

climate and its pathetic resemblance to things that came before, marking ethics (if not politics per se) as central to the work. As Estragon reminds us in Beckett's first act, one thing really never seems to change: "People are bloody ignorant apes."

Yet Chan's chaotic landscape is punctuated by moments of quiet, reminding us that these are appropriated stories that (however wretchedly) document the persistence of faith despite the loss of measuring objects. At one point, a windstorm carries a vast tangle of litter through the scene, the swirling colors relaying a dose of intense, if ambiguous, pleasure. In another sequence, the tree, sans bodies, is so heavily hung with empty sneakers that while one recognizes the contemporary reference, it's impossible not to think of other images of piled shoes. But above all, Chan's digitized slivers reflect such poignant notions: An inconspicuously delicate field of color that could be a sunset (or a sunrise) on one side of the screen contains an apocalyptic black haze that virtually smother the heavens on the other.

—Johanna Barlow

RICHARD KERN FEATURE, INC.

Before becoming known as a photographer, Richard Kern was a director of short "death-punk" films, pioneering a post-Warholian B-porn aesthetic that made itself at home on Sonic Youth album covers and in East Village basement screening rooms at a time when it was still possible to call such production "underground." In the meantime, Kern's photographs have been widely published in books and magazines as various as *People* and *Rarely Legal*. Kern does poets, art, and fashion photography, sometimes all in one day, but his singularity does not reside in this crossover potential so much as in the way he strips this multitasking down to its hollow core, and in how he elaborates his peculiar distance from the labor he performs whenever he aims his camera at a model.

The nine photographs at *Feature, Inc.* all operate within the tried-and-true codes of poetic photographic voyeurism. Kern's lens peeps through windows and half-open doors to capture glimpses up his models' skirts or down their blouses, locating panties or nipples. Blurry foreground elements such as doorknobs, potted plants, and window glare erode the simultaneous proximity and remoteness of the unseen photographer. It's hard to say whether Kern is referencing "surrealist toys" and "top-skirt" porn genres,



Richard Kern, *Office* (NYC), 2004, color photograph, 40 x 30"



Spencer Finch, *Sunlight in an Empty Room (Focusing Cloud for Emily Dickinson, Amherst, MA, August 16, 2014)* (detail), 2004, fluorescent light, theatrical floor, and cathegories, dimensions variable

or if these images were actually taken on the job. I prefer to think that we are looking at up-skirt porn that is referencing itself, that Kern and his female models are conspiring to open up a pose within the pose, making an illicit art moment on the porn clock. This new pose and the gaze it plays for may not look immediately different from those of pornography—the model, photographer, and viewer are certainly all the same—but the image seems to tear itself away from its initial context, establishing a new territory for itself here in a photograph like *Woman undress* (Chicago, 2012). These are stolen moments, captured on negatives the artist chose to withhold from his editor.

Unlike Terry Richardson, whose work seems fully invested in the dream of making commercial fashion transgressive or transgression fashionable, Kern doesn't pretend that image culture is a nonstop party. And unlike Ryan McGinley, whose photographs document a dream of youth freely exposing itself in moments as innocent as naps, Kern exposes the economics and artifice of every situation. Those photographs make work seem like play, whereas Kern plays at working. The crucial difference, and it's always sensible in his strangely upright images, is that a Kern moment is aware of its own nonbelonging as either play or work time. In *Office* (NYC, 2004), a model posing as an office worker seemingly caught unaware as she squats to retrieve a document conspires with Kern to reappropriate the pornographic situation, coolly reproducing it in an image that is closer to the sensibility of Perry Klownowski than the snapshot normalities of wild-boy lifestyle photography.

We see nothing, really, in *Up skirt* (L, 2002), but the pale blue dead-end of the model's

panties. We see a hobbyist's attention to form and detail and an image that doesn't bother to break the rules of the genre its title so straightforwardly names. We see Kern showing himself seeing everything and nothing, and his model readily agreeing to show it. A Kern image seems to start from the boredom of looking at a world already photographed, then finds its discrete distance from this boredom and this world. Kern captures nothing but some young, blank flesh, a moment slipped into panties and carefully, soberly returned to its own opacity. There is no simulated joy in this moment, only the joy of simulating it.

