

September 1, 2006

ART REVIEW

Power, Injustice, Death, Loss: At Sea in the Here and Now

By ROBERTA SMITH

I RECOMMEND starting at the end of “Out of Time,” the Museum of Modern Art’s latest display of contemporary works from its collection. It is only among the installations by Rachel Whiteread, Gerhard Richter, Robert Gober and the sisters Jane and Louise Wilson that this unusually sterile selection of 49 works by 36 artists coheres with anything close to the kind of resonance and emotional usefulness that should be expected from an art museum.

The relatively rousing close is due to the way these works make good on the exhibition’s worn-out theme of time. But they also get a boost from reality. Each sheds light on the fix the world finds itself in by touching on desolation, waste, abuse of power, injustice, loss and death — of both individuals and cultures — all of which count among the vicissitudes of time.

Ms. Whiteread’s installation is closely related to her memorial to the Holocaust in Vienna, but it works equally well as a metaphor for the numbing- and dumbing-down of the American mind. It is a ghost library: a room lined with bands of crenellated white plaster that you gradually recognize as the negative casts of jutting shelves and rows of books, as if the wisdom of the ages has evaporated.

Mr. Richter’s elegiac suite of 15 paintings, “October 18, 1977,” evokes the fate of the individual and the power of the state. The paintings are based on newspaper photographs of the German terrorist group that called itself the Red Army Faction. The canvases show the radicals in custody, dead in their cells (three died mysteriously on the same day), their heavily attended and policed funeral, and also happier times. But the paintings’ deliberately blurred surfaces ominously embalm events whose truth will never be fully known.

Around a corner from the Richters, the Gober piece is high on the wall of what at first seems to be an empty cul-de-sac. It is the window of an old-fashioned jail, blocked by three heavy, rather beautiful iron bars. It harks back to a time of simpler crimes and punishments. A radiant blue sky can be seen through the bars, as happy as your typical Hollywood ending.

Meanwhile, the Wilsons’ four-screen video projection, “Stasi City,” takes us on a clanging, Cubist tour of the abandoned headquarters of East Germany’s secret police. This symbol of daunting power becomes a readymade. Relentless tracking shots and dumbwaiters used to disorienting effect move us up, down and through the building, along endless hallways, into officelike interrogation chambers (note the padded doors), past revolving file boxes once filled with dossiers. The dead-end is a room for medical examinations, surgery or perhaps torture. Its floor is littered with blue and white flakes of peeled paint that evoke a vast Arctic ice pack. With its mordant slapstick, “Stasi City” may be a structuralist version of “Dr. Strangelove,” but it undercuts tragedy with the suggestion that evil ultimately crumbles and

falls away. And its formal rigor is itself cause for hope.

The connections between these powerful pieces are largely what I would call literary. Similarly, a cluster of works by Carrie Mae Weems, Fernando Bryce, Luc Tuymans and Koto Ezawa exposes the contortions of race and power, while Cady Noland's mostly metal found-object sculpture from 1988 (acquired 17 years after it was made) stands among them insinuating an incorrigible type of American pride and prejudice. Once you've seen them you might as well go home. The rest of the show feels like its own form of incarceration and is, at times, fatally sophomoric. Not much clicks visually, nothing surprises.

Sure, there are things worth seeing: Jeff Koons's trio of basketballs floating in an aquarium; the Modern's latest Frank Stella, from 1964; and Rineke Dijkstra's eight portrait photographs of a young (Bosnian) girl. Pipilotti Rist's version of mordancy and chaos, "Ever Is Over All," shows a beautiful young woman whose get-up is a bit like Dorothy's in "The Wizard of Oz" skipping along a sidewalk, gleefully bashing in car windows.

The point is that the selections and juxtapositions in "Out of Time" are so orthodox, so true to the Minimalist-Conceptualist gene pool, so loyal to a familiar cast of pre-approved artists and so risk-adverse and eccentricity intolerant that the art feels frozen and isolated, like deer in headlights. It is rather late in the day to be trotting out old standards like On Kawara date paintings or [Andy Warhol](#)'s film "Empire" for a show about time.

