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### Art review: Roman Signer at Young Projects

February 24, 2011 | 5:45 pm

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Swiss artist Roman Signer has described his art actions — many of which involve explosions and destruction — as “momentary sculptures.” However, most people experience them only as video documentation. In this sense, they are a species of filmmaking, and despite their undertones of violence, they are thoroughly delightful.

The current survey at Young Projects presents 15 works that effortlessly blend narrative, slapstick and existential poetry, all typically within the span of a few minutes. “Fass mit Kamera” (Barrel With Camera), begins with a shot of a man looking down at us, blocking out the sun. Then there is a rush of sky, then ground, sky and ground, blurring behind a water-splattered lens. The sequence is beguiling, exhilarating, puzzling and then suddenly humorous as the view switches to a medium shot of Signer placing a camera inside an oil drum and rolling it down a hill. One chuckles at the revelation that such a simple gesture could create such big, mysterious images.

Other works are almost pure slapstick: Signer sits down at an outdoor easel and poises his brush to start painting en plein air, only to be startled by an inexplicable explosion some yards behind him that makes him jump, leaving a single black mark on the canvas. Short, sharp and hilarious, the piece succinctly skewers the gentlemanly tradition of landscape painting with a literal “shock of the new.”

There are also works that allude to vaguely sociopolitical issues: a room full of toy helicopters lined up in neat martial rows take off all at once, buzzing around maniacally like so many trapped flies. In “Stuhl” (Chair), a mechanical winch twists a rope tied to a wooden chair, pulling it tighter and

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tighter, until it drags the chair across the floor and totally demolishes it. Darkly funny, it can be seen as an allegory of the implacable forces of unbridled industry in which the chair stands in, as it so often does in art, for the human body.

Some works strike a more existential, Sisyphean tone. There's the small truck filled with barrels of water that Signer sends careening down a U-shaped ramp, only to topple over on itself, spilling its contents in a great crash of utter futility. There's also footage of Signer sitting in a swivel chair, holding sputtering toy rockets in each hand that don't quite provide the cartoon-like propulsion he might have hoped for.



What's refreshing about these works is that unlike other artists who place themselves in harm's way, Signer doesn't seem to be interested in danger for its own sake. While clearly fascinated with machines and pyrotechnics, he seems more taken with their comic, aesthetic or metaphoric qualities than in presenting himself as a daredevil. In a sequence in which he triggers an explosion that catapults his hat up from the street so he can catch it from a second floor window, he is careful to tie himself to a pipe first to keep from falling. It's a moment that easily could have been edited out of the final video, but it provides a sober counterpoint to the fabricated danger in works like Yves Klein's 1960 photomontage, "Leap Into the Void," in which the artist appears to swan dive directly onto the pavement.

In the end, while Signer may think of his works as momentary sculpture, they are, in their video form, more like a poetics of experience in which fleeting ideas take form not as objects but as lived phenomena of uncommon clarity.

-- Sharon Mizota

Young Projects, 8687 Melrose Ave., L.A., (323) 377-1102, through March 14. Closed Saturdays and Sundays. [www.youngprojectsgallery.com](http://www.youngprojectsgallery.com)

Images: Top: Installation view, "Pro Tempore: 15 Momentary Sculptures by Roman Signer."  
Credit: From Young Projects. Right: Still from "Bürostuhl," 2006. Credit: Roman Signer.



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