

The Midwest Art Quarterly

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“With nothing can one approach a work of art so little as with critical words: they always come down to more or less happy misunderstandings. Things are not all so comprehensible and expressible as one would mostly have us believe; most events are inexpressible, taking place in a realm which no word has ever entered, and more inexpressible than all else are works of art, mysterious existences, the life of which, while ours passes away, endures.”

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

Editorial: Regionalism as Historical Necessity

To kick off this first issue of the second volume of MAQ, it's important to restate the publication's main historical contention, and to continue developing it into a set of guideposts for anyone who would like to make or experience serious art in the artworld's provinces. (The Midwest is paradigmatically a province of the artworld.)

MAQ's grounding observation is that Contemporary Art—the thing which everyone with an MFA was schooled in; the stuff you see when you go to galleries, museums, art fairs, and -ennials—is, despite its apparent diversity, a relatively homogenous stylistic period, as coherently whole as any other period in art's history. It began in the 1970s and has been in decline longer than most would admit. We are able to say this because the period's vice grip on the collective art-viewing and -making consciousness is loosening: the institutions and worldview that have undergirded Contemporary Art for decades have begun the slow process of decay. Signaling this have been, for instance, the recent deaths of important art schools (and the distant but looming deaths, or else massive restructurings, of what's sure to be more). Closer to home and to MAQ's mission, Cleveland's important Front Triennial (a cousin of sorts to St. Louis's Counterpublic) in February announced its shuttering. Its demise suggests the current precarity of the institutional structures that have supported Contemporary Art, which were formed for the most part in the excitingly liquid economic order of the 1990s and will be decreasingly viable as political, fiscal, and social parochialism mounts globally over the coming decades.

More directly relevant to our *experience* of art than these institutional happenings is the general shift in subjectivity that has attended them. The past few years have sown an idea that has been outré, even anathema, for decades: that art is not about critique, or correctness, or explicating theories, or changing people's minds, or doing politics, or modeling this or that—art, instead, is wholly and simply about beauty. The historical period out of which we are emerging has been one in which the alienation of most people from the types of activity that could substantively alter social reality has compelled us all to displace our expectations for a different and better world onto things which could never really deliver one—hence art's vulgarization from a spiritual salve into a political cipher, which is mostly how it's understood today. The sorts of institutions we have mentioned, whose days in their present form are relatively numbered, have served as bastions for this false consciousness about what art is for. They have therefore made themselves the enemies of beauty. As they obsolesce, the process of forging from their rubble new systems for the display and creation of art will, necessarily, be a process of cultivating new aesthetic principles, renewed ideas of what the beautiful even is.

It should not come as a surprise that, as the Front Triennial's failure suggests, the crack-up of neoliberal society's world system for the display and production of art would first befall the places least involved in this decrepit social order. Nor should this state of ruin be mourned. With the breakdown of our reigning ideological

paradigm, artists everywhere are given an opportunity to articulate truly new sorts of historical experience through their art. Artists affected by the results of obsolescence earliest and most acutely—artists who may never have profited, by dint of geography or whatever else, from the declining system when it was in its fullest health—have nothing to lose from deserting the old program. Provincial artists, in other words, are uniquely positioned to begin the exigent work of creating new forms for culture after the end of Contemporary Art. This is MAQ's contention.

Whether in the Midwest or elsewhere, artist-run spaces, DIY galleries, scrappy one-off showings, and the like are the germs—but only that—of a new way. It is likely that they provide the preliminary structure, if not yet the content, of an artistic program for after the end of Contemporary Art. However, their historical fruition would have to entail not just a high level of activity, but the creation of new artistic forms. Concomitantly, this would demand the creation of aesthetically educated communities capable of encountering these forms on autonomous experiential and intellectual terms. Such communities might behave—though not necessarily look—like the historical avant-garde: artists making art for other artists. Their work would not only be positioned against, but express ideas incapable of being grasped by Contemporary Art's *official culture*—its Academy—which has failed many artists materially, and most artists spiritually. The present situation differs from this aspirational state insofar as “independent” ventures mostly operate as feeder programs towards academic legitimation; this would have to change.

