

ARTINFO



DAVE MIKO AND TOM THAYER

This past month, Tom Thayer's scruffy star has been on the ascent, with the New York-based artist serving up his collages, retro animations, and even a few oddball, mesmerizing performances at galleries like Derek Eller and Tracey Williams. But it is his current collaboration with Yale-trained, Brooklyn-based painter Dave Miko at the Kitchen that best captures the intimate world-building impulse that makes his work lovable.

Miko (b. 1974) makes paintings — modest enamel-on-aluminum abstractions, sometimes featuring the outlines of ghostly silhouettes that suggest cave painting. Thayer (b. 1970) contributes a series of digital films, using Miko's paintings as screens. The footage involves near-static slides of slivery shadow puppets, even as Thayer insists on working with old-timey VHS video equipment. Oversaturated, blurry colors dominate, interrupted frequently by bursts of blocky static.

The titles of the resulting painting-video combos — e.g. "A Figure's Strange Triggered Change" — suggest free association, and the imagery glimpsable in the films seems to hint that Thayer used Miko's paintings as Rorschach blots. In "Nostrum Rostrum," for instance, the enigmatic image of a looming freeway overpass slowly forms (and then fades away) over an indistinct constellation of enamel trails that might — or might not — be the outline of its pylons and sweeping curve.

The key piece is "A New World Pig Allotropic," which at a half hour is by far the longest of the film loops. The story appears to stitch together the ghostly images that recur in the other shorter films into a story of sorts, albeit a distinctly dreamlike one: a hunter kills a wild pig, takes it home, and butchers it; he dresses his dog in the pig's flayed skin; he then tears down his house, which is sited beneath a freeway overpass, only to then build an enormous altar, which he sets on fire, bringing it crashing to the earth in chaos.

In one way, all this low-fi whimsy seems very familiar, since underproduced, regressive work is all the rage. But Thayer's particular brand of underproduced, regressive art has a very specific source that gives it its own kind of hippie mojo. He says his artistic method is inspired by "Learning by Discovery," a pedagogical theory that involves highlighting learning as journey rather than destination, working collaboratively towards creative answers with students rather than trying to offer up a correct way to do things. According to his Web site, Thayer employs this method in what look to be some very entertaining art workshops he teaches at City College in New York, engaging in theater trust exercises and even making a point of eating together in an effort to attain creative symbiosis.

That theory gives some context to Thayer's successfully evocative collaboration with Miko, and validates the way the works at the Kitchen slowly add together into a whole over time — because the experience of unpacking the show is the experience of retracing the artists' elliptical process of hatching ideas together. Consequently, this exhibition warrants the rare compliment that it makes me think that I would like to eat with the artists.

By Ben Davis, February 2011