

Art in America

June/July 2006

REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

Robert Attanasio at Jim Kempner

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Robert Attanasio: *Suspicious Package #3*, 2005, C-print, 13 by 10 inches; at Jim Kempner.

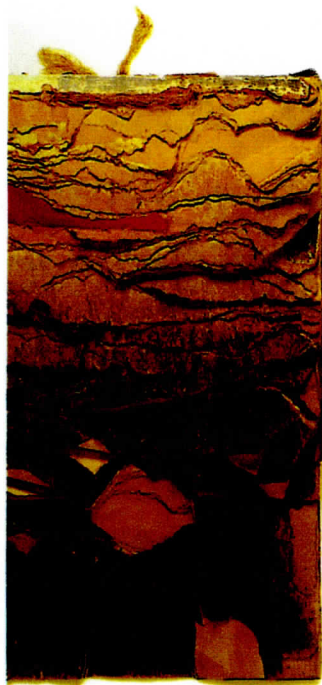
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Often, mind-boggling oddities were arranged to illustrate a larger point, although the overall result at times proved less than the sum of its parts. *Gray Matter (The Wall of Errorism)*, 2005, was a wall display of thrift-store paintings, collages and novelty items in the spirit of our nervous historical moment. A hand-painted Chinatown banner spelled out "Terrorism." Toy guns hung from strings; these had double lives as, variously, a toothbrush, a crayon-holder, a candy dispenser, a comb and a vibrator. (Weapons have indeed penetrated the most intimate areas of our lives.) Nearby, the digital

print *Suspicious Package #3* (photographed moments before it was deemed suspicious and destroyed by a bomb squad), 2005, showed a banal industrial garbage bag on an empty city street, its odd, rectangular shape assuming a malevolent air. Visual-verbal punning was also on display in a time-based of Central Park porta-potties lined up so their blue forms appeared to alternate exactly with Christo and Jeanne Claude's complementary orange *Gates* behind. And Attanasio's own experience became fodder. One wall of the gallery sported what were called "Sightings," framed. (From 2004: "I saw Kara Walker writing in a red notebook ~ on the R Train.")

Like Felix Gonzalez-Torres, another artist whom he recalls, Attanasio probes barriers between object and audience, giving away as much as he collects. Takeaways included candy kisses in a bowl and "nickel bags" of shredded fake dollars (presumably, one-twentieth in each). Thus, the material world remains, as it were, always in circulation.

-Carey Lovelace



Hayder Ali: Untitled, 2003, from the "Dafatir" series, paint on torn paper, 19½ by 13 inches; in "Ashes to Art" at Pomegranate.

Art in America contributor Steven Vincent wrote about Pasha and other Baghdad artists in these pages [see *A.i.A.*, June-July 2004] a year before being kidnapped and killed in Basra. Halahmy prefers to avoid political controversy; he would rather Pomegranate Gallery be a place where artists, musicians, poets and others from different backgrounds can come together in peace.

In this exhibition Pasha presented a series called "Tears of Wax," small colorful abstractions on board made from melted crayons, which he heated with fire when he was unable to obtain paint. The viscous strokes of crayon play on the surfaces in a variety of ways, sometimes remaining resolutely separate, and other times forming dense puddles that run together.

Qasim Sabti was represented by over 30 collages made from played book covers. According to Sabti's artist statement, the books were rescued from Baghdad's Academy of Fine Arts after the U.S. bombardment. The collages display a surprisingly varied range of delicate and rich color. Sabti often exposes the bindings of the books and pastes ripped fabric, paper or printed text to the covers. He is well known in Baghdad as the proprietor of the popular Hewart Art Gallery, which he founded in 1992. Described by Vincent as a combination art space, garden tea-house café

and gossip nexus, Hewart is the type of casual, mixed-use gathering spot that Halahmy wants to foster at Pomegranate.

The only woman in either part of the show was Hana Malallah, who teaches at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad, where she earned an M.F.A. in 2000 and a doctorate in the philosophy of art in 2005. She burns and cuts grids of triangles into wood panels. Over some of the brown and black charred areas, she often applies paint or collage in tans and whites. One work on view was a panel shaped in sinuous curves.

In the second part of the exhibition, Hayder Ali had the largest amount of work on view by far. His abstract oil paintings, some on canvas, others on board, engage the viewer with their subtle play of color and evocative symbols. In addition, he presented two other bodies of work: carved palm fronds and the "Dafatir" (art books) series. For the latter, Ali binds sheafs of thick paper at their tops like tablets. He tears away bits and pieces of the pages, creating weathered-looking, textured objects that, according to an artist's statement, represent his mourning for the National Library of Iraq (a casualty of the 2003 bombing). Ali's carved palm fronds, about the size of canoe paddles, were hung on the wall in a row and evoked African masks. In one example, the dark brown surface is scraped away to form patterned bands of a lighter brown, and the fibers on the top are frayed like a thick broom.

