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Tightened, As if by Pliers: A Conversation with Joshua Bienko and Leeza Meksin

ERIC HIBIT on 7 January, 2015 at 07:51

Tightened, As if by Pliers is an exhibition curated by Joshua Bienko and Leeza Meksin for *Ortega y Gasset Projects* at the Knockdown Center in Queens, NY. The exhibition opened on December 7, 2014 and will run until January 25, 2015.

The exhibition was inspired by the work of Julio Cortázar (born 1914 in Brussels Belgium, died 1984 in Paris, France). Known primarily as a novelist, he traveled to Jaipur, India in 1970 to photograph Jantar Mantar, an 18th century observatory complex built by a Mogul king. The complex is now a UNESCO world heritage site. The individual structures are architectural astronomical instruments that can be entered, climbed, and used to observe and understand the cosmos.

In the eyes of Julio Cortázar, the observatory becomes more than a site for contemplating celestial bodies. Cortázar experienced the space as surreal and dream-like. This was his inspiration for *From the Observatory*, published in 1972. The book combined his writing (which could be characterized as dream-like) with his photographs of the site. Stylistically, the text reads as free-verse poetry that resists conventional linear narratives. It presents the reader with vivid, if disjointed, imagery.

Beginning with this publication as a starting point, the curators began assembling works as a monumental aesthetic response. The exhibition includes 27 artworks representing the following mediums: drawing, painting, sculpture, installation, collage, assemblage, printmaking and photography. Artists include Kevin Curran, Luc Fuller, Angelina Gualdoni, El Hauser, David Humphrey, Mary Reid Kelley, Amy Lincoln, Chris Martin, Susan Metrican, Alan Ruiz, Harriet Salmon, Hooper Turner, Michael Veliquette, and Shielah Wilson. Although cohesive as an exhibition, there are striking contrasts between the pieces that make us stop and think. The exact connections between the works are mysterious (or at least not obvious). The exhibition meanders over 90+ feet of wall space. To illuminate the underlying themes of this exhibition, I posed the following questions to Leeza and Joshua.

Joshua Bienko (b. 1978, NY) received his MFA from the Lamar Dodd School of Art at the University of Georgia in 2008, and his BFA from the University of Buffalo in 2000. His approach is diverse employing drawing, ARTRAPPING, painting, music videos, pdf distribution, and pick-up basketball. He has exhibited at venues such as the Dallas Contemporary (TX), Artpace (TX), Labor Ebertplatz (Köln), Vox Populi (PA), Big Medium (TX) and the Guggenheim Museum (in collaboration with YouTube Play Biennial). He is one of the founding members of Ortega y Gasset Projects in Queens, a 2009 Tanne Foundation recipient, and a Hambidge Residency and V.C.C.A Fellow. He lives and works in Knoxville, where he teaches drawing in the School of Art at the University of Tennessee.

Leeza Meksin (b. 1977 Moscow, Russia) is an interdisciplinary artist who makes paintings, installations, public art and multiples. She earned a joint BA/MA in Comparative Literature and Humanities from the University of Chicago in 2000; a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2005; and a MFA in painting from the Yale School of Art in 2007. A recipient of the Robert Schoelkopf Fellowship (2006) and the Open Society Soros Foundation Grant (2009), Meksin has exhibited her paintings and installations at several New York galleries, including Regina Rex (2014 & 2011), Airplane (2014), Primitime (2013), and Thomas Erben (2009). She has created site-specific installations at Brandeis University (2014), Addis Donna in Chicago (2011), Cosign Projects in St. Louis (2011), Ohio State University (2012), The Lot @ Artpace in New Haven, CT (2012) and many other venues. In 2013 Meksin co-founded Ortega y Gasset Projects, a long-distance artist collective and curated project space. Her work is featured in the winter 2015 issue of BOMB magazine. Meksin lives in Brooklyn, NY.

Eric Hibit: Obviously, you were moved by the work of Cortázar. Can you describe your original response to his work, and how it evolved into an exhibition?

