



## JUSTIN THOMAS SCHAEFER MINNEAPOLIS

When Narcissus leapt into the waters, in a rash attempt to grasp his own unflappable image of youth, he united desire with death; that is, once he tried to secure pure beauty, he transformed it into something fleeting, susceptible to age and decay instead. The works in Justin Thomas Schaefer's solo exhibition *Comedy Comedy* appeal to this loss, a requiem for a youth that was already old in the livery of spring [Midway Contemporary Art; January 23—March 13, 2010]. This is but one motif in the exhibition's alchemy of opposites, a space filled with dark holes and bright lights, fresh flowers and cold chrome, where neo-Romantic attempts at authentic emotion brush up against the cool, disinterested presence of minimalist materials. Schaefer's works—all but one of the twelve works are title-less, not even untitled—are composed of unprecious and marginal things. However banal they may seem—cinder blocks, store-bought t-shirts, rolls of toilet paper, and so on—they have been made unfamiliar or aestheticized, often ornamented with Baroque details.

In the first gallery, cinder blocks have been piled atop each other in a half-hearted attempt at building a labyrinthine structure. Pale violet and gray hues have been stained onto the surface of these ruins. Contributing to the exhibition's dreamlike atmosphere and the ambiguous, hazy aura of its objects, circular clothing racks filled tightly with black t-shirts and bright, blinding light bulbs have been suspended upside-down from the ceiling. Walls painted a dark, cerulean blue are sparsely populated, save for a single, framed drawing and fresh flowers that hover under sheets of Plexiglas. A slumped-over rag doll in a dunce cap drowsily fades into the shadows. And yet, in this sensuous reverie, everything is dying. Left to age and rot throughout the length of the exhibition, the framed flowers become a *memento mori*—at their peak, they are en route to death. Even the absurdly hanging t-shirts are signifiers of instability, of empty masculinity and its failures—these are cheap

t-shirts, neither fashionable v-necks nor collared shirts that would otherwise signal a successful entry into adulthood or a white-collar workplace. These spectacles recall Sterling Ruby's compelling works, which use individual gesture and aggression to liberate from Minimalist geometry.

Schaefer's presentation—a collection of visual phenomena—makes language feel awkward, an ill-formed means of transcendence from this space with no verbal guidelines, just visual cues. However, as in a dream, where one encounters bits and pieces that do not make sense on their own, visual analogues appear. For instance, the light bulbs dangling from inside the clothing racks refract a gorgeous, amorphous splatter onto the floor, a motif repeated in the painted marks on the cinder blocks, the ornate curvature of the palm fronds held behind Plexiglas, and the outline of a monstrous figure in the framed ink drawing.

And yet, maybe these relationships, these meanings between objects, are mere phantoms, just the lies we tell ourselves to make sense of our surroundings. Turning the corner to leave the first gallery, a reverse projection video plays in the doorway, preventing entry into the last room. In this looped video, Schaefer finally appears, hidden behind a clownish mask of white face paint and wearing prison stripes. He dances and pulls at his suspenders in awkward movements and, at one point, drags a metal rod as a prop. His only respite from this Sisyphean performance is a sad primping effort where he crouches down to tousle his hair. The symbolism is heavy-handed and the artist-as-clown motif has been handled numerous times before. Here in this exhibition, however, it is an apt reminder of dwindling expectations because if this is a comedy, the joke delivers no respite from the fragile lightness of being.

—Corinna Kirsch

## CHRISTINE SWINTAK + DON MILLER MISSISSAUGA, CANADA

For *Location!Location!Location!*, Christine Swintak and Don Miller worked with a crew of professional tradesworkers and volunteer assistants to selectively dismantle parts of the historic Thomas Cottage, a building on the University of Toronto's satellite campus in the suburb of Mississauga, recently scheduled for demolition [January 27—March 7, 2010]. During the installation of this exhibition, the artists alternated between living in the derelict cottage, dismantling it, and reconstructing it in the gallery's main exhibition space. Carrying what they could by hand and using a shopping cart, they transported the salvaged materials to the nearby Blackwood Gallery, where they re-assembled it, filling in the missing support sections by using lumber and mortar that they painted or dyed chroma-key green. For both these artists, who deliver incisive and comical social critique through the process of building and inhabiting absurd and seemingly impossible structures, this project realizes a new level of scale and complexity.

