



Gahlberg Gallery
College of DuPage
425 Fawell Blvd.
Glen Ellyn, IL 60137-6599
www.cod.edu/gallery
(630) 942-2321



Peter Power

Peter Power

Thursday, Oct. 21 to Saturday, Dec. 4, 2010
Gahlberg Gallery

Peter Power has developed a somewhat peculiar format for his work: an awkward mix of exacting process, idiosyncratic mess and spiritual or aesthetic ambiguity and doubt. His large-scale “installations,” I’ll call them, each consist of two parts. They can’t properly be called “diptychs,” because the parts are so distinct from each other that they create more precarious tension than easy balance. Each has a two-dimensional component, on the gallery wall, one or a series of photo-based images silk-screened onto sheets of Plexiglas. In front of, nearby or in the general proximity of the two-dimensional component, each piece has a three-dimensional part, fashioned out of various bits of chipboard, plywood, Formica and plaster. These combinations are large in scale, but are shy of being architectural or environmental, as each part obdurately refuses to resolve itself into the other. Rather, for Power, it is up to the curious viewer, drawn into the inherent tension between the second and third dimension, to supply the fourth: experiential time, in order to wrap things up.

This experience does not take place in a vacuum. Power draws on his own personal experience, be it formal, cultural, historical or autobiographical, to work within a host of traditions, in order to unsettle them, and, by extension, you. Born in 1962 and raised in various towns in Ireland, Power explains that he grew up on a small island on the very edge of Europe. Power’s first artistic training was in Cork and later Dublin, training as a printmaker and sculptor.

His piece *Ah! Pilgrim* contains much evidence of this biography. The two-dimensional element is one giant image, a snapshot taken by the artist near where he was born in western Ireland. He fed the image into his computer, gridded it into tiled sections and turned these sections into the series of dots appropriate to make a photo-silkscreen. The sections were printed out, made into screens and then Power printed them in black ink onto the back of four-by-eight-foot sheets of clear Plexiglas. This printed grid was covered with a layer of

white paint, which serves as a white ground for the black image, once the protective cover of the Plexiglas is peeled away.

In effect, Power printed the image “blind,” discovering inconsistent tonalities, off-kilter edge-matches and random mistakes only after the demanding and repetitive job was completed. This faith in an almost blind process is paralleled in the content of the image. *Ah! Pilgrim*’s image is of a place of pilgrimage: Croagh Patrick, the most famous and highest sacred mountain in Ireland. Archeological evidence suggests that the mountain has been considered holy for 5,000 years, and it was here that St. Patrick himself brought Christianity to Ireland in 441 A.D. It is said that the saint spent 40 days and nights, fasting and praying, on the summit of the mountain, establishing the Christian faith in the country.

Power’s image of Croagh Patrick undercuts the grandiosity of these saintly mysteries. His blown-up image presents a straightforward

Ah! Pilgrim, 2009

2-D component: **Acrylic screen-print and oil paint on Plexiglas, 96" x 144"**

3-D component: **Particleboard and laminate, dimensions variable**

view of the summit in County Mayo; the saint's sleeping bed of scruffy shale teetering off the foreground of the picture, the rather dull white stucco chapel built rather recently, in 1905, dominates the middle ground and a calm cloudy sky hovers in the far distance. Amongst the landmarks, tourists mill around, reading brochures or Bibles, casually posing, perhaps resting after the strenuous climb to the top. Power's camera casually captures a dozen or so pilgrims, identifiable by their generic costume as nondescript western tourist types, in the endless stream of faith and devotion that relies on the consistency of the past to bring succor and comfort to the believer.

The three-dimensional component of *Ah! Pilgrim* is a strange conglomeration of shelves, cupboards, large rectilinear shapes of laminated chipboard, screwed together in three or four chunks. It looks as if someone tried to follow the instructions to make a "Frankfurt kitchen," that model of modern efficiency designed in the 1920s for German housing projects, but kept getting distracted along the way. Power admits, that, yes, this edifice is an old set of kitchen cabinets,

"repurposed" and turned inside out. Lots of old screw holes and bared unfinished edges offer a previous incarnation of tidy cleanliness, now almost guiltily revealing its now ad-hoc nature. Between the failed technical progress of the dysfunctional kitchen states and the blocky "modern" chapel atop Croagh Patrick, the viewer is left to wander around with the pilgrims, curious about the constructed nature of each component, including his or her own curiosity vis-à-vis the construction of art.

After Power went to school in Dublin, he received a DAAD scholarship to attend the infamous Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, Germany, right around the time Bernd and Hilla Becher were encouraging the budding photographers Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky and Thomas Ruff to make giant, pristine shiny photographs, and the year that Joseph Beuys, his influence already on the wane, died. *Ah! Pilgrim's* shiny Plexiglas face may be a nod to the spectacles produced by his peers, but the physical unfinished nature of the screen-printing and the three-dimensional screwy kitchen bit is perhaps part Beuysian process and part Irish pride, skeptical of the Teutonic fondness for the heroic genius.

