

High Anxiety

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Shaky Ground

Curated by D. Dominick Lombardi
Lesley Heller Workspace, NYC
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It is traditionally assumed that the art object is a record of history, whether the history of the artist, of its time, or merely an object left over after the fall of a civilization. While the writing of a period is open to the influence of retelling, interpretation, or the vagaries of translation, the visual object, by its very nature, promises us the stability of meaning inherent in its "objectness." How, then, in an age where perpetual war, disintegrating environmental conditions, and rapidly accelerating technologies, do we expect our artworks to function? What kinds of anxious objects will best represent to future generations our story? D. Dominick Lombardi

poses these questions, and a group of artists at Lesley Heller's Workspace seek to answer them in the exhibition *Shaky Ground*.

Lombardi's choice of artists is interesting. There is no sense of Orwellian dystopia here, no flickering video monitors, chattering sound installations, nor intercessional performance art; rather, painting, sculpture, and handmade objects dominate. If there is an iconic piece to this exhibition, it is Arcady Kotler's *Painless Necklace* (2006), a chain of prescription drugs strung like pearls, reminiscent of Damien Hirst, but with a twist. Fashion for the "ladies who lunch," who, indeed, never eat but socialize dazedly with Klonopin-soaked eyes while their husbands raid our retirement funds.

Painting plays an important role in our understanding of any historical period -- our understanding of Robespierre's *Terror* would be less rich if David hadn't stage-managed it. Lombardi's choices of painters suggest Margaret Atwood more than Orwell. In *The Handmaid's Tale* Offred surveys Fred's office, noting of the varnished, faux-naïve Americana portraits that "the art of the future resembled nothing so much as the art of the past." One piece in the show by Roman Turovsky, *Stadt 24 "Pulaski Skyway"* (2011), (image top) pictures an eerie dystopian landscape of decay. Though the paint handling resembles Kossoff or Auerbach, artists who indeed revel in decay, Turovsky imbues this painting with a sense of horror. It calls to mind Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*; one can almost see the teeming lines of refugees crossing the bridge to Jersey City.

Another painter in the show, Dennis Kardon, has always focused on the body as the site of his painterly explorations. His *The Consultation* (2005) (image above right) is a meditation on the body and perhaps also the body politic. With nods to Peter Saul and Jim Lutes, a group of people sit around an Eames table. A man in a black business suit, his head an elephantine mass propped up by a bamboo stick, is surrounded by mysterious figures: a Julian Schnabel-like man in pajamas, a woman who is tentatively touching the grotesque face, and a blue track-suited figure who turns its back to us. The creepy mysteries of the action are belied by the banality of the scene; a cat brushes the Elephant Man's leg, the mysterious figure pisses, and a scatter of notes lies on the table.





Other notable works which present variations on a theme are Lombardi's *Call of Nature* (2015), a trip scene of a one-eyed tree and a deer; Anna Ortiz's *Coast* (2013), which shows a plume of smoke à la SoCal's methane leak; and Mary Ann Strandell's *Trestle, Rock, Dam* (2011), a beaten-up, post-apocalypse landscape painting.

Lombardi's show poses interesting questions, and his artists provide, on the whole, thoughtful responses. Anxiety may be the current state in which we live, but then again, these artists suggest, *When wasn't it?* - *Bradley Rubenstein*

Mr. Rubenstein is a painter, story teller, and smart culture aficionado.