

The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2008

Art in Review



TIM LANZBERG

No. 17 (1960), by the Venezuelan artist Carlos Cruz-Diez at Americas Society.

emonstrating under pressure, he suggests a fashion, that five, not uniform. ing on here, s Mr. Cruz-Given his ceiling in his home-ieve that this 'in a New 'tion, which he Americas, ricas is still s.

LAND COTTER

Manhattan

ambitious, social-surreal-velation. The tion, which \$2, envision rinthine with a neat, il-

lustrative touch, they project cartoonish allegories of awesome complexity in which ordinary people are regimented in factories, warehoused in towering prisons and stored in endless phalanxes of hospital beds.

Evil capitalists and fascist dictators, pictured as overblown grotesques, control the machinery of power, and common humanity — often represented as crowds of pathetic, naked figures — is dwarfed by a vast architecture of finance, industry and war. Norman would have made a good illustrator for Philip K. Dick's darkly comic sci-fi novels.

You may wonder why you have never heard of him. A Jewish immigrant from Russia who turned to drawing and painting after fighting in the Spanish Civil War, Mr. Norman (1906-1989) studied at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco and briefly in the mid-1940s at the Art Students League of New York. He was inspired by the magic realism of Peter Blume and George Tooker and by the Mexican

muralists Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros.

Mr. Norman had two exhibitions in New York — at Long Island University, Brooklyn, in 1970 and at the Alternative Museum in 1986 — but he has been largely unknown outside the San Francisco area, where he lived most of his adult life, exhibited frequently and won regional prizes. (A trained barber, he supplemented his income by cutting hair on Saturdays.) In light of current circumstances, Mr. Norman's dystopian vision may strike some New York viewers as eerily pertinent.

KEN JOHNSON

Kay Rosen

Scarefull

Yvon Lambert
550 West 21st Street, Chelsea
Through Jan. 3

No, Noose Is Good Noose

Alexander Gray Associates
526 West 26th Street, Chelsea
Through Jan. 10

Kay Rosen first hit her stride during the Reagan years, when theory was in vogue, and artists like Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer were exploring the relationship of language and power. Her latest word paintings, which range from small, Ed Ruscha-esque witticisms to sprawling, enigmatic wall paintings in the mold of Lawrence Weiner, make a case for the continued relevance of text-based art.

"Removal From Office," a billboard-size wall painting in which the last four letters of "REMOVAL" have been italicized, makes a bold statement in the main gallery at Yvon Lambert. The political inspiration is obvious, but Ms. Rosen achieves a kind of linguistic catharsis.

Smaller paintings, in enamel sign paint on canvas, make up the rest of the show. The word "OVERBITE" has an exaggerated "V"; the first six letters of "PEACOCK" are stacked, three at a time, on the final "K," so that they resemble a fan of feathers.

Other works rely on subtler textual clues; for example, the puzzelike arrangement of the letters of the word "INSTINCT."

In the front gallery, which is visible from the street, Ms. Rosen places the word "CANTILEVER" and a witty anagram on adjacent walls. The title, "Justified," refers to the typography but also hints at a psychological reading.

Ms. Rosen's installation "No Noose Is Good Noose" (1983), at Alexander Gray, riffs on the children's game Hangman. Combining diagrams, stick figures and revolutionary language, it looks dated and didactic compared with the newer, more playful word paintings.

KAREN ROSENBERG

Aaron Young

Punchline

Bortolami
510 West 25th Street, Chelsea
Through Dec. 20

Aaron Young attracted a lot of attention with a 2007 performance at the Seventh Regiment Armory in which motorcycles made "action paintings" on coated floor panels. (The exhaust in the room was as thick as the hype.) This year he repeated the piece in two similarly spectacular settings: the Red October Chocolate Factory in Moscow and the active volcano Solfatara near Naples.

Mr. Young's latest show at Bortolami, titled "Punchline," is comparatively low-impact. Visitors pass a set of cast-bronze police barricades and a large empty gallery to enter a smaller, curtained room decorated with pale, nearly monochrome silk-screen paintings. Place a quarter in the machine by the door, and the lights go off to reveal phosphorescent mushroom clouds.

The surprise doesn't really work; savvy viewers will pick up on the glow-in-the-dark setup im-



SIKKEMA JENKINS & COMPANY

"Layers, Buenos Aires 3" (2007), part of a series by Nikki S. Lee, at Sikkema Jenkins.

mediately, and the effect is about as spooky as a light stick. The real problem, though, is that Warholian death-and-disaster imagery doesn't suit Mr. Young. He has built his career on machismo rather than camp.

KAREN ROSENBERG

Nikki S. Lee

Sikkema Jenkins & Company
530 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
Through Jan. 10

In her photographs and films Nikki S. Lee has posed as a member of various cliques: yuppies, punks, Long Island housewives. Her physical transformations have been compared to Cindy Sherman's, and her anthropological curiosity has been linked to various strains of identity politics.

In her recent works Ms. Lee has turned her attention to a more exclusive group: successful artists. In a recent mock documentary, "A K A Nikki S. Lee" (2006), she filmed herself at work and at art world events. Unfortunately, in her first show at Sikkema since leaving Leslie Tonkonow, Ms. Lee loses the thread of her own narrative.

For the series "Layers," Ms. Lee had her portrait drawn on translucent paper by street artists in cities around the world. She piled two or three drawings at a time on top of a light box and then photographed the blurry, composite images. The distortions are supposed to reveal "the difference between the 'I' that I perceive and the 'I' that others perceive," she notes in an artist's statement.

In the gallery the idea falls flat. The photographs don't tell us much about Ms. Lee, the anonymous artists who drew her picture or the cultural differences she might have encountered on her travels. The faces-beneath-the-faces are merely distractions in a series of remarkably consistent caricatures; the artists seem to have focused less on Ms. Lee's features than on her side-swept bangs and looped scarf. They see her, in other words, as a tourist.

KAREN ROSENBERG