

THE NEW REPUBLIC



Postcards from Nowhere

Jed Perl, *The New Republic* Published: Wednesday, June 25, 2008

Broad Contemporary Art Museum, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

© *Murakami*, Brooklyn Museum

Olafur Eliasson, Museum of Modern Art

Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century, New Museum

Jeff Koons on the Roof, Metropolitan Museum of Art

I.

When I returned from Los Angeles not long ago, where I had gone to see the new Broad Contemporary Art Museum, friends quite naturally asked for my impressions. The strange thing was that I hardly knew how to respond. And in recent months I have found myself often faced with this problem. I have not had much of anything to say after visiting a number of widely discussed events: the 2008 Whitney Biennial; the opening show at the New Museum of Contemporary Art (aptly titled "Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century"); the survey of Japanese artist Takashi Murakami at the Brooklyn Museum; the Olafur Eliasson show at the Museum of Modern Art; the exhibition of Jeff Koons's sculpture on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I have had thoughts, sure; but they are the thoughts of an anthropologist rather than a museumgoer, of a student of the art world rather than a person who has had an encounter with a work of art. What there is to discuss is not visual experiences so much as visual stunts, which are frequently mind-boggling in their size and complexity. Mostly what I can offer, after all this museumgoing and gallerygoing, is a series of postcards about nothing written from places that felt like nowhere.

I gather I am not alone. Reporting on the opening of the Broad Contemporary Art Museum in *Art in America*, Michael Duncan described "a bewildering event, provoking soul-searching in the local art community and the museum world at large." And in the lead article in *Artforum's* April issue, devoted to "Art and Its Markets," the art historian Thomas Crow complained of trustees renegeing on public trusts, of "barbarism" in cultural institutions, of "vandals ... inside the walls." Well, yes. Then again, I find it interesting that many commentators are far more eager to criticize the collectors and the dealers than the art stars who produce this junk in the first place. Can it be that even the most vapid machine-tooled work is still covered by the old romantic alibi, namely that the muses made me do it? The woes of the art world cannot be blamed entirely on the rapacity of a cadre of collectors, dealers, and curators. After all, it was an artist, Damien Hirst, who dreamed up the platinum replica of a human skull, paved with diamonds, that was first exhibited last year in London in a show called "Beyond Belief."

It is the artists, and a certain line of thinking about art, that have given the people with the cash permission to buy and sell what amounts to nothing, and to do so for ever larger and more insane sums of money. All this sensational commerce is fueled by the anti-aesthetics that were born nearly a century ago among the Dadaists, and have by now morphed into the laissez-faire aesthetics that give collectors sanction to regard one of Jeff Koons's stainless-steel balloon animals as simultaneously a camp joke and a modern equivalent of a Tang dynasty horse. (A critic in *The New York Times* described one of these glistening metal doggies, currently on display on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as a "masterpiece.") The artists involved--beginning with Duchamp and including Rauschenberg, Warhol, Salle, and Koons--celebrate, or toy with, a number of apparently contradictory thoughts: that art is nothing; that art can be anything; that randomness and order are the same thing; that art has no particular place in the world; that art can be found anyplace in the world; that art is just another commercial product, like tennis balls and washing machines.

I am well aware that these artists know how to produce work that is sporadically elegant, ingenious, and charming. They are not stupid men, not by a long shot. Some of them might be accurately described as dandies and aesthetes, and these are perfectly reasonable things for an artist to be. Nobody can deny that



Courtesy Museum Associates/LACMA
Installation view, Broad Contemporary Art Museum, 2008

Warhol put a personal stamp on his movie stars and supermarket products. David Salle will tell you that his juxtapositions are no more anti-aesthetic than those of an Old Master such as Caravaggio. Nevertheless, all these artists, in one way or another, are at war with the idea that a work of art establishes a freestanding universe. While their lines of attack are more or less subtle, the result is ultimately the same: they replace the *there* that constitutes a work of art with a *nowhere*.

