

**whitehot | July 2013: RAY OF DARKNESS: Old Black**  
organized by Todd von Ammon @ TEAM Gallery



*Robert Janitz Collateral Damage I, 2013 oil and wax on linen 77 x 60 inches, courtesy TEAM Gallery, New York*

## *Old Black*

Organized by Todd von Ammon

[Team Gallery](#)

by Daniel Sherer

*Old Black*, an exhibition organized by Todd von Ammon at Team Gallery, stands out among the shows currently on view in the city for a number of reasons. A manifest unity of theme, attained

despite a wide diversity of artistic practices, is one of them. In the press release Von Ammon describes the underlying theme of the show in language that is as charged and provocative as any of the works on display: “*Old Black* is an ensemble of works by artists whose shared tactic is the abuse, distortion and misuse of standardized methods of making. The collaborative strategy ... is to evoke a mood that ricochets between an abject melancholy and a jagged tension as commonly reflected in filmic visions of dystopia. *Old Black* could be viewed as a display of artwork culled out of a used-up and burned out occidental landscape—a future we’ve already seen and bonded with through the pessimistic but curious lenses of film and literature.” This show, therefore, can be read as an invitation to recognize a set of broadly defined artistic ambitions that connect with, even as they redirect, unruly energies traversing contemporary culture on multiple levels. Carving out a space for these ambitions and energies, it also points beyond them. Another way to say this is that the show reads as a cross-section of practices within contemporary art that push their expressive capacities to

the limit, capturing a dark, desperate mood without falling into the facile subjectivism that such an enterprise might initially seem to suggest.

Von Ammon's strategy of curatorial display is deft, foregrounding a play of adjacencies and juxtapositions that foster conversations between disparate yet for that reason all the more resonant sets of objects. At issue is a potent challenge to the modernist trope of medium specificity emphasizing hybrid conditions that efface, undermine or consistently distort their material determinants and technical properties. The most evident aspect of this strategy is the use of site-specific practices to initiate a complex negotiation with the claims of the autonomous artwork put forth by canonized forms of pictorial and sculptural abstraction.

The theme of site specificity puts on a strong showing in two works by Harold Ancart and Banks Violette, *Untitled and Not Yet Titled*, which read as a pair despite, or precisely because of their diverse mediums and antithetical modes of occupying space. Striking up an intense dialogue between sculptural and pictorial ideals, these works address the potentially ruinous and/or disastrous character of a significant tendency within contemporary art: the active manipulation of the ambient gallery space. Ancart's mural is 15 feet high, floating above the gallery like some kind of menacing, blackened horizon about to unleash an impending storm. At once dispersive, aleatory and inspired, this work features frankly applied charcoal on two walls of the gallery and covers two closed white doors with soot running down their surfaces in wispy or clotted streaks. Whatever else one might say about Ancart's disconcerting vision, certainly gravity is its close accomplice. Like many of the most imaginative contemporary artists Ancart situates his project at the tenuous border between the visible and the invisible.



Banks Violette, *Not Yet Titled*, 2011 powder coated steel 62 x 288 x 66 inches

Violette's freestanding sculpture, a piece of racetrack guardrail turned at an acute angle that suggests the explosive impact of a flaming racecar, establishes an effective spatial counterpoint with Ancart's mural, which is flat except for a slight undulation in the wall located above the door it covers. Barely perceptible contradictions pervade Violette's intervention, whose reading is inevitably inflected by its injured physicality and material torque. As a result, what initially seems to be yet another instance of the seemingly inexhaustible machismo that dominates many sectors of the art world ends up revealing numerous subtleties and an unexpected delicacy. It achieves this dialectical reversal through the detailed simulation of a found object that tells the story, in twisted metal and corrugated surfaces, of a violent change of state. Such minutiae as the lack of rivets in the floor at those points where the guardrail would normally be attached to the groundplane stand out against the ironic horizon of this subtlety: such a tactically deployed absence detaches the impression of artifice given by the work as a whole from any reductively mimetic reading, even if the master narrative of the installation is the invocation of a past disaster whose traces are evident for all to see. In this respect one can discern deeper commonalities with themes of crash and burn which have been a staple of some of the more visible areas of the artistic imaginary over the past four decades, and whose inaugural gesture was in all likelihood the *Saturday Night Disaster* series of Andy Warhol. Violette's piece evokes and negates this model by refusing to show the crash except as a crime scene, a forensic site of absence not objectively, but abjectly reconfigured.

