

Peter Baren: ARK (Featuring Bridge of Sighs, Sleep of Reason and Wailing Wall).
by Anne Stone

At regular intervals across the walls of the Helen Pitt Gallery, printed in smudged black charcoal, are the words, "earthling," "meatjoy," "crossfire," "shoot," "spirit." Beneath each word or phrase, a boomerang is embedded in the wall, incapable of return, and beneath each boomerang, a shadow has been drawn with charcoal.

Twenty minutes before the show begins, the artist Peter Baren walks through the gallery with a photographer, points out the places bodies will occupy during the performance.

At uneven intervals, plumes of smoke blur the borders of the room.

I trace the powdery emissions to a little black box set in the crawlspace above the lobby door. The smell is slight, sweet. The box makes a rattling, ratchety noise. As the little black box emits fumes, there is the sound of old vertical blinds endlessly drawing to a close.

Peter Baren flags the ashen smoke with a white blouse. Sends it drifting through the gallery. The smoke is so thick, I can just read, ghostly, the writing on the wall closest. Long before he appears, white blouse in hand, I've begun to think about his performance. The e-mail sent out, announcing the show's inclusion in the LIVE Biennial of performance art, had mentioned – along with the boomerangs and fog and text – Baren's use of nude models and molasses. And so I've spent the day thinking about material-based practices, about the body, and mostly, about the use of viscerally evocative substances, like this dark reduction of cane sugar. Culturally, molasses is a rich material sign, one with associations that prefigure the glacial pace of this show and, in this context, is able to signpost seminal performances of the past, like Carolee Schneeman's "Body Collage" or, as literally referenced by the writing on the wall, her 1964 performance, "Meat Joy." But molasses is also a visceral fluid, a slant double for abject bodily emissions: literally, it is a shit-brown drizzle on skin. But the substance's use in performance art signifies another way too. The laying on of this liquid acts to render a suspect tegument, but also strikes me with the full force of a cliché.

In the pre-show gallery, every few minutes, the smoke begins to clear and the text is faintly visible, and once again, there is the sound of rattling blinds and clouds of sweet smelling stuff and near-blindness.

The effect of the smoke, of seeing a little ways in, is both intimate and disorienting: It leaves me attuned to sound, sensing the incomplete edges of things. The show begins without a certain stroke of beginning, having a number of different starts, contingent on perception. The show starts when it is seen to begin.

It will end, though, with a small but unmistakable gesture: Baren will return to the room, one of a dozen such returns, but this time, he will acknowledge, with a small movement of his head and bend of the back, that we are no longer a proximal wall, rimming the gallery, but bodies outside of a performance. In other words, that we can clap.

Baren puts the first male model into position. The model's arms are to his sides and he is naked except for saran-wrap. He has been drizzled with molasses and his eyes have been blacked out. Peter Baren's hands rest on the model's plastic-wrapped hips, and he presses the model forward into a pre-determined space.

Hanging from each of the model's wrists is a large and flat silver circle, obscenely large earrings; each circle is cut into a series of smaller circles and so, each circular strip spins, and in spinning, cuts a third dimension. The model slowly circles in place as Baren retraces his steps, disappears into the back, and the circles dangling from the model's wrists circle too. And again there is the sound of old metal blinds pulled to an endless close as smoke clouds vision, and all that can be seen is the model's disembodied hand, outstretched, as it passes my way in the ashen fog, and a glint of orbital silver, and then that, too, vanishes for a cycle.

The process with the first male model repeats with the addition of a second and third. In this careful orchestration and repetition of key elements, is a movement towards the ritualistic; there is something of the sacred, though touched by fetish. After the next two young male models are put into place, Baren returns with the first female.

Each woman's face is covered with a black and white gingham scarf. The scarves disturb me, erasing the women's faces, reminding me of old medical photos from the 18th century, ones in which the faces of the naked specimens are covered, effectively struck from what is of interest, the bodies which display some deformity of interest to a medical (or other) gaze. Both women wear saran wrap over breasts and hips and like the male models, are smeared with the sticky brown trope of performance art. The saran wrap binding their hips and breasts is tight, cinching.

