

Art Review

Selling An America No One Wants To Buy

Sarah Wolff, 10.23.09, 12:30 PM EDT

In "America for Sale," artists respond to the recession.



America For Sale At Exit Art (Exit Underground) New York City, Through Nov. 21

If we needed any more proof that the road to economic recovery will be a long, Sisyphean journey, then we have only to look at the contemporary art world. Galleries have been shuttered and exhibition budgets have been cut, carved and redistributed like a Thanksgiving turkey.

Many artists have suffered, too. According to recent statistics from the National Endowment for the Arts, there are 63% more unemployed artists today than there were just one year ago. Exit Art, the 25-year-old culture and art center in midtown Manhattan, asked artists to strike back--their experience of the financial downturn forms the basis of the show *America for Sale*.

America for Sale is a project of *Social-Environmental Aesthetics*, a multimedia exhibition and archive program helmed by Exit Art co-founder Papo Colo that deals with daily life problems. This is just one in a series, and past SEA exhibits have illustrated how artists are dealing with issues like dependence on finite fossil fuel resources and hydroponic gardening in urban areas.

Though this sort of art can be one-note, most of the work in *America for Sale* is visually interesting in addition to carrying the burden of conveying such heavy messages. Unfortunately, the show's opener is a nonsensical and poorly executed video piece called "They Stole the Money" by the collective Radical Art Initiative.

The abruptly cut five-minute loop features two young male stockbroker-types sitting in an office. The men emote everything from hysterical laughter to tearful remorse while bandying about phrases like "It's not gonna work!" and "I just wanted to get rich!"

The dialogue is barely audible and the camera shakes throughout, which could be part of the point ... if there were one. Is the video parodying Wall Street or just sticking its tongue out at the gallery's audience by presenting ideas in the lowest of lo-fi? Is the piece supposed to be funny, or is it just an exercise demonstrating how to annoy an audience?

The other works on the first floor (the rest of the show continues in Exit Art's under-ground space below) include Sung Ho Choi's large-scale canvas plastered with hundreds of reddish-white lottery tickets. Their ovals are strategically filled in to spell out "American Dream," also the name of the piece. The scope is impressive, with all of Choi's collected, frayed and failed lottery tickets lined back-to-back over a 7'4" x 9'10" ground. Its foreboding air reminds the viewer that achieving the American Dream - as the piece suggests - is a huge gamble.

Nearby, there is a richly painted portrait of an unnamed office drone entitled "Wannabe CEO" by Ryan Roth, framed in a mock-Baroque frame. It contrasts the banality of the image--an average, slightly balding mid-level manager--with the sumptuousness of the brushwork and the elaborate framing usually reserved for important historical figures or wealthy patrons. "Wannabe CEO" could have been angry or malignant, but Roth renders his subject (actually a composite of various different people) delicately and with a sympathetic eye, even if it is winking at us.

Another one of Roth's acrylic portraits, "The Sweetest Firing," hangs in the gallery space below. Like "Wannabe CEO," "The Sweetest Firing" is also an image of a Caucasian middle-aged man. But instead of using the baroque framing again, Roth opts to bind his pencil pusher's picture in (faux) melted ice cream. Underneath, as a sculptural add-on to the painting, is a frilly white cake iced with the words "You're Fired." It's a riff on workplace rituals--here, celebrating employees' birthdays in the conference room--and the contrasting bitterness, betrayal and disappointment felt after a firing.



Some of the most visually exciting work in *America for Sale* borrowed from the Sino-Soviet poster art aesthetic. "Everything Must Go" by erin Ko combines the imagery of Maoist China with American icons both high and low like the statue of liberty and McDonald's french fries. The piece, which is made of vinyl appliqué in the style of traditional Chinese paper cutting, has been meticulously applied directly onto the white wall. This makes it look like one entire side of the room is a giant poster.

Propagandizing language--from the title, an obvious dig on American consumerism, and the Chinese characters spelling out "Dare to Think, Dare to Act" (a motto from Mao's social and economic plan, the Great Leap Forward)--run across and down the front of the piece. It is a satire of our intertwined cultures and economies, but its strength comes from the non-cloying way it references the sharp graphic design of Chinese political art from the late 1960s.

Like Ko, Elaine Kaufmann borrows the look of communist posters--this time from the Russian Constructivist era--in her 18" x 11" digital print, "The Strength to Be There." Red and black angular peasant women march across the page under a banner proclaiming the now infamous AIG catchphrase as a little man whose bowler hat has blown off tumbles out of the lower left part of the frame. Additional rhetoric from AIG's commercials directs the viewer to "put your mind at ease" and "live longer, retire stronger, never outlive your money." It's all very Brave New World--creepy but fascinating in its distorted Utopian ideals, much like the original propaganda that inspired it.

Much of the art in *America for Sale* works directly with the show's overarching themes, such as U.S. reliance on foreign investment to keep the economy afloat. It's difficult to keep art about grandiose theories grounded; the personal connection is often lost at the expense of a message.

Jess Levey's series of photographic C-Prints, "Untitled #s 1-6 (from After the Fold series)," take the show's themes to a more personal place. The series shows the disastrous effects of the economic downturn on nondescript offices, with their beige carpeting, neon lighting and pushpin cubicle walls hinting at former human presence. Most of Levey's photos are devoid of people, but they haunt them none the less--their presence is felt in a brown box

scribbled with handwriting here, a collection of plastic hangers stacked over there. They are an intimate experience of the financial downturn, at once post-apocalyptic and alive.

For a small show, *America for Sale* includes a lot of video work. Other pieces by Dominic Gagnon, Abby Manock and TRIIIBE are located in the basement space.

TRIIIBE is a group of identical triplet sisters--Alicia, Kelly and Sara Casili--and their collaborator Cary Wolinsky. Last October, the triplets recorded an in-situ performance piece in front of the New York Stock Exchange and the AIG building. They cut the video and set it to a score by Ben Vella and Barney Freeman that is reminiscent of composer Mark Mothersbaugh's work for the film director Wes Anderson.

The women dressed up as financiers with black tailored suits, bobbed brown haircuts, red lips, wire-rimmed glasses and high heels in order to work on Wall Street--begging for change. They shake tin cans (even though mounds of dollar bills spill over the tops of their tactful black purses) while a crowd starts to assemble around them. It's bittersweet and ironic, and the plucky score of synth-pop beats laced with lush acoustic guitar strumming adds an upbeat element to the otherwise somber performance.

It would be easy to dismiss *America for Sale's* critique of the economic crisis as trivial, especially since artists aren't known for their understanding of the world of high finance (Jeff Koons, who briefly worked as a trader, is the only exception I can think of). But the show ably brings the broader themes at play here back down to earth with its intimate scale and carefully chosen pieces. There is nothing inflammatory here, mainly just solid responses to the swamp of joblessness and fear that is threatening all of us, and artists in particular. *America for Sale* fights off this muck with beauty and candor.

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