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Peter’s Farm

GREENWICH, CONNECTICUT 05.17.17




Left: Artist Matt McCauley with curator Sadie Laska. Right: Lizzi Bougatsos with Tony Cox. (All photos: Trinie Dalton.)

FARM ANIMALS NEED A VACATION SOMETIMES, especially when they’re trapped inside the Orwellian nightmare of American politics. That was the pun Sadie Laska turned to while assembling this massive thirty-four-person exhibition, titled after an Amazon ad for George Orwell’s 1945 novel that kept popping up in Laska’s feed when the book hit the best-seller list after the 2016 presidential election. That’s so Big Brother.

“Peter Brant invited me to propose an idea the day after I attended the Women’s March,” the artist told me. Suddenly, the dystopian reference offered a perfect satire to contrast with the Brant Foundation’s gorgeous, pastoral, equine-friendly location. Designed for installation on a farm, the exhibition was by animals, for animals: a community of artists, primarily Brooklyn-based painters, sculptors, and musicians (who performed in a giant lawn tent), burning off steam.

I first felt the tension melting en route, via country roads peppered with mossy stone walls in a sprouting oak forest, but upon arrival the easygoing day pact was sealed, particularly outside where children and dogs running across the sprawling lawn reanimated Urs Fischer’s slate-gray sculpture *Big Clay*, 2011, which matched the dark, stormy sky. When sun finally arrived, I suspected Tony Cox’s mythic superhero band LOBOTOMAXXX was at the root of it, so powerfully aerobic-yogic and DEVO-esque was their vocal and drum machine performance: Cox’s trampoline, which he jumped on, flipped over, handstand-ed around, and crawled under—quite flashily in his silver sequined leotard—must have been a talisman.

Inside, generations of downtown painters were teamed up to “bridge” (Laska’s words) a rebellious, freewheeling, and colorful Pop lineage to militant graffiti and street-art aesthetics. In this respect, the exhibition pays homage to early Deitch Projects. For example, one room hosted Joe Bradley, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kenny Scharf, Joyce Pensato, Katherine Bernhardt, Keith Haring, and Nina Chanel Abney, all conversing in feedback loops of cartoon language. The room containing Peter Saul, Henry Taylor, Carol Rama, Jason Fox, Josh Smith, and Lonnie Holley—represented by a fierce motorcycle sculpture, *Riding Through My Roots Too Fast*, 2004—alternated between animal imagery and social critique. A. R. Penck’s *Skizze*, 1983, borrowed for inclusion two weeks after his death, was a heartfelt commemoration and fortified the pervasive spirit of activism.

Two nooks across from one another were Sue Williams’s *The Bill of Rights*, 1990, Sadie Laska’s *Stars and Bars*, and William Copley’s mock-heroic portraits of horse asses and powdered-wig-wearing buffoons that metaphorically spelled #dumptrump. Antiwar messaging bookended entryways as well: One was occupied mightily by a Bread and Puppet Theater display (MILITARIZED; HYPNOTIZED declared their banners), and the other hosted seldom-seen paintings by Don Van Vliet, whose chunky, visionary abstraction *The Drazy Hoops*, 1997, hung catty-corner from Wally Hedrick’s *Peace*, 1953, a wavy American flag with the title scrawled across it.




Left: LOBOTOMAXXX performance. Right: The Honey Badgers.

But the coziest room was where jam sessions by the Honey Badgers broke out periodically in improvisational merriment, inside Sarah Braman’s exquisitely magenta and lavender *Badger Den (Let’s Read Together)*,

2017, constructed from truck campers and plywood for secret fort fun. The Honey Badgers, named after the fabulously vicious YouTube-famous critter who puts up with zilch, is an all-star band including a roving cast of gallerists such as Jack Hanley and Phil Grauer, plus children. The brood really went for it, mellifluous tunes encouraging communal hang sessions between old friends. Joe Bradley apologized for not sending me a blurb awhile back, and I replied, “Hey, man, no worries, actually you did send it, and it was awesome.”

With moms laughing at their kids, it was cuteness overload, given our Mother’s Day occasion. We all sat on Katherine Bernhardt’s series of imported “Moroccan Magic Carpets” below Agathe Snow’s dangling sculpture *Coucou*, a “found tree-trunk gutted by natural elements” injected with stress-relieving soft sculptures built of memory foam that she had squeezed, twisted, and punched while building to allay anxieties. “Wreckage and stress,” she said while we stood beneath *Coucou*. Thankfully on the other walls, Chris Martin’s enormous *October*, 2016, high-fived Julian Schnabel’s smaller, pyramidal yellow-and-orange canvas *Untitled*, 2013, perhaps engaging in soul-advancing, psychic negotiations to promote tranquility, the way good canvases can.




Left: Bread and Puppet Theater’s installation. Right: Artists Johanna Jackson and Chris Johnson.

I hitchhiked home with Chris Martin and Tamara Gonzales, munching pecans in the backseat. As we left the farm’s valet area, we wondered aloud about how much upkeep the Jeff Koons *Puppy* takes, but then real life reared its head as we stalled in traffic near the landfill outside Co-Op City. Eventually I was delivered to another utopian convention: Chris Johanson and Johanna Jackson’s show “The Middle Riddle,” at the Journal Gallery. “We chose artists that we feel close to, aligned with, that live in our spiritual/social neighborhood,” Jackson said. Casual vibes radiated from the pair’s sculptural furniture collaborations, and we all admired Jackson’s 2017 *Dump Him* painting sitting on the floor in the corner depicting flicking fingers, as if shooing away some pestilence. And we’ve only just passed the first one hundred days mark. For a day at least, it seems animals everywhere reclaimed freedom, and made the most of it.

— *Trinie Dalton*




Left: Valentina Ackerman with curator Sadie Laska, artist Aurel Schmidt and designer Judi Rosen. Right: Artists Tamara Gonzales and Chris Martin.




Left: Katherine Bernhardt’s “Moroccan Magic Carpets.” Installation view. Right: Katherine Bernhardt’s “Moroccan Magic Carpets” with Sarah Braman’s *Badger Den (Let’s read together)*, 2017. Installation view.

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