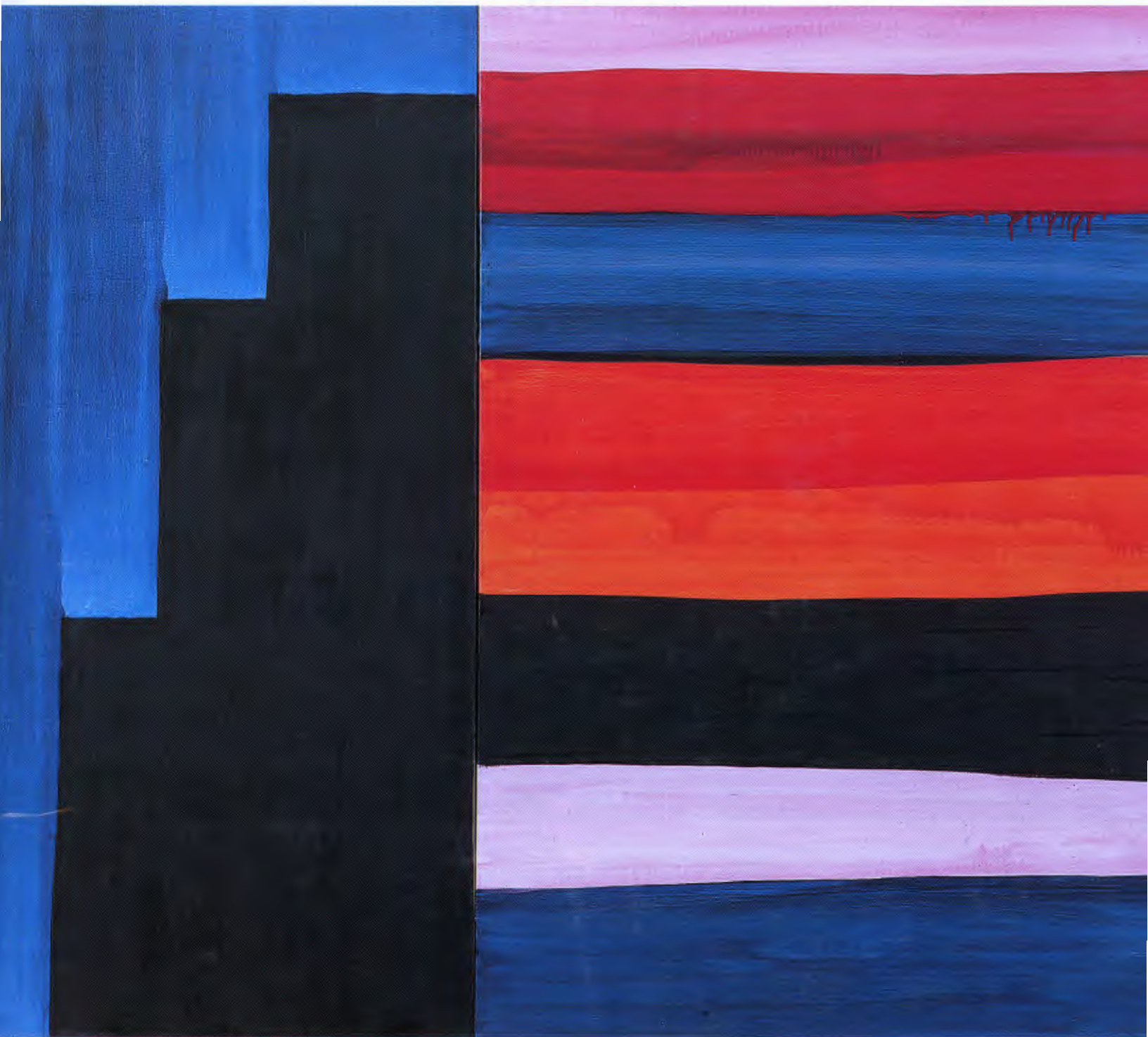


Modern Art

Sam Hunter John Jacobus Daniel Wheeler



Painting Sculpture Architecture

Third Revised Edition

The Nineties: Art for the Millennium

24

The 1990s produced no new art movement coherent enough to gain a title, leaving Neo-Geo, which had surfaced in 1986, to serve as the last of the many “isms” coined during the 20th century. The decade, however, saw the arrival of many promising young talents as well as the full emergence of important older ones. And whatever their ages, the artists who won critical attention tended, for the most part, to work in backlash reaction to the perceived excesses of the 1980s, now viewed as a period whose vulgar, over-hyped market turned art into a commodity and artists into globe-trotting celebrities. This frenzied scene had survived the stock market crash of late 1987, only for the art market itself to plummet two years later, almost like a prelude to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall, bringing an abrupt end to the Cold War, on New Year’s Eve 1989. Politically, the world began the last decade of the old century a freer, more hopeful place than it had been in generations, but in the specialized realm of contemporary art, a new sobriety quickly took hold. As galleries began to close all over SoHo and in other art centers of the world, it became all too clear that straitened, post-crash economics, as well as the ongoing tragedy of AIDS, would provide an opportunity for nothing so much as a thorough reconsideration of what art should be and what it should be for.

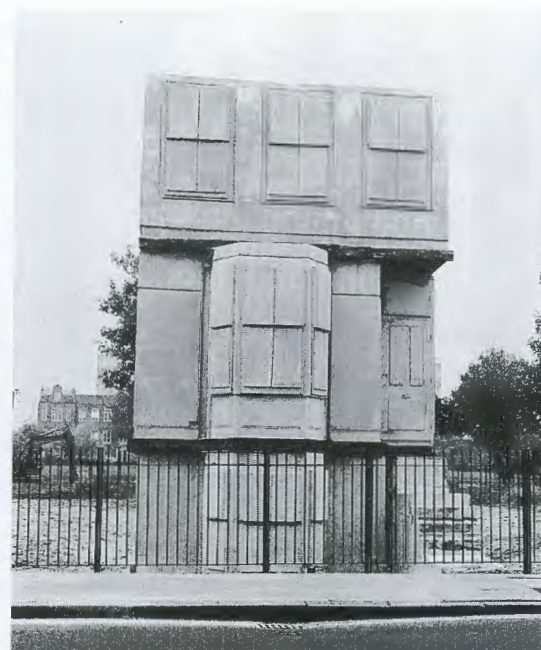
In the absence of a commanding new style, pluralism on a scale not seen since the 1970s would prevail throughout the waning years of the second millennium, a time, like T.S. Eliot’s April, for “mixing memory and desire.” Indeed, the nineties proved nostalgically hospitable to almost every medium, process, and tactic essayed in the course of the 20th century, particularly the more subversive ones innovated decades earlier by Marcel Duchamp or the Surrealists and then revived by the Conceptualists in the late sixties. Yet painting too would flourish, figurative as well as abstract, much of the new work unabashedly committed to Old Masterish standards of beauty and facture (Fig. 799). It prospered, moreover, despite the death sen-

tences still regularly pronounced upon the art by those believing it too elitist and decadent—too easily co-opted by the market—to retain its aesthetic integrity. As this suggests, attitudes, if not style, would dominate the *fin de siècle*, continuing a trend already very much present since the demise, in the late 1960s, of modernist formalism. These, in turn, were to dictate a preferred range of strategies, beginning with performance, photography, film or video, text, and collage or assemblage. Often, particularly in the first half of the decade, they could all be found mixed together in those *Gesamtkunstwerke* known as installations, a hybrid or multimedia genre already well advanced in the art of Jenny Holzer and Ilya Kabakov, seen in the last chapter (Figs. 797, 798).

Come the nineties, installation/performance art would find one of its most admired practitioners in Ann Hamilton (1956—), a native and resident of Columbus, Ohio. In essence, her work comprises poetic, visually striking combinations of unusual objects or stuffs, communal labor, transformed environment, and the ongoing presence of a woman or man engaged in some quiet, ritualistic task, like sewing or knitting. Each project is site-specific, temporary, and created with a singular set of materials, such as a ship-length cradle of votive candles, shiny copper coins used as floor tiles laid in a bed of golden honey, or a huge stack of obsolete patent books. Trained as a child in needlework, Hamilton majored in weaving at the University of Kansas, after which she studied sculpture at the Yale School of Art. For the Dia Center in New York City, Hamilton orchestrated one of her boldest installations, taking advantage of a vast, floor-through space maintained in a onetime factory building near the Hudson River (Fig. 800). The very title of the piece, *Tropos*, a Greek word meaning “turn,” suggests the tropic or metaphoric purpose of the Hamilton enterprise. On this occasion it required importing 3,000 pounds of long hair—black, brown, and blond—groomed from horses in China and then spreading it over the entire



799. Elizabeth Peyton. *Piotr*. 1996. Oil on canvas, 3'2" x 7'4". Courtesy Gavin Brown Enterprise, New York.



floor to create the effect of a gently roiled sea giving off a faint but sweet, gamy odor. This immense, pelt-like carpet—so luxuriously thick that visitors stumbled as they explored the strange site—had been made by sewing the horsehair into lengths of fabric, a job undertaken at the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia, following which students, friendly volunteers, and Dia staffers stitched or glued the shaggy lengths together. In the meantime, the brick walls of the space had been stripped and painted white and the clear panes in the windows replaced with opaque glass. While this evoked the site's industrial past, it also made the urban world outside seem more removed and the interior more present, with its aromas and sounds correspondingly heightened. Mingled with the whiff of horsehair was a slightly ominous, acrid smell, traceable to a small table near a far corner of the floor. Here a lone person sat burning away every line in a book with a wood-etching instrument. If this implied the elusiveness of language or the difficulty of communicating, so did the low, muffled sound of a recorded voice, the voice of a man suffering from aphasia. Yet Hamilton always approaches her art as a community effort, with her collaborators working together as did the quilting bees of old. This alone would invest *Tropos* with a feminist subtext, as would the textual effacement, the slow process of "unwriting the book of culture," as Leslie Camhi phrased it. Along with loss, however, there was also memory in *Tropos*, recalling not only the industrial, communal past but also the preindustrial, even archaic world, all of which nourish the way human beings assume their mature identities.

