

The Highlights - Robin Rhode at Perry Rubenstein

Robin Rhode, *Juggla*, 2007

31 year-old South African artist Robin Rhode's recent New York solo show took place in Perry Rubenstein's three Chelsea venues. The largest space, on 23rd Street, housed the three-dimensional sculptures, a wall drawing and some photographs, while the larger of the two 24th Street spaces held photographic works, as well as a 16mm film. The smallest space was reserved for a single video projection.

Robin Rhode's most successful work skillfully, beautifully and intelligently conflates painting, photography, animation, performance and installation. He uses a medley of working methods to deal with issues that are often not addressed, or misaddressed, by the art world establishment. His work is overtly political without being clunky, and gracefully poetic without being cheesy.

I am most enamored with the photographic work. It is documentation of performance, incorporates drawing, and is presented as storyboards. In the first frame of *Wheel of Steel*, a piece comprised of nine digital images (15.5×22" each) arranged in a grid, we are looking down onto a turntable, drawn in chalk on what appears to be the street. In the second frame we see Rhode's hands placing the record to be 'played' down on the turntable. The selection is a late-night favorite, Zamfir... with his tour-de-force LP *Romance of the Pan Flute*. In the frames that follow, Rhode scratches the record like a DJ, with his chalk-drawn turntable arm. The previous locations of the scratches mark the record and the 'turntable,' creating an increasingly complex drawing. Employing the visual strategies of animation, Rhode collapses an extended length of time into one moment, while simultaneously presenting us with the series of steps that were required to get there. The collapse of time into this non-linear form, coupled with the lo-fi materials used, suggests a high-low linkage to our digital moment and the digital divide.

In the piece entitled *Juggla*, Rhode's friend Vernon Scholtz interacts with black 'balls' painted on a white exterior wall, appearing to juggle them. The residues of the balls' previous positions are visible on the wall as the juggler interacts with their changing locations. The piece is installed as a grid of 20 digital photographs, 4 across and 5 down, 21×14" each. Drawing parallels between the idea of the juggler (minstrel, clown, beloved scamp) with that of the the artist, Rhodes acknowledges his performative role, as entertainer to the elite.

In *Candle*, a 16mm looped projected film, Rhode attempts to light a drawing of a candle.

The film inverts with the flicker of the flame, from light illuminating darkness to darkness defining light. The dark charcoal line of the candle turns to white chalk, while Rhode's wool hat and skin tones flip from shades of blacks and dark grays to shades of white, illuminated by the darkness. How light defines or mis-defines darkness, what is black and what is white, and who or what controls these reads are just some of the questions that are alluded to through this beautiful and subtle film.

The 13-minute video projection entitled *Storyteller* is a collaboration with dancer Jean-Baptiste Andre and composer Didier Petit. Rhode's drawing of a tree expands and contracts, ebbing and flowing to the music, as Andre interacts with it. I wanted the piece to be successful, but felt that it fell short of its mark. The movements and the interaction of the dancer with the drawing, and his relationship to the music, did not feel specific enough. I believe the intention of this piece was sincere, but that it was not played out to an effective end by the choreography.

I was initially nonplussed by the sculptures in the 24th Street space. They looked like 'Art', which isn't necessarily a bad thing, but isn't necessarily a good thing either. I'm still not sure if the information I garnered about the sculptural pieces saves them for me, or if I am just making excuses for them, but I did appreciate the works more after finding out the following information: the green carved soap bicycle lying beside a pail of soap and water, entitled *Soap and Water*, refers to the class status that is equated with owning a bicycle in South Africa, and to several chalk-drawn bicycle pieces that Rhode was known for earlier in his career. Spade, a gold-plated shovel in a pile of charcoal dust, brings the gold mines of South Africa right here to Chelsea, where we (maybe you?) can buy the idea of them. And in *Empties*, hand-blown replicas of Carling beer bottles reach towards the ceiling, their necks elongated like trees in red crates. This, too, is a South African reference, recalling the struggle against Apartheid, when an underground T-shirt designer made an infamous shirt using the local beer's label, changing it from "Black Label, White Carling Beer" to "Black Labour, White Guilt."

Robin Rhode is obviously a rising star whose work has been well-lauded internationally. I imagine that the mandatory backlash against this very interesting artist's work will come soon as well. I believe that Rhode has staying power, and will survive and thrive within the current swell of interest in his work to have a long and varied career. I look forward to his further explorations.