

# Art

MONTHLY

JUL-AUG 2002 / No 258 / UK £3.50 US\$6.50

## ■ Paris in Brooklyn

Various venues New York April 26 to June 26

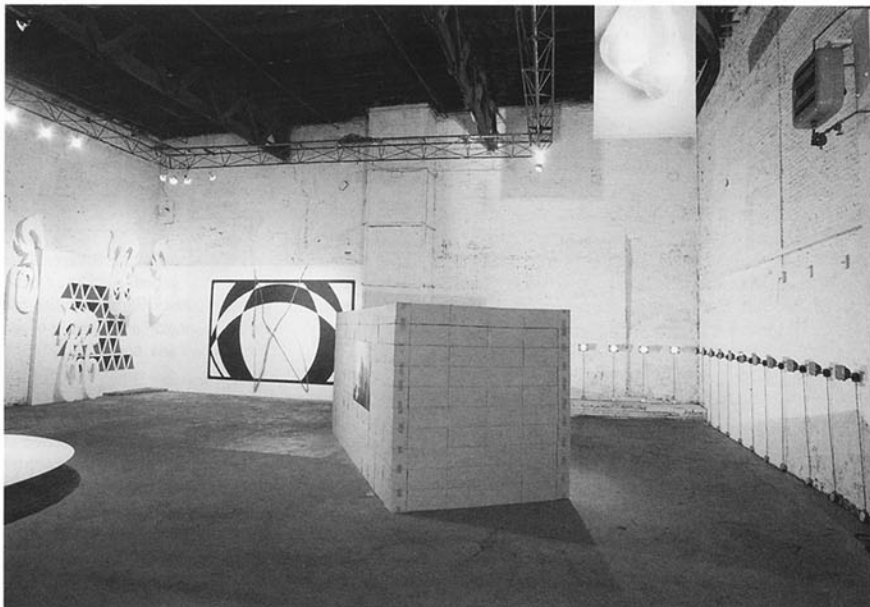
An exchange of artists between galleries based in the blue-chip Marais quarter of Paris and the rougher but hipper Brooklyn districts of Williamsburg and DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass) must have seemed like an intriguing prospect to its organisers, but the reality ruffles few feathers. There are successes and there are failures, but nothing particularly outré, distinctly French, or distinctly anything. Whilst it contains some real pleasures, the point of the enterprise remains obscure, looking suspiciously like an experiment in marketing rather than a genuine attempt to spark off international dialogue. Contemporary Brooklyn is prone to accelerating gentrification, and engineered face-offs with European capitals can only add fuel to the fire.

Nine galleries and a museum are involved in the Brooklyn end of the deal, showing individuals and groups, the established and the emerging. The venues themselves range from the cavernous (Smack Mellon) to the minuscule (Plus Ultra), from the slightly tumble-down (Southfirst:Art) to the slightly smart (Pierogi), and the art they house is nothing if not well matched to each host. It proves well nigh impossible, however, to distinguish up-and-coming pretenders from established stars.

At Pierogi, one of Brooklyn's longest-established commercial spots, Christophe Cuzin shows a site-specific installation *Bienpeintmalpeint*, 2002. Taking a direct cue from Sol LeWitt, Cuzin has worked, for the past 15 years, to a system of standardised constraints that govern the possible outcomes of his architectural interventions. He paints walls and furniture different colours, reproduces architectural elements as monochrome canvases, emphasises certain features and conceals others, always responding to the circumstances of a site as he finds it. As the work's title suggests, two of Pierogi's walls have been painted well (evenly, with a neat border) and two poorly (unevenly, with broad strokes and thin, dripping paint). Both are a cheerful yellow. Cuzin fulfills his promise to alter our perception of the space, but his project seems more than a little dated, here lacking even the satisfying sharpness of comparable explorations by Lothar Götz.

At Southfirst:Art, Isabelle Lévénéz shows a series of watercolours accompanied by a pair of videos and a chalked wall drawing. Contrasting absolutely with Cuzin's pared-down formalism, Lévénéz's work bleeds content. The watercolours record her attempt to inhabit the mind and body of a child implicated in the sexual fantasies of adults. That these fantasies are often acted out through the medium of Catholic ritual gives the work an added topicality. Each of the watercolours, collectively titled *Mes 9 ans veulent te parler* ('My 9 years want to speak to you'), 2000, includes scrawled texts, of which 'When I was little the priest always had damp fingers when he put the body of Christ in our mouths' is a typical example. The accompanying images depict silhouetted figures exchanging bodily fluids, awash in liquid red. It is all rather overheated for a pleasant Spring afternoon, and while the vein that Lévénéz taps is unarguably rich in potential, her underdeveloped technique makes for a disappointingly crude result.