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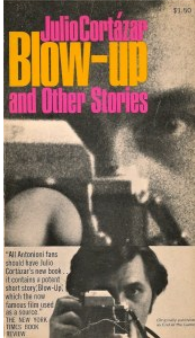
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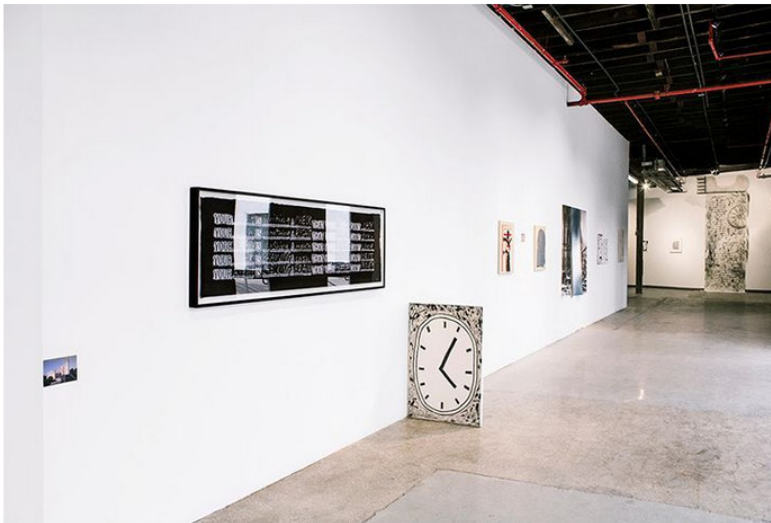
Joshua Bienko: Reading Cortázar is unique. There isn't anything quite like it. I think, if you look at a painting, and you start to daydream about something that the painting isn't really even talking about, well that's kind of part of the effect of the painting. When I read Cortázar, (*Hopscotch* in particular), I'm not really even sure if what I remember about the book was actually part of the book or something I daydreamed while reading and has now become part of my collective memory of the book. I think, for Cortázar, this is intentional. For me, Cortázar's writing is always pulling me in and keeping me out at the same time. Constantly provoking an interpretation, while resisting finite resolution. This is certainly my goal in the studio and I think, by and large, why I'm so into Cortázar. I bought a copy of *Blow-Up* and other stories years ago and I think on the cover, there was a picture of



He wrote about taking pictures and I knew something of his practice from reading about him and his life. *From the Observatory* was a recent discovery; I hadn't known about the book. After reading it, I had this idea to contact the publisher (Archipelago Press, Brooklyn) and ask if there was anyway to get access to any of Cortázar's photographs. That was nearly a year ago, but I think this has been a long standing curiosity. We gained access and permissions to the photographs from the Estate of Julio Cortázar a week before the show opened.

Leeza Meksin: I agree that the spirit of non-committal meandering as well as insatiable curiosity were guides in the process of putting together this show. Thinking back on all the conversations about Cortázar in the months preceding the show, I'm still amazed how much was relevant. From Lynch to Kierkegaard, the Hubble telescope to the underground railroad and genetic mutation – nothing, once considered, escaped the scope his grand, generative writing.

EH: I describe the show as a "monumental aesthetic response." The scale of the exhibition is quite impressive, and the scope of styles, mediums, and scales of individual pieces amount to a collection of very diverse objects. I'm curious about the process of laying out the show. How did you decide to put what, where? And beside what?



left: Mary Reid Kelley, *Your Mouth Is...*, 2011, rubbing on rice paper, framed, 21" x 78" Courtesy Fredericks & Freiser Gallery right: Luc Fuller, *Untitled (Clock Painting)*, 2014, India ink on raw cotton, stretched cotton (cama) fabric, 29" x 40" Courtesy Rod Barton Gallery