Peter Baren places his hands on the hips of the first female model, and with his hands, directs her to the place, earlier, he'd indicated to a photographer. It's difficult to navigate in so small a gallery, what with the bodies of the audience lined up against the walls, and the male models, arms outstretched, rotating in place with such outlandishly large jewelry suspended from each wrist, circling satellites. Baren slowly carves a path through all of the bodies in the Helen Pitt Gallery, places the first female model near the front of the gallery. Over the next couple of minutes, he returns with the second.

I wonder how the so-called models feel about their role in the performance. At the end of the night, as the last of the models leave, I recognize him as a local performance artist, whose work centres around abjectness, and, I later learn, explores the shaping of subaltern bodies under globalization. Perhaps, to this artist, molasses is a thing apart from its deployment in this show: Perhaps it is a substance that evokes colonialism. How does it feel, for these long minutes, to be one of three male bodies, his eyes blacked out, his body slowly spinning as his arms grow tired, weighted down and held perpendicular to his trunk as perceptibly, the molasses dries, tightens, and contracts on his skin.

Molasses isn't just a cliché or a cultural sign, I'm reminded, looking at the model closest, it's also a sticky mess that evokes real physical discomfort, that suffocates the skin. I find myself wondering, as the performance slowly progresses, if there is a shower in the back of the gallery, or even just a sink.

Peter Baren circles the female models. In his hand he holds a strange looking machine, layered like a wedding cake, composed of different levels, and between each level, one or more pistons. Lights flash at the end of each piston's cycle and the little machine makes the sound, over and over, that a Polaroid does when it cranks out a picture.

The models, facing one another, hold the wedding-cake piston between them.

Sometimes, all there is to be heard is the sound of the piston, and with all the smoke, there isn't even the barest trace of circling satellites. Sometimes, there is a glint, but nothing of the human arms that suspend. And sometimes, above the silver rounds, there is a human limb, orphaned by smoke.

Baren walks the periphery of the gallery, a sign in hand. Baren makes eye contact and presents the sign to each person before moving on. The sign reads: Ark: Featuring Bridge of Sighs, Sleep of Reason and Wailing Wall.

The second time Baren counter-clocks the periphery, he is holding out the other side of the sign – a jigsaw puzzle photograph. It's impossible to take it in, entirely, but it looks to be a soldier holding a body. The body has been shaped into a backward arc, and the soldier's arms support her. It is a black and white photo of a woman whose back is arched like a broken gymnast's. Baren takes the puzzle picture to pieces, walks the periphery and distributes pieces on the cool concrete flooring.

The markings of his charcoal on the wall are audible. Only later, between smoke clouds, do I see Baren writing. As he writes, he whispers, sleep of reason, sleep of reason, and later, wailing wall, wailing wall. He writes right to left, "marah marah amal marah" and on around the walls of the gallery.

He writes in an unfamiliar language on the floor at the feet of the female models, circling, and at the feet of the male models, distant from me, a spiral of familiar language opens outwards and traces the length of the gallery, "hope by force by far by far by far by far by far by force by far by far by far by far by far" and on.

And then slowly, over the course of long minutes, Peter Baren retracts the models, step by step, his hands pressing the male model's arms to their sides, and guiding each by the hips to the back room. As the last model is taken from the gallery space, I can hear voices and running water from the back of the gallery. And for a moment, before Baren returns to indicate the show's conclusion, all there is is the residue of this night, crazy white writings on the dark grey floor and on the white walls, black scribbles, and scattered at our feet, dozens of puzzle pieces, together forming a kind of prison-cell bedlam.

Anne Stone is a writer living in Vancouver. She is the author of *Jacks: A Gothic Gospel* (DC Books, 1998), *Hush* (Insomniac Press, 1999) and *Delible* (Insomniac Press, 2007) and has published fiction and essays extensively throughout North America.