

## Michael Asher by James Welling



Installation view: *Michael Asher*, Artists Space, New York, 2024–25. Courtesy Artists Space, New York and the Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation. Photo: Carter Seddon.

Michael Asher (1943–2012) approached each exhibition as a unique situation, and when the show closed that was that. Nothing remained. In a sense, Asher worked more like a dancer than a traditional object-maker, and the ephemerality of his work appeared to foreclose a posthumous exhibition.

But remarkably, Artists Space has found a way to celebrate this eccentric and influential artist with a survey exhibition now on view through February 8. Contrary to what we might expect from someone who famously didn't "make things" (or so I thought), fifteen of the twenty works on display here generated items for sale or distributed free to the public: postcards, T-shirts, magazines, stationery, brochures, paper weights.

In the 1960s Asher's first sculptures and environmental pieces synthesized California "Finish Fetish" work and the related Light and Space art movement. By the mid 1970s, as Asher began to exhibit in Europe, his West Coast aesthetic bonded with the more critical, overtly political form of art-making exemplified by the work of Daniel Buren, Marcel Broodthaers, Victor Burgin, and Dan Graham. This synthesis of California and Europe produced in Asher a heightened sensitivity to the spaces his works were exhibited in as he advanced ideas that radically dislocated the viewer's expectations of what a work of art might do. Yet however progressive and political Asher's notion of his work became, I can still discern the social nonconformity of a lingering California hippie aesthetic.

*Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979*, published by the Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design with Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, provides a detailed chronology of Asher's work. However, *Writings* can also be read for the stories Asher tells about the circumstances surrounding each work. This emphasis on storytelling reveals Asher to be a natural educator, and indeed for over thirty years he taught PostStudio Art at CalArts. The intensity and length of the marathon critiques in Asher's class were the stuff of legend. "For PostStudio," Asher once remarked, "we took the clock out of the equation and forgot about time."

His hundreds of students included vastly different artists: Kate Ericson, Rita McBride, Rubén Ortiz-Torres, Christopher Williams, Rodney McMillian, Phil Chang. And Asher's influence continues into the present: Gala Porras-Kim, who was in Asher's final class at CalArts, just closed her exhibition at Storefront for Art and Architecture.

The current exhibition opens with an astonishing early sculpture, *No Title (Checkers)* (1965–66), a pair of powder-coated aluminum checker sets that the twenty-two-year-old Asher fabricated when he was a graduate student at UC Irvine. *Checkers* struck me as a



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reference to Marcel Duchamp's passion for chess. In 1963, when Asher was an undergraduate art student, Duchamp was the subject of a retrospective at the Pasadena Museum of Art, and Asher's mother, Betty, who was a collector, curator, and eventual art dealer, can be seen in a photograph seated beside Duchamp around the time of the Pasadena show. Perhaps the young Michael Asher met Duchamp just a few years before he made *No Title (Checkers)*?

After graduate school, Asher designed small, polished metal sculptures that stretched between interior moldings and furniture in his small apartment. In 1967 he pivoted from these domestic works to what would become his first objectless pieces: columns of air made with simple room fans. In *Writings* Asher describes the origin of these "air works," which in a few years would be exhibited at the Newport Harbor Art Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art:

"In response to Joe Goode's window paintings of the mid-sixties, and wondering why he would not use the actual windows as he claimed to be interested in the window phenomenon, I decided to open my own window and sit beside it, and feel the air as it passed through."

Air flowing past a sensate body uncannily anticipates the viewing conditions of Asher's 1973 *Film*. The premise of *Film*, which will be screened at Artists Space on January 23, is simple. A roll of 16mm film stock was exposed and processed to achieve a medium gray tonality. This print would be projected once and thus destroyed. The first screening took place in 1973 and was coordinated by Project Inc., a small non-profit run by Paul McMahon. The film was projected in an empty dormitory room at a private school outside of Boston, and I was one of the handful of people in the audience. McMahon ran the projector, and we sat and watched the black and white film grain pass across the white dorm wall.

