

RB: *Gap, Gaping I*

kijidome, Boston

Attempt to Google “RB” or “RB artist,” and you are more likely to find rhythm and blues musicians (R. Kelly, Alicia Keys) than you are to encounter anything relating to the RB whose solo show *Gap, Gaping I* (January 16–February 14, 2016) recently occupied the South Boston project space kijidome. RB is an artist who rejects biographical interpretation by taking up a pseudonym and dissociating his practice from his CV—proving that, despite traditional professional advice, an entirely anonymous, un-Googleable artist can still get a solo show. (He has asked, via kijidome, to be referred to using male pronouns.) Viewers are left to accept—or reject—the fact that RB is probably not Usher, and are thus free to construct his identity to fit their own views or aspirations for, say, the art world they wish existed.

kijidome is one of a few experimental spaces in Boston. When the Prudential Center, a landmark on the city’s skyline, was lit up with the words “Art Hub”—instead of the usual “Go Sox” or similar sports cheer—during Boston’s *nuît blanche*-style festival, Illuminus, local art students and professionals were bemused by the declaration. Despite its prestigious museums and MFA programs, Boston remains marginal to both commercial and alternative gallery scenes. Run by Sean Downey, Carlos Jiménez Cahua, and Susan Metrican, kijidome’s model is not only artist-operated, but also artist-funded—a community response to the relative lack of emerging arts funding in the city. kijidome thus operates as a kind of proactive institutional critique, providing practical alternatives to the city’s dominant exhibition models, and empowering local and nonlocal artists as art mediators. Instead of positing criticisms about what is missing, kijidome offers an experimental solution with refreshing optimism.

Written by Alexander Borinsky, the narrative, “alt-lit” press release accompanying RB’s exhibition embodies the imaginative institutional vision of this artist-run space: it is an expansion, not a summary, of the installation. Three types of tree are listed in the text—oak, crab apple, and ginkgo—branches from which appear in RB’s work, wherein they are arranged, along with other flora, inside a “flower frog.” The arrangement changes daily; the press release reflects these ideas of changeability and flexibility embodied both in RB’s work and in the mission of kijidome: “You can picture what I look like,” writes Borinsky, “but choose from the faces in your family photographs. Your face should be in the picture as well. I know too much to be an outsider. You’ve seen trees like that, I’m sure. My face was blurred, your nose

was running, I was passing behind an oak tree, a crab apple, a ginkgo. Your nose was cold and running, my face was obscure.”

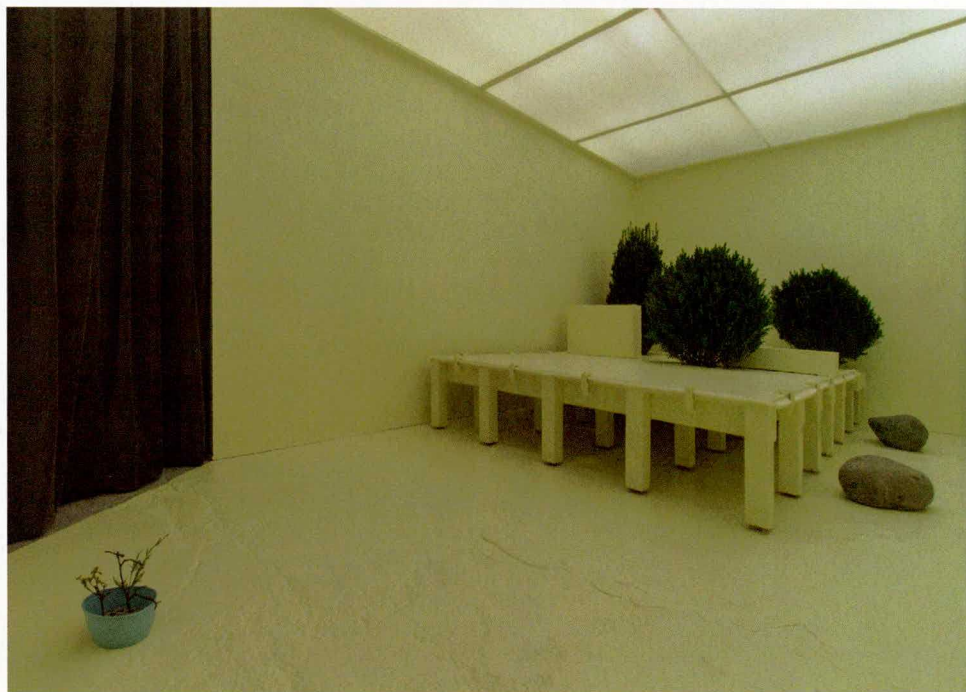
Every nonliving surface within the exhibition was painted in a sort of pale chartreuse yellow—a color roughly indexed to match the color of a ginkgo tree’s leaves just before they shed—a process unique to this species, which typically loses all its leaves at once, within a day. A raised platform hosted three boxwood shrubs, their intact roots visible beneath it. These sculptable evergreens often appear in formal landscaping or in front of suburban homes, and their growth patterns respond to their architectural surroundings. To what extent these plants’ growth patterns were controlled by the artist or were a response to the room was left deliberately unclear: the side of one shrub mimicked the flatness of an adjacent wall, yet maintained a causal and physical distance from it.

A scrim diffused the overhead light. Visitors were asked to remove their shoes before stepping up a stool, made of large rocks, and onto the platform. The effect was immersive enough to recall the work of James Turrell, yet the feeling conveyed was different, the light softer, less stark and more (though still far from) natural. Further examination revealed that pigment, not light, was creating the room’s ambient color, confirmed by the faint smell of fresh paint.

C-clamped to panels of wood on the same platform was a layer of foam, and walking on it was surprisingly disorienting—as was the obscurity of normal architectural reference points, such as corners, which were flattened by the chartreuse paint and the even light. The foam “ground” gave when viewers stepped onto it; accidentally stepping near a panel’s edge created a falling sensation. Two concrete blocks—one roughly the standard height of a curb, the other of a bench—provided comforting reminders of a more stable world, built for the human body. When I visited, I watched viewer after viewer intuitively sit on them. Apparently, sitting on objects of this standardized height is second nature, a function and behavior even more ingrained than our habit of avoiding sitting on art.

The installation, like its press release, was inconclusive and experience-oriented; the tensions it highlighted between built and natural environments were subtly provocative of feeling, but were not sensational. RB’s strange yellow abyss instead quietly rewarded a multi-sensory mode of perception, an approach that engaged body as well as thought, with effects that revealed themselves slowly, only over time.

—Emily Watlington



ABOVE: RB, *Gap, Gaping I*, 2016, installation view [courtesy of the artist and kijidome]