

ARTSEEN

ADAM MARNIE, TOM THAYER, and RUBY SKY STILER

by Anne Sherwood Fundlyk

DEREK ELLER GALLERY | JANUARY 6 – FEBRUARY 5, 2011

The beating heart of the three-person exhibit at Derek Eller is Adam Marnie's larger-than-life, floral bouquet collaged and carved directly into the entrance foyer's sheetrock. Color Xerox enlargements cut, torn, and glued; flower shapes, negative space, and shadow edges traced and carved out of the wall; and drips of adhesive all form elements of the rhythmic composition. They also underscore the undeniability of the artist's actions as they are tied to his thought process. It is the only piece in the gallery that pumps its own life-blood into the space; his red gerbera daisies hypnotically pulse in a perpetually blooming elliptical zoetrope.



Tom Thayer, Paper Puppet and Scenery from *The New World Pig*, 2009-2010, paper, tape collage, graphite, 12 x 17.75 inches.

For the rest of the art in the exhibition, a visual ventriloquism operates: the work is powered from off-site. Refracted from elsewhere, we are seeing, for different reasons, each artists' mojo remotely piped in. Tellingly for Tom Thayer's hand-made animation stills in Eller's gallery, he performed "Scenographic Play" at nearby Tracy Williams, Ltd. In Thayer's performances and video animations, he works collaboratively, integrating visual and musical improvisations. "Scenographic Play" demonstrated for his work at Eller, an overlapping subject matter and application of similar props, and an emphasis on the significance of the actual performance involved in the making of an artwork. In the visual arts, just as in the traditional performing arts, the quality of the artist's performance is the key to the transference of meaning to the audience, something frequently overlooked by an artist's interlocutors.

In "Scenographic Play," Thayer signals the importance of the connection linking heart, hand, and eye. The performance opens and closes with a boy using a pencil and paper—simple tools to connect hand with imagination, reminiscent of Thayer's animation collages. During the performance, Thayer employs loosely scripted directives for his performers, surrounding the audience in an imposing mix of digitally distorted strains of percussive noise, human voices, and musical samplings. A momentous mood, invoking our environmental vulnerability, is generated using the movements of his men and women performers backlit against bright, ever-altering video projections. Line-drawn forms and textures are interwoven with visual passages of partially completed gestures made by puppets of humans and animals.

The recognizable moments of audience connection during Thayer's performance reinforce an awareness of the experience of reading the artist's thoughts and actions in the works at Derek Eller Gallery. Marnie's other small photo-collages there feel like ideas jotted down in the studio as preparation for his piece in the foyer. He photographed a sparse, \$10 bouquet of red, yellow, purple, and white flowers in a clear glass vase on a kitchen stool. After printing small, glossy versions of the images, he cut them apart, scotch taping them back together in playing card-like permutations: split and rotated or sectioned and fanned. They become a row of floral musings: seven ways to consider beauty on a recessionary budget. Do they need to be framed? Tape or thumbtacks would be in keeping with the thinking/working-man feel of Marnie's premise. Don't forget, we are already looking at them in a gallery.

Thayer's hand-made animation stills and life-like paper puppets are spread across the gallery's back wall. His careful touch with line, color, texture, and composition plays throughout the poignant collages, suggesting fables of pending man-made disaster. Human and animal puppets are sketched in pencil, cut out with articulated joints, and posed in place with masking tape. Using a palette of National Geographic photographs, Thayer's deer and owls—made of leaves, bark, and moth's wings—are mounted on faded or recycled classroom construction paper. The little pieces of tape, smudges, and curls of paper are tell tale signs of the accumulation of the artist's improvised actions and thoughts. Again, the frames are unnecessary—what we are seeing are keepsakes from his videos and performances.

Ruby Sky Stiler's work in Eller's North Room, subtitled "An Artificial Return," despite its superficial resemblance to the other collage work in the show, doesn't read as well. The heavy-handed, puzzle piece approach to her antique Greek vocabulary veers toward kitsch. Images of her large-scale sculptures on the same theme in her one-person show, currently at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery (through February 27) look to be more true to her materials than the souvenir-like versions in Eller's show. Stiler's use of fractured form is less visual, more corporeal, like pieces of broken bodies resulting in a disruption of vital forces.

Marnie and Thayer use photographic images and film animation techniques to evoke the experience of perception and understanding, and the artist's actions that link the two. Their attitude is plainspoken, earnestly looking for strikingly beautiful effects using humble materials. With so much around us in flux, it is the small reactions, gestures, and expressions that we need to be reading for guidance. Stiler's work dwells more in the material world and less in the imagination. Her overhanging room, along with the distancing effect of the frames on Marnie and Thayer's works on paper, emphasizes the gallery's commercial role over its place as a safe-house for our souls in these uncertain times.