

ART & DESIGN

Art in Review

DEC. 28, 2001

Telling Tales II'

'Religious Images in 19th-Century Academic Art'

Dahesh Museum of Art

601 Fifth Avenue,

at 48th Street

Manhattan

Through Jan. 26

The challenge posed to religious art in the 19th century by the iconoclastic French Revolution was robustly met by French academic artists, this exhibition sets out to demonstrate.

It holds that these artists were instrumental in sustaining and refreshing the old traditions, continuing to produce viable religious art through times of social change and upheaval, from the restoration of the French monarchy in 1814 until the end of the century.

Among the subjects are Old Testament stories, Biblical landscapes and the depiction of Jesus and the Virgin, as well as scenes of religious observance and even satire.

The artists include Gustave Doré, James Tissot, Adolphe-William Bouguereau, Albert-Léon Gérôme, Jules- Joseph Lefebvre, Édouard Moise, the Princess Marie of Orléans, Ary Scheffer and many lesser lights.

Through religious allegory some of them commented on political events of the time, like Alexandre Cabanel's thundering extravaganza "The Death of Moses" (1851), depicting Moses dying before a stagey, Michelangelesque God and his angels while envisioning the Promised Land.

Done by the young Cabanel after he won the Prix de Rome, it was presumably a comment on the return to Rome of Pope Pius IX, exiled in 1849 by the new Roman Republic but restored the next year by Napoleon III.

A sendup of the sentimental goop that pervaded 19th-century genre painting is "The Missionary's Adventures" (1883) by Jehan-Georges Vibert.

Depicting a bored, indifferent gathering of cardinals and a bishop hearing the tales of a fervent missionary, it was painted at the time the Third Republic was actively pushing for the separation of church and state.

And it seems to make the state's case.

On the other hand, piety pervades the sculpture "Joan of Arc Praying," cast after 1843, by Princess Marie of Orléans, youngest daughter of King Louis-Philippe.

Admired for her own devotion, the princess shows St. Joan in full armor as she bends her head to pray for heavenly guidance.

One of the more interesting works (and that's not saying a lot) is Paul Chenavard's undated "Last Judgment," a big, no-color Dantean epic in charcoal that depicts a multitude of bodies swarming upward toward the figure of Jesus as three trumpeting angels blast the judgment call. It was probably intended for a mural to

decorate the Pantheon in Paris. But the project's ecumenicism bothered the church, which rejected the whole project as anticlerical.

For this show the Dahesh, which is focused on 19th-century academic art, has trotted out a good deal of its own collection, with pieces here and there from important museums.

Do the works reaffirm the vitality of earlier religious art? Hardly.

Many are pallid borrowings from it. Still, as a bible — no pun intended — of French academic styles, the exhibition is worth a walk-through.

GRACE GLUECK

Joel Sternfeld

'Walking the High Line'

Pace MacGill Gallery

534 West 25th Street, Chelsea

Through Jan. 5

Joel Sternfeld's photographs of the rusty, overgrown elevated railroad known as the High Line, which runs from 34th Street down the far west side of Manhattan, are a good argument for preserving this iron- girder structure, but also for leaving it as untouched as possible. Turning it into a safe, accessible public park would be great, and more than enough in the way of use- conversion. Adorning it with outdoor sculpture, as some are proposing, seems like an awful idea. Part Richard Serra, part Piranesi, part Fritz Lang, this fantastic remnant already is outdoor sculpture.

Mr. Sternfeld's big, eerie photographs capture much of the High Line's stark formal power, as well as the Surrealist frisson between wildness of its plant life and the surrounding buildings. In some there are signs of urban life, like disintegrating tracks or a discarded Christmas tree. In others it appears that a stretch of Kansas prairie has invaded the city, or that two unrelated photographs have been digitally combined. The pictures offer further evidence of the city as an organism subject to

constant change, decay and rebirth. They also prove that nature's reclamation project is still the grandest and most efficient.

ROBERTA SMITH

Ron Nagle

Garth Clark Gallery

24 West 57th Street

Manhattan

Through Jan. 5

Like Frank Stella, John Chamberlain or Ken Price, Ron Nagle operates in the gap between painting and sculpture with often impressive results. Never mind that his efforts are only a few inches tall and made of glazed ceramic; his eighth New York gallery show is terrific.

It presents 18 new pieces from three series, as well as a brief summary of previous efforts dating back 30 years. Also here are three works from 1991 in dark bronze that might be seen to contradict Mr. Nagle's deep involvement with color but really attest to an obsession with form that makes everything else possible. This form is the cup, to which Mr. Nagle has been as constant as Cézanne to his apples, or Morandi to his bottles.

