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ART

Eye Exam

A Mirror at the Event Horizon

Jason Foumberg

For years, almost a decade, the third-floor space at 1319 West Lake Street in the meatpacking district has been known as the Butcher Shop. Although no meat products have been butchered or sold here in recent memory, the name has served as a pseudo-secret alias (as perhaps more of an informed nod to the roots of the 'hood than as a speakeasy) for parties of the art variety. More than just any party, the art party is a youth-cult utopia that seeks engagement and community on a foundation of creativity. The idealism of the art party has its pros and cons, of course. They can build dedicated communities of informed and passionate artists, yet such groups also teeter on the edge of becoming ingrown, and we know what sort of offspring can emerge from that scenario.

Butcher Shop, though, has traded hands many times over the years, turning a different audience and crowd of artists every few years. The liveliness of the place reflects the possibility of the art scene when strongholds give way to community perspectives. This fall, Butcher Shop is being reinvented for the umpteenth time under the steed of Karin Patzke and Carrie Ruckel, and it might be safe to say that the space is growing up. Both Patzke and Ruckel are artists with experience in arts administration. Their hope is to transform the space, both physically and conceptually, into an exhibition space for thoughtful, themed group shows that are informed of, and responsive to, both current art trends and relevant subject matter. Visitors who know the space may not recognize it at first, as it's undergone a rehabilitative makeover to include smooth white walls and an even greater opening up of the huge space, and yet frequent visitors will also be glad to see many of its raw, exposed elements left intact.



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Ruckel and Patzke are taking the passing torch with pride. They've re-dubbed the space Lasso Gallery at the Butcher Shop, and their first curated exhibition is titled "Involving Violence," a tight show with an ambitious theme. Here, thirteen artists drawn both locally and nationwide from an open call consider a very difficult issue from some very keen points of view. The art party may have ended but the engagement is just beginning.

The practice of violence in the world, either premeditated or impulsive, is of course so pervasive that a summary of its effects would seem beside the point of any conclusive dialogue. Conclusions, though, are hard to come by these days, especially ones that we can trust. The strongpoint of "Involving Violence," then, is that it considers the effects of violent imagery as filtered through media outlets and then processed by artists, a notoriously observant and critical breed. If a violence of political, racial or religious absolutes persists in the world, we can thankfully count on our artists for their expansiveness and ability to create new harmonies.

Several of the artists in "Involving Violence" remake and reconsider iconic media images of aggression and murder, from brutal lynching scenes to Eddie Adams' blunt photograph of a Vietnamese prisoner shot in the head point blank. The lynching scenes from newspaper sources are rehashed courtesy of Krista Wortendyke. Her way of re-presenting violent imagery is to block out the tortured and bloodied victim with a pastel rectangle or stripe. This introduces a decorative element to the image, which is off-putting because it interrupts our expectations of the image ingrained in our memory. Wortendyke then traces a slight and careful outline of the victim's twisted body. These lines serve to just barely remind us of the body hidden underneath, entombed in the image forever, and shielded from the violence that is re-enacted each time the picture is viewed or remembered. Wortendyke seems to be in conversation with Warhol's legendary appropriations of violence; both make use of strong design elements in contrast to bleak scenes of murder, and where Warhol sought dissociation through repetition, Wortendyke's distancing effects stoke our fascination with mourning.

Taking on similarly iconic images from media sources, artist Jason Stec inserts found images such as the mentioned Saigon murder from 1968 as well as other suggestive or brute acts of violence that have become historically important due to their status in the popular-culture repertoire. Stec isolates these moments by cutting them out of their media contexts and then inserts them into new schemes or universes that tell a new story through formal associations. A roaring dragon and a stream of fire meet Adams' signature war photograph on either side to show that images, once paired, create a narrative. In these image maps we are left looking for clues by way of association. Stec reawakens the images burned in our retinas and minds, not to emphasize their importance or legacy, but to question how images construct a culture of violence.

Personal histories of violence are also presented in the group show, conveniently and tellingly shaped by the

camera's lens, including Regina Mamou's stark explorations of a pained existence and Chelcie Porter's "Vinegar Soaked Blade," a threatening portrait of a dagger, its jagged edge poised for plunging.

The abstract, too, has a voice in the conversation. Masaco Kuroda's small textiles are reminiscent of surrealist Andre Masson, whose sand paintings expressed violent notions through the merest suggestion of clashing materials and slyly sinister forms. Kuroda's weaving of threads appear like tattered, blood-stained cloths by way of a deceptively graceful technique.

Our relationship to violence is structured and maintained mainly through images rather than experience. How can we responsibly engage such abstractions? "Involving Violence" reveals our affinity for imagistic violence when access to real violence is (thankfully) inaccessible.

"Involving Violence" shows at Lasso Gallery at Butcher Shop, 1319 West Lake, lassogallery@gmail.com, through October 20.

(2007-09-18)

Also by Jason Foumberg

Eye Exam

In April 2007's Artforum, critic Brian Sholis wrote that Kevin Zucker, a New York City-based painter, had started to mature in his output. His paintings held more complexity than recent years, and thus Zucker had moved on from an art "that felt merely decorative." After reading this review, Chicago-based artists Marilyn and Peter Frank grew irritated by the insult inherent in Sholis' phrase, "merely decorative." The Franks' response is a work in neon script that mirrors the critical remark; it reads "merely decorative" and glows a clean white light

(2007-09-11)

Eye Exam

The opening night of the Fall art season always feels slightly like a pre-Halloween trick-or-treating to various galleries. At each stop we cruise the art that, like a parade of costumes, are the distillation of either the current trends or the most retro nod to the past (ironic or otherwise), and as always the best costume contains the least clothes

(2007-09-04)

Eye Exam

Golden Age Store + Studio opens this week on Pilsen's 17th Street. Divided into a front and a back, or the store and the studio, the place will bustle with activity. The storefront features limited edition artist books, mix tapes, seven-inch records from local labels, zines, artist-designed t-shirts, posters, jewelry, DVDs, screensavers and more. All items were selected for their attention to both concept and their design, for packaging made by artists surely is part of the artwork itself

(2007-08-28)

Eye Exam

"This is not a gay party!" reminds Justin Polera, co-curator of Queer Fest Midwest's art exhibition, "The Cowboy and the Pegasus." It's true, this will be a queer party, not a gay party, which is to say that it has nothing to do with being gay or straight or whether you are a penis or vagina kind of person, except that it has everything to do with that

(2007-08-21)

Eye Exam

(2007-08-14)

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