Nayland Blake
Buddy. Buddy Buddy, 2013. Mixed media, 79 x 70½ x 40¼ in.

NEW YORK

Nayland Blake

Matthew Marks Gallery // February 2–April 20

THE DOOR IS AJAR. In "What Wont Wreng," which delights in deft, disorienting transpositions right down to its title, every entrance is a vessel and vice versa. In one corner of the room a translucent orange curtain is draped ceremonially in front of a shallow supply closet: It's not quite a passage to nowhere, but it comes close. The installation is populated by tall boxes of cheap plywood that seem to function like closets as well. One holds a long pink towel, another, a strung-up collection of toys. But these homely wardrobes are open at either end, giving the impression that a person might pass through the hidden compartments instead of store things in them. Likewise, every surface of the installation is tampered with: Photographs are scored with grommets, and the wooden structures are punctured with holes at waist height. This may be the first time that electrical cord holes come to mind at the same moment as glory holes. (Who am I kidding; it can't be the first time.) All these elements allow for a viewer's dramatic, physical engagement with the exhibition. When Blake says, "My tendency is to make everything about sex," this may be because sex is about everything: performance and participation, intimacy and expectation, visual distance and physical contact. This is rich territory for sculpture, and Blake does not so much deal explicitly with sexuality as he sexualizes the entire space. In this work, surface becomes object, object becomes passageway, and the installation is impossible to understand without moving through it.

Perhaps this is why Blake has resisted documentation in the past, and while "What Wont Wreng" has been photographed, images don't really cut it for this show. That may be because of the artist's interest in multiple modes of thinking. The gallery describes Blake as a "modern-day flaneur" because he collects things. But what seems more relevant to flaneurism is Blake's understanding of objects through movement and manipulation. A small, worn table seems like a "thing" until it's hung on the wall, at which point it becomes a dangling figure, a collection of attributes, or a proposition, losing its usefulness while retaining, in its aged surface, a sense of history. (It may be no accident that the object suddenly, uncannily resembles a grandfather clock.) A poster of a bearded, shirtless leather daddy in a harness and chains advertises "The Spectre NYC," an apt name for a leather bar that may not exist at a time when Internet hookups have taken the place of real-world communities. For Blake, this is a loss and this show is a place for repositioning, for reimagining alternate realities. Blake has voiced an admiration for the theater of Richard Foreman in the past. Here, the artist reveals the arrangement and presentation of objects to be, at its core, a kind of possibility. As the randy leader of an acting troupe says in Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, "We do onstage things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit as being an entrance somewhere else." **—Nova Benway**

NEW YORK

"The Book Lovers"

The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts Project Space // January 25–March 9

VISUAL ARTISTS HAVE long flirted with the written word: Consider the phenomena of the artist-as-critic, book-as-object, and document-as-artwork. In "The Book Lovers," curators David Maroto and Joanna Zielinska—an artist and art historian, respectively—define the "artist novel" as a distinct literary form. Far from a nostalgic meditation on the changing nature of publishing, this exploratory exhibition frames the novel as a contemporary extension of social practice and research-based art. Compact and infinitely reproducible, the artist novel challenges traditional forms of visual "authorship" in the same manner that the printed multiple, video, and photography have done. But while the market has more or less absorbed those forms, "The Book Lovers" asserts that the category of artist novel retains a slipperiness and contingency ripe for examination.

Maroto and Zielinska construct the exhibition around a growing body of evidence—a curated selection of more than 130 artist novels displayed on tables in the center of the space. This book collection, recently acquired by M HKA, in Antwerp, is available for perusal; readers may also consult an online database—a practical, though less seductive, option. The books range from *a, A Novel*, 1968, Andy Warhol's transcript of his daily conversations, to recent narrative experiments like the science fiction novel *Philip*, 2007, collectively written by a group of eight artists, and curated by Mai Abu ElDahab. Spanning artistic generations and geographies, the archive contains books by authors like Yayoi Kusama, Stewart Home, Sophie Calle, Pablo Helguera, and Maroto.

Eight installations by

RIGHT:
Roee Rosen
A page from *The Stained Portfolio*, 1927–28, by fictional artist Justine Frank. Gouache and pencil on paper, 13 x 15 in.

OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT:
Lindsay Seers
It has to be this way (Tarot), 2012. Nine photographic prints displayed in a wood and Perspex vitrine, each 6 x 4 in.

