



north of my brain

south of my ass

Thank you  
Larry Greenberg, Gallerist  
Annelie McGavin, Director

Catalog Design  
Jennie Nichols

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Studio 10

56 Bogart Street  
Brooklyn, New York

north of my brain

south of my ass

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hats and shoes

by artists

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Studio 10

Opening Reception

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7 PM – 9 PM

Curated by

Matt Blackwell and Laurence Hegarty  
for Romanov Grave

## Hats and shoes, the parentheses of the self –everything else is in between.

-Kierkegaard

When we asked Moira Williams to explain her “hat” in the show she told us that it was a hat made from bleached newspapers; newspapers from Bogotá, Columbia. Newspapers that Williams had, while working on her bee-keeping apprenticeship in Columbia, either slept on by night or worn stuffed into her shoes by day. Williams’ specific hope in this was that the words of the newspapers would enter her dreams. And, the language having entered her dreams, she would thus acquire the ability to speak Spanish: a sort of linguistic osmosis. So, we could try and understand this schematically as, the bees absorb the pollen and make honey while Williams’ body absorbs, in some imprecise way –though perhaps it is a little like the way bees gather pollen– words. Pollen thus becomes honey, while words become knowledge. Words burrow their way –from your dreams, from your feet– into your brain and this is how you come to know something. So in this theory knowledge can be dreamed into a being through bodily contact?

It should be noted that this is a better deal than Freud. For Freud, as we all know, the dream was merely a wish fulfillment. The dream satisfied some social, sexual or bodily wish, but only mentally; in the dream. All you woke up with was the wish plus the dream. In Freud the dream is a consolation prize. With Williams you learn Spanish.

Freud is where much of this sorry tale begins. There we were in the studio one day trying to conjure Freud back to life from silicone rubber and cardboard, a few magical incantations were to be added later. We began, naturally enough, with his hat. That’s when we realized that the hat we were making looked pretty much like the ones our fathers wore back in the late 50s, early 60s. It also looked like the one we remembered Dick Tracy wearing in Warhol’s painting and the one Belmondo wears as tribute to Bogart in *Breathless*. In short, it (they really) were all over the place. The shoes were next. We wanted to recreate the ones Ray Johnson had made and mailed to Bert Brecht. After we made a maquette we consulted an image of the real thing in an old Johnson catalogue: he had made them for John Cage.

We decided other artists might be more reliable. A show of other artists making hats and shoes; Freud could wait. Being dead a little longer wouldn’t hurt. Richard Hulsenbeck, Sophie Taeuber, Joseph Beuys, Hugo Ball all wore great hats. And to come full circle, Max Ernst made his 1920 *The Hat Makes the Man* collage, allegedly with a nod to Freud.

When it comes to hats, Jung is more useful than Freud. Jung put forward the notion that as the hat covered the head it acquired the significance of what goes on inside it –thoughts. Jung is able to do this by leading us down the path to Gustav Meyrink’s novel, *The Golem*, and together Jung and Meyrink walk us through the magical realm of the hat. Meyrink’s protagonist mistakenly dons the hat of another character, one Athanasius Pernath, a jeweler and art-restorer no less. Having done so, he experiences Pernath’s life, thinks his thoughts, feels his feelings, understands his desires. Pair this magical hat with the conventional nostrum that hats signal social rank or function and the hat becomes the container, at one remove, of thought, idea, intellect and simultaneously the bearer of one’s social station and identity.

Now this hat has become a powerful and slippery customer serving two masters; your public persona and also the private, inner rumblings it has magically captured. Whose rumblings they are become something of an open question. Who, in this hat to head tango, is responsible for what is thought by whom? Is it the hat that channels; the hat the ventriloquist, the wearer the dummy?

Perhaps it is helpful to remember that magical hats are a commonplace of folklore and fairy tales. In *The Magic Hat* (Anonymous, Denmark, 1922) the hat provides invisibility allowing all kind of intrusive mischief for the shepherd-boy protagonist. In *The Magic Hat* (Mem Fox, Australia, 1995) the magic hat blows in from no known where and transforms people into large, frolicsome animals. The magic hat literalizes the hat as disguise, enjoins the wearer to shape-shift, it provides feints and masks for identity. And identity, if it is to be re-shaped, is first to be found, it seems, at the far north of the body, far from the baseness of the feet, beneath a hat, in the clouds, lounging in the seat of the soul –the head.

So the hat augments, but also changes whom you are because, as the somewhat superannuated story goes, who you are is located where it is: in your head. Who you are might be, a state of mind mumbled into being by parents, priests and psychoanalysts. But who you are is mightily deployed through the expressions on your face (see below, Matt Freedman’s Clumpist helmet) and the words you utter, (hear Moira Williams’ megaphone hat). And who you are becomes encircled by the hat you might wear.



#### MOIRA WILLIAMS

Nowhere, more than in Moira Williams' already mentioned piece, do we get the sense of the hat as the ventriloquist, the wearer the dummy. Williams seems to have realized that her system of language learning –bodily contact with the newspapers– required addenda. Having one night dreamed the words *apicultores* casco (Spanish for beekeeper's helmet) she

discovered that these words appeared nowhere on the newspapers.

