



Uri Aran: John

**Proposals, Pronouncements, Pool balls,
and Pictures: with cookies**

Uri Aran's Geraniums, at Rivington Arms

The famed Lower East Side gallery, Rivington Arms, closed its doors on January 25th after seven years in existence. Before final goodbyes, the gallery sent us a parting gift: Geraniums.

Uri Aran's first solo show is couched in the wider and overlapping circles of language where the concern is not simply with those borders but with the interplay between center and circumference. Aran's title for the exhibition, *Geraniums*, is just one instance of this: a flower with enough ubiquity to mean something, just nothing available for outline.

There is a curious flicker to Aran's work, in part because of his varied deployment of mediums and materials: monoprints, photographs, sculptures, and video, fish food, coconuts, cookies, and tea cups. The show is, however, decidedly manicured. While variety of this kind could, in the hands of another artist belie a slapdash aesthetic, Aran delicately avoids it. The artist has made a series of discrete objects and framed works, along with a more shameless sculpture featuring a collapsed dresser whose back displays a grid of large holes, some corked with cookies, and its front spewing up a synthetic aquarium on scrolling acetate. (Its title too is a bit shameless: *Letter, policeman, ambulance, firetruck, crosswalk, stop sign, the butcher, the baker, schoolteacher.*) Despite their obvious conceptual heterogeneity, the connection between the works manifests itself clearly on a formal level – the worn color of the dresser finding its way into prints, the color of the coconuts, and even in the tonality of a photograph.

A video in the back room, *Untitled*, is set in a recording studio where a friend of the artist's, whose voice has been featured recurrently in Aran's video pieces, is loosely directed to think of continued superlatives to lay upon the dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov. The repetition – “Mikhail Baryshnikov is the best dancer in the world”, “...the greatest dancer ever”, etc. – results in moments of comedy and strangeness, where the tension of the directed is visible. Aran's video also suggests that even with a steady and narrow set of parameters, the wandering of the mind can thread the simplest content with a variety of unforeseen material. Truth is thereby subjected to the viewer's weave.

Aran's art historical lineage remains more easily traceable than, in Deleuze's words, his “image of thought.” It's his intelligent whimsy that has allowed him to fashion a show that bears his fragile signature, while still acknowledging his predecessors. Nineteen-sixties Conceptualism is the key frontrunner, and Joseph Kosuth and Bruce Nauman are the closest thing to family. Aran's coconut

sculpture, Untitled, maintains a tangential but important relationship to Kosuth's One and Three Chairs, 1965. Aran's piece is simple enough: a coconut split in two, loosely reassembled – resulting in an overbite that Jim Henson could appropriately bring to life – and fixed to the wall. Next to it is a tablet with a torn out sheet of lined paper stained with polyurethane and dashes of pigment whose shape alludes to the imprint or bleed of a coconut – a connection that is logically untenable, but available nevertheless. The diagrammatic nature of the sculpture is certainly reminiscent of Kosuth's chair as image, object, and definition, but Aran's irreverence is refreshing and smart.

What's disappointing about the artists of that period who embraced Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations is that they misunderstood a major component of the text: its literary nature. The art that rose out Conceptualism feels a bit astringent and monotone, a far cry from the near lyricism of the later Wittgenstein – few 20th century philosophers match Wittgenstein's use of artful metaphor and figurative language in the Investigations. This kind of production has, of course, honed a particular tonality in art, but what Aran has done with his first show is go beyond the letter of Wittgenstein's text to its more subtle topography, or in a word: to its spirit.

