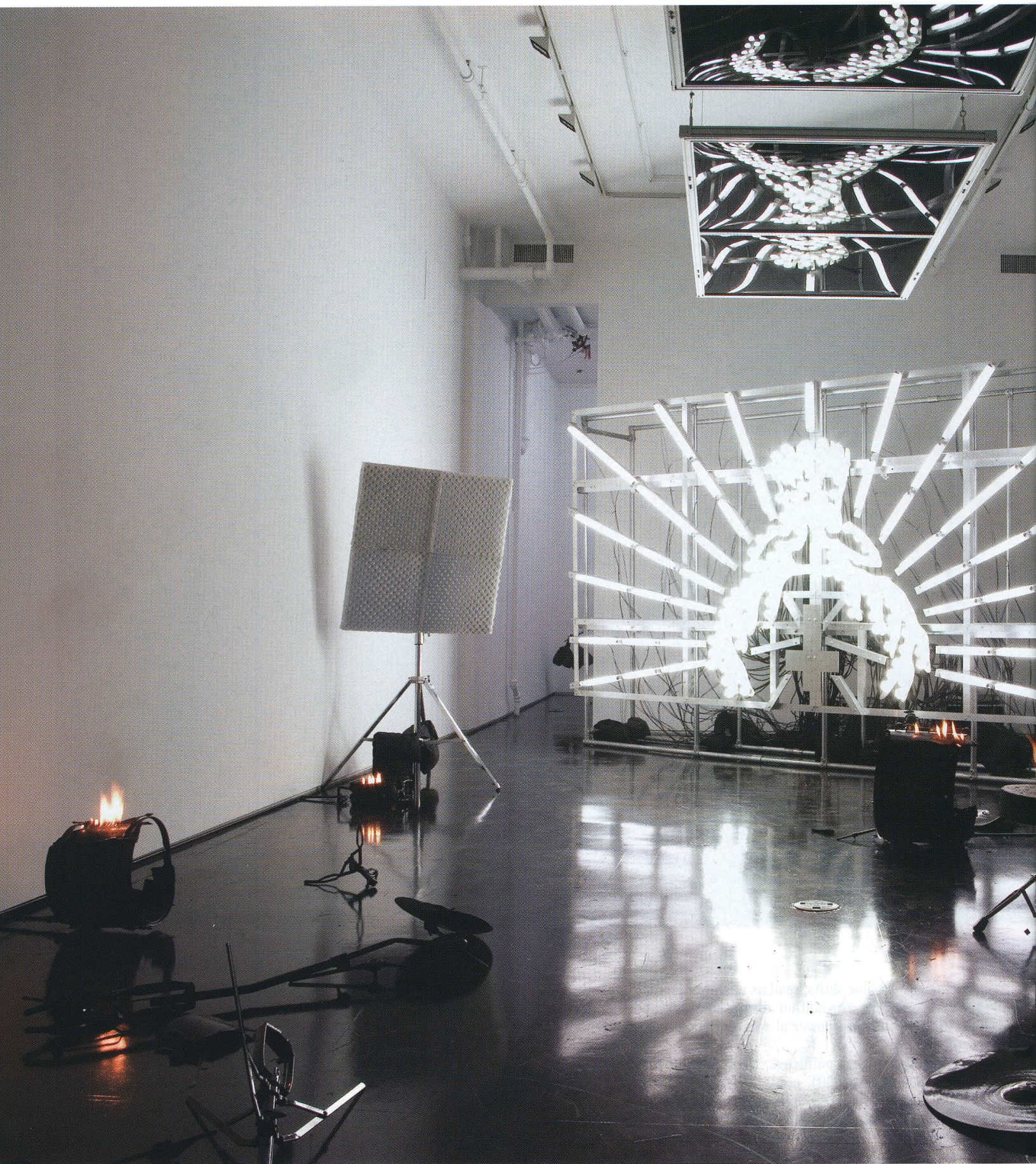


Art in America



View of Banks Violette's exhibition at Team Gallery, New York, 2007. All photos this article David Regen, courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York, and Team.

Rock Out

Heavy metal met minimalist form in Banks Violette's recent exhibitions at two New York galleries. Fire, ice and noise gave the installations a chaotic edge.

BY LAUREN ROSS

Despite his inclusion in many high-profile museum shows, Banks Violette had not had a solo gallery exhibition in New York for five years, and this twofold return, at Gladstone and Team, was undeniably ambitious. Violette paradoxically attempted a hot, aggressive assault tempered with cool, formal reserve, working tensions between order and disorder, purity and corruption, stillness and noise. His new work is perhaps best summarized as Minimalism filtered through the lens of rock and roll.

