

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Kunitz, Daniel, "The Man in Black," the village VOICE, July 18 – 24, 2007

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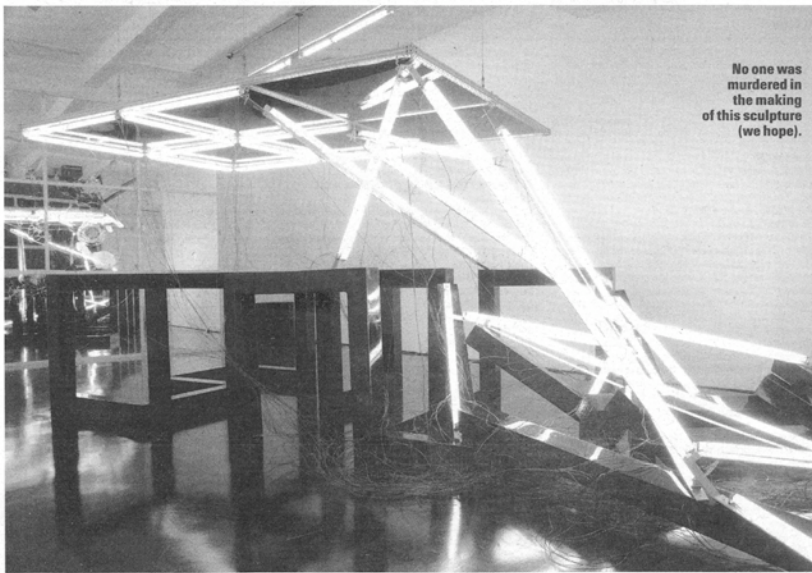
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Art

The Man in Black

Banks Violette tones down the death metal, but still torches drums



No one was murdered in the making of this sculpture (we hope).

Banks Violette
Team Gallery
83 Grand Street
Gladstone Gallery
515 West 24th Street
Through August 17

BY DANIEL KUNITZ

Metaphorically speaking, the artist Banks Violette is hunkered down in the parental basement done up like a dungeon. The door is locked, and he refuses to come out. Faithful to a youthful romanticism that makes a cult of destructive musicians, violence, satanic imagery, and monks' robes, the 34-year-old artist has not outgrown the Death Metal thing that has made him a sort of art anti-hero. In a colloquy published recently in *Flash Art*, he claimed to be "just as involved with that subculture as I am in the art world." He mixes the two freely. His previous installations have alluded to a church burning, Kurt Cobain's suicide, the ritual killing of a teenage girl by three male classmates who were inspired by Slayer, and the murder of a musician by two members of a Norwegian Black Metal band (he also collaborated with one of the two convicted musicians, Snorre Ruch, for a piece at the Whitney). Yet what distinguishes Violette from the usual horde of skull-mad goth artists is his ability to turn cheesy adolescent rebellion into something sexy. And, more perverse, to do it thoughtfully.

Mounted in two galleries—Team in Soho and Gladstone in Chelsea—Violette's first New York solo show in five years draws its energy less from Death Metal than from recent art history, especially the hyper-intellectualized, anti-romantic Minimalist and post-Minimalist '60s art you might imagine him hating. The music has evolved, too—as he did last year in London, Violette has collaborated on a soundtrack with Stephen O'Malley, of the drone-metal band Sunn O))), and vocalist Attila Csihar. In London, the band played inside the gallery—Csihar singing from inside a coffin—while the audience was kept outside to listen. This time, they re-

corded the soundtrack—a sort of chanted throat song—at Team, though you can hear it only at Gladstone, the well-deep droning buzzing your bones. Still, O'Malley's music isn't the most dramatic effect Violette has conjured: That award must go to Team's smashed and flaming drum kit—yes, real flames—strewn before a wall of fluorescent light tubes shooting out in rays from an upside-down fluorescent deer's head, which shelters an inverted cross in its antler rack.

In fact, Violette's over-the-top theatrics link him intimately with the austere Minimalism to which his installations so often refer. The big critical gripe against

Minimalism was that it was theatrical: It included the "beholder," the audience, in the experience of the work. Violette transforms this abstract theory into something bluntly literal and lavish: He makes sculptural objects out of the theatrical elements—except that his theater is the concert hall. And, like any good headbanger who's also an aficionado of post-Minimalist artist Robert Smithson, Violette relishes entropy. It's not the pristine apparatuses of a concert that will become his sculptural objects, but destroyed amps and drum kits.

In both galleries, the floors are painted a shiny black, and the entirety of the show is rigorously monochromatic: The objects are black, white, or silver, shiny or matte. Everywhere, modernist grids are disorganizing. At Gladstone, a refrigerated, wall-size grid of rectangular aluminum sheets seems to fall apart, its plates crumpling onto the floor while ice and fog form on its edges. The white ice crystals also visually echo a grid of corrugated soundproofing board, made entirely of salt, that hangs in an adjoining room. The salt forms seem

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to be eroding; the ice on the aluminum grid gradually evaporates. Near another grid—this one inadvertently formed by the garage door serving as the gallery wall—a low stage of black epoxy supports the shattered remains of an amplifier cast in salt. The dispersed pieces of the amplifier, as well as those of the drum kit at Team, seem like hyper-dramatized versions of the scatter pieces that Minimalists Barry Le Va and Robert Morris created some 40 years ago.

Not that you need to get the show's many references to enjoy the spectacle. Consider, for instance, the fluorescent light tubes hung in a rectangle above an elegant frame structure that looks like a jungle gym built from black four-by-fours in one room at Gladstone. You could ponder the allusion to Keith Sonnier or Dan Flavin ('60s artists who used tube lighting), or simply groove on how, at one end, the rigid structure falls apart into a tangled wreck of wire, glowing tubes, and black beams.

For all the entropic decay here, there is no disorder: Violette constructs an installation as precisely as a stage set, with none of the shaggy qualities one might expect from someone in a concert T-shirt. Sure, some of it—like the flaming drum kit—is a little overblown, and some feels a little slick. But all this calculated drama makes for a killer performance, one that reverberates long after you've left the show.