

"Correct Me If I'm Wrong," essay by Barry Schwabsky, 1997 White Out show at Workspace, NYC

Correct Me If I'm Wrong

But the title White-out tells me that what links these five very different artists has to do with a fascination with mistakes and their rectification, perplexity and revision. That the practice of art may harbor a sense of the meaning of "correction" very different from others current in our culture was forcibly brought home to me the other day when, as I do on a nearly daily basis, I drove past the jail on Atlantic Avenue at Jay Street in Brooklyn and caught sight of one of those ominous blue buses with metal mesh over the windows and the legend DEPT. OF CORRECTION stenciled along its flank. Either "correction" is simply a euphemism for "punishment," it seems, or crime (the theft of a title, for instance) has been demoted to a mistake.

In art, however, mistake is no crime and correction no punishment. The 19th century style wars that eventuated in the triumph of what we now know as modernism were about nothing other than the rejection of academic finish as an artistic criterion. With the seamlessness of the licked surface overthrown, the way was cleared for the work of a painter like Cezanne, in whose landscapes a multiplicity of fragmentary and mutually self-correcting glimpses somehow fuse into an impossible architectonic density, and on into our own century, to disciples of Cezanne as different as Matisse, whose transparent "erasures" allow a history of revisions to support the breathtaking immediacy of a concise and seemingly definitive configuration, and Giacometti, whose endless revisions reduced the figure to something like the wake of its own persistent disappearance.

For these modernist masters, the release from the constraints of conventional finish, and the realization of the consequences of that release, represented a heroic struggle. Today we enjoy the luxury of a more equilibrated stance toward the incorporation of process into product in the work of art. We learned about it at school, after all; it's just common sense. Perhaps a better muse than the famously anxious Giacometti for the five urbane women whose art composes this show is the woman – though not an artist at all – whose invention gives it its title, Bette Nesmith Graham, the secretary who concocted "liquid paper" – White-Out proper – to correct her own typos and then sold it to the world. Now that's putting your mistakes to work for you.

If modernist earnestness seems little more than a memory, that's hardly to say that you'll find any postmodern pranksters here. These artists may be toying with our nostalgia for certainty about "the truth in art," but that's serious play meant to open eyes and minds, though more through seduction than through obstinacy. Concealment and disclosure, rectification and adornment, hesitancy and impulse, embarrassment and insouciance are all evoked somewhere among these works, and we should all be able to empathize with those emotions and impulses, with the unease and the pleasure they evoke.

To do that is to recognize how Holly Zausner's shameless revisions of the human body render the grandeur and absurdity of the carnal desire to outstretch the limits of one's self, and how the doors and peepholes of Theresa Hackett's painting-constructions tease vision's pathetic susceptibility to find an object to desire in the suspicion of concealment. Likewise, Maureen McQuillan's "parcels," "leaks," and suggestively titled "slips" convey the dippy yet dramatic glamour of being not quite able to hold oneself together, while Holly Miller's stitchings evoke the flesh to justify the tender regularity of their reasonable gestures through the micro-violence with which those gestures begin and end – a thousand points of puncture. **Finally, Drew Shiflett constructs her toy "stage sets," her theatrical landscapes and habitations which I suspect Florine Stettheimer would have loved, as invitations to lose oneself in a disheveled and somehow friable reality that by merely pretending to replace or represent or describe (or by pretending not to, which may be the same thing) the one we're familiar with, actually succeed, a little bit but just enough, in doing so.** The point is that it's so much art as the world that needs revision, but to play at revising art is to practice reworking one's world.

Barry Schwabsky