

January 12, 2007

Art in Review

By THE NEW YORK TIMES

ROBERT IRWIN

Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue³

PaceWildenstein

545 West 22nd Street, Chelsea

Through Feb. 3

Buddhist temple interiors in rural Japan have low, flat ceilings and clear, wide floors. They are horizontal, twilightish, untheatrical spaces, and pulse-slowng. They make you want to sit down. They are also almost the only architecture I know that looks the way silence sounds.

I'm not strictly comparing "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue³," Robert Irwin's installation at PaceWildenstein, to Buddhist architecture. That would be too easy, and inaccurate. The true point of reference is Western and modern, specifically abstract geometric painting. In a past installation Mr. Irwin paid homage to one perceptual magician, Joseph Albers; now he makes a bow to another, Barnett Newman, turning Newman's 1966-70 paintings "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue" into a self-reflective architecture.

Three large aluminum panels are suspended low and horizontally from the gallery's ceiling, each painted in lacquerlike acrylic with one of the three primary colors. An identical panel has been placed on the floor directly below each panel. Because the paint is shiny and slick, it reflects whatever is around it: the figures of visitors, the gallery and illumination from an overhead skylight.

The panels also reflect one another. Look at a ceiling panel and you see the corresponding floor panel reflected, not as a smooth surface, but as a dark pool. Look at a floor panel, and the panel above leads out into dark space.

Optical illusionism of this kind has long been Mr. Irwin's calling card, but here he achieves it by bare-bones means: no stagy scrim, just the material that Newman himself used to create his own pioneering version of installation art: paint.

Yet just as Newman balked at the idea of having his largest painting series, "The Stations of the Cross," installed as a wraparound chapel, he would have resisted the notion that Mr. Irwin's paean to him — and to paint, and to light — was a temple, which it isn't. It's more like a country teahouse, companionable, dimly lighted, very quiet even when busy, offering spirit-soothing visual fare in an overstimulated world.

HOLLAND COTTER

MICHAEL FULLERTON

Get Over Yourself

Greene Naftali

526 West 26th Street, Chelsea

Through tomorrow

There is a lot going on in the work, and the New York solo debut, of Michael Fullerton, a young Scottish artist, but unfortunately not all at once in a single work of art. As with so many solo shows these days, this one functions as a fragmented rebus that delves into themes that supposedly transcend art. If you follow the news release, and then go home and Google a few names, it all points rather feebly to issues concerning information, fame, power and the formulation of public identity, through both the news and the portraiture.

Meanwhile, back at the gallery, Mr. Fullerton has a well-trained if so far unoriginal way with paint, as evidenced by several dark, washy portraits that hover between academic tradition and popular illustration. (Subjects include Mark Rothko, the young Carl Jung, a British defector and Margaret Burr, who was painted by Thomas Gainsborough shortly before marrying him.)

There are also two intriguing photo-based works in silkscreen on newsprint, one an enormous triptych showing a woman giving birth; a cryptic text piece; a sculpture made of gleaming hard-drive disks; and an 8-by-16-foot expanse of mirror splashed with a corrosive brown goop that the checklist identifies as ferrous oxide.

A large installation piece involves more ferrous oxide, as well as a white horizontal beam running wall-to-wall at eye level and the name of Jürgen Hambrech, the chairman of BASF, the world's largest producer of chemicals. Like the mirror piece, the installation has a sense of glamour, scale and materiality that has not yet affected Mr. Fullerton's painting, but should.

In the meantime, solo shows that resemble group shows are becoming generic. Once a tactic to avoid mastery of a single medium, they now can also be read as the equally limiting, perhaps male fear of commitment and tendency to colonize. Mr. Fullerton is, in bits and pieces, quite interesting, but he might consider more synthesis. ROBERTA SMITH

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

James Goodman Gallery

41 East 57th Street, Manhattan

Through next Friday

Despite other candidates, Roy Lichtenstein's elegant, buoyant canvases may be as close as 20th-century painting gets to [Mozart](#). There is a boundless optimism to his work, expressed in its unwavering celebration of popular culture; its cool, straightforward craftsmanship; and its intricate, eye-popping,

often witty perfection. Like Mozart in many instances, Lichtenstein is almost always an unsentimental romantic, at once innocent and skeptical. Perhaps he always posited the future as bright because the past and present gave him so much to work with.

