

Gladstone Gallery, New York, USA

Lucas Samaras' vivid work, with its fierce interiority, endless self-cannibalization and regeneration, can be difficult to consider alongside that of his peers: his art seems so personal that it is easy to overlook its engagement with essential art-historical questions. So it was refreshing to find him the presiding muse of the subtly textured show 'Dereconstruction', which brought together work that explores a variety of opposing impulses dating from the early 1970s to the present. The selection felt more balanced between male and female perspectives than the gallery's hit gathering of last summer, 'Bridge Freezes Before Road'. Gender was unrelated to the issues at play, despite more than one exhibit involving the stereotypically feminine crafts of sewing or weaving, notably Samaras' *Reconstruction #41* (1978), from his series of deliriously energetic but carefully stitched ribbon-and-fabric collages mimicking the patterns of Action Painting - a work that distils what curator Matthew Higgs describes in his catalogue essay as 'the simultaneous possibility, and mutual co-existence, of rupture and reconciliation'.

'Bridge' may have evoked a distinctly American road trip, meandering yet fuelled by testosterone and bravura, but many of the pieces in 'Dereconstruction' conjured a sense of burrowing inwards, as well as evoking aggression. The show included, for example, several tightly wrapped accretions by the late, self-taught artist Judith Scott (to whose memory it was dedicated). Works such

as her *Blue Hoses* (2004), in which obsessively knotted multicoloured yarn encases fabric and plastic tubing, like a translucent pod hiding a partially digested vacuum cleaner, are radiant cocoons that nurse a potential to explode. The show's allusions to the home were often double-edged, suggesting at once protection and threat, as in *Zusammenhang* (Connection, 2006), a delicately tinted, vaguely sinister, web-like assemblage of materials including branches, wool, leather and a dried plant by the young artist Alexandra Bircken. Despite the occasional reference to nature that appeared in works such as *Zusammenhang*, still life, with its evocation of death-in-life, was the touchstone, rather than landscape.

Collage and assemblage were dominant modes and recalled Modernist innovations of different eras, as in several dramatic, though not formally groundbreaking, Rita Ackermann collages which pay homage to Leigh Bowery. Aspects of Berlin Dada photomontage - such as Hannah Höch's hybrid bodies and curdled domesticity - echoed through some of the works on view. (In fact, Berlin's mordantly ironic, sometimes more neglected branch of the Dada family, singled by proximity to war, seems more relevant to present experience than Zurich, Paris or New York Dada, with their anarchic or cerebral gamesmanship.) In Linder Sterling's deadpan magazine-and-newspaper cut-out collages attractive faces are marred by lunatic, pasted-on eyes and toothy grins that

Judith Scott  
*Blue Hoses*  
 2004  
 Yarn, plastic hoses  
 69x36x64 cm

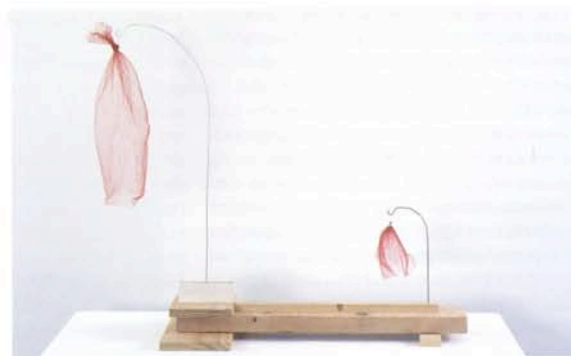
B. Wurtz  
*Untitled*  
 2005  
 Mixed media  
 70x76x22 cm

seem to slide into forkfuls of food; a layer cake substitutes for the face of a nude woman; and a young man peers down at his girlfriend through a home-movie camera eye. Made in the 1970s, they felt contemporary in this context. John Stezaker's recent elegant, small-scale works with snippets of enigmatic found images inserted into auction catalogue photographs of African sculpture recall both Surrealism and Dada. As for defining its own art-historical moment, 'Dereconstruction' was too resolutely idiosyncratic and wary to do anything of the kind, but Higgs suggests that its psychological and aesthetic dimensions defined 'a somewhat uncertain terrain, one that amplifies the sense of unease that permeates the present fragile times'. As an anxious prism through which to view an absurd contemporary landscape, as well as look back at other unsettled eras, his approach was intriguing.

Detritus from that landscape was hoarded and mysteriously transformed. Recycled materials appeared everywhere, sometimes including outright trash, as in B. Wurtz' *Untitled* tree-like object sprouting strips cut from printed plastic shopping bags. The recycling extended to film footage in Takeshi Murata's ten-minute video projection *Untitled (Silver)* (2006), which digitally reworks the Mario Bava 1960 horror flick *The Mask of Satan*, making it a story of delinquency more than demonic possession - a descent into decay and death. To a throbbing ambient soundtrack evoking crashing waves, figures decompose as they push through swimming pixels, occasionally reassembling into a barely legible face or limb.

*Untitled (Silver)* and other pieces bear out Higgs' positioning of the work in the show in a 'no-man's land' between formalism and the *informe*. Through a sort of magical equilibrium Samaras inhabits the centre of this fraught territory. Writing in a catalogue essay for an exhibition of the artist's work in the late 1980s, Donald Kuspit described the simultaneous preservation of conservative form and ever-encroaching formlessness in works including 'the fabric reconstructions with their metonymic grace and fury'. 'Dereconstruction' offered an opportunity to reconsider the difficulty of Samaras' achievement.

Kristin M. Jones



# Dereconstruction