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ARTNEWS

BORN TO RUN: DITCHING NEW YORK FOR BALTIMORE, AND NICHOLAS BUFFON'S LITTLE REVELATIONS

BY *Andrew Russeth* POSTED 09/16/14



Nicholas Buffon, *BQE*, 2014.
IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST AND FREDDY

Hit the road.

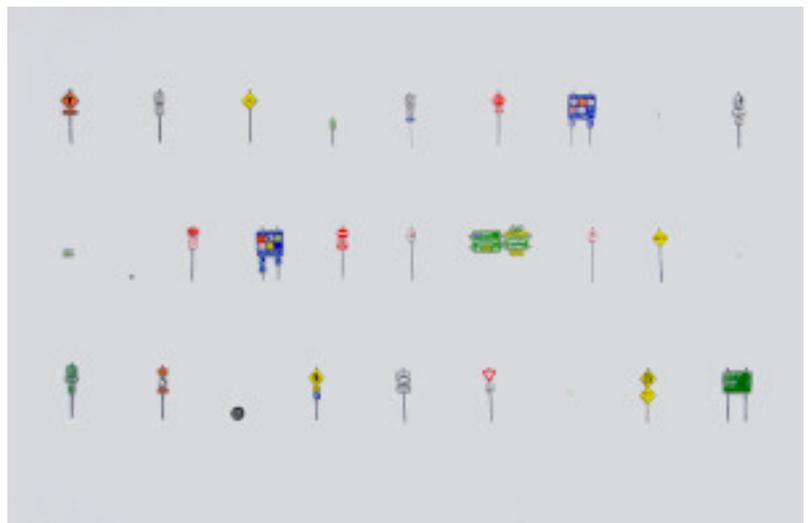
That's the title of New York artist Nicholas Buffon's new show at the Freddy gallery in Baltimore, and also the only real message I want to impart here: Get in your car or grab a bus and head down to Charm City. It's a 3-hour drive from New York—1 hour from D.C. You can, of course take, the train, but the highway is the way to do it. Buffon's remarkable, touching exhibition is about long journeys on the open road, and the images that define them. Getting behind the wheel will put you in the mood.

Recently Buffon has been fashioning the stuff of everyday life in miniature—trash bags, trees, bicycles, and, most astoundingly, whole buildings—with only slices of foam and paper, glue, and paint. His lovingly made objects sound goofy, but they can break your heart. They brim with pathos. He is at it again at Freddy.

Here Buffon has covered one wall with a spare grid of nearly 30 little paintings (if only there were a richer word!)—tiny street and highway signs, plus road-trip necessities, none longer or wider than about 9 inches. There is a mile marker, a spare tire, an exit sign, a rest-stop notice (McDonald's, Waffle House), and a bottle of water (three-quarters of an inch tall), each assembled and painted with halting, awkward care.

He can work larger too, as in cars that stretch just over a foot—a sporty red sedan with black shark fins hanging behind its tires, a rough-and-tumble white moving van, a police cruiser, and a box truck with a questionable vanity plate: "420 BUFF."

The pièce de résistance is a two-foot-tall version of the actual three-story building that houses Freddy, its white-brick façade washed with grime, a resilient, almost jaunty tree out front, and cans of beer, each smaller than a fingernail,



Installation view.

littering the sidewalk. Naturally you can peek inside the ground floor space in the sculpture and see a miniature of the miniature work you are looking at hanging inside the ultra-small gallery.

This is easily some of the most utterly sincere work that has been shown at a serious art gallery in the past few years. If you can resist its fragile, heart-on-its-sleeve charm, I worry for you.

Buffon's buildings recall Carrie Stettheimer's dollhouse recreation of her family home (1916–35), and Martin Wong's 1980s paintings of action-packed Lower East Side buildings, but Buffon is loose where the former is meticulous (magical but cold), and his buildings and cars are always uninhabited, in stark contrast to the thrumming energy of the latter's best works. Buffon's look lonely, like their maker has just stepped out of the image.

Memory and time are Buffon's subjects—the slippery way they get away from us, and the ways they conspire to alter our sense of the built world. He sometimes works from photos, or Google Street View, but the effect is always subtly impressionistic. There's a blur in the text on a police car and slapdash brushwork on one sign, a misspelling in another. He's after the particular feel, rather than the exact look of a place or an object. His scenes are being reconstructed piece by piece, imperfectly, and nostalgia and melancholy cloak them. His work underscores Proust's point that, even as we stand near or on them, "houses, roads, avenues are as fleeting, alas, as the years." Buffon's road signs, objects, and real estate are scrappily engineered to trigger all sorts of odd memories in those who confront them. As they do, everything he has depicted is receding into the past. The building he has constructed right now is home to Freddy. It was something else just a few months ago. Soon enough it will be gone.

On a less melancholy note, Buffon is also exciting because he is part of a group of artists today who are resolutely, radically committed to working small, like Sam Anderson, Matt Hoyt, Daniel McDonald, and a handful of others. They elegantly lay bare the difference between size (how big an artwork is) and scale (what it can do to its viewers in space). This is a tendency, not a united movement or even a trend—their interests are too dispersed for that—and it's, in part, a pragmatic move (many show at pocket-sized galleries), but it carries a real ethical message: we don't need more huge things in the world right now. (A variation, perhaps, on Doug Huebler's 1969 quip: "The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more.")

Their work is also a welcome, refreshing rejection of art as grand theater, as overbearing spectacle, and its newfound prevalence holds out the possibility of a thrilling shift in the cultural firmament: art that grows more potent, not simply bigger, over time.



Installation view with *Lamp Post* and *510 W Franklin St.*, both 2014.



Detail of *510 W Franklin St.*, 2014.