

Reviews

Chris Moukarbel, *IN/OUT*

★★★★★

Art in General, through Sept 13 (see Soho)

It's not often that you step off a Manhattan elevator onto a floor of crumbling mud, but visit Art in General and such is the incongruous welcome you'll receive. The modern-primitive finish comes courtesy of Chris Moukarbel in the latest part of his ongoing series *IN/OUT*. The sprawling installation, filling the sixth floor, is actually composed of numerous adobe bricks and the simple equipment—buckets, boards, shovels, and ladder-like wooden molds—used in their manufacture.

It doesn't sound very sophisticated, but in fact there's rather too much going on, visually and conceptually, in Moukarbel's work. Far from replicating the formalist cool of that most notorious brick sculpture, Carl Andre's *Equivalent VIII* (1966) (the Tate Gallery's purchase of which made it an exemplar of "difficult" Minimalism), *IN/OUT* arrives weighed down with references. Echoes of Robert Smithson and Joseph Beuys, Arte Povera and the Japanese Gutai group are clear in themselves, but combine here to muddy (sorry) the artist's own aim, a politicized critique of the mechanisms of labor.

IN/OUT also looks, despite its ultra-basic motif, oddly cluttered. Anxious perhaps about producing something too bare-bones, Moukarbel exploits every visual incident his process allows, from mucky handprints on the wall to Stonehenge-like stacks. Unfortunately, the improvisation feels arbitrary and contrived, introduced in the service of a nebulous "site-reponsiveness." In contrast, the powerful simplicity of Walter De Maria's *New York Earth Room* (1977), housed a few blocks away at 141 Wooster Street, continues to resonate. Moukarbel should stop by for a refresher.—*Michael Wilson*



"That Was Then... This Is Now"



Damian Ortega, *Controller of the Universe*

★★★★★

P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, through Sept 22 (see Museums)

While "That Was Then... This Is Now" offers much in the way of good-looking work, it's also one of the most timely and effective surveys on art and political activism in a long time. The show is divided into three sections ("Dreams," "Flags" and "Weapons"), each drawing on a tradition of art as protest to assemble a collection spanning the '60s to the present.

"Weapons" is the least effective of the three parts, perhaps because the subject matter is so overwhelmingly disturbing. The most powerful pieces incorporate absurdity and humor, or subsume frightening content to aesthetic effect, as in Alfredo Jaar's photographic print *Index: Landmines*, which lines up the deadly items in an impassive visual

catalog that recalls an appealing display of market wares. The "Flags" room cannot avoid being a potent reminder of our current election season. Pieces such as Gardar Eide Einarsson's *Untitled, American Flag*, which features the phrase YOUR MESSAGE HERE printed below an outline of the states imprinted with the Stars and Stripes, resonate with all sorts of implications, not the least of which is how quickly patriotism can be hijacked for ill purposes.

Finally, "Dreams" offers Josephine Meckseper's *March for Peace, Justice and Democracy, 4/29/06*, in which she remixes video footage using the simple manipulation technique of split-mirrored framing. The result is haunting, transcendently ominous and exhortative. Anyone wondering about the state of political art in the 21st century should definitely see this show.—*T.J. Carlin*

Working Space 08

★★★★★

Cuchifritos, through Sept 20 (see Lower East Side)

In this annual exhibition, residents in the Lower East Side Rotating Studio Program showcase the fruits of their yearlong labor. Selected by Tatiana Arocha, the eight artists in this eclectic cycle share an interest in the natural world, but are mercifully spared the task of exemplifying a master thesis.

One of the most remarkable pieces is Miwa Koizumi's *Pet Project Jelly*, an installation of shimmering jellyfish fabricated from water bottles. They contrast with Julie Anne Mann's *Mortifera*, a series of mutant creatures configured from a medley of animal parts. Transmutation also drives Jane Benson's *Naked Swans*, a photograph of two regal swans perverted by the artist's plucking of their plumage.

The ugly duckling assumes human form in Alice O'Malley's *Kenny Kenny-Dandy*, a digital photo of the celebrated '80s New York club kid,



Installation view

pictured as a corseted, gender-bending clown. All social masquerades are shed, meanwhile, in Megan Cump's *Bloodbath*, a nude, bloody self-portrait taken in a forest. The show turns more abstract with Claire Watkins's electricity-channeling machines, Heeseop Yoon's masking tape and Mylar renderings and Mary Valverde's fractal-based drawings and installations.

Bringing art into the social space of the Essex Street Market has long been Cuchifritos' goal. This year's residency exhibition, abutting a cornucopia of food stands, proves that the mingling of these two spheres can be both tasty and productive.—*Nuit Banai*

Phoebe Washburn: Tickle the Shitstem



Installation view

★★★★★

Zach Feuer Gallery, through Oct 4 (see Chelsea)

With attractive international interns operating a store and reggae resounding through the gallery, it's easy to dismiss Phoebe Washburn's show as a hipster event. Yet this Poughkeepsie, NY, native, who was in the 2008 Whitney Biennial, has a lot more to offer than just good times for sale.

Washburn's multi-part installation, with its naughty, scatological title, is a quirky cross between a child prodigy's science fair booth and a DIY project gone wrong. Its centerpiece is a washing machine in which used T-shirts are rinsed daily before being branded with the word *ORT* and sold for \$25 each. The water used in this process is then slowly purified through a series of vats and tanks. The end result eventually fills a massive barrel, which is emptied by the intern on duty.

Washburn's "rules of the game" stipulate that the excess water needs to be creatively reused. Plants are hydrated; sea urchins, T-shirts and pencils are dyed and sold; soda is peddled so that the bottles might be recycled to hold more water. It's a never-ending battle to keep the system functioning as production and consumption, usable material and waste, become outlandishly interchangeable. With supply exceeding demand, defeat seems inevitable, and the remainder of each day's water is transported to a plastic kiddie pool where it ungracefully stagnates. Washburn's show is a powerful demonstration about the fragility of our natural resources, which, when intertwined with human needs and desires, are placed in grave jeopardy.

—*Nuit Banai*