

“At this stage”

CHÂTEAU SHATTO



Martine Syms, *Some what?*, 2016, self-adhesive vinyl, 6' 3" x 14' 2". From "At this stage."

In a 1982 essay on the work of Dan Graham, Jeff Wall offered a resoundingly downbeat assessment of the shifting relationship between artists and the city. For recent artists, he argued, the metropolis was no longer a source of inspiration or aesthetic advancement—instead, “the key revelation of the city was in the shock of an absolute loss of hope.” Tellingly, these words were written at the start of the Reagan era, when the old urban order was collapsing, and blighted, postindustrial cities were being remade into commercial centers, shiny simulacra of urban experience. This same transformation is visible throughout “At this stage,” a group exhibition organized by Olivia Barrett at Château Shatto, which featured a range of mostly contemporary works juxtaposed with a few choice examples from the 1970s and '80s. Chris Kraus and Sylvère Lotringer’s half-hour video *How to Shoot a Crime*, 1987, established the then-derelict quarters of Lower Manhattan as ground zero for the show’s curatorial thesis. Equal parts video vérité, found crime scene—documentation collage, and staged police procedural, the film recalls a time when artists and dissident philosophers rubbed shoulders with sex workers and drug addicts in still-affordable loft spaces, while corpses piled up outside. Most of the footage was shot in 1982 and only edited in 1987, and the video is marked by the insights gained in that intervening five-year span, as Kraus watched the city metamorphose around her.

Equally suggestive was Elaine Sturtevant’s 1972 remake of Andy Warhol’s eight-hour-plus film *Empire* (1964). A scrupulous replication of the original long take of the Empire State Building, Sturtevant’s 35-mm print was here transferred to digital video and shown on a diminutive monitor, which suffused the erstwhile icon of Gotham’s ascendancy to a global capital with the dull glow of supermarket surveillance. The city is like a shelf lined with commodities, some well past their due date, others freshly stocked, but all equally susceptible to either theft and destruction or dispossession and redevelopment. Jordan Wolfson’s video *Con Leche*, 2009, offered a pointedly literal summation of gentrification through its animated sequences of marching battalions of milk-filled Diet Coke bottles layered atop views of the mean streets of Detroit. The sight of the ubiquitous middlebrow beverage, here reduced to a noncaffeinated and sugarless state, spoils any thrill offered by bohemian slumming.

Parker Ito’s contribution, *Western Exterminator/Kemel Kleenup/Little Man/Pestterminator*, 2013–15, puts another spin on the already complex social coding of the Western Exterminator Company logo, a top-hatted figure cautioning a mouse with a mallet hidden behind his back. This pseudo-aristocratic icon was here cloned into a series of multicolored sculptures that were arranged in a row in a corner of the gallery, somewhat like a 3-D rendering of a multiple-exposure photograph. His bottom-feeding counterpart is omitted, rendered redundant, probably because what chases vermin becomes vermin once the task is completed. “The exterminator, *c’est moi*,” Ito seems to say. Artists have an existential grasp of this dismal equation, even as they seem unable to escape it. WANT SOME? is the question posed by a destitute car via a cartoon bubble in a black-and-white vinyl photograph by Martine Syms that was affixed to Château’s storefront window. To those outside, it seemed to boisterously promote hard-core confrontation with true urban grit—but this was a bait-and-switch scheme. A glance at the checklist inside gave the work’s title as *Some what?*, 2016, with the titular rejoinder sounding a conflicted note. By staging the show, the gallery itself openly acknowledged its implication in this process. Ultimately, this incisive show reminded us, in the absence of hope there is only realpolitik, the relentless and intractable expansion of existing power. That “At this stage” was slated as Château Shatto’s last outing at its Pico Boulevard location in the once-transitioning and now largely refurbished district of South Park rendered such meditations all the more poignant.

—Jan Tumlir