

Derosia

Johanna Fateman, The New Yorker, July, 2020

# THE NEW YORKER

ART

## “Noplace”

The five artists in this exhibition at the P.P.O.W. gallery work in the terrain between absurdism and speculative fantasy. Although the gallery offers an engaging facsimile on its Web site, the show’s through-the-looking-glass quality is best appreciated in person. Near the entrance, Devin N. Morris’s arborlike construction of found doors suggests a portal to the makeshift, queer world of his art, which is also represented by a second installation made of salvaged materials and a colorful, figurative painting. The collaborative duo Ficus Interfaith makes a striking impression with an elongated riff on the Stars and Stripes; the twelve-foot-long composition, fashioned from inlaid terrazzo, feels at once officious and satirical. Raque Ford’s gestural paintings on translucent polypropylene are suspended from the ceiling by chains; Joel Dean’s alphabet-themed symbolist canvases convey a strangely ghastly yet whimsical realm. Guadalupe Maravilla’s shrinelike mixed-media sculpture, titled “Disease Thrower #4,” which merges references to pre-colonial Central American rituals and personal mythology, is the show’s immersive climax.

— *Johanna Fateman*

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Victoria Camblin, Art in America, January 5, 2017

# Art in America

## Up Close 2016: Around Atlanta

Joel Dean, “Powers of 7-8-9” at Species



The Atlanta Contemporary operates the Studio Artist Program, through which artists receive partially-subsidized studio space on the museum’s premises. Two of these artists, Erin Jane Nelson and Jason Benson (who formerly ran Important Projects in Oakland, California), occasionally convert their shared work area into Species, a gallery that focuses both on emerging artists and on the anthropological and environmental leitmotif of the Anthropocene. Linda Moncada and Saige Rowe’s “Is This a Love Connection” featured a melting ice sculpture that left blue-green marbled marks on the floor, alongside playful video and installation works exploring entropy and decay. Joel Dean’s “Powers of 7-8-9” paired rough wood sculpture with DIY miniature paper models of famous skyscrapers, monumentalizing archaic modes of production while dwarfing modern feats of engineering.

# ARTS ATL

## Review: Joel Dean's "Powers of 7-8-9" is a glorious exploration of binaries



Joel Dean's *Powers of 7-8-9*, at Species through December 31, is one of the most gloriously excessive explorations of binaries, or maybe just of two-ness, in town. (Does it matter that Dean, raised in Atlanta in the 1990s and now an artist in New York, is himself a twin? Perhaps.)

Dean has been deeply inspired by the ideas in Jean Baudrillard's lecture "Requiem for the Twin Towers," on the meaning of the twin towers and their toppling — which Baudrillard linked to the transmutation of capitalism from competition into "networks and monopoly" — and Dean's reading of it has given rise to his growing *City* of doubled or twinned model skyscrapers (each one constructed from a three-dimensional puzzle set). This collection of pairs of identical alternatives is complemented by *Twin Tower Mathematics*, a pair of wall-mounted twin abaci (the seldom-used plural of abacus), one of them completely filled with beads so that it cannot be used for computation, the other completely empty of beads so that it, too, cannot be used for computation. They form the perfect binary opposition, A and Not-A, or an exercise in identity and difference in which both sets, the empty and the full one, turn out to be equally useless.

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Jerry Cullum, Arts Atl, December 21, 2016

This elaborate exercise in binary mathematics also recalls the binaries of Sigmund Freud's fort-da game and Jacques Lacan's tale of the children reading the railroad station's bathroom signs ("We're at Ladies." "Idiot! Can't you see we're at Gentlemen."). The sets of skyscrapers can be read by determined Freudians either as a veritable forest of maleness or a set of suggestive slits formed by the gap between each pair of twin structures, and from there, the notion that architecture is a symbolic language leads us quickly into Lacanian territory.



Joel Dean: *No Body Can Say No*, (2016). Image courtesy Species Gallery.

If the Freudian dimensions of this show were in question, any ambiguity is removed by the adjacent pair of wooden sculptures, one of a boy seated cross-legged, the other of a human-sized (about 5-plus feet tall), emphatically phallic honey dipper, a pair presented under the title *No Body Can Say No*. Both are surrounded by coarse strings stretched floor to ceiling, forming a sort of cage with just enough room between the thin bars to allow a viewer to slip through. This looks like the prison of sexuality itself rather than constructed gender, although the prison is flimsy or illusory, so maybe not; and given the prominence of "No . . . No" in the title, are we supposed to think about Freud's essay on negation, the idea that for the unconscious, "yes" and "no" are not really an opposing pair? (After all, this might be at the root of our present "post-truth" political climate.)

