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Installation view of "Dreams and Nightmares of the African Astronauts" at John Connelly Presents



Two untitled works from "Dreams and Nightmares of the African Astronauts"



Marco Boggio Sella
Untitled (Dreams and Nightmares of the African Astronauts)
 2006
 John Connelly Presents

RETRO ACTIVITIES

by Ben Davis

Here's one way to look at the problem of being a contemporary artist: The avant garde defines itself by being on the cutting edge, and yet, outflanked by TV, Hollywood, the internet and video games, the virtues of the art gallery seem distinctly old-fashioned.

This contradictory state of affairs means artists are pulled towards both tradition and innovation at once, and this can lead to some strange contortions. Artists are, for instance, constantly compelled to drag up references to the past -- yet have to look for ever more novel ways to do this. The various nuances of this strategy get a workout in several exhibitions currently on view along West 27th in Chelsea.

Marco Boggio Sella at John Connelly Presents

The most complex and thought-provoking of these is probably "Dreams and Nightmares of the African Astronauts" by the Italian artist Marco Boggio Sella. A playful approach to past culture is the most consistent theme in Boggio Sella's oeuvre, starting with his first major exhibition at Spazio Via Farini in Milan in 1995, for which he (along with fellow Italians Roberto Bagatti and Francesco Toreno) created a fake 1970s-era American sitcom, and continuing to his more recent 2004 installation for John Connelly Presents, which involved erecting a walk-in version of Matisse's *The Red Studio*.

His current endeavour at JCP (at 625 W. 27th St.), May 12-June 17, 2006, ratchets up the stakes of this historical sampling a great deal, crossing new frontiers in the art-as-ethnography territory explored by people like Mark Dion. For the project, Boggio Sella travelled to landlocked Burkina Faso in West Africa -- consistently identified as one of the poorest countries in the world -- with the idea of locating a population that did not yet know about the moon landing. Sharing facts about the U.S.'s 1969 conquest of the lunar surface with people he met, he encouraged them to make art about it.

The results, mixing modern spacemen with imagery drawn from local beliefs about the moon, crowd the walls of the gallery and radiate real esthetic verve. Two large, untitled batik works have the spidery energy of Joan Mirós, doll-like astronauts with their bubble helmets cavorting with snakes and other animals in the sky, above landscapes populated by elephants and birdmen. Elsewhere, there are carved wooden sculptures featuring various takes on spacecraft, intricately carved wooden panels depicting narratives of earth-space contact and two large bogolan (mud-dyed fabric) pieces showing silhouettes of mythical figures being sucked ecstatically toward the sun and moon, respectively.

Boggio Sella's own paintings, made in New York following his African adventures, are displayed amid the indigenous pieces, indistinguishable to the unprepared eye (the notes accompanying the show do not identify the pieces by artist). A large piece facing the entrance depicts robots and yawning African masks, while others, executed using acrylic on a modern "expandable foam" surface, feature seemingly abstract patterns and bright, synthetic colors.



Display of artifacts from Marco Boggio Sella's trip to Burkina Faso



Video from "Dreams and Nightmares of the African Astronauts"



Still from *Dreams and Nightmares of the African Astronauts* (2006) by Marco Boggio Sella



Installation view of Vadis Turner at Holasek Weir Gallery

Further interspersed throughout the show are vitrines full of totems that the artist brought back from his journey, along with some of the modern images he showed the local craftsmen, and three different video pieces: a clip featuring songs composed by local musicians about the meaning of the moon landing; a projection depicting a Burkinabè man dressed in a spacesuit, wandering in the barren, sometimes moon-like desert landscape of his home; and two-and-a-half hours (!) of talking-head footage of residents from the villages Boggio Sella visited, showing their reactions, sometimes sober, sometimes incredulous, to the idea of a space visit.

There's a lot going on here. The show as a whole flirts with the familiar post-conceptual jokeyness -- as in the video of the man dressed as an astronaut -- but this is tempered by a deliberately removed, ethnographic presentation -- as in the museum-style displays of totems -- probably the result of the obvious potential for cultural condescension (a representative from the gallery noted that some visitors have accused the artist of "pure colonialism"). The show is a shapechanger, appearing as different, contradictory things depending on how you look at it: It serves as a kind of personal travelogue for Boggio Sella, but also embraces the collective, anonymous nature of creation; It radiates a sincere esthetic warmth, but it's also a super-arch, intellectual game; It has a goofy, genial side, but its other side is the reality of economic destitution for millions of people.

Given the state of actual relations between Africa and the West, it's probably only fitting that "Dreams and Nightmares of the African Astronauts" ends up as an uneasy standoff, not a harmonious fusion. This tension, humming just beneath the surface of the installation, is expressed succinctly by one of the men in Boggio Sella's reel of interviews: Asked about the meaning of the moon voyage, he refuses to take the bait, demanding instead why Westerners spend so much effort on such projects. "They should invest instead in giving us water and food," he concludes.

Vadis Turner at Holasek Weir

Closer to 10th Ave., at Holasek Weir Gallery (502 W. 27th), Vadis Turner is involved in a similar, though less perilous, braiding of tradition with the present, May 5-June 15, 2006. Originally from Tennessee, Turner is a 2000 graduate of Boston University's School of the Arts, and has a sideline in jewelry design -- a fact that shows in the carefully crafted nature of her work.

