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Still Crazy, But That Was The Concept

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y. — Art between the 1960s and the end of the 1990s was out of its mind. That's what was exciting about it. Painting and sculpture held their ground, while all this other stuff swarmed in:

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**ART
REVIEW**

bare bodies, disembodied ideas, flickery little films, weird sounds, angry words, dances on fire escapes, bulldozers in the desert. At various points, manically, everything was happening at once.

Since no one knew what to make of it all, it was, and is, left to museums to tell the story. Most of the big ones tackle the job in a certain way. They go into chaos-control mode, sorting art into movements, periods and stars. The history that results is tidy; it is also tranquilized and in some ways untrue.

By contrast certain smaller institutions, like the new Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College here, don't seem to feel compelled to make artificial sense of the past or of the present. Ensconced in an academic setting, based on an ethos of experimentation and free of charge to visitors, they can let art stay crazy and exciting, which is what the Hessel does.

Physically, the museum is a 10-gallery expansion of the existing Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard. The original building, designed by Goettsch Partners, looked like a bunker. Now it looks like a bigger bunker. The center itself was founded more than a decade ago in large part with money from Marieluise Hessel, who put her contemporary art collection at its disposal as a student resource. She also provided \$8 million toward the new museum, and with the opening of its inaugural



Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Wrestle

"Untitled" (North), with 15-watt bulbs, by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, at the Hessel Museum of Art in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.

show, titled "Wrestle," on Sunday, at least part of her collection will always be on view.

Its range is wide but patchy. Ms. Hessel started buying in Europe in the 1960s, and her tastes and interests have skipped around. She went through a Pop painting phase, an Arte Povera phase, a Pattern and Decoration phase. She clearly found work related to identity and gender politics of the 1980s and '90s particularly gripping. Consequently the collection has a fairly high percentage of art by

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Still Crazy After All These Decades, but That Was the Concept



Vanessa Beecroft



Chris Kendall

Left, "Piano Americano" (1996), left, video on laser disc, by Vanessa Beecroft. Right, sculpture in foreground, "Untitled" (1987), wool, fabric and mannequin, by Rosemarie Trockel; drawings, left to right, by Rosemarie Trockel: "Untitled" (2000), inkjet print on paper; "Untitled" (2001), acrylic on paper; Background painting, "Untitled" (1983), oil on fabric, by Sigmar Polke.

Left, "Piano Americano" (1996), left, video on laser disc, by Vanessa Beecroft. Right, sculpture in foreground, "Untitled" (1987), wool, fabric and mannequin, by Rosemarie Trockel; drawings, left to right, by Rosemarie Trockel: "Untitled" (2000), inkjet print on paper; "Untitled" (2001), acrylic on paper; Background painting, "Untitled" (1983), oil on fabric, by Sigmar Polke.

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women, and of work related, however obliquely, to AIDS. Yet everyone of course will have a list of artists who "should" be there and aren't.

Any attempt to mold so personal and episodic an ensemble into an era-by-era history would be foolhardy. And the show, organized by Tom Eccles, executive director of the center, and Trevor Smith, an independent curator, doesn't try to. Instead, true to its quirky, combative title, it weaves art of varying dates and media into a hectic, fractured, twisted rhythm, with theatrical images of disturbance, disguise and struggle recurring throughout.

One of the first pieces in the installation is a performance video by Vanessa Beecroft titled "Piano Americano" (1996). In it a group of women in platinum wigs and beige lingerie mill listlessly around a white-walled space. You can think of a fashion show, or you can think of patients in a sanitarium dayroom, too self-absorbed, or anaesthetized by boredom, to realize they are trapped.

The Beecroft piece links up with five short films by the artist Eijia-Lisa Ahl in which young women reenact psychiatric disorders, and with a selection of Cindy Sherman's 1970s "Film Stills," which combine adolescent dress-up fantasy with voyeuristic self-scrutiny. Ms. Beecroft films models; Ms. Sherman photographs herself. And as both director and sole actor, she plays not just characters in fictional films, but also what seem to be delusional characters. Hitchcockian nut-jobs, adrift in their own infantilizing narratives.

Childhood is a pervasive theme in the show, conceived as an Eden that all too quickly becomes a psychological combat zone. Robert Mapplethorpe's "Jesse McBride" (1976), a photographic portrait of a nude little boy, is a high moment of un-self-conscious innocence, while Paul McCarthy's pictures of besmirched and abused dolls go, with mean glee, straight for perversity.

Growing up means, among other things, grappling with what "normal" means, figuring out how you relate to it and playing, for the first and maybe only time, with alternatives. The American teenagers in Larry Clark's 1995 photographs and their European counterparts in 1960s pictures by Karlheinz Weinberger test limits in opposite ways. Mr. Clark's sexually precious subjects strip for the camera; Mr. Weinberger's don elaborate, armorlike, hand-customized outfits as binding as straight-jackets.

But no one turns convention on its head more graphically and wittily than Ana Mendieta, who, in a series of photographs documenting a 1972 performance, simply glues a man's beard to her face as he stands beside

her shaving it off. The final shot of the bewhiskered Mendieta was taken more than 30 years ago but makes perfect sense within the politics of since.

The Mendieta image finds an echo in a ghostly recent werewolf drawing by Rosemarie Trockel, a German artist whom Ms. Hessel has, presciently, collected in depth. And ghostly is the right word for the work of another favored artist, Felix González-Torres, whose "United (North)" (1993), a cascade of white lights dedicated to a friend dead of

AIDS, is installed in one of the larger of the new galleries, along with a beautiful Sol LeWitt wall painting. They make a calm center point for the exhibition, which pursues its unhinged progress around them: in 1972 performance photographs by Valle Export (she huddles like a refugee in a stairwell and lies stretched out along a curb on the street); a balletic video about love and bondage by Isaac Julien; and an extraordinary Sigmar Polke painting of cartoons silk-screened on swatches of cheap, pigment-swiped patterned cloth.

(Two additional Polkes hang in the Center for Curatorial Studies galleries across the lobby, where "Wrestle" continues.)

By the time you've circled around to the last two galleries in the new museum, one with a video of a naked, masked punch-drunk Mr. McCarthy beating himself to a pulp, the other with a photo-and-text piece by Cady Noland about the hard-drinking, truth-telling Watergate sibil Marjorie Mitchell, you're likely to have a soaked-in sense of the contemporary

art's potential for disorientation. This is not an experience provided by big museums of late, with two exceptions. The Whitney's recent permanent collection show, "Full House," had its moments. So did an unusually stimulating reinstallation of the Museum of Modern Art's contemporary galleries by Klaus Biesenbach and Roxana Marcoci last year.

Like that reinstallation, the Hessel show, accompanied by an excellent book of writings by women, edited by Rhea Anastas and Michael Brenson, focuses on art as a rupturing rather than an enrapturing phenomenon: messy, unmannerly, irritated, compulsively posing questions. Isn't that the business of art and its institutions? It was, though at the moment the market is making decisions that museums once made, and most new art is about as crazy and unpredictable as a pocket calculator. No wonder "Wrestle" feels like an adventure. I assume Bard will make every effort to sustain it.