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Art in Review

By Roberta Smith

## John Bock

"In the Shadow of the Maggot"

Anton Kern Gallery  
532 West 20th Street, Chelsea  
Through August 12

The German multimedia wizard John Bock clearly enjoys shifting gears. But his latest New York solo show, while characteristically ambitious, seems to shift largely into reverse. Its centerpiece, a 74-minute silent DVD titled "In the Shadow of the Maggot," is a dazzling feat of stylistic quotation, appropriation and reprise that lacks Mr. Bock's usual forward momentum. It's a little as if a painter of messy, wildly improvisational and innovative canvases had suddenly taken up a meticulous historically savvy representational style that places an uncharacteristic emphasis on craft and bravura technique.

This approach yields an exquisite black-and-white film with touches of color screened in a small black-box theater that also displays some of the handmade props and costumes featured in it. The work draws heavily on the silent-movie era, from its lively hand-painted black-and-white sets, exaggerated acting and makeup, Satie-esque musical accompaniment, dialogue cards and good-versus-evil plot (more black and white). The cultural chestnuts evoked include "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari," "Nosferatu," early Frankenstein films and the brittle, hectic artifice of silent films in general. At certain moments you may also be reminded of German Expressionism, Kurt Schwitters's "Merzbau" environments, the self-destructive machine sculptures of Jean Tinguely and, in an extended forest scene, of Jackson Pollock's early, slightly tone-deaf painting "Mural."

The plot involves a mad scientist attempting to create life, an even madder evil priest, played with charismatic flamboyance by Mr. Bock, as well as the scientist's blond naïf of a wife and the handsome automaton produced by his laboratory experiments. There are some wonderful visual moments, an excess of violence (most of it inflicted by Mr. Bock's hysterical priest upon the film's one female character) and a few good jokes, at least in translation, including the wild-eyed priest announcing, "My calling is calling," before rushing off to murder the automaton. But ultimately "In the Shadow of the Maggot" is a somewhat tedious exercise in nostalgia and revved-up mimicry. Mr. Bock has built on, and intensified, the silent-movie style, imbuing it with occasional self-conscious humor. But, uncharacteristically, he hasn't added enough to make it feel new. Instead he has revealed his previously unseen revivalist side, possibly getting something out of his system.

ROBERTA SMITH



A still from John Bock's "In the Shadow of the Maggot," being shown at the Anton Kern Gallery.