

ART SPIEL

Reflections on the work of contemporary artists

More Time Less at Cathouse Proper In Dialogue with David Dixon

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MORE TIME LESS, Cathouse Proper: Zac Hacmon, 'Capsule #5' (2020); Nari Ward, 'Anchoring Escapement (Baule)' (2017); Elana Herzog 'Cross Pollination #1' (2020); photo: Dario Lasagni

For Cathouse Proper's second ensemble exhibition, *More Time Less*, curator and gallery director David Dixon brought together five artists — Zac Hacmon, Elana Herzog, Aga Ousseinov, Tim Simonds, and Nari Ward — whose installations, wall-based work, and sculptures reflect our changing perception of 'normative time.' David Dixon describes his curatorial process, gives us a closer tour of this ensemble exhibition, and shares some background on his diverse art practices.

How did you envision the exhibition flow in the space and how did it develop throughout the curatorial process?

This exhibition began to take shape after several studio visits, not really thinking to do a group show, but there were several large scale works that I had been discussing independently with the artists, specifically Zac Hacmon and Aga Ousseinov. And I knew the piece *Baby Languages* by Tim Simonds ever since it was made back in 2015, and knew it was stored, hanging way up high on a wall in his studio. Elana and I met more recently, but I have known her work for as long as I can remember, years. I always liked it and knew that in her work she addresses spatial, physical context well, and that's something I'm always looking for in our rather exceptionally proportioned gallery.

Nari's *Anchoring Escapement* was the final link in the ensemble dynamic.

But retroactively, this all seems too tidy, there are always many works by a whole slew of artists swirling around in the mind, but these particular ones started to come together mostly due to their material, then scale. I made a big curatorial mistake by saying to Elana (when I returned to her studio to ask if she would include *Cross Pollination*) that the show would be "very crowded," which no artist wants to hear. So, I had to do a lot of back-peddling after that to convince her that her piece's dimensions would be respected, and it is.



MORE TIME LESS, Cathouse Proper, from left: Tim Simonds, 'Limb Ouroboros (was)' (2015); Zac Hacmon, 'Capsule #5' (2020); Elana Herzog 'Cross Pollination #1' (2020); Tim Simonds, 'Baby Languages' (2015); photo: Dario Lasagni

The point I was trying to make to Elana was that the show was going to have large scale works by each of the artists, but our gallery, square foot-wise, is not really all that large, although the ceilings are very high, hence there is an impression of spaciousness. So, the works would be large in there, filling the space, one might say, to capacity, allowing each piece to “lean” on the other in the matrix of meanings the show proposes. So, there is no real escape, but still each piece gets the appropriate elbow-room to be itself, which is of course necessary if you want a full experience. To my mind, the show is spatially tightly curated, as I originally said with Elana, but not exactly “crowded.” It’s just right, with no room to spare, which is what you want, especially if you are thinking in terms of ensemble, and with a leitmotif of confinement.

But initially, these specific pieces began to coalesce, over the Covid summer, based primarily on material differences: Elana’s fabric against Zac’s tile, with Tim’s printed white surface. Aga’s kite/sail was the most difficult for me to rectify in the room, I thought the materials would be too light near Elana’s weighty curtain, and that the verticality of these two would be too similar. But getting Nari’s clock in the mix resolved this by absorbing some of the mood of Elana’s piece, setting the scene, so to speak. And once Nari’s clock was involved, the theme of “time” began to solidify around “lockdown,” and solitude and reflection

— the atrophy of globalism while remaining “virally” connected — and different registers of time, cultural and otherwise.

In the press release for More Time Less you describe our current experience of time as being both “more expansive and compressed.” Can we take a closer look at some of the artworks in the show within that context?

Yes, this feeling of time-expansive-compression — I’m not sure if the words properly get at it, but that’s what the show itself should be doing, which I do think conveys something like that feeling. I did not set out to make a “Covid show,” but halfway through the summer the show began to take shape, as things remained slowed down, when we had more time on our hands, but less to do. Under these conditions, whether one likes it or



MORE TIME LESS, Cathouse Proper, from left: Tim Simonds, “Baby Languages” (2015); Aga Ousseinov, “Confusion of Tongues (Kite)” (2020); Aga Ousseinov, “Observer (Grappa Fueled Time Machine)” (2020); Nari Ward, “Anchoring Escapement (Baule)” (2017); photo: Dario Lasagni

not, reflection takes over; you’re stuck with yourself and your memories, your loss and anxiety, and your personal mental habits. With less to distract, time started to feel like something that had to be filled, as if it had been emptied, one could be more willful about choices since less was being asked, but with a narrower set of options. I was not sick with Covid, nor yet overly financially distressed. This was what my experience was like, and it seemed to jive with other’s. Ultimately, it was more about the time we had been given, rather than what had been taken away, yet more alone.

