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Reviews

Peter Fischli and David Weiss

★★★★★

Matthew Marks Galleries,
through Jan 16 (see Chelsea)

The veteran duo shows no sign of running out of steam. By **Michael Wilson**

Most artists would struggle to convincingly occupy just one of Matthew Marks's trio of Chelsea galleries—two of which are among the neighborhood's most capacious—but Peter Fischli and David Weiss currently fill all three. And so lightly worn is the Swiss duo's ambition, that they seem to do so without breaking a sweat.

Still best known for their compulsive 1987 film, *Der Lauf der Dinge* (*The Way Things Go*), in which the camera tracks a Rube Goldbergian contraption built from studio and industrial detritus, the longtime collaborators (who have worked together since 1979) here present a mix of new and older work that demonstrates their extraordinary range and wry wit. A multipart show at 523 W 24th Street complements a rangy installation at 522 W 22nd Street and a cheeky sign-off next door at 526.

The first of these, "Clay and Rubber," collects 26 small- to medium-size sculptures dating from 1986 to the present. Each made from one or the other of the titular materials, these objects sit on white pedestals scattered through the room in what is, given the prosaic nature of the things on which they're modeled, a strikingly elegant constellation. The works in

clay are unglazed and retain both the beige coloration of their raw material and the marks of their makers' hands. Their more numerous—and in most cases older—rubber counterparts are in basic black; visible seams reveal them as casts. While the clay works—an array of pipes, tubes, bricks and corners, plus a thick-walled jug and one clownishly oversized shoe—look semiabstract for the most part, the rubber pieces reproduce an inventory of everyday things both natural (two gnarled tree roots) and manufactured (a drawer).

If it sounds simple, well, it is. Sort of. In "Clay and Rubber," Fischli and Weiss seem to aim at little more than the aesthetics of the commonplace, but exploit their well-worn theme with style. They emphasize the formal qualities of their chosen mediums but do so without resorting either to heavy-handed craft or to the illusionism of their familiar trompe

Fischli and Weiss take an effortless glee in the oddities of culture.

l'oeil polyurethane carvings of tools and construction debris. And they select subjects that take a similarly effortless glee in the pervasive oddities of culture. Of the works in rubber, *Square Stool* (1987) makes a cube-shaped leather seat feel strangely forbidding, while *Little Wall* (1987) turns what might have been the



Long Tube

genuine stone article—looking more like a fiberglass garden-center accessory—into a curious hunk of rough-hewn abstraction. *Short Tube* and the adjacent *Long Tube* (both 2009) are the most effective works in clay. Likely conceived as an ensemble with *Plumbing Part* (2009), they also reduce monolithic land art (if a comparison to Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* from 1976 isn't too much of a stretch) to friendlier size.

On W 22nd Street, *Sun, Moon and Stars* also exploits an unexpected shift in scale. A top 38 long, glass-topped tables, the artists have laid out same-size photographs of 800 full-page advertisements selected from a collection of magazines. Derived from a commission for a corporate annual report, the installation presents its contents as a curated sequence arranged around visual and conceptual correspondences (Fia Backström did something similar with the October 2006 issue of *Artforum*). Strolling up and down the long aisles created by the artists' custom furniture, visitors move from a grouping of pastel-tinted skin-care promotions to the sleeker imagery and richer tones used to flog perfume. There might be a grand narrative

here: The first few tables hint at a life journey from romance to marriage to family. But if so, it's rapidly subsumed by the ads' rigid coding and dogged perpetuation of stereotypes. If you're unaware of the visual language used to sell gym equipment, or assume that advertising had evolved beyond the obvious, you're in for a revelatory, if disheartening, experience.

Finally, in the small space next door, *Sleeping Puppets* reprises Rat and Bear, anthropomorphic animal stand-ins for the artists that appeared previously in their films *The Least Resistance* (1981) and *The Right Way* (1983). The two slightly grubby-looking vintage plush figures are seen here reclining on a pile of blankets: Rat with feet crossed and hands joined over his well-stuffed stomach, Bear in a similarly casual, legs-apart position. While the films in which the pair starred satirized the art world, their current appearance might suggest a mellowing of attitude in the years since. Or perhaps the furry chums have simply relaxed into their roles. Either way, on the evidence of their makers' continued vitality, the one thing the work doesn't signal is exhaustion. ■

