

Muntean/Rosenblum at Team

Combinations of high and low culture, delicious ambiguities between sincerity and irony, and deadpan remaking of historical art in modern garb—such are the pleasures of recent work by Markus Muntean and Adi Rosenblum, the Austrian/Israeli artist pair now based in Vienna and London. In their first gallery show in New York since 2000 (despite a healthy exhibition schedule elsewhere), they showed four paintings and a video.

The paintings are in the artists' trademark illustrational style and depict beautiful, stylish, mostly young people in scenes with painted white borders, rounded at the corners, and captionlike text at the bottom of each canvas in blocky capital letters. As always, the figures are lifted from various pop-culture sources, the texts from both serious and pop literature. The works' punch comes from often comically portentous pairings of unclear tableaux with elliptical texts. For example, in an untitled



Muntean/Rosenblum: *Untitled (They were overcome by . . .)*, 2007, oil on canvas, 102 by 86½ inches; at Team.

2006 painting (not in this show), a young man poses with a Confederate flag above the words, "Life is the search for the impossible by way of the useless."

In each painting, groups appear in dramatic, contorted poses before everyday landscapes—woods, a rail yard, a junkyard. As often as not the men are shirtless, evoking a world conjured by Abercrombie & Fitch catalogues. In *Untitled (We are getting too slow . . .)*, several figures gather around a young man holding a tube, coming from a gas canister, that spews forth flame (all works 2006 or 2007, all paintings 102 by 86½ or 86½ by 102 inches). One man crouches, torso twisted; another bends double at the waist; several wear track pants. In *Untitled (They were overcome by . . .)*, a handful of figures appear amid stacks of car tires, one man holding a tire like the classic Greek discus-thrower. The text reads, in part, "They knew there was something momentous about this particular day, and nothing would induce them to stop. Not now." While one might imagine a narrative in which this text and image would correspond, the work seems to be in fact an exercise in inscrutability, perhaps meant to undermine the all-too-clear messages of the advertising from which they often crib.

Art-historical allusions proliferate in the 10-minute live-action video, *Shroud*. Dramatized by Caravaggesque lighting, a young man hides from a leather-faced watchman, then sneaks off and finds a young girl on a couch improbably situated on a hillside. Walking together in silence, they come upon a bloodied young man and probe his wounds, Doubting Thomas-style. Finally, they approach a trailer in which a bearded older man reclines; as the camera studies him from a vantage point below his feet, he becomes Mantegna's dead Christ, the two youths peering in from the side echoing Mantegna's mourners. When he sits up, we see in alternating shots his intense face and that of the young girl, who weeps in an apparent epiphany as choral music swells.

In the end, it's not clear just what the artists mean by all the art-historical quotations, and whether they constitute homage or parody. Do they seek to take their high-art sources down a peg? Do they attempt to redeem their low sources? In any event, the works seem to take part in a grand joke about an age of endless quotation—even as they wink at the viewer about just how done this all already seems.

—Brian Boucher