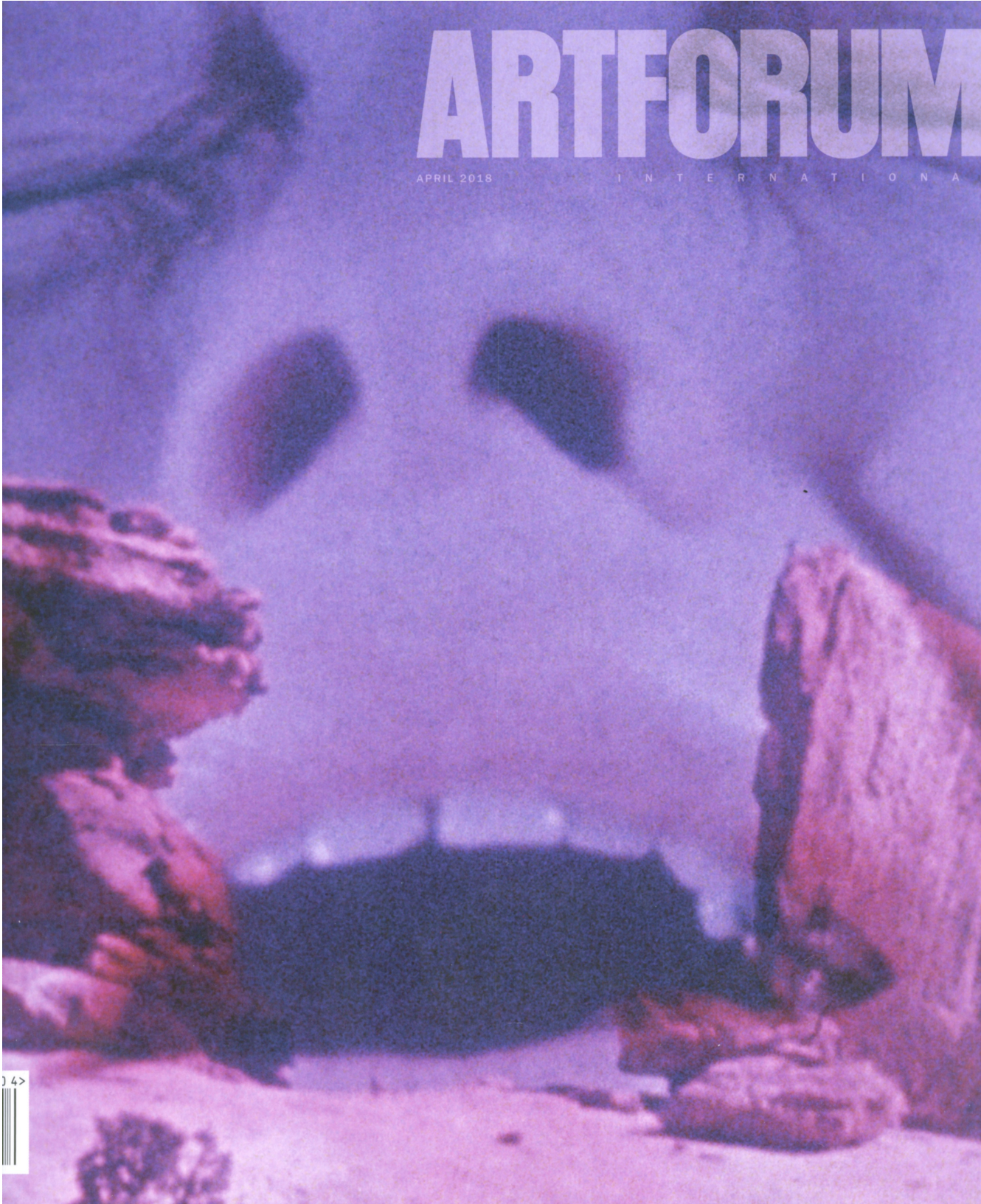


MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



REVIEWS

Ilana Harris-Babou

LARRIE

“Home decor corrals time,” Ilana Harris-Babou writes in her artist’s statement for “Reparation Hardware.” Through the delicate and strategic acquisition and display of objects, “we can conjure a perfect past and fold it into an aspirational future.” The show’s eponymous video parodied the slick, desirous collection videos of the upmarket home-furnishings retailer Restoration Hardware, juxtaposing the company’s breathless appeals to timeless quality and artisanal craft with the political demand for the delivery of reparations to African Americans in recognition of the stolen labor of their enslaved ancestors. Urbanelly outfitted in a chambray button-down and round tortoiseshell glasses, Harris-Babou plays the chimerical character of the Reconstructor, part social-policy maker, part lifestyle influencer. “Reparations,” she announces, “will be our most ambitious project yet. We’re going back to the source, with rugged, splintery, slippery materials. I find inspiration everywhere, and I take this inspiration with me back to the studio.” In a glassy deadpan, the artist mimics the marketing cant of the millennial creative class and its shibboleths of authenticity, entrepreneurialism, and self-expression via mindful consumption. Dreamy close-ups of salvaged woods and bathetic shots of urinating cows are interposed with footage of Harris-Babou pensively gazing through a barn window, nailing a wooden beam with a flaccid clay hammer, and filling her sketchbook with the phrase “40 ACRES AND A MULE”—an invocation of Union General William T. Sherman’s unfulfilled promise to redistribute property to formerly enslaved farmers. “Their liberation was handcrafted,” she intones before an antiqued sepia photograph of herself posing with a rake in front of a dilapidated farmhouse appears on-screen. The juxtaposition—like the four-minute video as a whole—is arch and ironic, yet nonetheless hints at the atavistic, perhaps softly revanchist, fantasies latent in the nostalgia-coated artisanalism that supplies rootless urban creatives with invented histories and class signifiers.

Her send-up of post-hipster aesthetics, with its fetishes of process, materials, and alienated labor, was amplified in the wordless video *Red Sourcebook*, 2018. The camera pans covetously across the pages of Restoration Hardware’s summer catalogue, lingering on sun-drenched stories with titles such as “Majorca in Grey All-Weather Wicker.” Beneath sumptuous images of infinity pools and “plantation grown, sustainably harvested” teak deck furniture, crawling text splices

language from the catalogue’s introductory essay, written by Restoration Hardware’s CEO, and from the Federal Housing Administration’s 1936 *Underwriting Manual*, a document that enshrined racist and discriminatory mortgage-lending policies known as “redlining.” Literally taking up the practice with a red Sharpie, Harris-Babou outlines particularly seductive products and landscape elements, yielding an analogy between the catalogue’s discerning curation of quality wares and the FHA’s partitioning of space along color and class lines.

