



Tom Burr

BORTOLAMI

Reading through recent interviews with Tom Burr—whose second show at Bortolami, "Deep Wood Drive," provided another persuasive demonstration of the artist's elegaic, conceptually assured sculptures and scenarios—several recurring lines of questioning begin to emerge. Most of them are predictable enough: How does Burr locate his practice within the legacy of Minimalism? What draws him to the personae of the kinds of cultural figures—among them Truman Capote, Frank O'Hara, and Jim Morrison—that so often figure in his work? In what ways do queer politics inform his choices of certain materials and imagery?

In a few recent interviews, another less likely inquiry also gets posed more than once: Does the artist, his questioners wonder, believe in ghosts? Queries about personal attitudes toward the supernatural are hardly the typical stuff of critical discourse, but in defense of Burr's interlocutors, this is an artist whose work is palpably haunted—by a deeply ingrained sense of longing and loss, by receding events and absent bodies. Burr has worked steadily over the past two-plus decades within an idiom that is at once immediately familiar in its general forms and deeply subjective in its evocations, and he's consistently managed to coax not just poetry but also a kind of aching, if restrained, eroticism out of his clear geometries and deadpan architectural stagings. Taken



View of "Tom Burr," 2012.

as a whole, his is a project that, depending on your view regarding the essential nature of the Minimalist enterprise, either radically subverts the intent of its founding fathers or excavates resonances that were always there, even in objects that supposedly presented themselves as fully transparent to apprehension.

Several motifs now familiar to viewers of Burr's work organized the space here: The show included a series of wall-hung constructions involving monochromatic blankets and T-shirts twisted, stretched, and warped, and then further restricted on their plywood bases by upholstery tacks; three floor-based scenarios; and an additional collage that, like earlier ones by the artist, features image and text from mass-media sources (here several yellowing copies of an April 1973 *Playboy* interview with a devastatingly acerbic Tennessee Williams), which Burr uses to conjure a presiding spirit. The textile works are perhaps most representative of Burr's mode of addressing absent friends and lovers. Although they evoke Felix Gonzalez-Torres's iconic 1991 *Untitled*—a billboard image featuring the rumpled bed that he and his then-recently deceased partner Ross Laycock shared—the intimate domesticity of Burr's blankets and shirts is controlled not just physically but also psychically. Their elegant, single-color palettes route them through the history of Minimalist painting, a move that is fully in keeping with the artist's penchant for leavening intensely personal narrative allusions (the works, all 2012, feature titles such as *his personal effects* and *Undiagnosed Blue Mood*) with impersonal formal frameworks.

The two major sculptural settings step away to some degree from the Minimalist pedigree of the wall works, but are similarly potent as receptacles for attenuated traces of once-charged presence. *Baited like Beasts* (a moon viewing platform) is a cage from which a body has fled; inside, a simple wooden chair tipped on its side and a low-hanging globe lamp conjure spaces of bureaucratic concentration, such as the schoolroom or the holding cell. Meanwhile, *An Orange Echo* consists of two rows of theater seats facing each other across a narrow space and enclosed in a pair of mirrored plywood cases that further double their gently worn auburn upholstery and the phantoms that once occupied it. Read against his work from 1995 addressing the at once faceless yet highly sexualized architectural environments of Times Square porn shops pushed out during the "revitalization" of New York's red-light districts during the Giuliani administration, *An Orange Echo* crystallizes the paradoxical erotics of Burr's project, structured as it always is by the tensions between the carnal and the sentimental. Perhaps this is part of the reason why Burr chose to place the Williams interview around the sculpture like a didactic panel ventriloquized from beyond the grave. When asked at the very end if he thinks that "in the final analysis, a man follows his phallus," the playwright responds, "I hope not, baby. I hope he follows his heart, his frightened heart."

—Jeffrey Kastner