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New York Galleries: Chris Burden, Bill Woodrow and James Mullen

Meyer Raphael Rubinstein

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[See table of contents](#)

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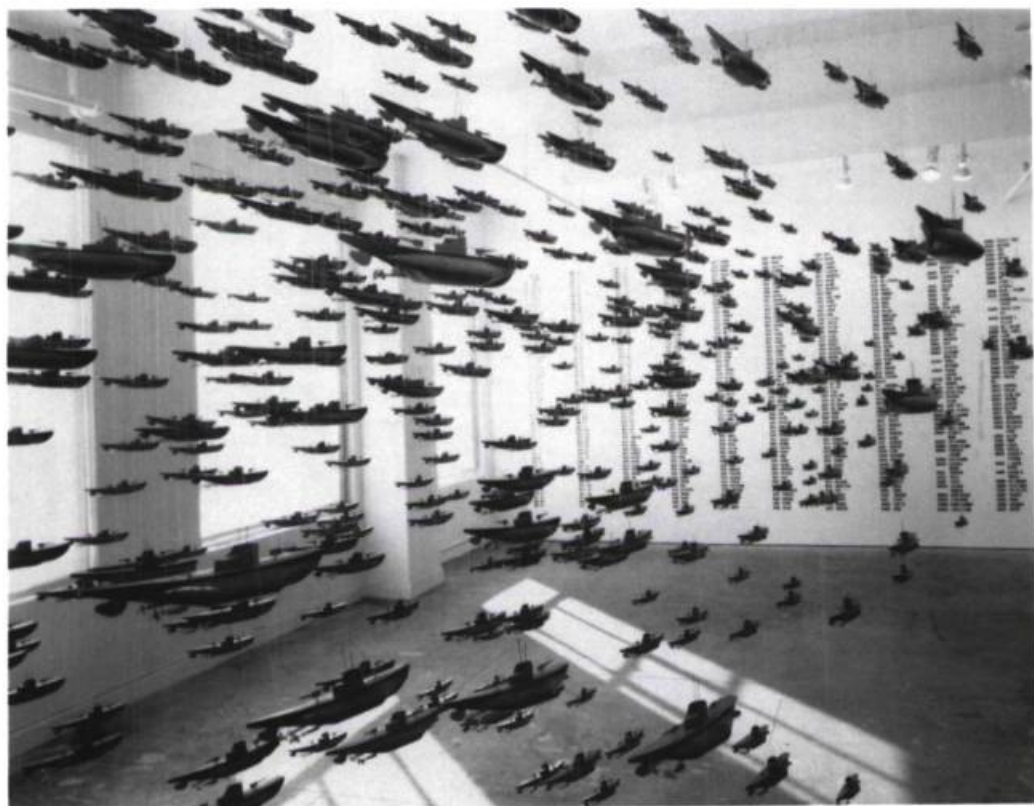
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ACTUALITÉ / EXPOSITIONS

New York Galleries: Chris Burden, Bill Woodrow and James Mullen



57

Chris Burden, *All the Submarines of the United States of America*. 625 cardboard and styrofoam submarines; overall, approx. 12 x 18 feet. Installation View: Christine Burgin Gallery, New York, 1987.

Chris Burden at Christine Burgin Gallery, New York — Just as for some people Marcel Duchamp will always be remembered as the man who displayed a urinal, Rauschenberg as the artist who erased a De Kooning, Joseph Beuys as the crazy German who had himself caged with a live coyote, so will Chris Burden be remembered as the artist who shot himself.

These actions, which probably seemed like good ideas at the time, were sensationalistic and unrepeatable, and when the sound and fury died down, the artist had to find a way to go on. Over the last decade Chris Burden has moved away from the performance art that first made his name and concentrated solely on installations. The latest of these, recently displayed at the Christine Burgin Gallery in New York, carried the unwieldy, matter-of-fact title *All the Submarines of the United States of America*. This was no hyperbol — Burden's piece presented exactly what it claimed, every submarine ever launched by the United States, all 625 of them. To make the piece, Burden built an eight inch model of a submarine out of cardboard and styro-

foam and then had 625 replicas made. These were then hung from the ceiling on string, suspended at different heights, all pointing in the same direction. While they were hung too closely together to allow the viewer to walk among them, one could move around this miniature fleet, following the vessels' shift from profile to head on and back to profile. The effect was a little like being inside an aquarium. One was also reminded of exhibits at institutes of science and technology, the kind of thing that's always popular with kids. But while the installation was delightful on this level, Burden also had a more serious aim.

In addition to the models, Burden had printed on the walls of the gallery the name and number of each submarine in the order of its launching, beginning with the SS1 Holland from 1897, up the SSN755 Miami from 1986. While the names of the submarines have a certain poetry about them — many are named after fish, the Cuttlefish, the Shad, the Bluegill — there are darker shadows present. Burden has assembled a catalogue with statistics about each vessel, many of which were sunk during WWII. The phrase "all 59 men lost"



Bill Woodrow, *Empty Grate*, 1987. Wood, aluminium duct, enamel and acrylic; 81 x 86 x 80 in.
 Courtesy: Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York. Photo: Ivan Dalla Tana

becomes a kind of litany. Burden also notes if the submarine is nuclear powered and one effect of the piece is to make us more aware of the missile-laden vessels constantly moving around under the ocean and the polar ice-caps, ready at a moment's notice to unleash their destructive missiles. Burden addressed this subject in his 1981 piece, *Reasons for the Neutron Bomb* in which he used coins and matchsticks to represent the 50,000 Russian tanks which the neutron bomb was supposed to protect us against. Although its subject and means were unorthodox, *All the Submarines of the United States of America* accomplished one of the chief tasks of art, to make the unseen visible, and it did so with a mixture of fascination and fearfulness that was just as memorable, and a good deal more interesting, than Burden's earlier gunplay.

