

ART PAPERS

STRIKING IDEAS + MOVING IMAGES + SMART TEXTS

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NEGENTROPY
AND PASTORALISM:
FERNANDO GARCÍA DORY

READYBOUGHT
JODI
IN CONVERSATION

CHARACTER
UNCATEGORIZED:
JIM NUTT

PORNO-POPULISM
THE PEOPLE'S BIENNIAL
+ WHATEVER IT TAKES





FREE PEOPLE OF COLOUR (AND OTHER PICTURES)

ATLANTA

Curated by Santiago Mostyn, *Free People of Colour (and other pictures)* brings together the work of four photographers who take on an array of subject matter while conjuring up a spiritually cohesive whole [Get This! Gallery; September 25—November 6, 2010]. The black-and-white photographs depict a subcultural demimonde familiar from Swoon's traveling band of nautical artists, director Kelly Reichardt's *Wendy and Lucy*, 2008, and the film and photography work of Gus Van Sant, Larry Clark, Katy Grannan, Oraien Catledge, and J. Bellocq. Defined either by artistic proclivity, sexual marginality, poverty or race, this off-the-grid world is as shocking to witness as any parallel narrative of America that challenges our antiseptic media and mainstream-defined national identity. These are dark valentines to an alternative world where lyricism and heartbreak seem very close neighbors indeed. In Mostyn's challenging and thoughtful portrait of an other America, the values of social progress are not necessarily swallowed whole.

The reality effect in *Free People* is both specific and timeless. Michael M. Koehler's photographs document a particular time and place: the post-Katrina landscape and bruised national imagination. *One Year After Katrina*, 2006, shows a grime-smeared American flag left behind in the dirt—a symbol of democracy trampled and abandoned. In *Off the Map*, 2009, a map of the United States on a classroom wall, the Southern states, including Louisiana, have significantly dropped off. A mostly water line hangs, like some snail trail or equator, on the cinder-block wall.

By contrast, Dinah DiNova's deliciously quirky tintypes staged in New Orleans convey timelessness. In *Crow Quill Night Owls*, 2010, modern musicians wear the garb of yesteryear and play banjos and washboards. DiNova's tintypes use an antediluvian photographic technology to echo the old-timey aesthetic and romantic infatuation with nature, music, and nonconformity that has united artists from the British Romantics to the modern Steampunks and shaped the willfully anachro-

nistic confines of New Orleans. Likewise, Mostyn puts forth mildly debauched portraiture. In the nature-idyll *George II (Ascension)*, 2010, an effeminate man arches his body provocatively while lying by the shore. The lyricism suggested in such images of velvety water or explosions of green foliage is undercut by the assertions of rigor and difficulty in the jagged seashells and chain-link fences, and vacant lots that hem in the beauty.

The marginal occupants of New Orleans' Tremé neighborhood, where photographer Craig Mammano moved in 2006, occupy the alternative reality of *Free People*. They are the spiritual kin—perhaps—of the self-willed American drop-outs seen in Mostyn's nearly erotic *Hitchhiker Eyes*, 2010 and *Walt Lighting Cigarette*, 2010. Mostyn documents a defiant, iconoclastic contemporary counterculture whose subjects gaze out at us with the vaguely unsettling, confident mien of people who have chosen a particular life for themselves. In the installation *A Few Square Blocks*, 2010, Mammano conveys the abject and ad hoc existence of these Tremé residents by tacking Xeroxed images to the cardboard box backing that constitutes homeless dwellings and pallets for backwoods trysts. The denizens of Tremé are defined by lives splayed out and visible, spilling out onto the streets from cramped row houses, forced to act out their creativity and sexuality in vacant lots and crudely drawn murals on liquor store facades. But they share an affinity with the slackers, the punk-rock kids, and rural pagans in some of the other artists' work: crafting their reality from what's available and creating cultures of self-selected or imposed difference.

—Felicia Feaster

BRIAN DETTMER

ATLANTA

Brian Dettmer's work exists in a contradictory, challenging space. Prodded, dissected, and bent into sculptural objects, his bookworks are critiques of the presumed wisdom contained in their tomes. They are also celebrations of the sheer beauty of antiquated volumes, with their quaint illustrations, softened, time-worn colors, and elegantly simple bindings. As such, a bibliophile could both love and revile Dettmer's exhibition *New Worlds to Conquer* [Saltworks Gallery; November 20, 2010—January 8, 2011]. The title is two-fold as well—both an implicit critique of the chest-beating superiority of the imperialist imagination that extols its grit and guts in the pages of these tomes and a reference to the artist's surgical process, a secondary conquest by way of cutting tools. Dettmer masters and owns the worlds contained in the books, disabling much of their intellectual power.

Dettmer's show-stopping technique involves the autopsy of dense encyclopedias, travel guides, and history books from earlier decades to reveal how their particular knowledge has become a kind of dead-end enterprise. Contorting these vintage manuals and encyclopedias back on themselves, he reveals the fallacies of their innards. Inside lie outdated maps, colonies, and countries as well as equally moldy assertions and points of view. The luxury of hindsight allows us to see these assertions as "bunk," to borrow a term from Henry Ford.

In the age of instantly-amended, rapidly-changing, and endlessly-malleable Internet information, the certainty contained in these books can seem almost quaint. As he turns them into sculptural objects and cuts away their pages, Dettmer reveals themes and fixations. In some sense, he also lampoons their absolute, inviolable certainties. Understated humor is a frequent tool of the artist. In *The R.O.T.C. Manual*, 2010, he wryly isolates the word "thrust," which is repeated throughout the book, along with illustrations of men in various athletic postures, uniformed men bearing firepower, gun sites and scopes.

