

# ARTFORUM

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ANTONIO NEGRI  
THE ZANZIBAR GROUP  
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to dominate, but different areas appear as if shown at different scales, revealing different densities of pattern and texture.

Rodríguez employs this Guston-like palette in two paintings whose titles engage provocatively with geopolitics: *Rogue State* and *The Round City, Baghdad*. In the former, the looping lines rendered elsewhere in black are painted in vivid red, making them more explicitly gutlike. Exactly which (or what kind of) state is being identified as rogue is unclear, but the red lines violently disrupt and obliterate the more delicately limned adjacent zones. *The Round City* similarly evokes violence, as the contour of Baghdad is rendered in smeared, bloody-looking strokes and clotted points.

—Philip Auslander

## SAN FRANCISCO

### Ian McDonald

RENA BRANSTEN GALLERY

The eleven sculptures that constituted Ian McDonald's recent exhibition at Rena Bransten Gallery were bunched together on a single white platform. The mode of display seemed as important as the objects themselves—smooth, stonelike ceramic sculptures, at times



View of "Ian McDonald," 2008.

encrusted with glittering purple crystals—in its address of a classic modernist trope. The works were also set on artist-designed powder-coated steel tables and in one case enshrined in a large vitrine, thereby blurring distinctions between art, décor, and institutional display. The totality of the installation evoked a combination of midcentury furniture, Minimalist sculpture, stylish bric-a-brac, and tailored munitions (some of the sculptures have distinctly bomblike shapes).

The ambiguous relationship of form and function has been worked through innumerable times before, but McDonald's juxtaposition of forbidding power with bejeweled allure is particularly well suited to a cultural moment in which quasi-military vehicles like Hummers are marketed to the general public. At times, McDonald deploys black surfaces that are as slick as crude oil; visually sharp, such elements remain conceptually indeterminate. The objects are lent a formal distance by their fetishistic presentation, yet they are installed in a small gallery that forces close scrutiny of their seductive sheen. Two large works, *Breather Collection (mono)* and *Breather Collection (purple & white)*, both 2007, have a similarly industrial gloss. Shiny hybrid forms, they suggest fashionable vases, bowling pins—or bulbous, pint-size missiles.

Some of these particular works are capped with a variety of circular aluminum vents that suggest inhalation, but other urnlike sculptures in the show have a more deathly air. *1/2 vessel-full*, 2008, is a hefty, shallow glazed vessel sealed at the top with cement that has been sanded to create a smooth but mottled surface. The suggestion that this contains something physically or psychically weighty—heavy metals, human ashes, or an incendiary document—is palpable. Placing the vessel on a specially made round table, McDonald counterbalances the funereal impression with elegant engineering; if you squint, it evokes a fashionable floor lamp. The work reflects the show's title,

"Optimism (If You Want It)," by offering the vague promise of consumer pleasure in the face of lethal implications.

A regal shade of purple appeared more than once, most emphatically in the prominently placed *Chiminea*, 2008, a miniaturized ceramic model of a fireplace. Perched on a stool-like side table, it looks fit for a bachelor pad. The object, however, is stuffed with lumps of coal, which, while containing shimmering flecks of mineral, visually recede into the body of the work like a hibernating predator. More glamorous minerals appear in works like *Geode #1*, 2008, a small ceramic boulder encrusted with borax crystals that suggests an uncomfortable conflation of well-intentioned New Age spirituality with the threat of radioactivity.

With ambiguity playing such a starring role, McDonald's project flirts dangerously with obliterating itself with multiple interpretations. The works are presented in a tight grouping that reads as installation, yet are titled (and sold) separately. And their effectiveness as singular objects is sometimes questionable: Do they rely too much on the carpet-bomb approach? That McDonald's title ironically invokes optimism as a guiding factor suggests that that battle might remain, for now, dynamically unresolved.

—Glen Helfand

## George and Mike Kuchar

2ND FLOOR PROJECTS

From Auguste and Louis Lumière and Warner Bros. to Ethan and Joel Coen and the Farrellys, brother acts have had a mighty influence on the history of film. Commandeering the foundational basement of the frat house of cinema, twins George and Mike Kuchar have long wreaked havoc, creating fetid splendors too numerous to list, the titles of some of their earliest collaborations (*The Wet Destruction of the Atlantic Empire*, 1954; *A Tub Named Desire*, ca. 1956; and *Pussy on a Hot Tin Roof*, 1961) providing only a glimmer of the kind of sexy delirium that would influence Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, John Waters, and David Lynch, among many others. Certainly this tale is by now well known in the experimental film world, but in the art world?

While the Kuchars were making their mystic, mischievous movie (and video) magic out of and in response to the gamut of Hollywood genres, the brothers were, especially during the 1970s and '80s, creating parallel worlds of marvels in oil, watercolor, pastel, acrylic, and ink. George has said he made his work "ambiguously," because he liked painting; Mike liked to draw, but his work was, as Eileen Myles confirms in a sharp essay published to accompany the show, "largely commissioned": "A roommate had a friend who needed art for some gay publications. Mike did a few for them, got paid, and the word got around that he was good." Myles notes that George told her "he learned about oil paintings from the Walter Foster books you'd find in Woolworth's as a kid."

Mike's mid-1970s to mid-'80s drawings (all pen and ink, felt pen, or watercolor) are gonzo allurements that do for all the paradoxical curvaceous va-va-vaoom of the well-built male physique what R. Crumb does for his dames' bosoms and booties. In these works, Mike escapes into a bawdy



George Kuchar  
*Bocko*, 1970  
canvas, 24 x