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ARTFORUM



Alex Hubbard, *Heads in the Dark*, 2009, still from a color video, 19 minutes 10 seconds.

A PHONE RINGS, and a tart yellow computer-generated square quivers in response. This peculiar interchange is over just as soon as it starts: Cut to a tabletop seen from above, where a plastic cloth is unfurled; a vase is set down, filled with water and a rosy bodega bouquet; said flowers are decapitated, buds tumbling onto the slab in a series of dully emphatic thumps; the vase is shattered; the whole tableau—scattered flower bits and thick beads of water—is spray-painted black; a hooked cane snares and drags away the refuse; and the tablecloth is pulled off, leaving behind the cane, alone, before the screen goes dark. All of this happens quickly and without commentary, although voices (“Ready?” “Just from the top like this?”) and Foley sound effects are audible throughout. Then there is the artist, Alex Hubbard, himself—or at least his incantations and his limbs, the latter moving props and setting this string of events in motion, giving lie to the passivity I’ve used to describe them.

The video *Collapse of the Expanded Field I (yellow)*, 2007, thus performs the inextricability of object and agent. Both of these ultimately yield to the destructive end foretold in the title—a failure less Pyrrhic than slapstick, as the vaudevillian staff suggests. (Companion works in the larger “Collapse of the Expanded Field” series, 2007, conclude with similarly consumptive acts involving a mop and a crumpling screen.) As in many of Hubbard’s pieces, the stress falls on the making. The short sequences, which usually run less than two minutes, incorporate quotidian items snatched from within arm’s reach. While Hubbard crops out most of the acting body, the videos are clearly performed in his Brooklyn studio in single takes (prior to the artist’s equally

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evident editing and postproduction, which include fast-forward cuts that make the action seem slightly suspicious, as if spliced together in a trick shot).

Progression—and the logic of causality its effects retroactively reveal—matters a great deal here. Indeed, Hubbard shows little else in his tightly cropped scenes. He revels in the very notion of *doing*. This is why, perhaps, his single-channel videos have sometimes been compared to cooking shows. (In fact, the videos also recall the flat work space on which any number of domestic activities or instructional demonstrations are packaged for a television audience: Think Martha Stewart.) But far from rendering process as innately purposeful, Hubbard's trend toward the ruinous disallows any eventual prize: His soufflé always falls. And even if it manages to survive undeflated of its own accord, Hubbard finishes it off.

LIKE *COLLAPSE*, its contemporary *Cinépolis*, 2007, is an exercise in carnage. Hubbard opens a projection screen and haphazardly paints around it before utilizing the support for a clique of grounded Mylar balloons. The rest of *Cinépolis* details the balloons' evisceration: They are torched, tarred, and feathered with the insides of a disemboweled pillow, cut open and vigorously shaken to produce an appearance not unlike that of a plume-filled snow globe. Allusions are plentiful—Jean Tinguely's kinetic *Homage to New York*, 1960, which performatively self-destructed at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Andy Warhol's *Silver Clouds*, 1966, which populated Leo Castelli's gallery and other venues with helium-fueled dirigibles; and Fischli & Weiss's video *The Way Things Go*, 1987, which trained its lens on a chain reaction involving everyday objects, are some of the most striking evocations.

In Hubbard's works, however, the point is less the formal operations or the references than the pressure he exerts on them as, collectively, a generic art-historical backdrop—a kind of white noise of accumulated reception histories and citations. Nor is this condition all that new. When Clement Greenberg argued that modernist painting was categorically unique in its self-reflexivity, art historian Leo Steinberg perceptively countered, "All important art, at least since the Trecento, is preoccupied with self-criticism. Whatever else it may be about, all art is about art." Hubbard cannily recognizes these conditions even as he exceeds them—upturning the legacy of artistic action and studio-based production.

So if Hubbard establishes a painterly surface, it is only to dismantle it. His videos' fixed vantages abet this, aligning the representational frame commensurately with its subject and reproducing the flat plane as another cliché. *Dos Nacionales* (Two Nationals), 2008, exhibited at House of Gaga, Mexico City, in the same year, includes a passage in which graph paper sourced from an architectural model-making shop is layered to produce shifting abstractions. Their aesthetic aspects are undeniable—yet they must compete (to no avail) with Hubbard's manual attempts to diffuse any prettiness with a shattered mirror, an assaulting brick, and so on. In *Untitled Red Herring*, 2008, the artist subjects Flavinesque fluorescent lights to various treatments (scratching, overpainting) and successive occlusion. The final undertakings involve Hubbard placing dime-store starfish and assorted seashells over the lights; all of this is covered with a fine mist of spray paint that both aggregates and articulates the discordant parts, rendering the work a kind of South Floridian version of a Louise Nevelson assemblage.