What gives substance to her art, however, is the tension it sets up between old-timey, time-intensive crafts associated with women -- which she celebrates -- and references to the modern, time-crunched, consumer-oriented world. This is evident in her series of soft yarn alarm clocks, digital numbers frozen in red or green string, and more interestingly in her boxes of chocolates, hung here vertically on the wall above a staircase, each individual treat given its own meticulously realized identity, made from wads of panty hose or soft layers of felt, match heads or pins standing in for sprinkles.

Ball gowns assembled from sheets of lined yellow legal pad paper or the pages of calendars strike a similar chord. Her series of hand-embroidered handkerchiefs emblazoned with the symbols for Dunkin' Donuts, Taco Bell and other fast-food chains, each stitch in the logo bearing evidence of human care, is a slightly clunkier gesture, but her large, quilt-like creations -- *Office Quilt* painstakingly works together lunch menus and memos into a pinwheel-patterned, diamond-shaped composition -- are more subtle, using materials that are at once impersonal and that have an almost diary-like significance in representing someone's daily routine.



Vadis Turner
Office Quilt (detail)
 2006
 Holasek Weir Gallery



Vadis Turner's "Alarm Clock" series



Vadis Turner
Sweet Tooth
 2006
 Holasek Weir Gallery

Turner's materials often have coded meaning. The description of several of the smaller paper works hung in Holasek Weir's upstairs gallery reads "collage with book pages and *US Weekly* magazines." Each features a single page of a book, interrupted by a rectangular shape formed of knotted up, mosaic-like colored scraps (presumably made from the magazine pages). These pieces play on the layering and colorful scrap-work of rag rugs, at the same time poking fun at the idea of gossip magazines as "rags." One features a page torn from some kind of geography fact book: The word "IRAQ" glares anxiously from the top margin.

It's clearly a deliberate choice -- but also a rather impenetrable and cryptic one, once again dramatizing the interesting conflicts of an art caught between community-oriented ritual and the personal "statements" required by the gallery world.

Michael Bell-Smith at Foxy Productions

At Foxy Productions, Michael Bell-Smith's exhibition, "Focused, Forward," which had its run extended and is now in its last week, Apr. 27-June 3, 2006, engages with the same tensions via a totally different set of historical references. To wit, Bell-Smith works with video games and early digital graphics, the kind of chunky, pixilated images that are burned forever into the brains of kids who grew up in front of *Super Mario Brothers* and *The Legend of Zelda*.

Most visceral in this respect is *Up and Away* (2006), a hypnotic video comprised of a continuous, scrolling loop of stolen video game background landscapes, one unraveling from behind the next as we climb forever upwards. Pyramids, skyscrapers, forests, magical cities, deserts, oceans, highways and more all flow smoothly by, triggering flashbacks to 8- or 16-bit adventures past, but vanishing almost as fast as you can recognize them.

The narcotic feeling of a digitally saturated world underlies the show. Thus, a second video work, *Self-Portrait NYC* (2006), shows a pixilated version of the artist (resembling Waldo of *Where's Waldo* fame) standing frozen in the middle of a digitized corridor street, hands in pockets and statically staring as a rainbow-colored flood of people passes on the crosswalk behind him, reduced to flickering streamers, as if in time-lapse.

Bell-Smith is better than most at giving this sort of retro digital fare gravity, with much of the work having a slightly unsettling twist, as in the video *Some Houses Have Pools* (2006), smoothly panning over a vast landscape of identically shaped suburban houses before isolating one that is gushing clouds of smooth digital smoke -- the monotony of digital sameness interrupted by anonymous violence.

The signature piece of the show is probably *Birds over the White House* (2006), set into a tabletop console similar to vintage Ms. Pac-man games. It features a blue-on-black aerial plan of the area around the White House, taking its cues from digital surveillance software, tracking the positions of a host of tiny digital markers -- representing birds, apparently -- as they circle the president.

This sense of vague, intellectual paranoia, along with the work's backwards-looking, retro quality, are apparently the markers that distinguish these videos as "art" as opposed to the mere "entertainment" of actual games. Bell-Smith has an excellent sense for color and atmosphere -- but his technical achievement is plainly very minor compared to that of the teams of artists and designers who create contemporary computer games (and compared to those works, which reach millions of end users, these videos are generally produced in editions of five.)



Vadis Turner

Tabloid Rag (rectangle) #3

2006

Holasek Weir Gallery

The outmoded and the minor-key are what define art in such a cultural situation. In Bell-Smith's nicely melancholy *Continue 2000* (2006), centrally placed at Foxy Productions, a tiny, red-caped hero stares at a slowly setting sun from a position atop a house submerged in a sea formed by strange, quilted blocks of color, evoking the limbo-like "continue" screen of a video game, where time ticks away as a player decides whether it is worth it to play again. As we watch, the sun flares briefly, with a deliberate, mesmerizing intensity, over the wrecked and dissipating landscape. It's an apt image for this art in general.

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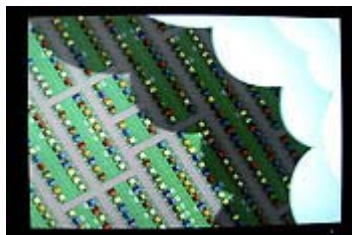


Michael Bell-Smith

Self-Portrait NYC

2006

Foxy Productions



Michael Bell-Smith

Some Houses Have Pools

2006

Foxy Productions



Michael Bell-Smith
Birds over the White House
2006
Foxy Productions



Michael Bell-Smith
Continue 2000
2006
Foxy Productions