

Art in America



INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW

ANSELM REYLE

BYE BYE KITTY!!!
UNDER DESTRUCTION
MARTHA COLBURN

plus
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Sally Mann:
*Untitled (Self-
 Portraits)*, 2006-07,
 ambrotypes,
 approx. 45½ by
 82½ inches overall;
 at the Virginia
 Museum of Fine Arts.



delightful works (a nose is a thing you might generally see in a mirror; Callas was a diva), but such literal, bottom-line thinking seems off the mark. Ladda's career has followed its own unique course for 30 years—an accomplishment that's nothing to sneeze at.

—Sarah Schmerler

PHILADELPHIA ANN AGEE LOOKS

Three enormous, perspectively skewed paintings of brightly colored rooms; hand-crafted platters and bowls mounted on steel armatures to create a trio of wall reliefs; a table loaded with eye-catching parodies of rococo-like glazed porcelain vases and a ledge supporting equally resplendent figurines, several with a characteristically sly, ribald twist, all gleaming white, are the components of Ann Agee's "Rules of the Pattern," her recent solo exhibition of peculiar delights. Together, they reconstruct Agee's Brooklyn home as both a domestic *mise-en-scène* and a site of production for all kinds of (women's) work. Agee sets the stage with murals on paper of two areas in her house—the kitchen and the Orange Room (the latter in two versions)—interiors emblazoned with green or patterned orange walls. Accented by strongly hued cabinets, chairs and carpets, the paintings juxtapose cool with warm. Coolness, however, prevails, the heated colors outlined and restrained by the drawing. The absence of people and clutter creates a sense of emptiness and expectation, as if we are waiting for the

inhabitants (or actors) to arrive so that life (or the play) can begin.

Toying with once-ingrained notions of ceramics as a minor art, Agee's porcelain creations are the mischievous, wonderfully misbegotten offspring of sculpture, painting, *objet d'art* and kitschy souvenir, throwing in some economic, sociopolitical and gender commentary for good measure. The blue and white wall relief *Gross Domestic Product* (2010) conjures a clunkier version of Delftware and the history of import-export trade, Agee exchanging that ware's more refined, at times exotic imagery for the unrepentantly humdrum—dishes drying in a rack, an oven, a washing machine under a staircase. Another wall piece, *Pink Set* (2009)—pink for girls?—is amusingly embellished with pictures of unmade beds, upending the familiar admonition to make one's bed and implying that today's women have so many better things to do with their time. These, with the whimsical, lopsided vases (one suggests an abstract preening rooster) and delicate, cunningly wrought figures, are the heart of the show; Agee gets better and better at her craft while retaining the trace of the slightly imperfect and handmade. The figures themselves are earthy, lively, both sardonic and goofily sweet, updated *commedia dell'arte* types. *Equine Gynecologist* (2009) depicts a vet, hand up a resistant horse's rump, conducting an examination. In *Tree Birth II* (2009), a ponytailed girl clutches a tree, legs astraddle, skirt hitched, the head of

an infant emerging, while beneath her a kneeling figure attempts to catch the baby. Rules and patterns, Agee seems to be saying, are made to be considered, then broken—which she does with infectious exuberance and wit.

—Lilly Wei

RICHMOND SALLY MANN

VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

"If you want to touch the invisible, penetrate the visible as deeply as you can." These words by the German Expressionist artist Max Beckmann could very well be those of contemporary photographer Sally Mann. They apply to much of her work over the past 30 years, which addresses corporeality, aging, memory and death, but perhaps most particularly to a series of self-portraits made between 2006 and 2007 that have not been shown until now. This series was the focus of the show "Sally Mann: The Flesh and the Spirit."

