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Installation view of props from "Forest" by Brock Enright and Ivan Hürzeler, at Cynthia Broan Gallery



Still from *Forest* (2005), directed by Ivan Hürzeler



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TWILIGHT OF THE TEEN IDOLS

by Ben Davis

Brock Enright and Ivan Hürzeler, "Forest," Feb. 23-Apr. 1, 2006 at Cynthia Broan Gallery at 546 W. 29th St. New York, N.Y. 10001

Two young artists, Brock Enright and Ivan Hürzeler, have created what may be the most emblematic work of the day at Cynthia Broan gallery, on the upper reaches of the Chelsea art district.

Enright graduated in 2001 with an MFA from Columbia. He's part of the "Greater New York" generation, having shown in P.S.1's bonanza last year and in various group shows aligned with its polymorphous vibe. He also directed a version of *Debbie Does Dallas* for the stage in the 2001 International Fringe Festival.

Hürzeler is a video artist (his *Fashion Town 2: Race for Oblivion* was shown at Broan in both single and two-channel versions in '03) who has described his work as "Emotional Pornography." According to the Internet Movie Database, he's also worked in minor capacities on several Hollywood movies, including the Amanda Peet sex comedy *Whipped*.

Small surprise, then, that their present collaboration is high on images of hormone-addled youth. Their "Forest" project involved taking a gang of artists, actors and friends on a five-day camping trip/performance art piece, enacting a scenario Enright and Hürzeler conceived. At the gallery, a dense undergrowth of props from the expedition -- wrecked football helmets, discarded cheerleader skirts, mud-caked coolers, stained blankets and vomitous trash -- carpets a large part of the main space. The centerpiece, however, is the Hürzeler-directed feature-length film splicing together footage of the voyage, which plays every hour in a rear gallery.

A young woman (Maggie Dickinson) is seen bathing in a stream. She puts on a cheerleading uniform and sets out into the vast, serene wilderness. Soon, she encounters a tribe of other folks dressed as athletes -- other cheerleaders, basketball players and football players -- who are setting up camp. She joins into their rituals without comment as they go through a series of summer camp-style getting-to-know-you exercises.

What follows is a string of scenes featuring the athletes wandering and roughhousing in the woods, in various combinations. The film has a fragmented, open feel to it, so that it's difficult to know where to put the emphasis when reconstructing the narrative. The camera lingers on the lushness of the setting, on spiders gliding through the leaves and the sky fading towards night; it's filmed as a hipster state of nature, like Terrence Malick's *The New World* crossed with *Wet Hot American Summer* (a film Hürzeler also worked on).

We see a night of bonding around the campfire that evolves into chaotic debauchery, with images of campers aggressively tackling trees, two jocks making out experimentally and a passed-out cheerleader, lying amidst discarded beer cans, as a guy urinates on



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her. The following day, we see the athletes cleansing themselves together in a stream, and then images of the team hunting through the woods for one of the basketball players, who has apparently vanished.

There's a sinister turn when the new girl happens upon the missing athlete (played by Enright himself), and it is implied that he attempts to molest her. However, any lasting sense of trauma in the film melts away as she returns to the camp to take refuge in her tent, and we witness a repeat of the frat party antics and group sex of the previous night, bathed in firelight and accompanied by a redemptive guitar score. The next morning, as the other campers bid one another farewell, we see the new girl wander off alone into the woods, much as she arrived.

The film never explains its summer camp setting -- in fact, at one point a character is overheard saying that they're trying to figure out why they are there -- nor does this setting resolve itself into any particular quotation, nor is the scenario staged as the symptom of some forbidden fantasy. The fragmented cheerleader/jock mythology upon which the story floats seems simply a common body of references that everyone can channel, with no particular source.

Throughout the piece, the performances have an awkward, improvised feeling, so that the viewer is aware of watching people play-act. At the same time, this act is taken pretty far into real life, and you are clearly meant to be watching people really get stoned, really have sex. This "realness effect" is hammered home before you even step into the theater by an explicit, two-panel video piece in the front gallery, featuring a basketball player and a cheerleader masturbating into Dixie cups on adjacent screens. At the same time, a letter tacked to the wall nearby shows one of the players from the film reflecting on the experience of being in the project -- in the same elliptical, ironically dude-ish tone as the characters in the film.

All this blurring of boundaries makes "Forest" the perfect expression of the territory that many young artists find themselves inhabiting. The film somehow manages to be warmly nostalgic and coolly removed, naturalistic and artificial, grotesque and transcendent, all at once. This is not because it is conflicted. In fact, it's just the opposite: It reflects a mindset in which distinct experiences -- intellectualism and hedonism, being-yourself and acting out, art and the swarming, posturing social scene that surrounds art -- are run together, the tension between them blissfully neutralized. In the jumbled wreckage in the front gallery, there's a battered copy of Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. There's also a copy of *Elvis: What Happened?*

Enright and Hürzeler don't try to rise above this state of affairs (though I'll take their honest immersion over Mike Kelley's similarly youth-obsessed "Day is Done," which wants to deconstruct its *American Pie* and eat it too). But *Forest* does at least allegorize it as a kind of purgatory, one which our heroine is compelled to escape every hour, only to be lured back by its temptations in the next. That, I think, is where we're at.

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*.

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Two-panel video installation by Brock
Enright



Letter from "Forest"