

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW

End Times Photography

Frances Stark
Brice Marden
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Art and Protest
in Postwar Japan
plus
MCA Chicago's
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Julie Evans and Ajay Sharma:
Orange-AssLandscape,
2010, acrylic, gouache and
mixed mediums on paper,
11 by 14 inches; at Julie Saul.

fill floating globes or proliferate across an abstract composition, and lotus buds are either faithfully rendered on their long stems or stylized and repeated in hypnotic fanlike designs. Animals rather than humans inhabit these tiny worlds. In *CowDustHour* a bejeweled white cow stands among pinkish clouds overlooking the multiheaded snake Ananta, from the Hindu creation myth, and black shimmering puffs adorned with white garlands and green dots. *SmokingMedallion* features a strange group of yellow animals in disproportionate scale, which move weightlessly within a circle adorned with flowers, right above an arc of fire.

Close scrutiny of the works reveals lightly or irregularly outlined penises and penis heads, which may top a flowered branch, protrude from below an earthy mass or bulge from a conglomeration of bulky shapes. The most humorous and provocative body part in the paintings, however, is the large, hairy posterior in *Orange-AssLandscape*. It defines the right side of the composition, ornamented with gracious floral decorations as well as ominous talonlike palm leaves.

At once beautiful and menacing, delicate and funky, the series is titled "Cowdust" after an old Indian expression for dusk—the "cowdust hour," when cows driven home for the night raise dust on the village roads. This in-between time of indistinct vision lends itself well to a visionary series that blurs the line between craft and fine art, figuration and abstraction.

—Anna Mecugni

TOM PHILLIPS FLOWERS

Over the last decade or so, as seen in "Tom Phillips Works in 2, 2½, & 3 Dimensions," the British artist best known for his text-based work in collage has been creating objects, and reconstituting familiar ones, with materials ranging from salvaged mud to wire, metal scraps and his own hair. The result is a variety of barbed disturbances. The sole work from 2010, in a show that spans 30 years, is a shaved tennis ball covered with Phillips's hair, *Ah, the middle years, the best of times*. The ball—a Duchampian "assisted" readymade—might be mistaken for the real deal, but for its gray color.

That Phillips intends a pithy commentary is largely revealed by his titles (what looks like a board game is a 2003 work called *Shrine*), and many of the objects "read" best if you know what they are made of (*Shrine* is an amalgam of hair, earth and found metal). The curious patina on a plaster head, *Skull: The Peeler* (1998), is aging orange peelings. One small maquette, a 10-inch-square checkerboard of mud, *The Song of the Earth: Earth Sudoku* (2008), is a gem, its myriad earth tones somehow narrative, a map without a legend. Textured grids recur, impressively so in a full-size (82-inch-square) star quilt, *Women's Work* (1997), made from tiny snippets of text salvaged from sex workers' flyers.

Text-based pieces continue to exert a magnetic spell in two strangely beautiful examples, in which *almost* readable words compel us to move up close. And stay. In the luminous *Wittgenstein's*

Tom Phillips: *The Song of the Earth*,
2009, mud on panel,
50 inches square; at Flowers.



Dilemma (1999), Phillips quotes the great thinker, often referred to as the poet's philosopher: "The limits of my language are the limits of my world." The sentence is silkscreened in white on a 5-inch-square acrylic cube. Lit from above, the words cast tiny haunting shadows on the surrounding base. A decade later, using the same text in *Wittgenstein/Cage* (2009), the artist twisted wire letters of his own design into the "bars" of an empty and austere 35½-inch-tall cage. Here he makes concrete poetry of borrowed words and their shadows, arranging text we're not able or even meant to read. Phillips appears to be "destroying clarity with clarity," to quote the painter Francis Bacon, creating a state best described by poet Anne Carson as "the place inside a word where it falls silent in its own presence."

Cult followers of Phillips may bemoan the absence of traces of his 40-year-long project, the collaged Victorian novel, *A Humument*, not part of this survey show of 35 paintings and sculptures. Yet, as with *The Seven Ages of Man* (2008), seven tennis balls in seven shades of the artist's hair, painstakingly gathered over 30 years, Phillips proves that his mastery of mixed mediums is not limited to works in words.

