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"But let's if not get to the point at least approach it briefly, where it lies like a seed deposited by the wind or a pure chance bang in the middle of a vast bare tabletop."

—Roberto Bolaño, "Literature + Illness = Illness"

Note: Exhibitions marked on the table of contents with an asterisk are part of the programming for Counterpublic, a triennial "civic exhibition" in St. Louis that began on April 15 and ends July 15. While the event's programming did not lend itself to discrete coverage given MAQ's format, reviews of several of its individual components offer a partial critical appraisal. Additionally, Counterpublic receives mention near the end of issue's editorial.

Editorial: Prospects for Regionalism at the End of Contemporary Art

This editorial is something of a Pascal's Wager, intended for artists working outside of the metropoles where official art predominantly circulates and is made. Instead of betting on the existence of God, however, I propose that these artists bet on the impending demise of Contemporary Art. Because even if it is not on its way out the door historically (though more than a few factors indicate that it is), Contemporary Art is still a system and a style that has offered artists in the provinces scraps, at best. They would do well to begin the arduous process of figuring out how to make work that cuts against its principles — how to fashion, as MAQ has urged before, regional styles of art counter to the diffuse uniformity of much that is "contemporary."

Confusingly, the phrase "Contemporary Art" does not refer to whatever art is now current. Instead, it refers to a period in art's history that began perhaps in the seventies and hit its stride about three decades ago. It is coincident with the historical period marked by the "end of history," a nineties idea that democracies in the West, particularly America's, had no more ideological wars to wage after the fall of the Soviet Union, just minor geopolitical problems to solve. Contemporary Art's institutions — *kunsthallen*, biennials, megagalleries, MCAs — spread worldwide throughout the nineties. They were cultural analogs to the intergovernmental organizations that facilitated the globalization of Western politics and markets in the same decade. These institutions propagated the postmodernist art that had flourished in the West throughout the 1980s, establishing as a global *lingua franca* for serious art postmodern techniques and preoccupations. These included a coy, teasingly critical relationship with mass culture; a politicalness unmoored from any specific politics; a tendency to conflate art with life; a conceptualist orientation; a hostility towards aesthetic judgements; an ironic and referential, if not antagonistic, approach to the history of art. This globally naturalized form of postmodernism is what we refer to as Contemporary Art.

As post-historical art, Contemporary Art abrogated the charge that advanced art is supposed "to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence" — since the end of history, ideological confusion and violence are supposed to have been things of the past. Instead, Contemporary Art has adopted the method of slinking behind culture so as to nitpick and criticize it, but never propel or fundamentally transform it. "To keep culture moving" had been the appointed task of the modernist vanguard, which had an explicit but contentious relationship with art's history: it sought, iteratively and willfully, to mold art's future out of art's past. Posthistorical art — Contemporary Art — replaced this impulse with an assertion of its own apartness from the movements of history, so that it might feel at ease tinkering with old forms but seldom making new ones. This self-styled

apartness remains apparent in the rampant hostility towards museums and the objects they preserve, which has been ascendent since the first wave of Institutional Critique in the seventies. It is more subtly (though perhaps constitutively) present in the extraordinary variety of Contemporary Art, which once may have implied a liberation from the strictures of style and influence but now bespeaks directionlessness and stasis.

Contemporary Art is contemporary insofar as it exists in a perpetual, universal "current moment" that it creates for itself. As the editorial of MAQ's previous issue explained, the concrete result of contemporaneity in art has been a pervasive artistic style that manifests globally as a relativistic nonstyle. This, among other things, has disappeared the only recourse which artists working outside of cultural centers once had to making work that could hold its own against the metropoles: regionalism. Regionalism is the understanding that the establishment of shared aesthetic principles and the execution of artworks based on a belief in those principles could yield significant art.

Contemporary Art's lack of a historical sensibility means that it precludes the development of a rubric for what's good and what's bad, such that no forms and no approaches can claim superiority over any others and, truly, anything goes. In this way Contemporary Art also precludes regionalism, which necessitates a certain belief in and dogmatism about style as a collective program that is anathema to Contemporary Art. Contemporary Artists are the paradigmatic individuals of art's history, forced to devise on their own both arbitrary, isolated artistic problems and esoteric solutions to them. Just as the hegemony of the free market in our age has offered the appearance of personal freedom but has delivered the dissonant experience of social isolation in the midst of material abundance, so too has the once-radical-seeming project of artistic pluralism delivered us into a poverty of riches.

