

ART IN REVIEW

Brad Kahlhamer: 'A Fist Full of Feathers'



Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna; Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Some of the handmade figures included in "Bowery Nation," a room-size installation that is part of Brad Kahlhamer's show "A Fist Full of Feathers," at the Jack Shainman Gallery.

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Jack Shainman Gallery

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The four new paintings in Brad Kahlhamer's show, his first local solo since 2006, spin out references to

contemporary Native American and postpunk urban culture in figures drawn in filament-fine-ballpoint lines,


in graffiti-like phrases and in spray-painted stains that look like scorch marks. Basics of Mr. Kahlhamer's personal history are embedded here: a Native American born in Tucson, he was adopted by a German-American family as an infant and has lived in New York City, near the Bowery, for decades.

The major work, though, is the room-size installation called "Bowery Nation," an assemblage that incorporates 100 handmade, roughly foot-high figures that the artist has been working on since 1985. Composed primarily of street finds — scraps of fabric and wood, coat hanger wire, pigeon feathers — along with taxidermy pieces, the figures are roughly modeled on Hopi and Zuni katsina dolls, cult objects that embody forceful spirits and are used to convey moral lessons to children.


After keeping the figures to himself for years, Mr. Kahlhamer recently began exhibiting them as a group on a platform put together from studio furniture: a work table, stepladder, sawhorses. The result was meant to suggest a flatbed float of the kind that appears, carrying costumed performers, in powwow parades, though the effect isn't exactly celebratory. The float is decorated not with Native American "traditional" designs, but with the repeated logo of the Lakota Thrift Mart. Two dozen figures of scrawny, predatory birds hang from wires overhead.


And the sculptures themselves convey mixed messages. No two alike, together they're as vivaciously inventive as Calder's "Circus." But they're also morbid, death-haunted, a circus risen from the grave.

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