

Art in America

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

View of Tom Burr's exhibition "sentence," showing (foreground) *slumbering object of my sleepless attention*, 2009; at Bortolami.



TOM BURR BORTOLAMI

The mood was set for Tom Burr's latest solo exhibition by *Black Storm Door*, in which a man's old black overcoat hung from the knob of a simple wooden door that leaned against the wall in the gallery entryway. Many of the works were similarly casual-seeming ensembles from which one got the feeling that, as Burr told the *Art Newspaper* last year, "the actors have left the stage." Ten sculptures and two collages from 2009 and a photo work from 2006 demonstrated Burr's interests in quasi-figurative sculpture, the nature of identity, and the way persons and their times are understood through their material traces.

Departure and return, a theme introduced by *Black Storm Door*, was taken up in *Caged Kate*, a collage on board in three parts (each 24 by 48 inches). English singer-songwriter Kate Bush appears in press clippings and on album sleeves, including the cover of her hit 1985 record *Hounds of Love*, all held in place with prominent thumbtacks. Several clippings from 2005 refer to a new release after a 12-year hiatus. Also pinned to the board are a pair of Dior stockings, which were echoed in *slumbering object of my sleepless attention*, a white, 12-foot-long hinged wood panel that reclined on the floor nearby, as if posing sexily, with a pair of men's Dior pajamas thumbtacked to it.

Continuing *Caged Kate*'s alliteration was *languidly lingering a little too long*. A low, 13-foot-long wood platform and some steel poles form a ward-

robe in which dangle cheap hangers and a frayed, inside-out Helmut Lang overcoat. The 46-year-old Burr has previously used his personal Lang clothing as a surrogate; in view of the overstayed welcome of the title, the garment here suggests a joke at his own expense.

Also gently self-mocking is the 2006 *Burrville*, a group of 21 small black-and-white photographs, arranged in a grid, that depict a "defunct" town near Burr's Connecticut studio. The pictures represent blank billboards, empty wintry landscapes and cracked blacktop. Two photos show the town's name in signage. If these artworks can serve as signs for the namesake artist's identity, Burr drolly suggests, we can read little in them.

The four-panel hinged wood screen of *Golden Age* alludes to human presence by recalling furniture that offers a fragile privacy. Piled on the floor to one side of it were five copies of the boosterish 1973 book *Doctor, Make Me Beautiful!*, authored by a plastic surgeon. While *Burrville* offers vacancy where identity should be, *Golden Age* suggests a mask.

The various threads wove throughout: *12 Steps to Hell* echoes the allusion to Kate Bush's 12-year sabbatical, the battered Adidas in two sculptures call back to Dior and Lang, and the unplugged headphones—in *American Master*, an homage to John Cage—indicate we've shown up a little too late. The show's title, "sentence," sums up the way these works relate—each piece seems to follow from and link to the others. That the word

could refer as well to a term of punishment, also resonating with the theme of absence and return, makes the designation all the richer.

—Brian Boucher