I don't think so, but frankly, I'm not sure. When you start with Baudrillard, you end up in increasingly strange intellectual terrain, and this is an interesting place to go, regardless of the lack of respect shown to Baudrillard these days in fashionable philosophic circles.

The presence of a *Tin Can Telephone*, in which communication between the binary opposition of the two sides can only be carried out via an extremely dubious string connection, further suggests that this show is a meditation on the problematic nature of language and how people use it, but also on the intrinsic problem of two-ness, always collapsing into an undifferentiated, monolithic unity or obscuring the complexity of situations in which there are always more than two sides to every question.

Throw in *The table is set, so now eat*, a three-legged table on which the missing fourth leg has been cut into portions served up on white plates, and *Architectural Digest*, a single model building laid aside in a wastebasket, and you have an over-the-top piece of witty theorizing that is a worthy successor to the theory-laden *ATLBNL* that closed at the Atlanta Contemporary an hour before this show opened in the art center's Studio 4, which morphs at regular intervals into the Species gallery space.

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Joel Dean: *Tin Can Telephone*, (2016). Image courtesy Species Gallery.

What all these sets of dualities add up to is left for the viewer to puzzle out. The prison of gender is there to be stepped out of, apparently, and the utility of a binary system for anything but computer languages is called into question. The unique doubling of the fallen twin towers (the model buildings in *City* are one-of-a-kind structures turned into twins by the artist) feeds somehow into this larger problematic.

But the oddity is that given the evidence, the exhibition seems to be about almost anything but the possibilities I've laid out thus far. The incomplete artist statement that Species' owners called on Dean to rephrase in a "grunting, stupid, but honest language" deals almost entirely with the twin towers as a symbolic expression of a two-world-power competitive opposition that became meaningless in a world being turned into a single interlinked economic and social entity.

That vision of irresistible globalization suddenly seems dated in the face of the new face-off of multiple powers in which, to paraphrase what a European political thinker said last week, "nations are ceasing to resemble one another and starting to look distinct again." The fact that binaries are blurring in the realm of gender on the one hand, and that the world economy and the global climate remain immense unified systems on the other, complicates the present-day drive toward division, but a global unification that once seemed inevitable has suddenly come to a painful halt.

It feels like Joel Dean has done his best to create symbols that grapple with this peculiarly difficult moment in world history. But if so, he has left us to assemble the puzzle parts for ourselves. He leaves us with a world in which the unified logarithmic scale that Charles and Ray Eames explored optimistically in their 1977 film *Powers of Ten* (which inspired Dean's exhibition title) has been succeeded by less perfectible ways of getting from zero to, if we are lucky, nine.

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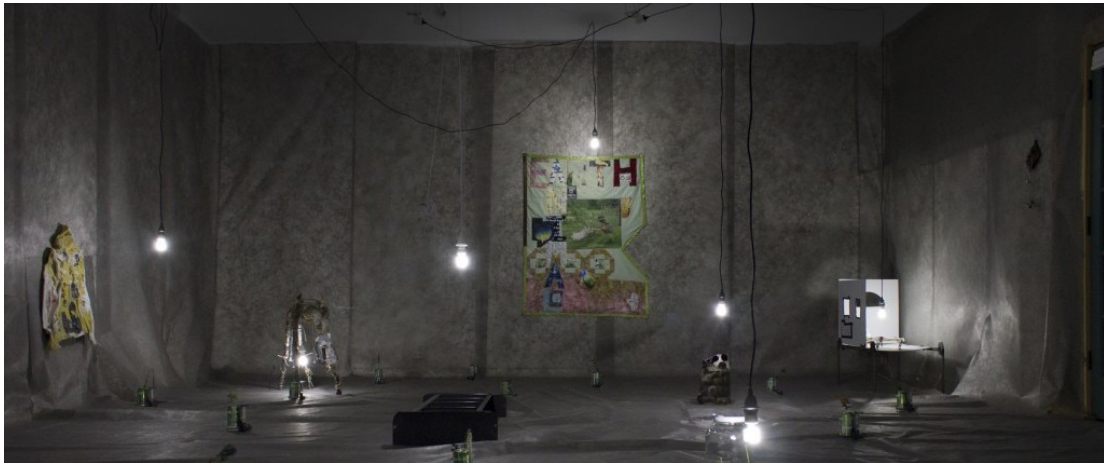
Jackie Im, Art Practical, May 5, 2015



**ART PRACTICAL**

Review

## 100° City



When I was a child, I remember having distinct feelings of anxiety about the environment. Coming of age during the time of *Captain Planet*, *Ferngully*, and the vaguely environmental video for Paula Abdul's "Promise of a New Day," the stomach-churning sense of fear and a realization that, as a child, I couldn't do much to halt or reverse the effects of pollution is a sentiment that persists today. Of course, as an adult, those feeling are mixed with a kind of fatalism as the Earth hurdles toward some end. The drought in California is not helping. The calamitous blizzards on the East Coast aren't helping either.

