
Michelle Grabner
MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART CLEVELAND

During the past sixteen years, Michelle Grabner and Brad Killiam have presided over some two hundred ad hoc exhibitions in an eight-by-eight-foot converted shed behind their house in Oak Park, Illinois, known as the Suburban. A full-scale replica of this concrete-block structure anchored “I Work From Home,” Grabner’s midcareer retrospective; she selected four artists—Michael Smith, Jessica Jackson Hutchins, Amanda Ross-Ho, and Karl Haendel—to display work therein, effectively creating a rotation of shows within the show. Grabner would appear to be among the most generous artists of her generation; she is keenly interested in what other artists do; she frequently brings people, ideas, and objects together, she writes about other artists’ works; she’s an educator and mentor. The sum of these activities, together with her own studio work, constitutes a mutually instructive practice in which Grabner’s paintings, drawings, and prints mine the interstices of both material and social fabrics.

At sixty-four square feet, the Suburban’s original exhibition space is absurdly small. (Since 2001, the venue has also included another, separate room.) And while the format may have been intended as a kind of institutional critique—insomuch as this white cube is a noncommercial space in a backyard, for the artists who show work in, around, and atop the structure, the Suburban also stands as a challenge with which to contend—and as an exemplar of the variety of creative activity that strict limitations can foster. Grabner has been described as: a modest, unassuming individual who is incredibly productive; a woman who has a rare ability to make her own work unique; an artist who is a teacher and mentor; her work is driven by her own interests and her own desires; her work is poetic; her work is provocative; her work is political. And yet, despite these paintings’ limited color palettes, fixed design parameters, and controlled markings, an astonishing variety emerges. This is also true of the artist’s “radial silverpoint” series, 2008–. The magic happens between the lines, in the delicate spaces separating figure and ground, in moments when Grabner eased up on the style, and, over time, as the metal oxidizes. Her "indescribable paintings," 1993–99, share this delicate sensibility. In these works, she made marks on panels through the tiny spaces between the fibers and wires of woven domestic materials—textiles, plastic tablecloths, metal screens—later using this residue to render brilliantly...
In this light, "Cinematheque Tangier" assumes a formal clarity, as a cultural repository that works on the scale of tangible mediation and circulation (like a library) and also on a larger sociopolitical project that is "the Orient" in general and Tangier in particular. As Edward Said famously argued in 1978, northern Africa has long been a site of projected fantasy and repressed desire for Western audiences. Barrada’s project resituates Tangier as a geopolitical map on which the ground changes to administrative and the built environment unfolds in the seemingly absurd terrain of art and literature. In deploying this symbolic archive alongside the physical documentation of her own seven-year-old site, Barrada brings her practice into focus as a continual reorganizing of objects to create new meanings. Of course, even in an atomized, streamlined world one needs nodes through which the past can be preserved and the present staged. A notable reason that so many prominent African artists live or work on other continents is that such physical infrastructure—from supply systems to libraries of critical theory to art-house theaters—is lacking.

At the heart of "Cinematheque Tangier" is a utopian pragmatism shaped around modernist projects of yore. Indeed, in her now-classic essay "One Place After Another: Notes on Site-Specificity" from 1997, Witoen Kwok cautioned against “globalism” or nomadic work that would feed the market’s insatiable “consumption of difference (for difference’s sake),” precisely remarking that “the string of art in ‘real’ places can also be a stream to extract the social and historical dimensions out of places.” “Cinematheque Tangier” is important, then, because it works in precisely the opposite direction. Viewers here do not so much enjoy visual documentation of Tangier as support the operation of an avant-garde infrastructure that extends to the Walker itself. Built into the show is a cinema in miniature, which screens eight films totaling two hours in length. Rather than trade on a veneer of documentary criticality or cash in on the voyeurism of difference, "Cinematheque Tangier" creates a platform for reinvestment in a place and the redemption of its contours.

—Isidre Boixlard

LOS ANGELES

Bob Mizer and Tom of Finland
MoCA PACIFIC DESIGN CENTER

In Victorian times, the site of gay pleasure, sensuality, and communal-ity was the off swimming hole, celebrated by artists like Walt Whitman and Mark Twain. Thomas Eakins and Henry Street Tuke, Photogra-pher and publisher Bob Mizer and illustrator Toikko Laaksonen ("Tom of Finland") relocated the Victorian Eden to the filling sta-tins, pools, bars, gyms, and backlots of a postwar landscape remarkably like Los Angeles, a sunbaked utopia where every man’s a dreamboat and he’s bursting out of his jeans to get at you. In recent years, Mizer’s and Laaksonen’s respective foundations (both artists died in the early 1990s) have attempted to insert their work into a high-art counter the moCA Pacific Design Center show was only the