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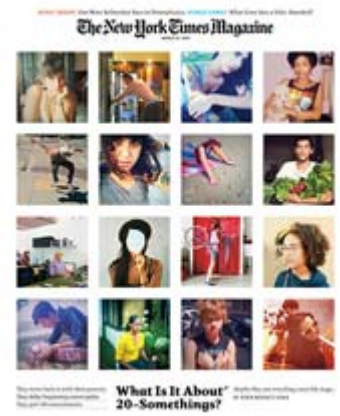


The cover of the *New York Times Magazine*, Aug. 22, 2010

Installation view of "Greater New York" at PS1, with Nick Mauss' *Depend, fasten, lower, suppose, dwell* (2010) (foreground), and photographs from 2009 by Michelle Abeles

LaToya Ruby Frazier
Self Portrait (United States Steel) 2010
Courtesy of the artist and Higher Pictures

THE "EMERGING" CONSENSUS
by Ben Davis

"Greater New York" opened at MoMA P.S.1 way back in May amid a ton of hype, but it seemed a fairly random affair. That is, till now, with the publication of the much-discussed *New York Times Magazine* feature, "What Is It About 20-Somethings?" That article made this show -- and a bunch of other recent shows, and artworks, and art phenomena -- snap into focus for me. It really was a kind of "eureka" moment.

To be honest, the *Times Magazine* article is itself fairly random. The discussion wobbles from brain chemistry to social forces, and wonders whether today's young people are experiencing a timeless phase of dislocation or something new, without really giving a convincing answer. It can't seem to decide whether "emerging adulthood" -- the phenomenon of late-blooming young people that the essay tries to define and name -- is universal or a sign of bratty entitlement.

Still, two things caught my eye about this feature. One: Aside from the mumbo-jumbo about synapses and gray matter, the article does highlight some concrete factors that suggest that the present generation is experiencing youth a bit differently than previous ones. And two: The middle- and upper-class kids that the article is ultimately about are exactly the kind of folks that form the art-world audience. Just look at the photos illustrating the article. At least one was *actually taken* at P.S.1's own "Warm-Up!"

Put these two thoughts together, and "emerging adulthood" begins to look like the key to understanding today's "emerging art."

Here are some of the factors contributing to new status of youth mentioned by the *Times Magazine*: "the need for more education to survive in an information-based economy; fewer entry-level jobs even after all that schooling; young people feeling less rush to marry because of the general acceptance of premarital sex, cohabitation and birth control; and young women feeling less rush to have babies." This list, it so happens, correlates closely with the themes of "Greater New York" and similar recent art surveys: impermanence, hermeticism, cheerful deviance, neo-collectivism, perpetual experimentation, and general fucked-up-ness.

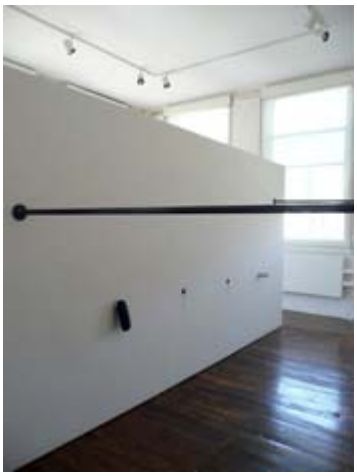
Of course, not all the artists in "Greater New York" are "emerging," and not all of them are 20-somethings. Still, the average age of artists in the show, as far as I can tell, is just under 33 -- we are still in "Younger than Jesus" territory.

And indeed, the major buzzwords the *Times Magazine* associates with the state of "emerging adulthood" -- "Identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and. . . 'a sense of possibilities'" -- seem to form an underlying thread that unites otherwise eclectic work.

So, on the one hand, you have the sobriety of LaToya Ruby Frazier (b. 1982) -- making her second appearance representing her

David Benjamin Sherry
Self Portrait As The Born Feeling Begins
2010
Courtesy the artist

Liz Magic Laser
Mine
2009
Courtesy Derek Eller Gallery



Dominic Nurre
Objection Room
2010
Courtesy the artist

Installation view of work by Kerstin Brätsch and Adele Röder, in "Greater New York"

Adam Pendleton "Black Dada" installation, 2010, in "Greater New York"

generation, after "Younger Than Jesus" -- whose stark black-and-white photos of herself, her family, and her hometown of Braddock, Pa., are almost perfect crystals of angst about carving out one’s own space in the world.

But on the other hand, you have David Benjamin Sherry (b. 1981), with his candy colored, psychedelic landscape photos, each one dominated by a single vibrant color, often featuring the artist himself in body paint, doing a human chameleon act. As Sherry explained to *T Magazine*: "Some people ask, ‘Are you a narcissist?’ But I don’t think so. . . . I’m just dealing with myself."

The amazingly named Liz Magic Laser (b. 1981) offers up a video/installation, *Mine*, that is almost a cartoonish distillation of the theme of narcissistic self-exploration. It involves having a surgical robot bore into her own purse, mining the content of her own world as if it were some kind of alien organ.

