

THE WINDY APPLE by Abraham Orden



Jay Heikes, "The Sixth Retelling," at Shane Campbell Gallery



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Jay Heikes, "The Sixth Retelling" (detail), at Shane Campbell Gallery

Chicago is a kind-hearted town, but this season its art dealers have indulged their taste for edgier, less friendly fare. In a chance alignment of dark stars, an assortment of provocative out-of-towners recently showed up to meet the city's unvoiced desire for avant-garde impertinence and dandified, aloof solipsism. What's more, several of the artists are all about "branding" themselves as bona fide art celebrities. How much self-obsession can the audience bear?

Jay Heikes at Shane Campbell

Start with last month's exhibition at the newly opened Shane Campbell Gallery space on Chicago Street by Jay Heikes, the 31-year-old Minneapolis-based Yale MFA who was one of the discoveries of the 2006 Whitney Biennial. Titled "The Sixth Retelling," Heikes' installation at Shane Campbell was a joke -- that is, it supposedly consisted of the fractured residue of a joke that had been told six times, about a pirate's troubles with his foul-mouthed parrot sidekick.

The series of "Retellings" started with a 2005 work titled *So There's This Pirate*, which in turn originated in a video Heikes made of himself recounting the already well-worn yarn. "By telling the same joke over and over," Heikes said, "I've realized that its rigid structure allows me to find totally new directions every time I make the delivery." Move over, Richard Prince!

The "performative" space in the gallery featured several odd elements, notably a row of black-and-white grimacing self-portraits of the artist, presumably telling the joke, made with enlarged photocopies. The walls of were punctuated with rather repulsive supergraphics of spatters and drips, black-and-brown images that looked like moldy overflow from the plumbing upstairs, or perhaps like oversized splats of rotten vegetables thrown by the audience.

Heikes also installed in the gallery a low and ugly drop ceiling, another one of his signature motifs. The installation was rounded out by a selection of sundry objects. Leaning against one wall was a three-foot-tall plywood disk, painted matte black.

From its center dangled a bronze coconut, a real coconut painted black, and a weight from a cuckoo clock, all tied on a single black string.

A kind of totemic phallus, the object suggested an eroticized play on words (*coco*, *cuckoo*) that symbolically conflates the raw tropics and the refined West. The disk and its kinetic trinkets also turned the gallery into one big Rauschenbergian *Combine*, though with a decidedly Neo-Gothic cast. The disk is \$6,000, while the wall installation is \$14,500.

Heikes' works have also turned up at Perry Rubenstein and Marianne Boesky galleries in New York, and at the Walker Art Center, which is among his collectors. For all its vague metaphysics, Heikes' popularity could just be based on its "look," which has real avant-garde strangeness and verve.

ABRAHAM ORDEN writes on contemporary art.