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WEEKEND Arts FINE ARTS LEISURE

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ART REVIEW

Endgame Rules: Borrow, Sample, Multiply, Repeat

By ROBERTA SMITH

THE world is ever with us, and perhaps never so much as now. Reality presses in from every side. Peace, tolerance, environmental awareness and even disinterested common sense are in scarily short supply. The future of the planet has never looked more uncertain, nor has America's role in that future seemed, to many, to be more fraught, short-sighted or self-centered.

So hopes understandably rise at the prospect of an art exhibition with an ambitious, resonating title like

Uncertain States of America

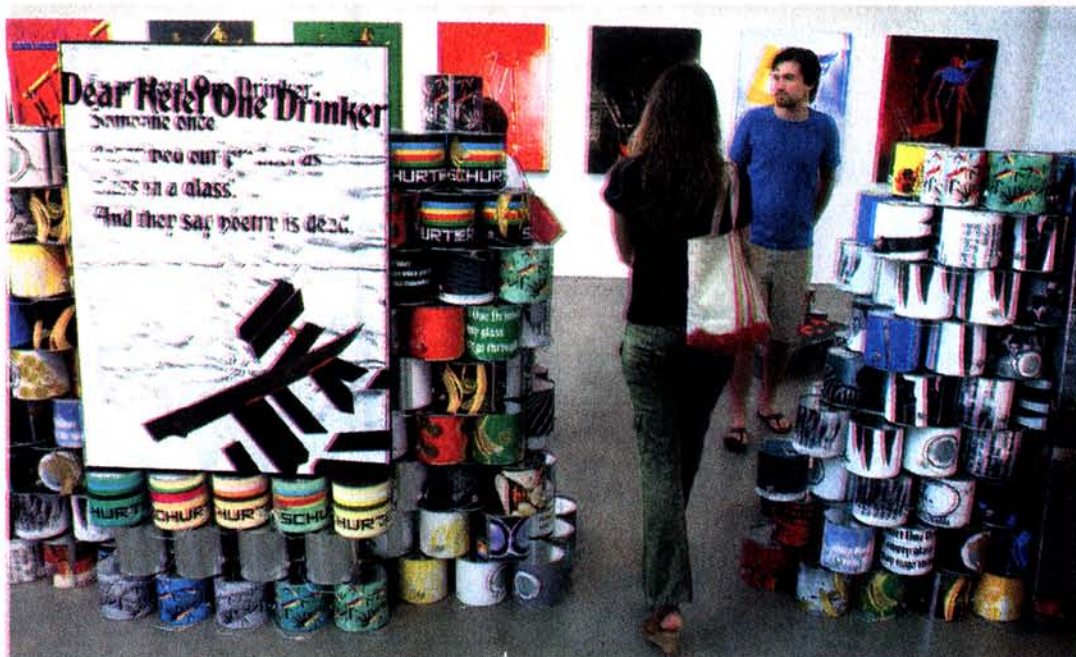
Bard College

"Uncertain States of America: American Art in the 3rd Millennium." Equally enticing, the show, at the Center for Curatorial

Studies at Bard College here, has been put together by outside agitators from "old Europe." It originated last October at the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in Oslo, where it was organized by Gunnar Kvaran, the museum's director, working with two high-profile curators: Daniel Birnbaum, director of the alternative space Portikus in Frankfurt, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, the Swiss co-director of exhibitions at the Serpentine Gallery in London.

The curators have had the courage of their convictions. They have limited themselves to a manageable head count and focused almost exclusively on a single generation. All but a few of the 48 artists (including three two-artist teams) in the show were born in the 1970's, the

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y.



Karl Rabe

An installation by Wade Guyton and Kelley Walker at the exhibition "Uncertain States of America."

children of older baby boomers.

In all, this exhibition seems primed to tell us something very specific and useful. It does and it doesn't. It is one of the most flawed successes, or interesting failures,

that have appeared of late.

