

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Sonnenborn, Katie Stone, "Displaced Histories: The Art of Banks Violette," The Brooklyn Rail, 2005

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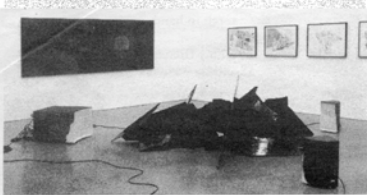
Displaced Histories:

The Art of Banks Violette by Katie Stone Sonnenborn

Meeting me in his studio in mid-August, Banks Violette shook his head: "they talk about a post-studio practice" he mused, "sometimes I wonder if I'm in a 'post-career' moment." In a culture primed to laud, collect, and consume "emerging artists," Violette may stand as a litmus test of whether all of this attention is a good thing. For if ever a young artist was "having his moment," Violette is. He has a full room in *Greater New York* at P.S. 1; a massive installation in Neville Wakefield's exceptional group show *Bridge Freezes Before Road* at Gladstone Gallery; and a solo exhibition in the Whitney's lobby gallery. Since May, the *New York Times* has graced him with not one, but three substantial write-ups (including a "Styles" section profile), and a fourth is on the way.

The pressures of too much early attention have long played out in popular culture, and given the dark and probing content of Violette's work it is easy to see why he treats his own fame with ambivalence. The current trio of installations, however, presents the foundations of a new visual vocabulary that is socially relevant, innovative in its scope, and historically engaged.

There are three sculptures at P.S. 1. In *Anthem to Future Suicide* (2004) four horizontal rows of white fluorescent bulbs are lathed across steel supports. The grid-like barricade casts an anxious white light across the room and it looks like the theater lights for a performance that might take place on *Hate Them* (single stage) (2004), the shiny black stage and stactette drum set that occupies the central gallery space. The third piece *Untitled* (*disappear*) (2004) is the concert backdrop, a black screen made of poured epoxy panels and supported by a steel frame. The sculptures are self-evident, irrefutable, and demand circumnavigation. Like the minimal works they recall, one can, and must, physically explore the space around the sculptures to engage them. They exist without context; yet unlike Donald Judd's boxes or Dan Flavin's lights, Violette deliberately evokes the narrative of performance. We are left wanting, however, for the sculptures raise expectations of sound, movement, fury, fame, only to render such prospects void by the absence of any



Banks Violette (with Stephen O'Malley), "bleed" (2005), wood, fiberglass, tinted epoxy, sound equipment, salt, installation view "Bridge Freezes Before Road." Courtesy Gladstone Gallery.

Hate Them (single stage) and *Untitled* (*disappear*) include the reflective epoxy panels common in Violette's work. Rather than fracture out in a distortion of the environment, these mirrors tend to close in on his sculptures and create total systems that become the framework for the objects. In an email exchange, he wrote that "rather than the landscape being a site that veils certain readings [which a mirror would destabilize], the mirror is the landscape itself, with the object intended to trouble the specular, reflective space of a condition that can be ascribed to media saturation." So in these sculptures, pregnant with expectation, we see in the reflection the gulf between reality and the profound belief we project onto to our idols; the way our blind faith makes them powerful; and the space for moments when we lose ourselves in their myth. (Wisely, Violette presents this in the high forms of minimalism and the popular forms of metal music; it is not whether we love, it's what.)

Similar to the works at P.S. 1, a sense of truncated energy is evident at Gladstone Gallery. There, a black fiberglass and plywood stage has been desecrated into a spatial plan, reminiscent in proportion and layout of Robert Smithson's

Map of Glass (*Atlantis*) (1969). Violette, deeply interested in Smithson, described the Cayuga Salt Mines in Ithaca where the elder did a mirror-displacement in 1969 and the younger grew up as having the mineral quality of planes of stacked razor blades. This kind of sharp, planar danger is evoked in his black exploded stage whose implicit violence is once again contradicted by its static postured and the three salt-encrusted speakers that surround it. Emitting an electronic composition by Stephen O'Malley, a musician who Violette admires (they are working on a second collaboration now), the work's score relies on extremely low-frequency amplification, which Violette describes as "distortion as a subject unto itself," that sort of buzzes and drones without climax. As with the latent forms, the music is a failure of sorts, a score progressing towards nothing.

If the music and sculpture form a dialogue at Gladstone that heightens the experience of the polarities within the composition, at the Whitney, Violette plays second fiddle to his collaborator. His piece, *Untitled*, is a charred, skeletal cruciform church cast in salt and presented atop a dark reflective stage. The surface of the beams is variegated, and though it is gouged and bubbled and defiled, the evenness of the mark at times feels decorative. As in other work, the chromatic range is essentially limited to black, white, and grays; but because *Untitled* so completely fills its space and is accessed through a heavy dark curtain, it feels like the set for an austere performance. Moreover, the sharpness of each post's silhouette is intensified by the darkness which makes the structure feel too solid for an ashen rind. It is tempting to wonder what the church would look like in natural light, with the sun snaking through the semi-translucent forms, particularly given the distracting reflection of the overhead lights that detracts from the ghostly frame.

