

ATTENTION
GETTERArtist Bill Burns knows
how to make you look

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ENTERTAINMENT

GLENN LOWRY REMEMBER ME

BILL BURNS

Bill Burns in his Art World Celebrity Signs series, which he flew over the Miami Art Basel art fair, makes a plea to MOMA director Glenn Lowry.

Art's outer and inner dialogues

Bill Burns makes a plea
at MKG127, Kelly Mark looks
inside at Diaz Contemporary

MURRAY WHYTE
VISUAL ARTS CRITIC

On Saturday, Bill Burns milked a goat — or more precisely, had a goat milked on his behalf (“It was a familiarity thing,” he shrugged genially, which only makes sense for so intimate a practice). That it came as part of his current show at MKG127 is the notable part, and for reasons both plain and not.

As an artist, Burns makes use of old conceptual saws — absurdity, process, commodity subversion, performance — in both blaring and oblique ways. First, the blaring: milking a goat, live and in-gallery, is a sure way to get attention (passersby gathered by the door, not sure what to make of it but more sure about not getting any closer), and literally begging for it is a trick Burns has pulled with some regularity in recent years. In December, he went so far as to hire planes to fly over the ultra-elite Miami Art Basel Fair in December trailing banners with what amounts, on the surface, to bald-faced supplication: GLENN LOWRY REMEMBER ME read the one that might resonate most closely with Toronto audiences, as Burns pleaded with the former AGO, now Museum of Modern Art chieftain to pay him some mind.

And yet, Burns is an understated, wry kind of guy. At the gallery, he shows a series of watercolour works from an ongoing project. The images are accompanied with non-sequitur snippets of story outlining the artist's quasi-fictional art-world adventures. (“First, she invited me to participate in the Helsinki Photo Biennial. Later she proffered a selection of salty lico-

rices,” under a nicely rendered image of the Finnish treat Salmiakki).

This is all delightfully bewildering, and more than a little sad, which is all of a piece for Burns, who offers up a weirdly autobiographical cross-section of his oeuvre shot through with big ideas of economy, labour and hierarchical dictates.

Stay with me here. Burns, by most measures, is a modest success, showing works all over the world (and at the Museum of Modern Art, hence the Lowry connection), rubbing shoulders with big influencers and occasionally being courted by them as well, though perhaps not as often as he'd like.

That being the case, the arbitrary nature of art-world fame and success becomes for Burns not only its own subject, but a way to piece through bigger ideas of how value gets assigned in an economic ecosystem based, in theory, on supply and demand.

Herein, the goat: in a gallery, where value is explicitly untethered from usefulness (in a cheeky bit of self-deprecation, Burns' watercolours are called “Veblen Goods,” an economic term for objects like high-priced designer handbags that signal status more than utility), he introduces a simple economic one-plus-one, of labour and material resulting in a workaday product whose value reflects its actual cost and availability (a cow might have better illustrated, but in MKG127's wee space, size was an issue and goats, Burns said, “have a certain je ne sais quoi.”)

Bringing art down to earth is one obvious goal, siting it in the world of everyday goods in a functioning economy.

But weep not for the artist, whose supplications include making Bobbleheads of powerful curators and

pagging famous art-world figures at various airports: Burns' message is less about himself and more about all of us. “Whether we work in a restaurant or an office or wherever, there's always a power dynamic,” he says quietly. Culture just happens to be a conveniently absurd hyperbole to illustrate the point.

As an artist, Burns makes use of old conceptual saws in both blaring and oblique ways

Meanwhile, at Diaz Contemporary, Kelly Mark fiddles gamely with language in a just as cheekily unresolvable fashion. Some years ago, Mark made a sound work called *I Really Should . . .*, which consisted of no more than a set of headphones and the artist's voice running through a litany of things she hadn't yet gotten around to.

It was dry, funny and quietly damning to anyone who listened to it, unless you're one of the seven people on earth to banish procrastination from your life, and there's an echo of that work here in *108 Leyton Avenue*, a video work that shows Mark in duplicate, facing herself across a table.

Both Marks play cards and sip bourbon as a to-and-fro unfolds. Cobbled almost entirely of clichés, Mark nonetheless fashions a conversational rhythm to the piece, as left-hand Mark tosses quips to right-hand Mark, who volleys back.

“Everything to gain, nothing to lose,” smiles left-hand Mark, raising her glass. “Nothing ventured, nothing gained,” replies right-hand Mark, in one of the piece's agreeable moments. It unfolds, though, as warring factions inside a single skull and imprecise language is its weaponry.

The show is called *Nothing Is Larg-*

er Than Everything and the pliable meaning, or its complete lack, is the unstable ground on which Mark looks to tread.

There's a reference to absurdist theatre of the 1950s, where playwrights like Samuel Beckett or Eugene Ionesco threw their characters into hopeless situations and buried them in clichéd dialogue to illustrate the frustrations of a disconnected modern life. Mark wanders gamely in, crafting a back-and-forth that reaches pique, despite its off-the-rack phrases.

It comes across as intensely personal, a sort of self-help double-talk in which the brain indulges in isolation, inevitably tempered by fatalistic despair (“Everything bad that can happen will happen,” Mark says, and replies, “Nothing is so bad that it can't get worse.”)

Stepping into a small back gallery, you can start to see the root of things. Another branch of Mark's work is intensely process-driven and laborious and here she shows a set of wildly dense drawings crafted from fragments of obsolete letraset, and still-life arrangements of wooden fruits that, painfully and by hand, she's transformed with graphite pencil to a dark, shimmering grey.

Mark's process is isolating, demanding days of quiet labour and a retreat inside her own head. It has its ups and downs, given voice here, with a sad, sombre, often hilarious futility. “Everything will be worth it in the end,” left-hand Mark says. “Nothing ends well. That's why it ends,” says right-hand Mark and gets up to go.

The Bill Burns Show (Part 2) continues at MKG127 to July 7, with a honey rendering demonstration on July 5. Kelly Mark: *Nothing Is Larger Than Everything* continues to July 19 at Diaz Contemporary.