

Art in America



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MONTIEN BOONMA

P & D IN L.A.

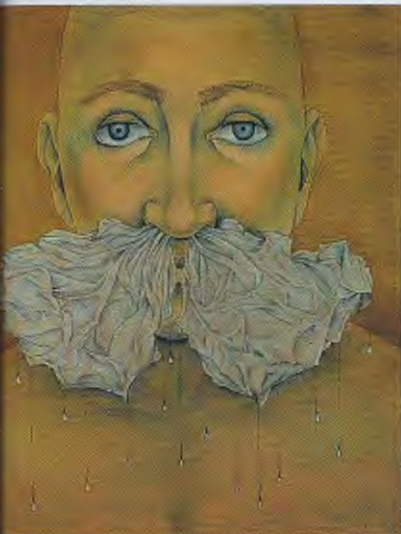
\$5.00 USA
\$7.00 CAN £3.50 UK

this bust-length image, however, perspiring, he may have been force-fed his dubious meal. Aggressive impulses are exposed but disavowed: someone else made him do it.

In the masochistic *Two Heads*, the deadpan faces appear side by side; glancing sidelong at the viewer, they are identical—save for the dozens of pencils that impale the head on the right. Sebastian-like, Biel's victim suffers for art. Throughout the series, the artist's role is ambivalently considered, both blessing and curse, like the stigmata displayed, in one drawing, by a geezer half immersed in a pool (baptized, that is, in the waters of the unconscious). Significantly, the dunce cap crowning a poor chump inscribing repetitive marks on the wall in one image formally echoes the star-spangled magician's hat in another. The artist alternates between self-punishment and the exercise of power. In *Daggers*, twin figures seen from the rear clutch bloody knives behind their backs, gleeful partners in crime. Elsewhere, though, Biel's artist-everyman is impotent, peering forlornly over a brick wall, his arms dangling in front of it, his pencil and notebook lying on the ground. His limp sleeves are much too long, he can't pick up his tools, and Biel conveys the paralyzing frustration of artistic block.

The most beautiful piece on view distilled all this ambivalence in a single self-portrait image. Here, the delicately colored head, pink and pale green, exhales billows of moist white cloth. Confronting the viewer with his mysterious condition, Biel's protagonist elicits sympathy and won-

Joseph Biel: *Malade*, 2003, graphite and pastel on paper, 40 by 32 inches; at Mark Woolley.



der. Though the title, *Malade*, means "sick," we recall how breath is traditionally associated with vivifying power, as when God breathes life into Adam in Genesis. Biel seems genuinely haunted by his own creative talent: is it a bizarre affliction or miraculous gift? —Sue Taylor

LONDON

Melanie Jackson at Matt's

For her second show at this gallery, titled "Some Things You Are Not Allowed to Send Around the World," Melanie Jackson expanded her references from an exhibiting artist's brief use of a space to myriad other temporary occupations—here, those of migrant workers. She evoked their survival strategies and carefully brought their experiences into play through diverse representational systems.

After negotiating the 8-foot-high partition that she built across almost the entire width of the gallery, blocking our view of the space and impeding access, we first noticed debris on the floor of this semi-raw space. The walls were unfinished and on the floor were Sheetrock fragments, tarps and casually dispersed sawhorses. After a while, we noticed the delicate architectural models balanced precariously on the edges of worktables or on the floor—a dozen or so miniature tableaux of world's fairs, circuses, refugee camps and containers ports. Only inches high, they are painstakingly crafted out of foreign newspapers available in London. Jackson used a cliché of installation art—the unfinished gallery—to make an allegory of the resourceful occupancy of appropriated spaces by people on the move.

In the middle of the room, a circle of eight video monitors faced outward, showing footage of Sunday gatherings of Philippine domestic servants in Hong Kong's Statue Square. Recent news reports have detailed abusive treatment of these *amahs* by some employers. The arrangement of monitors mimicked (but inverted) the small circles of socializing women, who enthusiastically talk, sing and share food to compensate for their isolation and drudgery.

On a separate monitor, Jackson showed a video of the El Ejido greenhouses in Spain's southern

desert, which are worked by immigrant labor. The soundtrack, Moroccan *haragas* music, alluded to workers' perilous crossings from North Africa in unseaworthy craft. These songs of exile rally the communities of undocumented Arab laborers.

Jackson's hybrid approach and heterogeneous materials, including brochures with song lyrics and lists of things you can't send abroad, polemical devices of installation art. What excited us here was the candor with which she exposed both the potentialities and limitations of the installation genre. Encompassing such incompatible concerns as disengaged formalism, craft-sensitive fabrication and explicit social commentary, the artist conceived each work to scrutinize the purpose and achievement of the others. That the results were sometimes without obvious resolution made the exhibition particularly effective.

—Mark Harris

ROTTERDAM

David Claerbout at the Museum Boijmans

The recent photo works of the Belgian artist David Claerbout (b. 1969) were installed alone in two tiny rooms in the middle of the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen's wing that houses 18th- to early 20th-century art. That environment suited them more than a contemporary selection would have, and the isolation was appropriate as well.

One room at first seemed to hold nothing but darkness. But as your eyes adjusted, you made out large-scale monochrome images of Venice, one showing the Palazzo Ducale and Bridge of Sighs, another San Marco and a third a view across the lagoon. But it took a while to determine that, for the *Venice Lightboxes* were barely illuminated and remained dim even after prolonged viewing. They are apparently night views, and they evoke an age before sodium vapor and security lighting. Yet if the artist was testing the viewer's commitment, for me there was not sufficient payoff; as best I could tell, these were only standard views made difficult. (I wonder at the implications of this, like the many blurry photos artists produce nowadays—as if it were an accomplishment to make visual images hard to see.)

In the second room, Claerbout's



David Claerbout: *Ruurlo, Bocurloscheweg, 1910*, 1997, black-and-white video projection, 10 minutes; at the Museum Boijmans.



View of Melanie Jackson's "Some Things You Are Not Allowed to Send Around the World," 2003; at Matt's.

other work, *Ruurlo, Bocurloscheweg, 1910*, though comparable in concept, was more affecting and pleasing. An old black-and-white photograph of a summer rural scene, projected onto a wall, included a huge tree, a few people on a dirt road, a windmill and agricultural fields—a conventional slice of the past, modestly nostalgic in tone. But as you looked at this projection, you suddenly realized that the leaves on the tree were moving as if in a gentle breeze. This digital effect was quite convincing; only with prolonged scrutiny did I notice that the movement was a little rigid near the edges of the projection. The effect was, I think, powerful precisely because it was not showy. Claerbout seemed to offer a door into the past, pushed open just a tad so the careful viewer could enter. I could confute my own experiences of hot, dusty late-summer afternoons with the costumes and landscape of another time and place, and find them accessible, knowable. This work is quiet and quietly transporting for the attentive and patient viewer.

—Janet Koplos