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The QUIETUS

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Craft/Work

Material Decay: Ryan Foerster's Accursed Share

— *Adam Lehrer*

At Clearing, Brooklyn, artist Ryan Foerster documents the decay of the modern world



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Honestly, in post-digital late capitalism, everything is junk, isn't it? It's all excess. Particles of media and sounds and images that pile up on our desktops subsuming and drowning the cultural consciousness. Does anyone actually memorise songs anymore? Do they extrapolate meaningful knowledge from texts? It's all just digital, ephemeral stuff accumulating until that ominous portent emerges on our smart phone screens: "iPhone Storage Full." We have lost our senses of materiality. That Baudrillard quote about the world having ever increasing information but ever decreasing meaning has been repeated to the point of redundancy, and yet its relevance only strengthens the further we slip into the abyss of liquid modernity.

We are all grasping for meaning. It's not just that our reality is bleak – it is, of course – it's that it is totally fluid, chaotic, and hard to pin down. Aside from the tactile pleasure or pain I experience and endure, I often wonder whether I exist at all. We are all pining to be reoriented to a semblance of material reality.

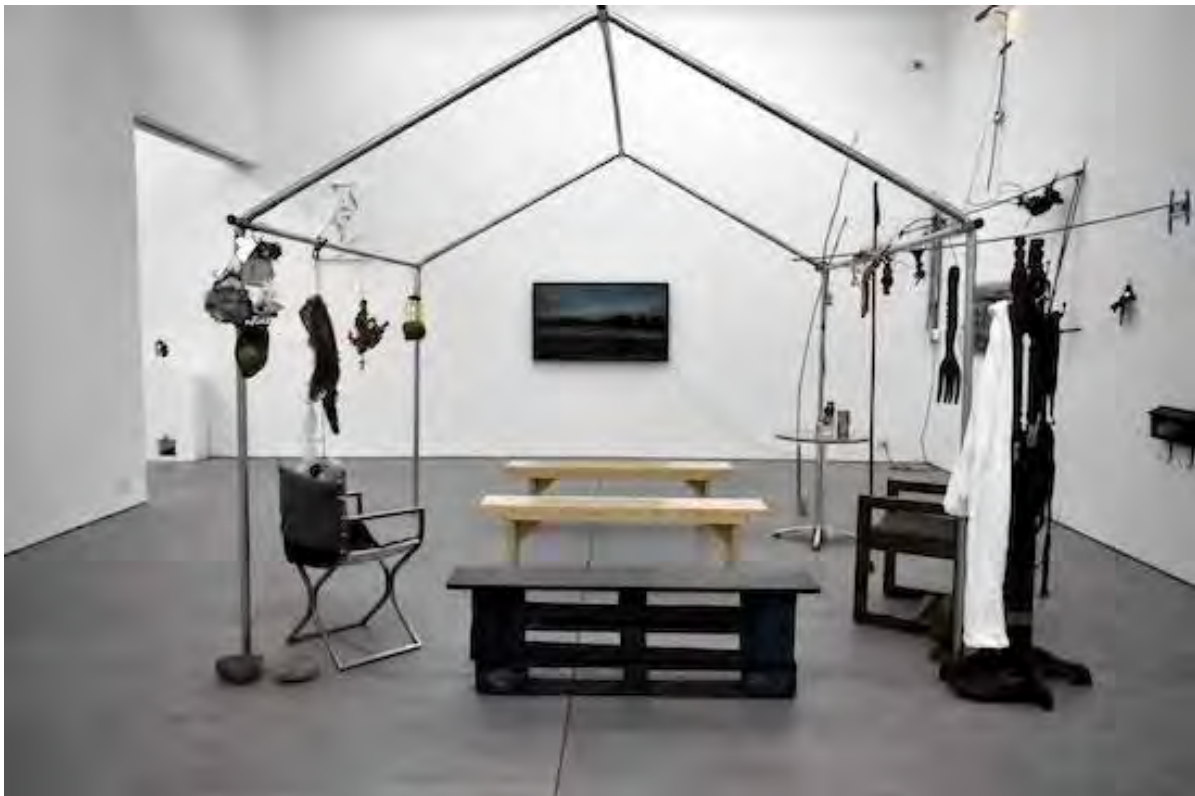
Materiality is the strength and allure of artist Ryan Foerster's work. The artist maintains a fascination with his physical reality that pulsates throughout his oeuvre. Nothing is discarded. Georges Bataille wrote of "the Accursed Share" as a necessary expenditure, a waste or excess, that was fundamental to human progress as we know it. Bataille believed that excess wasn't a byproduct but an end unto itself. But as capitalism has rapidly depleted the earth of its natural resources and rendered our planet an apocalyptic doomsday scenario of rising sea levels, dangerously incoherent weather patterns, famine, and the erosion of our greatest cities, it is becoming clear that Bataille's theory of excess doesn't hold in late capitalism. Excess is killing us.

Foerster refuses to let excess remain as it is. He finds new purposes for the discarded objects, for the trash, for the decaying photographs, and for the over-expended materials of our overstimulated world by viewing these things in the context of the environment that they inhabit and by dislocating those things from that environment by filtering them through his perception. Artist Jordan Wolfson said recently in a podcast conversation with the playwright provocateur Jeremy O. Harris that an artwork is an artist's way of allowing you to see how they see the world, and that we are "fucking lucky" to experience this. I feel particularly luck-struck looking at Foerster's art, which not only gives me a glimpse through Foerster's eyes but also provides me a particular sense of interacting with the material environment.

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HIS WORK IS ALSO INDICATIVE OF AN ECONOMIC NECESSITY OF MAKING USE OF THE WORLD'S EXCESS. FOERSTER INITIALLY GAINED ATTENTION FOR HIS PECULIAR PHOTOGRAPHIC PRACTICE IN WHICH HE USED ALCHEMICAL PROCESSES TO EXPOSE THE SCIENTIFIC PROPERTIES OF PHOTOGRAPHY ITSELF. THE IMAGES HE CAPTURED HE ALLOWED TO FADE AND DECAY WITH THE BACKGROUND AROUND THEM. CONSERVATION IS A TENET OF PHOTOGRAPHY, AND FOERSTER HAS CONNECTED THE CONSERVATION OF PHOTOGRAPHY TO A LARGER PRACTICE OF CONSERVATION OF THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AROUND HIM. FOERSTER'S INCORPORATION OF DISCARDED DETRITUS INTO HIS ART STEMS FROM A PERIOD OF FINANCIAL INSOLVENCY AROUND THE TIME THE ARTIST MOVED TO NEW YORK FROM CANADA IN 2009, JUST AFTER THE FINANCIAL CRASH THAT RENDERED THE ARTIST'S ASSISTANT JOBS HE HAD BEEN TAKING MOTE.

He started taking long walks around the city and began picking things up off the street – pieces of scrap metal and wood – that he would then bring home and find ways to combine them with his photographic prints. He repurposed both environmental dejection and his economic dejection into a new process of recording experiences that heightened the conceptual focus of his photography. “It all added different layers to how I understood seeing and remembering things,” he told Bomb Magazine in 2015.



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The ability to apply his analytical eye and artistic craftsmanship to the discarded objects of the world continues to inform his practice. At Foerster's new exhibition at CLEARING in Brooklyn, *ZOLTOG 99*, photography plays a smaller role than it ever previously has in his work. The works in the show – ranging from mixed-media assemblages, to drawings and watercolours, to sculptural tableaux, to a thirty-minute video – have been named by their creator as “zoltogs” and the title of the show simultaneously references the artist's childhood tendency to spraypaint his favourite hockey players' names and jerseys on the forts he would create in his parents' backyard as well as the iconic Coney Island fortune teller Zoltar who infamously made Tom Hanks big in that dreadful piece of '80s white suburban cinema *Big* (apologies to the Penny Marshall defenders of the world).

The show utilizes the gallery's substantial space, enveloping its three separate exhibitions in a hybrid of environmental and industrial grotesquerie. Akin to certain high-low culture fetishizing arthouse Americana filmmakers, such as the exploitation meets cinema verité styles of directors like Giuseppe Andrews or early Harmony Korine, a Ryan Foerster exhibition envelopes you in the artist's singular, perverse, funny and disturbing vision of the American world around him. Like said filmmakers, Foerster elevates the macabre beauty of impoverished America's artefacts. The mixed-media piece, *Targets* emphasizes this point; the discarded Target bag glued to the canvas illustrates the wastefulness of American culture. Target, with its insatiable hunger for gobbling the consumerist habits of lower-middle to middle class Americans, embodies the nihilist waste of American capitalism. At the same time, Foerster finds beauty in the waste, recontextualises it, and makes space for it to thrive in the context of art.

The notable departure of the exhibition is a series of sixty-eight mixed-media collages, drawings, watercolours, and paintings. Despite the incorporation of traditional art making methods in to his practice, however, the works don't feel conceptually incoherent amongst Foerster's photography and junk installations. Whereas his photos and found objects embody Foerster's interiority as projected onto his exterior world, these works are glimpses or recorded snapshots of his interiority outright: “they came from dreams I had, nightmares remembered, feelings I felt, air I tried to breathe,” writes Foerster on the pieces. “The memories of different things are not completely unlike the documentary photos I take or my thinking that led me to incorporate the different materials I considered as valid form of documents worth showing to tell a story.”