—Elaine Sexton

PHILADELPHIA JUSTIN MATHERLY MARGINAL UTILITY

The central piece in Brooklyn artist Justin Matherly's first solo show at Marginal Utility is based on the Belvedere Torso, a fragment of ancient

Justin Matherly:
*knowing, even the
grass We must tear
up so it will stay
green*, 2010, concrete
and walkers, 67 by
35 by 63½ inches;
at Marginal Utility.



Greek sculpture that was deeply influential during the Renaissance. The 5-foot-high *knowing, even the grass We must tear up so it will stay green* (all works 2010) is a rough copy of the sculpture in rugged concrete; Matherly made it after studying a cast of the torso at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Although he simplifies the original's anatomy considerably, Matherly preserves its basic contours, while calling attention to that sculpture's traumatic amputations. *Knowing* rests on a pair of walkers and a crutch; it is holey, saggy and conspicuously damaged. Lines scratched into the concrete suggest stitches; pink and yellow paint near the missing head and shoulders remind us that this is a representation of flesh. Although Matherly's reproduction might at first seem a crude parody, it is in fact a tender reinterpretation that reconsiders the original Belvedere Torso as an object in process, one that has been violently damaged over time and is in need of both physical and conceptual recuperation.

The remainder of the show consisted of three grainy monotypes, each 3 or 4 feet on a side, based on found images. The sheets are marked with rough grids of light pigment that look like creases, as though the source images had been folded into small rectangles and then flattened out again. *To hold out one's hand for one's partner's turd* (language operator) is based on a 1524 portrait by Bernardino Licinio of his brother's large family. In this work, the grid lines disappear when they arrive at the faces, making it seem as though the latter

were masks laid over the image. At left, the eldest son holds up a partially reconstructed statuette of the Belvedere Torso, which, Matherly told me, indicated the son's destiny as an artist.

Everything must be arranged to a hair in a fulminating order depicts a fly feasting on dark brown goo; according to the artist, the source photo comes from the Wikipedia entry on coprophagia, the consumption of feces. The image in *And I do believe that nature is about to speak*, taken from a *Wall Street Journal* article on "The Aesthetics of Security," shows four men—their faces reduced to blurry splotches—in front of an office building, next to potted shrubbery of the sort that provides a security barrier. An added Latin text, "Liburna Expositio Liburnae," appears at the margins of the sheet. This phrase is susceptible to various translations, but according to Matherly, it can refer both to liberation and to the lifting of an obstacle. Even with this information, it isn't clear whether the Latin refers to the shrubbery or the building, so the work is ultimately inscrutable. All the same, there's something satisfying in Matherly's opacity. It's like looking at a mutilated sculpture; you can't help imagining what isn't there.

—Melissa Tuckman

WASHINGTON, D.C. PHIL NESMITH IRVINE CONTEMPORARY

Last June, Richmond-based artist Phil Nesmith traveled to the Louisiana Gulf Coast with box cameras, glass plates, chemicals and a portable darkroom to photograph the aftereffects of British Petroleum's cata-



Phil Nesmith: *Phantom*,
2010, wet collodion
photograph on black
glass plate, 7 by
5 inches; at Irvine
Contemporary.

strophic 2010 oil spill. The resulting 22 works were recently on view at Irvine Contemporary in Nesmith's exhibition "Flow."

For his project Nesmith employed the laborious wet-plate collodion process, invented in the mid-19th century and long obsolete (though other contemporary artists, such as fellow Virginian Sally Mann, have revived it of late). Each of the images in "Flow" appears on a 7-by-5-inch black glass plate (some are diptychs or triptychs) and is unique. These are melancholic souvenirs that instantly render their contemporary subject matter antique. Smudges materialize where the hand-poured collodion has pooled unevenly, subjects veer in and out of focus, and surfaces are mottled with chemical drips and splats. Save for several tiny background figures and one full-length portrait (*Eugene*, 2010), Nesmith's scenes are entirely devoid of people: instead we find mazelike wetlands, a clapboard church, a pile of booms stacked dockside, boats of varying types and sizes. Small 21st-century details, like a seated man with a cell phone or modern radar equipment, provide the work's most disquieting moments.

Nesmith writes in an accompanying statement that he found the wet-plate method particularly appropriate for photographing the BP disaster, since the technique emerged around the same time that crude oil was first discovered in America. This is a bit like arguing that a Gutenberg-style press would render a text on modern repercussions of the Protestant Reformation especially effective, but the photographs resist appearing gimmicky or precious. They reveal none of the frantic pace or visual bombardment we came to expect from journalistic coverage of the disaster; instead these