



Appeasing the gods of the Academy: Takeshi Murakami's *Sea Breeze*, Jason Rhoades' *Swedish Erotica* and Fiero Parts

# P.O.'d

On MOCA's "Public Offerings" BY DOUG HARVEY

WHAT WERE THE '90s ABOUT, ANYWAY? THE INTERNET? Raves? Corporate globalization and the return of civil disobedience? Pogs? Every other decade gets its own theme. In the art world, the '90s were about ritual sacrifices and scapegoating, designed to appease the gods of the Market, which had just collapsed, and the Academy, which had flourished under the rigorous discipline of poststructuralist theory. Julian Schnabel and Joseph Beuys were swept under a sticky rug, and the lessons in plausible deniability learned from the Reagan-Bush years became the template for art-critical procedure in the Clinton-time. Artists were encouraged to express "generosity" and to "emphasize the work's reception" by making small, clean, archival objects with no contestable formal or conceptual content. New, bargain-basement art stars, whose investment return was guaranteed, were manufactured. Critics, curators and academics accelerated an unspoken pissing contest, demonstrating their influence by championing heinously slight work, and deploying reams of authoritarian double talk and constituencies of gullible or indifferent collectors. In spite of all this (and more), some excellent artists were able to navigate their way to prominence, often accommodating the dictates of their indentured jet-set servitude and even incorporating them into the act.

A perfect example is Matthew Barney, the polymorphous Yalie pervert who landed the cover of *Artforum* at virtually the same time as his solo gallery debut. A former fashion model making sculptures out of chilled petroleum jelly, referencing gym culture, Lacan and pharmaceuticals, and flashing his shaved bung hole at "Dokumenta," Barney seemed the prototypical hybrid of hype and pandering that made art viewing in the '90s so enervating. Over the last decade, I've heard people express this criticism again and again, increasing in amplitude in tandem with Barney's growing emphasis on slick, high-budget, mythopoetic filmmaking. But in my book, Barney's got the goods. His work is opaque in a way that doesn't rely on the Market's 15-minute art-historical memory, and his footnotes actually expand it as opposed to propping it up. It translates a number of dry conceptualist strategies into a seductive media-friendly depth charge of gooey ambiguities. It looks good.

And it holds up. Barney's sculptural installations (*REPRESSIA* and *Transsexualis*) and videos (*DELAY OF GAME* and *MILE HIGH THRESHOLD: FLIGHT With the ANAL SADISTIC WARRIOR*, all works 1991), gathered as part of MOCA's "Public Offerings," are among the most rewarding art experiences currently available in L.A. The list of materials in his sculptures alone — wrestling mat, Pyrex, sternal retractor, silicon-gel pectoral form, human chorionic gonadotropin and cast petroleum jelly (what, no self-lubricating plastic?) — remain outside of the mainstream sculptural envelope. The look of this early work, a creepy but masterful aestheticization of systems of objects relating to the functions of the human body, still delivers the same powerful doses of unsettling idiosyncrasy and surprise as on its original impact. The simultaneity of bodily presence and absence gives it a chill as palpable as passing through the refrigerated housing for the weight bench molded from petroleum jelly. The queasiness of the already

verboten urge to touch these viscous, overgroomed surfaces throws the museological frame of sanitary surveillance into sharp relief. And it looks good.

If all the works in "Public Offerings" stood up as well, it would be a powerful and convincing show. Curated by Paul Schimmel, it is an ambitious survey of young '90s art stars through the work that marked their debuts into contemporary art history. Presumably meant as an argument for the efficacy of the star system and the observable superiority of grad-school art practice, the show falls woefully short as a convincing excuse for either. Although it's easy to ascribe questions of inclusion and exclusion to taste, in this case the selections hold up neither as an impartial historical document nor as a persuasive manifesto, which could have been assembled with fewer in-house standbys and moneyed arrivistes and a few more A-list talents. Even the better-known quantities don't add up to much. I never thought, for instance, that it was possible to think less of Damien Hirst. One-trick ponies like Janine Antoni and Rirkrit Tiravanija — whose work here shows promise that wasn't kept over the course of their subsequent careers — make a strong case for a few years of buffering postgraduate obscurity. Diana Thater's video projections are as flat and empty as they wanna be. Chris Ofili's limp abo-delic pattern paintings constitute a pretty vacant footnote to his role as the elephant-poop Mapplethorpe of the '90s. Go, First Amendment!

