

REVIEWS

Things Got Legs

JESSE BERCOWETZ AND MATT BUA: THINGS GOT LEGS

DEREK ELLER GALLERY, NEW YORK
7 SEPTEMBER - 14 OCTOBER

Jesse Bercowetz and Matt Bua,
Architectural Additions, 2006,
wood, polystyrene, Plexiglass,
metal, paper, shish kebab skewers,
plastic, wire, ultrasonic foggers,
collage, acrylic paint, video,
audio, fans, electronics, Q-tips,
toothpicks, liquid nails,
foam core, string wire.
320 x 602 x 262 cm. Courtesy Derek
Eller Gallery, New York

One of the seemingly endless social side effects of 9/11 is that the conspiracy theory, once the happy preserve of psychos and religious fanatics, is back in fashion. Young American artists Jesse Bercowetz and Matt Bua are obsessed with conspiracy theories and seem to have spent as much time researching them as Tom Hanks's professor in *The Da Vinci Code*. Their new multimedia installation, *Things Got Legs*, gives grotesque 3-D reality to the myriad conspiracy theories – satanism, ritual abuse, time travel, the paranormal – that lurk in the subconscious of contemporary America.

Bercowetz and Bua's apocalyptic vision features a motley cast of aliens, paedophiles, the CIA, the Masons, Uri Geller and George Bush, all vying for attention within a dense, ramshackle landscape of shantytown architecture, overgrown nature, totems and crucifixes, bubbling pools of radioactive water and armies of model helicopters.

Special effects are hammy but weirdly unnerving: tripwires that set off eerie noises, flashing lights that reveal subliminal imagery. These artists are expert at creating atmosphere.

Bercowetz and Bua are self-appointed investigators into the dark side of American politics and folklore. Entering the gallery feels like accidentally stumbling upon their private laboratory, the kind that has a Danger: Keep Out sign on the door. Excitingly, this looks like a scene from *The X-Files*: there are files of case studies, photos, newspaper clippings, a reference library of books and CDs, interviews with dozens of conspiracy theorists and, more intriguingly, a mind-control machine with plastic guns positioned ominously around a makeshift seat. In one corner sits a model of the Twin Towers, delicately constructed from kebab skewers like a giant Jenga set and surreally topped by a bowling ball. An advert for www.911truth.org and questions scribbled inside scattered notebooks provide clues to the experiment: why did three high-rise buildings collapse at Ground Zero when only two were hit? Where were the US air defences during the 37-minute gap before the Pentagon was hit?

Like all good conspiracy theories, the illicit thrill of *Things Got Legs* is in the questions, not the answers, which disappointingly tend to reveal the raving lunacy or crooked agenda of their creators. Instead, Bercowetz and Bua merely encourage the making of connections between unexplained phenomena that turn cynical art viewers into the type of conspiracy theorists they are usually so quick to scorn. Risqué jokes designed to appeal to a liberal audience – distasteful links between River Phoenix and underage sex, Bush and satanism – lure the viewer further into Bercowetz and Bua's web of conspiracy before it becomes clear that this installation isn't actually that funny.

The last room is even – embarrassing to admit this – a bit scary. Remember cult film *The Blair Witch Project*? Know-it-all kids sent to investigate a seemingly implausible myth in which they become fatally implicated. Bercowetz and Bua have created a brilliantly unsettling work: a parody of paranoia which, paradoxically, leaves the viewer feeling more paranoid than ever. *Jennifer Thatcher*