Many of the key trappings of Contemporary Art — its dizzying formal variety, its confused relationship with what it calls "temporality," its misplaced antagonism towards cultural institutions, its rootedness in the prevailing political order that masquerades as radicality, its lack of a unifying program of any sort — are currently on display in full force through Counterpublic, St. Louis's triennial "civic exhibition." The exhibition's tagline, "Reimagining civic infrastructures towards generational change," is a slogan as programmatically ambiguous as it is syntactically evasive. This works to distance the exhibition from accountability, whether to artistic quality or political efficacy. Counterpublic sees itself as moving "towards" change because it knows it cannot legitimately effect it; it takes comfort in "reimagining" the social order because actually (historically) imposing upon it is unimaginable.

And the art through which the exhibition would do its "reimagining towards"? For the most part equally slippery, adept at displacing its aesthetics onto its politics and its politics onto its aesthetics, such that judging its artistic quality seems to miss the point while evaluating it in terms of how successfully it has transformed people's material conditions feels unfair. But we know that Torkwase Dyson's constructions will not make people north of Delmar any less poor, just as we know that they're not as good artistically as, say, Tatlin's. (To be fair, *Bird and Lava (Scott Joplin)* does profitably strengthen the oversimple geometry of Dyson's drawings and paintings, discussed in a review below, by monumentalizing it.) Instead of doing either art or politics, most of the artworks in Counterpublic try to forge instead a "third way," which in practice proves impossible to go down. They are left, so to speak, standing at a crossroads, incapable of moving in any direction. This stuckness is the stuckness of Contemporary Art.

In recent years, developments implying the return to geopolitics of ideological dispute and "great power conflicts" have led to a mounting sense that (excuse the hack turn of phrase) the end of history is coming to an end. The aspirations towards a free and open world economic order that have directed both politics and culture for the last few decades are giving way to a reality more fractious and parochial than the one we have known — than the one in which Contemporary Art was forged and to which it was a largely facile and facilitative response. If, as study tends to bear out, periods in the history of art are yoked to periods in the history of politics, economics, and ideas, then it is worth the assumption that the looming transition out of posthistory will either enact or demand a concomitant "rehistoricization" of art.

But what does this mean for MAQ, its critical project, and the artists to whom it would speak through that project? Something smaller and more concrete than much of what you've just read. Though art's present task is to strategize how it might remake itself historically — how it might get "culture moving [again] in the midst of ideological confusion and violence" — we lack strategies for how to do so. MAQ proposes that one possible method could be the resuscitation of artistic regionalism. This would require provincial artists, who are privileged by their relative alienation from the spoils of Contemporary Art, to cultivate shared aesthetic sensibilities, crafting idiosyncratic approaches to art's history that suit them and their own regional contexts. To do so would be a historical act in microcosm, which may not in itself prove capable of sublating the past half-century of artistic practice, but could serve to work out methodologies for how, in broader terms, that might be done.

—T.S.

Contemporary Art Museum Saint Louis
Jacolby Satterwhite: Spirits Roaming on the Earth
March 10-August 13

Installation view of *Jacolby Satterwhite: Spirits Roaming on the Earth* at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. Courtesy of Dusty Kessler.

The three recent VR works in Satterwhite's exhibition demonstrate more clearly than anything else in the show the major shortcomings of his whole artistic program. In each of these virtual environments, you're captive to a series of glitchy posthuman scenes that sort of float past you. (What law, by the way, says that this parody of late-info-age culture is how VR *has to* look?) You can't move around, but you can swivel to see the environments in 360 degrees. Along with certain cues in the soundtracks, you'll jump suddenly from one scene to the next; often your gaze will be mid wandering between one sex-beast's convulsions and another's and, out of nowhere, you'll cut to a brand new vista of a bunch of twerking computery asses (or some such). These cuts — which are the big problem here, as I see it — tend just to happen, cued off by little in the imagery itself; their rhythms, too, are just the music's rhythms. The decision to yoke the cuts to the sound must have been a facile borrowing from the world of pop music videos, where Satterwhite has worked. It certainly wasn't a conscious formal decision he made about how he might have mined a new technology, VR, to create a truly new sort of aesthetic experience.

