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FEELING BLUE

Artists get serious.

by Peter Schjeldahl

“After Nature” is an important group show of twenty-six international artists, past and present, at the New Museum, which proposes a saturnine new direction in art. The catalogue is a foldout slipcover around a paperback of “After Nature,” a book-length poem in three parts by W. G. Sebald. It’s an arresting gesture. The rapturously depressive German writer, who died in 2001, would seem an unlikely hero for contemporary avant-gardists, who have been more easily imagined reading comic books. The first two sections of the dauntingly erudite work—on the Northern Renaissance painter Matthias Grünewald and on the German naturalist Georg Steller, a participant in a disastrous Arctic expedition led by Vitus Bering in 1741—exude Old World gravitas, laced with obsessive descriptions of material ruin, physical disease, and mental suffering. The third, which is roughly autobiographical, quotes “King Lear” and expresses anguish directly: “Oh, / you are men of stones. . . . Water? Fire? Good? / Evil? Life? Death?” But Sebald’s signature tone is dead calm. His conjurings of historical and personal loss, which in his novels and memoirs are usually keyed to the calamities of the Second World War, happen to you slowly, as you read, like the onset of a cold. (I’m an admirer but not a fan.) What young artist would want to get mixed up with such connoisseurship of remote sorrows?

The museum’s director of special exhibitions, Massimiliano Gioni, who curated the show, is confident of Sebald’s Pied Piper appeal, as he is of Werner Herzog’s—the director’s gorgeous and dire film on the aftermath of the Gulf War, “Lessons of Darkness” (1992), excerpts of which are loop-projected on the first of the show’s three floors, is another touchstone. Gioni also cites Cormac McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic novel, “The Road” (2006), writing of a rising sensibility haunted by “the destabilizing sensation of having come upon the remains of our own civilization after its extinction,” transfixed by “offended sceneries and scorched earth,” and hankering for qualities of the “pure, distant, and extreme” in “a sphere that is, if not religious, at least sacred or obscure, like a mystery cult.” Remarkably, the visual goods on display endorse Gioni’s rhetoric. Something is happening in artists’ studios: a shift of emphasis, from surface to depth, and a shift of mood, from mania to melancholy, shrugging off the allures of the money-hypnotized market and the spectacle-bedizened biennials circuit. (In fact, the underappreciated recent Whitney Biennial hinted at the mutation.) It’s a fashion auditioning as a sea change.



The selections of unfamiliar past art in “After Nature” nonplus the viewer, by evident design. There are cameraless photographs, called “Celestographs,” made in 1894 by August Strindberg, the playwright, who exposed film to the night sky in hopes of capturing starscapes; he decided that the results had metaphysical import, despite comprising only traces of dust and chemical discoloration. Hand-lettered, delirious sermons by the Reverend Howard Finster (1916-2001), a Georgian bricoleur, and surreal abstractions by Eugene von Bruenchenhein (1910-83), a working-class Milwaukee-an, admit outsiders to the collegial mix. And little-known films by the late sculptor and painter Nancy Graves—obsessive studies, from the early nineteen-seventies, of camels, frigate birds, and the moon—contribute a note of, in Gioni’s words, “cosmic stupor.” These things share a driven sincerity; they couldn’t be made by anyone who didn’t mean them. One work jars, instructively: a dangling, taxidermied horse, its head (if it has one) buried high up in a wall, by the internationally celebrated, zingy satirist Maurizio Cattelan. Cattelan’s horse comes off as gaudy and smug—emblematic of a cul de sac (art as engineered sensation, more or less) that most of the artists in the show strive to escape.

