Brooklyn Dispatches
by James Kalm
Signs and Omens: A Reading

December 2007/ January 2008

How far can it go before it pops? With a market bulging like an overinflated Macy's Parade balloon on the verge of bursting, cultural soothsayers are scanning recent events, like the entrails of a sacrificial chicken, for clues to its future direction.

Peddling north on Bedford, the Indian summer sun is setting as I pass the North 7th Street subway exit. The L train disgorges its homeward bound hoards while a twitchy hipster works the crowd, panhandles for a dose of boutique cappuccino. "If I don't get a caffeine fix soon, it's not gonna be pretty - can you spare $4.50 for a soy latte?" A pathetic case of a caffeine jones, an absurdist slice of street theater sklyy goading the changing demographics of central Williamsburg?

If you've ever thought there was "independence" or "divergent opinions" within the mainstream commercial art press, open your eyes. The November issue of ARTnews (in the run-up to a year-end art jamboree on the east side) featured a headline, "ART HAS BECOME A FRONT FOR APPARENTLY HUMAN FEARS." A pathetic case of a caffeine jones, an absurdist slice of street theater sklyy goading the changing demographics of central Williamsburg?

Plywood fences surrounding condo tower construction sites are all too common throughout the Bedfrod/Metropolitan sector of the 'burg. Developers and brokers have displaced sizable populations of the local artsy crowd with fear and dread. But in Chelsea, when the plywood came down after a two-year project on West 25th Street, we were greeted by a twenty-story, gleamingly Legs break up the furniture's strict, angular aesthetic; the backs of chairs, with slender square metal legs, on top.

David Walentas has a vision for DUMBO and, despite being the area's biggest developer, that vision includes a hefty dose of cultural amenities. For over a decade he has subsidized rents for two of Brooklyn's most provocative publicly funded art spaces, the Dumbo Arts Center and Smack Mellon Gallery. Under his patronage, the St. Ann's Warehouse has become one of New York City's hottest off-Broadway theaters. 111 Front Street (another Walentas property), with its two-story plate glass entrance and the word "GALLERIES" emblazoned on an orange wall, could be mistaken for a navel of the art world. Apparently high-minded art.

With its ever-burgeoning development, Williamsburg faces a cold future, something out of Fritz Lang's Metropolis. Yet I can't help but ask: if the artists made the area desirable, will what be its attraction once they, along with their galleries, theaters and clubs, have all been pushed out? Just take a look at DUMBO,

where over the last decade many longtime artists and residents have been priced out of the zone and architectural excesses now dominate the massive bridge anchorages. But despite this steroidal boom, a few developers with insight and a view toward the future have seen the advantages of maintaining at least an appearance of artsy inclusiveness.

I dropped by Smack Mellon on a recent sunny Sunday. Its impressive space and huge windows facing the East River provided a perfect setting for the installation New Monuments to My Love Life by Peter Dudek. Filling the main gallery area, this piece seems to parody many of the "GALLERIES" emblazoned on an orange wall, could be mistaken for a navel of the art world. Apparently high-minded art.

"White Cotton Panties" (1994), the more articulate and somehow plucked down here in Brooklyn. A run through its second floor revealed no fewer than twenty-five galleries and design studios, and though a number of them exude a "commercial" ambiance, at least we've been spared "Blue Dog" or "Thomas Kinkade" galleries (so far).

Marilyn Minter contributes two paintings on aluminum. "White Cotton Panties" (1994), the more articulate and satisfying of the two, is a crotch shot blow-up focusing on a voluptuous, barely contained female pubic mound. Leaving a wide margin of bare aluminum as a framing device, Minter uses drippy flesh-tones as a base upon which she applies photo-silkscreen. There's a thickness to the screened dots, utilized and manipulated by licking, runny brushstrokes, that reinforces the painterly qualities of the photo elements in contrast to the hard metallic surface. The pictorial irony of panties reduced to little more than a white band stretched over succulent swells of pubic hair, all graphically rendered on an unfurling metal surface, is a cagy and sophisticated study of content in opposition to means.

Marina Adams, one of the curators, is showing what might at first sight be considered straight abstractions. In "Venus in the Sky with Diamonds" (2007), interlocking shapes in shades of green, gray and salmon recall camouflage patterns; over this Adams lays the thick, smooth, flat Japanese woodcut, these starkly diagrammatic figures present a subtle subversion and musky tang to apparently high-minded art.

Narrow shelves, filled with quirky small sculptures like artifacts from a cartoon cargo cult, line a section of beige wall. Below, a lean-to of rough shingles echoes the theme of tropical "primitiveness." In this untitled installation from 2007 by The Third Leg with Leidy Churchman and Sam Lopes, simple groupings of painted branch cuttings, lashed sticks, and tufts of grass become efficacious of post-coital couples, complete with smoldering cigarettes and horny dogs; a skein of sivous black hair hangs like a trophy pubic wig above a small bottle of hair dye; and what could be phallic prosthetics or sadomasochistic implements, crudely fashioned from rope and fabric, are displayed on a rack like souvenirs for sex tourists crafted by a TV-worshiping post-stone age tribe.

Also included in this exhibition are A.K. Burns, Boris Torres, Chitra Ganesh, Doreen Garner, Ed Faik and Dewanye Slightweight, David Humphrey, Kathe Burkhart, Mickalene Thomas, Suzanne McClelland, Ulrike Müller, Vanessa Chimera and Will Villalongo.