Nothing in the nineties unleashed more universal discussion of what art should be or for than *House* (Fig. 801), a public monument so controversial that on the same day in 1995 its creator, Rachel Whiteread (1963—), was declared both the best and the worst sculptor in Great Britain. On the positive side, Whiteread won the Turner Prize, the most prestigious award available to a young British artist; meanwhile, she also received \$60,000 in cash, twice the money conveyed by the Turner Prize, from the K Foundation, created by a pair of onetime rock stars known for their counter-cultural antics. Determined that the "anti-Turner Award" be accepted, the K Foundation threatened to burn the prize money on the steps of the Tate Gallery unless the artist accepted it. She did, but only for distribution to Shelter, an organization for homeless people, as well to several needy young artists. As for the prize-winning *House*, Whiteread had created it by spray-casting in steel-reinforced con-

above left: 800. Ann Hamilton. *Tropos*. 1993–94. Site-specific installation. Dia Center for the Arts, New York.

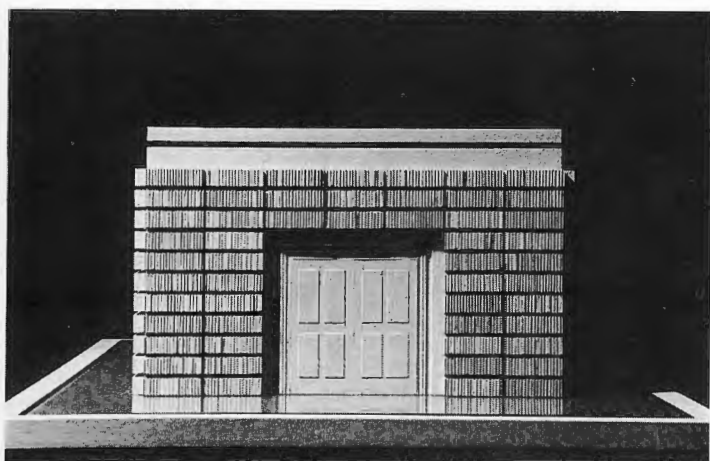
above right: 801. Rachel Whiteread. *House*. 1993. Spray-cast steel-reinforced concrete. London project sponsored by Artangel Trust. Courtesy Luhring Augustine, New York.

opposite top: 802. Rachel Whiteread. *Model for the Judenplatz Wien Monument and Memorial Site*. 1996. Height c. 10'. Courtesy Luhring Augustine, New York.

opposite above: 803. Guy Limone. *In 1995, 1,170 People Were Killed in New York City* (detail). 1996. 1,170 plastic figures and metal shelf. Courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun, New York.

crete the interior of a modest row dwelling in Bow, a run-down, working-class neighborhood in the East End of London. Once the brick shell of the narrow, three-story structure had been removed, along with other houses on the lot, the cast of the "negative" space remained, like a ghostly monument to the generations of family life that had unfolded in the old Victorian residence. Truly, things seemed to have been turned inside out, not only structurally but also culturally, with one critic proclaiming the work a masterpiece and the local population calling it an eyesore. As in the case of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* in New York (Fig. 719), local choice prevailed, causing the sculpture to be demolished, after a brief delay but consistent with the original plan to install a park.

Like Serra, Bruce Nauman, and others before her, yet with more impressive results, Whiteread seeks out and casts—in plaster, rubber, resign, wax, or concrete—not forms but the spaces around them, particularly the ignored ones, such as the underside of a chair or the void behind shelved books. The latter has become an important theme in Whiteread's work, thanks in part to a commission for a Holocaust monument in Vienna's ancient Judenplatz (Fig. 802). Here too a Whiteread sculpture—a kind of inside-out library—has become a subject of open dispute, this time less for the quality or character of the form than for the terrible history embodied in the memorial. When completed, the Viennese project will comprise a closed, windowless double cube of a building, about 12 feet high and 33 feet long, with a flat roof, a plain parapet, and a base inscribed with the names of towns near which Jews were mass-murdered during World War II. The concrete walls are to be textured with the cast imprint of books packed together in blocky, serried ranks on stacked shelves with their spines facing inwards, leaving the vertical, striated edges of pages and bindings to face outwards.



Not only would this library-without-walls commemorate “the people of the book,” lost during the Nazis’ infamous “final solution,” but it would also project towards the ambient world, interacting with it as a formidable presence “uncannily” resonant with absence, as Sigmund Freud, a Viennese Jew, might characterize the effect. In purely aesthetic terms, the richly haptic, bunker-like library has been likened to Minimalism, Constructivism, or even Brutalism humanized and invested with Expressionist feeling.

Alternative approaches, deemed marginal to such mainstream forms as painting and sculpture, held particular appeal for artists, critics, and curators committed to art as social critique or advocacy. To these reformers, art should be a vehicle for leveling hierarchies, breaking down barriers, and remapping culture so as to integrate the margins more equitably with the center. By 1990 the kind of critique pursued by artists obsessed with language and the mass media—John Baldessari, Cindy Sherman, Katharina Fritsch, and Jenny Holzer, among others—had become so common as to forfeit its power to persuade, especially younger artists with other problems on their minds. Deconstruction, espoused by the likes of Hans Haacke, Barbara Kruger, and Sherry Levine, lost its seductiveness as well. After the fall of the Soviet Union, with its vast disinformation machine, the neo-Marxist notion, articulated by the French intellectual Jean Baudrillard, that a society forever bombarded by propaganda or the “spectacle” of untrammelled consumerism would prove too passive to distinguish between media imagery and reality struck many as implausible. Theory in general came to seem academic and more restrictive than liberating, especially after the appropriation strategy it had legitimated, and seen to full effect in the last chapter, ran afoul of court decisions in favor of plaintiffs charging artists with copyright infringement. Less and less, after 1990, would

such revered names as Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan be cited as authority for whatever happened in art or criticism.

More relevant for the early part of the nineties were so-called “quality-of-life” issues, concerns that particularly motivated artists involved with feminism, multiculturalism, gay liberation, and the environment. While the global economy began to revive before the end of 1990, it left the art world behind, which made activist artists all the more sensitive to the pathological aspects of life, to problems of race, class, and gender, to political and ecological terrorism, the population explosion, homelessness, drug abuse, urban decay, genocide, and such hot wars as those in the Persian Gulf and the Balkans. Guy Limone (1958—), a Marseilles-based Conceptualist, addresses the woes, as well as absurdities, of the day with a degree of wit and charm rare in activist art. His approach is to transform dry statistics into miniature dramas with titles like *Two Percent of the French Cannot Stand Marguerite Duras*, staged with such commonplace items as toy figures, lengths of string, vinyl tiles, fluorescent tubes, snapshots, and pictures clipped from magazines. For a solo show in New York, Limone crunched some local numbers and then reimagined them as a long, narrow shelf so densely populated with tiny, red-painted figures that even from a brief distance the installation resolved in the eye as a thin red line stretched the full length of the



804.
Robert Mapplethorpe.
Ajito. 1981. Unique
gelatin silver print,
40 x 30". Collection
Lois and Bruce Berry.

wall (Fig. 803). Up close the figures proved to be delightfully individualized and quite animated—pushing prams, riding motorbikes, running up flags, fishing from the edge of the shelf, swinging from below it, playing stickball, mugging a passerby. Viewers’ chuckles soon turned to shock, however, once they read the title: *In 1995, 1,170 People Were Killed in New York City*. Clearly, this was the number of Lilliputians on the shelf, which meant that their beautiful red color signified blood, just as its uniform application symbolized their erasure, their abstraction from life into statistics.

In 1990 the art world found itself galvanized by an event that seemed to raise the spectre of censorship and abridged freedom of expression. What became a cause célèbre erupted when Dennis Barrie, director of the Cincinnati Art Center, was indicted for mounting a retrospective exhibition devoted to the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, an artist widely acclaimed, as well as frequently denounced, for his sleek, sculptural images of nude men, usually black and sometimes in homoerotic situations, and rather disarming photographs of children with their privates unself-consciously exposed (Fig. 804). Within this context, even the beau-

tiful, close-up views of single flowers assumed an air of coldly elegant, perverse sexuality, leaving the entire Mapplethorpe oeuvre open to charges of pornography. They were not long in coming after Washington's Corcoran Gallery, in 1989, canceled the same show, fearing the wrath of conservative members of Congress eager to prevent a reauthorization of the National Endowment for the Arts, which had partially funded the Mapplethorpe retrospective. Congress did, in fact, pass an unrelated bill amended, by Senator Jesse Helms, so as to prohibit the use of public money to "promote, disseminate, or produce obscene or indecent materials." Barrie, when brought to trial, was acquitted, but the struggle to save the NEA and the debate over censorship continued virtually to the end of the decade. Several artists—Karen Finley, Tim Miller, Holly Hughes, and John Fleck ("the NEA 4")—sued the agency, claiming the "decency" provision imposed upon the grant-making process violated their First Amendment rights. In 1998, however, the Supreme Court found no evidence that the law had suppressed freedom of expression. With this, Congress reauthorized and re-funded, somewhat more generously than anticipated, the long-beleaguered NEA, which, however, had now lost its power to support the creative efforts of individual artists. And this despite the fact that of the near 100,000 grants made by the agency since its inception in 1965, only a handful—some twenty odd—had triggered public controversy. One of these was Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, the color photograph of a small plastic crucifix submerged in a glass jar containing the

artist's own urine. While Mapplethorpe's homoerotic imagery seemed to undermine family values, the Serrano work, which succeeded in making the cheap little icon look curiously monumental and radiant, appeared to be a bigoted affront to Christian sensibilities.

