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THEN & NOW

*British art and the
1990s*



BERTRAND LAVIER

Yvon Lambert, Paris

Visiting Hollywood in 1937, Salvador Dalí boasted of having met three great American Surrealists: Harpo Marx, Cecil B. DeMille and Walt Disney. Despite generously supporting New York's Museum of Modern Art, Disney's attitude to modern art remained ambiguous. Only a few minutes of the animated film *Destino*, Dalí and Disney's proposed collaboration, were ever completed (and only long after both were dead). But some sense of the perspective on Modernism held by the House of Mouse can be gleaned from the bewildered look on Mickey's face in a Disney comic strip that first aired in 1947, in which Minnie drags her *murine inamarato* to an art museum filled with stark canvases and glutinous abstractions intended to imitate modern art works.

In this imagined gallery space, Bertrand Lavier discovered certain 'ghosts' of Clement Greenberg – in the cartoon references to the sculptures of Hans Arp and the canvases of Wassily Kandinsky, Clyfford Still and Jackson Pollock. From 1984, Lavier began making his own life-size copies of the art from Disney's museum in an ongoing series entitled 'Walt Disney Productions', seeking to exhume the formalist corpse through the sedimentary layers of Pop and Postmodernity. After a successful showing of a number of these works at the Centre Pompidou last year, Yvon Lambert recently exhibited six new canvases that extended the series while also departing from it significantly.

The first noticeable difference from previous 'Walt Disney Productions' exhibitions, however, was not the canvases but the walls. Last year's show followed forebears at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (1999–2000) and MAMCO in Geneva (2001) in hanging Lavier's pictures on brightly coloured surfaces like those of the comic they cloned. By positioning the works here in a traditional white cube, the effect was reversed. We were no longer stepping into the imaginary world of

Disney's characters; like Borgesian *hrónir*, the fictional objects were now leaping into the real world. In Jorge Luis Borges's 1940 short story 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius', items from an imaginary land begin to appear in contemporary Argentina. At Yvon Lambert, art works from a fictional gallery made it onto the 'real' art market (with real prices).

At just over two metres across, some round, some almost square, the new canvases are considerably larger than their predecessors, but their palette is even more restricted, consisting in all but one case of the same shades of burgundy, bright red and racing green (plus black and white) with no admixture or shading. Areas of colour are rigidly demarcated by thick black lines while allowing for occasional impressionistic intersections that may be the result of enlarging the original inks of the comic strip to a size at which slight errors assume new importance. What they still lack is individual titles, with each canvas identified only as *Walt Disney Productions 1947–2013 No. 2, 4, 9 or 13* (Lavier rigorously avoids an ordered sequence), encouraging a consideration of the whole.

Only with a closer look did the most significant departure of the new additions become apparent. Where the previous canvases were all prints, these new six were painted in swathes of acrylic. Lavier's fist-thick daubs mark the passage of what looks more like a house-painter's brush than a fine artist's, a gesture that brings the series into harmony with the artist's intervening works such as *Klein* (2001), in which similar brushstrokes coat the surface of a piano, or *Argo* (1993), where they are applied to a boat. In the latter works, the marks of Lavier's technique are a visible manifestation of the process of these readymades becoming art. In the 'Walt Disney Productions' works, the effect is more ambiguous – all the more so when you realize that the borders of each canvas reveal them as inkjet prints that the artist has painted over. Like the scene in Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) where the Joker's flesh-tone make-up washes off to reveal the clown face beneath, the imaginary lingers on behind the surface reality.

ROBERT BARRY

ARTIE VIERKANT

New Galerie, Paris

Artie Vierkant's exhibition at New Galerie was introduced with a trailer that appeared on the gallery's website before the opening. The video was a corporate-style animation sequence of transitioning diagrams, instructional arrows and CAD modulations, with a soundtrack of the kind of weakly emotive synthesizer music used in cheap online advertisements. The trailer, of course, was neither a whole-hearted promotional gesture, nor did it clearly reference Vierkant's work in the exhibition, entitled 'US 6318569 B1, US 8118919 B1; (Exploits)'. Perhaps most of all, it suggested the embeddedness of the young, New York-based artist's practice within commercial mediations and online interfaces.

Vierkant's most recent works – the first iteration of his ongoing series of 'Exploits' – are based on intellectual property legislation and the patent licenses required for manufactured objects and certain design processes. His 'Exploits' peek into a world of bedroom innovators and professional entrepreneurs, all hoping to one day sell their unique concept to a wider pool of commercial industries. This is a micro-world of patents that is governed and protected by license terms that include territorial rights for reproduction, colour palettes, material compositions and an endless list of other minutiae. Vierkant's 'Exploits' result from the artist's own direct negotiations with a number of patent holders to produce what he calls 'fabrications', which represent the realization of the patented products and their negotiated derivation as art works.

At New Galerie, Vierkant presented seven works from the 'Exploits' series, which he developed from two registered patents: a detachable magnetic storage rack suitable for domestic kitchens, and an organza air filter for windows that minimizes the effects of UV light, pollen and other allergens. The exhibition's title 'US 6318569 B1, US 8118919 B1; (Exploits)' took its name from the US patent number of these provocative yet banal products. Their implied interiority (one for use in the kitchen, the other for blocking out external environmental effects), as well as their function as support structures for presentation (a storage space, a window frame), however, are somehow analogous to the interior artistic circuitry of production and presentation that Vierkant sets for himself.

