



ART LIES

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DiverseWorks - by John Devine -



My Barbarian, *Post-Living Ante Action Theater (PoLAAT): Post-Paradise, Sorry-Again*, 2008; two-channel digital video; courtesy the artists; photo by Ben Tecumseh DeSoto



Joseph Smolinski, *Tree Turbine at MASS MoCA*, 2008; QuickTime image slideshow, Kodak video frame; 9 x 6 inches; and *Tree Turbine Model, Suburban Home*, 2008; wood, stainless steel, model house, fan; 24 x 24 x 36 inches; courtesy the artist and Mixed Greens, New York; photo by Ben Tecumseh DeSoto

Solution, curated by Janet Phelps, brought together works by six individual artists and one collective, gathering them under the rubric of “progress.” In a short introduction to the exhibit, Phelps describes progress as “a question—a 10,000-year-old experiment we have participated in but seldom controlled.” That’s probably too optimistic. Progress implies a teleology, progression toward some end, be it Marx’ proletarian paradise or God’s kingdom on earth. It seems that mankind has pretty much just been muddling along for the last 10,000 years. There have been advances, to be sure. Thanks to innovations in agriculture and medicine, humans, on average, are taller, healthier and have doubled their life spans over the last half-millennium. Genomes are being mapped and the Hubble Space Telescope pushes our comprehension literally to the edges of the universe. But progress? Too much of humanity is still mired in ignorance and superstition, and for all the wealth and comfort that the Industrial Revolution and its technologies have wrought, we are still paying the piper.

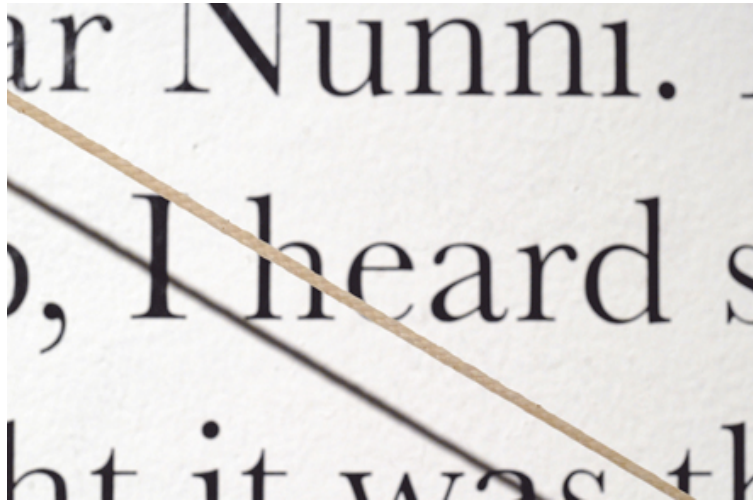
This is not to imply that Phelps is oblivious to this conundrum; it is a thankless curatorial task to come up with a conceptual umbrella under which to collect works in disparate media, with disparate agendas, that one happens to find interesting for disparate reasons. But to consider the works presented in *Solution* through the prism of “progress” would be a disservice to the artists. For the most part, their interests lie elsewhere.

Take Christopher K. Ho. Represented by several works, the largest is the split-screen video projection *Lesbian Mountains in Love*. According to the pamphlet, the mountains brought into adjacency on the split screen are Mt. Rainier in Washington State and Popocatepetl outside Mexico City. Separated by more than a thousand miles, the two lovers speak to one another in subtitled text borrowed from the collected works of Nicholas Sparks (he of *The Notebook* and *Message in a Bottle* fame)—dialogue that appears at the glacial pace of four-and-a-half-minute intervals. The pace emphasizes the banality of a conversation set against the vastness of geological time, the conventions of “timeless” love refracted through eons. Imagine a Robert Smithson catalogue published by Harlequin Romance.

