

Xavier Cha

Moving Arts: Power, professionalism and perversity: Looking back at the 2006 art scene

By Jerry Saltz

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Before New York museums and galleries get back into gear, let's look in the rearview mirror at the art season of 2006. A lot of people were saying the art world was going to hell. Perhaps, but people have been saying this for the better part of a century, and nonstop since 1982. Of course, there *is* a lot to raise eyebrows about nowadays, notably the runaway train of the art market. This will be dealt with here in the weeks to come. For now, a blog entry of Damien Crisp, a gifted MFA student at the School of Visual Arts, captures some of the anger, distrust, and frustration felt these days by students entering an art world awash in success, money, and professionalism. Crisp writes, "Art schools are pumping out artists like clay shooting targets. The paths to success are marked-out and worn-down. These paths aren't about creating interesting work; they make you walk the line. Reading Walter Benjamin year after year only keeps the power structure intact."

Last year the institutional variety of that "power structure" veered from thrilling to clueless to criminal. Starting with the criminal—instead of renovating its tremendous 22 nd Street Chelsea headquarters, establishing another building, or just opening a temporary New York space, the Dia Center for the Arts abandoned Manhattan by shutting down all of its rotating exhibition spaces in the city. It is mind-boggling and heartbreaking that not one of the trustees or the ex-director (who in a very Bush-like move abandoned the institution after he shut it down) resigned over or openly protested this irresponsible action.

Similarly, the Drawing Center has wasted years contemplating a misguided move to ground zero and is supposedly continuing to mull relocation to the South Street Seaport, where it will be little more than a tourist attraction. The Drawing Center needs to snap out of it, join the fray, hire a good new director and curator, and move to either Chelsea, the Lower East Side, uptown, or even Brooklyn. Maybe the Drawing Center should take over Dia's old building since Dia isn't going to swallow its pride, admit it made a mistake, and move back in. Whatever happens, it's time for all of us (me included) to stop looking the other way when our institutions behave in such cavalier manners. We all love Dia and the Drawing Center, but we need to let them know that we won't stick with them if they continue not sticking with us.

On the institutional upside, if all goes well, in around 60 months the Whitney Museum of American Art will move into a new building in the West Village. By then the museum will have gotten much right and much wrong. It will have had to cater to internal and external demands, appease competing neighborhood groups, mollify city officials, and suffer unforeseen setbacks. Whatever happens, the Whitney's rethinking and reimagining what a New York cultural institution could be are already having positive ripple effects. MOMA, having rebuilt beautifully but far too small, has subtly acknowledged this by hinting that it may build again on land it owns next door. If so, the square footage for its magnificent permanent painting and sculpture collection, as well as the photography collection, should be quadrupled, at least.

The Whitney's move is bold, but it could do one more momentous thing that would recast its destiny overnight. The Whitney should remove the provincial word *American* from its outdated title and rename itself the more open, optimistic, and accurate Whitney Museum of Art. One way to take the temperature of the art market is to look at one of the art world's big-cheese art magazines, *Artforum*. Ten years ago last month, the entire issue of *Artforum* had a total of 120 pages. Last month *Artforum* had more than more than twice that many pages of ads alone in its 352 pages. Let's be clear. I'm *not*

accusing *Artforum* of any correspondence between the number of ads and its editorial policies or content. Ads are fine; they're the porn of art magazines. Yet we all need to think about what this much advertising means and how it is affecting the ways we think about and see art.

Before I mention a number of last year's more memorable New York gallery solo exhibitions, let's not forget that only 24 percent of those shows were by women. Among last year's standouts were shows by our own queen of night, Kara Walker, whose harrowing video featured silhouette puppets acting out a stygian nightmare of plantation slaves, necrophilia, and excretion. Similarly harrowing but more brooding was *Chasing a Ghost*, Nan Goldin's three-screen lamentation to her suicide sister. Goldin's tour de force found this great photographic poet of the dead returning to top form. Other standouts included exhibitions by the demon griot Tamy Ben-Tor; the lone wolf Klara Liden; the ambitious gypsy Amy Sillman; the rogue medicine woman Xavier Cha; Jennifer Bornstein, who deftly melded photography, etching, and folk art; and Nathalie Djurberg, whose debauched stop-action clay animations were Rabelaisian fairy tales.

Other standouts included Dasha Shishkin, Jackie Saccoccio, Seth Price, Thomas Hirschhorn, Marilyn Minter, Josiah McElheny, Cheney Thompson, Wade Guyton, Aaron Young, Harrell Fletcher, Mark Grotjahn, and perhaps best of all, the exhibition by the living lord of chaos, Sigmar Polke.

Finally, I still think Steven Mumford's wan drawings of the war in Iraq are generic illustration, but in the spirit of the New Year, I must say the paintings he showed earlier this season had a density of vision, complexity of space, and richness of surface.

Maximum Voracity

Many of last year's good solo shows didn't garner as much attention as they maybe deserved; among them were outings by Joyce Pensato, Benjamin Edwards, Ellen Altfest, Kate Gilmore, Jessica Jackson Hutchins, Stuart Hawkins, Jennifer Dalton, Guy Ben-Ner, Karen Heagle, Judith Linhares, Chris Minor, Halsey Rodman, Tommy White, Keith Mayerson, Joe Fig, Mindy Shapero, and Sara VanDerBeek. One sleeper still on view is Jackie Saccoccio's uneven, retinal thought storm of an exhibition, which brings to mind baroque ceiling swirls, floral patterns painted on Japanese vases, and iced fog, and has what Georges Bataille called an "unstoppable repugnant voracity."

Saccoccio's paintings come dangerously close to looking like mid-century abstraction, particularly the work of artists like Joan Mitchell and de Kooning. Yet if you spend time in this show, the old-school quotient subsides and sparks begin to fly.

This is partly because Saccoccio has installed a number of large fluorescent-colored paintings atop calligraphic drawings made directly on the wall. You begin to get that she is nervily trying to combine the verve of Mitchell, the analytic painting-is-part-of-the-world conceptualism of Sol LeWitt, and the hardcore graphicness of Christopher Wool.

Saccoccio is in love with painting's expansiveness. She wants to literally go beyond the confines of the canvas. Here, the walls turn into roiling landscapes and biomorphic diagrams of cities. This makes the adamantly abstract paintings feel like real occupants of this unreal, diagrammatic realm. Then the effect reverses and the paintings turn unreal and the walls reassert themselves. Paintings hung on bare walls elsewhere in the gallery become loners living off the grid. If Saccoccio rids herself of the considerable whiffs of old abstraction, she won't be a dark horse much longer.