

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Rosenberg, Karen, "Renouncing the Dark Arts," New York Magazine, June 2-9, 2007

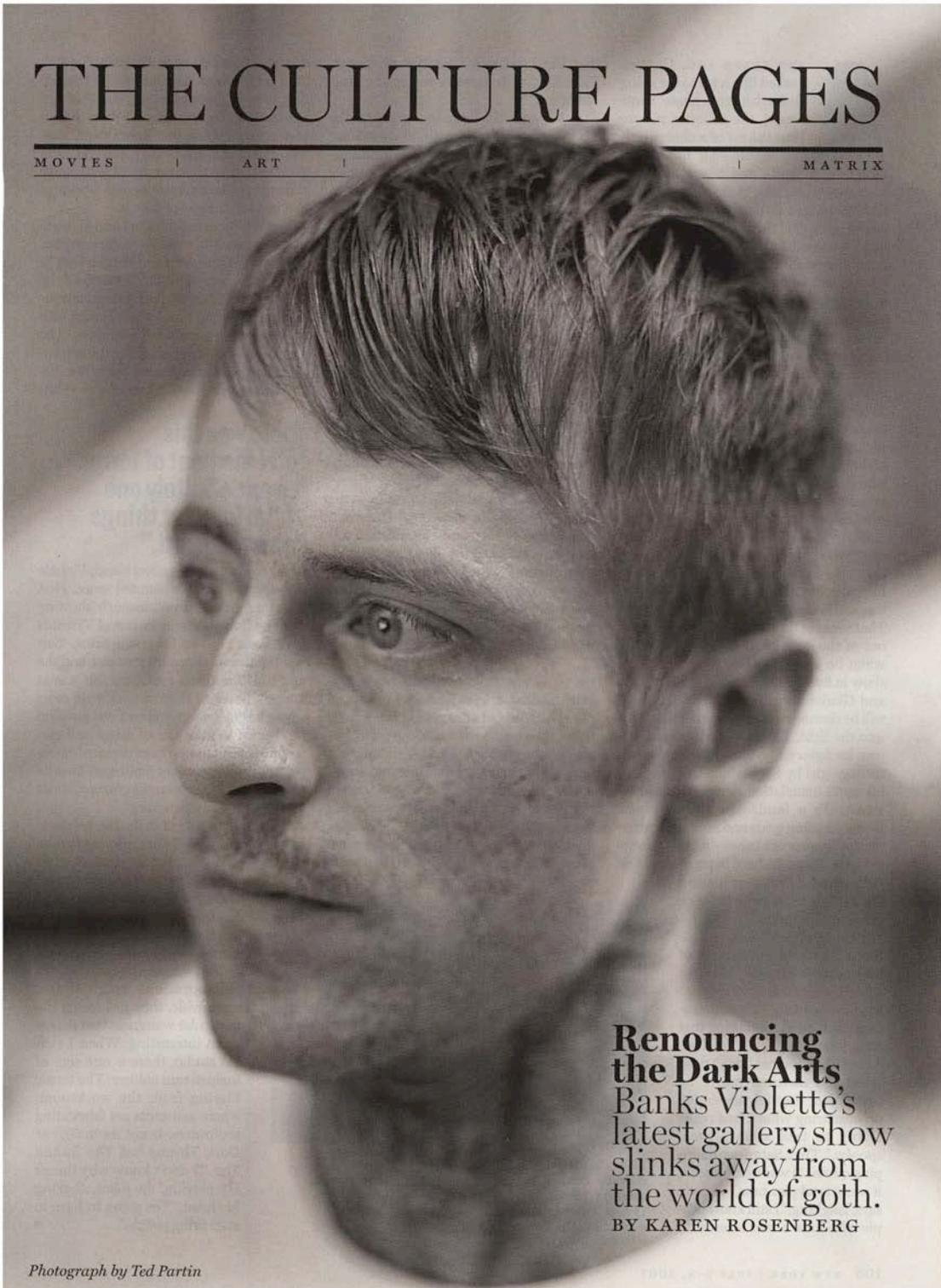
NEW YORK

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**Renouncing  
the Dark Arts**  
Banks Violette's  
latest gallery show  
slinks away from  
the world of goth.  
BY KAREN ROSENBERG

Photograph by Ted Partin

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**A** FEW YEARS AGO, Chelsea looked like a teenager going through its goth phase. Some weeks, the galleries resembled the set of a cheesy horror movie—all fangs and skulls and black makeup, with show titles like "Scream" and "Flesh and Blood." Sue de Beer was showing videos of goth Girl Scouts, and David Almejd was building installations around dead werewolves. And Banks Violette's glossy black sculptures and high-contrast drawings, inspired by murder-suicides and Scandinavian black metal, were among the highest profile of them all. The 34-year-old from Ithaca played up his gloom-and-doom image, too. The guy has a giant spiderweb tattoo on his neck that, as his Adam's apple bobs as he talks, appears to be choking him. *Vanity Fair* photographed him lighting a Marlboro with a blowtorch, and when a British journalist asked him if he worshipped Satan, he responded with a long-winded affirmation, citing Hegel.

