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Neo-news is no news: the broken mirror - exhibition of modern art

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It was hard to tell what this exhibition was trying to be. A showcase for the already familiar? A legitimization exercise for painting generally, or for this particular group of painters (even though the works presented did not hang together, either perceptually or conceptually, and in fact were wildly discrepant)? At best, the show proved only the pluralism of painting today, saying little about its value and sidestepping the problem of ranking the artists included by any critical criteria whatsoever.

The curators--Kasper König and Hans-Ulrich Obrist--said they wanted to eschew the "Besserwisserei" or "We-know-better-than-you-do" mentality, and to avoid creating a hierarchy. But the result, rather than the archaeological layering of various approaches to painting they seemed to be after, was chaos. In any event, the process of selection itself inevitably set up a hierarchy of insiders versus outsiders--the most tedious, irrelevant of curatorial clichés. The painters shown became representative of the current painting situation only because they were selected for the exhibition. Their relationship to one another within the spectrum of painterly possibilities was never spelled out.

While König and Obrist seemed to believe that they were proposing a new view of painting, the criteria for admission were all too familiar. In the words of Paul Virilio (quoted in the catalogue introduction), "The mirror which art used to be able to hold up to reality has been broken." That happened over a century ago. "Painting in the course of the twentieth century has been intent on questioning its own premises." Why is questioning still privileged over answering, especially when the same old questions are asked? Why is self-doubt better than self-assertion, self-effacement better than a brave new face, even if it is the product of plastic surgery? Why is painting about painting better than painting that reflects the world, especially if it does so in a new way? Can painting still be "caught between the traditional form and the rule-breaking impulses of modern art" when all the rules have been broken and traditional form has become

meaningless, except when it is appropriated for modern purposes, usually without being understood? The curators seemed to be unaware that the Modern has become traditional. (This is part of what it means to be post-Modern--to traffic in irony and fragmentation; to privilege concept over percept; and to repress beauty, all in the name of a new authoritarian academy.)

The exhibition's motto, a quote from French writer Jean Paulhan, captures the jadedness and tepid hopefulness that informed the exhibition: "Everything has been said; but words change their meanings and meanings change words." The fact of the matter is that everything has not been said--certainly not in science, whatever rut art and the humanities are in--and the interplay between words and meanings that Paulhan talks about isn't enlightening, just clever.

Anyway, here's what did and didn't impress me. Some artists--Francesco Clemente, Malcolm Morley, and Edward Ruscha--were predictably present with works that were meant to make an impact, and they certainly did, even if in ways predictable for the artists. And there were magnificent, not entirely predictable works--however familiar their ingredients--by "old masters." Next to an *Abstraktes Bild* (Abstract picture) composed of six vertical panels, Gerhard Richter showed a somewhat simulated-looking Chicago, both 1992, which could be of any anonymous urban corner. Georg Baselitz's 1992 black-ground paintings with automatist "figures" are masterful, and one, *Bilddreizehn*, is a masterpiece. Robert Ryman's *Concord*, 1976, with the ghostly white numbers "68" in an agitated field of white, is a particularly stunning way of making a sociopolitical painting as memento mori. It completely outclasses all the self-styled "message" and demagogic activist art of today. Maria Lassnig's *Tha, Tha, Tha*, 1990, is an extraordinarily haunting, original abstract image of female bodiliness.

There were many first-rate, genuinely enigmatic, subtly differentiated, hallucinatory abstract surfaces, including those painted by Eugene Leroy, Sigmar Polke, Arnulf Rainer, Per Kirkeby, Bernard Frize, Britta Huttenlocher, and Herbert Brandl. The hypnotic "neo-sublime" monochrome paintings of Joseph Marioni and Maria Eichhorn constitute a kind of perfection in themselves. There were tour-de-force series within the representational camp, most notably Philip Akkerman's self-portraits and Edward Dwurnik's "Hitch-Hiking Travels," and, in a different way, Jim Shaw's found "Thrift Store Paintings," though I think the last were exhibited to confirm a European sense of American naivete and vulgarity--

that is, the comic cheapness and facile sentimentalism of populism. There was also a good deal of satiric, "dumb," self-deprecating realism, such as Lisa Milroy's "Plates," 1992 and 1993, and Antonin Strizek's various domestic objects. They, too, had the look of cheap illustration; no doubt the artists' slumming is meant to tell us something about our everyday world.

The Swedish artist Dick Bengtsson was to be the curators' great discovery of the exhibition. But I think the swastikas he inserts into famous paintings--badly repainted by him--to create Edward Hopper: Early Sunday Morning, 1970, and Piet Mondrian: Domburg, 1972, are not so much stones breaking the mirror and its spell as facile devices creating a predictably shocking and ultimately unwitty juxtaposition. His use of them demonstrates how conceptually thin post-Modern irony is. (Although David Reed's Vertigo, 1992, and Hermaphrodite, 1993, were brilliant, slick versions of that irony.) Indeed, like that of many appropriationists, Bengtsson's is a spoiler's art.

The real discoveries of the exhibition were Walter Obholzer and Marlene Dumas. Obholzer's hyperlogical quasi-decorative paintings in his "Schachtel" (Box) series, 1992--93, are major innovations as well as brilliant, uncanny reprises of Wiener Werkstatte ideas. Dumas uses painting in the cause of feminism without sacrificing it to the movement--and with a certain wit, suggesting that the cause is not without humor, however black it may be. There were also second-rate works in the exhibition, even disasters, but they are best left unmentioned, because, after all, they belong to history, whatever that means. This exhibition won't make history, but it was, if unintentionally, a kind of testimony to the fact that painting is far from finished, and can even at times yield exciting and unexpected results.

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