This might seem nitpicky. It could be counterargued that the "cut" in the context of VR just hasn't been figured out yet. But who but artists should be doing this figuring?

What it comes down to is an apparent inability of conceptualists (that's how Satterwhite self-styles) to get a real artistic handle on new mediums. VR is not film or video, but Satterwhite has treated it that way, at the expense of his work's effect. The unexceptional quality of the rest of this show's videos, drawings, sculptures, paintings, installations, and so on derives from this flippant, instrumentalist approach which Satterwhite has to his many formats.

—T.S.

Kemper Art Museum
African Modernism in America
March 10-August 6

Installation view of *African Modernism in America* at the Kemper Art Museum. Courtesy of Alise O'Brien Photography.

Cut out a quarter of this exhibition and you have an interesting argument about a thing that happened at the twilight of modernism. Cut out half and you have a walloping show of really good, sometimes great, frequently challenging paintings. For *African Modernism*'s own purposes, the former might have been preferable, since its commitments are historical more than they are aesthetic. The exhibition tracks the doings of the Harmon Foundation, a 1922-founded philanthropic outfit that supported black art and, in the midcentury, funded creative exchange between African and African American artists. The show, focused on the products of this exchange, has the effect of a dissertation about a progressive NGO and its soft power. One wonders if a honed display of the very best of these works might have made a better case for their importance.

What should have been cut: the mawkish portraits, the overbusy figurative stuff, the American romanticizations of Africa, many of the works on paper. One can see in all these works what led Romare Bearden himself, in a 1934 essay lampooning the Harmon Foundation, to complain that many of the artists it supported were "at best hackneyed and uninspired."

What's good in *African Modernism*, however, is often very much so, or at least very interestingly bad. Works in the latter category, like Akinola Lasekan's breathy history painting, tend to rely too heavily on depictive comforts or weighty symbolism, but possess something (cool brushwork, weird colors, an odd design sensibility) that's worthwhile. The really good stuff, unsurprisingly, is the least representational, like Thomas Mukarobgwa's *View* — a darkly patchy fauvist whorl — or Ibrahim El-Salahi's totemic abstractions. The latter remind one of Cézanne's famous quip that he'd "make of impressionism something solid and enduring," which seems to be

what El-Salahi did for Surrealism. The Nigerian-Armenian Skunder Boghossian deserves special mention for his jewelly canvases. In bucking the asceticism of the high modern Western stuff that preceded them, they seem — very, very clumsily — to open onto a path for painting still untrod.

—T.S.

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Kemper Art Museum
"Killing the Buddha": Reconstructing Zen
April 27-July 24

Installation view of *"Killing the Buddha": Reconstructing Zen* at the Kemper Art Museum. Courtesy of the Kemper Art Museum.

A Koan must, almost out of necessity, begin such proceedings. And this exhibition has a fairly scrutable one: "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him." I suppose one should expect the show to shake up conventional ideas of what Zen is or is not. I don't envy the curators, as it was probably difficult to do this from the farthest corner room of the Kemper's basement.

Killing the Buddha resulted from WashU's 2022 Arthur Greenberg Undergraduate Curatorial Fellowship. The fellows — Alexandra Crotty, Endie Hwang, Jinxian Gloria Jin — were limited primarily to works already in the Kemper collection. They've done an admirable job with little, though one might grumble it could use some pruning. (Two Chinese pieces specifically might've been removed without detriment, since one of them is an eyesore, and we're reconstructing Zen here, not Ch'an.)

The first thing one notices is that there's simply too much packed into this small room, a state of affairs which might make a Zen master smile. Whatever Zen is or is not, it's not generally thought to extend to clutter. Though perhaps this is another Buddha yet to be killed.

One's attention is grabbed by Jirō Yoshihara's remarkable egg-white-on-black painting of the Kanji detail "One," a single line of paint dribbling down from its end. A beautiful painting. Yet what's most touching in the room is the juxtaposition of twentieth-century works (including by Kenzo Okada and Yoko Ono, a copy of the "score" for John Cage's 4:33, and one of Franz Kline's fascinating abstractions of East-Asian ideographs) with several gorgeous Edo and Meiji scrolls (one of the least exhaustible forms of art I can think of). This intelligent curatorial decision serves as a fine reminder that the infusion of Zen into Western practices is one of the genuine developments of 20th century art.

