

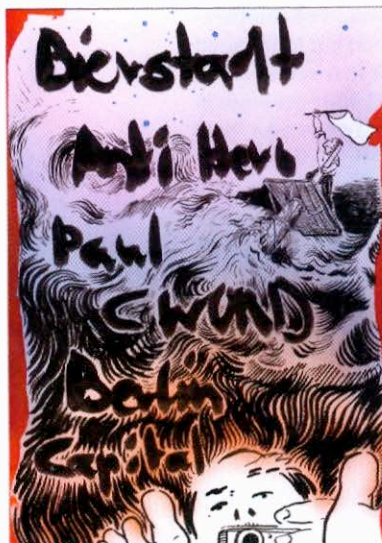
STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY

Artforum
'Paul McDevitt and Cornelius Quabeck'
October 2009
Michael Archer

Paul McDevitt and Cornelius Quabeck

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Though Cornelius Quabeck and Paul McDevitt are now both based in Germany, the two first met while studying in London. Quabeck has recently been working on the West Coast, and it was in San Francisco that the two artists encountered the work of Albert Bierstadt. Popular, successful, hugely productive, and not averse to redeploying tried-and-tested compositional tricks, the nineteenth-century landscapist—trained, as Quabeck initially was, in Düsseldorf—seemed an appropriate reference point for their own ongoing collaborative project. It helped,



Paul McDevitt and
Cornelius Quabeck,
Untitled, 2009, acrylic
and ink on paper,
11¾ x 8½".

too, that Bierstadt's name can be literally translated as "beer city," an imaginary place connoting the right mix of exuberance, excess, failure, and despair to encourage an open-ended, geographically dispersed joint enterprise.

What resulted was a show with two halves. In the front space, Quabeck and McDevitt hung a wide selection of the material they have jointly produced over the past couple of years. The small scale of the works reflects their process: One person would start a drawing—or, more recently, a small painting—then mail it to the other for completion. In their individual practices, Quabeck and McDevitt have unmistakably distinct styles. Perhaps inevitably, over the period of this project, they have developed a much more fluid relationship, so that it is now harder to decide just who has contributed what. Figures recur; imagery redolent of comics, cartoons, advertising, film, music, and book illustration is toyed with and rendered in a loose and confident manner. A few of the drawings were framed—just enough of them to indicate that while the conversation might be jokey and lighthearted, the artists do not see its outcome as trivial. Some are more successful than

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others, but the duds were not edited out. Even a few of the envelopes used to mail the drawings were included. On many of the drawings, along with *BIERSTADT*, one reads the word *ANTI-HERO*, a repetition that functions as a persistent refusal to make any grand claim for the project. The paintings were hung in slightly disorderly piles projecting from the wall, so that only the top canvas of each stack was visible.

The rear space contained what at first appeared to be a more conventional two-person show. A suite of etchings by McDevitt pairs a series of bizarre fountains and water features with images of a similar shape, as if in a kind of crazy back-and-forth between Paul McCarthy and Joan Miró. Alongside these were three paintings by Quabeck, similar in style to his recent graphite-on-canvas drawings and tie-dyed abstract patterning. Over the monochromatic image of a girl, Quabeck has added a rainbow as an echo of the colorful energy of the collaborative works. The other two canvases are fragments of a larger, unsuccessful painting. A final work is another joint effort: a painting of Quabeck's rescued from the studio, stitched onto a support, accompanied by McDevitt's bathetic effort at a copy executed in potato print. These are all, in one way or another, failed efforts that have been revisited and retrieved.

The doorway between the two galleries was blocked by an old wardrobe plastered with photographs, drawings, and paintings. Visitors could only access the other half of the show by climbing into the cupboard and stepping out at the back, as if clambering into Narnia. Which side of the divide was the fantasyland and which was reality remained provocatively in question.

—Michael Archer