Such environmental anxieties pervade *100° City*, a three-person exhibition by Jason Benson, Joel Dean, and Erin Jane Nelson at City Limits in Oakland. Entering the foyer of the gallery, you see the gallery's windows and glass doors covered with black plastic and taped down with blue painter's tape, looking like the exterior of a haunted house. The walls and floor of the gallery are lined with gray, papery fabric, veined in a way that reminded me both of the red weed that plagues Earth in Steven Spielberg's telling of *The War of the Worlds* (2005) and of varicose veins. The immersive installation made the normally sunny gallery space feel dank and alien, disrupting the common gallery tropes of the white cube and the more recent

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Jackie Im, Art Practical, May 5, 2015



Joel Dean. *Untitled*, 2015; Solarbotics Photopopper Photovore V5.0, glass jar; 11" x 7" x 7". Courtesy of the Artist and City Limits, Oakland.

*Contemporary Art Daily* chic of bright, even lighting. With a keen sense of display and through the works themselves, Benson, Dean, and Nelson have created an exhibition that prods at humanity's place on Earth, what comes next, and what does "next" look like? "Will sinkholes form?"

Coke Life cans teeter slowly around the gallery floor, flowers sprouting from their pull-tab mouths. Joel Dean's *Earthlings* (2015) pieces operate on oblong wheels with battery-powered robotics desperately trying to move them forward. Playing on our human knack for personifying all things, Dean shrewdly casts these

sculptures as cute, almost reminiscent of Wall-E, yet in calling them "earthlings," there's something disturbing in these Coke Life cans: a corporate cooption of natural and organic foodstuffs being left behind as humanity passes. There is a moment in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* where the man and his son savor a can of Coca-Cola, an act that is so mundane yet harmful to our health, and in this dystopia provides a kind of normalcy for the father, a reminder of a past life. These gestures of normalcy are present in Dean's untitled sculpture made of a glass jar containing two tiny machine-looking creatures powered by solar energy and equipped with light-sensing "eyes," as well as sensors to help them avoid obstacles. Displayed as one would a bug in a jar, the robotic beings have leaves to munch on and holes to breathe fresh air from. It's an eerie proposal: If insects die out, will we treat and care for robots in the same way?

Jason Benson's sculptures are decidedly creepier and horrific. His masked creatures take on alien forms, but come emblazoned with hockey masks, a cue that reads them as human and also strongly referencing Jason Voorhees from the Friday the 13th horror series. Like the famous masked antagonist, these sculptures seem reanimated, stiff yet relentless. An untitled piece, with deer-like legs made of pipes, is coiled in wire and bungee cord, a Frankenstein-like animal brought back to life via technology. Another sculpture sits in an open cardboard box, clad in plaster with a light fixture jutting out of its chest like the creature in *Alien* (1979). The piece is crudely made—it's ugly and creepy, plaster is spread unevenly, with rough-hewed, hooked appendages flanking either side—but it all serves to underscore an exploration of bodies, mutation, and death. Pasted on a flap of the cardboard box, a text reads, "The year of the death penalty," while the sculpture also sports a dog tag stating, "Welcome to Earth, the epicenter of abject cruelty." It's a damning sentiment that speaks to humans' ability to cause harm to others, to animals, to the environment.

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Jackie Im, Art Practical, May 5, 2015



Erin Jane Nelson. *How Acidic Is Your Body?*, 2015 (detail); cable-knit sweater, inkjet print on cotton, beeswax, spirulina tablets, almonds, embroidered patch; 30" x 23" x 3". Courtesy of the Artist and City Limits, Oakland.

In *How Acidic Is Your Body?* (2015), Erin Jane Nelson mines the anxiety of toxicity and deficiency. Nelson fixes and stiffens an oatmeal-colored knit sweater with sloppy pools of dried beeswax. Undermining its coziness, she points to first-world consumers' interest in a more natural lifestyle—the Goop lifestyle, if you will. Stuck to the sweater are almonds, a nutritionally dense food, and there are spirulina tablets, a dietary supplement that is high in amino acids. There is also the clipping of a fear-mongering quiz asking “How acidic is your body?” and a lifehack suggesting the use of tampons to check for leaking sewage. Bringing these elements together, Nelson prods at the kind of manipulative clickbait that gets people to blindly follow a lifestyle brand without thought of the ramifications.

