



Curation's Onslaught: White Columns Annual and Larry Poons

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How sensitively can a group show be curated--how deftly can works by more than 40 artists be assembled into an aesthetically unitary whole--before the art is reduced to decoration and it becomes impossible to discern the merits of any one piece? If you can't get to the Barnes Foundation, in Merion, Pa., before it closes in January, you can consider the question here in New York at "Looking Back," the fifth White Columns Annual, curated this year by Bob Nickas.

The aesthetic that Mr. Nickas has assembled so forcefully and beautifully is the '90s retread of the '70s that seemed to be the main product of the aughts, an aesthetic defined by the long, losing struggle against the deadening effects of mass media.

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Some artists are resigned: They accept that they now make images of images, instead of images of things, and get on with it. So there are images of images, as well as fragments of images and fragments of reference and fragments of text, which amount to the same thing. Drawings by Andra Ursuta and Karl Wirsum float in space, without backgrounds; Mike Cloud deconstructs and reassembles a photo book into a Mick Jagger Paper Quilt; Justin Matherly, Gene Beery and Ms. Ursuta assemble more or less intelligible sentences and lists; and Joseph Montgomery, Chris Vasell and Wardell Milan make collage. There's faux pornography, in the black-and-white photos of David Hurles and Alvin Baltrop, and there are remixed images of real pornography, as in Mr. Milan's Rose Garden, a much creased color still of fellatio with added Wite-Out.

Linking the pornography and referentiality is the language of irony, as in Volker Corell's 1964 photograph of two Klansmen with a baby stroller, or Charlotte Posenenske's empty gray aluminum box--also from the '60s--or Amy O'Neill's recent video FPFZ (Forest Park, Forest Zoo), in which snippets of video, floating in a black background like snapshots, lead us through an abandoned zoo to the sound of a sludgy metal song called "Fetus in Fetu." (The song's official music video depicts the band's singer being decapitated.)

Other artists try to turn away. There's primitivism, distortion of anatomy and self-conscious outsider style, as in Freddie Brice's large painting of a snake, which could have crawled out of a Revolutionary War flag; Huma Bhabha's grimacing, piglike demon face; Gert and Uwe Tobias' colorful 6-foot-tall woodcut of circles and lines; or Justin Matherly's heavy concrete creature that lurches across the gallery floor like an anime nightmare. There's non-Western geometry, as in Dan Walsh's beautiful red acrylic grid pattern or Alyssa Pheobus' Dar al-, a large, graphite drawing of a labyrinthine gate. The neon green and orange of Dave Malek's The Promise of Space and the careful smudging of Michael Scott's blue enamel stripes both look toward New York abstraction more than they do toward, say, the patterns of Delhi's Red Fort, but their purpose here is clear. Three small anonymous paintings from Rajasthan--two of deep blue stripes, one of an egg-shaped black lingam--prevent any confusion.

Some turn toward garbage, or raw nature, but they can't help making it clean, as in Carol Bove's delicate seashell mobile, with its empty, gold-colored pedestal; the pristinely rectilinear dirt-covered frames of Ms. Ursuta's drawings; or Virginia Overton's light box--hung in the alcove leading to FPFZ--showing a close-up of human hair. There's taxonomy, as in Candy Jernigan's wonderful mounted chart of the crack vials she found around her apartment over a two-week period in the '80s, Found Dope: Part II; and there's locavore-style nostalgia, as in Ull Hohn's misty, golden landscapes, Vija Celmins' painstaking aquatint map Amérique or Jules de Balincourt's outsider-style oil painting of a motley horse with travois. And there's the frank fetishization of material, as in Ms. Bove's seashells, or Barry X Ball's beautiful orange calcite bust of snake-headed Envy.

So what's the answer to the question? Is this show too beautiful? Is it all too deft? My eyes kept returning to the framework pedestal of Ms. Bove's mobile: careful, perfect, beautiful and empty.