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Art Review

Even a Little Space Can Hold an Abundance of Ideas

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These days, the New York art world resembles the New York art world on speed, what with art fair mania, the galloping market, Chelsea's proliferating galleries and the combustion of spotlight-seeking art-school graduates and heat-seeking dealers and collectors. The gold-rush, land-grab atmosphere is creating a lot of end-time fretting: the fairs are bad, art objects are corrupt, art schools are complicit, Chelsea is deadly, blah, blah, blah.

Whatever. Part of this moment's strange yet undeniable vitality is the revival of several of Lower Manhattan's more venerable nonprofit alternative spaces.

Whether because of changes in staff or in programs, rejuvenated boards or the economic bubble, they are in motion as they have not been in years.

You can feel the resurgence at the Kitchen, under its new director, Debra Singer, and at Artists Space, where "Empty Space With Exciting Events," a monthlong performance series, is riding on the excitement generated by Peforma 05, New York's first, largely amazing biennial of new visual performance art. You can also feel it at Art in General, under Holly Block, in a new program of artist commissions. In addition, the Dia Center for the Arts is building a new home in the West Village. And the Drawing Center should have extra energy now, after the demise of its harebrained scheme to relocate to ground zero. (File that one under What Were They Thinking?)

Among all these stirrings, **White Columns**, now 35 years old, is the most fully awake. Its reanimator is **Matthew Higgs**, 41, an English artist and curator who took over as director and chief curator last fall after curatorial stints in San Francisco and London.

The current crop of exhibitions and mini-exhibitions orchestrated by Mr. Higgs and his small, dedicated staff reveals an institution that is rethinking itself while, and by, operating on all cylinders - intellectual, spatial and aesthetic.

Mr. Higgs might be described as a visionary micro-manager, or perhaps the art world's first bonsai curator. Cultivating every square and cubic inch of available exhibition space, he has embraced a concept long revered in Japan: almost no space can still be space enough.

For example, the fancy 4-by-6-foot bulletin board hard by the entrance is introducing **Simon Evans**, an English skateboarder who morphed into a writer and then an exceedingly promising self-taught artist. On view is an array of tiny pages from Mr. Evans's notebooks, rife with sketches, wordplay and humor. Even smaller amounts of wall space are devoted to ongoing projects by **Aleksandra Mir** and **Lutz Bacher**.



Courtesy White Columns, New York
Colter Jacobsen's wall full of drawings and found materials.

Mr. Higgs's spatial frugality continues in "Open Walls," the relatively spacious centerpiece in which he awarded each of six emerging artists a wall to use as desired. With three works, **Tariq Alvi**, a collagist and painter based in London and the Netherlands, opts for a sparseness befitting his surgical parsing and recycling of price stickers, a Cingular brochure and, in the case of the wheelchair on the ceiling, pornographic images.

Robin Graubard has mounted a helter-skelter, 20-year retrospective of images ranging from China to the East Village club scene, and ever alert to the darker side of life and youth culture.

Pam Servatius shows a diverting DVD of a brief ferry ride in which everything moves except the flagpole located aft.

Christopher Russell, an artist and maverick publisher, captures subtle collisions between nature and culture in large color photographs, most memorably with a dirt-flecked advertisement for men's undershorts.

Colter Jacobsen, a young San Francisco artist, has mounted what is tantamount to his first solo show anywhere with a dense meditation on drawing, paper, images, time and memory. It encompasses found cardboard signs and labels, a clock, photographs and drawings based on photographs, including erotic images of men wearing only watches (each of which was worked on for exactly 60 minutes). There may be a homoerotic subtext to Mr. Jacobsen's preference for matched sets, most notably in a series of pairs of nearly identical drawings; it turns out that one of each duo was drawn entirely from memory, within 24 hours after the first.

Equally ambitious is "A Thousand and One Nights of the Roundtable of Nottingham," a video installation by **Alexandre Singh**, a British artist currently based in New York. Mr. Singh has erected, but not exactly built, a large house-of-cards structure out of building materials, tools and toolboxes, CD players and large bottles of soda. Sitting on this aggregate, you can listen to a fantastical narrative that conflates East and West, contemporary and ancient, Yves Klein and Kurt Schwitters (and Schwitters's golem look-alike) and mentions most of the materials incorporated in the piece. A projected image of a white brick wall changes color in sync with the artist's soothing voiceover.

The three ancillary shows all reward long visits. In one of the small White Rooms, a sixtysomething Dutch artist named Jack Jaeger is making his New York debut, showing lamps and wall pieces assembled from cardlike images that mix photography, design, sculpture and wry visual jokes.

In the other White Room, **Elysia Borowy-Reeder, Scott Reeder and Tyson Reeder** of the General Store in Milwaukee have organized "The Early Show," an outstanding, densely packed review of sundry childhood, teenage and first works by more than 40 contemporary artists. Containing drawings, paintings, sculptures and a couple of videos, the show reveals that the mature styles of artists like **Elizabeth Peyton, Cecily Brown, Laura Owens, Katherine Bernhardt, Rob Pruitt, Cory and Jaime Arcangel and Lane Twitchell** were implicit if not declared outright in their under-age art. This show should be expanded and sent on the road immediately.

Finally, the smallest gallery, dedicated to what Mr. Higgs calls Other People's Projects, is showing the lustrous little color photographs that a bird-lover named **Alba Ballard** started making in the late 1960's. The images resurfaced in 1992, through a chain of events involving Elizabeth Taylor, her daughter Liza Todd Tivey and Ms. Tivey's friend the New York photographer **Arne Svenson**, who published a book on the Ballard photographs last spring. Dressing her parrots in exquisitely detailed costumes (often including hands), and using sets and props built by her husband (who also took the photographs), Mrs. Ballard restaged scenes from all walks of life, history and popular culture. General Patton, Sonny and Cher, Bonnie and Clyde, and Sherlock Holmes are among the many people who make avian appearances. There is also a short film. Go, look, savor. You may initially be startled, even a little shocked, but chances are you will be won over by these divinely uproarious images. Further revisions of the history of set-up photography are in order.

Mr. Higgs's program may be more devoted to art objects than those at other alternative spaces around town, but this devotion is transforming from within the idea of the White Cube and how much it can comfortably hold. He has done this partly by subjecting the curatorial discipline to the aesthetic (and economy) of collage that is so prevalent in contemporary art. His exhibitions bring into spark-creating proximity artworks that come, literally, from all over. Together, they vividly define art as an irrepressible, unpredictable force that we can never fully know, while also providing lots of incentives to never stop trying.