There was much gossip (mostly online) about the two shows being unfinished on opening night. I mention this not to belabor an understandable delay, but because the shows, even when finished, were imbued with a sense of incompleteness—despite the fact that Violette has been using a similar vocabulary for some time. All pieces shared the same title and date: *Not yet titled* (2007), not only indicating their newness, but also suggesting that the artist himself had not had time to digest their existence.

The floors of both galleries were covered in a black vinyl skin, literally and figuratively setting the stage for performance. References to the recording studio and the stage abounded in musical instruments, acoustic tiles, speakers, amps, sound boards and roadies' carrying cases. A sound component playing at Gladstone was previously recorded at Team by the artist collaborating with musicians from the drone metal band Sunn O))),).

Violette filled Gladstone's sprawling space with several large sculptures. The main gallery was dominated by a construction of black-painted wooden beams meeting at right angles to form a variation on open cubes. Overhead, shiny panels of black Plexiglas framed in aluminum hung like a miniature version of a dropped ceiling. Attached to these panels were fluorescent tubes, arranged in a neat configuration of right angles. One end of the sculpture indicated what the entire piece would have been like if kept intact, but its geometric order was deliberately disrupted, leaving most of the elements collapsed onto the floor. The entire construction suggested a marriage of Flavin and LeWitt, subjected to Smithson's entropic forces. At the rear of the same gallery towered a gridded wall of mirrored glass panels that were partially shattered. Glass shards had fallen to the ground. Visible behind the wall were large tanks feeding liquid nitrogen, a refrigerant, onto the mirrors through tubing, causing patches of frost and condensation to collect on the front of the glass. Large speakers positioned in three corners of the room transmitted the aforementioned recording, better described as "sound" than "music": a rumbling bass, so loud and deep that it palpably vibrated through the body. The noise seemed like it could have caused the collapse of one sculpture, the shattering of the other. Remarkably effective, it elicited a high degree of physical and psychological discomfort.

In another gallery, fog reminiscent of the special effects used in rock



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concerts and horror movies hugged the floor—a result of another refrigeration tank hooked up behind a large wall of aluminum panels. Elsewhere an 18-foot-long array of acoustic tiles cast in salt hung on a wall. In the front room, salt casts of the components of exploded speakers were strewn about under a dropped ceiling, the fragmented and deliberately crumbling forms continuing the theme of deterioration.

At Team, the show was dominated by a 16-foot-wide sculpture featuring fluorescent tubes and bulbs that formed an oversize, inverted logo—a stag's head and a glowing cross—of heavy-metal rockers' favorite 70-proof herbal brew, Jägermeister. On the floor sat a disassembled drum kit painted black. Copper piping ran between the parts of the kit. Hooked up to hidden tanks of propane, the piping was outfitted with numerous valves that could be opened or closed. During the first week of the show, the piece was periodically lit to produce open flames, transforming the drum fragments into torches. Exclusive to Team were Violette's noteworthy graphite drawings, which whisper with a velvety softness, no matter how hardcore their subjects may be. The four presented here boasted stereotypical rock-and-roll images, including a rose, skulls (one of which was on an SS ring) and an upside-down American flag.

Independent of the recorded sound component, both venues pulsated with noises—the hum of refrigeration units and box fans, and the loud clack of timers turning apparatuses on and off. In anti-Minimalist fashion, Violette allowed the untidy foundations of his labors to show; he revealed the skeletal framework of his metal constructions as well as the sandbags used to weigh them down. Unlike Flavin, Violette exposes the wiring of his fluorescent lights; everywhere cords spilled out from the sculptures to their power sources like giant tangles of entrails. Despite themes of violence and destruction, the two shows were imbued with life. Violette's use of organic materials (salt), his elicitation of the elements (ice, fire) and altered states of consciousness (booze-fueled intoxication)—all enlivened his dehumanized forms.

Furthermore, the sense of things falling apart hinted at life's finiteness and vulnerability, which helped mitigate inconsistencies that otherwise would be difficult to read as anything other than technical problems. For example, it is not clear why the propane flames at Team burned only sporadically during one week. Similarly, at Gladstone, speakers positioned throughout the space promised an all-encompassing environment of sound, but during both my extended visits, the audio was limited to a single gallery.

As with Minimalism—a radical movement at its inception whose edge of resistance has been dulled over time—rock and roll has always positioned itself as a mode of rebellion. But genres like heavy metal bring to mind commercially packaged and sold hedonism, especially when associated with consumer products such as Jägermeister. It seems that Violette wanted to strike a blow against our current state of war and imperialism with his inverted flags and crumbling monoliths, but the thrust of his fight was blunted by the rock-star company it kept. □

Banks Violette's New York exhibitions appeared at Gladstone Gallery [July 6-Aug. 17] and Team Gallery [June 28-Aug. 17].

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Above, detail of salt casts.

Right, installation view at Gladstone Gallery.



