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Drawing Now: Eight Propositions, Museum of Modern Art QNS, curator: Laura Hoptman, New York. October 17, 2002 — January 6, 2003

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New York

PULLING IN THE NET

Drawing Now : Eight Propositions, Museum of Modern Art QNS, curator : Laura Hoptman, New York. October 17, 2002 – January 6, 2003

MoMA is an institution that demands our respect. It does not like to give the impression of making frivolous or arbitrary decisions. When the Museum speaks, it would have us sit up and take notice. Because, while MoMA exhibitions do not always enlighten, they unfailingly enunciate the heart of artworld realpolitik, telling us what to think, who to collect, and how to act at any particular moment. MoMA anoints those it deems worthy and excommunicates the wicked. It is a great leveller, a manufacturer of consensus and a font of conventional wisdom.

Apparently MoMA has decided that the time has now come for us to re-consider drawing, with not one but two shows opening in quick succession. I cannot report on the exhibition of visionary architectural drawings, as the MoMA press office told me not to go see it. The remaining show, *Drawing Now : Eight Propositions*, was curated by Laura Hoptman, who is now Curator at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, but was assistant curator of drawings at MoMA when the show was first planned.

Ms. Hoptman's thesis is that there is a flowering of drawing not seen since the late 60s and early 70s. The Minimalist and post-Minimalist drawings of that earlier period, she posits, were often analogous to sculptures, performances, or installations (by Smithson, LeWitt, Morris, Serra, etc.), and were not necessarily created as collectible objects in their own right. Contemporary drawing, by contrast, is autonomous, anecdotal, often representational or narrative, and quite collectible, with unabashed reference to the commercial, ornamental, illustrative and the vernacular.

To support this thesis, Ms. Hoptman selects from the work of 26 artists, grouped into eight "propositions," for an average of 3.25 artists per proposition. This figure exceeds the number of children in the typical American family, implying the specter of dysfunction. So God bless the child endowed with an inalienable proposition, for he will bask in the light of *Drawing Now*. Conversely, God save the orphan without a proposition to call his own, or who tragically falls into the dark limbo between propositions, for he will not see the light.

The propositions themselves are not exactly groundbreaking. For example, it is not news that John Currin and Elizabeth Peyton are both influenced by fashion; that Barry McGee, Takashi Murakami, and Yoshitomo Nara find inspiration in comic books and anime; that Toba Khedoori and Julie Mehretu deal with architectural space; that Matthew Ritchie and Mark Manders advance their own peculiar hermetic cosmologies. If you need more exhaustive documentation, you may consult the *Drawing Now* catalogue. Unfortunately, I do not have a catalogue at my disposal as I write this review. Still, I do have eight useful prepositions at my disposal – in, by, for, with, to, of, from, and over – which I plan to use frequently in this critique. Hopefully they will be equal to the task at hand.

A curated group show might succeed through its selection of artists, or through its advancement of a compelling thesis. (Ideally it should excel in both regards.) So even if the organizing principle seems artificial, trite, or overly reductive, there is always the work.

Drawing Now does have enough good work, from well known artists, to make it worthwhile viewing. But certainly there are few new discoveries here. The press release might call them "emerging," but most of the artists have international reputations, and are chosen from a pool of thirty-something usual suspects familiar to even the most casual scanner of *Artforum* ads. Some of the artists are fortunate enough to have shows at New York galleries concurrent with the MoMA show, while many more have New York representation.

The first piece we see in *Drawing Now*, drawn directly on an wall external to the show galleries, is Carcel, by Los Carpinteros, a Cuban collective who previously had an entire room of constructions at P.S.1, MoMA's junior partner. Carcel means "prison" in Spanish, and the piece is a wickedly humorous take on the utilitarian aesthetic of the panopticon, the workhouse model devised for jails, hospitals, and asylums. Here the panopticon is divided into a gridlike progression of drawers, each with its own wooden knob protruding from the sheetrock, making a visual pun on the *bu-reau*-cratic while subversively undercutting the arrogance of the institution with the modesty of the domestic.

This is the largest single installation in the show, but there are several other large works. Ugo Rondinone has two big black and white pieces, blown up from sketchpad to wall size, which try to re-invigorate the 19th century antecedent of a naturalist's field drawings, but lack the brooding mystery of his previous installations. Size here seems an affectation, an emphasis of scale, more bombastic than meaningful.

Not so with the enormous (as large as 12 x 20 feet), ghostly renderings of doorways, windows, and facades by Toba Khedoori, done in oil, wax, and pencil on unframed sheets of paper. They are given their own room at MoMA, hovering like apparitions on all four

walls. A recent MacArthur Fellow, whose solo show is currently up in Chelsea at the relocated David Zwirner Gallery, Khedoori makes size the central issue. It allows us to approach her work with our bodies as well as our minds, with corporeally mediated emotions, and a feeling of being physically implicated in the vast, empty stretches of her dislocated spaces.