Quickly Williams switched pedagogical horses. She voided language as a printed medium. She bleached the newspapers. Cleansed thus of words, they became the material for her hat, that encased –and visually obliterated and blinded– her head while supporting aloft a megaphone. The words and voice we hear through the megaphone are those of Alejandro David Osorio Pérez, her beekeeping mentor. The performance we watch is of Williams walking, gesturing and pantomiming the actions of beekeeping. And this pantomime is how Williams *really* learned about beekeeping. Language dismissed from the game, Williams and Osorio Perez retreated to a strange, penumbral region of communication, they gestured. Semaphore without the flags, they offered each other intuitions and vagaries. Over time they assembled passages and sequences of actions that filled in local color around the ambiguity of their gesticulations. Repetition is remembering said Freud. Thus to learn the necessary actions of her new skill, Williams would wander the evening streets of Bogotá repeating the gestures she had seen and learned in the preceding daytime hours. This perambulation, though not essential to beekeeping as far as we know, is at the heart of Williams' practice as an artist. Williams is part of The Walk Exchange, a Brooklyn collective that conducts "educational and creative walks". Not exactly a Dérive, not exactly running errands, these are walks that take one on a passage through time, space and relatedness. They range from Brooklyn bound neighborhood investigations to a planned walk from New York to Detroit.

Walking delivers the world in transitive, in-between or half complete gestures and moments. That these moments and gestures may be more true to the heart of experience than the alleged denotations of words is interesting but not fully the point. The point, foregrounded by Williams' performance is, that whether with words or gestures, we are acting in a social field. Words may be embodied, that is, put into service through a body in social action. And gestures may be the actual body. But it is the relatedness that has the sting. Here, in her performance, the pedagogical gestures Williams and Osorio Pérez exchanged with one another, inform the actions that Williams directs toward us, her invisible –because she is blinded by the hat– audience. What we witness is a deaf and blind, but not dumb, hat swallowing a vulnerable body from above. A pained series of gestures emanate from this figure and a painfully hard to hear voice resounds from atop its head. Should we mirror back her actions as she did with Osorio Pérez? Not sure, is the answer. At the end of watching her performance will we all be qualified

beekeepers? It is possible. But perhaps a more reasonable ambition lies in an observation Williams herself made, "Wearing a specific garment and walking a specific way is a gesture, a way to transform. Think John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*."

Mimicking and mirroring, as Williams and Osorio Pérez rehearsed it, is the foundation of relatedness, a way of being. Mimicking, aping, parroting will recur and repeat throughout *North of My Brain South of My Ass*. Mimicking is an all but magical transformation whether in cross dressing, ritual animal-dancing, making of totems, imitating the gods or doubling ones own self. It is a spectacle of self-creation by transforming one of us into the other, or me into myself,



#### GREG DRASLER

Greg Drasler paints hats that are unerringly male. And indeed in his larger paintings the hats all have men attached to their undersides (resembling not a little, Williams beneath her 'hat'). Here, in Drasler's smaller portraits of hats, the hats float free drifting above or upon colored grounds. While these are not exactly lost hats, it is the case that they are sundered from wearers. Drasler's floating hats so unmake the man that they actually delete him, yet all the while retaining the sign

of the masculine. Unlike, say the shaman's or the Pope's hat, with their mannered, but very clear, signage per the wearer's trade or occult skills, Drasler's hats shimmer as the halo of an absent masculine saint. For Drasler, the hat is a redemptive sign, layered in historical musings upon sartorial crisis or bliss. Disembodied masculinity could seem like a problem at first, but ramp up the exoskeletal hat and suit (cf. the larger paintings) and what you have is not armor, but display. In these small paintings one sees a foppish challenge to the staid, the conformist and strictures of traditional men's garments. Thus, these are not the hats of serialized drones of the "Organization Man" of the 1950s America. Capone or Frank Nitti –at least cinematic Capone or Nitti– could have tossed these fedoras and homburgs toward their colored grounds. While the straw boater would evoke their nemesis, the "Government Man."

It is less that Drasler solicits the presence of Capone et. al. and more that histories and mythologies collide around a given sign. Thus differing and definite, culturally specific figures of guardianship lock arms. The homburg was, apparently, made popular by Edward the VII of England, before Capone wore one. This was, in turn, before the fictional Michael Corleone wore one to transform Al Pacino through the magic of method acting. The fedora was named for the hat worn by cross-dressing Sarah Bernhardt playing Princess Fedora Romanoff. This was before she had an affair with Edward the VII of England, prior to the hat being made popular for men, in what should be thought of as, with the weight of Bernhardt's history, a cross-dressing by the soon to abdicate Edward the VIII of England. So history –and magic hats– bequeath to us fictional bodies of noblemen, gangsters, guardians and actors to stand in for absent or perhaps lost bodies.

