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I N T E R N A T I O N A L



FIRST TAKE
10 NEW ARTISTS

First Take

At the beginning of each year, *Artforum* asks a seasoned group of critics, curators, and artists to introduce the work of up-and-comers they feel show special promise for the future. The following pages feature their picks for 2005.

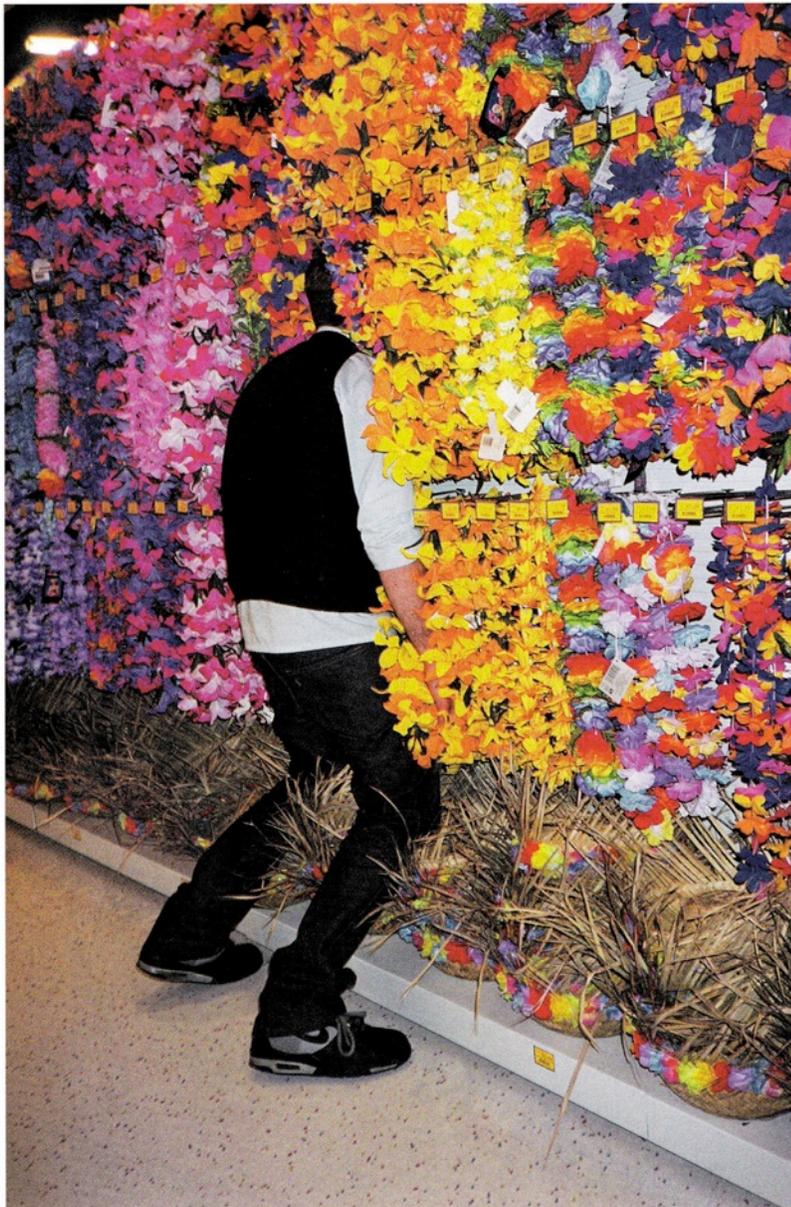
JOE SCANLAN ON WALEAD BESHTY

In 1969, a nightly TV-news anchor named Fred Van Amburg was troubled by his declining ratings, which he believed were due to the unbearable daily reports of protests and body counts. Having limited control over world events but much control over their packaging, Amburg decided that the news wasn't the problem, its presentation was. A somber, solitary journalist delivering the news directly into the camera—and, by extension, into people's living rooms—made viewers feel responsible for it, and the only way to avoid that feeling was not to watch. Amburg's innovation, dubbed "Happy Talk," forever changed television news. The format allowed two coanchors to banter between segments, thereby taking pressure off viewers at home. Rather than having to react to the news, viewers could react to the coanchors' reactions, which were invariably jovial.

As Amburg put it, "There's more to life than news, weather and sports." There certainly is! For one thing, there's shopping! The great side effect of Happy Talk was that advertising revenues soared. The more viewers learned how to shrug off Kent State or the My Lai Massacre as mere news (and therefore of no concern to them), the more they could transfer their newfound, carefree attitudes onto yet another trip to the mall.



Walead Beshty, *Dead Mall* (details), 2002–2004. 20 black-and-white photographs, each 8 1/2 x 11 1/4".
Top: Bridgeport, CT. Bottom: Poughkeepsie, NY.



Walead Beshty, *Party America, The Grove, Los Angeles, CA, 2002*, color photograph, 50 x 70". From the series "The Phenomenology of Shopping," 2001–2003.

Walead Beshty's forays into shopping are every bit as perverse as Happy Talk viewers turning decapitations into matching drapes. His photographs of merchandise and shopping malls have an air of misapprehension to them, as if he has stumbled onto a curious phenomenon but doesn't think it has anything to do with him. Stumbled is the operative word here, since Beshty's serial photos are cumulative chains of events acted out in an engorged stupor: He consistently pays attention to the wrong things, or the right things in the wrong way, or the right places at the wrong time—as in his photographs of outmoded shopping malls, visited thirty years too late. Little by little, step by step, potted plant by potted plant, Beshty's images zero in on the revelation of being confused.

The confusion in question is "late capitalism," as Fredric Jameson so optimistically put it. In this sense, Beshty's *Dead Mall*, 2002–2004, seems a little too mindful of the party line. Whatever Marxist *schadenfreude* might be gleaned from black-and-white images of corny decor, broken signage, and mismatched displays, this pleasure

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is more than offset by the will to power it reveals. However much Beshty would like to pass judgment on these nonsites by relegating them to the past, this is an exclusive privilege of the discriminating masses, one we artists can only dream about. And he probably shouldn't be any more judgmental of consumer society than we should be of him when an eighteen-by-twenty-two-inch photograph he displayed at P.S. 1 over the summer turns up in a Chelsea gallery face-mounted on Plexi at eight times that size.

Beshty's capitalism carries much more punch when he gets involved. Shot in stores all across the United States, "The Phenomenology of Shopping," 2001–2003, shows a pliant consumer inserting his head into banks of fake floral leis, racks of stuffed animals, and rows of washer/dryers like someone who's really, *really* into the whole shopping thing. The gesture is as effective as it is stupid, suggesting that when it comes to twenty-first-century capitalism, "hypertrophic" is a more apt adjective than "late." It's startling to see how many products the human head will fit into. I like the pun of "losing your head" while shopping, and I like seeing the body go limp as a consequence, not as a sign of death but of rank conformity—in the same way that a frog "conforms" to a great blue heron's throat. It's cathartic to see an artist dealing with his relative powerlessness by making an ass of himself, all in the guise of being a care-free consumer. □

Joe Scanlan is an artist and assistant professor at Yale University. (See Contributors.)