

20-20 Vision

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The exhibition history of a gallery over many years' time is revealing of the person whose name is on the door, though the image formed may not always offer a favorable portrait. Consider a gallery that has been around for, say, twenty years. More often than not the artists who appear among its earliest exhibitors are no longer present two decades later, or even at midpoint. In this we are mindful that loyalty in the art world is no exactly an everabundant commodity, and in this respect it's an important reminder. Artists come and go of their own accord, of course, but it's also not uncommon for gallery owners to pick up and drop artists as the winds of taste shift—"the dust blows forward ... and the dust blows back," as the old song goes—or as they lose interest, their vision more near than far-sighted. When you examine the exhibition history of Anton Kern's gallery, however, twenty years down the line, a very different image is revealed. Most of the artists who presented exhibitions in the earliest years of the gallery are still present, while very few are "missing in action." The current list of artists represented—setting aside later and recent additions—matches quite closely the program of the gallery between the mid'90s and now. Can the same be said of other galleries, those who shall remain nameless, though certainly not blameless, in this little town of ours?

And it is a town. If you live here, the term "New York art world" sounds like another planet from a different time, or its orbit can only be traced from outside. From where we stand, however, it's a small and mostly neighborly collection of misfits, some better dressed and better behaved, though no less iconoclastic. An actual gallery is merely a physical space that frequently appears as an empty box. What do you choose to put inside? How do you set the stage? How is a cast assembled and what are their parts to play? How, from one show to the next, from year to year, does something larger build upon itself and cohere? Cohere and continue to surprise? Behind the name on the door is a potential for worlds to be discovered.

After all, artists are the observers of and remakers of reality. Who do you choose to show and why? You don't always know, at least not immediately. The gallery, a temporal situation, is also a place of discovery for the person behind the name on the door. In some cases, though not all, this is someone with a sensibility and a vision, keeping in mind that vision—not necessarily a first requirement of business—is an ever more rare commodity in this business of art.

Appearances only go so far. A welltailored suit can only cover so much of a person, and we should never forget, from time to time, to gaze downward, towards the floor. Socks, or the lack of a pair, can tell you a lot about the person who stands in them or without them. Anton's socks, for example, always seem to be having a good time. They have a sense of humor, whimsical, though probably chosen after serious consideration, and not on a whim. They may prove helpful if you're dancing to music that's not necessarily danceable, such as that of Captain Beefheart, also known as the painter Don Van Vliet, whose work has

been shown by Anton. The music of the Melvins, of which Anton is a longtime fan, comes to mind as well. Once, when the Melvins' Buzz Osborne was asked to describe his music, he suggested: Captain Beefheart playing heavy metal. If the two seem incongruous, this is one of the keys to unlocking an otherwise open door. You have to be curious about what might be waiting on the other side. Anton presented a show devoted to the Melvins in 2003, organized by yours truly, in honor of the band's 20th anniversary. A dozen years later, they are still out on the front line, unstoppable it seems. One of the reasons for longevity in any creative endeavor, as Don van Vliet would have told you, as Buzz Osborne would advise, and as Anton knows intuitively, is that you have to do things your own way, you have to follow your own vision, minimize outside influence, and work steadily at your own pace.

Anton takes his time with important decisions. One of the key reasons why he stays true to the artists he represents is that he never grabs anyone in a rush, trying not to miss out on the latest thing, those "hot" trends that usually cool quickly. (THERMOMETERS, as Ed Ruscha has suggested, SHOULD LAST FOREVER. Although he wasn't speaking about the art market, where too many are addicted to taking its temperature, and from the bottom, he might have been.) Those art dealers who snap up artists just as easily as they toss them aside ought to replace the gallery entrance with a revolving door. But then that would be bad for their image, even as it represents the turnaround. This is another reminder.

Anton never seems to make decisions about which artists to show depending on who's "in" and who's "out." He shows what he responds to, to the art that he can engage with and to the person who makes it: the art and the artist form a coherent entity. If you think this sort of philosophy is true in every gallery, think again. When Anton finally takes a decision there is certainty, though he might even surprise himself. On his initial visit with Anne Collier, for example, he wanted to see all of her pictures. He spent a few hours in the studio, looking at everything, speaking with her, and near the end of the visit he confessed: 'I don't know why I'm here. I don't even like photography'—or something to that effect. Shortly after this visit he asked her to join the gallery. Anton follows the beat of his own drummer, one which may correspond to an unexpected time signature and reveals, in persistence, recognizable and overlapping patterns, consistent but subtly shifting, polyphonic. Connections can be made between the art he has shown, in all its difference, over twenty years' time.

9.19.1996

When Anton opened his gallery to the public, on Sept. 19, 1996, it was o Broadway in Soho, not far from my house, and I was a frequent visitor. I remember when John Bock had his first show there in 1999. The gallery next door, Brent Sikkema's Wooster Gardens, had just relocated to Chelsea and Anton had an opportunity to expand his space.

