

DARA FRIEDMAN by David Carrier

Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York NY
May 22 · June 28, 2008

If you turn from reading Tim Clark's *The Painting of Modern Life* (1985) to looking at contemporary art in the galleries, then you cannot but be a little disappointed. Who is our Degas, Manet, or Pissarro—who, that is, displays the hidden political and social dimensions of our public spaces, revealing how our private desires are externalized there? Modernist high art turned inward, leaving this task to mass art. Gene Kelly's dancing in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) shows, by comparison, how confined were the explicit social references of abstract expressionism.

Last fall Dara Friedman hired 60 people—children, tourists, and workers of all ages—to sing in public without accompaniment. They sang in daylight and at night, in coffee shops, on Manhattan street corners, in museums, and in Grand Central Station. Mostly they did popular songs, with a little opera and lyrics about longing. Some of the performers are very good, a few sound great, but they wouldn't attract attention in a concert hall. *Musical* (2007-08), a 48-minute large-screen, high-definition digital video, presents these performances. In New York, you can be pretty eccentric without attracting attention. At one point, someone gives money to the singer. And sometimes

bystanders try to avoid walking into the scene. But generally people on the street let the singers be, without interfering.

Being an art critic often is dispiriting. You see the art stars in the upscale galleries, and then look at shows of a few, mostly hopelessly idealistic kids in the marginal spaces. Pretty

soon you are ready to sit down and have a drink. But now and then, though this is sadly rare, you have without any warning an experience that redeems this pointless traipsing all over town. That happens when you come upon work by someone unknown to you, which stops you in your tracks. Like sexual pleasure, this aesthetic ecstasy cannot be faked. A half hour into *Musical*, it was transparently obvious to me that this video is a masterpiece.

Coming from me, this statement probably needs some context. A few years ago, a distinguished commercial journal commissioned an essay on video art. Most people, myself included, I wrote, are much more willing to tolerate boredom in the art gallery or museum than when watching TV. In the 1960s and '70s, Susan Sontag and other writers argued that rejecting art because it seems boring marks a refusal to engage with revolutionary art forms. But most videos are just dull. Even given today's large flat screens and wave sound technology, video art would not attract so much attention among the public. A great movie is worth viewing many times, but few museum videos deserve such attention. No wonder that the publication concerned rejected my cranky commentary. But as every critic knows, judging art involves responding to immediate experience, which can be entirely unpredictable. Then, of course, one goes home to reflect.

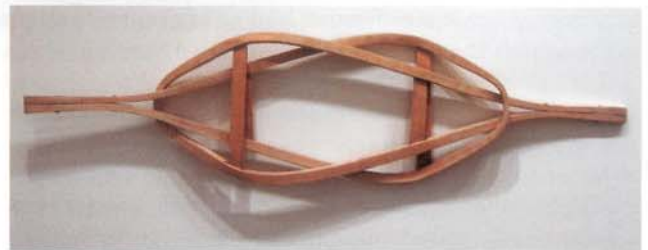
I passionately admire *Musical* because it animates our public spaces. People do this privately, listening to their iPods. It is as if many of us secretly look to music to give rhythm to street life. Friedman's genius derives from making public this widely felt desire. In Hollywood musicals, the setting typically is artificial. You know that Gene Kelly is just dancing on a stage set. But Friedman's singers perform on the very streets you will reenter as soon as you leave the gallery. And so when you exit Gavin Brown, Manhattan somehow looks different. Like the impressionists, Friedman transfigures the contemporary world. What more could we ask of any artist?

MELODY OWEN by Jacquelyn Davis

Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland OR
July 3 · August 2, 2008

Making a literal virtue of X marks the spot, Melody Owen's "Alexandria, I'm Waiting" presents works produced during residencies at Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, France; Gil Society in Akureyri, Iceland; and Centre Est-Nord-Est, Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, Canada. Comprising photographs, videos, sculpture, and collages, Owen's exhibition arose in response to various local materials and myths. Among her bizarre 2007-08 Icelandic series of collages, we see a blond-haired girl clutching a kitten while a huge, parasitic *Rafflesia* flower blooms malevolently out of her mouth (*Friða og Snotra*), based on local stories about elves switching out human babies for their own. Another treatment on the theme of changelings, 49, *mynd* shows an anatomical diagram of a man with a hawk perched on his arm, drawing similarities between the venous branches and avian feathers. *Shape of Smoke*, a column made up of different plumes of smoke, looks remarkably like the outline of a penis.

Owen's travels into latitudinal similitude definitely make your head spin. As she admits, "I feel like one of those quarters you spin on a table, the kind that keeps spinning long after you thought it would stop." *Travel Grid #2* (2008) is a case in point, scouring through such diverse locales as Berlin, Guanajuato, Quebec, and Portland to arrive at arresting scenes of the innate knotting of things. Taking her cue from Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957-60), Owen explores notions of relativity and continuum breathed through with alternate perspectives on the same subject-object relations, like those hashish-ridden lines: "Mountolive's ear aches, Liza's blindness, Clea's amputated hand, Leila's smallpox, Justine's stroke, Pombal's gout." Thus, too, Owen's prints of huge cargo ships and hotels from Mediterranean climes clouded over with masses of hive-like cellular grids, such as *Hotel #1 (Tokyo)* and *Hotel #3 (Ship)* (both 2005), suggesting uncanny parallels



between natural and human forms of cohabitation.

In a similar play on the insinuation of worlds, Owen's ink *Seed Drawings* (2004) compare teeming fallopian tubes with open tents, broken beds, and brimming bathtubs, leaving implied sexual determinations up in the air. Nothing, in fact, escapes this morphological uniformity in difference. For instance, *Beluga Soundwave* (2007) is a 3-D translation in wood of a beluga whale song. *8-Knot* (2007), on the other hand, elegantly interweaves two old snowshoes in the eponymous shape. These uncharted identities really spin out of control after a while, causing doubt and indecision over the most humdrum of arrangements. As the title of the show suggests, Owen's Durrellian switcheroos portend a world just like Alexandria, "the city which used us as its flora—precipitated in us conflicts which were hers and which we mistook for our own."