It is important to point out that nothing and nowhere are themselves significant artistic themes. De Kooning in the 1950s liked to say that he was painting New York's "no-environment." What is often forgotten today is that painting no place, as de Kooning did in his greatest canvases, from *Excavation* to *Gotham News*, actually requires an acute sense of place. A painting or a sculpture, whether abstract or representational, must always be a place--a unique locale, a little universe. The particularity of the place draws us in. We focus our attention, we linger, we explore. Yet once you have accepted Duchamp's displacement of the work of art with the Ready-made--that is, with anything--you can't go home again.

If a work of art can be anything or nothing, then the place where we look at it is also under threat. This helps to explain the poorly defined character of so many new museums and galleries. These exhibition spaces, whether the Broad Contemporary Art Museum in Los Angeles or the New Museum in New York, are as incoherent as the art they have been designed to house. They are bland, generic warehouse-style spaces--places to dump expensive stuff. And the new style in exhibition design, especially at the Whitney Biennial, favors a chockablock look, with works set in front of one another so that nothing can be experienced in and of itself. Is it any surprise that, after decades in which aesthetic contemplation and the idea of the freestanding work of art have been under attack, the people who design museums have not a clue how to arrange an exhibition space?

Time and again, when I visit museums and galleries, I feel as if I am surveying a display of trophies, works that have about as much relationship to artistic experience as a silver-plated cup on a shelf has to a champion athlete's leap from the diving board. The opening of the Broad Contemporary Art Museum (BCAM) was accompanied by the installation of a new work by Chris Burden just off Wilshire Boulevard, an arrangement of more than two hundred vintage street lamps--urban archaeology as a nouveau-retro light show. At the same time Michael Govan, the director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), of which BCAM is a part, announced plans for yet another gigantic sculpture by Koons, a seventy-foot-long replica of a 1940s locomotive that will be suspended from a 161-foot-tall crane, the point of this mostly being to create something that will be visible from much of Los Angeles, rather like the Hollywood sign.

Some of the most widely discussed contemporary artists appear to be as gaga over their big cars and trucks and trains as five-year-olds with their little cars and trucks and trains. Charles Ray's forty-six-foot-long *Firetruck*, which was parked on Madison Avenue as part of the Whitney Biennial in 1993, is now parked at LACMA. At the Guggenheim in New York, there might as well be a new rule that you cannot have a retrospective without putting a car in the rotunda. Richard Prince had a sculpture of a car hood in his show there last year, and this winter the Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang suspended a bunch of cars from the ceiling, with flashing lights projecting from them to suggest exploding bombs. In Chelsea, another Chinese artist, Zhang Huan, with back-to-back shows at PaceWildenstein's spaces on West 22nd and West 25th Streets, had a fleet of pedicabs to take you from one exhibit to the other, emblazoned with advertisements for the gallery and the show. Asked by one of the young hipsters doing the pedaling if I wanted a ride, I replied that I would rather not feel beholden to PaceWildenstein and walked out into the rainy afternoon.

II.

The king-sized egos of businessmen who take an interest in culture are not new. Andrew Carnegie was stamping his name all over buildings long before Eli Broad was born, and Broad is not the first person to have his name on a building at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. What has raised alarms in the cultural world is the degree to which Broad is seen as driving the agenda at LACMA. He donated the \$56 million for the new building, designed by Renzo Piano, and had more of a hand in shaping the plans than any single trustee should. Then, just as BCAM was opening, he announced that most of the art on display in the building would remain the property of the Broad Art Foundation, on loan to LACMA. This was widely reported to be an embarrassment for the museum, and for its relatively new director Michael Govan, whose ability to shape the expanding LACMA campus is quite naturally seen as a test of his leadership.

The only mystery here is why anybody ever imagined that Govan would be able to control a billionaire trustee. After all, Govan's career has been based on accommodating the whims of such people, a talent he acquired while working for former Guggenheim director Thomas Krens, that master of the Art of the Deal. So far as I can see, Broad is merely another steamroller personality for Govan to cheer on. Both Broad

and Govan have what amounts to an ideological aversion to institution building and collection development and exhibition planning, at least insofar as they represent an effort to provide a public forum for the essentially private experience of looking at a work of art. If there is a sense in which BCAM is a public gesture, even a civic gesture, all that it gestures toward are the peaks and the valleys of the art market. And that, come to think of it, puts Broad and Govan on the same page with many of the artists represented at BCAM, especially Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, for whom the idea is not so much to make art as to make money, money being the only sure value in a post-Dadaist culture, or so they believe.

