

# WHITEHOT MAGAZINE TM

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## whitehot | July 2008, Tom Burr: Addict-Love



*Erik Smith Who, Among You, Deserves Eternal Life?, 2008 Two car crash Dimensions variable Image c. 2008 SculptureCenter and the artist Photo: Jason Mandella*

Tom Burr: *Addict-Love*  
 gallery a+b ground level  
 And New In Practice Projects, Winter 2008  
 Sculpture Center  
 44-19 Purves Street  
 Long Island City, New York 11101

A medical straightjacket and a *recreational* straightjacket both occupy a similar phenomenological presence, particularly when strewn across Tom Burr's sculptures, but each operates on entirely different semiological levels. These two types of straightjackets are employed as material in two different sculptures in Tom Burr's exhibition, *Addict Love* at the Sculpture Center, and provide some of the subtle tension and incongruity, which runs through the entire exhibition. Burr's work occupies both theatrical and sculptural spaces simultaneously. In some works, we become unwitting participants, awkward actors in spaces which become destabilized through the arrangement of Burr's objects; while in others we remain spectatc

What appears to be a minimal black sculpture, morphs into a dressing screen. A simple ladder draped with a vintage magazine becomes a prop, as if left by a stagehand in the process of adjusting the lighting in the room. Monochromatic sculptures become more complicated upon close examination of the carefully placed vintage ads from *Esquire* magazine, vintage Chanel gowns, vintage curtains, vinyl presses of Kurt Weil's score from Brecht's *Three Penney Opera*, and articles the late Wadsworth Athenaeum Director, Chick Austin. Burr's work somehow shifts shape before our eyes, while it appears deceptively simple and straightforward.

The sculpture *Light Conversation*, a psychiatry couch with objects arranged on top, initially seems as though the right leg; the foot of the couch might be suspended over a round black hole. A closer look reveals that the hole is actually a black

plexiglass mirror, which the leg is resting on. The black mirror produces the subtle, theatrical effect that this black couch, with black tuxedo, black recreational straight jacket, and black plastic hanger, might somehow be sinking into this black void, or, perhaps emerging out of it. With psychiatry couches being the location of the drama of exorcism of one's persona demons, the title *Light Conversation* is read through an incongruous lens. What sort of light conversations do take place on psychiatrist's couch with a straightjacket- either, recreational or medical? Perhaps the light in the title is referring to an illuminating, self-reflective light, and not a lightweight sort of light.

Burr's exhibition is accompanied by a very strong group exhibition, *New In Practice Projects*, featuring work by Forde and the Ashbirds, Drew Heitzler, Alix Lambert, Haley Mellin, Leyden Rodriguez-Casanova, Erik Smith and Agathe Snow. The *In Practice* exhibition series is ongoing, and supports "the creation and presentation of innovative work by emerging artists." While I might question the status of some of these artists being "emerging," it is an unquestionably, formidable exhibition. I will discuss a couple of the works in the exhibition.

Entering the courtyard of the Sculpture Center, we are confronted by Erik Smith's work, *Who, Among You, Deserves Eternal Life?*, 2008. The work consists of two totaled cars, one black, one white. They are full-sized late 1970s to 1980s sedans. The black car greets the viewer entering the space, and gives the courtyard the impression of being a temporary parking space for someone working on their broken down car. Moving towards the white car, it appears that, perhaps the Sculpture Center might have rented out their courtyard space as a small junkyard. These perceptions precede the play of black and white between the two automobiles; black and white, signifying good guy/ bad guy, positive/ negative, yin/yang, etc. Moving in gets a better look at the cars, the violence that each of these objects, and likely, their drivers, experienced becomes apparent. The title of the work implies that at least one of these drivers met with their fatality and has embarked in the eternal life (in heaven or hell?). The physical wrecked cars produce a much more visceral response than Warhol's cool, distanced images of car wrecks, and even more so than Charles Ray's *Unpainted Sculpture*. The effect Smith's work has is at first glance humorous, yet upon closer examination, strikingly somber.

Navigating through the dark, dank basement of the Sculpture Center is always challenging and creepy. This particular exhibition is no exception. We are given a key and told to take it into the cavernous and dark basement. Whenever I am down there, I expect to encounter a spooky something or other lurking about the narrow passage ways and low ceilings. Passing through the other installations, admittedly quickly, I turn a corner heading to the far corridor and am met halfway by Leyden Rodriguez-Casanova's sculpture. It consists of a small space, framed by two locked gates, each on opposite ends of the space, impeding on one's ability to move freely down the corridor. The work's title is *Two Gates Externally Locked*. With key in hand, I can see the lock on the door, and realized the larger exhibition space, outside of the unlocked space between the two doors is actually regulated by the locked gates. I unlock the door, with some mild anxiety, and find myself inside the space framed by the doors. I am free to leave, without my key, but I need it to pass back through. I am free to move about when I am inside of the gates, and constrained by them when I am on the outside with my key. We need to unlock ourselves into the space we are free to move out of. Rodriguez-Casanova's simple, and elegant gesture presents a rather imposing psychological obstacle onto the flow of space.

The incongruity and two-sidedness of Burr's exhibition is echoed throughout the *New In Practice Exhibition*, particularly in Rodriguez-Casanova's and Smith's work. The two exhibitions work well together in forcing the viewer to slow down and experience the physical presence of the work as well as read it. Both exhibitions provide a refreshing break from the fluff of many of the current commercial exhibitions in New York City.

Each demands quite a bit more attention from the viewer than we have grown accustomed to here.

**whitehot gallery images, click a thumbnail.**



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