'Paris in Brooklyn'  
at Smack Mellon  
installation view



Saadane Afif and Fabien Verschaere are showing at Parker's Box courtesy of their Parisian dealer Michel Rein. While hardly amounting to the collaborative installation promised, Afif and Verschaere's contrasting projects do seem to have something to say to each other. Upon entering the gallery, we are confronted with the tail end of a parade of black and white watercolour drawings made by Verschaere directly onto the wall. Snaking around the corner and into the main space are images of keys and candles, flags and insects, razor blades and teardrops, rendered simply but with enormous charm. There are also more complex and surreal combinations of objects and figures: the body of a man sprouting flowering branches; a gun shooting bubbles; a beetle proffering a crown. There is a lot going on, and still more in *Seventy Five Drawings*, 2002, an array of small works on paper. Their combination of naïveté and strangeness lends them the distinctly unsettling quality of the darker fairy tales. Considered alongside the likes of Jean-François Moriceau and Petra Mrzyk, they also represent a current French interest in large-scale, semi-improvisational, jam session drawing, inspired by everything from underground comics to telephone doodles to street graffiti.

Afif comes across as a kind of Gallic Jim Lambie, knocking together down-home/glamorous sculptures from the detritus of contemporary pop culture. *Paradise*, 2002, is an orchid sprouting from a cardboard box, while in *National*, 2002, three items of thrift-store clothing are sewn together into a makeshift Tricolore. A simple poster, *Black Flag*, 2000, and a set of variously sized spinning mirrorballs, *Don't Worry*, 2002, have more than a hint of Jeremy Deller about them. Afif's laid-back strategy typically makes for hit-or-miss results, but here he gets the balance just about right. The degree to which each object or juxtaposition is tweaked also makes for a neat three-dimensional counterpoint to Verschaere's off-kilter sketches.

Another attempt to pair up two- and three-dimensional work is made by Damien Cabanes, showing at Plus Ultra alongside Didier Mencoboni and Corinne Sentou. While the dual strands of his work are conceptually divergent (*Aveyron, Eté*, 2001, is a roughly-brushed landscape extending across four sheets of paper, while his diminutive untitled twists of painted clay from 1998 have no obvious referent), they share an easy-going sensibility. Cabanes' work, primarily concerned as it appears to be with fairly straightforward formal exploration, is well matched with that of the other two artists, who are also here courtesy of Galerie Eric Dupont.

Didier Mencoboni's *Up and Down* and *Lay* (both of 2002) are summery confections of ice-cream coloured gouache on paper, in which teetering stacks of slender lozenge shapes collapse lazily into pure white space. A

kind of painterly Jenga, Mencoboni's approach is concerned with nothing but itself, and as such is effortlessly beguiling. Corinne Sentou, taking the opportunity to air a less effusive side of her similarly playful practice, contributes a set of four small collages that recall Dean Hughes in their quiet-day-at-the-office post-minimalist fiddling.

Finally, Smack Mellon plays host to *Rendez-Vous*, for which Claire Le Restif invited seven artists to make or adapt work on site. Of all the spaces discussed here, this is by far the largest, and most of the contributors to the exhibition choose to confront its scale directly by working big – really big. Paul Pourreau, for example, weighs in with a van-sized block of taped-together cardboard boxes into which are inserted two photographs. The first depicts the image of a chateau projected onto a collapsing wall of boxes, the other, a helmeted figure punching a wall. Pourreau's experience in set design might lead one to expect a more sophisticated arrangement, but on this occasion at least he seems happy merely to hint at the creative possibilities of DIY demolition. On the evidence of his video *X-Man Rodeo*, 2000, Hughes Reip is less reticent about taking things apart. A pity then that this jerky, stop-motion, drills-eye tour of an empty studio building loops back to the start just as it is really getting going.