Rather than wait for the contractors, Bock roughly broke through the wall to incorporate the room on the other side as part of his installation. Although this is decidedly of a more anarchic sort, theatricality is one of the hallmarks of the art that Anton would go on to show, and still does. Art, he seems to be saying time and again, must perform, and so too its audience: viewers who look passively have not played their part. Whether an exhibition involves an overtly theatrical situation, as with Erik Van Lieshout's recent staging of the space, *I am in heaven* (2015), or it's inhabited by 2 or 3 dimensional figures—from the paintings of Brian Calvin and Nicole Eisenman to the sculptural figuration of Lothar Hempel and Matthew Monahan, as well as their counterparts in the abstract, the parabodies created by Richard Hughes and Lara Schnitger—the gallery as stage has been an important ground from which to orient and re-orient our point of view.

In this way the photos of Araki, Saul Fletcher and Enrique Metinides can be thought of as film stills, moments that have been extracted from a cinematic flow representing life and death, while other picturemaking is centered on the creation of photographic images themselves, as with Anne Collier's pictures within pictures and Sarah Jones's noirish/forensic investigation. There are films by the painter Wilhelm Sasnal and the filmed shadow play of Alessandro Pessoli, alongside comic animations and drawings by David Shrigley. There are props, stage sets and surrogate performers created by Jim Lambie, Marepe and Frances Upritchard, the Mask sculptures and Face paintings of Mark Grotjahn. Art and life reflect in different dimensions.

When you consider the range of painting that Anton shows, a preference for a direct image, relating to his own sensibility and directness, is revealed; so, too, an undeniable attraction for the picture as conveyance, for the obsessive, the allegorical and the transcendent. This is apparent, over and over again, in Calvin's closely cropped portraits, in Eisenman's layered examination of the fantastic and the vernacular, and in Dan McCarthy's choreography of the everyday as blissfully mystical. Whether appearing agitated in its expression or cool in its reserve, from Ellen Berkenblit's jaggedly nocturnal world, with its velvety undertow, to Jonas Woods's rendering of life as a hyperreal collage, its surface and textures pieced together in the wide-eyed light of day, we see the pictorial's ability to register and measure emotion and distance by degrees. Related to the psychedelic, Grotjahn's contemplative Butterfly paintings suggest an act of expansion and contraction that is also performed in Chris Martin's canvases, cosmic and earthly by turns, as well as in Marcel Odenbach's large format collage works, embedded with a narrative density that is only revealed upon close inspection. Anton understands that we have to look at any work from both near and far. For him there is always an overall image that commands attention, that projects into a room and towards the viewers, particularly when they stand at a distance within the open space of the gallery where the shows have been presented over most of the past twenty years. Figures, both painted and sculptural, as well as the visitors to the exhibitions, will come forward and recede as actors on a stage. As the Minutemen once sang: "Theater is the life of you." And so, too, is art.

In the spring of 2015, I organized a show for Anton's gallery, *The Painter of Modern Life*. Despite the fact that there are any number of painters in the gallery who I admire, none



of them ended up being included. Some would say that this has everything to do with a certain "independent" spirit with which I am associated, for better or worse, and yet I would counter that it has just as much, if not more, to do with the same spirit being present for Anton. In the early planning stages, he not only avoided suggesting any of the artists he represents, but when I mentioned one or two that I was especially interested in, he urged me to stick to the list with which I had started, to my original vision—that it was a show of mine, not his. On the evidence of twenty years of exhibitions in the gallery, he must relate to his artists in exactly this way. You hear far too many stories about art dealers imploring their artists to keep making more of what they can move, more of what collectors are wanting and waiting for. But you can't imagine this happening at Anton's gallery. I think, and I'm only guessing, that he may avoid this for fear of never seeing what an artist would otherwise have done, maybe taking things to a whole new level, and us with them. (There is also the danger that artists being reduced to "filling orders," to being misrepresented, eventually go elsewhere.) In terms of artists having the freedom to explore the unexpected, why would Anton want to miss out on the surprise? As serious as he is about art, Anton also knows that it needs to be fun, and there's no fun in telling someone what to do, or in being told what to do. In this respect he is established as antiestablishment, and not only from the ankles down.

The socks are very often on public view. Although in most galleries the owner is almost never visible, usually ensconced behind a door marked Private, while most of the staff and directors are similarly behind the scenes, inaccessible, off limits, this is not the case at Anton's. Almost everyone sits right up front—the front office as it were—including the man himself. This represents a greater sociability and projects an openness, which in turn may inspire a certain confidence. To be "up front" is to be clear and direct, offering an unspoken guarantee. With the move to a new gallery, although the physical arrangement will no doubt change, this more open spirit will surely remain. In the end it comes down to a philosophy of how things should be run, in line with the quality of the gallery's program, particularly as it has been sustained over a significant period, and in many ways it has only just begun.