The old assumption that artists and art institutions can come together in an effort to bridge the distance between private feeling and public experience has been replaced by an avidity for logos and labels and brands. Eli Broad with his billions and Michael Govan with his matinee-idol looks (that's the first thing anybody says about him) are the men charged, at least this season, with setting up what in the business world would be called a new platform, so that distribution can roll. Broad does not present art, he places products. There are galleries at BCAM, especially the ones dedicated to work fashionable in the 1980s, that look as dated as the fashion magazines of the period. Broad is not a man with a sensibility, he is a man who buys whatever the happening galleries--perhaps Mary Boone and Metro Pictures back then, certainly Gagolian today--happen to be selling. BCAM is about high-end shopping. When I say that the only works that struck me as having a poetic power were two early paintings by Cy Twombly, all I am really divulging is that the museum has accomplished its goal, for visual expression is certainly not what BCAM is about.

Actually, you do not have to go to BCAM to know what it is about. All you have to do is drive down the Los Angeles boulevards and note the banners advertising the museum, which bear reproductions of Jeff Koons's broken egg in bright red high chromium stainless steel. It is the perfect logo for the newly hatched museum. Broad bought this Koons not too long ago from the Gagolian Gallery, and when I saw the use to which it had been turned in Los Angeles, I had to acknowledge that Koons has concocted what is, in its own way, a striking thing: crisply executed, succinct, rather funny. Like most of what fills BCAM, Koons's *Cracked Egg (Red)* is a matter of design rather than of art. And what, pray tell, is the difference? I thought I might find the answer in the writings of a great designer, so I took Paul Rand's *A Designer's Art* off the shelf. Rand, who dreamed up some legendary logos for IBM, UPS, ABC, and Westinghouse, says that "the designer's problems are twofold: to anticipate the spectator's reactions and to meet his own aesthetic needs." While I will leave Koons's aesthetic needs for others to ponder, there is no question that he and Hirst and many of the other artists whose work I have seen in recent months are cunningly anticipating the spectator's reactions.

Koons and his kind have never been interested in the old avant-garde idea of outraging the bourgeoisie, of shaking up expectations. The possibility that a work of art can disturb us, whether through its style or its content, is at heart a rather traditional possibility, a new twist on the complex emotional exchanges that have gone on between artists and audiences from time immemorial. Koons is mostly concerned with massaging the egos of gallerygoers and museumgoers--and, of course, high-end collectors. He knows how to cozy up to his constituency. Those of us who are outraged that Koons and Hirst and Murakami now take up so much space in our museums are not angered by their work. We are angered by the significance that arts professionals are attaching to this work. There is no art here to enrage me--or to engage me, either.

Artists often say, about the works of art they love, that you have to see them "in the flesh" in order to understand them. In the case of Takashi Murakami--whose retrospective was organized at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and is now at the Brooklyn Museum--you cannot possibly understand what a safe haven for frauds and con artists the art world has become until you have walked into this trickster's trap. Murakami, who produces figurines that are sold inexpensively in Japan, as well as very expensive Louis Vuitton handbags and exceedingly expensive paintings and sculptures, is a canny observer of consumer desires. It is easy to appreciate how niftily some of his effects are engineered. A new high (or low, depending on your point of view) in aggressive kitsch was reached in 1998, when Murakami created *My Lonesome Cowboy*, a sculpture of a skinny naked boy with flying yellow hair, an erect penis, and an ejaculation so powerful that the thing becomes a twirling lasso, circling his head. From time to time Murakami demonstrates a certain design sense. His compositions with lots of eyeballs have a freaky dynamism; and his melting and transmogrifying sci-fi humanoids, which mingle Surrealist strategies with a psychedelic Peter Max sensibility, are sporadically diverting. But the work is all shell, all facade, all empty assertion.

