

Russeth, Andrew, "Group Show War: Galleries *Really* Want You to Come to Their Summer Exhibitions", THE NEW YORK OBSERVER, 13 July 2011.

ART

## Group Show War: Galleries *Really* Want You to Come to Their Summer Exhibitions

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By Andrew Russeth 7/12 7:34pm



Plates (2011) by Luc Tuymans at David Zwirner.

On a breezy evening in late June, visitors to an opening at the Orchard Street gallery Untitled looked confused. But it wasn't the art—a monochromatic white painting by veteran Swiss avant-gardist Olivier Mosset paired with depictions of buckets and paint-splattered rags by young talent Haley Mellin—that was confusing them. It was the fact that the 2,000-square-foot gallery seemed to have shrunk to a 10th of its size.

"We really wanted to do this show with Olivier and Haley, and this is the size of the show," Untitled's proprietor Joel Mesler told *The Observer* matter-of-factly. But as he spoke, the bright yellow wall behind him began to spin along an invisible axis at its center, and Mr. Mosset, unmistakable with his long white beard, emerged.

"It's like a secret show back there!" the artist exclaimed giddily.

"It's our back room," Mr. Mesler corrected. *The Observer* had a look, and found not a back room—racks of artworks surrounding a viewing space—but rather a sprawling exhibition complete with artworks by a potent assortment of brand-name artists (Rob Pruitt, The Bruce High Quality Foundation), young stars (Sam Moyer, Zak Prekop and Angel Otero) and some more unusual figures, like Knight Landesman, the publisher of *Artforum* magazine. There was a lounge area with chairs by Donald Judd (not for sale), a table by Graham Collins (for sale) and a Modernica daybed (not for sale).

Secret or not, this baroque display represented a long-standing ritual of the New York art season: the summer group show.

Not so long ago, the end of the annual Basel Art Fair in mid-June marked more or less the end of the art season. Dealers returned to New York, hopefully flush from sales, then quickly decamped to various vacation zones, often to hobnob with their collectors, who'd retreated to the same spots. If they kept their galleries open through July and August, they typically displayed unsold works by gallery artists, leftovers from the past few seasons.

But with the explosion of the art market in recent years, and the upsurge in competition that has accompanied it, such a lackadaisical approach in the summer months began to seem absurd, even reckless. Group shows got more and more elaborate, and this summer, with money surging back into contemporary art, they may have reached a sort of apex.

“Business is business, and the idea for galleries now is to keep making money year-round, at least when they can,” Bob Nickas, a free-lance curator and a 27-year veteran of the New York art world, told *The Observer* over the telephone last week from the Hamptons, where he was installing a large group show. “They want people to keep coming in,” Mr. Nickas said. “Why on earth would a gallery just do a group show with its artists?”

Hence the summer group shows of today: free-form experiments that double as strategies to garner attention, convey status, build credibility and maybe even generate revenue. Mr. Mesler’s “back room” is a joke: he’s referring to the private rooms where dealers show work to collectors. Such rooms are common in Chelsea’s blue-chip galleries, with large inventories of work by established artists and room to spare, but they are rare in the upstart galleries of the Lower East Side, where every inch of exhibition space counts. Untitled’s modest back room is normally in its basement. “We decided to extend it,” Mr. Mesler said nonchalantly. The show is a clever conceit but not a cheap one: that rotating wall, designed by architect Jason Tang, cost a cool \$4,000.

Radical renovations and fanciful curatorial concepts like Untitled’s have become so central to the summer group show experience that galleries seem to be vying for the attention of anyone left in Manhattan—group show war! Cheim & Read’s “The Women in Our Life” includes only the gallery’s female artists (Louise Bourgeois, Ghada Amer, Jenny Holzer), Derek Eller’s “Perfectly Damaged” comprises works that look, well, damaged, and Rachel Uffner Gallery marks the season by letting artists Sam Moyer and Eddie Martinez curate “Summer Whites,” which includes nine artists’ work, all of it white.

In the great battle of group shows, it is not necessarily money that’s at stake. It’s reputation. Who will take the biggest risks? Who will debut tomorrow’s genius? “Group shows are rarely big sellers,” said Ms Uffner. “But finances are definitely not the priority.” Galleries often exhibit fresh, untested work, a move that can earn the favor of venturesome curators, critics and collectors, and lead to relationships with artists who mature later. If fall and spring solo shows are about the immediate sale, summer group shows are about the long game. “Sam and Eddie picked four artists whose work I didn’t know,” she admitted. “You could just show artists that are incredibly desirable, but that doesn’t make for an interesting show.”

