REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

NEW YORK
Mel Chin at Frederieke Taylor
Long a student of cross-cultural history, Mel Chin, in his recent work, demands that attention be paid to the survivors of conquest—here natives of the Congo, Sierra Leone and North America. In checklist notes for the pieces in the exhibition, he refers to the works—made of materials relevant to his narrative—as “Lamentations.” Among them is a monumental, elaborately carved and gilded “trophy frame” that he dedicates to King Leopold II of Belgium, who colonized the Congo in the mid-19th century through a program of torture and slavery. Making profits from organized trade in diamonds, rubber, ivory and minerals, Leopold’s campaign anticipated the tortures of the civil war that ravaged Sierra Leone from 1991 to 2002, a period of senseless atrocities and military oppression.

In the 12-by-7-by-1½-foot SAFE (2005-06), a trophy frame is substantially boarded over with planks and nails. The upper edge of the planks traces the course of the Congo River, and the frame itself is carved with representations of diamonds, lumber, gold, rubber, human flesh, whips, ivory and animal skins. The nails recall nail-studded African artifacts ritually transformed into objects of healing and peace. Chin notes, “No nails could keep them safe from Leopold II. A lamentation on the continuing tragedy that is the Congo.” Within the frame a largely obscured panoramic landscape painting by Chin depicts the working oppressed. More to Tell (for Sierra Leone), 2005, consists of a segment of peeled black walnut log measuring 8½ by 2 by 2½ feet that incorporates as a base a short-wave radio tuned to the only radio station in Sierra Leone. Chin warns, “If you avert your eyes from her severed hands her voice will be lost forever.” Small speakers set into two truncated branches reference the amputees of a terrorist campaign during the country’s civil war. An incised replica of an African mask specifically for women is mounted near the top.

Made of cast bronze, an Old World art material, and pipestone, the traditional substance of Native American peace pipe bowls, Shape of a Lie (2005) is described by Chin as “a psycho-biomorphic portrait of a lie.” Various abstracted elements in the 70-by-29-by-54-inch work pass through a free-standing wall. According to Chin, a lie begins with a foothold in reality. Represented in a length of cast bronze, the lie rises through the gonads to gather energy. It is then tied up in the gut, where it is first felt, represented as a bronze sphere pierced by a spike. The lie sprits through a bronze orifice to the wall’s other side, emerging as a tongue of carved pipestone to represent America’s first lie.

These objects, presented in a 2006 survey exhibition of Chin’s work at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art in Houston, were shown at the gallery along with drawings on multiple materials.

—Edward Leffingwell

Pierre Bismuth at both Mary Boone galleries and Team
Three shows of work by the Brussels-based French artist Pierre Bismuth revolved around themes of fame, advertising and brand recognition in the art world. No stranger to celebrity himself—he shared an Oscar for the screenplay of Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004)—Bismuth is not a dour scold about commerce in art. His playfully ironic interventions take such forms as large-scale tourist photos grailitied with the name of one or another currently prominent artist. For example, “Damien Hirst” and “Maurizio Cattelan” are spray-painted on photos of the American flag; “Elizabeth Peyton” and “Richard Prince” are scrawled on nighttime cityscapes; and “Olafur Eliasson” is painted on the silver door of a garage.

These works were shown at Mary Boone uptown in an exhibition titled “Most Wanted Men,” which perhaps alludes not only to the FBI posters but also to the project created for the 1964 World’s Fair by Andy Warhol. Bismuth’s most important ancestor in negotiating the conceptual bridge between celebrity and art. Bismuth asks us to locate artistic personae amid the mix of the purely self-promotional graffitiist’s tag and the bland, generic expressiveness of the tourist’s postcard. He makes further mischief with artists’ names in wallpaper that covered an adjacent room with indecporate, but somehow plausible, combinations of artists’ first and last names (Ed Buren, Marcel Nauman, Andy Ruscha). An installation about putting a name rather than a work on the wall, it was also about employing art—particularly the widely collected variety—as decor.

In a reversal of another sort at Mary Boone in Chelsea, reproductions of advertising pages for Bismuth’s shows from the March issues of Artforum and Art in America were blown up to freestanding 18-foot-high slabs. With a cheeky reference to the ostensible purity of grandiose minimalist constructions, these objects transformed the gallery into a promotional tool for a show in which advertisements themselves took center stage.