The show has many elements that project this aloneness: the annoying, white-noise hum coming from Zac’s capsule, Nari’s Baule figure encased in the clock’s body; Tim’s solipsism of a baby holding its own foot; Elana’s weighty, assembled curtain opening onto a white, empty wall; Aga’s futile attempts to fly away. Also, Aga’s sculpture *Observer* is very important here: it’s

looking at Tim's piece along with Nari's Baule sculpture that observes from across the room, out of the confines of the clock body through a small window. I like that these observers are active in the space, alone, even when there are no living people in the room. The show is complete without us in it. It's hermetic. It has its viewers (subjects) and viewed (objects) without any people in there, and when people do enter the room they view the show viewing itself.

What is your present vision for Cathouse Proper and how has it evolved since you started FUNeral?

There was a major and fascinating shift moving from Cathouse FUNeral to Proper. The original FUNeral space was in an ex-funeral home down the hall from my studio. In a sense, it was an extension of my studio, although an exhibition space for others. And I don't mean this only in a theoretical way; in fact, the exhibition space itself was constantly being rebuilt and reshaped to accommodate the given shows; it was sculptural. For example, if an artist happened to draw on the wall (as Brad Benischek did for his solo show, *Ghost City*), rather than paint over that work at the end of the show, we would preserve the work by building a wall over it. Over time the space itself accumulated a built-in material history. Even when nothing was installed, the space itself had a distinct and ever-changing form. We also "harvested" works from the exhibition design of the shows; that is to say, we cut out elements from the architecture of the space; these harvestings are now maintained as independent art works, as relics or remnants or ready-mades from the shows.



Brad Benischek, "Ghost City," solo show, Cathouse FUNeral, 2015; photo: David Dixon



Renée Cox, 'Origin' (1993) in a solo-solo show "Renée Cox: Roots Returned," Cathouse Proper, 2019; photo: Dario Lasagni

Moving to 524 Projects, which is the host space for Cathouse Proper, the situation is almost the opposite. At FUNeral the gallery started out as a white cube but never went back to its original white walls, and had this dynamic relationship to its own form, whereas Proper is an almost perfectly proportioned white cube that demands to be respected. We began at Proper by first proposing "solo-solo" shows, meaning exhibiting a single major work by a single contemporary artist (a good example of this is *Renée Cox: Roots Returned*, or Mike Ashkin's *Dismal Dreaming*) but that restraint proved difficult to always conform to, therefore, the solo-solo show soon morphed into also organizing targeted projects that utilize the space's exceptional proportions.

Tell me about your upcoming book.

Thank you for asking about the book, this is my latest new direction. I'm beginning a press to accompany the efforts at the gallery, its imprint will be called 'Proper Press.' The first publication will be one in a series of books containing intuitive and critical arrangements of images and text drawn from the over seven-year activity at Cathouse. If all goes as planned, this first publication, titled 'Cathouse FUNeral / Proper: Life to Art to Life,' will be available soon, hopefully, January, 2021, first through the gallery website, then beyond...

You are also an artist in addition to founding, curating, and running Cathouse Proper and its predecessor, FUNeral. Tell me a bit about your background and how has art making informed your other art practices?

For me, the decade before opening Cathouse FUNeral was dedicated primarily to making movies, two feature films, 'Unloosened and Root' (2006) and 'David Dixon is dead.' (2012), both of which, for the time being, are viewable on YouTube free of charge.



David Dixon in his solo show "Atavistic Expressionistic Primitivism," Cathouse FUNeral, 2016;

Artistically, I like to nest concerns. Movies, like a gallery, provide context for individual works; one can put a lot of diverse things (people, objects, text, music) into a film; it's a container, of sorts, as well as being the-art-object-itself. A gallery is like this too, a container. Additionally, after the films, I was thinking sequentially, in narrative, the scenes in a film being comparable to staging exhibitions in the same space one after the other. And in FUNeral, as we've said, there was aesthetic continuity between the shows — aspects of the earlier shows still present in the later ones. Hence, the material accumulation in the gallery was not only like collage, which curating always is, but montage.

Etty Yaniv works on her art, art writing and curatorial projects in Brooklyn. She founded Art Spiel as a platform for highlighting the work of contemporary artists, including art reviews, studio visits, interviews with artists, curators, and gallerists. For more details contact by Email: artspielblog@gmail.com