

Maine, Stephen. "Tony Oursler, Metro Pictures." *Art in America* (May 2009), p. 146.

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



View of Tony Oursler's installation *Marlboro, Camel, Winston, Parliament, Salem, Marlboro Light, American Spirit, 2009*, 10 PVC tubes and video projection, from 50 to 83 inches tall; at Metro Pictures.

NEW YORK TONY OURSLER METRO PICTURES

To Tony Oursler's credit, he is not resting on his laurels but pushing at the boundaries of what he has accomplished so far with video projection. To judge from the 14 works (all 2009) in "Cell Phones Diagrams Cigarettes Searches and Scratch Cards," the results are mixed. The show was unfocused and desultory, but for one engrossing work that strikes a thrillingly ominous, desperate note.

Marlboro, Camel, Winston, Parliament, Salem, Marlboro Light, American Spirit is a cluster of 10 PVC tubes, ranging from 4 to 7 feet high, with images of gigantic smoldering cigarettes projected onto them. (Some smaller, similar works occupied the same gallery.) The butts quickly burn to the filter amid toppling ashes, then reconstitute themselves as the video runs in reverse—exquisite torture for an ex-smoker. Funny, accessible and paper-thin, the work is accompanied by the amplified hiss of burning cigarettes.

Audio is more integral to three works featuring thumb-size figures projected onto model-like homes. The tiny structures are open on one side, like dollhouses, and the performers' images roam around them as if on a stage set, or in prison. In *Vacuum or All Things with Cave*, a man and a woman bicker over their possessions and their relationship, what they want and what they need. Oursler is hampered by his tedious subject matter: the spiritual malaise of the materially overburdened. The script also contains hints that the man is a ghost and

the woman an extraterrestrial. The video goes on for some 30 minutes, but in a gallery context it feels much longer.

Oursler plays with scale, suggesting the distortion of priorities in consumer culture. Near this miniaturized domestic dystopia was *Bedazzled, Set for Life, Funky \$5, Mother's Day, Welcome to Las Vegas*. Projected from above, on overlapping slabs of aqua resin arranged on the floor, is a disheveled array of huge New York State lottery cards. Hands enter the frame, methodically scratching away to reveal losing numbers.

Dominating the center room was the show's strangest and most successful work. With a looped projection 24 minutes long, *Federal Reserve Note Five Dollars* is an 8-foot-long likeness of a \$5 bill in which the gaunt, heavy-lidded portrait of Lincoln speaks. The spliced-in mouth, alternately tight-lipped and toothy as if in the throes of a painful demise, utters elliptical warnings and intimations of calamity. The sound fades in and out, with barely audible passages, but it is effective rather than annoying, heightening the sense that the speaker veers from lucidity to delirium and back. "On what spot," he laboriously asks, "where, exactly, was the first drop of blood spilled?" From beyond the grave, Lincoln questions whether Edwin M. Stanton's famous words were "Now he belongs to the ages" or "to the angels." Any parallel the script might suggest between our era and the Civil War—or any contrast between our greatest president and the recently departed one—is left tantalizingly unclear.

—Stephen Maine