



FILM ARCHIVES

Babylon Rising

by JERRY SALTZ

September 9, 2003





Times are strange. Not so long ago everything was extroverted, all about scandals and shock tactics. Now we don't know if Saddam is dead or alive, or if it's Osama on tape. Deceitful politicians who have lost all sense of nuance act otherwise, but Harry Potter is right: "The world isn't split into good people and Death Eaters." Today things are ambiguous and cryptic. No one knows which way the wind blows. Certainty is suspect, even scary. This upheaval is causing tremors in the art world. There's no paradigm shift; no major fractures have appeared. But change is in the air. Batons are being passed.

Much of this is just a hunch, none of it's about big names, and as always in New York, money could quash things overnight. There's also the curator problem. Russians say, "If you see a Bulgarian on the street, beat him. He'll know why." Because they've damaged so many art institutions, this saying applies to many of our academicized curators as well. The Whitney is in dire straits, the Grey Art Gallery is missing in action, P.S.1 and the New Museum reel between excellence and awfulness, the Guggenheim is struggling to make good on its Matthew Barney moment.

Nonetheless, something promising feels afoot. Thrillingly, for the first time in a while, art seems more important than the system. The professionalism of the recent past, the thing that made the late-'90s art world seem corporate and unsafe, is morphing into something less predictable, more homespun. The fringes feel frisky, good new artists and galleries are appearing, hype and fashionableness matter less, those capacious Chelsea galleries don't seem as off-putting, and art is becoming the focus again.

Meanwhile, art has brashly thrown itself over the pluralistic edge and into an amazing blender—one which siphons off moralizing and doesn't dilute the mediums but actually gives them solidity or specificity. At the same time, form is stepping out of subject matter's shadow. The way things look, how they're made, coalescing more.





postmodernism were in a grudge match with history—they had an adversarial, endgame relationship to it. History was a graveyard to them, a snake pit. Now, artists are meshing history with lived reality. They're attuned to the sadness, the terror, and the ecstasy of history. They understand that the present is history and that *all* art is contemporary art.

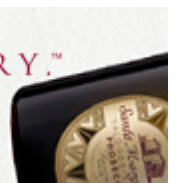
Most conspicuously, a new generation of gay artists has appeared. Excellent out gay artists have exhibited over the last 10 years, but they were confronting the culture wars and AIDS. Many artists died, including scores we'll never know. The aesthetic cloth was torn. Now it's mending. These days, galleries are filled with pictures of cute guys collaged onto pretty patterns (something an artist named Andy once did). A lot of this art is Pop-y, adolescent, flash-in-the-pan stuff. What's intriguing about the best of it is that it's not preachy but visually ballsy.

Then there are what might be called New Modernists, artists who present odd or outlandish arrangements of found or made objects, whose work is not imbued with irony or nostalgia but a belief in materials and the desire to meld them with subject matter (think Claire Barclay, David Altmejd, Nate Lowman, Cheyney Thompson, Jim Lambie, Sarah Sze, Sam Durant, Wade Guyton, or Aleksandra Mir, but not Dario Robleto or Jason Dodge, whose narratives exist outside their objects). These artists aren't anti-modern or post-anything. They're probing modernism and linking it with modern life. This connects them to a number of graphic whizzes (e.g., Keegan McHargue, Matt Leines, Yuri Masnyj, Xylor Jane, Erik Parker, and Anthony Burdin), some of whom are taking cues from renegades like R. Crumb, Chris Johanson, and Barry McGee, as well as street prophets and tattooists. All these artists are trying to fuse life, myth, narrative, and spirituality with form—the very things the early modernists wanted to do.

Elsewhere, painters like Dana Schutz and Jules de Balinc store and folk art, are sifting through diverse, often deva coming up with fresh results. If their work turns manner

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Steve DiBenedetto, Kristin Baker, Jeff Gauntt, and Matthew Ritchie). Meanwhile, videomakers such as Slater Bradley, Paul Chan, Aida Ruilova, Christian Jankowski, Anri Sala, Mika Rottenberg, and Sue De Beer are making dark rooms enjoyable again. Photographers and others like Katy Grannan, Daniela Rossell, Trisha Donnelly, and Francis Alÿs are finding ways around the arty discourse; collage and collectivism are ubiquitous; color is coming on like gangbusters; and all of it is happily happening across generational lines.

None of this guarantees good art. But people are realizing more than ever that the rules are dead, deader than they were under pluralism, and that we are all gypsies. In the end it comes down to what it always comes down to: vision and visionaries. All we have to do is bring it on and not be boring.

Sidebar:

“Critical Condition: Are Grousers and Gasbags the First to Signal Real Change?” by Jerry Saltz

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