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The New Museum



"After Nature" curator Massimiliano Gioni at the press preview



Installation view of works by Paweł Althamer in "After Nature" at the New Museum

NATURAL FACTS

by Ben Davis

"After Nature," July 17-Sept. 21, 2008, at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, 235 Bowery, New York, N.Y. 10002

"After Nature," the ambitious survey of 25 artists at the New Museum, is a strange show. It is studded with ensembles of artworks that feel like half-formed stage sets. The whole thing begins on the second floor, where a quiet sequence of photos by William Christenberry, picturing a shack overrun by vines -- a sort of backwoods *vanitas* -- serves as backdrop for a ragtag, space-filling installation of grotesque sculptural "self-portraits" by Paweł Althamer, including a man-headed fetus on a plinth. One floor up, there is the spectacle of a Jesus-like figure with tree roots for a head, laid in a glass coffin, by Belgian sculptor Berlinde de Bruyckere, opposite Robert Kusmirowski's full-scale recreation of the Unabomber's cabin. The whole show climaxes on the fourth floor, where Zoe Leonard's sculpture incorporating an actual tree, sawn into sections and bolted back together, plays against a headless, taxidermied horse by Maurizio Cattelan, suspended high up against one wall, body dangling like a reverse animal trophy.

The show is above all a curators' essay, interrogating the dispirited mood in contemporary culture. Described as a "visual novel," the exhibition might be better called "After Art History" -- it presents each of the various artworks not on its own terms, but as recontextualized still frames in curator Massimiliano Gioni's expansive, apocalyptic vision. "It is not a joyful show," Gioni said at the press conference, explaining his intentions. "But these are not joyful times."

Precisely because disaster seems to be the flavor of the day in contemporary art, however, the absences in Gioni's exhibition are as notable as the inclusions. There is, for example, no Alexis Rockman, the contemporary painter who made his name with realist oil paintings, the principal charm of which seems to be that they depict natural disasters. There is no Andrea Zittel, whose eccentric machines clearly tap into survivalist and sci-fi themes. There is nothing quite so openly eschatological as Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn's film *All Together Now* (currently on view at Elizabeth Dee gallery), which stages scenes of survivors wandering through a disintegrating, post-apocalyptic world.

Instead of Rockman, Gioni gives us a Dana Schutz painting of a *Man Eating his Chest*, an interpellation of Goya's *Saturn Eating his Children* in Schutz's familiar style. Instead of Zittel, there's a work by Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, which installs a series of actual Jenny Holzer light strips in a dark corner, still scrolling paranoid phrases but repurposed to serve as a light nourishing a hanging plant. Instead of Dodge and Kahn's Rousseau-meets-*Mad Max* fable, there is Polish artist Artur Żmijewski's 1998 *Oko za Oko* (*An Eye for an Eye*), a video depicting two nude men, one an amputee, moving in tandem.



"After Nature" at the New Museum



Robert Kusmirowski
Unacabine
 2008
 "After Nature"
 The New Museum



"After Nature" at the New Museum



Maurizio Cattelan
Untitled
 2007
 "After Nature"
 The New Museum

You get the idea. Gioni is after something more allusive and metaphorical than your run-of-the-mill end-of-days scenario. And so, if on the one hand, "After Nature" plays on fears that are tangibly contemporary -- in particular, environmental collapse -- on the other, it comes freighted with literary baggage. The whole exhibition, we are told, is inspired by a film by Werner Herzog, *Lessons of Darkness*, an abbreviated version of which plays as an installation on the second floor. That hook, however, is not enough. Gioni steals the title of his show, "After Nature," from a book by German author W.G. Sebald, a work that is an intermingling of autobiography, poetry and fiction (the catalogue for sale in the New Museum shop is simply a copy of the paperback version of Sebald's novel, with photos of various works inserted between the pages). Elsewhere, we are told that another inspiration was Cormac McCarthy's parable-like post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*. The wall texts for the show are an attempt to "subvert the idea of texts as voice of truth," Gioni explained; they are a mix of quotes, biographical information and excerpts from tangentially related works of literature. The audio guide features Gioni's explanations, but also readings from H.P. Lovecraft. And so on.

This zesty hall-of-mirrors spirit isn't just a superficial conceit; it penetrates into the selection of art as well. "After Nature" blends work by contemporary artists, including new commissions, with curatorial oddities. The best example of the latter comes on the fourth floor, in the shadow of the Leonard-Cattelan tree-horse combine. There, Gioni has installed a set of small 1894 "celestographs" by August Strindberg, borrowed from the National Library of Sweden. Strindberg, author of psychosexual stage dramas, apparently also believed that he had discovered a way to record the configuration of the heavens onto photographic plates -- the works feature trembling, indistinct patterns of rusty scratches and bubbles -- when in fact he was only registering dust as it settled onto the surfaces.

In a similar vein are the palpably odd paintings of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (1910-1983), the Milwaukee "outsider" artist who in the mid-'50s produced psychedelic images of explosions, inspired by anxieties about nuclear arms. It is also true of a series of framed "prayer cards" by legendary folk artist Rev. Howard Finster, handwritten mini-sermons in which scripture and sex, the end-of-days and the-right-to-bear-arms, are fused.

These selections are meant, it seems, to draw out the more delirious side of the contemporary work, to get away from pokerfaced irony and encourage a sense of real weirdness and menace. Thus, a new piece by German artist/choreographer Tino Sehgal, staged specifically for "After Nature," offers a female model sprawling on the ground dramatically at the base of the New Museum's most distinctive space -- the pinched, plunging stairwell that connects the fourth to the third floor. The woman writhes slowly. It's not clear whether this is meant to resemble pleasure of pain. Gioni's mythopoetic backdrop opens up a space for Sehgal here, more evocative than the irritating Brechtian literalness of the artist's other pieces (gallery attendants chanting "This is so contemporary" or warbling "This is propaganda").