That Drasler's hats channel identity, history, and the Oedipal tomfoolery of English aristocrats, while threading unconscious strings of association in lieu of attached bodies is no surprise. With the body signaled to us by its hat, a *corpus imaginarius* inevitably takes hold. We fill in between the lines. It is not the case that Drasler has been gazing at a face with lines of history and affect traced upon it, or if so, such lines have been displaced northward. It is, instead, as if Drasler had been staring at the silhouette of a personality. A personality magicked into being by history, but a history that refuses to tell the difference between the fictional and the actual. Here, hats become something like the paradigmatic case of masquerade. They are the costume party of everyday life, or better yet the Klingon cloaking device of the workaday week. They puzzle and outmaneuver "The Organization" (and "The Federation") at every turn.



#### STEVEN BROWER

Steven Brower's 'hat' and shoes, *Conrad Carpenter's Lunar Extravehicular Visor Assembly and Lunar Extravehicular Activity Overshoes with Intravehicular Activity Boot Assembly (Right and Left)*, are elements of a larger work with a shorter title, *Conrad Carpenter's Apollo A7LB*. The overall aim of the piece was to reproduce the space suit worn by American astronauts on the moon in the 1960s and 1970s. Now, it is

clear that both hats and shoes, in general, are protective in the most fundamental of ways. They provide frail humans with the shells and hoofs that other creatures get doled out to them at birth (or soon thereafter). In *North of My Brain South of My Ass*, all the work, save Brower's, decisively riffs upon hats and shoes that have moved on from the fundamentals of protection toward a culture of display and signage. Brower's work alone dallies with the protective function of such garments.

Ironically such garments are presented here at the moment when mankind nominally exits society toward the barren reaches of the lunar rock. That said exit is nominal only is important, as Brower's work is engaged with the complicated politics and cultural anthropology that cluster around the space program. Indeed NASA's hubris in lugging its militarized human culture to the moon is one subtext of Brower's narration of the despondent life of Conrad Carpenter. Carpenter is the astronaut who was not. His sad and somewhat shadowy biography shows him leaving the employ of both the astronaut corps and NASA in the mid 1970s, without ever having flown an active-service mission. In the following years there is much rambling and much alcohol. The 1980s find Carpenter finally sober and working as a handyman in Sheridan Connecticut where he would turn out for minor maintenance jobs dressed in his earth-orbit suit. In a 2003 radio interview Carpenter affirms his enduring patriotism and explains his continued wearing of the astronaut suite –while acknowledging that the reasons for doing so are "complicated"– as a way to "advance the cause of exploration". The Icarus like, pretensions of NASA and its acolytes flounder, in this version, in a dormitory suburb of New York where Carpenter finally succumbs in 2004. A belated funeral service is held in Llangollen,

Wales in 2007 whereat his ashes are sent aloft via weather balloon. His hat and shoes now frame a spectral presence of an absent body.

Brower enters, in medias res, the narrative of American exceptionalism spun around NASA's antics. The "one giant step..." thing of NASA's moon landing valorizes the mythic 'who' the step was made for, while suppressing the militaristic, cold warrior why. While abstractions, like 'mankind' occlude the frantic, ideological scrambling to toe the less abstract American populace of the 1960s to the line. As art object, Brower's work shades back to sculpture's prehistory as effigy, and perhaps it is important to remember that the sharp end of effigy was, not its potential for formal beauty, but whom or what it represented. Brower's astronaut's hat and shoes, minus the suit that goes between, form the parentheses around the empty human subject of Cold War ideology. Look left, outside the framed photograph of the Apollo astronauts, and we find Brower's tongue-in-cheek, elegy for sad-sack, non-astronaut, un-hero Carpenter, who never got to make the giant leap, never got to do anything much for mankind beyond hanging some very nice closet doors in Darien, Connecticut.



#### BRIAN GAMAN

Brian Gaman's is a hat that keeps nothing under it. A donut hat with a hole for a center. Formally, sculpturally this is a hat that seems to derail the magic of the hat. However, this is still the hat that we do not see. Instead we trip over it. It is a large steel sculpture that sits a mere 4 inches off the floor. This is a hat that can only expose its wearer. Something akin to an empty brainpan thrusts up toward the viewer from the floor. Cast adrift from this hat, but still in its orbit, is a much smaller aluminum ball. Metonymically, the work conjures a visual

rhyme about the spheres (or demi-spheres) of head, brain and globe; that is, what relationship each might have with the other as contained or container; product or producer. How did everything in there, the head, get to be everything out there, the world? (Or perhaps it is the other way around.)

Once again the head is the locus of identity, while now the globe is the locus of alterity. If this piece, *Big Hat Small Globe*, is taken as a clumsily scaled desktop model of the universe, then, orbiting around the center of the giant lobotomized brainpan, is a tiny globe imagined by the null, void of subjectivity. It is like a three dimensional illustration for a text that tells the tale about the world and the self reciprocally producing one another but finding, well, not much there. It is all a little like one of those *Twilight Zone* episodes about the micro-world within the micro-world. A mise en abyme of endless regression to a point, not where anything actually disappears, but a point where one starts all over again. It is also a point where one might realize –though from what place, or subject-position this could occur is uncertain– that each is the simulacrum of the other. To wit, a mirror image of a mirror image of a mirror image. As such, Gaman's work toys with the depletion of the whole maneuver of mimicry, it revels in the emptiness of such a spectacle. End of story.

