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Art in Review

'Perfect Man II'

By Holland Cotter. October 6, 2011

White Columns

320 West 13th Street, West Village

Through Oct. 15

In 2007, at the gallery White Columns, the artist Rita Ackermann organized an exhibition called "The Perfect Man Show" that consisted almost entirely of art by women and took 21st-century feminism as its theme. By implication, "the perfect man" of the title either didn't exist or didn't matter.

Now comes the sequel, and, as if to right a balance, it's a nearly all-male affair, one that attempts to take the measure of — what to call it? — contemporary masculine-ism, a subject so weighty, not to say leaden, that Ms. Ackermann recruited a second curator, Parinaz Mogadassi, to help out.

It looks as if they had fun with this project. They've given it a heroicizing description: "The focus of this exhibition is on those men who are on a quest, on the cold and sharpest blade of a knife," and so on. And — what really counts — they've made smart, offbeat choices of art and artists.

The visual testosterone level is fairly high. Markus Lüpertz's gigantic bronze "Shepherd" dominates the beginning of the show, along with a prickly junk relief called "Hammer of Doom," by the hip-hop-inspired Rammellzee, who died in 2010. And there are sports-bar themes in Malcolm Morley's painting of a hockey goalie and an installation by Antoine Catala with college football broadcasts blasting from facing flat screens.

Mr. Catala adds a third element, though. Between the facing screens he has placed a distorting mirror that turns both the broadcast pictures and the figure of the reflected viewer into cartoon images. A lot of the show looks that way.

In a gallery devoted to the theme of labor, everything appears to be either absurd or a failure, or both. In a video from 1968 we see Richard Serra's hand repeatedly trying, without success, to grasp bits of falling matter. A 1983 photograph by the Hungarian avant-gardist Miklos Erdely (1928-86) records a man hammering two nails into a wall just so he can have something to hang the hammer on. And there's Dan Graham's 1966 "Detumescence," a written account of a chronic male performative shortcoming.

One of the show's messages seems to be that when men don't try hard to be "male," they do better. The modest delicacies served in paintings by Kai Althoff suggest that a new type of man, imperfect and proud, has emerged in art in the last few decades, though not without resistance, as Ken Okiishi's astute video on one questing man illustrates.

In this piece, the best in the show, Mr. Okiishi revisits the artist David Wojnarowicz's 1980s diaristic accounts of his obsessive search for sex on abandoned piers that once lined the Hudson River near Chelsea. The video, however, transports Wojnarowicz (pronounced voy-nah-ROH-vitch), who died in 1992, into the present (via an actor playing him) and has him frantically pacing around the colossal family-fun sports-and-entertainment center called Chelsea Piers, which has replaced his old, illicit haunts. For better or worse, and probably some of each, the time of living on "the cold and sharpest blade of a knife" is over.

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to see which one prevails.