Halahmy, who studied art in London with Anthony Caro and Philip King, had large and small sculptures in both parts of the exhibition. His cast bronze works combine abstract shapes and figurative motifs, such as palm trees and pomegranates, in rhythmic arrangements. Halahmy will continue his program of exhibitions featuring artists from the Middle East. —Cathy Lebowitz

Matthew Higgs at Murray Guy

Matthew Higgs's new exhibition proves again that conceptual work does not have to be clinical and cold to be successful, but can instead be nuanced, intimate and wry. For more than a dozen years, Higgs has, remarkably, confined his work to found book pages and covers. His single-minded exploration continues here, with framed published pages trans-

formed into private revelations.

Higgs unearths books so exceptional it's hard to believe they actually exist—they seem to survive just to suit his purposes. A title page stating simply *Artists say the silliest things* (2006) alludes to the tendency, notorious among conceptual artists, to rhapsodize about the meanings of their work. That's not a problem for Higgs, who takes a fairly self-effacing stance, summarized by another title on display, *Brief and to the Point* (2006).

Recently, Higgs has added something new to his arsenal: exhibition catalogue covers with abstract graphics and no words at all. *Space/Time 1975/1976* (2006) is a series of horizontal stripes of blue in descending intensity, from navy down to white. It could be a Richard Tuttle collage, but also serves as a visual reference to the wall sculptures of Donald Judd. *Another Chance For Cities* (2006), also a catalogue cover, shows a yellow parallelogram surrounded by strips of black resembling the graphic style of Sol LeWitt. Its aging paper and torn corner, however, take it out of the realm of calculation and give it a gentle salvaged quality.

In addressing artistic traditions, Higgs strikes a delicate balance between reverence and mischief. *Art Always Changes* (2005) describes shifting tastes over time. It also characterizes Higgs's own investigation of the way objects themselves fundamentally change when they are placed in a gallery. Like the constraints of Minimalism, the restrictions Higgs places on himself heighten the perceived differences between each page, with changes in typography and shades of paper having surprising impact.

To Be Looked At (2005) reminds us that Higgs rescues objects destined to be forgotten and grants them relevance. He understands that shifts in context shift implications, and he transforms the discarded into artifacts that speak directly to us, if in whispers. By altering the meanings of things we see every day, Higgs

succeeds in creating a poetry that wears its knowingness lightly. —David Coggins

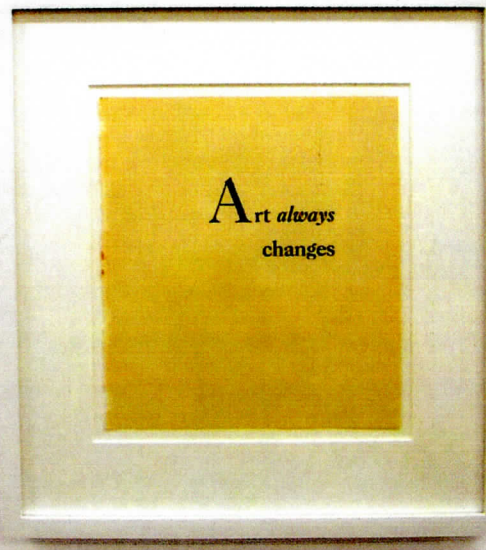
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Matthew Higgs: *Art Always Changes*, 2005, framed book page, 13½ by 12½ inches; at Murray Guy.



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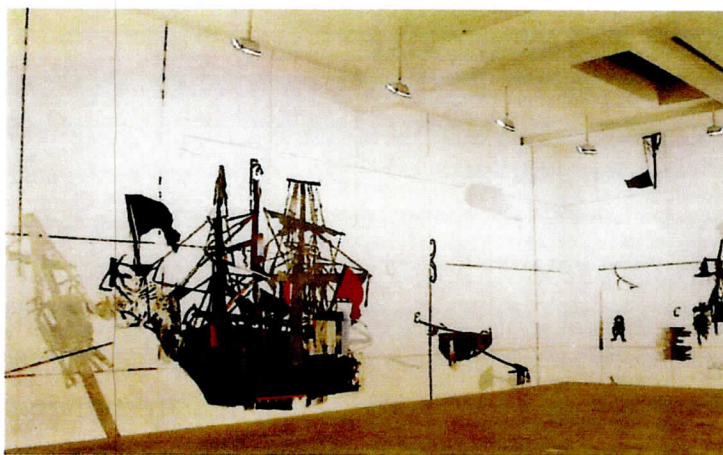
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Sally Smart at Postmasters

Pirates, long a romantic symbol of the subversion of authority and the rejection of accepted social mores, seem newly fashionable these days. The word piracy has infiltrated the globalist vocabulary to indicate a swashbuckling disavowal of borders and property laws. In popular culture, pirates cross other kinds of boundaries, as in Johnny Depp's gender-bending performance in *The Pirates of the Caribbean*.

