

PRESSBOOK

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"Beneath the Underdog" has turned the Gagosian Gallery into a museum of objects that speak of the base, the fallen, the ruined. (Gagosian Gallery)

New York galleries make an early splash

By Holland Cotter

NEW YORK: New York galleries are in the habit of saving their best - their newest, boldest, oddest - for last, for the annual blitz of end-of-season group shows that give exposure to underseen artists and freelance gigs to promising curators, while the commercial heat is down.

Usually these things are summer fare. But this year, as art-world eyes are turning to Europe - the Venice Biennale, Documenta12, and the Sculpture Project in Münster, Germany, are all set to open - a few group shows in New York have jumped the gun with a splash of stylish fizz, a knotty theme, a soak in strangeness, something special to catch the eye at season's end.

You'll find the fizz in "Beneath the Underdog," a multigenerational ensemble, with a smaller show tucked inside, at Gagosian uptown.

So prevalent is talk these days about the harmful effects of the boom market on art that presumably even this blue-chip citadel had to take notice. Maybe that's why it's featuring an exhibition about (I quote the news release) "alienation and marginalization" in "the towering vertical landscape of late capitalism."

It's one of the best gallery shows of the year. Full credit goes to its artist-curators, Nate Lowman and Adam McEwen. They've turned Gagosian's six-room space into a mini-museum of objects that speak of the base, the gross, the fallen, the ruined, the failed.

The effect starts in the first gallery, a kind of anteroom to abjection, with a treacherously pitted "concrete" floor and the words "Buy a Condo or Die" scrawled on a wall.

The floor, which is really plaster, is by the German artist Monica Bonvicini, a specialist in such subversions. The graffiti is a re-creation of a piece by Jessica Diamond done

in 1985, during the last art boom, when Manhattan was turning into the preserve of the rich that it has become.

Beyond this point, we're in some low-rise, post-Trump city of the future, in which no line is straight, no monument respected, no surface undefaced. It's a place of artful junk: a stack of shattered glass by Barry Le Va; a stray car bumper exquisitely shaped and painted by Kaz Oshiro.

And then there are odds and ends that have lost, or not yet found, a meaning. A 1960 sculpture by Lygia Clark, with sharp, bladelike movable parts, is one. Emily Sundblad's mulch-dark painting "Grindhouse" is another. A video by the sister team of Hanna and Klara Liden, in which the two women play vigorous kickball with pieces of commercial hardware, is a third.

The proposed city has its share of crime, mostly confined to "Mafia (or One Unopened Packet of Cigarettes)," a one-room show imported from Standard (Oslo), a gallery in Norway. This high-concept take on low life includes a concealed lethal weapon (by Claire Fontaine); photographic evidence of a rubout (by Torbjorn Rodland); and cryptic, possibly sinister messages galore from Tauba Auerbach, Daniel Knorr, David Lieske and Matias Faldbakken. But even with this "wrong element" in the mix, healthy anarchy rules in the alternative city Lowman and McEwen have conjured. Eleanor Antin's cadres of empty boots - seen in her 1973 photographs - patrol its streets. Big-boy heroics are banned. Singularity, whimsicality, crankiness are nurtured. As evidence there is a beautiful mobile by Agathe Snow, hung with job lot charms and fetishes and glitter-filled bullets. Snow calls the piece "Knock Yourself Out"; I call it a knockout.

But despite the outsider-art feel of this work, how removed is it from the mainstream? Not very. In fact, this entire showcase is a chic insider affair. Still, its curators ask good questions and acknowledge the bind that artists find themselves in now as they try to figure out a way both to accept the market's embrace and stake out resistant ground, share values and create values.

Marcel Duchamp built a career on such questions. And he hovers, like a damaged angel, over "The Price of Everything: Perspectives on the Art Market," a think piece of a show at the Art Gallery of the Graduate Center, the City University of New York.

With his ready-mades - the mass-produced items he designated as art - Duchamp tried to redefine what art was: an active tool for thinking, rather than a passive object of looking.

Once Duchamp's ready-mades started to be bought by museums, though, and he was inducted into the 20th-century canon, the power of his art was over. Resistance had itself become a commodity. Artists today are still sorting through all this.

This is evident in the Graduate Center show, put together by Martin Braathen, Stéphanie Fabre, Minnie Scott and Mike Sperlinger, all graduates of this year's Whitney Independent Study Program. Take Karl Haendel's "\$56,055, 2005." Basically, it's just a very large drawing of a fancy car, a Cadillac SUV. But to it Haendel added a very specific, some might think exorbitant, price tag: \$56,005, the exact list price of the car itself when new. Then he added something else: a stipulation that the drawing's future resale value would depreciate in exact proportion to the car's value, meaning that eventually the drawing would have no value at all. Needless to say, the art market depends upon thinking exactly the opposite way.