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GALLERIES

## Artists Point the Way Toward a New Queer Aesthetic (NSFW)

by Alicia Eler on October 1, 2012 2

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Elijah Burgher, "Enclosure for undisclosed ritual action" (2012), acrylic on canvas drop cloths (click to enlarge) (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

CHICAGO — I'd cruise slick Chicago boy bodies at the infamous bathhouse Steamworks if I were a cisboy, or at least marginally passable as an effeminate dude. Suffice it to say that my gender isn't welcome amidst the mist of those showers. My desire for dick instead led me to *The Great Refusal: Taking on New Queer Aesthetics* at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's Sullivan Galleries. Curated by SAIC faculty member *Oli Rodriguez* in collaboration with SAIC undergraduates and recent alumni, the exhibition spans nearly four white-cube gallery spaces and encompasses work by more than 50 artists.

*The Great Refusal* focuses mostly on an academically minded queer aesthetic. It successfully accomplishes what it sets out to do — investigate how queerness intersects with race, gender, class, and sexuality, and consider how these intersections could form a new queer aesthetic. What the exhibition sidesteps,

however, are the warm fuzzies — community, love, utopic futures, and semblances of spiritualized queerness. In refusing to accept current readings of queerness, the show accomplishes much, but unfortunately the softer themes of acceptance are mostly lost amid the overwhelming supply of concept-heavy, theory-based works of art.

The exhibition is broken up into four tightly woven yet highly interchangeable sections: Progressive Rituals, Misuse & Dislocation, Restraint & Indulgence, and Bad Values. (Full disclosure: I wrote the *essay for Progressive Rituals* but had no part in the planning or execution of the show.) It's modeled after the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago's recent exhibition *This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s*, which was divided into sections titled The End is Near, Democracy, Gender Trouble, and Desire & Longing. By arranging the show in this paralleled way, Rodriguez bridges the conversation between '80s pre-AIDS crisis culture and the present day's queerness-in-transformation dialogue.



Hannah Rodriguez, "Made Men" series (2012), collage



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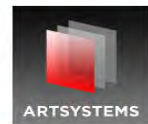
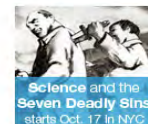
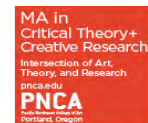
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The 20 Most Powerless People in the Art World: 2012 Edition

Perhaps to fill in the 1990s gap and to perform new queer readings of art history, Rodriguez chose quite a few pieces by Veteran Chicago artist and Northwestern University professor Jeanne Dunning. Her capital "F" feminist work about the abject body became well known in the mid-to-late 1990s; at that time, it wasn't labeled "queer." Consider her 1997 piece "Puddle," a photograph of a hand twisted into the shape of a hole and covered with an ambiguous, gooey substance, in conversation with the various openings utilized by queer sexual practices. This piece is easily queered.

Also on view is established Chicago artist Doug Ischar's "Untitled #22" (1984), a now-vintage photograph of two men making out at Chicago's once infamous cruising spot Belmont Harbor. Ischar waited until 2009 — far beyond the mid-1990s identity politics — to bring out this work and the series it's part of, *Marginal Waters*. In this context it becomes decidedly queer rather than just another in a series of gay photos pre-AIDS crisis. How many of these men in these photos are dead? How many survived the AIDS epidemic? How many lost lovers? We will never know. To look at the pictures in 2012, knowing all of the history that took place after they were shot, makes them feel queered by context. As the adage goes, timing is everything.



David Nasca, "Unlimited Intimacy" (2012), black and metallic silver cowhides, shredded high density foam (click to enlarge)

The majority of work in the show cock-and-cunt teases at what a new queer aesthetic could look like, but four of the works point to what that new queer aesthetic is — something less concerned with body politics and obvious questions about sexuality and instead leaning into ambiguous territory. Mary Coble's "The Sound of Fighting Cocks" (2012) asks viewers to first accept the pun (ha!) and then sit on one of two wooden benches, put on headphones, and listen to a soundtrack combination of slapping and yelling. Who is slapping whom? Are these cocks imagined or real, ghostly or embodied? Does it matter? Similarly, Elijah Burger's "Enclosure for undisclosed ritual action" (2012) is a four-sided "room" created by hanging sheets covered in magical queer symbology that is a language in and of itself. What happens here is up to those who step inside.

David Nasca's "Unlimited Intimacy" (2012) is a 100-pound, black-and-silver, life-sized teddy bear that leans tactically against a gallery wall. Created from three cowhides, this ominous yet cuddly cutie references both leather and bear communities. It welcomes viewers to fist its mouth with their hands and experience a queer form of penetration. Aiden Simon's sculptural performance "My Little Pony" (2012) features his partner, Pony, dressed up as the object of every little girl's fantasy — kind of. Kneeling nude on hands and knees, Pony is covered in tattoos — the old-fashioned key on their arm is particularly striking — and a pink tail dangles from a butt plug in Pony's ass. Pony propels themselves into a rocking motion. Simon is there if they need a push. The performance ceases when Pony grows tired of rocking.

These four works of art pose difficult questions: What does queer magic look like? How does a new queer aesthetics intersect with possible animal sexuality? How do childhood toys create gendered relationships with our lovers and our preferred sexual acts?



Aiden Simon, "My Little Pony" (2012), wood, human body

The queer community is all about being reflexive and reflective about its constant need for evolution, transformation, superhuman success, and epic failure. Glitter is always available. *The Great Refusal* plays an important role in molding a new queer aesthetic, and it's unreasonable to demand perfection from the exhibition. Besides, that would defeat the purpose of the ever-shifting definition of "queer." Rodriguez and crew do a solid job of starting the conversation around what a new queer aesthetic can and eventually will be. Because for now, it is still becoming.

*The Great Refusal: Taking on New Queer Aesthetics* is on view at the School of Art Institute of Chicago's Sullivan Galleries (33 South State Street, 7th floor) through November 10.



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