

Forbes

Contemporary Art Unsettles In Show At JTT Gallery Curated By Dan Herschlein

Adam Lehrer Contributor

Contemporary artist and curator Dan Herschlein has broad yet simultaneously hyper discerning tastes. In the artist's own work, that draws upon sculpture, performance, drawing, installation and photography, Herschlein presents works that instill the viewer with a profound sense of unease. His works play with the wildly intellectualized visual language of performance while drawing upon certain aesthetic markers of horror films (interestingly, when I saw Ari Aster's utterly brilliant horror film *Hereditary*, I couldn't help but wonder if the director was studying Herschlein's work when devising the film's haunted interior sets). Herschlein's work is influenced by a wide range of visual material. His Instagram (easily one of my favorite Instagram accounts to learn about obscure artists) dedicates posts to a diverse set of visual touchstones: works by Herschlein's contemporaries like sculptors Doreen Garner and Ivana Basic, images of works by historical and underrepresented artists equally drawn to the horrific and the macabre like the Czech early 20th Century painter Jaroslav Panuska and German 20th Century painter Sibylle Ruppert, film stills dedicated to directors like zombie king George Romero as well as the utterly terrifying 1990 experimental dark fantasy horror film *Begotten*, and anthropological images of things like mummies and apocalyptic survival products all sit side by side interacting and providing visual document of the images and concepts driving Herschlein's practice. All of this suggests Herschlein's belief in art and visual culture's ability to disquiet and unsettle. Whether beautiful or grotesque or both, an image or an object can force the viewer to look at it and accept its existence. This notion equally informs Herschlein's curatorial practice.



Nancy Youdelman, 'Bonnet' series ADAM LEHRER

At JTT Gallery, Herschlein recently curated *Beside Myself*. The exhibition focused on a range of mediums (sculpture, video loops, illustration, painting, etc) and honed in on artists that use mutation, disintegration, and decay as aesthetic choices to force one to consider art's ability to break us out of our preconceptions by presenting us with images outside of our world view. The exhibition used art historian and critical theorist Kaja Silverman's 1996 book *The Threshold of the*



Sedrick Chisom, 'Shub Niggurath's Conspiracy of the First Curse of Revtilligo' (2017) ADAM LEHRER

Visible World as its conceptual starting point. In her writing, Silverman discusses cultural influences over the "ideal self," and how culture around us fuels our "ideal self" and how our self worth and senses of self, or "moi" as said in the book, becomes based on how much or how little we proscribe to these cultural ideals. Silverman also outlines ways in which we can break free from the normative aspects of the idealized self. **Because of these cultural factors, our idealized self tends to repudiate anything that challenges cultural normativity, and thusly, our idealized self.** Silverman believes that the only way to challenge this psychological tendency is to continuously flood the brain with new images and ideas.

Herschlein asserts that this can be done by flooding the "visual pane" with objects that exist in opposition to the "same self" body, or bodies that directly assault the culturally typified ideal physique. All the art works contained within the exhibition reference the human body, and they also all subvert common expectations around the human body. The truly extraordinary lineup of artists with work in the exhibition all display **interests in the uncanny and the grotesque.** A challenging round-up of works, Herschlein focused on artists with little interests in pleasing vast swathes of eyeballs.

David Altmejd, perhaps the best known artist in the exhibition, makes immense sculptures that blur the figurative with the abstract and the grotesque with the beautiful. Though often associated with a kind of macabre imagery due to his use of werewolf heads and other monstrous forms, Altmejd sees his work having much more to do with the exploration of the infinite possibilities inherent to the human body. It's more about life than it is about death. His sculpture *Solemn, Air* is a disembodied human head with a massive forehead and narrow face adorned with graffiti style markings, suggesting an inner circuitry. Tarwuk, a Croatia artist duo that uses found objects as a starting off point for their work and is known to collaborate with non-artist family members, presented an installation that sees an oil painting interact with a slightly abstract but still figurative leaning sculpture. The impact

of the interaction between the objects is disquieting and uncomfortable. Artist and writer Vanessa Thill, like Altmejd, points to the infinitudes found within the chemical composition of bodies and nature, but unlike him eschews the figurative for much more abstract objects. Using materials like fake blood, coffee and detergent, Thill aestheticizes the organic processes that result in form, contrasting the harshness and decay of the processes themselves and forcing us to emphasize the form and flesh they go towards creating.



Tarwuk, 'SOOH. EDBA0. 00. 0ABDE. HOOS' (2018) ADAM LEHRER

The show, heavy on sculpture overall, also focused on sculptors with more direct interest in the presentation of "grotesque" bodies. Feminist artist Nancy Youdelman's 'Bonnet' series of sculptures displays a range of female heads that are seemingly deceased or at the very least dreadfully sick and exhausted judging from the pale pigmentation of the flesh and the closed eyes. These heads are all adorned in opulent headwear that suggests fashion, and fashion conformism, as a kind of death. The juxtaposition of the macabre and the glamorous confronts expectations surrounding this kind of imagery. The sculptor Hugh Hayden, surprisingly considering the context of this exhibition, uses the concept of camouflage as his primary work theme. His objects often place external forms trying to blend into their surrounding ecosystems. The work is irony laden; when one tries to camouflage themselves or conform into their surrounding, the forms end up merging with those surroundings and still create a new form. Uniqueness, Hayden suggests, is unavoidable despite all best efforts. Hayden's piece in *Besides Myself*, *Hangers #3*, depicts four walnuts along domestic hangers. The piece, with its deliberate misplacement of objects into seemingly out of place surroundings, achieves an uncomfortable effect and wouldn't be out of place in the artist Mike Kelley's research into the uncanny. The artist Elizabeth Jaeger's sculpture *Richard* is a figurative object shattered and fractured into disparate pieces and spread about the floor. The artwork suggests the psychosis endured when the human psyche is torn between limitless cultural influences and norms.

