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Anna Mikhailovskaia and John Schacht

by Diana McClure

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A serious conversation on the topic of play appears to be at work in the two-person exhibition, *Anna Mikhailovskaia and John Schacht*, currently on view at the Knockdown Center. With very few right angles or orderly readings available, the show calls into question larger assumptions about the association of irresponsibility with playfulness, the assumed randomness of organic forms, and predilections toward linear thought.

Mikhailovskaia's sculptures and Schacht's works on paper intersect and converse, despite being situated in different mediums and historical moments: Schacht, a midwesterner, had an early connection with the Chicago Imagists movement of the '60s and '70s, while the Kiev-born Mikhailovskaia (who is also a curator and a writer) counts the Japanese movement Mono-ha, the work of James Lee Byars, and Brutalist architecture among her influences.

The Knockdown Center's sprawling airy industrial space is a mixed-use venue that houses a narrow rectangular area with multiple doors that open onto a courtyard exhibition space.

The container-like atmosphere complements the fluid, curvaceous lines that appear in much of Schacht's work and in several pieces by Mikhailovskaia; it offers a potential freedom to explore somewhat irrational terrain.

Organic, free-spirited shapes rendered by a tight hand populate Schacht's works on paper; they suggest movement and a surface impression of chaos. Upon closer inspection the precision of lines, dots, shapes and color selection reveal a comfort with looseness or perhaps a mastery of disorder. There is a playfulness to Schacht's broad and strong color choices, as well as in his penchant for images that read as non-linear tapestries. Still, the work is not haphazard. Leitmotifs of quasi-psychedelic genitalia, cowboy hats, ceramic vases, and what look like saloon doors and Persian textiles, repeat in certain drawings and seem to coalesce in an indecipherable surrealist dream. One series from 1985 (it includes *Title unknown (#3)*, *Title unknown (54-1, #5)*, *Title unknown (58-1, #9)*, and *Title unknown (53-1, #4)*), is a study of heterosexual intercourse at close range that expresses the unique flavors of attentive sexual play. These works perhaps try to visualize the feel or sensation of the interaction of sexual organs through an array of color, ornate design and patterning. They seem to want to suggest the vibrancy of orgasm, but remain constrained by the critical distance of the intentional hand constructing them in ink, gouache and watercolor.



John Schacht, *Title unknown (58-1, #9)*, 1985. Ink, watercolor, and gouache on paper. 17.5 × 12 inches. Courtesy Knockdown Center.



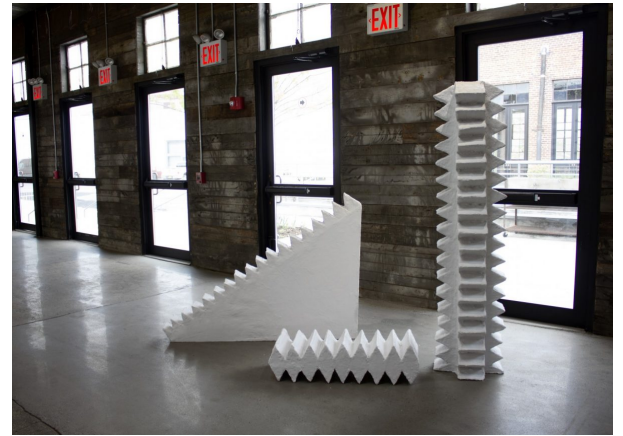
Installation view: *Anna Mikhailovskaia and John Schacht*. Knockdown Center, April 28 – June 19, 2016. Courtesy Knockdown Center.

In contrast, a sense of orderliness frames Mikhailovskaia's sculpture. One enters the work through the secure realm of form: shapes are delineated into variations on triangles, circles and squares. The comfort of a limited, controlled color palette in red, blue, white, gold and silver embraces viewers. Beyond this initial impression, the lighter playful organic shaping of Mikhailovskaia's sculpture is undeniable. Made from basic materials like plywood, plaster, Styrofoam, and thread, there is no quest for an obvious perfection in the molding of her objects.

Although the work may be influenced by the minimalism and straightforwardness of Mono-ha and Brutalism, its mixture of orderliness and subjective form invite a re-contemplation of traditional notions of seriousness or rationality. *Bubba's Ghost* (2012), a white zigzagging series of three complementary sculptures, is seductive in its simple, monochromatic, non-threatening palette and recognizable shapes, yet dangerous and mysterious in its fiery form—it recalls totems, pyramids and tombs.

Sky Rock (2015) speaks a similar language: it offers the solidity and familiarity of a giant blue stone, while simultaneously being painted with childlike gold stars that instigate a sense of wonder—the feeling of daydreaming under a night sky. A two-dimensional wall sculpture, *Untitled (Colorful Crusty Holes)* (2016) is similarly accessible at first glance: drawing viewers in with a primary color palette of red, blue and yellow, and basic shapes, a circle, square and triangle, she creates a stucco-like, crusty surface reminiscent of cratered planetary surfaces.

Both Shacht and Mikhailovskaia dance between the known and the unknown, using form, color and texture as a structure for spontaneous yet controlled exploration. Schacht appears to enter this conversation wildly, reigning himself in with form, while Mikhailovskaia seems to begin with form before diving into an inviting imaginative spaciousness. Their pairing by curator Stacie Johnson is a refreshing reflection on the integration of psyche and spirit or intellect and intuition, driving impulses, expansion and constraint.



Anna Mikhailovskaia, *Bubba's Ghost*, 2012. Plaster and wood. 96 x 72 x 72 inches. Courtesy Knockdown Center.

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