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The New York Times

SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW | THE ART ISSUE

‘The Contemporaries,’ ‘Painting Now’ and More

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JUNE 25, 2015



Chris Ofili, “Afrodizzia (2nd Version),” 1996; acrylic, oil, polyester resin, paper collage, glitter, map pins and elephant dung on linen.

Everyone says the art world has changed, which is true, though your view of how, and how much, will depend on your entry point. Mine was long ago, in the early 1970s, when New York City was utterly unlike the High Line town of today. It was on the verge of bankruptcy. Physically, Manhattan was unraveling at the seams, and “urban renewal” had trashed vast stretches of the other boroughs, leaving working-class residents, many of them new immigrants, marooned.

The commercial art world, confined to Manhattan, was small. Galleries numbered in the high dozens to very low hundreds, with the newest ones in a still raw SoHo. A critic could do a comprehensive sweep in one hard-working day. Rents in Manhattan were doable. Most artists lived there, sometimes upstairs from the galleries they showed in. The social pool was small. You could pretty much fit the whole demographic into two downtown bars on a Saturday night.

The art world still filled some popular notion of bohemia, though professionalization was underway. Everyone had gone to art school, though graduate degrees were uncommon unless your goal was to teach. Galleries were tightly run shops. SoHo was already a brand. In 1974, *New York* magazine ran a cover story calling it “the most exciting place to live in the city,” and included a gallery map.

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Yet alternatives to it existed, probably more than I knew. I lived farther south, below the still half-empty World Trade Center, on the fringes of the financial district. I lived with one artist, and was surrounded by others. There was no money. Few of my friends showed in galleries. Many were

performers; most were multi-disciplinary: filmmakers who painted, musicians who danced. A lot of people had pickup day jobs. I had a string of them and wrote about art at night.

In 1980 I had to move. SoHo was by then out of financial reach, so I went first to Chinatown, then to the East Village, which was just becoming an art neighborhood and a manifestly un-SoHo scene of apartment-studios, shoestring storefronts and a bit (just a bit) of racial mixing. The area's brief heyday coincided with an economic boom; club crawling and art collecting grew chic. Limousines showed up on Avenue A; people climbed out and wrote checks for whole shows.

This was the start of something we now know well. Money brought instant problems. Artists began producing too fast. And the market did what it always does: It created a few stars, gave them everything and gave everyone else nothing.

All that ended with the crash of the late 1980s, by which time the East Village was out of fashion anyway. Galleries closed; careers tanked. With the market in disarray, some gate-crashing happened and new kinds of art came in. Work by -African-American, Asian-American and Latin American artists finally gained admission, bringing politics with it. AIDS and the culture wars intensified the politics. For the first time in memory, art felt fused to life. You probably had to have been around to understand how utopian the moment felt. Multiculturalism was always a tricky concept. For me, back then (and still) it meant one main thing: everyone coming to the table, bringing colors, languages, genders, attitudes and stories, to cook up new kinds of meals.



Dana Schutz, "Assembling an Octopus" (2013); oil on canvas.

But the racial and ethnically uniform art establishment — museums, big galleries, major collectors, mainstream critics — never really went for any of this. And when the economy got back on track, it didn't have to. By the turn of the millennium the old machinery was up and juiced. Not only was there unimaginable wealth around, but art's stock was sky-high, with a new class of collectors investing fortunes in it. The events of 9/11 didn't change this. The 2008 recession didn't change it. The market kept growing. The basic art story of the past 15 years or so is about volume. Galleries mushroomed. (Chelsea was born, then Williamsburg, then Bushwick.) Museums ballooned. Art schools turned out record numbers of graduates. One of them was Roger White, who arrived on the scene around 2000 and describes what he found, then and since, in his book "The Contemporaries: Travels in the 21st-Century Art World."

