

ART REVIEW

Prison, Paper and Puns in New York's Art Galleries

Jesse Krimes, Jesse Chun and Georges Hugnet in this week's Fine Art



A detail of Jesse Krimes's 'Purgatory' (2009).

PHOTO: JESSE KRIMES/BURNING IN WATER

By Peter Plagens

Sept. 9, 2016 4:02 pm ET

Jesse Krimes: Marking Time in America, The Prison Works

Burning in Water

317 10th Ave., (716) 380-3080

Through Sept. 18

Jesse Krimes is a great story, but how good is his art?

Mr. Krimes (b. 1982) was the child of a teenage mother, never knew his father, and was first arrested at age 18. Nevertheless, he managed to attend the Tyler School of Art in

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He made art, though, while incarcerated, and the derring-do involved in its creation and its being smuggled out of prison almost renders critical evaluation pointless. The 292 thumbnail-size portraits of “Purgatory”—made by using hair gel to transfer printed photographs onto small pieces of soap—were hidden, like the old gun-in-a-book trick, inside partial decks of playing cards.

“Apokaluptein:16389067” (the number being Mr. Krimes’s prison ID), a photo-transfer work more than 40 feet wide and 15 feet high, consists of 39 panels on purloined bedsheets (the artist had a friend in the prison laundry). It required three years to complete.

Both works are stunning: “Purgatory”—especially as displayed, on a long shelf with the cards, against a black wall—because necessity made it so original, and heaven-and-earth “Apokaluptein” because it’s as good as Rauschenberg’s similar work and, perhaps, more heartfelt and lyrical.

Mr. Krimes is now gainfully employed in the Philadelphia art world and wants to be known, eventually, as simply an artist who was once in prison. But this exhibition is going to be a tough act to follow.

Jesse Chun: On Paper

Spencer Brownstone

3 Wooster St., (212) 334-3455

Through Sept. 17

Jesse Chun, who was born in 1984 in Korea and lived in Hong Kong and Toronto before moving to New York, is a conceptual artist not far removed from graphic design. “I started thinking about my immigration documents because I’ve had to fill them out,” Ms. Chun told an interviewer earlier this year. Using them as a source, she’s come up with mostly black-and-white work that’s quite good-looking in a bare-bones sort of way.

Her first method is to selectively erase bits and chunks of text so as to create what they used to call “concrete poetry”—language manipulations in which the visual component is at least as important as the meaning of the words. Her second device is to remove all the

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Ms. Chun has, however, another pictorial gambit at hand, and that is to take the security background patterns from passport pages and business envelopes and have them function, variously shaded, like the half-tone dots in published photographs—in one case here, a spectacular mountain view. The trouble is that conceptual art must be, if nothing else, rigorous, even severe. The landscapes compromise that by catering—even with intended irony—to the pictorial. Without them, the show would have been less attractive, but more convincing.



Georges Hugnet's 'Maitresse de maison accomplie, elle ne laisse rien au hasard...' ('Accomplished hostess, she leaves nothing to chance...')

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Through Sept. 30

Among the marquee names of European Surrealism (Salvador Dalí, René Magritte and Max Ernst, for example), Georges Hugnet (1906-1974) is likely to seem like an afterthought. He was a French commercial artist with a penchant, which began in childhood, for cutting up pictures and rearranging them.

In 1947, Hugnet took a trip along the Brittany seacoast, snapping rather standard, touristy photographs. Some were incorporated into small collages that were gathered together with earlier collages to constitute his satirical tour guide, “Guide Rose Micheline,” a change-of-gender play on the “Guide Michelin.” Twenty-two years later, bookbinder Henri Mercher published the guide as “Huit Jours à Trébaumec.” The fictitious town of the title is another pun, meaning “very handsome guy.”

The exhibition comprises a maquette of the whole book; five “deluxe” copies of it containing the 82 original photographs; 10 copies hand-bound by Mercher; and, most important for viewers, estate photographs of all the collages. The overall effect of the show is a delicious combination of the antique and the avant-garde. Seventy years ago, Surrealism was still an edgy style, but today it’s so standard in everything from car commercials to Facebook posts that we hardly notice it. In the confines of this intimately proportioned, old-school and off-the-beaten-track gallery hard by the Queensboro Bridge, however, a tingling sensation returns.

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