

and assemblages—hidden ironies mold their pathos. A sense of formal refinement serves as an affective complement to the intimacies the artist so delicately evokes. To the canon of black queer brilliance, King adds the potent splendor of understatement.

—Travis Jeppesen

## “Hard Opening: Vigil for Black Death”

HOUSING

HOUSING opened the doors to its new Lower East Side location as a sanctuary for protestors before its inaugural exhibition. Founder KJ Freeman secured the keys for the space in May 2020, in the midst of demonstrations against the senseless and ceaseless killing of Black people by the police. During all this, the gallery announced a vigil for “Black Death”—the preventable, premature loss of life caused by systemic racism. Mourners brought flowers and candles, which were placed by portraits of those who died at the hands of law enforcement, such as Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Tony McDade, and Breonna Taylor. These memorial emblems were arranged atop the cellar doors just outside of HOUSING on the sidewalk. The metal gate was spray-painted with the acronym BLM, or “Black Lives Matter.”

The art industry extracts from (sub)cultures and marginalized peoples to amass wealth through the (uncoincidentally) *white* cube. “Hard Opening: Vigil for Black Death,” a group video show, resisted this model. Above the shrine and through the gallery’s street-facing window, the works played on a flat screen. The movement’s insuppressible momentum meant that two parts were organized before the end of June. In the first were works by Aly Brown, Taina Cruz, Kamron Hazel, Baseera Khan, Zenobia Marder, Alyssa Mattocks, Howardena Pindell, and Keijaun Thomas, while the second featured pieces by Aria Dean, Cameron A. Granger, Sofia Moreno, Ben Neill and David Wojnarowicz, Sondra Perry, Marlon Riggs, and Jordan Strafer. The programs were

unified by dissent: social, political, and deeply personal. The spirit of the show dovetailed perfectly with the revolution energizing most of the United States, a nation where racial capitalism and white supremacy have festered for centuries and continue to enable the decimation of Black and brown people—perhaps most insidiously through the unchecked spread of Covid-19, which has disproportionately affected these communities. Speaking of the AIDS crisis in *ITSO FOMO (In the Shadow of Forward Motion)*—documentation of a performance that took place in 1989—Wojnarowicz rails against a willfully complacent US: “When I was diagnosed with this virus, it didn’t take me long to realize I’d contracted a diseased society as well.”

“Hard Opening” was more than a show. It was also a space for love and carnal exuberance.

One such example was Keijaun Thomas’s *My Last American Dollar: Round 1. Tricking and Flipping Coins: Making Dollars Hit and Round 2. Black Angels in the Infield: Dripping Faggot Sweat*, 2019. At the beginning of the video, Thomas taped to the wall a sign reading TRANS RIGHTS HUMAN RIGHTS. Outfitted in a corset, mesh garter belt, stockings, and do-rag, she gyrated to “Dance Like a Stripper,” a song by Atlanta rapper M.E (Main Event). Later, while clad in a thong and pouring glitter over her body, Thomas invited the POC in attendance to join her at the center of the room, cooing, “This space is for us.” Following some sips of alcohol (being Black and carefree in the face of endless adversity sometimes requires a stiff drink), she said: “Are y’all OK? . . . I’m so happy that you’re here.”

Perhaps the most damning work here was Howardena Pindell’s *Free, White and 21*, 1980 (the title of which, in addition to appropriating an old racist catchphrase, indicates the artist’s age when the US Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964). In this video, Pindell dispassionately addresses the camera, her demeanor a jarring contrast to her description of the instances of racialized violence perpetrated against her (one horrific tale involves her kindergarten teacher, who tied Pindell to a bed for hours after she requested a bathroom break during naptime). At various points in this piece, Pindell is made up as a white woman. This character—a critic grotesque in cat’s-eye sunglasses, a blond wig, and pasty skin—delivers a patronizing monologue to the artist: “I hear your experiences and I think, Well, it’s gotta be in her art. That’s the only way we’ll validate you. . . . If your symbols aren’t used in a way that we use them, then we won’t acknowledge them. In fact, you won’t exist until we validate you.” Pindell’s lines—giving voice to attitudes that should be obsolete—speak clearly across a forty-year time span.

