

ARTISTS TO WATCH

Scavenger Hunts, Cover -Ups, De-Compositions and Unofficial Miracles

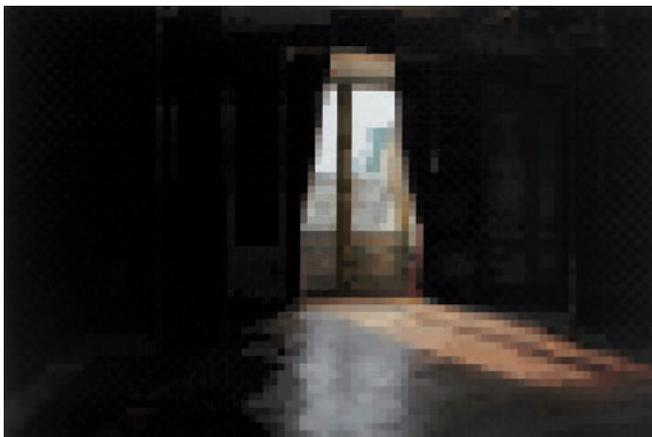
BY BRUCE HELANDER



Peter Buechler, *Untitled*, 2010, Oil on Objet trouvé, acryl glass box, 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 12 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (42 x 31.5 cm), © Peter Buechler, Berlin, Germany, Courtesy: Morgen Contemporary, Berlin, Germany, Provenience: Haas collection, Berlin, Germany

Each month our editorial staff sifts through literally hundreds of candidates for this section of *The Art Economist*. In terms of a sheer appetizing anticipatory event, like enticing, spicy aromas coming from under the kitchen door, this column might be considered as an inside conversation at the end of a cocktail reception that serves up the best for last: a delicious dessert with whipped cream on top and accompanied by a splendid celebratory bottle of bubbly. From the first few pages almost to the last, we are dealing generally with artists that have already been discovered 20 times over and have made a name for themselves by harnessing their raw ability, boundless energy and natural ego into a valuable, engaging and genuine style. There are literally thousands of artists out there who are full of talent, but can't get the break or the exposure they need and eventually give up. In Julie Belcove's feature, *A Leap of Faith*, one hotshot art dealer on the Lower East Side suggests that to "make a go" of collecting emerging artists, you need to observe them in their natural habitats. This challenge also requires some extra shoe leather for hiking through various art fairs, biennials, and even art school MFA shows. The more you look, the more you learn. I know of precious few successful artists who were discovered by accident. Essentially there are no exceptions, unless we are including a wonderful primitive painter who might be displaying his works on a porch somewhere near a rest stop in Alabama. However, most of those artists have now been snapped up by visionary dealers like Carl Hammer in Chicago or Ricco Maresca in Chelsea. In a recent lecture by curator, Bonnie Clearwater, at the de la Cruz Collection Contemporary Art Space in Miami, she recalled her discovery of some small "paintings" made from powdered and liquid Slim Fast hanging on the studio walls of another artist that she was visiting; she immediately connected to the work and included him in her next museum exhibition. Hernan Bas, about 10 years later as slim and

trim as ever, has since made a real name for himself, and is now on the List of Top 300. Finding new artists is often a game of chance, but you need to start your engines first and be willing to make some on-the-spot decisions. Evel Knievel's quotable quote, "If there's no risk, there's no reward," certainly applies to scouting about for innovative art. There is one extraordinary exception that comes to mind on the subject of accidental discovery, although certainly there must be a handful of similar circumstances suitable for a screenplay treatment somewhere. Harold Shapinsky studied with de Kooning and Motherwell as a young, outstanding student who eventually went off to war, and when he returned in the late 1940s, he became disillusioned with the art world and simply dropped out of sight overnight. He lived in a tiny, rent-controlled apartment in Manhattan, where he painted while his wife patiently knitted sweaters for Bendel's, which paid for supplies and provided a meal or two a day. He had absolutely no ambition to show or to sell his pictures and was perfectly content to smoke his pipe and produce remarkable works that no one but his wife knew about. Quite by accident, his son, while attending college, met a professor as they both were traveling in India. Asked what his father did, the son replied, "He's a serious painter, but never showed his work." Out of curiosity, the professor acquired a sampling of images and on a chance layover in London, stopped at the mighty Tate with a few photographs and a naïve demand to meet with the keeper of paintings. Since he would not take "no" for an answer, finally his patience was rewarded and he was introduced to a director, who exclaimed with amazement that these extraordinary works were created by a genius. Pushed further for advice on how to proceed, he suggested a meeting with James Mayor, a prominent gallery director in London, who immediately offered Shapinsky a show. Several months later, accompanied by the artist's first catalog, his



