

# WESTERN ★ PROJECT

## Selected Press on Michael Dee

### Artweek

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Shana Nys Dambrot

#### 'SCULPTURE: Part Two' at Western Project

If a single leitmotif can be identified to encompass the far-flung range of styles and media comprising the second half of Western Project's small but salient contemporary sculpture survey, it would have to be Playtime. But not just any old recess or crafts hour. No, the five artists in this assembly take their jocundity to heart. One of the factors lending this exhibition its considerable energy, likely results from the fact that two of the five – **Wayne White** and **Michael Reafsnyder** – are primarily painters in their customary art practice. And of the other three, all have a taste for nontraditional materials, culled to varying degrees from outside the fine art lexicon. Taken as a whole, the exhibition demonstrated a freshness, a subversive and innovative attention to craft and an undeniably upbeat sense of humor not usually associated with conceptual sculpture.

**White**, one of the painters, showed a series of alphanumeric totems, in which words were spelled out in Don Suggs-style vertical stacks of three dimensional single letters. The main work was *Porkgrease*, a word-object drenched in both the color and texture of weathered adobe, or perhaps, burned swine fat. The privileging of text references his penchant for painting words over found images, but this formulation of the ironic tug between word and image is not as successful without a more developed imagic component to play off the text. Other more symbol – and metaphor – rich fancies like *I'm Dreamin'* and especially *Word Burn Country Boy* become more distinctly sculptural and in moving away from the word-based, flatter work and embracing the narrative and associative potential of content, then, like his wonderful paintings, they embrace all the dimensions, including that of imagination. One imagines that if Philip Guston had made children's toys, this is what they might look like: random objects – fishing poles, arms, light bulbs, signs, corn cob pipes – dangle from a spiky-stemmed tree and wood base which are themselves deeply scored and burned with an inscrutable alphabet of Paleolithic glyphs.

**Reafsnyder**, the other painter, also references his painting style in his sculptural entries – lumpen ceramic affairs of fatty, shimmering flesh. *Glossy Goo* looks like someone beat a Ken Price to death; a voluptuous female figure is in there somewhere, but the glossy, creviced surface folds around itself like a wet wool cloak. *My Glorious Mermaid* evokes a fountain, with ice-hard pools of pigmented glaze like black water inside a shell/bowl of its base and its mottled distressed overall quality of insane, absurd violence done to the clay shivering its own dark ripples like a frozen spring. **David Kiddie**, a renowned ceramic artist in his own right, also collaborated with **Reafsnyder** in an earlier project in which **Reafsnyder** painted on **Kiddie's** heavy, ornate platters. *Baroque-a-Doke* and *Rococo A Go-Go* were made in this way and their knifed skins and broken brocade borders slathered with unpredictable weights of glazing pigment encompass the abstract expressionism and exuberant impasto of **Reafsnyder's** acrylics.

**Michael Dee's** suite of three large scale sculptures – Star (Large Red), (Large Clear) and (Large Blue) – bear some relation to the vivacity and non-traditional approach of what **Kiddie** and **Reafsnyder** did, as **Dee's** process of melting down plastic drinking cups into malleable skins and recombining them into frozen starbursts results in a similar shimmer and mottled texture. However, despite the great fun he clearly has making these monumental trifles **Dee's** conceptual foundations are in formal discourse about surface, mass, beauty and illusion, and represent a serious attempt to conceal his objects in the invisibility cloak of their own disintegrating surfaces.

**Heimir Bjorgulfsson's** *lone star* arranges a concert of stuffed parakeets atop a spinal column that rests like a tripod on a photo-covered box, with the parakeets

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converging at its head like a flower's petals, or like one of **Dee's** stars, with the topmost bird angled up at the viewer like a rocket launcher or stuck lawn dart, its tail caught mid-wiggle. The photos on the box give a series of spiky palm fronds and blue skies the same treatment, with vertical segmentation and the reshuffling of their components making for unlikely but lively formal patterns – encapsulating the exhibition's overall fusion of serious craft and even more serious recreation.

*Surface Sounding* at Seeline Gallery

by Tucker Neel

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To create Seeline's *Surface Sounding* exhibition, the gallery's director, Janet Levy, invited ten curators, artists and writers from Southern California to choose one artist each whose work addresses the concept of surface, a convenient theme broad enough to encompass any number of aesthetic propositions. With ten artists present and ten curators looming in the wings, it would seem impossible for Seeline, a relatively small gallery, to accommodate so much work and so many personalities without the show becoming an incomprehensible mish-mash. Thankfully, what could be a "too many cooks in the kitchen" scenario is in fact more like a jubilant pot-luck dinner party, with each curator bringing an artist as both date and dish. For her selection, the curator and arts writer, Emma Gray, includes John Bucklin's *Remote Control Covered Wagon*, a rickety, cobbled-together pioneer wagon with lopsided hand-crafted wheels, indented with marks from the artist's fingers. For most of the show the pathetic-looking contraption, complete with antenna and remote control, is encased in a plexiglass vitrine on a humble plywood pedestal. But during the opening, the artist took it out for a spin, making it limp feebly along, like an injured insect, at a hobbled pace. In presenting this shoddy pioneer wagon, injected with the entertaining trappings of control, Bucklin actively proposes a witty and critical take on the legacy of manifest destiny and how such an ideology of conquest is suffused into common children's toys, the didactic play-time tools that teach us about American history.

