

REVIEWS / MAY 20, 2010

Katie Bethune-Leamen: Public Images Limited

Katie Bethune-Leamen Paintings from the *Peter Saville's OMD 'Dazzle Ships' (1983) Album Cover* series 2009
Installation view Courtesy the artist and MKG127



by Lee Henderson



The 1980s revival is a curious thing. The decade is long enough past to be retro, but the quotation of its fashion is always nostalgically conflicted. The 1980s was, after all, the last decade in which phrases like “mutually assured destruction” had any relevance, and at its end it seemed as though the last barrier to global, open-24-hours capitalism had fallen. The significance of these factors appeared lost on much of the pop culture of the day, as the youth of the free world heard disobedient punk quickly turn into apolitical, unthreatening new wave. During the same period, reality and fantasy bled into each other as, alarmingly, President Reagan (an actor) delivered speeches composed more of Hollywood dialogue than of stately address. It was a decade of illusion, of smoke and mirrors, and of blissful ignorance.

Katie Bethune-Leamen Sculptures from the *Gouzenko Hood (It's A Thing Covered By A Thing That Thereby Becomes Another Thing)* series 2009–10 Installation view Courtesy the artist and MKG127

Such a decade, and the flashy deception that goes with it, was resonant throughout Katie Bethune-Leamen's “Dazzle Shizzle” exhibition at MKG127 in Toronto. Bethune-Leamen's methodology seemed to emulate—perhaps unsurprisingly, given the exhibition title—the mash-up. Not to be confused with a project of collage, the artist selected recognizable designs, images, characters or tactics, combining them into a more-or-less-whole experience of wholes, rather than surgically reconfiguring fragments of ingredients. Thus an Orchestra Manoeuvres in the Dark album cover is joined anachronistically with depictions of Robert Peary's polar expeditions, with the glowing, severed heads of childhood sheet-ghosts, and with images of WWI-era ship patterns called “dazzle camouflage.”

Katie Bethune-Leamen (from left) *Study for The Office of Dead Slang 2010 SS OMD Sails 2010 & Robert E. Peary First Sees Ahnighito 2010 Installation view Courtesy the artist and MKG127*

This collection of exhibition components seemed at first like a distraction. Upon encountering its glitzy cacophony, one might have had the sensation of being a stranger at a party, surrounded by faces one recognizes as human but which hold no particular collective significance. Still, the consistency of each component's evocation of illusion built to an underlying thesis. For example, Bethune-Leamen's *Gouzenko Hood* series of pastel plinths, upon which shiny ghost heads are lit by internal LEDs, are painted in sickly greens and blues but remain slickly commercial. Some glow in the dark, we were told, but were displayed in a brightly lit gallery environment—neutralizing the luminescence of the paint, and thereby asking us to take the artist's word for it.

Elsewhere, on video monitors, a dramatization of Peary's voyage played out and seemed to suggest that we cannot trust our senses—nor accurately chronicle our accomplishments—while under duress. A rocky formation in the front of the gallery elaborated on this; iridescent white, the few-foot-wide styrofoam meteor bears the inscription of its title (*Really It's A Lot Bigger, A Lot Heavier, And A Lot Darker*). While this could be an allusion to Peary's less-than-heroic, exploitative practices during his time in the Far North, it also contradicts the viewer's experience of the thing described, suggesting that appearance is insufficient. It is here that we most clearly see the artist's critique not of history, but of artistic practice; by using images and materials, Bethune-Leamen paradoxically suggests that the last things we should trust are images and materials.

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Katie Bethune-Leamen *Really It's A Lot Bigger, A Lot Heavier, And A Lot Darker* 2010 Installation view Courtesy the artist and MKG127

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photography, installation, sculpture, performance and text. He currently teaches art and new media at Ryerson University and is represented by Zalucky Contemporary (Toronto).