

SAN FRANCISCO

Matt Borruso

STEVEN WOLF FINE ARTS

In his semiautobiographical 1928 novel *Nadja*, André Breton described the Parisian flea market as “an almost forbidden world of sudden parallels, petrifying coincidences, and reflexes particular to each individual, of harmonies struck as though on the piano, flashes of light that would make you see, really *see*.” In a similar vein, Matt Borruso explored discarded objects of the recent past as sources of unexpected revelation in “The Hermit’s Revenge Fantasy,” his second solo show at Steven Wolf Fine Arts. By means of cut-paper collages, pencil drawings, a two-channel video, and imagery culled from the dregs of consumer culture—schlocky album covers, old handicraft and DIY special-effects magazines, 1980s food porn—Borruso transformed the banal into the truly weird.

For most works on view, compositional energy was generated by Borruso’s destabilization of boundaries demarcating animate/inanimate, nature/culture, and interior/exterior by way of such uncanny tropes as image-doubling and disconcerting shifts in scale and orientation. For example, in *The Beard Label* (all works cited, 2011), a forkful of glistening orange spaghetti hovers in space apparition-like, haloed by the Technicolor aura of an ’80s album cover. In other collages, grotesque monsters simultaneously elicit disgust and compassion—a dualism that also pervades the artist’s ultrafine Ingres-esque pencil drawings of fantastically disfigured humans, themselves composites based on found imagery. These images transgress subsectors of visual culture as well, highlighting various idioms ranging from the home knitter and the monster-makeup enthusiast to the more conventional aesthetics of commercial design and the art world. Favoring the alternative reality of the eccentric hermit, Borruso has meticulously constructed an idiosyncratic world forged from the detritus of mass culture. Refraining from merely ironic or nostalgic readings of yesteryear’s kitsch, he *détourne*s its clichéd graphics and Day-Glo hues to unearth a formal vocabulary as distinctive as the color theory of Albers or Itten.

In the context of seamless digital culture, Borruso’s collages are notable both for being handmade and for their timeworn source material (indeed, the collection and archiving of vintage books, magazines, and ephemera must be a foundational aspect of the artist’s process). Just as the Surrealists sought an alternative vision via the antiquated objects and chance encounters of the flea market—a critical consciousness that promised to reenchant a world regulated by profit—Borruso suggests that the act of seeing itself might be a means of (re)constructing or transforming the world. The physicality of cutting and pasting finds its counterpart in the corporeality of vision that this show referred to again and again. For example, in *Holo*, a pair of holographic plates reflect the viewer from two slightly different angles, allowing her to literally see herself seeing. And in the video *How to See*, sight is revealed to be a locus of violent struggle as footage from John Carpenter’s *They Live* is juxtaposed with clips from Arthur Penn’s *The Miracle Worker*—both films in which people desperately force others to see.

Many of Borruso’s works produce a sensation of déjà vu, which is, in turn, evocative of the artist’s own process of sifting through and recombining outdated ready-made imagery. As Freud insisted, such instances of uncanny serendipity are less random than they appear, since they are actually litmus tests of our own desires and projections. One of the questions this show ponders is to what extent this very mode of seeing—rooted in not only the experience of looking at images and objects but also in the spaces and economies through which they circulate—might itself be on the verge of obsolescence, as flea markets and used bookstores (or all bookstores, for that matter) are supplanted by online commerce. Borruso addressed this very question head-on in *Scanners*, a temporary used bookstore that he developed and operated with

writer Nick Hoff at the Mina Dresden gallery in San Francisco for the month of October. Here one could browse a constantly shifting inventory (arranged according to a rather Delphic classification system clearly designed to disrupt received epistemological categories: guides to embalming, soft sculpture, and beekeeping were shelved among rare, out-of-print art and design books) without knowing exactly what one was looking for. And, without fail, always find it.

—Gwen Allen

Matt Borruso, *Hide*,
2011, cut-paper
collage, 11½ x 10”.

