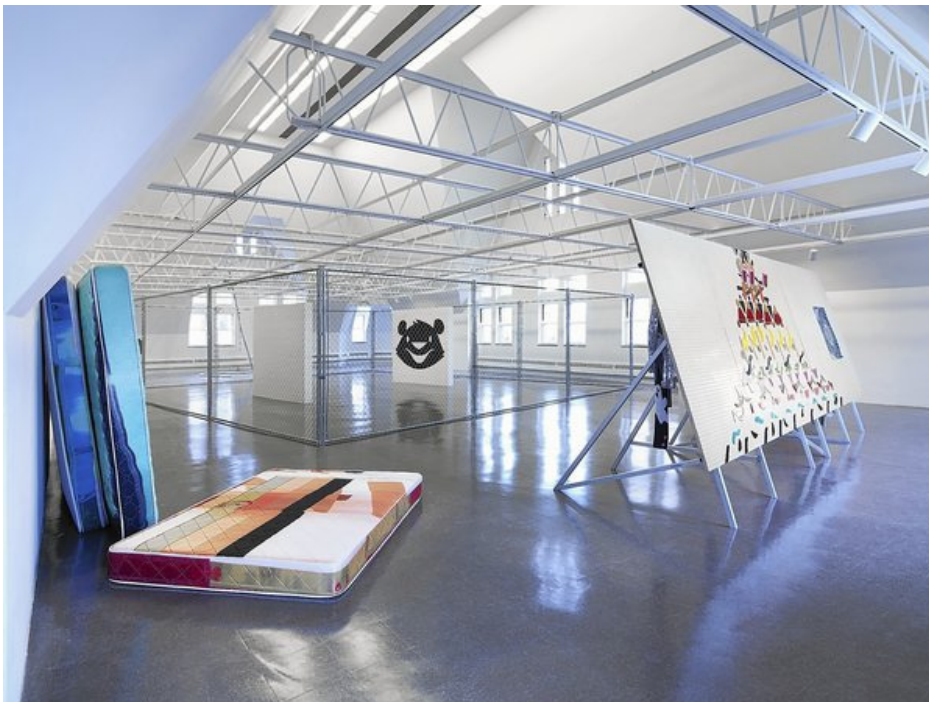


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The new abjection: Art about teenagers at the Ren



Installation view of the "Teen Paranormal Romance" exhibition. (Tom VanEynde, / March 11, 2014)

By Lori Waxman
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By all standards of the apocalypse, there ought to be nothing really terrifying in an oversize color picture of an attractive blond girl modeling a printed bathing suit against a greyish white background.

But Roe Ethridge's photograph, part of "Teen Paranormal Romance," a group exhibition at the Renaissance Society in Hyde Park, gets me shaking. On its own, perhaps not. On its own, in fact, I'm not quite sure I would know what to make of its awkward depiction of a bland, doubting teenager, hand on her hip, Miami-airport-at-sunset image on her torso, tote bag in her hand, photo studio at her back.

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Nor would I be able to sort out Kathryn Andrews' "Friends and Lovers," a pair of white concrete brick walls painted with smiley cartoon bear faces and surrounded by an enormous chain link fence. Or Jack Lavender's "Fantasy Line," a towering piece of bent steel tubing from which hang a potato chip box and what looks like a mini energy drink. Or Guyton\Walker's mattresses, covered in shiny, blown-out fabrics as gorgeous as they are random, as bespoke as they are machine generated.

Put them together, however, along with pieces by Ed Atkins, Chris Bradley and a half-dozen others, and a creeping discomfort takes over. Call it the new abjection. The girl's vacuousness blooms vampiric. The smiley bears turn deranged shut-ins, their fencing a crude pixelating of everything. The metal pole grows a hangman's noose. One of the mattresses appears stained with bodily fluids.

This kind of cumulative meaning making is what can happen in a strong, thematic group show. Bold exhibition titles help of course — "Teen Paranormal Romance" lacks nothing for brashness — but mostly it's the surrounding artistic company. Alternately, put the same photograph/video/sculpture in with a different cohort and something else will likely happen. Context isn't everything, but it can be a whole lot.

The context here is teenage aesthetics, what curator Hamza Walker calls "today's teen spirit," hearkening back to the adolescent esprit of earlier generations, from a post-punk Kurt Cobain to the Surrealists and the Romantics. Ranging in age from late 20s to mid 40s, none of the artists in "Teen Paranormal Romance" is anywhere close to teenage in years, but that's okay. It's necessary, really. It takes a certain amount of distance to see clearly. Contemporary teenagers are already there — they don't need to understand their own desire to wear an item of clothing that looked cheesy in 1986, the first time around ... nor their comfort with everything virtual and everything else covered in preprinted, premeditated images.

The transformative cachet of vintage takes on a whole new strangeness if you were there originally. Appearances to the contrary, not everything that's old and now new again is being wielded ironically. With its history of found object assemblage, art can provide a natural arena in which to work this all out. Jack Lavender's wall-hung reliefs, made from misshapen grids of rusty rebar and every kind of junky thrift-store doodad, oblige. A zingy one titled "Hannah" after the artist's wife, forms a face out of a wicker wreath, bent steel, plastic peanuts and dried limes. Unless they're nearing divorce, Hannah can't be smiling with irony. She just can't.

There's a cliché to be formulated here about one generation's trash being another's something-or-other, maybe its art. Take Chris Bradley's "Grease Face #3" and "#4,"

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which look like portraits arisen grotesquely out of the oil and slice marks on the inside of pizza boxes. But pizza boxes these are not. Bradley uses steel, aluminum and spray paint to achieve an archival replica of his subject, complete with stoner-red pushpin eyes, or rather, cast-bronze lookalikes.

Or Anna K.E.'s "Lucky Weekend," an indoor billboard whose front side sports a randomly pretty abstract mosaic against cheap white bathroom tiles. Hooks on its backside act as hangers for thrifted clothes only an eighteen-year-old art student could pull off. Beside the mosaic, a thick wad of posters represent an exhibition-within-the-exhibition of images by a few dozen of the artist's friends. The day I visited, the topmost poster was Kristof Paul Wickman's oddly erotic image of two hands spraying a can of OFF! onto what might be a recumbent hip. The product placement gave the entire stack of artworks the slightly seamy feel of so many adverts on so many subway walls.

The commercial sentiment is declared more plainly but no less strangely in the exhibition flyer designed by Anna Gray and Ryan Wilson Paulsen. The duo rearrange the letters in ENTREPRENEUR to get PRETEEN RERUN, an anagram that so perfectly encapsulates the entire exhibition it's downright eerie.

It could also be a description of Ed Atkins's eight-and-a-half minute video loop. Spoiler alert: Atkins's "Even Pricks" is essentially a fake trailer for the worst, weirdest movie that will (hopefully) never be made. The prick in question is an inflatable thumb that pokes its way into an ear, an eye and a belly button, amid the dizzying montage of a philosophizing monkey, burning beds and cratering floors. This is much funnier than it probably sounds.

Add some snazzy graphics borrowed from the average apocalyptic summer blockbuster, and Atkins brings it all right back to that terrifying girl in her retro bathing suit. The end is upon us, and it's devoid of meaning yet full of references.