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Like Foerster's photographs – imagistic documents in material decay – these works allude to the corrosion of memory. Much like Leyland Kirby's music which repurposed and manipulated vintage ballroom recordings yielding an uncanny and unsettling temporal loop, Foerster's works exploit the "crackle" of the utilised materials to haunting – or dare I say "hauntological" – effect. In *Self-Shadow Sun*, a figures appears to be fading, or disintegrating, from view before our eyes. In *Birth*, a magazine cut-out of a baby being delivered could refer to trauma and its tendency to fade from the concreteness of our conscious mind into the deterritorialised unconscious mind. Foerster doesn't just use discarded materials to make art, he uses discarded materials to emphasise our discarded memories. Memories, he suggests, are both fixed and fluid entities. Like Brutalist architecture, the foundation of the memory material remains while its form and content deteriorates.



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Various series of abstract assemblages litter the spaces: spraypaint, acrylic, coffee, tape measure, and sunflower seeds represent just some of the materials that Foerster has brought into his practice. An interplay between the weird and the eerie develops. The scattered junk is out of place. It feels like it shouldn't be there. At the same time, the traditional markings of an art exhibition – labels, paintings, coherent press materials – are missing. The binary separating art show and reality is blurred. These random assemblages lead to a totemic movie theatre entitled *Come For to and Carry my Home*. Like the bare skeleton of a wedding tent, the naked pipes that cohesed its structure are adorned with various dystopian artefacts: dead animals, skulls, junk, and so on.

The theatre is set up to watch a thirty-minute film of the same name. The video collects footage shot by Foerster from the end of 2014 through now and serves to “express better how [the artist] feel[s] and think[s] than [he] can get across in words.” The scenes provide a sense of geography and temporality to the works on display throughout the exhibition. It also focuses on environmental dislocation and excess, reminding viewers of the horrors wrought upon by ecology through late capitalism. A cheetah skulks from side to side in its cage at a zoo, pining for the habitat it once knew. A horseshoe crab pathetically scuttles back towards an ocean full of pollution and peril. Butchers carry gutted pigs slumped over their shoulders into their shops from the streets. The scenes course with sadism and humour, with Foerster documenting and attempting to make sense of the nonsensical world around him.

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes wrote that “what the Photograph repeats to infinity has only occurred once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.” But Foerster has expanded on this limited notion of photography by ensuring that these moments do in fact ring out existentially. In his work, nothing – captured images, found pieces of junk, his brief fantasies and dreams – go to waste. Instead, he doesn't just capture moments, but freezes his perceptions of these moments, and aestheticises the ways in which these moments fade in and out of his interiority throughout his existence. All art is, more or less, about how the artist sees the world. But for Foerster, his art is actually an encapsulation of exactly how he sees, inhabits, and remembers the world.

Ryan Foerster is at Clearing, Brooklyn, until 18 January

CRITICS' PICKS



Ryan Foerster, *Skate*, 2018, digital C-print, 30 x 40".

NEW YORK

Ryan Foerster

BAXTER ST AT THE CAMERA CLUB OF NEW YORK

126 and 128 Baxter St

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Bataille thought the freedom to dispose of excess—psychically, materially—was a sign of sovereignty. Ryan Foerster's multimedia exhibition, "A MECCA BLUR," presents an alternate vision that seeks to reconstruct a world from the discarded and forgotten. His C-prints, emulsified or layered with playful clip art, occupy most of the small gallery. Yet they are broken up by a video of the artist photographing rocks along the East River (à la Sam Samore's surveillance footage, but softer,

more intimate) and various sculptures, such as *Support Structure* and *Support Structure 123*, both 2019, assembled from scavenged materials including bamboo poles, string, and wire.

The ocean laps the edges of the show. *Skate*, 2018, placed near the entrance of the gallery, captures the titular fish belly-up, with little figures and symbols cavorting atop its sodden grave. In many of his abstract photographs, Foerster uses the corrosive properties of water to unearth their latent painterliness. Take *Compost Print*, 2014, which was drenched by rain, among other elements. It looks like a satellite view of an archipelago in the throes of heat death: Infernal pockets of violet, orange, and yellow burn through flat islands of black that are bordered by a mottled, chartreuse sea.

Such colors seem like the result of a delicate balancing act between the aleatory process of decomposition and the artist's careful sourcing of refuse. We see this most clearly in his chemigrams, which he made while working as a lab technician between 2011 and 2014. One of his duties was to use unexposed photo paper to clean the color processor; once done, he was left with blackened, exposed sheets. He would then take them to his Brooklyn home in Brighton Beach and subject the pieces to the great outdoors. In *Garden, Compost Prints 5*, 2014, a teal lens partially covers a splenic purple circle—perhaps a mark left by the bottom of a planter. Train your eyes on the work's surface, and other indexical marks appear—little bits of leaves, dirt, and unidentifiable debris, adding to his art's protean, hermetic allure.

—Julian Cosma



Ryan Foerster, *Universe/Garden*, 2018, 12-part suite of unique C-prints, debris, each 14 3/4 × 11 3/4".

Ryan Foerster

C L E A R I N G | U P P E R E A S T S I D E

Ryan Foerster has a penchant for rescuing rejects, courting accidents, and embracing disasters. When Hurricane Sandy flooded the artist's home in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, ravaging the photographs stored in his basement, he exhibited the buckled, bleeding prints as new works. His recent solo show at C L E A R I N G's uptown branch delivered similarly resourceful, unabashedly imperfect projects. Among them were twelve pieces made with defective photo paper, nine cast-off aluminum printing plates, and a sculpture composed of flotsam found on the beach: a tangled fishnet, a battered soda-can fragment, a toy raccoon. Foerster's scavenger tendencies—part of a punk ethos that has characterized his work since he first began making zines as a teenager in Newmarket, Ontario—have earned him well-deserved comparisons to Robert Rauschenberg, who famously sourced materials for his Combines from the streets of New York.

Foerster moved to Brighton Beach in 2011, and the neighborhood has served as his muse and collaborator ever since. The aluminum plates in this show, for instance, were originally used to print a book of jokes by the artist's retiree neighbor, Ira Wolfe. After collecting daily emails of

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homegrown humor (“What do you call the science of yodeling? Echo-logy!”), Foerster released *Wolfe-Arama: Jokes from Ira* (2014) through his publishing outfit, RATSTAR Press. A group of pale-gray panels, “Brighton Beach/Ira’s Jokes,” 2014–18, each tattooed with eight pages of jokes in lowercase Helvetica, were blotched and blurred like Rorschach tests. Dense black zigzags suggesting spiky seismographic data cover some plates, and among the smudges one could pick out the whorls of printers’ thumbprints. After being used to produce hundreds of books, printing plates like these are normally discarded—not unlike chickens that are killed after they stop laying eggs. We rarely see or value these unique objects, dented and stained: The elevation of banged-up survivors is at the heart of Foerster’s practice.

On the opposite wall was a suite of prints titled *Universe/Garden*, 2018: sheets of near-black photo paper that Foerster pinned down with tomato pots and left outside for months. One can imagine the anticipation of lifting each container to see what had happened: a surprise similar to cracking open geodes as a kid, or microwaving CDs to marvel at their melted, blistered beauty. Fiery rings and spheres, swirling with color like gutter-puddle rainbows, burn at the center of each, the corroded emulsion blazing in shades of molten magenta wreathed in licks of algae yellow, poppy red, and lichen green. All of these prints are encrusted with dust, dirt, and even a few leaves.

The tactility, modest scale, and nonprecious nature of these works are especially gratifying at a time when so much contemporary photography takes the form of clinically well-printed, pointlessly colossal C-prints. Foerster’s camera-free engagement with the medium makes Man Ray an obvious ancestor, but Robert Morris is an influence as well, in spirit if not in method. Morris championed the use of materials that react to time, and the power of art that reveals the process of its creation. Foerster is one of the few artists working today who plumbs the depths of what photography can be by dropping it down every well he can find.

In the alley outside the gallery lay a stone carved with the words CHANGE BOTH RIB (the name of the exhibition and an anagram of *Brighton Beach*). Most viewers probably strolled past the piece without noticing it, a fact Foerster may well have anticipated and quietly enjoyed. His work is often antisocial, in the best possible sense. It feels as though it derives from a personal, private need, independent of an audience. After all, this is an artist who once installed his

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photographs, exposed to the elements and weighted down by debris, in an empty lot in a derelict part of Miami. It was spring and the Basel crowds were long since gone. Foerster is the rare artist who rewards attention but does not need yours.