Peter Buechler, *Untitled*, 2010, Oil on canvas,
6.56 x 9.84 ft. (200 x 300 cm), © Peter Buechler, Berlin, Germany,
Courtesy: Morgen Contemporary, Berlin, Germany,
Provenience: Private collection, Frankfurt/Main, Germany

first realexhibition became a phenomenal success and was followed by a 16-page feature article in *The New Yorker* about the near impossible circumstances surrounding this fairy tale-like dream come true. I had the good fortune to offer Shapinsky his first American solo exhibition in my Worth Avenue gallery (1987), which grossed several hundred thousand dollars in its first days, including an acquisition by the National Gallery in Washington, DC. One article, written by Kenworth Moffett, the former director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, offered the amazing, controversial premise that Shapinsky might be a better painter than de Kooning. Harold and his wife, unaffected by their newfound success, continued to live a spartan but happy life, but with ample food on the table and fresh paint on his palette until Harold died in 2004. His estate is represented by Franklin Riehlman Fine Art on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Truth is indeed stranger than fiction!

It is easier to discover an artist who isn't hiding from you, but for those who don't make themselves available, it's up to dealers to present their artist's work with courage and conviction. To attempt to visit every gallery in various geographic locations around the world would be a fulltime occupation and nearly impossible to manage. That's why art fairs especially offer the greatest concentrated opportunity to unearth genuine and relatively new talents. But keeping your eyes open means experiencing some momentary pain as well; it's like being stuck watching a really bad play in the theatre's front row without an intermission to escape. Unfortunately, it seems that visual ignorance is bliss for the majority of average viewers out there. Ironically, the most terrifying discovery was outside the fair in plain sight. The inept, awful, giant "sculptures" of a hopelessly overrated artist named Britto are now permanently scarring Miami's urban landscape, and hopefully will be blown harmlessly out to sea by the next hurricane with the other riffraff.

After spending six consecutive days at Art Basel Miami Beach, crisscrossing between all the satellite fairs like SCOPE, PULSE Miami, NADA, Creative Time, Art Nova and Art Positions, as well as numerous private collections and a host of other shows, including at hotel lobbies, I found an unfamiliar German artist at Scope, who gained my immediate attention with his riveting invention and confidence that was quite remarkable. Peter Buechler's work literally grabbed me by the collar, as I expressed my excitement to

his representative while receiving a quick primer on his methods and visual philosophy. It's the simple things in life that seem to make the biggest impressions. Uncomplicated and successful compositions that kindle my fascination and spark a fire in me is what makes this constant foraging worth the effort. Buechler seems to take a cue from Duchamp, with altered states of consciousness in the form of pixelated squares that literally block out identifiable components that add mystery and intrigue. My personal favorites are his "deconstructions," which consist of altered found paintings, especially those that covered up existing images like the head of a man or dog. Less is more, more or less, for this talented fellow who owes a little something to the pioneering spirit of artists before him. The lingering spirit of Rauschenberg's infamous "Erased de Kooning," where the brash Rauschenberg erased an original drawing by the master that left only a dusty, telltale ghost, is vaguely present in this new work. By the way, rumor has it that Rauschenberg rejected the first drawing given to him as not good enough to erase, and de Kooning reluctantly agreed to his request. The piece is now in the permanent collection of SFMoMA. The works by Buechler that caught my attention and made me sit down while evaluating my unusual reaction are those that are selectively taken apart by covering them up. A naked corpse on a slab with only its anonymous head draped from view is a slightly humorous parallel. Buechler's images encourage you to try and determine what was covered up and how to enter a foreboding world with an informed insider's password. Some works are geometrically camouflaged or treated to a split personality that's unidentifiable, like the moving pixelated squares that protect the "innocent" identity of drunken suspects in a cops and robbers TV documentary. Buechler goes beyond altering faces by applying his square grease paint to interiors, curtains and windows to generate an impressionist-painterly effect. Here again, the artist selectively blocks out the main object often by employing hundreds of blurred rectangular fields, applied square by square, which creates a flat tension between the real crime scene and the cover-up. Peter Buechler is not just an artist to watch, he's an artist to acquire while you can still escape for a song.