



Fischer's fourth-floor installation at the New Museum.

A Whole New Museum

The Urs Fischer-izing of a four-story institution.

BY JERRY SALTZ

URS FISCHER specializes in making jaws drop. Cutting giant holes in gallery walls, digging a crater in Gavin Brown's gallery floor in 2007, creating amazing hyperrealist wallpaper for a group show at Tony Shafrazi: It all percolates with uncanny destructiveness, operatic uncontrollability, and barbaric sculptural power. It's set expectations for his full-building retrospective at the New Museum incredibly high, and he's working hard to meet them. Fischer has lowered ceilings, added lights, and closed off doors, trying to get the effects he wants in this cold, almost soulless exhibition space. So much so that the curator Massimiliano Gioni mused to one writer, "I have thought a couple of times of killing him."

Thrill seekers, be forewarned: There's bravura work but no drop-dead moment here. Each of Fischer's three floors is beautiful, and each has an elfin elusiveness and deep material intelligence. They also have dead spots and duds. Fischer is weakest at smaller discrete sculptures and best when he's taking over entire spaces or reacting to other artworks nearby. (Also, at a rumored \$330,000 to stage, the show is another example of an art world that doesn't know when to say no.) Had Fischer made a swashbuckling statement by (let's say) demolishing the museum's second and third floors, he would have wowed everyone. Instead, thankfully, he took the hard way, putting together multiple ideas: exploring the sculptural-philosophical-experiential qualities of fullness on the fourth floor, emptiness on the third, and a mixture of both on the second floor. (For the record, the only hole here is a little one in a third-floor wall; a pink latex tongue sticks out, making it seem like the museum is clowning around, blowing you off, talking back, enticing, or hitting on you. A sight gag, and a great illustration of the weird ways museums have desires, needs, ideas, and consciousness.)

Step out of the elevator on four, and you're in a gigantic otherworldly nursery. Five enormous molten-looking amorphous ectoplasmic ex-

crecences fill the space, dwarfing viewers. Fischer makes these sculptures by squeezing clay, computer-scanning the shapes, making molds, and casting them in aluminum at monstrous proportions. They're where de Kooning, Rodin, and Lynda Benglis meet Frankenstein, Warhol's floating silver pillows, and the hatchery from *Aliens*. Gigantic fingerprints are visible; humongous thumbnails protrude. They make the room hum (even as they give off a whiff of old-style formalist abstract sculpture writ large) and create a feeling of things pupating—of the pure, unformed future being relentlessly pressed into shape by the past.

Fischer's ideas about exaggeration, entropy, optics, and play are all present in the stunning second-floor installation. Here, 51 large shiny chrome boxes—Warhol Brillo boxes by way of John McCracken's pristine minimalist slabs—have been arranged in an irregular grid. Each sports a super-detailed, five-sided photographic image of something one sees every day (a cupcake, a lighter, shoes, a souvenir) that turns out to be a composite of thousands of individual images. Walking among these quasi-Cubist futuristic photographs is like being in a city of cryogenically disembodied objects displayed on ultraembodied perfect containers. It's a walk-in necropolis, an exploration of the fabled ghost-in-the-machine but a look at the machine in ghosts—the essence that can make real things feel like shells of themselves.

The heart of the show, though, is the third floor, which echoes Fischer's tour de force Shafrazi wallpaper. It is essentially a walk-in photograph of the room itself. Fischer photographed every inch of the gallery, then wallpapered the room with a printed reproduction. The experience is like being enveloped in alien architecture. Fischer almost goes and spoils the experience with a silly sculpture of a melting piano plunked down in the corner—but then all this thwarted interiority and mechanical reproduction sparks to life in a tiny detail: A beautiful artificial butterfly alights on a croissant suspended from the ceiling. It's an absurd, wondrous sight. This tiny replica of a reincarnating insect—one that might have flown down from the fourth floor—is the secret soul of the whole show.

Calling a young artist "great" these days can give one the heebie-jeebies: The word has been denatured in the past decade. Still, amid the duds and stumbles, Fischer's wizardly ability to present objects on the brink of falling apart, floating away, or undergoing psychic transformation, and his forceful feel for chaos, carnality, and materiality, make him, for me, one of the most imaginative powerhouses we have. ■

URS FISCHER:
MARGUERITE DE
PONTY
THE NEW
MUSEUM,
THROUGH
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COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER, ZÜRICH; GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE, NEW YORK; AND SADIE COLES HQ, LONDON. PHOTOGRAPH BY BENOIT PAILLEY/COURTESY OF THE NEW MUSEUM