—Zoë Lescaze



The Versatile Photographic Practice of Ryan Foerster

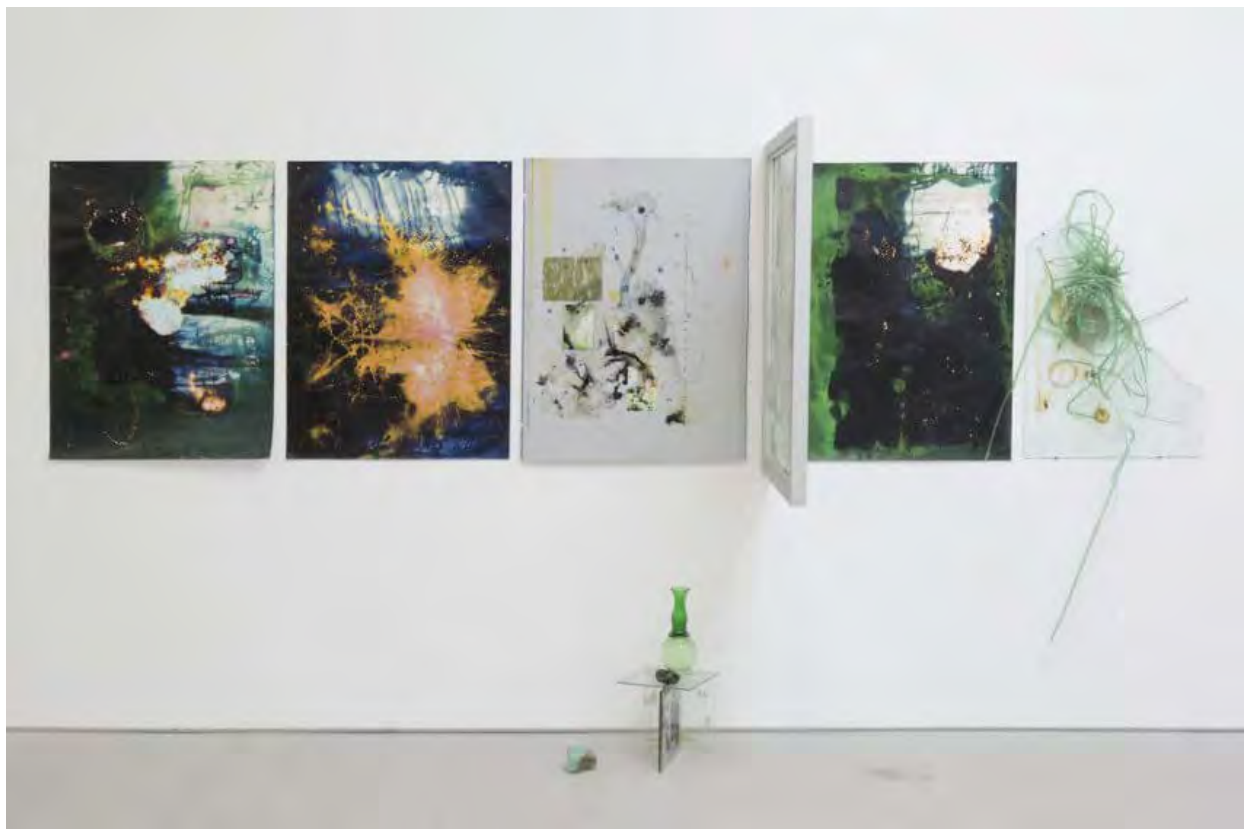
Conservation is one of the core ideas of photography. Capture a vision of reality. Do not waste time by letting it slip away. Conserve a fragment of the moment so it might be experienced after the moment is gone. The compulsion to conserve is partially what makes **Ryan Foerster** one of the most compelling artists of his generation. Foerster demonstrates photographic conservation in the usual sense, meaning he takes photographic images and shoots films of the real world, conserving images of reality for others to see later. But he also practices conservation in other ways. He conserves materials, finding new uses for the scraps left over from his projects. He conserves the relics of his community, picking up detritus as he moves around his adopted home of Brighton Beach, New York. He conserves energy, allowing the elements of nature and time to collaborate with him in his process. And he conserves judgment, never wasting it, instead waiting until later, much later, maybe never, before deeming anything a success or a failure. After all, judgment has no enduring value to an artist. As the work of Ryan Foerster demonstrates, what seems ruined may only be in a state of transition; what seems like a waste product may only be awaiting a new purpose; what seems like a disaster may be the start of something unexpected; and what looks hideous may only need to be seen in different light.

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Ryan Foerster Reuses Manhattan

Ryan Foerster was born in 1983, in the former farming and industrial town of Newmarket, Ontario, on the outskirts of Toronto. His first artistic efforts revolved around the Toronto punk rock scene in the late 1990s. He published zines with his friends, and in the process learned about writing, **photography**, printing, journalism and all of the other aspects of analog media production. His zines gave him access to bands, which he sometimes interviewed in exchange for admission to their shows, and brought him into the orbit of a group of creative collaborators. The experience inspired him to become an artist. In particular, he felt driven toward one specific aspect of the creative process: photography.

In 2005, Foerster moved to New York City and enrolled in classes at the International Center for Photography (ICP). Located in the heart of Midtown Manhattan, ICP bills itself as a vital, cutting edge environment, one that leads the way in avant-garde photographic pedagogy. And it may be exactly that, but it was not the right place for Foerster. As he told BOMB Magazine in 2015, *"I just wanted to make things and be in New York. So I dropped out."* Instead of academic credit, Foerster devoted himself to earning artistic credibility. He was nearly broke all the time and was in a constant state of confusion about his decision to make art in New York. But the scarcity of his lifestyle led directly to his sense that everything matters, both in survival and in art. Rather than using expensive cameras and new film he worked with whatever materials he could scrounge up, a supplies list that included the loose-ends of the film rolls of other artists, damaged photo paper, discarded printing plates, and innumerable found objects such as windows, mirrors, scrap metal, rocks, shells, and even slag, the left over byproduct of the metal smelting process.



Ryan Foerster - Installation view at C L E A R I N G, New York, USA, 2014, courtesy Cooper Cole Gallery

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The Aesthetics of Evolution

At first, Foerster was dismayed by the harsh aesthetic qualities of the hand-me-down materials he was using. Damaged photo paper and film negatives do not result in pristine prints. But his dismay evaporated as he became more connected to the formal aesthetic qualities of the transitory state. Damaged paper has its own aesthetic position, and when it is allowed to express the inherent qualities it possesses it can lead to new discoveries and new ideas. Rather than fighting with the aesthetics of decay, Foerster embraced them as the aesthetics of rebirth. He began seeing all discarded and undervalued materials as simply materials that had outlived their intended use, but that possessed the potential to be given a new identity through artistic intervention.

The range of possibilities Foerster has since discovered for his found, inherited, and repurposed materials is vast. After hiring a printing company to print a zine on newsprint, he recovered the printing plates from the garbage and incorporated them into his work. After setting a cup of water down on a sheet of photo paper he noticed the way the water altered the color and texture of the paper and started experimenting with that process in his work. After Hurricane Sandy flooded his basement and moistened many of his photos, he was thus already prepared to embrace the aesthetic potential of water-damaged emulsion, and was able to salvage those damaged prints and redirect them into aesthetic phenomena that surpassed their original intent.



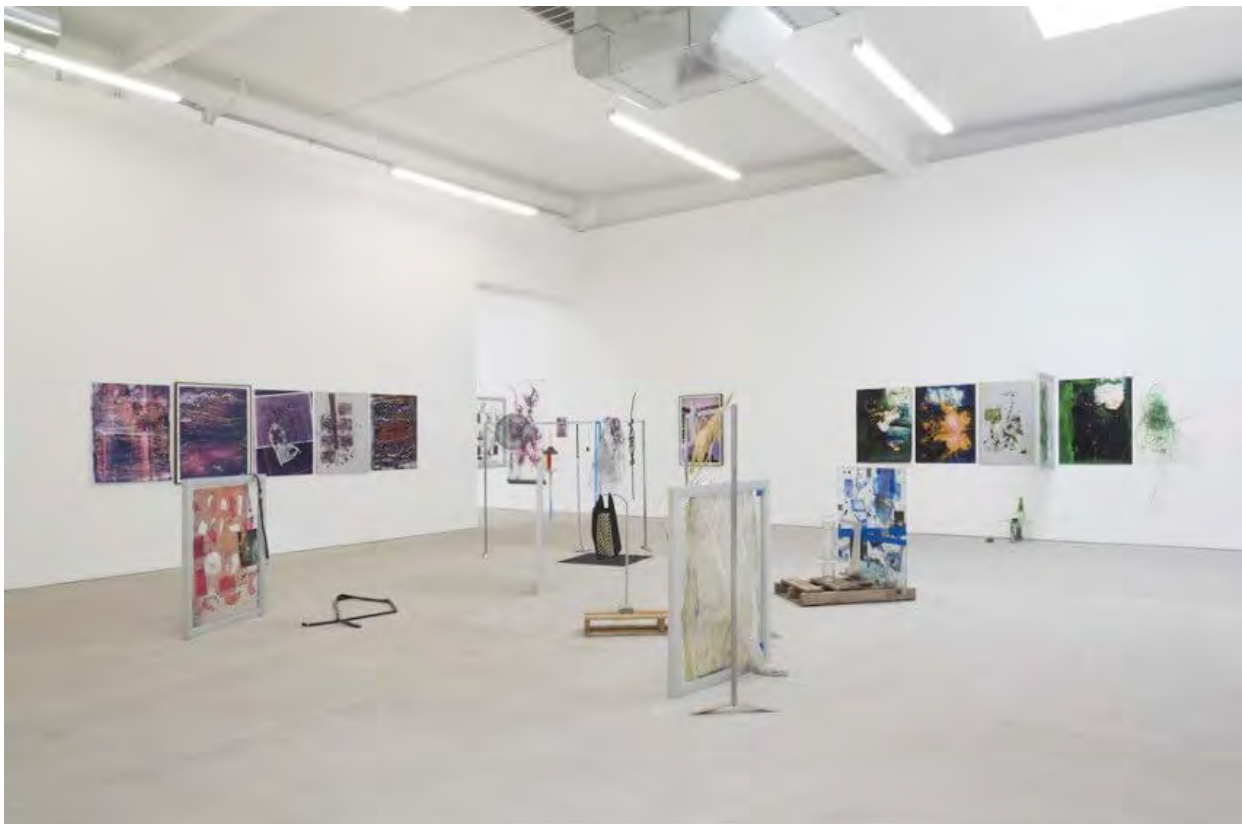
Ryan Foerster - Untitled Garden Print, 2014, Unique C-print, 61 x 51 cm, (Left) and Untitled Garden Print, 2014, Unique C-print, 61 x 51 cm, (Right), Photos by Gert Jan van Rooij, courtesy Upstream Gallery

