LITTLE WOLF, WIS.
GRETCHen BENDER
THE POOR FARM
ON VIEW THROUGH JUNE 2013
If Gretchen Bender (1951-2004) is less recognized than some artists of her generation, "Tracking the Thrill" should initiate a remedy. Organized by artist Philip Vanderhyden and the Poor Farm (an experimental venue in the countryside of Wisconsin run by artists Michelle Grabner and Brad Killam, now in its fourth year), this exhibition presented a survey of Bender’s video work for broadcast television, as well as two monumental, monitor-based pieces of what she called electronic theater.

Bender began exhibiting at Nature Morte in the East Village in 1983. Close with Robert Longo, Cindy Sherman and others associated with the critical strategies of appropriation, she set out to infiltrate the corporate domain of mass-media representation—and the flattening image-flow of television in particular, where politics and entertainment are conflated—so as to highlight the insidious qualities of big business’s ideological operations. Her approaches for doing so, as seen here, were abstraction, acceleration and multiplication.

There was an eerie frisson to encountering Bender’s work in a bucolic landscape. Filling two floors of an old poorhouse, surrounded by barns, cornfields and the sounds of cicadas, “Tracking the Thrill” was immediately distinguished by its technological glow. Upstairs were music videos Bender edited between 1985 and 1990, for bands such as Megadeth, New Order and Babes in Toyland, as well as two versions of the credit sequence she designed for “America’s Most Wanted” in 1988. Uniting these works (all made for television) at the level of form is the cutting procedure: images hit the screen as if fired from an automatic rifle, like a flicker film. The extreme close-up of an eyelid opening the “America’s Most Wanted” credits suggests that perception itself is under attack (think A Clockwork Orange).

On the main floor were two multi-monitor videos, Wild Dead (1984) and Total Recall (1987), which have not been seen by an audience in over 20 years. Total Recall (22 minutes) was the most compelling work on view. Screened at set times in a theatrical environment, as if it were a performance with the TV sets on stage as actors, the work features quasi-narrative movements of imagery orchestrated across eight channels on 24 monitors and two projection screens. It includes a soundtrack composed by Stuart Argabright (of the electronic band Ike Yard) and animation sequences designed on a flight simulator by artist Amber Daneker. In effect, it is nearly overwhelming. On the one hand, slowed down and multiplied fragments of commercials populate the monitors: a happy factory worker at GE who “brings good things to life,” high-tech weaponry promoted in military videos, and razzle-dazzle, animated corporate logos. On the other hand, we see commercials for consumer recording technologies (cameras and camcorders) and footage from then-topical Hollywood films such as Salvador (1986) and Under Fire (1983) about photographers on assignment in places where the U.S. was supporting repressive regimes. As an implicit portrait of the military-industrial-media complex, Total Recall confronts the spectator with a mesmerizing critique of the violence of images in a society now predicated on their commodification. In a media culture saturated by corporate self-representation, it is, Bender argued, images themselves that prevent us from seeing the reality of the world we’ve constructed.

[The exhibition will travel to institutions in the U.S. and Europe; venues and dates to be determined.]

—Jonathan Thomas

LOS ANGELES
ALISON SAAR
OTIS COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN
ON VIEW THROUGH NOV. 17
Alison Saar has recently added cast and blown glass to her already broad repertory of historically charged, richly tactile materials—coal, tar, wood, rope, antlers, ceiling tin, old tools. In four of 12 works at Otis’s Ben Maltz Gallery (one 2010, one 2011 and the rest 2012), glass is fashioned as bodily vessel or distillery equipment—or both, as in Still Run Dry. The three components of this wall-mounted sculpture suggest the abandoned remnants of a rustic laboratory, its obsolescence and nonproductivity a metaphor for the female body’s midlife decline. On one shelf, thorny twigs fill a clear glass uterus whose tubes are sealed to resemble gnarly, stunted fingers. A canister beside
the object, connected to it by tubing, holds a glass pomegranate split open to expose not juicy red seeds but desiccated bits of black coal. This is alchemy in reverse, potential gone extinct.

