

Petzel

Jeffrey Kastner, "Walead Beshty," *Artforum*, June 2017.

ARTFORUM

Walead Beshty

PETZEL GALLERY | WEST 18TH STREET



View of "Walead Beshty,"
2017. Photo: Christopher
Burke.

With an intermittent soundtrack provided by the futile jittering of wrecked office equipment displayed like broken bodies skewered on pikes, and colossal flat-screen displays that had been mortally injured and then strung up in the fashion of cold-room carcasses, the opening rooms of Walead Beshty's recent exhibition at Petzel suggest a Dr. Moreau-style project updated for the digital age—a ruthless program of mechanical vivisection designed to forcibly bestow an organic bearing on a set of captive entities. Yet if this ambitious show initially seems to wear its high-tech-abattoir vibe a bit blithely, it turns out to be a considerably more nuanced enterprise as it unfolds across the gallery's spaces. In addition to the brute deformations with which the exhibition begins, the pieces on view also include a number of considerably more oblique, less easily digestible works. Taken as a whole, the show makes for a compelling accounting of the artist's central interests: bodies (animate and technological) in contact with other bodies, labor and its traces, standardization and its disruption, and the behavior of things when acted upon by external forces in planned and random ways.

Beshty has built the show around several discrete formal and conceptual groupings, demonstrating his ability to articulate his primary concerns via diverse materials. All but one of the individual works were made in 2017, the outlier being ~~Sharp LC 90LE657U 90-inch Aquos HD 1080p 120Hz 3D Smart LED TV~~, 2016, a forerunner of the "canceled" items of technology that dominate the early portion of the exhibition. A flat screen split like an expensive hunk of glossy lumber along its horizontal axis, ~~Sharp LC90LE657U~~ sits in a corner with half its screen paralyzed in a mute emerald test pattern, the work coming across as something between a manipulated television, à la

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Nam June Paik, and a vaguely Flaminesque light source. (Two other 2017 works on view bear the same name—one similarly bisected, the other cored with a twelve-inch drill bit.) The artist paired it and its siblings with three pieces of ruined office gear—computer, scanner, and printer, the last of these pathetically blinking out the forlorn error message IF PROBLEM PERSISTS CONTACT DEALER OR SERVICE REP—and once again his disorganizing ministrations call into question these objects' ontological status. Like the screens, they too remain plugged in, but only for purposes of life support, operating (just barely) at the bottommost limits of their utility.

Sharing the large final gallery are the show's other two main sets of work—a quartet of the artist's massive "Cross-Contaminated Inverted RA4 Contact Prints," which forms a subset of his series "Curls," 2008–, and his *Copper Surrogate* (60" x 120" 48 ounce C11000 Copper Alloy, 90° Bend, 60" Bisection/5 Sections: April 12–17/deinstall*, New York, New York), an array of finely polished metallic forms suggesting hypertrophic high-end wall brackets, here arranged in a floor-based phalanx in the middle of the room. The artist made the former—the latest instantiations of his ongoing experiments with photograms—by exposing two enormous strips of photosensitive paper cut in the pitch-blackness of the darkroom to successive doses of light in the three process colors of cyan, magenta, and yellow and then running them face-to-face through a wide-format color processor. The resulting works display what the artist has called the "Rorshaching" produced when the two pieces of paper (whose dimensions are often slightly mismatched) go through the machine together. They present—like the glitched printer paintings of Wade Guyton, with which they share a decided formal and conceptual kinship—gorgeously muddled surfaces inscribed everywhere by contingency, interrupted by drips and puddings, marked by streaks and handprints. Meanwhile, *Copper Surrogate*, set in formation between them, constitutes the newest example of the impulse first explored by Beshty in his FedEx works of 2007–, for which he makes sculptures explicitly designed to accumulate tangible physical evidence of (extending to wholesale damage from) their travels. Like those, this new work contains a record of the labor involved with its own realization, and here the pristine gleaming surfaces of the individual pieces—which are meant to be installed bare-handed—have already been "marred" by the finger- and handprints of the installers who unpacked and positioned them. It's in such infrathin zones of interaction that Beshty's insistent explorations of the ever-present yet uneasy symbiosis between bodies and artifacts, between human and machine—continually marked by one another—are most persuasively conducted.

—Jeffrey Kastner

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