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Natural Processes

One of the most formative experiences Ryan Foerster had with the reuse of materials came about in 2009, when a photo of his was damaged in an exhibition at a gallery. Most artists would be devastated, angry, or at least eager to seek reparations, after such an event, but Foerster held true to his belief that accidents can be useful and materials can outlive their original intent: even if the material in question is an original artwork. Foerster set the damaged photograph outside on his roof and allowed rain to fall on it. The result was a new work he titled *Universe/Night Swim*. The image could easily be read as a picture of the night sky, full of distant stars and exploding galaxies, as seen through a telescope. But the white dots are in fact only damaged emulsion caused by falling rain.

In 2012, Foerster elaborated on this idea of allowing natural process to intervene in his work in a collaborative project he did with Shoot The Lobster gallery. For the project, Foerster took over an abandoned urban lot in Miami, Florida, and filled it with an outdoor installation of his works. The works were assembled on site in such a way that they blended in with the so-called natural environment. The aesthetic qualities of the materials Foerster used, such as scrap wood, metal, rocks, and old printing plates, spoke in perfect conversation with the visual language of abandoned urbanity. Once installed, Foerster left the work to be ravaged by whatever elements sought to interact with it, whether that be the weather, animals, or people passing by.



Ryan Foerster - Installation view at C L E A R I N G, New York, USA, 2014, courtesy Cooper Cole Gallery

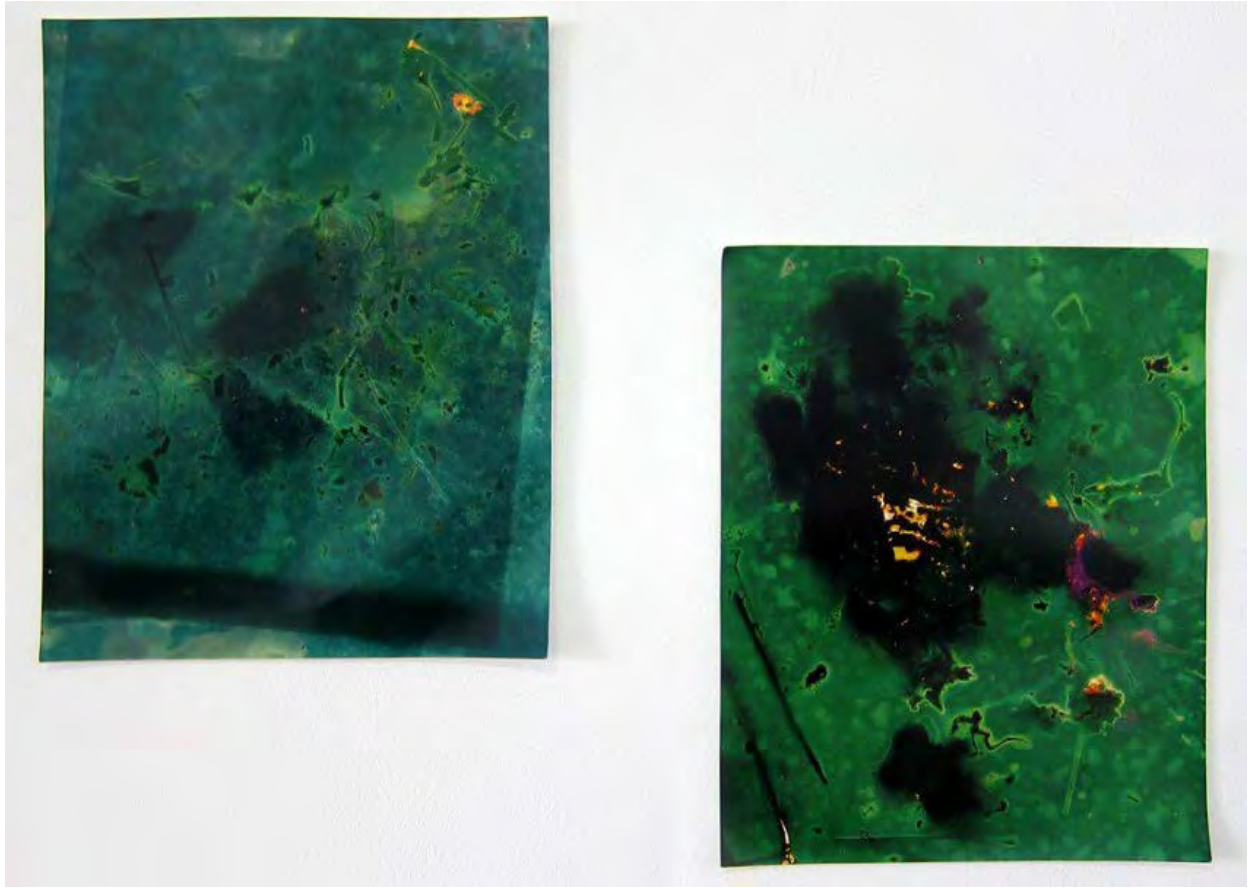
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Relationship Advice

Ryan Foerster often compares his process to composting. Like someone gathering food scraps out of their garbage and spreading them in a backyard garden, he gathers up the waste products of society, mixes them in with the byproducts of his own activities then uses the mash to feed the germination of a new generation of ideas. Just like the crops once harvested on the bygone farms of his hometown, the so-called finished products of his process are only representatives of the next phase of another, much longer, ancient, never ending process. Formally, the work is abstract. Its language is one of vivid colors, apocalyptic textures, uncanny forms and haphazard compositions, balanced with occasional figurative elements that appear like ghosts, or memories interspersed among bursts of primal energy. But realistically, the work is never finished. It captures a moment in time, like a photograph, but the elements will never stop working on it, altering it, evolving it into something new.

Not even Foerster can ultimately say what his works will eventually become. Even as they are being installed he is still negotiating his understanding of them based on their relationships with each other and their surroundings. And somewhere in that fact lies the most important aspect of the work. It is about relationships. It expresses the relationship the artist has with materials. It interrogates the relationship culture has with consumption. It engages in passing relationships with natural processes. It investigates the relationship between the artist and the desire for control. Most compellingly, it invites viewers into new relationships with all of these elements. Of course, found art, recycled materials, and the idea of allowing the natural elements to collaborate in the creative process are nothing new. But Ryan Foerster engages with all of these ideas in a way that is undeniably contemporary. His work is humble in the sense that it admits that the ego of the artist is only one part of a larger event, and even sometimes relegates the artist to the role of editor. Such humility grants us as viewers permission to also not have all the answers, but to simply allow ourselves to be participants in something ongoing, something bigger than us, and something that may ultimately end up much different than it was intended, or than we ever imagined it would be.

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Ryan Foerster - Green Garden Prints, 2013, Unique chromogenic prints, courtesy Cooper Cole Gallery

Featured image: Ryan Foerster - Untitled Garden Prints, 2014, Two unique C-prints, 61 x 51 cm each, Photo by Gert Jan van Rooij, courtesy Upstream Gallery

All images used for illustrative purposes only

By Phillip Barcio

Ryan Foerster: “I Was Always Against Art School”

Ryan Foerster is one of several young Canadian artists now living in New York. For him, the city is a school in itself.



Ryan Foerster, *Hurricane (Julie Shower)*, 2006–13. Unique C-print with debris, 101.6 x 76.2 cm. Courtesy Clearing, New York/Brussels.

by **Bob Nickas**

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Born in Newmarket in 1983, and based in New York since 2008, Ryan Foerster has become internationally renowned for his messy, abstract and arguably punk-rock approach to (formerly) pristine photographic processes.

Foerster's process involves adding debris to printing plates; leaving photographs out on his roof, or in the rain; and weighting down photo prints with Sudbury mining slag.

Foerster is of course far from the first innovative Canadian photo artist to have made his mark in New York. Here, American critic Bob Nickas speaks with Foerster about this, and other things.

