

Paul Butler

MKG127, TORONTO

Few individuals move so effortlessly among the categories of artist, dealer and curator as Winnipeg's Paul Butler. Indeed, Butler has used his fluent awareness of the inner workings, social networks and institutional apparatuses of the art world to create a mobile and respected international presence. His *Collage Party* events are a veritable who's who of art insiders. So it came as a bit of a surprise to find that his latest body of work, shown at MKG127, attempted a kind of critical unpacking of this magazine's "Toronto Now" photo series from winter 2007 (a profile of the movers and shakers on the local scene).

Meticulously using tiny pieces of black masking tape to blot out all the people in the original photographs, Butler exaggerates what he sees as the artificiality and constructed, stage-set nature of the article

PAUL BUTLER *Toronto Now*
Suite (detail) 2008 Archival
tape on magazine pages
27.9 x 41.2 cm



and others like it. Butler reinforces his intentions in his exhibition statement, in which he makes reference to the hoax once perpetrated on *Wine Spectator*, whose Award of Excellence was in 2008 infamously given to a fictitious restaurant, prompting an international debate about the magazine's credibility.

The eviscerated images are meant to be allegorical. Butler is ostensibly arguing for a sort of artistic autonomy; he has named one piece in the show *Power to the Artist*. The idealized, artist-centric notion of the art world he puts forth assumes that artists, galleries, cultural institutions and magazines operate in separate orbits. Surely, however, if anyone is aware of the soap-operatically intertwined connections among producers, markets and institutions, it is Paul Butler.

Butler has long been concerned with art-magazine advertising. Some of his best earlier work featured adhesive tape affixed to magazine ads in a bandage-like covering-over of famous names and gallery logos. These beautifully elegiac collages seemed to reinforce his distance from the locus of cultural power. In this latest work, however, he is no longer on the periphery lobbing potshots from the do-it-yourself perspective of a struggling emerging artist, but is himself a kind of tastemaker; so his criticism of champions and gatekeepers is less an exercise in the detached observation of structural power and more like a peer review.

The strength of the show lies in Butler's ability to mobilize the often playful and spontaneous quality of collage to pointedly critique the widespread fetishization of popularity, top 10 lists and the tendency of art magazines to mimic the glossy, personality-obsessed nature of celebrity culture. There is a certain irony, however, in this critique emanating from someone whose own practice so nimbly exploits an understanding of the structural mechanics of the art world and the powers that be. SKY GLABUSH