

READER

Short Takes on Current Shows

All about prison, a collage of cats and babies, and a good 80s-inspired paint slinging

by Bert Stabler

Captive Audience

WHEN Tue–Sat through 2/24

WHERE Gallery 400, 400 S. Peoria

INFO 312-996-6114

MORE Gallery talk with Marc Fischer and artists Lucky Pierre Sat 1/27, 2PM. Public discussion Sat 2/3, 2PM.

Edra Soto: Familiar Portraits

WHEN Sat through 2/3

WHERE Polvo, 1458 W. 18th, 1R

INFO 773-344-1940

Peter Hoffman and Caleb Lyons: Hot Mess

WHEN Thu & Sat through 2/4

WHERE Green Lantern, 1511 N. Milwaukee, 2nd fl.

INFO 773-235-0936

MORE Musicians Jacob Christopher and Celia Whire improvise in response to the paintings Sat 2/3, 8PM, \$5 suggested donation

Captive Audience, an extraordinary exhibit about incarceration curated by Marc Fischer, approaches its compelling subject from many angles, using the gallery as a place to savor, examine, and blend experiences. You can try on prisoner clothing, restraints, and hoods, for example, as well as see the catalogs that sell these products to public and private institutions. You can even take home your own plastic-wrapped prison-issue toothbrush. And a clever board game—*Incarceration*, created by a group of British prisoners known as Risk-Takers Ltd.—allows you to explore daily life on lockdown a bit more deeply.

Straightforward pedagogy is part of the show, but the work quickly moves beyond that. Technically accomplished renderings in ballpoint pen and colored pencil by an inmate identified only as Angelo easily merit a solo exhibit; his vivid epic tableaux depict fantastical scenes of humiliation and torment. Some pieces are collaborations between prisoners and people on the “outside.” Chicago artist Mary Patten,

who corresponded with several prisoners, displays their letters, photos, and ephemera in the highly moving installation *Contraband*. In *Coming Home* the group Chicago County Fair—which works with prisoners at the supermax facility in Tamms, Illinois—created a photo display of fictional scenes of prisoners triumphantly returning home. Unincarcerated solo artist L.J. Reynolds offers one of the least didactic pieces: a video, *Space Ghost*, combining scenes of prisoners and astronauts that elicit startling insights into the two groups' parallel and opposed worlds.

The postcards and virtual notices for Edra Soto's installation at Polvo, *Familiar Portraits*, feature a manipulated photo of the artist lying beside her sleek black cat, Tito—who's blown up to the mammoth proportions of a full-grown tiger. But photo experiments barely appear in the piece itself, which was fine with me. Whimsical trompe l'oeil effects often seem like overdetermined attempts to undermine visual "reality," and Soto's closet-sized installation is far more snugly than your average epistemology seminar.

Tito's monstrous purr, delivered via a speaker with plenty of chest-vibrating low end, permeates the installation. But while the intimacy and the sound suggest the womb, the visual aspect evokes tasteful domesticity: the walls are brightly lit and decorated with clean photographs of Tito in an assortment of poses against white hexagonal bathroom tiles, which transform him into a near silhouette. The black-and-white color scheme is occasionally interrupted by colorful floral shapes: cutouts of snapshots, primarily of cute babies. Out of the way, above the door, are two postcards, one showing Christ surrounded by children and the other Saint Francis preaching to the animals. Homey interiority is perhaps culturally specific here, evoking the Catholic faith of Soto's Puerto Rican upbringing (her parents sang in a nationally televised church choir). The postcards offer a subtle but welcome counterpoint to the bouquets of rather homogeneous white babies on the walls.

I tend to feel a tad stumped by art that apparently has no grand aspirations—but that's not necessarily bad. *Familiar Portraits* resembles a MySpace page for a 30-ish American woman, and as such becomes an ephemeral yet tangible reflection of an era in which individuals' virtual scrapbooks and gestures of individual expression are globally distributed, living on as long as there's a server to host them.

Every generation of indie rockers pays homage in its own way to the Velvet Underground, and every generation of young painters tweaks the romantic gestural cacophony of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Jonathan Lasker, Georg Baselitz, and Judy Pfaff. Now—as various traveling retrospectives and art students' fashion choices attest—the 1980s are thoroughly upon us. Their impact is undeniable in *Hot Mess*, Peter Hoffman and Caleb Lyons's salon-style installation of festively frenzied collaborative paintings, which feature thick slabs and dabs of many colors jarringly combined in dense layers. But these two artists are even more devil-may-care than their paint-slinging forebears in their rendering of faces and architecture, and far more untidy in their geometric elements and color choices.

This isn't a recipe for success, but Hoffman and Lyons get impressive results. Warm and cool tones, bright and dull hues, areas of high and low contrast, smeared transitions and sharp edges, opacity and transparency, lines, patterns, shapes, textures—in every piece these components balance one another in a delicate makeshift orchestration teetering on the brink of collapse. Some individual paintings are more attractive than others. But the volume and energy of the installation overall should impress any lover of bravura painting. Even if you're not one, you can find all kinds of things to see—just squint and turn your head the right way.