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ROBERTA SMITH Art Review of "Circumventing the City"

In These Shows, the Material Is the Message



Works by, from left, Sarah Braman, Nicole Cherubini, David Brooks, and Jedediah Caesar

Chelsea's summer group shows are both test sites for new ideas and polling stations for aesthetic trends. They indicate what might be seen elsewhere in the near future — in the next Whitney Biennial, for example. A few summers ago there was an outbreak of '60s psychedelia, rainbow colors and all-around craftsiness, lots of sewing and knitting and rather twee art. Then followed a summer or so of heavy-metal boys in black.

This summer several group shows seem to say "back to basics," starting with titles like "Stubborn Materials," "Substance & Surface," "Laying Bricks" and "The Lath Picture Show." Perhaps a younger generation of artists is adding its own spin to the long-running romance with the Post-Minimalist styles of the late '60s and early '70s. The shift away from language and images and toward fairly raw materials is hardly new, just more pronounced.

D'Amelio Terras

The battle between illusion and reality becomes pitched even within single artworks in "Circumventing the City," a show of 10 artists at D'Amelio Terras. Here you never lose sight of process or materials, or the tricks they can play. Erika Vogt's scrappy yet elegantly attenuated collage "Up Your Wall Forever No. 4 (Orange)" is an instance of Kurt Schwitters writ large and Minimal. Valerie Hegarty's "Cracked Wall" is both real and patently fake, a ragged, stage-set-like fissure made of paper.

Jacob Robichaux builds abstract paintings from string or bits of wood painted red. Ian Pedigo (also at Peter Blum) is here with a free-standing piece. Sarah Braman works more expansively in a similar mode with found furniture, a sheet of Plexiglas and a dazzling dose of blue spray paint.

In "Graphite/Dolman," David Brooks piles chunks of opulent unrefined graphite into a precarious sculpture, making a wall drawing in the process. A large paper drawing by the talented Sterling Ruby counters with more black, spray-painted and inscribed with crystalline lines and collage elements that suggest suspended scepters or votive objects.

Nicole Cherubini echoes the mood of off-key grandeur with a large, elaborately crude jar set on stilts that greedily combines different clays and glazes. Yuri Masnyj's piled coffee table, fashioned from wood, plaster, wax and paper, refines the fake-real duality of Ms. Hegarty's crack in the wall and is the show's most carefully made piece.

The least is Jedediah Caesar's "Untitled (grey container)," a block of cast resin and trash, both organic and inorganic. Sleek as marble and wildly marbled, it is tacky and refined at the same time, like a fossil from now or a four-cornered version of a poured urethane piece by Lynda Benglis. It includes the stained and crummy cardboard box in which it was cast, and from which it was cut like ice from a frozen river.

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

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"CIRCUMVENTING THE CITY"

Favoring materials like Plexiglas, lumber, and drywall, the artists here take architecture as their premise and formalism as their challenge. The results are mixed. Jedediah Caesar's enigmatic trio of objects—including a battered, paint-spattered box housing a sooty chunk of resin—commands attention, as do David Brooks's pile of graphite rocks and Valerie Hegarty's trompe-l'oeil sculpture of a crack in the wall (a fourteen-foot-long fissure made of paint, paper, and glue). Constructivist-flavored works by Sarah Braman, Yuri Masnyj, and Ian Pedigo, while witty, appear almost interchangeable. Through Aug. 10. (D'Amelio Terras, 525 W. 22nd St. 212-352-9460.)