And yet, it is nonetheless the case that Gaman's metal hats also resound with other connotations. What Gaman's work also evokes are the metal hats –helmets is perhaps the word– of soldiers. This is a reading where identity is militarized and serialized as the muddy infantryman of the early Twentieth Century. (These are assuredly not hats, nor helmets, of any contemporary moment.)

History, however, as much as the already invoked simulacrum, can conspire in the excising of identity. History at a stroke can envelope, conceal and suffocate. It can dispose of all complications or transactions of relatedness by placing them in a univocal mythical discourse, while the figure of the infantryman himself inflames the image of a landscape of human –and landscape, come to that– ruins akin to Passchendaele or the Somme. The crucial difference from “end of story, period” would be the ripple effect spreading around the globes and spheres.



JOHN BJERKLIE

Born unto this world at an open-studio event in 2004 Big Hat, a.k.a. John Bjerklie, has been appearing on TV, computer screens and at sites as varied as PULSE Art Fair, a bus stop in Red Hook, Brooklyn and the Savanna College of Art and Design in Georgia. Big Hat paints, recites Big Hat poetry, dances and otherwise seduces, commands and instructs his awe struck audience.

Affectionately, however, it must be noted that Big Hat dances like a hip-hop farmer; he channels an upstate

redneck infatuated with urban culture. His painting lessons hinge upon the lamest of punch lines, while his writing has a messianic cast.

Much of Big Hat's oeuvre is a video or audio signal beamed by Bjerklie from his studio. This might mean either his actual day-to-day studio in Brooklyn or some temporary location set up as his studio where, for the duration, he will toil as a workaday artist and also perform as Big Hat. The audience is never actually invited into the studio, but Bjerklie is frequently projected outward via a live feed. Thus Big Hat has appeared as large video projections upon building walls and has stood – non-video, flesh and blood– at open windows with megaphone in hand (and hat on head) to inveigle his audience. The megaphone –and binoculars– may also appear wielded as deliberately redundant props within the videos, as Big Hat directly addresses the camera, a.k.a. his audience, delivering commands or perhaps slogans that portend salvation: “The Breezes in the Treezes Cure my Diseases Thank - U Thank - U Jeezus.”

The graceless elegance of the clown and the slapstick banter of cheap cabaret have been trawled by artists and performers from at least Karl Valentin to Mike Smith's *Baby Mike* or Bruce Nauman's *Clown Torture*. This is a device that is always about out-of-placeness: about being a cultural interloper. It turns outsidership upon its head, gridding the wrong body with the wrong cultural map. It is a device that ridicules the performer while girding the viewer within a voyeuristic loop of sadistic pleasure that puts one on the edge of one's seat, cringing. In this the performer's body becomes the agent of an aggressive self-sacrifice.

The comparison to Bruce Nauman is particularly apropos for Bjerklie. Each artist reflexively turns upon the isolation of the studio and the social parenthesis of hermit and clown that hold the artist in this, no particular social space. They both perform the ambiguous territory of the studio because it is a place where what exactly happens? The studio is –often– the site of non-productive, directionless rumblings. After all, how does one measure productive time in the studio? This odd, dream world of the studio, is traded in by Big Hat. He translates it into how-to-recreationally-paint spoofs. Big Hat riffs on a TV genre that sells a quick series of tricks as the route to visual and intellectual pleasure while in fact, he, Bjerklie, is working his day away in the studio.

That the artist's double –Big Hat– sallies forth to do this work for Bjerklie returns Freud to the scene. Not the original double (sic) of Freud that we tried to concoct in the studio, but the Freud who, quoting Otto Rank, offered that our double “is an energetic denial of the power of death.” Big Hat is an energetic denial of the dead time of the studio.

Big Hat is at war with someone or something that haunts the studio. From his pulpit, come cave, come studio, he is calling someone to prayer, or to a fight, or for a studio visit. Big Hat is calling for something that will innervate studio time. The real lesson here is not the techniques for so-called Sunday painters. The real lesson is for professional artists to watch over their own shoulders, as they watch over their shoulders, at the empty space of the studio.



JENNIE NICHOLS

Now shoes, too, we must remember, are magical. It is not just the hats. But shoes, unlike hats, are unclean, even dangerous. The Seven League boot of European folklore and Hermes winged sandals spirit their wearers beyond the humdrum stroll of human limitations. These magic shoes are shoes that have independent agency, they can carry one at incredible speeds, can

transit between seen and magical other dimensions, but you should still leave them at the door. Orphaned at the door, unwelcome in the home, shoes are impure.

