

Art in America

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

JANUARY 2016

KARL HAENDEL Mitchell-Innes & Nash

Los Angeles-based artist Karl Haendel, born in 1976, is part of a generational cohort that breathed new life into 1980s appropriationist strategies in various mediums. His Photo-Realist draftsmanship recalls the technique of fellow Californian Andrea Bowers, while his eye-catching installations evince a showmanship shared by artists like Kelley Walker. Unlike Bowers, however, whose labor-intensive drawings pay faithful homage to her source images (of political protest and leftist movements), Haendel portrays a more ambivalent attitude toward his hand-drawn reproductions of mass-media and personal images. “Organic Bedfellow, Feral Othello,” Haendel’s first solo show at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, focused on human resistance to “devolution,” per the press materials. But the works on their own evoked a richer set of associations toward Haendel’s subjects—modernism, intimacy and technology—than the exhibition’s rhetorical and visual scaffolding would suggest.

Comprised of 27 drawings, the show was situated in a space dramatically enhanced by geometric motifs, harking back to experimental exhibition designs pioneered by avant-garde movements like the Bauhaus and Constructivism. Large angular black, white or checkerboard-patterned shapes snaked along the floor and onto the walls, guiding sight lines. One could discern a loose teleological narrative among the three groups of drawings on view.

Six works featured primates, such as a gorilla and a gibbon, balancing on stacks of polygons and circles. In contrast to the animals’ lifelike modeling, the rendering of the shapes is completely flat. The tension between figuration and abstraction in this series implies a binary opposition between nature and culture. But rather than signaling the triumph of modernist abstraction, the works, given the vibrancy of the primates, reference what the press statement calls humans’ “animalistic nature to evolve and transform against tendencies toward devolution.” In every instance, the bright-eyed apes remain on top.

Nine drawings in shaped, black frames depict couples performing acrobatic yoga poses. Each piece is named after a famous demarcation line drawn in battle, like the Maginot, 17th Parallel and Mason-Dixon. Despite the antagonistic titles, the claustrophobic cropping by the frames, and the challenging positions held by the athletic subjects—where one partner is often contorted to support the other—the images exude tenderness. Haendel’s elegant depictions appear to update Pictures Generation artist Robert Longo’s “Men in the Cities” (1977-83), a jolting series of drawings depicting his suited friends dancing frenetically against white backgrounds, for the “athleisure” era. But whereas Longo plucked his figures from their original context and imported them into a blank space open to psychological projection, Haendel traps his subject into a tight frame surrounded by yet more visual framing apparatuses.



View of Karl Haendel’s exhibition “Organic Bedfellow, Feral Othello,” 2015, at Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

A set of drawings on irregularly shaped boxes placed on the floor completed the trio. These rebuslike works illustrate the mass-produced consumer items cited in their poetic, alliterative titles, all of which seem to be lifted from spam e-mails marketing lifestyle enhancements. *Penis Pump and Choking Collar Corresponds to Straight to Curls and Carnal Flower* (2015), for example, depicts the objects listed (penis pump, choking collar, a tuberose perfume called Carnal Flower and a mathematical symbol meaning “corresponds to”). Each drawing also includes a unique QR code that, when scanned with one’s smart phone, links to a YouTube vlog (appropriated and presented on Haendel’s site) showcasing a personal transformation, such as a weight loss or gender transition. *Penis Pump*’s accompanying video, for example, narrates a black woman’s “hair journey” from treating her hair with chemical relaxers to embracing her natural kinky texture.

Haendel’s work is at times simplistic in its syntactical approach to combining images and can demonstrate a seriousness that borders on moralizing. Even so, his show addressed important questions about technology’s effects on the body as we attempt to manipulate “nature” to enhance our personal pleasure.

—Wendy Vogel