Sarah Lucas' oeuvre would be intriguing and funny if it turned out to be the work of a fictive personality, created by a disillusioned 26-year-old Midwestern farm boy with an MFA. The contingent of Murakami-come-latelines do better here than in the anemic and misrepresented "Superflat," with an amusingly Fluxusque 19-wheeled oroboro-cycle from Yutaka Sone (*Her 19th Foot*, 1993) and Yoshimoto Nara's 1995 *Cup Kids*, which will strike a chord with anyone who's sat too long in the sun watching kids get sick on the Mad Hatter's Tea Party ride at Disneyland. Less excusable are Tsuyoshi Ozawa's just-okay landscape photos made, what — interactive? — by a pile of futons. I'm so sure. Murakami himself eschews his considerable graphic skills for a slightly interesting exercise in the classic combination of male erotic dancing and conspicuous consumption of electricity (eight 16,000-watt klieg lights).

More engaging are the derivative but elegant second-generation conceptual minimalists like Gary Hume and Rachel Whiteread. Both create mute inversions of domestic architecture — monochromatic semigloss-housepaint paintings of outlined doorways, and plaster casts of negative kitchen spaces — oddly affecting in their ghostly re-inscription of the human on the ideal forms of material reductionism, but hardly epochal. Thomas Demand's nicely constructed (literally and conceptually) photographed origami dioramas of vacant crime sites harness similar emotional content to more complex and contemporary ends. Toba Khedoori's familiar enormous, waxy drawings on paper of theater seats and building façades have an appropriately glacial presence, though the conflation of the cramped and repetitive draftsmanship with the grandiose scale of the grounds reaches back to a sweet nostalgia and melan-

choly in the vein of de Chirico, with a splash of dog-hair Povera. Reminiscent of European painting in the '80s, the work represents more of a traditional continuity than a generational break. More up-to-the-minute are Michael Joaquin Grey's clay electron microscope, aluminum replica of Sputnik, and other assorted cargo-cult science-fetish objects, which recall the critically and publicly acclaimed gizmo art of Martin Kersels and Tim Hawkinson, neither of whom were important enough to make the cut here.

THE SHOW DID PROVIDE ME A COUPLE OF OPPORTUNITIES for reassessment. Jorge Pardo, best known as "that guy who got MOCA to build him a house as a work of art," seemed to have been pitching a more finely tuned Duchampian line in his (here reassembled) 1990 show of stepladders, warehouse pallets and lumber re-created in bubinga and other exotic woods. Sharon Lockhart, whose more recent work hasn't moved me, single-handedly curdles the stagy pedophilia of much contemporary figurative work with a few gruesome fake boo-boos. The rest of the local talent doesn't fare as well. The effort spent in reassembling most of the dozens of scattered Styrofoam-'n'-yellow-legal-paper furniture clusters from Jason Rhoades' *Swedish Erotica* and *Fiero Parts* (1994) should make this hilarious essay on utilitarian craftsmanship even funnier, but, incomplete and forlorn in the high-ceilinged Geffen police garage, the installation surrenders its original claustrophobic faux abundance for an annoying sense of ankle-biting clutter. This dispirited rendition of the one postgrad Rhoades work everyone in L.A. has already seen isn't going to do much to bolster his already vaporous hometown rep. Laura Owens' bad-boy contempt for painting seemed tired the first time around, and seeing these snotty canvases once again only reiterates the slight and embarrassing impression they made back then. Owens' purchase on the art world's attention is maintained only through massive infusions of the garbled advocacy of critic Lane Relyea — "She insists that her work's literal conditions be consequential (not apologize) for their figurative and vice versa" — whose intense pedagogical relationship with Owens helped secure her perch originally.

The catalog is chock-full of such strained prose, though mightily handsome in its overbudgeted '70s annual-report design. Amassing a short promotional essay for each artist and seven (count 'em, seven) lengthy historicizing theses, it attempts to position this art and the milieu it sprang from at the fulcrum of contemporary art history. Surfing through it, you get the impression that there are absolutely no grounds for questioning the vitality and importance of this art, and why should you, since you're having so much fun and learning so much? Close the book and the emerald glasses come off. The larger-than-life cover image of Sarah Lucas' *The Receptacle of Lurid Things* (1991) — a wax cast of the artist's erect middle finger — states the real text of this exhibition all too clearly: This is the canon. This is art history. No questions. If you don't like it, Pub Off. ☐

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