Jennie Nichols' shoes are perhaps the most verbose and talkative (bar Williams' hat that *actually* talks) of all the work in *North of My Brain South of My Ass*. They are a colorful benediction of the baseness of the foot. Nichols knows that shoes connect us to the base materiality of the body – they keep our feet out of the heavens and firmly anchored in the mud. And she knows that shoes differ from hats in that they *become* the wearer in a way a hat never does. The hat is an appendage, the shoe an extension. The hat adorns and signals, and it can temporarily hijack consciousness – Athanasius Pernath again– but the shoe melds and becomes a prosthesis, a second skin. Besides, the shoe enables our bodies in ways hats never can. As we primordially swung down from the trees, our dainty feet needed all but permanent protection. Hoofless as we once were (and still are) shoes now enfold our bodies as



an exoskeletal membrane. The shoe becomes a portable home exactly as we seem ported by it: carried away you might say. And there must surely, somewhere, be a Borges' story where the shoe is a replica of the foot it conceals.

Having said all this, what possible world of feet can Nichols hail from? Extrapolating from the shoes of fairy tales and literary grotesquerie, Nichols amplifies and hyperbolizes the formal flourishes of such footwear. The curlicues, figurations and other scattered signs of a slightly tarnished excess congeal in her sculptures formed from Aqua-Resin. Her *Monster Shoe* is comic cancer. It is not the shoe belonging to a goblin, but an actual goblin-shoe. These are shoes to dance Morphasmos, or animal dances. That is, the ritual dances where the characteristic appearance, movements, gait, sounds and bodily undulations of the animal are mimicked by human dancers. And, in Morphasmos at least, one mimics in order to become, thus the dancer is the animal, is the goblin. Magical transubstantiations occur. Truncated spiral bunions and tattoo-like markings on a shoe that has the pallor of dead skin, morph the wearer and transform her into a fictive being. And why does any of this matter? Jean Servier, ethnologist and occultist: "to walk shod is to take possession of the ground." The wrinkle is in who and how you take possession. As mere mortal or as hybrid monster. Who will finally be in charge is the real question?

In all this, Nichols knows that Freud parked the unconscious in reverse gear. He insisted that the indestructible contents of the unconscious do not go away, they return. Designed to protect and serve, the shoe turns on us. Corns, carbuncles, blisters, hammer toes, are the mere epiphenomena of the shoe's revenge. The final coup is to take possession of the whole body and the spirit. In Michael Powel and Emeric Pressburger's film version of *The Red Shoes*, Norma Shearer is asked, "Why do you want to dance?" Without missing a beat her reply is, "Why do you want to live?"

Hans Christian Andersen's original version is less generous; the eponymous shoes take over the protagonist:

"The shoes continue to dance, through fields and meadows, rain or shine, night and day, and through brambles and briars that tear at Karen's limbs. She can't even attend her adoptive mother's funeral. An angel appears to her, bearing a sword, and condemns her to dance even after she dies, as a warning to vain children everywhere. Karen begs for mercy but the red shoes take her away before she hears the angel's reply. Karen finds an executioner and asks him to chop off her feet. He does so but the shoes continue to dance, even with Karen's amputated feet inside them..."

Vain children (and adults?) be warned! The grotesque, desired and denied, returns, inverted, in full destructive force.



NIKI SINGLETON

Jailbird-artist Niki Singleton's hats, roughly hewn from cardboard and duct tape, are shaded by personal as much as public history. Singleton, who like many artists, takes New York walls and streets, as much as galleries, to be the site for depositing/elaborating culture, was arrested for destruction of public property summer of 2012. In this case, stashing an artist away for twenty-four hours plus in Brooklyn Central Booking transforms the 1970's totem of pig to shark.

If we take Singleton's whole practice, from graffiti to sculptural installation, to dance and video, as a broad stroke we are often facing up to an agit-prop sense of formal urgency. For agit-prop the injunction is to Emote! Speak! Make images before the historical moment has passed us by. Zooming in on the fine print or detail of Singleton's work, we are in a slower narrative terrain of unfolding plots and character development. The larger installation pieces and dance work are often collaborative. There is a sense of careful, theatrical blocking wherein discrete objects or performers are deployed in relation to one another. In the collaborative dance piece, *2012, Animals Occupy NY 2*, Singleton invokes, as Nichols also did with her shoes, Morphasmos, or animal dances. Dancing the animals was/is a moment of shape shifting. It was originally a gesture of sympathy or empathy between human and animal. In lore, for example the Gaelic fith-fath, it becomes a means of the human achieving invisibility by taking on the form of the animal and thus merging with the landscape. (What nocturnal urban creature Singleton needs to dance in order to tag New York undisturbed remains to be seen)

Singleton's work here in *North of My Brain South of My Ass*, dances the NYPD. The work is from a series of shark hats. Totems for –or against– New York's finest. Such totems traditionally attribute the animal characteristic to the human. Singleton shape shifts the arresting officer, and his genus, as sharks rather than pigs. A migration along the animal or food chain that inflects cops with something other than slothful rolling in the muck. Mindful that Wall Street shark Jamie Dimon is bankrolling the NYPD, this simple displacement along the feeding chain resonates well.\*

Singleton's sharks are posed, staged, in relationships with one another to reveal individual markings like plumage. Thus within the shoal each shark is in fact very different from every other shark. So it is a uniform, but a uniform with personality. Unique attributes, personal modifications abound; trophies like scalps or ears harvested by warriors dangle. Color schemes change from shark to shark evoking subgroups, perhaps particular skill sets. While dorsal fins –the revered crown of sharkdom– are each weaponized to suit the whim of their owner.