Station/Paris is more sprawling and more self-referential, but similarly methodical. Its two-dimensional component is a series of about a dozen snapshots, screen-printed with black ink onto the back of Plexiglas sheets with the same white-painted background. These images are each approximately 20-by-14 inches and are butted up against each other

edge-to-edge, hung in a horizontal band. One is of a molded plastic chair that has seen better days, a product in which modernism met mass-production, and another nod by Power to the incalculable numbers of small failures and victories of the technical progress of modernity. Other images are of the artist's studio, with works-in-progress and material messes scattered about. One, in which Power himself is seen lying prone amongst his works, is violated: underneath its pristine plastic surface, Power has mushed around some buttery paint with a brush. This irreverent stab at traditional printmaking reminds one of the similarly shoddy-looking works of Dieter Roth, but without that German artist's compulsion to collect.

Gradually it becomes apparent that some of the images in *Station/Paris* are of the three-dimensional component of *Station/Paris*. This is a jumble of boxy vertical shapes, stage-like areas that are raised above the floor, an odd curvy-edged bit that looks like a cartoon cloud, and a long bench-like form with some plaster smeared on its side. This sculpture is more abstract than *Ah! Pilgrim's*, perhaps because Power was more intuitive in its making. The images show the piece in a series of various compositional stages. The *Station* part of the title first takes the imagination to the thing going from Gare St. Lazare over to Gare d'Nord on the Paris metro. But, in proximity to *Ah! Pilgrim*, the *Station* could refer to the successive stations of prayer of a penitent retreat or the Stations of the Cross. There is such a place of penitence in Ireland, on Station





Station/Paris, 2010

2-D component: **Acrylic screen-print and oil paint and acrylic paint on Plexiglas, 23.5" x 159"**

3-D component: **Particleboard and laminate and plaster, dimensions variable**

Island in Donegal, one of the few full-on Catholic retreats still in use. The penitent's search for self-identity involves a three-day fast, a lack of shoes and extensive no-sleep prayer. Its stations were immortalized in the Irish poet Seamus Heaney's *Station Island*, in which he reflects on his own second pilgrimage to St. Patrick's Purgatory and on the artist's responsibility to speak to the political situation of the troubles in Northern Ireland. Or metaphorically, Power presents *Station/Paris* as the result of putting the thing itself through the trials, progress and digressions of the artist's studio. And again, the viewer can attempt to navigate between the aggressive, lurching forms and the quiet documentary studio shots, being careful not to trip.

In 1989, Power became restless, looking for a change of scene. He landed in, of all places, Daytona Beach, Florida, and found the sunny and transient atmosphere of Florida a bit different from his past experience in Ireland and the former "West" Germany. After his studies in Ireland and Germany, places burdened by the relentless presence of history

in everyday life, Power was stuck by the Americans' willful lack of acknowledgment of their own history. In Europe, the profound tragedy of the past made people wary of what was to come. In Daytona Beach, not burdened by any big ideas, people assumed that the future is necessarily going to be good, that the future is ours and now, a delightful and very American belief.

This disparity may have shaped *Party! Party! Party!* Its two-dimensional component consists of variations of two images, each repeated four times, screen-printed on the back of Plexiglas and hung in a horizontal row at eye level. One is of a cheerful blue sky with fluffy clouds. The other is the top floors of a brutalist building,* printed monochromatically against a dull sky. As in *Ah! Pilgrim*, the universal ancient optimism of the clear blue sky is paired with the skeptical promise of Modern architecture that once promised an International Style.

The three-dimensional component of *Party! Party! Party!* looks like it has indeed suffered from too much of its own title. There are two table-like structures of rough chipboard closing in on a mail-roomish shelving unit pinned between them. On one table are several rectilinear shapes looking like they have yet to be re-assembled into coherency, and underneath the other table are elegantly rounded structures hidden as if laying in wait to pounce. Here Power covers some of the chaotic mix of textures with nice, smooth black Formica, creating an optical illusion that

flattens out the three dimensions into two in the brain, again charging the meandering viewer with the responsibility to sort out the variable dimensions in his or her own time. When the artist moved to Chicago in 1991, he got a job building sets for television commercials. These sets were perfect, but only from one camera angle, and only for a short time. In his own sculptural elements, Power wrangles with this urge for the perfect sweet viewing spot. His structures are rife with surface play that never coalesces, but offers active visual stimuli from all sides.

The combination of blue sky, brutalist high-rise and jumbled-up furniture of *Party! Party! Party!* may also reflect a component of Power's earlier art-school studies. The subjects of his undergraduate art history thesis were Irish nationalist art from 1910 to 1960 and the art favored by the National Socialist German Workers Party in the 1930s, commonly known as the Nazis. These sorts of ideological extremes can be seen in *Party! Party! Party!* in formal and cultural parry. Power lived through the ideological wars of the 1970s and 1980s, when the Irish IRA, the German Baader Meinhof group and Italy's Red Army provided idealistic sources for youthful hopes and rage and the ensuing extended historical grievances. His move from Ireland to Germany replaced one historical paramilitary cause, that of Irish Nationalism, with a younger, but also historically grounded form of left-leaning terrorism. Power observes that in Northern Ireland, the working class, both Catholic and Protestant, were asking for either a little more

Party! Party! Party!, 2010

2-D component: **Acrylic screen-print and oil paint on Plexiglas, 23" x 211"**

3-D component: **Particleboard and laminate, dimensions variable**

to make life easier or reassurance that the status quo would be maintained, while in Germany, the Baader Meinhof gang protested the profound post-war materialism of the so-called decade of the Economic Miracle. Germany had too much, so the left wanted to blow it all up. And this was in contrast to Daytona Beach, where Power found that the profound materialism of post-war America was seen as good capitalism, a birthright.