The *Objection Room* by Dominic Nurre (b. 1980) incorporates recorded hyena howls, saltlicks, a pipe fixed across the space that visitors must duck under, and "glory holes" cut in the wall. You have to read Lauren O’Neill-Butler’s interview with the artist to get it, but the installation is all about simulating a place for anonymous public sex, a celebration of the points where "community" and "anti-community" meet.

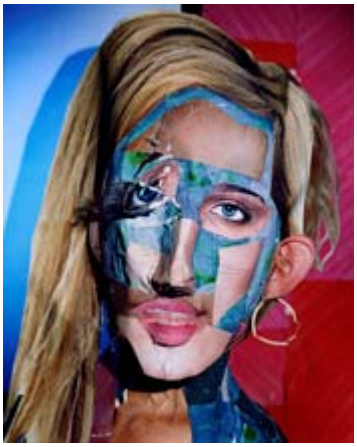
Kerstin Brätsch (b. 1979) and Adele Röder (b. 1980) work in the guise of an invented collective entity, their dummy "import/export" agency, DAS INSTITUT, founded in 2007. Under this name, Röder creates digital patterns in Photoshop, which Brätsch then translates into paint on large hanging sheets of clear mylar, and then back again ("import/export"). It’s a vision of art as limitless, object-less screwing around and, as Adam Kleinman points out, may be rooted in the German-born, New York-based artists’ sense of themselves as nomads.

As for the "sense of possibilities," you can’t beat Adam Pendleton (b. 1980) with his second-floor corner devoted to spooky, black-painted mirrors, and the artist’s re-recording of a Civil Rights-era tune. This brainy, inscrutable work perfectly captures a sense of idealism mixed with equivocation. "Black Dada," as he calls his project, "is a way to talk about the future while talking about the past. It is our present moment."

But is any of this particularly new? There is a characteristic contemporary tone to all this -- but not necessarily a characteristic contemporary style. In fact, all this art seems to be characteristically unconcerned with its own uniqueness. But, then again, the new "emerging adulthood" is supposedly all about being unable to separate oneself from one’s parents’ values and find one’s own place, right?

The major evident trait here -- total eclecticism -- was also a big theme of the "postmodern" generation, of course. But when Gerhard Richter decided to paint in both abstract and photorealist styles at once, critics generally saw it as a polemical statement against baleful modernist specialization. For the young Greater New Yorkers, working in all styles has no meaning, it just is. Rather than a defiant act, it is more as if an art-school period of genre experimentation has been extended into a limitless default position.

In a thought-provoking essay, "The Trouble with Youth," Donald Kuspit argues that the artistic avant-garde, modern political revolution and the idea of the rebellious youth were all born of the same underlying impulse -- all of them involved an idea of a break between generations, the present coming to be through a rejection of



Daniel Gordon
Woman with an Earring
2010
Courtesy Claudia Groeflin Galerie and Leo Koenig Inc.

Sam Moyer’s *Bleach Beach*, right, and another India ink work, in "Greater New York"

Tauba Auerbach’s untitled "Fold" paintings from 2010 in "Greater New York"

Naama Tsabar’s monolithic black "Speaker Walls" in "Greater New York"

the past. If it is even half true that social conditions have metastasized to create a de facto new life stage suspended between adolescence and adulthood, then this will probably have its reflection in how artists relate to tradition and the world in general.

For one, this notion gives some social background to recent art-theory hand-wringing that the idea of "postmodernism" -- a term that, for all its limitations, still had some critical and intellectual juice in it -- has given way to the looser, merely descriptive term "contemporary art." The two things look a lot alike -- just the way the untethered experimentation of contemporary young people looks a lot like the angst and soul-searching of their parents in the ‘60s and ‘70s -- but the former lacks even the minimal countercultural thrust of the latter.

Something that has been nagging me, and that I have heard anecdotally from curators as well, is that for a lot of newer art, the question I find most interesting, "What does it mean?," seems of limited use. The Big Statement is still an ambition for some -- but the ultimate horizon of much contemporary art is something more, well, self-oriented. "I like it" seems to be the main esthetic criteria, and there is not much of an ambition beyond that. In "Greater New York," this seems as true of the messed-up photo collages of young women by Daniel Gordon (b. 1980), as of the cool, homespun minimalism of Sam Moyer (b. 1983); as true of the slick, designy paintings of folded surfaces by Tauba Auerbach (b. 1981) as of the large, obelisk-like invented musical instruments of Naama Tsabar (b. 1982).

That’s a lot to take away from one fairly middle-brow *New York Times Magazine* article. But these days, you take inspiration where you can get it.

"Greater New York," May 23-Oct. 18, 2010, at PS1 Contemporary Arts Center, 22-25 Jackson Ave, Long Island City, N.Y. 11101

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