

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Matthew Higgs, "Best of 2005: Robert Bechtle," *Artforum*, December 2005, p. 258.



Matthew Higgs

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1 "ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: HOARFROSTS" (GUILD HALL, EAST HAMPTON, NY) The saddest summer show ever? Given that institutions tend to roll out holiday favorites or crowd pleasers for the summer season, the Guild Hall's decision to exhibit Rauschenberg's little known, rarely seen, and profoundly melancholic "Hoarfrost" series was a bold gesture. Hanging like "ghosts" in the air-conditioned chill of the museum's elegant rooms, the 1974–75 "Hoarfrosts"—unstretched fabric "paintings" constructed from layers of transparent, translucent, and opaque materials—were so aesthetically subdued that they barely registered on the eye, but somehow, miraculously, they left a nagging, indefinable impression that persists to this day.

2 ROBERT BECHTLE (SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART) This retrospective, brilliantly organized by SF MOMA's Janet Bishop, was, at least to my non-American eyes, a complete revelation. Almost Proustian in its downbeatness, Bechtle's work seems to have been devoted to recording his personal discomfort with the world around him. From the emotionally strained paintings of the 1960s and '70s (often derived from family snapshots) to the deserted streets depicted in recent paintings of his San Francisco neighborhood, Bechtle's reclusive art describes a psychogeography profoundly at odds with the socially progressive, utopian narratives typically associated with his northern Californian home.

3 LUCAS SAMARAS: PHOTOFLOCKS (IMOVIES) AND PHOTOFICTIONS (A TO Z) (PACEWILDENSTEIN, NEW YORK) Like Bechtle, Lucas Samaras focuses on issues close to home: namely, himself. *PhotoFlocks (iMovies)*, 2004–2005—sixty short, digitally generated "movies," each "starring" Samaras—was his first engagement with the moving image since his appositely titled 1969 film *Self* (made with Kim Levin). The installation itself was, like Samaras's entire project, a radical gesture. The movies, and an additional four thousand digital photographic images—*PhotoFictions (A to Z)*, 2004–2005—were displayed on thirty-five Apple workstations, which allowed the viewer to independently navigate the works on screen and transformed the vast gallery space into a surrogate "classroom" dedicated to the study of its sole subject: Lucas Samaras.

4 RITA ACKERMANN, "COLLAGE 1993–2005" (ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK) Overheard on West Twenty-fourth Street outside Rita Ackermann's exhibition: WOMAN: "What's in there?" MAN: "Junky collages." "Junky" aesthetics or not, this wonderfully focused exhibition barely scratched the surface, only hinting at the larger ambition of this mercurial artist's kaleidoscopic output (which embraces art, music, writing, fashion, and curatorial projects). Ackermann remains defiantly against the grain and ahead of the curve. A thorough survey of her work would allow us all an opportunity to catch up.

5 ISA GENZKEN (DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK) It is hard not to imagine Isa Genzken's recent works—precariously assembled from just about anything: action figures, furniture, plastic flowers, sections of an aircraft fuselage, umbrellas, adhesive tape, paint—literally falling apart. This built-in sense of imminent collapse lends the work a genuine sense of foreboding, and, with the "one-armed bandit" that sat mysteriously on the gallery's floor, Genzken seems to suggest that art, like life, is ultimately a gamble.

6 PETER HUJAR, "NIGHT" (MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY, NEW YORK) American audiences appear to have an insatiable appetite for looking at photographs of other Americans. This past year, New York alone saw substantial shows from noted "people watchers" such as Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, William Eggleston, Larry Clark, and Bill Owens. More provocative, though, was an exhibition of mostly never-before-seen nocturnal photographs by Peter Hujar (1934–1987). Invariably positioned somewhere between Arbus and Robert Mapplethorpe, Hujar is, for me, the more compelling (and ultimately more complicated) artist. A perfectionist who trained his lens on an imperfect world, Hujar deserves greater acknowledgment for his extraordinary vision. (I'm sure that curator Bob Nickas's current Hujar survey at New York's P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center will go some distance in rectifying this situation.)

7 KAY ROSEN (GRAY KAPERNEKAS GALLERY, NEW YORK) Though she has been showing for nearly thirty years Kay Rosen is constantly pegged as one of the art world's "best kept secrets" (a sobriquet I'm not sure she would

necessarily appreciate). Someday I hope to see a space the size of Dia:Beacon filled with her sly, brainy, poetic works, but in the meantime I'll have to make do with her recent exquisite exhibition at this small and highly promising new gallery in Chelsea.

8 ROBERT BARDO, "ANOTHER DAY" (ALEXANDER AND BONIN, NEW YORK) Seemingly effortless, as if conjured from almost nothing—a smear of paint here, a blob of paint there—Robert Bardo's deceptively ambitious recent paintings, like all great art, encouraged me to think of other artists: such as René Daniëls, Thomas Nozkowski, Raoul de Keyser, and Mary Heilmann (whose own solo show at New York's 303 Gallery was another 2005 gem).

9 "LOG CABIN" (ARTISTS SPACE, NEW YORK) "Log Cabin" was a wildly ambitious if occasionally unfocused group show that stood out primarily as a brave attempt, by curator Jeffrey Uslip, to stake out some original (curatorial) territory, seeking as it did—according to the press release—to "examine the impact of neoconservatism on queer representations in America." The fact that "Log Cabin" wasn't entirely successful in articulating this condition might be a cause for concern, but I'm convinced that as a provocation, the exhibition—which I've already heard colloquially referred to as the "Gay Show" and which featured contributions from more than thirty artists including Cass Bird, AA Bronson, K8 Hardy, Jonathan Horowitz, Monica Majoli, Dean Sameshima, Scott Treleven, and Kelley Walker—might, with the advantage of hindsight, be considered a landmark event in years to come.

10 JONATHAN HOROWITZ, "THE NEW COMMUNISM" (GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE, NEW YORK) Horowitz's "New Communism" succeeded in its stated aim of spreading "a light dusting of style" on the tired arena of American party politics. A new design for the Stars and Stripes; a memorial sculpture of the World Trade Center created from stacks of recycled newspapers; the artist's ecofriendly Prius placed on a pedestal (with a SUPPORT THEIR TROOPS sticker attached); and dealer Gavin Brown's promise to personally answer all calls to the gallery for the show's duration combined to create some of the sassiest and most satisfying political art in recent memory. □

1. Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Hoarfrost)*, 1974, solvent transfer on fabric with paper bags, fabric collage, 46½ x 36½". 2. Robert Bechtle, *Alameda Gran Torino*, 1974, oil on canvas, 48 x 69". 3. View of "PhotoFlocks (iMovies) and PhotoFictions (A to Z)," PaceWildenstein, New York, 2005. 4. Rita Ackermann, *Untitled (King Ubu series IV)*, 1996, collage on paper, 18 x 24". 5. Isa Genzken, *Bouquet*, 2004, plastic, wood, lacquer, mirror foil, and glass, 102½ x 45½ x 51½". 6. Peter Hujar, *Woolworth Building*, 1976, black-and-white photograph, 14½ x 14½". 7. Kay Rosen, *Blurred*, 2004, colored pencil on paper, 15 x 30". 8. Robert Bardo, *Daybreak*, 2004, oil on canvas, 22 x 31". 9. Cass Bird, *I Look Like My Daddy*, 2004, color photograph. From "Log Cabin." 10. Jonathan Horowitz, *New American Flag Made in China*, 2005, nylon, 40 x 60".