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Time Out New York

Tom Johnson, "Better Social Realism"

CANADA, through Jan 18

An antidote to the swaggering machismo of so many contemporary male American artists, Tom Johnson's show at CANADA provides a healthy dose of old-fashioned self-doubt. Johnson – clearly aware that human strengths issue out of confrontations with weakness – prostrates himself before his fears, enacting a classic ego/id struggle in videos and assemblages that convey a painfully (and willfully) naive sense of introspection. Two videotaped monologues capture the artist in his studio as he muses on subjects both simple ("Is desire the right word?") and convoluted ("I had a self-desire for multipleness, but there wasn't multipleness, there was just one thing"). His ramblings, many of which address the familiar Freudian theme of sexual frustration, make for strangely compelling viewing. For those too cheap (or too poor) to afford therapy, this show could double as a primer of self-analysis as we witness Johnson talking through his problems.

The "combines," as Johnson calls his assemblages (a phrase he borrows from Robert Rauschenberg), follow a stricter, less intuitive process. In one untitled piece, two pencil drawings on paper flank a pasty and amorphous slab of clay, fashioned into a sort of rudimentary mask. They depict a woman diligently absorbed in an unspecified task and a group of men whose menacing and hooded visages are reduced to sets of lips, noses and eyes. (The drawings are so crudely rendered and laminated that at times they recall a grade-school project displayed on a refrigerator.) Johnson's deliberately unrefined artistic process opens a primal space of discovery where personal and artistic concerns collide.

- Noah Chasin

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