Materially, artists in the provinces are uniquely positioned to begin such work, which would have far-reaching implications for culture at large. Yet it is unclear the extent to which the current social situation of artists prepares any of them psychologically—least of all those in the provinces—to capitalize on this historical opportunity. To be “artist-run” is perhaps the most ambitious project in a culture that undermines artistic leadership and aesthetic experience in so many ways.

Referring to the social potential of the artist in our era necessitates thinking historically about the artist's relationship to society. Society is an experiment more or less invented in the 18th century. It finds its microcosm in local communities, and takes a special interest in artists. Society requires the independence and free imagination of artists to advance itself, but it simultaneously fears and truncates such freedom in particular instances. Through the social upheavals of the 19th century, the artist's identity became primarily *déclassé*: artists came to have no clear affiliation with public, ruler, or anyone besides other artists. This signaled the birth of the idea of aesthetic autonomy: art for its own sake might serve as a proleptic fulfillment of Enlightenment philosophy's radical idea that human beings could be free to make decisions for themselves, instead of being subordinate to given mores.

Modernity, which began with the invention of the concept of society, is the historical period in which aesthetics is the primary means through which we relate to the world.

It became the role of the advanced artist in modernity to create and to clarify the novel aesthetic forms through which people could relate to a society in constant flux, and to workshop these forms into ever more acute experiential modes suited for a constantly unfolding present. The Contemporary period is defined by its steady reversal of this relationship: as these forms increasingly were opened up to appropriation and eventually to creation by the general culture, they lost their directive aspect and became merely instructional. Art became the rear-guard of culture, rather than a thing challenging and advancing it. Art's communities became continuous with the culture at large, rather than productively antagonistic towards it.

The offices of Contemporary Art are compelled to pay lip-service to the notion of artistic community because of their collective interest, as cultural lodestones, in maintaining the debased relationship between art, its communities, and culture in general. In real terms these institutions fail to develop community, instead instigating divisive social relations (e.g. culture wars). The idea that aesthetic experience itself holds saving power—that beauty is worthwhile—is liquidated in the process. Within this dominant culture, there is *no possibility* for the vanguard social function of the artist. Increasingly in the era of Contemporary Art, artists have been forced to adapt to anti-artistic, often overtly pseudo-political social pressures, or ignore them and risk their own irrelevance. Writing in the 1990s, the theorist Susan Buck-Morss considered that critical artists may opt to go underground in the future—and since then scores of them have. This indicates the disappearance of the critical project of the artist: to take advantage of artistic autonomy so as to develop a form of cultural leadership in their own historical moment.

Artists are now more divided than one is led to believe. There are the those who side with the mores and unshakable ethos of official communities and are therefore beholden to rigid party lines; there are those who desert, challenging such mores by pursuing aesthetic experience as finely as possible. Since its early 20th-century beginnings, critical theory has postulated that the former artist is fascist, the latter radical: an artwork that exhibits a true aesthetic tendency also exhibits every true political tendency as well. Historically, only the latter artists—who have challenged mores—have been beneficial for art and society. The former have been revealed to be conservative and moralistic, often to the point of actively repressing new art.

The project of the Midwest Art Quarterly is to challenge what we've come to assume is important art—*official art* manufactured in boardrooms—in the name of honing a special regional artistic product that may develop beyond the offices of the Contemporary academy. Artists alienated from the cultural outposts are primed to begin forging their own systems—to think brave ideas, to imagine new aesthetic forms. What is peripheral today may be what is historically necessary, even essential, tomorrow.

—B.S. and T.S.

Contemporary Art Museum Saint Louis

Paul Chan: Breathers

March 8-August 11



Installation view of works from the *Nonprojections* (left) and *Arguments* (right) series, from *Paul Chan: Breathers*. Photo by Troy Sherman.

