

Philip Martin Gallery

Harvey, Doug. "Brian Bress," *Art in America*, March 2012.

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Video artists have been inexplicably slow in taking advantage of certain possibilities inherent to flat-screen technology, specifically that of creating wall-hung screens with looping videos that occupy the space where one expects to find a painting. The bulk of Brian Bress's recent show, "Under Performing," addressed this peculiarity with the complex humor and formal inventiveness of his work from the last half-decade, but with a sharpened sense of focus.

Viewers familiar with Bress's recent works, such as his breakthrough 2009 video *Status Report* (recently exhibited at the New Museum in New York), know him for his almost overwhelming barrages of absurdist collage. He constructs tableaux from thrift-store detritus that he then photographs and green-screens onto various backgrounds. The videos made up of these collaged arrangements often interlace three or four entirely different scenarios, resulting in something akin to channel surfing—if all the channels were public access.

For "Under Performing," Bress presented eight "portraits" (all 2012) in a mostly uniform format: framed flat-screen monitors. Most are about 28 by 22 inches and are displayed vertically. In one case, a pair of monitors forms a cryptic diptych of isolated, snowbound figures. Two family groupings—a cubist-faced set bobbing in a painted surf and four featureless inflatables, posed Sears-portrait-studio-style, replete with patterned sweaters and bad-haircut wigs—are hung in a horizontal orientation. These looped portraits—which range from 1 to 30 minutes—include actual human figures, wearing layers of costumes and masks. The outfits obliterate the identity of the models, who are replaced with Bress's cartoonish or nightmarish (or often both) characters. Two of the figures rotate slowly on unseen turntables: Janus (Max), whose two faces merge with the background—a pale but intricate monochrome landscape flipped on its side—to startlingly different effects; and Infinite Man (Britt), which uses repeated images of a scrap of a found painting portraying a man's head gazing up into the distance. The

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latter has the effect of conjuring a fictional art historical invention, something like a prismatic Futurist zoetrope. The gorgeous Beadman (Parker) shows the titular character, completely encased in multicolor beads, hopping up and down in slow motion. A more elaborate conceit is the puffy white dough man with mustache and hat, titled Cowboy (Brian led by Peter Kirby). The figure reaches out in front of him with a marker, drawing a profile on what would be the backside of the picture plane. The most powerful comedy is rooted in ambivalence, and nowhere is this clearer than in the odd-man-out centerpiece of the show, the hauntingly beautiful, gutbustingly funny, approx. 20-minute road movie *Creative Ideas for Every Season* (2010). Appropriating the figure and words of Agnes Martin (and set to John Zorn's sweetly ominous musical homage "Redbird"), Bress's work presents the Zen painting matriarch as a befuddled pilgrim behind the wheel of a comically minimal sedan, sharing her fragmented philosophy with an array of seemingly hallucinated Bressian passengers. This might be offensive if Bress didn't so clearly identify with the driver. He poetically nails the allure and anxiety of contemplative reductivism for a virtuosic maximalist artist attempting to hone a more precise vocabulary.