Taking this admittedly selective sample as a guide then, Paris still seems off the pace, more often than not providing minute variations on an array of strategies already nearing exhaustion. Brooklynites (gallerists and artists, there are plenty of both) would do well to pay heed and consider this exchange worthwhile, if only as a cautionary tale. Mastery of one's own scene necessarily precedes international ambition, but offers no guarantees. That the galleries involved in this exchange, on both sides of the Atlantic, have the will to realise such an experiment is encouraging, but they must already be pondering its broader implications. ■

Paris in Brooklyn took place in the following galleries

## ■ Brooklyn à Paris

Various venues Paris June 5 to July 13

The second part of an exchange programme between Paris and New York sees nine French galleries hosting exhibitions of young Brooklyn-based artists. Christine Ollier, one of the main organisers of the scheme and director of the Galerie Les Filles du Calvaire in Paris, hopes that this first project will herald the beginning of a spate of other partnerships with different cultural capitals.

The idea to 'shake up the international scene of the big market and of big biennial events' was conceived at the Stockholm Art Fair last year, where an encounter between some of the New York and Paris galleries revealed, it is claimed, many affinities and common interests – such as a spirit of innovation, experimentation and discovery. In the last five years Brooklyn has seen a host of new, mainly artist-run spaces springing up. Similarly, many young French gallerists have recently opened spaces in the Marais area of Paris, and it is this apparent dynamism, concentrated in a particular area of the two different cities, that has drawn the partners together.

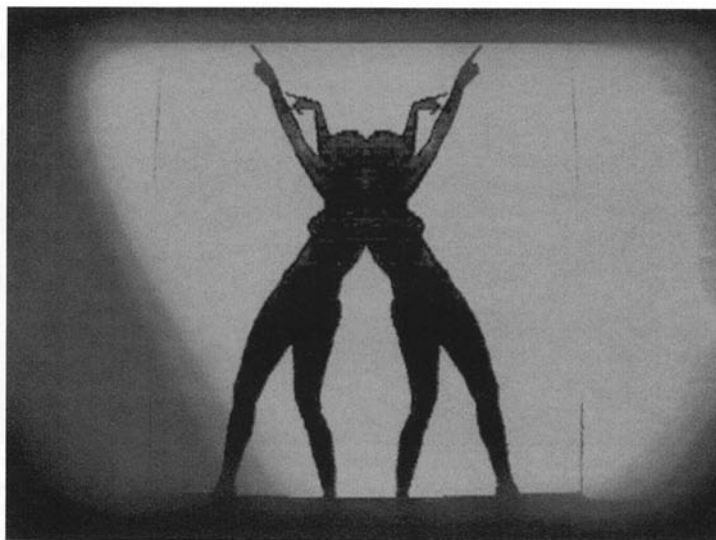
Smack Mellon Studios, a complex of studios and a gallery space in Brooklyn, are showing at the Espace Paul Ricard. Curated by the Studios' director Kathleen Gilrain, the exhibition is entitled 'Play, Splay, Play ... The Invisible Scalpel of an Anatomical Aesthetic', a reference to the obsessive habit of taking things apart which is displayed by the artists included. For example, Jennifer & Kevin McCoy's video suitcase *Every Anvil*, 2001, is a video database drawn from over 100 episodes of Looney Tunes cartoons from the 40s and 50s. You can find 'Every fall from a great height', 'Every kiss', 'Every unconscious', 'Every moment of realisation' and so on. David Baskin has taken apart his grandparents' furniture in order to cast it in urethane rubber. The casts are splayed out flat against the wall, an armchair in garish red, a chest of drawers in sickly pink. *A History of Unmanned Flight*, 2001, a video work by Melissa Dubbin & Aaron S Davidson, juxtaposes the elegant and effortless flight of birds with a narrated catalogue of man's laborious and mostly suicidal efforts to fly.

