Begging and Stealing at Recess’s Annual Benefit

by Wendy Vogel

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Recess's adventurous reputation is signaled by its name, and this year’s benefit had a playful spirit to match the nonprofit’s moniker. "Beg Borrow or Steal" raised approximately $110,000 in funds for the six-year-old art organization, best known for a selective artist residency program that offers its SoHo storefront space to participants as a studio and exhibition venue. Under the dynamic direction of founder Allison Freedman Weisberg and staff members Zoe Mills and Maia K. Murphy, Recess has incubated projects by artists like the Bruce High Quality Foundation, Abigail DeVille, David Horvitz, Liz Magic Laser, Jessica Segall and Christine Sun Kim.

"Beg Borrow or Steal" took place on Mar. 31 at Pioneer Works, an enormous former foundry that hosts exhibitions, events and education initiatives, in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Seats for the dinner portion—with a farm-to-table meal provided by the Brooklyn-based Italian eatery Rucola, accompanied by wine and spirits by Chatham Imports—started at $500; open-bar after-party tickets sold for $75.

The evening's main event was a game conceived by artist and designer Zach Gage, with a premise that all dinner guests would leave with an artwork of their choice. The list of artists, many of whom had already worked with Recess, included Corin Hewitt, Howie Chen, Kalup Linzy, Matt Keegan, Mika Tajima and Sara Greenberger Rafferty.
Upon entering, 180 dinner guests were assigned a random artwork from among the 206 donated pieces on view, pictured on a badge to be hung around one’s neck. But like most games, there was a catch: there were no identifying labels or lists of artworks available while the game was on. Guests were allowed to peruse the art and decide whether they would like to keep their assigned piece or trade for someone else’s. For the more competitive types, "steal cards" ($25) and "defend cards" ($50) were available for purchase, raising the stakes and the evening’s final tally. In order to filch an artwork, one simply had to trade more steal cards than the holder had defend cards.

When I arrived during cocktail hour, the game was just heating up. New Museum curator and Recess board member Gary Carrion-Murayari was the first person I encountered who was itching to trade. "I'm not really a cat person," he said, pointing to a photo of a feline on his badge. "I'd like to jettison the cat for a more appealing animal." Shortly thereafter, with a drink in his hand, I saw him eyeing a small painting of a sasquatch-like creature.

Recess alumni got into the festivities, as well. Molly Lowe, a sculptor and video artist whose work explores aspects of the grotesque body, proudly showed me her assigned artwork: a sculpture with an ear-like orifice. Andrew Beccone of the Reanimation Library was ready to defend a photo by Michael Smith, which showed the veteran performance artist among a group of shirtless young men in a rustic setting. Julia Sherman, who recently co-designed a rooftop salad garden for MoMA PS1 (and whose Salad for President blog will induce hunger pangs), quickly gravitated toward a sculpture of a kale leaf. Later in the night she nabbed it, showing me her badge semi-surreptitiously tucked into the back of her sheer dress.

As the after-party crowd filtered in, the game drew to a close. Smiling dinner guests queued up to take home the artworks for which they had begged, bargained and stolen—wrapped and clearly labeled with the artist’s name, title and materials.