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Just Enough Seriousness to Go Around

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y. — Forget about Hans Haacke revealing the list of industrial magnates in the provenance of a famous masterpiece, or documenting the neglected tenements owned by museum trustees. The latest form of artists' scrutiny of museums — widely known as institutional critique — seems to be congenial entertainment. Turn museums into places where fun happens, and where making art as well as looking at it is a form of play, not much skill required. It may not get to the roots of things, but it undermines art's pretensions to seriousness, personal expression and permanence. Sort of.

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ART
REVIEW

There's quite a bit of fun to be had in the two summer shows at Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies and the center's Hessel Museum of Art, both overseen by Maria Lind, the new director of the center's two-year master's program, who has had a peripatetic career as a curator in Europe. Her debut shows at Bard present the viewer with monumental walls of bright paper to confront, newly built stairs to climb, unusual seating to try and art jokes to get. The two exhibitions feature five little-known, often interesting artists from Europe and deftly float some ideas about collaboration, irreverence and artists as curators. Luckily there is just enough seriousness to go around.

The main show is the languidly titled "Personal Protocols and Other Preferences: A Collective Exhibition With Works by Michael Beutler, Esra Ersen and Kirstine Roep-



CHRIS KENDALL/CENTER FOR CURATORIAL STUDIES, BARD COLLEGE

Personal Protocols and Other Preferences/I've Got Something in My Eye Paintings by Paul McCarthy and sculpture by Thomas Schütte are in one of two new exhibitions at Bard College.

storff" at the center. The show's contents and installation have been largely determined by its three young participants, all working in Berlin. They have also made loose attempts at collaborating on artworks, but their effort still reads as a series of slightly overlapping solo exhibitions.

The most noticeable disruptions of museum business as usual are long, high walls built of big blocks of brightly colored paper, made on the spot by Michael Beutler, as indicated by rolls of paper, thin sticks of bamboo and two large work tables seen in one gal-

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS KENDALL/CENTER FOR CURATORIAL STUDIES, BARD COLLEGE

Works by Michael Beutler, left, and Kirstine Roepstorff in the exhibition "Personal Protocols and Other Gestures," at Bard College, which also includes work by Esra Ersen.

Playful Exhibitions, With Just Enough Seriousness to Go Around

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lery. The walls contradict the chilly white bareness of the center's galleries with a blast of festive dishevelment — suggesting the handwork of an extra-large child — but they also rather quickly start to look bulky and poorly made.

Mr. Beutler's other contributions to the show work better because they have jobs to do. Kirstine Roepstorff has hung some of her large, obstreperous paper and fabric collaged wall hangings at the very top of the center's tall walls, and Mr. Beutler has built a staircase and walkway (across one of his own walls) to afford a better view of her efforts. Built

"Personal Protocols and Other Preferences: A Collective Exhibition With Works by Michael Beutler, Esra Ersen and Kirstine Roepstorff" and "I've Got Something in My Eye" continue through Sept. 7 at the Center for Curatorial Studies/Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.; (845) 758-7958, bard.edu/ccs.

from fresh-smelling two-by-fours and planks, the structure has a sturdiness that contrasts strikingly with Mr. Beutler's slovenly paper walls.

Ms. Roepstorff, who had her first solo show in this country at the Drawing Center in Manhattan last year, seems to have her own issues with slovenliness. Her barely assembled pieces can be either large or quite large. Punctuated by grainy appropriated photographs, like a recurring image of women reading newspapers on a subway, they veer between colorful quiltlike patchworks of fabric scraps and painted wood or Goth-style compositions of black, white and silver Mylar, and occasionally venture into three dimensions with mobilelike standing structures. Messy and scattershot, these works hit all kinds of social and aesthetic issues and evoke an enervating laundry list of other artists' work.

There is plenty of ambition here, and there is nothing wrong with Ms. Roepstorff's evident disdain for traditional crafts (artistic and otherwise). But except-

ing a large fabric collage titled "The Self" and a series of large black-and-silver collages, too much of this work simply drowns itself out. Mr. Roepstorff is an artist to watch, but her work would benefit from more hard looking on her part.

Mr. Beutler also built a large, high platform for Esra Ersen, the artist in this show who is most likely to hold your attention and even take a little piece of your heart. Ms. Ersen specializes in poetic yet socially probing documentaries, which she usually presents in modest settings of her own design. For example, for the showing of the tapes "Brothers and Sisters" and "This Is the Disney World," Ms. Ersen designed stools and simple easel-like structures to hold the thin screens and arranged it all on a painted plywood floor that by coincidence echoes Mr. Beutler's walls. You might almost be watching the tapes from the security of a well-maintained day care center, yet they are all about insecurity. "Brothers and Sisters" surveys the hard lives of illegal immigrants from Africa in

ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

Images from the shows in Roberta Smith's review: nytimes.com/design

Turkey, "This Is the Disney World" interviews young Turkish boys abandoned by their destitute parents who live by begging in the streets of Istanbul. As you watch, the innocence implicit in Ms. Ersen's setting may begin to feel uncomfortably removed from reality, all the more so because of Mr. Beutler's elevated platform.

Ms. Ersen's two other pieces are more recent and even better. "Parachutist in Third Floor, Birds in Laundry" is a three-channel piece centering on interviews with people who have immigrated to Sweden, mostly from Turkey (where Ms. Ersen was born) but also from South America. As the immigrants talk wistfully about their lives, a second screen shows close-ups of a woman painting little scenes in the stairwell of a down-at-the-heels apartment building; as it is finished,

each scene turns out to depict something from the interview. On a third screen two ebullient immigrant girls race giddily through the hallways of another building, pausing to give rapid-fire interpretations of the little landscapes painted on its walls. You end up hoping that their energy and sharpness will never be thwarted, and also a bit stunned by the collaborative intricacies Ms. Ersen has orchestrated. The work's floor-level screens can be viewed from two tiny bleachers that resemble stairs.

And don't miss "Growing Older (Dis) gracefully," which centers on a lovely British widow in her late 70s, who submits at Ms. Ersen's behest to a horrible makeover that includes very high heels. It speaks to some of the central neuroses of our time.

The second exhibition, "I've Got Something in My Eye," in the Hessel Museum, has been orchestrated by Liesbeth Bik and Jos van der Pol, two humorously inclined Dutch Conceptualists who have worked together since 1995 as Bik van der Pol. As required, most of the works are

from the Hessel collection, with the artists adding some of their own pieces and a few loans from the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands.

Bik van der Pol's own works are negligible, excepting a homage to Yves Klein involving live canaries. But the par has put together a marvelous show. There are revealing, often humorous juxtapositions — like training the disapproving eyes of the big, threatening terra-cotta busts that are Thomas Schütte's "Dirty Dictators" on other art — and some corners of pure poetry. And on view from the Van Abbemuseum is Artur Zmijewski's "Them," a video in which several groups of people with stridently opposed beliefs (patriotic Catholics, leftists and so on) are set up in a studio. They are given art supplies and asked to make emblems of their beliefs and then to "correct" the emblems made by the other groups. No one dies, but things get very heated.

Turning a museum's collection over to artists almost always has interesting results.