And perhaps because Power immigrated to the United States, settling in Chicago, heavily populated by the Irish, *Party! Party! Party!* leads to another analogy: Somehow the optimism offered by the new world must always depend on the old, with its often cruel history. *Party! Party! Party!* has a mix of transgressive force and gloomy wretchedness like the feeling experienced when one hears the Clash's 1979 hit song "London Calling" played earnestly, yet awfully, by a garage band from Detroit, at a wedding party in Schaumburg. The sincerity is clear, the representation full of lack.

With a similarly searching attitude, Power works on an ongoing series of prints titled *Hopeful Drawings*. They act as sketchbook pages,

providing rehearsal spaces or playgrounds. The images, widely diverse in subject matter, are consistent in format and size: each is 14-by-20 inches, printed on standard issue, 22-by-30-inch paper. Within this consistent format, Power accumulates a grab bag of ideas, all corralled by the questions, "Is this a picture? Does it work? Is it successful?" The "Drawings" are actually photomechanical reproductions, juxtaposed with what appear to be "hand-made" interventions. Power presents cajoling texts, landscapes, snapshots of his studio, carefully layering the content. He then allows himself to violate or acknowledge their propriety: nudging them out of registration so their layers don't coalesce, or adding to their pristine surfaces a spray of paint, a smudgy mark or a crisply defined censorious addition. But these seemingly serendipitous sprays and smudges are actually meticulously made photo-mechanical representations of said serendipity. The layers of failed representations effervesce with the dizzying thrill of optimism – for hopefulness in the discovery and investigation of the attempt to represent.

And it is representation itself that is the central concern of Power's work. Amongst all the specific historical, biographical and political content, it is this core concern of representation, the urge to represent accurately and the certainty of failure that is paramount. Even the sculptural components refuse to resolve into fixed static objects. Their rambling units beg for rearrangement and alteration. The unfinished, moveable quality of the three-dimensional units call

out the monumentality of the screen-printed images, disavowing any pretense to a finished, final accuracy of reproduction. Trained as a printmaker and sculptor, Power is a hopeless perfectionist, exacting in detail work. Yet, as an artist working in Ireland, Germany and the United States beginning in the early 1980s, he recognizes the futility, and maybe the impossibility of ever achieving precise and perfect reproductions: of images, of structures, of ideas. What continues to fascinate him is that we still believe in, and dream of, perfect repetition, in pilgrimage, print or politics. In his combinations and confusions of dimensionality, originality and faith, Peter Power consistently and generously invites the viewer to engage with his artworks, run through his stations, rest and ruminate.

— Kathryn Hixson

**It is the University of Illinois at Chicago's administration building designed by Walter Netsch for the Chicago architectural firm Skidmore Owens and Merrill in the mid-1960s. This is the highest building on campus, built under the late Mayor Richard J. Daley's administration in an attempt to provide a truly urban university for Chicago. Much of Netsch's plan has since been dismantled, due to the criminal behavior it seemed to attract in its brutish concrete spaces.*





Wann, den Richtig.
Better Fail, FAIL BE
TTER Be the task
great or small, do
it WELL
OR NOT
OR NOT NOT AT ALL.



Images on page 10 and page 11:
From the *Hopeful Drawing series*, 2007-2010, screen-prints,
14" x 20" image size, 22" x 30" paper size

Peter Power was born in Oughterard, Ireland, in 1962. He is a graduate of the National College of Art and Design, Dublin (1987) and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (1993). He was also the recipient of a DAAD scholarship and studied at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, Germany. Power has exhibited widely in his native Ireland, continental Europe and the United States, most recently at the devening projects + editions, Chicago. He lives and works in Chicago, where he is an associate professor and chair of the Department of Printmedia at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Kathryn Hixson is an art critic, art historian and educator. She teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, is writing a dissertation on art of the 1970s for a Ph.D. in art history at the University of Texas at Austin, and recently received an Art Writers Grant from Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation.

Peter Power

Thursday, Oct. 21 to Saturday, Dec. 4, 2010

The Gahlberg Gallery/McAninch Arts Center would like to thank the artist, Peter Power, and the writer, Kathryn Hixson, for their creative vision on this publication and exhibition.

Barbara Wiesen
Director and Curator
Gahlberg Gallery



This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, and by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Image on cover: ***Station/Paris, 2010***
2-D component: **Acrylic screen-print and oil paint and acrylic paint on Plexiglas, 23.5" x 159"**
3-D component: **Particleboard and laminate and plaster, dimensions variable**

10-2778(10/10)1M