

## "Vile Bodies"

MICHAEL WERNER

The bodies in this group exhibition may have been *vile*—they certainly weren't classically ideal—but they were absolutely distinctive. "Vile Bodies," which extended to the gallery's London branch, was full of various stylistic persuasions. Take, for instance, the linear clarity of Lucio Fontana's drawing *Nudo* (Nude), ca. 1956–59; the bawdiness of Joseph Beuys's sketch *Josephine*, 1954; or the expressionistic zeal of Don Van Vliet's gouache on paper *Untitled* (Woman), 1986. Yet its major through line, as the title of the exhibition made clear, was a



Jörg Immendorff, *Gestatten. Mein Name ist Geschichte!* (Permit Me, My Name Is History!), 2005, oil on canvas, 59 x 51 1/4". From "Vile Bodies."

roiling contempt for the human form. Women, in particular, were treated with a morbid curiosity (all of the works were by male artists, many of whom seemed to have a jaundiced view of the opposite sex). Thus Beuys thrusts his subject's vulva in our faces, spectacularly announcing his castration anxiety while defending himself against it by turning its owner into an abject insect, à la Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, or something out of Wolfgang Lederer's 1968 book *The Fear of Women*, a treatise on the depiction of women by men in art and culture throughout history. Other examples included Enrico David's painting, *Untitled*, 2017, in which a woman is made into a specter, bound up within a grid, and Jörg Immendorff's *Gertrude*, 2001, a bronze figure who has stones bound to her feet and is thereby forced

to walk with a pair of canes. Eugène Leroy's *Untitled*, 1980, was a drawing of a chthonic female built up with smears of charcoal, pastel, and gouache. And in Hans Arp's sculpture *Figure recueillie* (Self-Absorbed), 1956, one could locate a vaguely sinister quality in the object's serpentine form and phallic head.

But there were works in "Vile Bodies" where abstraction and fantasy are what do the human figure injustice, such as James Lee Byars's ironic and self-deprecating sculpture *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1959, in which he renders himself as a plump stick figure sitting dejectedly on the floor, with a tiny dark ball for a head. Luckily, Byars's effigy got a subtle lift by being in close proximity to another Immendorff piece, *Gestatten. Mein Name ist Geschichte!* (Permit Me, My Name Is History!), 2005. The painting reproduces an illustration of a flayed man from Andreas Vesalius's multivolume anatomical study *On the Fabric of the Human Body* (1543). The work's incisive and confrontational renderings of organs and muscles appear in sharp contrast to the blue-gray form painted right next to it—an almost primordial figure that nearly vanishes into the background. Hitler would have called everything here "degenerate art." The show accurately laid out that the body is no longer as praiseworthy, to use Aristotle's conception of it, as it once was. It has lost the nobility and dignity, the godlikeness, it had in classical art. The necessary interrogation of the human form in modern and contemporary art has led to an estranged—or rather, warped—relationship to our own bodies. The desperation this has yielded is palpable, despite all the (seemingly useless) "wellness" movements currently in vogue. The body, as Freud wrote, is the first, or foundational, ego. We have lost this foundation because the body is believed to be incurably sick, as "Vile Bodies" made disquietingly apparent.

—Donald Kuspit

## "Intimate Infinite: Imagine a Journey"

LÉVY GORVY

Featuring scores of small works spread across three floors, "Intimate Infinite: Imagine a Journey" wasn't your typical survey of exquisite works by historically significant makers and thinkers. Lévy Gorvy mounted a museum-quality exhibition that few art institutions would have had the courage or means to organize. It was packed with idiosyncratic and rarely seen paintings, constructions, and works on paper. As the title suggests, the exhibition was utterly transporting, designed to submerge the viewer in "the work of artists who collapse the vastness of infinity into tangible dimensions." You had to rewire yourself before entering each of the gallery's three levels, which were full of astounding surprises.

