

ARTFORUM

From Counterculture to Cyberculture

by Gwen Allen
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“From Counterculture to Cyberculture” took its title from Fred Turner’s influential 2006 book, which demonstrated the unexpected symbiosis between the Bay Area counterculture of the 1960s and the computer industry that emerged in nearby Silicon Valley over the same decade. Guest-curated by David Lewis and including nine artists represented by both his New York gallery and Altman Siegel, the exhibition engaged with the overlapping legacies of alternative DIY culture and digital utopianism. Coming on the heels of “Hippie Modernism: The Struggle for Utopia,” a major survey of 1960s and ’70s art and design organized by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (for which Turner’s book also served as a conceptual touchstone), this show explored the ways in which the dreams and delusions of this earlier moment continue to inform our digital culture today.

Despite its focus on technology, the show presented works that were surprisingly material- and process-driven. Several had a homespun quality that indirectly evoked ideals of collectivity, collaboration, and quasi-spiritual communalism. Lucy Dodd’s large abstract canvas *Beyond Blind (1981 1/2)*, 2013, stained with organic pigments (including black lichen, yerba maté, dog urine, and sumac and leaf extracts) that read like ingredients for a magic potion, gave an impression at once earthy and ethereal. *Beyond Blind* was paired with another work by Dodd: *Lady Long Gone*, 2016, a tattered chair woven with colorful rags that trailed off behind it. Installed nearby, Dawn Kasper’s *UH yes, UH no*, 2017—titled after the transcript of a famous interview with Andy Warhol—consisted of incense and vintage noisemakers resting on a snare drum, and a speaker that softly played a recording of a 2014 performance in which these props were used. A related painting created during that same performance hung in an adjacent gallery, emblazoned with the words *uh yes uh no*. By appropriating Warhol’s blank refusal of artistic presence, Kasper underscores its performative dimension while effectively complicating contemporary notions of artistic subjectivity and authenticity.

In a different vein, Israel Lund’s Jules Olitski-esque canvas (*Untitled*, 2017)—a magenta field dappled with yellow highlights—engaged with new media through a reprisal of modernist medium specificity: Lund’s hazy acrylic compositions marry a silk-screening process with digital images filtered through a smartphone applica-

tion. Even the most distinctly sci-fi work on view—Alex Mackin Dolan’s wooden slot machine displaying computer-generated images of a grim dystopian future (*Untitled*, 2017)—was handcrafted and old-fashioned looking, like a well-made German children’s toy.

Some of the work was bleakly fatalistic, such as Sean Paul’s stylized paintings of a doomsday clock counting down to nuclear war (*Doomsday Watch, 1974, 2017*) and an atomic mushroom cloud (*Dawn, 0.053 SEC.*, 2017) and two 2012 gelatin silver prints from Trevor Paglen’s project of that year *The Last Pictures*. On the flip side, Jared Madere’s *To be titled (Matter Harmonic Topiary)*, 2017—a glyph-like sculptural installation consisting of dried flowers, broken glass, wood, and glitter, all strewn across the floor as if in some shamanistic ritual—seemed to revel in the detritus of cultural and environmental entropy. These dueling ideological poles were thrown into relief by Bruce Conner’s large jacquard tapestry *Christ Casting Out the Legion of Devils*, 2003. Based on a small collage the artist made in 1987, Christ stages a battle between humans and machines that culminates in the exorcism of technology’s evils, even as the tapestry’s very medium complicates any strict opposition between the mechanized and the handcrafted.

“From Counterculture to Cyberculture” brought these contradictory attitudes and ideas into play without trying to neatly resolve them. At times, the curator seemed to have almost cast the net too wide, accommodating works that did not immediately or obviously fit the premise; and yet this breadth resulted in some of the show’s most interesting moments. This was the case with K.r.m. Mooney’s sculpture, *Joan Green, Bimetal IV*, 2017, titled after the pseudonym used by a male psychiatrist to impersonate a disabled woman in a chat room in 1982 in an incident famously described by media and transgender studies theorist Allucquère Rosanne Stone. The work comprises readymade industrial materials, including a fluorescent tube, a steel conduit, and an electrical splicing ribbon, which are complemented by near-imperceptible, finely crafted details—such as a delicate bloom of lavender cast in silver—that quietly destabilize the viewer’s assumptions and certainty about what is produced by nature, what is produced by technology, and how the two fit together.

—Gwen Allen



View of “From Counterculture to Cyberculture,” 2017. Clockwise from top right: Bruce Conner, *Christ Casting Out the Legion of Devils*, 2003; Lucy Dodd, *Lady Long Gone*, 2016; Dawn Kasper, *UH yes, UH no*, 2017; Jared Madere, *To be titled (Matter Harmonic Topiary)*, 2017.