The organizers of the Murakami show make no bones that the artist is in the business of producing logos and products. To begin with, the show is called "copyright Murakami." And it comes with a real live Louis Vuitton boutique, complete with sleekly dressed salespeople and a shimmering cash register, situated right smack in the middle of everything. Those who defend Murakami--and Koons and Hirst--may want to argue that what we have here is nothing more than a new version of the old search for a personal style. Some may even argue that Mondrian's primary colors and right angles are no less a look, a logo, than Koons's shiny chromium surfaces and curvaceous forms. The difference is that for Mondrian a style is a dynamic principle, not a fixed attitude. (I cannot believe that I must make a distinction between Mondrian and

Koons, but this is where we are.) An artist's style is a vocabulary, the medium through which something is expressed. The more expressive the artist becomes, the richer the possibilities of that vocabulary turn out to be. To the extent that Koons or Murakami can be said to have a style, it is a frozen style, an inert vocabulary.

III.

If the designs of the New Museum on the Bowery in Manhattan and the Broad Contemporary Art Museum are any indication, the architects who are getting the commissions to design these exhibition spaces are as fixated on logos as the artists whose work is on display inside them. Is there anything that stays in the mind about the New Museum aside from the oddly stacked volumes that make up the building's profile as you see it from various spots on the Lower East Side? That's the museum's logo. The same can be said for the red steel beams at BCAM, which protrude from the building's basically boxy structure and are arranged to create a sort of jungle gym around the entrance.

Once you have noted those oddly stacked volumes and those bright red beams, the stories that these buildings tell are over--there is nothing more to see. Many admirers of Renzo Piano cannot quite believe what has become of the creator of the Menil Collection in Houston, that most exquisite of museums; all they can do is lamely praise the skylights on the top floor of BCAM and then change the subject. Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa, who designed the New Museum, also have their fans. Neither building, however, has a meaningful entrance or lobby; there is no sense of a progression from outside or inside, or indeed from gallery to gallery, as Sarah Williams Goldhagen observed about the New Museum in these pages a few weeks ago ("Stopped Making Sense," May 11). Discussing such museums in architectural terms is like discussing a sculpture by Jeff Koons in compositional terms. You would be kidding yourself. These museum are only brands designed to contain brands.

The generic spaces created to display contemporary art, which are often said to embody a new unfinished-finished style in architectural design, are basically big-box stores: cubic footage to be filled with stuff. Whatever happened to the belief that a museum ought to be a unique space that contains unique objects? Donald Judd understood that his one hundred mill aluminum boxes, arranged in two huge buildings at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, are a singular monument, a particular experience that you can have only in a particular place; but the people who run many of the contemporary art museums would probably be nervous about an experience that was so utterly unique. They are uncertain about their own taste. They want to give the public a dependable experience, which means an experience that has already been market-tested in other museums and galleries--and in the auction rooms. Richard Serra is a brilliant artist, and his immense, snaking steel sculptures are eye-opening, at least the first or second or third time you see them. By now, though, they are almost a joke, the rusty steel logo that is de rigueur for any museum that wants to prove that it is in the major league. The differences between these works are not great enough to keep them from being as repetitious as the chain stores in the malls across America. Serra, too, has become a chain. I could explain why I think one of the two Serras at BCAM is better than the other, but the only thing that really matters is that Eli Broad, being a very important guy, has both of them.

Exhibitions are now treated as if they were colonial occupations. Self-respecting artists do not just expect to have a show in a gallery or a museum, they hope to have the entire interior gutted and re-arranged to accommodate them. What mostly registers at the Murakami exhibition is how many rooms the show exhausts on two floors of the Brooklyn Museum, and the fact that some of the rooms do not contain very much only adds to the sense that the guy is really major. (I am reminded of throne rooms in baroque palaces, with their mind-numbing square footage.) At BCAM, the only interesting game is guessing which artists will cop the most space. Cindy Sherman is represented by more than three dozen of her photographic self-portraits, and that in itself makes her a winner. Damien Hirst, lucky boy, has two whole rooms.

