



William T. Williams's *Elbert Jackson L.A.M.F. Part II (1969)*, at MoMA.

ART

Back From the Brink

MoMA relives painting's postwar near-death experience.

BY JERRY SALTZ

ASAD FACT OF LIFE lately at the Museum of Modern Art is that when it comes to group shows of contemporary painting from the collection, the bar has been set pretty low. "What Is Painting?," the crowded 50-artist, 50-work exhibition that opened quietly in July (and closes September 17), has been a welcome exception, especially if graded on the MoMA curve. It is better than all of the second-floor installations of the permanent collection that have taken place since MoMA's reopening three years ago, because it defines a polemic about a single medium and then cogently explores it.

Curator Anne Umland has divided the 7,000 square feet of this space into twelve boxy galleries. Each cubicle contains four paintings from the museum's collection, one work per wall. If I were an artist in the show, I'd be put off by the crowded conditions, the way the installation renders everything equal, and how you can never step back to contemplate anything. But "What Is Painting?" isn't really about contemplation. Not only does it bring artists from the margins into MoMA's center, but each gallery becomes a condensed chapter in the cliff-hanger story of painting through the sixties and seventies, when Minimalism and Conceptualism both presumed it dead, and its subsequent journey to the multifarious shores it occupies now.

WHAT IS PAINTING?
MUSEUM OF
MODERN ART,
THROUGH
SEPTEMBER 17.

More than a third of the show's artists are women, and it begins with Vija Celmins's 1964 salmon-and-gray rendition of a handgun being fired. Immediately you see that Umland isn't on the approved art-historical path—Abstract Expressionism to Johns-and-Rauschenberg to Pop and Minimalism. In 1964, Celmins was already crossing Pop with Minimalism, photography, conceptual art, illustration, and what twenty years later would be called appropriation art. It's a hazy, mazy little picture, as fervid and flat-footed as it is clairvoyant. It makes sparks with Lee Lozano's hammer hitting a surface, a 1963 painting that emits animal energy and the revolutionary power of women's anger. Rounding out this room are Philip Pearlstein's alluringly unsexy pair of nudes from 1967 and Philip Guston's 1977 painting of a head with a hole in it. The gestalt of the gallery crackles: Celmins and Lozano are blowing holes in the head of painting, Pearlstein is investigating ways to make it simultaneously fevered and frigid, and Guston is subjecting painting to metaphysical brain surgery with a spatula while embarking on one of the weirder visionary trips of the era. This gallery is a perfect start for a show about the violence, force, ingenuity, audacity, desperation, oddness, and speed with which painting has moved over 40 years.

That said, the question-and-answer debate behind the show can turn annoyingly literal and didactic here and there. There's a room of all-white paintings, and other cubes are stocked with portraits, grids, comic-y figuration, and appropriation. (Why do curators love to make art make sense by constantly grouping like-into-like? One of the best things about art is that its logic is nonlinear.) Nevertheless, many of those juxtapositions are satisfying. There's an interesting gallery of artists who generally don't paint, including Barbara Kruger, Marcel Broodthaers, John Baldessari (who does paint), and Elaine Reichek, whose needlepoint sampler with a stitched quote from *The Odyssey* has Penelope speaking of a process of constantly remaking, creating and destroying and beginning again. Not only is this the way Penelope saved her life—weaving and unweaving her tapestry until Odysseus returned—but it's also a wonderful analogy for the way in which painting was turned inside out, deconstructed, and revised in order to keep it alive.

The revisionism of this show works partly because it is so seamless. Except for one or two cases—a generically decorative canvas by Beatriz Milhazes and a conven-

tional monochrome by Shirazeh Houshiary—inclusions don't feel too forced or political. One room contains a handsome Minimal painting from 1969 by William T. Williams, an African-American artist not often on view at MoMA; in the same gallery, there's a vivacious geometric configuration by the overlooked Japanese artist Atsuko Tanaka. These paintings predict work by artists like Gary Hume, Sarah Morris, and Odili Donald Odita. Their inclusion helps establish that modernism's creation myth is wrong: The history of painting didn't only happen in New York in the Cedar Bar among aging white alcoholic men.

