

drawings, like crossing over to the other side of a mirror. Settling into the armchairs, one could hardly relax: The moment seemed fraught with tension, as if it were the one prior to the conflagration evoked by the images on the walls, those violent drawings that gave the suite its sole point of color, perhaps in anticipation of that other explosive moment—namely, the birth of the artist.

—Riccardo Venturi

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

Amélie Bertrand

SEMIOSE GALERIE

Featuring a limited palette of matte oil paints, whose saturated hues channel something of the bright, flat light of David Hockney's Los Angeles poolscapes, Amélie Bertrand's surrealist environments are as enticing as they are disconcerting. An odd assortment of cartoonish motifs including blank tombstones, redbrick walls, velvety sandpits, white lattice fencing, Astro turf mounds, and crenellated ramparts characterize an unpopulated terrain that is distinctly artificial, yet

appealingly familiar. But alluring though they may be, these pictures are not portals. Bertrand keeps the viewer at bay—denying easy access by relentlessly referring back to the surface of her paintings.

Eight smaller works, about 27 1/4 x 23 1/2", make up the bulk of the show. These focus in on snug corners and otherwise tightly cropped enigmatic vignettes. Bertrand augments the general feeling of claustrophobia in scenes depicting, for example, a yellow ladder hooked over a wall leading who-knows-where (*Untitled*, 2012), a nondescript horizontal cylinder supported by thick chains hanging beside a brick barrier (*Untitled*, 2012), or an anonymous tombstone with palm fronds and a miniature skateboard ramp in the background (*Untitled*, 2011) with discreet but

effective manipulations of one-point perspective and shadow. In several cases, an expanse of turquoise at the top of the composition—initially appearing to represent the sky—upon closer consideration is revealed to be more likely a solid wall or ceiling. With a subtle band of slightly darker blue beside the turquoise, Bertrand establishes a corner and thus boxes in the scene. Suddenly, these invitingly bizarre locales reveal themselves to be airless dystopias with no sense of relative scale and disconcertingly ambiguous boundaries between interior and exterior space.

Bertrand's facture insists on a single superficial plane. Painstakingly painting each element of the composition while masking off the rest of her canvas, she produces evenly coated and crisply defined regions of vibrant color. The neat seams formed wherever two areas of paint abut draw attention to the delicate tessellation of the works' surfaces, which are not unlike complex jigsaw puzzles or pixelated LED screens. That the eye is held hostage to the surface, unable to fully penetrate the picture, is not altogether surprising, considering Bertrand creates her compositions on a screen—digitally collaging and Photoshopping her own photographs and images culled from the Internet.

Further clues as to the genesis of Bertrand's curious *mise-en-scènes* are revealed in one of two much larger canvases, about 6'3" x 5'6", which is also the most narrative of all the works on view. This painting, *Untitled*, 2011, depicts a facsimile castle wall and tower buttressed by a scanty scaffold and anchored to a bright-green platform with heavy chains. A ramp at the bottom of the composition leads up to a circular sandpit marked with a pink flag. It makes sense that Bertrand finds inspiration in mini-golf courses, whose wacky scenery is amusing but whose flimsy construction and warped sense of place mark them as ultimately inhospitable. With this work's grander, more pulled-back perspective, Bertrand cracks open the door to her world and affords the viewer some breathing room. Yet even here one feels that each element and its peculiar textural quality—craggy stones, gleaming chains, soft sand—is mainly an excuse to explore painting in terms of abstract forms and color theory. The complementary hues Bertrand uses to represent shadow on the castle's faux-flagstone wall, for instance, would surely have made Josef Albers proud.

—Mara Hoberman

BERLIN

Jan Kotik

JIRI SVESTKA BERLIN

Why are we so in love with the art of the 1960s and '70s? Maybe because in our times of nostalgia and ironic detachment, it promises to satisfy a very contemporary desire for authenticity. Artists from that period, we feel, were exploring, not revisiting; their formal experiments were original, driven by an urgency that was fed by a belief in aesthetic, social, and political transformation. Maybe something of this utopian drive lives on in certain recent manifestations of what might be called social sculpture, but in the more object-based forms of contemporary art, this spirit seems to be lost.

This might be one reason why Jan Kotik's oeuvre from the '70s is so compelling, even though the phrase "object-based" isn't quite adequate here. A large part of Kotik's artistic project was devoted to altering the notions of painting and drawing and to abolishing the hand of the artist. Therefore, many of his works come with—or rather, come in the form of—instructions and sketches, texts and drawings, usually mounted on black cardboard, to be carried out by others: for instance, the sparse, untitled installation conceived in 1978, but unrealized until this exhibition, a decade after the artist's death, consisting of a white wooden slat placed in front of a delicate rectangular wall drawing. Another newly realized work, this one conceived by the artist in 1976, is made of eight earth-colored strings that seem to be knotted to a piece of thread that, on closer inspection, turns out to be a line of chalk. *Moving line*, 1972, however, plays with the reverse effect: The gently meandering pencil line is, in fact, made out of a strand of cotton wool.

Kotik's works often seem to deceive the eye just when they are really at their most straightforward. *Possible Variations*, 1975, for instance, could strike you as a piece of Op art, yet its three-dimensional effect is no illusion; the work is made from a piece of painted

Jan Kotik, *Guide for 1976*, str. chalk, acrylic, 35



Amélie Bertrand, *Untitled*, 2012, oil on canvas, 27 1/4 x 23 1/2".