Artists from Roebbing Hall show at the Galerie Les Filles du Calvaire. Guy Richards Smit's video *Ballad of Bad Orpheus*, 2000, is a burlesque rock opera: Orpheus, a self-obsessed lady-killer on shore leave, is stabbed to death by a jealous fellow sailor. Wounded and dying, consoled by his love Eurydice, Orpheus reproaches his killer, 'Why me, not you?'. The characters burst with suppressed emotion, parodies of themselves. Christoph Draeger works with found images and footage: *Kuwait*, 2000, is a huge photograph of the oil wells left burning during the Gulf War that has been stamped out as a jigsaw puzzle. *Ode to a Sad Song*, 2001, shows a solitary caravan being engulfed in flames whilst a video-collage made from footage of space launches and plane crashes – both real and fictional – adds to the overall sense of carnage in Draeger's work. Sebastiaan Bremer works mostly with large-format photographs he has taken of friends and family; he covers these with a layer of intricate dots, so that the original image beneath becomes barely decipherable. The dots could be seen as another layer of consciousness – dreams, reflections, memories; in *Garupaba II*, 2000, for example, the kitchen sink in the photograph is transformed into a gushing fountain and the ceiling is hung with exotic lanterns and plants, like Ali Baba's cave.

Schroeder Romero has sent work by Peter Hendrick to Galerie Anne Barrault. Hendrick's photographs of buildings illuminated from within are taken at dusk, giving them a haunting, romantic quality. Just around the corner, Chez Valentin plays host to Momenta Art @ Four Walls. Mike Ballou presents a multi-screened sculpture for watching artists' videos. The entire contraption, which includes three monitors housed in trumpet-shaped metal casings, balances on a small wooden chair. Also at Chez Valentin was Robert Boyd's performance for *The Virgin Collection*, 2001. Wearing in a wedding dress topped by a satin Ku Klux Klan hood rather than a veil, Boyd stood stock-still in the gallery holding a bouquet of white flowers. Two sinister, expressionless eyes prompted the disconcerting realisation that someone – and someone male – was actually inside the dress.

Joshua Stern's large black and white photographs (courtesy Parker's Box) on display at Galerie Michel Rein also bear Ku Klux Klan overtones. Using small wooden figures as his models and matches as their blazing torches, Stern creates scenes suggestive of disturbing

Stacy Greene  
*Rorschach Striptease*  
2001  
video still



violence. Showing alongside Stern is Tim Laun, whose split-screen video of an American football game seen from two different perspectives examines the way in which the world of sport is glamorised and distorted on television.

At the Espace Huit Novembre, linked to Star 67, Hide-nori Kondo also works with media representations. Taking adverts for brands such as Prada, Banana Republic or Dolce & Gabbana, Kondo removes the figures from the images, leaving only bland non-spaces, empty of identity. Ghostly shadows of the original inhabitants remain, making the images doubly uncanny. Sharon Paz's complex video works draw on memory and dreams, examining psychological and social behaviour, relationships, family, identity, sexuality, desire and need. Galerie Anton Weller hosts Sean Dack and Jane Callister from Southfirst:Art. Dack's video uses footage of Kurt Cobain's concert for the release of his album *Nevermind*. Scenes of crowd hysteria are interspersed with images of Cobain and his band smashing their equipment. All this takes place in polarised colour to a dull, crashing soundtrack. The viewer is left disorientated and somehow frustrated.

Leslie Brack, Stacy Greene and Philip Riley have been sent by Plus Ultra to show at Galerie Eric Dupont. In Greene's video *Rorschach Striptease*, 2001, amateur strippers in silhouette are mirrored to become duos of themselves as they cavort on screen. Brack's colourful collage-based paintings use imagery drawn from popular culture as in *Snoop*, 2002, a small portrait of the rap artist Snoop Doggy Dog, surrounded incongruously by a border of flowers. Riley's wall drawing is an enormous

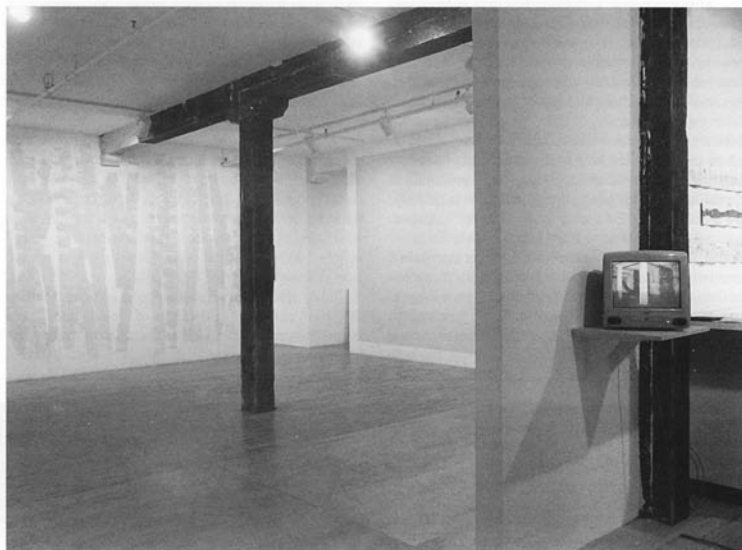
purple form, something between a jester's hat and a musical instrument, entitled *J'ai senti que tu aimais la musique* (I felt that you liked the music), 2002.