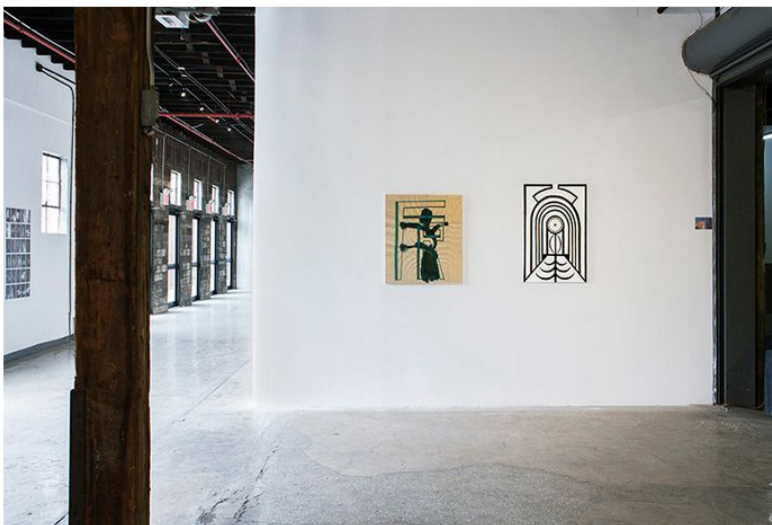
JB: Hahaha! Well, we just knew where everything was going to go because we're such incredible planners. I don't know how to answer this question. I think because Leeza and I are artists first, organizing the show was more like drawing or getting ready to go out. We were both motivated by the basic artistic impulse... a compulsion to see what it would look like. For Leeza and I, there was no didactic reasoning that articulated what went where. We tried to trust our impulses and let the reasoning reveal itself to us!

EH: Categorization. The word implies comparison and boundaries. Cortázar was particularly interested in creating work that challenged the notion of categorization. How did you extend that impulse into the curatorial process?

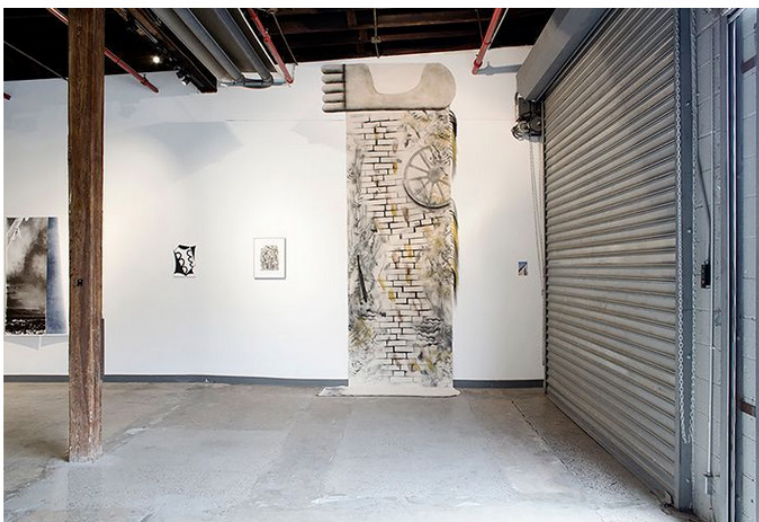
LM: When brainstorming for this show, Joshua and I were especially interested in creating something unusual, perhaps even unorthodox; something that would be different from the shows we have seen before. We tried to find connections between works that are stylistically and conceptually different from one another, creating new relationships and narratives between works through playful juxtaposition. In other words, we tried to have fun with it. For the most part, this is what motivated our choices.

JB: In terms of categorization, I hate that shit. Categorizing is like the death of art. I hate all of this talk about Zombie Formalism, New Casualist, New Imagists etc. There's premature-motivation to historicize, define, classify and categorize art which is precisely what art aims to destabilize. It's certainly tempting to be seduced into the conversation, but damn, I can't name an artist who introduces themselves as a New Casualist. "Hi, Joshua Bienko, I'm a New Image Zombie-ist." Can you imagine?! It's like religion. Folks might have a system of belief, or an innate and intimate spirituality, but as soon as you call it something, there's a big load of baggage attached that might not be your bag. That's where you get categorizations like Cornel West's self-description which is something like a "Jazz Infused, Non-Marxist Socialist, Chekhovian Christian Bluesman." So, I don't necessarily think Cortàzar was interested in challenging categorization. I think he was making his work and leaving the boring, mundane, logical, and analytic work of categorization up to those folks who are interested in such games.

