

# ARTFORUM

## Phillip Lai

STUART SHAVE/MODERN ART

Right from the start, you could be certain only that there would be no certainties. Just inside the door of this show, on the floor of the gallery's lobby, Phillip Lai had installed *Untitled* (all works 2009). On and around a low pile of foam slabs of various sizes and thicknesses were four wine bottles, a couple of balls, and a baseball bat—a temporary resting place, perhaps, for a gregarious though security-minded vagrant. All of the objects are cast in sponge foam, but they are imperfect, looking as if parts of their surface layers have been left in the mold; the balls in particular seem almost purposefully distressed. A similar one was pictured in isolation on the mailer for the show, where it looked like nothing so much as a degraded globe. The slabs, too, far from being abject found material, have been carefully cast to appear just like what they actually are. Questions of occupation without possession, of simulation and dissimulation, of transience and vagrancy, of conviviality tempered by suspicion and the potential for brutality and oblivion, all arose in this initial doorstep encounter.

*Untitled (smokes)*, is the aluminum framework of a temporary shop unit—like something one might find in the booking hall of a railway station or some such place of transit. Cigarettes, or bits of them, have been poked into several of the holes drilled through the frame, and a cheap disposable lighter rests on the lintel of the door opening. The whole construction is set, unfixed, atop a number of fruit pits: One slight nudge would knock it off its unstable perch. Lai's last show at Modern Art, "Free to Meet for Coffee Sometime Soon," offered a positive image of shared experience, commonality, and discursive engagement while remaining critical of any easy mapping of such activity onto broader models of social and political action; *Untitled (smokes)* maintains this complexity in its understated treatment of the conflicting prospects of contact and compromise held out to the individual through this shareable pleasure/poison. Such an individual—rootless, in search of orientation and placement in relation to others—is akin to what philosopher Giorgio Agamben has called a "whatever being," where "whatever" signals not indifference, but that which always matters.

Other elements in the show were a pair of men's black trousers made with a circular hole in the seat (*Untitled [trousers]*), a trompe l'oeil wall painting of a substantial rectangular gray panel with—again—circular holes at each of its corners (*Ears, Eyes*), an arrangement of white panels and screens reminiscent of the space under a domestic staircase (*Untitled*), and, at the rear of the gallery, a Plexiglas panel flush with the (false) wall fronting a somewhat distressed display case (*Untitled*). The board forming its floor is grubby and a little warped, and the side and rear panels look equally scuffed. In keeping with this well-used feel, the piece contains a worn motorcycle tire, a large crumpled-up sheet of dusty polyethylene, and some plastic packaging straps. A piece of wood, slightly longer than the vitrine is wide, is jammed between its sides. The whole thing is, according to Lai, inspired by the interior of a small truck he saw recently. It is a passing view of the itinerant, as well as an image of labor and exchange. The aluminum struts at each corner of the case echo those of *Untitled (smokes)*, pulling that work—and by implication the show as a whole—further into the contested, problematic contemporary space of a world we cannot possess, yet to which we, disoriented, are irrevocably bound.

—Michael Archer