Paul Noble also uses large scale to grand effect in Mall, his huge pencil drawing of a depopulated city, whose block-like buildings and ruins recall a Navaho pueblo, a Middle Eastern bazaar, a shantytown, or alternately a city of the dead with each mausoleum cruelly ransacked. The intricate detailing of this mythic city recalls the semiotic investigations of Borges. Each bit of distressed masonry suggests a glyph, a small part of a puzzle, a lost alphabet waiting to be deciphered. With his dense, all-encompassing, anarchic vision, Noble returns us to the aleph, the origin of signification.

Kai Althoff, fresh from the cover of the October *Artforum*, graces the show with an impeccably and densely installed series of watercolors that recall the early modernist expressions of Die Brücke and other hall-of-the-mountain-king figurations.

Chris Ofili, the Sensation-al employer of elephant dung, employs tiny Afro heads as lines and dots, the graphic building blocks of his finely wrought, black and white drawings of kings, queens, and African ceremonial functions. As one title puts it, Albinos and Bros With Fros.

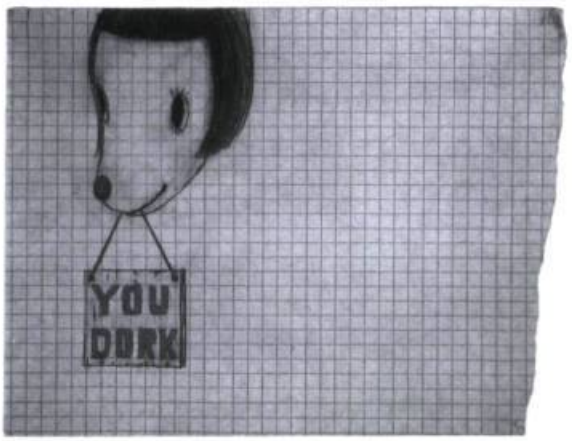
Neo Rauch, the epitome of the East German academic Sunday painter taken to sardonic excess, has a number of paintings on paper seemingly taken from old socialist magazines, catalogs, and instruction manuals. Nostalgia for the ungainly but familiar is presented in counterpoint to an uncertain future under unification.

David Thorpe, an English artist who shares the room with Rauch, collages small cuttings of colored paper into fussy and unexciting landscapes. Franz Ackermann also deals with landscape, albeit the urban, with his impressions of a walk through Pittsburgh organized into the 34 small studies of trans east west (undoubtedly also Ms. Hoptman's personal homage to her new posting at the Carnegie). Russell Crotty, from California, presents a series of pen-and-ink drawings of beach vegetation and surfing locales, bound into large books.

Barry McGee contributes an assemblage of small, framed elements on paper, overlapped into a dense mass on the wall. Multiple drawings of his axiomatic figure – a heavily-jowled, sleepy-eyed, lumpen prole – are interspersed with detritus from the street – graffiti, photographs, signs, other found objects – to provide material testimony of the urban skateboarding *flâneur*.

In the same room, Yoshitoro Nara tapes various cartoon versions of his wide-eyed waif over reproductions of classical ukiyo e-prints. Are they the young and the restless, drenched in pop culture, looking only forward, oblivious to history ? Nara has a concurrent show at Chelsea's Marianne Boesky Gallery.

John Currin and Elizabeth Peyton share a room. While he rummages through the attic of figurative painting stylizations, she portrays the skinny, the pretty, the



trendy, the epicene, the rock-y and the roll-y. Both have been widely seen in New York, as have other *Drawing Now* artists like Kara Walker, Matthew Ritchie, Shahzia Sikander and Takashi Murakami. The latter even had an installation last year of huge inflatables in Grand Central Station.

Space prevents extended consideration of the remaining artists in the exhibition : Laura Owens, Jockum Nordstrom, Jennifer Pastor, Richard Wright, Kevin Appel, and Graham Little. But overall, *Drawing Now* might have included more adventurous curatorial choices. This is not to disparage the quality of all the selected artists, but merely to wish for something new. Even among the usual suspects, there are the somewhat less usual. Then again, this is MoMA, where a ratification of the consensus is to be expected. Ms. Hoptman casts her net in familiar waters, and what she catches she offers up as comfort food.

Was her main creative effort expended in formulating the propositions, then filling the slots with those artists having the most buzz, or with those who best fit the categories ? It's the perennial chicken and egg question : which came first, the artists or the propositions ? To her credit, we can imagine the show growing organically and geometrically. Selection of a first artist suggests a point of departure. Selection of a second defines a line. The third (or the third and a quarter) lies along that line, which has now become a proposition. Also to her credit, the curator attempts to extend the definition and scale of drawing beyond pencil and ink on a sketchpad. Sometimes this works, sometimes not. For example, even as we celebrate the figure and color of Neo Rauch's oil paintings on paper, we cannot help but wonder what defines them as drawings. Is it merely because they are on paper ? Had they been done on canvas, would they then be paintings ? Ms. Hoptman might have spent more time defining the kernel of drawing, the irreducible impulse to configure that underlies the discipline, and also on the still strong relationship that exists between drawing and sculpture. But such concerns could weaken her central thesis, that we have left the 70s behind, that drawing now is very different from drawing then.

STEVEN KAPLAN

Yoshitomo Nara, *Time of My Life*, 1992-2000. Coll. David Teiger. Photo : Thomas Griesel, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © Yoshitomo Nara