Perhaps it's the idealist in me, but when I go to a major exhibition of some touted international artist (Chan is a recent MacArthur Genius), I still hope to find personality on display, something unique to that artist, through which I might learn how someone different from me sees the world. On this score, however, most major Contemporary exhibitions are a sheer let-down. Even the most esteemed of these artists seems like every other—disappointing in their sameness, submerging all personality or vision beneath the same set of concepts. Their work requires paragraphs to explain why they did what they did, typically justifying some object you could buy for a few dollars on Etsy.

Chan is wildly successful, though nothing in this exhibition remotely explains why. A friend of mine called the *Breathers* (his big nylon fan-bodies) vaguely “moving.” If they are, it's pure bathos: human forms rendered in a faintly ridiculous and haphazard way, with materials connoting kitschy highway-side commercialism. Some of these Chan calls *Bathers*, which is a nice little reference to Cezanne and Matisse, though this seems to insist that the awkwardness and tackiness of these objects is in some lineage with those artists' rendering of bodies. I'm not convinced.

Tackiness is not exactly a virtue. Yet Contemporary artists continually deploy it as a weapon against propriety, which is why we are drowning in mediocre Camp. The rest of the show—comprising Chan's *Arguments* and *Nonprojections* series—doesn't even benefit from any ambiguity. “Objects [that] refuse to operate the way they typically should” is what the wall text calls them. Contemporary artists are addicted to this way of talking: it shields them from ever having to engage with craft, and serves as a permanent artistic adolescence. The joke is always on “real art” for

thinking it's somehow exceptional. This trains its viewers to be suspicious of quality. And it only stops when enough people get so tired of being dragged down that they start asking for some genuine transcendence instead.

—S.J.

The Luminary

Moving Stories in the Making: An Exhibition of Migration Narratives

February 3-March 30



Installation view of *Moving Stories in the Making*. Photography by Virginia Harold © Moving Stories and The Luminary.

Again and again it needs to be said that the only thing that matters with respect to works of art *in their capacity as works of art* is whether or not they are good, which is to say whether or not we experience them as beautiful. In fact, art is only art by virtue of our ability to judge in just this way the things that we agree fall under its (art's) purview.

The WashU-centered theoryish thinktank that curated this Luminary exhibition (not to mention the academic discipline it peddles, “migration studies”) will in no way materially change the lives of migrants, let alone the social conditions that beget migrancy. That would need to have something to do with expropriating the school's \$12 billion endowment, or at least preventing it from busting unions. But even though political exhibitions like *Moving Stories* basically beg to be evaluated by nuts-and-bolts materialist metrics—in which case they would be evaluated negatively, always—art is not about any metrics at all, least of all materialist ones. It is about spirit: artistic quality has to do obliquely, and not at all intuitively, with politics.

There is one work of artistic quality in *Moving Stories*: Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya's *Of Soil and Sky*, a slight but imposing textile installation. Threads and cylinders hung from the top of a long thin tapestry make the work's peak seem weighty and its base weightless; yellow text jumps handsomely off of the weaving's red ground; an ensemble of vessels around the bottom of the piece, connected to its body by threads

pulled out from the text, were contributed by visitors, and the thin but sturdy relationship between these and the “primary” artwork seems to materialize something serious and unsimple about that buzzword, community.

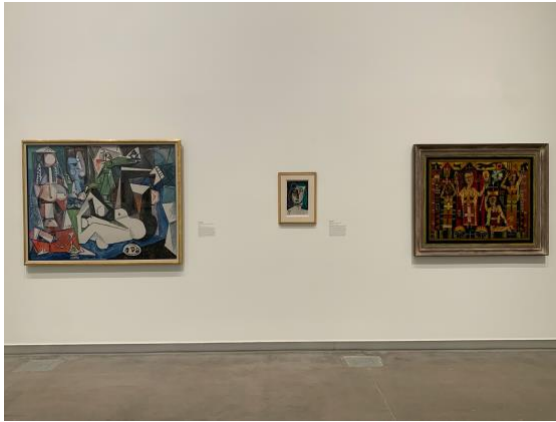
At least as far as art is concerned, not much else in the show is worth mentioning (besides perhaps Mee Jay’s decorative sculptures and Kiki Salem’s *Silver Lining*).

