

The Village Voice October 05, 2011

Boom, Bubble, Bust: Matthew Barney + Jenny Saville + Mickalene Thomas

By Christian Viveros-Faunã

We have, the historian Jacques Barzun told us back in the 1980s, the culture we deserve. But perhaps it would be more accurate to say we have the culture we tolerate.

Cast back to that crass, crazily coiffed Reagan-Bush decade and recall the Rubik's Cube and Pac-Man crazes, the goonish *Die Hard* and *Rambo* franchises, and that hirsute slag calling herself Madonna. (Now where did she disappear to?) After you're done remembering that piddle, consider the era's dramatic political and economic swerve. What went woozy then is still very much with us today.

In folk-toy parlance, the country's social and economic structure moved from Lincoln Logs to Lego robotics 2.0, sustaining an avalanche of changes that shifted values with the force of an earthquake. Organized labor was pilloried. Wall Street and banking were deregulated. Derivatives were introduced. When the dust settled three decades later, the country was fundamentally different—10 percent of the population owned 73 percent of the wealth. At the ass-end of the boom-bubble-and-bust cycle that even free-market economists admit describes our teetering economic order, we've seemingly learned precious little. Ask an out-of-work machinist from Jersey City today what really gets his goat, and he'll probably crook a thumb at a picture of Obama or predictably freak at footage of two men kissing on *The Millionaire Matchmaker*.

"Postmodernism," my fellow art scribe Ben Davis wrote in paraphrase of the cultural critic Fredric Jameson, "is the cultural logic of neoliberalism." No truer sentence has been penned in the past decade; no more radical idea has been elevated from beneath the collective proboscis. The revelation that the "end of the grand narratives" trumpeted by liberal relativists fits the neocons' "end of history" like a Spanx tee, though, has hardly set the cultural world on fire. Like banking and government, there is little appetite today for wholesale reassessments. Take the current art world, for example: Inside its galleries, museums, and studios, folks have found it blindingly difficult to ask important questions about a crisis they have yet to fully acknowledge.

Proof of this willful ignorance (or amnesia) are some of the shockingly retread gallery exhibitions on view during New York's all-important back-to-school season. Attempts to cash in on yesterday's sure things amid the dramatically uncertain now, these shows present last-ditch plays for a back-to-the-future scenario. Instead of forward-looking contemporary art, what is on offer at some of Gotham's bigger showrooms looks more like lemons rummaged from the junk heap of art's DeLoreans.

Consider Jenny Saville's new exhibition of gigantic paintings at Gagosian's Madison

Avenue space. An English artist celebrated in the 1990s for mammoth, fleshy nudes that fingered societal obsessions about plastic surgery, negative female body images, and excess chub, her work has since undergone a domestication that is as literal as it is, existentially, troubling. In place of the awkward rub that informed the massive paintings she exhibited at shows like 1997's "Sensation," Saville has currently turned her attention to inexpressive, fussily empty portraits of herself and her children—in XXXL scope.

In a nutshell, what originally seemed extreme—she trowels buckets of paint onto huge canvases with palette knives and squeegees—now looks like a parlor trick. That Saville's once racy forms have strayed far from her previously neurotic content becomes clear in repeated renditions of the artist holding her children. Inspired by Renaissance nativity portraits, these studiously scumbled and scratched pictures (her superimpositions and erasures rarely avoid predictability) appear less visceral meditations on motherhood than vastly scaled geegaws propped up by classicism and sheer bloat. What dynamism this artist once possessed—which seduced this art critic to wax lyrical about her 1999 show—is past history. Her paintings today are as compelling as a 15-foot Hallmark card.

Another unwanted blast from the past is Matthew Barney, whose current exhibition at Barbara Gladstone features mainly cast sculptures from yet another epically expensive, absurdly scaled, utterly pointless extravaganza. Staged in Detroit, the all-day performance that begat the biggest iron, lead, bronze, and copper gallery monument featured—among other Caligula-like excesses—a freezing barge ride down the Detroit river, cars being dredged up, a legless actress, and a barrelful of snakes. About their significance: Better not to ask, since Barney is convoluted about his work to the point of unintelligibility. The gallery press release mentions Norman Mailer, Egyptian mythology, and a Chrysler Imperial in an attempt to describe "a complex system of storytelling that intertwines personal, historical, and modern mythologies." The point here—as in mall architecture—is confusion by design. How else to foist this gussied-up crap on an intelligent public?

In this first New York gallery outing in seven years, Barney still plays to type. He remains that figure New York loves well but never wisely: the artist as Alpha Creator. A persona whose extravagance dovetailed perfectly (during the boom times anyway) with the airs of hedge-fund billionaires, real estate moguls, and museum chairmen, his elaborate excesses gave arty, operatic voice to their buttoned-up longings. Presently, his inflated career symbolizes monumentality for its own sake—as illustrated by a 47,000-pound amorphous, poured-metal eyesore currently on view in Chelsea. No single message could seem more spectacularly out-of-date today.

By contrast, a third show in the city's newish arts neighborhood, the Bowery, sounds a note of restraint and even stocktaking that other artists might consider. Mickalene Thomas's exhibition at Lehmann Maupin is a scaled-down affair by an artist who recently made a splash with a blinged-up mural for MOMA's 53rd Street window. A display of medium- and small-scale photographs and collages—some of which exhibit a vivacity of color and texture that recalls passages of David Hockney—Thomas's salon-style hang suggests meditation, reinvention possibly. The culture we

deserve isn't always, clearly, the culture we need. But at least this artist knows when it's time to stop, look around, and reassess.