Adjacent to Violette's installation is Jack Pierson's *WHERE ARE THOU*, a piece that shows once again that he is a photographer capable of profound modulations. In this work Pierson evokes volatile forms and sensual possibilities hitherto undreamt of in the photographic image. The agitated movement of seawater sharply illuminates the foreground waves, which seem to respond to the slightly buckled surface of the image, while in the background the horizon shimmers with kaleidoscopic effects of blue, silver and green. The image is folded three times, a fact that is not immediately evident from the contrast of foreground and background but which comes into focus once the eye perceives the dimly articulated vertical creases dividing the upper zone of the image in an equal rhythm. This device enhances the object-like presence of the piece, lending it a sculptural quality that spatializes this highly self-conscious photograph which already reads as a painting given the dense tonal layering and large, canvas-like format.

Equally suggestive in its aesthetic claims and modalities of execution is Robert Janitz's *Collateral Damage I*. This brooding abstract expressionist investigation of light and color actualizes previously unexplored potentials of its pictorial medium, oil paint tempered by the addition of wax. A self-taught artist whose knowledge of the tradition in which he moves is evident in every stroke, Janitz paints with broad industrial brushes used by house painters to achieve visual effects that move effortlessly beyond the technical range of his somewhat banal instrumentality. Translucent, smoke-like forms move through the canvas, suggesting a depth of field that, together with a vertical movement as unexpected as the intensity of the curvilinear waves that fill it, become all the more lucid due to their carefully choreographed step away from the edge of the picture. The idea that a work of great sophistication constitutes another kind of labor comparable to house painting paradoxically informs the refinement of this essay in abstract dynamism, which reads as an extrapolation from inquiries by seminal figures like Richter and the abstract expressionists of the 1950's and early '60s. Janitz captures the essence of their experiments while pursuing their premises in a radically new direction.



*Donald Moffett, Lot 122611 (the extended hole, black), 2011-12 oil on linen with wood panel support with cast iron flanges, black common pipe, hardware 17 x 17 x 15 inches*

Just as the Ancart and the Violette pieces form some sort of conversant pair, so to do the Janitz and the Mariah Robertson. Robertson's 16 presents a clear-cut case of chromophilia: her practice eschews traditional techniques of chromatic articulation in favor of a frenzy of color that spreads in all directions. Exploring the dense visual textures that can be obtained by varying the temperatures at

which a photosensitive sheet of paper is exposed, Robertson excavates latent potentials of the photographic process, displacing them towards new artistic ends. Deftly adapting photographic techniques for her own abstract purposes, her work foregrounds a dispersive chromatic excess, leading to an entropic yet somehow composed idea of visibility. In this work a riot of blues, reds, oranges and greens dissolve into each other, forming jagged patterns and charred edges reminiscent of the burnt film stock of Stan Brakhage and structuralist cinema more generally. Robertson's sensitivity extends not only to materials and techniques but also to a total restructuring of the visual field evoking an open intersection between painting, film, photography, and sculpture.

Donald Moffett's *intervention, Lot 12661 (the extended hole, black)* occupies an interstitial space between painting and sculpture comparable to Robertson's marriage of pictorial format and displaced photographic technique. At the same time, both on the perceptual and the emotive levels, it offers a darker vision than hers. The part that is visible from the front view of his tripartite assemblage—a central hole, evoking the inviting yet vicious mouth of some unknown urchin-like creature—is surrounded by half-inch long obsidian-colored impasto filaments. These only add to the urchin-like quality of the intervention (or, alternatively, to its evocation of some kind of tar-tamper or perhaps even a rotatory floor waxer). Behind the extruded circular element there is a piece of square canvas stretched over a wood frame (identifying that area as a painting). This, in turn, is supported by the third element, a squat cone of gunmetal riveted powerfully into the wall. The entire assemblage is a sandwich of painting, sculpture, and modified industrial design, at once overtly mechanistic and disturbingly organic. Due to its deliberate mixing of materials, forms, and codes, the work has the effect of making the viewer squirm, calling to mind the recoil that occurs when touching one's foot on something prickly yet also slimy in shallow ocean water—preferably not the beautiful/sublime marine environment so ably represented by Jack Pierson, yet undeniably close to it.