—T.S.

Kemper Art Museum

The Body in Pieces

February 16-April 1



Installation view of (left to right) two Picassos and Stevens’ *Arrival of the Village Princess*, from *The Body in Pieces*. Photo by Troy Sherman.

The Kemper’s short-run presentation of modern art from its collection is, like the museum itself, small but filled with quality work. We see different groupings of early 20th-century artists responding to the complexity and fragmentation of the modern world through their (variously) figurative works in different mediums. It’s a didactic framing that is stretched a bit—particularly for the photography—but it’s accessible and fits a university art museum.

Exhibition highlights include two silent films: Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis* (1927) and Germaine Dulac’s *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928). *Berlin* features kinetic cuts and a photographer’s eye for overlapping geometry. Dulac’s Freudian flick predates the much more famous *Un chien andalou* (of Dali and the split eye). It’s easy to bemoan CGI’s replacement of practical effects (*Jaws*, *Jurassic Park*), but I do miss the inventiveness and theatricality of early film. How is it that Dulac makes me smile by stop-motion Sharpie-ing chasms onto his actor’s face, and then frightens me in the next frame?

In addition to two representative works from the master of piecemeal bodies (Picasso), there are refreshingly uncharacteristic works from famous modernists. Miro's early, Fauvist *Portrait of Josep F. Ràfols* integrates wonderful purples and blues. Klee's *Timid Ones Together* feels more ghostly and affecting than his bizarro children's book dispatches, perhaps due to the watercolor medium.

Overall, the standout is Edward John Stevens' *Arrival of the Village Princess*. The painting is racist and primitivist, conflating indigenous cultures across continents. But its confusion of cultures actually works to its aesthetic advantage: Teutonic crosses meet dual-faced Janus shamans standing on yin-yang daisies. It's a beautiful mess, pen-thin oil paint lines giving it the texture of a recovered wooden tableau. A plume of newspaper print smoke below a blazing Black Hole Sun anchors it in fractured modernity.

—B.Z.

Kemper Art Museum

Santiago Sierra: 52 Canvases Exposed to Mexico City's Air

February 23-July 29



Installation view of *52 Canvases Exposed to Mexico City's Air*. Photo by Troy Sherman.

Sierra's work commits to being critical and pessimistic where so much other social art would be communitarian and twee. This is important, but it is not what most importantly distinguishes Sierra as an artist. Rather, he's special because even through their contingency and unboundedness—despite their involvement with the mucky stuff of real, lived, non-artistic life—his artworks tend to feel composed, and composed in a way that allows them to metabolize completely all of the uncomposed, uncomposable elements that make them up. Sierra wields the most complex social forms with the same precision with which a draftsman wields their stylus. He makes the chaos of social reality as palpable as a glob of paint.

There are several things about *52 Canvases Exposed to Mexico City's Air* that its title doesn't convey: its near-monochrome canvases are square; they're arranged in a 4x13 grid; the lightest one is hung in the top left corner and the darkest at the bottom right; their surfaces are grimy and tactile, caked with stuff like hair and dirt and dust.

So from a distance, *52 Canvases* looks like staid, proper minimalism, albeit with some flourishes—a slash on a canvas here, a hazy circle there—that save it from seeming too tight. Up close, however, the thing is ugly and irregular, marred by the way that literal pollutants have settled on its 52 surfaces. Its prettiness and its ugliness are separate aspects of our experience of the work but also, simultaneously, telescoped untenably together in our final estimation of it. Sierra has taken the discomfort we ought to feel at our modern impulse to appreciate art for its own sake—even in the midst of suffering and injustice—and embedded this discomfort into his art as *itself* something to be appreciated for its own sake. This is a horribly beautiful contradiction.

—T.S.

Monaco

William Driscoll: Memory Palace

January 19-February 10



Installation view of *William Driscoll: Memory Palace* at Monaco. Photography by Emily Mueller © Monaco.

Driscoll has an intuition for color, specifically foreground and background relations. The close-up Twinkie in one photo is not merely a staging of the quotidian; it formalizes the informal aesthetic coincidences that occur to aesthetically open minds. A Southwest Airlines plane happens to roll by in the distance, and a dreamy haze of sunset ochres and oranges is manifest.

