

ARTNEWS

DETOURS

Detours: Cy Gavin on the Inaugural Show at His Secret West Harlem Gallery, The Can

BY *Alex Greenberger* POSTED 08/13/15 1:43 PM



ektor garcia, *Matanza*, 2015, leather, hemp, screw links, and handmade meat hooks.

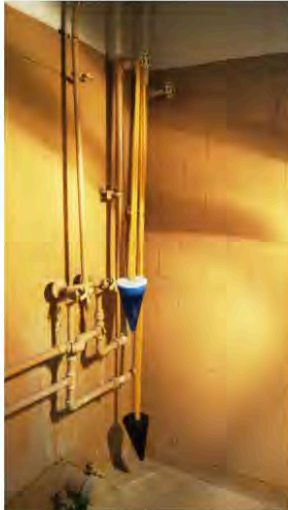
CY GAVIN

Detours is an ongoing series in which a New York-based artist gives us a tour of a show of his or her choosing. In honor of his show of paintings at Sargent's Daughters, Cy Gavin discusses the inaugural show at his secret West Harlem art space, The Can, which was curated by Participant Inc.'s director, Lia Gangitano, and features work by Michael Blake and ektor garcia. "Cy Gavin: Overture" remains on view at Sargent's Daughters through August 21. The show of work by Blake and garcia remains on view at The Can through August 30.

Cy Gavin found the space for his new gallery, The Can, by chance. He was storing his art in a building in West Harlem when, one day, he discovered a new room filled with pipes, a large metal structure, cigarette butts, cobwebs, broken glass, and trash. People hadn't been there in at least two decades, he later discovered. He spotted some light coming into the dark room and walked toward it. Then he discovered another room. "The door was a little open—there was a breeze coming in," Gavin said. "So I just opened it. The skylights just bowled me over. With a dearth of space for studios and such, to see these places with natural light existed in this location?"

MARY MARY

Gavin could barely believe it, and he still describes it as if it's too good to be true. He also has to keep it a secret—those who are interested in seeing The Can's current show of work by ektor garcia and Michael Blake will have to reserve a time slot on [the gallery's website](#). (Gavin's space isn't, strictly speaking, legal, so he'll meet you at a nearby McDonald's and walk you over.) But even if you know what you're getting into, walking through the building's subterranean corridors to get to The Can is an adventure. You know you shouldn't be there, but you're too intrigued to turn back.



Michael Blake, *Untitled*, 2015, resin and latex tubing.
CY GAVIN

The first things visitors see in The Can's inaugural show of garcia and Blake's work are meat hooks dangling over what looks like a human skin. I found it shocking; Gavin seemed unfazed. It turned out to be a work of garcia's a leather sculpture that, Gavin explained, takes its name, *Matanza* (2015), from the Spanish word for "slaughter." "It has a lot to do with ethnic cleansing and Mexico," Gavin said. "He always uses things that are tanned or naturally close to being brown or black to reference his own experience as a person of color and the experiences of his family."

Garcia's Mexican roots also informed a series of glazed ceramic works alongside rusting steel muzzles in The Can's back space, a decrepit shower room. (The space that The Can now occupies used to be the locker room for workers at a nearby factory.) Shown on a rotting wood plank, this sculpture also refers to garcia's childhood. "With respect to these dog muzzles, his ideas were linked with how, as a kid, he was constantly crossing the border, and they would have dogs with these muzzles," Gavin said. "It terrified him as a kid because it meant they could get you. Then he liked that there was a duality between that indicator of that dangerous, threatening entity with the idea that it could be tantalizing."

He continued, "In the BDSM community, which ektor doesn't entirely participate in, but which ektor has some personal experience with, muzzles are used in a way that is usually about highlighting submission. And I think in ektor's work, he's found a way of inverting this power dynamic by laughing at it. I feel like there a lot of smiling at it."

To an untrained eye, the wood plank seems to be a remnant of the locker room's old space—Gavin and Gangitano, the show's curator, wanted the boundary between the lo-fi art and The Can's decaying space to be blurry. We paused briefly to look at graffiti scrawled on one of the shower stalls. "It's not crass," Gavin said, trying to read the graffiti, which was written in verse. Time had rendered the writing illegible, but Gavin was sure there was something beautiful here. "It's poetic," he said.

MARY MARY

We moved on to talking about a piece by Blake—several ocean-blue cones attached to latex tubing and slung over a pipe. Gavin seemed to find these works funny. “He’s making these pseudo-sexual butt-plug exercise machines,” Gavin said. “You can imagine a gym or something, but with the most salacious, sexy forms.” The gelatinous-looking material used to make these sculptures, Gavin explained, was melted-down deodorant. The ironic part is that, in this form, deodorant creates “a subtle, disgusting, acrid, manmade smell that is not supposed to make you think of man, probably,” Gavin said.

Gavin directed me back to the first room, where we looked at Blake’s *Untitled (Achilles/Perseus)* (2014), a pair of plaster-cast feet in knotted gym socks attached to the wall. Plaster toes poke out of large holes in the socks—there’s something very human about it all. “He’s taking these prefab, manmade objects and making them into these bodily forms or things that are corporeal in some way,” Gavin said. “He’s making bodies into objects. I think of Ektor’s work as taking objects and making bodies out of them.”

We walked across the room to the only collaborative work in the show, a plaster cast of a deodorant stick by Blake paired with a beer can by Garcia. (“Oh, there’s a bug that kind of died. Aw!” Gavin said, flicking away a caterpillar that had expired next to Blake’s sculpture.) The cast deodorant barely needed any explaining, but, because the Bud Light beer can had a printed black-and-white image of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer wrapped around it, Gavin had a lot to say. Garcia was cleaning out his studio and found this image of Dahmer in the process. He also wanted a beer and a walk outside, so he combined all three by wrapping the print-out around the can and taking a stroll with it.



Michael Blake and Ektor Garcia, *Untitled*, 2015, plaster, Jeffrey Dahmer print-out, and Bud Light can.
CY GAVIN

“Ektor’s interests and the way that often, in the queer community, people of color are fetishized have made Jeffrey Dahmer a particularly fascinating figure for him because Dahmer targeted only those people,” Gavin said. “Men of color, including myself, felt that you could’ve gone home with this person.”

Both artists’ work, he added, is “powered by this urge to understand their identities and construct them in a space that is confusing sometimes.” As he said this, I could only imagine that this confusing space was The Can itself.