

Art Fag City: As Smart As They Are

by Paddy Johnson



COURTESY APEX ART

I hate to sound boorish, but I don't always enjoy seeing the words "intellectually rich" attached to shows about conceptual art. Don't get me wrong, I'm all for challenging work, but I am not consistently interested in reading a press release to understand the art I'm looking at.

With that said, a thin but fairly consistent stream of challenging shows inspire attentive wall- and press release-reading every year, the most recent currently on display at **Apex Art**. Inspired by the desire for an imagined past or future, *Stalking with Stories: The Pioneers of the Immemorable*, an exhibition curated by Antonia Marjaca and Ivana Bago, brings together the macabre investigations of eight international artists.

Among the more visually dominant works in the show, **Sanja Ivekovic's** *Ponos (Pride)*, a red neon sign from a former Yugoslavian textile shop, hangs near the entrance of the gallery. On its own, the piece reads as an empty mass-cultural relic, though, as history documents, socialist-era banners such as this frequently employed words such as Freedom, Victory and Knowledge; politically charged words with emotionally invested ideology. In the post-communist economy these names were replaced with international counterparts; "Ponos," or Pride, for example, might become the X Nation, Eldi International or Terranova. While these new signs do not appear in the exhibition, the historical reference coupled with the ambiguity

of aesthetic interpretation underscore the uneasy transitional state of the country.

Also characterized by the pairing of past and present, **Felix Gmelin's** *Farbest, Die Rote Fahne II* simultaneously projects the 1969 performance documentation of Gmelin's father running through the streets of West Berlin with a red flag, and the 2002 reenactment in Stockholm. Aside from obvious differences in location, the original film culminates in the meeting of other youth activists at a government building, whereas the updated performance engages multiple artists in the run, but finds no other collaborators at the finish. The absence speaks to a new generation of civic indifference and a small, marginalized community of politically engaged people.

In large part, the elegance of Gmelin and Ivekovic's work comes from the simplicity and economy of the gesture itself. As the related video, *It Doesn't Matter*, by **Katerina Seda**, goes, upon discovering that her depressed grandmother remembered all the items sold in a tool shop she once worked in, the artist asked her to draw each of these objects. The resulting video and book project not only saved her grandmother from inactivity by helping her engage with the present but served to document the past. Comparatively, however, Seda's artistic response feels slightly less graceful than some of the other work in the show, weighting personal experience over shared national history. There's nothing necessarily wrong with this, of course — **Artur Zmijewski's** *Lisa* also takes this approach, but the story is ultimately more digestible in an eight-minute short than through the copious documentation Seda provided. Still, I largely enjoyed the cataloguing of these objects, and see the project as a distinct voice behind the greater concept of the exhibition: that within the past there should lie a spark that helps us, if only briefly, to re-imagine the future.

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George Adams Gallery

James Valerio: New Paintings and Drawings

Large-scale, meticulously detailed figure and still life paintings that blur the line between real and surreal. Closes 10/27.

Tue-Sat 10am-6pm; Mondays by appointment. 525 W 26th St, between Tenth and Eleventh Aves (C, E to 23rd St) 212-564-8480 georgeadamsgallery.com

International Print Center New York

Working with Prints: Selections from Eight Corporate Collections

Demonstrates the high quality and diverse

imagery included in today's corporate collections. Closes 10/20.

Tue-Sat 11am-6pm. 526 W 26th St, Room 824, between Tenth and Eleventh Aves (C, E to 23rd St) 212-989-5090, ipcny.org

Julie Saul Gallery

Maira Kalman: *The Principles of Uncertainty*

More than one hundred of the original gouache paintings made for an online-visual journal for *The New York Times* from June 2006 to May 2007. Opens 10/11, closes 11/24.

Tue-Sat 11am to 6pm. 535 W 22nd St, between Tenth and Eleventh Aves (C, E to 23rd St) 212-627-2410, saulgallery.com

Lehmann Maupin

Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba

The Ground, the Root, and the Air: The Passing of the Bodhi Tree is a film exploring the struggle facing many youths in Laos to incorporate traditional values with contemporary success. Closes 10/20.

540 W 26th St, between Tenth and Eleventh Aves (C, E to 23rd St) 212-255-2923 lehmannmaupin.com