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## SoHo: Provocations, Reflections and Abstractions

From historic to spanking new, intimate to spectacular and minimalist to surrealistic, the art on view in the galleries of SoHo and the lower West Side covers a lot of territory.

**KEN  
JOHNSON**  
**ART**

A gorgeous, museum-like exhibition of works by members of the Zero Group, a loose association of '60s-era European avant-gardists, is at Sperone Westwater, while giant, socially provocative paintings of young men in repose by Kehinde Wiley are at Deitch Projects.

"Looking Back," at White Columns, offers one curator's view of New York art in 2007, and "Perverted by Theater" at Apexart celebrates histrionic impulses in contemporary art.

For quieter viewing Tracy Williams, Ltd., has elegant abstractions on small sheets of colored paper by Ernst Caramelle, and Janet Borden displays cut-paper silhouettes by the multimedia artist Robert Cumming.

Peter Freeman has minimalist works from the 1960s by the German artist Charlotte Posenenske; and Spencer Brownstone has creepy-crawly fantasy sculptures involving insects, taxidermic animals and ugly fairies by the British artist Tessa Farmer.

Beautifully installed in a meandering series of small rooms at Sperone Westwater, "Zero in New York" features

works dating from 1957 to 1966 by about 20 Europeans, including textbook names like Piero Manzoni, Arman and Jean Tinguely. Founded in the late 1950s by two Germans, Heinz Mack and Otto Piene, the Zero Group rejected personal expressionism in favor of radically new forms of abstraction.

The exhibition is a fascinating window onto a time when progressive artists believed they could start from ground zero, as it were, and it includes some exceedingly attractive objects. Resembling Brancusi sculptures with electric lights built in, Mr. Piene's lamp sculptures are worth a visit by themselves. Boxy constructions of polished aluminum and textured glass by Nanda Vigo are sleekly crystalline. And Yves Klein's panels covered by colored, granular pigments are vividly sumptuous.

(Speaking of important Europeans, there is a retrospective exhibition of works by the Italian artist Carol Rama at Maccarone. Ms. Rama scandalized the Italian art world with her erotic watercolors in the 1940s, and she went on to explore a dizzying variety of modes, from geometric abstraction to autobiographical symbolism, over the course of her six-decade career.)

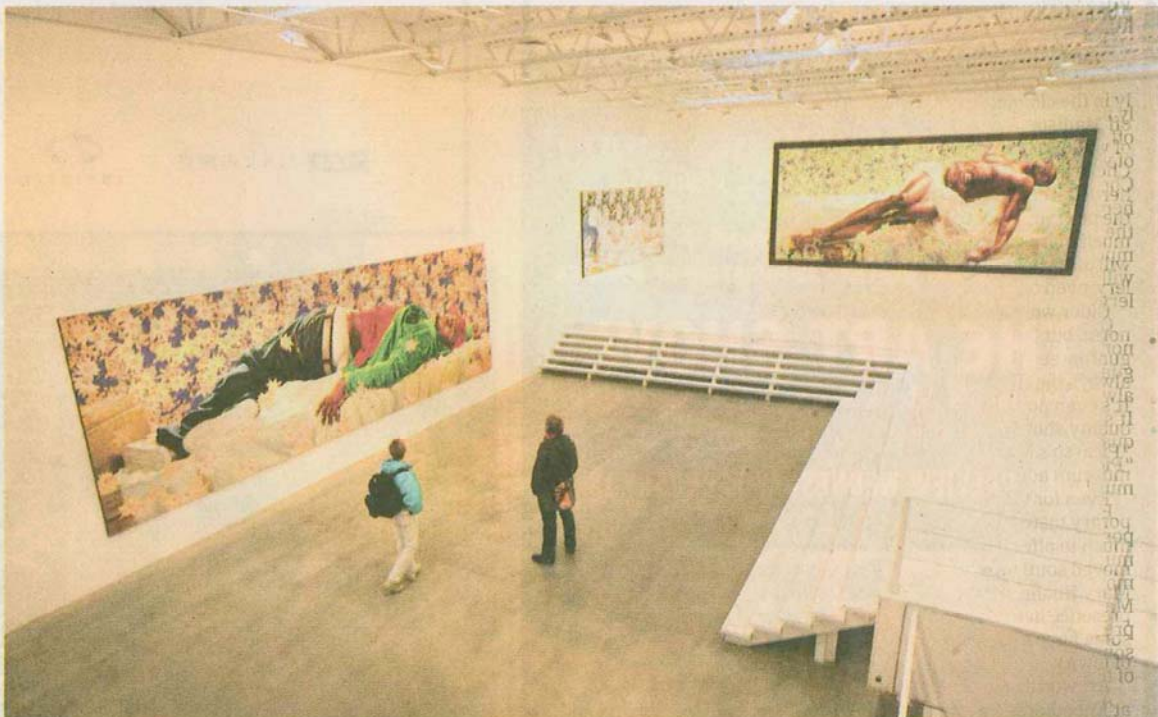
That the Zero Group's back-to-basics ethos lives on is evident in Tracy Williams's show of works by Mr. Caramelle, who creates elegant abstractions using a technique so simple a child could do it. He partly covers sheets of ordinary col-

ored construction paper with straight-edged pieces of paper, exposing them to sunlight for weeks or months and then removes the masking. The geometric compositions of different shades of one color have a beguiling luminosity and an understated playfulness.

For another creative use of paper, see Robert Cumming's exhibition "Recoleta" at Janet Borden. An exceptionally inventive painter, sculptor and photographer, Mr. Cumming has created a series of intricate, faux-Victorian silhouette pictures cut by hand from sheets of black paper. Packed with eccentric storytelling and intriguing symbolism, they were inspired by a visit to La Recoleta, a vast cemetery in Buenos Aires.

