

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Ishmael Randall Weeks

by Thomas Micchelli

Eleven Rivington, April 7 - May 22, 2009

One of the artists considered for the New Museum's *The Generational: Younger Than Jesus* (all of the nominees are listed in the exhibition's telephone-book-thick supplemental compendium, *Younger Than Jesus: Artist Directory*), is Ishmael Randall Weeks, who was born in Cusco, Peru, in 1976. From the evidence of his compact but impressive display of new work (all 2009) at Eleven Rivington, timed to coincide with the opening of the noisier exhibition around the corner, it's hard to fathom why he was excluded other than for the sake of curatorial consistency, which isn't necessarily a good thing. Weeks's work deals with the realness of the real, which doesn't quite jibe with the virtual, the projected, the mediated, the ersatz, or the machine-tooled—"youthful" forms that dominated *The Generational*, for better or worse. To enter a white-cube gallery that smells like a tire shop immediately tells you something substantially different is up.

The smell comes from "Saddle," in which black zip ties suspend a saddle and stirrups halfway between the ceiling and a carpet of recycled tire treads. Weeks's method is simplicity itself: he takes an object and does something to it. "Primed" consists of two eight-foot-long rubber boats, painted white and vertically hung, with fist-sized holes cut out of the sliced-and-stapled skin of one and the other reduced to latticework. In "Plans (Macchi)," he tacks a set of architectural plans to the wall after having excised their depicted floor space, leaving only a delicate network of wall lines dangling like a lacy undergarment. Another set of plans, thickly bound, is carved into a miniature landscape that appears to have fallen victim to mountaintop removal. These works could be viewed as proceeding from a conceptual impulse, I suppose, but several key issues separate Weeks from the majority of his 33-and-under confreres and consœurs. The most obvious is his sense of materials, which seems to stem as much from the Minimalism of early Richard Serra and Robert Morris as anything else. Add to that his hand-hewn aesthetic, and his work takes on a heft and density that resonates with much greater poignancy than the typically fingerprint-free objects populating Chelsea galleries in spades.



Ishmael Randall Weeks, "Primed" (2009). 2 parts, cut and painted rubber boats and staples. Height: 96"; Installation dimensions variable. Courtesy of Eleven Rivington, New York.

What is most striking about the work in this show is that, despite its conceptually-based, easily verbalized premise, Weeks's art feels much more vital and primal than that of many of his peers. It is about fragility and security, the need for shelter and the randomness of fate. The boat that would carry us to safety is punctured and shredded; the horse we would have mounted has disappeared into a patch of uselessly cut-and-flattened tires; floors vanish and walls entangle themselves. In a telling series of works on paper in the second room, Weeks incises fantastically intricate geometric patterns based on Lebbeus Woods's drawings of collapsing buildings over photo transfers of church interiors. These modestly sized works, not much bigger than a sheet of typing paper, could easily be interpreted as examples of latter-day appropriation or as meditations on the mediated image. But their overlay of destabilizing lines, which literally splits apart the vaguely 19th-century-looking photos of sacred spaces, seems to strike at the core human fear that everything we've put our faith into is riven with faults (in all senses of the word) and could come crashing down at the slightest provocation. Perhaps that is why this work feels so intimate. It is made from uningratiating rubber and paper, and seems to exist at a cerebral remove—self-contained, introverted, and astringent—yet you have the sense that, as T.S. Eliot wrote of John Donne, the artist knows "the anguish of the marrow." Weeks's work is precisely thought-out and elegantly presented, yet his vulnerabilities vibrate its foundation, and his intellectualism translates into another form of nakedness.

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