

NEW YORK

Zach Bruder

La MaMa Galleria // January 8–31

THE SUBJECTS OF the paintings in Bruder's debut solo exhibition veer from ancient Egypt to contemporary evangelical Christian theology to Native American burial grounds. What brings these worlds together is a contemplation of American ideologies, made clear through the presence and placement of *AM Guesser*, 2015, a spare black-on-ocher rendering of a rattlesnake at the gallery's entrance. Inspired by Benjamin Franklin's pre-Declaration of Independence Don't Tread on Me flag, Bruder's use of the rattlesnake can be read as a response to the far right and its revival of the symbol or, alternatively, a progressive patriotism currently far from fashion and too idealistic for today. The title of the piece comes from An American Guesser, the pseudonymous byline Franklin used to sign his letter to the *Pennsylvania Gazette*—of which he was also the owner—arguing for the rattlesnake as the emblem of America.

The show hints at divisions in American society—not just young/old or poor/rich but also the myriad shifting allegiances that form and dissolve based on political and religious trends. But Bruder's work is also formally distinct, and if one were to view the show without prior knowledge of the artist, it's likely

that much of this semipolitical subject matter would go unnoticed. Few would realize that the imagery of *Ignoble Tradition* and *Flood Geology*, both 2015, was sourced from creationist propaganda, or that *Charity Starts at Home*, 2015, is a reconfigured depiction of the Random House logo.

In his *New York Times* review of the recent Whitney exhibition "Flatlands"—which brings together youngish painters who clearly share Bruder's context—Ken Johnson introduced the idea of a semiskilled painter. The term aptly describes Bruder, not because he compromises aesthetics for the sake of the sociological but because, as Johnson explains, these are artists who "draw on methods associated with commercial illustration and design in order to play with public signifiers and personal poetics." Largely influenced by Sigmar Polke, Bruder's personal poetics aren't quite as dark as the German Expressionists' or as fun as the Chicago Imagists', though he draws upon both in his practice.

Poetics, in fact, are secondary to Bruder's personal politics, and his "semiskilled" approach to the canvas allows him to play simultaneously with the conventions of the medium and with these politics. It's less



Zach Bruder
AM Guesser, 2015.
Acrylic and Flashe on
linen, 36 x 36 in.

about taking a position than exploring the multiplicities, idiosyncrasies, and conflicting possibilities of the existing positions. Three depictions of owls, a selection from a larger series the artist started after seeing the recent Middle Kingdom exhibition at the Met—embody much that he is seeking in his work. Vaguely rather than specifically familiar, the animals stand as signs of wisdom, or perhaps harbingers of death. —Sara Roffino

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

Ann Hirsch

MIT List Visual Arts Center // January 5–February 26



ENTER HIRSCH'S exhibition and face the roar that has come to define contemporary America: the inexhaustible voices of reality television. Today this soundscape is difficult to avoid in most U.S. homes, where a New World democratic ethos has sanctified the allure of men and women who look and speak "just like you and me"—only with better lighting. In Hirsch's show, the supremacy of this televisual pageantry is no different. Even if a visitor is wearing headphones to view another video in the exhibition, the noise from the loudspeakers that accompanies Hirsch's *Here*

for You (Or My Brief Love Affair with Frank Maresca), 2010, bleeds through. The video documents the artist's experience as a participant in a VH1 dating show, compiling her successful audition tape alongside clips from the season and independent video performances that collectively mourn her failure to win Maresca's love. The montage techniques Hirsch employs leave ambiguous the degree to which her televised presentation might have been sincere, though the question of authenticity is perhaps the true object of her mockery—if it is, indeed, mockery. Regardless of the personal stakes of her performance, the video's underlying sadness ultimately rings true. Few sequences show Hirsch speaking or acting of her own volition. Contestants apply her makeup, and Maresca makes out with her, as she is remade for everyone, it seems, but herself.

The video installation suggests reality television's presence is not only ubiquitous but also mundane. Hirsch has inscribed the video, moreover, within painted lines that form the frame of an "old-fashioned" television, as if to ensure its disconnect from the newer media of her works on the opposing walls: a collection of her own YouTube performances from 2008–09—including the public's comments and video responses, entitled *Scandal-ishious*—as well as an app, *Twelve*, 2013, which adapts her tween AOL chat room experiences for Apple's iPad. It is hard to shake the impression that Hirsch wants visitors to feel the strain of having to slow down 21st-century streaming and mobile technologies to fit the gallery circuit's more conservative display. There's a palpable tension in the gallery, stretched between the privacy of today's visual culture and the public intimacy of 20th-century exhibitions. —Sean Wehle

Ann Hirsch
Still from *Here for You (Or My Brief Love Affair with Frank Maresca)*, 2010.
Video, 14 min.