

The Washington Post: 'New York Art Galleries Focus on Politically Oriented Collections', by Blake Gopnik, November 18th, 2010

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New York Art Galleries Focus on Politically Oriented Collections

By Blake Gopnik

The November shows at New York galleries give as good a survey of new art as you'll get. Right now, what they're showing is more substantial than usual, with less of the normal market-driven fluff. Whether because of our recent elections or our generally dour times - or just because it's in fashion - there's a political cast to a lot of the best work .

Here are a few exhibitions that reveal that direction.

John Gerrard at Simon Preston - Washingtonians already got a nice look at Gerrard, an Irish artist based in Vienna, last fall at the Hirshhorn, when he showed his animated, ultra-realistic visions of an American hog farm, oil well and dust storm. They seemed to take an effective swipe at the roles of oil and mechanized farming in America.

Gerrard's latest work is yet better made, and subtler. His new animation, called "Cuban School (Community 5th of October)," gives us a view of a crumbling residential school in the countryside outside Havana. It was made, as before, by using thousands of photos, taken on site, to build a 3-D model of the structure and its setting. Thanks to customized video-game software - perfected since the Washington pieces - Gerrard can then show us his subject from any angle, at any distance, with the lighting it would have in Cuba at the same moment we're seeing its image in New York.

In "Cuban School," Gerrard's virtual camera circles a building that was once a proud symbol of the communist way forward. The school is an elegant example of brutalist cool, designed by its Eastern Bloc architects to have bulk without being heavy. And now the building, like the system that gave birth to it, has crumbled. Plate glass has been replaced by crude wooden shutters. Piles of split logs around its base indicate that winter heat now comes from wood stoves. Crucial maintenance seems to have been put off to the point where the building will never recover.

And still its staff and students are making do, growing produce on the school's lawns, stringing up cables to grab whatever power is left in the grid, rigging up pipes to let waste and smoke out, since the mechanicals in this "functional ruin" (Gerrard's coinage) are not up to the job.

Which means that Gerrard's piece seems less about a grand political failure as about a modest human success. And it shows that the same modern structure can speak about both.

Through Dec. 19 at Simon Preston Gallery, 301 Broome St., New York. Call 212-431-1105 or visit www.simonprestongallery.com.

"The Tower: A Songspiel," at Postmasters - "The Tower" is a video by a Russian collective called "Chto Delat?" ("What Is To Be Done?") - a name taken from a famous pamphlet by Lenin. So yes, there are politics involved.

The wonderful thing about "The Tower," however, is its extremely complex view of political realities. Chto Delat's video documents a performance of a deliberately stilted piece of agitprop theater, modeled on the Weimar-era "musicals" of Bertolt Brecht. Elite conspirators - a greedy CEO, a craven politician, a grasping mafioso, an amoral priest and an egocentric dealer and her pet artist - sit on a high dais, scheming to force through St. Petersburg's first office tower, and take turns pitching it to the masses below. (Literally "below" - they stand at the foot of the dais.) The "people" aren't united, however. They're grouped into choruses of intellectuals, workers, pensioners, burghers and youths - each with its own desires and priorities, which they take turns singing out.

Rather than advancing a single clear position, as Brecht's theater did, "The Tower" documents the impasses and agendas that dominate politics in post-Soviet Russia - and in other countries one might name.

Through Dec. 4 at Postmasters, 459 W. 19th St., New York. Call 212-727-3323 or www.postmastersart.com.

Adam Helms at Marianne Boesky - Cliches are a cultural flaw - and cultures everywhere are built around them. Helms, a young artist from New York, explores one of the governing cliches of our current moment in a piece called "48 Portraits."

In the rear room at Boesky, Helms has installed a long line of framed images of heads, all showing terrorists or criminals (or so we assume) who conceal their identities by masking or veiling their faces. Helms's images have clearly been grabbed from mass circulation - some show signs of a printer's half-tone screen, or of online pixelation - but they've also been altered: All have been laboriously drawn, life-size, in black charcoal.

These portraits function as a condensation of our image of "bad guys," explored inch by inch by this artist's drawing hand. Their repetition shows how little substance our cliché delivers.

Through Dec. 18 at Marianne Boesky Gallery, 509 W. 24th St., New York. Call 212-680-9889 or visit www.marianneboeskygallery.com.

Anselm Kiefer at Gagosian - Since launching his career in the late 1960s, Anselm Kiefer has been a master of political drama. His latest show revisits some of his earliest work while raising its volume.

The exhibition's centerpiece is a controversial series of photos Kiefer first showed in 1969. Shot in historic settings across Europe, they show Kiefer in the foreground giving the Nazi salute. Kiefer was trying to point out, and resist, the historical amnesia his nation then suffered from.

At Gagosian, those 1970s photos have grown to mural size. They're shown suspended in a hulking iron enclosure, rather like a boxcar, whose half-closed doors only partly reveal them.

That centerpiece is set in front of massive paintings of grand romantic landscapes: Alpine peaks with dead trunks arrayed in front of them like tombstones in a row; dark woods that recall a Wagnerian Black Forest.

And all across the gallery floor sit towering glass cases, maybe 20 feet tall, that frame assemblages of props and detritus. One case, inscribed "Flying Fortress," shows the gray motor from some ancient plane laid out on a bed of cracked mud, its gears and parts strewn around it.

War, imprisonment, ruin - the show seems to be lamenting them all. And yet it can be hard to take its lamentation absolutely seriously. There's so much melodrama on view, so lavishly produced, that the whole show registers as Art, with the biggest capital "A" money can buy. And that pulls it farther from the world it pretends it's about.

Through Dec. 18 at Gagosian Gallery, 555 W. 24th St., New York. Call 212-741-1111 or visit www.gagosian.com.