\*<http://www.nakedcapitalism.com/2011/10/is-jp-morgan-getting-a-good-return-on-4-6-million-gift-to-nyc-police-like-special-protection-from-occupywallstreet.html>



#### SUMMER WHEAT

Summer Wheat, too trawls American politics in her work. Wheat presents the contortions of class squabble come class war through commodity bling. Hewn in un-blingy plaster, fabric and paint, *Prada and Payless Spectacle*, offers the named brands arm wrestling to a draw. There can be no class winner, it seems, given that each, and all, are consumed by the commodity sign. That there is no outside to consumer culture, wherein class

antipathy might have a suitably uneven playing field, on which one side can finish the other off, is probably what stops the combatants in their tracks.

Guy Debord's original nostrum from 1967 was, "The Spectacle is a social relationship between people mediated by images." McKenzie Wark recently reminded us that, "the trick is not to be distracted by the images, but to inquire into the nature of the social relationship." Wheat is not distracted by the images. However, she does point out that the images merge into too-many-frames-a-second to be discerned one from the other. Thus, her shoes are fighting hard, but they are also morphing into each other. Wheat's work reveals shod, mismatched feet topped by ankles and calves isolated in a context-less moment atop a podium. It is all social relationship, all image, all squished together. It is the inseparable, intersectionist nightmare, where what to struggle for first –shoes or class– becomes a Hobson's choice.

We are not going to venture onto the invidious playing field of where contemporary Spectacular culture begins, but for sure cinema played its part. Shot in 1901 Edwin Porter's one and a half minute film, *What Happened on 23rd Street*, grounds the shoe and attached ankle, calf, thigh, and spectacle beyond to another struggle, this one libidinous. The film's stationary camera tracks the progress of a woman and her beau –actually a cameraman colleague of Porter's– as they walk directly toward the camera and, just shy of the camera as they step across a grating in the sidewalk, we see the woman's floor length skirt blown high by a gust of wind from below. The scene, of course, presages Marilyn Monroe in *The Seven Year Itch* 54 years later. And, in its oh so modest turn of that century way, presages that cultural form's struggle with the spectacle of sexuality. Thus as the man's body disappears from Greg Drasler's paintings, replaced by its synechdochic totem, so too the shadow of the woman as spectacle emanates from Wheat's sculpture.

What actually happened on 23rd street, it turns out, was that the grating set into the sidewalk near the Flatiron Building provided a regular, daily spectacle of skirts blown northward and ankles and calves provocatively shown for lascivious visual consumption. The spectacle became a meeting place for wayward youth –"urchins" in contemporary accounts– to ogle the boulevardiers of lower Fifth Avenue. Cops were routinely on hand, per orders of the Mayor, to discourage ogling and disperse crowds. In its way it was all class struggle, all the time. The mores of the bourgeoisie were defended by the agents of Hizonner, while the out of control plebs were kept at just the right distance from the goods.

That DeBord's Spectacle is urban is a given. That the city is its own proto-cinematic spectacle, riven by class fracture, was *already* a given at the turn of that century. That desire, shaped as it is to fit the form of the available commodity, is insatiable, is the spectacle's baseline. That Wheat's work – with its poetics of excess – pits the stores of Fifth Avenue in the ongoing economic struggle, even though that struggle occults its class nature, is Wark's and Wheat's point.

Curiously the class antagonism of Wheat's work finds itself reduplicated in the, so to speak, class relations of hats and shoes. If the hat is the crown, reaching to the heavens, then the shoe or its contents, the foot, represents the base materiality of the body; as low as one can go, teetering on the cusp of abjection without fully throwing one's hat into that ring. The fetishizing of the shoe, from Jimmy Choo and *Sex In The City*, on to Prada, is itself a reaction formation. It is the valorizing of the foul. It is class antagonism displaced downward but made oh so pretty all the better to distract us. To not be distracted, as Wheat is not, as Wark reminds, is really the struggle.



#### JUDE TALLICHET

Imagine if Abraham Zapruder had been looking the other way. Imagine he heard the shot (or was that shots?) and swung his Bolex back to catch only a glimpse of a speeding Limousine dashing down Elm Street. Well something just happened that's for sure, but what? Jude Tallichet's work, while

not exactly enmeshed with the Kennedy assassination serves up that *just missed it* feeling. Tallichet's work offers us cast bronze socks and shoes as litter. They are the only remaining evidence of some hurried event, but what event? The two men's socks and one man's shoe here, in *North of My Brain South of My Ass*, are pieces from a larger body of work including garments from both men and women, as well as pieces from both over and underwear.