The photos in this exhibition (titled *Memory Palace*) are really about *impermanence* and humanity's ephemeral attempts at reconciliation with the terrifying continuity of the cosmos. *Mortuary Facade* is obviously about the mortality/continuity dialectic. One profound photo shows a shoe resting on water, trying unsuccessfully to gain footing in an evanescent universe. The ergonomic shoe, already half-mimicking nature, ripples naturally with what is probably water, but also evokes cosmic gasses, as if free floating, not quite part of nature but also not totally separate from it either. Occasionally—and paradoxically—mimesis has an interesting way of articulating *differences* over similarities. It is the intervention of the photograph (and visual faculty itself) that articulates this and distances humanity's mortal temporality from cosmic continuity, rendering visible the veil that separates humanity from nature.

Driscoll has a way of capturing the prismatic aesthetic of liquid, a challenging artistic task ever since Impressionism. There is something vaguely libidinal in these photos, as well. In one, a play of brown liquid against a background of sky blue ejaculates into the atmosphere, referencing the art history of fountains *à la* Bruce Nauman. Again, we are keen to discern the colorful sublimity of life waiting for us in every bottle, if we dare to open it.

—B.S.

Monaco

Alexis Taylor: Relume and Sage Mend: Tender Growl

March 1-March 30



Installation view of *A Thousand Stars, Hearts, and Scars*, from *Sage Mend: Tender Growl* at Monaco. Photography by Emily Mueller © Monaco.

In lifting her motifs from the history of art, Mend set herself up for failure. Her works at Monaco borrow from some 15th-century tapestries that are literally among the greatest artworks ever. That her own tapestries don't match their forebears for quality is fine, because the work is good in a smaller way and Mend seems to be an artist whose powers are growing. And besides, standing your ground against the

monstrous enormity of art's whole history despite the unavoidable fact that old masterpieces will hand you your ass is *the whole fucking point of being an artist*. For her foibles, Mend is an artist.

The best thing her tapestries do is interrupt their black surfaces with all these errant shocks of white thread, the same white as the figures are “drawn” in but peppering the compositions at apparent random. These seem to be updates to her models’ profusions of floral ornament (the famous *millefleurs*), but here the “ornamentation” is not merely noncontextual, but unfit and dissonant. The effect is that Mend’s appropriated medieval scenes convey a motion, despite their flatness, that’s almost cinematic—they pop with a liveness that their stiff figures struggle against. (Their closest visual analogue might be Kubelka’s *Schwehater*.) This works better in black-and-white than it does in color, probably because rainbow-and-black doesn’t provide the same polar contrast. It’s conceivable that there could be a place in all of this for Mend’s tongue-in-cheek icons and phrases, but as it stands now these mostly serve to interrupt the flickery effect without complicating anything conceptually.

Taylor’s small exhibition has moments of clarity. The dual ambivalence and hyperactivity, in her larger paintings, to the way foreground and background relate is worthwhile. In fact, it’s an approach pursued to similar ends by Rialda Mustić, whose recent show got some words on MAQ’s website.

—T.S.

Pulitzer Arts Foundation

Delcy Morelos: Interwoven

March 8-August 4



Installation view of *Earthly Weaving*, from *Delcy Morelos: Interwoven*. Photography by Virginia Harold © Pulitzer Arts Foundation.

The Pulitzer’s fetish for visceral post(post, post...)minimalism is, in terms of the quality of the exhibitions that result, somewhere between harmless and a straight-up good thing. As I’ve written before, Contemporary Art has few more lingeringly

potent primal scenes than Eva Hesse's genius. Besides, the presence of an institutional *métier* that's something other than the academy's canned "radicalism" means that, at their worst, the Pulitzer's shows are perfectly sufferable. Which is what Morelos's is, apart from a couple standouts.