This display seems to have involved less thought than an exceptional summer group show in a commercial gallery. It makes me wonder about the curatorial imagination of the team behind it: Joachim Pissarro, curator of painting and sculpture, and Eva Respini, an assistant curator of photography. But mainly it makes me think about how [MoMA](#) is imprisoned by its history and its new building.

At the time of the reopening in 2004, the double-height galleries at the heart of the expanded Modern felt like a big, scary valentine to new art. Some people worried that these grand and prominent, if anonymous, galleries signaled a shift in MoMA's focus toward the new and away from the historic Modernism with which its own story is entwined. Those folks can rest easy. So far the presentations have tended to function like appetizers or dessert, briefly enjoyed before or after the main course, which is the good old stuff upstairs.

The selection and installation of recent acquisitions is one of the most basic tests of curatorial talent, and it is one in which MoMA's curators have frequently been outdistanced by their peers at other museums, among them the Whitney, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Museums of Contemporary Art in Chicago and Los Angeles. And these peers are doing what they do with a lot less. They are just looking and thinking very, very hard, trying to arrange artworks in space so that they speak to one another in unexpected ways.

An effective juxtaposition can stick in the brain. One that impressed me a few years back at the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in Chicago was the pairing of a big, juicy late painting by

Philip Guston and a starkly Minimalist diptych by Jo Baer. They shared only a forceful love of color (primarily white, red and black), but this force bridged the gaps of method, style and intention, supplying a jolt of pleasure and insight into the capacious subversiveness of painting.

A Guston next to a Baer is not all that daring, but nothing so unpredictable happens in "Out of Time." In one gallery, Sarah Morris's architecture-based abstraction, "Creative Artists Agency," is paired with the 1964 Stella. Ho-hum. They're both hard-edged, geometric and use green. But the Morris and its horizontal swath of green facets made me long to see it next to one of Ed Paschke's acrid masklike faces, with their horizontal pulls of pure color, exacerbating the undercurrent of urban dystopia that separates the Morris from the Stella.

Even this feels too capricious for MoMA, at least in these galleries. (In less prominent galleries of prints, drawings and photographs, the curators seem freer and more ecumenical in their choices.) What about a drawing by Jim Nutt? Something by an outsider artist? What about venturing beyond the art world's top commercial galleries?

Nothing doing. One wonders whether the theme of time was at least partly imposed on the curators by some higher-up who felt the public needed an idea to hold onto. That may be nowhere near the truth, but it would explain the show's half-hearted alternations between the obvious and the arbitrary.

Obvious includes the juxtaposition of Process Art drawings by Robert Morris, Bill Anastasi and Janine Antoni and big Process-Art circles (one made with sand, one with fire) by Mona Hatoum and Cai Gou-Qiang. And of course one of Bill Viola's lugubrious slow-motion video installations, which museums find irresistible, is de rigueur when time is to be invoked. Here, his "Stations," another gloss on birth, death and redemption, is as literary as the Wilsons' video is visceral. Elsewhere there doesn't seem to be much of a connection at all, as with the Stella, the Morris and Wangechi Mutu's collage of a serpent-slaying primordial feminist.

When time is evoked, the art is usually forced into the role of illustration, because so little attention has been paid to form. This indicates a problem that is not unique to MoMA: the appropriation of the curatorial discipline by academic art theory. Exhibitions rarely come to life when guided by a world view that sees art mainly as a vehicle for higher meaning, where visual connections come last if they are allowed in the game at all.

The basic question here is, what are curators supposed to do? Perhaps they should relax and give in to the irrational, subjective nature of visual experience. This would mean letting their eyes betray them and take them to places where carefully worked-out theories and current fashions do not. Caught between fear of its supposedly formalist past and the apparent desire for a canon, any canon, the Museum of Modern Art has its own particular problems. But for starters it needs get over itself and to figure out how to free its curators to do their work.