

Saltz, Jerry, "Sincerity and Irony Hug It Out," New York Magazine, May 27, 2010, page 1 of 2.

Sincerity and Irony Hug It Out

At P.S. 1's "Greater New York," a new union of opposing attitudes.

By Jerry Saltz

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Mariah Robertson's 88, on view at P.S. 1.
(Photo: Matthew Septimus/Courtesy of MoMA P.S. 1)

I'm noticing a new approach to artmaking in recent museum and gallery shows. It flickered into focus at the New Museum's "Younger Than Jesus" last year and ran through the Whitney Biennial, and I'm seeing it blossom and bear fruit at "Greater New York," MoMA P.S. 1's twice-a-decade extravaganza of emerging local talent. It's an attitude that says, I know that the art I'm creating may seem silly, even stupid, or that it might have been done before, but that doesn't mean this isn't serious. At once knowingly self-conscious about art, unafraid, and unashamed, these young artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial; they grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind—what Emerson called "alienated majesty."

The best of the work at "Greater New York" pulses with this attitude. The worst of it is full of things that move, light up, or make noise, all frantic enough to make you feel like you're at a carnival rather than a museum. I yearned to see more art here that demands that you stop and be still, like painting, of which there is very little. Instead, the curators—Connie Butler, Neville Wakefield, and Klaus Biesenbach, the museum world's unofficial czar these days—favor things that are "about" painting, like Dave Miko's canvas propped on a little shelf with drips painted on the wall behind it, carrying the

Saltz, Jerry, "Sincerity and Irony Hug It Out," New York Magazine, May 27, 2010, page 2 of 2.

heavy-handed title Lonely Merch Guy. (When will everyone get over the ossified idea that painting's particular alchemy is suspect? Bad dogma!)

But let's look on the sunny side. I counted thirteen artists whose work I really like and twelve others whose work I'd like to see again. Like Liz Magic Laser's Mine, a secret-life-of-women video in which she and a surgeon perform an operation, with medical robots, on her purse (tiny tools snipping the face out of a \$20 bill, for example); the artist simultaneously dismantles and creates, remaking her purse into a Rauschenberg combine.

This weirdly familiar otherness goes green in Brian O'Connell's funny-strange architectural columns composed of potting soil, which make you feel like you're occupying a very large sand castle. Or David Brooks's section of real forest mummified in concrete, a sad comment on turning the natural world into doomed playgrounds. Leigh Ledare's pictures of his mother having sex bring us to the dark heart of the human drive for connection; the sweet sight of Ryan McNamara being taught to dance in the building's corridors speaks for artists compelled to strip themselves naked (metaphorically or literally) in public. Saul Melman's gold-leafing of the giant double furnace in the building's basement may be just another labor-intensive process piece, but it's also an ancient sarcophagus, a moving memorial to the dead. Equally serious, particularly in their strangeness, are Matt Hoyt's tiny carved clay objects, which look like sculptural-biological forms and dead rodents. They hint at the innate connection between creating form and creating life.

Much of the most effective work in "Greater New York" also involves the artists' leaping from medium to medium in madly unexpected ways: Sculpture, music, video, and photography get mashed up; techniques like collage and assemblage are combined with unusual materials like mud, magnets, stolen record albums, and art reviews (even one of my own, in Franklin Evans's walk-in installation-painting). Mariah Robertson's long strip of photographs looping along the ceiling and across the floor is photography as sculptural installation, so smudgy and phantasmagoric and unruly that it looks like drawing, a painting, and a filmstrip all at once.

Giant group events are distorting organisms: You can like and hate them in rapid succession. In the 2005 edition of "Greater New York," there were 162 artists on view, which was ridiculous. In 2010, there are just 68. More critical is what's not there: a by-now-familiar genus of cynical art that is mainly about gamesmanship, work that is coolly ironic, simply cool, ironic about being ironic, or mainly commenting on art that comments on other art. I'm glad to see it fading away—sincerely and otherwise.