Among these is *not* the marquee installation, *Earthly Weaving*. Aromatic and taking up the whole main gallery, it's a garden path of spice-infused, dirt-covered chain link fences. The closest local analog is Sol LeWitt's *Intricate Wall* at Laumeier. This work's compact unnavigability (which makes it an object you're impossibly tempted into, rather than a space you actually get to explore) suggests that *Weaving's* openness is more an invitation to adventurism (or entertainment) than an artistic inevitability. *Weaving's* return-to-earth symbolism, too, is a little trite, in execution if not necessarily in conception.

The rest of what's on view is, likewise, competent but unchallenging. Two leaning canvases near the entrance don't develop their lack of pictorial oomph into a sufficiently sculptural effect. Most of the textile pieces rely too heavily on the basic waxy visual intrigue of Morelos's technique, which leaves their overall shapes seeming somewhat arbitrary. The two standouts are a large drawing and a larger singly-folded, flatly displayed textile. The former is a cosmic-topographic skein of nodes and threads; in proper postminimalist fashion, it gets at an infinitely complex and renewing structure through simple iterations. The latter presents the only three-dimensional form in the show that seems to be in any sort of productive tension with the techniques that begot it. In fact, this piece is exactly what Morelos's canvases were trying to be.

—T.S.

Pulitzer Arts Foundation

On Earth

March 8-August 4



Installation view of Hopinka's *Mnemonics of Shape and Reason*, from *On Earth*. Photography by Virginia Harold © Pulitzer Arts Foundation.

This slate of video installations is down in the Pulitzer's bowels, and I found myself quite pleased descending into those dark rooms to sit and to watch. Though hardly brilliant, none of the five works are bad, and all benefit from the experience of wandering in the dark, sometimes hearing another film through the walls and growing curious to see what's happening on the other side.

Two of the films—one by a pair of Brazilian artists, the other by a 20th-century Cuban-American—do close to nothing and struck me as purely rote. As a friend said, works of their monotonous and symbolically simplistic stripe just wouldn't cut it anywhere outside of a Contemporary museum. Another piece, Jeffrey Gibson's *To Feel Myself Beloved on the Earth*, has its moments but mostly lives up to its terrible title: it has a sentimental preoccupation with the bodies of its filmed dancers, who are placed only occasionally in genuinely arresting positions, but mostly are situated no differently than they would be in an average pop music video. It's also peppered with beyond-pat phrases like "Time for Change," which a wall-text proudly declares "reflect the complex demands of the moment of their creation." I try not to be a complete cynic, but the insistence that there is artistic complexity to this insults every viewer's intelligence.

There are two videos that deserve unequivocally to be seen: Ali Cherri's *Of Men and Gods and Mud*, which is really a traditional short documentary, and Sky Hopinka's *Mnemonics of Shape and Reason*, which does *not* live up to its terrible title. Though Hopinka may have been trying to suggest bigger things, even gallery movies like this have to contend with the primal sensual pleasures produced by filmed motion synced with music or sound. *Mnemonics*, at the very least, succeeds at achieving this, a thing which Contemporary Art consistently undervalues and seldom accomplishes.

—S.J.

Saint Louis Art Museum

Concealed Layers: Uncovering Expressionist Paintings

March 15-August 4



Installation view of *Concealed Layers: Uncovering Expressionist Paintings*. Photo by Troy Sherman.

In the two galleries where this exhibition has been set up, viewers will find reproductions of images produced by x-ray, ultraviolet, infrared, and other kinds of imaging technologies. These illustrate the conservation and investigative work going on behind the scenes at SLAM. Sometimes the reproductions yield fascinating discoveries: early doodles covered up by the subsequent layering of paint; entire paintings hidden on the backs of finished canvases. Sometimes they provide a view onto artists' techniques: the make-up of a painting can be revealed to researchers by the tendencies of various materials to behave differently for different imaging methods. Uniformly, the reproductions (thankfully placed right next to the original artworks themselves) provide something I've always longed to see more of from museum interpretation: a glimpse into the actual *processes* of great artists.

