

Uncertain States of America – American Art in the 3rd Millennium

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America isn't what it used to be. And neither is art. It's in the air. Sometimes it takes outsiders to see what's really going on in your world, and that's what three ambitious European curators have done in "Uncertain States of America." Daniel Birnbaum, Gunnar Kvaran and Hans Ulrich Obrist hold a mirror up to the aloofness and fragmentation, the vulnerability and regression that have plagued the U.S. since 9/11.

Walking up to the show, I pass "Flag," Frank Benson's flagpole hoisting an American flag of squiggly stripes and off-kilter stars. In the foyer, Christian Holstad's "Freeplay," a glittery jukebox, blasts old vinyl and nearby "Corrections," a vanity table, is amuck with wigs and nail polish. Bursting out of its white-cube galleries, the show defiantly sneaks down the hallways where Miranda July's addictive audio works and odd videos stand out for their intimacy.

Paul Chan's "2nd Light," a projection skewed onto the floor, invites us into the galleries proper. Animations of tequila sunrise backgrounds blend into each other while black silhouettes float slowly over top. Plant life and peculiar objects – sometimes even humans – fall through the air or ascend in rapture. You can't help but think of bodies falling from the Twin Towers.

Not far from Chan's work is a video by Matthew Day Jackson that is emblematic of his generation (almost nobody in the show is over 35 years old). The work features the artist's mother on a picturesque cliff, tie-dyed wraparound over jeans, summoning the forces of life and nature to bless her child's artwork (absent from the video but hanging nearby in the show, it is a giant mixed media portrait of Eleanor Roosevelt). This video is so earnest that watching it is worse than voyeurism. It's the epitome of our generation's paradoxical longing for our parents' naiveté and sincerity (70's hippy culture) and chastising it as futile.

This sort of uneasy nostalgia plagues much of today's culture. In the show it crops up in several works, including Mike Bouchet's "Top Cruise" ("Top Gun" era Tom Cruise heads, made of clay and paint from Mexico, lie clustered on the floor, the movie star beheaded hundreds of times). Seth Price's "Digital Video Effect 'Spills'" features an old home video of Robert Smithson, Richard Serra and Joseph Helman talking about the art market. The work is shown on a television face up in a cardboard box, with a digital animation of black paint made to look as if it's spilling over the screen. We don't know whether to mock or obliterate our predecessors.

The Bard incarnation of "Uncertain States of America" (the show traveled here after being exhibited in Oslo) goes to some pains to differentiate itself from this year's Whitney Biennial, "Day for Night," which also claimed to pinpoint contemporary artistic developments in America. Biennials do not traditionally have a theme (or title) although this one did. And group exhibitions normally do; yet "Uncertain States of America" claimed not to be based on a theme at all. The two feel similar. It's as if we want artists to be rebellious teenagers. We want surprising and lo-fi materials and an indifferent mash-up of influences, peppered with plenty of subculture.

The Whitney Biennial reflected on epistemological concerns that have been evident recently in the work of artists such as The Atlas Group, the Bernadette Corporation/Reena Spaulings, The Yes Men, and Adam McEwen, amongst others. This increased questioning of "reality," especially how it can be represented in the media, is partially the result of 9/11. Being for most people primarily a media event, it led us to question the rift between the image and lived experience, between reality and fiction. This concern is subdued in "Uncertain States of America" but shines through subtly in some works, such as Frank Benson's "Human Statue," a completely realistic looking man standing naked on a pedestal covered in silver paint. (The model is actually Anthony Burdin, another artist in the show.) He looked so real I had to make sure it wasn't a performance. Another example is "Collector's Favorites," in which the artist, Jennifer Bornstein, appears on a television show about collecting too absurd to be real. She showcases her collections of various low-brow trinkets, such as breath mints, paper cups and the like.

Still trying to wrap our minds around 9/11, we've deemed that astounding event everything from "the greatest work of art ever made" to marking the start of capitalism's downfall. There is no doubt about it, it's made us hesitant and detached. It undermined our self-assurance. Such uncertainty is fertile ground for suspicion and vacillation that in turn give way to Conservatism and nostalgia. It's everywhere - from 80's fashion to "Desperate Housewives." It's the new Reganomics. The works in "Uncertain States of America" are both a diagnoses of this new state and a tactic for channeling the nonchalant rage and played-down insecurity that come with it.

-Chen Tamir