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Lucid Dreaming: The Market of Genius

By Beth E. Wilson



ZHANG HUAN, ASH ARMY, ASH, STEEL, WOOD, 25" x 15 7/8" x 16", 2008. COURTESY OF PACEWILDENSTEIN GALLERY.

What happens when there's an inexorable demand for artists to be original—that is, to develop some indelible, personal “signature style” for their work, thereby differentiating themselves from the thousands of other artists currently at work? If you demur, thinking that someone making good work should be understood and accepted, regardless of whether the painting/sculpture/whatever looks a bit similar to something published in last month's Artforum, think again. Art school critiques these days are frequently recitations of the various influences/similar ideas to be recognized in the student work.

Critic Rosalind Krauss some time ago wrote a famous essay titled “The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths,” which made a postmodernist point about the impossibility of absolute originality, holding that everything’s already been done, so the only thing left is to recycle the past. Thus, quite logically, followed her support of artists like Sherrie Levine, who (among others) launched the ironically “new” strategy of appropriation art in the late 1970s and 1980s.

But where does that demand for constant novelty come from? The market continues to look for that latest hook (like appropriation), making new art stars along the way with impunity. Now many of these big names really deserve the attention—they got where they are because they really do good work—and I’m sure that over time, the flash-in-the-pan types will fade from memory, as the depth of the others becomes more and more apparent.

bring this up because of a show that opens this month at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill. “Origins” brings together an impressive roster of blue chip contemporary artists—30 of them, from Louise Bourgeois to Martin Puryear—focused on work that uses primal materials such as clay, fiber, wood, and stone. It marks a major step forward for the HVCCA as an institution, as its first show made up primarily of loans. (The center, which opened in 2004, was founded by Marc and Livia Straus, and their collection has been the basis for the shows organized there to date.) The show will be opening this month, along with the latest edition of the Peekskill Project installed throughout the city.

The show began with an invitation from the Westchester County Arts Council, to participate in its fall ’08 initiative “celebrating clay-based artwork.” Not surprisingly, the show quickly grew to include not only ceramics, but a wide range of other materials deemed close to nature. This move away from a purely media-defined show reveals another of the contradictions embedded in today’s art discourse—despite the supposed postmodern erasure of distinctions between high and low, or fine versus applied arts, maintaining one’s allegiance to a specific medium carries with it old-school connotations of craftiness, of a humble, less intellectual path into the work. The preference for a more polygamous relationship to various artistic media in contemporary art has been dubbed the “post-medium condition.”

Interestingly, there is no single curator for “Origins,” but, rather, a group of six or so people, recommending artists and/or works among themselves (and who prefer to remain nameless). Now the people associated with the HVCCA tend to be very smart (and very well connected), but this group process has produced an exhibition that seems closer to a market survey of the moment, rather than much in the way of a really unified curatorial theme. I can guarantee that there will be work that is well worth the visit, like Zhang Huan’s exceedingly delicate *Ash Army*, a bust of a Chinese soldier, modeled on Huan’s own features, made of the ash produced by burned incense. Going by the press release, I imagine this fragile beauty must fit within the rubric of “the human figure as a focus of expressive possibilities,” as opposed to the other main theme, work that presents its raw materials in a more direct, presumably nonrepresentational, fashion.



CARL ANDRE, 64 SQUARE ALUMINUM, ALUMINUM, 3/8" x 64" x 64", 1969. COURTESY OF PRIVATE COLLECTION.

This division of the exhibition is more of a convenient way of grouping so much work than it is a critical curatorial statement, and ultimately the show seems to be more of an embarrassment of riches than anything else. Now, due to monthly deadline pressures, I am writing this in advance of the actual installation of the show, so the actual installation of the work may add a layer of meaning that is difficult to envision when presented with the extensive artist list, and the minimal curatorial statement. Looking at the list, I wonder, though, how they will contend with having both Carl Andre and Ana Mendieta in the same exhibition. (Has anyone even dared to do this before?)

Andre was a major figure in the development of both Land Art and Minimalism starting in the 1960s. He specialized in modular sculptures of minimally processed materials, often splayed out on the floor, as with *64 Square Aluminum*, included in the show. (Even though it's still an uncomfortable challenge to museum visitors today, you're actually supposed to walk across this carpet of metal plates.) In the 1980s, Andre married a young, brilliant, up-and-coming sculptor and performance artist named Ana Mendieta. She'd made her name doing her own earth-based work, crafting simplified effigies of her own body (or digging out the impression of it) in the landscape, sometimes burning in this *silhueta* (silhouette) by igniting gunpowder. (I guess the *Silhueta* work included in this show would probably place her in the "figurative" subgroup.)

The marriage was short, and met its untimely end with Mendieta's death in 1985, when she either jumped or was pushed from the 34th-floor Greenwich Village apartment she shared with Andre. Her friends were dismayed, claiming that she was definitely not suicidal or depressed; there was an inquest and a grand jury considered murder charges against Andre, but declined to indict him for lack of evidence. To this day many still think him responsible, however; in the wake of the O. J. Simpson acquittal, the Guerilla Girls issued a poster calling Andre "the O. J. of the art world."

Given this history, I'm very curious to see how exactly the HVCCA will contend with the tension produced by having both artists included in the show—either they put them at opposite corners of the space, pretending that they have nothing to do with each other, or else they install the works in a proximity that raises all sorts of uncomfortable questions. (Whether those can be resolved is a whole other question.) In any event, the one thing that both artists share is a blue chip profile in the art market—which is, I'm afraid, the main message that many may take away from this show.

“ORIGINS” OPENS SEPTEMBER 13 AND WILL BE ON VIEW THROUGH JULY 26, 2009, AT THE HUDSON VALLEY CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART IN PEEKSKILL. AN ARTISTS’ RECEPTION WILL BE HELD ON SEPTEMBER 14 ROMF 4 TO 6PM. “PEEKSKILL PROJECT 08” ALSO OPENS ON SEPTEMBER 13 AND WILL BE ON VIEW AT LOCATIONS THROUGHOUT THE CITY UNTIL NOVEMBER 23. (914) 788-0100; WWW.HVCCA.ORG.