In Kosuth's Sixth Investigation, he asserts that “[a]rt before the modern period is as much art as Neanderthal man is man. It is for this reason that around the same time I replaced the term ‘work’ for art proposition. Because a conceptual work of art in the traditional sense, is a contradiction in terms.”¹ The concept of the proposition plays an important role in the history of philosophy, and to Wittgenstein in particular. With his first major work, the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Wittgenstein attempted to find a logical atomization of language that mirrored the atomized facts of the world, however, once the work was completed he realized his flawed course and abandoned the propositional structure of language for a more nuanced idea of language games, and more importantly, to focus on language in practice rather than creating an external grammar or attempting to discover a logic prior to language's instantiation. These language games are similar to a game in that there are rules and play, but in language the rules are more loosely bound. Wittgenstein begins the subject in ¶ 65 of the Investigations:

“Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, – but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship or these relationships, that we call them all language’.”²

Though to quote Kosuth is to sidestep how his works exist and function in practice, it is telling nevertheless that the idea of the proposition is invoked, and I believe that it is Aran’s, along with other contemporaneous artists’, contribution to change the idea of the proposition into the idea of the proposal. It will be necessary to further explain Aran’s works so that the distinction is more than just semantics.

Next to the reassembled coconut, is a photograph entitled John. It is perhaps the most straightforward work in the show and commands the most wall space in the exhibition’s entirety: Aran has sought to make every decision, curatorial included, appear well considered. The photograph depicts the word “John” in clumsy letters made of clay and you can see a bit of the surrounding props, notably a cookie and a coconut, but more important seems to be the ambience created by the candles sticking out of the clay. It is either a celebration or a mourning. Like “geraniums”, “John” is a name of such common usage that its associations really do color the word gray. The photograph succinctly puts Aran’s belief in language’s tactility, ceremony, and that it is perhaps absurdly consumable – the candles make the letters reminiscent of a birthday cake, and I believe that Aran is aware of even the slightest slip of the letter, smiling at the similarly rounded sound of cake and clay. It may be a way of implying that language does not always go down well, or of insisting on a kind of playful “grounding.” In any case, it is also a way to distance himself from Nauman’s white bread words from a photographic work of 1966 of the artist about to, literally, dip “words” into a bottle of jam.

Across the space of the exhibition, candle flames reappear, modestly flickering in a partially lit circle that surround a small container of fish food sitting atop a pedestal. The title of the piece is Purpose, and is the most obscure work of the show. The minor repetitions of formal characteristics and indeterminate themes

accrete but refrain from the unity of an opus statement. We can speak of the ceremony and consumption in both John and Purpose, but demarcation is difficult, as every impression that Aran leaves remains subtle and in low relief.

Of course language remains key to Aran's practice, using it to articulate the seams between sense and nonsense, each stitched to one another with idiosyncrasy. In a milk drinking contest... could very well be the storyboard of Aran's thought. The sketch of a participant with milk gallons is captioned by the directive: "In a milk drinking contest, it is o.k. to have one of the contenders drink chocolate milk." The parameters of the milk drinking contest are slightly loosened with this odd addendum. The rules of the game are as such: tacitly agreed upon, but there is no stringency in this linguistic rule making. In practice, we can make our accommodations.

At the back wall of the space is a humble table with pool balls frozen in a pour of polyurethane. The table has its scratches, smudges, and marks, and even the occasional fake eyelash. On each ball is the label: bus. It is a strange traffic of unidentified passengers with no regard for lanes. After the constant naming and un-naming (every name that Aran applies soon rings of the arbitrary), following lines of thought and their erasure, one can take a fake escape in the image above the traffic of a clear blue ocean with dolphins, with a glistening layer of painted medium atop.

Each work is not prepared for final pronouncements, as, say, a painting of Willem de Kooning's or Barnett Newman's would be; nor are they studied enough to list their propositions, abstractions lacking tooth. They are, in essence, a facial expression, with a matter-of-fact sense that results in the everyday maintaining an artful relationship with the synthetic, the formed, and the proposed. They are works ruled by the logic of the conjunction, suggesting this and this and this. They propose, but marriage is constantly deferred. They are willing to simply have you in suspension, giving a taste for the color and opacity of language.

It all seems just right but looks just nearly so. Aran has updated the gesture of past painter's to a conceptual one for our moment.

- [1] Joseph Kosuth, *The Sixth Investigation 1969 Proposition 14* (Cologne: Gerd De Vries/Paul Maenz, 1971), n. p.
[2] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Philosophical Investigations* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), p. 27



whitehot gallery images

Uri Aran, John, 2008