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Swagger and Sideburns: Bad Boys in Galleries

By ROBERTA SMITH

Judging from a number of overbearing, obstreperous and generally large works by male artists that command gallery space right now, it seems to be bad-boy week on the New York art scene. Isn't every week, you ask? Maybe, but some are more emphatically so than others.

It's hard to say exactly what qualifies an artist for "bad boy" status. Is it a matter of social swagger and conspicuous display? Extroverted self-indulgence and a tendency to revel in unholy messiness? A penchant for extra-large sinister-looking objects that are the sculptural equivalent of long sideburns? All this and more, certainly, awaits your scrutiny in a few of these shows, which exemplify different stages of bad-boyness: beginner (there's still time to turn back), over the top and over the hill. Others give hints of a change of tune or even redemption. They adopt the scale but not the macho; they add parodying overtones or elegiac undercurrents; or they exercise restraint, delicately explore touch and even broach maturity.

Leonardo Drew

If Mr. Violette's work has benefited from relenting a bit, Leonardo Drew's, on view at Sikkema Jenkins & Company (530 West 22nd Street, Chelsea), has toughened up. In the past Mr. Drew's wall-size accumulations of rusted containers, filled with papery detritus, have usually been overly tasteful. A little more badness was in order.

The show's tour de force is "Number 134," a glowering, craggy mass of wood in several forms — blocks, beams, sticks, shingles, tree limbs and trunks — all of them painted black and many projecting outward like weapons or natural eruptions. The piece is at once a barricade holding back an unruly force and the force itself, about to break over your head like a wave. It is as if Mr. Drew had subjected the black, compartmentalized work of Louise Nevelson, to whom he is sometimes compared, to a perfect storm. Nevelson's orderliness is apparent in other works as Mr. Drew presents the full range of his working capabilities.

But the violent topography of "Number 134" reigns in the other large reliefs, one of which is a 15-by-60-foot sweep of plywood — pocked, splintered, seemingly burned here, bristling there, unexpectedly delicate elsewhere. It's an endless catastrophe seen from above. The energies intimated in these works are beyond human control, bigger than all of us, and Mr. Drew handles them respectfully. He has made his work more muscular without completely tossing caution to the winds.



Photo: Librado Romero/The New York Times

Full article:

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Damien Hirst

Let's start with the unrepentantly over the hill. That would be Damien Hirst, who made the latest bad-boy mold — opening art to flies, decaying flesh and sharks in

formaldehyde — before breaking out of it to become a restaurateur, a retailer of his own work and the maker of a diamond-encrusted skull. In the beginning he conducted himself with intelligence or at least inclusive cheer. Not so much these days. It is as if Mr. Hirst had seen the light, and it was gold, and he wants to shove it in our faces lest we think we are above greed.

In his latest show at the uptown Gagosian Gallery (980 Madison Avenue), thousands of artificial diamonds, each a different cut or size, shimmer in neat rows on the narrow shelves of a gold-plated cabinet. (The asking price is rumored to be \$10 million.) A bull's head with a large solid-gold disc between its gold-wrapped horns occupies a gold-trimmed tank of formaldehyde. Greasy Photorealist oil paintings of single magnified gems — produced by Mr. Hirst's workshop — line the walls, framed in gold (like Francis Bacon paintings) or glossy black. If this isn't Sodom, it must be Gomorrah.

Two floors down, groups of dot paintings, cabinets filled with pharmaceuticals, butterfly-wing tondos (which look like Victorian stained glass from afar but are just sloppy up close) sum up Mr. Hirst's past work but are actually quite recent, suggesting an artist who is on automatic pilot if not cryogenically suspended. Maybe this is bad-boy hell: a place of high-priced, self-reflexive art tantrums where no one can hear you scream. The show is titled "End of an Era." As if.

Gelitin

The Gelitin collective, made up of the Austrian artists Wolfgang Gantner, Ali Janka, Florian Reither and Tobias Urban, seems never to run out of bumptious, bad-boy things to do. For "Tantamounter," their 2005 show at the Leo Koenig Gallery, they spent a week holed up with sundry art materials in a box the size of a small trailer, making copies of whatever the public could fit into their roughly milk-crate-size in-box. Objects of all kinds were brought in, inserted and returned in due course, with ingeniously improvised, wittily deconstructive facsimiles.

Their latest show, "Blind Sculpture," billed as "a Happening by Gelitin with a little help of their friends," is another test in chaotic creativity. Starting on opening night, each Gelitinist spent more than a week blindfolded while making a sculptural assemblage at Greene Naftali (508 West 26th Street, Chelsea), "guest-assisted" by a different invited artist each day.

The available materials included string, fabric, plaster, paint, wood, everyday objects and cardboard boxes. Visitors could observe from bleachers, though watching made me itchy. It looked messy, exhausting and mildly offensive, since the artists wore high heels and skimpy cocktail dresses, underwear optional. If they hoped these getups — and the fact that some of the assistants were women — would mitigate the bad-boy image, no such luck.

But now it's over, and the bleachers are gone. The jury-rigged, metastasizing forms that remain are better than seemed possible, at least the free-standing ones. What's surprising is how familiar they are. The best are skillful reprises of Rauschenberg combines, as well as of the work of Franz West, Rachel Harrison and Jessica Stockholder. It's better when Gelitin can see what it's doing, and we can't.

