

ArtInfo, Sam Gaskin, Review: "Downtown" at James Cohan Gallery, Shanghai, March 13.2012

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Review: "Downtown" at James Cohan Gallery, Shanghai

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Courtesy the artists and James Cohan Gallery

David Brooks, "Imbruglios (a phylogenetic tree, from Homo Sapiens to Megalops Atlanticus)", 2012; and Joshua Abelow, "Dumb and Easy", 2007-08

by Sam Gaskin

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Erica Baum, "The Naked Eye", 2008-2012 "Dumb and Easy", a mosaic of 63 brightly coloured paintings by Joshua Abelow, takes up most of the wall in the larger exhibition room. Its check pattern is composed of the titular phrase and a cartoon self-portrait that, in this gallery, resembles an art deco architectural element. Abelow says the face's nose is meant to look phallic: "My intent is to suggest that the male heroic painter is a self-absorbed masturbator. These paintings are self-celebratory and self-critical at the same time." They're also Hirst-critical, one suspects.

SHANGHAI — In the late '60s and early '70s, Manhattan below 14th Street was broke, run down, and dangerous, but it also offered opportunities for artists. Today, the area's edge is mostly gone, but not the energy, with several strong galleries setting up on the Lower East Side since the early 2000s. It's from these galleries that Jessica Lin Cox and William Pym, who work at James Cohan's Chelsea gallery, drew the artists on view in "Downtown".

Eight artists exhibit work in the charming villa, situated in the Former French Concession — a part of Shanghai that's also seen rents rise and artists leave in the past decade.



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The extent to which intellect and difficulty are in and of themselves aesthetically satisfying is moot, but the David Brooks installation in front of Abelow's paintings certainly isn't playing dumb. "Imbroglios (a phylogenetic tree, from Homo Sapiens to Megalops Atlanticus)" shows fish speeding and thrashing their way up an evolutionary tree, aptly obscuring the simplifications we make in the service of science. Further muddying the waters between species, the fish are made of fiberglass and gelcoat, materials also used in fishing boats.

Erica Baum's "The Naked Eye" is also attentive to material, although in her case the objects aren't made but found. Baum shoots photos of people she says are "trapped in the strange landscape that I create through my view of the spread open book." Her macro shots of partially open pages exalt paper — the pulp that looks like chipboard, the occasional dark worms of fiber, and pages warped like TV flashback wobbles — and the diagonal lines and Lichtensteinian dots of printing processes.

Caught between pages, Baum's shots suggest movie stills, frames stolen from the temporal flow, emphasizing the book's almost oxymoronic status as a static narrative medium.

"Downtown" is itself a partly flipped page, a species mid-mutation, or, as the curators describe it, "a snapshot" of art in the Lower East Side, which they concede would look very different a year from now, with much artistic endeavor heading across the East River to Brooklyn. Nonetheless, it's a great show — another snapshot next year would be most welcome.

"Downtown" continues at James Cohan Gallery through May 5.

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Visual Arts, James Cohan Gallery

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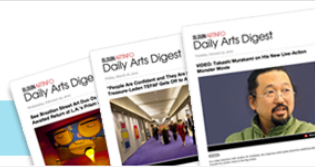
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