Ultimately, the insight of “Reparation Hardware” owed less to its gleeful satire of petit bourgeois “good taste” or its Benjaminian prompt that all “documents of civilization” are—with varying degrees of mediation—“documents of barbarism” than to the intellectual contest between reparation and restoration and their competing claims on history. In the artist’s own words, “[T]he restoration of old furniture takes something stale and makes it sleek. The reparation of lost wealth takes the smooth, seamless inevitability of the American Dream and makes it rusty.” Harris-Babou’s odd ceramic objects and desk lamps—the artist’s answer to Restoration Hardware’s nouveau heirlooms—were displayed on mounted shelves and on a reclaimed-wood table. While emphatically handcrafted, these aberrant housewares—gloopy, splenic agglutinations of epoxy clay, acrylic paint, and ceramic—flout the design ethics of functionality and skilled craftsmanship. Rather than conjure an idealized past or an aspirational future, they inhabit an imminent, acutely unresolved and contested present.

—Chloe Wyma

GCC

THE AMIE AND TONY JAMES GALLERY, THE GRADUATE CENTER, CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Much of the recent work of GCC—the group of artists whose eight members hail from various Persian Gulf countries, and whose name references the acronym for a regional political and economic alliance known as the Gulf Cooperation Council—has focused on the growing popularity in the area, among both governments and the wider populace, of the “positive energy” movement. Their 2016 solo at New York’s Mitchell-Innes & Nash included five bas-reliefs, in a maroon, velvet-flocked thermoformed styrene, based on 3-D renderings of stills derived from YouTube and other online sources of various regional proponents of this and other related New Age spiritual practices.

For their show at the James Gallery—a reprise of their contribution to last year’s Art Basel Parcours program, where the works were presented off-site in galleries and niches at the city’s Natural History Museum—they showed six such reliefs, titled *Mahd (Gesture I–VI)*, all 2017, fabricated out of sandstone-colored MDF, their uncannily artificial surface topologies softened with rubbings of baby powder. Resting against parts of their wooden shipping containers and carefully cushioned with bits of shipping foam, they resembled recently unpacked artworks or artifacts, such as ancient architectural reliefs or sarcophagus lids. Broken corners, chipped edges, and cracks snaking across some of their surfaces enhanced this suggestion of antiquity. The first one featured a man with a microphone looking directly out at us, performing the signature hand gesture of the prime minister of the United Arab Emirates, a country that boasts a bona fide minister of happiness. The English subtitle that runs along the bottom edge asks, WHAT IS THE SECRET BEHIND IT? Adding an extended thumb to the common sign for peace and victory, the cryptic gesture supplements, according to its creator, the conventional meaning of triumph with a profound expression of love. In another, a healer leads a seated group of people, their eyes closed and heads leaning back, in what appears to be



View of “Ilana Harris-Babou,” 2018. Photo: Jackie Furtado.