A more straightforward yet equally vigorous attempt to combine techniques and codes informs the work of the Belgian artist Edith Dekyndt. Her sculptural object, *Palladium and Blue Blanket NY*, consists of an altered felt blanket that hangs from the wall by a single screw so that it barely touches



*Edith Dekyndt Untitled, Palladium & Blue Blanket NY, 2013 blanket with finest palladium leaf 71 x 87 inches 180 x 220 cm*

the gallery floor. If one side of the object is covered with silver leaf, sounding an unexpected note of visual richness, the other side is plain, presenting us with the dirty blanket in its abject rawness. This strategy makes the work read as a figure for the complementary aspects of the modernist project which, in one way or another, has always hinged on the abrupt transformation of detritus into value. The title underscores this pointed dualism, which is simultaneously material and temporal/historical, insofar as the Palladium was an image of the Virgin carried into battle by medieval Byzantines and Russians to assure the victory over heathen enemies. Part sacred image fallen from grace, part tacky blanket snatched from the bedroom of some flea-bitten motel, Dekyndt's work is a singular hybrid whose use of silver leaf detaches the found object from its origin. Although the overall form in its occupation of a space between wall, ceiling and floor asks to be read as an abstract spatial intervention, it also evokes specific precedents such as Eva Hesse's rubber hanging sculptures. Dekyndt problematizes her echo of Hesse by adhering largely to the surface of the wall, in contrast to Hesse's more comprehensive expansion of the object in space through a distinctly dispersive and tentacular logic.

In this respect, this key work within the ensemble of *Old Black* lights up the dark underside of our present cultural obsession with covering over the actual shape of things with a false image of reconciliation. In this complex sense of an ever-recurring disparity between the subjective impulses objectified in art and the hidden motives of an increasingly appearance-driven culture, *Old Black* manages to do something that many recent shows have failed to accomplish: to specify a common ethos among disparate works from the same cultural moment, expressive of deeper currents running just beneath the surface of the visible. In this way the show suggests a shift away from Rosalind Krauss' nearly exhausted trope of the "expanded field" to a newly emerging paradigm which might be called "the imploded field" whose contours one can envisage as those of a jagged crater.



*Harold Ancart Untitled, 2013 charcoal powder dimensions variable unique*

In *Inner Experience*, one of Georges Bataille's most insightful texts, the author quotes the Neoplatonist Dionysius the Areopagite who at some point in the sixth century A. D. plumbed the depths of the "experience interieure" by displacing the ray of light, then a commonplace of Christian discourse, with a decidedly more heterodox alternative, the "ray of darkness" that overtakes the

mystic in a spontaneous vision. One can perhaps compare the cumulative effect of the works on display in *Old Black* with the hypothetical and unsettling impact of this ray, which makes distance and proximity collude in what Jacques Lacan has called "extimacy": the intimate feel of that which comes from a great distance. It is precisely this dialectical reversal, harnessing the powers of the negative with the aim of overcoming the traditional divisions of near and far, interiority and exteriority, medium specificity and aesthetic synthesis, that lovers of contemporary art would do well to search out more often. *Old Black* will help them do that, freeing latent possibilities that have been filed away without much critical reflection under the category of the "uncanny", a term which, though suggestive, and endowed with an impeccable Romantic and psychoanalytic pedigree, ultimately fails to do justice to the depth and complexity of the phenomenon in question.



*Jack Pierson WHERE ARE THOU, 2009 folded pigment print 62 x 83 inches edition 3/3*



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