

GAGOSIAN

ARTFORUM

1999 Carnegie International *Carnegie Museum of Art*

Katy Siegel

When you walk into the lobby of the Carnegie Museum, the program of this year's International announces itself in microcosm. There in front of you is atmospheric video projection (Diana Thater), a deadpan disquisition on the nature of representation (Gregor Schneider's replication of his home), a labor-intensive, intricate installation (Suchan Kinoshita), a bluntly phenomenological sculpture (Olafur Eliasson), and flat, icy painting (Alex Katz). Undoubtedly the best part of the show, the lobby is also an archi-tectural site of hesitation, a threshold. Here the installation encapsulates the exhibition's sense of historical suspension, another kind of hesitation. Ours is a time not of endings but of pause.

My favorite work, viewed through the museum's huge glass wall, was the Eliasson, a fountain of steam wafting vertically from an expanse of water on a platform through which trees also rise up. It's a heart-throbbing romantic landscape. Romantic, but not naive: The work plays on the tradition of the courtyard fountain, and the steam is piped from the museum's heating system. Combining the natural and the industrial in a way peculiarly appropriate to Pittsburgh on a quiet Sunday morning in early autumn, it echoed two billows of steam (or, more queasily, smoke?) off in the distance. When blunt physical fact achieves this kind of lyricism, it is something to see.

Upstairs in the galleries, Ernesto Neto's *Nude Plasmic*, 1999, relies as well on the phenomenology of simple form, but the Brazilian artist avoids Eliasson's picturesque imagery. Shoeless, you enter the large, sheer-white-nylon structure, pulled and stretched, punctuated by holes and sandbags, and move around, held comfortably within the environment but still able to see the world passing by outside. Curator Madeleine Grynsztejn pairs Neto's work with eight bodacious John Currin paintings, matching direct, physical sensuality with twisted vision. This is one example of the exhibition's consistently intelligent installation. If some of the art is familiar, from either gallery shows or other international exhibitions, the work often looks better here. And some of the artists do manage to surprise with pieces made specifically for the exhibition.

The best example of work realized for the occasion is perhaps Kinoshita's seventeen loggias flanking the grand staircase. These little plywood shacks are simply furnished with cast-off chairs and every-day objects that perform little tricks of sight and sound, displaying the influence of Fluxus and Cagean game-playing. One of my favorites features a telescope through which we spy a vignette in the gift shop, a tiny still life of books and objects. Kinoshita draws what is far near, turning real space into a purely visual image. The intensity and smallness of Kinoshita's elaborate installation resonate with much of the art here. Most obviously, Sarah Sze (who will complete the Venice/Carnegie/Whitney trifecta) uses prosaic materials—most memorably,

watches—to evoke a sense of wonder. A less ubiquitous artist, Bodys Isek Kingelez, shows a minutely patterned and painted urban diorama (Villa Fantôme); Franz Ackermann's modestly scaled drawings surround the Kingelez, depicting imaginary maps. Chris Ofili, Kerry James Marshall, and Matthew Barney are all represented by bright, complex work as well. If we have for some time seen social and historical forces as the generating agents of art, we can now sense the reassertion of the artist's presence, the foregrounding of his or her ability to maneuver and create within or despite these various conditions.

Even work that directly addresses the nature of representation does so with a twist, with some kind of personal touch. Back in the lobby, we see a small door attended by a museum guard. Stepping into Schneider's *Haus ur*, 1987–99, we go from the vast open space of the museum to a small domestic enclosure. As we move from room to nondescript room, from living room to kitchen, we experience an Alice-in-Wonderland feeling of reduced scale. Squeezing through a hole, we pop out the other side of the structure into dark-ness, and realize that it is a building, a precise, small-scale reproduction of the artist's home. Schneider built *Haus ur* inside his real home in Germany, cut out a section, and shipped it to Pittsburgh. The results are creepily thought-provoking—both icon and index, an image and an imprint.

Thomas Demand's photographs approximate this sensation of uncanniness: Schneider's reality turns out to be a representation (albeit a handmade one), and Demand's pictures of other pictures turn out to be real. Demand's photographs mimic familiar media images, such as Jeffrey Dahmer's apartment hallway, but the scenes he records are painstakingly created by hand, most often from cardboard. Like Schneider (and Vik Muniz et al.), Demand sees that images are about other images but complicates the notion, reinserting or reasserting the sense of illusion and craft demoted in the '70s and '80s. Many other artists also refer to the history of image making (Currin, Kara Walker, Sam Taylor-Wood, Mark Dion's re-creation of bird painter Alexander Wood's studio) and similarly transform their conventions, stressing difference over repetition, even if the surface of the final work remains somewhat opaque.