Speaking of Smithson, Joseph Smolinski’s largest contribution to the exhibit, *Taking Back the Jetty*, greeted the viewer in the gallery’s anteroom. This digital animation, a reaction to news stories about the leasing of oil rights in the Great Salt Lake, depicts Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* in the foreground and an oil platform in the lake. After a minute or so, the platform explodes, sending waves washing over the jetty. Leaving aside the questionable politics of industrial sabotage (does Smolinski really want to borrow tactics from John D. Rockefeller?), one wonders if Smithson would be concerned that any man-made structure encroached upon the “pristine” site of his intervention.



Jeanine Oleson, *Greater New York Smudge Cleanse* (still), 2008; video documentation, fabric, wood, pain; dimensions variable; courtesy the artist



Nina Katchadourian, *A Leak in the Feeling*, 2009; plastic buckets, water, wooden dowel rods, string, photographs, vinyl; dimensions variable; courtesy the artist and Sara Meltzer Gallery, New York; photo by Ben Tecumseh DeSoto

Around the corner, **Smolinski** offers works that directly address the title of the exhibit. Fascinated by cellphone towers disguised as trees, he wondered what other identities trees could take on. Inspired by the many aesthetic objections to wind turbines, he created the *Tree Turbine* project, represented here by a QuickTime slideshow of a Tree Turbine installed at MASS MoCA, a small, shelf-mounted model of a Tree Turbine and a suburban home, a digital animation of turbines providing power in various situations and the lovely drawing *Spinning Trees for Spent Oil, Dubai*.

The spirits of Joseph Beuys and the New York happenings of the late fifties and early sixties haunt the videos of the Los Angeles-based collective My Barbarian (Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon and Alexandro Segade) and New York-based Jeanine Oleson. The former's two-channel video depicts the collective and recruits rehearsing and performing *Post-Paradise, Sorry Now* at the New Museum in New York. Referencing two 1968 performances, one by the Living Theatre (New York) and a critical response by antitheater (Munich), the performance is an attempt to translate 1960s theatrical tropes (improvisation, audience participation, social taboo) into the twenty-first century in yet another attempt to foster social and political action. Similarly, Jeanine Oleson evokes shamanistic practices in *Greater New York Smudge Cleanse*, a series of performances around New York intended to cleanse the city of negative energy by burning a large sage stick, a ten-foot example of which lay nearby on the floor. The earnestness of these performances is touching; whatever gods there may be know that we cynics need such idealism to keep us honest. Still, both My Barbarian and Jeanine Oleson's performances convey more wishful thinking than substantive solutions.

Nina Katchadourian and Michael Waugh provide the two most engaging works in the exhibit. Katchadourian most directly approaches the exhibit's premise with *A Leak in the Feeling*. Excerpts from letters between her maternal grandparents (she declaring the depth of her feeling for him, and he confessing he's overwhelmed, deflecting feelings to an account of his solution to the problem of a rainwater leak in his ceiling as he was trying to sleep) are posted on a freestanding wall. Katchadourian has reimagined a solution: a leaking bucket atop the wall by a photograph of her youthful grandfather passes its drops to a length of string running on a diagonal across the wall to a bucket on the floor, into which drops of water fall underneath a photograph of her grandmother. The work is an elegant tribute, both to the artist's grandparents and to the passions and confusions of youth.

Michael Waugh's large ink-on-Mylar drawings, *Decline and Fall*, are hung on the other side of that same wall. A bear cradling a dead deer and a wolf astride a dead fawn flank and look toward the third drawing: a rather effete bear hugging itself. But what really gets your attention is the line work in these drawings—it's written text, select excerpts from Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. There is a somewhat labored effort to draw connections between the argument that Christianity feminized the Romans

in the face of barbarian invasions and the American radical right's contention that expansion of rights to women and gays is similarly weakening this country, presented in these drawings as something of a satire. Whatever the inspiration, these drawings are a tour de force of draftsmanship.

If *Solution* proposed very few, that's not really a problem. Solutions are for engineers, therapists and ministers—not artists. Artists make art, and art helps us to ask better questions. *Solution* brought together the work of some intriguing artists who are pursuing interesting ideas and issues. In the end, that may be solution enough.

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