

REVIEWS



View of "James Gilbert," 2010.

The mast of one vessel sports a basketball hoop, while a pool slide descends from its stern; a seesaw sits on the gunwale of the other boat—the effect is Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* reimagined as a pleasant diversion. Gilbert's casual craftsmanship—threads dangle from the plastic's seams, and the boats' wooden oars are scap-pily handmade—adds to the insouciant air.

Videos played on screens scattered throughout the gallery. Several tiny monitors occupied cracks and voids in the scarred cinder-block walls of the space (formerly a metal shop), while a replica of the airplane's so-called black box held another. These portray a shirtless man swimming underwater; the fact that he never comes up for air confirms that all is not well in candy land. Also striking an ominous tone is a video lampooning standard airline-safety admonitions. On screens situated inside the plane's central fragment, a mouth, seen in extreme close-up, delivers ludicrously inappropriate advice—such as “No pushing unless the people in front of you are slow” and “Look under your seat for free stuff”—in the emotionless tone of official condescension that tends to inform such instructions.

In the nose and tail sections of the fuselage, large video screens show Gilbert involved in a variety of quick interactions with cheap, brightly colored swimming-pool air mattresses. He arranges them into a pattern on the floor and takes a nap. He then wraps himself in them and lies down (with evident difficulty) across a safety-orange chair before rolling onto the floor. In these and other vignettes, Gilbert presents the viewer with a paradox: The air mattresses might cushion his landing, but they contributed to his fall in the first place. Sometimes, there is peril in trying to protect ourselves.

As a whole, the installation examines the ways in which safety measures and the fears they presuppose become a subtle means of social control. By situating his audience in a playground where droning imperatives are audible, Gilbert suggests that standard warnings and instructions infantilize their audience. The presumption that a society's safety and welfare are best insured by a remote authority—a grownup—relieves the social body of its autonomy and endows it with anxiety. And yet the playground is a disaster. The plane crashed. All the helpful advice appears to have outlived the victims. In Gilbert's scenario, we are on our own.

—Michael Odom

SAN FRANCISCO

Emily Wardill

ALTMAN SIEGEL

Emily Wardill's *Game Keepers Without Game*, 2009, cribs from *La Vida es Sueño* (Life Is a Dream), a seventeenth-century Spanish play by

Pedro Calderón de la Barca, but the source is nearly unrecognizable. Whereas Calderón's play revolves around the life of a Polish king who imprisons his son at birth, Wardill's adaptation, set in contemporary Britain, recounts the tale of a mixed-race girl put up for adoption by her family and her father's dubious attempt, many years later, to bring her back into the family fold. Although the plot is linear, Wardill complicates its telling with an exaggeratedly slick, glossy stylization—the entire piece is shot against a stark white backdrop that casts everything into specimen-like relief—and a glacial pace. Furthermore, she incorporates varied acting styles, multiple narrators (some reading appropriated texts), and seemingly nonsensical shots of commercial objects (a Nicorette package, a DVD case, a key); for a brief Brechtian moment, the artist is heard instructing an actress to speak like “a fake girl.”

An additional battery of distancing strategies amplifies the characters' alienation—and challenges the viewer to stick around. At the opening of the film, the characters are introduced by way of an extended exposition. One by one, they stand solemnly against the white background, and a voice-over coldly lists their names, ages, occupations, and relationships to the others. When the actors do finally interact, the scenes are staged to emphasize their estrangement from one another. As two teen girls fleece a drunk American early in the film, the beginning of the scene is shot from above—an awkward, abstracting angle that leaves most gestures and facial expressions unseen. Then the camera shifts perspective. The girls' heads are entirely cropped from the frame, and only their bodies and voices carry the action. In *Game Keepers*'s central sequence, the novelist father engages his estranged prostitute daughter (who, not recognizing him, believes he is a john), but Wardill refrigerates this hot-button confrontation. The actors avoid eye contact, and when the daughter begins to disrobe, the camera pans to the father in a manner that seems to move him farther from her in space. She is unseen as he coughs nervously, alone in the frame. Other conflicts transpire offscreen or are avoided

Emily Wardill, *Game Keepers Without Game*, 2009, color video, 76 minutes. Production still.

altogether. For example, an incident of incest between brother and sister is represented only by an explicit description in voice-over, accompanied by shots of a cell phone and a ticking wristwatch.

In an interview, Wardill noted that the word *melodrama* conjoins “melody” and “drama,” “whereby the musical element communicates to you in a way that somehow bypasses cerebral understanding.” Here, the film is set to a drum score. Jazzy and seemingly improvised, the rhythm (not a melody) is erratic, often overpowering the narration and dialogue. The inconsistent sound track echoes the dramatic pacing, which lurches between outbursts of violence and near didacticism, as well as the visual grammar, which alternates between flashes of colorful objects—a steaming mug of borscht is deliciously lingered over—and logy emptiness.

Extending this sort of work to seventy-six minutes is risky business, especially for an artist so painfully effective at alienating the viewer. But when Wardill does allow audiences to identify with the characters—say, in the wordless, extended shots of the father and daughter showering, lost in their own confused thoughts and physicality—the richness of her vision becomes more readily apparent, its challenges worth taking on.