It coheres to the point of redundancy yet, as noted by a young artist I ran into at the show, the works don't really seem to engage one another, to talk among themselves. It reflects young artists' interest in all kinds of realistic styles — as well as reality itself — yet seems pulled down

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by a complacent, in-crowd hermeticism and a weird emotional deadness.

The show has an endgame, end-time mood, as if we are looking at the end of the end of the end of Pop, hyperrealism and appropriation art. The techniques of replication and copying have become so meticulous that they are beside the point. This is truly magic realism: the kind you can't see, that has to be explained. It is also a time when artists cultivate hybridism and multiplicity and disdain stylistic coherence, in keeping with the fashionable interest in collectivity, lack of ego, the fluidity of individual identity. But too often these avoidance tactics eliminate the thread of a personal sensibility or focus.

I would call all these strategies fear of form, which can be parsed as fear of materials, of working with the hands in an overt way and of originality. Most of all originality. Can we just say it? This far from Andy Warhol and Duchamp, the dismissal of originality is perhaps the oldest ploy in the postmodern playbook. To call yourself an artist at all is by definition to announce a faith, however unacknowledged, in some form of originality, first for yourself, second, perhaps, for the rest of us.

Fear of form above all means fear of compression—of an artistic focus that condenses experiences, ideas and feelings into something whole, committed and visually comprehensible. With a few exceptions, forms of collage and assemblage dominate this show: the putting together (or simply putting side by side) of existing images and objects prevails. The consistency of this technique in two and three dimensions should have been a red flag for the curators. Collage has driven much art since the late 1970's. Lately, and especially in this exhibition, it often seems to have become so distended and pulled apart that its components have be-

come virtually autonomous and unrelated, which brings us back to square one. This is most obvious in the large installations of graphic works whose individual parts gain impact and meaning from juxtaposition but are in fact considered distinct artworks.

Bard used every inch of available space to accommodate this show, as if to justify the large expansion to its galleries it is in the works. This fragments things a bit, but also contaminates the white-cube ideal in a healthy way. Along a hallway is a room containing Jordan Wolfson's

An American show put together by Europeans.

bleak, ethereal video installation "Infinite Melancholy," which uses the actor Christopher Reeve's name and the sound of "Getting to Know You" being picked out with excruciating slowness and ineptness on a piano to discreetly conjure up the timeless horror of paralysis.

Across the way, behind a glass door covered by a torn garbage bag, Anthony Burdin creates a me-and-my-car (and my video camera) reverie as good as, if not better than, his effort in the recent Whitney Biennial. Further along, you can listen on headsets to Miranda July's snippets of dialogue, which compress whole stories into a few words.

In the library beyond this, a video shows Jennifer Bornstein explaining her collections of coffee beans, breath mints and such on a cable television program. Nearby, in another expression of modesty that is powerful beyond its means, Mario Ybarra covers the walls of a small listening room with fliers for nighttime music raves and interviews survivors of these events on their pros (the music) and cons (the drugs).

In the video gallery, hats off to Matt McCormick's "Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal," an award-winning 16-minute film from 2001 that wryly documents the antigraffiti campaigns in several northwest cities (mostly Portland, Ore.). Painting over graffiti yields public abstract painting that looks peculiarly

"Uncertain States of America: American Art in the 3rd Millennium" remains through Sept. 10 at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., (845) 758-7598. Starting in the fall, it will travel to the Reykjavik Art Museum in Iceland and the Herning Art Museum in Denmark.



Karl Rabe

Mika Tajima's "Echoplex" (2006), from the exhibition "Uncertain States of America: American Art in the 3rd Millennium" at Bard College.

modernist and brings to mind Rothko, Motherwell and even Malevich. The video continues the art-is-everywhere ethic of the Bornstein and Ybarra works, showing how the effort to stamp out one collective, public form of expression can result in another one.