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Santiago Mostyn, *Crossing Under the Bridge*, 2010, c-print in artist's frame, 24 x 30 inches [courtesy of the artist and Get This! Gallery, Atlanta]; Brian Dettmer, *The March of Democracy*, 2010, altered books 18.5 x 19.5 x 4 inches [courtesy of the artist and Saltworks Gallery Atlanta]



FRANCES STARK
CAMBRIDGE, MA

The work in *New Worlds to Conquer* moves beyond Dettmer's fantastic skill and the novelty of his process to reach a new level of sculptural finesse. Nowhere is that truer than in *The March of Democracy*, 2010, a set of burgundy history books embossed with majestic—and vaguely fascist—eagles and gold lettering. The books are shaped into a pentagon, obviously conjuring up America, the country promulgated in these tomes as the primary practitioner of equality and elected government.

The works' power partly resides in their combination of the familiar and the strange. On one hand, Dettmer's cutting can often feel quite conceptual and measured, a clever semiotic tool that allows the artist to find the key words or phrases to illuminate the text. In *War Through the Ages*, 2010, the artist has cut away a central image of a knight on horseback and the phrases "big guns," and "repulsed with heavy losses." It's a pithy, humorous reduction of war to its essential nature. Sometimes, the themes are more visual than text-based. In *Civilisation*, 2010, a beautiful tapestry of fleshy pinks, mossy greens, and golds emphasizes God, art, and government. In *The Secret Museum of Mankind*, 2010, the visual emphasis is—as in Sixties Mondo films—on "primitive people" captured in delicate, muted violet, sepia, and indigo.

There is also a dimension of Dettmer's work that reaches beyond the intellectual to engage with the unconscious. There is something eerily organic, almost insect-like, and occasionally violent in his book-objects that curl into each other like centipedes and morph from intellectual objects into primordial ones. In *A Loose Leaf and Self Revising Reference Work*, 2010, the volumes of *Colliers New Encyclopedia* meld into each other in a ladder-like configuration that recalls Ouroboros devouring its tail. There is something uncanny, even magical in the books' manipulation, as the familiar is deconstructed, Siamese twin-like, into some alien form.

—Felicia Feaster

Frances Stark's newest collection of writing, *This could become a gimmick [sic] or an honest articulation of the workings of the mind*, published on the occasion of her recent namesake exhibition, presents a surprisingly visual understanding of her artmaking [MIT List Visual Arts Center (LVAC); October 22, 2010—January 2, 2011]. This is all the more exemplary since the catalogue contains no images. Conceptually based in a 1995 work on paper wherein Stark makes shorthand liner notes on a page of Alain Robbe-Grillet's *The Voyeur*, which the show is titled after, the book is filled with her poems and writing as well as freehand notes by exhibition curator and co-editor João Ribas. The first U.S. museum survey of the Los Angeles artist's work, and the first LVAC show for Ribas, is a tangible recreation of Stark's treatment of language—cutting, repeating, re-shaping, re-contextualizing—that makes physical the inner dialogue of artmaking without ever taking itself too seriously.

Stark's work results from her own thoughts and creative struggles. As such, it should come as no surprise that much of the work featured in the exhibition reveals a physical exploration of interiors. Her trademark fields of white negative space sidle up next to desks, small tables, chairs, and other pieces of furniture dotted with colorful vases and flowers. Her *Cat Videos*, 1999-2002, juxtapose the uneventful actions of house cats with the unlikely sounds of 1980s-era Throbbing Gristle. A 2004 text-based work on paper proclaims, "THE FURNITURE OF MY MIND IS ALL UNDEDUSTED STILL." This attention to the *inside* of things is both reflected visually in the figurative rendering of collaged interior scenes and also implied throughout the show. It makes the work intimate without resort to insignificant personal references. It's also quite feminine.

While literature plays a significant role for the writer and poet, whose artworks often reference published works or use pages from books as material, Stark's textploits are first and foremost plays on language.

Several drawings and collages reveal literary reference indirectly, with chains of squiggly lines unfolding like paragraphs in a book, complete with line breaks for missing punctuation. Others tackle the book as object. *To a Selected theme (Emerson v. Nietzsche)*, 2008, literally casts the cover of Friedrich Nietzsche's 1908 book *Ecce Homo* as its subject matter, with a blue pansy blossom covering the cover's title and the male figure. The work is part of a 2000 series titled after Nietzsche's final book, which discloses his own interpretation of his achievement, development, and meaning of his oeuvre—a theme that Stark's work echoes adamantly.

Similarly, the final work in the show, *I must explain (again)*, 2009, is a text scroll that spills over onto the floor, wherein the artist endlessly explains herself as her words slowly roll away and out of view, not unlike Nietzsche's sanity or the illusive nature of the creative process itself. *This could become a gimmick [sic] or an honest articulation of the workings of the mind* is ultimately not unlike Robbe-Grillet's *The Voyeur*, which places the audience inside the mind of Mathias, the protagonist. Here, we are inside Stark's mind.

—Evan J. Garza

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Frances Stark, installation view of *This could become a gimmick [sic] or an honest articulation of the workings of the mind*, 2010 [courtesy of the artist and MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge]; *If conceited girls want to show they have a seat... [standing]*, 2008, vinyl, paint, rice paper and fabric on casein on canvas, 185.5 x 96.5 cm [collection of The Westreich]; *Why should you not be able to assemble yourself and write?*, 2008, rice paper, paper and ink on gessoed canvas on panel, 137 x 68.5 cm [courtesy of the artist and the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles]