

119 West Montgomery Avenue, Philadelphia PA

"Here it is, this is the only place for me!" This group was known to some as "the family"; my own name for it was "the tribe." Things went on like that for just a little while, not long at all-but such moments are precious in life, and distinctly rare.

-Jean Michel Mension, *The Tribe: Contributions to the History of the Situationist International and Its Time*. Vol. 1

We all know that it's a bitch to survive in this town. This being the case, there are ways to get around the unstable employment dilemma and still be able to live in a thriving art scene. Real estate on the edges of the city is cheap and artists have been working in these areas in converted factories and warehouses for decades. The affordable architectural landscape seems to have been internalized into the sinews and bones of many of the artists that live and work in the area.

The gallery Little Berlin is housed in a large renovated warehouse at 119 W. Montgomery Avenue. This building has been the home of many notable artists working in Philadelphia. The footprint of the place is massive, and it has made it possible for the artists who've resided there to produce large ambitious works and make a lot of noise. In the 90's this building provided a safe haven and vital environment for Bardo Pond.

Bardo Pond has a legacy of being the city's 'premier lurching noisemakers' and has been beating the Gamelan-like central drum for this assemblage of creative individuals in many ways. Its strain of American psychedelic rock is loud and durational. Through extended songs that rely on high volume repetition, one is lulled (or beaten) into a state of passive acceptance until Isobel Sollenberger vocally sucker punches the audience out from its sleepy-ness and into a state of temporary ecstasis. It is a palpable and visceral experience. Many of the artists that are associated with this scene have generated works that provide similar effects in the visual field.

Much of the work in Little Berlin's 'Heaven and Earth' exhibition has been wrought by the aforementioned coalition of friends and colleagues. This is a genuine arts community that has drawn from one another for more than ten years. Communities have the ability to buffer the influence of the ubiquitous and hegemonic international art crowd that can be found sprouting up around the planet in biennials and art fairs. A narrow margin of blue chip artists are over-represented on the pages of full color glossy art magazines, and their ripple effects can be found in the derivative gestures of art students and career minded social climbers. In contrast to this state of affairs, some of the work in this show is incredibly strong and gives form to themes that are unique to this city.

What themes and articulations in the realm of the sensible are unique to Philly?

In 2003, Sid Sachs, the director and curator of the Rosenwald Wolff gallery assembled a historicizing exhibition titled 'The Other Tradition' that tried to outline what sets Philadelphia artists apart from the dominant trends of the New York-centric artworld. A handful of the artists from 119 W. Montgomery Ave. were in the show. In trying to pin down an intergenerational thread that stretches from Robert Crumb to Joy Feasly, Sachs states that 'Philadelphia has an underground figurative tradition based on comics, graffiti, Duchamp, and a true raw sense of the absurd' and that 'there is also a dark, almost abject sensibility going back to Charles Bukowski, Paul Thek, and David Lynch.'

Artists respond to their environments, and this tenor of the absurd, the dark and the occult is inscribed into the architecture of the city. It can be found in

the country's largest Freemason lodge on Broad street, the hanging cast concrete pagan creatures in the alcoves of city hall, the Theosophical society on Walnut street and the Academy of the Fine Arts building that was designed by the maverick American architect Frank Furness. Philadelphia has a slower architectural turnover than New York, and many of the older anomalous buildings, facades and signs of long extant business adventures are hanging on like ghosts in the shadows of urban redevelopment. These buildings have populated the psycho-geographic imaginary for the cultural producers who've resided within the city limits. If one cares to look for it, a sort of dark magic can still be found in the city's alleys and neglected streets or even in the dusty bookstall at the Reading Terminal.



