

Village Voice
June 26th, 2007

Where the Boys Art

At CRG Gallery, it's piss and beer, crackheads and punk. Plus, er, Chris Farley.

— Meghan Dailey

A crystalline stream of urine, a dirty fridge filled with 40-ouncers, stereo speakers, a grunge idol's suicide note: I was ready to write off Colby Bird and Joshua Fields's two-person show as just another instance of "boy art." The designation is a shorthand for work made by smart, cynical, punk- and hip-hop-obsessed young dudes late of MFA programs, who get stoned in their studios and tease ironic meaning out of deliberately downgraded materials in the vacuum of popular culture. But I stuck around long enough to remember that the veneer of adolescent slacker posturing often obscures sincerity, even vulnerability, operating just below the surface.

This is the first major appearance at a New York gallery for these Brooklyn-based artists. Bird is in the current group show "In Defense of Ardor" at Bellwether (through June 30); Fields will probably be brand-new for most viewers. The installation of sculpture, photographs, and a few works on canvas is not a collaborative effort, but it does feel seamless.

We're ushered into the exhibition by its most grandly scaled work: a grid of ceiling tiles pitched at a 90-degree angle and anchored to the wall by wires. On the floor below lays a tangle of electrical cords and a rectilinear, Flavin-esque arrangement of fluorescent lights. We know this deconstructed office/school/generic institution is Bird's, because he's signed his name, spray-painted in gold, on one of the tiles.

The inscription of identity is a trope throughout. Fields "signed" one of his works into existence by peeing his name in the snow and photographing the result (it's called *Territorial Pissings*, after the Nirvana song). Sometimes the artists are indirectly present. Fields has written the phrase "Just do it" on paper in his own blood, and Bird titled one photograph a self-portrait, but the guy in the picture, who sports gold teeth (the foil from a champagne bottle), isn't him.

Bird offers a few other photographs, but they feel incidental to his three-dimensional works, which



he fashions out of such things as cheap glassware, bathroom vanity lights, plastic cups, and faux-wood speaker cabinets. With these he riffs on culture, high to low and very low, as in the video clip of a young crackhead at a gas station, part of *Royal Crown*, a two-part sculpture. *Action Painting* consists of a makeshift ramp leading to a blank canvas. In one corner of the gallery, Bird has installed *Untitled*, the open mini-fridge filled with 40s; a smoke machine on the floor in front of it periodically goes off with a hiss, emitting a fog that envelops the stacked bottles inside before dissipating into the gallery. Aside from signifying "party" of a certain variety, the work telegraphs "Minimalism" (the cube, the stack, multiples, industrial uniformity). While Bird's art gets some of its conceptual heft from such art-historical allusions, he never takes them too seriously.

Fields has a darker, more anxious view, evidenced by a preoccupation with death. In *Seek and Destroy*, a tumbleweed rests in a small, circular barbed-wire and wood-post fence. The sense of desolation is an obvious link to punk rock, which Fields makes various uses of, as in the twin forms of *Feel Like Shit*. . . *Déjà Vu*: two turntables on plywood stands, one at either end of the gallery, that each spin a Suicidal Tendencies album with the needle stuck on the same song.

The adolescent angst of *Feel Like Shit* segues neatly into the text of Kurt Cobain's suicide note, which Fields has transposed onto canvas. Your eye shifts between the substance of Cobain's lament (" . . . I think I simply love people too much, so much that it makes me feel too fucking sad") and the billowy shapes of the handwritten paragraphs against the stark white background. Fields again turns to a dead celebrity in *The Birth and Death of Chris Farley*, which shows us the comedian's birth and death certificates, enlarged on canvas. The names, dates, and physical statistics on the forms are both tawdry and piteous. The big lug who overindulged, and then overdosed, was first someone's baby. As Warhol was only too eager to point out, tragedy finds its most fluent expression in the utterly prosaic.

Bird's work, and Fields's to a lesser extent, exemplifies a fashionable approach to art-making that relies on reconfiguring and juxtaposing common objects and pop-cultural residue in an attempt to elicit a transformational charge. This studied ad hoc style may be considered a subgenre of boy art. I'm not the first to note that this mode has begun to feel like an institutionalized aesthetic among young artists. There are built-in limitations to this kind of work (that's the risk), since failure or at least a studied shabbiness is endemic to a project that frequently aims to expose how often we turn to the cheap and easy as a stand-in for the real thing. For Bird and Fields, refinement is not the goal; it's about feelings a lot of the time and ideas some of the time, which can make for some lively, if uneven, results.