Brett Gorvy, the show's curator as well as one of the gallery's co-founders, presented refreshing takes on abstraction, systemic painting, and Surrealism. His engaging interpretations were predicated on our drawing close to the mostly small-scale objects on view—a subtle act of curatorial mesmerism. The walls facing west were lined with panels by Robert Ryman and Cy Twombly. Almost all of the Ryman paintings featured moments of green peeking through layers of white. Instead of being sidetracked by a more calorie-packed palette, the viewer could easily notice the various ways the small surfaces had been activated by the use of just a couple of hues. Since two of the three Twomblys (the third was from his suite of blackboard paintings) were also predominantly white, looking at both artists' images didn't feel like comparing apples to oranges. Never having associated the two painters with one another, I was startled to realize that they occupied both sides of the same coin in terms of formal discipline and painterly sensitivity. As always, Twombly's assertive marks were a visual feast. And Twombly's magic was palpable even on modestly scaled surfaces, as evidenced by *Untitled*, 1961, a piece measuring about twelve by sixteen inches.

Obsessiveness expressed in the form of repetitive gestures and patterns dominated the works on the second floor. There were examples of unusual offerings by artists such as Günther Uecker, Piero Manzoni, and Alberto Burri, who are still rarely seen in US galleries and museums. The stars and stripes of two encaustic flag paintings by Jasper Johns—a red, white, and blue version featuring a portrait of the artist and art historian Suzi Gablik (*Flag*, 1965) and a gray one hung vertically (*Flag*, 1971)—along with his *White Target*, a creamy-white encaustic target from 1958, set the tone for the art surrounding them. Nevertheless, when you're taking in works comprised of countless nails (Uecker) kaolin pleats (Manzoni), and kneaded erasers (Hannah Wilke's work was also on view), Johns seems a tad conservative. Wondrous wall reliefs from John Chamberlain (*Untitled*, 1961) and Lee Bontecou (*Untitled*, 1960, and *Untitled*, 1959) added to the astonishment permeating these groupings of art. Multiple times, I came away feeling as if I was seeing work by these artists anew. Certainly, I had never associated these particular Europeans with these particular Americans.

Jean Dubuffet, *Le strabique*, 1953, butterfly wings and gouache on paperboard, 9 3/4 x 7". From "Intimate Infinite: Imagine a Journey."





On the top floor, Surrealism had never felt fresher. I found I was “reading” the many intimate works—by the likes of Hans Bellmer, Claude Cahun, Bruce Conner, Jean Dubuffet, Max Ernst, and Henri Michaux—as if they were texts. In order to appreciate the fine (and in some instances, gut-wrenching) imagery, you had to look closely. It was hard to believe that the figures and landscapes in a handful of collages by Dubuffet were comprised of butterfly wings—scores of them. Time seemed to stand still as boxes by Joseph Cornell and Lucas Samaras enraptured and enchanted. Czech artist Maria Bartusová’s impressive plaster sculpture *Untitled*, ca. 1966, called to mind related works by Alberto Giacometti and Isamu Noguchi. Other paintings and works on paper by Vija Celmins, Brice Marden, Joan Miró, and Yves Tanguy were more familiar. Nevertheless, these enigmatic objects underscored the theme of adventure Gorvy skillfully wrought here—marvelously so.

