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Ups and Downs

Literal highs and anemic lows on the ever more crowded downtown gallery roster

by **Jerry Saltz**
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Lucy McKenzie's *Cheyney and Eileen Disturb a Historian at Pompeii*, 2005
photo: Robin Holland

Chelsea basically went off in our faces three weeks ago, when more than 125 shows of contemporary art opened over the first three days of the season. Despite rampant Chelsea-bashing, a gallery isn't bad because it's there or better because it's not, although the place can really get on your nerves. Whatever. Currently there's a smattering of highs and lows in downtown galleries. A simultaneous high and low turns up at Nicole Klagsbrun, where "Interstate," curated by Adam McEwen, continues this summer's unbridled testosterone binge, which saw group shows averaging 18 percent women. Of "Interstate" 's 22 artists, only three are female—surprising in a show curated by a good, smart male artist. Apart from this gross inequity and the fact that the vast majority of solo shows this month are by men, "Interstate" ably cruises the psychic highways of America, portraying an enervated, deluded, oblivious realm. Especially gripping are Jeremy Deller's almost end-times Texas documentary and Donald Judd's 1968 American flag in negative colors, which creates a malleable black hole of hate, hope, and irony.

Elsewhere, "Carry On," the plucky potpourri about psychedelia at Feigen, is a literal high. Other highs include Adam Cvijanovic's clairvoyant Tiepolo-esque deluge at Bellwether, Katherine Bernhardt's wild paintings at Canada, and the wondrous cut-out trees by Yuken Teruya at Josee Bienvenu.

Another high-low split is by the French artist Orlan, whom I have long considered a front-runner for "Worst Well-Known Artist Award" (a/k/a "the Jim Dine Prize" or "the Kataj"). At Stux, Orlan has dispensed with the usual gaudy videos of her multiple facial surgeries and is now just digitally manipulating photographs of herself. Although, to my amazement, there's something compelling and touching about these silly pictures, Orlan is now only failing tamely, when she used to fail majestically. In the rear gallery, Brian Belott doesn't seem to know the meaning of the word failure; his books and collages evince an artist adept at creating hallucinatory space and who is apparently unaware that sundry critics have banned anything "craftsy."

A number of artists needed to make changes and did; some should have but didn't; several need to think about changing professions. In the "made needed changes" category is Monique Prieto, whose new word paintings at Cheim & Read are far more eye-catching than her previous formulaic blob paintings. With any luck she'll avoid getting too wrapped up in the cute color field backgrounds, not only rely on words, and sidestep repetitiousness. I'm not a fan of Candice Breitz or Lara Schnitger, but both improved. Breitz's karaoke-on-steroids videos at Sonnabend may not be deep, but they are quite diverting. At Kern, Schnitger's lopsided tepee shapes with written quips like "It aint going to lick itself" are now erotic and strange rather than merely formalism. At Feuer, Danica Phelps changed, but not enough. She's still recording her life maniacally in notes like "went for walk" or "made love with Debi." But these blurbs reveal next to nothing and suggest that Phelps, whose work I genuinely admire, is only leading a recorded life, not an examined one. At Postmasters, Omer Fast didn't need to change but did and made his work even more trenchant.

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In the "needs to change but didn't" group, Mike Pare's friends should stage an intervention to wean him from the overreliance on photographs in his otherwise enjoyable drawings at ATM. At Zwirner, Marcel Dzama's work has gotten bigger and more topical, to good effect. Yet the overall look of his drawings is so similar that everything fizzles—too bad, because one Dzama at a time can still stir. At Petzel, Jon Pylpchuk's show might look childish but actually presents a disturbing vision and even packs some of the witchiness of primitive sculpture. Meanwhile, Suling Wang at Lehmann Maupin, Frank Nitsche at Leo Koenig, and Pia Dehne at Haswelllediger all produce paintings that are so generic and derivative that a committee might have made them. Each needs to deploy his or her talent far more imaginatively.

The two most rewarding solos downtown are also the most challenging; both come on weak and take time to appreciate. On repeated viewings, Lucy McKenzie's U.S. debut at Metro yields philosophical depth and tenderness. Like a number of artists of her generation—notably Kai Althoff and Piotr Uklanski—this 28-year-old Glaswegian views history as material, something to use without memory, allegiance, or judgment. McKenzie has almost a lover's touch with history; she deploys dead, dormant, and suspect styles, combining early-20th-century cartooning, constructivism, and fascist neoclassicism in works on paper that initially seem like appropriations and tracings but are actually personal and invented.

Anthony Burdin's sparsely installed four-floor exhibition at Maccarone is equally thorny but more ecstatic. Burdin, who is a phantasmagoric combination of Vito Acconci, Bruce Conner, and the Unabomber, inhabits the zone between art, life, and music. A sort of traveling magician-maniac-minstrel, he lives, makes art, and stages performances in his van. His videos, drawings, and sculptures tap into some vagabond voodoo that relates to witch doctors like Paul Thek, Jack Smith, and Dieter Roth. All of which means it might be better to just breathe Burdin's art in rather than look directly at it.

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