

Flipping the Hierarchy of Needs

By Rob Colvin

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Installation shot, 'Homeland [IN]Security: Vanishing Dreams' (photo by the author; all other photos courtesy Dorsky Gallery unless otherwise noted)

What does the work of Will Cotton, Mary Mattingly, and Stephanie Imbeau have in common? Not much, I figured, when taking the G train to Long Island City, where Dorsky Gallery is hosting *Homeland [IN]Security: Vanishing Dreams*. Reading the names of the twenty-one artists in Margaret Mathews-Berenson's curatorial project — Jeff Brouws, Brian Tolle, Adia Millett, etc. — I am bracing myself for bric-a-brac and overreach along with the substantial moralism and didacticism an exhibition on “global collapse” invites. Natural and human-made disasters, ranging from terrorist attacks to hurricanes, religious and political conflicts to financial breakdowns, increased homelessness and inequality to environmental destruction, all create a sense of personal anxiety and longing for safety, which is the focal point of the show.

Will Cotton's glazed donut, that the viewer must navigate around in order to enter the gingerbread cabin or candy apple forest beyond, is the first disarming feature of this terrific exhibition. “Abandoned (Churro Cabin)” is a sugarcoated landscape, cast in warm colors, luring the viewer into strange delights, where time and gravity still loom. Not likely responding to the ‘sky is falling’ premise — the exhibition “seeks to examine artists' responses to the many man-made and natural disasters” — because his decaying candy land motif well predates September of 2001; it nevertheless is perfect for setting the tone of ambivalence most of the artists bring into their own works here.



Will Cotton, "Abandoned (Churro Cabin)" (2002), oil on linen, 60 x 60 inches

Several yards around the corner, in the second room, are Stephanie Imbeau's five porcelain sculptures negating the weight of their own construction. Unglazed ceramic sheets are draped over the physical absence of generically shaped homes, like napkins. The interior vacancy is suggestive, a personal cover for emptiness, or lodgings willing themselves into existence. Yet the works are animated with folds, overlaps, and sweeping gestures that wind blowing through an open window could produce. The pieces, by virtue of their small size and clustering on a single pedestal, are in danger of being overlooked.

Mary Mattingly, in her photographs and documentary footage of public projects, also creates homes where none existed, from reclaimed debris. Hers is a life of hunting and gathering, getting by in world where both industrialization and agrarianism have washed away. Mattingly's work is most fitting for the exhibition's premise, directly addressing life with disaster, which might explain why her work dominates in scale and number.



Stephanie Imbeau "Untitled (Covered/Uncovered) Series 8, 9, 17, 20, 24)" (2013–14), porcelain, varying dimensions

Brian Tolle's New England-style homes, made of silicon rubber supported either by crutches or a found wheelchair, beg to be touched. Their playful sadness has a delightful force, recalling Claes Oldenburg's early soft sculptures, yet these homes, in rubber, are more absurd, and therefore haunting. Directly behind these droopy houses is Ben Grasso's domestic explosion, a 50 x 70 inch painting of a narrow, white, two story house blasting out from a single-point perspective, like shrapnel.



Brian Tolle, "Old Glory" (2008) found wheelchair, platinum silicone rubber, 36 x 25 x 36 inches

Chris Verene's two photographs of Amber and her girls, whose lives the artist has charted, are brutal in their stark reality, with the family once in a car and then in an abandoned restaurant (where a mattress straddling booth seats becomes a makeshift bed). The most gripping works in the show, they portray many people's greatest fears, homelessness topped with parental responsibilities. The girls, however, are not unhappy, not knowing a life otherwise, while Amber's face reveals disappointment and strain, a mother who can't provide in any other way. These pieces, by virtue of being portraits, connect with the viewer better than several other photographs in the show, unpopulated spaces in various states of decay, that feel more like what gets called ruin porn, even if in the broader context of the artist's work, aren't such, as in the cases of Adia Millett and Jeff Brouws. Nevertheless, these pieces move the show along as geographic frames. In contrast, James Casebere's enormous print, mounted to plexiglass, is of a flooded hallway fabricate, in small scale, by the artist. The outside light bouncing off stairs and into the water below, distorting the checked floor tiles, creates a dreamy image, like tragic events remembered or foreseen.



AMBER AND HER GIRLS ARE LIVING IN HER CAR.

Chris Verene, "Amber and Her Girls Are Living in Her Car" (2006), Chromogenic print with handwritten caption in oil, 30 x 36 inches



James Casebere, "Yellow Hallway #2 (2001–2003), digital chromogenic print mounted to plexiglass, 71 x 89 inches

Safety and stability, what all the works in *Homeland [In]Security* put in limbo, are desires that arise after more basic needs are met for a person, such as food and water, and also followed by a need for community and belonging. Confidence and self-esteem are sought, followed by the greatest need we have, what we call self-actualization. This is Abraham Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs," which accounts for the trajectory of human motivations in life. But for artists the psychological motivations are upside down, starting with self-actualization (like creative gratification and realization of new ideas), which leads to higher self-regard and confidence (like artistic ambition), which spurs on communal involvement and engagement (like forming tribe of peers), then to stability (like having regular shows and selling work for higher and higher prices). Then come better meals, better living conditions, and perhaps physical well-being. This is a path to fulfillment for many artists in Brooklyn, in Philadelphia, in Detroit, and maybe around the world.



Detail of Chen Qiulin, "Balconies #1, #4, #5, #9" (2007), mixed media, 18 x 29 x 9 inches (photo by the author)

Homeland [In]Security: Vanishing Dreams continues at Dorsky Gallery (1103 45th Ave, Long Island City, Queens) through November 16.