

ARTFORUM

“Soft Machines”

THE PACE GALLERY | 510 W. 25TH STREET
510 West 25th Street
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View of “Soft Machines,” 2011. From left: Holton Rower, *6ac6g*, 2011; Kate Gilmore, *Through the Claw*, 2011; Stuart Brisley, *The Collection of Ordure*, 2002; Anthony Keith Giannini, *Gather then Mourn*, 2011; Tim Hawkinson, *Balloon Self-Portrait #4*, 1996.

Evoking William S. Burroughs’s 1961 novel *The Soft Machine*—which imagined the fate of a world controlled by forces like sex, violence, drugs, and fierce cultural hegemony—the sixteen works in “Soft Machines” illustrate the way these same forces insi*Claw*, 2011, a performance by Kate Gilmore, debuted during the opening with five women dressed in pink 1950s-style housedresses and heels. For two hours, they tore apart a 7500-pound block of clay and hurled it against the walls. The reactive quality of the performance—a furious response to the phallogocentric artistic landscape of the 1950s—is in contradiction to the passive nature of the other works on view here, which all deal with more or less contemporary themes. For example, in her video *No.4 Pingyuanli to No.4 Tianqiaobeili*, 2007, Beijing-based artist Ma Quisha holds a

razor to her tongue as she recounts the pressures of growing up in a family that prided academic and social success above anything else. While Gilmore looks back in time to fight with fate, Ma resigns herself to it, her video brutally depicting the ways in which the forces of Burroughs’s world dominate everyday life.

Like Ma’s video, the majority of “Soft Machines” seems a despondent response to the animalistic society outlined in Burroughs’s book. A banality rises out of the gruesome content in the exhibition, effectively reminding one how inured we are to a culture driven by grit and gore. As a result, curators Sarvia Jasso, Harmony Murphy, and Nicola Vassell simulate not Burroughs’s world but our own. Walking out, one sees a psychedelic swirl, an icon of the 1960s peace movement. Called *6ac6g*, 2011, by Holton Rower, it consists of colors painted over plywood boards, which are fastened to the wall and floor. With four gaping holes cut out of the middle, the work looks torn, and it seems to puddle on the floor. After all, this is not 1961. Even the most idealistic optimist knows that the peace sign is simply retro for naive.

— Allese Thomson Baker