The most compelling work on view, one that offered more than art-world blagues, is Following the Right Hand of . . . (2007), shown at Team. In this projected video of John Huston’s 1961 film The Misfits, every gesture of the movie’s star, Marilyn Monroe, produces a thick animated black line, which forms a dense skin that eventually obscures the whole image. Bismuth here took his cues, perhaps, from two other star vehicles: Hans Namuth’s film of Jackson Pollock painting, shot from beneath a glass plate as the artist covered it in drips and pours, and Henri-Georges Clouzot’s movie of Picasso at work, filmed in part from behind a translucent painting surface that conceals the artist, though his brushwork is visible. Without any of the ponderousness such a description might imply, Bismuth’s remade
video is about how star power occludes our interest in the object itself, wiping out an esthetics of art with an esthetics of fame.

—Jonathan Gilmore

**Andy Yoder at Winkleman**

Light-conductive lead crystal gives to the newest sculptures of Andy Yoder a translucency appropriate to these playful digs at the less-than-transparent monied classes. The glass elements of the project—fragile portrait busts—were said to be three years in the making. Yoder conceived and cast them to represent Wal-Mart mogul Samuel Walton in sapphire blue, optimum consumer Martha Stewart in leaf green and developer Donald Trump forever amber, each head larger than life at about 24 by 10 by 16 inches. Placed on simple cylindrical pedestals at respectful distances from one another, they radiated with the glow of votive candles, as though lit from within. The easily identified figures were topped with clearly defined coin slots: the portraits are piggy banks, as though lit from within.

Further sending up his famous targets, Yoder represents miraculous appearances by the subjects in three watercolors on paper, each head roughly 12 inches high. Martha of the Leaf locates Stewart's face in insect-grained trails on an aspen-shaped leaf attached to a branch against a yellow ground. Yoder finds Walton among the stars of Sam Nebula and portrays Trump in a slice of bread for Donald of the Toast.

Andreas Kocks at Jeannie Freilich

This was a show made entirely from paper—paper as sculpture, paper as relief, paper as installation. But never paper as mere drawing surface. In delicate "paperworks," as he calls them, German artist Andreas Kocks represents the medium; his imaginative riffs on its properties and possibilities are rooted in handicraft, and installed in careful attention to the architecture of the gallery. This exhibition included paper "cutouts" that colonized the walls with a seeming organic spontaneity, as well as rectilinear "reliefs" (not the right word, but these works don't adhere to any traditional format) for which Kocks carved the surface of thick watercolor paper, using a razor blade or Exacto knife. The barely raised patterns thus created on the flat pages are augmented with silvery rubbed graphite or watercolor.

Both approaches employ patient, artisanal methods to build up formally complex surfaces. Together, the wall-consuming installations and the feathery, almost imperceptibly detailed carvings described visual extremes.

The main space was given over entirely to Paperwork #703 (Cannonball), 2007. Conceived as a site-specific installation, it was made from intricately cut and constructed watercolor paper applied to four of the gallery's walls. The painstakingly elaborate installation captured a pattern of splash marks, suggesting that the floor was a pool of ink into which a cannonball had plunged, or into which someone had done a "cannonball"—that jump intended to displace and spray as much liquid as possible. Layered waves of graphite-coated paper rose and appeared to slosh up the wall, with stray droplets scattered to the ceiling. The most impressive effect was conceptual: the sense of a void, of the room's utter emptiness, was achieved through the elaborate depiction of an imaginary event's consequences. A second and far smaller paper mural, Paperwork #310 (2003) climbed a narrow wall near the entrance. Its layered cutouts, painted with white acrylic, conjured a column of smoke or clouds, and were also vaguely floral—though far more abstract than the illusionistic "cannonball." While Kocks's cutout murals engage the physical scale of both viewer and gallery, his "carved" compositions, examples of which occupied the office, are as intimate as any miniaturist drawing. The notion that paper is a surface for drawing is playfully discarded in his work. Like many artists before him, notably Matisse, Kocks makes paper itself function as line and shape, in work confined not by the picture plane but by the space of a room.

—Kirsten Swenson