Meanwhile, the censorship fray spread to Europe, where Gran Fury, a gay-activist organization, mounted billboard-like works at the 1990 Venice Biennale attacking the Roman Catholic Church for its condemnation of homosexual and safe-sex practices. One wall, for instance, featured an erect penis together with such statements as "Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head." This time it was Italian obscenity laws that kicked in, shutting down the Gran Fury venue, at least for a while. What the Gran Fury project reflected was a growing preoccupation, in art communities everywhere, with so-called "identity politics" and with the body as the locus for such identity—gender, sexual orientation, race, class, age, and/or, alas, disease. In this area of concern, few contemporary artists have worked more consistently or eloquently than Kiki Smith (1954—), who, though largely self-trained, springs from a family of artists,

below left: 805. Kiki Smith. *Virgin Mary*. 1993. Bronze with silver inlay; 5'7 1/2" x 2'2" x 1'2 1/2". © Kiki Smith. Private collection. Courtesy the artist and PaceWildenstein, New York.

below center: 806. Stephan Balkenhol. *Big Man in Grey Shirt and Black Trousers*. 1999. Linden wood, 8'4" x 2'7" x 1'5". Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.

right: 807. Adrian Piper. *Cornered*. 1988. Video, table, lighting, birth certificates, and videotape. Courtesy John Weber Gallery, New York.

below right: 808. Glenn Ligon. *Untitled (I Do Not Always Feel Colored)*. 1990. Oilstick and gesso on panel, 6'8" x 2'6 1/16" x 1'1/2". Whitney Museum of American Art. Promised gift of the Bohen Foundation in honor of Tom Armstrong.



claimed him once he realized that “too much of my life was left out when I walked into the studio.” That life involved the experience of a black man in a white society who also happened to be gay, which made Ligon feel himself an outsider twice over. An avid reader given to frequent re-examination of favorite texts, he has sought to explore and assert his own identity through “found language” appropriated from the writings of Rita Dove, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, James Baldwin, Jean Genet, and Mary Shelley, among others. The result is elegantly abstract but also concrete, its special allure derived significantly from the working process developed by the artist. Beginning at the top of the field, Ligon reuses the stencil and, letter by letter, repeats the chosen phrase (“I am somebody”; “I feel most colored when I stand against a sharp white background”; “I remember the very day that I became colored”) until the paint clots and smudges as the lines descend towards the bottom. Gradually, the simple black-and-white contrast mutates into a smoky haze of variable gray and the words into semi-legibility. As the critic Roberta Smith wrote in 1991, “the accumulating grays seem appropriate for an artist who says he’s ‘not interested in a clear pro or con’.” The deep humanity of Ligon’s art emanates even from the format, its dimensions those of an architectural member scaled to accommodate the human frame.

As the Argentine-born grandson of Jewish immigrants from Ukraine, Guillermo Kuitca (1961—) has long pondered such issues



above: 810.

Yasumasa Morimura.
Portrait (Futago).
1988. Cibachrome
(edition of 5),
6'10³/₄" x 9'10".
Courtesy Luhring
Augustine, New York.

left: 811.

Yayoi Kusama.
Cosmic Door. 1995.
Acrylic on canvas,
46³/₈" x 35⁷/₈".
© Yayoi Kusama.
Courtesy Robert Miller
Gallery, New York.

right: 812.

Yayoi Kusama.
Infinity Net Painting,
Accumulation #2,
Macaroni Floor,
and Kusama. 1966.
© Yayoi Kusama.
Courtesy Robert Miller
Gallery, New York.

as identity and place, the “other” and “elsewhere,” always taking a somewhat Surrealist approach, thanks in part to his mother, a prominent psychoanalyst in Buenos Aires (Fig. 809). Further major influences include the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges and the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, both known for their freely associated mixtures of fact and fantasy. About Borges, Kuitca has said: “The idea of universality in Borges is so precise, so clear. A basic stance of Borges is to say that one man is another man, one place is another place, the idea that no matter what you do, you are doing everything. I find that very liberating.” A prodigy, Kuitca began painting seriously at the age of six and had his first commercial exhibition when he was thirteen. Today he is best known for his paintings layered with road maps, charts, or blueprints for cities, houses, small apartments, and even cemeteries, all of them specific in origin but so modified as to become heightened metaphors—geographical



nowheres that also connote a spiritual everywhere. For the *Tablada Suite* Kuitca appropriated a map of the Jewish cemetery located in Tablada, a suburb of Buenos Aires, but then removed many of the identifying labels, such as one for a Holocaust memorial, projected the overall image on a heroic scale, and called the picture *Untitled*, the better to underscore its abstract quality. The canvas thus becomes a delicately executed field painting, as evanescent as an Agnes Martin grid, but haunted by an ambiguous though unmistakable sense of loss and longing. Inspired by Kahlo, Kuitca has sometimes allowed his lines to mutate into thorns or bones, motifs identified throughout Latin America with Christian martyrdom. In the work seen here, he used bones to trace out, on a dark ground, the pattern of a city some may identify as San Francisco, a metropolis with a gay population decimated by AIDS. Given this association, the network of urban arteries becomes a symbol for the arterial system within the human body, martyred by incurable malady. Increasingly, Kuitca has dedicated himself to charting volatile places where the personal and the public collide and struggle for meaning.

The hothouse world of gender and identity politics produced no more exotic a flower than Yasumasa Morimura (1951—), often viewed as Japan’s answer to Cindy Sherman. Morimura, in other words, is a photographer/performance artist who stars himself in restaged versions of famous paintings, works for which he too has made the costumes and props, designed the makeup, set the camera, timed it, and then posed for the shot. But whereas Sherman re-inter-

prets historic genres or styles—old movie stills, Rembrandtesque portraiture, illustrations of Grimm fairy tales—Morimura mimics specific masterpieces, such as Manet's *Olympia* (Fig. 810). And however populous the scene, Morimura performs every role himself, including both *Olympia* and her black maid, a feat made possible by his mastery of computer technology, which allows him to splice the figures into the background of the original painting. Although best known perhaps for his quotations and deconstructions of key images from Western art history, Morimura has also transformed himself, wittily, into subjects familiar in Japanese painting, among them fish, birds, and vegetables. Another series, entitled *The Sickness Unto Beauty—Self-Portrait as Actress*, finds Morimura assuming the likenesses of great film stars in their most famous roles—Marlene Dietrich as the Blue Angel, Vivien Leigh as Scarlett O'Hara, Audrey Hepburn as Holly Golightly in Givenchy's "little black dress." Yet, the precision and craft involved in these performances, as well as the clear artificiality of the images, owe much to Japanese traditions, despite the artist's manifest obsession with Western culture. One has only to think of the Kabuki *onnagata*, or female impersonators, whose white, mask-like makeup and stylized gestures signal the feigned or theatrical nature of what is being presented. So too Morimura never entirely disappears into the characters he plays, however convincing the initial impression, a fact he confirms by calling the actress pictures "self-portraits." With stunning imagination and technical aplomb, Morimura appears to comment on the many ironies inherent in the cross-currents of an increasingly globalized culture, deeply affecting even the insular world of Japan.

Coincident with the concern for identity, authenticity, and the other, "outsider art" sparked more interest during the nineties than at any time since Dubuffet and his fascination with the art of the insane (*l'art brut*). Today outsider art has come to mean art made by untutored individuals compulsively driven to objectify some inner, often mad, but always idiosyncratic vision. A famous outsider already seen in this book is Henri Rousseau (Fig. 278), the French *naïf* viewed by the Surrealists as a forerunner of their own visionary art. Similarly, multiculturalists discovered a forerunner of their own, Yayoi Kusama (1929—), a Japanese artist who had spent a lifetime precariously balanced between active involvement with mainstream avant-gardism and her status as a genuine outsider, self-confined to a private psychiatric hospital while feverishly engaged in artistic projects as a means to cope with mental disorder. At a very young age, Kusama had defied the conventions of her country in order to become an artist, impelled by a sense that artistic creativity would help her keep at bay the terrifying hallucinations she had suffered throughout childhood. One of these came when, after staring at a tablecloth decorated with red flowers, she looked up and "saw the same pattern covering the ceiling, the windows, and the walls, and finally all over the room, my body and the universe. I felt as if I had begun to self-obliterate . . . and be reduced to nothingness." In another, she sensed herself being enveloped in "a thin silk-like grayish colored veil." On the day this happened, Kusama went on, "people receded far away from me and looked small." Out of these nightmarish visions the artist forged the motifs of her strongest work, beginning with the Infinity Nets, large-format paintings with all-over, interlocking patterns of white arcs on a white ground (Fig. 811). First exhibited in New York in 1959, the pictures brought Kusama the interest and friendship of Donald Judd and Frank Stella, then in the process of formulating what would be known as Minimalism. Although reductive in form, relative to Abstract Expressionism, the Infinity Nets, like the rest of Kusama's art, would never evince the cool, seemingly impersonal quality of true Minimalism. Even before Warhol made his rubber-stamp pictures, Kusama fashioned collage paintings from such banal materials as airmail stickers, overlapped in rows that move across the canvas in waves rather like those of the Infinity Nets. In 1962 she turned to

sculpture, appropriating all manner of everyday items—chairs, tables, stepladders, a rowboat, a sofa—and covering every inch of their surfaces with hundreds of plump, cotton-stuffed sacs or pods, ranging in length from three to twelve inches. It was during the same year, if somewhat later, that Claes Oldenburg, another Kusama friend, would make his first soft sculptures from sewn and stuffed materials. In her humorous, porcupine pieces, Kusama claimed to have projected her obsessions with "sex and food." Nowhere does this seem more ripe with period charm than in a photograph for which Kusama, nude but for highheel pumps, lounged face down in an environment burgeoning with polkadots and handmade phalluses, the former covering even the artist's bare back (Fig. 812).

