

The Highlights - Jay Heikes at Marianne Boesky

Installation view, Jay Heikes, *Like a Broken Record*, at Marianne Boesky Gallery.

Dispensing with the marketing lingo of novelty and inauguration that usually accompanies an artist's first solo show in New York, Jay Heikes bravely introduces himself as someone who, in his auspicious debut, is already stuck in a rut. *Like a Broken Record*, a group of sculptures and drawings thematizing repetition and storytelling, finds the artist engaged in a timely consideration of mediation, systems of duplication and distribution, and the mutations in meaning that occur when an idea is repeated beyond its usefulness.

The show is full of signifiers of looping, decaying, and recombination: cast multiples, nearly identical paired assemblages whose components are subtly rearranged from one to the next, translations of visual textures from medium to medium, Xeroxes of Xeroxes, and so on, tied together with circular and spiral motifs. Thus, the broken record: on the face of it, a flawed artifact in which a signal is interrupted, segmented, and trapped in an endless loop - a repetition within a repetition. A broken record is usually annoying, but it's not without a certain aesthetic appeal. Heikes's work can be seen as an exploration of this appeal, and asks the question of whether or not the skips and glitches of defective communication can open up possibilities for making art.

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Unlike contemporaries such as Cheyney Thompson and Seth Price, who take an austere, almost clinical approach to the problems of a hyper-mediated culture, Heikes's work is played for laughs and pathos: *Like a Broken Record*, of course, implies not just reiteration but interminability: a speaker who goes on and on and on, saying the same thing. And in fact, the press release for the show informs us that the whole show is itself a reiteration - of a joke, about a pirate, told and re-told by the artist in previous works, "the narrative rendered irrelevant with no linear arc, nor final punch line," which has now "established a state of stasis, seemingly impossible to escape."

Heikes's central metaphor emerges from, and reacts to, the context in which his work exists: the critical-commercial complex of MFA programs and mainstream galleries, where the demand for art to fulfill certain requirements of narratability can become ridiculous and stifling. This art world abounds with ritualized storytelling: an artist tells a story about why he makes something, a dealer tells a story about why it's valuable, and a critic tells us what it all means. The types of stories change according to fashion, but it's hard to avoid the awareness that, whichever role one occupies, it's dangerously easy to sound like a bad comedian flogging tired material.

Here, Heikes gets at something important about the anxiety surrounding art and language. Given that we're always telling stories about objects, what happens when our stories and our objects don't match up? Taking on the collapse of meaning as a theme for art is a risky, ambiguous move. For one thing, we want to accord a certain respect to the storytelling surrounding art. We don't just walk in and free associate in front of objects. We want to know what the artist means. So, Heikes's insistence on a devalued narrative as the organizing principle for the show puts us in a tricky spot: Either we disregard the framework for understanding the art and simply Rorschach it, or we toe the interpretive line and add another sad reiteration to the worn-out pirate joke. These are hardly options that encourage much goodwill from the spectator.

If the objects are explained by the story, but the story doesn't mean anything, the whole affair can seem solipsistic, achingly meta, and more than a little precious. Genet's absurdist theater - cited in Heikes's press release - had definite political aims to accompany its attacks on meaning and interpretability. In this case, the most sympathetic reading is that Heikes's decision to defer meaning is a compromise with the unreasonable demands for significance placed on art: The gallery gets something to write up in a press release, and the artist buys himself a little room to explore.

Fortunately, enough goes on in the objects to warrant further exploration. The strongest pieces demonstrate an inventive approach to sculpture and drawing, and suggest a way out of the show's closed-circle logic. At his best, Heikes makes evocative and mysterious works that embody the virtues of the broken record: the way that a pattern emerges out of a glitch in a system and produces something new. These moments suggest that it's a good time to re-think the stories we feel compelled to tell, over and over, about what art is supposed to mean.