

Mount Miami: American Artists in Tel Aviv

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The exhibition *Mount Miami* was inspired by a fantastic and daring idea to create a snow mountain in one of the flattest places in the world. Grandiose in both imagination and scale, the project (proposed in 1998 by a group of New York-based developers) boldly envisioned a snow-skiing resort enclosed in a gigantic glass dome on a small island in the bay between Miami Beach and downtown Miami. Estimated at \$300 million, the proposed project was eventually rejected by the City of Miami Commission, but the extraordinary spectacle of a controlled micro-Alpean climate in the subtropical heat of South Florida became a source of inspiration and a key metaphor for the current exhibition.

The selection of works featured in *Mount Miami* represents a trend, a conceptual path which young artists have been recently pursuing in western art centers, especially in digital high-tech America: A hopeless yearning for “nature” and the “natural”, and the manifestations of a reality oscillating with alarming dreaminess between the real and the imaginary. *Mount Miami* is a metaphor for postmodern America; an allegory of the far-fetched fusion of reality, fantasy, simulation and fakeness; an emblem of late 20th century hubris. At the same time, it is a song of praise to the freedom of imagination and the wonders of simulation technology making the inconceivable conceivable -- such as creating a snowy mountain on a tropical island.

As the gateway through which the mass of Latin immigrants, refugees and tourists enter America, Miami has become the official showcase of *Americana* (more than Hollywood, more than Las Vegas), offering the much desired American dream. Palm trees on golden ocean beaches, vivid flowering hibiscus, above-ground mangrove roots, and pastel Art Deco colors – all form the glorious facade, the stage set of perfect happiness, a simulation of earthly paradise. Miami’s accelerated development over the past two decades has endowed it with the image of a futuristic city overflowing with architectural styles of all times and all places. It is a paragon of postmodernity; a city which appropriates everything at hand; a city where the imitation is more real than the original.

Miami is also considered a successful model of multi-culturalism: a subtropical garden city, more Latin than American, that attracts the poor and needy from the Caribbean, gays from New York, refugees from Cuba, and businessmen from Latin America, as well as hundreds of thousands of tourists from all over the world. Varied, heterogeneous and multi-faceted, the art produced in Miami today is born of this multi-cultural mix. The thirteen artists selected for *Mount Miami* represent diverse cultural backgrounds (United States, Columbia, Chile, Cuba, and Peru). Most

reside in Miami, although some have moved from Florida to live in New York and Connecticut. Their works reflect the qualities and issues tackled by young artists throughout the world, spanning a wide range of artistic media: video, photography, drawing, sculpture, installation, and text.

Unlike more seasoned American artists, such as Bruce Nauman, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Cindy Sherman, whose approach to the technological and simulative dimension of mass culture is mixed with a considerable measure of militant social critique, the younger generation of artists, like those participating in *Mount Miami*, dares express the yearning for the real in a more personal tone. Their work, although it is permeated with irony and self-ridicule, nevertheless reveals a great deal of exposure and an awareness to the substitutes' groundlessness.

Eugenie Vargas' video piece *After "Mount Miami"*, 2000, is a key work in the current show. The promotional film of the original Mount Miami development project presents a stylized simulation of the ski resort, a gigantic tourist complex under two massive glass domes. Vargas left the film untouched. The design, simulation and text seem to do all the work for her. Mount Miami is marketed in terms of authenticity ("scientifically manufactured 100% natural snow"), magic ("indoor winter wonderland in Miami"), fantasy ("fusing reality and fantasy"), and ultimate political correctness ("ecologically sensitive"). The project brings to mind another programmed recreational reality actualized elsewhere in the world: the indoor artificial tropical beach in Japan known from Mariko Mori's work.

John Espinosa, too, is interested in the simulacra culture. For him, Disneyland is not only an allegory, but also a natural setting, an actual reality. As someone who grew up in Orlando and experienced the tourist pilgrimage as a daily event, he employs this biographical detail as a source of inspiration. In the series *Blue Bambi* – nine Duraflex photographs featuring a tiny sweet bluish Bambi figurine against a background of mundane commodities and close-ups of contemporary artworks by celebrated artists – Espinosa merges popular culture with high elitist culture. The wanderings of the blue bambi in the realms of a fictitious art world echo Baudriallard's mirage of America as an ephemeral country of screens and masks. In the series *BPM [beats per minute]* – 54 framed video stills citing climactic moments (explosions) from Hollywood movies – Baudriallard's vision becomes a nightmare wrapped in cellophane. The highly photogenic cinematic catastrophes bring to mind the fascinating association made by French scholar Paul Virilio in his book *War and Cinema* between advanced weaponry (spy satellites and cameras) and cinematographic technologies. Espinosa, however, presents the called-for Hollywoodean reverse: no longer cinematic techniques in the service of the battlefield, but rather battle simulations and smoke screens in the service of cinematographic special effects.

Luis Gispert's video piece *Nothing* (inspired by Samuel Beckett) likewise addresses American cinema, from the marketing perspective. Three trailers for an illusive action movie that has never been made were planted in Blockbuster videos in Miami and Chicago. Thus Gispert responded to marketing manipulations and commercialization while deconstructing the cinematic narrative to a

postmodern rashomon of sorts. **William Cordova** is also interested in marketing cinematic mythology and is likewise fascinated by the blurring of boundaries between real fiction and far-fetched fiction. He features a staged series of 35 postcard-size photographs under the title *El Papito* (1999), where he himself stars next to glamour girls in scenes which look like citations from gangster movies ('*El Papito*' in Spanish slang means "hunk", the smug, indifferent rogue type in telenovelas). The photographs, imitating visual stereotypes of Latin melodrama and mob movies, look like still photographs from a dark mobster movie that has never been made.

