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Bad Faith

BY TIM GENTLES

James Fuentes, New York, USA

In New York, it has become a predictable curatorial trope to refer wistfully back to some halcyon version of the city and its art. Last year's Greater New York at MoMA PS1 recast a survey of the best work by the city's emerging artists as a dialogue with the practices of more established artists from the 1970s and '80s. Along with shows like the New Museum's 'NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star' in 2013, such nostalgic treatments leverage New York's recent art-historical past in a bid to affirm contemporary art's status quo.

While 'Bad Faith' – which includes work made in New York between 1982 and 1994 by Nayland Blake, Jessica Diamond, Peter Halley and Robert Morris – undoubtedly plays into this trend, curators Andrew J. Greene and James Michael Shaeffer thankfully avoid overly simplistic historical arguments. The selected artists are, in many ways, idiosyncratic and, despite the press release's references to specific historical events – such as the culture wars, the AIDS crisis and the rise of identity politics – the exhibition argues more broadly for their shared sense of political urgency, mobilized through aesthetic devices.



Installation view, Bad Faith,
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Diamond's No Money Down (1986/2016) – which consists of the phrase 'Buy a house with 200 credit cards' painted onto the gallery wall at billboard scale in a haphazard, handwritten vernacular – drolly critiques the deceitful real-estate industry tactics that prey on the financial vulnerabilities of aspirant homeowners, prescient in light of the 2008 mortgage crisis. Across from Diamond's work, an unconventional Morris piece from 1987, MEMORIA (For Alan Buchsbaum, dead March 21, 1987, from Pneumocystis Carinii Pneumonia), pays tribute to the artist's friend, who died from an AIDS-related respiratory disease. A pair of lungs, drawn in silver leaf on lead, carries a pared-down, morbid beauty quite unlike anything else from an otherwise extraordinarily baroque period of Morris's oeuvre. These two works form an unlikely but intriguing pairing: Buchsbaum was an architect who pioneered luxury loft living and might, in retrospect, be considered a key figure in the gentrification of downtown Manhattan. The decision to align these pieces could, perhaps, be seen as a reminder of the role galleries and artists can play – albeit unwittingly – in bolstering real-estate markets: one of the more significant legacies of this era in New York.

Three pieces by Halley rigorously probe the relationship between architecture and systems of oppression. Yellow Cell with Conduit – a 1982 painting in the artist's typical abstract, neo-geo style – is accompanied by two prints, a Photostat and a Kodalith, which diagrammatically explore urban and suburban design systems as carceral structures. In this context, and with the painting's title in mind, Halley's work is refreshingly recontextualized as an exploration of the politics of form. Finally, two sculptures from the early 1990s by Blake provide, perhaps, the most ready analogue to contemporary work with their stylized figuration.

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Both reference the Marquis de Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795), and use puppet show props – including a puppet representing an icon of Andy Warhol's *Factory*, Joe Dallesandro – to allude to the complex ways in which identity, particularly sexual identity, is embodied, aestheticized and performed.

'Bad Faith' seeks to critique our present socio-political situation. (The show's accompanying press release claims that these works might offer examples of how an aesthetic politics could be enacted today.) Nowadays, the political in art often manifests as a nostalgic effect of historical activism, failing to address the severity of contemporary crises, while art that takes on more explicitly 'contemporary' subjects frequently appears to be apolitical. Whether an exhibition featuring a number of older, commercially successful artists can meaningfully contend with such perceived impasses remains to be seen. What 'Bad Faith' does make clear, however, is that the art of the recent past can help us critically re-examine the present, rather than simply endorse its inevitability.