

Paul-Émile Saulnier Un siècle de cendres

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Paul-Émile Saulnier, *La cathédrale engloutie*, 1993. Somerset paper, glass, wood, rope, charcoal and acrylic. 2,43 x 4,26 x 1,21 m. Artist's collection. Photo : Daniel Rousset.

Paul-Émile Saulnier's thickly worked installations reflect an impulse to work back in history as he reconstructs the material of cultural myths left in the wake of WWII Berlin. This exhibition of Saulnier's work spans ten years and appears at a time of resurgent interest in news, films and books depicting the events of WWII and their course through Europe. The works are set up not only to locate an image of the past but to draw the viewing audience as a witness to very compelling events. With such realities being so removed from the present time and place,

the work takes on an added role in historical messaging. The relation of the artist's representation to its subject is a point which necessarily infuses into reflective viewing of the work.

In picking through the installation sites, the pieces appear crowded with blackened debris, with panels of drawings integrated cogently into the profusion of material, as entryways on to what could be loading stations. Floods of rags and bound paper spill out, soiled and sullen. Red stenciled numbers and encoded signs appear as directives from some distant office. Broken up crates double as boxcars in a defunct system of transport.

Further on, a post pulls away at an angle and extends a charting arm whose point lands on a red splotch of Berlin on wooden plates of East and West Germany, bolted to the floor. Some standard

black planks flanking the threshold have heavy violincello heads perched on top, wires snipped. Elsewhere, mutated versions of these instrument heads have fallen to the floor like small animals, rats, with turnkey legs struggling in a tangle of wire. In another view, similar sized lumpen forms assume steely positions with wire passing through the pegs to nearby mousetraps fixed like detonators.

The generative material of the installations is worked into with direct references to music, architecture, master painting and stage settings, which recall an empire of

de cendres

aesthetic ideology associated with the government of that time. The effects of Nazi ideology are associated with impersonal repetition and systemizing of certain forms which surround the suggestion of the transport of human beings and unfathomable endings. The one-dimensional portrayal of figures with stylized screaming mouths allude to a collective victim, while the presence of passive witnesses is implied with tiny chairs drawn up in front of a great expanse of theatre vaults.

A tendency towards thin characterization in alluding to specific historical realities, contrasts with the engaging way that Saulnier shuffles the range of his formal material to produce forms that reemerge as precisely articulated inventive moments. The evocative visual timing apparent in the loose arrangement of forms and images seems attuned to precognitive necessities that are felt immediately and could lend themselves to reflectively positioned themes.

In attempting to give a sense of emotional impact that goes beyond the historical facts, the work is pulled into the pitfall of the cultural archetypes it is depicting. The tendency to violence is portrayed as an anonymous movement, like for example the forces of nature, in an extension of myth-making that builds accountability outside of the humans involved. There is a noticeable absence of the sense of human consciousness that would permit association with Nazi ideology-building, while the presence of unelaborated victim types, subdued references to the Holocaust, and a general sense of impending doom increases the melodramatic aspect. Rather than subverting the myth this approach tends to deprive it of memory.

An exhibition of this sort necessarily raises the issue of its relationship to the contemporary context of war. In particular, the war in the former Yugoslavia with its precedent of WWII alliance conflicts and ethnic cleansing, comes to mind immediately. The work seems to favor a more hermetic

approach rather than acknowledging current situations or finding contemporary resonance in addressing the nature of consciousness that opens itself to war. In this way it tends to elaborate on its own level of artistic expressiveness and, along with work that chooses a delicate subject of this vein, must deal with the risk of displacing the effective memory of these past events with a more recent assimilated version. It can't be assumed that ruminating over historical identity is a benign activity in our time. This exhibition does, however, take part in indicating a renewed fascination with the systematics of these events, which is pertinent to North America. As European politics are redefined, the 1940's marks the last period before Eastern Europe was essentially closed out of exchange systems with the West. It is historical background to the current reestablishment of cultural and economic links. No longer is North America seen as a type of immigration haven from a tenebrous communist world, it now communicates with an enlarged European cultural territory.

The initial installation upon entering the exhibition includes this citation from George Grosz's 1924 text: "It is complete nonsense to believe that spirit or anything spiritual ruled the world. Goethe in bombardment, Nietzsche in knapsacks! Jesus in trenches! But there were still people who thought spirit and art had power." Taken in the context of the exhibition, I had interpreted this text as describing a sort of invincibility of spiritual aspiration that the artist wanted to suggest for viewing the work. However, in referring to Grosz's writings, it was clear that he dismissed the rising popularity of Expressionism, and any art centered on the expressions of the soul, as profoundly bankrupt examples of bourgeois escapism. He was virulently cynical of the spiritual capacities of a people that could accept or rationalize the carnage of war. Indeed much of Grosz's caustic anti-war railings were directed not only at the ruling classes but at the common person

whom he believed preferred the war because it improved their economic situation and indulged baser instincts.¹ This seems to be a direct callback for the emergent combination of Neo-Nazi revivalism and floundering economies of this decade. It underlines the need for relevant cultural discourses.

The aspect of Saulnier's work, which leaves matters of thematic representation unattended, seems at odds with Grosz's unbounded cynicism. Its strength, however, comes with attempting to provoke a material empathy or parallel experience from which to extrapolate historical understanding. ■

Galerie de L'UQAM

September 17-November 6, 1993

NOTE :

1. Irwin, Mary Beth, *George Grosz: Art and Politics in the Weimar Republic*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey; 1971.

Puisant au thème du jour, Paul-Émile Saulnier a trouvé la matière de ses installations dans l'histoire de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, en particulier dans la mythographie associée à la République de Weimar. À l'aide de panneaux illustrés et d'une profusion d'objets qui nous rappellent les pires moments d'une guerre atroce, Saulnier nous plonge dans un Berlin exsangue, sur le lieu de ce qui pourrait être une gare de chemin de fer, point de départ pour la déportation des Juifs vers les camps d'extermination. Dans une accumulation morbide de lambeaux, débris et liasses de journaux, des caissons à claire-voie évoquent ces wagons à bestiaux qui servaient au transport des proscrits. Un affichage de signes encodés et de chiffres à l'encre rouge ajoutent à ce décor sinistre. Deux autres installations de même nature, aux éléments touffus et morbides, complètent cette exposition. On y sent le poids d'une idéologie infâme qui infectait jusqu'aux moindres recoins de la musique, de l'architecture et de la culture fasciste. Toujours, la violence s'y exerce de façon anonyme, derrière la mascarade d'un mysticisme tronquée. En voyant cette exposition, on pense bien sûr à la guerre d'épuration que connaît actuellement l'ancienne Yougoslavie et à la résurgence inquiétante du fascisme contemporain et des solutions totalisantes.