Paul Chan's "2nd Light," a floor projection similar to his contribution to the Biennial in its dreamlike intimations of disarray and mayhem, forms a kind of horizontal gateway to the galleries, creating a fitting sense of disorientation and foreboding.

In the galleries, I was impressed by the consistent, if oppressive technique in a wall covered with large, framed pencil drawings by Karl Haendel. All are based on appropriated images, news clips, posters and the like, but only one seemed truly self-sufficient: a map of the United States labeled with the states' mottoes, creating a display of hope, dedication and boosterism that is ineffably sad and the single best illustration of the show's title. (Less em-

blematic, I hope, is Mr. Haendel's catalog statement about the reportorial responsibilities of artists, which ends with an unusually righteous dismissal of originality and of artists who don't happen to share his ideology; it smacks of the thought police of early October magazine and Donald Judd at his worst.)

Other moments of compression occur in Wade Guyton and Kelley Walker's installation of redecorated paint cans and paintings, although it is not clear what the two artists accomplish together that they don't accomplish working alone.

The show contains what still may be the best work that Seth Price, an artist of some reputation, has produced: a 2004 sculpture consisting of a video monitor, facing up from its cardboard carton, on which plays a debate about art and the market among Robert Smithson, Richard Serra and the art dealer Joseph Helman. To this tape, shot in Mr. Helman's home in St. Louis in the early 1970's by the artist Joan Jonas, Mr.

Price has digitally added animated amoebalike "spills" — both black and see-through — that intimate the collective unconscious and the conflicting desires and infantile needs that drive the discussion.

Also good: the strange space and stranger narrative of Mika Rottenberg's video installation "Dough," which casts an obese woman in the role of a kind of queen bee; Adam Putman's slight but perfect shadow play with mirror and paper cutout; and Josh Smith's attempts to wrestle collage, accident and interaction, as well as his signature (that telltale sign of faith in originality), back into the frame of painting. A colored knit sculpture by Jim Drain and two pieces by Matthew Ronay provide the show's few moments of color, but seem out of place.

The one stop-in-your tracks moment highlights, by its very modesty, the show's dearth of passion. A short video by Rodney McMillan, an artist from Los Angeles, is part of a larger collaboration with the artist Edgar Arceneaux. On a small screen mounted on the wall, Mr. McMillan lip-syncs with amazing passion and precision and wonderful physical gestures to Gladys Knight singing climactic excerpts from "The Way We Were" and "Try to Remember." Mr. McMillan, seen from the waist up, is a trim, muscular man wearing a white T-shirt and cursory white clown makeup that leaves his brown neck and the close-shaved top of his head exposed. Everything is ambiguous: he is a black man looking whiter than most white people, mimicking a

sad clown yet going deeper; he is not in drag; in fact his syncing to Ms. Knight's husky voice is so accurate that we begin to doubt her gender, not his. In one of the show's few moments of connection — as opposed to overly close resemblance — the intensity of Mr. McMillan self-portrait is expanded on by a work across the gallery, Matthew Day Jackson's large-scale, flamboyantly inlaid image of a markedly visionary, sexually ambiguous face. It is Eleanor Roosevelt.

This exhibition offers proof that sampling is among contemporary art's primary strategies, and it contains almost enough work to prove that that doesn't rule out compression or transformation. It conforms to conventional European views of American art: work descended from Pop and Conceptual Art is highly favored. There is a dearth of women — 10 out of 48 artists — and a dearth of painting, which is typically seen as a medium dominated by Europeans, usually male ones. The European curators have done a show that most American curators resist doing for fear of charges of jingoism or hegemony-building. In a way, if they had been a little more uncertain themselves, they might have organized a less cliché, more genuinely diverse exhibition. Too much art here is in the thrall of Richard Prince and Cady Noland, and too much of it seems to be in a holding pattern, which isn't true of American art in general. But holding patterns may be the mode à la mode. We're all holding our breath.