



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JONATHAN MEESE, *DR. NO (MEESAINT JUST II MEIN ICH, DIE WARHEIT)*, 2006. PHOTO: JOCHEN LITTKEMANN, COURTESY CONTEMPORARY FINE ARTS, BERLIN; THE ICELANDIC LOVE CORPORATION ON THEIR WAY TO PERFORM *INTIMACY CIRCUS*, NEW YORK, 2004. PHOTO: ELISABET DAVÍÐSDÓTTIR; BREYER P-ORRIDGE, *CRUCIFORM*, 2005. COURTESY THE ARTIST; CARIANACARIANNE, *OATHS OF SIGNATURE*, 2005. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

NORTH ADAMS, MASSACHUSETTS

THE BELIEVERS

MASS MOCA

"The Believers" is the title of the current exhibition at Mass MOCA, but it would have been more appropriately called "The Visionaries" or, even better, "The Mad Geniuses." The show's theme is deliberately vague; various constructs in which one can believe surface throughout, from utopia and social perfection to the powers of science, religion, and the perfect sexual union. But the overarching form of belief that runs through the exhibition—one that is unexamined by the show's organizers—is the belief in artistic genius.

Quite a few of the artists are not visionary outsiders but artworld insiders: Bas Jan Ader serves as the exhibition's godfather and guiding spirit; Panamarenko and "Plan B" (a.k.a. Fritz Haeg and Yoshua Okon); Jonathan Meese; and the all-women performance-art trio known as the Icelandic Love Corporation. Meese's work is so deeply ironic that any attempt to claim it as a representation of belief—even of belief in artistic genius—seems to double back on itself; he is not a believer but a neo-expressionistic cynic, more Kippenberger than Beuys. In contradistinction to the insiders, Emery Blagdon and Witch Vortex are two bona fide "outsider artists" whose work would fit well in an outsider-art fair, despite its being made for healing and spiritual purposes, respectively. What is unconsidered is how the curatorial framework—which emphasizes the apotheosis of the artist as genius—affects their artworld institutionalization. To be put on display as an artist in the context of an exhibition whose subtext is artistic genius is to be labeled as an artistic genius. But beyond mistaking Meese's self-aggrandizement for a belief in art, artistic genius as a form of belief remains unexplored.

Geniuses or not, some of the best work here comes from nonartists, or those only marginally involved in the contemporary artworld. Belief in science is what drives two of them. After being trained as an artist in the Netherlands, Theo Jansen turned to artificial intelligence and bricoleur-style, DIY "robotics" in his *Strandbeest* (Beach Animals). These huge creatures, built from plastic tubing, are designed to collect and compress air as their winglike appendages flap in the wind. Stored in plastic soda bottles attached to the beasts' bodies, the compressed air pneumatically drives

them up and down the beach on multiple, crablike legs. Finnish electronic-music and personal-computer pioneer Erkki Kurenniemi shows off his early designs (beginning in the 1970s) for electronic music synthesizers incorporating video imaging and biofeedback as interfaces. Religious belief has never been more exuberantly psychedelic than in the silk screens of Sister Corita (a.k.a. Corita Kent), whose trippy posters included abraded, clashing fonts decades before *Ray Gun* magazine made them cool. Liberally quoting from John Lennon and Martin Luther King Jr., her brilliantly colored prints shout out antiwar and anticorporate messages that resonate today.

Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man recurs in some of the strangest, most provocative work in the exhibition. The Vitruvian Man figured Man (with a capital M) as the perfect union of the sacred and the secular. Breyer P-Orridge and CarianaCarianne push this union even further, exploding humanist notions of Man by profaning the sacred and problematizing the singular. Breyer P-Orridge, a two-person collective consisting of Lady Jaye and Genesis P-Orridge, represent the Vitruvian Man as an overlay of their self-images into a pansexual being that is indeterminately female and male. Breyer P-Orridge's work is largely dedicated to documenting the various transformations the couple has undertaken to become more physically like each other, including multiple surgical procedures from facial modifications to matching breast implants. Moving in precisely the opposite direction, CarianaCarianne has split her personality into two personae, creating a dual, schizoid self that she (they?) documents in various works, including a 2005 video in which Cariana and Carianne each recite in turn an "Oath of Signature" written on the occasion of their becoming official notary publics. Through some minor video wizardry, they swear an oath to each other, claiming their different signatures as unique, and therefore legally securing their separate identities.

Despite the challenges to the Renaissance legacy of singular artistic genius seen in Breyer P-Orridge and CarianaCarianne's post-Vitruvian representations of being, the exhibition as a whole upholds it. The curators claim that what binds all the works together is the individual genius of each maker rather than any shared belief. This makes for a wonderfully eccentric collection of objects, while simultaneously affirming the artist as the visionary outsider. Perhaps a more provocative exhibition would eschew notions of singular genius for a more complex, skeptical understanding of the nature of belief against its idealization as inherent in the figure of the great artist.

—WILLIAM KAIZEN