Injecting a welcome breath of serious ocular pleasure into the show, art critic, curator and author Shana Nys Dambrot presents viewers with three of **Michael Dee's** *Negative Star* photographs, puzzling images of gelatinous black, purple and pink globules congealing together in richly hued constellations. The work looks almost photoshopped, like digital pictures of glass dildos adorned with a neon glow filter. Yet to make these works, Dee bypassed the computer and instead went oldschool, tweaking the Rayograph process, making images by capturing directly onto a negative, the light that passes through his signature phallic sculptures, made of iridescently hued melted whiskey tumblers. Like the objects they are made from, these sculptures, and their indexical photographs hold an intoxicating potentiality; they are unabashedly drunk on their own beauty.

Curated by LA artist Alexandra Grant, Xana Kudrjavcev-DeMilner's work may not be wholly radical or new, but there is something aggressively ambiguous and a little annoying in her collages. The first time I saw Kudrjavcev-DeMilner's collages of nature photographs mixed with silhouettes of stately interiors and pictures of fabric from old fashion magazines, I admit I was overly skeptical of their message, their critical import. I thought, "Do we really need more pretty pictures made from the visual detritus of a consumer-obsessed society? What is important in this work?" There are so many other artists out there doing this kind of thing (and with greater effect) that these works, at first, seem redundant. Yet weeks later these simple collages were able to worm their way into my memory. In *Standing*, a stumpy surrealist figure swathed in fuchsia and bubblegum pink tweed, promenades past picturesque crashing waves on a rocky beach. The image is irksome, teetering on the brink of abstraction and filled with incongruous and peculiar elements. After trying to pick it apart for some semblance of meaning, one is left with the feeling that they have seen this all before. Upon second-glance, it becomes evident that this collage

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and Kudrjavcev-DeMilner's other works in the show coyly investigate how printing techniques and photographic reproduction can stimulate memories of the past. Since her images are made entirely from magazine clippings from the 1960s and 1970s, they inspire a sort of Kodachrome nostalgia, a rumination on a color-saturated past and the shifting sign value of increasingly outdated technologies.

Lisa Melandri, a curator always willing to embrace the absurd and irrational, chose to exhibit *A Brief History of the World*, a creepy and entertaining work by Bill Kleiman. The piece consists of a hand-made white-on-yellow star-burst tessellation embedded with resin and cat hair, ripped open to reveal red-hot neon camouflage that oozes out a sludgy green hand with elongated fingers that masquerade as paint drips. This hand plops lumpy rubbery blobs into a complementary outstretched appendage atop a pile of tiny black and white felt clippings, arranged on a puddle-shaped mirrored shelf. Like any hyphen and comma-laden description of it, *A Brief History of the World*, is absolutely ludicrous and over-the-top, a creepy crafty meditation on absurdity. Maybe it's that the piece is from 2003 when the US began its illegal war in Iraq, but Kleiman's conglomeration of loaded signifiers: fiery camo print, Islamic tessellations, zombie hands and reflective surfaces, all lean towards a possible critique of current events, war, and what happens when one's creations get out of control.

When one or two curators select dozens of works for a group show it's easy to overlook unfortunate choices and confusing conceptual pairings. But in a show like Surface Sounding there's really no room for error. Here the act of curatorial choice is put under a microscope for close examination. Each work on display is intimately tied not just to its creator, but also to the curator who, with a Midas-like touch, chose it for exhibition. In a situation like this, the relationship between curator and artist (and gallery for that matter) is revealed as intimate, almost symbiotic. And while that revelation may not be a new one, it's at least refreshing to see this intimacy play out in the open for all who care to see.

## Michael Dee's 'Negative Stars' exhibit contemplates the vacant beauty of celebrity by [Dan Tranberg](#) / [Special to The Plain Dealer](#) Sunday May 18, 2008

Shaheen Modern and Contemporary Art

Los Angeles artist Michael Dee puts a new spin on the idea of the pretty emptiness of Hollywood celebrities in his new solo exhibition "The Negative Stars" at Shaheen Modern and Contemporary Art in downtown Cleveland.

### **REVIEW : Shaheen Modern and Contemporary Art**

**What:** "The Negative Stars," a solo show of new work by Michael Dee.

It's beyond cliché these days to call Hollywood stars vapid or empty. Ever since a generation of profoundly trivial celebrities such as Paris Hilton began to capture the limelight, it seems downright unreasonable to expect much in the way of substance from the seemingly endless parade of vacuous yet pretty creatures that keep celebrity bloggers in business.