—S.J.

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Kemper Art Museum
Torkwase Dyson: Bird and Lava
March 22-July 10

Installation view of *Torkwase Dyson: Bird and Lava* at the Kemper Art Museum. Courtesy of Alise O'Brien Photography.

The wall text for Dyson's show explains that her mostly simple geometrical compositions are born from a robust and very deliberate symbolic system: trapezoids, for instance, refer to the attic Harriet Jacobs stuffed herself in for years to hide from her holders. The artist's shapes (for some reason she calls them "hypershapes") pertain to slavery and the grueling, ingenious ways people escaped from it.

Problem is, Dyson's symbology comes through barely if at all in the works themselves, which look a bit like what Malevich might have made with a head cold. The drawings and collages have just about zero depth of field and fail to make up for this flatness with any decorative ingenuity. Occasionally a passage of thick excressant paint sets something off in the surrounding straight lines and curves, but only ever meekly. The paintings, which are worse than the works on paper, are heavy things. They try (and fail) to make up for their scant designs by juxtaposing different

types of handling — impasto next to superficial broad swaths, milky fields contained by crisp diagonals — but this just ends looking sloppy. One would have to search hard to find either references to liberation or artistic quality in them.

Vivifying bad arrangements through conceptual moves is a perfectly legitimate artistic approach. Dyson, however, has failed to couch her objects adequately — at all — in her ideas. Because while a rhombus *can* represent a room, it doesn't do so necessarily. There's nothing immanent to Dyson's objects that connects their shapes to what she wants them to mean. This is a problem common to the whole genre or trend of politicized abstraction, of which Dyson is something of a paragon: being representationally obvious is corny, but *ars gratia artis* untopicalness is a cardinal sin. So paintings hulk mutely, with much to say but few ideas of how to say it.

—T.S.

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The Luminary

Black Quantum Futurism: Community Futures: Space-Time Liberation Lab (CF:STL Lab)
March 22-July 10

Installation view of *Black Quantum Futurism: Community Futures: Space-Time Liberation Lab*. Courtesy of Counterpublic. Photo by Jon Gitchoff.

A strain in the right wing of current art criticism drives an increasing number of writers to lambaste art for being propaganda. This is facile, and it is a critical methodology — not to say an ideology — that must be resisted. Mark Rothko had as much politics as the Guerilla Girls. Although the one's art displays it much more plainly than the other's, the works of both were pieced together to an equal degree from the totality of their respective makers' worldviews. This is to say that an artwork can't help but index the society within which it was made, nor can it help but advocate, through the person who made it, for something or other about that society. Artworks are necessarily propagandistic, but as artworks too they convey something above and beyond their ideological content. It's criticism's task to work past ideology and limn with language the something that constitutes an artwork's "art."

That said, the only thing worse than Counterpublic's bullhorn of a Luminary exhibition is the fact that politico-kitsch just like it occupies a dominant (if, I hope, waning) position in current art. Its problem isn't that it's propaganda, but rather that there's very little to it — damn close to nothing except hack symbolism and bad design — that's anything more than propaganda.

CF:STL has every trapping of the cloying vogue: a bookshelf full of books you won't read, tables strewn with activities you won't do, interactives without a mote of irony or self-reflectiveness. The show's genre is afrofuturism, and it's lazily checked all those boxes, too: there's a spaceship thing, slogans about "temporality," cowrie shells, vintage stuff. All of it's been calibrated to make you get the point, and the point is not an artistic one. If there was ever a style of art that was given both to recycling its own tropes and to scraping the most banal ones off of the culture industry's filmy surface, that style is Black Quantum Futurism's.

—T.S.

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Monaco
Jaune Quick-to-See Smith
April 14-July 15

Installation view of *Jaune Quick-to-See Smith* at Monaco. Courtesy of Counterpublic. Photograph by Jon Gitchoff.