The major surprise is the sculpture of Pawel Althamer, a forty-one-year-old artist based in Warsaw, whose animal-intestine-skinned, straw-stuffed, naked people, among other works, give an old-fashioned humanism the burning presence of an angry revenant. Althamer’s art discounts considerations of style to insist on realities of life and (chiefly) death, as does a bolted-together and propped (and perhaps needlessly large) reconstruction of a dead tree, by the American Zoe Leonard. Other artists pile on raw-nerved provocations: the Italian Diego Perrone, with photographs of maw-like holes in arid ground, some with a naked man who seems to contemplate a suicidal plunge; the New Yorker Dana Schutz, with an Expressionist painting called “Man Eating His Chest”; the Pole Artur Zmijewski, with a video in which naked able-bodied people become living prostheses for naked victims of maiming, helping a one-legged man walk and a man without fingers shampoo his hair; and the Pakistani-born American Huma Bhabha, with “legs, and arms, and heads” (2008), a big, truly scary skull in several mediums.

If the common run of contemporary art risks triviality in the pursuit of seduction, the new kind incurs hysteria as a toll of earnest intensity. Emotional reach exceeds formal grasp throughout the show, and certain melodramatic lurches fail entirely. (I don’t care what Robert Kusmirowski intends by his painstaking reconstruction of the Una-bomber Ted Kaczynski’s cabin; it’s dumb.) But the futility of artistic technique in the face of world conditions may constitute a subject for art as substantial as any other, and rather more compelling than today’s stacked-deck models of success. Bhabha’s gruesome death’s-head neatly—that is to say, messily—critiques Damien Hirst’s famous diamond-encrusted skull, which sold last year for a reported hundred million dollars. Work like Bhabha’s tacitly cancels the credit of artists who allude to terror and horror without personal investment. Existentialist standards of authenticity may be back in force, however fleetingly. How much can we bear of art that, like Sebald’s writing, glories in bottomless malaise? I expect we’ll find out.



You suspect that a big change is coming when sensitive young people project (and, because they're young, enjoy) feelings of being old. This has often signalled a backward crouch preceding a forward leap. I think of Picasso's world-weary blue period, T. S. Eliot's "Gerontion" and "Prufrock," and the budding Abstract Expressionists' wallows in Jungian mythology. The syndrome announces the exhaustion of a received cultural situation, whose traditions are slack and whose future is opaque. It typically entails nostalgia for real or fancied past ages that dealt—successfully, in retrospect—with similar crises. Many of the New Museum artists return in spirit to the last era when events crushed imagination, that of Sebald's seedtime: the Second World War, the brand-new atom bomb. Alberto Giacometti and Samuel Beckett hover as tutelary ghosts. The show's symbolic heart is a work by the young British-born, Berlin-based artist Tino Sehgal: a live dancer (from a rotating crew of eight) elegantly performing, in street clothes, a slow-motion writhe on the floor, oblivious to viewers. The sight stirs a feeling of existential anxiety, given momentary relief in wanton gracefulness. (Not knowing whether to stare or not to stare, I found myself somehow doing both at once.)

Politically, the new art is benumbed. Desperate to eschew narcissisms of money and fame, along with academically entrenched ideology, the artists operate at psychological depths at which social attitudes can't coalesce. (This is an interesting counterpoint in a summer when politics of the get-out-the-vote kind generates something like avant-gardist passion among young people suddenly excited to deem themselves citizens.) Religion—after a century and a half of modern movements that conceived one secular substitute after another—is very much at issue. Gnostic intimations glimmer in the show. There is a smack about it of intellectual despair. Wasn't God supposed to be dead? Abruptly, once-settled views and values have unsettled themselves and stalk the mind.

Because we are talking about contemporary art, in the contemporary art world, silly froth is sure to fleck the developing wave. In the catalogue, the New Museum's energetic director, Lisa Phillips, hazards topical referents: "earthquake and flooding in China, the cyclone in Myanmar, the tornadoes and flooding in Iowa." Get ready for neo-Romantic dotting on miscellaneous catastrophes, with global warming the default alarm. There is nothing new in our culture which can't be faddified. What we want now is a major artist—a Manet, Picasso, Pollock, Warhol, or Beuys—who will manifest durable truths at the core of inevitable hypes and hyperboles. If none such appears, that will be a valuable datum. It will help us adjust to the happenstance that, once and finally, our particular civilization is spent. ♦