

205

HUDSON GALLERY

205 Hudson Street New York, NY 10013

Something Possible Everywhere: Pier 34 NYC, 1983–84 By David Frankel

January 2017

The story of Pier 34, on the Hudson River at Canal Street in Manhattan, traces a kind of poem of empire: Built in 1932, when New York was a busy port, it would then have been a meaningful source of employment for the working class of the city's industrial and maritime age. That heyday was short: By the 1960s the city's piers were sidelined, not by the globalization that today has made so many American factory workers redundant but by the streamlining efficiencies of old-fashioned capitalism, the growth of the container traffic that demanded both fewer hands on the docks and more storage space than Manhattan allowed. Combine that with the city's fiscal crisis of the '70s, and the piers on the Lower West Side were abandoned to rust.

That left them open, in the early '80s, to artists such as David Wojnarowicz and Mike Bidlo, who saw them as freestudio and display space and broke in. Others had thought similarly before, most famously Gordon Matta-Clark, who had carved his piece *Day's End* out of the metal skin of a pier a few blocks north of Canal in 1975. But Matta-Clark's work, both conceptual and abstract, differed considerably in tone from the art that Wojnarowicz, Bidlo, and a growing crowd of others spontaneously began to fill Pier 34 with in 1983, and that was the subject of this recent exhibition at Hunter College's downtown gallery. No less than Matta-Clark, the younger artists were responding to the pier as a physical environment. How could they not? Both vast and in ruins, it was a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* all by itself—the sublime, in its pity and terror and also in its thrill, gone postindustrial. But this was a new moment in American artmaking, the moment of the return of painting—and particularly of figurative painting—from the



grave in which many artists of Matta-Clark's generation had thought it lay. On the evidence of the Hunter show, not all but most of the artists who worked on Pier 34 were concerned with the body, human or animal, from Luis Frangella's giant male torsos to Kim Jones's rats. And that plays into the story of the piers, many of which, notoriously, had become gay cruising grounds in the '70s—so that the development of post-Stonewall gay sexuality went hand in hand here with the flowering of a group of young artists who, hungry to work and show, took the rotting Pier 34 as an opportunity. Many of these artists—Wojnarowicz, for example—were members of both cultures at once; others were sympathetic fellow travelers. The city government was not sympathetic and eventually demolished the pier. Then AIDS did its own kind of damage, leaving the participants in this joyful experiment a smaller group.

The loss of Pier 34 gave the recent exhibition's curator, Jonathan Weinberg, a conceptual challenge: how to mount a show on what had basically been a single enormous, multi artist installation, constantly in flux and now completely destroyed. He solved it admirably by combining a cache of documentary photographs by Andreas Sterzing,

a regular visitor to the pier, along with a scattering of others by Dirk Rowntree, Marisela La Grave, and Peter Hujar, with works the artists had made elsewhere but in the same time frame. Many of these works had power to burn—those by Wojnarowicz, as you would expect, and Bidlo's Jackson Pollock take, Frangella's oversize dreaming head, and Rob Jones's Shroud, ca. 1984, were among other memorable paintings and sculptures—but they faced fierce competition in the documentary photos, which set works of their kind in a vitalizing context.

Weinberg's exhibition catalogue includes brief writings by or about the artists, who prove adept in describing the pier. Jane Bauma remembers a "totally decrepit but grand space—a queer punk palace," John Fekner "the inherent silent spirit during the day and the raucous unbridled energy present at night." For Paolo Buggiani, "the empty black corridors and devastated rooms evoked catastrophe," and indeed, Sterzing's photographs of Frangella's murals have a Pompeii-after-the-volcano feel about them. Two of the artists represented, Keith Davis and Jean Foos, worked in the design department at Artforum in the '80s. One of my fondest memories of Keith is his taking me to see Pier 34; he died of AIDS in 1987.