

Scroll Contributor | Julie Baumgardner on Bortolami, New York

“Artists look at other artists,” writes Tom Burr, the sculptor and critic – now turned curator. The just-opened group show at his own representing gallery – Bortolami Gallery – entitled “now I am quietly waiting for the catastrophe of my personality to seem beautiful again, and interesting, and modern” (through October 27) – marks his first foray into a role that, by many accounts, is an extension of his own artistic focus. Burr’s statement, paired with snippets of stanzas from Frank O’Hara’s poem Mayakovsky (also the title’s origin), serves as a clue to both the approach and the outcome of a show where sixteen artists share the gallery space. The roster includes historical and contemporary names of note — Kaucyila Brooke, Jean Cocteau, Dan Graham, Ull Hohn, Hilary Lloyd, Sarah Lucas, Gordon Matta-Clark, Lucy McKenzie, Ken Okiishi, Elizabeth Peyton, Josephine Pryde, Mary Simpson, Dash Snow, J. St. Bernard, Charline von Heyl and Emily Wardill — but whose relationships to one another and art in general aren’t equal or even immediately obvious. Connection and perception are the questioned concepts here, and every variable considered — spatial proximity, personal relations, thematic similarities — is filtered through those lenses. This is after all Burr’s solo debut in the director’s chair, all eyes are on him. So then, it seems he’s set-up a rubric for us to draw the parallels between the artists, their works and each other. It all feels very personal. Not surprisingly, the stakes of the show mirror Burr’s own nimble conceptual works invoking biography and memory.

So it also makes sense that Burr called on his longtime intellectual spirit-animal — American poet Frank O’Hara. The two have much in common — arbiters of culture, gay men and New York denizens who deeply rely on the power of observation. Knowing oneself is through the other O’Hara opined, “what does he think of that? I mean, what do I?” reads his poem, and surely Burr is looking at O’Hara here while at himself through O’Hara. The imprints of one’s own biography are impossible to avoid, but especially for Burr’s curatorial premiere — his inclusion of this crop of artists draws a line directly back to him. The easily traceable ones are Ull Hohn, a former mate from the Whitney Museum’s studio program back 1988 and painter Charline Von Heyl, who now paints on the other side of Burr’s own Chelsea studio wall. But then there’s Elizabeth Peyton, whose history with Burr spans back to the classrooms of SVA but whose cagey self-portrait hangs close, perhaps dangerously, next to a series of Dash Snow print-media collages tucked in the corner of the gallery’s opening room. Snow, the conflicted and conflicting East Side royalty-meets-downtown derelict, represents a schism in popular and critical tastes. Interestingly, Peyton has acquired the same status. However, Snow succumbed to a perhaps-orchestrated overdose. Such prescience of his early demise is eerily catalogued in one work, *Untitled*, 2008, a remediated letter of gratitude from a Lafayette House concierge, the very hotel of his death, that is under the catty-cornered glancing eye of Peyton’s *EP*, 2012. What is Burr suggesting here — something sinister, cheeky or a recognition of artstar status and/or its perils?

Another standout treatment is of Ken Okiishi, whose first appearance in the show with Marcel Duchamp's Studio on Streeteasy.com (dust breeding), permutation 5 (at Bortolami, New York) hangs against a green stripe of paint staked strategically. It holds an image, a faintly familiar one, of the contemporary website listing of Duchamp's actual atelier at 33 West 67th Street doctored with objects from the Dadaist's era. The photograph also has a twin in the back corner of the gallery's additional room. While the two whisper to each other through the walls, the works' use of repurposed ready-mades giggle at the many historical, and meta, echoes found in the others and itself. More highlights include emerging film-maker Emily Wardill, whose ink-jet on silk depictions of crumpled film negatives with titles like Tonight I need a friend, 2012 and Yesterday is dead and gone, 2012 elicit a universal recollection of nostalgia-gone-destructive. (Remember tearing up old photographs of the ex?); and Kaucylia Brooke's series titled "Kathy Acker's Clothes" is just that — photographs of the deceased avant-garde writer's garb appearing aloof, wilted and almost dismembered without the body of its owner.