The perfection of his paintings was achieved through extensive and beautiful preparatory studies, as indicated by his drawing retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1987. It is not too soon to be reminded of this again, in a delicious survey of nearly 60 works.

The works here include several that show the artist in the early 1960s, making straightforward graphite renderings of advertising motifs — a pair of sneakers, a wrist-watch, a half-zipped zipper — but blown up, cropped and isolated and, above all, concentrated through an admiring, unfussy attention.

Especially plentiful are the jaunty postcard-size sketches in graphite and colored pencil that Lichtenstein produced throughout his career. Ineffably tender, they conjure to a remarkable degree the effect of the finished paintings within embryo form, as suggested by the 1995 “Study for Water Lilies.” Several larger pencil drawings and even larger collages fill in all the details of some of these works, leaving nothing to question.

In their optimism, Lichtenstein’s elegant paintings argue explicitly that most art is about love, both in its initial impetus within the artist and its final effect within the viewer. His drawings make the argument even more explicit by reminding us of his rapt devotion to his art, its fabrication and the cultural motifs that made it all possible. ROBERTA SMITH

WEAK FOUNDATIONS

Momenta Art

359 Bedford Avenue, near South Fourth Street

Williamsburg, Brooklyn

Through Jan. 22

Anyone who has searched for an apartment in an urban real estate market could probably agree with this show’s cynical premise: that the “built environment” suffers from a “bankruptcy of its ethical rationale wherein all reason beyond that in the service of self-interest is eclipsed.”

The individual works in “Weak Foundations,” organized by Eric Heist and the artist Michael Ashkin, don’t need company to reach that conclusion. Jennifer Dalton’s “Getting to Know the Neighbors,” a series of inkjet prints bound together in a snaking accordion book, details the activities of local Williamsburg businesses that provide services from “air release” and “toxic release” to hazardous waste disposal.

The Polish artist Józef Robakowski’s wonderful black-and-white video “From My Window,” made from 1978 to 1999, covers in 20 minutes the alterations to his surroundings brought about by Poland’s political changes. The video ends with construction under way on a “beautiful foreign hotel” that will obliterate his view.

“Weak Foundations” also includes work by classic urban-decay chroniclers like Martha Rosler and Camilo José Vergara. Ms. Rosler is represented by “Routes 1 and 9, New Jersey,” a mid-1990s photo in which a shadowy human skeleton hovers in the sky; Mr. Vergara by four photos of methadone clinics in the Bronx, taken from 1988 to 1992.

If there is a missing element in “Weak Foundations,” it is greater acknowledgment of the recent real estate boom and its effect on what Mr. Ashkin calls the “new urban ethics.” Mr. Ashkin’s black-and-white photos of sites in Long Branch, N.J., acquired through eminent domain, nod toward current local developments. Yet over all, the show feels rooted more in New York’s (literally) bankrupt past than in its equally complicated “revitalized” present. MARTHA SCHWENDENER

iMERENGUE!

This Skin I’m In

El Museo Del Barrio

1230 Fifth Avenue, at 104th Street, East Harlem

Through Jan. 21

“iMerengue!: Visual Rhythms” is made up almost entirely of paintings. But it’s really about music, namely the national popular music of the Dominican Republic, merengue, which for many New Yorkers is synonymous with Latino culture.

To what degree merengue directly influenced Dominican art is the main subject of the show, which originated at Centro Cultural Eduardo Leon Jimenes in Santiago. Most of the 40 or so paintings document people performing or dancing to the music; a few pictures, by artists like Raúl Recio and Jesus Desangles, seem to be formal responses to its percussive beat. Their pictures are semi-abstract; most of the others are in modern figurative styles that stay remarkably consistent over time. The basic look of a 1938 painting by Jaime Colson, or one by Alfredo Senior La Paz from 1944, is still current in work by Plutarco Andujar and Jacinto Dominguez half a century later.

Actually, all of this art is most interesting in the context of a second, smaller show, “This Skin I’m In: Contemporary Dominican Art From El Museo del Barrio’s Permanent Collection.” Here merengue’s vaunted joie de vivre undergoes some critical prodding from several artists of Dominican descent living in New York, whose take on it is shaped by postmodern identity politics, with its emphasis on gender, class and race.