An artist, teacher and estimable prose stylist, White was born in 1976, grew up in California, graduated from Yale in 1997, then came to New York City, where he acquired an M.F.A. in painting from Columbia University and an insider's knowledge of the professional landscape. His book is an episodic report, at a slight critical remove, from various points on that terrain, beginning in a long first chapter with a plunge into a full day of attending studio critiques at one of the country's top art academies, the Rhode Island School of Design.

The critique, or crit, is a standard art school exercise, wherein students submit their current or most recent work to group scrutiny and comment by faculty members and classmates. Some sessions are rumored to be brutalizing, ego--mauling assaults, like an art school version of hazing. The 19 that White describes, and in which he participated as a faculty member, have some edgy

moments, but are conducted in a coded language that seems designed to sound tough without actually delivering any damage or, it would seem, any practical correctives.

What the crits seem most useful for — though White denies this — is to push students into learning how to explain, defend and generally package their work. To what degree such packaging figured in art school training decades ago I don't know, but a developed patter, as carefully composed as a press release, is now a regular feature of a new professionalism. Here, as throughout the book, White is an observant, vivid reporter, but perhaps exactly because he is inside the system, somewhat cautious as critical commentator.

He doesn't say that self-selling is now an essential skill for ambitious graduate students who are stepping from school into a competitive marketplace. Many have put their economic futures in hock to pay for an education that costs thousands upon thousands of dollars. While a degree has become a career requirement, it guarantees nothing, not even a supportive teaching job, as art schools increasingly rely on low-paid and disposable adjuncts. White writes hardly at all about money, but he acknowledges its weight in one terse sentence: "The three numbers that never seem to drop are tuitions, big-city rents and the total student debt."

With the odds stacked against artists being able to support themselves through their art straight from school, day jobs are the norm. And the next subject in the book is postgraduate employment, specifically the role of assistant to artists with careers already well established. Here again White is evenhanded in his description, but more willing to sound adversarial. He spells out the rewards and travails of work that can range from errand-running to ego-stroking, and from making coffee to making someone else's art.

He describes studio situations in which highly successful artists — Jeff Koons, for example — no longer have a hands-on relationship to their art, which is physically produced by carefully drilled assistants. White notes that this is common now, though you get the sense that the painter in him doesn't fully approve. Even when the workshop masters are fair employers, as Koons apparently is, they come off looking somewhat suspect. And White reserves unalloyed scorn for one unnamed artist who, when it came time to give Christmas gifts, had an assistant produce one of "his" works, which he then signed.

Even paintings can be made in a hands-off way — Koons's are — though of all major art forms, it's the one most closely associated with an artist's touch, and the aura of one-off preciousness that conveys. That's one reason for its overwhelming popularity in the past several years, coincident with the market surge. Paintings work well in art fair booths. Collectors can feel they're getting some old-fashioned skill for their money. Critics uncomfortable with Conceptual-style art, which doesn't lend itself to easy description, find in painting something they can comfortably write about in an old-fashioned formalist way.

Unsurprisingly, books on painting, in full color and large format, are not in short supply. A bunch have been hitting the market lately. Some don't pretend to be much more than opportunistic boilerplate. Prestel's hefty "The Paintings That Revolutionized Art" is of this sort, chronologically lining up 100 canonical Western paintings from Giotto to Lucian Freud (with a token non-Western image, a Hokusai "Wave"), accompanied by short texts attributed to the "Prestel editorial department." The book's opening sentence — "Art is a universal expression of humanity" — sets the standard, in tone and weight, for what follows.

Suzanne Hudson's "Painting Now" is far more focused — all the work is recent — and genuinely global in its selection. But it's still essentially an annotated list split up under vague headings ("Appropriation," "The Body"), and it reads like one. There are ideas here, but the writing in run-on artist-by-artist entries has the dense, mechanical locution of auction--catalog copy, which is as joyless to read as it must have been to write.

