

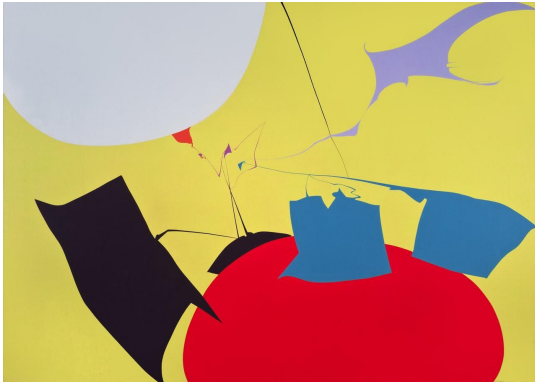
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ART REVIEW

'Chaos and Awe: Painting for the 21st Century' Review: Trying to Corral the Uncorralable

An exhibition makes it clear that painting today is frantically trying to keep up with the winking, blinking and noise of electronic media.



Heather Gwen Martin's 'Trigonometric Functions' (2010) PHOTO: HALLMARK ART COLLECTION, KANSAS

By Peter Plagens

July 7, 2018 7:00 a.m. ET

Nashville, Tenn.

'Chaos and Awe: Painting for the 21st Century' (whose title is unfortunately redolent of the "shock and awe" of the Iraq War) comprises work made before, or independently of, Frist Art Museum chief curator Mark Scala's idea for the exhibition. Like all anthology shows, this one is a kind of collage, a meta work of art. Of course, the products of artists are often used in ways their makers didn't intend, and contemporary artists are happy to be included in almost any reputable museum exhibition.

Chaos and Awe: Painting for the 21st Century Mr. Scala's operative thesis for this gathering of 52 works by 39 international artists is grounded in what he refers to as the world's "social body, billions of bodies" acted upon by "larger forces, which seem uncontainable." (We're talking global

*Frist Art Museum
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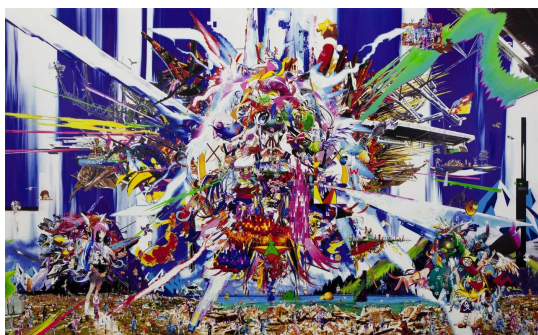
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warming, immigration, wars, political extremism, pollution, and more.)

This is about as big a theme for a show of paintings as ever there was. Naturally, questions arise: Does the show work? Why didn't a powerhouse museum in New York or Los Angeles come up with this sort of survey and take it on tour to more venues than the Chrysler Museum in Norfolk, Va. (where "Chaos and Awe" reappears beginning Nov. 15)? What does this exhibition including artists from, as Mr. Scala puts it, "the Congo to California" say about the current state

of painting?

The answer to the first question is yes and no. Regarding the second, you'd have to ask the Los Angeles County Museum of Art or the Museum of Modern Art (which, in 2014 mounted a smaller painting survey, "The Forever Now," with half the number of artists—all but three were American). Finally, "Chaos and Awe" makes it clear that painting today is frantically trying to keep up with the winking, blinking and noise of electronic media.



Kazuki Umezawa's 'Over the Sky of the Beyond' (2014) PHOTO: KAZUKI UMEZAWA/PIZZUTI COLLECTION

As is often the case, a single work can represent the thrust of a show. Here it's Corinne Wasmuht's enormous triptych (with almost invisible seams and

meant to be seen as a contiguous whole) "Bibliothèque/CDG-BSL" (2011). The title apparently refers to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris—a repository of about as much knowledge and opinion as can be crammed, in traditional physical format, into one place—coupled with the airport codes for Paris and Basel, Switzerland (home of the world's most prestigious contemporary art fair, which is held annually).

It's a daunting painting, both technically (oil paint on wood mounted on aluminum) and pictorially, with a kind of architectural psychedelia spread in organized form across almost 165 square feet of surface. If you step back far enough, you can see its three sections progressing, left to right, from mostly grayish to warmer colors and then to cool ones. Most of the imagery has been lifted from the exhibition's lurking foe, the internet. Its wildly varying scale (partial human figures five feet tall to some no more than little clots of paint) and institutional glare are supposed to say something, one assumes, about the socially, politically and culturally overwhelmed and unmoored state in which we currently exist.



Dannielle Tegeder's 'Lightness as It Behaves in Turbulence' (2016) PHOTO: DANNIELLE TEGEDER/CARRIE SECRIST GALLERY, CHICAGO

"Chaos and Awe" contains some wonderful paintings. Among them are Dannielle Tegeder's crisp and airy "Lightness as It Behaves in Turbulence" (2016); Heather Gwen Martin's bright,

Ellsworth-Kelly-on-a-trapeze “Trigonometric Functions” (2010); and “Everything” (2004), a handsomely absurd, rusty orange mélange of city maps by Guillermo Kuitca.

The abstractions and semi-abstractions here fare generally better than the figurative paintings because those modes are more tolerant of artists’ throwing in everything but the proverbial kitchen sink; some painters, such as Kazuki Umezawa with “Over the Sky of the Beyond” (2014) and Nashvillian James Perrin with “Semiosis on the Sea” (2015), toss veritable dishwashers and stoves onto the pile. One exception to representational painting’s second-tier status is Neo Rauch’s “Waiting for the Barbarians” (2007), in his trademark style of a 1930s magazine illustrator having been hit on the head and wandering the streets, disoriented. His subject is racism and colonialism, and the painting delivers political content more subtly and convincingly than any other work in the show. Its realism shows white colonizers preparing for an attack by natives, but the absurdist composition reveals the injustice of their cause.



Corinne Wasmuht's 'Bibliotheque/CDG-BSL' (2011) PHOTO: CORINNE WASMUHT/PETZEL, NEW YORK

At times, “Chaos and Awe” can look like a Master of Fine Arts degree exhibition on steroids.

Minimalism (with a small “m”)—with its emphasis on form, rigor and restraint—is woefully out of style these days, and seemingly every ambitious young painter wants to make, as the show’s catalog puts it, pictures “in the era of the LED-backlit computer and smartphone [that] often engage with the kind of spaces and effects that the electronic screen generates.” Alas, as the same catalog admits, “what can be achieved today through painting looks very circumscribed compared to what is possible in other more immersive and interactive media.”

All of this may make it seem as though “Chaos and Awe” isn’t an excellent show. It is, in its noble, practically heroic attempt to corral the uncorralable, and in its rough-and-tumble arm-wrestling with computer and TV screens. “Chaos and Awe” tries mightily to be a breakwater against the art world’s anti-painting waves. The catalog should be bought and read by everyone interested in serious painting today, and those worried about its state would do well to make a trip to Nashville or Norfolk.

Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.

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