

Ryan Foerster's Home Is Where the Art Is

Also, a roof with a hole in it, a dirty sink and exploding sewers

By Michael H. Miller



Mr. Foerster's house. Photo by David Schoerner

On a patch of concrete in the backyard of the artist Ryan Foerster's house in Brighton Beach, a large sculpture by Zak Kitnick had been chained to a fence, like a bicycle. The sculpture was made of recycled office shelves and its symmetrical lines and sharp angles would have made it look like a piece by minimalist Sol LeWitt, except that its surface was brown

with rust. Mr. Foerster, 27, had put it there for a group show he curated at his house called "Harvest Moon."

"When we brought this out," Mr. Foerster said, "there were two guys with shopping carts who were collecting scrap metal who were eyeing it. They stopped for a long time. Everyday people ask me about it. So we have it chained up out here so it doesn't get taken away."

Elsewhere was a piece of painted plexiglass by Erik Lindman and Hunter Hunt-Hendrix (frontman of the metal band Liturgy). They had painted it with blotches of green and yellow. It blended nicely with the overgrowth of the

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garden and a discarded piece of plexiglass that was in the yard when Mr. Foerster moved in. A canvas by Jacob Kassay—one of the artist’s coveted “silver paintings”—hung outside. The bronzing process Mr. Kassay uses in this series left this particular one looking a charred. It was easy to miss because it was the same color, size and shape as the rusted electrical box just below it.

Prominently featured in the front of the house was a large sail that was clear and hung from a tree in the yard. It looked like a piece of tarp that had blown in from one of the neighborhood’s nearby construction sites. Mr. Foerster was worried the neighbors might complain about it and ask him to take it down. No one has said anything yet.

Inside the house, Silvianna Goldsmith, the artist whom Mr. Foerster rents from, was sitting listening to National Public Radio and waiting for her friend to come by to fix the roof. There was a hole in it.

“Pardon the mess,” she said.

The mess, however, was the whole point. From the street, the house looked like any other on the block: the artwork could have been any number of strange objects that the locals might store thoughtlessly in the yard. Rochelle Goldberg’s plaster sculptures leaning against the house looked like weathered drainpipes. Lukas Geronimas’s wooden sawhorse really was a well-made sawhorse. Further blurring the lines between art and everyday objects, Mr. Foerster was using a shelf by artist Grayson Revoir as a place to stash his morning paper and coffee.

In a summer filled with original group shows—Bob Nickas’s Bridgehampton Biennial (where Mr. Foerster displayed some of his photographs), the New

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Art Dealers Alliance's co-opting of an old glue factory in Hudson—"Harvest Moon" is easily the strangest. Here, simply in his house and with no institutional support, Mr. Foerster has featured the work of his peers for no other reason than aesthetic enjoyment. The artists in his show, however, have steadily climbing markets; a piece by Mr. Kassay sold at the auction house Phillips de Pury & Co. in May for \$290,500, over an estimate of \$60,000-80,000. It is something only a young and skilled artist could have come up with: both a serious exhibition and a way for an isolated talent to amuse himself in a neighborhood better known for its borscht than for an appreciation of contemporary art.

"I wanted to make it really clear that these are all my friends that I've done this with," Mr. Foerster said. "I like knowing that kind of stuff. Sometimes it's not said. A lot of these summer shows, it's like you're in it because you're friends with whomever. Or so and so fucked so and so and now they want to be in it. I like being able to say, 'These are my friends, this is their work.' I mean instead of looking at my own stuff around the house, why not look at theirs?"

Mr. Foerster was working in his garden, wearing a dirty white tank top and a bathing suit. His body was covered in tattoos. One, on his left arm, was a depiction of his own face. It's dangerous, he told *The Observer*, when your friend owns a tattoo parlor.

One side of his house at the corner of Ocean View and Brighton has a facade of fake brick nailed to aluminum siding. Its color is a swirl of seafoam green and gray. Inside, there were dishes in the sink and artworks in progress; the place had a lived-in smell. Despite his relative remoteness in deep Brooklyn, in the art world, Mr. Foerster is in demand. His work figured in a two-artist

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exhibition, with Kyle Thurman, this summer at West Street Gallery, a fashionable art space in a downtown apartment. In September, he will be included in a three-person show at Laurel Gitlin Gallery and will have a solo show at Martos Gallery in January.

Mr. Foerster grew up in the Toronto suburbs where he took photographs of his friends and printed them in zines using the copy machine at his father's office. He came to New York in 2005 to attend the International Center of Photography, but dropped out after three months. It was too traditional. One of his teachers suggested he get a membership at the Camera Club of New York, a co-operative dark room whose past members include Alfred Stieglitz, Richard Avedon, Edward Steichen and Berenice Abbott. It was founded in 1884 and was an early advocate for making photography a canonical medium in the fine arts. Mr. Foerster couldn't pay the membership fee, so he got a job doing maintenance on the club's color processor. People would discard faulty materials around the building—photo paper with chemicals spilled across it, expired film—and Mr. Foerster would take them home and use them for his photographs.