A more severely purposeful ambition animates "Prototypes for Mass Production," a show of Minimalist works dating from 1965 to '67 by Charlotte Posenenske (1930-1985), a German sculptor and conceptualist, at Peter Freeman. The works in this exhibition — simple, geometric forms made of folded sheet metal and painted in black and primary-colored enamels — were intended to be mass-produced, sold at cost and displayed in public. Posenenske stopped making art in 1968, when she concluded that it could not make enough political difference in the world, but her sculptures still have a bright Pop Art-like punch.

Formal rigor and moral rectitude are less prevalent in art today — judging, at

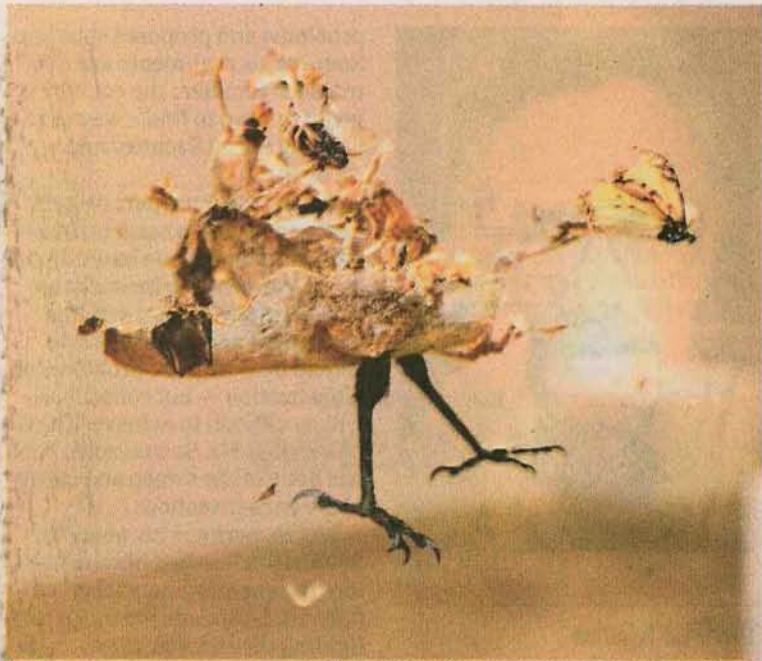


CHESTER HIGGINS JR./THE NEW YORK TIMES

Three of the enormous, socially provocative paintings of young men in repose by Kehinde Wiley at Deitch Projects.



# Provocations, Reflections and Abstractions



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHESTER HIGGINS JR./THE NEW YORK TIMES

Detail from "Horned Skullship" (2008) by Tessa Farmer.

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least, by "Looking Back," an entertaining selection of works at White Columns. It is the third installment of a tradition at the nonprofit gallery in which an art-world luminary selects an exhibition based on his or her experience of art in New York the previous year. This year's decider is Jay Sanders, a curator and writer and the director of Greene Naftali Gallery in Chelsea. His picks include a scary sound installation by Paul McCarthy, a pair of funky wooden sculptures of pianos by the playwright Richard Foreman, a sculpture of a white cube with eccentric additions by Liz Craft and wall-mounted rectangles made of partly inflated bicycle tire tubes by Gareth James.

Especially absorbing is a satiric videotaped conversation from 1977 between the critic Gregory Battcock and Marcia Tucker, the founding director of the New Museum. At one point Ms. Tucker explains, without cracking a smile, that New Museum personnel are hired based on the ratio between the width of their heads and the width of their shoulders. Produced by the conceptualist Jaime Davidovich, the program was first broadcast on a Manhattan cable channel.

The equally diverse exhibition "Perverted by Theater" at Apexart, another nonprofit, was organized by the artist Franklin Evans and the playwright Paul David Young as a rebuttal to the famous 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood," in which the critic Michael Fried condemned what he saw as a corrupting theatricality in new art. In their brochure essay, the curators point out theatrical effects in works by an assortment of artists in the show, including a lovely portrait of a zany imaginary woman drawn by Jim Nutt; lists of synonymous words by Mel Bochner; a cartoonish, otherworldly being painted by Laylah Ali; and a deliriously decorative light sculpture by Virgil Marti.

But no exhibition now in SoHo is more impressively theatrical than Kehinde Wiley's "Down" at Deitch Projects. Mr. Wiley is known for paintings of young African-American men dressed in fashionable street wear posing against richly patterned backgrounds like heroic figures in Renaissance paintings. His current exhibition presents eight

enormous, horizontal paintings of young men in reclining positions. The biggest, called "Sleep," which measures 11 by 25 feet, depicts a muscular man lying back like the dead Jesus, naked but for a snowy white cloth swaddling his hips. Bigger is not always the answer, but it sure is for Mr. Wiley.

For Tessa Farmer, on the other hand, smaller is better. This



"Cronotopo" (1963) by Nanda Vigo at Sperone Westwater.

imaginative British sculptor has created a hideous race of ant-size "fairies" — teeny black humanoid skeletons equipped with insect wings. She has documented their activities, which include hunting, killing and eating bugs much bigger than themselves, in riveting, comically nightmarish stop-action videos. You also will find them populating sculptures revolving around a mummified dog, a stuffed crow, a dead mouse and bees, moths, spiders and other crawling and flying creatures suspended by threads. The scale may be reduced, but the narrative vision is epic.

There is plenty more to see in the West Village and SoHo. While you are there, you could also check out these worthy galleries: Art in General; Gavin Brown's Enterprise; the Drawing Center; Ronald Feldman Fine Arts; Guild & Greyshkul; Harris Lieberman; Renwick; Peter Blum SoHo; Swiss Institute; Kerry Schuss/KS Art; and Team.