References to the function and symbolism of the still run through this show of potent sculptures and tableaux (most 2012). In one piece, inky liquid rises through a tube into a clear glass heart and head; a hand pump sends droplets trickling out from the eyes into the washbasin below. In another, Mammy Machine, a cluster of bulbous brown glass breasts receives and pumps out fluid. Saar’s devices embody racially inflected ideals of purity and viability, while shifting states of emptiness and fullness signify transformation and change keyed to phases of fecundity within a woman’s life. “STILL . . . ,” the exhibition’s title, refers as well to a kind of stubborn endurance. Three damaged hearts, in bronze, teeter defiantly on legs like those of a Louise Bourgeois spider.

Saar has long focused on certain persistent, corrosive notions (still around) having to do with the positioning of African-Americans and women. Her figures are strong and self-possessed, sturdy descendents of African deities and the wood carvings of Expressionists like Hermann Scherer and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. She pits the formidable physical dignity of her sculptures, their internally anchored identity, against objects and details that threaten a diminishment of the figures’ status. In Weight, for instance, a young girl sits on a swing attached to a scale for weighing cotton.

On one side is this taut little soul, pigtailed, carved in wood and sheathed only in a gleaming skin of coal dust; on the other, a cornucopia of cast iron tools of domestic and field labor (skillet, scythe, shears, chains), the implements that will determine her functional worth.

Saar’s work is personal, but so deeply informed by myth and history that its narratives become universal and inclusive. The eyes of her figures are generalized or turned inward, so the sculptures don’t meet our gaze, yet their presence registers viscerally. In all their power and vulnerability, these women embody essential conditions of being—social, political, biological. They represent humanity, distilled.

—Leah Olmert

Los Angeles
DANIEL JOSEPH MARTINEZ
ROBERTS & TILTON

For more than two decades, Daniel Joseph Martinez has tackled questions of race, identity and the body in his multidisciplinary work. The four large photographs, three mixed-medium sculptures and two neon signs in this exhibition evidence a new vein of inquiry: the nature of contemporary faith. Slavoj Žižek’s slim but illuminating volume On Belief could serve as a companion text to this excellent and thought-provoking show; like Žižek, Martinez ruminates on the body and faith in the digital age, repudiating easy answers and commonly held assumptions.

The photographs (each 74 by 60 inches), collectively titled A Story for Tomorrow in 4 Chapters, Dostoevsky

Loved the Hunchback of Notre Dame, Muhammad Ali and Dandelions, Lick my hunch! (2010-12), depict the artist, enhanced by prosthetics, stage makeup and an oversize mask, as a shirtless, hunchbacked man. Prominently tattooed across his chest and both arms are sacred prayers—in Arabic, Hebrew and Latin—of Islam, Judaism and Christianity. He wears dark pants hitched up with a rope, evoking a prophet or a beggar. In one image, he is seen from the back, wearing a bishop’s mitre, his torso leaning to one side in a position reminiscent of a pietà. In another, he kneels on a prayer rug, bent forward to expose the top of the mask, which has cracked and broken, revealing the flimsy wire supports beneath. The photographs incarnate three interrelated ideas that reverberated throughout the exhibition: the shared roots and values of the three religions; the embattled position of faith, religious and secular, in contemporary life; and the long and tragic history of violence in the name of religion.

Who Killed Liberty, Can You Hear That, It’s the Sound of Inevitability, The Sound of Your Own Death (2012) is an ambitious sculptural installation featuring a white fiberglass Statue of Liberty that horizontally impales a gallery wall. The statue’s head and torso appeared in a smaller gallery, while its feet and base protruded into the main space. The sculpture’s surface resembles layers of bandages and appears cracked in places, suggesting the tenuousness and perseverance of the ideals the icon represents. On its base is a square mir-