless as Tomagochis. With names like Janus (Maxx) and Family (Denis, John, Jason, Lauren), both 2012, these pieces fit classical portraitature into a technically and commercially savvy package without ever claiming to actually represent their effaced subjects. The exhibition’s punny title, “Under Performing,” was similarly evasive. “Udan,” as “not good enough,” or as “in supporting,” could also mean “file under” or “chell it up.”

The staged levity of this exhibition acted as an escape hatch from the torturously finite workings of the video’s superficial vehicle. In so ambivalently illustrating contemporary art’s secret attraction to things like “inspiration,” “beauty,” “history,” and “success,” Creative Ideas paradoxes itself above all.

In the final scene, the mechanic turns to face the camera, and in his yoked drawl, sucking on his false teeth, sings us a cheesy song: “You know our love is like a circle. It comes around in the end…” "To me, the possibility of beauty or happiness hide in art like true love in music— for Martin, the highest art form? What would happen if we followed her advice and willfully stopped thinking, forgetting everything we thought we knew? And can there be earnestness without a certain play in the language of expression, of the artist’s own? The video raises serious questions, but haunted by Martin’s dreamless confidence, it can’t claim its way out of a self-imposed loop. Ultimately, though, aren't these vague art-historical echoes little more than empty problems? For Bress, as long as the art car looks good and keeps going, repetition is much safer than a straight answer.

—DAVID DIEHL

CLAREMON RT, CA

Liz Glynn
PITZER ART GALLERIES

In her exhibition “No Second Troy,” Liz Glynn made her own archaeological dig through the epic chronicles of “Priam’s Treasure”—the supposed gold of Troy discovered by the German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann in 1873—in order to trace (forward and in reverse) the
movement of the people, objects, ideas, identities, and truths implicated in the story and its historical milieu. Taken from Schlemm's excavation site at Hissarlik (in modern-day Turkey), this resplendent cache of vases, pots, jewelry, and other such items was displayed in Berlin until Allied bombing campaigns forced its removal to underground bunkers, from which the Soviet Army seized the loot in 1945. After the war, a set of replicas was produced that are on view today at the city's Neues Museum.

As vessels of symbolic value and fleeting power, these false riches—memorial objects that indeed never belonged to King Priam—are of great interest to Glynn, who, for this show, fabricated a full collection of her own from brass, bronze, and gold-plated papier-mâché. She displayed these small miniature objects on double-sided plants that approximate the actual vitrines used to hold the German copies. Surprisingly handsome, Glynn's gift items appeared in twee cabinets, titled Troyan Surrogates (Neues Museum Case II) and Trojan Surrogates (Neues Museum Case II), both 2011–12. The trublecence of the artifacts' golden coating subtly revealed the neo-Fauvist soberness beneath. A nearby sculpture, Krozbein Halat, 2011, had been made using a similar technique, but rather than shredded wallpaper, paper served as the material support. To this base, Glynn had applied gold leaf and gold acrylic paint before wrapping the bounty onto the sort of collapsible shopping cart typical of Turkish marketplaces. As the fruits and vegetables nestled inside, the ornament shrank from its golden casing, leaving behind wrinkled edges. Alluding to the ongoing friction between Germans and Turkish immigrants, this work was one of several on view that connected the story of Schlemm's findings and their subsequent displacements to contemporary instances of cultural exploration: the resources (mostly goods and labor) of others.

While such sculptural critiques of current German-Turkish affairs were oblique and perhaps failed to communicate all that they could have, Glynn's three videos, by contrast, were quite trenchant. Rooted in conceptual drives driven by the artist's strength, Untitled Epic Poem (after Homer on the shores of Gallipoli), 2011, shows Glynn standing on the beach—the shores of ancient Troy as a metaphor for the distance—dropping a series of fabric signs into the water, each bearing a violent or forceful phrase from the Iliad. "HOMER WAS A DEMENTED SCENE, THIS, LIVES FOREVER DEATHLESS, WITHOUT AGE. HERE, Glynn inscribes Homer's account of the Trojan War onto the site of a more recent battle, the First World War's deadly Gallipoli campaign, from which the Turks emerged victorious. Yet Glynn's poetic but straightforward action is no more didactic than reverent, simply connecting one point in history to another, attempting to inhabit both.

The "pilgrimage" depicted in the video Trojan Return, 2011, is equally intuitive, with the intention of physically, if only symbolically, bringing the story full circle. This twenty-three-minute tour follows Glynn's journey from the Neues Museum and its case of faux Trojan treasures to the Mediterranean grounds where Schlemm unclothed the original trove. There, Glynn dyes a rocking chair, enters the excavated lion's mouth, and finally brings back to life the five surrogate objects of her own making. It is a humble gesture of repatriation that at once acknowledges the mutability of history and, very efficiently, the permanence of the museum's visual repository for historical—and often nationalistic—production.

—Catherine Taft

London

Renee So

KATIE MARGAIRE

Until now, you may have given little thought to Assyrian beads. In fact, they are remarkable things, with tiers of spiral-like beads carefully aligned to produce an almost architectural construction with which to adorn the face of the Mesopotamian male. Renee So has evidently considered thought to the contours of Assyrian facial hair, along with other well-selected highlights in the history of human self-design. In the artworld's tableau of plastic surgeons, as the terror of the beard is doubled and formed from a repeated pattern of semi-spherical glinting in delicate metallic glass. In other sculptures and knitted pictures, it invokes a uniquely stylized yet simple, almost cartoonlike bearded figure, repeated like a motif across every work. This character has strong, almond-shaped eyes, and on his head he wears a floppy nineteenth-century Dutch black hat (think Rembrandt). His curvaceous ballon trousers are inspired by an image from a Japanese screen from circa 1600.

The artist is evidently fascinated by masculine accoutrements of all sorts—trousers, hats, pipes, walking sticks. Her nameless man is a composite of influences, from Rodin to Watt to the 1970s in San Francisco, all of which are connected to the anthropomorphic bearmen of sixteenth-century Germany to the double-sided king in your deck of cards. The bearded on Captains, 2010, reclines on a chair with an imaginary gentleman who dances through the Beatles' 1968 film Yellow Submarine, expands like a bubbling balloon.

So executes her two-dimensional works using a knitting machine, which precisely translates the artist's simple line drawings into literal and formalized flat patterns. Drawing and knitting are diurnally different operations; to make a knitted flat pattern the machine requires tremendous effort, interrupting what should be an easy mechanical process with a white change of yarn color just for a single stitch, row after row. Yet, even if each figure is painstakingly outlined this way, Machine knitting needlessly builds up the image (or sweater, as the case may be) starting from the bottom, knitting line by line to the top. Similarly, the superfluous works are built from the bottom up, through the accumulative dig through the epic chronicle of "Priam's Treasure"—the supposed gold of Troy discovered by the German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann in 1873—in order to trace (forward and in reverse) the

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