Nicolás Dumit Estévez, photographed wearing a cape, bikini briefs and flip-flops, sends up merengue’s machismo ethic in his performances as Super Merengue. [Freddy Rodríguez](#) suggests the music’s African links, and its combative history with Haiti, in bright, geometric paintings. The artist named Scherezade explores the propagandistic role it played in propping up the regime of the dictator Rafael Leónides Trujillo.

These are serious subjects, but if you want to leave on an upbeat note, you can. Go back to the big show,

and listen to the classic merengue musician Nico Lora plaintively singing to his own accompaniment in a vintage film. His performance is worth a thousand paintings, easily. HOLLAND COTTER

BUT I WAS COOL

Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art
591 Broad Street, Newark
Through Jan. 20

In a 2006 New York Times Op-Ed article titled “A Poverty of the Mind,” the sociologist Orlando Patterson suggested that the most important liability for many African-American men isn’t joblessness or poor education, but what he called the “cool pose,” a masculine stance of power and invulnerability that made hanging out, doing drugs and risking going to jail a worthy career.

The three black male artists in the show — Dread Scott, Robert A. Pruitt and Jerry Gant — offer nuanced glosses on Mr. Patterson’s position, questioning it and casting it in into historical perspective. Mr. Scott refers back to the radical politics of the 1960s in an assemblage titled “Bensonhurst: Violence Is an Equal Opportunity Employer,” which refers to the Black Panther Fred Hampton, killed by police in 1969, advising blacks to arm themselves.

Mr. Pruitt looks to the same era in his life-size “Black Shining Prince” drawings, which depict men wearing Black Panther-style leather jackets and African dance masks. The series title comes from a eulogy delivered at the funeral of the murdered Malcolm X. The “portraits” are of the young artist’s contemporaries. The images are complex because African masks can be used to deter violence and sustain social equilibrium or in pursuit of justice and in war.

Other pieces by Mr. Pruitt trace “cool” back to slavery, when masking emotions — staying cool — was a survival tactic. Mr. Scott brings the investigation into the present with posters memorializing deaths in Hurricane Katrina and an African “power figure” in the form of a black male toy doll bristling with bullets.

It is Mr. Gant who offers the most abstract and positive take on the coolness theme in the form of a mediating remedy through art. For the occasion, he built a thin, high throne made of plywood and equipped with halo-like headphones and a crown. The throne, at once regal and fragile, is actually designed as a listening station. And Mr. Gant, who organized the exhibition with Edwin Ramoran in memory of Aljira’s chief curator, Eathon G. Hall Jr., plans to build more. It’s a sociable idea. With the right music playing, a whole new cool could rule.

HOLLAND COTTER

ANDREW MOORE

Yancey Richardson
535 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
Through Jan. 27

Andrew Moore, a midcareer artist, makes work that merges variant strains of photography. Mr. Moore is a

journalist-documentarian adept at gaining access to restricted locales like Governors Island in New York Harbor. In the last decade he's also photographed his way across Russia, Bosnia and Cuba.

At the same time, Mr. Moore borrows heavily from the bag of tricks employed by conceptual photographers like Andreas Gursky and Jeff Wall. His chromogenic prints mimic the scale of easel painting and the color saturation of commercial photography. He is also not averse to digitally manipulating his images.

This selection of seven photographs from various projects, dating from 2002 to 2006, showcases Mr. Moore's aesthetic pyrotechnics. It also tries to reposition him as a photographer of the physical landscape rather than of what Lee Friedlander called the "social landscape."

"Sea of Fog, Sweden" stretches out below an ancient Viking ruin and refers to an 1818 painting by Casper David Friedrich. Rustic waterfront houses in "Fishing Village, White Sea" are sandwiched between low hanging clouds and a harbor at ebb tide. "Tay Ho, Hanoi" captures the Vietnamese city against a moody, dramatic sunset, while "Round Up II, Keene, North Dakota" is a crystalline image of a verdant Western range under sunny, cloud-flecked skies. Several images, like "Casino Rooftop, Asbury Park," play a trompe l'oeil game, looking more like paintings than photographs.

Presenting photographs as digressive fragments or self-contained objects rather than as parts of a larger cohesive series is a strategy gaining in popularity among younger practitioners. Yet knowing that these works come from longer, essaylike series makes the display here disorienting rather than illuminating. As the show hops from one continent and vista to another, nothing substantial is registered about landscape per se, although the pictures are extraordinarily beautiful.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER

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