Perverted by Theater {read more}

APEXART

With the advent of video, many works of art took on explicitly temporal characteristics and embodied performance. But even if a work of art does not perform in the literal sense, it still exists in real time, real space and directly engages the viewer once, twice or many times. Moreover, still, quiet, solitary or internalized that experience, the work of art is intended to perform something on the senses or mind of the viewer. Does any artist believe otherwise while in the act of creating?

The dilemma with Perverted by Theater, therefore, is not the legitimacy of its argument that much art is theatrical but that the relatively new works chosen are insufficient as proving its case. With just a single work by each artist, the selections serve only as examples of the curatorial thesis, which presumes the viewer in its favor. If theater is typified by, as curators Franklin Evans and Paul David Young suggest, “temporality, the subject/observer relation, the audience, the presence of the actor, the performance text and character, story and plot structure,” then most any work of art could be implicated to some extent. Still, gathering these works together to consider the influence of theater on visual art is an interesting conversation and has its rewards.

One of the more engaging portions of the show is a wall of portraits that collectively illuminate the role of the audience in art (including theater). Two drawings, Shoshana Banker’s ink-and-graphite-on-yellow ochre depiction of her actress mother and David DeBurgh’s pencil-on-paper Portrait of the Artist as Better Clone, show subjects who are tellingly aware of the viewer’s gaze. Martha McCluney’s Photograph 1989 No. 1, an acrylic-on-paper painting of a seated man in a bathtub, and Mildred Thomson’s Lovely Six Pints, a large C-print of an, it seems, black woman gazing at the viewer from a seventies-style “doo” set, both manipulate the viewer through provocative clothing and suggestive body language. In all of these, the degree to which the subject is portrayed as being conscious of the viewer/audience is an important element of the work. Self-awareness is the most theatrical of all stage issues, and perhaps central to the work of any artist in any medium.

The mechanics of stagecraft are critical to the readings of other works. Ann Patchet’s Drifter (20), an acrylic-on-canvas abstract painting, is composed of a monochromatic gray field with brightly colored concentric circles “downtown center,” the most dramatic position for a single actor onstage to hold. Kate Gilmore’s videodtope Going Under depicts a woman holding a bouquet on the right side of the screen left by an unseen figure off left. Much of the video is the offscreen struggle between these two forces, indicated by the taut rope reaching across the work’s visual plane. The monitor “as procession” and motions of onstage/offstage action are essential to the humor of this piece.

The theatrical role of the text, or script, informs other works in the show, such as 36 Bochsler’s Thesaurus drawings, Fool and Cult. Louis Camnitzer’s Jointing Under Hypnosis, a multi-panel documentation of hypnosis in the form of photographic and page of typed text, recounts an exchange between Camnitzer and a “Charlatan” wherein the artist embodies a work of art itself, describing through questions and answers his own creation, from the selection of paint and subject matter to actualizing techniques and the work’s framing. Painting as performance is implicit throughout.

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With two issues shared frequencies, an audio work consisting of bilks, bleeps, and randomly sampled radio static is played through two wall-mounted speakers. This raw-source material is gathered by an antenna, radio scanner, and mixing deck—the guts of the piece are set up a few feet away, yet the installation’s inclusion is to overlook this equipment and stand before the speakers, the “noisemakers,” in a position of frontal address that mimics a stage performance. Nearby, the wonderful abstract, oil-on-canvas painting by Adel Werth, similarly plays with perception, in this case depicting a close-up of a hand holding a camera lens cap. The circular, black void in the center of the canvas draws the eye to what lies on the periphery, suggesting a reversal of the subject/viewer/performer/audience dichotomy and subtly alluding to both Brecht and Magritte.

Other works were chosen for their more schematic relationships to theater; again, these ideas feel as though they are projected onto the works rather than inherent to them. In Igor Makis’s large photograph above, a gallery wall and floor appear to be the building for an abstracted tree with bare branches, a simple but compelling image seemingly created with nothing more than stripes of packing tape here, the work alludes to the simple “magic" of set design. Elsewhere, the curators illustrate the theatrical mainstays of plot and character with paintings by David Humphrey and Jackie Gendel, and a wall-mounted sculpture with plaster casts, mirrors and lights (The Friends from Shanghai) by Virgil Marti.

If the term theatrical has had a negative connotation in the visual art world, it’s because the tropes of theater have been so well and resolutely defined over history—actors, costumes, props, Aristotle’s “unity of action,” a prosenium separating audience and offstage, etc. By themselves, these parameters are too determined and limiting for the vast range of visual artists who have interests and questions far outside the field of theater. But for the visual artist who is interested in theatricality, the tropes of theater make perfect sense. Why be aggressively deconstructive in rejecting them? We can ask these questions in our permissive postmodernism, postminimalist age. The growing pains of earlier movements have created space in the culture—and theoretical discourse—for such inclusiveness.

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