Another gallery shows how women in the seventies echoed Penelope, tearing painting apart and putting it back together in order to insert themselves into the men's club of art history. Lynda Benglis ties canvas in knots, Jackie Winsor lashes logs together with twine to make a Paleolithic stretcher, Dorothea Rockburne creates chipboard grids (a Rockburne survey is overdue), and Lee Bontecou quite simply presents what looks like the mouth of hell, the eye of a Cyclops, the surface of the moon, and a vagina dentata in a relief painting that still has the power to terrify, entice, and awe.

The idea that painting can save your life crescendos in a deeply moving installation, one in which you grasp the dilemma of being a young German painter at a time when your language is anathema, your parents are outcasts, and your coun-



Vija Celmins's *Gun With Hand #1* (1964), at MoMA.

try is hated. Seeing these artists fight their way back into the story of painting can take your breath away. Anselm Kiefer's 1972 picture of an empty wooden room isn't only a painting of receding interior space; it's the 27-year-old clearing the psychic skeletons from the attic and dreaming of an undiscovered room in the house of painting. Georg Baselitz's Frankensteinian figure is a perfect stand-in for what it must have felt like to be a German artist at the time. Sigmar Polke's 1972 portrait of Mao surrounded by cover girls, crowds, newspaper headlines, and ads is jacked up on so many historical, stylistic, and consumerist hormones that it makes Pop Art seem quaint.

In the portrait gallery containing works by Chuck Close, Gerhard Richter, and Cindy Sherman (does Sherman have to be in every show?), and John Currin's 2001 Norman Rockwellish picture of an elderly couple gardening, Umland misses a chance to show a recent pivotal point. MoMA has long wrongfully ignored the

and drama was being reshaped on the anvil of irony.

As told by the final room in this exhibition, this crucial shift informs much art today. Wade Guyton's quasi-Suprematist 2006 rendition of smudged black Xs is about Warhol, the negation of the hand, writing as art, marking time, the machine-made touch, and the notion that printing is painting. Nearby, a brightly colored, hard-edged Sarah Morris of a modernist building façade shows how artists are circling back to sixties geometric abstraction in order to reconnect it to the world.

In the end, "What Is Painting?" deftly puts the lie to one particular art-world bromide. Except for diehards, the pleasure police, *October* magazine, pedantic curators, and those last few Greenbergian critics who still insist that if painting isn't about itself it's washed up, no one thinks painting is dead. "What Is Painting?" establishes once and for all that no one thoughtful has actually believed this since the Nixon administration. ■

FIVE...FOUR...THREE... MORE SHOWS TO SEE IN THEIR FINAL DAYS.



"Summer of Love"

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART; CLOSSES SEPTEMBER 16.

Before Kara Walker digs in for the fall, indulge in the Whitney's array of psychedelia: black-light graphics, Hendrix, and Joplin, all of it covered in dizzying color. No, it's not first-rate art—but it sure is fun, especially the posters.



"Organizing Chaos,"

P.S. 1; CLOSSES SEPTEMBER 24.

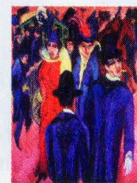
Rounding out a heavy summer roster (Tunga, Jim Shaw's perplexing *The Donner Party*), P.S. 1's mini-survey is a hit parade of conceptual pioneers (Bruce Nauman, Robert Smithson, John Cage) with videos, photographs, and sound works.



"The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson: Constructing a Legend"

THE JEWISH MUSEUM; CLOSSES SEPTEMBER 16.

The grande dame's eerie sculptures make a bizarre prelude to the museum's next two shows (Pissarro's landscapes, Isaac Bashevis Singer on the Lower East Side).



"Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Berlin Street Scene"

NEUE GALERIE; CLOSSES SEPTEMBER 17.

The \$135 million Klimt isn't the only thing here: Make some time for Kirchner's vibrant *Berlin Street Scene*, an Expressionistic rendition of what he termed "the symphony of the city."



"Design for the Other 90%"

COOPER-HEWITT NATIONAL DESIGN MUSEUM; CLOSSES SEPTEMBER 23.

Until Piranesi's ornate mantels and commodes arrive this fall, see this array of designers' imaginative solutions to basic needs, from shelter to transportation.

RACHEL WOLFF