Critical art is at its worst when it's only doing critique, or else when it's doing critique at the expense of artistic effect. The problem with Smith's installation at Monaco — other than the fact she seems to have sort of phoned it in — is less that it is critical than that its critical function interacts only in the most perfunctory way with its artistic function. The former subsumes the latter almost entirely. For stuff like this to work as art (let's bracket whether or not it's working as politics), it simply has to be the other way around.

I haven't seen enough Smiths to confidently cast aspersions, but my sense — not at all troubled by this painting — is that a superficial though academically prevalent reading of midcentury American abstraction as a gestural and therefore spatial and aggressive mode of phenomenal artmaking influenced her, when she started painting in earnest during the eighties' nadir of the esteem of modernism, towards the idea that manneristic drips on big map-filled canvases plus pastiched Native American iconography would make for a captivating artistic *gotcha* of both Western colonialism and Western painting. (There's a lot of Jasper Johns in there, too.) It's, like, disclosing the fallibility of both cartography and abstraction by interpolating the idealized discursive system of each with the representational limitations of the other, right?

But actually, no, at Monaco it's more like sloppy handling with no perceivable resolution into either a visual or a conceptual effect, and sickly greens sitting near ugly blues, and lines that are too thick, and patchiness, and unconsummated disorder, and words that just browbeat you with the very true but not really that complicated notion that America's land was stolen. It's unclear why I needed a painting, and of all paintings this one, to educate me about colonialism.

—T.S.

Pulitzer Arts Foundation
Faye HeavyShield: Confluences
March 10-August 16

Installation view of *Faye HeavyShield: Confluences* at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation. Courtesy of Faye HeavyShield, the Pulitzer Arts Foundatoin, and Alise O'Brien Photography.

It's tough to say if Contemporary Art has moved at all beyond postminimalism (a sixties phenomenon) or if the past fifty years have simply been a manneristic period kicked off by the unassimilable off-ness of Eva Hesse's art. HeavyShield's exhibition implies mostly the latter: a very recent work, this year's *Honor Cahokia*, could even be

a copy of Hesse's *Schema* (1967), though one that gains little from either its smoothness relative to the original or its multimedia component.

But aside from this piece, some drawings, and another work from 2023 — a lame arrangement of many not-bad photos called *aiyo niitahtaan* — HeavyShield's work at the Pulitzer is at worst excellent "in the manner of" postminimalism. At best, it's demanding of another term altogether, one I'm not sure we have standing in reserve.

The worked surfaces of most of HeavyShield's earlier stuff (late eighties, early nineties) are among her art's most stylish elements, but the touch of quiddity they give to her dangerously simple compositions is nevertheless crucial. (To be sure, *Honor Cahokia* fails for its lack of physical texture, which becomes a conceptual easiness.) Less stylish — though it doesn't seem so at first — are the bodily configurations of many of the works: guts, maws, spindly legs. At first, that is, the bodiliness seems taken directly, again, from the example of Hesse, for whom weird corporeality was a way of conveying universal anguish. But on inspection, HeavyShield's aren't ur-forms yanked kicking from some collective unconscious. They're more like representations that have lost their referents, which is conveyed as much by the works' specific-seeming titles (*twelve wives*, *my spine*) as by their sculptural containedness. HeavyShield doesn't careen into absurb repetitions *à la* Hesse, but focuses and renders, as though a work like *fort belly* is a figure study of an actual belly.

—T.S.

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Pulitzer Arts Foundation
The Nature of Things: Medieval Art and Ecology, 1100-1550
March 10-August 6

Installation view of *The Nature of Things: Medieval Art and Ecology, 1100-1550* at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation. Courtesy of the Pulitzer Arts Foundation and Alise O'Brien Photography.

Despite the work of contemporary historians, we still tend to take the Enlightenment view of the Middle Ages as a time of stasis and miserable lives all too nasty, brutish,

and short. We look at that sweep of time between the fall of Rome and the rise of the Medici, and in its many artistic treasures we so often see only the desperate offerings of starving, religion-mad paupers. Yet the fading of literary and material cultures in contemporary society, and their continual supplanting by the tyranny of screens, presents us with difficulties that might be best addressed by thoughtful study of the Middle Ages. It may even be that we are headed towards a kind of Dark Age ourselves, in which case such study would be invaluable.

