

Miami Project 2013: Systems at Work

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Ambreen Butt, "Untitled (\$5 Bill)" (2013), shredded money, collage on tea stained paper, 45" x 89" (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

MIAMI — Perhaps the most defining feature of art fairs is their organizational structure: floors divided into white-walled, cubicle-type booths; important galleries selling expensive work situated near the front or center; strategically placed VIP lounges and bars. So perhaps it's no surprise that, wandering the aisles of this year's Miami Project fair, I found quite a number of artists making, engaging with, and unpacking systems. Probing mechanisms of authority and offering alternatives is par for the course these days anyway. Or maybe artists are just drawn to (dis)order and have authority issues.



David Ellis, "The Message" (2006)

I heard the first system before I saw it: a kinetic sculpture by David Ellis called "The Message," at Joshua Liner Gallery's booth. Comprised of a wired typewriter set on a small school desk with a handful of bottles in a box underneath, the work plays Grandmaster Flash's "The Message" via rhythmic typing and timed bottle strikes, while also typing out the lyrics of the song on a never-ending sheet of paper. Ellis's piece is infectious — its click-clack mesmerizing and the ringing notes of the bottles incredibly satisfying. It's also compelling in its perfect functionality and practical uselessness.

Fran Siegel, whose "Balancing Act 2" is on view at Lesley Heller's booth, also creates systems in her work, although in two dimensions rather than three. Siegel maps out physical environments in an abstracted way, exploring the conditions of light through an intense layering and collage process. The colored pencil, paint, ink, collage, and cutting in

“Balancing Act 2” result in an ordered maze that hangs together with an internal conceptual logic.



Fran Siegel, “Balancing Act 2” (2013), colored pencil, paint, ink, and collage, 60” x 36”

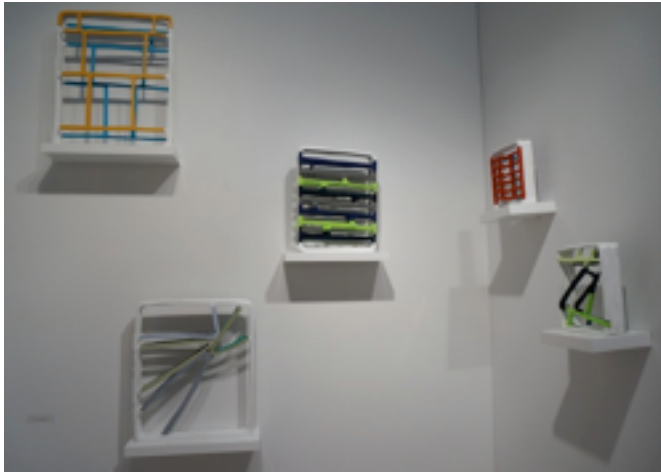


Terao Katsuhiro, untitled, pen and acrylic on wood panel

I remembered Siegel’s work when I later encountered a piece by Terao Katsuhiro with Jack Fischer Gallery. The untitled pen and acrylic on wood panel has a striking gold and black palette, but its repeating patterns of marks and shapes outshine any flashiness with their near-obsessive quality. According to a brief biography, Terao worked as a welder for his father for 20 years, and “everything he sees is converted into an iron structure in his mind.”

The structure of the mind is also a concern for James Sterling Pitt, whose abstract wood sculptures fill a corner of Steven Zevitas’s booth. Pitt was in a major car accident six years ago, and since recovering he’s been using art to explore the new way in which his mind works. He makes drawings of lines and shapes as a kind of visual diary, and the sculptures are translations of those into wooden form. They feature simple, colorful patterns at the front and back of

white-bordered frames, like small, quirky window fans you want to pick up and carry home. It's hard to tell if they function more as paintings or sculptures, which gives them an intriguing in-betweenness that makes them great.



Work by James Sterling Pitt

Amy Myers also explores the workings of her mind, while at the same time examining the workings of our universe. Myers is the daughter of a physicist, and her often large-scale drawings, on view at Randall Scott Projects' booth, start from her understanding of theoretical physics. But within that given framework, she works intuitively, making stray marks and mapping traces of her own brain onto the received knowledge. The drawings curving and looping symmetrical forms seem to reveal the secrets of a natural system.



Work by Amy Myers

Penelope Umbrico filters information as well, but it's of a much different kind. Umbrico sorts through the ocean of images that surrounds us, fishing out, transforming, and grouping them together aesthetically and categorically. In doing so, she strips them of any pretensions to uniqueness, placing them into a larger system, which she emphasizes in her grid layouts. For her piece on view at Mark Moore Gallery, "Mountains, Moving: Of Dr. George C. Poundstone," Umbrico applied smartphone camera filters to early 20th-century photographs of a mountain shot by Pictorialist George C. Poundstone. The resulting wall of framed images has a sublime beauty that's unsettling and confusing.



Penelope Umbrico, "Mountains, Moving: Of Dr. George C. Poundstone" (1926–2013), 37 archival pigment prints on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag paper, 34" x 85"

Umbrico imposes her own order onto her subjects, but she's also confronting the social and economic systems of our larger world. Similarly, some of my favorite pieces at Miami Project take up the idea of a — or more often the — system in this vein. There are at least four artworks made of cut-up and collaged US dollar bills, an act that defies and questions the notion of accepted value. Mark Wagner, at Pavel Zoubok Gallery, and Ambreen Butt, at Carroll and Sons, have the strongest. There are also, at Western Project, the drawings of Patrick Lee, who photographs tattooed, brawny men he meets on the streets of Los Angeles and then renders them in delicate, gray-toned drawings. The compassion that Lee grafts onto these strangers will make you rethink your ideas of machismo.



Patrick Lee, "Deadly Friends (Frozen Eye)" (2013), graphite on paper, 40" x 30"

Then there are the fantastic sculptures of Vanessa German, also at Pavel Zoubok and nearly the first things you see when you enter the fair. German's mixed-media assemblages feature black dolls posed atop miniature improvised pedestals — a lion, a desk, a can of lard. The dolls pose with their arms out, like circus ringmasters, and they're covered in elaborately surreal costumes made of accumulated objects — more dolls, locks, toy guns, plastic cars. The aesthetic is somewhere between junk art, voodoo dolls, and nkisi nkondi. In one piece, an angry doll stares out at the viewer as little white, ceramic heads sprout from her hair and a giant box of "White King Soap" sits atop her head (while she also stands atop a lion and holds a black baby). The message seems clear: the weight of white American culture forces African Americans into a juggling act.



Work by Vanessa German



Devin Troy Strother, "That National Geographic shit: Creeping on the come up" (2013), mixed media on canvas, 22" x 35"

Nearby, Devin Troy Strother has a series of pieces on view at Richard Heller Gallery that take up the black American experience, albeit in an entirely different tone. Strother puts small, black, cut-paper figures into brightly colorful scenes made from a mess of media — paint, paper, glitter, vinyl, and more. Some of the works appear innocent enough but stun you with their titles ("Oh That Nigga Be Collecting Shit"); others make their dark humor clear from the start, as in "That National Geographic shit: Creeping on the come up," which shows black men in basketball jerseys throwing spears at animals in an elaborately patterned cut-paper jungle. Strother may not be sending up any one system so much as all of them, replacing them with an imaginative and sharp-eyed absurdity that will hopefully prove difficult to contain. The Miami Project continues at NE 29th Street and NE 1st Avenue (Wynwood, Miami) through December 8.