—Kerry Doran

## Richard Bosman

NICELLE BEAUCHE GALLERY

Richard Bosman is renowned for his noirish paintings, which often feel like settings for the artist himself to play out his hard-boiled fantasies full of bloody knives, mutilated bodies, and dimly lit mise-en-scènes. Yet the artist’s crude brushwork and comic-book aesthetics—along with a generous dollop of black humor—frequently lighten the load. But Bosman’s exhibition at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, which featured nine modestly sized acrylic-on-paper paintings made between 1979 and 1980, struck a decidedly different tone and seemed more indebted to the stylings of ’50s science fiction and mystical fantasy than to Dashiell Hammett and Sam Spade. This was because the works mark a critical transition in the artist’s career, before the femmes fatales and gumshoes, when Bosman abandoned abstraction and embraced the “expressive figuration” (per the show’s press release) that has defined his art ever since.

In *The Guard* (all works cited, 1979), a sentinel—dressed in a hand-some striped tunic, chain mail, a pointed helmet, and a blue Dalek-style skirt—stands at the end of a tunnel, the opening of which resembles a spiderweb. He faces away from the viewer and holds a spear in his crimson-gloved right hand, while a small campfire burns beside him. Our knightly hero is not battling dragons but observing the cosmos, which is punctuated by blobby little stars and a fat moon. Is he an ancient occultist? A futuristic star traveler? A combination of both? Bosman’s commingling of hoary genres in this work seems naughty, decadent—*freeing*. One wonders if the artist felt like Philip Guston when he stopped making tasteful, pretty-pretty abstractions and started painting those crusty, homely Klansmen surrounded by dirty lightbulbs and oversize hobo shoes.

Keijaun Thomas, *My Last American Dollar: Round 1. Tricking and Flipping Coins: Making Dollars Hit and Round 2. Black Angels in the Infield: Dripping Faggot Sweat*, 2019, video, color, sound, 5 minutes. Installation view. From “Hard Opening: Vigil for Black Death.”





Richard Bosman,  
*Night Studio*, 1979,  
acrylic on paper,  
30 × 22".

Loners figure prominently in Bosman's art. Here, a few of them are fighting against cruel nature—or allegorically reckoning with their own demons. *Survivor* depicts a bedraggled man sitting on a make-shift raft beneath a wuthering, moonlit sky. He's adrift on a tempestuous green ocean flecked with white spray and awkwardly holding a bleeding gull, whose wings are broken. Perhaps the bird is meant to be an ominous symbol, foretelling a ghastly end for this helpless stranger, or maybe it's just dinner. Another avian creature takes center stage in *Night Studio*, a nocturnal scene in which an enormous menacing raven attacks a man in an ugly brown sweater (the palette on the floor with bright daubs of color indicates that he, like Bosman, is also a painter). And in *Pursued*, a suited man flees two giant, ghostly insects

that are chasing him through a dark city; the dreamlike snapshot leaves his fate unknown.

"Works on Paper" offered a fascinating preview of Bosman's later efforts. For example, *Survivor* presaged a series of prints, made throughout the 1980s, of mainly seafaring tragedies, while *Night Studio* is the progenitor for a 1986 series of oil paintings wherein artists battle for creative control against all manner of monsters. Since the works in this show were made, the narrative thread of Bosman's oeuvre has dealt largely with the anomie of modern living: A set of 2017 mono-prints featuring an assortment of household appliances going up in flames—a stove, a clothes dryer—is especially panic-inducing. However, one visual aspect that seems to have been set aside is the celestial esoteric imagery of *The Guard*. Bosman has explored the horrors of this world all too well. Perhaps next time he will take us on another trip to the stars.