In the quilt piece *Earth Animal* (2015), Nelson stitches on a print of a flier that reads, “Art won’t save the world.” Couple that sentiment with studies of the human impact on the planet and it seems clear that humans can’t—and won’t, either. While fatalistic, *100° City* is not a wholly ominous show. There is a black, absurd humor that pervades, pointing at our

foibles, where humans are hypocritical and where we perhaps foolishly try to save ourselves. The show is not easy to view: Works are either on the floor or hung low, forcing you to stoop down, to become base. The press release, written by Dean and Nelson, is a poetic list of questions that both illuminates and obfuscates subject matters: “Will sinkholes form,” “Did Phyllis hang herself,” “Is brown the new green,” and so on. *100° City* seeks to challenge, to draw people into these messy conversations about anxiety, about the effects we have on the Earth and our powerlessness to effect change.

*100° City* is on view at City Limits, in Oakland, through May 9, 2015.



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Alexandra Pechman, ARTnews, October 1, 2014

# ARTnews

## ‘Four Drawings of a Farmer’ at Bureau

Curated by artist Maliea Croy, this show of work by 12 artists working in various mediums often reflected the human face and focused on alienation and anxiety.

In the front gallery, misreadings of Ed Ruscha’s name emanated from a mobile by Joseph Grigely and Amy Vogel, titled *You* (2001), which is composed of entangled speakers. Surrounding it, three of Lui Shtini’s cold “face paintings,” stared back at viewers from eyeless globular heads, while on the floor, a Joel Dean sculpture consisted of a white 3-D printed head poking out of a white gym bag. In this gathering, faces seemed to be trying to establish contact with their audience but remained just out of reach of mutual understanding.

In the main gallery, one of Tony Oursler’s talking heads was howling for release from her orb-like confines, lending an eerie and frantic feeling to the experience of viewing the other more sober pieces in the room. Three works in particular—a lovingly crafted pair of panty hose titled *night egg* (2014) by Allison Branham; the delicate charcoal drawing *Lonely Girl* (2013) by Natasha Ghosn; and three untitled dioramas by Jason Benson composed of cut-up newspaper—when viewed together, took on a more charged, urgent tone, though they represented a kind of solitary, artistic longing. Such loneliness made for good company.

# SFAQ

## REVIEW: “THE MUTANT AND THE MELODY” SOLO EXHIBITION BY JOEL DEAN AT JANCAR JONES GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.



As a spectator entering a gallery or museum, anticipation of aesthetic elation is internalized. Once upon these works, viewing an interesting something or other creates a silent, intangible collision of intellect and emotion. The works often unwavering, your opinion and observation, conversely, are fluctuating actions. This existential quandary is the continuative thread through art history from Mesopotamian to Contemporary. Our inquisitive nature relentlessly asks: What is the purpose? What is this function? And, (everyone’s favorite), is this “Art”? Very rarely is the human’s physical presence integral to the function of a work of art. One may argue the mere attendance by the general public to such art viewing arenas, is an act of participation, directly impacting the gravitas of these pieces in question- however, do these works react to you, the spectator? For Joel Dean’s “The Mutant and the Melody,” currently on view at Jancar Jones Gallery, the inanimate becomes animate. Within this space the art and oneself are unified in flux.

Resembling paintings, four panels lean against the walls of Jancar Jones, dozens of tonal rocks strewn across the floor. Size and width of each panel are equal in scale with all the

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Bianca Guillen, SFAQ, September 27, 2013

industrial harmony of a McCracken. Dean's panels are cascades of electric gradients. However, if you are in this intimate space with more than yourself the panels begin to morph with a suddenness that is surprising. This is not clear at first. As you enter, the panels remain glossy and brightly hued. But, what are in fact heat sensitive panels begin to change. As you approach each, the color morphs, unceremonious and instantaneously, to a deep monochromatic shade. The miniature boulders scattered at your feet appear to be of random placement. With tiny aisles giving way to loose, makeshift prosceniums, cleared at the foot of each panel. This, undeniably, begs a viewer to come close and observe, only for the works, to vanish within a fraction of a second. But, before you find yourself in such close proximity to these works, you must navigate through the artificial gravel. As you try your best to avoid these rocks your nerve level spikes. Anxiously treading around the path already created, you look closer (or sneak a squeeze); ironically, the rocks in question are made of the same foam rubber as standard issue stress balls. You can't help but feel like being a pawn in a diversion.

According to Dean the participatory nature of, "The Mutant and the Melody," reflects the structure of a narrative fable. You the observer and gallery patron come to a "pithy maxim" of shared human endeavor, through this event made up of these elusive, seemingly disconnected elements. This seemed grandiose at first but once immersed within, the fleeting beauty ahead (panels) and the challenges set before (stress ball rocks), seem to mirror something that is bigger than its existence. Beyond that, those relentless inquisitive humane questions are never answered, making even your "pithy maxim" an unsettled resolve. "The Mutant and the Melody," is confusingly beautiful constructed with conviction that can only be described complex simplicity.