

## THE NOBLE SAVAGE AND THE LITTLE TRAMP

I have yet to witness the bounty of great art that was to have emerged phoenixlike from the rubble of the global economic crisis. Artists, jittery about their poverty–fueled martyrdom, instead seem preoccupied with their livelihoods, taking previously scorned odd jobs, leaving the city, or giving up their studios. What it has done is force an engagement with the abstraction of our global situation. For artists, crises of consciousness seem to accompany major ruptures of the geopolitical (9/11) and socioeconomic (Katrina) orders. But the economic collapse leaves little opportunity for a call to action. Global capitalism, all encompassing and all implicating, provides no platform from which to contemplate it.

In George Baker’s essay “Photography and Abstraction,” he argues that the height of economic “abstraction” (exemplified in terms like exotic derivatives and collateralized mortgage obligations) and its subsequent collapse forces a parallel crisis in photographic strategies. Referring to the global financial collapse he writes:

This situation calls for photography to imagine other tactics, perhaps new strategic relationships to abstraction (and thus to itself as well). And while yet again a narrative of determinism is to be avoided, can we not say that today the crucial project to imagine would be some form of what we might call an “aesthetics of the crash”? Should we not attempt to invent new modalities of abstraction’s collapse, new modes of emptying out and devastation—not of the economy, but of images?

He goes on to cite Walter Benjamin (whose phrase “aesthetics of the crash” he has previously invoked) and Roland Barthes, who put forth their own theories linking aesthetic reconsideration to financial collapse, for Benjamin the Great Depression, for Barthes the oil crises of the ’70s. Baker goes on:

Not surprisingly, both Benjamin’s and Barthes’s texts offer up primitivist instead of productivist visions of photography, elegiac attempts to reconnect with the medium’s “underground” and earliest history. Both are fantasies of what we might call photographic atavism. Benjamin’s text [“Little History of Photography”], as is well known, imagines the present economic crisis as opening up a form of aesthetic time travel, the potential to return to the lost halcyon days of the photograph in the first decade of its existence, the latent power of the medium prior to its crushing and massive industrialization as an aesthetic form.\*

Reading this essay well after putting together the bulk of this show, I was struck by how precisely Baker had articulated my thinking behind it. The artists in *The Noble Savage and the Little Tramp* mark an interest in direct experience as is specifically in contrast to the indirectness of the contemporary social situation—"experience not fully devastated by the operations of modern abstraction." The paradoxical modes of thought that inform artmaking at this pivotal time—"newness" and "atavism"—are present in equal doses in the artists' answer to the crash's call, addressing complexity via reduction. Gil Blank's use of color fields would seem to provide one solution to Baker's appeal for new strategies of "emptying out," taking an inherently abstracted photographic representation and removing it even further from its referent. While Baker's discussion revolves specifically around photographic practices and their close alignment with industrialization, I argue that these ideas transfer easily to artistic modes in other media, which are also impacted by industrialization, if indirectly. Indeed, several of the nonphotographic works in this exhibition, by Nayland Blake, Trisha Donnelly, and Jonah Groeneboer, incorporate mass-produced objects.

The show's title is itself a throwback to pre-industrial and industrial eras, one that proposes personal examination of our post-industrial situation. The phrase "noble savage" draws from eighteenth-century notions of the essential goodness of primitive man, uncorrupted by civilization. The Little Tramp is the iconic Charlie Chaplin character who in *Modern Times* is driven mad by industrial society and eventually abandons it altogether. Recalling these two figures, Michaela Frühwirth's repetitive mark making is both machine-like (like the Little Tramp's factory job) and as urgent as a biological imperative. James Welling's stark photograph of a train, an icon of industrialization, presents a portal to a bygone era. (Implicit in this project is a collapsing of time, granting this photograph, made over a decade ago, new relevance.) There's a modesty to the works of the artists in the show that I find attractive, as if they are simply sidestepping the race to find the next great artist out of the devastation, in favor of more honest pursuits. They asymptotically approach a basic core, where hard meaning can reliably be found, like a rock smoothed by friction. These works lead the viewer lumberingly toward the knowable. This shedding of complication carries an edge of delusion, but knowingly so, since these are acts not of escapism, but of affirmation.

\*George Baker, "Photography and Abstraction," in *Words Without Pictures*, ed. Alex Klein (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2009), pp. 371–372.

-- Hannah Whitaker