

ARTFORUM

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Tom Burr BORTOLAMI

There was no single work in Tom Burr's recent exhibition "sentence" that was truly emblematic of the whole, but one pair at least came close. The two sculptures *his personal effects (White)* and *(Natural)* (both 2009) demonstrate a bold juxtaposition of randomness and precision and a fascination with the aura of ephemeral objects that united all the pieces here. Enclosing two pairs of worn-out sneakers in Plexiglas cases—one per shoe—and placing them atop wooden pedestals of differing heights colored according to the works' subtitles, the New York- and Norfolk, Connecticut-based artist seems to have framed his exhibition as a meditation on entropy and loss—a series of forward steps that cohere only with a backward glance.

Burr made his name in the early 1990s, alongside Cady Noland, at Colin de Land's storied gallery American Fine Arts, and "sentence" retains aesthetic and atmospheric traces of that heady time and place. The material toughness and the attendant chilly glamour of much of the work in this show share something with Noland's caustic po-mo rerouting of the legacies of Pop and Minimalism. And while not explicitly concerned with hot-button issues—as was so much art produced in the heyday of political correctness—Burr's new work is marked nonetheless by a persistent suspicion of assigned roles and institutional structures.

This overarching ambivalence was perhaps most evident in large constructions such as *endlessly repeated gesture* and *12 steps to hell* (both 2009). The former, which dominated Bortolami's rear gallery, is a white-carpeted wooden platform set about with walls faced in mirror tile. Suggesting a jerry-rigged Dan Graham pavilion or an exploded remodeling of Lucas Samaras's *Mirrored Room*, 1966, *endlessly repeated gesture* fulfills the "promise" of its title but only, it would appear, to rub the dazzled viewer's nose in the futility thereof. *12 steps to hell* is a metal stepladder draped in a white parachute. As an allegory of failure it seems almost too succinct, a brutal one-liner, but the jarring poetry of the materials ultimately redeems it.

In the three further stagelike installations on view, Burr again seems to borrow from Noland—by way of her signature

Tom Burr, *his personal effects (Natural)*, 2009, wood, yellow Plexiglas, men's sneakers, 48 1/2 x 12 x 12" and 38 x 12 x 12".



steel poles—and also recalls an altogether more attention-seeking artist, Damien Hirst. But where Hirst pursues an "eternal now" by literally sealing and preserving his lurid dioramas, Burr's little dramas are open-sided, hinting at a more fluid conception of time and motion (habitually referring to his sculptures as "moments," Burr seems to be under no illusion about their true longevity). For *I prefer laughter to tears*, 2009, he gathered four battered bar stools, a cluster of empty wineglasses, and a dangling pair of vintage headphones on a glossy black box in a two-sided cage, the whole suggesting an abandoned wake, while in *languidly lingering a little too long*, 2009, he has pared the mise-en-scène even further to achieve a Beckettian atmosphere of desolation.

Playing backup to all this theater was a slew of musical references. *Silver Sleeves (used capital)*, 2009, features a neat patchwork of salvaged record protectors; *American Master*, 2009, incorporates a sheaf of John Cage album covers and a promo shot of the composer from the eponymous TV show; and *Caged Kate*, 2009, juxtaposes clippings about Kate Bush on the occasion of her 2005 comeback with a pair of baby-blue Christian Dior stockings. And if the self-referential nod in such works is half-buried, a set of subdued black-and-white photographs titled *Burville*, 2006, makes it explicit. Focusing on an abandoned drive-in in the eponymous Connecticut town, Burr pictures odd fragments—scattered birch twigs, a blank scoreboard, asphalt cracked by weeds—that dovetail with his sculptural aesthetic and here underlined this show's fusion of material economy and visual richness, brooding nostalgia and experimental drive.

—Michael Wilson