Meanwhile, back in New York, Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim rotunda, the miraculous interior that in the good old days of modernism was often said to be a mediocre museum space, has emerged as the *kunsthalle* that logo-mad artists love. For Matthew Barney, Richard Prince, and now Cai Guo-Qiang, having a retrospective at the Guggenheim is like being a Visigoth who has been given the keys to Rome. At the Guggenheim, the staff no longer curates exhibitions. They simply invite an artist to come in and rape the place. (The institutional superego sees to it that in some remote gallery there is a small exhibition that modestly, and guiltily, salutes the museum's original mission. This time, along with Cai Guo-Qiang's follies, there is an exquisite show devoted to Karl Nierendorf, the legendary dealer who in the 1930s and 1940s acquired many of the modern masterworks that are now in the Guggenheim's permanent collection.)

Even the Museum of Modern Art is taking a do-with-me-what-you-will approach to curating. The Scandinavian conceptualist artist Olafur Eliasson, the subject of a retrospective there called "Take Your Time," has been allowed to occupy various areas around the museum, so that his show functions as a series of interventions (and continues at P.S.1, MoMA's outpost in Long Island City). In the main atrium at MoMA you will find *Ventilator*, in which a single small fan swings from the ceiling as museumgoers watch their kids race around; in one corridor there are lights that turn the space a deep yellow; another room contains a work called *I only see things when they move*, with a contraption that casts bands of colors across the walls. Like Murakami and Koons, Eliasson works on a scale engineered for the international exhibition circuit, in which overwhelming people is the only way of affecting people. The difference is that Eliasson's particular brand of belligerent glamour has an austerity that is to MoMA's liking. I suppose you could say that he is a better-mannered megalomaniac than Koons or Hirst or Murakami.

The anthropologist in me remains fascinated by the spectacle of MoMA, this grand dame of modernism, as it tries on all the new party dresses. They like to point out that the new party dresses are not entirely different from the old ones; this is what passes for scholarly probity. As an accompaniment to the Eliasson show, the Modern offers a brief survey of kinetic light effects in twentiethcentury art, beginning more or less with Moholy-Nagy. Eliasson, so we are being told, is in the Great Tradition, or at least in some tradition or other.

The Museum of Modern Art's institutional memory is not entirely dead. Unfortunately, most of what seems to be remembered is the modern-art-can-be-funky-fun attitude that was popular at the museum in the 1960s and 1970s. I keep seeing things at MoMA that remind me of the show that Pontus Hulten was brought in to organize there in 1968, "The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age," which ranged from Leonardo drawings to work by the pioneering video artist Nam June Paik. It was high-level intellectual slumming. This winter's "Color Chart: Reinventing Color, 1950 to Today," organized by Ann Temkin, was clever in a Pontus Hulten sort of way. The idea that standardized mass-produced color has replaced the mixed colors of the painter's palette does help to explain the power of certain works by Ellsworth Kelly and Donald Judd, but as a theme for a major exhibition it quickly deteriorated into a MoMA-friendly mixture of the tendentious and the cute. Although it is not clear what unites all these works that happen to use pre-mixed colors, at least Temkin had the wit to insist on a formal idea, which is unusual nowadays.

MoMA feels better today than right after it reopened. Cézanne's *Bather* has been returned to its central place at the beginning of the permanent collection, and Mondrian has once again been given a room of his own. These are not matters of blind obeisance to the past, for the reaffirmation of the old choices is a reaffirmation of enduring ideas. To the extent that the museum feels a tiny bit more the way it used to feel, the people in charge are honoring a sense of place, honoring the sense that the Modern was, for generations, The Place. And in doing so, they are reminding us that the sense of place is inextricably associated with the sense of memory--and with aesthetic value. After seeing the New Museum and BCAM, I find myself again warming to Taniguchi's building. The entrance, with the dark staircase to the right and the Sculpture Garden beckoning, has a whisper of pageantry; the details of doorways and railings have a lovely clarity; the atrium, though turned into a dumb-ass playpen by Eliasson, pulls together the disparate parts of the museum; and one long vertical aperture high up in the atrium, offering a glimpse of a staircase in the permanent collection, begins to feel endearingly inevitable, like those quirky windows on the facade of Marcel Breuer's Whitney.