—John Kelly

SPENCER FINCH POSTMASTERS

Henry David Thoreau famously admonished that we too often lead lives of "quiet desperation." His remedy was to live deeply and reflexively, sucking life's "marrow," and, if need be, communing with the Walden woods in the relative seclusion of meditative if quixotic faux isolation (he was literally a stone's throw from his nearest neighbors). For Emily Dickinson, another archetypal American recluse, a purposeful and startlingly conscious life was to be found within the walls of her Amherst, Massachusetts, birthplace. In fifty-five years she rarely ventured out, communicating chiefly by means of cryptic notes and gnomic poems, of which, at the time of her death, only ten had been published.

For Spencer Finch, the charge to live simply and deliberately translates into vital pilgrimage rather than focused immobility.

After forays to famous places including Vienna, Cape Canaveral, Loch Ness, Los Alamos, and the site of ancient Troy, the artist chose Stockholm and Amherst as destinations for the making of his most recent show, *The Magic Hour*, Stockholm, May 8, 2013 (installing *Inspired Bergman*) (all works 2014) is the result of Finch's attempt to seize and reproduce the ineffable bluish glow outside the director's apartment, here approximated by means of overlapping and precisely calibrated prismatic stained glass panels. As light screamed in through the gallery's window, the hazy Swedish twilight was successively manifested in a white cube in New York. Conceived not as resemblance but as sublime phenomenological effect, works such as this and the monumental *Sunlight in an Empty Room (Focusing Cloud for Emily Dickinson, Amherst, MA, August 16, 2014)* forsake irony for a kind of poetic and hallucinatory ideality.

To make *Sunlight*, Finch assembled one hundred fluorescent tubes that together re-create the precise quality of the light he experienced in the poet's yard before a cloud passed overhead. We are finally presented with a milkshakish cloud—a mess of mustily brilliant theatrical filters held together with clothespins—that reflects the interior luminosity into a complementary pallid haze. This riotous of existential optics would be unthinkable without Dickinson's work, to which Finch alludes in the show's title, "As much of noon as I can take between my finite eyes." This line is culled from a poem in which Dickinson describes peering "upon the window pane" to the world beyond, at once evoking Emerson's transcendental "transparent

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To make *Sunlight*, Finch assembled one hundred fluorescent tubes that together re-create the precise quality of the light he experienced in the poet's yard before a cloud passed overhead. We are finally presented with a makeshift cloud—a mess of murkily brilliant theatrical filters held together with clothespins—that refracts the intense luminosity into a complementary pallid haze. This roomful of existential optics would be unthinkable without Dickinson's work, to which Finch alludes in the show's title, "As much of noon as I can take between my finite eyes." This line is culled from a poem in which Dickinson describes peering "upon the window pane" to the world beyond, at once evoking Emerson's transcendental "transparent eyeball" and Thoreau's allegory of the mutable pond wherein a sheet of frozen ice produces and sustains a reflection before ceding to wintry gray opacity. Matter reveals and conceals, depending on the season, or, as Finch suggests in *Forty-Nine Minutes (after Kawabata)*, the time of day.

Smaller and subtler, *Forty-Nine Minutes* comprises seven digital C-prints that shade from a landscape seen through a window to the reflection of a domestic interior, as the failing light changes every seven minutes and the clear pane of glass becomes a dense, dark mirror. Blindness thus becomes the precondition for another kind of sight, of which Thoreau, for one, would have heartily approved: "It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful," he wrote, "but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts."

—Suzanne Hudson



psycho!

Ricci Albenda, *psycho!*, 2004, acrylic on panel, 47 x 82".

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RICCI ALBENDA
ANDREW KREPS GALLERY

The loose-knit French literary/mathematical collective OULIPO (*Ouvroir de la littérature potentielle*, or "Workshop of Potential Literatures") applied a variety of constraints to the composition of poetry, drama, and fiction in an effort to investigate the outer limits of language. Among the bizarre products of their rigorous approach are cofounder Raymond Queneau's book *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (1961)—which contains ten pages each split into fourteen strips, one for each line of text,

that allow the reader (in theory at least) to construct the hundred trillion poems of the title—and Georges Perec's *La disparition* (1969), a full-length detective novel written without the use of the letter *e*.

There's something of the same amiably mendacious, rule-driven experimental spirit to Ricci Albenda's COLORE-ME-TRY "alphabetic colorization system," a mapping of the alphabet onto the natural spectrum that he has pursued for going on a decade. In "Cyclodrome" (the title of his recent exhibition of text paintings and a term he coined to identify the circular ordering principle applied to each work, and to the theme as a whole), Albenda extended this relatively straightforward system into six self-contained monochromatic galleries. Each painting at Andrew Kreps Gallery followed one of these scales, so that the letters in days old (all works 2004), for example, range from bright orange to a muted yellow-gray, while *psycho!*'s is a riot of purple, magenta, and scarlet. Hailed in white on smooth cream grounds, the words seem ready to break away from their panels and drift off into the air of the gallery and the world beyond.

