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## Making Art in Disquieting Times

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05- Augustus Nazzaro at Halsey McKay

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By Jennifer Landes (/node/489)  
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disquieting-times) The Halsey McKay Gallery's exhibitions in East Hampton this month offer two renditions of America and American themes that on the surface appear to diverge, but stand as bookends to the disquieting reality of daily experience.

Subject=Making%20Art%20in%20Disquieting%20Times&Body=http://www.easthampton.com  
05- In "SMILE," Todd von Ammon reaches into the past, back to Brian

08/making-art-  
disquieting-times) Wilson's 1966 effort to record an album that was a reaction to the British Invasion of the 1960s and the Anglophilia that was prevalent then in popular culture. It was Mr. Wilson and the lyricist Van Dyke Parks's idiosyncratic exploration of American history and values, humor, and psychedelia in both drugs and music.

Mr. Wilson's vision was so multifaceted and all consuming that the project suffered, and it was shelved until 2004, when a version of it was released. Here, Mr. von Ammon's vision is succinct, and powerful because of it. His gathering of the artists Kathryn Andrews, Ashley Bickerton, Catharine Czudej, Matt Kenny, Ajay Kurian, Helmut Lang, Megan Marrin, Tabor Robak, and Julia Wachtel reflects our recent past up to this moment and the way the concept of American exceptionalism reveals itself as myth. This was true in the past — as Brian Wilson likely found as he tried to extol it in the 1960s — and at present, when any sense of being unique in the world and mostly better for it has unraveled over the past couple of decades and has even been abandoned in the past few years.

The smile in this context is the bait, pitch, and seduction, brought to the fore to obfuscate or misrepresent an otherwise obvious truth. The artists Mr. von Ammon has chosen for this show all explore some aspect of how society's complacency in the face of threats to human survival can be traced back to our vulnerability to distraction, be it our obsession with celebrities, money, sex, video games, drugs, or

violence, or all of the above.

These artists often lure viewers to their work with Pop-like commercial imagery or familiar setups. Ms. Wachtel does both. In "Picnic," a grinning cartoon pup gives a thumbs-up signal. The dog is part of a multipanel composition, and its panel overlays imagery of what appears to be a traditional tailgate outing with people gathered on aluminum picnic tables. Move a little closer, however, and the figure in the foreground takes aim with a very lethal-looking gun. Then there is a person next to him apparently doing the same thing. In the background a group is gathered around something. Is it something they shot, another weapon? It's hard to tell, but clearly this idyll is not what it seems.

The gun imagery in Mr. Kurian's "Wolf" is more direct. A young person depicted in the richest and deepest of black tones has climbed halfway up a black rope hanging from the ceiling. With his body resting in a loop tied halfway, he points a gun at his head. The mask-like face is smiling wide. His fingers look like spindly lighted matches. Cast in this very adult pose, he wears Adidas sneakers and a white T-shirt that appear even more pristine and childlike than they would normally. There are many layers to this work, which most overtly relates to young urban experience. Its broader meaning is also relevant to a majority of the population only an unexpected \$400 expense away from financial ruin.

In the gallery's other show, "Threshold," Augustus Nazzaro also employs tropes from American culture and history, relating broader meaning through a very personal lens. His wood panels, painted in acrylic and repeatedly sanded, repainted, and polished to a light sheen, appear like bad photocopies from afar, and more like photographs up close. His surface is another seduction, like the smiles downstairs in the gallery, but this work, too, conveys deeper and darker meanings.

Although he is a representational artist, Mr. Nazzaro's imagery is foggy and pixelated, revealing only a portion of a larger subject. He finds these subjects from video stills, photographs, and other mediums. Every panel is in black and white in various tones, ranging from almost total whiteout, as in "Wet Cement," to deepest, darkest ebony, as in "Fragile Moment."

His editing allows enough to engage the brain to search for associations and meaning. His titles also help. "Never Let Your Loyalty Make a Fool of You" is a collection of flags. "Harbingers" presents mosquito-like bugs that may be a warning of coming pestilence. "Epitaph" is a portion of a note the artist's grandfather wrote to be read upon his death. "Vigil" is a collection of burning candles seen through a chain-link fence.

Mr. Nazzaro finds layers in the images he selects and edits them to put those layers into focus. The exhibition is installed to be read sequentially, like pages in a book or cells in a film. According to the gallery, the title of the exhibition refers to his practice and how far he can take his erasure of his source material before it is lost or its essence is changed. In the end, he leaves it to the viewer to decide and to shape the work's final meaning.

Both shows are on view tomorrow and Saturday.

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