Clarifying the simplest actions and decisions that contribute to the overall practice of an artist is invaluable for showing people (especially non-artists like myself) why great works of art are *important*—what constitutes real excellence in the execution of a piece. It is fortunate that, right next to these interpretive galleries, is a hallway filled with even more great Expressionist work for you to turn your newly-enlightened eye upon. (And on the other side of the exhibit, there is the vast room devoted to the Expressionist crown prince, Max Beckmann.) I genuinely found myself looking at these paintings like I'd never looked at them before, beginning to understand something deeper in the peculiar, sometimes perplexing, decadence and very ugly beauty they evoke. *Concealed Layers* is a window onto a lost time in art's history—one absolutely worth spending time looking through, which is exactly what the curators have helped us to do.

—S.J.

Saint Louis Art Museum

Matisse and the Sea

February 17-May 12



Installation view of *Matisse and the Sea*. Photo by Troy Sherman.

Matisse was exemplary of the Italian idea of *limpidezza* which Nietzsche valued so highly—a light and airy form, like the feeling of a breeze blown in from a strange land. This exhibition captures something of that arid genius, highlighting paintings and sculptures influenced by the artist's time by the sea that exude a kind of radical ease. The show ranges from earlier impressionist works to the late paper cut-outs. (These latter have nothing to do with the sea but are nevertheless a joy to look at.)

Much of Matisse's genius was in his painting of lines that are as freely spontaneous and languid as they are confident and strong. Of note is an early seascape with a lyrical drawing sensibility, a kind of prose in painting. We see how Matisse achieved a profound simplicity of form with only a few basic colors. The curators have included a reproduction of Matisse's limited palette. He imposed on his art a kind of radical finitary sensibility that is more often found in music than painting. The result is a lucid picture plane which the viewer can take in very easily, but without sacrificing critical self-awareness. Indeed, through limiting its material the artistic mind reveals itself in a more clarified state.

Music is one of the best pictures here, not surprising since music was a consistent inspiration for Matisse other abstract painters who looked to bourgeois music's nonconceptual, inherently nonfigurative form as a paradigm of aesthetic autonomy. A companion to *Bathers With A Turtle*, *Music* represents the laconic spirit of music via lucid, earthy colorfields of sky blues and verdant greens behind simple human forms in erotic repose. Elegant simplicity, minimalism without pedantry.

—B.S.

John Martin. *Sadak in Search of the Waters of Oblivion*. 1812. Oil on canvas.

On view at the Saint Louis Art Museum



John Martin. *Sadak in Search of the Waters of Oblivion*. 1812. Photo by Troy Sherman

From the great year of High Romanticism came perhaps my favorite painting in all of SLAM—John Martin’s *Sadak*. It’s one of the rare works that comes near to Caspar David Friedrich, or to Shelley, or to any of the other truly central Romantics Proper, in a zone where myth, literature, and nature fuse completely. A lone, tiny figure struggles up enormous inferno-red cliffs; water runs down them, not in proper wet washes, but in arcs and swirls of pure light. The cliffs appear to scale up and backwards forever. The figure is exhausted but the enormity of the world around him suggests he cannot stop. This is the height of “literature” in painting—of the visual figuration of grand narratives of human will and passion. And it contains a monumentality, a sublimity, which I often regret we have traded in for mundane realism, for the smallness of the contemporary world and the infinitesimal human anxieties that accompany it. Still, these very things, which make *Sadak* as profound as it is, are always ripe for rediscovery.

—S.J.

Lincoln Frederick Perry. *Urban Odyssey*. 1987. 7-panel mural.

On view at Metropolitan Square



Two panels from *Urban Odyssey* by Lincoln Frederick Perry. Photo by Troy Sherman

Ensnconced inside of downtown St. Louis' ur-Postmodern corporate tower, Metropolitan Square, is a set of murals that seem unfortunately neglected in civic consciousness. Many visitors to the building have seen the then-and-now panels by Terry Schoonhoven, which are even visible from the sidewalk on Broadway through the building's delightfully pretentious two-story glass vestibule. However, most St. Louisans have probably not walked beyond the elevator banks behind the main lobby into a secondary open room. Here an implied rational, classical orthogonal grid—ironically disrupted by chamfered corners—dictates the placement of marble-wrapped columns, rococo chandeliers, ceiling coffers, and seven wall panels containing Perry's ponderous *Urban Odyssey*.

