

LigoranoReese

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northern california art

“Garble” @ Catharine Clark

Posted on 28 January 2015.

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LigoranoReese, Dawn of the Anthropocene, 2014, single-channel video, 4:22.

When conceptual art first reached a mass audience in the late '60s, it shocked by asserting that standalone text could be visual art. Today, text is ingrained in so many types of art (video, installation, drawing, sculpture, painting and photography) that it doesn't elicit so much as a raised eyebrow. *Garble*, a text-heavy show featuring seven gallery artists doesn't challenge that state of affairs. Instead, by offering a kind of core sampling of current practices, it affirms a key principle of Conceptualism: that ideas, not their delivery systems, are what matter. As for garble itself, there is little; the artists in this exhibition deliver messages that for the most part are quite clear. But if, by using the word garble, the show seeks to demonstrate how artists mess with codes of visual and linguistic communication, well, there's plenty of that going on.

The strongest example is **Anthony Discenza's** *A Sculpture (Reclining Figure)*, a roped-off, blank canvas mounted a few inches off the floor. It appears in a darkened room near the back of the gallery. Enter and you hear, broadcast from speakers, the plummy, recorded voices of two actors (male and female), reciting bits of text sourced from the Internet. Affecting stuffy erudition, they describe, in purely formalist terms, a work of art we can't see. But when you listen and stare, things change. Sensory deprivation and

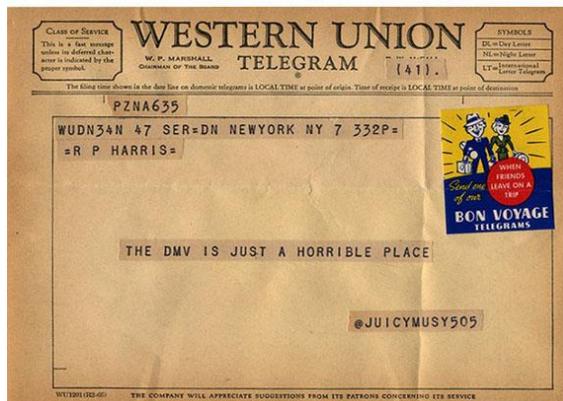
suggestion conspire, and before stupefaction sets in, the canvas at your feet — a literal smackdown of painting — becomes a kind of “screen” onto which we project our own visions of the object described. It’s an elegant demonstration of how and why ideas needn’t be affixed to objects to become concrete. The artist makes that point again with snippets from seven gothic/horror novels, all self-penned and displayed on yellowing paper with foreboding titles (*The Visage*, *The Tomb*, *The Goddess Plague*). They, too, light up pictures; only here the effect rests *entirely* on words, a tribute to sharp writing and to genre parody of a very high order.



Anthony Discenza, *A Sculpture (Reclining Figure)*, 2014, audio.

Nora Ligorano and Marshall Reese, known professionally as **LigoranoReese**, submit a time-lapse video called *Dawn of the Anthropocene*. The title refers to the science of calculating when human activity began altering the course of nature. Their heavily edited, dawn-to-dusk record of a melting 3,000-pound ice sculpture in front of the Flatiron building encapsulates the difficulty of conveying the threat posed by global warming. The sculpture, which spells out “THE FUTURE,” was created for last year’s People’s Climate March. Its

meltdown over the course of a beautiful New York day sent a clear message. But the four-minute, 22-second clip, which plays to the strains of a mournful string quartet, shows few signs of that message having been received. Instead, it shows people gleefully snapping group portraits and selfies. The impulse is understandable. But so is a terrible irony: The act of taking such pictures is equivalent of photographing yourself against a cardboard cutout of the Grim Reaper: a demonstration of the gulf between consciousness and behavior.



Charles Gute, @Juicymusy505, letterpress and mixed media on vintage paper, 5 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches

It’s a fitting segue to the work of **Charles Gute**. He embeds Tweets (e.g. “THAT HOOKAH JUST MADE ME THROW UP”) in telegrams crafted to resemble those of yore, printed on aged paper, replete with mid-century typography and clip art. Readers of a certain age may remember a similar-looking effort by Robert Rauschenberg, *Portrait of Iris Clert* (1961), embracing Duchamp’s idea that art is whatever an artist says it is. More to the point: Before Western Union quit the messaging business in 2006, telegrams signaled important

events. You won the Nobel Prize. Your father died today at 11:12 a.m. They were also expensive, which is why you didn't send one on a whim. By contrast, Twitter, which is free, produces a ceaseless torrent of useless trivia. Gute, by combining the two media, one extinct, the other thriving, brings levity to the numbing reality of Information Age "discourse."

Nina Katchadourian's photographs of books, culled from personal and public libraries, stand as high-level intellectual voyeurism: the kind we pursue reflexively when we scan bookshelves for clues about their owners. Her efforts also have contemporary analogs and precedents, those being [Four Proposals for Reading](#), which goes on view next month at Seager Gray, and Nigel Poor's [The Relative Value of Things](#). Katchadourian's effort, *Kansas Cut-Up*, is particularly intriguing.



Nina Katchadourian, *Voices from the Tapes*, from *Kansas Cut-Up*, 2014 C-print, 12 x 19 inches

It was shot at the Lawrence, Ky. home of William Burroughs, author of transgressive masterpieces like *Naked Lunch*, a collage of the author's dope-addled writings. If you've read it or any other of Burroughs' books, you've probably struggled to imagine what sort of twisted soul incubated them. Katchadourian's photos open a window.

The artist who comes closest to addressing the theme head-on is **Sandow Birk**. Birk, it's worth noting, is the Southern California artist who six years ago transcribed the Koran into English and illustrated it with American scenes — all without incurring a fatwa. Here he writes about broken promises (health care, housing, economic justice) and bigoted laws (against miscegenation and sodomy). Those writings appear in two large drawings, both of which invoke the Tower of Babel as a symbol of incoherent political dialog. Problem is, nobody entering this (or any other) gallery is likely to dispute his positions; they're sermons to a choir. No matter. Wit and imagination prevail in this group show, which also includes work by **John Slepian** and **Walter Robinson**.

—DAVID M. ROTH