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FRANCIS BACON, Marlborough Gallery; "An Australian Accent," P.S. 1; PIÑA BAUSCH. 1980, Brooklyn Academy of Music:

FRANCIS BACON

Francis Bacon's new paintings continue again his secure mastery of a by-now-familiar vocabulary, and yet, with the artist aged 75, still strike new notes. Bacon's position seems trouble-free at this moment. Through the ages of abstraction and minimalism he remained one of the very few representational painters about whom even desecrated formalists could feel good. Now the forefront of things has caught up with him; in both his sitting — of Carnabys, Van Gogh, Velázquez, Ingres, and of photographic images — and his kind of exploration of space. The opposition between the illusionistic, three-dimensionality, space representation and the flat, concrete space of minimalist abstraction offers a conceptual dilemma which Bacon was among the first to bring into the open, exploring, as he put it, "the difference, in fact, between paint which conveys, directly and paint which conveys through illustration." Since about 1950 his canvases have involved limited areas of illusionistic depth surrounded and separated by areas of flat part suggestive of fabric. Certain areas remain highly ambiguous as to which view of space they more openly express. Recent work called post-Modern has been prominently occupied with this question, justifying and negating the two kinds of space in ways that often question the reality of either.

In Bacon's new work his familiar vocabulary of depth definition is used. Hints of perspective poles through orange grounds (a feature of his earlier paintings) and create momentary twines for the drama of the representation. Furniture also performs the space-thickening function of weaving an illusionistic platform from the ingenuity of the ground. As in the "Pope" paintings of 1951, areas of three-dimensionality are sometimes mixed in by surrounding perspectival boxes or boots. Most of the new works show naked male human whose anatomy strays off into spaces blurs and melts into dippings on the floor. Seen through the dissembling veils of time, the figures are hopelessly often have legs and feet where arms and hands are expected, and, in three-legged-and-monster aspect, seem homoerotic into a buttonless-centered humanity. These figures act out what Bacon has called "the shortness of the moment of existence between birth and death," undergoing before our eyes an impersonal drama of absorption into the voids/ground. Caustic as it is on operating tables, partial as if on meat racks, they briefly and weakly state the message of their existence and their desire. Space itself, the property of being endowed, erodes/then instantly, flattening, the illusionistic stuff into mute objecthood. Here Bacon turns the contradiction between the two panoptic models of space into pure content, excising his figures upon it. Though elegantly sweetened by pastel amid the acrilyc, these works still exude something of the "exhausted despair," as Bacon called it, of the earlier works. Two paintings of less familiar type take Bacon's sense of spatiality and expand it, first into an outdoor urban scene in Statues and Figures in a Street, 1963, then into cosmogony in A Piece of Land Waste, 1980. These pieces hint at new wonders that may flow from Bacon's confrontation with me facts of body, space, and the world.

"An Australian Accent"

This show of works by three Australian painters not seen in this country before was right on the issues of the moment; it made one wonder how much intelligent and mature international painting goes relatively unseen here. The post-Modern concern with mediating surface and self — terms that can be applied to both painted space and the sense of self — is basic and well-understood ingredient of much of this art. Mike Parr's large horizontal works on paper address the dilemma directly. Each features on its left side a representational charcoal self-portrait of the artist in a relatively con- text of deep space, this context is strangely tortured and twisted, however, and is balanced on the right by an expressively inscribed melding of the surface which comprises deep space, sometimes to an extreme of flatness. Parr, formerly a performance artist, incorporates performance elements into the works, giving them interesting formal and conceptual layers. Sometimes, they are also handsome or intriguing aesthetic presences.

Like Parr's, maters Tillett's large paint- ings incorporate both conceptual and performance elements. Each is a vast jigsaw composed of many small canvas panels, all identical in size and shape, and all painted with a fragment of the total image system. These small canvases may be stacked on the floor, in a minimal/conceptual type of installation, or arrayed on the walls as representational paintings. But when they are com- posed on the walls, it is found that the jigsaw is compromised; confus¬ ing edges do not necessarily read cor¬ regularly, and so on.

Most interesting is how Tillett deals with the interface between the deep and shallow models of space. In some works, grids asserting the primacy of the ground are jostled by arthur-drawn fig¬ ures which bring no environment of deep space with them. In others the ground is worked and reordered in a variety of ways till it becomes a kind of wooly surface. In this enacting stuff, images from different contexts and of different scales flow over one another, as in filmic superimposition. The images are all quoted, found ones, and their rela¬ tionships part to a semiotic infinite re¬ gress. As, for example, areas that func¬ tion as ground in one reading function in another as figure. Sometimes figurative incidents relate in joking ways to the ambiguous density of the surface that surges around them; small landscape vistas open up here and there, with in which tiny dramas arise. One studies the most successful works, like Palpably¬ Man, 1984, as if from two feet as twenty, finding quite different paint¬ ings and experiences.

Ken Unsworth's paintings are con¬ cerned less with the question of space and self with than with the post-Modern substitu¬ tion of dramatic for formal values. Though works on paper, they are so heavily built up with bitumen — and alum¬ inum-based paints as to appear heavy. Unsworth's cartoon-like images are appropri¬ ated partly from the domain of the horror novel and the horror comic, partly from his own earlier performance pieces. Birds start trouble everywhere as in Alfred Hitchcock's films, while hu¬ mans are attacked, tortured, and terrorized in a variety of ways. The images are hauntingly dramatic.

In all these works we are dealing with post-Modern, conceptual painting. Til¬ let's images are all appropriated. Un¬ worth and Parr, auth formerly body artists, try to mediate performance and painting by incorporating elements of their performances into their pictures. Both, for example, sometimes derive their images from photographs of their own performances. Many other artists who ten years ago felt that by doing performance they were working "closer to life" are also now juggling images in this way. But the nearer one is to life, the more different its nature becomes; insofar as images and their perceptions are of and for the mind, they embody life as consciousness. Yet paintings derived from performances often seem less compelling than photodocumentation of the theater and covered with soda. But the perform¬ ances themselves In any case, this strategy is emerging as another major subgenre of conceptual painting.

PIÑA BAUSCH

While Pina Bausch's work is consist¬ ently surprising, it is no altogether un¬ predictable. The four works seen here in her New York premiere — The Tale of Spring, 1975, Café Müller, 1978, Bluebeard, 1977, and 1960; all deal with the ancient motif of "Death and the maiden," or the Persephone Myth. In addition, all exhibit a Wagnerian leisure in making their points, and making them again and again, till all meaning the artist has access to has been wrung out of them, meanwhile, the intensity of concentra¬ tion rises in an almost demonic arc. Still, in other ways the four works are entirely different. I am here describing 1980, a work that revises the Dada per¬ formance vocabulary and brings it to life with astonishing vigor.

Except for a low platform, the stage is stripped bare back to the rear wall of the room. The light is dim. A youth enters, sits on the platform, and begins slowly, cata¬ tically eating. Couples enter as a Beet¬ hoven adagio is heard. Slow, droopy ball¬ room dancing begins. The dancers pa¬rade through the audience and back. One woman is separated from the others, who say goodbye to her, though all remain on stage. The magician Death enters to show his trick of making threads longer or cutting them short, as the Fates do in Greek mythology. A woman undresses a man and gives him a hotdog. A woman kisses a man till his face is red with lipstick. Two or three things are going on at once now, and then suddenly it's ten people are eating, dressing, undressing, exchanging clothes, cutting migs on plates, moving in every direction. A nearly naked girl is hiding demurely behind this person or that. Mae West is imitated. The stage...