

Herbert, Martin. *Art Previewed*, *ArtReview*, January & February 2017, print, pg. 35-40

## Previewed

*Desert X*  
Coachella Valley, Palm Springs  
25 February – 30 April

*Helen Johnson*  
ICA, London  
1 February – 2 April

*Monica Bonvicini*  
Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art,  
Gateshead  
through 26 February

*Give Me Yesterday*  
Fondazione Prada, Milan  
through 12 March

*Robin Rhode*  
Stevenson, Cape Town  
19 January – 4 March

*Rita Ackermann*  
Malmö Konsthall  
through 22 January

*John Currin*  
Sadie Coles, London  
through 21 January

*A.K. Burns*  
New Museum, New York  
18 January – 23 April

*Sam Durant*  
Blum & Poe, Los Angeles  
7 January – 4 February

*Rosa Barba*  
Neuer Berliner Kunstverein  
through 27 January



1 *Desert X* 2017 site view, Palm Springs. Courtesy Desert X

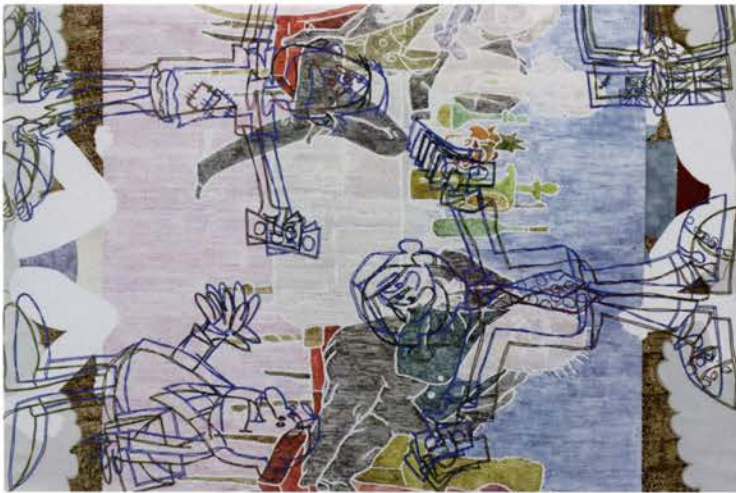
The desert, Honoré de Balzac wrote in *Une passion dans le désert* (1830), is 'God without men'. That phrase filters into Neville Wakefield's curatorial statement for *Desert X*, an expansive, site-specific show that resembles a biennale but won't necessarily happen every two years. The sandy region in this case is California's Coachella Valley, whose myriad preinstalled associations range from retreats for Hollywood wheeler-dealers into Palm Springs idylls, to the collectivist rush of Coachella's annual music festival (with which *Desert X* synergistically coincides). In the desert, Balzac also wrote, there is 'everything and nothing'. Here, if the 'nothing' is the desert's entropic encroachment, the 'everything' has yet to be revealed – no artist list so far – though it's characterised as 'art without constraint'. More specifically, the well-connected Wakefield, who has perhaps browsed Hari

Kunzru's Balzac-quoting, Mojave Desert-set 2011 novel *Gods Without Men*, is apparently inviting established and emerging artists to the free-to-visit project; said artists will use indoor and outdoor locations to engage with 'global and local issues that may range from climate change to starry skies, from Tribal culture and immigration to tourism, gaming, and golf.' *Golfart?* Sold.

