Aaron Young  
HARRIS LIEBERMAN

Acknowledging the inflated percentage of America’s income banked by its economic elite, Aaron Young’s recent show was titled “1%.” Young’s choice of materials and his penchant for hiring streetpeople and conspiratorial performers further signal his interest in class struggle. This concern was apparent at the 2006 Whitney Biennial, where he showed LOCALS ONLY! (Bayonne, New Jersey) (all works 2006), a boulder cast in bronze and painted by hired hands to closely resemble its source, then finally tagged by Young in spray paint with the eponymous territorial slogan. A couple of years before, he had hired a helicopter to harass the crowd outside his opening at Midway Contemporary in Minneapolis with a spotlight, appeasing the loiterers with free aviator sunglasses.

At Harris Lieberman, Young showed three large rectangles of safety glass—propped against the wall like discarded windshields—each bearing his own silhouette framed as negative space by hot rubber splattered from motorcycle peel-outs. These full-body prints extend the lineage of David Hammons, Yves Klein, and Yayoi Kusama, artists who notoriously(indexed the corporeal with skin-to-surface confrontations. At the same time, Young’s pathetic immersion in a hired biker’s hot tire rubber is a ritual of assimilation that borders on the erotic, pushing the works beyond mere tracings of bodily presence.

Young’s tough yet seductive aesthetic recalls Robert Morris; his employment of iconoclastic iconography evokes Richard Prince (specifically Prince’s “Hippie Drawings” [1996–2005] and “Girlfriends” photographs [1995]). But Young personalizes his association with subject matter in a way that seems antithetical to Prince’s approach. The artist’s reverence for rubber is also apparent in the macho elegance of The Driftiness, a set of wobbly loops of tire rubber left by a biker who burned out in doughnut formation on the gallery’s concrete floor. Also floor-bound are three street curbs—basic units of urban traffic control—cast in bronze and painted a Ralph Lauren–ish taupe. Each curb, almost twelve feet long, is rammed unceremoniously through a different gallery wall, but not so far as to prevent its jutting aggressively into the central space. Apparent on their surfaces are flecks of fuchsia, turquoise, and brilliant bronze, all exposed by acquaintances of Young’s, who earlier used the slabs as surfaces for skateboard maneuvers.

After such displays of virility, four silk-screen prints in the smaller back gallery came as something of a surprise. In each, an identical, indeterminate image is rendered in white, pink, purple, or yellow against a black background. The imperative FOCUS ON THE FOUR DOTS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE PAINTING FOR THIRTY SECONDS, CLOSE YOUR EYES, AND TILT YOUR HEAD BACK is the partial title for each piece. Viewers following Young’s mandate will see a searing afterimage of Jesus. Like Bruce Nauman’s “Directions” pieces—for instance, Body Pressure, 1974, in which a printed text guides viewers to press their bodies against a wall and concentrate “very hard”—Young’s prints encourage viewers to consider them with maximum attention or risk a failed art experience. The meditation necessary to “activate” them makes the exercise almost, well, religious.

Felix González-Torres repeatedly stated that he didn’t care to stay or define his influences; he aspired to learn from and incorporate them. Young overtly appropriates and expands the strategies of various predecessors to address self-empowerment and its relationship to class as well as the visual vocabularies of authority and its spiritual opposite. Using materials like tire rubber or street curbs to address group subcultural identification in quasi-Minimalist parlance summons a paradoxical puzzle: In an era of trickle-up appropriation, how long can an aesthetic remain viable before the 1% who will co-opt it for profit dilute it into an empty signifier?

—Nick Stillman