The media that currently rule reality in our culture—video and film—make an emphatically strong appearance here. There is the exciting feeling that video projection is finally reaching the point where artists are beginning to understand the formal aspects of space and time and gaining a sense of which images compel at what pace. Pierre Huyghe and Willie Doherty both make excellent showings with simple but unconventional structures: Huyghe uses three video projections that alternate on and off, in and out of sync; Doherty creates an intersection of eight images, eight different perspectives, no more than two of which can be seen at any given time. Janet Cardiff's *In Real Time*, 1999, is a spectacular tour of the Carnegie Library, in which you follow a fifteen-minute video on a hand-held screen as it guides you through the offices and stacks. Looking back and forth from the books and the floors and the windows to their image, listening to the story the artist tells, is deeply disorienting and involving. All this feels like very open territory. Then there is the fact that many artists are learning to use film; if the quality approaches that of more mainstream productions, the films themselves are clearly art. Ann-Sofi Sidén's *QM, I think I call her QM*, 1997, features a semitradectional narrative and a well-known theater actress, and Matthew Barney's new *Cremaster 4*, 1999, includes dialogue for the first time, but the level of finish doesn't interfere with the (considerable) level of invention.

Painting here is more problematic, and, ironically, much thinner. First, a caveat: It's a big relief to walk in and see the Katz canvases announce from the get-go the presence of the medium, and it is nice to see fresh work from an artist already in the history books. But Ed Ruscha, whom I

usually like, looks oddly affectless. It may be that the neighboring Laura Owens paintings drag him down with their spacey gimmicks; as representatives of the LA apotheosis, they have the unfortunate effect of making you say, so what? Together with Luc Tuymans, who puts in a particularly wan appearance, these paintings make the cool Currin look hot and heavy. Maybe this is as it should be, painting as it ought to look in an electronic age. But you want to see something a little less insouciant, a little more “there.” The six paintings by Ofili stand out in this respect, dense and emphatic despite their cartoony irony.

The painterly detachment on offer delayed my realization that all the canvases are at least nominally representational; Grynsztein’s pronounced conceit for the show, after all, was “the real.” Perhaps she felt that abstraction represents the old-fashioned internationalism of the ’50s and ’60s, in which a certain kind of painterly Esperanto was required for a speaking part in the modernist dialogue.

The ’90s version of internationalism—installation art that makes a pass at site-specificity while vaguely warning of anonymous, superstructure conspiracies—has a blessedly limited presence here. Blandly sinister art (Kendell Geers’s howling, repeated torture scenes from popular movies), often twinned with modernist architecture, as in Jane and Louise Wilson’s *Gamma*, 1999, collapses under its own self-importance. Infinitely better, because infinitely more specific, are William Kentridge’s and Shirin Neshat’s work about places and conditions (South Africa and Islamic culture, respectively) experienced from particular social conditions (those of a white businessman and a woman). Only the late Martin Kippenberger manages to successfully evoke a generalized modern experience: His *Happy End of Franz Kafka’s “Amerika,”* 1994, toys with the job-interview scene in the unfinished novella, perfectly capturing the voracious futility of bureaucracy. The playfulness makes it work: Spread out on a giant Astroturf field, countless pairs of ridiculous chairs face off (in one coupling, two recliners spin around a small circle of railroad track). Looking up from the Kippenberger into the second-floor beaux arts sculpture court, one sees Kara Walker’s figures marching around the museum’s walls in a black-and-white frieze. Another great match, this is a genuinely exciting visual moment, and one that seems particularly hopeful for the medium of installation art, proving that it is possible to fill a room, even, in Kippenberger’s case, to fill it with found objects, without simply making a huge mess.

Critics—including myself—have done much complaining about the form of the contemporary summary exhibition, how it anesthetizes even the best-chosen art. But the Carnegie clearly succeeds in its mission, which is not to surprise the art-world insider but to show an interested public what art looks like today. And even for someone familiar with much of the work, the exhibition presents a good opportunity to stop and think. It strikes me that the past thirty years have seen a lot of strong art that insisted on all or nothing—say, all real (Judd) or all representation (Levine). Here we have a lot of work—some good, some not so good—which seems to say, “both.” Not because the artists can’t make up their minds, but because it turned out that it was all more complicated than anyone thought. Trying out new ideas (or what seem like new ideas), it’s hard to resist overstatement. I think that what currently feels like a moment of historical indecision is really a pause taken to qualify many heavily subscribed beliefs, the oversimplifications of the past. This may not make for good manifestos (or easy art criticism), but, for artists who can tolerate the pause, the possibilities expand.