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shows

By Dan Duray 3/14 6:50pm

Tom Burr Offers Nostalgia and Blankets at Bortolami



'Berlin Blue' (2012). (Courtesy the artist and Bortolami)

The artist Tom Burr is tall, eloquent, pronounces the year 1996 "nineteen hundred and ninety six" and displays a whole host of other qualities befitting the confident man he is. This is just one reason why his habit of bringing his fingertips together while discussing his work, as though he's slightly embarrassed by how personal it all is, might seem a little odd. The other reason is that the exhibit he showed us last week, "deep wood drive," at Bortolami gallery, consists of blankets nailed to boards, a large metal cage and piles of painted shutters—none of it obviously very personal at all.

But then take a look at that cage, titled Baited like Beasts (a moon viewing platform). The inspiration comes from a moon-viewing platform he was meant to have built with Mrs. Pip, a neighbor on Deep Wood Drive where he grew up. He did odd chores for her, mostly collecting forsythia, and though they spoke of it often the platform was never built. It was also inspired by an incident when older children from the neighborhood locked him in a dog crate.

"There are all these holes, so as a cage it wouldn't really work," Mr. Burr said, indicating the three-foot square holes in the cage, which features a giant moon-like bulb hanging low near a knocked-over chair. "There's the failure of the cage, the failure of the light and the failure of the chair. The failure of the moon, in a way." He grinned. "Hopefully not the failure of the piece."

All the work in the show evokes an irrational hominess, especially the blankets, which he calls "cloud paintings." The original ones were made of grey, fire-retardant blankets that seem to be oily but aren't, and riddled as they are with upholstery nails that Mr. Burr hammers himself, they look bullet-riddled. "People don't have these blankets anymore," he said. "The duvet has completely taken over."

The blankets evoke grandma's house, and the black shutters, Rectangled Restraint, evoke his own in Connecticut.

"I wanted this to be this ink spot in the room, this imploded, collapsed neurotic thing," he said. Though the cage is much larger, your eye does, if only in the periphery, go here first.

In the back there are a pair of theater seats, directly across from each other, from an early performance of his at school. On the wall in a corner of that room sits Playboy, April, 1973, multiple copies of an interview with Tennessee Williams from this issue, deconstructed and arranged as a right angle-only collage. Mr. Burr is obsessed with the writer, and this interview, where every line is quotable. Here's one, on why, of his affairs, only one was with a woman: "I found that androgynous boys could give me more. As an artist I was better off with a boy because I couldn't afford a girl." (Mr. Burr shrugged at this, "Girls are expensive!")

Mounted in the corner, the interview turns in on itself, which is something Mr. Burr enjoys. "Like the blankets the interview as a format is sort of dying," he said and then glanced at us. "Er, no offense."