And yet, the quirky summer group show is increasingly giving way to an even more radical strategy: the solo show! Summer has traditionally been seen as a deadly time for artists to debut new work in New York. But this season a number of galleries have gone the one-artist route. Mr. Nickas said that, until recently, if he talked with an artist who had been offered a show in the summer months, he would advise that artist, “Maybe you should hold out. It could be a waste.”

A waste? Not this time. Call it a comeback. In late June, Gavin Brown moved 6,000 pounds of honey and 57 hemlock trees into his West Village gallery for artist Peter Nadin’s first New York show in almost two decades. Down on Grand Street, far east of most L.E.S. galleries, Ramiken Crucible is displaying a single sculpture by the Romanian artist Andra Ursuta, a giant trebuchet that holds a model of the artist’s body.

Meanwhile, summer shows have finally figured out what we really like about spending hours watching summer blockbusters: free air conditioning. They may not be showing *Transformers*, but two Chelsea galleries have built fully equipped temporary screening rooms. Anton Kern is looping a violent film by the mercurial German artist John Bock, while Barbara Gladstone has a full schedule of unfinished films, running five days a week.

The films at Gladstone were selected not by the gallery, but by Thomas Beard, the director of the Brooklyn alternative film space Light Industry. And that is another popular group show strategy: the special guest star curator. Others filling that role are artist Thomas Demand, who is in charge of a heady show at his gallery Matthew Marks — it is traveling there from the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco — and Kate McNamara, the director of Boston University's art gallery and a member of the scrappy four-woman Greenpoint art collective Cleopatra's, who organized an all-female paintings show at D'Amelio Terras.

But there is really only one way to win the summer wars: close. Over at the far end of West Chelsea, in the Starrett-Lehigh Building, art-book dealer David Platzker has affixed to the door of his gallery, Specific Object, a white postcard that reads: "During the exhibition the gallery will be closed." It's a restaging of conceptual artist Robert Barry's *Gallery Closed* piece, which took place—or, as it were, didn't—in 1969 at galleries in Los Angeles, Amsterdam and Turin. "I'm absolutely shooting myself in the foot," Mr. Platzker said, sitting in the office at the rear of his gallery. The lights were off in his exhibition space, which was filled with books. "Every summer for the last few summers, I've always done really big, over-the-top shows," he continued. "They're always my best-attended shows, best-reviewed shows, and they're my most financially successful, without a doubt."

While Mr. Barry's piece has shuttered Mr. Platzker's gallery through Sept. 4, the dealer is meeting with clients by appointment. "We have to do work to survive," he said. With his own space shuttered, he's the special guest curator at his wife's eponymous gallery, Susan Inglett, on West 24th Street, assembling some 450 pieces of ephemera by the artist Lawrence Weiner. The entire set of announcement cards, posters and the like, assembled by the obsessive collector Jean-Noël Herlin, costs \$55,000.

Despite these high jinks, the traditional summer group show—with plenty of gallery artists and even some works from inventory—is not dead. David Zwirner gallery director Kristine Bell explained that her just-opened show, "The House Without the Door," about the psychologically disturbing aspects of domesticity, was inspired by Mona Hatoum's *Home*, a 1999 sculpture that includes electrical wires and kitchen utensils; it's consigned to the gallery by a collector. "I'm in the process of placing it with a museum," Ms. Bell said.

But maybe summer shows are more than thinly veiled bids for the art world's attention. Rather than just exemplifying the industry's penchant for cutthroat competition, they may well epitomize its collegiality. Artist Robert Gober, who is represented by Marks, loaned one of his drawings of a prisonlike baby crib to Zwirner, and Luhring Augustine loaned Zwirner an early Rachel Whiteread sculpture in the form of a mattress. "Luckily, with our summer exhibitions, not everything needs to be for sale," said Ms. Bell. But what, then, is the goal of the summer group show? "We want to bring in an audience that might not visit the program, and offer the public something intelligent and thoughtful," she said. As she spoke, a deeper reason emerged. "It's a way for us to allow ourselves to be curators, instead of art dealers."

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