Jean-Luc Moulène
MIGUEL ABREU GALLERY

After visiting Jean-Luc Moulène’s “Torture Concrete” at Miguel Abreu Gallery this past fall, one would have been forgiven for scratching one’s head. The artist’s diverse, astringent work, which has ranged from monochrome paintings and landscape photographs to enigmatic sculptures comes wrapped in a aura of obdurate difficulty—the implacable air of the deadly and complex. Split between the gallery’s two spaces, this show displayed thirty-seven pieces in various media, many (though not all) belonging to “Opus,” 1995—a series that was the subject of a major survey at Dia:Beacon in 2011.

In a 2009 interview with art historian Briony Fer, Moulène articulated a mission statement of sorts: His work, he declared, is born of a desire to create “any indescribable object with exactitude.” The original French uses the adjective quelconque, which can also be translated into English as “anything whatever” or “unspecific” and points to the phrase’s self-consciously wry inversion (if not involution) of Donald Judd’s “specific object.” Fer goes on to invoke Judd’s statement that a “form that’s neither geometric or organic would be a great discovery.” Moulène responds: “We know about other mathematical models, other, less dualistic geometries.” Could such geometries lead toward the quelconque? To be sure, several works in the show show Moulène borrowing from the esoteric netherworlds of higher math—specifically, from a branch of topology called knot theory—where he has found a rich vocabulary of forms and procedures in which the categories of geometric and organic break down.

In fact, one way to view this exhibition was as a veritable Wunderkammer of topological knots. At the Orchard Street space, a pair of dazzling blown-glass sculptures modeled something called the Hopf link; seven glass and bronze works mounted on vertical poles at Eldridge Street reconstructed the first five prime, or “nontrivial,” knots; nearby, a compact ravel of red, blue, and yellow blown-glass loops expressed Borromean rings; and a group of concrete heads cast from Halloween-mask molds were, the press release informed us, “another variation of the knot in its most condensed, simplest form of a single loop surface” (or a self-contained sphere). The prevalence of blown glass was fitting, as the plasticity of that substance in its molten state has a natural affinity with a mathematical discipline that studies the continuous properties of three-dimensional objects in a dynamic state of change and deformation. And deforming these knots Moulène does: He seems to relish destruction through creation. The majority of his sculptures—particularly the seven based on prime knots—steadfastly flout math-textbook ideals of depictive clarity. Rather than reveal their structure, the bronze Noeud S.1 Varia 02 (Paris, 2012) and its ilk are blasted, bony wreaths.

That’s because for Moulène, knots are a means, not the end. They are tools. “We can consider the surrounding world not in terms of forms and colours, but topographically,” he said in his interview with Fer, “in terms of the number of holes.” A concern with holes, and with classifying the world by holes, evidently inspired Blown Knot 1 (CIRVA, Marseille, June 2014) and Tête-à-Cul (Paris, spring 2014)—two works that, at first glance, could hardly be more different. To make the former, the artist shaped a length of welded mesh into a trefoil—the second of the prime knots—and then inflated a blown-glass vessel inside it. As the heated glass expanded to fill the metal structure, it bulged outward around the wire, swelling like a strangled balloon. For Tête-à-Cul (Paris, spring 2014), meanwhile, Moulène began with an actual balloon, and inflated it inside a very different kind of object—an assemblage consisting of the jawbone of a boar affixed to the pelvic bone of a deer. Here, the swelling is disturbingly bodily and considerably more extreme: Latex protruberances spill like tumors from between the sculptures’ gaps.

The shared submission to the forces of inflation, construction, and distension in these works—this squeezing of substances through orifices and holes—suggests a vision of the world as a continuum of homeomorphisms. It is a place where the organic and the geometric might meet or entangle or overlap as they collapse onto a spectrum of continuous flux, as destabilizing expressions of the quelconque.

—Lloyd Wise

Kiki Kogelnik
SIMONE SUBAL GALLERY

Kiki Kogelnik’s art has rarely been seen in New York aside from a superb 2012 show of work from the 1960s at Simone Subal, despite the fact that the artist, who died in 1997, lived in the city for the entirety of her adult life and maintained close friendships with other significant artists such as Roy Lichtenstein and Claes Oldenburg. With “Cuts, Fissures and Identity: Works from the 1960s and 70s,” a second exhibition at Simone Subal that opened this past November, Kogelnik’s art feels hard to ignore; it puts pressure on a Pop moment we thought we knew, and, in doing so, forces us to reconsider things we may have guessed about Pop but were afraid to ask.