IV.

The trophy-art economy is a global phenomenon. Walking through the Murakami show at the Brooklyn Museum or looking at the work by Serra and Warhol and Hirst and Koons at BCAM, you do not get the feeling that a curator has left a mark. Though there is more of Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari, southern California's favorite sons, at BCAM than there would be in a comparable show of contemporary art on the East Coast, the rest of it is one-from-column-A-and-one-from-column-B collecting. And why shouldn't this be the case, when we consider that Koons and Hirst and Murakami and the other hot artists of today are engaged in what amounts to one-from-column-A-and-one-from-column-B art production?

The claim is often made that the impersonality of much contemporary art reflects a sea change in the human condition. Like it or not, some will say, we are living in an increasingly interconnected and homogenized technological world, and this world demands a new, streamlined kind of art. Speaking at a press conference at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on the day his show opened there, Jeff Koons explained that the chromium surfaces of his new works are quite simply the characteristic surfaces of our time. These shimmering finishes, so he said, are the mark of our modernity, much as the polished marble surfaces of the statues in the Greek and Roman galleries were the characteristic surfaces of their time. Although the sun was shining on the roof of the Metropolitan as Koons gave his brief speech, it was a dark day indeed when one of the greatest museums in the world permitted this media hack to define tradition

downward.

Our technologically driven age gets the art it deserves. This is the argument that the all's-right-in-the-culture punditocracy will want to make. Interestingly, though, the argument has received a good deal of criticism. Much of the work in the New Museum's opening "Unmonumental" exhibition and in the Whitney Biennial was self-consciously low-tech, reflecting the resurgence of a grungy, collagist, do-it-yourself sensibility. Marc André Robinson's heap of distressed wooden chairs at the New Museum had the friendly insouciance that found objects can have, although here, as with many works in this show, I was left wondering if the effect was any more charming than that of some particularly odd heap of trash that I might glimpse on a Manhattan sidewalk. Still, there can be something gladdening about a casually tossed together piece of work. Heather Rowe's environmental construction at the Whitney Biennial, a lumberyard maze in which one's image appeared and disappeared in the slim vertical slits of mirror, was an amusement-park attraction for narcissistic adults.

Generally I prefer my Dadaist nonsense to be low-tech rather than high-tech, although Tony Feher's show at PaceWildenstein in April, with its coat hangers and odd bits of plastic, did begin to cross the line from nothing much to nothing at all. While I find Rauschenberg's early Combines, which are nowadays hailed as masterpieces of classical structure, to be stupid and incoherent, I understand that some younger artists see warmth there, at least compared to Warhol's ice-water heart. And as the all-around guru of this casual-is-cool movement there will always be Richard Tuttle, who can tease lyricism out of bits of string and wire and Styrofoam. Yet the charm of Tuttle's work, authentic as it is, does not excuse the critics who write about a funky poetic comedian as if he were a master for the ages. Could it be that many artists and critics are actually embarrassed by contemporary painters and sculptors who still want to craft something sturdy and substantial, with their own two hands?

Funkiness--a playful, insouciant elegance--is a good thing. Although it is not enough to make a resolved work of art, it is a beginning. And it is this feeling for imaginative play that held me at Ry Fyan's first one-man show, at Perry Rubenstein in March. Working in oil and acrylic and enamel, often on wood supports, Fyan brings a stream-of-consciousness freedom to his surfaces, mingling teensy pictures of ordinary objects (a Vicks NyQuil bottle, a roll of Bounty paper towels, a bottle of Dawn detergent) with fantasy landscapes. Sometimes he seems to lose the narrative thread and just enjoys playing with the paint, building up trippy patterns and then rubbing them away, exposing the wood support. There is a jungle painting and another one with pyramids, but it was not the overall iconography that held me so much as the obsessive details and the pile-up of those painterly divertissements. I was reminded of some of the paintings that Carroll Dunham did in the 1980s on sheets of wood veneer, with their witty capriccios and arabesques--a little hailstorm of multicolored O's, a lovely passage of art nouveau patterning. Dunham's early paintings were the subject of a show at the Skarstedt Gallery in March; there is also one up at MoMA this spring. When I first saw those Dunhams I admired many of the individual elements, especially the way he used paint and pencil to riff on the grain in the wood veneer, but I did not think the paintings cohered--and Fyan's work leaves me engaged in a similarly open-ended way.

