

Paris 3

9/15/2005

Howdy All. Here's some more of the stuff that I did with Elise, before I go into solo excursions.

We went to the Pompidou Center for Modern Art (Paris' answer to MOMA). It's a building that many people hate, and it's certainly not 'pretty', but much to my surprise, I rather liked it. It's got a subversive sense of humor to it. The joke? It's turned inside out. Virtually all of the 'mechanicals' of the building (Heating, Ventilation, Stairs, Elevators etc.) are on the outside of the building, painted in bright primary colors. And there's method to the madness. By putting all of this stuff on the outside, there's more open, contiguous exhibition space.



(Pompidou, strutting it's bad self...)

Part of the museum was closed for work on new exhibits and renovation. A pity, as Elise had really been looking forward to seeing their collection of surrealist paintings. Instead, there was a big, sprawling exhibition called 'Big Bang', based on some pretty dodgy curating concepts. The exhibit was broken into sections like 'Sex', 'War', 'Parody', 'Construction/Deconstruction' etc.

Each of these were broken into sub-divisions like 'Transparency', 'Conceptualisation', 'White Room', 'Mirror/Entropy' etc. ad nauseum. I am allergic to academic-speak and over-conceptualizing (especially when the concepts seem thin to the point of transparency themselves). So I tended to read the little descriptions in each room, shrug my shoulders like the anti-intellectual I am, and then look at the art.

Oh yes, the art. Into each of these hermetically-conceptualized rooms were thrown, hither and yon, an almost random selection of stuff from their collection. Elise objected to pieces from the 70's standing cheek-by-jowl with pieces from the teens and twenties, though, ignorant spectator that I am, I didn't really mind. We both objected to the relative paucity of REALLY GOOD STUFF in the collection. There were a few pieces that caught the eye, a few more that were funny or cute for a minute or two, and a whole lot, from many different periods, that just left me cold. I also objected to the shoddy presentation. A perfect example: Meredith Monk's superb video 'Ellis Island', which is 28 minutes long and has some of her beautiful music in it, was shown on a tiny TV, with a tinny speaker at low volume, and nowhere to sit! Is this respecting the slow, meditative truth of this work, to make it uncomfortable to the point of futility to try and experience it and digest it undisturbed?

But here's some stuff I did like... First one of the oldies but goodies:



(The biggest damn Giacometti sculpture I've ever seen. I love his stuff. This was the only piece @ the Pompidou, and it made me miss the humungous collection at the Zurich Kunsthhaus.)

Now on to more recent stuff...



(Yeah, I know, it's a braid of hair in a steel plinth... but I liked it, so sue me).



(Hanging mats of jute or hemp or something...)



(another view w/crazy cool shadows)



(Hanging aggregation of framed photos. Elise didn't like that they were all body parts as she wanted a larger scope. I just didn't like that the same body parts were recycled, big and small, over and over ad infinitum. We both agreed that this is a perfect example of the problem with a lot of recent art – interesting idea, shoddy, lazy, half-realized execution. Still, it has potential.)

Yup, not a lot of great stuff, especially compared to the D'Orsay or the Rodin (yeah, more on him soon).

That said, there was something stunning (and for me, I mean REALLY stunning), and that part of the exhibit was done up right, with due respect to another artist's hypnotically slow and meditative piece (five pieces, really) of video/installation art: Bill Viola's '5 Angels for the Millenium' (2001).

This exhibit of 5 videos was set in a severely-darkened room, so you had to proceed with caution, but as a result of the dark, you were properly enveloped in the works; they became the entire environment. Each video is an extremely slow-motion recording (with loud slow-motion sound too – really LOOOW notes) of him diving into and being

pulled out of beautifully lit pools of water. I know, it doesn't sound like much, but it's at turns harrowing, joyous, inspiring, and hypnotic. All of the pieces are very slow and require a *long* attention span.

My third favorite one is a reversed dive, where the calm water, with streams of light is disturbed from below as the body rises (indeed, like an angel) from the water, until it disappears above and the water is once again calm, but not before the incredible violence and natural 'choreography' (for lack of a better word) of the foaming, exploding water takes your breath away.

My second favorite seemed to be a forward slo-mo play of him being pulled rather quickly up and out of the water, with incredible slow-mo spirals of scintillating droplets flying off into the beautiful gauzy suffused light.

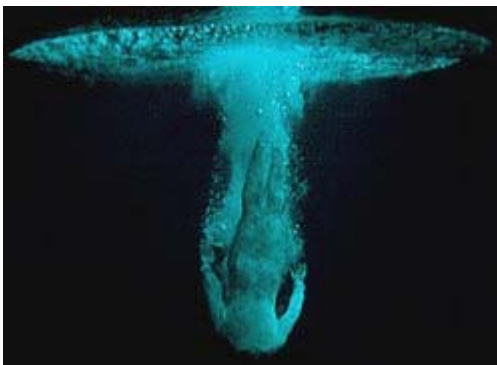
And my favorite was a forward play of a dive. He dives, producing this booming column of water. The column rises further until it forms a frothing, exploding mushroom cloud at the surface, with him at the bottom.

All in all, the work is scary, beautiful, peaceful and apocalyptic: a walking contradiction that asks more questions than it answers (or at least engenders many complex and seemingly contradictory emotions that beat at one another in a gorgeous kind of symmetrically balanced cognitive dissonance). Yet, beyond all of that, it's also somehow soaring and... religious, for lack of a better word. 21st century liturgical art, in an odd, indefinable way.

Most of the really new art that I like somehow involves capturing or conspiring with nature's beautiful randomness (I recall some art in Prague where a guy managed to ink the beautiful fern-like patterns of ice you sometimes see on panes of glass on cold winter days). If and when I find time to approach the visual arts again, randomness, natural symmetry and asymmetry, things like surface tension, gravity and radiance, as well as organic forms like leaves, ice and insects and soil will definitely inform my work as well, though I doubt I will ever innovate anything as simple, obvious, subtle and not-so-subtle as Viola's great idea.

His stuff eclipsed everything else in the huge museum for me, and was well worth the price of admission on its own.

Here's a still I stole from the Tate museum web site, but I may be doing more harm than good. A still doesn't capture it. It demeans it somehow. You need the slow, slow, slowly developing motion, like watching something being born, and the overpowering deep bass sound that provokes both thoughts of post-nuclear anxiety and something like unconscious memories of the rushing sound of blood in the womb. Yup, this photo may be a bad idea, but I hope that perhaps it'll whet your appetite. I think the Whitney may also have this work on display.



(Viola's 'Mushroom Cloud')

Well, this one's getting big, so I guess I'll put Rodin et. al. in the next. So, how about a little miscellany?



(The beautiful Gare Du Nord (North Gate) train station.)



(We've had incredible skies/clouds every day.)



(One of Rousseau's most insane paintings, from the D'Orsay. Love that crazy horse with his tongue hanging out...)



(Plants seen through misted glass on a quiet Montmartre street.)



(Two bridges in one over the Seine – you can enter from the top level, or from the bottom and come up in the middle.)



(Paris is a city of beautiful bridges, though, alas, no suspension ones so far.)

Namaste

- Samuel