EH: Despite the reference to figures in the titles *Woman with Pendant IV* and *II*, Hooper's symmetrical abstractions suggest an engagement with cathedrals or temples. Metrican's scroll-like assemblage *Spooklight Road* contain giant feet, suggesting a colossus. The horsehair elements in the work lend a shamanistic feel. How do you see these references within the broader context of the exhibition? Such suggestions of sacred spaces and practices makes me wonder about your attitude toward the cultural secularism of the contemporary art field. Thoughts?



left: EJ Hauser, *FR (blue)*, 2014, oil on printed paper mounted to canvas, 33" x 29" courtesy of Regina Rex Gallery
right: Hooper Turner, *Woman with Pendant V (Portrait of Jen Bandini)*, 2014 oil on canvas, 36" x 24"



from left to right: Hooper Turner, *Cate Blanchette's Dress*, 2014, oil on canvas, 12" x 16" Chris Martin, *Psilocybin for Leeza...*, 2006, watercolor, gouache, pen on cardstock, 9" x 12" Susan Metrican, *Spooklight Road*, 2014, acrylic and spraypaint on canvas, horsehair, plywood, 70" x 163"

JB: I certainly think that is one of the potential reads of the work and the relationships between them. However, we wanted to keep the references to the sacred open-ended. Hooper's paintings are vaginas though, at least that's how I read them (which is not to say they are NOT cathedrals or temples).

EH: In the press release, you address the notion of time. Personally speaking, one of the things I find so fascinating about art is that it can be a portal to the time and space in which it was created, and to the reality of the artist. Or, at least the reality we can imagine. Was part of your intention to challenge or dislodge our conventional understanding of time?

LM: I think art has the potential to shift or dislodge one's understanding of time. We chose works for the show with this in mind. I'm not sure if all together the works in the show create a challenge to our conventions of time – I doubt it. But I do think that the individual works within the show do this, and perhaps the sprinkling of Cortázar's snapshots of the observatory create a visible thread, linking the works in the show in a time-warp sort of way.

JB: Yeah, the book *From the Observatory* certainly does this. It's a shape shifting time bending arc. This has a relationship to the non-linear narrative Cortázar sets up in *Hopscotch*. You're never really sure where you are in the book because of the non-linear sequence he lays out. At the end of each chapter he tells you which chapter to go to next (ex. 32 – 132 – 61 – 33 – 67 – 83 etc.). The "end" of the book ends in a loop between chapters 58 and 131 so you can't really even say you've read the book... only that you've quit reading it. Didn't someone say this about painting, that you're never done, only that you quit working on it. Luc Fuller's painting of a clock, *Untitled (Clock Painting)*, deals a bit with this. I got to thinking about the frozen clock hands. It can be an aggressive thing to do. To freeze time is to, in a certain way, attempt to kill time. So again, there is a beautiful pull between the aggressive and futile act of killing or stopping time, and the flippant and lackadaisical practice of "killing time," or just messing around. How much better can you describe the dialectic of art making than this!

EH: Observing the cosmos might bring to mind a new understanding of our place within it. We might feel small. We feel that our place in historical time, our societal conditions and identities, are understood in a new context. The dramas of our lives take on a refreshing insignificance. Do you see this exhibition as metaphorical of an observatory?

LM: I love the idea that the exhibit itself extends Cortázar's fascination with the observatory (the real building as well as the metaphor that it creates). For Cortázar, the observatory signifies a look-out point, a place for seeing, observing and contemplating. Joshua and I talked a great deal about these themes within the show and I think some of the more unusual curatorial choices that we made were inspired by the flowie, meandering style of Cortázar's writing.

