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# *The New New Image*

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*in New York City*

## Greater New York 2005

When P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center first tried the entire art world on for size, that alone made a statement. Back in 2000, "Greater New York" boasted of new possibilities and new clout, after an alliance with the Museum of Modern Art. With almost one-hundred fifty artists, all working in and around New York, it made the institution synonymous with the vitality of New York City itself. With a focus on emerging artists—and the determination to seek them out—it dared the rest of the art world to measure up. It also offered a dare to the Whitney Biennial, then only weeks away.

What, however, could P.S. 1 do for an encore? Who, in a new century, needs another fat survey of the art scene? Who could make sense of it all? Who could even find the way out?

For just one moment, I felt that I had found one escape from this year's second act. I had found a moment of contemplation and, almost, of peace. That satisfaction lasted all of perhaps five minutes—before I finally got a handle on "Greater New York 2005." The rapid-fire imagery, like a single cartoon strip covering five floors, told a story all its own.

### *Seeing the light*

Peace and quiet do not come often at P.S. 1. As with the first incarnation of "Greater New York," the artists—more than one-hundred

sixty this time—take over the entire display space. Once again, they spill over into the courtyard, halls, and stairwells. They enter the toilets and boiler room, just one more token of the show's restlessness, hype, and charm.

My moment came on my second visit, just when I had again polished off the basement and ground floor. It came with a seemingly atypical contribution, Corkey McCorkle's *Circle of Light*. McCorkle has cut into the wall of a dark room, so that light from behind makes the circle glow.

P.S. 1 regulars will note an echo of the museum's permanent winter wonderland. In a room upstairs, James Turrell has removed much of the ceiling. On those short winter days, when museum hours extend until twilight, a solid volume of light seems to float above one's head, to gather weight, and to dissolve again in darkness. People look at each other and the floor, to assure themselves that the room has not dissolved as well. Couples separate to breathe a purer air or cling together to share the light. Sitting in the cold for half an hour only increases the sensation of mass and the slow pace of change.

Downstairs, in the warmer present, I felt that I had recovered a connection to the institution's origins, back when it made perfect sense to have Richard Serra install his still-visible marker on the roof. And then I looked again. For the occasion, McCorkle has erected a diagonal wall. The light does not come from outside, and rather than changing one's experience of space, it traces an image—an ideal halo, perhaps, or a static eclipse. Unlike with Turrell, *the work* is transient, while *the image* never, ever changes.

In "Greater New York," images lie everywhere, and each seems to belong to someone's unconsciousness other than one's own. Perhaps one lingers for Jenny Rogers's cowboy ballet as synchronized swimming. Perhaps one remembers Dana Schutz for her crowded and majestic burial ceremony, its central figure suspended between life, the gathering faces behind, and the excavation below. Perhaps one has time to peer into Will Ryman's rather sillier pit of space aliens, Peter Caine's funny and somber polar bears in blackface, or King/Diaz de León's classical musicians fragmented into the semblance of a mirrored disco, to name just a few more. Perhaps one stops even trying to explain Justin Faunce's view of heaven as glittery collage, Jamie Issenstein's silent player piano, or the latter's hand inexplicably gesturing from a gallery wall. Perhaps one comes away with little at all.

Has P.S. 1 lost its keen vision in settling for images in today's hyperactive art world, just as the Museum of Modern Art ventures more into contemporary art? Has a vibrant institution settled for showing off its energy level, or has it become the entertainment division of its

parent company, the Museum of Modern Art? Has the entire art world, now that cash rules and successful artists seem happy to fit in? I suspect that the very focus on imagery holds an insight into emerging art. To see why, however, consider first how much *else* has changed in just five years.

### *A Biennial on overdrive?*

In its second incarnation, "Greater New York" necessarily amounts to one art fair among many. It brings one more visit to art's perpetual shopping mall, not unlike a day in Chelsea or an evening in Babylon. No wonder the lines in Queens no longer reach around the block as in 2000. The crowds have returned to Manhattan.

Critics can boast of how many artists they recognize. As with the upcoming 2006 Biennial or to a far lesser extent a National Academy Museum Annual, one can tick off the hot dealers—here ATM, Feature, Zach Feuer, Bellwether, Team, Canada, and so on—and how many have set up shop in Chelsea rather than the outer boroughs. One can even note how little P.S. 1 has contributed to an art scene in Long Island City. Is the reconstructed Modern, back in Manhattan, just affirming its dominance over the contemporary once more?