In 1972 Kusama returned to Japan, where she committed herself voluntarily and went on with her creative life, writing by night and making art by day. Often the themes are continuous with those of her earlier work, including polkadots and undulant veils (Fig. 811). Gradually, Kusama earned the respect of her countrymen, who canonized her in 1993 with a one-person show at the Venice Biennale. Called "the greatest comeback story of the nineties," Kusama moved



813. Nan Goldin. *At the Bar: Toon, C, and So, Bangkok*. 1992. Cibachrome print, 30 x 40". Courtesy the artist.

Calvin Tomkins to write: "It's been a gutsy performance, her refusal to self-obliterate, and the work bears that out."

Nan Goldin (1953—), another instinctive rebel, left home at thirteen and has spent the rest of her life seeking the youthful ideal of an alternative family, a colorful tribe of bohemian friends who together create a society more sympathetic than that of their bourgeois, judgmental parents. The better to hold on to this surrogate clan, Goldin has never ceased to capture it on film (Fig. 813), a compulsion that began during her adolescent days at a free, hippie-type school in Massachusetts. By the age of eighteen she was taking pictures seriously, motivated by a new-found ambition to become a fashion photographer. This, in turn, had been quickened by the milieu in which Goldin found herself living, the world of fashion-conscious drag queens in downtown Boston. At first drawn to the early films of Warhol and Fellini, as well as to the fashion photographers Guy Bourdin and Helmut Newton, Goldin gradually discovered art photography while studying at the New England School of Photography and the Museum of Fine Arts School in Boston. For rich subject matter, she had only to focus on the exotically clad denizens about her, whom she saw as a "third gender," people who had "stepped out of the circle," thereby emancipating themselves from "gender dysphoria." Her desire, Goldin told the critic/painter Stephen Westfall, was "to kind of glorify [the queens] because I

really admire people who re-create themselves and who manifest their fantasies publicly." Goldin succeeded, in part because she also joined wholeheartedly in the doings of her chosen, sexually diverse ambiance, photographing from within, even to the point of finding herself a battered woman in need of detoxification. The emotional immediacy of the resulting pictures first came to general attention in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, a sweeping, diaristic slide-show (800 images in 45 minutes!) with taped music—rock, reggae, blues, opera—that had its debut in 1979 at the Mudd Club in New York's SoHo district. Here, in unforgettable combination, were the messy content and meticulous form that are the hallmarks of Goldin's art. The first consists of fetchingly punk youth—artists, writers, poets, thrill-seekers at their revels or on the nod—and the latter of "porno-lurid" colors—saturated reds, greens, bilious yellows—that snap into place with picture-puzzle perfection. By 1986, when *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* appeared in book form, the narrative had assumed a tragic dimension, reflecting the cruel impact of AIDS on the very community Goldin had made her own. From the East Village and Times Square setting of *The Ballad*, Goldin, in the nineties, has moved on to the world stage—Berlin, London, Tokyo—without ever abandoning her romantic, counter-cultural stance, as the work seen here discloses. By making herself an active participant in the story, Goldin neutralizes charges of voyeurism and exploitation. Not for this artist the ironic, distancing strategies of post-modernism, about which she once said: "I have the same aversion to post-modern theory as I did to technology. I don't think either of them has anything to do with the creative process."

Nor did the prodigious David Wojnarowicz (1954–92) need post-modern irony as a pretext for art, fueled as his creative instincts were by an autobiography so breath-stopping that bare facts utterly trumped the kind of fantasy cherished by Nan Goldin's cross-dressers. Not only a gay man but also an inspired sensualist, Wojnarowicz understood and accepted his sexual identity at a very early age, even turning his first trick as a child prostitute while still a nine-year-old playing in Central Park. Brutalized by his drunken, suicidal father, the boy had fled New Jersey for life with his divorced mother and two sisters in Hell's Kitchen, an old Irish slum close by Times Square and the Hudson River waterfront, both of them cruising grounds for New York City's rough trade. Encouraged by his mother to draw and paint, Wojnarowicz attended the prestigious High School of Music and Art, where he earned lunch money by rendering his classmates' lubricious reveries in quick sketches. At sixteen, however, he dropped out and went his own, highly independent way, hustling and thieving, yet agonized by his sense of himself as a social outcast. Fortunately, Wojnarowicz was also driven to project his anger into confessional drawings and journals of searing candor, "reveal[ing] everything that people are pressured not

to reveal," as he traveled, Beat-style, around the United States and Europe. Like many of his generation—Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, Jean Michel Basquiat, Nan Goldin—Wojnarowicz soon gravitated towards the East Village, from which base he shot Super-8 films of abandoned warehouses, stenciled images of burning children on gutted buildings, and joined a "post-punk" noise band. Identifying with Arthur Rimbaud, the great *poète maudit* of late-19th-century France, he had a lover don a Rimbaud mask and pose for photographs shot at various sites in New York City, as if to say: "We are everywhere." By the mid-1980s, Wojnarowicz had become an East Village legend, for his bold activism but also for his increasingly powerful paintings—brooding, mortality-obsessed works marked by collage-like arrangements packed with the most disparate, metaphorically potent imagery (Fig. 814). The iconography, micro-managed and painted with a labor-intensive, almost *naïf* touch, ran to flaming houses, volcanic eruptions, sprinting soldiers, pornographic stills, scientific illustrations, bits of animal or vegetal nature, maps, and dollar bills. Frequently it was laced with words.

A compulsive writer in the free-associative yet lucid manner of Jack Kerouac, Wojnarowicz is today admired perhaps even more for his texts than for his visual art. His view of the world, as a place rife with antagonisms—between mainstream and marginal society, the powerful and the vulnerable, man and nature, eroticism and righteousness, the organic and the mechanical—could only be reinforced by the onslaught of AIDS. The epidemic would carry away his great friend, the photographer Peter Hujar, and then Wojnarowicz himself in 1992, but not before he had produced some of his most impressive work. Thanks to this surge of creativity, fired by icily clear-



above: 814. David Wojnarowicz. *Where I'll Go If After I'm Gone*. 1988–89. Black-and-white photographs, acrylic, spray paint, collage on Masonite; 3'9" x 5'4". Collection Ninah and Michael Lynne, New York.



left: 815. Mike Kelley. *Arena #5 (E.T.s)*. 1990. Stuffed animals on a blanket, 8'1" x 7'3". Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.

headed, unsentimental grief and rage, the artist came in for a kind of universal fame he had never quite known in less fraught days. It also helped that he won a widely publicized lawsuit against the head of the American Family Association, who, in his zeal to stamp out pornography, had violated Wojnarowicz's rights by reprinting in a pamphlet, for distribution to members of Congress, the erotic bits excerpted from a large and multivalent painting. In writing, as well as in visual art, Wojnarowicz could range from the choleric to the elegiac, as here, in some of the last lines he ever wrote, for a book entitled *Memories that Smell like Gasoline*:

Sometimes I come to hate people because they can't see where I am. . . . I'm a blank spot in a hectic civilization. I'm a dark smudge in the air that dissipates without notice. . . . I am screaming but it comes out like pieces of clear ice. I am signaling that the volume of all this is too high. I am waving. I am waving my hands. I am disappearing. I am disappearing but not fast enough.

At the outset of the nineties, the always quotable Jean Baudrillard framed the challenge of the moment in a terse rhetorical question: "What are you doing after the orgy?" Many artists, as already noted, would respond with installations recalling the *povera* ones of the late sixties and early seventies. These were the post-Minimal years when the first Conceptualists attacked formalism by renouncing sculpture as well as painting in favor of working with eccentric, formless materials—devalued, everyday objects or soft, organic, even unstable substances—presented in equally eccentric, "scatter" arrangements (Figs. 676, 706, 709). A master of the genre, now called "pathetic art," is Los Angeles artist Mike Kelley (1954—), who says: "I'm not interested in things that rise above but rather that sink below. Anything that people don't like." True to this word, Kelley, a Cal Arts graduate, fashions installations whose black humor savages the sentimental fictions by which humanity attempts to redeem its spiritual poverty and moral failure. Yet, however uneasily, one cannot but laugh, inasmuch as a perverse, even terrifying funniness runs through, for example, Kelley's *Arenas* (Fig. 815). In this series, a found infant's blanket serves as a kind of gladiatorial field on which discarded toys—dolls and stuffed animals—believe their bright, cuddly charm to act out manipulative power plays common to the adult world—common for the simple reason that, according to the artist, they begin in the sandbox and playpen. If idealizing parents imagine children to be so sweet and innocent that only the freshest, cutest, most sexless toys are fit for them, Kelley disabuses such self-delusion by working with cast-off, thrift-shop baby fare, all of it soiled and odorous from much rough play and messy adoration. An unsettling message arises not only from titles like *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* but also from arrangements on the order of that in *Arena #5*, where a pair of E.T. dolls bend over a recumbent third, who could be their patient, their sexual partner, or indeed both, while a fourth E.T. cowers in the opposite corner, head bowed as if in shame or horror. A true artist for an old century racing toward burn-out, Kelley spurred Ralph Rugoff to make this summary comment: "Above all, [his] art rebels against the tyranny of the ideal—and its degenerate counterpart, the cliché. . . . The pulling down of cultural façades is carried out at times with an enjoyable viciousness, but mostly with a playfulness and vitality that is loose-limbed, raucous, intelligent, and bluntly honest."

