

**Sam Pulitzer
& Peter Wächtler
at House of Gaga
// Reena Spaulings**

**December 11, 2016–
February 4, 2017**

Given the use of relatively traditional materials and the discernible presence of the artists' hands, one might have mistaken this

collaborative exhibition for a study in closeness and tactility. Yet its characteristic mood was one of absence, even disembodiment. The more pointed its references and the more specific its images, the further away the show felt.

Take for instance the installation of Pulitzer's meticulous and varied colored pencil drawings, which were displayed on a series of metal fences standing freely in the middle of the space. At 11x17 inches, each drawing is about the size of a laptop screen. Given their heterogeneity and the fences' gridded backdrop, moving from one to the next was not unlike navigating the internet, except that the mark-making and rich palette communicate a decidedly analogue feel. Their imagery includes cartoonish figures that wouldn't be out of place in mid-20th century magazine advertising; abstract forms accompanied by arch slogans ("When a terrible day turns into a terrible life"); and stylized representational landscapes.

Friday Evening (all works 2016) depicts four figures composed from flat geometric shapes. Their faces partially covered by balaclavas, they engage in warfare while the sun, a simple yellow circle, emerges from puffy white clouds (of smoke?) behind them. It's as if Playmobil had designed a set of toys inspired by global instability. Pulitzer denudes the violent scene of its pathos, lending it a cheerful veneer that captures the uncomfortably bleak sensation of watching the world's chaos

take place at a mediated distance. Accordingly, an appreciation for the impressive acuity—and controlled beauty—of his work was for me inseparable from frustration.

In *The only decision*, Earth herself gets uneasy treatment; anthropomorphized with a toothy grin and googly eyes, the globe sprouts smokestack-like trees into an ashy cubicle of space. There's growth, but of a sickly sort, and the image offers little sympathy, channeling instead a mocking, end-of-times hilarity. The drawing couldn't be more precise in its diagnosis of the current zeitgeist. However, Pulitzer's brand of detached representation also suggests that art has lost the ability to offer the kind of catharsis that counteracts despair. Anguish is held at arm's length, where it can be observed and analyzed but its disruptive (and potentially productive) ferocity can't be fully inhabited. Even when such aestheticization is the opening salvo in a more embodied form of critique, it runs the risk of freezing the emotions and generating privileged nonchalance.

Wächtler, whose works in the exhibition took shape in a diversity of formats, would seem at least on the surface to offer a more Dionysian response. A series of five large pastels on paper, depicting erupting volcanoes against skies dominated by a single saturated color, are titled *I Don't Want to Die*. At once brooding and humorous, they can be read both as acknowledgements of the natural world's inherent

1. Tom McDonough, "Complacency in Crisis: On Jeff Koons at Versailles," *Texte Zur Kunst*, March 2009.

violence and as sanguine expressions of the basic existential fear of death. *Basic* is the operative word: the pastels are self-consciously clumsy, and the viewer was forced to consider the group of them as a single, unarticulated display whose willful flatness offered little visceral connection to the terror to which their signifiers allude.

Their inscrutable sculptural counterparts are a series of five blown glass sculptures of starfish installed on pedestals, entitled *I Don't Want to Live*. Stranger and more moving, though, were the two *Dog* sculptures that Wächtler placed on the floor like sentries beside the short flight of stairs leading from the gallery's entry into the exhibition space. (A third from the series was placed in the exhibition space itself.) Formed from folded and draped pieces of leather, they successfully convey the lovable ennui of sleeping canines, and with less room for ironic remove, either your heart reaches out or it doesn't. Mine did; it's odd to say that the most abstract objects in the exhibition prompted an emotional response.

Formally speaking, however, the dogs are hollow, nothing but skin. And so in the context of the rest of the show, they posed disturbing questions: have we evicted whatever we used to call *heart* from its formerly central lodgings? Must emotional responses to art now be sought, often in vain, beyond the edge of a forever expanding periphery? Wächtler's *River Scene*, a watercolor tucked

away next to the gallery's bar, indicates this might be the case. A pair of hands belonging to an unseen body pulls aside the foliage of a tall hedge in the foreground, violently displacing a bird and its nest in the process. Unfortunately, even such a fierce need to see—something, anything—doesn't reveal much besides a muddy slope and a parking lot in the middle distance.