

METRO PICTURES

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ARTNEWS



Installation view of Nina Beier at Metro Pictures, New York.

When the history of today's art is written, eBay will need to occupy a prominent position. It has become, for many artists, what the flea markets were to the 1930s Surrealists and the Canal Street plastic shops were for New York artists in the 1960s and '70s—an encyclopedic source of raw materials and random hits of inspiration. Chris Burden has trawled it for just the right meteorite for a sculpture, Camille Henrot has purchased commonplace objects to coat with tar, and Rob Pruitt regularly peddles books through its networks.

And now there is the case of Nina Beier.

Last month, when I visited the Danish-born Beier at a studio she was using on the Lower East Side, right by the Williamsburg Bridge, she was experimenting with recent eBay acquisitions, namely an impressive pile of Hermès ties and a curvaceous, dark brown coco fesse seed from Seychelles, which measured about a foot long. (I highly recommend looking at pictures of them for a bit; they are incredible objects.)



Nina Beier, *Plunge*, 2015, faucet, coins, resin, wine glass,
29 1/4 x 9 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches.

Beier, 39, is very tall—one might say gangly—and has long blonde hair. If she wasn't one of the most interesting artists on the international art scene right now one could imagine her playing professional basketball. As it was, she was prepping for a solo show at the Metro Pictures gallery, her first one-person outing in New York, which opened last week and runs through May 23. She showed me around the studio.

Along one wall were glass panes under which she had shoved ties alongside human-hair wigs, the strands of hair twirling out and around the ties. Arrayed at awkward, jagged angles, the ties seemed to be caught in torrents of energy, attacking or trying to slip away from the hair, only momentarily frozen. The works are deviously funny, but given the traces of human lives, also pretty unsettling.

Beier relishes, and traffics in, such improbable images. She makes work that looks like it should not exist.

"I keep returning to a confusion between image and object and the moments when these intersect," Beier told me in an email interview after my visit. Her pressed-wig pieces offer an ideal case study. "I like to think of the wig as a fixed haircut, a style, hair that will never grow," she said. "An image of hair and just hair at the same time." (One could also cite her 2011 piece *Tragedy*, which periodically has a dog pretending to be dead on a carpet during the run of an exhibition.)

If Beier has a trademark series, it would be the "Plunge" works that she has been making recently—oversized cocktail glasses filled with peculiar objects that are set in translucent, neon-hued resin. Her show at Metro has glassware variously holding an espresso cup, a snake, and a small hammer. They are based—again, improbably—on existing stock images that one might use to illustrate articles and PowerPoint presentations.

"These author-less and homeless images found in image banks spring from freelance photographers trying to figure out what others might want to communicate or might need to be said today," Beier said. "Empty and open metaphors are created, and the less these images mean, or to put it differently, the more they *can* mean, the more successful they are."



Installation view of Nina Beier at Metro Pictures, New York.

One work has a little faucet that seems to be spilling out a stream of coins. What could it possibly be used for? At first the mind goes blank, and then the possibilities start piling up: the increasing cost of tap water, or the price of leaks (whether of information, money, or material), or maybe it's a metaphor for brainstorming, ideas flowing out steadily like money. "The same image can have contradicting words attached to it," Beier said, "like a broken rope can be tagged with both 'hope' and 'despair.'"

"I see this arena of image making as one of the most simple and interesting today," she added. "The images here are not burdened with intention or message, very little is expected of the individual image... So in this way already-absurd imagery mutates and becomes more and more autonomous and detached."

Looking at them, I thought of Leo Steinberg's insight about Jasper Johns's early paintings of objects, his suggestion that Johns's targets, hangers, and light bulbs evoke "the possibility of an object's lone self-existence without any human attitude whatsoever surrounding it." They are untouched, awaiting, respectively, an arrow, a shirt, and a power source. "If his works are disturbing at all," Steinberg wrote, "perhaps it is because they insinuate our absence."

But unlike Johns's encaustics, her "Plunge" sculptures await neither human touch nor specific uses. Outfitted with signifiers by an unseen mass of photographers, they spiral off in their own peculiar directions, self-sufficient but also ready for anything. Which is the horror of today's hyper-networked media environment. They embody the knowledge that every snapshot and bit of text is now archived, ready to be picked up again and to become something else—to mean anything. In the meantime, they seem to be taking on lives of their own.



Nina Beier's *Tragedy* (2011) on view in 'Dogma,' organized by Gianni Jetzer at Metro Pictures in 2012.

With precise little touches, Beier amps up the unreality of her art. She uses oversized martini and sniffer glasses to skew our sense of proportion, and carefully brushes around her mounds of fertilized dirt (which bear the butt-shaped seeds that will never germinate) so that they seem to have been smoothed in Photoshop. Her art radiates a faint digital luster.

These stock image banks link up effortlessly with the ties in Beier's logic. "The fashion brand Hermès works with a similar process when creating their patterns, where freelancers propose ideas, based on the brief that 'it can be anything,'" she told me. "I think it is in these sorts of outputs that we can find the closest to a collective subconscious expression, as it presents the possibly most genuinely groping portrayal of today's reality for us to speculate about."

And so, dancing about her works, are ties imprinted with patterns of peanuts, turtles, and chains, Persian carpets and snails. Sociopolitical commentary lingers, but as in the stock images, always just out of reach. They dare you to fix them down. "This is a universe where peanuts, people, and pearls find themselves with equal status," Beier said. "Basically a complete flattening of pictorial and socio-political hierarchies."

Beier has a busy few months coming up, with shows in Hamburg and Vilnius, plus a group show on Governors Island that is being organized by Tom Eccles and Ruba Katrib. She was still finalizing her piece for the show, and couldn't yet reveal its exact content, but was willing to offer a hint. "I am going to use an empty swimming pool as an exhibition space!" she said.