

Art Forum, September 2014

ARTFORUM



View of "Jayson Musson," 2014.

Jayson Musson

SALON 94 BOWERY

If the title of Jayson Musson's second solo exhibition at this gallery, "Exhibit of Abstract Art," seems oddly generic, it's not through any lack of sophistication on the part of its maker; the consciously bland moniker refers to the work of another artist—albeit not one generally considered part of the fine-art canon. Ernie Bushmiller was an American illustrator who created the *Nancy* newspaper comic strip, a long-running classic of the genre that first appeared in 1938 (and which has also been referred to by other artists—most notably Joe Brainard—with the same affectionate reverence applied in a similar context to George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*). Intermittently throughout *Nancy*'s run, Bushmiller would parody the pieties and conventions of modern art, and Musson's show featured an array of life-size reproductions of the paintings and sculptures that appeared in such strips—"remakes" of imaginary art objects that never previously existed beyond Bushmiller's satirical page. It's unsurprising, then, that the result appeared wholly synthetic, its casual forms, uninflected surfaces, and ice-cream coloration suggesting a body of work with all the substance of a cereal-box prize.

Musson made his name in 2010 via an alter ego, street kid Hennessy Youngman, whose online series of short video monologues "Art Thoughtz" ("What up, Internet?") is a compulsively irreverent take-down of art-world assumption, jargon, and privilege. Musson's previous exhibition at Salon 94, "Halcyon Days" in 2012, saw him assemble fragments of densely patterned sweaters by Coogi (a brand associated with figures from Bill Cosby's Cliff Huxtable to the late Notorious B.I.G.) into surprisingly rich, even painterly abstractions. In "Exhibit," Musson again employed a popular form to explore a cultural intersection, in this case between the suspicion of modernist abstraction embodied by Bushmiller's quasi-parodic approximations and the lauded status of the cartoonist's own output, which itself makes use of some of the very stylization that, evidently, stuck in his craw.

"Exhibit" opened with the pairing of a painting, *Recently Discovered Constellation I* (all works 2014), and a sculpture, *Lamp* (conical shade), that together transformed the gallery's upstairs space into something like a domestic setting. The painting is typical of the show as a whole: A large canvas featuring strokes and swirls of primary red and bright- and baby-blue Flashe paint on a yellow ground, it wouldn't look out of place in an IKEA-conceived "contemporary" apartment. (Its "dumb" stylization also evokes Sigmar Polke's ironic *Modern Art* [*Moderne Kunst*], 1968.) The lamp is a quirkier affair, distinguished by a crazily looping stem—more of an Urban Outfitters find. Downstairs, the apparent living-room idea was dropped in favor of a more conventional exhibition-style arrangement. The space was packed pretty tight, but the airlessness functioned as a cue that these works are best approached as manifestations of an idea, and as a single installation rather than a collection of separate works.

In titles such as *A Sign Which Points to Itself* and *Sculptural Allegory for a Specific Cultural Sphere*, Musson plays with adding a contemporary theoretical gloss to Bushmiller's arguably empty—or actually mocking—images. His clever-clever nomenclature seems to represent a self-conscious embrace of current cliché, and is, as such, just as mocking about the art of our time as Bushmiller's images were of his. The first of these works is a painting of a cross-like form, perhaps a figure, accompanied by a triangular glyph. Is this really the "perfection of form" to which Musson makes (apparently sincere) laudatory reference? The second, a bulbous powder-pink figure with a hole through its stomach—picture a cross between a Henry Moore bronze and the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man—wears a snooty expression. But to what or to whom does this detached attitude really belong? The illustrator? The work? The work's unknown fictional maker? Or, conceivably, the supposedly populist Musson himself?

—Michael Wilson