

# BUY AMERICAN

JOE SCANLAN

*Buy American* is a show about what it means to be an American. Not the kind of American we have come to loathe in the past few years, but the thoughtful, doubtful, introspective kind of American who has been muscled temporarily from public view. *Buy American* is about artists who, however small or isolated their gestures, still believe they have an effect.

Intellectual commentators are lately fond of saying that America has become a Hobbesian state, in reference to British philosopher Thomas Hobbes who, in his signature work, *Leviathan*, proposed that war is the natural condition of man. In some respects this observation is true: two decades of corporate and civic animosity has created a social atmosphere of perpetual contestation: against the world, against the driver in the next lane, against each other. Being aggressive at all times toward every person you encounter appears to have become the preferred mode of behavior. If you are not in the act of preemptively screwing others, then you yourself are probably getting screwed.

In such a warped state of mind, knowledge becomes a hindrance. No person can claim to be truly knowledgeable without admitting that their knowledge has limits and is subject to doubt, and is therefore vulnerable to attack. The more sophisticated the knowledge, the more vulnerable it is. Knowledge is weakness. On the other hand, any person who claims to be faithful suffers neither limits nor doubts. Their willful ignorance in the face of overwhelming opinion or scientific fact only serves to strengthen their faith. The more blind the faith, the more powerful it is. Faith is power.

Under the leadership of our current president, traits that should be the basis of human knowledge—curiosity, skepticism, reason, humility—are portrayed as signs of weakness because they demonstrate a lack of faith. To be reasonable or skeptical is to be an unbeliever, and not believing is the work of traitors and evil-doers. Consequently, the United States has devolved into a Darwinian society whose only salvation is faith in God, a paradox that would be funny were it not so disingenuous and hostile to the very idea of civilization.

*Buy American* seeks to transform the hatred of this moment into love for its dissenters. *Buy American* features art that is underwhelm-

ing and nonthreatening. Art that is full of pointless systems, trivial obsessions and petty scams. Art that is laughable and poetic. Art that refuses to be competitive. Nonetheless it can't be dismissed, because it is everything that America currently is not. In that sense, *Buy American* is an act of appropriation, an attempt to leverage the hostilities riled by arrogance and turn them toward positive ends.

Yes! It's reassuring to know there are still people who refuse to cooperate. Yes! It's comforting to know there are people who refuse to be bellicose and profitable and dull. Yes! It's encouraging to know there are artists whose works are subtle and Yes! It's consoling to know they are there and they need your support. Yes! Buy American. Yes. <

*Originally published as a press release for the exhibition, Buy American, held at Galerie Chez Valentin in Paris, from February 7 to March 6, 2004. The exhibition featured work by Walead Beshty, Louis Cameron, Martha Friedman, James Hyde, Hirsch Perlman, Joe Scanlan, and Donelle Woolford.*

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