Surely we are in a period when the sense of place as a sense of classical order is almost impossible to maintain. The fluid, the improvisational, the changeable, the ambiguous preoccupation most of the best artists right now. The Impressionists' shifting light and the Cubists' labyrinthine spaces and the Surrealists' paradoxical narratives are about as much of a homeland as contemporary artists can expect to possess. At the New Museum, where the big assemblages of "Unmonumental" were accompanied by a show of collages called "The Un-Monumental Picture," I did not see much of anything that I would regard as a fully resolved work of art, and yet the yearning to reclaim Surrealism as a modern sense of place was palpable. The work of Kim Jones and Henrik Olesen and some others put me in mind of Jess, the San Francisco artist who died a decade ago and who was the subject of a show at the Paule Anglim Gallery in San Francisco in February and a show currently at Tibor de Nagy in New York.

Jess's vast collages, with their images clipped from magazines and their mingling of the contemporary and the classical, have an openness and a quirky erudition that has considerable appeal right now. I can see younger artists responding to Jess's willful, idiosyncratic imagination. What may be harder for them to grasp is the pictorial logic that he assimilated as a student of Abstract Expressionism around 1950. It is that old modern sense of form that enabled him, in a number of his oil paintings--especially *The Enamored Mage*, a portrait of his life partner, the poet Robert Duncan--to construct an imaginative world that is entirely his own: an impossibly rich and resplendent world, with its bejeweled colors and surfaces and jigsaw-stil intricacies and literary conceits.

One of Jess's phantasmagorical landscapes, *Ex 7 Zodiacal Light*, came up for auction in London in February. It was from the collection of an old friend of Jess's, the painter R.B. Kitaj, who died last fall. Recently the Marlborough Gallery in New York presented Kitaj's last works, a cycle of small paintings at once dense and telegraphic, a quickening tour through his luxuriant iconography, with portraits and memories and jokes presented with streaming, peremptory ease. Beginning in the 1960s as a Pop Artist of sorts, Kitaj proceeded to work his way back into tradition, in the 1970s teaching himself how to draw with

an acuity that brings Degas to mind, and in the 1980s and 1990s using this hard-won graphic freedom to create a body of work that has the density of a private emblem book projected onto a painter's public scale. Kitaj published two volumes of writing reflecting on his experiences in the studio, which he called his *Diasporist Manifestos*. The first of these is perhaps the most original of all recent efforts to describe the artist's sense of place. "Paintings sit there," Kitaj writes, "looking out at the world, which remains separate. I'm for an art into which the painter imports things from the world that he cares about"--imports them into the alternate world that is the work of art. "Painting," Kitaj explains, "is a great idea I carry from place to place. It is an idea full of ideas, like a refugee's suitcase, a portable Ark of the Covenant."

The artist's sense of place is the stranger's sense of place, the outsider's sense of place. Such a dispensation can feel expansive and inviting. It can also feel exclusionary, because its particularities push out other particularities. An art that pursues its own viewpoint, and does so unironically, can seem elitist, because it propounds a secret. "This is just for us," the work declares--but it is always the case that the "us" includes anybody who can imagine himself or herself into this particular place. Anybody can enter, but not without making an effort.

V.

