

TOM BURR

sentence

10 September- 24 October 2009

Tom Burr's first show at Bortolami Gallery, opening on September 10th, is also his first gallery exhibition in the United States in six years.

Things have changed greatly since Tom's last commercial show in his native New York. A new generation of artists emerged to advance and challenge traditional ideas in art. Among these is a notable group that is mining the history of Post-Minimalism and Post-Modernism. It is important to recall that these artists are picking up on a thread that began a generation or two before them.

Tom Burr entered the picture then, back in the early 1990s when he started showing at Colin DeLand's American Fine Arts in SoHo. AFA had already presented the fences and aluminum panels of Cady Noland and the domestic-object based installations of Jessica Stockholder; across the street and around the corner, Felix Gonzalez-Torres put out strings of light and Jack Pierson hung tinsel. Within this context, Burr was an important new voice in the dialogue of institutional critique, exploring the politics of minimalism and politics at large that were at the forefront of artistic and social concerns—notably identity, society and the body, often dealing with issues of sexuality, war and the structures of public and private spheres.

One distinction of Burr's work that persists is his consideration of the ephemeral. This interest extends beyond time to all sensory experiences, which must be transitory by nature. He describes individual sculptures as 'moments' and thinks of their varied qualities in terms of musical notes, temperatures, and moods—qualities that cannot be trapped into the permanency of an object, but may be somehow suggested.

Movies and sitcoms, like *Men in Black* and *Bewitched*, acknowledge the crux of the ephemeral by giving protagonists the unearthly power of being able to snare those moments. They stop time with a click, a twitch or a wiggle. Burr positions himself as this hero and casts the viewer as his sidekick. We walk into a room full of scattered objects, many of which appear to have been suddenly abandoned. It feels almost-familiar; you are in your neighbor's bedroom, perhaps. The scale is human and humane and even in his most monumental works bears a direct proportional relationship to the spectator. Materials have a latent potential—the hinged figure could collapse flat, the shirt could fall, the bare wood could be painted, varnished or otherwise concealed.

A sense of timing lingers between the objects and their ownership remains ambiguous. It might appear that there is a story or scene involved—and in fact there may be. Or not. Officially, no specific narrative is ever revealed by the artist, no interpretation or assignation ever described as blatantly 'wrong.' The shirt or pants may have belonged to the artist, or his lover, or his father. The portraits may be devotionals culled from a fan's stash of memorabilia—to Jim Morrison, Brad Davis, John Cage, Kate Bush, etc. Or they may be surrogates, stand-ins meant to represent elements of the artist himself, discrete clues about the artist's own biography or experience.

The use of language enhances this ambiguity. Titles for works and for exhibitions are deliberately elusive, typically bearing many meanings and leaving the visitor to speculate which—if any—bear real significance. Sentence, sliver, silver, and so forth.

Tom Burr's work may currently be seen in a two-person exhibition (with Monica Bonvicini) at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel; as a part of 'Rachel Harrison: Consider the Lobster and other Stories' at the Hessl Museum at Bard College; in 'The World is Yours', curated by Anders Kold at the Louisiana Museum in Denmark; 'Moby Dick', curated by Jens Hoffman, at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco (opening late September) and in the exhibition 'Saints and Sinners,' curated by Laura Hoptman, at the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University. He will have a solo show at the FRAC Champagne Ardenne in the Spring of 2010. He is presently a visiting critic at Yale School of Art, Graduate Program in Sculpture. His work is included in prestigious public and private collections around the world.