In the upstairs gallery, *Detachable storage rack for a metallic structure 1 (Exploit)* (all works 2013) had the confident proportions of a Minimalist wall sculpture. Its mirrored metallic surface acted as a baseboard for two white magnetized relief elements, arranged at oblique angles so as to diminish any reference to their latent function as pieces of a storage rack. Vierkant's arrangements of these elements also willingly introduced the art-historical precedents of structural abstraction, from Kazimir Malevich to Donald Judd to Liam Gillick. Another iteration of the same patent, *Detachable storage rack for a metallic structure 2 (Exploit)*, applied the same elements differently. In this case, a single blue rack stretched the vertical length of its metallic supporting surface and was

1
Bertrand Lavier
*'Walt Disney Productions
1947–2013',
installation view,
2013*

2
Søren Martinsen
*'De Mina', installation
view, 2013*

3
Artie Vierkant
*'US 6318569 B1,
US 8118919 B1;
(Exploits)' installation
view, 2013*



2

installed low on the gallery wall. The variety in the scales of the structures and the colours of their magnetized rack elements suggested the elasticity within the particular terms of the patent license.

The second patent provided Vierkant with a similar range of interpretative limits. *Air filter and method of constructing same 6, Six Screen Ascending Blue (Exploit)* operated within the patent's specificities of frame, mesh and fabric, but evidently allowed the artist to play with colour and format. Vierkant presented a six-panel variation of blue screens that ran like a colour palette across the gallery's back wall. Downstairs, the same patent was applied to more singular coloured forms.

For each of the two licenses, Vierkant agreed with the patent holders that he would be allowed to produce up to 75 works over the course of the series. With legal negotiation at the heart of 'Exploits', one might assume that Vierkant's priorities exist somewhere within the Conceptualist doxa of testing or affirming the limits by which objects become sanctioned and possessed by definitions other than those that art holds for itself. Yet Vierkant's work goes even further to implicate commercial objects and their circulations – most significantly, the governance that dictates their very becoming.

MATT PACKER



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SØREN MARTINSEN

Martin Asbæk Gallery, Copenhagen

Contrary to what the recent popular *noir* crime fiction coming out of Scandinavia would suggest, the people of the region are strong believers in, and consistent producers of, images of 'the good life'. According to several surveys, the people here are among the happiest in the world – and it shows in their depictions in lifestyle magazines and television programmes. But art history has also contributed to this trend, and perhaps no one more so than Swedish painter Carl Larsson. From the middle of the 1880s to his death in 1919, he painted romantic images of his family in the idyllic settings of the countryside – far from the brutal realities of developing urban life. The images from his 1895 print book *De Mina* have been reproduced in millions of poster copies to become an integral part of the Scandinavian interior.

While Danish painter Søren Martinsen appropriated the title of Larsson's book for his recent solo show at Martin Asbæk Gallery, it was more of an ironic comment than a classical homage to his Swedish predecessor and the picturesque cultural identity he ushered in. Rather than reflecting the golden light emanating from Larsson's works, the paintings (and one photograph) in Martinsen's show created a distinctly more sombre chronicle of family life in the Scandinavian countryside. As indicated by the painting of a tree-lined road leading up to a graveyard (*Graveyard [Ledreborg Palace]*, 2013) and the black and white photograph of an apple tree simply titled *Black Apples* (2010–12), which greeted the visitor at the entrance of the gallery space, the outer and inner landscapes that Martinsen depicts are somewhat darker in nature. The greyish air shrouding the foggy lake in *Gloomy Lake* (2012) spelled it out quite literally. The point was further

emphasized, albeit less literally, by Martinsen's self-portrait *Father* (2013) – a genre he has investigated throughout his career, also as a filmmaker and curator. Hanging in the darkened space in the middle of the exhibition, the painting depicts the artist sitting under a cold lamp light in an otherwise unlit room, hands under his chin, staring discontentedly into space. The scene is matter-of-fact in its minimal composition and realistic style, and Martinsen's expression seems to reflect an experience of everyday life that refuses to add up to anything but its own continuation, generating a strange blend of irritation and wonder. An obvious nucleus of the show, the work effectively set the tone for a more ambiguous, existential exploration of life in the country, beyond its prefabricated and commodified forms of recreational happiness. Three other portraits in the darkened room – the artist's wife staring at the garden, his son laying on his back staring at the ceiling while playing guitar, and his daughter sleeping – also testified to this endeavour and the great subtlety with which Martinsen ventures into it.

This sensitivity to everyday life was characteristic of most of the works in the show, as it is of Martinsen's photography-based painting in general. The motifs are taken from the artist's immediate surroundings in the western part of Zealand, a rural area that is perceived as quite uneventful. However, through his use of light and colour, and his titles, Martinsen's paintings enrich this seemingly mundane landscape with an air of intrigue. In *September* (2013), a nondescript curve in a road became a poetic metaphor for the slow but steady turn into the autumn of life. *Nocturne* (2012) embeds a small, seemingly deserted farm complex in a darkened suspense that brings to mind Tobe Hopper's movie *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and its description of the horrors of post-industrial society. In *Sweet Tasting Sky* (2013), the sense of mystery explodes into the psychedelic dimensions of a bright pink sky seen through a circle of treetops from the perspective of someone laying on the ground (maybe his guitar-playing son?). Hung on the back wall in the last room, this powerful painting constituted a more hopeful future than the one outlined by the other works. Rather than evoking death, it envisioned the appearance of a curious, otherworldly phenomenon carrying the promise of a vibrant, even miraculous, life in the spheres above. It might be a dream or a trippy hallucination but, as suggested by *Appearance* (2013), which depicts the reflection of the sky in a lake just as the sun is about to break forth from behind a cloud in an explosion of light, it is one worth waiting patiently for. 'De Mina' attested to Martinsen's particular and expansive interpretation of the Scandinavian landscape painting tradition as a distorted psychological complex, subverting its idyllic source of inspiration with a critical – and more inspired – perception of reality.

JACOB LILLEMOSE