

Momus

We Are Gathered Here to Grieve: Salvaging, Mourning, and 'Cargo Cult Formalism' in New York

2021-01-13 14:01:39 Andrew Woolbright

As New York galleries reopened after the first wave of lockdowns, I noticed a trend across a handful of exhibitions that channeled the alienation and heartbreak of our moment. Their artists were each drawing from materials readily available in their vicinity, and salvaging, foraging, or collecting. The processes of Jane South, Connor McNicholas, and Mike Cloud, all of whose shows I saw in those flickering moments of physical access across this global pandemic, involved no fabrication and no exorbitant budgets. Their work was idiomatic and isolated, defined by acts of assembly from what appears discarded and overlooked. Despite their material choices, these artists avoided the modest, aloof aesthetics of provisional painting and sculpture, and instead elevated their materials to acts of something like spiritualism.

A devotional ritualization of wasted materials and a provisional bricolage has emerged, which I'm terming "cargo cult formalism." This aesthetic speaks to our understanding of post-capitalist decay and despairing collapse. Arrived at through the close availability of materials, its formalism is reminiscent of the postmodern aggregations of cargo cults, which rose to prominence in the aftermath of World War II and functioned as pastiche, conflating Indigenous beliefs with the phantasmagoric transmissions of Western culture. For instance, the John Frum cult on the island of Tanna deified an American soldier and created fetishistic rituals around the supplies he left behind, out of a hope for his future return as a religious savior. Similarly, the Prince Philip Movement, also on Tanna, deified the British prince, treating photographs and souvenirs bearing his likeness as relics. The cargo cult relics and shrines attempt to remedy the feeling of ambivalence caused by capitalism's attentive gaze and subsequent disappearance. An aberration is created by signifiers crossing into opposing cultural interpretations, signifying them in radically different terms. This triggers the uncanny. It makes the familiar unfamiliar – "making strange" as Brecht would say – the Coke bottles now become coded objects, having both valences as commodity and sacred object.



Jane South, "Switchback" (installation view), 2020. Courtesy of Daniel Greer (photo) and Spencer Brownstone Gallery.



Jane South, "Lash," 2020. Courtesy of Daniel Greer (photo) and Spencer Brownstone Gallery.

After the stay-at-home order lifted in New York City, the first show I visited was Jane South's at Spencer Brownstone, a beautiful, meditative gallery that is among my favorites in the city. Something about the way South's work interacted with the architecture made this commercial space feel more like a chamber or a vault, sunlight streaming in through the window facing the sculpture garden. This reflective effect belied the fact that South drew from the materials of her exploding living space, which her landlord has been renovating over the last few years to keep up with city codes and ordinances. South, who recently started working with an industrial sewing machine, mined the history of her building, feeding fabrics left by past tenants and roommates as well as her past artworks through the machine's teeth. The resulting work has a certain home-schooled savant quality (reminiscent of Harmony Korine's interest in the avant-garde aesthetic developed by home-schooled kids, their assemblage of contradictory images and symbols formed in opposition to their insular environment). The quilted materials in South's work run into removed packing foam, and seams from old curtains abandoned by former roommates are left to hang. For instance *Cutter* (2019), an irregularly shaped wall-hanging assemblage, combines older works-on-paper by South with batting, curtains, and packing foam. *Mark* (2019) similarly combines drawings, batting, and fabric, though its circular shape makes it resemble the inside of a booster rocket – or more of an IBM mission control computer. The work seems to visibly be about material interchanges – such as thread and fabrics finding harmonies – and a materialism that supersedes any metonymic language. South's exhibition felt like a deep codex, the result of a material hermeticism that only has room for the artist herself to occupy. These soft aesthetic machines appeared remote, the materials washed ashore from a great wreck, something owed to South's shift in materials from the stable, architectural forms she had previously been making from wood. South has turned the sewing needle into a drawing device and has applied it to the excess materials abandoned in our rented spaces. She addresses the drift and precariousness of our current moment, enchanting the makeshift and impermanent materials of late-Capitalism as an act of preservation.

Of course, Cargo cult formalism is not the first movement of its kind. Dada sculpture of the late 1910s and 1920s regularly employed familiar and available materials towards transformative ends, albeit nonsensical anti-discursive ones. There are other scattershot moments of provisional materials and quotidian objects; but most of them, like the sculpture of Pop, are in the lineage of the readymade, and pull back before reaching any type of material transformation. I'm reminded of the painted white sculptures of Cy Twombly from the 1950s, and how their presentation seemed to re-totalize simple materials towards a formalist interpretation. Also, Mike Kelley's essay "Playing with Dead Things" (1993) from his book *The Uncanny*, places found objects and their usage within a sculptural praxis. Both understood there was an alchemy with familiarity and translation (what Brecht would call the Distant Affect), to transform the modest towards something else. This appeared more recently in the *Unmonumental* show at the New Museum (2007-08), which translated its way into MFA programs as young artists, in painting and in sculpture, adapted a Home-Depot aesthetic. This approach was one of institutional critique, another challenge to the art object's value through frenetic stockpiling and modest manipulation. Cargo cult formalism shares this material modesty, so much so that materials might better be described as *stuff*, but it also takes a more humanist and sensorial approach to scavenging, replacing the jaded surrender of a Home-Depot aesthetic with something more transcendental. El Anatsui and Noah Purifoy (think of the latter using detritus from the Watts Rebellion of 1965) share a closer proximity to this "zen of stuff" than, say, Lara Schmitzer, who employs ridiculous and bathetic forms, or Carlos Bunga, who's interested in the aura the institution can configure around cardboard and repurposed material. Cargo cult formalists instead imbue discarded materials with a sense of heartbreak that lends itself toward a kind of spiritual materialism. We're gathered here to grieve.



