

# ARTFORUM

## "The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World"

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK  
Lloyd Wise

**THE PAST IS NEVER DEAD**—it's only a click away. And the artists in "The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World" immerse themselves in a networked, GIF-ed-up history that's as promiscuously accessible as it is screen-deep. Contemporary culture, claims the show's curator, Laura Hoptman, is defined by the compulsion to synthesize disparate historical tropes. Ergo, for artists today, movements such as AbEx, Minimalism, Constructivism, Fauvism, and De Stijl are no longer landmark steps along modernism's teleological progression, but tools in a toolbar or colors in a palette. The operative approach is that of a "connoisseurship of boundless information," per her catalogue essay, "a picking and choosing of elements of the past to resolve a problem or a task at hand."

This is presented as a good thing—and it may very well be. Yet the preconditions for such art have a dark side: The notion of atemporality at play here, borrowed from the work of science-fiction author William Gibson, is linked to a state of uncertainty and risk. Gibson explored the idea in his paranoid post-9/11 novel *Pattern Recognition* (2003), in which the heroine, Cayce Pollard, freelances as a "coolhunter," with a preternatural ability to divine what will be trending in a volatile, recombinant consumer culture where novelty is no guarantee of What's Next. "Fully imagined cultural futures were the luxury of another day, one in which 'now' was of some greater duration," says Pollard's client Hubertus Bigend. "Things can change so abruptly, so violently, so profoundly, that futures like our grandparents' have insufficient 'now' to stand on." Atemporal painting, then, is as much a happy outcome of

the late twentieth century's deconstruction of modernist myths of progress as it is a by-product of the real-world conditions of our panicky, hyperconnected present. The aesthetic of the age of precarity is inevitably marked by a reluctance to dream about the future and a concomitant drive to frenetically recycle the past.

Precisely how atemporality differs from theories of postmodernism (and the painterly styles attached to them) is one of the first questions raised by this exhibition's premise, and Hoptman, in her essay, goes to considerable lengths to distinguish the show's seventeen artists from the bricoleurs of yore. Indeed, the art on view offers little of the smug irony and slick sensationalism of, say, the International With Monument stable; but the decade of junk bonds and neo-geo heralded more than the death of the author, of course, just as the Pictures artists weren't the only ones we called po-mo. At times, the atemporal can even seem like a more inclusive version of neo-expressionism. At first, Nicole Eisenman's *Whatever Guy*, 2009; *Guy Capitalist*, 2011; and *Guy Racer*, 2011, appear to mock that very movement; these brushy, pallid portraits festooned with photos of African statuary are surely having some fun at the expense of the grandiose dudeliness of a Julian Schnabel or a Sandro Chia by parodying those artists' own cynical appropriation of the midcentury ideals of unbridled artistic subjectivity and primitivist immediacy. Yet it's hard to deny that this appropriation of appropriation, this parody of pastiche, can feel a little bit tenuous, a bit *stressed out*, or that the fragile edifice of second-order irony risks collapsing into yet another simulacral variant of the thing itself. Writing on the neo-expressionists in 1981, artist-critic Thomas Lawson sounds as though he could be discussing the artists here: "Appropriation becomes ceremonial, an accommodation in which collage is understood not as a disruptive agent . . . but as a machine to foster unlimited growth." For Lawson, though, this unlimited growth was bad.

Still, as "The Forever Now" makes abundantly clear, the endless proliferations of our anxiety-laden moment have yielded plenty of powerful work that does go beyond the pictorial culs-de-sac of the *Less Than Zero* generation, with highlights ranging from Michaela Eichwald's explosively dark abstractions to Joe Bradley's atavistic glyphs. And if the resurrection of 1960s-era sculptural decon-

struction of "painting" is a box that needs ticking, it's hard to imagine anyone more perfect to fill it than Dianna Molzan. The Los Angeles-based artist's sense of kissing, coruscated color and calibrated coyness give shape to winking enigmas of desire, reanimating the endgames of Manzoni and Ryman to strange and mysterious effect.

If one artist is representative of the show, it is Josh Smith, who cranks out paintings in a wide range of ahistorical styles at a dizzying pace, stirring up an ahierarchical flurry of pure and multifarious production. As manifest in Smith's practice, this is compelling—at once imitating and infiltrating the visual glut of our moment. Yet as a curatorial model, it has pitfalls. "The Forever Now" is scattershot, its purposeful inclusiveness resulting in vibrancy but also incoherence. The artists are each represented by a small handful of works, arranged like so many art-fair booths. There is a sense that the intent was

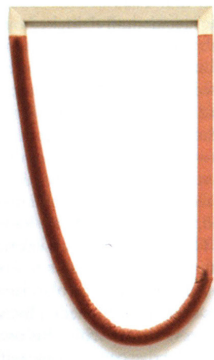
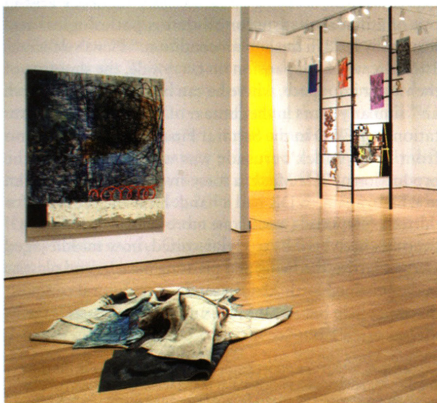
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to include the broadest range of practices possible, and a clear narrative thread has been lost; the show seems hard-pressed to account for the elusive cool. And so it points to a familiar difficulty: that of establishing aesthetic criteria in an age of cultural pluralism—a problem, it so happens, at the core of *Pattern Recognition*.

"The 'cool' part—and I don't know why that archaic usage has stuck, by the way—isn't an inherent quality," Pollard explains to a Russian "viral advertiser" named Magda. "It's about a group behavior pattern around a particular class of object. . . . I try to recognize a pattern before anyone else does." But as we learn from Gibson's novel, such patterns can also be illusions—hallucinated signals in the noise. Better to hedge your bets; better to bring everyone to the party, because you can't know who will be trending next. "We have no future because our present is too volatile," says Bigend. "We have only risk management." □

"The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World" is on view through Apr. 5.

LLOYD WISE IS AN ASSOCIATE EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.



From left: View of "The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World," 2014–15. Floor, foreground: Paintings by Oscar Murillo, 2012–14. Left wall: Oscar Murillo, *1/2*, 2014. Background: Kerstin Brätsch, *Sig's Erben (Agate Psychics)*, 2012. Photo: John Wronn. Dianna Molzan, *Untitled*, 2011, oil on canvas, 37 x 21 1/2 x 1 1/2". View of "The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World," 2014–15. Nine paintings by Josh Smith, 2006–13. Photo: John Wronn.