Other contemporary figures don't fare so well. Their uses of "sinister" symbols function as moments within Gioni's general idea, but are also set off by his framework as relatively glib: Italian painter Roberto Cuoghi's "Axis of Evil" paintings, gleaming baubles depicting the outlines of "hostile" states like Cuba and Myanmar; Kusmirowski's reborn Unambomber cabin (less interesting as subject matter than the artist's previous replicas of Communist artifacts from his native Poland); and the slacker conceptualism of Klara Liden's installation, stashed in an alcove off the stairway, featuring a chintzy



Dana Schutz
Man Eating His Chest
 2005
 "After Nature"
 New Museum



Installation view of Huma Bhabha's
legs, and arms, and heads (2008) [left]
 and Allora and Calzadilla's *Growth*
(Survival) (2006), in "After Nature" at
 the New Museum



Artur Żmijewski
Okno za Oko (An Eye for an Eye) (still)
 1999
 "After Nature"
 The New Museum

replica of the New Museum's own building hung upside-down overhead. The sober Southern Gothic of Christenberry's photos and the old world oddness of De Bruyckere's tree-Jesus better capture the intended spirit, as does *Any Time Prime Time*, an unsettling video of young Kurdish men beating drums and performing a folkloric dance, by Fikret Atay.

These days, a common observation is that the average person finds it easier to imagine the end of the world itself than a simple, radical change of society for the better. The juxtapositions of art in "After Nature" suggest a corollary: It is easier to turn the end of the world into a motif, an affectation, than it is to imagine it sincerely. It was with this in mind that I kept returning to Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* -- by far the most powerful single work in "After Nature." And finally, I can't help thinking that Gioni, who claims that Herzog's work inspired his project, gets it wrong.

The film is a documentary about the oil fires in Kuwait left by Saddam Hussein's retreating forces following the 1991 Gulf War. Like "After Nature," it has extravagant literary pretensions: a long sequence of sweeping aerial shots over the roaring oil fires is introduced by a title card dubbing it "The Devil's Theme Park"; the whole thing is scored to Wagner and Mahler. On the soundtrack, Herzog's laconic narration weaves comments on the action in straightforward language with Biblical quotations and descriptions of the firemen taking on the flames as extraterrestrials. Gioni, in his explication of the work's meaning, puts great emphasis on this blurring of the real and the fictional, how Herzog's "rejection of the banality of facts in favor of a more allegorical tone acquires a lucid, almost predictive quality." He highlights, for instance, how the epigraph that opens the film ("The collapse of the stellar universe will occur -- like creation -- in grandiose splendor") is attributed to Pascal, but authored by Herzog himself.

Yet all this is no revelation; it is Postmodernism 101. The key scene of the film, in fact, is relatively intimate and direct. In one of the early sequences, Herzog turns his lens to cataloguing instruments of torture found in bunkers abandoned in the desert by Hussein's retreating forces. Our gaze rolls across a seemingly endless gallery of whips, clubs, clamps, electrodes and so on. The filmmaker then cuts to an interview with an Iraqi woman who, we are told, watched her son tortured to death. Since then, she has been unable to speak. For a long, painful minute, Herzog maintains the focus on the woman's face, as she stutters, gestures and makes inarticulate noises, seeming to want desperately to say something, but failing.

In this way, the director indexes within the film the significance of his own documentary form: The inability to communicate literally, here, is symptom not of blurring truth with fiction, but of being too traumatically close to the truth (another sequence in the film -- elided from the cut version playing at the New Museum -- depicts a woman whose son suffers from aphasia after being beaten by soldiers). When Herzog describes the firefighters as sci-fi creatures or frames the burning landscape as something from Dante, the significance is not, as Gioni suggests, that Herzog is transmuting the specificity of the Kuwaiti oil fires into a prophetic fantasy of the future. In fact, the sense is that this *specific* reality is so disturbing, so beyond the scope of normal human experience, that Herzog has to resort to myth in order to grasp it at all.

You can debate the possible decadence of Herzog's approach. What is indisputable, however, is that *Lessons of Darkness* would not have the same vitality if he had pasted together random scenes of burning landscapes from diverse sources. Yet in a sense, stitching together random images charged with apocalyptic portent is what Gioni has done in his show. And thus, in the end, the dread that "After Nature"



August Strindberg

Celestograph

1894

Royal Library, National Library of Sweden

"After Nature"

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evokes remains purely theatrical or literary, nebulous and untethered. "These are not joyful times," Gioni says. But his mythical preoccupations point away from these times, not towards them. A puzzle of an exhibition, "After Nature" rewards investigation -- but it also feels like only half the pieces are there. You are not quite allowed to make out the larger picture that they form.

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Left to right: Eugene von Bruenchenhein's *Atomic Age* (1955) and *Untitled* (1980), in "After Nature" at the New Museum



Model performing work by Tino Sehgal, in "After Nature"



Rev. Howard Finster
Untitled (Sermon Cards)
 n.d.
 "After Nature"
 New Museum



Roberto Cuoghi
Untitled (Iran)
 2007
 François Pinault Collection
 "After Nature"
 The New Museum



Model of the New Museum building in
 Klara Liden's *Untitled* (2008), in "After
 Nature" at the New Museum



Installation view of Werner Herzog's
*And A Smoke Arose -- Lessons of
Darkness* (1992), in "After Nature" at
the New Museum