“The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World”
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Lloyd Wise

THE PAST IS NEVER DEAD—it’s only a click away. And the artists in “The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World” immerse themselves in a networked, wired-up history that’s as promiscuously accessible as it is screen-deep. Contemporary culture, claims the show’s curator, Laura Hoptman, is defined by the compulsion to synthesize disparate historical tropes. Ergo, for artists today, movements such as ABEx, Minimalism, Constructivism, Fauvism, and De Stijl are no longer landmark steps along modernism’s teleological progression, but tools in a toolbar or colors in a palette. The operative approach is that of a “commissariat of boundless information,” per her catalogue essay, “a picking and choosing of elements of the past to resolve a problem or a task at hand.”

This is presented as a good thing—and it may very well be. Yet the precursors for such art have a dark side: The notion of atemporality at play here, borrowed from the work of science-fiction author William Gibson, is linked to a state of uncertainty and risk. Gibson explored the idea in his paranoid post-9/11 novel Pattern Recognition (2003), in which the heroine, Cayce Pollard, freelances as a “coolhunter,” with a preternatural ability to divine what will be trending in a volatile, recombinant consumer culture where novelty is no guarantee of What’s Next. “Fully imagined cultural futures were the luxury of another day, one in which ‘now’ was of some greater duration,” says Pollard’s client Hubertus Bigend. “Things can change so abruptly, so violently, so profoundly, that futures like our grandparents’ have insufficient ‘now’ to stand on.” Atemporal painting, then, is as much a happy outcome of the late twentieth century’s deconstruction of modernist myths of progress as it is by-product of the real-world conditions of our panicked, hyperconnected present. The aesthetic of the age of precarity is inevitably marked by a reluctance to dream about the future and a concomitant drive to frenetically recycle the past.

Precisely how atemporality differs from theories of postmodernism (and the painterly styles attached to them) is one of the first questions raised by this exhibition’s premise, and Hoptman, in her essay, goes to considerable lengths to distinguish the show’s seventeen artists from the bicourletes of yore. Indeed, the art on view offers little of the smug irony and slick sensationalism of, say, the International With Monumental Stable; but the decade of junk bonds and neo-geo heralded more than the death of the author, of course, just as the Pictures artists weren’t the only ones we called po-mo. At times, the atemporal can even seem like a more inclusive version of neo-expressionism. At first, Nicole Eisenman’s Whatever Guy, 2009; Gay Capitalist, 2011; and Gay Racer, 2011, appear to mock that very movement; these brushy, Pallad portraits festooned with photos of African statues are surely having some fun at the expense of the grandiose dulness of a Julian Schnabel or a Sandro Chia by parodifying those artists’ own cynical appropriation of the midcentury ideals of unbridled artistic subjectivity and primitivist immediacy. Yet it’s hard to deny that this appropriation of appropriation, this parody of pastiche, can feel a little bit tenuous, a bit stressed out, or that the fragile edifice of second-order irony risks collapsing into yet another simulacral variant of the thing itself. Writing on the neo-expressionists in 1981, artist-critic Thomas Lawson sounds as though he could be discussing the artists here: “Appropriation becomes ceremonial, an accommodation in which collage is understood not as a disruptive agent . . . but as a machine to foster unlimited growth.” For Lawson, though, this unlimited growth was bad.

Still, as “The Forever Now” makes abundantly clear, the endless proliferations of our anxiety-laden moment have yielded plenty of powerful work that does go beyond the pictorial cul-de-sac of the Less Than Zero generation, with highlights ranging from Michaela Eichwald’s explosively dark abstractions to Joe Bradley’s atavistic glyphs. And if the resurrection of 1960s-era sculptural deconstruction of “painting” is a box that needs ticking, it’s hard to imagine anyone more perfect to fill it than Dianna Molzan. The Los Angeles–based artist’s sense of kissing, coruscated color and calibrated coyness give shape to winking enigmas of desire, reanimating the endgames of Manzoni and Ryman to strange and mysterious effect.

If one artist is representative of the show, it is Josh Smith, who cranks out paintings in a wide range of antithetical styles at a dizzying pace, stirring up an archaichal flurry of pure and multifarious production. As manifest in Smith’s practice, this is compelling—at once imitating and infiltrating the visual glut of our moment. Yet as a curatorial model, it has pitfalls. “The Forever Now” is scattershot, its purposeful inclusiveness resulting in vibrancy but also incoherence. The artists are each represented by a small handful of works, arranged like so many art-fair booths. There is a sense that the intent was to include the broadest range of practices possible, and a clear narrative thread has been lost; the show seems hard-pressed to account for the elusive cool. And so it points to a familiar difficulty: that of establishing aesthetic criteria in an age of cultural pluralism.

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Lloyd Wise is an Associate Editor of Artforum.