The beleaguered dummies made by Tony Oursler (1957—), another Cal Arts graduate, have sometimes been viewed as emerging from the same "psychic swamp" as Mike Kelley's sorry stuffed animals. In the Oursler dramas, however, animation is key, a temporal, narrative dimension made possible by a clever exploitation of video, creating a hybrid, mixed-media art typical of the early nineties. Working as playwright, sculptor, puppeteer, and camera man, Oursler brings to installation art a welcome measure of beauty, vitality, lugubrious humor, and emotional intensity. Always con-



816. Tony Oursler. *Untitled*. 1996. Video projection of eyes on 13 painted fiberglass globes with soundtracks. Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.

cerned with social issues, especially the toxic effects of not only industry but also substance abuse and technology, most of all the media, Oursler began his career making videos of Punch and Judy psychodramas, staged within painted-cardboard sets recalling those of early children's television. Only after he discovered the potential of miniature video-projection technology, however, did Oursler begin to achieve his signature works—soft-sculpture dummies with faces brought to unnerving, sometimes hilarious life by pre-recorded video. In *Getaway #2* the blank, stuffed head of a dummy, with an inert, empty bedjacket and pajama bottoms for a body, is wedged or squashed under the near corner of a twin-bed mattress. In the darkened gallery, the head comes radiantly, even fleshily alive once the tape begins to play, whereupon the androgynous features (actually those of the performance artist Tracy Leipold) contort with rage and resentment over the public predicament in which the figure finds itself. Incredibly, the eyes seem to fix on startled visitors just as the mouth appears to speak directly to them: "Hey, you. Get out of here. What are you looking at?" For another penumbral installation, Oursler hung a veritable galaxy of fiberglass orbs, mostly the size of basketballs, each of them luminous with a single eye—that proverbial "window to the soul" (Fig. 816). Darting, squinting, weeping, or slowly opening wide as if in shock or disbelief, the oculi derived, in fact, from close-up views of art-world people mesmerized by some unfolding drama—a video game, a television show, a pornographic film. All about, meanwhile, individual soundtracks murmured with random noise, the audio completing a metaphor for the ubiquitousness of media culture and its capacity to induce an altered state of mind, a power as insidious as that of drugs, emotional trauma, or atmospheric pollution.

Critical and public support for socially aroused art made by alternative means climaxed and then crashed in 1993. What appeared to send the whole syndrome over the top was the Whitney Biennial, this time dedicated almost entirely to artists who "raise important questions about the changing role of the artist in society; the politics of representing racial and sexual difference; the boundaries between art and pornography; the function of art as a sociopolitical critique; the interrelationships of self, family, and community; and the influence of new technologies." Of the eighty-two artists included in the exhibition, only eight were painters. Robert Hughes, writing in *Time*, dismissed the Biennial as "a saturnalia of political correctness, a long-winded immersion course in marginality . . . one big fiesta of whining agitprop." For many writers, the show merely dramatized

the eternal problem faced by artists engaged in social critique: how to translate strong moral convictions into visually compelling statements. Peter Schjedaahl, one of the more generous critics, found the affair baleful but allowed, in *The Village Voice*, that “the episode will last until a generation emerges that is tired of it or until universal justice occurs on Earth, whichever comes first. Neither can come too quickly for me.” Two years later, Mark Stevens, critic for *New York Magazine*, could still write of the “widespread didactic strain in contemporary art,” which the Biennial had highlighted, “reveal[ing], better than any critic, the exhaustion of the form.”

In elderly London, meanwhile, exhaustion evaporated as a wave of enterprising “YBAs” (Young British Artists) burst upon the scene, straight out of some of the most vital art schools anywhere, particularly Goldsmiths College, known for its democratic approach to material and meaning. Trained to debate their ideas, vehemently, in seminars and tutorials, the articulate young Brits could readily jump-start their careers by curating their own shows, designing their own catalogues, reviewing one another’s exhibitions, and providing generous mutual support, often in smoke-filled rock clubs popularly known as “raves.” Immune to British reserve, they also manifested a gift for publicity worthy of their principal collector, Charles Saatchi of Saatchi & Saatchi, the premier advertising house based in London. In other words, the YBAs exemplified—despite the leftist sympathies usual among artists—the entrepreneurial spirit endlessly preached in Great Britain by Prime Minister Thatcher’s Conservative government. The most universally respected YBA is Rachel Whiteread, seen earlier (Figs. 801, 802). The most notorious, as well as indispensable, is Damien Hirst, who, while still a student at Goldsmiths, launched his generation into public awareness by curating the now legendary *Freeze* show, a three-part cooperative event held during the summer of 1988 in an abandoned Docklands warehouse in London’s East End. *Freeze* proved to be a clinching

moment, one that quickly reverberated across the waters, not only because of the sheer initiative displayed by its organizers but also because of the rambunctious diversity of the art on offer. Like most of the artists encountered in this chapter, the “Brit Pack” tended to perpetuate themes and strategies inherited from earlier, more innovative decades; yet they also radicalized them, doing so, moreover, with nose-thumbing, proletarian energy and high visual impact. As Martin Maloney wrote in 1997, the YBAs, echoing Duchamp and the Conceptualists, enforced “a belief in art’s ability to show ideas as physical things.”

Only later, after *Freeze*, did Damien Hirst (1965—) become a household name, for a signature series of works as scandalous as any created in recent times. With the processes of life and death as his motive interest, Hirst began as a painter, producing randomly organized, color-spotted canvases bearing pharmaceutical terms for titles. In his “spin” paintings, he used centrifugal force to achieve a new form of Abstract Expressionism, with such demotic, lower-case titles as *beautiful, kiss my fucking ass painting*. Then came the cabinet pieces, glittering glass vitrines displaying collections of surgical tools or great quantities of pill bottles. Taking a cue from Jeff Koon’s basketballs afloat in fish tanks, Hirst produced his most challenging work: a dead shark suspended in an immense tank of formaldehyde. Title: *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone*



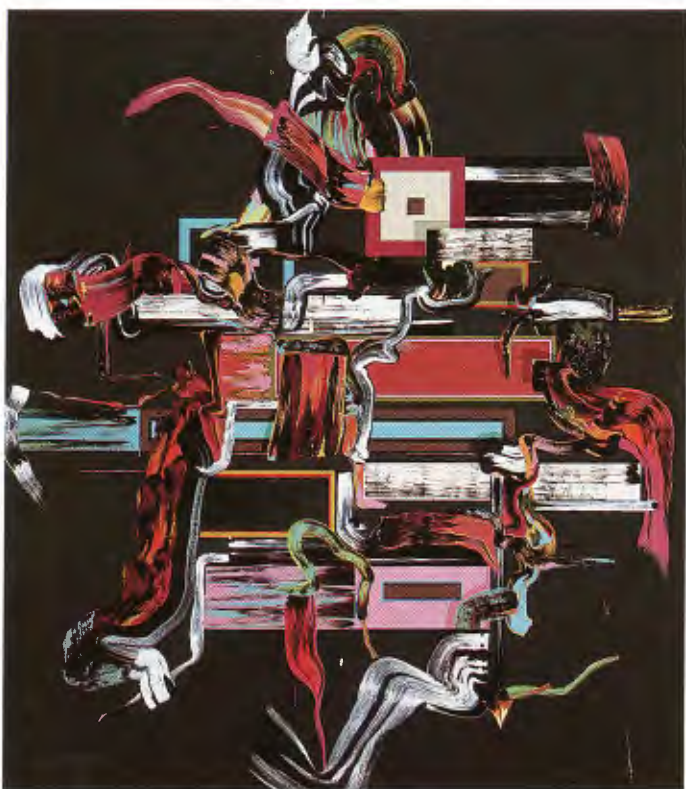
right: 817. Damien Hirst. *Away from the Flock*. 1994. Steel, glass, sheep, and formaldehyde solution; 3'2" x 4'11" x 1'8". The Saatchi Gallery, London.

below: 818. Marcus Harvey. *Myra*. 1995. Acrylic on canvas, 13' x 10'6". The Saatchi Gallery, London.



Living. Here the artist seemed to have recast the gothic horror of a Francis Bacon painting into a kind of literal reality characteristic of YBA art. A gentler, Arcadian variant is *Away from the Flock*, a tank containing the pickled body of a fluffy, sweet-faced sheep (Fig. 817). Here, in a strange new way, Hirst managed to bring the joy of life together with the inevitability of death.

Sensation, the title of a 1997 Royal Academy show derived from the Saatchi collection, aptly summarized the overall personality of much YBA art, the most tabloid example of which was, at the time, a mural-size canvas entitled *Myra* (Fig. 818). Painted by Marcus Harvey (1963—), the picture could, at first glance, be mistaken for one of Chuck Close’s more loosely painted black-and-white, Photo-realist portraits. On closer inspection, however, the bland, pointillist image turns ugly, as viewers realize that the paint marks are actually children’s handprints, giving a sinister clue to the identity of the blonde, big-haired subject: Myra Hindley, a woman convicted and long imprisoned for a string of child murders committed in the 1960s. If art’s purpose is to provoke, as the avant-garde has always insisted, *Myra* must be deemed a lurid triumph, given that, during the run of *Sensation*, the painting drove one viewer to vandalize it, forcing the Royal Academy to rope off a section of the main gallery.



In the anything-goes world of YBA art, even abstract painting could flourish, at least in the ironic, appropriationist manner perfected by Fiona Rae (1963—). Acutely aware of the old argument that nothing new can be done, especially in painting, Rae has candidly pilfered from such older masters as Hans Hofmann, Gerhard Richter, and Sigmar Polke, creating her own tricky amalgam of 20th-century formal devices (Fig. 819). The effect is one of avid eclecticism, a promiscuous, edgy *mélange* of Hofmannesque push-pull planes in smacking hues, Pollock-like spills, rainbow skid marks in the style of Richter or de Kooning, Tachist textures, Color Field disks, powerful Picassoid strokes, and, always, hues boldly contrasted to rival those of Matisse or Kandinsky. Clearly, Rae responds to the profligacy of visual and material culture at the end of the millennium. It should hardly surprise, therefore, that she may sometimes admit an electronic diagram, as here, or even a cartoon figure, but never to the point of compromising the essential abstraction of her pictorial world, wherein planes are so interwoven that all sense of deep, illusionistic space vanishes. Rae's is a self-conscious, post-modern art, making no attempt at transcendence *à la* Mark Rotho; rather, it offers a heady cocktail of colliding images and styles, in which many viewers have found a surprising coherence, even freshness and delight.