Amid business as usual, P.S. 1's playful sprawl can easily look complacent as well, with free rides for the kiddies. At the first "Greater New York," a toy train snaked about, as if to mock one's own attempts to find one's way. Now the exhibition has *two* trains—one on video from Oliver Michaels and one from Ian Burns that sticks to a large room. David Ellis's makeshift organ resembles a stripped-down version of Tim Hawkinson's Whitney retrospective, itself all too eager to please.

Even artists I had seen before lose some of their edge, perhaps so that everyone can go for a ride. Burns already tried out a funnier version of his contraption last fall, in the sinister basement confines of SculptureCenter, barely a quarter mile away. Sue de Beer lets one climb into a plywood automobile, a prop from her video, with grainy, retro images on the dashboard in the place of instruments. It has no back, so that she can simulate motion with a moving backdrop, a nod to those movies of the 1950s and 1960s in which everyone seems on the street or on the road. The brief video recycles her theme of adolescent desire as if on cruise control.

Has the puzzle of 2000 given way to familiar pleasures? Christian Jankowski offers a mini-epic in black-and-white. Surrounded by the ominous tones of film music, the flicker of light from an old 35-millimeter projector somehow brings a skyscraper to earth. However, the implosion seems curiously detached from real disaster—and from Jankowski's usual sharp lens on movies and the art scene. For that

matter, Caine's furry creatures decidedly turn down the raunch level—even if, admittedly, that made it easier for me to handle and perhaps even better as well. His last show of "animatronic" sculpture featured everything from Michael Jackson as Santa Claus with a mobile erection to Slick Willie and slicker George Bush, Sister Wendy inviting one and all to smell her turd, and an entire picnic for Nazi schoolgirls. He could have been parodying the very excess of oversized group shows like this one.

Then again, why *should* "Greater New York" seem any more profound? An Armory Show represents the international market, while Brooklyn's "Open House" has encapsulated a moment in the creativity of an entire borough. With "Freestyle" and now "Frequency," the Studio Museum has promoted emerging African-American artists. Each Biennial assesses—and determines—success, including the continuing influence of older artists, while galleries just sell what they can. As one bit of megalomania among many, can "Greater New York" really have a point of view?

### *What so many artists leave out*

Actually, it must, given how much it leaves out. It hides such interesting artists as Ryan McGinley and Shannon Plumb in stairwells, a reminder that the curators have little interest in photography, video, and digital art. As with Plumb's pretend TV commercials, Ronnie Bass's instructions for making cut-out scissors, or Tammy Ben-Tor's Long Island accented *Women Talk about Hitler*, new media offer something fun to watch rather than something for the artist or viewer to manipulate.

Obviously, abstract painting—or *any* kind of sculpture—does not fit in easily. The rare exceptions have slick surfaces, and their exuberant images overflow any frame. Kristin Baker prefers big bands of acrylic on PVC and titles like *Portrait of a Whatever Agricultural Experience*. Whatever. Wade/Guyton twists the tubing of a Breuer armchair into, well, twisted tubing. Either formalism or too much irony would challenge the art world, and these artists would rather celebrate what they can do.

Representation hardly appears, at least as a love affair with nature. Cheyney Thompson's lively newsstand has a broad style that relates more to the tabloids on display than to photorealism. Richard Aldrich could fool one into thinking that Elizabeth Peyton has broadened her theme from portraiture to doodling. When nature does appear, it serves as the backdrop for human intervention. Rob Fischer uses paint to convert photographs into scenes of houses on fire, and Elif Uras paints America's love of guns as a kind of suburban Wild West show. Many

artists, in fact, yearn for the wilds of their imagination, whether with Michelle Segre's giant mushroom, Kurt Lightner's Mylar forest, or Guy Ben-Ner's ostrich suits.

Encounters with P.S. 1's architecture, too, have more in common with fantasy than with Minimalism. Karyn Olivier, for example, lets an ornate tabletop morph into a supporting pillar. Even installations ask one to look rather than bend over to enter another world. Carol Bove's low-budget shelves, stocked with paperbacks that college rebels once cherished, seems more an evocation of a lost sensibility than a confrontation with today's. Her curtain of glass beads neither follows the gallery angles nor disrupts the visitor's path. Even Phoebe Washburn keeps her installation as trash collection simple for once—just two folding chairs embedded with pebbles and titled *P.S. 1 Rocks*.