Tallichet is playing with cliffhangers. To keep a viewer on the edge of his or her seat is the stuff of melodrama, the soaps. A hypothetically endless narrative is unfolding and we are always caught off guard in its relentless flow. These objects have the feel of maybe, evidence? They are to be scooped up in a plastic baggie by a passing cop. Therein the mystery to be solved, as if a police procedural, and thence the narrative's trajectory would become known to all. Yet Tallichet is refusing to take on that authoritarian role of the omniscient, she-who-knows-all, power broker. Her touch leaves an open, gap-toothed tale to be toiled at.

So, absent the cop, these splintered pieces might be held to evoke the orphaned memories of trauma. The trauma victim rarely remembers a completed or coherent narrative. Just fragments, glimpses, and shards of images. Indeed trauma's effects are often spoken of as a psychological disintegration of the victim. Aphasia, and aphasia-like disorders are the common sequelae of trauma, that is, glaring gaps



between well ordered meanings. To go there in Tallichet's work is an option. This is the destination that beckons enduringly as the disturbing undercurrent of the work. But Tallichet plays an ambiguity into the hand. There is, after all, something comic about these fragments. They are something Jack Lemon in *The Odd Couple* would fret over. Or he and Anne Bancroft would argue about in *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*. Who's the slob? Or were the clothes scattered in a frantic, Eros driven rush for the bedroom?

The viewer is held between two poles. Either the major key narrative event has just been missed or, narrative itself, as a form, cannot bear the weight of responsibility forced upon it. This latter point is the one foregrounded by trauma's rupturing of language. In the end, narrative cannot be relied upon, so to speak, to organize the phenomena of life. That Tallichet's work, the individual pieces, are installed in, around and in between other peoples work; that they are not a centered focal point unto themselves, is an important part of this phenomena. They might be missed, not noticed, but they might also leach onto someone else's work, someone else's tale. They might hijack –or be hijacked by– another artist's story.



MATT FREEDMAN

Matt Freedman's Clumpist helmet and mittens are the badge of office of Clumpism. Their purpose is, it has sometimes been suggested, to scare the art world into submission. Freedman's work has, historically, wrangled the truth claims of its own propositions while making asserted intervention into existing discourses upon culture. With Clumpism, and its history, we face –deliberately it often feels– an occluded and occulted text.

Freedman was undoubtedly one of the main protagonists of the movement. Clumpism's opening moment was planned as an eruption from its margins into the center of the New York Art World during the heady 1980's marriage of downtown art and further downtown commerce. A planned yet spontaneous seeming fistfight occurred at a Leo Castelli gallery opening. People are coy on whose opening it was. Fischli's and Weiss' 1986 show is sometimes mentioned. Part theater reminiscent of rowdy early Surrealists, part Rosicrucian society akin to Bataille's College of Sociology and part enactment of contemporary art-world anxieties, the whole movement flared and sputtered in a recurring cycle through the waning years of the Twentieth Century and into the first decade of our current century.

Thematically, formally the Clumpist mood drew connecting lines between unexpected dots. Classical themes might share space with science fiction monsters; iterations in the end, it was implied, of kindred apprehensions. If Perseus had known the Monster from *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* he would have slain him for sure. And a monster, like sculpture by Freedman, offering a single direct digestive-excretory tube from mouth to anus, belied –no doubt– the Minotaur's maze. As an intervention in the closing moments of Modernism the movement seemed to propose a conjoining of eschatology and scatology.

Present here in *North of My Brain South of My Ass*, is a principal artifact of the movement. The Clumpist helmet and companion "Clampus Eternus" fighting mittens as worn by Freedman during Clumpist meetings/ceremonies. Were the mittens involved in the fight at Castelli's? Again the fog of memory closes in upon us. However, the three elements, taken in toto, as artifacts of their location in culture –not as works of art discoursing upon said culture– constitute the most concise examples of the hat as shamanistic badge of office. This is emphatically the hat as magic totem that transfigures the wearer by conferring upon him both disguise and feared authority.



NANCY DAVIDSON

Nancy Davidson has also dabbled in gross transformations of the body. Hers is the actual brains and the ass of *North of My Brain South of My Ass*. Legs right up to her chin, which doubles as her ass, *Li'l yello* is the ten-foot tall inflated voluptuary of no specific gender. Weather balloons –*Li'l yello's* stuff– have figured frequently in Davidson's work

over the years. Utilitarian objects in the service of meteorological agencies both civilian and military, a weather balloon's most glamorous assignment is usually to be mistaken for a UFO. Davidson's practice is to anthropomorphize the balloons. She wants us to mistake them for breasts and buttocks. Davidson commonly situates the balloons in groups banded together by, and dressed in various hues of spandex and lace. The effect tends to be luscious and comic, gargantuan bodily mounds rising to greet the viewer.

