

# THE NEW MUSEUM

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## STORY MANN: POSSUMHEAD

Installation, June 30 - July 21, 1979

Story Mann's work challenges today's sophisticated viewer and defies the cool objectivity which is expected of the seasoned spectator. Born in 1953, in North Carolina, Mann attended the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and presently lives and works in Austin, Texas.

Mann's academic background was based in sculpture, but his work derives from a variety of media and emphasizes total environments rather than individual pieces. His earlier major works had outdoor settings. Architectural structures built by the artist were activated by a diversity of objects placed outside and within their actual space. Mann is skilled in woodworking and carpentry, having at times earned a living as a cabinet-maker, and his environments evidence his interest and ability in these pursuits.

Midget Tower, constructed in Chicago in 1977, was an awkwardly vertical split log thatch-roofed fortress, ominously encircled by stuffed crows on rocky perches and "guarded" by two devilishly horned shamanistic scarecrows. The only approach to the structure was via a crude hand-hewn ladder and across a narrow hanging bridge without handrails. The cumulative effect of these threatening obstacles and the precarious means of entry was to intimidate the viewer while guarding against the violation of the sanctum sanctorum. "The invitation," Mann reminds us, "is always harder to accept than the final act." Inside, Midget Tower actually provided a temporary home for a "crazy midget" Story Mann had befriended in Chicago.

The artist's next major project was Pop's Pavilion of Death, created at Artpark near Buffalo, New York. It was a windowless concrete dome, 20 feet in diameter. This arcane fortress, like a mausoleum, was virtually impenetrable save through a highly ritualized system of entry. Encircled by a low rocky wall and a barbed wire fence, the pavilion was illuminated and further protected at night by a blazing ring of gas flames. Here again, spectators entered only on the artist's terms. Mann and his cronies, anonymously concealed in intimidating disguises, were in complete control.

Possumhead, Mann's piece for The New Museum, draws from some of the sources found in earlier works. Mann divides the site into two separate arenas. In the "inner sanctum" he recreates a barren Texas landscape--the kind of terrain found south of the Austin area where he now lives. In effect, Mann has created a theater set, the set providing its own drama. Amidst this ominous native landscape the artist projects his devastating representation of a fundamental American icon: house and home. Mann filmed a burning house in the same foreboding environment he reproduces in the Museum. There, in the great open spaces so prized in the history of this country, the artist symbolically lays waste to the basic image upon which so many of our traditional values have been predicated.

The other half of the Possumhead installation relates directly to the artist's personal life and draws directly from autobiographical sources. Some of the photographs and assorted paraphernalia relate to dogfighting, while others are records of people, places and events in the artist's life. Still others simply evidence Mann's own kind of black humor and fascination with things which menace, threaten and intimidate: the bizarre, the mystical, violence, death and destruction. The videotape featured in the installation documents a two and half hour dogfight which took place recently in Commanche, Oklahoma. The artist has been fascinated by this illegal sport for the past two years and keeps several pit bull terriers of his own, training them and entering them in matches across the country. Mann is obviously attracted to the energetic theatrical environment in which the fights are staged, and he is also drawn to the subculture in which the sport thrives.

Story Mann twists the knife in his liberal museum audience by confronting us with a graphic description of a bloodbath involving man's best friends. He transgresses the realm of acceptable source material and good taste even as they are loosely and broadly defined by many wordly adherents to the avant-garde. He gives us a vivid portrait of an event which is both illegal and taboo in our culture and dares us to objectify it and translate it into yet another "civilized" art world viewpoint.

The artist is certainly not attempting to proselytize us to become dogfight enthusiasts, but he does dare us to observe and acknowledge something of the ferocity in the interplay between life and death, when that interplay has not been muted, repressed, or transposed into substitutes determined more palatable and acceptable by our society.

Mann acknowledges the dual nature of violence by recognizing it as characteristic of the instincts which both create and destroy life. He is fascinated by its natural energy, spontaneity and ferocity. He admires it as a force which ultimately overrides and exceeds the bounds of institutions and imposed rules of behavior. At the same time, he reminds us that what gives us the greatest passion for life also threatens to destroy us.

This is the first of five installations specially executed for The New Museum, which will appear throughout the summer.

June 30-  
July 21

FINLEY FRYER  
DAVID SAUNDERS

The Cat Band  
Scope

August 25-  
September 15

PHYLLIS BRAMSON  
GUNDERSON and CLARK

The Myths of Inspiration  
Dagar Ane