

# MODERN PAINTERS

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Installation view of "Tom Burr: Addict-Love," SculptureCenter, New York, 2008. Foreground, from left: *hinged haze*, 2008; *propped perfume*, 2008; and *bent booze*. Background: *Chicks*, 2008. Photo Jason Mandella.

## NEW YORK TOM BURR SCULPTURECENTER

Arthur Everett "Chick" Austin, the former head of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, in Hartford, Connecticut, was, among other things, a "party-giver *par excellence*," or so it is asserted in an excerpt of a book profiling him, tacked to the wall in Tom Burr's show "Addict-Love." A handsome Harvard grad, Austin was appointed director of the Wadsworth in 1927 at the precocious age of 26. He lived a charmed existence through the early 1940s, circulating among the most influential international cultural figures and the richest New York society personalities of the period. Burr's collage *Chick Clips* (all works 2008) arranges in a rotating pattern four portraits of the dapper Austin from leaves of his biography, using minimal visual information to invoke the privileged social-cum-art scene of a high-modernist enthusiast. Austin was an early supporter of the works of Gertrude Stein, George Balanchine, Salvador Dalí, and Piet Mondrian, for example, although the self-described dilettante embodied a certain Jazz Age enervation and louche glamour. His effortless rise to fame ("I'm no intellectual. I only read *The Saturday Evening Post*," he once claimed) paralleled a rapid personal and professional decline in which his numerous superficial attractions wore thin long before his premature death from lung cancer in 1957.

Two of Burr's sculptures conjure Austin's febrile world of distraction, unflinchingly depicting both its tendency toward revelry and its attendant hangover-induced recriminations—the mean champagne-and-barbiturate cocktail of the mid-20th-century upper class. In *Chicks*, a labyrinth of white wooden balusters guides the viewer to a central figure, not the fearsome Minotaur of lore, but rather an austere black Chanel frock on a hanger draped over one of the banisters. Scattered beneath the ankle-length gown are records of the composer and longtime *New York Herald Tribune* music critic Virgil Thomson's score for Gertrude Stein's *Four Saints in Three Acts*,

an opera that Austin had premiered at the Atheneum in 1934. Burr is himself a Connecticut native, and with the barest of signifiers, he delivers an incisive lexicon of the area's high culture and wealth. But a dark undertone of this grammar is revealed in Burr's *bent booze*, a collage of vintage single-malt whiskey magazine ads on one of his characteristic black hinged plywood structures, a sculpture that discloses how advertising sutures excess, insecurity, alcoholism, and aspirations toward social advancement. Preying on class anxieties, the invitation to drink appeals to the desire for social relaxation, while the status claims of particular classy and expensive single-malt brands function as barometers of taste and lifestyle.

If the Chanel dress of *Chicks* evokes elegance and sophistication, several of Burr's sculptures deploy cues from the flip side of privilege. In *Light Conversation*, a snazzy black tuxedo on a hanger languishes on a psychoanalyst's black vinyl couch, augmented by what the exhibition's press materials describe as a "recreational" straitjacket. Beneath one leg of the couch is a large, highly reflective disk of black Plexiglas, spread like a pool of morbid reflection for the latter-day Narcissus of Park Avenue. And just what is a "recreational" straitjacket, anyway? S and M has never seemed so chic as when accessorized with the pomp of a tuxedo, part of a culture of leisure that gets its pleasures forcing encounters between the proper and the perverse.

The sculpture *Chick* goes even further, beyond the nightmares of the analyst's couch to the starkness and intensity of the asylum. Burr's trademark plywood planks, here painted white, fold into the shape of a sun chair/hospital gurney, with a white straitjacket draped over its peak like a blazer over the back of a chair. A steel drafting light casting the harsh glare of a surgical lamp perches over the hybrid structure, lending a clinical intensity to the scene, under which a roll of white vinyl is unfurled beneath a chrome ashtray stand. The effect of white on white, spotlighted from above, is near blinding, yet the relative obsolescence of the straitjacket and the ashtray effectively specifies and temporalizes the tableau in a way that connotes the troubling psychiatric practices (electroshock therapy, heavy medication, total-body restraints) of the pre-1960s era.

The Chanel dress, the whiskey, the Stein-Thomson albums, the straitjacket, and the ashtray: together Burr's clues summon the ghostly outline of a Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton in the 1950s, or perhaps their spiritual godmothers, the Zelda Fitzgeralds and Lee Millers of the '20s and '30s, creative women who worked hard and some of whom drank harder, and who went a little crazy in their sprees. Or these clues may shape the spectral form of the many unhappy marriages of the men in Chick Austin's cultural milieu, men whose homosexuality, as in many cases of the time, was closeted though scarcely restrained. Burr gives the viewer the psychosocial and mnemonic conditions of 20th-century affluence but lends the old stereotype "poor little rich girl" a more sympathetic ring. As the epoch of high-flying hedge fund managers based in moneyed Connecticut bedroom communities comes to a close with the looming economic downturn, Burr's scrutiny of the codes of the unhappy wealthy may become an increasingly familiar practice.

—EVA DÍAZ