EH: Flowie. What a great word! In *From the Observatory*, the eel figures as a main character. Was this metaphorical figure a source of content for you as a curator? The gracefulness of eels speaks to your "meandering" curatorial style. Do you agree?

JB: Absolutely. I love the part about the eel performing a dance for an audience of none. I know I am not alone in my inclination to perform a related dance in my studio. Here I am not being poetic or deeply metaphoric. When Tunechi's *Senile* comes on my mix, Imma stop painting and dance all flowie like.

EH: I love that you just owned up to dancing in the studio. Who hasn't done it?

JB: Dude, I cut a rug! Back to the point about the show being a metaphor for the observatory. Yes, we did talk about the way the gallery or art space can function as a kind of observatory. A place to consider (not "figure out"), but just consider the cosmos, historical time, societal conditions etc. I tend to harp on this but isn't this idea of art as a thing that creates a space for contemplation what Hegel calls the dawn of human consciousness? Isn't this why folks so often say, "I don't get it," when they look at art? It isn't to be "got." It is to be considered. It can stop a cycle of consumption and replace it with a cycle of contemplation, which can lead to radical change... but it doesn't have to. It just *can*. So for instance, Michael Velliquette's *Pitch Black Serpent* was one of the first works we started with. The thing literally seems to be moving out of or into an endless abyss. I don't think it's a work you can look at and "get." I think it's something you approach with questions. It antagonizes questions. The darkness seduces closer inspection, upon which there are delicacies and details that continue to seduce. If it weren't for the acrylic wall-mounted vitrine, one might be tempted to enter it. At the opening, David Humphrey and I watched a little girl who was both intrigued and reluctant to engage with his sculpture *Dogs*. Later that night I was thinking about this little girl. I think the child saw the stuffed animal head and really wanted someone to take it off of the big monster animal so that she could safely play with the thing. It was beautiful. It was like *I want it, but I would like to get away from it now. But can I have it?*



left: David Humphrey, *Dogs*, 2010-2014, Hydrocal, paper pulp, paint, plush, 68" h x 45" w x 55" d right: David Humphrey, *Rabbits*, 2008, Hydrocal, paper pulp, paint, plush, on pedestal with dolly, 69" h x 30" w x 33" d



left: Kevin Curran, *Untitled*, 2014, laser print with foil transfer on foam core, 11" x 12" right: Michael Velliquette, *Pitch Black Serpent*, 2014, tar paper, glue, 25" x 25" x 2.5"

EH: I like that you bring up the distinction between different ways of understanding: "getting it" as opposed to "considering". When there is nothing to understand, according to our conventional way of thinking, we can simply be present with experience.

I recently read excerpts from *Cronopios y Famas*. Like *From the Observatory*, I found the writing required a lot of imagination to follow. The visualization of the vivid imagery he creates is what gives the experience of his work structure. However, his writing is difficult to follow at times. What is your thoughts of his writing?

JB: Yeah, he's hard to follow. Sometimes he's totally impossible. But he plays tricks on you and games. There is a chapter in *Cronopios y Famas* that is made up of fake words. It took me like 7 sentences to even notice at that point because I was half paying attention. Sometimes you'll read three pages and then stop and not be able to say one damn thing you just read. Then you read a page of all fake words and it's like he's pulling you back in! I think this resonates with a lot of the work in the show. Angelina Gualdoni's painting *Tissue* feels like the inside of a washing machine or a Turner landscape. It pulls in directions but resists articulating itself as a pattern. Both reads are just sort of around. Mary Reid Kelley's rubbing on paper *Your Mouth Is...* is similarly hard to pin down. It's suspended in conflict with itself. It's constantly inviting you in, while keeping you at an arms length distance. It is loving and kind while being violent and cold, playful and serious, whimsical and researched.

LM: Things that are hard to follow are often invitations to initiate your own quest. There's no right/wrong meaning when you read Wittgenstein or Lacan. I know lots of scholars of these philosophers would disagree with that statement, but since they cannot find any consensus amongst themselves on what that absolute truth consists of, the reader's own feeling/opinion/impression is probably just as valid, if not more so.