GCC, Mahd
(Gesture II), 2017.
MDF, baby powder,
sound, 47 x 47".

a guided meditation. Two others focus in on the practitioner's hands. In one, they cover a face in a gesture that reads as both soothing and smothering. In another, the left hand lies laterally across the front of the open-faced right palm, the healing energy almost palpable in the shallow but pregnant space between them.

Belief in the Power of Believe, an audio piece that played throughout the gallery, anachronistically interweaves short excerpts from the ancient Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* with bits of transcribed audio excerpted from the videos the images are sourced from, all read aloud by a robotized female voice. Though digitized, the disembodied voice is unexpectedly calming, like that of a yoga or a meditation guide or, somewhat more sinisterly, of someone engaged in hypnosis or mind control. The voice also indexes the recent embrace by governments in the region of cutting-edge artificial intelligence (just last fall Saudi Arabia bestowed citizenship on a humanoid robot named Sophia) and other related future technologies as central both to their post-oil economic plans and to their commitment to models of smart governance. However, a woman recounts her frustration over the process of securing government-subsidized housing in a snippet of testimony at the end of the audio track. A projection of positive energy finally garners a response after repeated failures. This seemingly innocent anecdote troublingly posits positivity as a viable solution to bureaucratic ineptitude and to the lack of political agency, quelling all possibilities of dissent.

What is gained by representing these images and texts in a material and literary context that conjures up Near Eastern antiquity—one that attempts to transform bits of obscure online ephemera into contemporary cultural artifacts? The evocation of a foundational pagan, pre-Islamic prehistory of the region raises the question of why certain types of New Age spiritualities, sanitized through pseudoscience and imported from the West, are enthusiastically promoted by governments, while indigenous practices derived from pre-Islamic and Islamic mysticisms are routinely marginalized and suppressed as witchcraft. And the reference to Gilgamesh suggests a genealogical link between the King of Uruk, mythologized for his construction of magnificent cities, and the contemporary rulers of the Gulf, recasting their triumphant nation-building endeavors—bolstered by neoliberal exercises in soft power such as the instrumentalization of discourses of positive energy and happiness, and the establishment of mega-institutions of art and culture—as myths, not histories.

—Murtaza Vali

Gil Batle

RICCO/MARESCA GALLERY

Gil Batle used to go to Walmart in Southern California and scrutinize the cashiers. He'd keep his eyes peeled for anyone who was new, bored, or unremittingly sloppy. When he found his mark, Batle would visit his or her checkout line with some expensive appliance in tow and would pay for it with a money order. But the piece of paper he'd hand over for his big-ticket item was an exquisitely made drawing—a counterfeit. Batle would then sell his stealthily looted merchandise on the street for cash to support his crystal meth addiction. His skills as a master forger got him into a lot of trouble; Batle spent about twenty years in and out of jail, much of it for fraud. However, in prison, where he'd supply his fellow inmates with drawings or tattoos, his talents as an artist earned him respect and, perhaps most importantly, protection. Having been free for about a decade, Batle now makes artwork on a remote island in the Philippines. But the sculptures and drawings on view in his second solo outing with Ricco/Maresca Gallery illustrated the dark days of his numerous incarcerations in fastidious, lurid detail. Crime and art overlapped beautifully, hypnotically—as in a classic EC horror comic.

With a high-speed dental drill, Batle carves his harrowing tableaux into the surfaces of emptied ostrich eggs. Each one takes about a month to complete. Virtually every stripe of misery gets its due—rape, murder, suicide, poverty, hopelessness, revenge—in a style that seems a synthesis of Robert Crumb, Hieronymus Bosch, and those eerie little illustrations from the Ellesmere manuscript. Nineteen of the artist's eggs were installed throughout the gallery and protected by glass domes, as if they were dainty Victorian keepsakes. Because the pieces were placed close together on long, low plinths, a 360-degree view of each work was difficult to find. But observers were encouraged to linger, as a tidy row of magnifying glasses was available in the gallery for anyone willing to spend more than a few minutes poring over one of these exactly created objects.

Abducted, 2017, tells the story of a dentist Batle knew, named Dr. Simmons, who received two life sentences for killing his family. (One day Simmons went to the police to file a missing-persons report, claiming that his wife and son were taken hostage by aliens—a few weeks later, authorities found their bodies buried in a field.) The egg is embellished with UFO battalions, an alien judge, cops, prison watchtowers, and a pair of disinterred skulls. In one part of the work, an extraterrestrial tenderly gifts Simmons with a noose. Nearby, there's a rendering of the dentist in his cell with a bedsheet tied around his neck, writing a farewell letter. *Kite Deck*, 2017, takes its name from the sets of altered playing cards prison gang members use for secret communications. Panels from the egg, modeled after different card suits, depict, among other things, a shiv growing from the earth like a root vegetable; a doctor carrying a saw and severed limbs; and an old junkie with a needle in his arm hovering above a spectral Death, who is clutching his scythe, patiently waiting. A braid of hungry serpents, devouring one another, encircles the top of the egg.

