ARTFORUM

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ARTUR ŻMIJEWSKI

JOHAN GRIMONPREZ

BARKLEY L. HENDRICKS

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space will continue to unfold in Tannatt's solo efforts, but don't hold your breath waiting for Pauline's "Boofthle 3-D."

—*Michael Ned Holte*

TORONTO

Iris Häussler

ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO

Iris Häussler's installation *He Named Her Amber*, 2007–2009—an ongoing project at the Art Gallery of Ontario—is an ingenious deception. Visitors are under the impression that they are simply taking a guided "archaeological" tour of the Grange, Toronto's oldest mansion (built in 1815) and the first home of the AGO's collection; a glass doorway connects the Grange to the adjacent, newly renovated museum building. The tour guide spins an elaborate tale about a young Irish servant from Kilkenny, Mary O'Shea, who resided there and developed the curious habit of making objects out of beeswax and hiding them within the building's walls and beneath its floors. The Grange's butler at the time, Henry Whyte, made a map of the house identifying the location of thirty-four objects hoarded by O'Shea (whom he nicknamed "Amber") between 1828 and 1857. This newly discovered document, the guide explains, sparked an investigation by Chantal C. Lee of the Anthropological Services of Ontario. But like O'Shea, Lee is a fictional character—yet she is functional, complete with business cards and a working e-mail address (she even responds promptly to exhibition-related queries). The tour provides glimpses of the excavation-in-progress and preparations for an O'Shea exhibition, allowing visitors access to previously off-limits portions of the house and to the compulsively crafted wax objects themselves—all in various stages of disinterment and institutional processing. The participants' sense of privileged access, the exacting attention to detail, and the complexity of information provided about Lee's intensive investigation contribute to making Häussler's illusion utterly convincing.

The charade begins with a display case in the entrance hall containing a tiny pinch pot made of wax and unfired clay, found inside an interior wall—a lone and humble object that one can easily accept as an early O'Shea creation. Accordingly, there is little cause to question the validity of the museum label, which indicates that the pot contains blood—adding a dash of intrigue regarding the girl's folk traditions or mental state. Visitors are then led through a door to a wood-paneled library that serves as a makeshift laboratory, with unfinished display cases and Lee's diagnostic and imaging equipment arranged on worktables. A tied bundle of letters, encased in marvelously decayed wax, lies next to a monitor presenting an "x-ray" view of the scrawled words, possibly penned by O'Shea's Irish relatives; she may have buried the documents, the tour guide suggests, after hearing of her family's demise following the famine in her homeland. One vitrine includes a clay-and-wax brick with a rabbit skull suspended inside of it, further highlighting O'Shea's superstitions. The tactile, shamanistic qualities of the objects uncannily evoke scenarios and characters contrived by Joseph Beuys.

Häussler, *He Her Amber*, 2009, mixed installation.

Further legs of the tour lead to encounters with the larger wax objects associated with the "sculptural" ambitions of the adult O'Shea. These include an enormous cone (known as "object no. 17") in the process of being dug up in the mansion's pantry; its ambitious size, compared to the intimate scale of the other objects, perhaps triggers doubts for some viewers as to its origins, but the abundance of carefully positioned, incidental details helps alleviate any nascent suspicions: half-empty water bottles, power tools, shovels, and knee pads have been carelessly left lying around by the excavators. Similarly, visitors are led into Lee's office, which contains an impressive array of drawings, notes, and diagrams, collectively evidencing the focused determination of a committed professional researcher. But various details suggest an obsessive, rather than simply rigorous, mind: A cot is located in this workplace, as is an exact replica of "object no. 17," suspended by wires in a glass case. After the tour, when the veil is finally lifted on the elaborately staged fiction, one is left speculating as to Häussler and her collaborators' extraordinary efforts—including those of the gallery's curator David Moos—in orchestrating such an event. *He Named Her Amber*'s eerie material presence, narrative flow, and stagecraft, and together functioned not as mere trickery but as a provocative and heartfelt meditation on the claims of authenticity made daily by artists, scientists, and institutions of all stripes.

—*Dan Adler*

LONDON

André Thomkins

HAUSER & WIRTH

André Thomkins must have been one of those on whom nothing is lost. The origin of the technique he used to make his "Lackskins," which he began in the mid-1950s, can be ascribed to chance or to observation as you please: While painting a crib for his child, he noticed that the enamel he'd washed off his brush formed a thin, cohesive skin on top of the water; he liked the look of it, and realized that if he could slide a sheet of paper under the floating paint and then lift it, he'd be able to skim off and preserve the colorful shape.

Thomkins, a Swiss artist who lived much of his life in Germany, was only fifty-five years old when he died in Berlin in 1985; he was at heart less a painter than a sculptor, draftsman, and conceptualist, and he often collaborated with other artists, including George Brecht, Robert Filliou, Dieter Roth, and Daniel Spoerri. Among the most charming of his extremely disparate works is a series of enamel signs, reminiscent of old Paris street signs, bearing palindromes such as *OH! CET ÉCHO!*; *NEE, DIE IDEEN*; and STRATEGY: GET ARTS. But with the "Lackskins" he gave himself over to pure painting, though in a highly unusual way.

Included here were twenty-one works from the series; ranging from about seven inches square up to more than six feet across, they are primarily but not exclusively abstract, either grisaille or garishly colorful. Certainly the most impressive pieces were half a dozen very large ones, mostly from the early '60s, though one is dated 1982. (All the paintings here are untitled, except for a black-and-white semi-figurative series from 1961 and 1962 called "Astronauts.") These