—Glen Helfand

LOS ANGELES

Liz Craft

PATRICK PAINTER

Liz Craft derives inspiration from any manner of cultural fodder: from high to low, from mundane to fantastic. Often, the spark seems to come when she mashes multiple aesthetics together, as in the sculptures featured in “Death of a Clown,” an exhibition of work from 2010. Several pieces see her combining the most debased of cultural forms (pictures of clowns and flowers, living-room furniture) with the loftiest (geometric abstraction, Minimalism) and some in between (Pop art, assemblage, hyperrealism).



Liz Craft, *Nicole Couch (Pink, Fuchsia, Orange)*, 2010, fiberglass, paint, 32 x 98 x 40½".

A group of wall-hung pieces incorporate the grid—as much a standard of modernism and Minimalism as a visual and physical structure essential to the decorative arts. These rectangles of steel mesh, framed by rectangles of welded metal tubing, might share their material basis with Robert Morris’s late-1960s cubic structures, but Craft addresses them as if they were rough-weave linen or the open-weave “canvas” used in yarn crafts. For *Left and Right*, thick, bulky yarn is woven through the steel warp and wool to create giant needlepoint flowers. Elsewhere, using a rug-hooking technique, Craft draws tufts of yarn and fabric through the mesh so that the dangling materials form the hair and beard of giant clown faces. These visages are adorned with found objects cast in bronze and then painted white: a lemon for an eye, a serving tray for teeth, rumpled jeans for wrinkly lips. One grid with an abstract design rests on the floor. There, it suggests at once a landscape (with some white-painted objects rising as architecture), a burlesque of the classic Minimalist floor piece, and a shaggy rug.

Allusions to home decor crop up again. In other works, furniture functions as sculptural pedestal: A side table holds a rough-formed ceramic clown figurine; on a full-size couch nearby, a young woman sleeps stiffly or stiff as a corpse (both furniture and figure were sculpted in clay and then cast in fiberglass). A mélange of Pre-Raphaelite, Arts and Crafts, and Art Nouveau style overlaid atop references to representations of death—from Egyptian sarcophagi to Sleeping Beauty—the latter piece, *Nicole Couch (Pink, Fuchsia, Orange)*, draws tension

from the stillness of its pasty-skinned figure and the lively floral pattern on the upholstery. Sculpted in full relief, the exuberant design almost seems to emerge from, if not envelop, the couch.

But for all its visual dynamism, the work felt awkwardly placed in the center of the gallery—and that awkwardness was telling. Whereas much of Craft’s past output has involved the conversion of two-dimensional forms into full, three-dimensional presences, the sculptures in this show, particularly those backed into corners and hung on walls, emphasize the frontal and the pictorial. Likewise, the engrossing front of *Nicole Couch* drew interest away from its “blank” backside, which felt like something you just had to get around—the sculpture was as unwieldy as a real couch placed in the middle of a living room. The show left one wanting more probing of the peripatetic potential of Baroque (Bernini) and modernist (Caro) sculptural space—a space that becomes fully “known” only in the ever-elusive experience in the round—which when applied to Craft’s highly idiosyncratic imaginings has so energized her work in the past.

—Christopher Miles

Justin Beal

ACME

Justin Beal’s second solo exhibition continues his project of revealing the repressed of modernist architecture and design. At first encounter, his wall-mounted sculptures seem ascetic, cold. Slabs of slick-surfaced materials—aluminum, Plexiglas, and mirror—are bound together by plastic stretch wrap, often coated with glossy black and white enamel. In some pieces, the wrap delineates the contours of a hidden, protruding hexahedron; in others, it captures a tangle of transparent tubing, whose length grazes the floor. The work appears to be a simple rehashing of Minimalist aesthetics with up-to-date materials, redolent of commercial displays of high fashion and design. Yet prolonged observation reveals purposeful details that betray the artist’s handcraft. Drips and drops of enamel and short lengths of transparent tape interrupt the mirrored surfaces, which emphasize imperfections by doubling them in reflection. While these “flaws” index the artist’s body, the mirrors reflect fragments of the viewer at every turn—notably legs, hips, and thighs.

Props placed on two low, glass-topped tables make the corporeal suggestions unmissable. Scattered across the first table, in the show’s eponymous *Hot Hot House* (all works 2010), are seven cucumbers—five fresh (from hothouse growers) and two coated in nickel-plated plastic—strongly recalling Fluxus artist Robert Watts’s early-1960s chrome-plated sculptures of food items such as eggs, chocolates, cabbage heads, and sticks of butter. Watts’s shiny, inedible foodstuffs were a joke on the consumer culture of their time—an era that witnessed marketers devising ever-new ways to make goods more desirable. But Beal’s deployment of aestheticized food objects (his last solo show here included forms in the familiar bulbous shape of POM bottles) extends the critique to a contemporary design world that would demand that a vegetable turn platinum to match the look of its environment. In other words, this work performs a critique-by-imitation of a design



Justin Beal, *Untitled*, 2010, mirror, aluminum, plastic tubing, stretch wrap, 108 x 48 x 6".