

Art Review:

October 2011

THE NEW VERISIMILITUDE

M+B and François Ghebaly Gallery,
Los Angeles

14 July – 2 September (M+B)

16 July – 20 August (François Ghebaly)

The Wikipedia entry for ‘verisimilitude’ kicks off with the uncharacteristically weighty line: ‘The problem of verisimilitude is the problem of articulating what it takes for one false theory to be closer to the truth than another false theory.’ It is productive to think of the two-gallery exhibition curated by François Ghebaly not as a parade of impressive stabs at reproducing reality but as a series of failures, albeit failures that unfold in different and expressive ways.

The New Verisimilitude never really reveals just what is new about the various forms of verisimilitude on show, nor does it explain how they are linked. At M+B, the larger of the two venues, a captivating videowork by David Levine, *Present/Not Present [excerpt]* (2006/9) is placed not far from Peter Rostovsky’s *Miami Stadium* (2008). The former shows footage of two men sitting in chairs and fidgeting. Only the list of works reveals that one is an actor and one is not, but which is which? The latter piece is a large painting of an American football stadium seen from high above; though competent, it is not photorealistic (in that it couldn’t be mistaken for a photograph), but nor, I think, does it try to be. It’s hazy and atmospheric, and it encourages a feeling of drifting away from reality, not screwing it down.

There is an important distinction to make here: ‘verisimilitude’ equals neither photorealism nor hyperrealism. In fact, it has its etymological roots in drama, and more often refers to a convincing presence than it does to appearance alone. You can tell that Victoria Gitman’s exquisite paintings of beaded handbags are copied from life, not photographs. They have an immediacy (born, paradoxically, from painstaking production) that Karl Haendel’s pencil drawings lack. But Haendel’s work is about mediation itself: the labored process of transcription from object to photograph to pencil drawing to abstract collage—as with *Pencil Stubs in Strips* (2010), which he slices into Daniel Buren-style diagonals—is intended to create distance. If there is presence, it is the presence of the artwork, not its subject; if there is truth, it is philosophical rather than experiential.

The selection of works at Ghebaly’s own, smaller space was stronger than at M+B, principally because it made a virtue of diversity. Alongside Haendel’s *Pencil Stubs in Strips* and Gitman’s *On Display* (2008), Isaac Resnikoff carved a wooden sapling tied to two stakes, and a towering totem pole of stacked chairs. Both works had physical presence in spades, even if they had none of the accuracy of Yoshihiro Suda’s *Camelia* (2006), a perfect wooden bloom that sprouted from high up on one wall. Dan Finsel’s collaged *Self Box #1* (2011), returns the conversation to drama: throughout his work, Finsel method-acts a character named Dan Finsel; the ‘self-box’ is an art-therapy exercise in which participants decorate a box to reflect their interior and exterior selves. He teaches us that while representations can be perfectly accurate, their subjects still can be false.

-Jonathan Griffin