

frieze

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Michelle Lopez

SIMON PRESTON GALLERY, NEW YORK, USA



Michelle Lopez, 'The Violent Bear It Away' (2009), exhibition view

Dynamite may well have exploded in the bowels of Simon Preston Gallery, because the objects Michelle Lopez is presenting upstairs seem to be stalled in flight. A bough of a sycamore is sticking through a partition wall facing the entrance; behind it the tree's branches fan out across another gallery. The compressed wreck of a car is pushed up against a wall. A small black object resembling flames from a small campfire sits on the floor, and two sandbags weigh down ropes that disappear into the ceiling as if they were trying to secure a hot air balloon.



Southern Trees/ Black September (2009)

Maybe the explosion is appropriate, because Lopez has been relatively quiet in recent years: this is the 39-year-old Brooklyn-based artist's first New York show since her exhibition at Deitch Projects in 2001. At first glance, 'The Violent Bear It Away' might remind one of Janis Kounellis: there is something of his theatre in the appearance of arrested violence, though the variety of elemental materials (the flame-like object is fabricated from soot) is most reminiscent of the Greek artist's work. All of the works are, however, hybridized oddities: the flying bough, Southern Trees/ Black September (all works 2009), contains a branch that has been spliced with a white, resinous phantom limb. The car, Woadsonner (edit), is partially clad in soft leather: it's a crushed version of a leather-skinned Honda that Lopez made in 2000. And that ball of flames, Portrait of Artist as Special Mission Project/ Akira Revisited, is a wig, a reference to Takashi Murakami's Special Mission Project Ko2 (1997), in which cyborg women are transformed into planes.



Portrait of Artist as Special Mission Project/ Akira Revisited (2009)

All of these objects are marvellously poised between being one strange thing and something stranger still. They have an energy borne of single images or ideas clashing together suddenly: Woadsonner suggests a human and a mechanical carapace, fused and then collapsed. Yet Lopez has found her way to these objects by circuitous routes, and the forms can't hope to support all her intentions. A catalogue essay by J. Uslip tells us that, on its own, Southern Trees/ Black September is meant to suggest Billie Holiday, aeroplane hijackings, Palestinian terrorists, 9/11 and maybe the artist's birthday. But the objects alone have to do the work alone, without any tacked-on ideas – and here they do.

Morgan Falconer