Herschlein didn't just focus on the three-dimensional to challenge societal norms about the idealized self. Many artists opt to confront the viewer through image-based work. The aforementioned Jaeger, for instance, also has a video loop on display in the show. The video, also entitled *Richard*,

might be the name of a specific character (or at least a singular entity that stands in for a larger cultural idea) and serves to perhaps explain the process of Richard's bodily annihilation depicted in the sculpture. Two images run on loop, the pieces has a fiercely potent effect, evoking sadism and violence and empathy that grow in intensity as the 14 second loop continues to replay.



Vanessa Gully Santiago, 'Receptionist' (2018) 'Finger' (2017) ADAM LEHRER



Adam Putnam, 'Projector' (2018) ADAM LEHRER

The artist Adam Putnam, primarily known for his stunning photography and video work and his provocative performance practice, displays *Projector*, a figurative wood carving. With a vague outline of a figure carved from a wood and engulfed in vibrantly colored pigments, the piece finds the human form struggling to define itself in a chaotic landscape. Artist Vanessa Gully Santiago contributes three of her haunting monochromatic figurative drawings. All of the bodies in her drawings radiate anxiety and tension; sometimes between the subjects themselves, sometimes between the subject and the viewer. The artist and writer Sedrick Chisom's paintings pulsate with intellectualized institutional critique. His concerns with climate change and right wing assaults on science have led to him painting human figures interacting with man built environments that have been allowed to degrade into a toxic wasteland. Chisom's painting *Shub Niggurath's Conspiracy of The First Victim of The Curse of Revitiligo* depicts a seemingly

white man being forced to grapple with a world he may have destroyed and that he is totally at the mercy of.



Hugh Hayden, 'Hangers #3' ADAM LEHRER

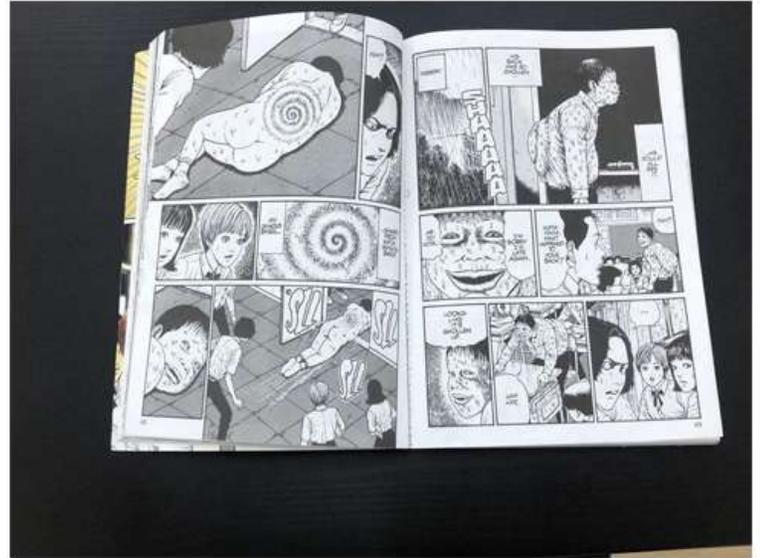
And as is true of Herschlein's taste, *Beside Myself* also succeeds in placing artists from outside the highfalutin contemporary art world alongside those artists that do live within the institutions of academic critique. The Philippines-based outsider artist Gil Batle uses a dental drill to carve intricate scenes based on his five years spent in California penal systems into Ostrich eggs. The work is gritty and humane. Batle's work takes on even more layered meanings when taking into account his living in the Philippines. The Filipino president Rodrigo Duterte's no tolerance drug policies have led to astronomical extra judicial killings of not just drug dealers, but also harmless drug users and on numerous occasions falsely accused non drug users. The policies have legalized vigilante justice, resulting in normal people becoming brutal and violent and indulgent of their anxieties and hate. Batle's piece on view at the exhibition, *Panderer*, depicts persecution of prisoners as well as unity, and the scenes of jail life assault his countrymen's views of the incarcerated.



Gil Batle, 'Panderer' (2018) ADAM LEHRER

Lastly, Herschlein decided to include a 1998 Japanese manga series, *Uzumaki* (volumes 1-3), written and illustrated by one of manga's great provocateurs Junji Ito. The manga series,

full of Ito's signature grotesque body horror illustrations, focuses on a town suffering from mass hysteria and unnamed disease. The inhabitants of the town have all become obsessed with spirals. Yes, spirals. Ito's series analyzes mass psychosis and media manipulation and focuses on how conformity and mob mentality can lead an individual to become engulfed in false belief.



Junji Ito, 'Uzumaki' ADAM LEHRER

In a cultural landscape of constant distraction, we are all trying to hold onto our senses of self and establish our own individual belief systems. Herschlein affirms his belief in art as a way to challenge man kind's tendency to conformity. The works in *Beside Myself* are united by their abilities for confronting the viewer with something outside the confines of "normal" representation. Because every time we are challenged to see something we have difficulty accepting, we are unavoidably evolving psychologically and socially.