Bob Nickas: In the mid-'80s I was aware of two Canadian artists in New York—Vikky Alexander, originally from Ottawa, and Alan Belcher, from Toronto. They were friendly and smart, each working with photography that wasn't necessarily camera-based, with photo-murals and photo-objects. It never occurred to me to ask why they came to New York. That's what younger artists did back then, and still do. Many of the artists here are from somewhere else. The way that Vikky and Alan looked at pictures—as representations, as constructions—fit in with and helped define that moment. They were thought of as New York artists. They were part of the scene. Alan had co-founded Nature Morte, which was one of the best galleries in the East Village. There were other Canadians, photo-based artists in particular, who only came to New York for shows. The first time I saw works by Rodney Graham, Ken Lum, Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace was in 1985 at 49th Parallel, which was the Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art in New York. So they were definitely “imports.”

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I also wouldn't have thought to ask Vikky and Alan, "Why did you leave Canada?" I've never asked you. Maybe now's the time.

RF: I left because I was feeling frustrated in Toronto. Moving there from the suburbs was really eye-opening at first, but by 2005 I wasn't getting much from it. I lived there for three years and thought: this is not working. I needed to see more art, meet more people and get more involved. Everything I was excited about was coming from New York. I had been in some group shows in Canada, but it wasn't until I told people I was going to New York that I got offered a solo show there. It added to my realization that I had to leave. And then another 10 years would go by before I was offered a show in Canada.

BN: That was the time-out penalty! But consider yourself lucky, because by then you had developed your ways of working, equally refined and experimental. In fact, there's a full loop from where you were in 2005 to where you are now. Leaving things to chance, bringing earlier pictures back into the mix—and pictures, for you, represent lives and experiences—has been a way to move forward as you look back. In a sense, you reflect on the present, whatever's on hand, and sometimes it's the past, both lost and found.

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A lot happened in the 10 years you've been here. In that time I met a number of Canadian artists through you—Elaine Cameron-Weir, Bozidar Brazda, Ben Schumacher, Rochelle Goldberg, Shawn Kuruneru, Lukas Geronimas. Counting you, that's already three times as many artists as I knew in the '80s from Canada. How do you see this shift with these artists, who I know are all friends, in your time?

RF: We're taking over! Actually, it was pretty gradual over the years. Even though we're all from Canada, most of us became friends in New York. When I first got here, everyone would introduce me to other Canadians, which was annoying. But in the end it was helpful. There's an automatic connection when you're from the same place and trying to get at something new. Bozidar was the only artist I knew from Toronto who was already living here. He was a bit older, more established, and really open, talking about art and ideas. There's this sense of camaraderie, helping each other out. At first there was a lot of drinking and joking around, which didn't seem specifically Canadian. But I remember Mike Egan from Ramiken Crucible joking that we were the Canadian mafia, and he couldn't go out with us because he couldn't keep up.

BN: Too much Canadian Mist whisky.

RF: Which I'd never heard of back at home.

BN: People tend to meet in art school and then move to New York. I'm thinking of the CalArts crowd—which included Jack

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Goldstein, who's originally from Montreal, by the way. Although they're all very different artists, they were seen as coming out of that milieu, banded together. But you and your friends don't have that in common. "School" started for you when you got here. And while there's common ground visually and intellectually where the CalArts artists are concerned, I'm not sure the same can be said for the artists who've come from Canada in recent years. There's no set curriculum or similar indoctrination, and of course we're living through a time when there aren't movements anymore.

RF: Even though Jack Goldstein was part of this group, he had an outsider persona. He skated around that even before he left the art world. I always like artists who are part of something and are also doing their own thing. Agnes Martin and Philip Guston, both Canadians, parts of scenes but separated from or rejecting certain styles. Moving to New York and meeting people definitely sped up my schooling. I was always against art school. I thought it was unnatural. I can't speak for everyone, because most of the artists we've mentioned ended up getting MFAs. I had no idea MFAs even existed until I got here. I really wanted there to be a group that came together—just not from within an institution. We got together by chance, just being from the same place, having similar references and experiences growing up.

BN: Although school offers a sense of community, community may already exist, or is encouraged. John Baldessari was one of the influential figures at CalArts. By the mid-'80s, a number of his students already had careers

more successful than his. When he was asked about his approach, he said that he got the better students to teach the others.

RF: Finding people whose way of thinking you respect, you learn just being around them. If I think of the artists who came to New York when I did, and since, even if there was no set curriculum that we all went through, there are similarities to our work, and between ours and other generations of Canadian artists. It's kind of embarrassing to say, but definitely there's a way that we deal with space or a sort of landscape that I'm sure has some connection to being Canadian.

This spotlight article, adapted from the Fall 2016 issue of Canadian Art, has been generously supported by the RBC Emerging Artists Project.



Ryan Foerster, *Untitled Backside*, 2010. Unique C-print, 35.5 x 27.9 cm. Courtesy Cooper Cole.



Ryan Foerster, *the Sky is Falling* (compost print), 2014. Unique C-print , 101.6 x 76.2 cm. Courtesy Clearing, New York/Brussels.



Ryan Foerster, *Self Shadow Garden* (cyan printing plate), 2012–14. C-print mounted on aluminum with ink, 88.9 x 58.4 cm. Courtesy Clearing, New York/Brussels.

Ryan Foerster by Ashley McNelis

"If this is what this material does now, just treat it as a positive thing."



Ryan Foerster. *Communication Breakdown*, 2010, C-print, 20x24 inches. All images courtesy of the artist.

MARTOS GALLERY

Since his teenage punk years in his hometown of Newmarket, Ontario, Ryan Foerster has circumnavigated the traditional path that artists generally follow to success. He is a dropout of the International Center of Photography and the Ontario College of Art & Design, and (while his studio is in Tribeca) he is based in Brighton Beach. Since approximately 2007, Foerster has used elements of alt process photography, found objects, and the effects of nature to make his work. His method is nostalgic but also fresh and irreverent. His preference for working outside of the mainstream extends to his installation style as well. The *Shoot the Lobster* installation (organized in collaboration with Bob Nickas and Jose Martos) in Miami in 2012 involved leaving photographs, printing plates, and found objects exposed to the elements where they were installed in a grassy roadside lot.

Foerster is more than just a prolific photographer. He has published dozens of zines of his photographs and several books. Currently, he is compiling every photograph he has ever made for a retrospective-inspired archival book project. In the past, he has integrated sculpture into his photography-based practice and is now expanding his approach to include experimental poetry and filmmaking. He has exhibited with CLEARING, Martos Gallery, and others. Recently, he curated an exhibition of Silvianna Goldsmith's work at White Columns and a group show, *LOCUM*, at Ribordy Contemporary in Geneva.

Ashley McNelis

Can you speak to the significance of zines to your practice?

Ryan Foerster

Making zines was one of the first ways I started to put my work out into the world. When I was a teenager, I had a zine with a few friends called *Dear Henry Wang*. It was random writing, stuff we found in dumpsters, photos, jokes, and interviews with punk bands from around Toronto. We first put it in a cooperative-run store in Toronto called Who's Emma? which introduced me to a lot of ideas. I met my first girlfriend there. Bands played in the basement. Everyone in that scene contributed in some way, so having the zine seemed like a necessary way to get involved, voice ideas, and meet people.



Magenta Massacre printing plate, 2013-2014, aluminum printing plate with plastic bags, 30x41 inches.

From there, I started going to zine fairs in Toronto and really liked that a lot of it was based on trades. We copied our zine at my dad's office so we had no expenses and could give it away. We started getting into bigger shows for free as press with the zine. The highlight was interviewing Green Day in 1999. Everyone was very welcoming. I think the ethics of everyone being on the same level in the punk scene was driven into me early on. It's been really important in how I continue to think. I did that zine for about two years. Then we all got in a fight over including some nude polaroids we had found in a dump. We got suspended from high school for that.

I was getting into photography at this point—mostly of bands. This slowly led to taking photos of my friends at the shows and partying for a few years. I then made zines of those photos and gave them out people to get my work out there.



Dear Henry Wang zine Issue 1, 1997.

AM

How does your connection to zines translate to bookmaking?

RF

I have always been attracted to the physical quality of books and handling something. There's also something really great about the way zines and books travel. It's really interesting how they survive by getting passed from like-minded people or found at a certain shop or fair. I like that you have to be out doing something to find them.

The archival book started a few years ago as way for me to go through all my photos and trace what I'd done. It was really therapeutic for me. Seeing connections or repetitions over a ten year span was great. I like knowing the history behind how someone got somewhere and started making things. The book is also supposed to be very democratic, where everything is equal. Even though some if it is embarrassing or stupid, it was all valid and necessary.



Compost, 2011, C-print, 24x30 inches.

AM

You relocated from Toronto to New York to study at the International Center of Photography, correct?

RF

Yes. In 2005 when I first moved to New York, I was really set on being a photographer. I was taking lots of photos and making books of them every month then, but school I found frustrating. At ICP I felt trapped because I didn't really feel connected to the students, and I just wanted to make things and be in New York. So I dropped out.

I did take a class at ICP about photography and sculpture with Sam Samore that was influential though. I was trying to mix the mediums at the time with found-object books and sculptures. It didn't really work, but it was fun. The first shows I did in my apartment in Brooklyn were a mix of photos I took and sculptures I'd made from shit on the street. It's funny that I'm basically doing the same thing ten years later.

AM

Where did you get the materials you used for the sculptures and other works?

MARTOS GALLERY

RF

I was working for a few different artists and art handling at the time. It was hard to see all the waste that went into production. It really grossed me out. I thought, I should be able to find a way to use these leftover materials; I don't need to get new stuff. So I started using discarded material.

