

WHAT CAN I DO BUT ENUMERATE OLD THEMES?

On Allen Ruppersberg at Greene Naftali Gallery, New York

Like all good conceptualists, the Californian artist Allen Ruppersberg gives typography and language a central role in his multifaceted works, though they often take a turn toward the literary register and bluntly aim for the viewer's attention.

During his first show at New York's Greene Naftali gallery, Ruppersberg now offered a glimpse of his great passion: collecting. Among the objects of this passion were not only great numbers of record covers, score sheets, flyers, and book covers, but also, surprisingly, Scrooge McDuck. Less surprising, perhaps, were the references to canonical figures such as Mike Kelley and Marcel Broodthaers. Ultimately, the show's colorful surfaces seemed to conceal an ongoing work of mourning on the legacy of the avant-garde.

In 1974, Marcel Broodthaers began to reflect on his career in a series of retrospectives entitled the "Décors". Fully aware of the dubious reputation of late work, Broodthaers launched a mordant attack on the expectation that, as an artist becomes an *éminence grise*, his work will become bigger, slicker and more expensive. Encasing his own earlier production in vitrines as through it were rare and precious ephemera, Broodthaers mockingly exacerbated the self-indulgence, self-referentiality, and unoriginality associated with late career art.

If we can imagine Broodthaers, about 20 years younger and living in Los Angeles, digesting Beat poetry rather than Belgian surrealism, he might well resemble Allen Ruppersberg. Not only were the two artists part of a turn toward the literary in the early 1970s (Ruppersberg's handwritten text of "The Picture of Dorian Gray" across a series of canvases almost precisely coincides with Broodthaers's 1973 series of "Peintures Littéraires"), Ruppersberg is an acknowledged fan of Broodthaers – he is one of the three Marcells, along with Proust and Duchamp, to whom he

pays homage in a 2001 work, "The New Five Foot Long Shelf". And like Broodthaers, Ruppersberg has approached his own late work as a memorial through which to allegorically reflect on the mechanisms of prestige.

Or this is one way to read his recent show at Greene Naftali Gallery in New York. Ruppersberg has divided the exhibition space into roughly two halves, each of which is conceived as a separate installation. Entering the gallery, the first work encountered is "Big Trouble", 2010. "Big Trouble" revisits a piece of mail art – a movement whose lifespan was as short as its medium was ephemeral – which Ruppersberg had made in 1969. For the original version of the piece, Ruppersberg mailed copies of a particular Scrooge McDuck comic strip to friends in L.A. The comic describes a potlatch-like competition between Scrooge and a foreign Maharajah to build the biggest monument to the founder of Duckland – the comic ends with Scrooge triumphant with a massive monument made of platinum encrusted with precious stones, and the Maharajah losing his shirt. Georges Bataille would have seen its enormous potential for allegory; it could describe anything from competitions in prestige between the East and West, to the phenomenon of big art collecting as a very public form of trophy hunting.

In "Big Trouble", Ruppersberg takes images of all the monuments from the comic, gradually increasing in grandiosity, and blows them up onto marine-grade plywood standees. On a wall facing these flat statues are hung the pages from which the objects have been taken. Ruppersberg has reprinted them onto thick card stock and framed them such that the cut-out spaces in the page cast shadows against the mat. As a result of their digital printing, both the comics and the



Allen Ruppersberg, Greene Naftali Gallery, New York, 2010, exhibition view

standees display an unexpectedly lush surface. Ruppersberg's approach is dialectical: even as the thin, pulpy, "low" mail-art comic is enlarged and thickened for the gallery, the results are one-sided statues and reproductions shot through with holes. Ruppersberg's use of the standee is a reference to the installation "Al's Grand Hotel", 1971, in which he exhibited standees of himself in different outfits giving the peace sign – offering up the image of the artist's energetic and welcoming presence while, at the same time, pointedly revealing that image to be flat, and the artist nowhere to be found.

The other part of the show, entitled "The Never Ending Book Part Two/Art and Therefore Ourselves (Songs, Recipes and the Old People)", 2009, is set into a recessed portion of the gallery, suggesting a backdrop against which the oversized standees are performing. Previously exhibited at the Santa Monica Museum of Art last year, "The Never Ending Book Part Two" has a very different look from "Big Trouble": if "Big Trouble" works subtly within a few select gestures, "The

Never Ending Book Part Two" is constructed to provoke a feeling of overwhelming heterogeneity. An elementary school esthetic of bright colored furniture and loud neon signage make it resemble nothing so much as a Mike Kelley installation. And Ruppersberg, too, is attracted to signifiers of Americana, but of an altogether more wholesome sort than Kelley: the centerpiece of the installation is a wall of color photocopies of sheet music covers from the 1940s, scores, handbills, black and white family snapshots, cookbook covers, in short, an accumulation of generically old stuff with no value as collectables and very little evocative charge as souvenirs.

Further copies of the images on the wall are stacked in a series of cardboard boxes placed on the pieces of furniture. Posters embedded in the installation invite us to help ourselves, but "no more than 6 pages. Future viewers will thank you" (unlike Scrooge and the Maharajah, we, apparently, need to exercise restraint in our consumption). Consistent in Ruppersberg's work is an interest in how artworks address us and call

on us to interact with them – his highly voiced neon posters have, after all, become something of a signature style. At the same time, however, an insincerity is detectable in his hippie calls for everyone to join the fun. What we can take home are cheap reproductions of already cheap material, destined for the trash quicker than a Felix Gonzalez-Torres poster.

“The Never Ending Book Part Two” is a witness to its own commodification in much the same way as “Big Trouble”. A printed banner reading “Wave Goodbye to Grandma”, presiding over the whole installation, is a recreation of a 1970 work, in which Ruppertsberg unfurled an even more enormous handwritten scroll with the same text on a grassy hillside. In its new incarnation, it is shrunken, the expressive handwriting replaced by affectless type, the paper support converted to durable vinyl. His private archival accumulation of junk on paper is likewise not presented in the original, but in an unlimited edition of digital copies.

While Ruppertsberg’s convivial attitude is undeniable, there is something forced, even too shrill, about it. The literary figure of the faux-naïf is one which he, no doubt, knows well. Masquerading as a trifle, there is something of the mausoleum in Ruppertsberg’s installation – aside from the cheerful-morbid message of “Wave Goodbye to Grandma”, “The Never Ending Book Part Two” contains many images of tombs and poems suffused with melancholic irony (crucially, W.B. Yeats’s “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”). A similarly mitigated pathos appears in “Letter to a Friend” (1997), where Ruppertsberg pairs his posters with floor-tile memorials for friends and artistic influences who have passed away. Self-reflexive even in his work of mourn-

ing, Ruppertsberg presents his late work as about belatedness.

Ruppertsberg is certainly an adept dialectician. In the legacy of the best conceptual art, he performs the “allegorical procedures” (Benjamin Buchloh) into which so much critical hope was placed in the 1970s and 1980s. But the anxiety lurking beneath his colorful surfaces, more than a general anxiety about death, is perhaps a concern over the very obsolescence of these strategies – a suspicion that they may have outlived their time, that it is too late, that the Scrooge McDucks of the world have thoroughly recuperated them. “How I miss the avant-garde”, reads one of his posters. Of course, a longing for the obsolete was always part of what gave the allegorical its force, but such longing can also harden into academicism. As someone who identifies with the “old people”, Ruppertsberg wonders, in the words he quotes from the late Yeats poem nestled in the billboard-wall of “The Never Ending Book Part Two”, “what can I do but enumerate old themes?”.

MICHAEL SANCHEZ

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Michael Sanchez is a writer and lives in New York.