

NEW YORK

Saltz on Bjarne Melgaard's *Ignorant Transparencies*

By Jerry Saltz
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Photo: Thomas Mueller/Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise

A number of terribly boring, terrifically safe artistic clichés are squeezing the life out of the art world right now, and the most toxic is the bad-boy installation. All clichés are bad for art, but this one is -extra annoying, because it's so overscaled and overproduced: the vogue for jam-packed wild-style installations dealing with sex, drugs, self-doubt, self--destruction, personal narratives of the dark nights of the soul, and other white-male navel-gazing. You can't swing a cat in Chelsea without hitting a giant gallery filled with junk, stage sets, enlarged objects, vitrines, or superrealist high-cost casts of people with penises. (As well as the other hacky tropes of the moment: minimalist formal -installations of planks and boxes neatly stacked, fussy collages full of ads and porn, and modest abstract painting replete with spray-painted art-historical references.) Much of this art is momentarily distracting and produces the frisson of "Gee! How much did this cost? How'd they get all this stuff in here?"

You could mistake the work of the -Norwegian-bred New York artist Bjarne Melgaard, who describes himself as "a 45-year-old worn-out faggot," for more of the same old bad-boy stuff. The boxes are all checked: junk piles, the appearance of glib transgression, the self--destructive angst. But Melgaard has cracked open the genre and taken it to incandescence. I don't know if he can sustain this level without joining the pack or burning himself out, but right now he's the best version we've got of "I can't go on. I'll go on."

What distinguishes Melgaard is that his work doesn't rely on scale, high production costs, obvious symbolism, hipster hieroglyphics, or postadolescent sexuality. You get the feeling that instead of this being a punkish game of piecing gothlike signifiers together, Melgaard is replicating things less recognizable and not so easily named or snickered at. None of his work feels like a game of spot the lower-middle-class references and naughty bits. Melgaard's art comes across as something much closer to need itself, something manically important he's trying to get at—even if he knows that in our oversaturated, defensively cynical moment that

this is almost impossible. Usually, these tropes signal to enthusiasts that “I’m not glitzy like Jeff and Damien. I’m a little punky and cerebral; I’ve got proper values; your friends will think you’re serious. I want to blend in.” Amid intellectual wallpaper and highbrow showbiz and the timid leading the timid, Melgaard is out on his own limb.

The press release for his current exhibition at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise reads “Melgaard cannot stop.” This helps explain the all-out mad gravity in his art, his prodigious material drive, and the highly developed vocabulary of forms and characters. In Melgaard’s thick-squiggly paintings that flicker like poisonous frogs, installations made of sticks and bismuth crystals, doll houses that look like crack dens, Clay-mation porn seemingly scripted by the Marquis de Sade, beefcake photos of big dicks and pictures of naked girls, “Melgaard cannot stop” means staging at least seven group or solo exhibitions in two years, each a walk-in manifesto about what’s possible in art today, uncontrollability, and creativity on the edge of self-immolation.

Look closely at all the trashed-out chaos of Melgaard’s Gavin Brown show, and things start to feel obsessively placed, made, and overseen. In the first of three galleries, we’re greeted by the rear-end view of a twelve-foot-tall fiberglass Pink Panther smoking a meth pipe, his backside painted with psychedelic patterns. It’s like an animal presenting sexually, displaying its ass to -attract others of its kind. It recalls a description I once read of Nijinsky: “Half-snake, half-panther.” On one wall is the first of three giant photorealistic murals depicting a scene from Michael Haneke’s downward-spiral film *Amour*. Here Melgaard supplies the text YOU ARE A MONSTER SOMETIMES. Somehow we know this is Melgaard talking to himself—a vivid instance of the death drive and life force in collision.

The next gallery has an aura of opaque menace. Among rows of paintings made, in part, of salt crystals, shark fins painted on walls, and rubbery furniture strewn about are islands of real trees decked out in Spanish moss and burlap. The scene is inhabited by blinged-out life-size Pink Panthers. The *mise-en-scène* is some sex club for night hunters, fashion freaks, and those with toxic blood or addictions to kitsch. One big cat poses on rose crystals, like its hatching offspring. The whole thing evokes Dante’s Wood of the -Suicides, where dead souls are locked in trees and speak when Harpies tear their branches. (We viewers are the Harpies.) A large doll house and a film set look like they’ve been outfitted by Francis Bacon, Sigmund Freud, and Alfred Hitchcock. Rooms are occupied by sculpted figures having sex, hanging out, getting high, or sleeping. In the creepy dungeon is an electric chair. A Claymation clip features a Mr. Potato Head thing waking from a bed of nails, perusing Internet porn, then spitting up crystals while being anally raped by a Pink Panther. The caption on the *Amour* mural here is FEAR DOESN’T EAT THE SOUL IF YOU DON’T HAVE ONE. From the first gallery’s self-warning, we now have the wail of the damned.

The final *Amour* image reads WANT THE SAME AS YOU. This is Melgaard’s plaintive expression of need, cruelty, obsession, shame, pain, phobia, love. Two large scrimms sport images of gay male porn stars who met early deaths, one by suicide. Then more suicide: references to another porn star, Shannon Wilsey, a.k.a. Savannah, and to the artists Jeremy Blake and Theresa Duncan, who both took their own lives.

I revel in Melgaard’s animalistic, animistic realm. For me, these characters are simultaneously surrogates for the artist and creatures trying to avoid extinction, engaging their appetites, and surviving in the cracks. They emit a psychological bioluminescence that makes me feel like I’m seeing what they’re like and what they do in the dark. They may inhabit this psychically scorching hydrothermal Babel, but they live. And they aren’t easy clichés.

Bjarne Melgaard: Ignorant Transparencies, Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, through October 26.