WEEKEND UPDATE
by Walter Robinson
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The hot show in New York last month was "Who’s Afraid of Jasper Johns," the exhibition at Tony Shafrazi Gallery that features works by Francis Bacon, Mike Bidlo, John Chamberlain, Malcolm Morley, Robert Morris, Francis Picabia, Rob Pruitt, Cindy Sherman and others installed right on top of tromp l’oeil photographic wallpaper of the gallery’s previous show, titled "Four Friends" and featuring works by Shafrazi’s core early stable: Donald Baechler, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf.

This wacky idea -- installing art on top of other art -- essentially produces a lot of visual noise. But as an avant-garde gesture it’s priceless, playing upon and amplifying Shafrazi’s notorious 1974 art action, when he spray painted "Kill Lies All" onto Pablo Picasso’s Guernica (1937), then hanging a the Museum of Modern Art awaiting the end of fascist rule in Spain. You thought it was some kind of overheated psychosis, like the guy who hit Michelangelo’s Pieta with a hammer ("Pieta? I thought it said 'pinata'”, said a cartoon in the National Lampoon)? No, it was an extreme avant-garde performance, now illuminated by two of our best avant-gardists, artist Urs Fischer and dealer Gavin Brown, co-curators of the show.

As a portrait of Shafrazi, "Who’s Afraid" telescopes time, creating a whimsical inventory of one individual’s history and concentrating it in a single installation. It’s a "box in a valise," to borrow the term for Marcel Duchamp’s celebrated briefcase full of miniature replicas of his own famous artworks.
Installation view of "Retrospective" at Gagosian Gallery, with works (from left) by Piero Golia, Takashi Murakami and Tom Friedman

Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise* (1935-41) is a central exhibit in this month's hot show, "Retrospective" at Gagosian Gallery on West 21st Street in Chelsea. Organized by Andisheh Avini, an artist (he shows at I-20), curator and longtime Gagosian employee, the exhibition spreads works by 13 artists through the warehouse-sized gallery space. Jasper Johns is there, with a suite of *The Seasons* (1987), as is Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, both with works that assemble all their motifs into a single image.

A darkened room holds Douglas Gordon’s collection of several dozen videos, each on its own monitor ("we took all the tvs from Larry’s apartment while he was out of town," joked one Gagosianian), and Chris Burden’s book of 50 Body Art photos from 1974 stretches along one long wall. In a corner is a long spill of colorful detritus that purports to be leftover bits of every eccentric sculpture made by Tom Friedman. And Italian artist Piero Golia’s model on sawhorses of a classical museum filled with a retrospective of his own work is billed as an example of "wishful thinking." One mini-exhibit shows a photograph of a young woman’s back bearing a large tattoo of Golia’s own portrait -- a bit of "work for hire," apparently.

Both "Who's Afraid" and "Retrospective" push us further along what seems like a strange and contradictory postmodernist trajectory, presenting nihilistic gestures of avant-garde provocation within a context of artistic egotism and institutional affirmation.