

Castles Burning

by Michael Straus

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Taking its title from a line from the Neil Young song “Don’t Let It Bring You Down,” this group show at the split-level gallery ROOM EAST is anything but a downer. Kudos go once again to gallery owner Steve Pulimood for the brainy discipline that has come to typify both his selections and installations in this admittedly difficult space, where the relatively small “upstairs” room confronts you immediately at the top of the bend of a narrow set of stairs and the “downstairs” room is even more constrained, virtually sharing its space with the gallery offices. All the more remarkable, then, is this show’s disciplined balance of concept and space, alternating among the tightly minimalist paintings of Steven Baldi and Augustus Thompson, the layered intricacies of Jo Nigoghossian’s steel and rubber crawler sculpture, and Sean Raspet’s peek-a-boo screens and clocks, all built around—at least conceptually—Carlo Scarpa’s iridescent black glass vase from the 1940s, thrown in a form reminiscent of the viewing portals in the meditation room he incorporated into the Brion family tomb in San Vito d’Altivole, Italy.



Jo Nigoghossian, *Levels* (2014), steel and rubber crawler (clear); and Augustus Thompson, *Shared Memory Scenario IV* (2014), india ink and pencil on canvas. Images courtesy of the artists and ROOM EAST.

Thus, the larger, upstairs portion of the gallery is in the first instance dominated by Nigoghossian’s complex of steel pipes, angle irons, sheet metal, and clear

rubber hose, itself tiered in split-levels redolent of the gallery space itself. Her work was recently included in the Brooklyn Rail Curatorial Projects's own sprawling Surviving Sandy show in Sunset Park (from which, true confessions, I acquired it). There, two steel, glass, and fabric works by her were featured against the spare, flat backdrop of an Alex Katz painting; while here, her sculpture is balanced against the neo-constructivist blocks of black and white in Thompson's elegantly composed canvas, itself benefiting from a smart placement at the end of the gallery's otherwise open eastern wall, where it also sits in harmony with the gallery's spartan window facing Orchard Street.



Sean Raspet, *Inflection* (2009-10), Plexiglas with 2-way reflective coating, mirrored Plexiglas, stainless steel hardware and wall clock. Image courtesy of the artist and ROOM East.

Beyond that, Nigoghossian's somewhat gridded cross-bars and vertical supports, together with certain flattened plates of steel, are placed so as to echo both the square and rectangular inked blocks of Thompson's painting and Baldi's irregularly-shaped "Black Box," hung opposite the Thompson on the gallery's western wall. And the matrix arguably tying all three works together is Raspet's intricate and variably-adjustable construction of multiply-hinged planes of reflective Plexiglas—shades of Larry Bell's coated glass boxes from the 1960s, functioning both as mirrors and windows—which masks, in part, a tick-tocking clock that will bring back bad memories to anyone who, like me, spent bored aeons staring at the standard-issue wall clocks marking the passage from 1st through 12th grades in an unimaginative series of public schools in New Jersey. Back downstairs, the gallery's second, smaller room is itself compressed by a mini-maze of polyethylene sheeting stretched on spring-mounted poles, another of Raspet's fabrications and this time blocking our view, in part, not only of another of Thompson's carefully-structured geometric compositions (containing the only hint of color, and that a slight reddishness in the show) but also a second of Raspet's partially-hidden clocks—in other words, by purposefully intensifying the existing limits of the space, this portion of the installation forces our concentration on the ins-and-outs of the works and, in the architecture of the reconfigured room, recapitulates the interplay found in a more open way in the "upstairs" portion of the show.



Carlo Scarpa, Cinesi Vase (designed in the 1940's, for Venini). Image courtesy ROOM EAST.

But the conceptual heart of the show remains Scarpa's vase, a modestly-sized 9 × 9 x 9 inch form that sits quietly on a pedestal in the far corner of the downstairs room, again partially hidden by the polyethylene screen. And that's in large part the point, for Scarpa's design for the Bioni tomb requires passage through multiple levels and turns to reach its inner sanctum, just as this show does. Moreover, the double-circular form of the vase, at least as viewed from the top, is reminiscent of Scarpa's use of the ancient form known as vesica piscis, circles of equal radius overlapping such that the center of each circle lies on the perimeter of the other, with the mathematically necessary result that the ratio of the height of the circles to the width across their centers is the square root of three, an irrational number. In his design for the tomb, Scarpa cut these as open forms in the wall of the meditation room, a deep architectural comment on the turmoil beneath the surface. And thus does Scarpa's design provide the show's conceptual context, where reductively painted and sculpted forms vie with others fragmented and exploded.