

Stillman, Nick, *Jonathan Pylypchuk*, *ArtForum*, November 2007, pp. 366-367 (ill.)

## Jonathan Pylypchuk

FRIEDRICH PETZEL GALLERY

Jonathan Pylypchuk's fourth solo exhibition at Friedrich Petzel Gallery was arguably his most far-reaching to date. Pylypchuk's previous gallery outings have concentrated on diminutive, puppetlike characters fabricated from old clothes, bits of wood, and other items ticketed for the junk pile. And while these remained prominent at Petzel, the Canadian artist and former Royal Art Lodge member here provided his creatures with a gallery-spanning habitat of rickety wood. Once free-floating entities, Pylypchuk's characters thereby became actors in a quasi-narrative diorama.

But despite its expansion in scale, Pylypchuk's shabby, scatological work remains intentionally scrappy; ultimately, the addition of an architectural element only added to this effect. Protruding nails pointed this way and that, and slats of splintered wood could have been hammered just as precisely blindfolded—Pylypchuk is doggedly antigrandiose, resolutely non-precious. Materials for the installation were scavenged in Detroit (although there's nothing particularly Detroit-specific about them), where a different version was originally installed in the Museum of Contemporary Art. They were a typically Pylypchukian haul of throwaways: asymmetrical and threadbare castoffs, mutilated shards of wood, Budweiser cans. The scene felt a little like the minimalist soundstage set of Lars von Trier's 2003 film *Dogville*, although the Danish director's allegory takes place in Colorado, whereas Pylypchuk's ramshackle housing stock and bawdy characters seem modeled on poverty-stricken towns in the rural American South. Shutters were fastened arbitrarily to structures that threatened to disintegrate with a gentle nudge.

Fantastic human-animal hybrids were prominent in Pylypchuk's cartoonish Hooverville—there were panda-people, elephant-people, and bird-people. Their revelry in body fluids located them squarely among the lowest of the low. They pissed dried glue, fished in murky, drool-like puddles, and hunched forward sadly. The entire installation, titled *Press a weight through life, and I will watch this crush you*, 2007, was simply plopped down on the floor, exuding pathos. On the rough side of town, a gang toting miniature Bud cans congregated with mute reverence around a scattering of empties. A balding blond sock-for-head with bugged-out eyes and skinny wooden legs guarded his dwelling with a haughty arm propped aloft by the door frame, gray fluid oozing from his matchstick-thin phallus. The southern edge of Pylypchuk's dystopia seemed slightly more family-oriented: two adult protectors charmingly guarded tiny youths, although a nearby yokel pissing an elegant arc against the facade of a house polluted the idyllic scene.

There seem to be two tactics at play in Pylypchuk's brand of slapstick craft art: scavenging, and the reliance on squalid iconography. To be sure, scavenging and what happens to fall under the latter designation are both products of poverty. The worn nonutility of Pylypchuk's secondhand materials seems to demonstrate that his fondness for them is motivated by their bathos. The act of claiming and finding use for the unwanted and already consumed detritus of American culture (Pylypchuk currently works in Los Angeles) is an inherently politicized act, one that critiques a culture of waste and refuses the artist-as-virtuoso stereotype. Yet Pylypchuk's work eludes designation as "critical," largely because of its flippant humor. It is as if the artist is reluctant to truly activate his found materials by imbuing them with specific signification. When it works, then, it's good mainly for a chuckle.

—Nick Stillman



Jonathan Pylypchuk,  
*Press a weight through  
life, and I will watch  
this crush you*,  
2007, mixed media,  
dimensions variable.