Chronologically the next work included in the Artists Space exhibition is Asher's 1975 contribution to the inaugural issue of the Bay Area publication *Vision*. Asher's proposal involved gluing two blank pages together, face to face. Conceptually in sync with Robert Barry's notorious 1969 *Closed Gallery* show, where Barry closed the gallery for the duration of the exhibition, Asher's contribution to *Vision* could also be read as a sight gag on the magazine's title.

The following year Asher created *Via Los Angeles*, a live television broadcast for which he directed the camera crew of KGW-TV in Portland, Oregon to film the station control room for the entirety of the thirty-minute program. (At Artists Space, a selection of 8x10 stills stands in for the work.) This live broadcast, punctuated by commercials, played opposite the Superbowl, in the least valuable time slot on the television calendar. During the show, Asher sat in the control room and fielded 140 bewildered viewer calls!

A subtle and absurd humor emerges from these early works. Asher had a unique and explosive laugh, a laugh that laughed at itself laughing. As Asher's colleague and CalArts dean Thomas Lawson put it, "That laugh explains everything." I first heard the laugh at a conference on Marcel Duchamp in 1971. Two years later when I met Asher, I put the face and the laugh together.

In the 1970s Asher's work was sometimes associated with that of his friend Dan Graham (1942–2022). Graham was obsessed with punk youth culture, and a sarcastic, anarchic sense of humor laced his work; Asher's *August 30, 1979* owes something to this



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sensibility. August 30 announced itself with a small ad in a Dutch newspaper that read, “Your own telephone number on a T-shirt.” The idea was that the public could go to a stand in the town farmer’s market, pay fifteen Dutch guilders and have their home telephone number printed on the front of a tight-fitting white T-shirt, an avant-Tinder work many decades ahead of its time.

Perhaps the wittiest piece at Artists Space is Asher’s 1979 *Grinstein Collection*. For this work, his only private commission, Asher moved a section of the collectors Elyse and Stanley Grinstein’s boundary wall eleven inches deeper into their own property. This adjustment gave the Grinsteins’ neighbors more than fifteen square feet of extra land. The notched wall remained intact until October of last year when the Grinstein house—and Asher’s intervention—was demolished.

In his most celebrated and enigmatic work, *Kunsthalle Bern*, 1992, Asher moved and re-piped all the Kunsthalle’s radiators into the entrance lobby. In his 1999 essay “Michael Asher – Down to Earth,” Allan Sekula refers to the Bern work and notes that a “preoccupation with the flows of waste, with plumbing and heating ... is central to Michael Asher’s work.” Asher’s interest in waste and plumbing reaches its apotheosis in two works made in Germany, *D+S Ausstellung* (1989) and *Outlook* (2003).



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During a site visit to the Kunstverein in Hamburg to plan his work for the group show *D+S Ausstellung*, Asher became fascinated by the parade of garbage trucks that hauled Hamburg's solid refuse across the border to East Germany. Working with an art photographer, Asher commissioned what, in the photographic trade, are called "builder shots": images of eight behemoth garbage trucks, each perfectly posed at a classic three-quarter angle. Asher made postcards of the images and sold them in department stores. (At Artists Space the eight postcards hang on a vertical Plexiglas column reminiscent of a postcard rack.) Children and garbage truck card collectors must have gone nuts.

*Outlook*, made for an exhibition in the small town Neuenkirchen, consists of a set of maps detailing the rural community's water and electric infrastructure. An exhibition copy of the brightly colored schematics of utility lines complements a large wall-mounted research photograph Asher made of the snowy town to suggest a poignant sense of security and community.

The most recent work at Artists Space documents Asher's 2010 contribution to *How Many Billboards? Art In Stead*, a group show curated by Kimberli Meyer of the MAK Center for Art and Architecture in Los Angeles. For his contribution Asher chose to reproduce a celebrated 1959 Volkswagen Beetle ad, "Think Small," designed by the advertising agency Doyle Dane Bernbach. The ad copy extolled the reliability and modesty of the VW "bug." For many years Asher drove a VW bug to CalArts from West Los Angeles, and this late work functions as a wry, yet honest, self-portrait of an irreplaceable artist and educator.



Michael Asher, *D&S Ausstellung*, Kunstverein in Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany, 1989. Eight postcards. Courtesy Artists Space, New York and the Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation. Photo: Carter Seddon.