When it came to the sculptures of Dinos and Jake Chapman (1962—; 1966—), the Royal Academy feared not so much vandalism as traumatized children and thus, for *Sensation*, assigned the brothers a room of their own, accessible only by adults. What they saw was a ring of blue-glass-eyed child mannequins—shop-window dummies—joined like a circular daisy chain of Siamese twins, some of them with a Pinocchio nose in the form of a full-grown phallus, sprouting above a yawning anus in place of a mouth. Almost as intimidating was the title: *Zygotic acceleration, biogenetic, de-sublimated libidinal model (enlarged x 1000)*. A more jolting image than this group has rarely been encountered in the history of art, even though, as Robert Rosenblum noted in 1996, it takes “us back to a Surrealist inventory of monsters whose anatomies are shaped by an all-consuming sex drive: Salvador Dali's Freudian humanoids, Hans Bellmer's fetishistic female dolls.” In other pieces, the

Chapmans have allowed their mutant brats to retain normal facial features and merely to pair off as genderless, self-reproducing couples, the better to roam about an Eden-like setting, as if to show where demon libido first erupted and went awry (Fig. 820).

The *fin-de-siècle* London inhabited by the YBAs may have found its most acute eyewitness in the young German photographer Wolfgang Tillmans (1968—). Sometimes called Gen-X's answer to Andy Warhol, Tillmans, like the sixties Popster, entered art by way of fashion, celebrating the latter right along with admass, corporate, and youth culture (Fig. 821). And he too is an active, nonjudgmental presence among his chosen glitterati, a cool, gender-bending throng of models, rock stars, and movie actors willing to be photographed in rave or techno clubs, in the street, or at home, clothed, nude, or sexually entangled. Though born in Remscheid, near Düsseldorf, Tillmans has pursued his career mainly in the British capital, documenting his crowd for such trendy magazines as *i-D*,

left: 819. Fiona Rae. *Evil Dead 2*. 1998. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 8 x 7'. Courtesy Luhring Augustine, New York.

below: 820. Jake and Dinos Chapman. *Tragic Anatomies* (installation). The Saatchi Gallery, London.

bottom: 821. Wolfgang Tillmans. *Installation* (Regen Projects, Los Angeles). 1994. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.



Interview, *Spex*, and *Vibe*. But he also permits his interest to wander—again like Warhol—beyond the narrow confines of celebrityville to picturesque details of life—admittedly not electric chairs or highway accidents but, rather, sheets, cast-off garments, factories, a pile of half-eaten fruit spilling over like autumn foliage. Exhibitions of his work thus become installations, arranged by the artist himself so that images function as bytes of information randomly scaled and jumbled together with fashion shots in ad hoc groups like those currently favored in hip magazine layouts. Color photographs in sizes ranging from huge to postcard dimensions, regardless of subject, are taped to the gallery walls from floor to ceiling. Given this distancing, uncritical approach, narrative import remains inchoate, apart from the drive towards social and aesthetic leveling ever more present in Western civilization since the 1960s. Like Nan Goldin, Tillmans offers an intimate but unsentimental portrait of his generation—at least in that part of the forest he frequents—yet rejects Goldin's personal, diaristic approach, insisting that his work “is not about capturing or remembering things.” “I want,” he says, “to describe a particular thing in the most universal way. Even though I feature strongly in my work, it's more a screen for each viewer's projection. . . . When I put people or couples together, it's a dream, really, and when people see it, it empowers them to be that way themselves. I can make my idealism look real.”

In the early 1990s, the art-world irony of Damien Hirst, producing the brashest art imaginable in a culture historically given to reticence, was further compounded by the Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco (1962—). Although heir to the grandiose rhetoric of his country's mural tradition, Orozco has won broad critical acclaim for a hybrid Conceptual art blessed with eloquent understatement. Sometimes called a “Marxist of immateriality,” Orozco travels lightly through the world, redeeming the discards of consumer culture by recasting them as art works that loom larger in the imagination than in reality. For the *Penske Project*, the artist drove about New York City in a Penske truck, collecting detritus and, on the spot, transforming it into modified readymades. One of the sculptures consisted of three cast-off wallboard-compound buckets cut and joined into a single trilobate vessel. Inside it was mimicked by a miniature version of the same object, this time made out of three paper cups. Exhibited along with the *Penske* works were the *Dents de Lion*, or “dandelions,” beige tumbleweed-like structures, each with seven branches budding out into seven clusters of seven leaves, all meticulously crafted of fabric and paper (Fig. 822). But the ultimate in “trash minimalism” was a set of four lids from yogurt containers,

mounted one to a wall, each a blind porthole revealing nothing but alluding to much—absence, presence, waste, simple perfection, or merely a personal taste for dots and circles. In video and still photography Orozco may be at his poetic best, as when he explored Berlin on a yellow Schwalbe, an old East German motorbike, in search of a “mate,” another yellow Schwalbe. Whenever he spied one the artist pulled alongside and snapped a double portrait of the two bikes, thereby creating an absurdist love story worthy of Surrealism—an object longed for and serendipitously found, then sought and discovered at random all over again.

An equally deft, witty touch distinguishes the way Jessica Stockholder (1959—) deals with found objects and materials. At first taken for yet another installation artist in “penitential reaction to the glitz and materiality of the 1980s,” the Yale-educated Stockholder soon revealed herself as much involved with Matisse-like color formalism as with the editorializing potential of the funky *trouvailles* she typically appropriates. The inspired lunacy of her oxymoronic fusions—of low-rent objects, gorgeous, ecstatic colors, and off-handed but balanced compositions—has called forth comparisons with such luminaries of the sixties and seventies as Robert Rauschenberg, David Hockney, Judy Pfaff, and even Ellsworth Kelly. Stockholder makes independent sculptures, but she is best known for her vast installations with poetic names like *Your Skin in This Weather Bourne Eye-Threads & Swollen Perfume* (Fig. 823). For this piece, created at the Dia Center in late 1995, Stockholder



above: 822. Gabriel Orozco. *Penske Project* (installed at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris). 1998. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

left: 823. Jessica Stockholder. *Your Skin in This Weather Bourne Eye-Threads & Swollen Perfume* (installation, Dia Center for the Arts). 1995–96. Paint, concrete, Structolite, various building materials, carpet, lamps, electrical cord, purple plastic stacking crates, swimming-pool liner, welded steel, stuffed-shirt pillows, papier-mâché, balls; 3,600 square feet, 18' ceiling. Courtesy Gorney Bravin + Lee, New York.



enticed visitors into her surreal world along a lime-green linoleum path (the nineties equivalent of the “yellow-brick road”?) bounded on the right by a rough-textured cement wall. The oblique angle of the lino strip provided a foretaste of the visual delirium that would soon follow. First to be encountered was a stage fashioned of robin’s-egg-blue concrete laid on like cake frosting and an overhead platform piled with a jumble of gaudy household lamps, the latter fed by fat yellow cables that hung to the floor before radiating in tent-like swags above and even beyond the installation. On the left an irregular steel grid served as another wall fronted by wooden posts and draped with a large spread of luscious pink carpeting. Farther along, on either side, stood cubic masses of purple milk-crates stacked to the ceiling, and then, straight ahead, a bulging mound of white shirts stuffed with foam rubber and partially painted green and orange. The great pile rested there like a benign, inscrutable Buddha functioning as a centerpiece for the entire show. From this point on the cement wall sported a blue plastic swimming-pool liner, its blazing color in full vibration with patches of floor painted lemon yellow and rusty red. Last to be encountered, on the left, was a door cut into the structural wall and covered with a wire grid, through which could be seen Dia’s storeroom for building supplies. In this way Stockholder declared the site-specific nature of her work. Overflowing the 3,600-square-foot room into the lobby and even spilling through the windows into the alley next door, *Your Skin* suggested to one critic “the crazed nightmare of a homemaker imprisoned by the imperatives of nest-building.” Others saw the piece as celebratory, as big, buoyant, and replete with moments of extreme beauty sprung from knowing juxtapositions of the most ordinary materials. “My work,” Stockholder contends, “often arrives in the world like an idea arrives in your mind. You don’t quite know where it came from or when it got put together; nevertheless, it’s possible to take it apart and see that it has an internal logic. I’m trying to get closer to thinking processes as they exist before the idea is fully formed.”

Although deeply political, Cuban-born Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957–1996) also adopted a sly, subtle approach to installation art, creating works of spare but affecting beauty before he died of AIDS-related causes at the age of thirty-eight. Like David Wojnarowicz, Gonzalez-Torres made love and loss the primary substance of his art, Conceptualist in nature but realized with eccentric, vernacular materials and a near Minimalist sense of form (Fig. 824). Following graduation from the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, he joined Group Material, an art-and-politics collective based in New York City. Thereafter Gonzalez-Torres never flagged in his commitment to such urgent causes as gay rights. Among the most poetic of his creations must be counted elegant strings of low-wattage incandescent bulbs that were allowed to burn out during exhibitions. Many saw them as sculptural first cousins to the dark, spectral elegies painted by Ross Bleckner. Just as collectors or curators were encouraged to arrange the lights as they wished, viewers found themselves invited to dip into sculptures made of brightly wrapped candies, piled in pyramids or laid out in rug-like expanses, as if the austere Carl Andre had suddenly turned cheerful and become a Pop artist. As the sweets disappeared into mouths and pockets, the artist or others replaced them, so that the mass would always have the body weight of the person in whose memory the piece had been made. In this way the work not only evoked the transience of all things; it also questioned concepts of ownership and value. Nowhere did Gonzalez-Torres’s sense of restraint and beauty combine with his celebratory soul to better effect than in a series of beaded curtains, like the example shown here, its blue and gold colors suggesting, for one critic, the artificial hues of chemotherapy drugs. An equally simple, allusive work had the artist posting a photograph of an empty, unmade bed on twenty-four billboards throughout New York City. It served as a memorial to his life companion, another AIDS victim.



824. Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *Untitled (Beginning)*. 1994. Plastic beads and metal rod. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

Here, as elsewhere, Gonzalez-Torres quietly but steadily eroded the boundaries between social commentary and intimate disclosure, between private experience and public politics.

Midway through the nineties, the oversupply of sprawling, moralistic art yielded what one critic termed an “anything-but-installation” mood. This cleared the air for a resurgent interest in painting, a medium even its most grudging critics had to admit was probably here to stay, having been around since prehistoric cave culture. As already observed in London, painting could be deemed a viable artistic option among many, continuous with pictorial art like that of Howard Hodgkin, Per Kirkeby, Brice Marden, Ross Bleckner, and others met in the last chapter. Among the leading painters of the decade must be included Jonathan Lasker (1948—), a New York artist who, along with Fiona Rae, produces a hybrid, mediated, even jarring form of abstraction. Like Gerhard Richter in his abstract paintings, Lasker practices self-quotation as a technique for denying the kind of inspired, automatist spontaneity so dear to the Abstract Expressionists. For these postwar artists, “things were different,” Lasker once said. “They were seeking something cosmic, but their assumptions about the big metaphysical picture were based on some pretty basic beliefs—like the answers of religion, like the idea that the family was intact, like the principle that people are accountable for their actions. All of that has broken down. We’re in a period of history where a lot of culture has been leveled, and we’re trying to recompose what can have meaning for us.” The pieces Lasker works with are invariably figure, ground, and line, a set of simple, familiar elements in which he discovers inexhaustible visual interest, endlessly permuting them without regard to the ideals of either formalist or expressionist abstraction. The result is an oeuvre with a presence unlike anything else in today’s art. A representative work, with a characteristic title, is *The Eternal Silence of Infinite Space* (Fig. 825), identifiable as a Lasker by its curiously awkward, unresolved composition, all-over flat field, strident colors, unvirtuosic touch, and disparately handled abstract images. If the artist succeeded in making oil paint look like plastic, as one critic asserted, it was in part because he had scrupulously copied, on a grand scale, a small study made with ballpoint and felt pens. Such a distancing process served perfectly to transform clumps of thin, meandering lines or slashing brushstrokes into mere signifiers or cartoon versions of the Abstract Expressionist styles pioneered by Pollock and de Kooning. If Franz Kline is recalled in the upper right figure, the angular mesh of heavy black lines is so chaotic that it breaks free along the bottom, forming a base or horizon line below the two images immediately to the left, each of them realized in a different kind of graphic language. Adding to the discord among the shapes is the off-center tangle of pink and red lines messily painted wet on wet and superimposed over both field and figures as if flung there from across the room. Clearly the unifying possibilities of the cold-



left: 825. Jonathan Lasker. *The Eternal Silence of Infinite Space*. 1994. Oil on canvas, 7'6" x 10'. Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York.

below: 826. Mary Heilmann. *Popocatepétl*. 1998. Oil on canvas, 5' x 6'3". Courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery, New York.



ly bright yellow ground are denied. And so is the flattening effect of the all-over field of solid color, given that the variously treated images—among them the mock signature in the lower right—tend to snap back and forth in space, jockeying for their special positions without ever finding them. Thus, if Lasker's Pop-bright paintings, with their odd, indecipherable blend of clumsiness and sophistication, optimism and irony, humor and seriousness, look rather "off," or even a bit *faux-naïf* or Art Brut, it is for "on" reasons, painted as they are in "today's universe," when, to quote Jude Schwendenwein, "signals are crossed, meaning is filtered and dispersed, and a picture is still worth a thousand words."

When Mary Heilmann (1940—) took up painting in the early 1970s, she brought to the task the experience and sensibility of an accomplished ceramist. Thus fortified, Heilmann enjoyed the self-confidence to defy Minimalist doubts about painting, then at their peak. She also moved from California to New York, where she had the wit to co-opt formalism's structures, and then to humanize them with a ceramist's fluid, personal touch, love of fortuitous accident, and translucent colors (Fig. 826). This "rebellion-through-relaxation" process has served Heilmann well ever since, enabling her, at the turn of the millennium, to claim the aesthetic high ground as an abstract painter whose work sails triumphantly above fashion. Loyal to modernism's concern for objecthood, Heilmann frequently flows medium over the edges of her canvases, giving them a three-dimensional look. As for the two-dimensional surface, she often acknowledges its flatness by the modernist device of a grid, only to loosen and soften the armature in fluent, even splashy washes of color. Applied one hue over another, the paint is laid on so adroitly that an upper layer appears to be peeking through a lower one. With a rare gift for feigning nonchalance, this most sophisticated and steadfast of artists has reinvented formalism and made it seem not only insouciant but also ever-green. Yet, in the words of the critic Peter Schjeldahl, "there is a haunting undertone, an existential gravity, to Heilmann's never-fail spontaneity. Meanings that do not arrive do not cease to be wanted. Heilmann's funky and frolicsome layouts wait for Godot. A quality of tense, fateful irresolution accounts for her staying power. . . ."

Elizabeth Peyton (1965—), a Gen-X soul-mate to the mature Mary Heilmann, was lucky enough to study at New York's School of the Visual Arts, where a general disinterest in painting, especially portraiture executed in the deliquescent manner of Rubens, enabled her to grow strong through stubborn resistance. The SVA was still famous, after all, for having nurtured the graffiti-related talents of Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, and, unofficially, Jean Michel

Basquiat. Peyton, a determined painter since the age of eleven, is nostalgic not only in style but also in her love of such 19th-century writers as the French poet/art critic Charles Baudelaire. In a celebrated essay entitled "The Painter of Modern Life," Baudelaire argued for the dandy as a heroic type, who, in revolt against the leveling effects of mass culture, gives way to a "burning need" to invent a "personal originality," to a "kind of cult of the self." It follows, therefore, that Peyton would discover a hero in Andy Warhol, the inveterate and dandyish portrait painter who made his "stars" look almost surreally beautiful. Like Warhol, Peyton works from mediated imagery, discovering her subjects in history (Ludwig II of Bavaria, Napoleon) and the celebrity world, as well as among her East Village friends (Fig. 799). Furthermore, she paints them, as Baudelaire would say, "with an intoxication of the pencil or the brush" so as "to express . . . their luminous *explosion* in space." Rock culture, especially, attracts Peyton, who has depicted the likes of John Lennon, Liam Gallagher, and Kurt Cobain, the last a favorite because "he made great music despite everything." To reveal them as magically transformed, people who could change the world as well as themselves, Peyton endows her dandies, male or female, with luxuriant hair, cherry-red lips, dreamy eyes, and a general air of androgynous, melancholy charm. Most of all, she assures their "luminous explosion in space" by ravishing them, as well as the viewing eye, with one of the most seductive and painterly styles to emerge since de Kooning. Shameless in her preference for pinks and purples, Peyton strokes on intense, glaze-like color with a brushy, bang-on virtuosity that harks back to such masters of the loaded brush as Velázquez and Sargent. Fortunately, the sheer aura of her spectacular technique transcends self-regard to illuminate the aura and mystery of popular culture, a glamorous, narcissistic world replete with the tragedy of overnight fame and early burn-out.

The *Newsweek* critic Peter Plagens, in summary remarks made at the end of 1997, lamented what he called the "tired carnal sideshow" of contemporary art, citing, in particular, the work of Barbara Kruger, Andres Serrano, and the Chapmans. "While outrage artists might fantasize that they're simply speaking truth to power, it's more likely that they merely know that what gets press

isn't beauty but wretched excess." Ironically, beauty, a concept once demonized as socially constructed and thus discriminatory, was by then making a much-discussed comeback, in a form, moreover, that pre-post-modern eyes might recognize. Evident in the paintings of Peyton and Heilmann, beauty as a crucial component of art would find steady reinforcement in a series of wildly popular museum exhibitions dedicated to acknowledged masters from the near or distant past. The shows began with van Gogh in 1990 and then moved on to Titian, Vermeer, Monet, Cassatt, Picasso, Braque, and Matisse, among others, before ending with Jackson Pollock in 1998–99. The Pollock retrospective broke all attendance records but one at MoMA, where younger viewers queued up six deep for the first chance in years to behold the great Abstract Expressionist in real depth. The nostalgic hunger for "authentic" art—for "quality," another forbidden word—even caught the eye of the German artist Thomas Struth (1954—), who, like Bernd and Hilla Becker, his one-time teachers, specializes in a form of documentary photography, albeit on a grander scale than the Beckers' black-and-white stills and in rich Cibachrome (Fig. 827). What most startles about Struth's images is the hyper-reality of the all-over focus. This makes for a near surfeit of data about an art-jammed space like that inside the

below: 827. Thomas Struth. *Louvre 4, Paris*. 1989. Cibachrome print (edition of 10), 6'1/2" x 7'11/2". Courtesy Marian Goodman, New York.

bottom: 828. Bill Viola. *The Greeting* (production stills) from *Buried Secrets*. Video/sound installation created for the United States Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 1995. Courtesy the artist.



Louvre, where the public becomes symbiotic with the mesmerizing objects of its gaze. A fortunate few within that public, flush with new wealth from a soaring stock market, finally rekindled the art market, at least that segment of it dealing with Old Master works, one of which—a Cézanne still life—fetched an unprecedented \$60 million when sold at auction in May 1999.