In Mr. Nagle's hands the cup has evolved into a functionless, nearly abstract element with architectural, landscape and even human connotations. It has ranged from geometric to organic to slightly creepy, with surfaces that are exquisitely smooth and shiny, stuccoed or matte.

In a series of 10 works a cylindrical, pinched-in cup meets its vestigial three-part handle, which resembles a fancy wall sconce, in kind of a Brancusian kiss. Together they make possible delicious exegeses on the complex family ties between seven rich, shiny colors. The families may be Las Vegas loud or kimono soft; their forms include floating squares, crisp outlines and vaporous aureoles.

Applied with custom-car painting techniques that Mr. Nagle has miniaturized to perfection, these motifs overlap with those of Josef Albers, Kenneth Noland and Dan Flavin.

While these works sparkle, others glow and burn, most notably a series in which the cup has morphed into a backdrop for the handle, which is now fleshy and detumescent, like a thin snail, a tiny elephant's trunk or the Grinch's finger.

The coloring here is ostensibly monochromatic, and definitely powdery and luminous, as if resulting from serial dustings of dry pigment; at the bottom edge, a shiny hardness peeks through. Mr. Nagle works small but thinks big. His ambition, inventiveness and superb craft make his art capacious to both mind and eye.

ROBERTA SMITH

Barbara Takenaga

Graham

1014 Madison Avenue, at 78th Street

Manhattan

Through Jan. 12

Barbara Takenaga's compact, densely patterned paintings are optically riveting and transcendently suggestive. Working on wood panels with small brushes, she creates fields of extremely fine spirals and dots that tend to concentrate and become more luminous toward the center.

Scores of little feathery spoked wheels accumulate in loosely concentric circles, and brightly colored dots like bubbles or cells fill the dark spaces between.

There is a swarming, spacey feeling as though one were traveling at the speed of light through some distant galaxy or into the depths of some inner psychic center of illumination. In the delicate touch and extreme industry of Ms. Takenaga's work you

feel this artist's own playfully devotional state of mind; one imagines it's like that of a mystically inspired medieval manuscript illuminator.

On paper Ms. Takenaga produces more expansive, less concentrated compositions consisting mostly of spherical shapes like balls of string outlined in ink and colored pale orange, pink and yellow. At best, as in a big circular field of hundreds of such balls, there is an appealing, slightly wacky but illustrative whimsy like you might find in an inventive children's book. It's in the panel paintings that her trippy enterprise is most persuasively realized.

KEN JOHNSON

Andrew Lenaghan

George Adams

41 West 57th Street

Manhattan

Through Jan. 26

From a distance, Andrew Lenaghan's easel-size cityscapes have a freeze-dried Photorealist look. Up close, however, one is gratified to discover they are painted with a deft, lively touch, and the extreme detailing reads not as cold-blooded copying but as an affectionate alertness to the world's surfaces. Everything from rooftop water towers, skylights and vents to scum on the glassy surface of the Gowanus Canal and weeds growing from the blue floor of a vast abandoned swimming pool in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, is observed with an exhilarated clarity.

Although it's hard to believe, given the extraordinary verisimilitude of his pictures — especially a series of wonderfully complex views of New York City painted from the roof — he works not from photographs but from life. Mr. Lenaghan is drawn to scenes of urban decrepitude: vacant lots, abandoned factories, a decaying concrete pier strewn with rotting lumber. Depicted in panoramic compositions, these forsaken places have a wild beauty.

Two interior pictures, by contrast — one of the artist's studio with his wife working glumly at a computer off to the right and one with a baby lying on its back in the middle of the floor — feel cluttered and oppressively claustrophobic. It's the adventure of the undomesticated outdoors, evidently, that quickens Mr. Lenaghan's soul.

KEN JOHNSON

Lucas Samaras

'Paint'

PaceWildenstein

534 West 25th Street

Chelsea

Through Jan. 5

A wizard at offbeat techniques and materials, from no-holds-barred Polaroid images of the 1970's to intricate jewelry made of gold chicken wire for a 1999 exhibition, Lucas Samaras has returned for this show to the most traditional of artist's mediums, pigment.

Thick and gooey and slathered in multicolors on many surfaces, it is the guts of his pyrotechnical new work. He has spread it — most artfully of course — in several cumulative series: a group of 8 1/2-by- 11-inch papers titled "Chroma Smearscapes"; another of small wood panels called "Chroma Stroke Boards"; a cluster of bowls, cubes and cylinders; and insectoid knife, fork and spoon combinations ("Chroma Coupled Cutlery") that resemble supersize dead flies. And he has saturated in dazzling colors his "Views From Prison," oval and round canvases with windowlike rectangular centers.

Less flamboyant in tone, but in keeping with the theme, is a group of more restrained canvases called "Wounds," in rectangular and smaller oval shapes, on

whose quiet overall grounds appear one or two ugly painted gashes that look like cuts in dire need of medical attention.