Paul Swenbeck, *Blood Drawing*, 2009

Richard Harrod has been producing art and exhibiting within the city for the last 15 years. Harrod's works have at times set up situations for encounters with the unheimlich that are disorienting and funny. In the Little Berlin exhibition, with a work titled 'The Managers' Harrod provides a trompe l'oeil image of a life sized rectangular hole in the floor of the space (on the actual floor) with a fearsome set of steps leading to a basement for unaware gallery goers to stumble down and meet their untimely demise. The work consists of large format laser jet prints that have been glued together and highlighted with off white paint. At the bottom of the steps is a short log with scissors impaled into its cross section. The illusion is not convincing, but one still feels a little wary walking around it. To reinforce the sense of vertical depth, Harrod has run a string from the floor to the ceiling thus literalizing the name of the exhibition.

The title of Harrod's floor work could have been taken directly from Kafka or Maurice Blanchot. In Blanchot's most Kafkaesque novel *Aminadab*, the antagonist Thomas wanders into a house that has infinite rooms with an ever-changing set of rules and hierarchically distributed roles for the servants and managers. There is no comfort to be found in the bedrooms, and the mood of the house constantly oscillates between safety and danger. The novel is dream-like. Blanchot intimates how the impressions left on us by interiors are perpetually in a state of flux with strange atemporal admixtures of memories of rooms that overlap and interpenetrate one another. Harrod's stairway performs similar procedures by compositing multiple points of view and contaminating the domestic scene with absurd and spooky details.

Another exhibition with artists from the same community is the 'None More Black' show at Vox Populi. A standout from the show was Paul Swenbeck's suite of blood drawings. Swenbeck had a nurse withdraw a cup of blood from his body. This blood was used in a manner similar to ink that was transferred to paper with brushes and pens. Swenbeck borrows images from the book of Solomon to create talismans that hopefully will not work. Admittedly, the artist loves to work with blood. This fascination began with a sanguine fluid drawing made from a high school biology blood test that the artist has carried in his wallet for more than 20 years for good luck. These drawings are generous and frightening. In an altruistic gesture, Swenbeck donated the blood that could provide nutrients and oxygen to his muscles and brain for the production of drawings that are to be consumed by others. Still, the occult symbols with their Faustian connotations are troublesome with their lack of intelligibility or supplementary wall texts, leaving one to guess who the intended recipient of the talismans may be.

Drawing with blood, and the use of the body's humors has a long history in pagan, alchemical and satanic rituals. The images bear a striking resemblance to Joseph Beuy's iodine paintings on paper. Beuy's was interested in Alchemy and the re-sacralization of life. This lineage can be traced through the work of Joan Jonas in the artist's attempts to neutralize the effects of technology and instrumental reason by evoking the sirens of the sublimated counter histories of secret societies and initiatory rites of passage. Swenbeck's drawings reflect the darker side of this art historical trajectory, as well as embodying Sach's description of a local ethos that is both dark and abject.

There is no apparent investment in critical theory in any of these works, nor do they bear the mark of a vogueish miming of current art world trends. Most of the artists in this informal community came into there own in the early to mid 90's, a moment when French theory was being crammed down throats of resentful art students throughout the country. It appears that their work is part of a generational rejection of the era's theoretical trends. These artists work with the tropes of the uncanny, inside jokes, and a renewed interest in the occult, without resorting to the intellectual crutches of philosophy, psychoanalysis or semiotics.

A problem with projects that have an anti-theoretical attitude is that the artists do not provide the public with a form of self-diagnoses through their statements or public talks, and therefore leave the ideas behind their work unintelligible and opaque for the uninitiated. The burden is placed on the viewer to decipher and decode their offerings. Due to the swaying indeterminacy of the artists' intent, one is cautious of over-reading their drawings and installations. This caution short circuits extensive readings and cuts off a wider and more meaningful discourse.

Genuine alternative artworlds are vulnerable and precious. They provide a very thin crust of resistance from the banalizing effects of living in the belly of an advanced capitalist state. Fragile worlds are always on the verge of dissipating and fading into invisibility. Where there are gatherings of friends who share an aesthetic project no matter how articulate or inchoate, there potentially stands an indefatigable community that can withstand the ebbs and flows of the art market as well as the assaults of younger generations who attempt to sideline their predecessors to stake out their own territories.

-Holly Martins