

## **A Review of Troy Richard's show at Grand Arts Dark and Airy: A Consideration of Midwestern Culture**

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While the first response to the work of Troy Richards might be a chuckle at the absurdity of giant mutant inflatable advertising balloons and cheap lawn chairs hanging from the ceiling, the artist's work is grounded, to his credit, not so much in a will to create spectacle as in a want to investigate middle-class matter and the mentality from which it springs. If Paul McCarthy's tauntingly explicit, mechanically fucking characters come to mind the moment one encounters conjoined blow-up cowboy and chef, a closer consideration reveals that Richards, one generation removed from McCarthy, Mike Kelley, et al., has perhaps more in common with artists highlighted in the recent *Under the Influence: New Art From L.A.* at the H&R Block Artspace. The work of these younger artists, whether from La-la-land or the Cheese State, as Richards is (though he now lives in New York), is sweeter, humbler, explicitly informed by popular culture and place but with a sense of acceptance, even fondness. Less radical, less aggressive, less critical in many ways than that of their teachers, the work of younger artists like Richards is also more intimate, more fluid, more open, more in and of process.

The artist's materials of choice, here, are decidedly non-precious, expendable - lightweight plastic and aluminum folding chairs, faux wood paneling, balloons which are generic enough to float from one business to the next - and for Richards, whose mother sells used mobile homes, these carry with them a first-hand cultural resonance. While signifying at once a socioeconomic class characterized by used car dealerships, strip malls, and a pervasive sense of resignation, Richards's tone is not one of mocking or disdain, but rather of consideration. What is the underlying logic that informs the perpetual manufacture of these almost iconic products? What do they signify about the culture? For him they serve as manifestations of behavioral and value systems, and his manipulations stem from a quest to seek, to discover, to extract, and to evoke that which is most human about them.

The strongest works in the show are his *Untitled (Lawn Chairs)* which, without for a moment escaping their identity as common objects, become at the same time beautiful, almost painterly constructions. A dozen or so of the chairs are linked by continuous strips of colorfully striped seat-weaving material, bound this way as one contiguous body. Well installed near the gallery entrance, they swoop through the airy atria, extending on a diagonal down from the gallery's second-floor balcony to greet the viewer upon entering the space. While referencing modernism through the linear, gridlike patterns of the striped plastic, and specifically minimalism through the use of repeating units - the chairs, geometric-ish in form and industrial-ish in material, play on the hard-edged steel forms of Donald Judd and the like - the distinctly postmodern work subverts those associations by emphatically being something: cheap lawn chairs. This tact is by no means unique, but Richards accomplishes it succinctly and with a surprising beauty. A number of other chairs, placed in corners and against walls, have been altered to suggest mutations, adapted to accommodate strange handicaps, perhaps, with their half-size widths, curved frames, folding backs. If the hanging assemblage represents the "in crowd," these are the anomalies, the outcasts, the troubled children at the outskirts - and they do evoke a pang of empathy, even pity, as if themselves human.

Grander in scale though ultimately less interesting, *Duplex Twins* continues Richards's work as the maker of mutants. Here, two inflated figures, a cowboy and a chef, have been split and recombined to form two hybrids, one of the upper bodies, the other of the lower halves, joined by gold belt-buckled waist. The pair sprawls awkwardly through the main gallery space, their huge bodies suspended from taut cords attached to the walls, the chef

positioned facing the street so as to readily confront the passerby and thus fulfill his original function as advertisement. Simply by placing these blow-ups in the context of the gallery and thus demanding our consideration, Richards raises certain questions: how do these balloons function as advertising devices, what do the characters stand for, what are they selling, what do they say about us? Larger than life, full of air, these toy men with rather pitifully painted faces, blue fringed shirt or bulbous white hat, seem decidedly effeminate - testaments to failure, to impermanence, to clearance sales - and desperate attempts to command attention. Here, as two-headed or four-legged monsters, their strangeness is emphasized and their accepted location as populators of our cultural landscape called to attention. Yet Richards does not go far enough here. We are left only with a reminder that, indeed, we are a society that produces some ridiculous monuments. The greatest interest lies in watching the upper bodies, whose internal motorized air pump is set on a timer, rise upward as they fill with air. At such moments, as the ballooning fingers seem to grasp for some invisible prize, the "twins" threaten to come to life, to burst forth Godzilla-like and shake us from complacency.

As the giant inflatables signify a sense of expectation for the businesses that own them, so too does Richards's *Young Jimmy Olsen Dreams of Seeing Through Walls* posit a notion of hopefulness, a longing for superpowers. Yet, as with the tacky balloons, this want also entails a sense of resignation, an acceptance of mediocrity. In an enclosed fake wood paneled room constructed in the smaller back gallery, a worn armchair serves as a surrogate for Superman's sidekick - the chair positioned to face a cutout in the wall through which a large, illuminated landscape is glimpsed, as if through the penetrating gaze of x-ray vision. But for Olsen, who will forever exist in the shadows of greatness, all that is revealed is an unremarkable rural Midwestern landscape, devoid of drama or glamour. To see beyond the walls is to see more of the same. We are stuck here. (Take comfort in irony.)

By pursuing a number of related ideas through diverse means, Richards has succeeded in creating an exhibition that feels more cohesive, coherent, and complete than many recent shows at Grand Arts. One comes away grasping a substantial sense of the artist and the concepts with which he is dealing. The architecture of the space, too, is utilized to advantage - the sweep of chairs emphasizing soaring space, the balloons claustrophobically contained and engaging the world beyond the windows, and the rear gallery treated not as an afterthought but maximized as a more private realm. One hopes this more considered approach to the exhibition in its entirety continues.