In *The Nature of Things*, curator Heather Alexis Smith has presented the crafts of this period in groups according to their material origins: Earth, Forest, Field, Quarry. Never mind the smart title; the conceit works. Against the concrete Tadao Ando surfaces at the Pulitzer, the mundane wood, glass, metal, clay, and paper of these collected craftworks take on a strange, liminal quality. Yet this is far from the wrong way to view them. Floating on gray, or behind glass, the sheer textures of these pieces are made so clear — especially the various English Oak panels and some gorgeous *Livres des heures* — that one can almost imagine something of the worldview which could have produced such painstakingly worked and spiritually profound objects.

"If you showed this to a medieval peasant, it would kill them instantly," goes the current meme. Sometimes I suspect it's the other way around.

—S.J.

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Kranzberg Arts Center Gallery
Vincent Stemmler: Doom Scroll
June 9-July 23

Installation view of *Vincent Stemmler: Doom Scroll* at the Kranzberg Gallery. Courtesy of Vincent Stemmler.

No one work in Stemmler's show was an unqualified success, and a couple might have been nixed. But altogether *Doom Scroll* gives the impression of an artist working through and coming up with ideas. Though the precise way these ideas have been

combined is not always right, their presence is palpable in much of the work. At the very least, the exhibition is a laying out of some formal problems which it would be very worth it to Stemmler — and perhaps other artists — to continue developing.

The work I wanted to say was best was *Lovejoy*, a slightly corrupted high contrast digital photo printed out matte and hung in a thick frame. But even though the red of the sky silhouettes the trees almost perfectly and the stray pixels distributed across the whole surface give the arrangement some gainful subtle texture, the work seemed a bit unforceful alongside Stemmler's other work. So I was happy to discover that Stemmler had originally included a grass-and-sculpture-filled vitrine on the floor in front of the photograph. Had he kept it there, it would have troubled the somewhat easy conceptual clarity of the image. "Systems" moves like this one, which succeed by forcing a viewer to recognize the conceptual connections between an artwork's optical components, are prevalent throughout the show. They tend to be the most successful elements of any of Stemmler's works.

To work in this way is essentially to practice a disarticulated form of collage. Most of Stemmler's assemblage sculptures — the ambitious *A Confluence Over Time*, especially — might therefore have been more successful as diffuse networks of various made and assembled things, rather than as discrete objects.

—T.S.

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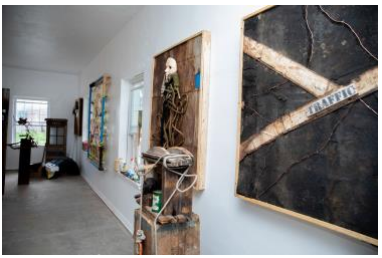
Rudo Studio
Robert Green: Think, Imagine, Reclaim
June 3-End of Summer



Installation view of *Think, Imagine, Reclaim* at Rudo Studio. Courtesy of Tyler Small.

Robert Green's exhibition is the highlight of Counterpublic's programming. The show's success exists in the show as a whole, not in its presentation of individual works. Integrated into Green's two-story, residential-building studio, hundreds of individual objects, which blur the line between what's "art," what's "décor," what's

"his," and what's simply "collected," function altogether as a righteous Gesamtkunstwerk.

Green was born and raised in St. Louis, having grown up in the Pruitt-Igoe housing projects. He worked as one of the first African American engineers at IBM before pursuing what he now calls his true medium: producing "festivals" — events aimed at economically empowering young folks. Green does not typically identify as an artist. He describes his space, full of paintings and sculptures, as his journal, a place where he works through personal and historical trauma. While *Think, Imagine, Reclaim* presents numerous individually weak artworks, the strength of the world that Green has built goes beyond such shortcomings.

The exhibition's crown jewel is a second-floor room titled *Sic Semper Tyrannis*. It is filled with a brutal, evocative wood and rope structure, plus Green's diverse array of media dealing with African American history. It is an overwhelming work that plainly illustrates Green's mastery in assemblage and installation. Though Green may not call himself an "artist," it is undeniable that environments like this provide powerful aesthetic commentary on historic trauma in St. Louis, on displaced communities, and on American injustice at large. This show is testament to the fact that a basic curiosity for everyday things and a drive to create without intending a final product can, under the right conditions, produce something real, something that speaks to art's power to convey truth.