—Phyllis Tuchman

## WATER MILL, NEW YORK

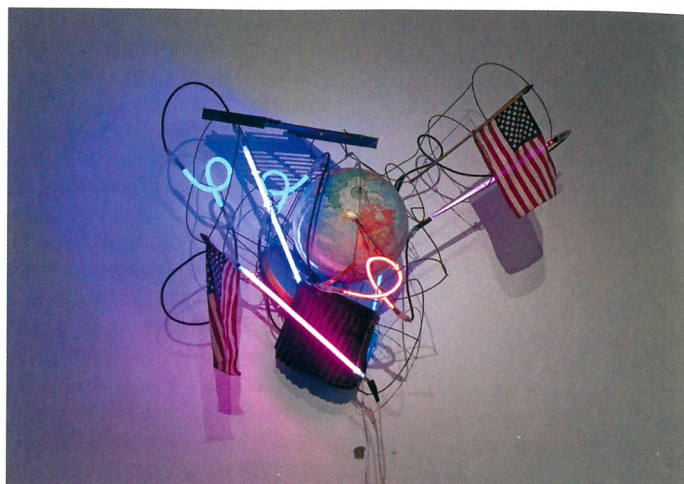
### Keith Sonnier

PARRISH ART MUSEUM

It comes as a surprise that “Keith Sonnier: Until Today,” a selection of thirty-nine works made between 1967 and this year, really is “the first comprehensive museum survey to consider the arc of this iconic artist’s achievement,” as curator Jeffrey Grove writes in the catalogue. After all, Sonnier has been a renowned figure for five decades; by thirty he’d exhibited at the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, and at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He also participated in legendary shows such as Lucy Lippard’s “Eccentric Abstraction” at New York’s Fischbach Gallery in 1966; “9 at Leo Castelli” (organized by Robert Morris) at New York’s Castelli Warehouse in 1968; and, in 1969, both Harald Szeemann’s “Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form” at the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland and James Monte and Marcia Tucker’s “Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials” at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. Sonnier was a protagonist of the burgeoning post-Minimal or “anti-form” trend then widely seen, in Lippard’s words, as “opening up new areas of materials, shape, color, and sensual experience” in sculpture—and in which, per Morris, “considerations of ordering are necessarily casual and imprecise and unemphasized.” This was the milieu in which such now-canonical figures as Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman, and Richard Serra emerged. Why hasn’t Sonnier been accorded similar prestige?

Martin Filler’s catalogue essay implies that it might be because Sonnier’s “protean nature challenges the received notion that creative development is a linear process,” but the selection of work here doesn’t really bear this out. Yes, the artist made lateral moves regularly enough, but not all of them were successful: Works incorporating found objects—a pair of US flags and a globe in *USA: War of the Worlds*, 2004, for instance—tend to lack the offhand elegance that characterizes much of Sonnier’s work, and are instead fairly generic assemblage sculptures; likewise, some painted Hydrocal blobs (among them *Elgin Fragment I, II, and III*, all 2011) add little to the familiar realm of gritty biomorphic sculpture. The 1975 sound installation *Quad Scan*, which brings elusive wisps of ship-to-shore transmissions into the gallery, only weakly fulfills its promise “to bring distant places into one volume.”

On the other hand, some subtly colored, geometrically compact bamboo constructions made in India in 1981 are among Sonnier’s best. Still, if he is going to have a lasting place in the history of art—as he should—it’s not going to be as an uncategorizable chameleon like Morris or Nauman, but for his most familiar role, as a pioneer in the use of neon, often in combination with glass (or, later, Plexiglas) or



aluminum. Or maybe my use of the word *pioneer* is misleading, because the ultimate value of Sonnier’s neon works lies not in the fact that he was an early adopter of the medium but in the way he uses it: inventively, with a sense of delicacy and precision, and with a profoundly architectural feeling for each work’s relationship to the wall, floor, or both (and even, in *Passage Azur*, 2015/2018, to the ceiling). Perhaps because he is so attuned to neon’s sensuous qualities—“psychologically very loaded and erotic,” as he once put it—he can use it in a quasi-structuralist mode without minimizing its allure, as in the early *Ba-O-Ba I*, 1969 (he glosses its title, presumably in the Louisiana Cajun dialect with which he grew up, as a reference to “the effect of moonlight on the skin”), or in the more recent *Rectangle Diptych*, 2013, which seems to be its rectilinear companion. In works such as *Circle Portal A and B*, both 2015, by contrast, he graffiti the wall with his neon colors in a bout of outrageous freedom and humor, yet the works retain the intensity that bespeaks the seriousness of his intent. If we’ve yet to take the true measure of Sonnier’s accomplishment, it’s because we still haven’t let him convince us that neon can be used with a range that rivals those of stone, wood, or steel.

—Barry Schwabsky

## CHICAGO

### Josh Reames

ANDREW RAFACZ

In each of the four paintings in Josh Reames’s exhibition “BO-DE-GAS,” uniformly distributed idiomatic images floated graphically on raw canvas surfaces. Punctuating each of the intimate gallery’s four walls, the paintings were supplemented with three black, wall-mounted handrails that sported a selection of attitude-declaring bumper stickers. The works are stylistically indebted to the appropriation work of the 1980s, such as the commodity-driven, logo-festooned work of Ashley Bickerton, Matt Mullican, and Peter Nagy, and to the later work of Laura Owens. Yet Reames’s lexicon of found imagery is devoid of critical engagement with the updated questions of authorship, originality, and the authority of painting. Instead, his paintings imitate and aggregate languages of critique, not as a counterposition but as a nullification of those conditions of representation.

*Wheres my gun*, 2018, comprised a taxonomy of images—a black-and-white illustration of a skeletal hand, a directional arrow, a distorted police badge, a flute, a lizard’s foot, and a contour of a cartoon horse. These commonplace signs are interspersed with abstract paint

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