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Alex Hubbard, *Dos Nacionales (Two Nationals)*, 2008, stills from a color video, 3 minutes 28 seconds.

Similarly, *Heads in the Dark*, 2009, is notable for its minutely shifting compositions. Running almost twenty minutes, this significantly longer set comprises Hubbard's hands maneuvering papers, newsprint, lingerie advertisements, a Greek-diner coffee cup, a candle, art supplies, and still more seashells on a workstation; multiple postcards of the Empire State Building and of a coruscating sunset over open ocean are deployed to produce a visually stuttering house of cards. The look is deliberately cheap, a mockery of pictorial arrangement staged as the mutability of things on a horizontal backing. Watching these schlocky craft materials lurch about is not to follow them into some final resting state, but to witness their active unraveling. Hubbard restages doing and making (post-Pollock, post-Nauman, post-McCarthy) as a deflated spectacle. The cropped frame renders the actions anonymous, almost as if spurred by the inanimate objects themselves and, of course, by gravity.

Contingency is therefore embedded in Hubbard's materials and encoded in the what-if exigencies of his production: in the videos, the spills and falls that precede inevitable demise and the articles that careen off camera or refuse to dissipate (Hubbard still comes across the occasional feather); in the more recent oil, resin, and fiberglass paintings, the paint that splattered here not there, that seeped into the support or clotted on top of it or ran down its edge. Physical and structural collapse coincide. Hubbard triangulates the very systems of painting, performance, and video, generating his own precarious and colliding schemes. (Fittingly, Hubbard titled his video suite after Rosalind Krauss's defining 1979 essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," which mapped a new arena of practice in the wake of a fallen formalism and nascent pluralism.) In other words, what is a painting that begins as a performance presented for a video—and what is it if neither performance nor video nor really painting, either?

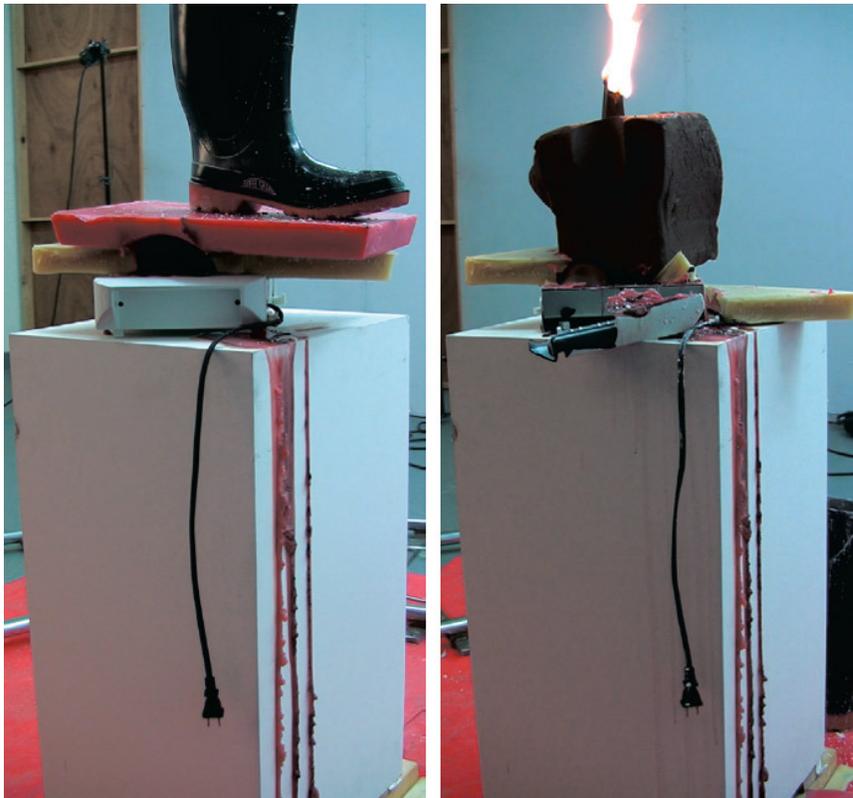
The artist, then, is not so much mining "modernism"—whatever we now take this to mean at its most facile—as he is showing its fabled implosion as a chestnut of its own. A retrograde query into medium-specificity is hardly the goal. If, for example, Hubbard's subsequent videos seem to document the making of a "sculpture," they nevertheless open onto an aporetic space of movement and abolition. Thus the oscillation between two- and three-dimensional space, surface and real and illusionistic deepness, is a mainstay of his work.