"Painting Beyond Pollock," by Morgan Falconer, makes an initial pretext of taking a critical position on the recent hype surrounding the so-called return of painting after its being forced into exile by Conceptualism. (Painting never went anywhere; just look in our museums.) He suggests that the attachment to the medium is -older-generational. "To people in their 30s and 40s, such as myself, painting's grip isn't so strong." But with that any contrarian stance pretty much ends. What follows is a cheerleading modern history, with Pollock as a tired touchstone. It has a few wild cards but mostly, fatally, restricts its choices to "painters whose work is judged by a consensus of critics and historians to have made the most significant contribution." "Sadly," he writes, most of those painters are men, though he does nothing to right the historical balance. And he thinks it is "too soon" (why?) to write non-Western painting into the mix.

Consensus culture is the name of the game in 21st-century art so far, thanks to the engulfing, turf-molding power of the present market. Simply put, it dictates what gets noticed. For years now there have been laments about a “crisis in criticism,” meaning, among other things, that criticism’s former role in shaping art is now in the market’s hands. The laments are not unfounded. Week after week, at least in New York, the same few critics write about the same few shows and say identical things about them. It’s like reading a single review. In a similar way, Falconer gives us, apart from a few tweaks, a standard, market-vetted history, which he sells as something new.

Where do we find new? White, in the second and more interesting half of his book, looks for it, and feels he’s found it, outside the art world’s heavily networked centers. In a chapter called “Milwaukee as Model,” he travels to that Midwestern city and likes what’s there, past and present. Referring to early-20th-century painters like John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood, he writes that “Regionalism constituted the first critique of New York as the center of the American art world,” and argues that this remains an active, healthy -perspective:

“The relative absence of an art infrastructure in Milwaukee means that artists can play a bigger role in determining how things are going to go; in this respect, the scene is wide open to change in a way that places like New York, or even Chicago, -haven’t been for generations.”

My own experience of artist communities in smaller cities in the United States and elsewhere, as was the case with alternative art scenes in New York in the 1970s and ’80s, confirms his observations.

White also finds refreshment in contemplating certain artists from the past who deliberately veered away from the mainstream, his primary examples being a pair of very different 1960s and ’70s Conceptualists, Stephen Kaltenbach and Lee Lozano (1930-99). Both, separately and in very different ways, removed themselves from the art industry’s circulatory system, and made that removal part of their work. In doing so, White suggests, they offer a powerful example to young artists today, an alternative to the current, crushing educational-industrial options.

And he sees hope in younger artists like Mary Walling Blackburn, whom he describes as “a singer, a tutor, a choreographer, a documentary filmmaker, a tourist, a critic and a translator” with a strong but politically uncategorizable activist streak. No one, least of all the art industry, seems to know what to do with her, and that, White apparently feels, is beyond good. It’s invaluable.

The filmmaker Luis Buñuel once said that artists “keep an essential margin of nonconformity alive. Thanks to them the powerful can never affirm that everyone agrees with their acts.” In fact, the New York art world and many of the art schools that feed it are precisely in the business, by creating an endless supply of pleasing product, of assuring the economically powerful that their acts are just fine.

Blackburn, at least in White’s description, has determined to do the opposite, to perch on the margins delivering large, unpalatable statements at inconvenient times, loud. She seems to understand the reality that the market is, at present, an unmovable force. You can capitulate to it and follow its bidding; or you can bang your head against it in ultimately useless protest; or we can turn our attention in other directions and focus on where the market isn’t looking, which is in many, many directions.

Just as, in some ways, current regional artist communities recall aspects of the mainstream New York art world as it existed 40 years ago, figures like Blackburn are ghosts of alternative possibilities past. Such figures are also, however, promises of possibilities present. They are proof that no matter how hard the market tries to force consensus, there is not, and never will be, a single art world. There are many; some are communities of one. And they are constantly changing — all good news for artists whose point of entry is now.

THE CONTEMPORARIES  
Travels in the 21st-Century Art World  
By Roger White  
Illustrated. 276 pp. Bloomsbury. \$28.

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