Finally, Galerie Bernard Jordan shows Joe Amrhein and Bruce Pearson. Amrhein, who runs Pierogi in Brooklyn and is a sign-painter by trade, layers texts, often taken from art journals, on vellum or glass, both as a criticism of a surfeit of theory and to tease out new meaning from the words. Pearson's paintings in carved Styrofoam are also text-based.

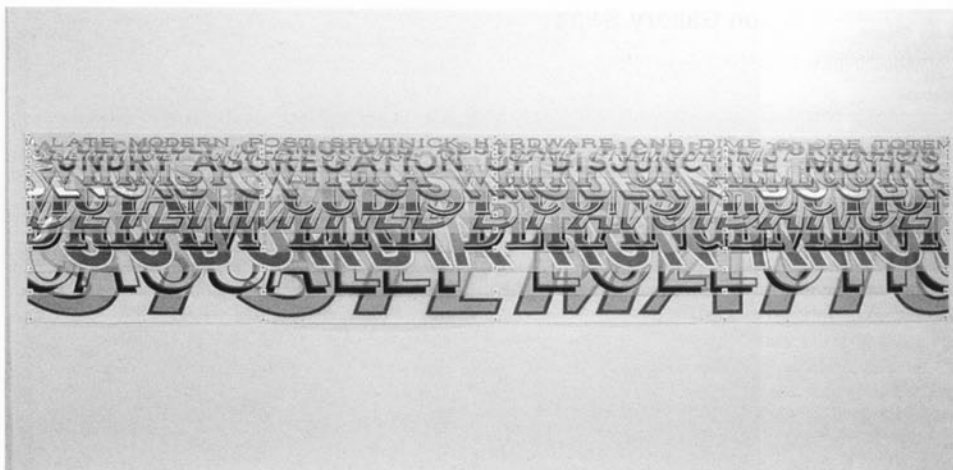
All this work is by turns funny, sinister, disconcerting and serious. It reveals a hive of activity in Brooklyn, which, with its proliferation of studios and alternative spaces, could be seen as the Hackney of New York. Although many of the artists draw on references from popular culture, which is arguably central to American culture and even to American art, what emerges is a wide range of concerns and approaches rather than an identifiable trend. The artists themselves are not all native to the US, adding to the breadth of experience, references and interests.

Coinciding almost exactly with the opening of the exhibitions in Paris, the French Ministry for Cultural Affairs published a report by Alain Quemin, a sociologist at l'Université de Marne-la-Vallée, on the influence of different countries on the art market and their international importance in terms of contemporary art. The report was partly based on the number of contemporary works in significant international museums and collections, as well as on how many artists and works were presented at contemporary art auctions and what prices

Christophe Cuzin  
*260420021*  
2002



Joe Amrhein  
Post-Sputnik 2001



they reached. The results of Quemin's research highlighted the slow decline of French contemporary art on the international scene. In 1979, for example, in a list of 100 names, 50 came from the US, 12 from Britain, 11 from Germany and 9 from France. In 2000, 33 were American, 28 German, 8 British and 5 French.

Christine Ollier states that one of the aims of the programme is to 'spread the French scene abroad, and allow the installation of long-term collaboration'. The exchange is perhaps an extremely canny move on the part of the French commercial galleries to give their artists a higher profile on the international circuit. Whether the American artists showing in Paris and their galleries reap the same benefits is questionable, but their presence undoubtedly brings energy to the French city. ■

**Brooklyn à Paris** took place in the following galleries in Paris: Galerie Anne Barrault, Galerie Les Filles du Calvaire, Galerie Bernard Jordan, Galerie Michel Rein, Galerie Chez Valentin, Galerie Anton Weller, Galerie Eric Dupont, Espace Paul Ricard and Espace Huit Novembre, June-July.

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