

Interview

ART

THE STILL HOUSE ON STRIKE

By ALLYSON SHIFFMAN

Initially, you might be surprised to find works from members of the young, contemporary artist collective The Still House Group alongside those by deceased masters in a gallery on the Upper East Side. What is even more surprising is how natural the pieces look installed several feet from one another, despite being conceived decades apart. It is easy to spot the congruencies between the late French sculptor's César's compressed vehicles and Still House's Dylan Lynch's compacted barrel, or Lucio Fontana's iconic sliced canvasses and Alex Perweiler's blown-up images of discarded matchbooks—both works that find beauty in casual destruction. But beyond an aesthetic coherence, *Strike(s)*, which opened earlier this week at Madison Avenue's Nahmad Contemporary, emphasizes a similarity in approach between the Still House artists and their predecessors. Both groups deny art world convention and established power structures. Both find artistic beauty in seemingly destructive or even violent acts. The opening of *Strike(s)* was populated with a peculiar mix of uptown art enthusiasts and the hip, young crowd that loyally follows the Still House boys wherever they go. It felt like a half-century update on the show in which *Interview's* founder, Andy Warhol, exhibited his infamous Brillo Boxes at an Upper West Side gallery in 1964. Perhaps there were some perplexed looks or some discontented murmurs, but as Warhol, and the artists of the Arte Povera movement featured in this exhibit were well aware, any good show is sure to spark some controversy. We called up Still House co-founder Perweiler at the collective's studio in Red Hook to chat about the exhibition and the evolution of Still House. ALLYSON SHIFFMAN: How does it feel to see your work in the same room as César, Lucio Fontana, and Alberto Burri? ALEX PERWEILER: I speak for everybody when I say it was an honor and a privilege. It's interesting to see work that was made so long ago in dialogue with work that's made now, and the effect that they have one another. All of the work in that show is super important, because it paved the way not just for us, but for everything that came after it. The work that my contemporaries and I made in dialogue with that work makes it look very fresh. That's also a

testament to the quality of the work—it continues to look and function in a very contemporary way. SHIFFMAN: It was interesting to see a more youthful, downtown scene of people in that space for the opening. PERWEILER: We tend to attract a younger audience that's actively engaged in some sort of creative field. In my opinion, the space that this exhibition took place in is a museum quality space in everything from scale to lighting to the entire configuration. In addition to being able to exhibit our work with the historical work, the platform was second to none. SHIFFMAN: How did the show come to be? PERWEILER: A group show of just our work was proposed, and that was counteracted with the idea that, because of the circumstance, there was this opportunity to source this historical work. We aren't necessarily established enough to obtain this type of work when we do shows ourselves and the insurance can be very expensive. Joe [Nahmad] has access. This platform gave us the ability to source the work quite easily and quite quickly—quick enough that it became a feasible idea to execute.

SHIFFMAN: Can you tell me a bit about the process of creating the matchbook painting that's featured? PERWEILER: It's made by collecting discarded matchbooks that I find moving through my everyday routine—whether they're found on the floor or in one of my contemporaries studios or in my house. The actual work is executed by creating a photograph of the matchbooks. Typically it's done in pieces; I'll take four photographs of one book and digitally piece them together. That's done in order to create the high level of clarity that you see in the actual image. Then they are printed onto aluminum panels, which I make here in my studio. SHIFFMAN: How has Still House changed or evolved in the last couple of years? PERWEILER: We've grown significantly from where we originally started, both in our ability to produce more work and our community outreach in terms of our residency program. Essentially, we have eight studios in our space, and there's a ninth one that rotates every three months for our residents. There's an exhibition space in the front—it's sort of a platform that allows for experimentation. SHIFFMAN: You have had that space in Red Hook for some time—how has the neighborhood changed? PERWEILER: From what I've heard from the outside looking in, it does seem like it is changing significantly. It's getting a lot of attention. It's a desirable place; it's on the water, it's quiet, there's a much more suburban atmosphere—that's attractive to people—and it also has space. We all exist in our studio bubble. It's from our houses to the studio and then back to our houses. SHIFFMAN: You mean you're not engaged in the Red Hook community? PERWEILER: [*laughs*] I was just going to say we're community activists. SHIFFMAN: Tell me more a bit more about the residency program. What are you looking for in an artist who wants to come do a residency at Still House? PERWEILER: The objective is to find someone who's going to add a different layer to the conversation. In terms of finding people to participate, it's been a pretty fluid and organic process—one person leads to the next person who leads to the next person. But we are all out there, actively looking for artists we find interesting. SHIFFMAN: When you guys started you weren't necessarily career artists, but now it seems you've all been able to "quit your day jobs," so to speak. How do you balance the business or moneymaking aspects that come with that sort of success with Still House's original vision? PERWEILER: I don't think that part is difficult—the original vision is still 100 percent intact. The difference is that it's actually working. "*STRIKE(S)*" *IS ON VIEW AT NAHMAD CONTEMPORARY THROUGH MARCH 1.*