

ROBIN RHODE

by nancy princenthal 1/1/09

As one image dissolves to the next in Robin Rhode's hypnotic black-and-white digital projection *Promenade* (2008), a silent performer in a business suit and white gloves, a black stocking obscuring his face, slowly enacts a series of moves that originate somewhere between dance and social formality: bowing deeply, extending his hand, advancing and retreating. Meantime, a blizzard of diamond-shaped white forms drawn in chalk descends the wall behind him, surrounding him with a backdrop that gradually becomes a visual prison. Thus trapped, the performer stands ramrod straight and tips his head forward, more in a signal of satisfaction than defeat, though there is something of both in the gesture. Then he turns toward the pattern of chalked diamonds, which contracts, starting at the margins, until there is a single white square in his hand, which he holds by one corner: a magician, causing his handkerchief to appear at his will and then, as the final image fades, vanish for good.



VIEW SLIDESHOW Robin Rhode: *Promenade*, 2008, 36 C-prints on aluminum panels face-mounted with Plexiglas, 14 by 21 inches each. Courtesy Perry Rubenstein Gallery, New York, and Tucci Russo Studio per l'Arte Contemporanea, Torre Pellice.; *Keys*, 2008, black-and-white pigment print, 47 1/4 inches square. Photos this page courtesy Perry Rubenstein Gallery.;

The past six years of Rhode's career, barely a decade long, were recently surveyed at the Hayward Gallery in London. There is also, through Jan. 10, a show of recent work at White Cube in London, and there will be another survey this spring at the Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio; his New York gallery, Perry Rubenstein, will present a solo show in November. Currently, Rhode's work can be seen in the biennial "Prospect.1 New Orleans." *Promenade*—prominently situated at the entrance to the Hayward exhibition, where it was set to a spare, penetrating piano score by Arenor Meyer—was made as part of the set design Rhode is preparing for a spring 2009 performance at Lincoln Center in New York of Mussorgsky's piano suite *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Things have been moving very quickly for the preternaturally energetic artist, who was born in Cape Town, South Africa, to mixed-race parents in 1976, and moved with his family to Johannesburg when he was seven. Since 2002, the year this survey begins, Rhode has lived in Berlin with his wife and son. He attended the Witwatersrand Technikon and the South African School of Film, Television and Dramatic Arts, programs he entered on the strength of talents that helped shape his identity as a teenager whose other interests included, more conventionally, skateboarding, sports and music. According to a story he has already told interviewers several times, drawing on the wall and enlisting other students to interact with the image was a rite of passage in his high school.

Rhode has not altogether given up the enthusiasms of his adolescence. In a stygian concrete "undercroft" beneath the riverside Hayward that is the only public place in London where it is legal both to skateboard and to paint graffiti, Rhode executed a wall drawing, in spray paint, that covers an area the size and feel of a small parking garage. Squat columns, shallow ramps, curving walls and one narrow, tall space he calls "the throat" were covered with a deluge of black rectangles over dull silver. Twelve hours after the two-day, nine-man-crew installation, when the artist and I viewed the site together, the drawing had been thoroughly

bombed with fresh tags, an epic outpouring of bright paint and bold flourishes. Veteran street artist that he is, Rhode professed himself pleased. But his first sight of the ongoing alterations—a young man was hard at work with a spray can as we watched—produced in Rhode an uncharacteristic moment of stillness.

Speed—and, especially in recent works, its patently hard-won control—is crucial to Rhode's sensibility. The works for which he first gained recognition were hybrid drawings/performances, done initially, in 1997, as strictly ephemeral events on the streets of Johannesburg. The forms hastily drawn on walls or ground—a basketball hoop, the arc of a half-pipe's edge—served as props for a series of postures that when photographed and storyboarded became stop-action increments of everyday acts of heroism: a slam dunk (*He Got Game*, 2002), a flight into midair (*Catch Air*, 2003). Initially Rhode enacted the scenarios himself, but he soon hired a performer he refers to as his body double. *Stone Flag* (2004) shows a man dressed in white struggling, across nine frames, to hold up a flag made of red bricks, as it seems to whip in the wind while the pole supporting it bends perilously; in fact, it was all performed on the ground. In *Hard Rain* (2005), a black-clad figure stares up at the blank white wall presented by the exposed interior of a demolished building; rubble is at his feet. He lifts an umbrella as black rain, first a sprinkle and, by the 16th frame, a deluge, falls directly above his head; the last frame shows the man moving along the wall to safety, away from the now solid, dripping black rectangle. The black rain of Hiroshima is an impetus for this work, but so are all those cartoons in which a luckless character is shadowed by his own personal rain cloud.