Australian artist Sally Smart takes the subversion one step further in her exuberant celebration of the pirate tradition. She uses the four walls of the gallery as a monumental backdrop, marking it with a large open grid that recalls the longitudinal and latitudinal indicators of a nautical map. Arranged throughout are intricately cut-out silhouettes of galleons, rowboats, flags and fearsome pirate shadow puppets. The twist here is that the pirates Smart memorializes are female, a fact attested to in the laciness of some of the cutouts, as well as the addition of collaged feminine fabric. Cutouts of strings of beads, skirts and flying braids adorn the stalwart pirates, aggressively planted throughout the piece with arms akimbo. Female presence is also suggested by additional composite figures made up of



View of Sally Smart's exhibition "The Exquisite Pirate," 2006; at Postmasters.

body parts cut out of magazines, perhaps meant to function like exotic native totems found in the South Sea islands. Scattered about the wall, they are reminiscent of the surrealist figures in the work of Kenya-born artist Wangechi Mutu.

Smart notes that this work is based on her research into the historical existence of female pirates. Like these paradoxical figures, her sailing ships are an odd mix of delicacy and power. They are composed of black masses that give way to skein-like interweavings of cut-out fabrics, suggesting the lines of masts or evanescent threads of sea foam. Campy elements like the white skeleton gracing the prow of one ship are combined with references to real life, as when part of a ship is defined by an actual black shirt sleeve. Meanwhile, the room as a whole is activated by the depiction of ships and masts as if they are bobbing, which gives one the sense that they are indeed being tossed about by waves.

The title of this exhibition, "The Exquisite Pirate," refers in part to the Surrealist game of exquisite corpse, in which participants are asked to add to a drawing without being able to see what the other players have contributed. Smart's collaged figures and ships have a hybridity similar to such drawings, appearing to be made up of a variety of disparate and even contradictory materials and forms. The eye is constantly forced to shift between a straightforward reading of the images and the physicality of the materials that compose them. Meanwhile, the silhouettes are open to multiple readings—as when a flag might also be the outline of a country, or a gun a peg leg. In the end, this show may not provide a great deal of insight into the gender roles

of pirates, but it does offer a feast for the eye and a sense of the pleasure of making
—Eleanor H

Bruce Robbins at Marlborough Chelsea

Bruce Robbins's architect-based assemblies were inspired by the construction and warring of walls, an extension of his interest in the relations between sculpture, painting and architecture. With their contents stacked building-block fashion, the larger among wooden objects were bolted to the wall like paintings that rested more or less solidly on the floor like sculpture, ending both planes. The blocks are often faced with thin plywood, sometimes covered with linen and jute—resembling a stretched canvas—sometimes painted in rhythmic patterns more than vague reminders of late Mondrian.

Anticipated by the narrow block-on-block tower of *I-Blue Kiss*, 2003-04, the *Hybrid (Green Buttrick)*, 2005, directly addressed Robbins's multiple conceals: elements were stacked a wide and 8 feet high, so it appeared to provide support for the wall. Gessolike underpainting remained visible in patches through the monochrome painterly fields of grass-green enamel that enlivened the evocation of the quoin (an architectural dentation at an exterior corner), which provided a pleasing contrast to the gallery wall. In this arrangement, Robbins inserted shims of pine to form horizontal bands between larger blocks of wood, for both structural and ornamental purposes. Viewed from the side, the deepest blocks could be seen to



Robert Attanasio: *Suspicious Package #3*, 2005, C-print, 13 by 10 inches; at Jim Kempner.

medium. The witty *Clearing* (2000), from "Selections from Counterfeit Music Videos" (1996-2005), featured a blank drive-in movie screen shot in daylight that does a kind of fade to its negative to the tune of the Rolling Stones song "Paint It Black." (Attanasio has exhibited as a filmmaker and had a video in the 1997 Whitney Biennial.)

Much of this territory is familiar, bringing to mind artists from Martha Rosler to Kurt Schwitters to younger scavengers of pop-culture slogans and imagery, like Nate Lowman. Attanasio employs a shrewder eye than most as he sorts through life's detritus, albeit displaying a weakness for art-world in-jokes. The C-print *Mr. John Christo* (2005) located a vantage point from which a trio