

16 mi.

TUESDAY, JULY 16, 2013

Sam Anderson, 'Shuffle Puck Cafe,' at Bed-Stuy Love Affair



Installation view of Sam Anderson, "Shuffle Puck Cafe," at Bed-Stuy Love Affair, Brooklyn, through June 23. Photos: 16 Miles [more]

For her recent one-person show at the new Bed-Stuy Love Affair gallery, "Shuffle Puck Cafe," Sam Anderson arrayed more than 100 hunks of coal in long rows on the floor. Carefully spaced out across the room, they dominated the display at first glance—dusty or lustrous, sharp-edged or elegantly worn down, chic or dirty. Wielding Minimalist tropes awkwardly and irregularly, they recalled in their variations Joel Shapiro's sets of small clay objects and inked fingerprints from 1969 to 1972 that Craig F. Starr Gallery showed earlier this year, though Anderson's mutations are readymade, ultimately impersonal selections, rather than handmade and intimately produced.

The carefully handmade sculptures are elsewhere, though it took me a moment to spot them—peculiar objects set on top, around, and within the coal grid, like musical notes on a staff or words placed on the lines of a notebook. A fragmented, ad hoc syntax became apparent. Two short saloon doors, just a few inches tall and made of light wood, were ajar. Frog skeletons appeared in various places: climbing a piece of coal, asleep or dead on a bed—a pyre?—of leaves and gambling chips, and sprawled out next to at least half a dozen little bottles of liquor. It looked like a raucous party had come to an end hours earlier, only a few stragglers having failed to escape. Or maybe separate, solitary tragedies had just been playing themselves out all night. (Another, even more bracing possibility: this was the same frog, presented throughout the installation at various points in his or her life, like a biblical figure who reappears repeatedly throughout an old painting at different stages in a religious journey.)

There was also a minuscule bowl of minuscule walnuts (complete with a properly proportioned nutcracker), tiny skis, a few little drums, (full-size) lemons, and a toy trireme-like vessel sitting not far away from the coal, guaranteed to sink immediately upon being placed in water, its body a slab of cement, its oars little wooden sticks. And all of this was lit by colored ceiling lights. (My photos don't really do it justice, but the gallery's website has some images that better capture the atmosphere.)

You could point to Charles LeDray's minute sculptures as a reasonable comparison, but Anderson's not interested in obviously obsessive (finicky) craftsmanship. She's building provisional, hilarious sculptures with seemingly whatever she has at hand. And all the while, there are hints of rich and strange stories playing themselves out. What were the Alcoholics Anonymous coins doing throughout the piece? The dead slug on a slab of concrete? And the show's title, referring to a classic, bizarre air hockey video game?

I'm tempted to think of the show as a dissembled, madcap, and maybe even slightly sinister version of Carrie Walter Stettheimer's dollhouse at the Museum of the City of New York, though that's a structure that is eerily devoid of life, always begging to be activated by people, whereas Anderson's piece teems with signs of activity—maybe more activity than one could take in even on a long visit. Just when I thought I had seen the whole work, another little sculpture caught my eye, suggesting other stories.

Sheer novelty is a pretty dubious criterion for evaluating art, as Aldous Huxley wrote in his 1926 essay "The Best Picture," warning about "the error of those who measure merit by a scale of oddness and rarity." There are plenty of unique, one-of-a-kind things that are terrible or worse, boring. But not Anderson's practice, which feels wonderfully, exceptionally unique in its blending of formal and narrative issues, and its absolute brio. The show has been stuck in my head for more than a month now. What was happening to those frogs? What are they up to now? Where will Anderson go next? Bring on the sequel.

(A final note: the gallery takes its name from a cocktail that was offered for a time at Peaches, the redoubtable Southern-leaning New American restaurant located not far away in Bed-Stuy, a sign of good taste and ambition if ever there was one.)

POSTED BY ANDREW RUSSETH AT TUESDAY, JULY 16, 2013