In live actions that he has performed indoors, and which were sampled in a series of documentary videos at the Hayward, Rhode interacted with drawings made directly on walls. A start-and-stop jazz performance of 2004 at Artists Space in New York found him dashing back and forth between renderings of a trumpet, a bass and a set of drums, all dripping paint that blackened his hands and face as he tried to keep pace with the bursts of music the drawn instruments were, seemingly, producing. At the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 2003, Rhode performed *Car Theft*, in which he drew a car on the wall in charcoal and then tried to pry open its windows and door with real, improvised tools; *Car Wash*, also at the Walker in 2003, involved drawing and then washing away a similar vehicle. All of the deft charm of the performances and early photoworks are preserved in subsequent photo sequences that, enacted on a knife's edge between presence and illusion, restore some of the darkness to the arts of prestidigitation. A top-hatted man juggles drawn hats in the 12-frame, black-and-white *Juggla* (2007). *Empty Pockets* (2008) consists of 21 black-and-white photographs (Rhode has not used color since 2005) arranged in an inverted triangle on the wall. In this title as throughout, the pun is intended: poverty and the life of the street remain themes in Rhode's work, and this one was inspired in part by seeing snooker played outdoors in Beijing; it is played that way in Johannesburg, too. In preparation for this work, a table was stenciled, upside down, on the wall, and Rhode played an acrobatic pretend game beneath it. Since the photos are hung upside down, what we see is the artist using a cue stick to vault across the table's top while playing a winning round. But the balls refuse to stay sunk in their pockets, rising to a perfectly racked triangle that is a metonym for the work's configuration, and also a signal that Rhode's preoccupations are shifting from narrative to abstract form.

Other new works of more thoroughgoing abstraction include a drawing on black paper executed with a chalk sculpture of an abalone shell; the all-over pattern that it produced is disappointingly generic, even bolstered with the information, provided in a gallery talk by the artist and the exhibition curator, Stephanie Rosenthal, that the prized abalone is important to the underground economy of South Africa. Still more opaque, in every way, is the anomalous *Untitled (Black Painting)*, 2008, a modestly scaled square field of black oilstick and spray paint relieved along one side by a dot-screened wedge of gray. In the gallery talk, Rhode discussed his turn to abstraction as a consequence of his growing interest in Constructivism and the social aspirations it embodied. But it is hard not to read these unyielding recent works as a bid for quiet and calm amid the tornado of activity he generates. At the same time, Rhode continues to make immensely satisfying figurative work. *Candle* (2007) is one of the more reductive. A 16mm film projected onto a wall, it begins with an image in negative, a ghost of a man drawing a candle that appears in white outline against the large sheet of paper that serves as backdrop. The draftsman strikes a match and holds it to the candle, producing a flame that flips the image into positive form—a bit of legerdemain that is as simple as it is enchanting. More complex is *Brick Face* (2008), a big, 20-image photo grid of a drawing/performance executed on a favorite wall in Johannesburg—Rhode now makes such street art only on visits home to South Africa. The action involves a gray-suited, porkpie-hatted man seeming to feed a (real) bolt of geometrically patterned fabric into a sewing machine drawn in white chalk on the black-painted brick wall. As if issuing from the machine, a pattern of white-chalk-outlined bricks ultimately covers the wall.

In a conversation at the gallery, I asked Rhode if Sol LeWitt was an influence on recent works, like *Brick Face*, that involve geometric wall drawings, and if earlier pieces—for instance *White Walls* (2002), which concludes with a drawing of a car surrounded by a corona of white lines—had anything to do with Keith Haring's *Radiant Baby*. Rhode acknowledged—enthusiastically—only the affinity with LeWitt. And though William Kentridge would appear to be an obvious source, Rhode admitted he didn't respond to the

work of his compatriot at all until recently, when their shared interest in collaboration with musicians and other performers helped forge a friendship. If Rodchenko presently claims Rhode's attention, he says the question "What would Duchamp do?" guided him throughout the Hayward installation. In an interview with curator Rosenthal published in the exhibition's catalogue, Rhode bridled at the mention of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. But during the gallery talk he volunteered that the two actors' importance to his work was clear, and growing; indeed the use of live piano in early cinema screenings, Rhode said, helped shape *Promenade*. Of course such questions about influence, beloved of critics and curators, are not much welcomed by most artists. But Rhode engages them actively; they are both raised and deflected by the title he gave the Hayward exhibition, "Who Saw Who." Declarative rather than interrogatory, it is a phrase that allows several readings. One offered by the artist is that it refers to the deliberate elusiveness of his photographic persona, and to a host of issues that attend the business of creating, through art, one or several alter egos. While citing performances by Vito Acconci and Dennis Oppenheim that he first became aware of when he was a student, Rhode says that as a black conceptual performance artist still firmly identified with South Africa, everything he does makes its own history. It is a hard conclusion to argue with.

One promising possibility for what Rhode plans to do next with his contested photographic self is suggested by *Kite* (2008), in which he eliminates the figure almost entirely. A mixed-medium installation, it features a film of wind-tossed treetops shot from a moving car, projected obliquely and high overhead. As the film proceeds, the image speeds up, until the trees are a blurry torrent. The projection—it forms a parallelogram with angled sides—is connected at three corners to black cotton cords that span a corner of the room in which it is installed, terminating in a pair of black hands shown in a photograph on the adjacent wall. In talking about *Kite*, Rhode refers to a new interest in the fundamentals of pictorial representation, and to optical studies from the Renaissance and antiquity—ideas that are as sketchy as they are rich. But he also describes, much more viscerally, the experience of driving through post-Katrina New Orleans. "I felt like I was driving underwater," he says, "like I was suffocating, drowning. The trees were like waves." That sensation, and the deep resonance it had for Rhode, is captured with uncanny precision in the queasily unstable image held aloft as if by magic, and seemingly in peril of disappearing—like the community it stands for—before our eyes.