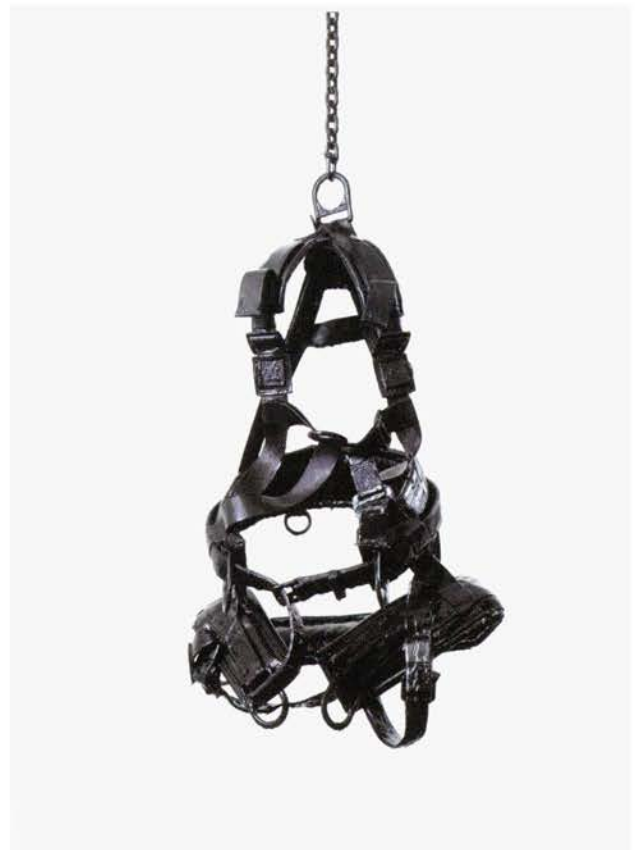
Among the current generation of young painters, the élan and personality of **Helen Johnson's** playful, issue-driven work stand out. Her canvases are at once sociably inclusive – matching Italian postmodernist design with miniature cartoon narratives and political issues (eg *Women discussing patriarchy*, 2015) – and speckled with self-conscious distancing techniques such as compositional windows and frames, textile accoutrements and humour.

That distancing is only to foreclose hectoring, though. For the Melbourne-based artist's show at London's ICA, close to where the British colonisation of Australia was plotted, Johnson mounts images on a zigzag structure related to the plan of Canberra, Australia's prefab modernist capital. Expect, amid the offbeat fluency of her compositions, images of white imperialism and, among other things, men masturbating to the Australian national anthem (the usual, then).

'Architecture is the ultimate erotic act / Carry it to excess,' **Monica Bonvicini** spray-painted across a wall in Zürich's Migros Museum in 2002. A melding of the bodily and the built, language and control, has been the Venice-born, Berlin-based artist's métier for decades – whether via the video *Wallfuckin'* (1995–6), in which a naked woman humps a corner wall,



2 Helen Johnson, *Great Depression* (detail), 2016, acrylic on canvas, synthetic fabric, 370 × 320 cm. Courtesy the artist

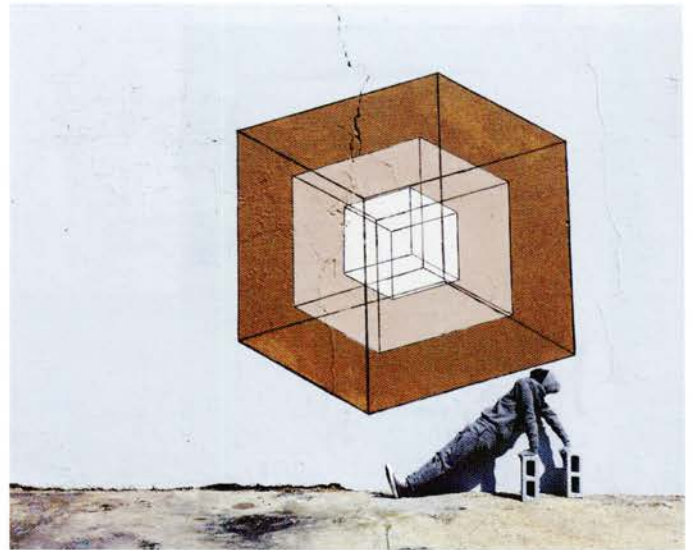


3 Monica Bonvicini, *Harness*, 2006. Photo: Jens Ziehe. © the artist and VG-Bild Kunst, Frankfurt. Courtesy Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead





4 Melanie Bonajo, *Thank You for Hurting Me I Really Needed It* (detail), 2008–16, wallpaper, dimensions variable. © the artist. Courtesy the artist and Fondazione Prada, Milan



5 Robin Rhode, *Three Nudes* (detail), 2016, c-print, set of three, 59 × 73 cm each. © the artist. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town & Johannesburg

arrays of dangling s&m-like hammocks (*Never Again*, 2005) or declarative yet ambiguous text sculptures (*Satisfy Me (Big)*, 2010). The survey *her hand around the room* cherry-picks Bonvicini's muscular oeuvre and its exploration of subliminal shapers of identity: expect glaring light-works, a staircase of chains and steel pipes, a substantial selection of drawings, and newly commissioned works. 'The aim', Bonvicini once said, paraphrasing Lenin, 'is to be more radical than reality is. Try that!'

