

ARTFORUM

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Mathieu Mercier, *AAA* (detail), 2002, Plexiglas and neon, 15 1/2 x 31".



"Time Is Free," 2002. Installation view.

The artist's intoxicating use of gaming and, in turn, the druglike warmth with which these corrosive images meet the eye is deft but not totally new. Describing the crowd in his poem "At the Ball Game," William Carlos Williams wrote of the same blissful "spirit of uselessness" surrounding a pastime: "So in detail they . . . are beautiful . . . / It is alive, venomous . . . It is the Inquisition, the / Revolution / It is beauty itself / that lives / day by day in them." Stern's images of games, usually experienced in isolation, are appropriate to an era more concerned with terror cells than with the fascism of Williams's day. And the automaton rhythms of the animated figures is in tune with contemporary religious fervor—the conviction that events unfold according to a grand plan, with all the world a kind of code in which we are merely players. This elliptical realism was underscored in a second gallery by a selection of handmade Afghani war rugs purchased or borrowed by Stern, each one depicting a scene in which indigenous people resisted Soviet aggressors during the war in the '80s. The stitched images provide a kind of analog pixelation, making Stern's work in media seem by comparison intimately linked to the world, not divorced from it like those spectacles Žižek envisions and derides.

—Tim Griffin

MATHIEU MERCIER

SPENCER BROWNSTONE GALLERY

Mathieu Mercier's *AAA*, 2002, a backlit wall-mounted sign in which the title's three letters become smaller from left to

right, looks like the scream of a cartoon character plunging off a cliff. The text's off-kilter font is a superimposition of two opposing styles: the hard-edged geometry characteristic of Theo van Doesburg and a flowing, fanciful script developed by New York typographer Edward Benguiat in the '70s. A strategically contrived hybrid of design philosophies, *AAA* is a succinct introduction to this young Parisian's practice and an appropriate piece to kick off his first solo show in New York.

In a looped digital video, *Red and Blue Blast*, 2002, the computer-generated image of a Rietveld chair glides in silently from stage right, only to burst suddenly into pieces as it nears the center of the screen. The conceit is childishly simple but immediately appealing (British viewers will be reminded of the much parodied animated logo for Channel 4 Television) and effectively emphasizes the fragility of De Stijl's original agenda, and the way any "pure" aesthetic ideal is doomed to collapse. Mercier is unabashedly nostalgic for the utopian foundations of early modernism: A gesture that would have been gleefully anarchic applied to a contemporary object seems here, after inducing an initial chuckle of surprise, oddly mournful. Sprouting in the center of the main gallery is *Folding Lamp*, 2002, an adjustable steel palm tree reaching from floor to ceiling and hooked up to a portable air compressor; the tree's five branches are attached to a series of fluorescent light tubes. Styled after a prop from a movie set or operating theater, the work is a heavyweight piece of equipment haunted by the ghost of Malibu kitsch. *Drum and Bass 2*, 2002, is a three-dimensional Mondrian constructed from red plastic binders, blue storage bins,

and yellow utility lights, all filed neatly away on a black shelving unit. That Mercier frequently employs the materials and methods of bricolage is reflected in his physical remodeling of supposedly exhausted utopian ideologies. This drift toward superficiality both repels and seduces such that, despite his apparent theoretical disapproval, Mercier can't stop himself from repeatedly exploiting its residual visual cool.

In *Plastic Anchors Wall*, 2002, a repeated constellation of primary-color widgets covering the entire right side of the gallery, and *Hi/Lo/No-tech*, 2002, a collection of blank prototypes for vinyl and digital discs rendered in black and gray Plexiglas, Mercier comes off like Jim Lambie minus the indie cred. Both artists share an attraction to found materials of a certain pop-domestic stripe, but where Lambie cuts loose and rocks out, Mercier prefers to keep his decorative impulse under strict control. In *Euro Palette*, 2000, he approaches the light-but-stylish sculptural touch of Liam Gillick but skips the senior artist's labyrinthine anecdotal and theoretical explanations in favor of a more cut-and-dried routine of comparison and contrast. The eerie flawlessness of chipboard support is at odds with its quotidian design, a veneer of smooth white melamine reproducing the functional/functionless, five-minutes-into-the-future look to perfection. Still, the sculpture is a one-liner: clever but airless, and a little too easy.

If Mercier's approach veers at times toward glibness, he is unquestionably traveling a road lined with interesting sights. A drawing behind the gallery's front desk indicated a gap between two unidentified sketched surfaces, and a note beneath

asked, "Which science could help me understand this space?" Like all the best questions, this one is deceptively open-ended, appearing to give nothing away until considered in context, when it becomes loaded with provocative hints toward possible solutions—or other questions.

—Michael Wilson

"TIME IS FREE"

A P E X A R T

Boredom used to be a sin, attendant cousin of sloth, a welcome state for the devil to seduce weak minds. We know what it did to Emma Bovary. For most people now, boredom is instead a name given to a lamentable, persistent discontent. But boredom would also seem like a luxury today, having been displaced by the new collective condition of mass anxiety. In order to avoid guilt, dread, and other unpleasant thoughts, we prefer our time to be organized, eschewing purely contemplative hours spent doing nothing in favor of constant activity. So what about that state of just *being*, and where does artistic creativity reside in this cultural scenario? According to Jan Hoet, the director of SMAK in Ghent and a guest curator of "Time Is Free," the artist is located in "an autonomous time zone," somewhere between work and leisure. Collaborating with Ann Demeester, he presented seven artists whose work questions and/or functions within that indeterminate, potentially boring, infraspaces.

Unavoidable boredom is boredom condoned, such as that experienced while waiting for a bus or plane. Scottish artist Kenny Macleod's two-channel video *Breaking Up*, 2001, focused on such banalities, showing images of airplanes landing, a very ugly hotel room, and a suit of clothes, to a voice-over narrative of a business traveler's mundane concerns. His two video monitors were installed high on a wall, creating a difficult viewing angle that underscored the generally tedious nature of the piece and of time spent waiting in airports. The sense of life as flat and dry informed Manfred Pernice's installation *Gartenfest*, 2001, in which the elements of a shabby party setting—barbecue grill, outdoor umbrella, modular seats—could be arranged by the artist in any configuration, because, as the exhibition brochure states, the arbitrary mood is the same regardless. Inherently temporary was Jessica Diamond's wall painting *I Hate Business*, 1989. With its title rendered in graffiti, the piece was decisive but still lacked the guerrilla impact