



BWW Reviews: Plotting Contemporary Art with the Guggenheim's STORYLINES

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The atrium of the Guggenheim Museum is the one piece of art gallery real estate that should never be left unoccupied. Even if -- as is the case now -- the museum is between major retrospectives, there must still be something, many things from the permanent collection to keep Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic architecture from going to waste. Thus Storylines, a sweeping group show of almost fifty artists, has taken up residence for the summer. Billed as an examination of narrative tendencies in contemporary art, the exhibition further subdivides its chosen artists by tone, tactics, and genre: the bad dream campiness of Mark Manders and Matthew Barney on one level, the text-into-art whimsies of Natascha Sadr Haghigian and Agnieszka Kurant on another, the toying-with-tradition painting of Rashid Johnson and Laura Owens near the atrium's top.

Despite such scope and currency -- refreshing to see the organizers define "contemporary" as "2005 and after," not "1975 and after" -- Storylines is easy to underestimate. It isn't as big or beautiful as America Is Hard to See at the Whitney; it doesn't have the scholarly heft of the Guggenheim's recently-departed On Kawara -- Silence or the soon-to-enter Alberto Burri: The Trauma of Painting. And the one major attempt to make creative use of all that architecture -- a cascade of golden bead curtains, courtesy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres -- is too easily sentimental for anything Wright created. Yet the lesson of this installation is that the Guggenheim's ascending ramps can make enlightening use of almost anything you give them -- can offer such progress and lucidity that a show like Storylines, which would have been a well-meaning but hopelessly jumbled display anywhere else, becomes a purposefully energetic display here. See why you never leave this place unoccupied?

Some of this exhibition's potential for unruliness has to do with how little traditionally two-dimensional art is in attendance. Johnson (who often works with carved black soap and wax) and Owens (who is famous for her uses of Photoshop) are representative of the painting on show, and there's almost no standard art photography -- unless anyone wants to make a case for Catherine Opie. No one medium and no one approach to narrative really predominate. In some artworks, an everyday item conjures complex emotions, if not entire episodes -- as in Rachel Harrison's clever All in the Family, a polystyrene-and-vacuum-cleaner sculpture that summons both the monotony and the comedy of housework. In others, narrative considerations are overwhelmed by pure form -- as in Pawel Althamer's plastic-based sculptures, statues of Deutsche Guggenheim staff and visitors that are far more memorable for their ghostly white anatomies than for anything they communicate about their subjects. Then in others -- and best of all -- the play of form becomes unforgettable, becomes a part of your own life's narrative. The greatest successes here are two entries from Haegue Yang, works that turn colored blinds and wall-mounted fans into maze-like environments, miniature worlds that could be three-dimensional Paul Klees.

Playing on narrative in yet another way, the Guggenheim has enlisted much-praised creative writers to contribute to Storylines and its accompanying exhibition site. Among the most easily-recognized names are John Ashbery, Joyce Carol Oates, and John Banville, though younger luminaries such as Ben Lerner and Edwidge Danticat are also present. A revealing move, though perhaps not in the manner the curators had hoped: while visual art, on the basis of this exhibition, values a certain kind of volatile freedom, written art, on the basis of just about any literary magazine in America, is still playing it hopelessly safe. It's 2015: how are people still writing run-of-the-mill stories about run-of-the-mill characters who have tidy revelations, and getting published? To visit this exhibition with any thoughts of literature is to wish that contemporary literature would be wilder, more fun, more willing to fail -- more like contemporary art. Save the structure for an exhibition like Storylines, which is eclectic enough to need it, or for an architect like Wright, who had a rare gift for endowing painstaking structure with teeming, ascendant life.

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