Perry offers an immersive update to Homer's epic poem, through which any of the building's (male, white, bearded) office-dwellers can imagine his daily commute as an exotic journey skirting death itself. Drama is rendered in vivid, quattrocento pictorial style straight from the Italian Renaissance. The episodes include a rendezvous with Circe in Forest Park, an encounter with the opium eaters at Soulard Market, and an ominous confrontation with Scylla and Charybdis on a grand staircase at the Saint Louis Art Museum. A Siren even beckons this buttoned-down Odysseus from the steps of Metropolitan Square. Unscathed by the end, our hero—tie loosened, jacket discarded—finds his way home to suburban Penelope.

The mural cycle displays a milder chauvinism than Perry's controversial 29-panel *Student's Progress* at the University of Virginia, and may at first seem like a tasteless relic. Yet Perry's desire to connect the potentially alien, ahistorical mass of Metropolitan Square to the local built environment offers a steady, subtle critique of a 1980s corporate culture that regarded place as fungible. The lambasting, too, of the

era's Capitalist Everyman—who is damned if he sees himself in the story, damned if he does not—is an excellent mirror for Reagan-era individualism.

—M.R.A.

Francisco de Zurbarán. *St. Francis Contemplating a Skull*. Oil on canvas. c1635.

On view at the Saint Louis Art Museum



Francisco de Zurbarán. *St. Francis Contemplating a Skull*. c1635. Photo by Troy Sherman

Supposedly this was a part of a larger altarpiece, hopefully in a candlelit corner chapel. Even then, Zurbarán's painting feels more liminal than the kind of declarative work I'd expect on an altar. It's too solemn, insular, geometric—St. Francis as Hamlet, but the skull is cradled facing inward, rather than held aloft. I may not have noticed the skull had the title not called my attention there. At a glance, a fitting title for the painting might have been *St. Francis Contemplating a Vase*.

We can hardly even see the skull's sockets; it's more of a sphere than a skeleton. St. Francis's eyes are even less visible. The man is a monument with starched folds. We see almost none of his skin: firm hands, an oddly gleaming left thumb, bulbous toes. These toes undercut the effect of St. Francis as Imposing Triangle: his stance is no power pose, but staggered, uncertain. Fitting for a man contemplating death.

That tension between the solid and the ephemeral is what animates the painting. The long, draping robes, but crinkled sleeves. Overwhelming darkness, but a light on his left shoulder that resembles a smokey wisp. Firmly confronting death in an uneasy stance.

If you typically find older art stale and overly concerned with realistic depiction – which has often been my own hang-up – check out this painting in SLAM's baroque gallery. There's a lovely Titian on an adjacent wall that also transcends

straightforward naturalism, though with the opposite approach. It is grainier and less solid.

—B.Z.

Unknown Artist (Chinese; Liao, Northern Song, or Jin Dynasty). *Seated Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin) of Water-Moon Form*. 11th-12th century. Wood, gesso, and pigment with gilding.

On view at the Saint Louis Art Museum



Seated Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. 11th-12th century. Photo by Troy Sherman.

According to the legends, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (called Guanyin in China, and still among the most beloved and prayed-to enlightened ones in the Buddhist and Daoist worlds) swore to remain in the material world until all people had been saved. More than one religionist has pointed out Guanyin's similarities to Christ. I've always been enamored of the extraordinarily life-like quality of this particular statue of the figure. Made of wood from nearly a thousand years ago and miraculously well-preserved, it's beyond stunning. It feels entirely real, as though at any moment it might stand up from its pedestal, or turn its head—at brief rest, rather than taking an eternal respite from the world. Of course, this perfectly befits a near-deity representing worldly compassion. In its presence, I always feel something of the deep uniqueness of so much Buddhist art. Peaceful but not tranquil, serene but not quite at bliss. Entirely worthy of iconic contemplation.

—S.J.

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