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"Lush Life: An Exhibition in Nine Chapters," New York

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The premise is a nine-part exhibition inspired by an edgy crime thriller, promising equal parts complexity and intertextuality. The results, however, aren't quite as involved. "Lush Life: An Exhibition in Nine Chapters" is grouping of a nine loosely-themed summer shows scattered throughout New York's Lower East Side. The exhibition takes its cues from Richard Price's 2008 novel, *Lush Life*, a murder mystery that unfolds around old and new ghosts of the neighborhood. But the connection stops at the level of inspiration. Not that the show is lacking in structure: the collaborative venture by painter Franklin Evans and independent curator Omar Lopez-Chahoud involved soliciting artists from each gallery, assigning a chapter title as theme to each venue, commissioning works specifically for the show, and even a website complete with a picturesque map and video tour by Price himself.

Walking through the galleries, however, the elaborate armature fades away. This may be to the show's benefit, saving the work from becoming illustrations of the novel. Price's *Lush Life* is mired in urban grit, with brisk dialogue and deft character studies that capture the desperation present in the neighborhood's upscale bars no less than its outlying housing projects. But the grit of the "Lush Life" exhibition is buried beneath layers of slick materiality: the shiny patina of surfaces, the nostalgia of blurry photographs, the delicately constructed or deliberately deskilled assemblages, the ponderously evocative or quietly ironic videos.

At venues like Salon 94, the fragility and sensitive handling of material contrast productively with the morbid undertones. Robert Lazzarini's small and shiny wall sculpture, *brass knuckles (v)* (2010), is hard to identify at first, so much a desirable object the simple weapon has become. But the menace is reflected in the drawing that flanks it: Patrick Lee's *Deadly Friends (Big Top)* (2010), where a beefy, shaven-headed man glares out of the soft graphite drawing. Crafted violence is also played up at Lehmann Maupin: the synthetic, glittering surfaces of Nina Lola Bachhuber's sculptures and drawings, for example, are given ample space to develop their balance of visceral femininity and its outward representations. And while the grouping was generally heavy on painting and drawing, the inclusion of Robert Buck's *The Shrine* (2000), which literally realized the shrine of stuffed toys, candles and cheap flowers that springs up overnight at the novel's murder site, extended the exhibition onto the street.

It is to the show's credit that different venues have a palpably different feel, ranging from the professional ambiance of Lehmann Maupin or the more relaxed air of Collette Blanchard Gallery, where it was often hard to tell where one work stopped and the other began. At that gallery, Bachhuber's totemic sculpture of a horned-and-wigged head greets visitors and creates continuity with the earlier venue. Further in, Robin Graubard's *Glass Heart Productions* (2010), an installation of photographs,

texts, and objects, suggests that the blend of authenticity and artifice that designated acts of rebellion in the eighties is not that different from how it is signaled today.

Other spaces, like *Invisible Exports*, are more tightly organized. The show takes up the bird theme of its chapter with a single-mindedness that sets it apart from other stops on the tour, and allows it to be seen as a discrete exhibition as well as a component of a larger project. Dana Levy's video of live birds roosting in a museum display, *Silent Among Us* (2009), works well with its immediate neighbors—Nicholas di Genova's classification of bird-bear hybrids in *Temperate Forest Region* (2009) and Jon Rappleye's *Night* (2009), a bleached white bird-on-a-branch sculpture—and also encapsulates the overall sense of that gallery as an object display that is both ghostly and vibrant.

If the exhibition's premise resembled a scavenger hunt, it also remained more or less at the level of a game. There were works that took exception: Nanna Debois Buhl's *Other Halves* (2007), which reads Jacob Riis's iconic documents of "how the other half lives" in view of the current state of the neighborhood, or Yashua Klos's *6 Page Letter to Silowae* (2006), which simply presents his correspondence with an incarcerated friend alongside his friend's drawings of his jail cell. But there was little to be found of the neighborhood's layered history, few works that attempted to dispel the spectacular opportunism of its recent immigrants, or even consider their real dilemmas—no attempt, in short, to really reflect on its being embedded in the neighborhood. Like any street-savvy character from *Lush Life*, the show felt the pulse of the situation and delivered accordingly. No questions asked. And none answered.