

Hirsch Perlman

ROBERT MILLER GALLERY

Hirsch Perlman exhibits regularly but infrequently in New York—it's been six years since he participated in the Whitney Biennial and more than a decade since his last solo show here. These time lapses are sufficient almost to allow us to forget about his practice, an effect that complements the already spare means and demeanor of his art and ratifies his preference for understatement. Perlman's use of ephemeral materials, simple black-and-white photography, and text dates back to the '80s and aligns itself with vintage Conceptualism's promotion of ideas over objects. True to form, he often makes use of pure information as medium and subject. An installation in his recent exhibition is shaped by strict functionality, offering copies of the hefty *US Army Counterinsurgency Manual* for twenty-nine dollars each, with the proceeds to benefit the Center for Constitutional Rights, and National Popular Vote.

But Perlman also animates his ideas with tricks that are far more subjectively inclined than any card-carrying Conceptualist would allow. A penchant for melancholic absurdity, for instance, surfaces repeatedly in selections from several series of long-exposure photographs—including "Sketches," 2003–2004, "*Apparatum Armorum Ineptum*," 2003–2004, "My Reproof," 2003–2004, "Operation Idiocracy, 2003–2007, and "*ergo despero*," 2007—that formed the core of the show.

Twenty prints from "Operation Idiocracy" present abstracted images that vaguely resemble stages of an explosion. In one pair of images, two bulbous forms effloresce in molten

red-oranges, their seductive but ominous beauty synonymous with total destruction. The looming terror of nuclear blasts plays from one picture to the next and the next, appearing at once deadly serious, deeply ironic, and pure slapstick: Perlman's quasi-scientific studies are actually snaps of a deflated plastic beach ball filled with a string of lights.

Low-tech science projects, circa the early '70s, set the tone for selections from "*Apparatum Armorum Ineptum*," which document what appears to be a failed attempt to launch a rooftop rocket. Other subversive activities are captured in selections from "My Reproof" and "Sketches," and include "invisible writing" with a flashlight, suspicious activity around a fog machine, and other comically quasinefarious goings-on. The artist as hapless, harmless stooge—that's one image we might glean from Perlman's private performances that spoof terrorism and paranoia. The artist as humble tinkerer—that's another image that runs throughout the work and contradicts the persistent vogue for celebrity.

Sandwiched between these escapades were half a dozen selections from "*ergo despero*," deadpan images of deserted stretches of beach littered with what look like the washed-out remains of sand castles. In the context of the exhibition's narrative thread, the symbolic resonance is that of an earth that has been wiped clean—a peculiarly nineteenth-century take on apocalypse that allows for a new beginning. The only visible inhabitant in Perlman's makeshift cosmology is a feline companion that appears in "My Reproof," which he names Schrödinger's Cat. Large silk-screened prints based on drawings of the animal relaxing and looking out at us are all out of register, as if we lacked the appropriate glasses to convert the disparate lines into a seamless image—a neat metaphor for the artist's political stance.

—Jan Avgikos

Hirsch Perlman,
Apparatum Armorum Ineptum #3,
2003–2004,
black-and-white
photograph, 24 x 30".
From the series
"*Apparatum Armorum Ineptum*," 2003–2004.