But all is not lost. Los Angeles artist Michael Dee has managed to use the vacant glitz of today's Hollywood as inspiration for a tricky series of sculptures and photographs that ascribe new meaning to the idea of candy-colored emptiness. In his solo exhibition "The Negative Stars," on view at Shaheen Modern and Contemporary Art through Friday, June 20, Dee presents a group of clear, starshaped sculptures made from disposable polystyrene cups and a suite of monochromatic color photographs based on negative images of these sculptures. Together, they make for a visually enticing exhibition that

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toys with the language and connotations associated with common value judgments of Hollywood stars. As a successful artist who lives in Los Angeles, Dee has plenty of first-hand experience with celebrities.

At the show's opening last weekend, he shared a personal story about being at a dinner party recently with comedian and famed art collector Steve Martin, and actor, director and musician Vincent Gallo, neither of whom quite fit the profile of ditzzy Hollywood eye candy.

Dee explained that he began this series of works when celebrities such as Lindsay Lohan were just beginning to create media frenzies every time they appeared in public. His sculptures are made by heating clear plastic cups to the point that they can be melted together and then attaching them one to another to form clusters. He sometimes mounts the final forms on light boxes, which makes them glimmer and glow like starlets on the red carpet.

But Dee's visual metaphors aren't as simple as they might sound. The ways in which his sculptures refract light, and the manner in which his photographs dissolve space and substance, make his work function well on many levels. As beautiful if unconventional objects, they expose a compelling contradiction: If prettiness is really so completely empty, why are we so drawn to it? This is Dee's second solo exhibition at Shaheen. His first was in 2000, following his graduation from the master of fine arts program in sculpture at Kent State University. He has exhibited at several prominent galleries in New York and Los Angeles, including Gagosian Gallery (NYC) and Roberts and Tilton (L.A.). He moved from New York to Los Angeles in 2004, where he continues to live.

In light of his new work, Dee comes off somewhere between a wry critic and a reluctant fan of the rich and famous. Either way, the works he creates are anything but empty. And, as the show subtly proposes, the same just may be true of the celebrities that inspire them.

## WHITE LIGHT

WHERE ALL UNPUBLISHED REVIEWS GO TO DIE  
MONDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2008

### Darkness Surrounds Us at Jail

“Darkness Surrounds Us” at Jail curated by Michael Dee deals with the spiritual loss and alienation characterized by both philosophy and pop psychology. The premise of the show challenges the participants to make meaning out of the void and comment on the proximity of the gallery to the Los Angeles County Correctional facility located across the street. The role of existentialist artist as a solitary tormented figure has perhaps become a cultural cliché. However, there is a power to this show that brings new attention to the contemporary recontextualist fascination with modernist philosophy and the very real anxieties of artists living in the face of Los Angeles' hollow urban core.

The curator Michael Dee's sculptures are an odd mix of savant charm and Occidentalism. Dee's work seems to literally embody the need for a personalized grounding within the darker context of meaninglessness and depression. His piece, “the blue light was my blues the red light was my mind,” fuses plastic 99 cent store glasses creating a piece that resembles a Murano chandelier. Lit from underneath in a darkened corner the piece casts phallic shadows forms on the wall creating sexy red and blue lights out of the otherwise mundane material. Much like the crafty experiments of the Swiss team of Fischli & Weiss, Dee's piece has an ability to capture the beauty encompassed by the banality of everyday life and magnify this presence. The rest of the show similarly riffs on the theme with mixed results. Martin Durazo's assemblage, “The Ballad of Jim Jones” seems like a derivative

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Jessica Stockholder without the nostalgia and handiness of Stockholder's craft. The ancillary photo collage depicts bodies surrounding a Kool Aid tub along with a letter from Harvey Milk vouching for Jones' character; attempt to push this piece into the territory of a sprawling Jason Rhodes installation. However Durazo falls short in both concept and execution. On the other hand his neon pink drawing "Motorhead Distress Logo" cleverly points to a "white power" prisoner aesthetic perhaps illustrating the tension between the gallery space and its neighboring "Bailbonds" storefront. Pentti Monkkonen's giant beer sculpture, "Native America" misses the point, its art historical references to Jasper Johns and political subtext makes it seem out of place in the context of the show's very personal nature. His much more poetic, "beer cans" sculpture of mice trapped in resin plastic seems to illustrate the creepy tension between alcoholism and hallucination characterized by the lonely addict. Ricky Becerril's piece, "Elk" creates a graphic architecture of personal and cultural references bringing the surroundings of downtown Los Angeles into focus. While Jamie Scholnick's series, "Enemy Combatants" brings to mind the spiritual simplicity of isolation. Her careful renderings of caged pit bulls highlight both to the urban sport of dog fighting and the meditative cloistering of imprisoned souls in direct relation to the gallery. Another stand out is a group of fine small oil paintings by Jamie Adams. "Almost" and "Upstairs" depict the moments just before waking when dim light begins to paint the walls of a plastic thrift store alarm clock and sculpture with imaginative light, and transience.

Artists attempt to expose the real texture of human experience, in an unreal simulacra. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of "The Darkness Surrounds Us" is its attempt to approach such a grandiose conundrum, successful or not.

-Mary Anna Pomonis