

Failing Better: Bjorn Copeland at Jack Hanley

by Elwyn Palmerton

A chorus from acclaimed Indie Rock band The New Pornographers that goes “It came out magical, out from blown speakers” is testimonial to moments when music is transcendent despite technical glitches. Simultaneity of broken equipment and sonic pleasure is one that Bjorn Copeland, of the musical collective Black Dice, must know intimately as it is one that he embodies perfectly in *BD Mix*, (all works 2013) a Yamaha amp oozing black polyurethane foam. Call it abject synesthesia, this is the perfect totem for his group’s embrace of the broken, distorted, noisy, chaotic, and experimental aspects of music-making.

It also seems like the sort of thing which a certain type of misanthropic teenage musician, presented with an irredeemably broken amp and a can of polyurethane foam would immediately seize upon—not as “Art” per se, but as the type of Dada gesture that kids who have never heard of Dada might embrace for the thrill of being weird. Copeland’s execution has just enough restraint and self-consciousness to allow these narrative associations without undermining the basic purity of his gesture. Some naysayers might argue that they’ve seen quite enough of Marshall (or Yamaha) amps in contemporary art, but let’s face it. Marshall stacks are, in fact, pretty cool. Other pieces here also take failure and brokenness as a starting point. Not in a striving “Fail better” Beckett sort of way but more like its reverse. As the great filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky said: “Failure isn’t anything, it just means changing paths.” The disassembled and frayed parts of a large 6 foot wide balsa wood glider balanced, somewhat haphazardly, in a white five-gallon bucket undermines any functional “lift” the plane might be capable of, yet it achieves a Brancusi-like kind of sculptural lift. The slight flare of the casually balanced parts feels perfectly ascendant if, also, awkward: more like a ragged aeronautical flower, perhaps, than a plane – despite the irony that the air-craft is taking a nose-dive.

The dingy, abject, and ad hoc mood of these pieces is more of-the-street than of-the-studio: a Bushwick flaneurial revelling in oddball sidewalk finds. Take, for instance, a found image of a galaxy with a jokey exclamation mark thought ballooned on it. Next to it is a rolled up flag that looks like a firecracker, a metaphor for the Big Bang that contains enough mystery to resist its own jokey bathos. His 2-D work also engages a line between meaning and form as he reconfigures text almost to the point of unreadability, the letters taking on the look of some imaginary Semitic language.

A Dunkin’ Donuts ad for tuna salad on bagel in *Remnant Screen IV* demonstrates another type of communication breakdown. In one swift gesture of appropriation, Copeland succeeds at precisely defining the essence of his sensibility: a pop sheen that manages, almost against the odds, to be more off-putting than it is ingratiating. In fact, it reverse the terms: for all the advertising know-how brought to bear on the problem of selling Dunkin’ Tuna Bagels, they still seem oddly not-great. “Epic fail,” as the kids say.

But as a trashy bit of pop detritus hovering on a fragment of black hexagonal screening, it's perfect.