A work of art--any work of art--is a particularity. The trouble with so much of the work at BCAM and the other contemporary art extravaganzas is that it trades in generalities that are passed off as universalities. I do not really believe that the educated audience that surveys the work of Koons at BCAM and the Metropolitan, or the work of Murakami at the Brooklyn Museum, sees some deep meaning in these overblown comic-book heroes and factory-produced baubles. A lot of the visitors to these shows have a knowing, ironic look fixed on their faces. They can see that what is presented as art with a universalist message is really just global marketing swill--but these trumped-up universalities have a way of eclipsing everything else. When I went to Brooklyn to see the Murakami show, I discovered that the museum's great collection of European paintings was closed due to renovations, at least until the fall. There was room for endless Murakamis, but not for one painting by Degas or Corot or Cézanne.

In Los Angeles, the media storm surrounding BCAM has almost entirely erased the infinitely more important story at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art--which is that this museum that has had a chip on its shoulder practically forever in fact has a very fine permanent collection. Michael Govan's best move has been to borrow Tony Smith's twenty-two-foot-high *Smoke*, an agile behemoth of a sculpture that gives much-needed focus to the atrium of the Ahmanson Building, where the lion's share of LACMA's permanent collection is beautifully installed. Eli Broad may have decided not to give his puerile toys to LACMA, but in the meantime the museum has acquired the Lazarof Collection, with its riches in Picasso and Giacometti, which are given a striking yet intimate presentation; and upstairs the permanent collection looks absolutely terrific. In the Ahmanson Building I felt precisely what is missing at BCAM, which is a sense that the works on display have been acquired one by one, that they have been loved for what they are. These works come from many times and many places, and they have somehow all found their way to Wilshire Boulevard, refugees in the sense that Kitaj believed that every work of art is a refugee, but now at home in Los Angeles, a city to which people have for generations been coming from many other places.

I wish more museum directors and trustees understood how hungry--and how disgruntled--museumgoers in America really are. Again and again, people are pointed in precisely the wrong direction. It is depressing to think how many people have visited LACMA in recent months to see BCAM without sparing a minute for the Ahmanson Building. They literally do not know what they are missing. From Los Angeles I went up to San Francisco, and it is more or less the same story. Everybody rushes to the Museum of Modern Art and the De Young, two overblown buildings with sporadically important collections, while the most beautiful museum in the city--the Legion of Honor, in which masterpieces by Watteau, Le Nain, and Seurat have been given a thrillingly elegant installation-- is hardly ever mentioned.

Shortly after returning to New York, I went down to Philadelphia to visit the Barnes Foundation, a sacred place for anybody who loves modern art. And the news there is bad as well, for most likely the Barnes will soon be torn out of its historic home in suburban Merion and reconstituted as part of a projected museum district in downtown Philadelphia. I wish that the cultural commissars who now control the Barnes's financial future and believe that the downtown move is a favor to the public would take another look at the way visitors are responding to the collection in its present location. What a thrill it is to see how vigorously museumgoers engage with this most personal of installations, where the world's greatest collection of Cézannes and key works by Seurat and Matisse and Renoir are brilliantly juxtaposed with pieces of Pennsylvania German ironwork and paintings by El Greco and the Venetians and sculpture from

Africa. When I was there, everybody looked keyed up--they looked happy, the way nobody looks at BCAM.

The Barnes Foundation in Merion, Pennsylvania is a somewhere, make no mistake about it. Matisse, who visited the foundation when he was in America, painted one of his most deeply pondered murals, *The Dance*, for the central gallery, shaping his monumental figures to fit the curiously curved spaces above the three huge windows. To see this seminal work by Matisse in the room for which it was intended, hard by Cézanne's greatest *Card Players* and Seurat's *Models*, is one of the essential experiences that a museumgoer can have in the United States. Nothing could be more magnificently particular than this museum on a quiet street in a Philadelphia suburb. It is a monument to modern art, and to the reception of modern art in America. And yet there are people--powerful people--who want to depersonalize this most personal of places. Only bureaucrats who have become inured to a world in which works of art are nothings and museums of art are nowheres could consider such a plan. But this is where we are today. Before I left the Barnes I went down to the shop and bought a few postcards. I am looking at one of those postcards now, of the wall in the main gallery with the Cézanne *Card Players* and Seurat's *Models* and three other Cézannes and a Corot and a number of pieces of early American metalwork. This is a postcard from somewhere.

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