In earlier bodies of work Davidson has presented, as the final object, photographs of these amorously clad balloons. The photographs which tend to be domestically sized, not giant plotter prints, are a much more coy device than the sculpture. The photographs encourage a transactional debate within the viewer. Close cropped as they are, around their titillating moment, they teeter on the precipice between fakery and verisimilitude. Is this real erotica or fake erotica, is the redundant query ricocheting in the viewer's head? There is a safety valve effect with this sort of fingers-crossed lie that you might tell in the confessional.

With the sculpture, while the artifice is as loud as a Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, the Eros is devoutly practiced. And yet the work does not simply resound with the erotics of the Carnavalesque, in fact it literally utilizes the carnival. *Li'l yello* is a pastiche of a Moko Jumbie. The Moko Jumbie is a stilt walker from Trinidadian carnival. He, as it usually is, mimics the gods. He is a god crossed with a ghost. He haunts and is omniscient (like any self respecting god). He is a dancing god-ghost whose height allows him to see far off and way above the heads of mere mortals. And, just to complicate Christian matters, Davidson's Moko Jumbie is of cloven hoof. Proudly so. There is no attempt to conceal this particular mark of the beast.

Davidson's ploy is often to play with the tit and ass show. Repossess, repurpose and resignify the body parts, while a Butlerian thesis of gender performativity guarantees the political credentials of the work. With *Li'l yello*, Davidson's cultural mix –i.e. snagging stuff from the global archive of culture – reconnects to the cartoon's radical potential.

God-ghost, sex-doll come cartoon, *Li'l yello* wants to please everyone. She is the first of a soon to be group of feminized Moko Jumbies brought to life by Davidson. She is set to clump her way, on cloven hoof, into the landscape of Ignatz, Fritz and Sabo-cat. And that landscape is one of ideological subversion.

On Thanksgiving Day the cartoons of America are sent aloft as contemporary distraction from the serious business of America –the only business of America– which is set to begin the next day. We would do well to remember that cartoons are satire, caricature but also that they are originally the prep work, the rough version for, so to speak, the final assault that is yet to come.\*

– Laurence Hegarty



#### PARTICIPATING ARTISTS

John Bjerklie

Steven Brower

Nancy Davidson

Greg Drasler

Matt Freedman

Brian Gaman

Jennie Nichols

Niki Singleton

Jude Tallichet

Summer Wheat

Moir Williams

The Two Dunces

JOHN BJERKLIE a.k.a. BIG HAT



STEVEN BROWER





NANCY DAVIDSON



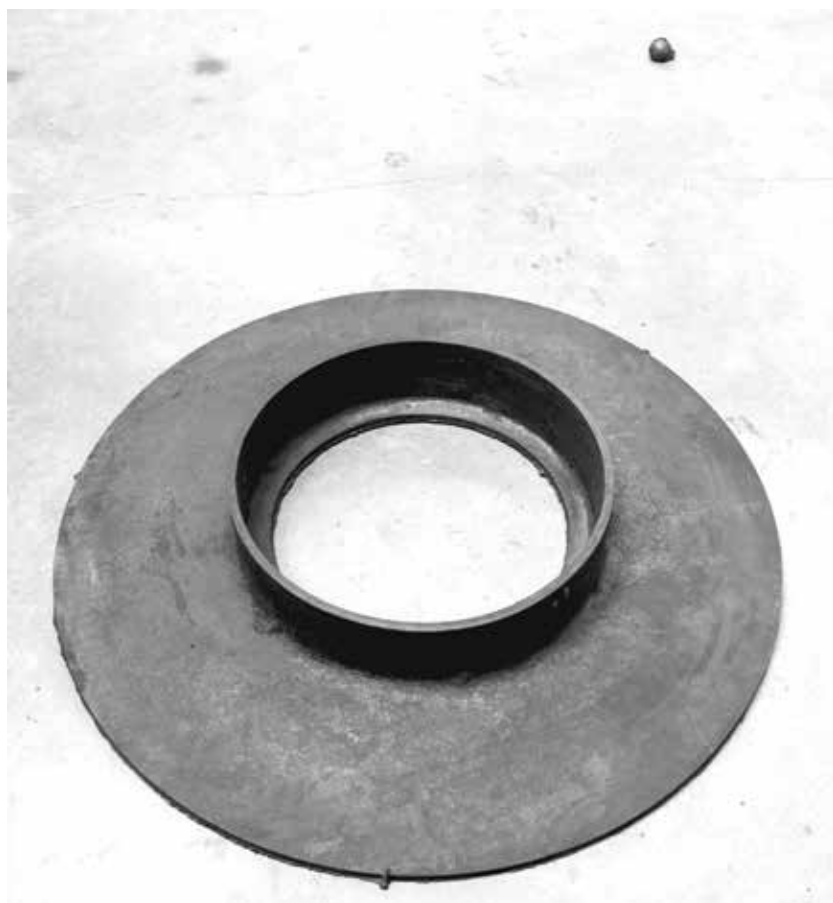
GREG DRASLER



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THE TWO DUNCES



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