Snorre Ruch composed the score for the Whitney piece, an electronic compendium that alternates between sounds of nature—thunder, rushing water—and white noise—static or the buzz of film running. Ruch is a member of the Norwegian Black Metal movement, an extreme manifestation of heavy metal whose members espouse Satanism, and who, in the early 1990s incited mayhem and violence throughout the country as a way to rid Norway of Christianity and return to its pagan past. The violence culminated in a series of church torching, to wit the sculpture, and Ruch was convicted as the accomplice in the murder of a former musical idol. Violette, long fascinated with the extremist movement, sought Ruch out in jail and convinced him to collaborate on the piece. (Violette is not alone in his interest: Ruch is included in a series of Black Metal photographs and interviews presented at See You at the Riviera in 2004 by Brooklyn-based photographer Peter Beste.)

Violette's detour into the archives of violent heavy metal is not new: an important exhibition was the 2002 show at Team Gallery that presented works inspired by a horrific murder in Arroyo Grande, CA where three teen-age heavy metal aspirants killed a fellow student in what appeared to be a conflation of musical lyrics with their own real-life actions. However, *Untitled* takes this act of social/media appropriation a step further by engaging an original "actor" in the creative process to the point that it detracts from the work. Further, there is too great a reliance on secondary materials like the press release, catalogue, or reviews to explain the history.

Nevertheless the idea behind *Untitled* is ambitious and rich, and the process with which Violette crafted the sculpture offers one of the fullest expressions of his material progression, and an extraordinary lesson in his construction through destruction. The artist made the church by casting a single 8-foot poplar beam, halving it, re-casting the 4-foot beam, halving it, and re-casting the 2-foot beam. With each act, the wood eroded more, so the whole is composite parts worked "towards a point of dissolve," as Violette explained. His aim was that the process of creation should mirror the series of events that took place following Ruch's crime: an entropic breakdown, a closed system locked into inevitable chaotic turns.

The church is one example of what Violette describes as an appropriation project. This happens literally, as in his use of a Misfits album cover skull for numerous drawings (as well as his own tattoos); and also figuratively, as in his adoption of cultural clichés such as sunsets, horses, rock stars, and flags, among others. Violette looks for universal icons that through their ubiquity become ambiguous and blurred as people's perceptions of their meaning shift as their experiences with these icons change over time.

A case in point is a drawing in five parts taken from a photograph of the sunset at the edge of the salt mines in Ithaca. The central page presents a blinding white sunspot, burning through the trees. Flanked by two panels of branches dappled in sun, the suite is completed by two solid black panels on either end. As with much of Violette's work, the full spectrum of the "sunset experience" is evidenced tonally, and he demonstrates that blindness comes in darkness, but also in full light. In fact, the salt mine is a famous suicide site in Ithaca: the sun, a herald of life, is also a harbinger of death. For the knowledgeable viewer, beauty is interrupted by tragedy, and yet still it beguiles.

In his studio, Violette is continuing to rework one panel of this sunset as a wall "drawing" made of silver duct-tape pieces. With obsessive, tiny tears, the once legible branches have moved closer to a glistening, silver abstraction. As material concerns—scale, material, shape, texture—take over, the content disbands further into a state of dissolution that is reflective of the artist's best work. Violette has a limp command of his materials. He worked for Robert Gober, and relishes the nearly-perfect aesthetic that comes from hand-fabrication. With a cheeky nod to Koons for mastering the perfect aesthetic so that others don't have to, he retains the index of his processes, and enjoys the fact that poured epoxy, for example, maintains a perfectly glistening reflective surface that can also contain bubbles and irregularities, or seize the particles, dust, and hair that catch in its flow. For the viewer, these material distortions become a primary concern. For example, a warped panel in *Untitled* (*disappear*) at P.S. 1 ruptures the mirrored reflection of the trident fluorescent bands, causing them to wave and shattering the perception of a silent gestalt.

Violette grew up in Ithaca, the son North Carolinians who missed the Outer Banks, and his very name seems to portend the questions about place and nostalgia he now explores through his art, mining the moments when the ordinary becomes extraordinary—often in a turn towards danger or fear. And just as his name signifies more than it is, so too do his sculptures, paintings, and drawings attempt to visually represent the interstitial gap between a place or an event and our relationship to it. Confronting contemporary cultural transgression, Violette poses a direct challenge to himself and the viewer to engage in a dialogue with actions we may detest. Can we empathize? Tapping our own emotional middle space where the lines between hatred and love begin to blur?

Although firmly rooted in art history, it is social reality that gives rise to Violette's project. Through his artwork he turns actions and events back on us in the form of questions about our own internal moorings. Thus far, Violette's fame has come largely from the impression that his work deals with this time of international trauma by focusing on lesser moments of anguish, found within chosen subcultures. In displacing anxiety from a more political sphere, he presents works that deal with trauma through a language of minimal form. Recently, by proximity and chance, the works currently on view in New York engage with the work of Robert Smithson, who in the late 1960s created a visual language riffing on nature and science to trouble ideas about history and culture. Whether Violette's work is able to retain relevance beyond New York City at this moment depends on his ability, as in the Gladstone installation, to continue to tap into a more universal undercurrent or psyche. Violette's work has the potential to develop an aesthetic experience akin to Richard Prince's observation of artistic displacement and disquiet (quoted in Neville Wakefield's catalogue essay for *Bridge Freezes Before Road*): "From where I stand I don't exactly see things from where I stand." ■