The work seems spurred by myriad events in the Samaras consciousness, from the events of Sept. 11 to the loss of an older brother by their mother's miscarriage. We learn this from a lengthy prose-poem he has produced to accompany the show, in which he cites as reference points not only the recent terrorist attacks on the United States but events like "things evicted from the womb or issuing from the kitchen as well as mountains and valleys, clouds and crawlers, air and fire, chaos and treasure," and "wounds, views from prison solitary confinement, clumps and primal matter."

There's a monotony to the repetition of these raw chromatics, but cumulatively they project the nervy life-affirming energy that runs through Mr. Samaras's best work.

GRACE GLUECK

Louise Bourgeois

Cheim & Read

547 West 25th Street

Chelsea

Through Jan. 5

As everyone who has followed her art should know by now, Louise Bourgeois did not have an easy childhood. Every artist practices self-exposure to one degree or another, but Ms. Bourgeois is a master at it. Even at 90, she produces work that is a still-fresh exploration of herself, her painful growing up and her perception of her existential condition in the adult world.

A group of smallish, fetishistic-looking rag dolls is the prime evidence here. Occurring singly in cages, their bodies sometimes horridly gross and distorted, and also in couples clinging tightly together as they dangle from the ceiling, they

proclaim vulnerability and a search for union. A large white androgynous head, its mouth open in what looks to be a sob of agony, seems in this context a graphic expression of the human need for solace.

In the gallery's front room is an installation of a big oval pier glass, framed in shiny aluminum, and faced by two rough-hewn chairs. An accompanying tape plays Ms. Bourgeois chanting in French. When two people sit in the chairs, one can see only the other in the mirror. The work seems to state the human condition of aloneness even in togetherness.

Some of the objects in the show evoke past totemic images, like the group of pillars that hark back to Ms. Bourgeois's wood and metal "Personnages" that she has done over the years. Here they are revisited in soft materials, built up in cushiony layers to form intricate towers that, when closely explored, reveal words, orifices and other humanoid trappings.

Few artists have expounded on the harshness yet inevitability of relationships with Ms. Bourgeois's wit and panache.

Despite all those soft rags and cushions, this show does not lack the edge that one has come to expect from previous Bourgeois performances. It forms another vivacious chapter in a continuing history.

GRACE GLUECK

`Miss World 1972'

`A Free-Form Art Show

by Daniel Reich'

Daniel Reich

308 West 21st Street, 2A

Chelsea

Through Jan. 31

The young curator Daniel Reich, formerly of the Pat Hearn Gallery, has figured out a way to be in Chelsea without necessarily being of Chelsea, at least the Chelsea of the pricey art malls. He operates out of his tiny ground-floor apartment with real shows but limited walk-in hours: Thursdays and Saturdays, 1 to 6 p.m.

At the moment he is offering an eclectic mix of some 30 small pieces, several by artists who have yet to become familiar names in Manhattan. The title is taken from a video montage, assembled by Mr. Reich, of 1970's film clips: a little Hollywood, a little television, a little pornography interspersed with snippets of the Miss World event. And the gallery show, directly or indirectly, takes off from this.

A few pieces — a vintage hippie poster, a photograph of Michael Jackson by Lynne Goldsmith — go back a bit in time. Other entries are recent. In line with the just-post-flower-child theme, floral images abound, among them a photographic still life by Roe Ethridge, a funeral wreath sculpture by Virgil Marti with the Kiss logo spelled out in purple pansies, flower decals by the artist who calls himself Assume Vivid Astro Focus (a.k.a. Eli Sudbrack), and a pretty shaped painting of cartoonish blooms in a pot by Scott Reeder.

In addition to Mr. Reeder, "Miss World 1972" has other promising painters, including Gina Magid, Cannon Hudson and Robert Kitchen; graphic work by Albert Tien; and drawings by Amy Gatrell, Steven Hull, Tyson Reeder and Mari Eastman, the last represented by an ash-gray ink image titled "September" of silhouetted figures and shattered buildings.

The choice of video artists is especially engaging. Marcos Rosales's hilarious "Untitled Mouthpiece Part 1" is like an art theory lecture delivered by the Ramones with a hip-hop coda. The four artists known as Forcefield have a compilation tape of short pieces that blend film, sound, sculpture and performance art with zany, low-tech, back-to-the-future brilliance: it's abject, psychedelic sci fi.

They have previously shown at Parlour Projects in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, another apartment gallery (open Sundays only). Given the economic climate, this exhibition format seems like one of the more viable ways to keep new dealers, curators and artists visible and in circulation.

HOLLAND COTTER

© 2018 The New York Times Company