Connor McNicholas, "The Distance Earth Keeps," 2020. Courtesy M23 Projects.



Connor McNicholas, "Phase Transition," 2020. Courtesy M23 Projects.

The spiritual materialism of cargo cult formalism is investigative and contemplative, and works to preserve traces of a system in shock. Where South utilized familiar and gathered materials to gesture toward the changeover of her apartment, [M23 Projects](#) on Henry Street, Connor McNicholas's show *Where Remote Futures Meet Remote Pasts* (2020) seemed to be sifting through the dregs and driftwood of empire towards understanding our embodied roles within environmental collapse. McNicholas reassembled detritus – antennae from old radios, pieces of plastic, foraged plants, WiFi routers, security cameras – into surreal machines that invite viewers into meditative solitude. The work is more clock radio than NASA, blending telescoping antennae and pieces of plastic with foraged plants, WiFi routers, and security cameras, all towards making useless eco-machines. McNicholas requested that the door leading out to the street remain propped open during the run of the exhibition, so a breeze flowed through the space and excited the reeds and moss that the artist had preserved within the space. In the center of the gallery, two speakers faced each other. Droning tones, reminiscent of '80s-era sci-fi and synthesizer futurism, were interspersed with radio and satellite pings. McNicholas's version of cargo cult formalism acts like a Post-Internet paganism – an animism that seemed to acknowledge our own inadequate language for addressing the incoherence and incomprehensibility of nature in relationship to human presence.

It's difficult to imagine works that offer a sense of permanence in a time of such vulnerability. A return to the familiar, materially, makes sense both practically and meaningfully. Even before COVID, there had been a number of written pieces that discussed contemporary art's circulation as both an asset and a modality. Such arguments championed post-studio practices as most prescient and of-the-moment. In addition to McKenzie Wark's writing in "[Digital Provenance and the Artwork as Derivative](#)," there is Boris Groys's *In the Flow* (2016), which examines the digital presence of an artwork and the institutions that display it as co-equal to the original experience, image, or art object itself. There is also the writing of Hito Steyerl, specifically within her book *Free Art* (2017) and its exploration of the uploading of the Museum of Damascus during the Syrian Civil War to preserve the physical museum through digital artifacts. David Joselit's *Heritage and Debt* (2020) similarly talks about the ability of circulation, specifically cultural circulation itself, to affect the work and the making of it. In Jennifer Chan's "Notes on Post-Internet," she defines the effects of Post-Internet creation as a post-studio practice, one that is reflective of our commuter culture and gig economies. These calls from Post-Internet theorists justify the art object's recent tendency to become pared down, mobile, capable of being rolled up or transported, streamlined, or stripped to poetically reflect the force of venture capitalists within late capitalism.



Mike Cloud, "Beheading James Slemp," 2020. Courtesy Thomas Erben Gallery.



Mike Cloud, "Mixed Marriage Bering/Strain" (detail), 2020. Photo: Andrew Woolbright.

At [Thomas Erben Gallery](#) in Chelsea, Mike Cloud delved more fully into his hermeticism than either South or McNicholas, in service of directly addressing the act of mourning — the personal drift — through the vehicle of painting. His solo show formed an arcane language and classification system, a rigorous formula for paths, that looks to cosmograms and Indigenous American Spirit Wheels for formalist answers. The shape of each canvas he makes — whether triangle, arrow, or octagon — represents a different genre of painting and a different vehicle for relaying information through paint. Triangles are portraits, specifically obituaries and monuments of mourning, and are depictions of people who have died by hanging. Cloud's five pointed 'Star of David' paintings are portrait and system paintings — in *Shopping List Greener Pastures* (2020), panels explore mundane color conundrums (green versus black tea, or green versus greener pasture). Cloud's ideological approach to aesthetics has conviction, and his paintings recall Dutch still-lives in their non-hierarchical approach to seeing; that the whole world and everything in it needed to be painted, and in every combination. Cloud is thinking of the generosity that forms from hermetic vigilance, from an ideology that isn't strategic, but felt and revealed slowly.

Like mythology, Cloud's aesthetic — as with those of South and McNicholas — requests considerable buy-in. His language unravels slowly, withholding quick interpretation, yet is generous in its slow burn, its preservationist's attempt at recapturing what we feel we are losing. This current shaving-down of cargo cult formalism can avoid the past associations of what late critic Raphael Rubinstein would call provisional aesthetics, and address the current problems of our time through a more intentional inflection towards the work of critically understanding shift and drift. The foraging of materials takes on new meaning, ringing with a spiritualism derived from the foraging and preservation of transitions. Suspicious of saccharine or kitsch optimism, and instead, employed in service of a post-human conscientiousness and criticality. This new provision-ism, directed towards an engagement with mourning, can mimic the sorrow of collapse while offering moments that excavate its fragile sublime. South, through her material maneuvers with the fragments and excavation of lived space and McNicholas, with the artifacts, both real and illustrated, of our human involvement in shifting ecologies and world space. As we face eviction — and the larger eviction experienced through climate collapse — and that our bodies are susceptible to contagion, and that our politics are vulnerable to fascism, this new formalism preserves the evidence of this now unfamiliar and post-human landscape. As we've seen a new era of mutual aid networks grow to address the failures of our society, cargo cult formalist artists are providing a humanist response to our shared grief.