

Nathaniel Robinson

FEATURE INC.

Taking its cue (and deriving its name) from *l'heure bleue*, that fleeting moment of atmospheric ambivalence at dawn and dusk when daylight has not yet begun (or has just finished) drawing a world of legibility and clear distinction, Nathaniel Robinson's New York solo debut, "Civil Twilight," operated within a territory of formal, conceptual, and material indeterminacy. The suite of restrained sculptural scenarios—most consisting of some object or set of objects cast from pigmented polyurethane resin, occasionally augmented with found materials—was engaging if clearly transitional, finding the young artist similarly *between*: between things and arrangements, verisimilitude and deformation, materiality and meaning.

Possessing a technical proficiency that, thus far at least, outstrips his conceptual range, Robinson nonetheless has a knack for representational precision in the service of a certain mode of poetic abjection, and the six pieces on view here (all works 2010) share a certain wistfulness that is only slightly less affecting for being vaguely familiar. There was a tangible ambivalence in the way the works occupied Feature Inc.'s small Allen Street storefront: The carpet of thousands of maple seedpods that constituted *Distribution* spread convincingly out from a corner at the entrance like a doleful harbinger of autumnal decline, while, nearby, *Free Information*, a sodden book cast in flat pink resin (modeled on one found on the street by the artist), was set altogether too squarely in the middle of the floor, subtly but significantly tilting its feel away from poignant objet trouvé to self-conscious objet d'art.

If the pieces taken together didn't so much propose a coherent narrative environment, they did suggest an array of closely related moods, all in the vicinity of loss, absence, and the various associated species of melancholy. This is an artist, to paraphrase Claude Lévi-Strauss, who clearly favors things that are good to *feel* with, and his choices suggest that he has already begun to map the quickest way to the heart of the matter. Yet when routed through objects less immediately acquiescent to poetry—as in *Other*, a discarded lavender soda cup lid with two straws tucked into its drinking hole like sweethearts nestled together; or an untitled duo of squashed beer cans in blue resin, a pair of street-wise perfect lovers that nods toward Jasper Johns and the clearer influence of Felix Gonzalez-Torres (along with Jim Hodges, Robert Gober, and others)—the artist's tendency toward sentimentality is less prone to prescriptiveness, and to the kind of mawkishness that can attend it.

The majority of the work here functioned as a primer on the formal vocabulary accessible to Robinson as an obviously skilled maker of compelling things, but two pieces seemed to suggest potential forward trajectories for his program. A second work titled *Distribution*, consisting of a found wooden table on whose oval surface lay a small stack of white business envelopes and a fair scattering of rodent droppings, had, for better or worse, the beginnings of narrative, one suffused with a provocative open-endedness and a low-key tang of the uncanny. Meanwhile, the core of the show (both physically and metaphorically)—the large suspended environment called *Civil Twilight*—tantalizingly raised more questions than it answered about Robinson's next moves. A dome built on an open wooden frame and hung upside down from the ceiling, the assemblage depicted an empty fountain ringed with grime and dotted with bits of dry leaves, cigarette ends, and a bottle cap. That this meticulously rendered urban still life was inverted on a structure that readily revealed the artifice of its carriage suggested perhaps another route altogether for Robinson's project—one designed to at once offer *and* dismantle the routines of trompe l'oeil, that fully privileges neither things qua things nor their instrumentalization, but instead works to productively unsettle both approaches.

—Jeffrey Kastner



Nathaniel Robinson,
Other, 2010, pigmented
polyurethane resin,
1 3/8 x 8 x 3 3/4".