At the entrance of the show, which was organized by curator John B. Ravenal, hung a grid of 18 ambrotypes—collodion wet-plate negatives set against dark backing or rendered directly on black glass, as Mann has done, so that they appear as positives—each focused on a view of her face. The last gallery contained a grid of 75 self-portraits in the same medium. The seven galleries between these two installations featured selected works from nine series completed between 1978 and 2009. In these, she penetrates the visible through photographs of her three children, her husband, the Southern landscape,



View of Máximo González's exhibition, showing (left) *Decorative* and (right) *Aluminum*, both 2010; at the Hyde Park Art Center.

the historical landscape and decaying corpses in a forensic body farm—all speaking to the determined provincialism of her life in Virginia.

Having always remained peripheral in her work, she becomes the central subject in the recent self-portraits. These haunting and haunted images evidence an exploration of the self. Within the frames and through her shifting and fragmented glances, an interior life is revealed. Sometimes appearing psychologically distant, Mann is encountered as a mother, wife, artist, daughter of the South and, most of all, a fading body and soul.

Although the seven intermediate galleries featured a variety of photographic mediums, including Polaroids, Cibachrome prints and digital prints, the majority of the works were made using the same 19th-century method as the self-portraits. Characterized by intractable chemistry and an urgency of timing, collodion wet plates provide a fertile ground for the creative evolution of photographic imagery. The medium captures residues of its liquid interaction and is sensitive to the artist's gestures in the processes of exposure and developing, so that chance plays a key role in the pictorial effects of the images. Mann permits accidental droplets and streaks to remain on the plates, and the ensuing abstraction both transforms and, paradoxically, magnifies her subjects, offering new views and conceptions of the body and the self. Through the liquidness of the collodion process, her picture planes become rectangular petri dishes breeding enigmatic

cultures of the sensorial and the spiritual worlds. In her intuitive union of process and subject, Mann stirs together elements of chemistry, biology and metaphysics, producing curious images of persistent melancholy and ambiguity.

—Paul Ryan

CHICAGO MÁXIMO GONZÁLEZ HYDE PARK ART CENTER

Máximo González, an Argentinian who lives and works in Mexico City, is best known for intricate murals and collages created with paper money. Lately he has changed materials, if not his general focus. In 2010, González won the Premio Tequila Centenario at the Zona Maco art fair in Mexico City for *Warning Monument*, a large-scale installation incorporating dozens of shiny new red plastic household items. For the five works in "Material Poems," his exhibition at Hyde Park Art Center (where he was in residence during the summer of 2010), González combed flea markets around Chicago for domestic goods. Here we see him widening his often playful investigation into notions of value, with an emphasis on home economics.

In *Insomnia Victims' Favorite Wallpaper*, González drew on a found wallpaper-printing cylinder. Among the mainly damaged or broken-off parts of its raised metal design is one intact element: a cooking pot. In graphite, González added vessels, clock faces, burners and swirling steam, creating a kitchen scene in which one can imagine sleep potions or hot toddies being concocted.

The installation *Decorative* took its cue from a splotchy red and white enamelware cup that was hung high on the left-hand corner of a wall. From it tumbled glossy red and white strands of flowers, and silhouettes of words from peeled-off red vinyl lettering. Completing the ensemble were four framed abstract paintings on paper informed by the cup's suggestive patterns, in which the viewer can't help but seek hidden imagery.

There were also two videos. *We Recycle* is an animation projected onto the blade of a handsaw painted by a previous owner with a pastoral scene, including a barn. In the 30-second loop, a man emerges from the barn and saws down a tree, which pops back up the minute he returns to the barn. In the video *Straight Jacket*, screened on a monitor, González stands in an unfurnished high-rise apartment, furiously removing a series of white shirts. These have been buttoned together at the sleeves or collars, forming a continuous, chainlike cloth cocoon around his body.

Aluminum 1886 is a large installation of more than 100 vintage serving platters, trays and vessels that the artist borrowed from a local collector and arranged on the wall in a neat rectangle. According to the gallery statement, the objects were hung precariously so as to indicate the fluctuating nature of the value of aluminum. (The title references the year that an affordable process for extracting aluminum was patented.) That connection does not translate at all, but the piece was visually commanding.

—Ruth Lopez