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ART VIEW

ART VIEW; Turning the Corner on Political Correctness?

By Roberta Smith

Published: March 3, 1991

The New Museum of Contemporary art, well known as a champion of politically oriented art, is not quite its usual contentious self these days. True, Gran Fury, the activist art collective, is holding forth from its front window with a display concerning the distribution of condoms and the legalization of prostitution. In addition, there's an unusually beautiful, if history-laden installation by Carrie Mae Weems in the "workspace" gallery that involves various texts printed on wafting pieces of silk and photographs of significant objects -- a hammer and a sickle, say.

Nonetheless, the bulk of the museum's high-ceilinged gallery space on lower Broadway is surprisingly devoid of overt political messages or references to specific social problems. This month its primary exhibition ventures into an area where political subjects are generally assumed to be rare: contemporary abstraction.

"Cadences: Icon and Abstraction in Context" is an earnest and uneven show, with a fairly high quotient of visual drabness and familiarity. But, as the title implies, context is all important. In its New Museum setting, this show indicates a bit of institutional mellowing or maturation, a softening of the hard line that, in art, social relevance is all and abstraction a plaything of the rich.

The show may also represent a flawed yet much needed attempt to reconcile the arguments of the art world's most hotly argued polarity -- the poles of art for society's sake and art for art's sake. It comes with the usual well-designed, textually high-powered New Museum catalogue that works both with and against the art on view. The total package sends an intriguingly contradictory bunch of "signifieds," as the theory-prone might say, or mixed signals.

The exhibition presents abstract artwork, mostly sculpture, by eight young artists and a mysterious collective from France that calls itself B.P. (It consists of three French artists, all born in 1962, who live in Nice.) It is the thesis of Gary Sangster, the curator who organized the show, that the work is connected by a subtle thread of social consciousness, and that a new kind of abstract art may be in the offing.

This viewpoint reflects a larger and more fashionable art world trend of a sort the New Museum usually tries to avoid. Over the last few seasons many younger artists have turned away from the self-conscious ironies of Neo-Geo abstraction, which specialized in high-tech, high-cost fabrication and direct quotations from earlier modern art. Increasingly, they favor forms of abstraction that emphasize modest, everyday, virtually untouched materials, scientific information and, despite the absence of recognizable images, references to the human body. It has been called abstraction with a conscience.

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Much of this work seems to have emerged from an early 1970's time capsule and might loosely be divided into categories of "raw" and "cooked." The first category reprises Post-Minimalism's "as is" uses of commonplace or industrial materials à la Richard Serra's and Barry LeVa's early 1970's work. The second offers handcrafted, more evocative fusions of the geometric and the organic favored by artists like Eva Hesse and Jackie Winsor.

The work at the New Museum is no exception. On the raw side, there is Curtis Mitchell's "Untitled (Subway Stripe)," a low-lying square of asphalt that seems to have been cut from a subway platform, and the mottled monochrome works of Dana Duff, which turn out to be everyday substances like laundry soap or mixtures of grease, lye and formaldehyde, under glass. Claudia Matzko is represented by a large wall piece whose glittering surface is made of thousands of stamp-size squares of glass held in place by simple dressmaker's pins.

According to Mr. Sangster, such ordinary uses of material subvert the traditional notions of spirituality, esoteric meaning and masterly skill associated with modernist abstraction while also bringing a new directness to the modernist vocabulary. But actually, most of this work seems very young and derivative, operating at a level of obviousness that might be called Duchamp 101. B.P.'s contribution is a typically modernist combination of a black square on a black background, except that the background is of darkened steel and the central square is a gleaming sheet of dripping oil. This gimmicky linking of art and commerce does not make for an auspicious debut.

The cooked side of the show is even weaker. It is not hard, nor is it very engaging, to read Elena Maria Gonzalez's "Nursing Missile" a cream-colored cone-shaped wall sculpture, as a fusion of male and female, war and peace. Likewise, the sincere, subtly crafted wood pieces of Terry Adkins suggest both containers and masks. The monochrome paintings of Eva Schlegel, an Austrian artist, and Tomoharu Murakami, who is from Japan, have a crowded ancestry that makes them seem virtually generic -- and quite reminiscent of abstract art that the New Museum often exhibited in the 1970's.

But it would be unfair to be too hard on the art itself, which is mostly still developing and, in any case, merely part of a larger, sometimes successful, sometimes strained attempt to put theory into practice. Demographic correctness prevails: the artists come from different parts of the world and different ethnic backgrounds; excluding B.P., half are women. For better, but mostly for worse, the show shuns the more prominent younger artists working in this vein, like Liz Larner and Kiki Smith, who might be construed as "stars"; the only possible candidate for this status is Charles Ray, a Los Angeles artist who was included in last year's Whitney Biennial.

The show demonstrates that curators can venture beyond the pool of usual suspects -- white, male and from New York -- and put together a perfectly respectable exhibition. On the other hand, the art world consensus seems to be confirmed by the fact that Mr. Ray is one of the exhibition's most impressive artists. His use of raw materials -- here a large black steel cube filled nearly to overflowing with black printer's ink -- is one of the show's few instances of artistic flair and intensity.

To a great extent, "Cadences," the catalogue, overwhelms "Cadences," the show. Mr. Sangster writes like a man nervously looking over his shoulder, trying to fend off the objections of the various theoretical camps. At one point he hesitantly ventures that "the deliberate and intentional desire to . . . make art abstract . . . is not, then, necessarily an escapist fantasy, an obscure evasion of social responsibility" -- as if the idea were heresy.

He does not make big claims for the art on view. To do so would be to espouse the ideological no-nos that mar the road to critical clarity like potholes on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway: the myth of originality, the art market's insatiable desire for newness and so on. But between the lines, he seems to be pulling for abstraction, for the dangerous pleasures and rewards of esthetic experience.

Mr. Sangster's essay is followed by contributions by Elizabeth Grosz, a philosopher, and Yve-Alain Bois, a French art historian. While more clearly written, their essays express

ideas whose difficulty contrasts starkly with the simplicity of the art on view. Nonetheless it is here that the most positive aspects of the exhibition's complex agenda are expressed. Toward the end of Ms. Grosz's essay she states simply that art cannot be evaluated from a purely political viewpoint, but must be seen both as a social object and an esthetic one and evaluated in terms of the history of its own medium. There is nothing new or innovative about this moderate proposal, but in this context it shines forth as a glimmer of hope.

If Mr. Sangster had followed Ms. Grosz's suggestion and examined his selections a little more thoroughly in the light of the history of abstraction since 1970, he might have had a better exhibition. Nonetheless, at least in terms of attitude, "Cadences" is a shaky step in a new and better direction for New Museum, and perhaps for the art world in general.

Photo: From "Cadences"--Squares by Tomoharu Murakami, cube by Charles Ray, round object by Maria Elena Gonzalez and J-shaped sculpture by Terry Adkins (The New Museum)

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