—J.C.

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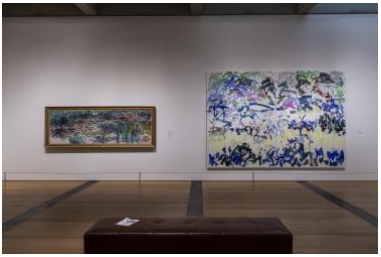
Saint Louis Art Museum
Monet/Mitchell: Painting the French Landscape
March 25-June 25



Installation view of *Monet/Mitchell: Painting the French Landscape.* Courtesy of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

SLAM offers St. Louisans a rare opportunity to see *inspired paintings* from two masters of color, light, and landscape — Claude Monet and Joan Mitchell. Painter's painters, rejoice!

The two artists were often compared throughout Mitchell's lifetime, and this exhibition shows that it's no empty affinity. Viewers may be surprised how continuous Mitchell's canvases are with Monet's, separated as they were by two world wars. In particular, the two artists shared dreamy lavenders and deep blue-green expanses. For those who believe that AbEx is reducible to gestural expression, Mitchell is shown to be a painter of free and open, masterfully colorful pictures. Her massive canvases exude a dilating openness and rare vibrancy — for instance in their impenetrable blues and their pale, radiant yellows — that make Monet's appear dense and muddy at times, and which show how AbEx was in some ways a *clarification* of Impressionism. With their white backgrounds shining through and their bold, broad brushstrokes, Mitchell's pictures appear almost like exploded-view interpretations of impressionism, sharing Monet's iterative practice of perceptual exploration. That it's Monet's *later* canvases that appear more like Mitchell's suggests the development of painting into the flatness we've come to know and love from the best paintings of our era.

Monet/Mitchell is a must-see for today's "painter's painters" who want to refeel the lost dreams of those who once painted *big* — in the aesthetic, historical, and spiritual sense of the word.

—B.S.

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Saint Louis Art Museum
New to the Museum: Prints, Drawings, and Photographs
April 14-July 9

Daniel Hopfer, *The Franciscan Friar Pelbart of Temesvar Reading in a Garden*, 1502, woodcut and letterpress. Courtesy of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

The works-on-paper galleries at SLAM are always an interesting place to wander through, featuring a more diverse array of art than anywhere in the museum. I was sad to see the last exhibition go, since little of the current show matches its Weimar-

era photographs and weird-old mystic scrawlings for sheer fascination. Yet *New to the Museum*, which the wall text proudly declares spans 500 years, is suited to our moment. It acts as a sort of grab-bag of the World Soul. Our scrambled sense of art history is aptly reflected in the assortment.

Here one can find photographs: 1960s women and their umbrellas in a snowy black-and-white New York; or cyanotypes of a fin-de-siecle ocean; or stark pictures of Bedouins and of Victorians. One can find works by indigenous makers — including a colorful screenprint by the Anishinaabe artist Norval Morrisseau — various lithographs, collages, gouaches, watercolors, dull prints of automobiles, a still life photograph of a peach bowl on bloodstained white linen. (Apparently the latter was meant to seem quite edgy.)

One can find treasures in the master etchings and woodcuts, by Italians Guido Reni and Carlo Maratti, the German Daniel Hopfer, and especially the Dutch Dirck Volkertszoon Coornhert. (A print by the latter was put out by the influential 16th-century publisher Hieronymus Cock, whose magnificent name I wouldn't dare exclude here).

If you are, like me, endlessly entranced by the rush of new names of old masters, by these strange Christian engravings that radiate exquisite torment, ecstasy, and belief — if you find, as I do, that these old scenes and their intricate details dazzle in ways (even in media) seemingly inaccessible to the modern artist — then you may linger longer on these than on some sleeker, easier things from this or the last century. And in this exhibition you might be justified, when they appear so clear and unapologetic in such a grab-bag couple of galleries.

—S.J.

Damon Davis, *Pillars of the Valley*, 2023

On view at CITYPARK

Damon Davis, *Pillars of the Valley*, 2023. Courtesy of Great Rivers Greenway.