In Bonvicini's home country, meanwhile, the Fondazione Prada looks backward. We mean that in a good way. *Give Me Yesterday*, a title observers of geopolitics might approvingly or despairingly echo, joins the dots between our moment, where smartphones and Instagram have made photographers of us all, and the informal, diaristic photography first floated

by Nan Goldin, Larry Clark, Wolfgang Tillmans et al and extended by the 14 Italian and international artists here, including Ryan McGinley, Joanna Piotrowska, Leigh Ledare and Melanie Bonajo. Unlike the rest of us, of course, these artists (perhaps) aren't just fishing for likes. Instead the show focuses on unceremonious photography as an agent of control apropos the gazes of observer and observed, and a format that upraises individual and/or collective selfhood. All of which will be essayed within the Fondazione's new, apparently photography-centric exhibition space in the (originally) nineteenth-century Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, one of the world's first shopping malls, on the level of the dome shielding the arcades.

5 Let's linger in Italy a moment longer. **Robin Rhode**, the South Africa-born, Berlin-based

artist, rose quickly a decade or so ago to ripped-off-by-ad-agencies levels of fame for works that intermingled video and animated graffiti-style wall sketches, and post-Muybridge serial photography of progressively developing drawings. Since 2005, when he was featured in the Venice Biennale, he's been a regular visitor to Northern Italy, particularly Turin, and for his third solo at Stevenson, *Paths and Fields*, Rhode draws on the influence of the country, specifically artists such as Giovanni Anselmo, Giuseppe Penone and Giulio Paolini, and the general repurposing ethos of Arte Povera. And he draws on the gallery walls, using charcoal sculptures as his tools, as well as presenting works involving video shot in post-Katrina New Orleans, with hopeful intent. Wall-scrawling is a childlike procedure, but for Rhode that's the point, an evocation of innocent creativity



6 Rita Ackermann, *Freezer Burn*, 2014, acrylic, enamel, chalk, spraypaint on canvas, 198 × 112 × 4 cm. Courtesy the artist and Malmö Konsthall



7 John Currin, *Happy House Painters*, 2016, oil on canvas, 178 × 132 × 3 cm. © the artist. Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London



8 A. K. Burns, production still, 2016. Courtesy the artist

that can locate freedoms by, as he said in a 2015 interview, tapping into ‘that psyche that’s not tainted by reality’.

6 **Rita Ackermann** also first became recognised for her drawing practice, but it couldn’t have been further from Rhode’s. Cast your mind back to the Budapest-born artist’s overlapping outlines of doe-eyed sylphs, edged with bloody smears, anxious fixtures on the postrecession art scene of early-1990s New York after she moved there in her early twenties. Ackermann still works in that visibly beautiful/violent style sometimes, where much of the subject matter seems to be transpiring off-canvas, and she’s moved through various diaphanous and expressive phases in between. But as is affirmed by her first Scandinavian show, mixing early and recent works, she’s also lately focused on *Chalkboard Paintings* (2013–), which are composed

out of erasures, aggressive rubbings-out anti-intuitively ensuring, Ackermann has said, that what’s being expunged becomes *more* visible. She’s prone to quoting Paul Virilio in support of this practice of disappearance, but what these paintings do – and how they smartly expand upon Ackermann’s decades-long interrogation of painting and drawing – needs little theoretic exegesis.

