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Brian Bress ANGSTROM

A collage sensibility is central to the concerns of Los Angeles-based artist Brian Bress, even as the collage *medium* was thoroughly subsumed into photography and video in his recent show. In the thirteen-minute twenty-second video *Under Cover*, 2007, that sensibility pervades the sets, props, and costumes with which Bress, ambitiously assuming a variety of oddball personae, indulges the camera. The video begins with a seemingly flat image of vibrant color bars, initially assumed to be electronically generated, that are revealed to be handmade when the artist, posing as a sleazy narc, complete with bushy moustache and tropical shirt (hence the title), punctures the frame, suddenly providing unexpected depth.



Brian Bress. *Untitled*, 2006. Ink-jet print, 53 x 42 3/4".

In another effective sequence, the artist, wearing a white mask and jumpsuit densely covered with small collaged images, is shown dancing; he is camouflaged against a matching backdrop and floor. Several other scenes—one showing the artist laughing maniacally, wearing a blond wig, sunhat, sunglasses, pancake makeup, and thick strings of pearls; another in which the artist, beaten and bloodied, repeatedly dunks his head into water and blabbers as if undergoing a B-movie police interrogation—are delirious but overindulgent, fatally undercutting the inventive bricolage and spatial complexity of the rest of the video.

Ten photographs (all *Untitled*, 2006) explore the same garish visual decadence and formal play as the video, but they do so with greater concision and purpose, largely owing to the limitations of the still-photographic medium. Five of these—two of which follow directly from scenarios in the video—document large, occasionally sprawling tableaux that feature Bress's studio wall as a backdrop. The most effective of these appears to be a palimpsest of studio activity, with broken lamps, a mangled canvas, a birdcage, and other debris scattered on the painted floor, which occupies the bottom third of the image. Above it is the studio wall, which comprises variously colored drywall panels—some spray-painted, others with images (mostly indiscernible) pasted on or partially removed. The whole is remarkably flattened and has an offhand, almost painterly handsomeness that belies its subject and that sits, somewhat anxiously, between construction and ruination.

Five additional photographs represent more tightly concentrated still-life compositions, each setting an accumulation of smaller objects against a white, mostly shadowless background. With these, Bress successfully exploits the irreconcilable tension between the flat, anti-hierarchical plane of the photographic surface and the dimensional volume of his carefully arranged piles of bric-a-brac. These accumulations, each of which occupies the center of an image, appear fully collapsed into flatness against a seamless backdrop that otherwise obliterates their scale or spatial context; yet the outer edges of the photos reveal a just-out-of-focus sliver of studio space beyond, creating a spatial conundrum. Adding to the vertiginous effect, one of these horizontally composed photos is simply turned on its side.

Calling attention to the artifice of his bare-bones illusionism, Bress confidently foregrounds his knack for striking juxtapositions of colors, shapes, materials, and textures. While some of his found objects—wigs in blue and hot pink, a plastic cactus, a vase, a snakelike child's puzzle, hair-extension braids, a bobbin, a piece of lime green mesh fabric—are identifiable, many more are not, lending the images an unsettling, even abject quality. Confounding the reductive grasp of language and thereby disrupting the finality of signification, these photographs rely successfully on their eerie aesthetic self-sufficiency, which brings to mind Lautréamont's resort to an unlikely metaphoric description of beauty—once a rallying cry for the Surrealists—as "the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table."

—Michael Ned Holte