While Albenda initially framed COLORE-ME-TRY as a parody of the utopian ideal of universal communication that gave rise to the likes of Esperanto, he is now beginning to believe his own hype and argues with a straight face that the programmatic addition of color to type might constitute a genuine and useful enhancement of its associative power. It sounds like a fairly ludicrous position, but the anomalous ocheres of woodcut or the rich purples of encaustic do seem to add something to the words' meaning, and the very difficulty of defining what this might be is no small part of the



Saint Clair Cemin, *Compartes*, 2004, polychrome wood, 60 x 67 x 12".

works' lasting appeal. In addition to playing with color, Albenda has also invented some time in a quest for the ideal font, arriving at Albenda Bold, a variation on Times Roman designed for maximum ease of reading and sufficiently flexible to allow for occasional small variations (notice how the tops of the *y* and *r* of *eyrie*, for example, blend into one another, or the *h* in yellow holds link up).

Artistic precedents for Albenda's project are legion: Ed Ruscha and Jasper Johns spring readily to mind, as do Mel Bochner's recent thesaurus paintings and Bob and Roberta Smith's waggish placards, both of which use color to slow and problematize the comprehension of words. Albenda's contribution to this lineage is a modest one but no less worthwhile for that. Painted text is now such a familiar form that to employ it without descending into snarky conceptual witticism or half-baked sociopolitical "statement" is a genuine achievement. Ironically, Albenda's hyper-rationalism succeeds in reminding us of the arbitrary, abstract beauty of words. Like the members of OULIPO, Albenda seems to be engaged in a refinement and concentration of his practice: Where earlier texts painted directly onto gallery walls relied on the use of quirky perspectival distortion for much of their effect, "Cyclodrome" was marked by an absence of such trickery, depending for its subtler appeal on a system followed to the letter.

—Michael Wilson

SAINT CLAIR CEMIN
BRENT SIKKEMA

In his theory of creativity as bisociation, Arthur Koestler wrote: "When two inde-

pendent matrices of perception or reasoning interact with each other the result . . . is either a collision ending in laughter, or their fusion in a new intellectual synthesis, or their confrontation in an aesthetic experience." He adds that such "comic, tragic, or intellectually challenging effects" can occur simultaneously—and this is precisely what happens in Saint Clair Cemin's doll sculptures.

The collision of a multicolored female figure and a white polyhedron in *A Shard of Glass* (all works 2004)—the figure horrified by what it sees, the object pristine and unmoved—is at once a laughable conflation, an aesthetic confrontation of opposites, and their synthesis in an intellectually puzzling relationship. It is the relationship between opposites—between art and dead or indifferent work-of-art; more broadly, between an all-too-human representation and an eccentric geometrical abstraction; and even more broadly, between an object that presents itself as "art" and a human being who wonders why it claims such exalted status. Cemin's work is funny, thought provoking, and a condensed summary of the unresolved conflict between figuration and abstraction that haunts modernism and its descendants. His sculpture satirizes itself in the act of satirizing the unresolvable standoff between art and life.

The pairing of figure and pedestal in *Monument to Credit Card Debt* and of head and rectangle in *Body* involves a similar aesthetic confrontation—the bases of the sculptures reference Minimalism; the figure is quasi-Expressionist, and the head quasi-classical—but the result is more absurd than tragic or comic. It suggests the impossibility of the integration of opposites in a new artistic synthesis (from one perspective the problem of postmodernism, which seeks to reconcile that which modernism implied was irreconcilable). Cemin continually restates the problem, but finds no solution to it.

Again and again Cemin talks on, with a kind of tongue-in-cheek innocence, the kids and ideas of modernism: Richard Serra in *The Night*, Earth art in *Adam*. He knows his art history and puts it all up for grabs, sometimes in delicious combinations. In *Compartes*, for example, he fuses truncated cross and simplified figure in quasi-Art Nouveau style. There's a kind of playful morbidity to Cemin's art that's especially evident in *Wic*, a conglomerate of clay figures of all sizes and shapes, some colorful, most not. It's a mishmash of sculpture and a mocking comment on humanity and its gods (including art gods,