

*Planet of Slums*

Third Streaming, New York

17 December – 5 February



Mike Davis's 2006 survey of global poverty, *Planet of Slums*, hit the neoliberal consensus like an earthquake hits a favela. There it was, in Davis's flamethrower prose, with numbers to boot: more humans around the globe now dwell in cities than not, and they do so increasingly in slums, not because of some inherent degeneracy or collective lack of will to better their lives, but because economic liberalisation – deregulation, privatisation, tariff elimination, etc, often administered by the IMF and WTO's Structural Adjustment Programmes – put them there. 'How the other half lives' has of course been of interest to activists and reformers since industrialisation put slums on the map. And mapping those slums – that is, making them visible – has been a central strategy of progressive social agendas ever since. But how those slums are made visible – in reports, pictures, documentaries, fictions – is the founding question in the politics of representation, to which any exhibition that would take Davis's title for its own must answer.

Omar Lopez-Chahoud and LaToya Ruby Frazier, the cocurators of such an exhibition, at Soho's promising new entrant Third Streaming, are well placed to do so. Frazier, an exceptional new photographer in her own right, and Lopez-Chahoud, an indefatigable curator fresh from the triumph of his previous NYC outing, *Lush Life* (nominated in Rob Pruitt's 2010 *Art Awards*), have gathered an assortment of works that picture, in one way or another, either the peripheries that evoke slum life today or the processes that have produced it, or both.

Strongest here are works by Ishmael Randall Weeks, Erik Benson and Takashi Horisaki. Weeks's precariously constructed cut-paper collage of a narrow urban alleyway, *Perspectives II (Modern Vernacular)* (all works 2010), and his video of a front-end loader 'resettling' a hastily constructed cinderblock folly, *Pukusana (After C. Smith)*, capture perfectly the tension between material (and *material's*) stability and imperatives of adaptability and motility. With the large painting *Brownfield (Site)*, Benson continues his exploration of urban edge-zones, the kind of unwanted and unusable surplus spaces that stand as the visual analogue of the unwanted and unusable labour that global slums serve to warehouse. And Horisaki's *Laundry Day 1* (2010) provides the show with its necessary physical texture, a traipsing of clotheslines bearing fabric casts of address numbers and architectural details from 'underserved neighbourhoods' (a condescending contemporary euphemism for 'slum'). The work itself was made with the help of 'at-risk youth' (another terminological fiasco, this time for the desperately poor).

Yet there is a problem here. These works, and others, primarily photographic ones by Manuel Acevedo, Elisabeth Subrin, Rishi Singhai and Lori Waselchuk, evoke a general emptiness in their imaging of so many urban no-man's-lands. These are pictures of 'neoliberal melancholy', the structural squandering of opportunity. But they don't picture slums. If Lagos or Mumbai or Kinshasa has any lessons to teach, it's that slums are dense and crowded – really fucking crowded. Representing their mesh-works and flows of base materials and bare life would seem to be the task, and the politics, at hand. *Jonathan T.D. Neil*

Erik Benson, *Brownfield (Site)*, 2010, acrylic on canvas over panel, 152 x 239 cm