

the village

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Art

Best in Show

Pol Bury at Chelsea Art Museum; Carolee Schneemann's 'Painting, What It Became'; Wei Dong at Nicholas Robinson

By **Robert Shuster**

Tuesday, March 10th 2009 at 2:23pm

Stare long enough at one of Pol Bury's unsettling kinetic sculptures, and you may start to feel like those scientists in *The Andromeda Strain* searching for signs of microscopic alien life. Suddenly, you're startled by tiny, possibly imagined, movement. In this small exhibit of the artist's rarely seen devices, something a little eerie is happening.

Bury, a Belgium-born Parisian who died in 2005, started out in the late 1940s as a painter of Magritte-like surrealism. But after encountering Alexander Calder and the sculptor's mobiles in 1952, Bury ditched the brush for the electric motor and devoted himself to the art of motion. Apart from a few examples of cinetastions (photographs he altered to suggest the shifting of space), all the work here gives nascent life to small populations of objects. In a piece from 1962, *16 Parallelepipeds*, small rough squares of copper struggle to turn and touch each other. In others, spheres shift and shake, filaments slowly wave, and wooden blocks try to communicate something. Occasionally, you can hear the faintest of sounds.

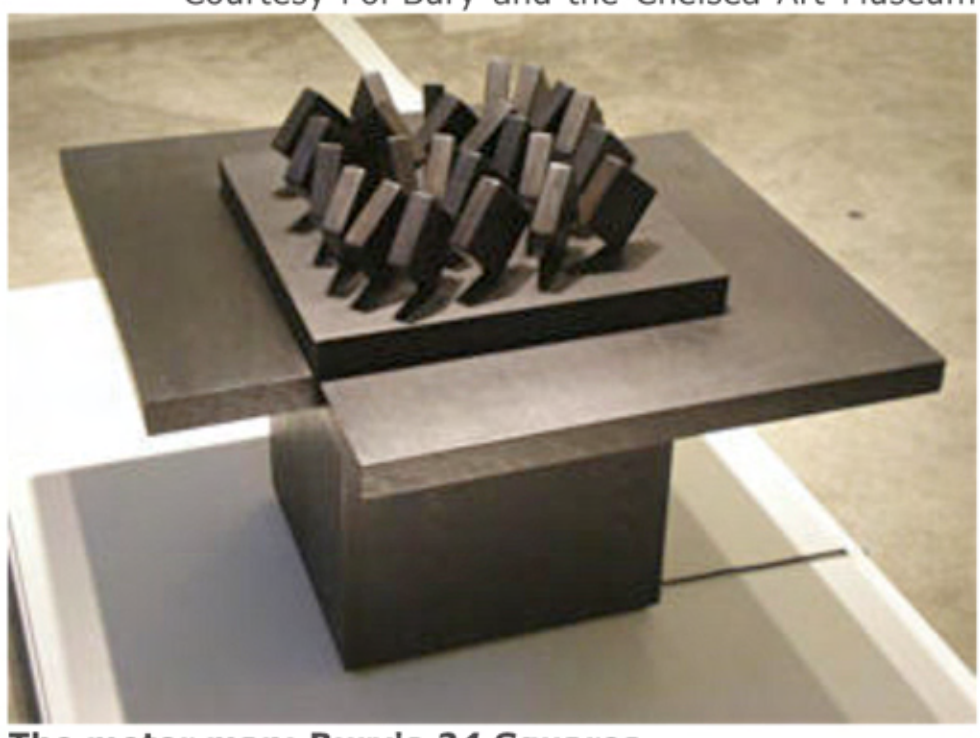
Bury achieved such effects with clever mechanisms of motors, magnets, strings, and springs, but by keeping it all hidden, he created a sense of basic Nature: the will to exist. Rewarding patience, Bury's marvelous living works, at first a bit creepy, are ultimately endearing.

Carolee Schneemann: 'Painting, What It Became'

Whatever you think of Carolee Schneemann's art, which has often involved Dionysian displays of herself, you have to admire her enduring exuberance in making it. In this well-selected mini-retrospective of her career, Schneemann does everything—swiping a brush, swinging naked, having sex, or smooching a cat—with a kind of reckless candor.

That all-or-nothing approach began in the late 1950s with her paintings, showcased here. Schneemann seems to have tried out everything she'd seen—de Kooning's nervous portraits, Rauschenberg's combines, Cornell's boxed assemblages. The oil is thick and messy, the strokes lunging. It's as if Schneemann

Courtesy Pol Bury and the Chelsea Art Museum



The motor man: Bury's 24 Squares

Details:
'Time, Motion and Surprise: The Kinetic Universe of Pol Bury'
Chelsea Art Museum
556 West 22nd Street, 212-255-0719
Through April 4

were hurrying to find an idea that really suited her.

That turned out to be her body, nude and (let's be honest here) packed with dynamite. What followed was a series of performances and films that combined the energy of action painting with feminist empowerment and the era's sexual breakout. Included in those shown here are the notorious *Meat Joy*, an orgy of barely clad men and women writhing among sausage, fish, and plucked chickens; *Body Collage*, which features the artist nude, coated in glue, and rolling around on toilet paper; and the 30-minute 1965 film *Fuses*, a silent, dreamy, and explicit sequence of Schneemann making ecstatic love to her boyfriend. Once dismissed as exhibitionist (like many of her works), *Fuses* now stands as her tour de force. With a nod toward Stan Brakhage, Schneemann painted and scratched the 16mm film, and fragmented its progression. Clouded by color and shadow, the images jump around like a distant memory of youthful vigor. In fact, the entire show is a little like that, and it's a delight. *P.P.O.W*, 511 W 25th St, 212-647-1044. Through March 28.

Wei Dong

If you hired Botticelli, Lucian Freud, and a fashion photographer to produce portraits of mermaids, you might end up with something like the recent paintings of Wei Dong. Master of the chiaroscuro, Wei expertly imprints the rich Renaissance style onto modern themes. In the past, he's often mixed in references to Mao's cultural revolution and socialist realism—a Hoboken resident, Wei grew up in Inner Mongolia—but here, except for couple of army tunics, he has jettisoned his political past for grotesque twists on classical romance. Smiling Asian women in glamour poses (Wei freely borrows from fashion mags) bear scaly fish tails, sometimes in states of decay or dismemberment. In *Interior View*, a cat seems to have devoured the entrails spilling out from a woman's gutted lower half. Another mermaid tries to free her tail from cement. In the most striking work, a saint-like figure with finned, fused-together legs (rendered with Freud's lumpiness) rises from a still life while a horrified Chinese man seems to ask, "What in hell is going on here?" Wei offers few clues, but leaves you wanting more. *Nicholas Robinson Gallery*, 535 W 20th St, 212-560-9075. Through April 4.