This installation has a number of notable precedents: Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed*, 1970, Cornelia Parker's *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, 1991, Rachel Whiteread's *Untitled [House]*, 1993, in London's East End, and Simon Starling's *Autoxylopyrocycloboros*, 2006. Like these works, *Location!Location!Location!* engages processes of entropy and catalysis, as well as site-specificity and institutional critique. Unlike Parker's *Cold Dark Matter*, however, where she hired the British School of Ammunition to blow up a garden shed and its contents, and hung the assemblage of collected pieces from the gallery ceiling, Swintak and Miller's destruction and reconstruction of Thomas Cottage occurred in slow motion, dispersed across three sites. It appeared in the gallery, where visitors could sit on a bench installed on the cottage's reconstructed—and green-mortared—stone terrace or wander through the reconstructed building; at the original cottage site, where one could enter the building's hollowed-out shell

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Justin Thomas Schaefer, installation view of *Comedy Comedy*, 2009 [courtesy of the artist and Midway Contemporary Art, Minneapolis]; Christine Swintak and Don Miller, view of *Location!Location!Location!*, installation, 2010, dimensions variable [courtesy of the artists; photo: Sandy Plotnikoff]



and view a cross-section of its interior, which was like an inside-out Rachel Whiteread sculpture; and in a smaller satellite gallery, where the shopping cart, a cross-section of the floor, and stacked sheets of yellowed newspapers found between the layers of the floor were installed inside the black-cube exhibition space. While contractors told the artists that the building could be demolished in just a few hours, it took Swintak and Miller several months to dismantle and reconstruct it, after the gallery negotiated the university's complex bureaucracy and secured the required permissions.

Extremely considered and highly labor-intensive, this process stands in stark contrast to the logic of efficiency that would ordinarily accompany a building's removal. A performance as much as an installation—the inevitable demolition was temporarily supplanted by a process of un-building, requiring an alternative system that included labor-exchanges with friends, the use of interns who bashed mortar off salvaged bricks, the hiring of a professional bricklayer who reconstructed the fireplace inside the gallery, and catering provided by another artist. In turn, this produced a liminal space based on *inefficiency*, which the artists temporarily occupied. But this project goes far beyond simply being inefficient. It achieves yet a higher level of absurdity and even madness: beneath the floor of the original cottage where the artists had been living, lay the fragrant corpse of a skunk that they left as part of the final installation. Like the works of Smithson, this project exposes certain perceptual blind spots through shifts in perspective and scale. The original cottage, so out of character with the university's modernist and brutalist architecture, went virtually unnoticed by students and faculty. In a recent campus map accessible on the university's website, which shows all other buildings, the cottage does not appear. Incidentally, the map includes the site for the Health Sciences Complex, a building that does not yet exist. Here, the act of occupying a site—one that is soon

to be no longer—makes its transformation and erasure visible.

While the artists and their process went largely unnoticed by faculty and students, this project was most visible to the grounds workers and maintenance staff, many of whom had never been in the gallery. Here, the project also shares significant features with Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day*, 1976, and *Touch Sanitation*, 1977-1980, which enacted the largely invisible maintenance, such as cleaning, upon which contemporary institutions depend, or publicly acknowledged this work by shaking hands with 8,500 public sanitation workers in the greater New York City area. In *Location!Location!Location!*, the first tour of the installation was for the grounds and custodial staff, who concretely understand the labor that sustains and transforms the campus. This highlights an important tension between materiality and immateriality, and visibility and invisibility, also evoked by the contemporary building materials that, painted chroma-key green, can be made to digitally disappear while they also support the salvaged fragments of the old structure. Reconstructed in the gallery, the building becomes frozen in a state of dematerialization, a process that, as the artists reveal, is incredibly labor-intensive. But when the exhibition is over, its catalytic transformation continues. The building will be dismantled once more, to rematerialize somewhere else.

—Amish Morrell

## CARRIE OLSON NEW YORK

Beautiful, mathematically precise designs abound in Carrie Olson's exhibition of ceramic sculptures and printed wallpaper [CUE Art Foundation; January 21—March 13, 2010]. The works' primary aim is to bring the practical artifact into conversation with ornamentation. Elemental design is carefully balanced by cultural observation. The marketplace that banks upon fear is shown to be remarkably, disturbingly appealing.

Olson is interested in the beauty of the terrifying artifact. In previous works, she has pursued the juxtaposition of aesthetics and artifacts by examining the commodification of human beauty. She invented ceramic implants inspired by diverse body modification procedures, including elongation of the cranium and breast implants.

Ceramics, Olson's privileged medium, conjures notions of ornamentation and preciousness on the one hand and utilitarianism and function on the other. This medium is especially well-suited to address questions that, as curator Natalie Marsh puts it, have "both polarized and ghettoized ceramics and ceramic artists for decades: does form trump function, and does art trump craft?"

The current exhibition interrogates the aesthetic implications of our cultural obsession with fear. Cast in glazed and matte Limoges porcelain, *Respirators*, 2005, translates the utilitarian half-face respirator into a refined object of desire. The casts are simple and austere; the smooth and shocking whiteness of their surface belies the vulgar utilitarianism of the represented objects. Ultimately, the piece makes accessories of bio-warfare, which are normally regarded as unattractive and indelicate, beautiful.

While the artist consciously identifies the recent SARS and anthrax scares in North America and Asia as the source of these works, these pieces also invoke WWII Europe where gas masks were recommended to the public for purchase. Mid-century Europe is also

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: **Christine Swintak and Don Miller**, view of *Location!Location!Location!*, installation, 2010, dimensions variable [courtesy of the artists; photo: Sandy Plotnikoff]; **Carrie Olson**, detail of *Marburg respirator display wall*, 2009, slip cast and altered Limoges porcelain, digital print, dimensions variable [courtesy of the artist]