Sterling Ruby

Like Gelitin, the young, absurdly talented artist Sterling Ruby keeps a lot of bad-boy options open. He draws in nail polish, sashes gnarly ceramic sculptures with glaze, builds and vandalizes Formica plinths in mockery of Minimalism and makes street-wise, toxic-looking Rothkos, using black and fluorescent spray paint. Last fall at Foxy Production, his longtime New York gallery, Mr. Ruby exhibited "The Masturbators," a surround of nine videos, each showing a professional male porn star standing naked before the camera engaged in onanism (not always successfully). Bad boys incarnate.

Now Mr. Ruby, who had a show two years ago at the high-profile gallery Metro Pictures, has turned up at the even more prominent PaceWildenstein (545 West 22nd Street, Chelsea) with two large works that veer toward familiar Goth spectacle. The sinister, needlessly oppressive found-object sculptures in "2Traps" disappoint, demonstrating how big spaces and possibly big budgets can bring out the worst in bad boys.

"Bus" was a former prison bus that had been converted into a rolling showroom for sound systems before Mr. Ruby sprayed it black with fluorescent touches, added chrome to its display speakers and divided the rest of its interior into cages. It's something Mad Max would drive if he could find the gas.

Equally massive is "Pig Pen," a shipping-container-size assemblage of cages made from barred security doors of urban homes. Also highlighted with fluorescent spray paint, it conjures up incarceration, paranoia and industrial decay; it might also be taken as a three-dimensional painting whose hazy layers happen to be metal. Mr. Ruby's art always involves bad-boy brinkmanship, but here the qualities that make his work compelling are present in unconvincing ratios.

Banks Violette

Banks Violette's show at Gladstone Gallery (530 West 21st Street, Chelsea) feels like a onetime bad boy's new beginning. After headlining the Goth faction of early aughts art — with eerily immaculate installations using high-gloss black fiberglass, cast salt and Nordic heavy-metal soundtracks — Mr. Violette seemed to be fading

from view, despite the flashy name. His lower profile may have been a good way to shake off that old reputation, but making better art helps too.

The Gladstone presentation centers on one of his best works so far: a big, morose chandelier made of white fluorescent lights titled “throne (and over and over again).” Hanging close to the floor, it’s more a skeletal cabana or giant wind chime, despite the arctic light. Its black wiring spreads like tendrils across the floor to a bank of outlets in a big road case that a rock band might use.

Opposite is “blackouts/blackholes (and all the things between)/for DS 7.13.09.” (The work is dedicated to the artist Dash Snow, who died last July of a drug overdose.) Its enormous rumped or broken planes of black fiberglass refract the light of the chandelier. Two are elevated on metal scaffoldings; they suggest abstract outcroppings, collapsing billboards and rock arena sets. Frankly, I like the idea that the shiny blackness might be heading for storage, like stage flats being raised into the fly tower above the Gladstone space. As the chandelier indicates, more hands-on is a good direction for Mr. Violette.

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EI Anatsui

If anything, the Ghanaian-born artist El Anatsui, now based in Nigeria, would seem to be the anti-bad boy. At 66, after all, he is surely a bit beyond the age limit. And the shimmering tapestries he makes from the discarded foil of liquor-bottle tops and bottleneck wrappers have a gender-neutral dignity that suggests a kind of antidote to bad boyism. But these works — the latest of which are up to 35 feet long and form a resplendent exhibition at the Jack Shainman Gallery (513 West 20th Street, Chelsea) — have their own subtle form of swagger, as if Mr. Anatsui were showing the youngsters a viable alternative.

The pieces are blithely indifferent to Western distinctions between high and low, and art and craft, and their implicitly subversive stance is amplified by exuberance and scale. Their ravishing patterns are achieved by simply folding the foils into different shapes and mixing or matching within the palette of silver, gold, black, yellow and red, and seem to accrue without plan. Looking almost more repaired than made, the works evoke lace but also chain mail; quilts but also animal hides; garments but also mosaic, not to mention the rich ceremonial cloths of numerous cultures. Their drapes and folds have a voluptuous sculptural presence, but also an undeniably glamorous bravado. And up close, the brand names of the liquors come into focus — First Lady Brandy, Old Man Deluxe Whiskey and several kinds of ponche, an eggnog-like punch — creating an atmosphere of revelry, excess and dubious behavior.

Keith Haring

The 1980s certainly had no shortage of genuinely hopeless bad boys from both sides of the Atlantic, but Keith Haring (1958-1990) deviated from the norm by having something close to a heart of gold. It always seemed emblematic that his subway graffiti did no lasting damage: he drew in white chalk on the black paper covering unrented advertising panels. Even more characteristic was Haring's habit of painting public murals pro bono. During his lifetime he completed 16 such works at hospitals and children's centers around the world, including the 70-foot-long "Mural for St. Patrick's Daycare Center," from a San Francisco building. It dates from 1985, was dismantled in 2006 when the center lost its lease and can be seen in an enormous all-white space at Deitch Projects (18 Wooster Street, SoHo) through Saturday, and then again from Feb. 23 through Feb. 27. It looks stunning.

Executed in acrylic on wood, the mural is populated by a range of charming cartoon characters and animals inspired by Haring's childhood drawings, including a self-portrait at one end. The forms are rounder, the energy less aggressive and antic than usual, as if Haring were softening his style, summoning his younger self for younger viewers. Which makes it all the more interesting that he was clearly at the height of his powers, working with complete assurance and ease. The mural is a superb calligraphic performance, revealing the bad boy as a Zen master in a state of grace.