7 **John Currin** began exhibiting paintings of unclothed women around the same time as Ackermann, but – here comes another pivot – otherwise their outlooks and aesthetics couldn’t be more different. Currin, famously or notoriously, takes a neoclassical aesthetic, harking back particularly to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European painting, and merges it with low-cultural signifiers (from porn, a ‘cliché of transgression’ in his words,

to cheap cinema) to create a psychological problem-space, seductive in some ways and deeply uneasy in others. The developments in his sixth exhibition at Sadie Coles HQ, focused on pairs and couples, are symbolism, Surrealism and, perhaps, the plot-twist of restraint. Figures sport ice-cream-cone horns or gleaming fish wrapped around their faces, there’s a play of dripped paint between two embracing women, and all the while Currin’s academic painterly precision pulls in one direction, the teasingly vacillating oddity of the scenarios in another.

*More Surrealism?* The style is shaping up as apposite for our present stranger-than-fiction world, though admittedly it’s only one strand of **A. K. Burns’s** project as artist-in-residence at the New Museum, and her broader cycle of speculative fiction works in video installation and sculpture. To the extent that Burns updates



André Breton's movement, it's with ancillary doses of theatre, sci-fi, queer politics and post-Donna Haraway cyborgian theory, and for a moment of pronounced bodily and ecological anxieties. Here, following on from 2015's four-channel video *A Smeary Spot*, which the institution describes loosely as a 'parallel cosmology where aspects move or flow, are controlled, measured, used, or cared for, raising larger questions about how value is allocated and perceived', Burns will set up an in-process video installation exploring the subjugation of the body.

Subjugated bodies throughout history have recurred in the work of Sam Durant (who staged a show titled *Invisible Surrealists* in 2014, but we must press on) which early on engaged with the contemporaneous histories of the Civil Rights movement, the arc of 1960s rock and

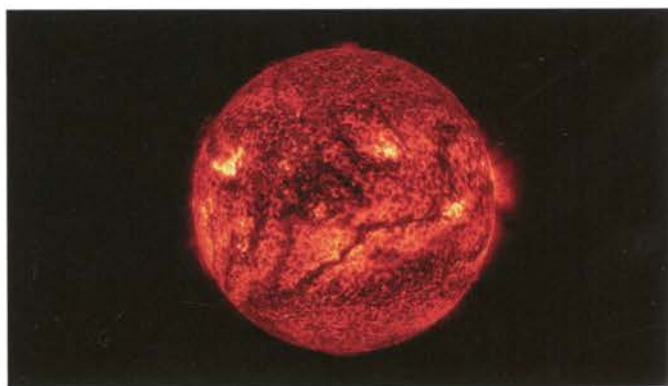
postminimalist sculpture. Durant has since explored and mooted monuments for slaughtered Native Americans, works highlighting the us's long history of executing its incarcerated (and, in other works, collaborations with prisoners) and many other intricately researched projects. His work rarely appears untimely even when it digs into the past, but with America seemingly on the brink, it feels increasingly urgent of late. Given that Durant tends to be highly location- and time-specific, we're looking forward to whatever he does in Los Angeles, in *Build Therefore Your Own World*. Right now, though, our only clue is *Dream Map, Polaris* (2016), a star map made from pennies glued to the dark field of a surplus military blanket.

To which there's a link to Rosa Barba's current show. But it'll take a moment to get there, moving past the loud, rattling, positively

sculptural film projectors that are a hallmark of her art – less for nostalgic reasons than as part of her longstanding investigation of the materiality of cinema, and the relationship of film to memory. The film *Subject to Constant Change* (2013), for example, shot the UK in Kent and Manchester, explored the end of the industrial age, ranging from Manchester locals considering bygone objects to the surreal sea forts in the Kentish estuary. At n.b.k., meanwhile, in the 'cinema-sculpture' *The Colour Out of Space* (2015), the Italian artist presents footage of stars and planets shot at the observatory in Troy, New York, along with a dense sound collage of interviews with artists, writers and astronomers on the relation between cinema and the cosmos: the pairing evoking, like the scale of the universe itself, a situation that outpaces human perception. The starry heavens, then: told you we'd get there. *Martin Herbert*



9 Sam Durant, *The Meeting House*, 2016 (installation view, the Old Manse, Concord, MA). Photo: Alex Jones. Courtesy Trustees of Reservations, Old Manse



10 Rosa Barba, *The Colour Out of Space* (still), 2015, five coloured glass filters, steel base, HD video, colour, sound, 36 min. © the artist. Courtesy Fondazione Prada, Milan