But Violette's works were also less campy and juvenile than a lot of art from that scene, courting curators with smart formal references to seventies-era sculptors like Robert Smithson and Barry Le Va. That sense of history gives him a direction out of the goth ghetto, and on June 28, when he opens his first New York solo show in five years (a double, at both Team and Gladstone galleries), the art world will be clamoring to see whether he's come into the light. The new work has no evil-teen backstory, like the 1995 murder of a teenage girl by Slayer fans that inspired his 2002 installation *Arroyo Grande*. Instead, it's a landscape of sculptural forms—broken grids and mirrors, scatterings of fluorescent tubes—reminiscent of Sol LeWitt and Richard Serra. Except that LeWitt and Serra never hooked their art up to propane tanks or refrigeration units.

The change isn't quite so dramatic as those makeovers of black-eyeshadowed kids on *Ricki Lake*, but it does amount to a new maturity. "Those narratives illustrated something that I was interested in, but I've done it enough times that I don't need to rely on them anymore," he says. "Also, the violence ended up obscuring what I was really trying to talk about—*oooh, spooky*." That Satan-worshipping quote? "I was really drunk; it was a total piss-take," Violette says, laughing. "I still know people who have a real interest in

that, but I was raised completely atheist. That kind of religiosity scares the crap out of me."

So Violette's challenge has been to make his art more abstract without sacrificing intensity. Commissioning music for his installations has been one approach—especially when the music in question sounds, in Violette's words, like "Kabuki-painted Vikings shrieking through the grim North." Last year, he teamed up with the band Sunn O))) for a performance at the Maureen Paley gallery in London. (Violette is a hit in Europe, where they think he represents a particularly American dystopia.) At that opening, guest vocalist Attila Csihar sang from inside a sealed coffin. An audience of hundreds formed outside the gallery to hear, and feel, the music. "There was this total moment of terror," Violette recalls. "Then, when they started, it was definitely one of the loudest things I've ever heard. The entire audience outside just took a huge step backwards. I almost collapsed with relief. And then cracks started forming in the ceiling. Lightbulbs blew out." The event quickly became art-world legend, and this new show at Gladstone, says Violette, is its continuation, with low-frequency audio composed by Sunn O)))'s Stephen O'Malley. The artist likens the listening experience to the drop in pressure before a thunderstorm: "It suddenly feels like space is evacuating."

IN AN ART WORLD filled with poses, Violette's nihilism, at least, is no act. He dropped out of high school after getting into crystal meth, then worked as a tattoo artist in Hawaii before getting a G.E.D. Thinking that he'd "parlay my visual aptitude into a productive job, photography or graphic design or whatever," he enrolled at SVA, where, in a scene straight out of *Art School Confidential*, his freshman painting teacher, the artist Steve DiBenedetto, told his students that

they should all become dental hygienists. "So I got involved with fine arts for the pettiest reason: [to say] *screw you*." (He and DiBenedetto are now friends.) From there it was on to Columbia, then group shows, representation at Team Gallery, and the 2004 Whitney Biennial, where he showed glossy stalagmite-like sculptures and drawings that invoked the end of grunge.

The Whitney curators liked him so much that they gave him a solo show the next year. His installation—a ruined church cast in salt—had a nerve-jangling soundtrack by Snorre Ruch, a Norwegian black-metal musician who did jail time for associating with his bandmate, a convicted murderer. "The idea is, he's the accomplice, I'm the accomplice, and we turned the audience into the third accomplice," says Violette. The Whit-

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ney's project gallery can feel bland; Violette transformed it into a haunted space. That the museum was simultaneously showing work by Robert Smithson, one of Violette's idols, wasn't lost on the young artist. "Salt was Smithson's signature material, and the first time Smithson ever used salt was at Cornell," he says. "There was a Cargill mine where he got the salt—when I was growing up, I used to take lots of drugs and run around the salt mine. It was personal entropy," he says, using one of Smithson's favorite words. "And socioeconomic entropy, about burnt-out upstate New York."

Will Violette get out of the black-velvet-lined coffin for good? His critics say that he needs to curb his instinct to reference other artists, that he risks being a second-generation Smithson. And he's faced with the same paradox as all subcultures: As they become more accessible, especially online, where they can spawn collaborations and tributes worldwide, they risk losing the particular weirdness that makes them interesting. When I visit his studio, there is one sign of mainstream culture: The music blaring from the workroom, where assistants are fabricating sculptures, is not Sunn O))) or Dark Throne but *The Joshua Tree*. "I don't know why there's U2 playing," he jokes, shaking his head. "I'm going to have to start firing people." ■



Three Violette works, as seen in the 2004 Whitney Biennial: burnout (fadeaway)/vol. 1 (2003, on the left wall), spotlight (blackhole)/vol. 1 (2003, to its right), and DeadStar Memorial Structure (on their hands at last a 4.1.94 (2004, in foreground).

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF TEAM GALLERY