I was working at the Camera Club of New York at the time; Allen Frame, a teacher of mine, had introduced me to it when I dropped out of ICP. The Camera Club was an amazing recourse for me. I worked there cleaning the color processor in exchange for access to the darkroom. I started being given expired film and paper that members had left behind. When I first used and developed the expired materials, I only saw fucked up colors and corroded film. I was bummed out. It really began to feel like I was scraping the bottom of the barrel with materials. Then I thought: If this is what this material does now, just treat it as a positive thing.

Eventually I had a stack of ruined, blank test sheets at home in my studio. When I left a cup on top of them, the condensation built up, and after a few weeks there was a circle where the emulsion on the paper had corroded. It exposed layers of color that made up the black of the sheet. I made a bunch of these, for a while, with different amounts of time and water, until I thought I had exhausted it. It added a whole new layer to the photos I was taking.

AM

How did the printing plates become part of your practice?

RF

In 2007, I made my first commercially printed zine on newsprint with photos of friends I had taken that summer. I found out that Linco Printing in Queens basically cost as much as making zines myself. When I went to Linco to see the printing, I couldn't believe how big the presses were. I was really excited to see my photos on newsprint; I had always wanted to do that since I was a teenager and saw older zines on newsprint. When they started printing, all the pages came out over-inked and with psychedelic colors. I took the messed up ones out of the garbage. After they were done, I asked them for the printing plates. They just laughed, then said yes.

MARTOS GALLERY



Anders, Hockey, Sex, (2001 dreams) printing plate, 2012, ink on aluminum printing plate, 23 x 35 inches.

MARTOS GALLERY

AM

Were there any other factors in your decision to pursue avenues outside straight photography?

RF

Being broke really forced me to introduce these other elements. I was at a breaking point in 2009; I had nothing left to lose, and that's all there was at one point. I was assisting a few artists on and off for the first few years I lived here, but after the financial crash, there were no more jobs like that for a while. I ended up finding a job delivering cookies at night on my bike that barely covered my expenses, but it was a good job for a while. I was able to start trading cookies for food, and one time I even traded 500 cookies for an old Leica and a bunch of old film.

During the day I would walk around a lot since I was in a weird transitional period, not photographing and feeling depressed. I would find stuff on these walks that I thought was interesting enough to bring home. I mostly picked up scrap metal and wood. I played with seeing these objects on my walls and adding the photos I had at home. It seemed right. It was closer to my actual train of thought and how I interacted with things. The printing plates started to make more sense with everything then too. It all added different layers to how I understood seeing and remembering things.

AM

How did Robert Frank's fiftieth anniversary exhibition of *The Americans* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2009 influence your work?

RF

It was really inspiring for me. At the end of the exhibition there was a photograph, *Mabou, Nova Scotia (1977)*, of a few prints from *The Americans* hanging on his clothesline. I remember thinking that, even though he made a crazy iconic body of photography, he continued to explore and push his work. I saw his collaged photo text pieces and films around this time too. I was totally happy with the straight photos I had made up until that point but his work definitely made me want to push my work further.



Sky is Falling printing plate, 2012, aluminum printing plate with debris, 23x35 inches.

AM

How has your move to Brighton Beach effected your practice?

RF

Brighton Beach has been good for me. It opened up my work a lot. Since it is so cheap to live here, my time has been freed up, and I can take my time working. Even though it feels slower out there, feeling like I have all the time in world has made me try more ideas.

MARTOS GALLERY

Having the yard and space around the house to work in helped ground me. Plus, being close to the ocean changes everything. I like that the neighborhood itself is weird and different. Not everything is marketed to me or distracting like in other neighborhoods I've lived in. I like it here, where you really feel like the minority in the scene.

When Hurricane Sandy flooded the house, it really ramped up my production. I had tons of boxes of old photos which all got soaked. When I started throwing stuff out, I opened these boxes and saw that the emulsion on the prints had totally shifted and transferred to other photos. I hadn't thought of using my actual photos to mess with and corrode, but this was interesting because it brought past memories to the present.



Universe/Montreal Snow Window, 2009-2014, unique c-print with debris, 30x40 inches.

MARTOS GALLERY

AM

It's fascinating that entropy was actually a positive influence for you. Can you tell me more about how else natural elements have effected your work?

RF

I began working more organically. It felt more natural to just go with things and take advantage of the best parts of each situation. The hurricane was a huge blast of encouragement for working that way. Beforehand I had experimented with discarded material and printing plates in parts of my work, but not as a whole.

This also came out of my concerns for the environment and wanting to recycle more. There was a photo of mine that got irreparably damaged in a group show in 2009. I couldn't really imagine just throwing it out, so I wanted to figure out a way to re-use it. It ended up being the first photo I left outside on my roof. I thought the rain might strip it down to the aluminum backing, but it stripped away some of the emulsion on the print, leaving white dots all over it. The photo was already very dark to begin with, so it started to look like an image of the universe. I ended up re-showing it at the same gallery that damaged it.

The idea of being powerless to the universe and letting things happen naturally was liberating. The garden prints came from this accidental working method when I was in the yard trying to make frames and backs for printing plates. I left all of it outside when I went the beach and never cleaned up the yard. A week or so later, I saw that the materials were changing with the exposure to the sun. I ended up leaving the plates covered in more dirt and rocks to get long-term exposures of the sky. It was really satisfying to use leftover materials and natural elements to make new work.



Universe/Julie Night Swim, 2009-2011, unique C-print mounted on aluminum, 40x27 inches.

AM

Would you agree that the *Shoot the Lobster* installation project in Miami is an extension of your use of the outdoors?

RF

The Miami show was special because, being in an empty lot, it was completely open to the environment and general public. This show happened soon after I had begun making more work outside, so it felt good to return it to the elements. But I had to figure out the reality of having paper blowing away or people just taking things. My first thought was, I'd better not only bring my best shit.

MARTOS GALLERY

I ended up using different objects and sculptures to weigh the photos down. I even ended up wedging some in the fence. There was so much interesting stuff to play off of when displaying the work in the empty lot: old foundations from the buildings, the grass, the rocks, the huge tree in the middle. There was a great feeling of the work being equal with its environment. It felt really epic, like nature prevailing in a fucked-up, post-apocalyptic scene. It was such a great setting for an exhibit.



Installation photo of *Shoot the Lobster*, Miami. Ryan Foerster, *Garden stripe with glass*, 2012, unique C-print with glass, 5x45 inches.

MARTOS GALLERY

AM

Can you tell me more about the interaction between the works, objects, and elements in the show?

RF

There was one piece that I had been working with for a while that successfully came together there. It started with a sheet of blank photo paper I had corroded in my yard beforehand. I installed slag that I'd been collecting for years and incorporating into shows on top of it. That was the first time I had installed slag on a print that was already corroded. I also included some coral and rocks from the lot on top. All this helped to keep the paper from blowing away and made this mixture of photography and sculpture that looked like a model for a universe.

AM

What is slag, exactly?

RF

It's the waste from metal smelting. The slag was originally from Sudbury, the mining town in Ontario where my grandparents live. There, slag is everywhere, but it's mostly used for lining hiking trails and train tracks now. When I was kid I loved it because it looked like lava. I started collecting it when I went to Sudbury in 2010 to make benches with my grandpa. I liked that it was a throw-away byproduct that was used in new ways.

With the slag, the found objects, the printing plates, and even the expired photo supplies, I was exploring the in-between stage when something still exists but it no longer functions the way it was intended to. The process lifts these materials back up. I think composting is a really good metaphor for my work—the entire cycle where old work generates new work—it's the in-between stage where discarded food gets turned into a rich soil again to grow more food.

AM

Your indoor exhibitions have included sculpture, found objects, and other “scraps.” How do you usually approach creating an installation?

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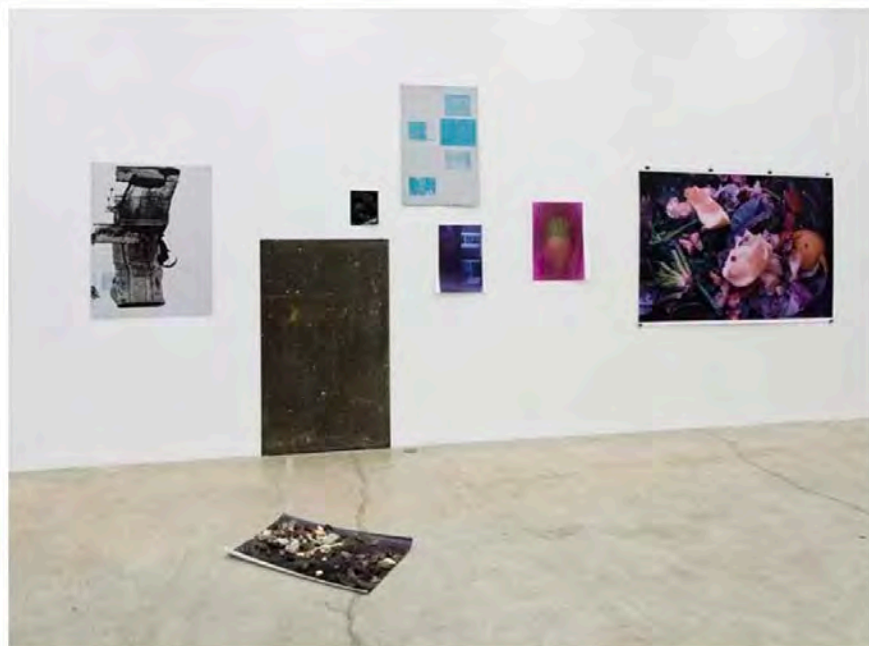


Sudbury, Brighton Beach, Miami etc., 2010-2012, unique C-print with slag, rocks, coral, aluminum, 20x24x4 inches.