—Darren Jones

## "EPHEMERAMA: Hollywood"

### SHELTER

"EPHEMERAMA: Hollywood" presents a collection of anonymous amateur drawings of women from the first half of the twentieth century—an archive of unsolved mysteries from an estate-liquidation sale in Southern California. They are unsigned and undated (although the names of legendary actresses, such as Lucille Ball, Yvonne De Carlo, and Vivien Leigh, are written on some). Forty-seven of these headshot-like portraits, from a set of more than one hundred, are exhibited by Shelter online. Researchers at the gallery have begun the process of trying to identify each face. They have located some source materials for these pictures, such as old magazine covers and advertisements. The presentation also functions as a critique of the racist industry that contrived the edicts of white female stardom. The project is commendable, but Shelter's investigation may never fully unlock the enigma of these drawings. The words *untitled* and *unidentified* repeat hypnotically as one scrolls through images that collectively start to resemble a cartoonish menagerie of mug shots or missing-person sketches.

The exhibition text declares these disquieting works to be "an absolute joy to look at"—or are they an absolute horror, the kind that you can't look away from? They are garishly rendered with a limited palette in pencil and chalk (some have watercolor backgrounds) on irregularly cut pieces of what the gallery calls "brown wrapping paper," perhaps reused grocery bags. Each work is roughly eleven inches high and eight inches wide and marred by glue and creases. Whoever made these drawings was very frugal and/or had paltry resources. Nonetheless, he or she was determined and prolific. The penciling is heavy, distorted facial contours deepened in lurid shadows of red and purple. Coiffures are attentively fixed into sculptural coils or stiff waves. Teeth are individually rendered with dark lines; eyes look frantic in several instances. These were the faces of peak Golden Era Hollywood: women who had found fame or were just trying to make it, though many were likely lost to the lacuna of anonymity.

Nearly every subject is depicted from the shoulders up, and all are posing for the camera, as this was the era of movie magazines such as *Photoplay* and *Modern Screen*, with starlets on the covers and celebrity endorsements in ads. *Life* and *Esquire* were popular fare—the latter published Peruvian illustrator Alberto Vargas's cheesecake paintings of pinup girls, which later found a home in *Playboy*. The work in "EPHEMERAMA: Hollywood" has a pathological and surreptitious air about it, as if the drawings were culled from an obsessed stalker's scrapbook. But they could just as easily have been the product of a film buff's innocent hobby, or made by an idle Californian suburbanite who inadvertently mixed many a cocktail of creepy and lonesome.

As far as the movies go, creating pretty pictures can be an ugly business, and the reality of "the industry" has never been perfectly pleasant, unlike the weather in Tinseltown. Countless dazzled newcomers to Los Angeles have been sucked into its vacuum and spit out—or worse. Take aspiring actor Elizabeth Short, a young woman who was murdered and mutilated in 1947, then posthumously nicknamed the Black Dahlia (the moniker was supposedly a riff on the 1946 noir film *The Blue Dahlia*, written by Raymond Chandler). Filmmaker and enfant terrible Kenneth Anger's scandalous, sex-obsessed book *Hollywood Babylon II* (1984) included a photo of the Black Dahlia's bisected and bloodless body left in an empty lot in southwest LA. The woman who found the corpse thought it was a mannequin.

The spectral figure behind these artworks created imitations of caricatures of glamour. A quote from Chandler's novel *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940) springs to mind: "She looked merely like a woman who would have been dangerous a hundred years ago, and twenty years ago daring, but who today was just Grade B Hollywood." A brutal line, but them's the breaks. And now, what's the difference? Faces are forgotten, and the things that characterized LA during that halcyon era have disappeared: The streetcars were decommissioned, Bunker Hill destroyed, and the movie palaces shut down. Some became porn theaters, and then they just closed, visited only during ghost tours for tourists (and ghosts). "EPHEMERAMA: Hollywood" conjures that amnesia perfectly. No names, no answers, only a portfolio of faded dreams brought to auction. It's a real whodunit, and maybe it should stay that way.

—Charity Coleman



Anonymous, *Untitled*,  
ca. 1930s–1950s,  
graphite and colored  
pencil on brown  
wrapping paper,  
11 × 8". From  
"EPHEMERAMA:  
Hollywood".