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Sam Pulitzer and Peter Wächtler

HOUSE OF GAGA//REENA SPAULINGS FINE ART



View of "Sam Pulitzer and Peter Wächtler," 2016-17. Photo: Jeff McLane.

Post-truth, post-irony—post-exhaustion from such prefix-laden terms—it was tricky to decipher the intentions of Peter Wächtler and Sam Pulitzer in this coupling of both artists and their respective galleries, Reena Spaulings Fine Art (of New York) and House of Gaga (of Mexico City). Twenty-two carefully rendered colored-pencil drawings by Pulitzer were clipped to a quartet of flimsy wire-mesh retail display racks in the center of the main gallery of the two venues' shared Los Angeles space. Scattered throughout the room on waist-high plinths sat five of Wächtler's largish glass starfish (from his series "I Don't Want to Live," all works 2016); five sizable pastel drawings of volcanoes on mostly monochrome grounds ("I Don't Want to Die") erupted on the surrounding walls, joined by other works on paper by the artist, including a monoprint of a shamrock (titled, in deadpan redundancy, *Shamrock*), a watercolor landscape (*River Scene*), and a trio of floor-bound, vaguely dog-shaped bundles of leather respectively titled *Dog 1, 2, and 3*. Downstairs, in the empty foyer you passed through to access the second-floor gallery, a sign made by the artists proclaimed WELCOME HOME FRIEND. The coyness of the gesture (did anything about this setup suggest either a domestic space or the open-armed welcome of a close friend?) set the tone for this somewhat slippery show.

The subjects depicted in Pulitzer's drawings looked oddly familiar. One was modeled after a clip-art symbol; another was vaguely reminiscent of a character from children's TV. It's the kind of saccharine poster kitsch that colors drab office cubicles or litters popular media. Floating Cheerios formed a distressed face in a spoonful of milk in *Monday morning*. *To Be Half* featured two half avocados, armed and legged, with simple faces drawn on their pits, one of which pokes out from a chubby belly, wearing a smiling face, while the other rested on the ground beside its host fruit, looking rather unhappy about it. None of the depictions struck one as original; their iconography was, rather, purposely drawn from a common, ubiquitous visual language. The crosshatched penciling evidences a soft-hued diligence, while the images themselves seemed situated somewhere between the blandly upbeat originals and an overtly cynical aping of them. (The press release somewhat smugly described the drawings as "tediously rendered.") I couldn't tell if Pulitzer was genuinely invested in these icons (which could certainly be read as abject/pathetic remnants of attempts at cheer) or if he was simply fucking with me.

Wächtler's starfish, meanwhile, wouldn't look out of a place in a seaside tchotchke shop. While the artist's hand is less overt in these starfish than in his past sculptures, the works reflect his ongoing interest in meticulously crafted objects that could nevertheless be mistaken for mass-produced doodads. The volcanoes were amateurishly rendered; the shamrock barely worth mentioning except that it was there. Those dogs, however, are weirdly lovable. With their unkempt grace and loose humor, the charming floppy creatures—each crafted from a single strip of untanned leather that has been cut, folded, and arranged on the gallery floor—are uncanny in their resemblance to snoozing hounds.

Pulitzer and Wächtler seem to present the viewer with a choice between interpreting their output as the result of sincere affection or clever disaffection. While the latter reading is more in keeping with current artistic modes, I'd prefer to think that these works are offered in earnest. Thus seen, Pulitzer's drawings become delightful moments of pathos plucked from a morass of shared images, and Wächtler's works on paper and oddball trinkets just that—quiet, unremarkable objects whose seductive melancholy may indeed derive from their very forgettability. The artists are both gifted writers: Pulitzer gained notoriety as an acid-tongued pseudonymous blogger and is an occasional contributor to this magazine. And Wächtler publishes short stories and other literary writings in addition to making the narrative-driven animations for which he is best known (together with his sculptural and painterly practices). Both artists clearly know how

to cogently articulate their points. The vacillation between affable sincerity and cynical sophistication demonstrated here just might be what they're driving at.

—*Andrew Berardini*

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