

Guilty/(NOT) Guilty at Norte Maar, New York

by Sarah Hassan

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Norte Maar Gallery is cleverly housed in a ground floor apartment with its living room window fixed on Wyckoff Avenue. Passersby can glimpse at the work inside when the gallery is closed and is serving as someone's residence. This act of double duty—a studio in place of an apartment, a gallery in someone's kitchen—is a phenomenon in the industrial neighborhood of Bushwick in Brooklyn, where pop-up galleries and storefront operations catering to both new and established artists have become the norm and a strong sense of camaraderie exists between the operators and the artists they wish to showcase so intimately. Space in New York is a premium, to quote Sarah Schmerler, the curator of Norte Maar's current show, *Guilty/(NOT) Guilty*; with so little of it left to go around, it seemed a matter of time before people would begin to open their homes to the public and creating a proverbial *salon* around work they admired and artists they wished to promote. Schmerler's show is one such example, and the do-it-yourself vibe it emits is not only found on the walls of Norte Maar, but in a more permanent and complicated venue: cyberspace.

Schmerler, an accomplished art critic and educator, is also the creative director and self-proclaimed "silent partner" of 45 Projects, an online gallery which seeks to create a working forum for artists and art professionals looking to operate outside of the conventional art market. Along with Paulius Nosokas, the web and design director, Schmerler assembles a cast of finely trained artists whose work hangs on the "walls" of 45 Projects' three different virtual galleries. Nosokas' design takes a cue from the traditional white walls and airy spaces of Chelsea, down to the light streaming in from the windows across slate gray floors, and the work is put into a familiar architectural context; the online viewer does not need to pretend they are viewing art in a gallery, because, thanks to Nosokas, they are. The idea of creating space where there is none, and then subsequently deciding what fills that space, is a curator's dream, and Schmerler is aware of the level of vanity involved with such an endeavor. However, the questions that haunt every curator, from the pop-up novice to the museum professional, are at the forefront of Schmerler's mind when assembling a show for 45 Projects and in a tangible space: Who makes the rules? What is a real reason for creating art? What makes us feel culpable?

These questions were explored in *The Guilt Show*, an online show highlighting the work of four experienced New York City-based artists working across a variety of mediums, which has since morphed into physical reality on the residential walls of Norte Maar as *Guilty/(NOT) Guilty*. I was able to view the show by appointment with Schmerler as my guide, taking in the work from the kitchen, the living room and the adjacent Projects Room, which highlights multi-media works in progress not necessarily involved with what is currently on view. In the kitchen, Francesco Masci's *The Fall of Man, Featuring a Dirty Pig (after Masaccio)* paid homage to biblical narrative while illustrating an indebtedness to comic book culture. Masci's India ink rendering of a nightmarish and newly banished Adam and Eve taunted by a flying pig on their way out of the Garden set up the classical parameters of his work to come, such as a crucified cartoon panda modeled after the work of Mantegna and a reclining odalisque gazing into an apocalyptic horizon inhabited by dinosaurs. In the living room, Pablo Tauer's hypnotic ink drawings of spheres created soothing yet strange vortexes for the eye while Ellen Letcher's collages composed of acrylic paint, found objects and magazine clippings jostled the brain into composing its own conclusion over how such objects ended up together.

Perhaps the most striking artist in this strong quartet was Alfred Steiner, part intellectual draftsman, part pop culture surgeon. His works on hot press paper consisted of characters and scenes from the popular to the ambitious—Shaggy and Fred from Scooby Doo!, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Saint Anthony—all composed of jutting, blood-tipped bones and glistening, sinewy muscle. Profiles were assembled not with soft lines but with femurs, horses galloped not with hooves but on bare bone and demons brandished swords of muscle over prostrate outlines of pus and blood. Steiner creates a disorienting, dreamy and disturbingly beautiful feast for the eyes, calling to mind large masterworks of surgeons operating in an amphitheater, though one believes it is Steiner whose work operates on us, rather than vice versa. By creating instantly recognizable outlines from the most vital and basic parts of human anatomy, Steiner forces us to look at the culture around us while acknowledging the literal cultures within us.

When viewed in a traditional gallery, art is easy to create a fantasy around, yet when viewed in a residential space, or someone's actual home, the truth-telling of art becomes more literal; the romance of location is stripped away and the reality of living with the art becomes apparent. While the online manifestation of 45 Projects allows artists and their work to live on in virtual immortality, galleries like Norte Maar force the viewer to consider how it would feel to wake up to such artists and their various works; Marge Simpson's silhouette shaped in bone, a broken mirror hidden with street poetry and comic book art obsessed by old master paintings. Schmerler and Nosokas have created an ambitious universe where talent is rewarded with an eternal home on the far-reaching internet, while Norte Maar has filled the space between by opening its home for the eye to dwell a bit closer, and as viewers in both the virtual and the tangible, we are made richer by their generosity.

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