Though Pop was deeply committed to the image, it would have nothing without the body, and so it is with Kogelnik’s work. The body here, however, is not simply flattened or “imagined,” but incessantly cut, poked, and prodded. It is a medicalized body, subjected to surgery and ripe for examination; Kogelnik made good use of her husband’s access to equipment at the now-defunct St. Vincent’s Hospital in New York, where he worked as a radiation oncologist. One of the strangest and most striking works in the exhibition featured a photograph of an X-ray of a woman’s torso: The points where arms would emerge, however, have been cut out so as to suggest mouths and chins; next to these sharp, quasi-abstract silhouettes, there are two spray-painted starbursts (most likely shower drains) that conjure the image of phone receivers—someone or something is trying to get through. The work put me in mind of the late photomontages of John Heartfield, but Kogelnik’s use of the form—certainly no longer “radical” by the mid-1960s—raises an issue pertinent to her moment, and to ours: a new, permeable self that communicates in previously unheard-of ways.

Certainly, this is the theme that haunts all of Kogelnik’s work, and, happily, she offered no easy answer. In a later work on paper, Untitled
Peter Stichbury
TRACY WILLIAMS, LTD.

“In the afternoon of April 6, 1966, one of the most famous UFO cases in the world occurred over a school in Westall, Australia,” begins a passage on a handout that accompanied “Anatomy of a Phenomenon,” New Zealand painter Peter Stichbury’s recent exhibition. “Pupils and teachers were told not to talk about what they had seen, and the chemistry teacher, Barbara Robbins, who had taken photos with her camera, was forced by authorities to hand it over.” In Stichbury’s portrait of the woman, Ms. Robbins is depicted as an oval-faced blonde with haunted, wide-set eyes that suggest the persistence of a traumatic memory—and give her something of an otherworldly appearance. This particular look is a longtime signature of the artist’s, and in this exhibition, he explained it by asserting that those pictured were all “experiencers” — individuals who have supposedly had a close encounter with aliens or their craft.

At Tracy Williams, Ltd., Barbara Robbins, Westall High (all works 2014) was joined by four other portraits ranged along one wall. These faced off against five black-and-white paintings based on published photographs of UFOs, and a sixth such pair hung together in a separate space. Picturing mostly saucer-like shapes—and, in one case, the elongated inverted teardrop of a weather balloon—the UFO series made the exhibition’s basis in the culture of sighting, encounter, and abduction visually explicit. The images’ geometric simplicity—their forms and near-featurelessness of their aerial backgrounds make them appear virtually abstract—on that earlier occasion, the artist linked his subjects’ apparent torpor to the existential angst associated with the nineteenth-century Russian literary archetype from which the show borrowed its title. And two years before that, in “The Proteus Effect,” he tethered the unreality of his steely, Lempicka-esque visages to the robotic idealization of digital avatars. Although his style remains consistent from project to project, this continual thematic reinvocation has allowed the artist’s oeuvre to gradually accumulate an absorbing breadth and complexity.

Perhaps Stichbury’s work is linked, however, not only via explanation but also via continuing mystery. Just as the UFO phenomenon is shrouded in layers of disinformation, conspiracy theory, and myth that no amount of investigative reporting or academic debunking seems able to conclusively penetrate, so too do Stichbury’s portraits depict the citizens of an alternate reality that hovers just out of reach, visible but partially suppressed. The stony-faced looks of Milton Torres, a military pilot who was ordered to open fire on a UFO over England, and Gordon Cooper, an astronaut and repeat experiencer, confront the viewer with a seeming candor that ultimately repels helpful analysis. The photo paintings too are self-consciously frustrating, offering only tantalizing glimpses, never the longed-for head-on view. The UFO phenomenon is real in the sense that it continues to generate reportage and debate (not to mention entertainment), but, as with the “phenomenon” of art, its interpretation is unfixed, perhaps unfixable. It is, like the photographs on Barbara Robbins’s government-confiscated camera, removed from common view.

—Michael Wilson