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Ester Partegàs
*Less world (torn advertising
magazine pages)*
2010
Christopher Grimes Gallery



Installation view of *Ester Partegàs' "More World"* at Foxy Production



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TRANSCENDENT TRASH by Ben Davis

Ester Partegàs, "More World," Oct. 21-Nov. 27, 2010, at Foxy Production, 623 West 27th Street, New York, N.Y. 10001

Here's a theory about why there is so much trash in visual art today: Contemporary art is marginal with relationship to technical advance in visual culture as a whole. Consequently, art obsesses over cast off stuff, because it itself is kind of cast off from the mainstream. Art is the odd little brother of visual culture, sifting through the hand-me-downs from film, design, etc., carving out its own identity by exploring the weird spaces that its more popular relations scorn. Which brings me to the work of Ester Partegàs, currently showing at Foxy Production.

For years now, Partegàs (b. 1972) has been exploring a kind of brainy, garbage-picking esthetic, from works that take black-and-white photos of crowds on New York streets, blotting out faces so that the brands of the bags people are carrying are foregrounded, to large photos that are literally close-ups of loaded trash bags, highlighting the abstract patterns in their folded surfaces. Partegàs recently told *Flash Art* that her influences are Salvador Dalí -- she is Catalan, after all, like the Surrealist goofball, though she works in Brooklyn -- and Andy Warhol. In some ways, these might seem like odd parents for her: Partegàs doesn't have anything like Dalí's cackling lunatic side; her work is actually quite decorous. But she goes in for psychically charged juxtapositions. She also does not share Warhol's equanimity towards popular culture -- her works are spun from bits and pieces of cultural flotsam, but they generally project an air of intellectual distress.

Partegàs' current Foxy Productions exhibition, "More World," serves as a kind of counterpart to "Less World," a show that opened last month at L.A.'s Christopher Grimes, Sept. 11-Oct. 30, 2010. "Less World" features, among other things, colorful abstract collages made from torn bits of magazine ads, ripped so that only scraps featuring fields of color are incorporated. The central references of the original ads are missing; all you get are layered pieces of the slick backgrounds. The viewer is left to fish for some type of esthetic communion with leftovers.



Ester Partegàs
Organized Fries
 2010
 Foxy Production



Ester Partegàs
Ghost [still]
 2010
 Foxy Production



Ester Partegàs
Overcast
 2010
 Foxy Production

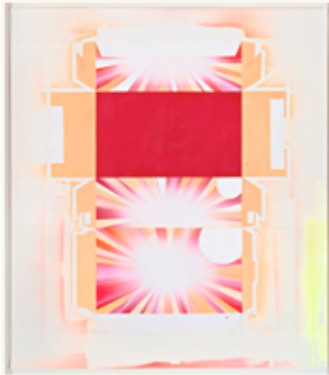


Ester Partegàs
You Are Here
 2010
 Foxy Production

"More World," for its part, serves up a disparate mix of artworks in this same inscrutable vein. A series of life-size, painted polyurethane sculptures of potted plants come off like diseased, mournful spins on Roxy Paire, their leaves rendered different toxic colors, their tops hooded with garbage bags as if they are about to be chopped down. One wall features a large photo of a forest which, upon closer inspection, actually displays a series of visual glitches, indicating that it is a picture not of an actual forest, but of some kind of tree-themed backdrop (in fact it is a vinyl barrier placed around a construction site, meant to give one of the more unsightly aspects of urban space a green veneer). Nearby, two large photo collage compositions center on the image of dozens of greasy french fries laid next to one another, highlighting their regular but varying shapes, a found form of "eccentric abstraction" fished from the bottom of the deep fryer.

Symbolizing the slow-burning urban alienation that is the underlying theme here, the installation is tied together by a photographic wallpaper of a black-and-white chain-link fence, an exhibition design idea lifted from Urs Fischer. Meanwhile, in a back room, a short film clip focuses on the reflection of a desolate Brooklyn neighborhood in a puddle. A Pringles chip container languishes in the scum. A bird passes. An animated billboard for the iPod shimmers in the water.

"My work is about the fluctuations, negotiations, and contingencies the contemporary subject deals with in his/her struggle for constructing and consuming the representation of him/herself in this late-Capitalist, urban economy," Partegàs explains. She has a tendency to pitch her practice, a bit too-seriously, as an "exercise in resistance." Yet calling such works meaningful "resistance" to the "late-Capitalist, urban economy" is like saying that a painting of a storm cloud is an act of resistance against bad weather. Her artworks successfully evoke a particular state of alienation and disorientation; but they do not propose to do anything to change this environment, besides living in its cracks.



Ester Partegàs
Studies in Mysticism (Red Square)
2010
Foxy Production



Ester Partegàs
Studies in Mysticism (Blue Stellar)
2010
Foxy Production



Ester Partegàs at her show "More World," at Foxy Production

So the key point to emphasize, for me at least, is that Partegàs' works are affirmative and not negative. Her gestures are less valuable as critique than as attempts to find some kind of tortured contemporary sense of beauty for art, neither pop-cultural nor classical. This is the real meaning of her affection for Warhol and Dali: Warhol represents an "artist whose visual language matched the times he lived in," and points to the need to engage with junk culture rather than retreat from it; the less trendy reference to Salvador Dali, she says, reflects his ability to infuse "magic and poetry into the most banal of objects." It points to the redemptive side of Partegàs' art, searching for the moments of brooding energy amid the waste, and flushing it to the surface. "For me," she says, "producing work" is rescuing real life."

Of course, redeeming fleeting moments of quotidian beauty is itself not the most radical of ideas (remember the plastic bag from *American Beauty*?) -- the success of this program all depends on the visual ideas that back it up. In "More World," the most convincing works are Partegàs' airbrush paintings, titled "Studies on Mysticism," whose compositions invoke flattened-out gum and candy packages, minus the actual brand names and product information. All that is left are some abstract patterns -- starbursts, action lines, wheeling comets -- cosmic symbols quietly liberated from their status as background. They are like Ed Ruscha in a particularly contemplative mood.

In the end, there is something ghostly about this kind of esthetic (the video in the Foxy show, in fact, is called *Ghost*). The whole project is about being engaged with the world but not of it; how to respond to the realities of present culture, without being identical to it. To quote Oscar Wilde, by way of Fatboy Slim, it's art that finds itself inhabiting a space halfway between the gutter and the stars.

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