A satirical, militancy-free tone is also discernible in **Elizabeth Withstandley's** photographic works. In one work, a blood-stained man's shirt is set against the inscription "he forgot their anniversary for the last time". In another, a woman's bleeding palm is stretched out on the floor under the inscription: "he was sick of having shake and bake for dinner." These are two scenes from her series of staged photographs *Candy Coated* (1999), reminiscent of David Lynch's early movies about violent suburban America. As in crime novels or popular TV series, the viewer is exposed to incriminating evidence about violence that has taken place only moments earlier. Withstandley touches upon America's two greatest obsessions: food and television. She cynically employs preposterous male and female stereotypes prevalent in the vocabulary of American media, ridiculing absurd situations of violence in the family.

Joanne Rosen presents a different aspect of family abuse. Her *Dream House* series focuses on the lies and deception underlying the perfect facade of the bourgeois American dream. The series consists of digital prints of architectural blueprints, of photographs of luxurious villas, combined with advertising real-estate texts. Excerpts from psychological literature were inserted into this marketing rhetorics, thus subverting the representative tone. Rosen points to the soft belly of American suburban culture. Bubbling under the perfect architectural cover, and sizzling behind the entrepreneurs' fantasy, are dysfunctional relationships, violence, perversions, and sexual abuse. As in the movies *American Beauty* and *Ice Storm*, the anomaly, deviation, and perversion are well disguised and only gradually revealed.

Another group of works in *Mount Miami* reflects the obsessive preoccupation with the body, the indulgence with the principle of play and entertainment, and the desire to recount a personal, autobiographical, or even moving, story. A hot dog protruding from a roll, a tower of bowling balls a la Brancusi against the backdrop of formica kitchen cabinets, and a table lamp on a stainless steel bowl turned upside down on a Persian rug – this is **Frank Benson's** photographic syntax. A collection of mundane objects in odd, amusing and unexpected combinations, Benson's works are made-up stories, toying with absurd juxtapositions of fake and real, actual and simulated, illusive and concrete. **Annie Wharton** combines "female" images and kitchen-related materials with Miami Beach clichés: "light" non-committed style and eye-pleasing pastel coloration. Her works in the current show – digitally enlarged prints of female genitalia, drawings of circles/holes, and the series of *Kitchenette* paintings (1999) based on imprints of kitchenware (potato mashers and cookie cutters) on vinyl – reflect the extraordinary hybridization formed by the gravity of the

feminist discourse and the easygoing narcissistic atmosphere, aesthetics and appearance of Miami Beach.

Nina Ferre's works deviate from the simulative-narrative nature of *Mount Miami*. Ferre has developed a kind of fragile, intimate and minimalist language based on graph-like sketches, seemingly demonstrating patterned interrelations between varying forces. An orbit of red circles encounters an orbit of black circles, intersecting, drawing away, touching, and breaking apart, as in an illusive choreography of attraction and rejection. Having yielded all the narrative features – text, time, and place – all that is left is the dynamic interaction between forces, the repeated pattern, like a polygraph output. **Emilio Perez'** monochromatic drawings similarly disobey any linear regularity. They look like comics that have been mixed in a blender: a jumble of ground and deconstructed comics images, which for a split second flicker out of the chaos, and the next moment disappear and dissolve into abstraction. Viewing them is reminiscent of the associative way we find familiar shapes and forms in clouds. In *Mount Miami*, Perez exhibits a drawing in blue and white whose images seem to have been horizontally stretched, like in the distortions of a carnival house mirror.

Robert Melee presents four short films from the series *Home Movies* (1996-1998), alongside several still photographs extracted from these movies. Starring in all of them is his alcoholic mother performing ostensibly casual actions, such as going up to the roof to sunbathe, dancing at a party, or eating popcorn. However, her appearance is diametrically opposed to every convention synonymous with the notion of “mother.” Her seductive appearance is bizarre and eccentric. Heavily made-up, in garters and feathers, she is modeling her aging grotesque body for her son. Staged up to the most minute detail, the movies seem more like a documentation of a campy performance or a parodic spectacle than of a standard domestic reality. At times, Melee himself takes part in the tragicomic situations which poignantly expose his relationship with his mother.

For several years now, **Janice Sloane** has been photographing the nude body of a man who repeatedly models his skin for her as in a private show – stretching, pinching, pulling, pressing, clenching, squeezing, tightening, and folding, until it seems as though the skin has a life of its own, like an independent redundant organ. Sloane documents the elastic capacities of the model against the backdrop of heavy fabrics, set up in a manner which brings to mind Renaissance and Baroque paintings on one hand, and clinical presentation modes of bizarre freaks on the other. Registering the action sequentially helps evoke the sense of situations in motion, verging on circus performance, like acrobatics of the skin.

Naomi Fisher's photographs contain the ultimate manifestation of the hopeless desire for a tangible relationship with “nature” and the “natural”. Documenting bizarre activities within a wild landscape, her Cibachrome and C-print photographs acknowledge the impossibility of such a merger, though some solace may be found in pretending that this possibility nevertheless exist. Wearing fashionable underwear, she crawls and rolls in the mangrove jungles of South Florida, in

a desperate attempt to merge, like an animal, with her surroundings. The postures of her limbs are like those of the tree trunks; roots and branches curl and wrap around her body, and flowers cover her pure white buttocks. The striking beauty of the photographs alludes to Japanese aesthetics (flower arrangements) and to Kurosawa's films, as it addresses the affinities between beauty and violence, pleasure and torture. The representation of the artist's androgynous (hairy legs) and erotic body in a fantasy of masturbation in *Paradise* proposes a new way, ironic, fantastic and radical, for contemplating the cliché woman-nature: no longer woman as a synonym to nature: she **is** nature.