

“Dereconstruction”

GLADSTONE GALLERY

A grotesque neologism, the title of “Dereconstruction,” Matthew Higgs’s recent curatorial effort for Gladstone Gallery, was—according to the catalogue essay—both “a hybrid term, one that conflates notions of ‘construction,’ ‘reconstruction,’ ‘deconstruction,’ and ‘destruction,’” and a reference to “The New Reconstructions,” Pace Gallery’s 1979 exhibition of work by Lucas Samaras. It was surely no accident, then, that Samaras’s patterned fabric patchwork *Reconstruction #41*, 1978—hung on the far wall of a room adjoining the reception gallery—was the first work one noticed on entering Higgs’s show.

Despite its unwieldy title, “Dereconstruction” was characterized by a restraint not often found in summer group shows, the hand of the ubiquitous White Columns director demonstrably evident only in the selection of the works rather than imposing itself via overblown wall texts or installation design. Approaching Samaras’s work, one passed two nests of household items obsessively tangled in yarn by Judith Scott. These elaborate, colorful messes spark a dialogue between interior and exterior that here reflected the highly visible yet sequestered placement of *Reconstruction #41*. (Scott, who died last year and to whom the show was dedicated, had a particularly high profile here, with four works spread across two rooms.)

Higgs is adept at this kind of orchestration, and he exercised the talent to form several other unexpected alliances. For example, John Stezaker’s droll appositions of cutouts from African figurine auction catalogues and film stills, in the reception gallery, were forced into collusion with Rita Ackermann’s disturbing works—collages in the main gallery and a mixed-media painting, *Out of the Blue*, 2006, in the back—fixated on Leigh Bowery’s iconic silhouette. And scrutiny of the partially obscured contents of Scott’s yarn balls had a parallel in the temptation to scan Eileen Quinlan’s photographs “Smoke & Mirrors,” 2005–, for hints of figuration.

With a few stark exceptions (Stezaker, B. Wurtz, Vincent Fecteau), most of the works in “Dereconstruction” scorned methodological and

material economy, reflecting instead an approach based on enthusiastic appropriation and accumulation. Much attention was paid to craft technique (loudly announced by a profusion of fringes and rough seams), but two works offered an exception to the rule. Bruce Conner’s *At the Head of the Stairs*, 1987/2003, a tapestry produced mechanically on a Belgian Jacquard loom from a digital scan of a 1987 paper collage, deconstructs both

its complex technological facilitation and its cut-and-paste origins. Takeshi Murata’s video *Untitled (Silver)*, 2006, digitally extracts and distorts the image of actress Barbara Steele from the 1960 Italian horror movie *Mask of Satan* (aka *Black Sunday*). The only work in the show to subject its source material to noncontemporaneous technologies of fragmentation, it wears its disintegration on its sleeve but buries the laborious coding that brought these effects to the surface.

While “Dereconstruction” identified an aesthetic resonance shared by some outwardly dissimilar works, it stuttered while trying to articulate its pitch theoretically. Higgs’s amalgamation of terms and ideas, while initially captivating, collapsed under its own weight, and an attempt to discern how each component work might demonstrate this or that aspect of a muddled principle tended, finally, to handicap one’s experience of them.

—David Velasco

View of “Dereconstruction,” 2006.