Pillars of the Valley, a public sculpture at the southwest corner of the new soccer stadium, seeks to commemorate Mill Creek Valley (MCV). Unfortunately, the work seems more interested in honoring Damon Davis, its creator, than one of the great, lost black neighborhoods in St. Louis' history.

Public art is successful when it conveys its message without relying on textual information. *Pillars*' clothespin-like shapes, however, speak minimally to the specific memory of MCV. In fact, visitors will find at the site's center a pedestal etched with text that doesn't introduce the neighborhood, but instead proclaims Davis as artist — hardly a commemorative gesture. At the monument's perimeter are more germane materials: a confusingly oriented neighborhood map, an obscure topographical map, the names of a few dozen (of the 20,000) former residents, a bland quote by Davis, and text that explains some of this. Until recently, when it was quietly changed, this text dated the neighborhood's demolition to 1969; MCV was razed in 1959. Perhaps the work's greatest failure, though, is the neighborhood map, which appears designed to confuse. Not only is its location off to the side a display of its relative priority, but its misalignment with the orientation of the lost neighborhood loudly proclaims the insignificance of such historical information.

Despite all of this, *Pillars* does do a couple things right. First, its placement on the lot of the new stadium reminds visitors that this latest work of flashy urban development did not come without great cost. Second, the most understated element of the work — a series of squat stone benches and historical home addresses engraved in the ground, outlining what was once the footprint of a block of MCV — is its most effective. It integrates the lost neighborhood into the present urban design with quiet reverence. *Pillars* would therefore have been more effective without its pillars.

—J.C.

Édouard Vuillard, *The Fireplace*, 1901, Oil on paper mounted on canvas
On view at the Saint Louis Art Museum

Édouard Vuillard, *The Fireplace*, 1901, Oil on paper mounted on canvas. Courtesy of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

What persists of the Symbolists' verve persists in their arrangements. Too much that was better by way of color, facture, and poetics was to come throughout the century they preceded. Their paintings' echoes in our own decade's muddy portraits and subjective interiors, too, tend to sound dull. But Vuillard's scene of his mother reading by the fire — a tilty Symbolist arrangement *par excellence* — hangs together against enormous compositional odds, and in ways that make its daubs and blendings seem somewhere close to necessary. Starting from that bizzarely cropped, massive, paper-flat anchor of a body at left, the scene contracts nervously rightwards down towards a point where the corner moulding meets the floor or… wall? Here Vuillard's decorative impulse manifests as a strength of design: painterly elisions in this room's architecture close out the picture at right — opposite the sitter — but like her they are weighted low, hurling the mantel back across the frame into that giant lap. And there, the way that void of a newspaper, stilly angled against the painting's active lean, sucks in the colors around it and sets off the whole composition's fall to the right… however modestly and messily, Vuillard's picture might even give Cézanne's similar scene of 1866 (which lives in DC) a run for its money.

—T.S.

Unknown Artist (Quapaw), *Spouted Vessel with Painted Motifs*, c1500-1700, Ceramic with pigment

On view at the Saint Louis Art Museum

Unknown Artist (Quapaw), *Spouted Vessel with Painted Motifs*, c1500-1700, Ceramic with pigment. Courtesy of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

This object reminds us that history is dull and teleological only if we make it so. The vessel is an important expression of Native American ceramic design, a fact lost on most viewers due to the curiously limited interpretation SLAM has provided. An accompanying label states that the vessel was made by Quapaw potters imitating European teapots. It does not state that, concurrent with the teapot design and for centuries before and after, potters in what is now eastern Arkansas made vessels shaped like shells, armadillos, frogs, otters, and the heads of corpses. (See the case across the gallery for an example of the latter.) Instead of evidence for the inevitable adoption of European technology by Native Americans, this pot could just as well be seen as an ironic commentary on 17th-century current events, a joke about the formal similarity of armadillos, human heads, and Europeans' kitchenware. There is also the vessel's red and white pattern, described by the label as a representation of cosmological dualities. This explanation is frustratingly ahistorical: motifs of alternating red and white were intermittently employed over the course of at least 3,000 years in the Mississippi Valley. Instead of a rote invocation of cosmology, here the red and white might be an experiment with dissonance, laying old patterns over novel forms.

—G.W.

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MAQ

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