EH: There is an emphasis on light in the show. Many works contain a shift between dark and light, such as Sheilah Wilson's *Build Your Altar* and Chris Martin's dappled abstraction *Psilocybin for Leeza....*. What are your thoughts about how light is depicted in the individual artworks, and in the show overall?

LM: In some ways, light is the most salient motif in the show. Not only is light the literal component of what makes it possible for us to see the world and construct notions about our universe (based on speed of light calculations, for example), it's also the most layered metaphor for our existence – a slit of light in a sea of darkness... I think of Alan Ruiz's *WS/SD/48*, a site-specific serpent-like infinity sign done in metal studs and drywall as the most vivid incarnation of this metaphor. Some works in the show allude to transcendental epiphanies symbolized by beams, bolts and flares of light, like Kevin Curran's hologram or Sheilah Wilson's re-captured light from vintage photographer's blanks. Other works, like Chris Martin's painting and Susan Metrican's spray-painted scroll, tell of a psychedelic, or shamanistic transformation that took place in real time/light, yielding artifacts that will serve as clues or codices for us to decipher at a later date, bathed in a different light.



Alan Ruiz, *WS/SD/48*, 2014, site specific installation, MDF, metal studs, drywall, acrylic paint, existing architecture. 8' x 3' x 8'

EH: Amy Lincoln's paintings *Desert Study* and *Bird Island Study* offer an unexpected, if brief, burst of color in this exhibition dominated by black, white, and neutral tones. What role does color play in the show? Its presence and absence?

LM: Color ended up being the wild card in the months leading up to the show. We at first thought that the photographs we were waiting to receive from The Estate of Julio Cortázar would be black and white (like the ones that appear in his book *From the Observatory*). While awaiting these photos, we made some stylistic decisions about the other works we were choosing: 1) Constrained color palette 2) Emphasis on black and white works with strong contrasts and 3) Works that evoke or narrate a mystical or transcendental experience. Then we got the photos from Cortázar's estate. To our surprise – they were in color! At first this seemed like a confusing set-back, but the more we looked at the

As far as your comments on mood, indeed, the show creates a certain mood, one difficult to put ones finger on, but one that one no less returns to. This is how I think of Cortázar's writing anyway. I don't know why I read him. I can't tell you what the story is about. I can't tell you what I just read. I can't really even tell you what kind of writing he writes. But he creates a space and a mood and you just want to be in it, drinking mate, listening to records and contemplating the cosmos and the seas and the dancing eels from a place of sensual magnificence.

EH: Your last sentence makes me think that you probably smoke a lot of pot. Or, maybe you are just high on art.

Tightened, as if by Pliers is on view at [The Knockdown Center](#) in Queens, NY until Sunday, January 25, 2015 when there will be a closing reception 3-7pm with additional programming. In the gallery all throughout the day: A durational performance by Tamar Ettun and video screening by Alex Zandi. A Sit-down event will start at 5pm, with a reading by Wayne Koestenbaum and Musical performances by Rachel Mason and Phrogz (David Humphrey & Jennifer Coates).

Ortega Y Gasset Projects was launched in May 2013 as a gallery and curated project space in the Bushwick/Ridgewood neighborhoods of Brooklyn and Queens. Formed by artists living in California, Illinois, Ohio, Tennessee, Maryland, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania and New York, O y G operates as a cross-country collective and an incubator for dialog and artistic exchange. *Ortega y Gasset Projects* was founded by Lauren Adams, Joshua Bienko, Clare Britt, Carrie Hott, Jessica Langley, Leeza Meksin, Sheilah Wilson and Karla Wozniak.

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	ERIC HIBIT	HOOPER TURNER	JOSHUA BIENKO	JULIO CORTÁZAR	KEVIN CURRAN	LEEZA MEKSIN	LUC FULLER
	MARY REID KELLEY	MICHAEL VELLIQUETTE	ORTEGA Y GASSET PROJECTS	SHEILAH WILSON	SUSAN METRICAN		
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