“Everyone around there says, ‘Ryan will take anything,’” he said. “That paper from the '70s? That old film? O.K. I'll shoot on it.”

Ryan McGinley, a photographer of youth who is in his 30s and a darling of the international art scene, is an obvious touchstone in Mr. Foerster's style, but the materials he uses give his work an oddly hallucinatory feel absent in Mr. McGinley's comparatively more straightforward pictures. What might be a simple erotic image of a naked woman becomes an abstract study of light and color, with swirling swaths of purple and green superimposed over the image from the defective film. These accidental imperfections create a kind of

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statement about the process of taking a picture and developing it. Like those of the late German artist Sigmar Polke, who took a particular interest in printing and darkroom errors, Mr. Foerster's photographs are more about photography itself than they are focused on the subject in front of the lens.

How he got to Brighton Beach is another story. Looking for odd jobs to pay the bills, Mr. Foerster met Ms. Goldsmith at the Camera Club. She had just been evicted from her studio in Chelsea and needed help moving equipment to the house she owned in Brighton Beach. After a breakup this past winter, Mr. Foerster left his apartment in Hell's Kitchen and began renting the house from Ms. Goldsmith.

"I bought it for \$25,000 in 1981," she said. She had on pink-and-purple socks and sandals. She wore a novelty shirt of the kind you'd find at a street vendor in the West Village or Times Square that featured a photograph of a group of Native Americans and the text THE ORIGINAL HOMELAND SECURITY printed on it.

"I spent another \$75,000 replacing everything," Ms. Goldsmith continued. "It doesn't look it. We just had to put in a whole new sewer line."

"The sewers exploded," Mr. Foerster said gloomily. "I had no water for two weeks."

"They charged me \$16,000 to fix it."

"All the roots grew into the pipes. They had to rip up all of this." Mr. Foerster motioned to the new concrete walkway leading up to the door of the house. "They showed me these cracked pipes just filled with roots. And shit."

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“They wouldn’t let him take pictures!”

“Yeah, they wouldn’t let me photograph.”

Ms. Goldsmith says she bought the house in Brighton Beach because “everything’s a little off.”

Presumably she referred to both the building and the neighborhood. Out here, one feels a long way from Manhattan—or even the rest of Brooklyn. But the place has its benefits. It’s cheap, for one thing, and its peculiarities carry no small amount of inspiration for Mr. Foerster.

“Most of this stuff is subtle,” he said. “That was kind of the idea. So that people aren’t necessarily thinking, ‘Oh what the fuck? This guy moves in and puts some stupid art show up.’ It’s things that aren’t offensive to the neighborhood.”

He pays particularly close attention to the day-care center across the street; he has yet to see any children go inside.

“It’s just dudes over there,” he said, mystified.

On the day care’s lawn, there were no fewer than three doors removed from their hinges and strewn about the yard among the pieces of old plywood and bits of aluminum siding. Mr. Foerster is both baffled and entertained by the continuous recycling of old refrigerators from the building, several different ones each week.

During the opening a few weeks ago, two dilapidated houses were being torn

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down. Random objects from inside were thrown out and placed in the street. There were curtains blown out of the windows and washing machines on the roof. Mr. Foerster snuck in and stole an old radiator cover (its pattern did not look so different from Kyle Thurman's floral monochrome that was hanging on the side of the house). He referred to the destruction of the condemned houses as "the rival show next door."

Later, Mr. Foerster was standing in what used to be his home studio, a small, hot room with cracked concrete floors attached to the side of the house. He recently moved his equipment and set up shop in Manhattan, so the room contained only the photographs he'd hung on the wall. He was looking at one by Ms. Goldsmith, of a projection of flowers onto a woman's bare back. He turned to a print by Josh Tonsfeldt, an image of the artist's brother hammering a nail into a tree.

"It's kind of like something you would see out here," he said and laughed.

Leaving the house, he walked past a canvas by Erik Lindman that looked like it could have been the chunk of the roof that was missing above it; past the textual paintings by David Schoerner that act as the entryway for the rest of the show (they say: "SUMMER IN THE CITY," "TWO IF BY SEA," "BUD LIGHT"); past the old piece of plexiglass and the tomatoes and peas and cucumbers of his garden. He exited out into the street, then stopped as he rounded the corner.

"Oh. Here's a new piece. This wasn't here before."

It was an empty Poland Spring water bottle that someone had stuck inside a hole in the fence.