

when he applied his oil paint more thickly. Like the earlier canvases, *The Black Line* is divided into quadrants. This quartering seems to have been Leslie's modus operandi. And then there's the vertically oriented *Cough Control*, 1961–62. Rather than calling to mind the best, most carefree side of Leslie, it feels labored and ponderous. The various areas of the painting are more rigid than the other works in the show, and the colors seem more assertive, even though the artist used a lot of white and some pale blue. This canvas looks like a cross between the work of Al Held and Knox Martin from the same period. Like the selection of eight incidental collages spanning the '50s that were on view, it seems to have been included for the historical record. This time around, the chunky parts just don't cohere.

Meanwhile, Leslie was making underground films, including the highly regarded *Pull My Daisy* (1959), which he codirected with the incomparable Robert Frank; he also took many Polaroid portraits, nearly all of which were burned to a crisp in 1966. In 1962, he began painting remarkable, gargantuan grisaille figures that were at the forefront of the realism revival at the end of the decade. Once Leslie started to exhibit his huge figures, his wonderful early abstractions were all but forgotten. But standing in front of *Four Panel Green—Big Green* at Alan Stone Projects, it's clear why Leslie was so admired back in the day.

—Phyllis Tuchman

BALTIMORE

Ajay Kurian

ROWHOUSE PROJECT

At the recent exhibition of Mike Kelley's "Kandor" series at Hauser & Wirth in New York, it was easy to forget that these seductive glass-enclosed resin cityscapes—essentially overwrought snow globes—were emblems of trauma. In comic-book lore, Kandor is the last remnant of Superman's destroyed planet, Krypton, shrunk down and preserved beneath a bell jar. "Kandor now sits, frozen in time," wrote Kelley, "a

perpetual reminder of [Superman's] inability to escape that past, and his alienated relationship to his present world." The influence of Kelley's Kandors is evident throughout the work Ajay Kurian has made over the past five years: Plexiglas displays of jawbreakers, action figures, betta fish, e-cigarettes, reindeer moss, magnets, iPad holders, and other choice tchotchkes arranged to evoke otherworldly territories or hallucinatory natural-history dioramas. The sculptures in "Work Harder Under Water," Kurian's first solo show in his hometown Baltimore, revealed a continued preoccupation with the Kandors, though with a shift in focus from the formal to the thematic—that is, from alien landscapes to alienation.

I confess to some embarrassment at even mentioning alienation in an art review. So hackneyed! It reeks of action painting's privileged brooding. But strip the word of its Sartrean and Marxist varnish, and you're left

with *alien*. In a statement accompanying "Work Harder," Kurian writes vividly, angrily, of how the sense of belonging he experienced as the son of a prosperous Indian doctor began to crack in the wake of 9/11, when suddenly his skin color flagged him as a security threat. Baltimore, news reports attest, has lately been showing its fissures as well. A status quo of disenfranchisement has given way to outright riot and rising violence. Rowhouse Project, the show's host venue, is a typical Baltimore residence that, between exhibitions, undergoes periodic renovations for eventual resale. Kurian took advantage of this unusual (and *unheimlich*) situation, treating the venue as a city-in-miniature—a Kandor, if you will—where, between floorboards and slatted walls, structural instabilities could assume a texture and shape.

The awkward greetings started in the foyer with a frog-faced black-amoor, an amphibian cousin to the obese figurines that populated Fred Wilson's US pavilion project at the 2003 Venice Biennale. (Wilson's landmark excavation of slavery's material culture, "Mining the Museum," debuted in Baltimore in 1992.) A pair of Bermuda shorts dangled around the frogman's ankles as he held aloft a loudspeaker adorned with cadmium imitation leaves and filled, like a serving bowl, with liquid pink cornstarch. The speaker emitted a low bass hum that stirred the slurry into a bubbling Pepto-Bismol swamp. On a nearby wall, a faint smear turned out to be *Self Portrait as a Monkey Holding Another Monkey*, 2015, a silk screen in butter based on a drawing commissioned from a caricaturist by Kurian's classmates at a prep-school party—a joke that appears less innocent with hindsight. Kurian's work has incorporated audio equipment or tested the limits of viewer perception before, but here these experiments possessed a newfound social dimension. The butter became a suitably slippery stand-in for structural racism, a stain visible only in raking light.

The house's surprises and confrontations carried on from there: two cracked ostrich eggshells, each filled with black polyurethane, inside a kitchen cupboard; an oversize purple Plexiglas Jacob's ladder hanging down the stairwell; handheld video of a black Muppet policeman asphyxiating himself; an Edward Kienholz-esque assemblage-cum-fountain of wire scarecrows in schoolboy clothes, one pissing into another's mouth; and, in the basement, a system of pipes dripping water into buckets and pails surrounding yams nestled in mounds of dirt. The exhibition culminated on the top floor with *The Half-Life of Fucked Is Forever*, 2015, a trash can brimming with glow-in-the-dark chains. The title's allusion to radioactive isotopes connects back to Kurian's 2013 exhibition "Proleptic," at 47 Canal, New York, which riffed on the problematics of nuclear-waste storage. Again, Kurian's work has now acquired an additional layer of social concern. It was impossible to miss that the trash can's contents were chains, tools of oppression that, though broken in a heap, remained toxic.

—Colby Chamberlain

MIAMI

Alex Bag

INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART

For Alex Bag's solo show, which opened in concert with Art Basel Miami Beach this past December, the art-establishment farceur reprised her 2001 mockumentary about the fictional pimp-cum-cultural entrepreneur Leroy LeLoup (played by the artist's brother, Damian Bag, in a skunky wig) some fifteen years after he debuted his "gallery" (housed in a souped-up white Dodge Ram) at the 2001 Armory Show in New York. *Untitled (The Van)*, 2001—a scabrous and still apt parody of the art world's simultaneous demand for critique and complicit consumerism—is screened inside the titular van, which was reinstalled in ICA

Ajay Kurian, *Prep*, 2015, mixed media, dimensions variable.