If Burr's objective was a puzzle to solve, then guessing the clues and filling them in is only half the fun. This new role continues his signature thoughtful investigation of place, space and personality. But since these are not Burr's works, therein is the added layer of mystery, and as such, depth. Burr signs off his statement saying, "Maybe all artists are photogenic in the eyes of other artists," and Burr's affinity for the artists he's chosen is clear. Yet so is the reflection they have on his own lens.

Be sure to check out Bortolami Gallery's Paddle8 page for available work!

Julie Baumgardner has long been involved in the culture sector. Now she writes and curates. Her work has appeared in such publications as Interview, Surface, Artlog and 1stdibs. Julie has also presented her cultural criticism at Yale, Dartmouth and University of Michigan, just to name a few.



**Phyllida Barlow**  
*RIG: untitled; pompoms*, 2011  
(installation view), fabric, paper,  
15 large fabric balls, dimensions  
variable. Photo: Peter Mallet.  
© the artist. Courtesy the artist  
and Hauser & Wirth, London



**Tom Burr**  
*Fassbinder Piece*, 2011, stained  
plywood, painted steel, vintage  
leather coat, vintage poster,  
vintage magazine, steel pushpins,  
coat hanger, 182 x 90 x 115 cm.  
Courtesy Stuart Shave/  
Modern Art, London



# TOM BURR

Tom Burr  
Modern Art, London  
9 September – 1 October

**Tom Burr** is a sensual thinker. In his latest show at Modern Art, intellectual seduction comes in the form of draped and dangling textiles (leather, denim, wool), their familiar textures a sculptural meditation on the nature of clothing, its propensity for disguise as well as warmth. Rucked grey blankets, tacked against squares of black-stained plywood, recall the photographic elegies of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's unmade beds, and like them memorialise the movements of prone bodies. Their titles – *Last Night*, *Cover Me Cautiously*,

*Patterned After Pleasure* (all 2011) suggest erotic melancholy, their fields of roiling wool a performance of Romantic yearning. A denim shirt, brown jacket and trench coat, meanwhile, provide the period colour: the utilitarian sobriety of the early 1980s. As in Burr's previous work, this show takes a twentieth-century historical character – here, filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder – as its basis for an exploration of the relationship between identity and artefact. Burr conducts loaded objects around an absence, sad signs pointing towards a void.

Fassbinder is felt as a more active presence here than in previous Burr exhibitions. A freestanding black wooden display case has a poster for Fassbinder's last acting role, in 1982's *Kamikaze 1989*, draped along its base, with a copy of *October*, also from 1982, cracked open against it. The abutment of the two artefacts attests to a doubling in Fassbinder's cultural identity (the avant-garde filmmaker of the austere academic essay, and the corpulent actor in the leopard-skin suit in the garish sci-fi). The green leather coat hanging from the rail above – tightly belted, as though put away for the winter – draws meaning to it: Fassbinder's fondness for leather bars, a lover's suicide by hanging, anonymity, disguise. Meanings accrue.

Burr allows objects to vibrate in associative resonance. Nothing is forced. The drawing pins that suspend the wool blankets in their baroque folds have a kind of calm, almost surgical precision, and there's a delicacy in Burr's placement that eschews the postpunk energy of the period with which he's concerned. And yet there's a quiet anarchy in Burr's approach to the stuff of art. The inverted spatial relationship of the blankets made to hang on the wall (sculpture doubling as painting) is echoed in reverse in *Shades of Green* (2011), a low stage draped in green window blinds. The protective enclosure they imply echoes in the brown paper 45rpm record sleeves in *Fade One* and *Fade Two* (both 2011). The missing sensual black of the vinyl, whose curves still cling, impressed, to their paper cases, provides further allusion to the missing heat of human emotion, as well as riffing on Burr's draped vinyl pieces such as *Bitch*, *Immediately After Vinyl* (2004). Disguise is, after all, preservation too, and the shading of the light stops the record getting warped. Like *Kamikaze 1989*, a bad film made interesting by the poignant inaccuracy of its vision of the future, Burr's work preserves a way of thinking, pinning it, however quixotically, to the wall, in echo of Johan Huizinga's advice to the historian: 'He must constantly put himself at a point in the past at which the known factors still seem to permit different outcomes'.

**BEN STREET**