FROM TOP: NAYLAND BLAKE AND MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY; ELIZABETH FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS

contemporary artist-authors fill the rest of the space. These works fall into roughly three subcategories: the novel as project documentation, research object, or complement to traditional art objects. Jill Magid's *Becoming Tarden*, 2009, and Julia Weist's *Sexy Librarian*, 2008, document performative practices that frame the author as an unlikely femme fatale, whereby the novel serves as an empowering tool to avoid self-objectification. A selection of prints accompanies Magid's redacted account of her infiltration of the Dutch secret service as a commissioned artist. Weist's humorous collection of discarded library books—some shaven down to piles of dust—refers to her double life as librarian and artist. Goldin+Senneby's *Looking for Headless*, 2010–ongoing, began as a research-based investigation of offshore tax havens but has become a premise for staging scenarios during exhibition runs and launch parties (including for "The Book Lovers") in off-site spaces, that are then narrated in subsequent chapters. More conventional novelistic premises provide the creative backstory to standalone objects like Lindsay Seers's humorous tarot cards, 2012, and Tom Gidley's ceramic *Masks*, 2010–13.

Roee Rosen's project, a body of work attributed to the fictional Jewish-Belgian protofeminist Surrealist pornographer Justine Frank, best synthesizes these three tendencies. The complex output includes the novel *Sweet Sweat* and drawings, supposedly by Frank, as well as a monograph and related criticism of her work. A searing critique of art history's blind spots, the work exposes the unspoken and thoroughly gendered criteria that elevate certain artists while marginalizing others. In this exhibition, video testimony by the translator of Frank's monograph (Rosen in drag) denigrates Rosen's practice, accusing him of appropriating Frank's subversive visual lexicon, which fuses Jewish iconography and pornographic tropes, in his nonfictional (and much maligned) installation *Live and Die as Eva Braun*, 1995–97.

Ambitious but not exhaustive, "The Book Lovers" raises important questions, as yet unanswered, about the production and circulation of artist books. Some artists have distributed their books for free or at low cost via print-on-demand services, online, or through independent publishing means. Other books are published in limited editions or at exorbitant prices. Rather than being an untroubled category, artist novels highlight the growing economic precariousness of artistic labor and the willful fetishization of the book object at the moment of its obsolescence—a reification all too familiar to artistic practice. Situated between the mass-produced object and high art work, the artist novel is neither easily assimilable to literary publishing houses or the machinations of art discourse—a difficult position, to be sure, but one that inspires critical leverage. **—WV**

FROM LEFT: COLIN TODD, LINDSAY SEERS, AND MATT'S GALLERY, LONDON; ULI HOLZ AND VENUS OVER MANHATTAN

NEW YORK

Andra Ursuta

Venus Over Manhattan // February 13–March 30

THE SPARSENESS OF Ursuta's "Solitary Fitness" is jarring. Located in an unfinished concrete room whose ceiling's conduit system has been left exposed, it seems so far from a pristine exhibition space that visitors might enter and think they had stumbled upon a utility room. The gallery is dominated by an installation inside a massive fenced-in cage with a baseball-pitching machine that casts handmade rubber and concrete rocks over 40 feet at two freestanding walls. The uneven thud emitted by the pitching machine in *Stoner*, 2013—programmed to release balls at random intervals—seems to signal a malfunction, an automatic action that has gone awry. The room emits a masculine energy: One could very well imagine a hedge fund manager stopping in to hit some balls in the cage after scoring a deal on a Brice Marden at Gagosian, located in the same Madison Avenue building. Ursuta harnesses this testosterone and perverts it. The freestanding walls—*Stoning Wall (Bad, Bad Painting 1* and *2)*, 2013—are composed of urethane tiles laid over long black human hair that sticks out at intervals along the surface. The uneven pattern of the nude-colored tiles represents bruised human flesh: The installation was inspired by a news story about a woman who was stoned to death in a fundamentalist country for committing adultery. In Ursuta's work, this woman is absorbed into the fabric of the objects; her death is rendered even more horrific by the industrialization of her torture.

Outside the cage stand three vertical sculptures, which seem almost lost in the space. Titled *Dumb Belles 1*, *2*, and *3*, 2013, these lithe, airy structures of brushed steel strongly recall works by Constantin Brancusi and Makonde sculptures. Both their names and the platforms they stand on, seemingly composed from tiles found in a locker room shower, relate to a gym. The associations with working out are heightened by the exhibition's title, "Solitary Fitness." Ursuta borrowed the title from an exercise manual written by Charles Bronson. A notoriously violent British criminal who has spent most of his life in solitary confinement, Bronson is known for his almost gleeful attacks on fellow prisoners and prison guards, as well as for his Hercules-like physique. The cage where he works out in prison could hypothetically be the one dominating the exhibition. Beyond that, immediate thematic relationships between specific works are difficult to discern. But that may be exactly where the key to the exhibition lies. The press release states that the works are a manifestation of Ursuta's own form of personal fitness, practiced in solitude in her studio. The resulting works do not necessarily cohere but certainly suggest a lot about an artist who has chosen to include a powerful claim about violence against women, the musings of a crazy workout fanatic, and a bunch of "Dumb Belles" in the same exhibition—mostly, that she has a fantastically sick sense of humor. **—Brienne Walsh**

BELOW:
Andra Ursuta
Dumb Belles 2, 2013. Brushed steel, glass tiles, cement board, and wood, 102 x 18 x 30 in.