When it comes to politics, the kind of critical voices seen just down the street at SculptureCenter's "Make It Now" again give way to personal impressions. Kent Henrickson's patterned wallpaper and quaintly framed images supply a kind of Rococo lynching. Paul Chan's video panel invokes a lynching, too, amid indecipherable cartoon narratives of birds, shootings, and sneakers draped over a tree. As one tries to make the panel's two sides add up, their images seem even more haunting and perplexing. David Opdyke's intricate model aircraft carrier as shopping mall makes a point, too. And yet America's dark past and tense present remain largely untouched.

I could say the same for gender issues. When Kate Gilmour says *My Love Is an Anchor*, she means only that she has plenty of work to hack that plaster bucket off one foot. Amy Wilson and Amy Cutler have drawings as intricate and worthy of attention as ever, as the former updates Henry Darger for the Bush administration. All the same, their context lends them almost the same air of innocence, almost at opposite poles from so many dark, private visions in galleries now.

### *After Neo-Dada*

"Greater New York" has a sensibility more at odds with the tense, chaotic ambitions of much art now than its scale suggests. In its focus on imagery and youth, it reminds me of moments before two other striking shifts in New York art. I mean one just over twenty-five years ago and another a quarter century before that.

In the late 1970s, when P.S. 1 first opened its doors as an alternative space and before its remodeling, the art world had a brief fashion called New Image Painting. Susan Rothenberg and others were rebelling against the hegemony of abstraction, but also against the dispersal of art into earthworks, performance, and new media. It provided a New York-based alternative to German and Italian Neo-Expressionism. It foretold,

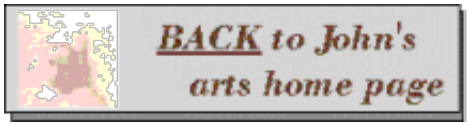
people said, a return to painting. In retrospect, it marked instead a kind of calm before the postmodern storm.

New Image Painting preferred imagery to interpretation, subjectivity to formal structures, painting to experimental media, and pleasure to confrontation. In all these ways, it paralleled another moment of transformation. Around 1940, what would acquire the name Abstract Expressionism still had little to do with abstraction. As a wave of émigrés hit New York, the legacies of Cubism, Expressionism, Dada, and American realism morphed together into Surrealism.

By coincidence, New York is also hosting retrospectives of Max Ernst and of American Surrealism. At P.S. 1, I thought of Ernst's instinctive optimism and sensuality, despite his struggle to escape Europe. I thought of his own love of forest scenes. I thought of how a young Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, or Adolph Gottlieb chose to represent the unconscious with an invented hieroglyphics rather than their later mute expanse. I thought of how many others preferred a personal response—in twisting torsos, wide-eyed faces, and empty cities—to more explicit documentation of the horrors of war. The home page for "Surrealism USA" at the National Academy Museum even shows hands moving through a picture frame, like Issenstein's.

One could call "Greater New York" a New New Image Painting or a new American Surrealism, desire truly unbound—or bound forever to conspicuous consumption. Perhaps it makes sense as the natural successor to the neo-Dada of Jeff Koons and the Young British Artists. Can another storm still break loose? I better come back in another five years to find out, if I dare.

I have not given up on Long Island City, even after the departure of MOMA QNS and even (perhaps especially) if the Olympic Village never materializes—certainly not as long as P.S. 1 has Alanna Heiss's guidance. I can imagine it as a way for MOMA and the SculptureCenter to shout at each other from facing rooftop installations. I can imagine it a way for MOMA and the Museum of African Art to pull off a more stimulating debate about "primitivism" than "Art of a Continent" a few years back at the Guggenheim. For now, as with each competing version of today's art fairs, "Greater New York" defines not just a style or a commentary on art now, but also how an art institution imagines its role. P.S. 1 so loves images because it sees five years of emerging artists as an effervescence of the imagination, and it sees itself as their canvas. Whether a vision of New York art will emerge as well may depend on more than any museum can accomplish.

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*"Greater New York 2005" ran at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center through September 26, 2005. The Max Ernst retrospective ran at The Metropolitan Museum of Art through July 10, and "Surrealism USA" ran at the National Academy Museum through May 8. Peter Caine's earlier show of animatronic sculpture, "Domo Arigato, Mr. Roboto," ran at Jack the Pelican through March 27.*