

Uri Aran: Geraniums

by Emily Warner

Rivington Arms; December 11 2008 - January 25 2009

In the center of Uri Aran's *Geraniums*, a wooden dresser tilts forward at an angle, drawers out and cabinet doors aslant. Emerging from the trunk's center, like an impossibly long keyboard tray, is a fake, flat-screen "aquarium," a motorized roll of plastic scrolling brightly printed fish along an ultramarine background. The scene is at once random, like a castoff in an alley, and eerily deliberate, as if we have walked in on a botched crime scene or the results of some odd design experiment. This curious blend of precariousness and pregnant possibility characterizes the show as a whole: things, tipped over; words, repeated; objects, askew. Something has happened, and we are facing the aftereffects, like so many visual clues and thematic resonances to piece together.

The first solo show for this Israeli-born New York artist, *Geraniums* is also the swan song of Lower East Side pioneer Rivington Arms, which closed its doors at the end of January. Arriving in 2002 at Rivington Street, it was one of the first of the galleries that pursued a spot in the Lower East Side at the beginning of the decade. That "renaissance" (Rivington Arms opened around the same time as galleries like Maccarone, Canada, Participant, Inc, and others) embraced an ethos of risk and energy ostensibly missing from the more established Chelsea venues. Aran's *Geraniums*, a strong if at times constricted first show, continues in that tradition.

The surreal quality of Aran's dresser-with-fishtank recurs throughout, in works like *Untitled (Bus)* (2008), where a photo of a dolphin is glazed onto a mirror, or *Dogs and Cats* (2008), with its hairy coconut nested into a red and white teacup and brushed with acrylic paint. But Aran's strain of surrealism has more in common with Duchampian gamesmanship



Uri Aran, "Letter, policeman, ambulance, firetruck, crosswalk, stop sign, the butcher, the baker, schoolteacher," 2008. Mixed media, 40" x 58" x 54".
Courtesy of the Artist and Rivington Arms.

than with the fetish objects of Man Ray or Oppenheim. Repeated shapes and things (circles, spheres, cookies, flames, coconuts) weave a trail of familiar but indecipherable signposts. Along the plywood back of the dresser, circular holes are occasionally plugged with chocolate chip cookies, resembling a beehive or a mancala board, and a flaccid plasticine “fish” flops itself over a wooden knob. These arrangements, absurd yet recurrent, imply a set of rules or reasons, but ones we don’t have access to.

This area between the familiar and the obscure is fertile territory for Aran. In a short untitled video, a man before a recording mic improvises on the artist’s off-screen instructions: “Baryshnikov is the best dancer in the world,” he intones. “Baryshnikov is the best dancer I have ever seen.” “Baryshnikov is the greatest of dancers.” Et cetera. In this distressing and tedious repetition, the words become something very different from their linguistic meaning. Aran is adept at locating those connection points where things and their names, or objects and their representations, overlap, and in worrying at them until the categories begin to sag and pull apart. The assembled cue balls in *Untitled (Bus)*, stuck with glaze to a tabletop and labeled “BUS” with short strips of embossing tape, perform a similar shift in register. They are simultaneously a still life, a set of “real” objects, a mapped diagram, and an outlandish—and patently false—metaphor. Sited below the dolphin-mirror (and punctuated by a set of false eyelashes), they even begin to look like personal vanity objects.

What gives the show its distinctive character is this very sense of home, or even homeliness, that clings to so many of the objects and arrangements. They are decidedly plain and ordinary: an old dresser, a canister of fish food, chocolate chip cookies. Even the more exotic coconuts have an air of use and handling about them, touched up with acrylic or cut open and glued back together. Take an object, do something to it, do something else to it: but where Jasper Johns’s dictum soars for the conceptual, Aran heads straight for the domestic, implicating not only object and illusion, but all the networks of language, habit, routine, and affection with which we surround the material stuff of our lives.

The result is both compelling and a little claustrophobic. We are like voyeurs, venturing into a space or a ritual we recognize faintly but do not comprehend. Aran’s insistently banal and resolutely personal absurdities forge an experience that is by turns tedious, maddeningly opaque, and drolly magnificent. With its last show, Rivington Arms demonstrates that the work it has done in fostering these young artists will continue long after their doors have shut.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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