

Pap goes the easel: Painting After Postmodernism, Belgium-USA



Pal Manes, *Departure* 2013, oil on canvas, 264.1 X 396.2 cm

Brussels—It’s being billed as a “manifesto exhibition,” and the curator, my friend, the art historian and filmmaker Barbara Rose, is happy to say, “This is a polemical show.” Indeed, the first line of her catalogue essay reads:

“This exhibition intends to prove that painting as an autonomous discipline can still make fresh, convincing statements as a living, evolving and significant art form that communicates humanistic values in an increasingly inhuman, technology driven globally networked world.”

The idea that an exhibition can “prove” anything strikes me as the most controversial part of this sentence; but when I thought about it a bit longer, I found myself happy to concede that this show of large works by eight Belgian and eight American painters, though of course of varying quality, amply demonstrates the truth of the argument that painting is not “dead, dying or of diminishing importance.”

Barbara Rose put the enormous, important show together with the painter, dealer, collector and art historian, Roberto Polo, when each sent the other material from exhibitions they’d recently visited, and she said, “Together we have stumbled on the future.” Polo summarized the argument in a note to me: “Barbara and I hope to

prove that every time that painting is declared dead it returns stronger, in a grander manner, than ever before; and that there is a new painting, sourced in our Western artistic heritage, but which, contrary to Postmodernism, does not directly quote and recycle it.” Barbara Rose has said that though it was “odd to find coincidences” between the Belgian and American artists in the show, perhaps it’s because most of them live “far beyond the madding crowd” with respect to biennales and art fairs. It’s apt that this show should happen in Belgium, where the first modern painter that springs to mind is the Surrealist Magritte, as there’s a touch of the earlier movement even in many of the abstract paintings on show – the space they create is other-worldly, to say the least. “Maybe,” says Rose, “it’s a reflection of the times in which we live: no stability, all flux, uncertainty.” (And is there any other way to regard Donald Trump’s preposterous Presidential campaign? It would have delighted Dalí and perhaps Duchamp, irritated Max Ernst, and driven Buñuel barmy.)



Paul Manes The Fifth Seal 2006 oil on canvas 264.2-x-198.1-cm

All the work on show at Vanderborght, a recovered and restored Modernist building, formerly a department store with an atrium, facing the Galeries Royales Saint-Hubert (there is another part of the show at the Cinéma Galeries), has sufficient vitality and vigour to challenge the simplistic notions that photography, or any of the -isms, from Surrealism to Minimalism, or schools and movements from Pop Art to Postmodernism or Poststructuralism, have killed off painting, or made it impossible. Most of the paintings displayed in Brussels are abstract, but there are three striking exceptions by Paul Manes, the massive tree trunk in *The Fifth Seal*, 2006, and the depiction of stacked bowls, as well as another of the bowls, both at rest and hurtling through the pictorial space of *Departure* 2013. I was lucky enough also to see Manes' massive, three-panel, James Ensor-inspired, apocalyptic *The Entry of Christ into New York, II*, 2006, which was on its way to be hung in Brussels Town Hall. This is not just figurative painting, but contains multiple portraits, used in a metaphorical mode that alludes to philosophical arguments, art history and even music, in a fashion that will be relished by those who also like the work, for example, of the late R.B. Kitaj.