

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Bruce Nauman: 'One Hundred Fish Fountain'

By KEN JOHNSON

Labels do not stick to Bruce Nauman, but for present purposes it helps to think of him as a surrealistic existentialist. The single room-filling work here, "One Hundred Fish Fountain," is an actual working fountain. Bronze casts of real fish — catfish, bass, whitefish and other species — are suspended by wires from the ceiling at different heights. They appear to be swimming in a giant aquarium. Rather than being immersed in water, however, each is a hollow container from which water spurts in slender streams through multiple little perforations. The water falls like rain into a broad, shallow basin on the floor, from which it is pumped back up to each fish through a hose connected to its belly.

The spectacle resembles something dreamed up by Magritte, a vision of fish swimming in the air during a heavy rain produced by the fish themselves. In typically Naumanesque style the work's artificial, mechanical nature is fully exposed, creating tension between otherworldly fantasy and empirical reality.

There is a personal dimension too. A gallery news release explains that all the fish from which the casts were made were caught in the Great Lakes by Mr. Nauman and his friend and dealer, Donald Young, who died in April. Mr. Nauman created the fountain before Mr. Young's death, but now it serves as a poignant memorial, with the streaming water like a rain of tears.