"Beauty" is rarely absent from comments about the oeuvre of Bill Viola (1951—), who as a video-installation artist works in a medium much favored by the "rage" masters so deplored by Peter Plagens. Together with Nam June Paik and such younger practitioners as Mary Lucier and Gary Hill, Viola has transformed video installation into a high art, capable of elevating "a merely pretty event into something truly beautiful," as Plagens wrote in 1995. Like Paik, Viola came to video from electronic music, which he studied at Syracuse University before establishing his studio in Southern California. Although a pioneer in video, beginning in the 1970s, Viola did not have a gallery exhibition until 1992, thanks to the unsalability of his pieces, which require such costly technology as well as labor-intensive preparation that, usually, they can exist only on commission from major art institutions. His most celebrated project to date was for the 1995 Venice Biennale, where *Buried Secrets* occupied the same space taken over by Jenny Holzer in 1990 (Fig. 797). Inspired by a verse from the 13th-century Persian poet Rumi—"When seeds are buried in the dark earth/Their inward secrets become the flourishing garden"—the Biennale work continued Viola's exploration of such big subjects as life and death, conscience and memory, Eastern and Western mysticism, city and nature, and time itself. A favorite device is slow motion, which allows an event, a landscape, or a moving body to unfold like a languorous dream. At Venice this was best seen in *The Greeting*, one of the five room-size installations making up *Buried Secrets*. Here a radiantly smiling, pregnant woman approaches two other women and then whispers in the ear of the one she recognizes (Fig. 828), the action accompanied by a whispering audio mixed from the sounds of wind, rushing traffic, and a babble of human voices. For the art-historically aware, the elaborate set and ravishing colors evoked a Visitation painted by the great 16th-century Florentine Mannerist Jacopo Pontormo. Viola, explaining how he achieved a truly Renaissance effect of transcendent reverie, said to Steven Henry Madoff: "I used a high-speed camera, shooting 300 frames per second—1,000 feet of film in under 50 seconds—and then slowed the work down so that it takes 10 minutes, revealing every ambiguous dynamic of their gestures as the secret moves through them." According to the critic Anne Doran: "It is a tribute to the sincerity of Viola's work that it is neither sentimental nor didactic, but deeply human and somehow heroic."



The longing for beauty, coming at the end of a century of art often indifferent to it, has entailed a certain morbidity, an apocalyptic sense consistent perhaps with the end of the millennium. A similar ethos emerged during the last *fin de siècle* when Symbolism's aesthetics of decadence found pictorial counterparts in the works of Gustave Moreau, Edward Burne-Jones, Fernand Khnopff, and Toulouse-Lautrec, or such Art Nouveau stars as Aubrey Beardsley and Gustave Klimt. The Symbolist era itself has frequently been understood as a nostalgic revival of Romanticism, that grandly poetic, long-lived movement whose late-18th-century founders had defined the sublime as beauty tinged with terror. And this at a time when a medieval or Gothic revival was under way, all of which flowed into such "Gothik" confections as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), the ur-prototype of exquisitely wrought horror fiction. Not surprisingly, the new *fin de siècle* has produced another wave of strange, unsettling beauty, encouraged by all manner of current realities, among them sci-fi fiction, monster films, cloning, biogenetically altered food, global warming, and the Y2K problem, plus all the pathologies encountered earlier in this chap-

Bellini and continuing right through Rembrandt and Velázquez to Manet and the Impressionists. For imagery, however, Yuskavage takes her cue from the Surrealists, allowing her subconscious to dictate a feminist-inspired obsession with the female body, its sexual characteristics so exaggerated as to become a weird caricature of the fantasy life behind "the male gaze." Her breakthrough came with two series entitled *Bad Babies* and *Big Blondes*, the paintings notorious for their "demonically distorted Kewpie-doll women" presented in silken, atmospheric spaces radiant with a palette of golds, sea-greens, purples, and hot pinks. More recently, Yuskavage has composed on a grander scale, again working in the Renaissance tradition, this time by modeling small figures, arranging them in light boxes, and making a series of preparatory studies. As a result, a picture like *Honeymoon* resonates with art history (Fig. 830), especially Georges de La Tour's Penitent Magdalenes, figures with long, flowing tresses and bowed heads picked out of an enveloping gloom by the magical light of a glowing candle. The "bride" seen here, with her pert, almost piggish nose and open, bee-stung mouth, would appear to be, as in so many Yuskavage canvases, a partial



right: 829.

Alexis Rockman.
Harvest. 1991. Oil on
wood, 5'8" x 9'4".
Courtesy Gorney Bravin
& Lee, New York.

right: 830.

Lisa Yuskavage.
Honeymoon. 1998. Oil
on linen, 6'5 1/2" x 4'7".
Courtesy Marianne
Boesky Gallery,
New York.

ter. Contemporary gothic, with its intimations or narratives of death and decay, its deliciously potent mixture of mourning and celebration, gorgeousness and grotesquerie, has already been seen, to one degree or another, in the works of Ross Bleckner, Robert Gober, Kiki Smith, Damien Hirst, and, especially, the Chapman brothers. Among younger painters, gothic finds its most theatrical exponent in the New York artist Alexis Rockman (1962—), whose tightly focused, Old Masterish renderings of a nature run amok recall the apocalyptic scenes of that 16th-century fantasist Hieronymus Bosch, including the black comedy (Fig. 829). In Rockman's absurdist vision, the world has become a post-nuclear, evolutionary bog rife with miscegenation, its bestiary of creatures from the earth's past, present, and imagined future "red in tooth and claw."

Lisa Yuskavage (1962—), as skilled and droll as Alexis Rockman, has also given birth to a devilish, gothic beauty in her mischievous blends of elegance and vulgarity. She has even been credited with making contemporary art adventurous again, not least because of her willingness to place a Titianesque mastery of oil glazes at the service of subject matter some have seen as both misogynist and kitchy. By way of explaining her choices, the Yale-educated artist confesses fidelity to her "white-trash" origins in Philadelphia as well as to the high European tradition of luminous, oil-based colorism, beginning with Jan Van Eyck and Giovanni

self-parody. The figure is backlit through a window giving on to an exquisitely painted grisaille mountainscape, the very kind of view the early Romantics would have called sublime, its beauty now tinged with post-modern irony perhaps more than terror. The lambent light, though pale and misty, all but sets the tumble of heavy, blond hair on fire, not to mention the swollen breast with its huge, bright jewel of an upturned nipple. Kneeling on the bed in an open robe, this nubile nymphet seems to radiate vulnerability, as if sexuality had come upon her with the puzzling, unbidden stealth of an incurable disease. Acknowledging the disturbing though seductive quality of her art, Yuskavage has said that, in the age of MTV, "painting no longer has the power to affect anybody's morals. . . . The hoopla caused by what I do always surprises me because painting seems so ineffectual. . . . I've always known you don't change the world through painting. I think that's part of the reason why I allow myself to take such liberties." What saves and glorifies pictures like *Honeymoon* is the artist's ability to plunge headlong into depths of molten feeling and yet navigate this roiling sea with icy, cunning clarity.

A gothic stew of allure and horror pervades the art of Matthew Barney (1967—), a figure as polarizing as any to appear in the nineties. His sudden acclaim has even been likened to the egregious sort achieved by Jeff Koons a decade earlier, and for some of the



Laughton Candidate, as the satyr is called, tap-dances a hole in the floor of a pier, walks along the seabed, wriggles through a narrow, intestine-like tunnel filled with gooey Vaseline, and picnics with three androgynous fairies. All the while a pair of cyclists on side-car motorbikes race one another from opposite directions, until the video ends just as they are about to collide with a native Laughton ram, its fleece died red like the satyr's hair and its curious horns, one pair ascending and another descending, beribboned in yellow and tartan. The related gallery installation, by contrast with the action-filled video, seemed a bit flat, overstuffed with beautifully crafted props already viewed on the screen and then displayed like luxurious anthropological artifacts. Barney's artistic ancestry clearly lies among the Conceptualists, especially performance and video artists like Bruce Nauman, but it also includes the Surrealists, among them Buñuel and Dali, as well as their nemesis, Jean Cocteau. More important, Barney appears to belong very much to the present or the future, hailed as he already is as the mythographer of the millennium. Commenting on his work, the artist remarked to the critic Roberta Smith in 1997: "I want to get at the moment of freedom between things, between formlessness and form, which is the exciting moment, the moment of conflict. The goal of the work isn't about something being fulfilled but about setting out to find perfect symmetry, true equilibrium. I think of it as a tragic goal; the pursuit of it is what the narratives in the videos are based on."

below: 831. Matthew Barney. *Mile-High Threshold: Flight with the Anal Sadistic Warrior*. 1991. Videostill © 1991 Matthew Barney. Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.

bottom: 832. Matthew Barney. *Cremaster 4*. 1994. Videostill © 1994 Matthew Barney. Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.

same reasons. Barney, a native of San Francisco, played football in high school, earned a B.A. at Yale, and modeled for J. Crew. As this would imply, he is physically well equipped to star, glamorously, in his own performance/installation pieces—bizarre, surreal sagas exploring ideas about beauty, cultural history, gender ambiguity, mythic narrative, and the body's potential for transformation. Obsessed with such athletic performers or escape artists as Harry Houdini and football-legend Jim Otto, Barney turns every work into a terrifying variety of ritualistic endurance art. At his 1991 debut show in New York—*Mile High Threshold: Flight with the Anal Sadistic Warrior*—the naked artist strapped on a harness and, by means of titanium ice screws and hooks, played the human fly, negotiating his way across the gallery ceiling and down the stairwell to the basement, a laborious journey that yielded a forty-two-minute video (Fig. 831). His destination was a refrigerated glass box furnished with a sculpture shaped like a weight lifter's incline bench but thickly coated in frozen petroleum jelly. Viewed from below while swinging overhead, the macho Barney made himself appear open and vulnerable in a way many women claim to have always felt, and the bench, a traditional site for hard-body he-men, as soft and delicate as female flesh.

Soon thereafter Barney launched into the *Cremaster* series, so called for the muscle that contracts the testicles in response to stimuli such as fear or cold. In *Cremaster 4: The Isle of Man*, filmed in bright, storybook colors on the eponymous island in the Irish Sea, noted for its strangely hybrid creatures, the artist appears as a horned, hooved, henna-haired, and goat-eared satyr nattily attired in a white-linen suit and two-toned shoes (Fig. 832). Moving through a sequence of birth or initiation rites, the



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