RF

Sometimes I have a rough idea of what I'm going to do for an exhibition, but it usually comes together when I'm installing. I'm constantly making work and exhibitions just come out of the best stuff I have at that time. I usually start with more than would fit in the show and edit from there. It's difficult and exhausting actually.

I always want to see more and try as many possibilities as I can. I'm always installing till the last minute. When it works it's amazing seeing how things connect. I feel like I learn more about what I'm doing when I install and see new relationships form between objects that I hadn't seen before.



Installation view of *Ryan Foerster*, Martos Gallery, New York, 2012.

MARTOS GALLERY

AM

What are you working on now?

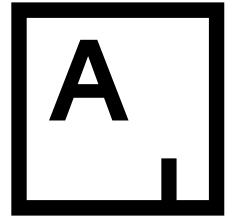
RF

I've been working more on editing together a bunch of video and audio I shot over the past year. It's similar to the video in my last show at CLEARING, which summed up a lot of ideas I had surrounding my experience in New York. My new footage is post-apocalyptic, fucked up, end of the world footage. I have also been using random apps that make the films funnier with animation or sounds.

I've curated a few shows too. The last one was Silvianna Goldsmith at White Columns this fall. I've known her since 2007. She owns the house in Brighton Beach that I live in. The show consisted of paintings she made at a senior center a few years ago; she has a long history of filmmaking and doing political actions in the 1960s. It was really inspiring to work with her on the show since she's done so much. We made a zine for it as well, which traces her history of art making.

I've also been working on my press RATSTAR, where I've been publishing the work of friends and others for the past two years. The press seemed like a natural extension of my zine making. I wanted to help make stuff that I thought should be out in the world. The last book was *Undead*, a poem by Paul Buonaguro from the '70s, and a book of Hannah Buonaguro's poetry. I'll be doing a another joke book with my neighbor, Ira Wolfe. The first one was all the jokes he emailed me over three years. It's almost been that long since the first book, and we have enough material for a second one.

Ashley McNelis is a curator, writer and art historian based in New York City. She holds a master's degree in the History of Art, Theory & Criticism from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. See her other contributions to BOMB.



Oct 23, 2014

Up and Coming: One Man's Trash is Ryan Foerster's Treasure

Tess Thackara



Portrait of Ryan Foerster by Alex John Beck for Artsy.

When Ryan Foerster was a kid in Newmarket, Canada—a suburb of Toronto—his mom, an artist, would let him skip school and take what he calls “mental health days.” “I hated school so much, she would be like ‘Alright, you don’t have to go today, but you’ve got to do something, you can’t just watch TV,’ so I would work on my fort in the backyard,” he recalls. Rather than buying new materials, he and his mom would take a tour of the neighbors’ garbage cans, collecting scraps of metal and wood, discarded doors or windows—anything they could lay their hands on. “I’d take it all in the van and then I made the structure of this huge house attached to the fence in my backyard.”

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Years later, living in Hell's Kitchen, New York, and trying to make it as an artist, Foerster would take himself on walks through the neighborhood and pick up waste on the side of the road, eventually incorporating the discarded materials into his sculptural arrangements. Today, with the 2013 Artadia NADA Prize under his belt and major collectors lining up to buy his work, that hoarder mentality can be felt in the details of his small, first-floor Tribeca studio, where haphazard but sparsely placed piles of C-prints are arranged alongside panels of muddied mirror, glass, and printing plates, and a few fragments of wood and metal leaning upright against walls. "This was part of a window frame or something," he says, picking up a piece of bent, burnished metal he rescued from the dump and examining it, "but it has this amazing curve to it and a hook on it here, which I guess was a hook for a window."

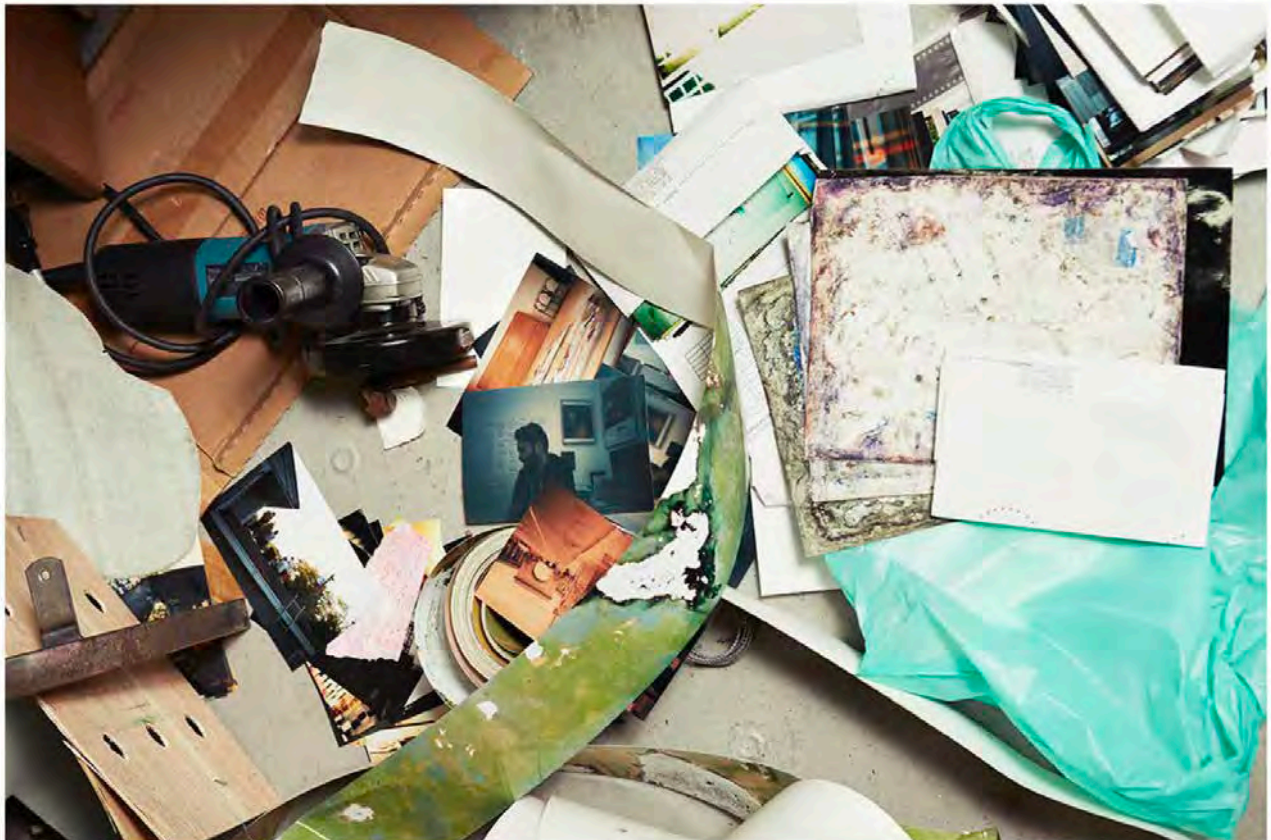


Photo by Alex John Beck for Artsy.

MARTOS GALLERY

This economy of material, DIY approach, and responsiveness to objects, events, and people that find their way into his path is at the core of Foerster's practice, not only in his three-dimensional works, but also in his experiments with photographic prints. In his Tribeca space, where we meet—he also has a larger space in Bushwick, housed in the former CLEARING Gallery that now represents him, and which will host a sprawling exhibition of his work next month—a row of abstract and semi-abstract C-prints in uniform dimensions is spread out on the floor. One image appears to show the curling forms of an iron fence, closely cropped and blanketed in hazy gray light; another resembles a pale green atmosphere, its center peeled back to reveal a dark, star-speckled solar system. These are destined for Art Toronto this week, when Foerster will return to his native city and take over Artsy's booth with an installation of his work.

His early photography includes endless images, compiled into 'zines, of his high school and college antics—punky snapshots of his friends getting naked or with an object set aflame on someone's head—and his more recent images are often composed on photo paper retrieved from the waste pile of the Manhattan darkroom he once worked in: the old, yellowed sheets that his colleagues viewed as expired, for instance, or paper used to clean the processor. “Every day we'd run like 50 sheets of paper from a box like this. This is a \$50 box of paper, and we would just run them to get it cleaned out.” Lacking the money to pay for expensive photography materials, Foerster began saving the blackened sheets and taking them home to his studio. “[One day] there was a stack of them and they were blowing. So I put, like, a beer can or a coffee cup or something on them. And the condensation underneath it lifted up the emulsion and made it corrode.”



Photo by Alex John Beck for Artsy.

