

N.Y. / REGION | ART REVIEW | CONNECTICUT

The Nature of Time, Ever Passing

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO NOV. 20, 2009

By my count, it has been more than six years since the curators at the Yale University Art Gallery organized a show of contemporary art in all media. That is difficult to understand, given that the museum collects in this area and primarily serves students, including those studying at the nearby Yale School of Art.

The wait, however, has been worth it. “Continuous Present,” which examines how artists are working with ideas of time, presents some terrific contemporary artwork in an engaging yet scholarly way.

Organized by Jennifer Gross, the museum’s curator of modern and contemporary art, the exhibition includes the work of 11 well-known contemporary artists installed in the temporary exhibition galleries adjacent to the museum entrance. Some of the works are from the collection, but the bulk of them are on loan from other museums, galleries and collectors. There is a great deal of painting, but also works of film, video, photography, drawing and sculpture.

In addition to issues of time, the show inadvertently picks up on other trends in contemporary art. Much of the art lacks finish, or is process oriented, suggesting the influence of conceptualism. And even the less conceptual, more visually appealing pieces here are grounded in ideas that invite viewers to ponder the nature and passage of time.

On Kawara evokes the “continuous present” in his paintings of the day, month and year of execution, done in white letters on a flat background. The artist has been doing these date pictures since 1966, making this one of the world’s longest running conceptual art projects.

The ebb and flow of time is the subject of Francis Alys’s animated video loop of a woman pouring water back and forth between two glasses — a simple, meditative work that after a while becomes hypnotic, like listening to the tick-tock of an old clock, and the endlessness of time.

Other artists try to slow time down. For “Cabinet of” (2001), Roni Horn photographed a clown’s face, with long exposure times so as to capture facial gestures and subtle shifts in observation. Rather than a snapshot of a moment, this series of 36 photographs traces her subject’s movement through time.

Rodney Graham’s short film “City Self/Country Self” (2000) is, like a lot of contemporary art films, oblique. Things don’t ever really add up. Mr. Graham is a talented filmmaker with an eye for a sensual image, but this particular work — a looped sequence that follows two characters and a silk hat — comes off as visually captivating yet unresolved.

“The Way Things Go” (1987), by the Swiss duo Peter Fischli and David Weiss, is more focused. In this entertaining video, the artists have recorded a series of staged and carefully timed chain reactions using ephemeral materials. One event leads to another, and another, and so on, forming an endless narrative of interrelated incidents — a meditation on the inescapable importance of timing.

Instead of dealing directly with ideas of present time, many of the artists in this show work with the past, presenting art traditions in new ways. Franz West subverts the conventions of sculpture in “The Monster of the Black Lagoon” (2004), three painted papier-mâché blobs on metal stands resting on artists’ pedestals that have been tipped provocatively onto their sides.

Thomas Nozkowski’s abstract paintings also evince enormous freedom and imagination. They are raw, with a childlike simplicity; several are intriguing combinations of shapes resembling jigsaw-puzzle pieces. Showing here are half a

dozen made between 1973 and 2009, each of which is a little gem, redolent with the playfulness and serendipitous quality we have come to expect of him. It has been years since Mr. Nozkowski had a survey show, and this selection proves he deserves one.

An exquisite and strange painting of a prostitute by Laura Owens might not at first glance appear to have much to do with the theme, though according to the exhibition catalog it is based on a painting by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner in Yale's collection. Here, time is folded back on itself, with the artist subtly transforming a piece of art history into something vibrant and new.

"Continuous Present," Yale University Art Gallery, 1111 Chapel Street, New Haven, through Jan. 10. Information: (203) 432-0600 or artgallery.yale.edu.

A version of this review appears in print on November 22, 2009, on page CT12 of the New York edition with the headline: The Nature Of Time, Ever Passing.

© 2016 The New York Times Company