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Bill Woodrow at Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York — The 39 year old English sculptor, Bill Woodrow, recently had his second one person show in New York at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery. Following his usual method, the pieces in the show were made from debris found on the streets of New York. Like the German sculptor, Rienhard Mucha, who makes his museum pieces out of the spare furniture and fixtures he finds lying around the museum, Woodrow's is an efficient, ecologically sound art of recycled material. Where he departs from Mucha, and from the tradition of readymades, is in the transformations he performs on his materials.

Woodrow's favored material is galvanized duct, a tough yet pliable metal which allows him to cut, bend

and twist it into other forms. In *Empty Grate* he has fashioned a large commode out of duct, painting its surface in a crude imitation of wood. From the back of this piece of false furniture he has cut out three pieces of duct and made them into a knife, fork and spoon. One end of the fork is still attached to the commode while one of its tines is inserted into a hole in a shabby, old fashioned fireplace moulding. The spoon, filled with metal flames, perches on the mantel of the fireplace, while the knife handle leans against it as the knife blade cuts into a clock, also made from duct. Woodrow has been cutting up metal and forming it into models of everyday objects for some years, proving that in the right hands anything can become anything. Other pieces in his recent show contained plucked chickens; an apple; a shoe; a piece of steak; a bicycle frame denuded of wheels, seat, gears and handle-bars; all made out of cut metal. This last object shows how unpredictable Woodrow's method can be. Everywhere on the streets of New York one sees such bicycle frames locked to street signs and parking meters, their valuable parts stripped by thieves. Rather than take one of these forlorn skeletons during his street-combing, Woodrow has chosen to make his own. He even makes the chain. On the other hand, he sometimes uses found objects, rather than reconstructing them: an old wooden handtruck, a barrel. He gives his imagination a free reign, twisting this way and that as the mood takes him in order to assemble a bizarre, looking-glass version of the real world. The originality and obsessiveness of Woodrow's work can make it seem, on one level, closer to naive art than to the "art world", but his socio-political agenda that bursts through in some pieces with surprising anger indicate that it is dissatisfaction with the status quo, rather than isolation from it,



James Mullen, *Manufacture*, 1987. Oil on canvas; 64 x 64 in.
 Courtesy: Sorkin Gallery, New York.

which gives his work its strangeness. The silverware in *Empty Grate* seems to have been exhorted by the artist to grow large and defiant, to turn against its environment, to rebel against its function. As with his other work, Woodrow's material pictorialism is here a kind of manifesto against some tendency of bourgeois society he clearly abhors. Perhaps what is most uncanny about Woodrow's uncanny œuvre is his ability to turn nasty without losing his sense of humor.

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James Mullen at Sorkin Gallery, New York — James Mullen is one of a number of painters (Willy Hecks and Melissa Meyer are others) who are currently attempting to reestablish connections with the energy and vision of Abstract Expressionism. Unlike other recent recuperations and appropriations of modernist precedents (I am thinking here of artists like Philip Taaffe and Peter Halley), Mullen and the others I have mentioned are not approaching the past with a cautious, bet-hedging irony. Their project is not to invent end-game variations or make philosophical statements through painting — they only want to make paintings. Negotiating the narrow passage between pastiche and parody, they have led their painting into an area that is not so well-charted as one would have imagined. Far from being a period style condemned to the living death of the museum, Abstract Expressionism proves to be a source of vitality in their hands.

Unlike his epic predecessors, Mullen's paintings are easel-sized; and are composed vertically rather than horizontally. Within these reduced dimensions Mullen packs a great deal of painting. Dense to the

point of claustrophobia, it is as if the artist has concentrated the matter of a six by eight foot de Kooning into a 64 inch square canvas. The forms press in upon each other, squeezing and puncturing, bending and stretching, to achieve a kind of tortured angularity that is reminiscent of El Greco's figures and "rumpled sheet" backgrounds. Though all his paintings share this turbulent density, they may be separated into two distinct types: monochromatic and polychromatic. The black and white monochromatic paintings, of which there were two in his recent show at Sorkin Gallery, tend to have more figurative illusions, while the polychrome paintings are suggestive of landscapes. In general the black and white works are more successful, but in one recent painting entitled *Manufacture*, Mullen seems to be combining his two modes, producing a painting of icy blues and whites that strives for the atmospheric poetry of his polychrome work and the jagged directness of his monochrome paintings.

Mullen is a resourceful painter with a diverse vocabulary at his discretion. He can employ faceting like the Cubists or Futurists, a sfumato that harkens back to Renaissance painting; a gritty, searching drawing that reminds one of Pollock's mid-1940's work, and he can achieve a sense of texture without resorting to impasto. Although mannerist by virtue of his Grecoesque forms and his reliance on the art of a preceding period, Mullen is clearly making the kinds of paintings he wants to make and his work may possibly be pointing towards the future of painting as much as towards its past, a future in which, by force of discipline and passion, painting will regain its autonomy from the suffocating embrace of endless one-upmanship.

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