This accident left the imprint of a burnt red ring on the photo paper, with frayed edges revealing nuanced color variations locked into the black ink, an effect that Foerster liked so much he began routinely to experiment with photosensitive paper, exposing it to the elements—rain, heat, bird shit—weighting the paper with rocks and earth to hold it in place, which then become an encrusted layer over the image. “There’s a huge satisfaction for me, obviously, about making something out of nothing,” he reflects.

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When Hurricane Sandy struck in 2011, piles of the images stored in his Brighton Beach home became waterlogged; for Foerster, though, the damage only improved them, turning images of people and places into cloudy abstractions. His total lack of preciousness or pretension manifests itself in the curled corners and rough surfaces of his compositions, and extends to his approach to installation and framing. “I really feel like you could just put some shit from the ground in a frame and you’d be like ‘Oh, interesting,’ or put something onto stretcher bars and it’s automatically ‘art.’ It’s like it has this context of importance,” he says. Instead, Foerster pins his work to the walls of galleries, giving them an absorbing, unfinished quality that more closely resembles the artist’s studio than a pristine exhibition display. One has the sense of the artist intensely working through something, with measure and restraint. “It makes things way more democratic when it’s all hung up in the same way, nailed up, or taped up, or using magnets or something—it’s more DIY, like something you would do at home.”



Portrait of Ryan Foerster by Alex John Beck for Artsy.

MARTOS GALLERY

I can't help asking if behind Foerster's thrifty spirit and endless recycling of materials there is some environmental message at play. "I mean, I definitely have concerns," he considers. "And also because I went through the hurricane and had this work made out of it, and because a lot of these photos look like the apocalypse, or the earth exploded, or like it's the fucking end of the world, you know? So there are parts of it, for sure, that are about the environment—but you could say it's about anything."

Critics tend to view Foerster's chemically corroded images and large-scale printing plates covered in residues and traces of ink as studies of decay, but for the artist this doesn't quite cut it. "It's not really decay, you know? I feel like a good metaphor for a lot of my work is 'composting,'" he reflects. "I like the cycle of things transforming. I think there's a gray area that I'm interested in."

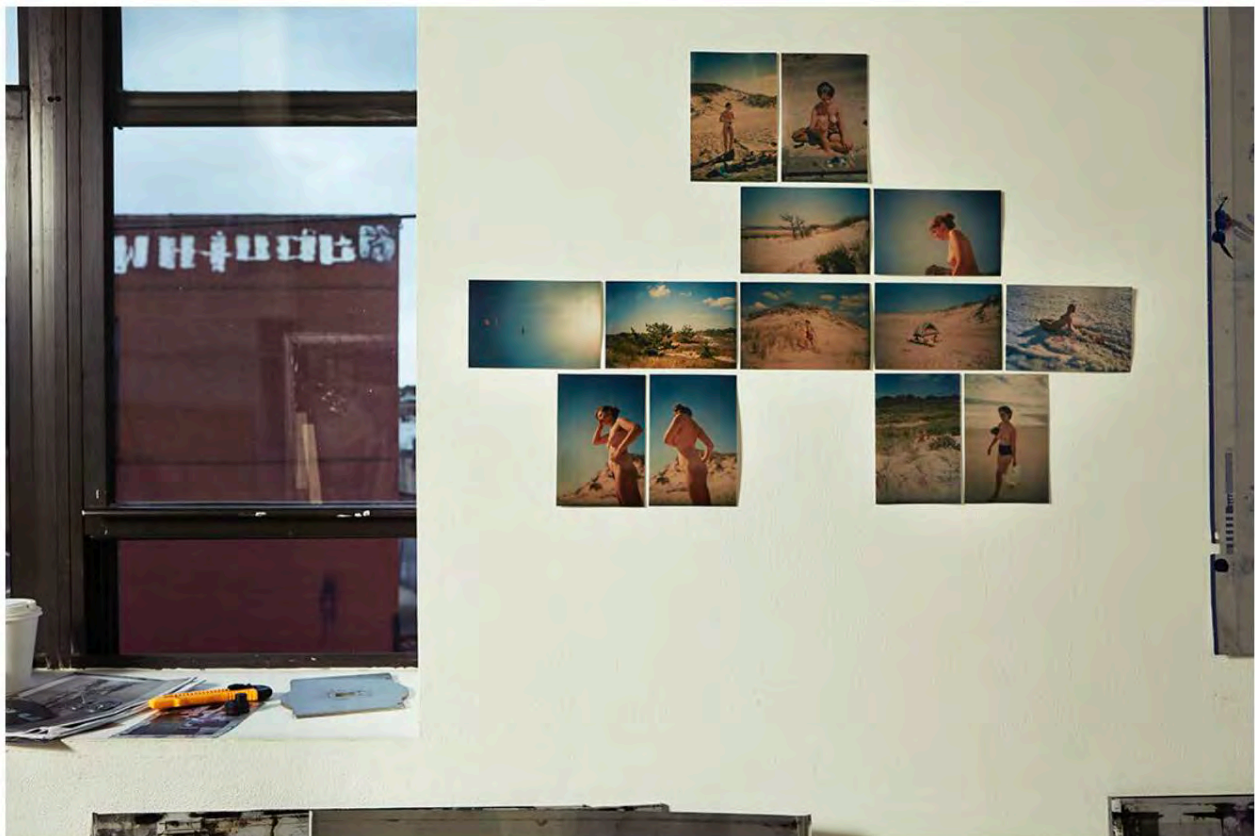


Photo by Alex John Beck for Artsy.

MARTOS GALLERY

This open-endedness manifests itself in the stream-of-consciousness way in which Foerster combines images in sequences and conceives of shows.

“The work is like these memories or like a train of thought; it depends on your mood at the time,” he says, casting an eye over the prints he’ll take to Art Toronto. “It represents how I would think, or how someone from your past comes into your mind for two seconds. It’s connecting the dots.”

With something of a homecoming to Toronto this week, Foerster has come full circle, invoking in his work his childhood foraging from all those years ago.

Time and Permanence: Ryan Foerster and Ben Schumacher



ABOVE: INSTALLATION VIEW COURTESY OF MARTOS GALLERY

MARTOS GALLERY

Arranged alongside the walls of Martos Gallery are a dozen plastic drink bottles, filled with mystery liquids—they might be urine, or rainwater. A two-liter Sprite bottle looks like it's filled with motor oil. Artists Ryan Foerster and Ben Schumacher found these half-filled bottles on walk along side railroad track in Brooklyn, which became the crux of the collaboration in their first show together at Martos Gallery in New York [opens tonight]. The work in the exhibit revolves around gestural accidents, work that is constructed but embraces chance.

Foerster and Schumacher grew up two hours apart from each other in southern Ontario, only to meet in Brooklyn years later. The work in the show stems from the similar sensibilities of time, embracing the aging of objects and past work while addressing the instance mistakes that make life interesting.

Foerster's contribution to the two-person exhibit is a number of photographs, which present accidents within the photo-making processes and the various patinas that are formed when a photo or photo plate is left outside. A large, semi-abstract photograph of a girl hangs alone in the back part of the gallery. The photo was damaged in shipping, and instead of scrapping the work, he indulged the mistake by leaving the photo on the roof of his Brighton Beach home. The result is a summer's worth of weathering, stains, mildew, and bird shit that transforms the photo into the star-filled galaxies captured by the Hubble Telescope.

Contrasting with Foerster's work are the clean lines of Schumacher's' fabricated sculptures: a six-foot-high plaster mold, pieces of custom built window frames and mesh. The work addresses a similar engagement with time and permanence. A five-foot-high metal frame encases a gently laid strip of a yoga mat, a loose object in a rigid frame. It looks as though the mat will slip off at any second and the "drawing" will be erased.

ART IN REVIEW

Ryan Foerster

By Karen Rosenberg

Martos Gallery

540 West 29th Street, Chelsea

Through Wednesday

Ryan Foerster practices a fetching, free-spirited form of photography in which mistakes and accidents are valued and much is left to chance. Entropy reigns supreme at his latest solo, despite the cyan-and-magenta color scheme.



Ryan Foerster's "sudbury, brighton beach etc.," (2012), part of an exhibition of his prints and found objects at Martos Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Martos Gallery

MARTOS GALLERY

The installation style owes something to Wolfgang Tillmans, especially in the mesmerizing, free-associative cluster of prints, printing plates and assorted found objects covering one of the gallery walls. Ryan McGinley may be another influence, as seen in portraits of friends en déshabillé. But [Mr. Foerster](#) has his own quirky process, one that takes place both inside the darkroom and out in nature.

Typically he will place photosensitive paper on the ground outdoors and cover it with dirt, leaves or, as in “Giant Compost,” food scraps. These intriguing works (and others made with corroded mirrors) link photography, long associated with preservation, to decay. And they have a lush, painterly messiness that’s difficult to resist, even when they evoke floods and other disasters; in “sudbury, brighton beach etc.,” a print lies on the floor under a scattering of rocks and slag.

Works like these tip over from photography into sculpture, but Mr. Foerster still has some work to do in this second medium; his larger found-object sculptures, like the doubled-over bed frame or the single piece of bent aluminum, are irritatingly coy. They could use a little of the nothing-is-precious attitude of the photographs.

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

MARTOS GALLERY

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

MARTOS GALLERY

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.