But in *Weekend Pass*, 2008, Hubbard shifts to shooting his videos sideways instead of from above, while in the related *Screens for Recalling the Blackout*, 2009, he enlarges his frame, actively shoving and rolling large stage sets and movable walls. In the former, the camera circumnavigates a pedestal with tracking shots that are seemingly longer than the entire duration of any previous video. Objects placed on top of the base as if for auction-block delectation are canceled one by one in wholly unnatural acts of

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deterioration: Obsolescence is forced sadistically with a bowling ball oozing plaster, a hot plate melting wax, and so on. In both pieces, the dolly comes into view, though *Screens* camps up these cameos more robustly, incorporating Hubbard's body and the surrounding environment—previously spied only in glimpses—wholesale. A heightened depth of field, along with cuts that interrupt the procession around the pedestal, produces a surprising feeling of suspense and a surfeit of humor, too.

THE STUDIO PICTURED in *Screens* is an expressively obsequious parody of process and action taken therein, harboring a veritable catalogue of precedents: some Robert Morris felt, a Carl Andre block stack, and two Marcel Broodthaers potted palms, to name but a few flags. Installed at Gallery-C at Team in New York last year, alongside large silk-screened and painted canvases that resemble transitional video stills while evincing the obdurate materiality of facture, *Weekend Pass* and *Screens* traded on their invocation of and remove from the physical processes alternately registered on the nearby walls.



Alex Hubbard, *Weekend Pass*, 2008, stills from a color video, 8 minutes 54 seconds.

Much, in fact, could be made of these shifting relationships between Hubbard's videos and paintings and their various lives in the studio. The paintings began as surprisingly literal artifacts from the video-production process (an early collagelike one, for example, flaunts a sorry balloon souvenir from *Cinépolis*), but more recent exploits shun such one-to-one correlations in favor of complementary adjacency. Hubbard's new canvases at Maccarone gallery, New York, seem relatively unburdened by context or conceit. In such pieces as *Troubadour*, *Adios*, and *Will*, all 2010, sequestered in the back gallery away from a suite of menu paintings (messily deictic tablets of New Jersey fish-shack

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offerings) and three new videos (pared-down Rube Goldberg chains comprising an air pump, drop cloths, and sundry garage and domestic implements that, again, recall the causal processions of Fischli & Weiss as well as their studies of balancing acts and tipping points), what's left is the gesture—isolated and finally ossified owing to quick-drying resin.

To conclude that Hubbard's project is about representation is to say everything and nothing, a hackneyed truism that feels right in spirit with Hubbard's feints. For the Whitney Biennial, Hubbard has completed *Annotated Plans for an Evacuation*, 2010, a roughly five-minute video that performs, well, an evacuation, complete with getaway car. The piece is set on a street in Los Angeles and focuses on the profile of a 1988 Ford Tempo, onto which Hubbard affixes a Styrofoam cutout as a makeshift background set. He plasters the car's hubcaps, sets barrels atop it, and then actually drives for a few minutes—before getting out, covering the vehicle with more props, and finally letting it crash into a curb, beaching it as an ersatz monument. The video camera is attached to the car by a jury-rigged beam, so that we almost feel the jostle and speed. Just as Hubbard inhabits these provisional scenes, it seems that we might easily join him, participating in or reenacting our own vision of his flight plan.

Trappings of the studio in tow, the artist moves into the world. Portability reigns: Beyond their literal traffic between and beyond specific media, Hubbard's outings reflect on their fate, which is to say, how the objects and strategies he employs can still be put to use. They pose action itself as something to be circulated, whether transmissible as video projection or YouTube clip or portable as painterly trace. Process and distribution are superimposed, evoking a broader condition in which sharing and displaying an event are also a kind of consumption—in which everyone may be producer and receiver at once.

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