

HYPERALLERGIC

The Frontier of the Art World

by Hrag Vartanian on October 2, 2014



The revival tent at William Powhida and Jade Townsend's "New New Berlin" (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

GALVESTON, Texas — The idea of a boomtown is part of the myth of the United States of America. Like dreamers huddled around a storyteller in an ethereal oasis, Americans like tales of prosperity that lead to legends of streets paved with gold. But that enthusiasm for riches is coupled with its shadowy cousin, depression. Galveston exemplifies that arc: once a boomtown of great wealth, it succumbed to the deadliest natural disaster in US history over a century ago and entered a long period of decline. Today, the city of 48,000 retains a ghostly quality, like a place filled with eerie memories — it can sometimes feel like the flood waters of history haven't fully receded.



A view of “New New Berlin” a few hours before it officially opened

It was in this setting that Brooklyn artists William Powhida and Jade Townsend were invited to conjure up their latest satirical take on the art world and its culture of courtship, its social hierarchies, and its larger-than-life mythology. Commissioned by the Galveston Artist Residency, “New New Berlin and N(ev)ada Art Fair” is an extensive installation that features Monopoly-like stereotypes of a Western town reworked in an art world idiom. The project pokes fun at the art fairs that pop up around the globe hocking their wares, and during the opening night actors played absurd characters including a saloon prostitute, mouthy bartender, born-again preacher, undocumented prisoner, apathetic hotel clerk, and disgruntled newspaper editor.



A detail of “ABMB Hooverville” (2010) evokes the flavor of “New New Berlin.” (via WilliamPowhida.com)

Ever since Townsend and Powhida’s “ABMB Hooverville” (2010) drawing was released in the midst of the global financial crisis, people have been seduced by their vision of an art world dystopia overrun by the blind ambition of artists, the cruelty of dealers, the buffoonery of critics, and boom or bust nature of a business that pitches its tent near any coterie of moneyed interests hungry for the aura of culture. “New New Berlin” feels like the first physical manifestation of that shadowy world, and, like the drawing, it is an oasis fleshed out with real world personalities distilled into types. (Full disclosure: I was one of the figures lampooned in the drawing, and I was friends with Powhida before it was released, and have since befriended Townsend.)

“New New Berlin” isn’t directly about neighboring Houston and its strong art scene, though there are clear nods (the Aspen Hotel refers to the Colorado town of choice for many of Houston’s art collecting elite, and the term “New New Berlin” is swiped from Contemporary Arts Museum Houston Director Bill Arning’s term for Houston). The bigger target of the project is the strange provincial politics that govern a global system we like to call the art world. Art bloggers, socialites, small-time dealers, wealthy patrons, and auction-annointed artists rub elbows while seeming oblivious (or apathetic) to each other’s successes, needs, and anxieties.



The cranky newspaper editor with his “Editorial Policy”

Townsend is often overlooked in his collaborations with Powhida, partly because the latter is more verbose, offering an easier entry point into the work, but Townsend brings a mythic energy to the project that acts as the ambient frame through which to see these fantasies writ large. And for those familiar with Townsend’s work, the physical constructions resemble his precarious style more than Powhida’s, which is more obvious in the details like the newspaper and graphics.

The revival tent at “New New Berlin” is a brilliant send-up of a religious tradition but also of the art world’s love of white-box spaces as the default for viewing contemporary art. A Dan Flavin–inspired cross leans on a wooden podium as folding chairs invite the faithful to pray. The covers of cheap paperbacks are painted white, with “The Last Word” spray-painted onto each volume. There’s something strangely familiar about this fragment of the larger work, reminding me of an art fair booth by Gavin Brown Enterprises or something equally clever at the NADA Art Fair. Minimalism, like religious faith, requires the written word to cement its place in the world.



Artist Jade Townsend in front of the Aspen Hotel

If the art town shenanigans — including a frantic conspiracy theory room in the newspaper office and a sadly marginal “Occupy” zone — are the project’s superego, the id of the project is in the back, past the townie

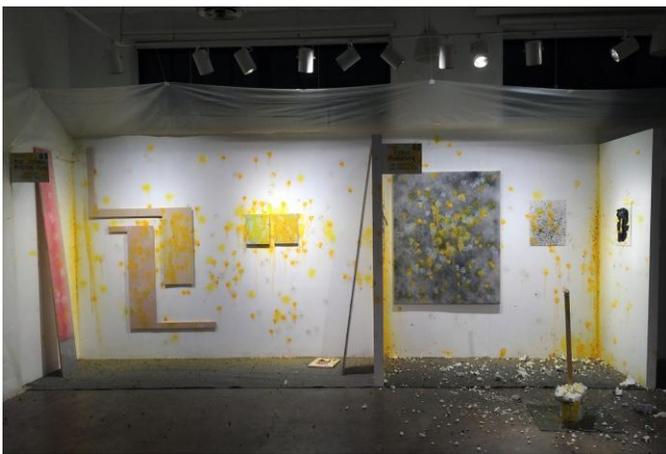
hoopla: an art fair shooting gallery named “N(ev)ada Art Fair.” Visitors are handed a paint ball gun and invited to shoot at generic-looking abstract paintings hanging in comically named art fair booths, like David Zwirner and Gagagosian. Powhida and Townsend have the aura of exclusivity and money that’s part of most art fair brands in their sights. Their VIP lounge is pared down to a table of water bottles, a glass vase with fake flowers, and exercise balls in place of chairs. Absurdly minimalist, it doesn’t look entirely out of place at a small art fair, making the staging more poignant.

Overall there is a nervous energy about the project that stops it from feeling too carnivalesque, though the distortions of scale and playful framing often provide a hall-of-mirrors thrill.



A happy inmate with bodies poking out of plastic bags in the back

When filmmaker Jacques Tati made *Mon Oncle (My Uncle)* in 1958, his attack on modernity was sugar-coated in an obvious affection for it. That sugar coating is less apparent in “New New Berlin”; there’s a clear angry streak running through the project, and it has a negative impact, chipping away at the absurdity and contradictions to leave flat stereotypes. The hotel, which on opening night featured a clerk who ignored you, is undeveloped, and the town jail, inhabited by a happy inmate who was eager to rape the newly indicted Texas governor Rick Perry (while plastic bags filled with body parts of his friends are stashed in the back), is just bizarre.



The results of N(ev)ada Art Fair shooting gallery in “New New Berlin”

Earlier this year, some Angelenos organized a weekend art fair at the Paramount Ranch soundstage outside LA. “New New Berlin” immediately evokes that marriage of Hollywood Western set and art world eccentricities. The strength of the project is that it isn’t too far from reality to be real.



The bank, with its difficult-to-reach ATM (click to enlarge)

“ABMB Hooverville” continues to appeal to people who see the disparities of the art world growing each day. The Galveston project is not quite a full realization of that vision. After the opening night, there are no actors drawing you in, no fake preachers going through the motions of faith, and all you’re left with is a stage set for a drama that continues to play itself out in city after city enamored with art. The party may now feel like it’s over at “New New Berlin,” but the art world is like a weed: there’s always a party somewhere, where the rituals of desire, wealth, and the faithful are sacrosanct. Sometimes you aren’t sure who’s doing the laughing and who they’re laughing at.



On the poker table inside the saloon

New New Berlin! & Nevada Art Fair was created by William Powhida and Jade Townsend, curated by Janet Phelps, and continues at the Galveston Artist Residency (2521 Ships Mechanic Row, Galveston, Texas) until October 25.

Editor’s note: The Galveston Artist Residency provided free lodging to the author during his stay in Galveston, Texas.