



Ryan McGinley *Night Sky (Green)*, 2009-2010

MADE IN AMERICA

New Jersey gets its first contemporary art museum

Home to Bruce Springsteen, boardwalks and an infamous reality show, the Jersey shore recently welcomed a new kind of cultural institution. NJ MoCA, the state's first contemporary art museum, launched its programming on October 23rd at Asbury Park's historic Paramount Theatre and Convention Hall Mezzanine. The inaugural exhibition *It's All American* features 37 local and international artists realizing the theme of what it means to be American. The museum will operate as a Kunsthalle—nomadic in nature and community-minded in programming.

Curated by Alex Gartenfeld and Haley Mellin, the New York-based team chose the site with New Jersey's urban, and urbane, qualities in mind. "New Jersey—being both media saturated and dependent upon external urban centers—is a fascinating study in identity. The architecture on the boardwalk of Asbury Park, which is significant, monumental and historic, affected the show a lot. We have these long Art Deco hallways, which focused our inquiry into monuments and necessitated that we work with series and sculpture," offers Gartenfeld.

Mellin adds, "We selected the exhibition site not only because it is one of the most stunning venues I'd ever seen, but because of its legacy as an aging heritage building of both American and international influences. It has 17' windows that wrap the exhibition space—the show literally looks out at the state of New Jersey, which is fitting for the inaugural exhibition."

NJ MoCA started only a few short years ago as the vision of self-proclaimed Jersey girl Robin Parness Lipson, who spent much of her childhood summers in Asbury Park. Working in partnership with her husband Marty, the Hort Family and other benefactors, including the support of Lt. Governor Kim Guadagno, Lipson wanted to establish a museum "with roots in the international contemporary art world of Art Basel, Frieze, the Armory Show, Art Forum Berlin and FIAC." No small feat, but on a mild late fall evening in one of the state's most cherished waterfront venues, she succeeded in doing just that.

"The title is *It's All American*, and we wanted to specifically discuss the way that different modes of production approximated Americana. The latter is a complex thing, and involves folk and 'high art' traditions and national pride, but also protest and transgression," says Gartenfeld. A sentiment provocatively interpreted in much of the exhibition, beginning with Rob Pruitt's chorus line of cement-filled Levi's jeans, *Esprit de Corps*, while four oil paintings by Van Hanos (originally from Edison, New Jersey), including his hauntingly serious *Portrait of Benjamin Franklin*, nicely offset Pruitt's clever floor work.

"This exhibition is very clear and invested in what it means to be American now. The work is optimistic, and is filled with sentiments of endurance, individual perspective and wisdom," Mellin states. Particularly resonant in Robert Melec's installation, his mixed



Van Hanos *Portrait of Benjamin Franklin*, 2007



Martin Creed *Work No. 916*, 2008



Rita Ackermann *TICTACTOE*, 2009

media *Mobile* and gorgeously drippy *Untitled (Freestanding Curtain)* draw visitors to the New Jersey native's brightly hued work again and again during the opening. While Berlin-based artist James Adamo's *Four*, comprised of four whittled down baseball bats and chips, is a study of the compulsive, a sharp remark on performance and presentation.

Josephine Meckseper, Zak Prekop, Daniel Turner, Sterling Ruby and Ryan Kitson presented interesting variables on the theme. While Martin Soto Climent's stunningly cool *Parabolic Dust* turned the mundane into the mesmerizing, by reconfiguring two window blinds into art. Jeremy Deller's "Open Bedroom" projection—*I Preferbia Suburbia*—illuminated a dark stairwell, at perfect unease in its meaning and context. And the larger-than-life silhouette sculptures (including an Easter Island head) of Peter Coffin contemplate icon and form, while staying playful at the same time.

New Yorker Michele Abeles' four photographic prints, each titled by date, emitted an eeriness and uncertainty one couldn't turn away from. While Monica Bonvicini's *White* sculpture (placed brilliantly across from Abeles') used fluorescent lights and broken safety glass as a feminist metaphor for 'breaking the glass ceiling'. Starrier turns by Ryan McGinley, Aurel Schmidt, Martin Creed, Polly Apfelbaum and Rita Ackermann lent gravity to the show, but by no means eclipsed the diverse line-up of

lesser-known and emerging artists.

Brendan Fowler, Francesca DiMattio and Mathew Cerletty all continue to show exciting work, including Israeli-American artist Uri Aran. When asked what inspired his piece, *Untitled*, Aran explains, "The main formal elements...are a small book open on its first spread, in which only the title appears in small but bold print: *SUPERMAN*, and a single chocolate chip cookie, placed on glass as part of the spread's composition. My use of these icons of popular culture relate to the theme of the show directly. The choice to include such an 'American piece' is in line with questions of identity, politics, mediated culture and the ostensibly clear." Together, the show's artists fulfilled their own American dream—not only made in, but also making it in, America.

And capping off the benefit gala's celebratory atmosphere was a performance by Brooklyn-based trio Fall On Your Sword. During two sets on the Paramount's smaller stage, the band's hypnotic electronica incorporated iconic American movie clips and dialogue into their act. The music provided a smart, seamless merger with the exhibition, while even party hors d'oeuvres reflected the *It's All American* theme. Pigs in a blanket anyone? ROBYN DUTRA

It's All American runs from October 24 through November 15, 2010, Paramount Theatre and Convention Hall Mezzanine, Asbury Park, New Jersey