

Barbara Rose

As told to Kat Herriman



Larry Poons, *Tantrum 2*, 1979, acrylic on canvas, 5'5" X 13'5"

Art historian, filmmaker, and curator Barbara Rose is a force of nature with a penchant for the rarified fine arts. Her latest undertaking, “Painting After Postmodernism: Belgium - USA,” features sixteen painters—half of them Americans, half Belgians. An exhibition that encourages exchange, the show asserts a need for a new discussion surrounding the condition of contemporary painting, as Rose discusses here. “Painting After Postmodernism” is on view in the historic Vanderborcht building and Cinéma Galeries in Brussels through November 13, 2016. THE ONLY THING anybody knows about me is that I wrote that article with the title I didn’t give it, which was “ABC Art,” and then everybody insisted that I invented Minimal art. Well, that is seriously wrong. I don’t invent art movements. I just notice coincidences, and those coincidences began to make sense to me as a worldview, which the Germans call *weltanschauung*. I once brought up the idea of a worldview to some young people and they did not understand what I was talking about. That is troubling to me. I think the artists in this show—who range from age thirty-eight to ninety—have a similar worldview, which is that we live in an extremely unstable and changing time, and that the problem of life, which can be expressed in painting, is a search for equilibrium in this fluctuating landscape. The artists in the show are expressing a common worldview and it is strangely related to Cezanne. Matisse said

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FINE ARTS

that Cezanne was “the father of us all,” and he really was. He’s the real founding father of modern art. He had a different worldview than even his contemporaries, the post-Impressionists. There’s nothing in a Cezanne painting that’s standing still or stable. It’s all in a state of being resolved. Cezanne worked on his paintings for a long time, and all these artists do too. They’ll go back to them, change them, revise them, and rethink them—they are critical of their own work. And they work very slowly. They try to get all of the elements into equilibrium despite constant shifting. They take accident and chance and structure it in some kind of meaningful way so that we can deal with it and the composition doesn’t fall apart. And that’s what we have to do now. Every day you wake up and find out new horrible things have happened, and the question is: How do you regain a sense of equilibrium and stability?

The building where the show is installed is a miracle of modern architecture. The Vanderborcht was originally a department store, designed in 1932—around the same time as the original Museum of Modern Art, which opened in 1929. It was the beginning of the International Style in architecture, so it’s actually a historic monument. It’s constructed around this glass atrium so that you can have all of the pleasure of say, the Guggenheim, because you can look across the building. I installed it in such a way that there would be a dialogue between the Belgian artists and the Americans. And in fact they started to write to each other, which makes me happy, and I write to them and they write to me—I have correspondence with all these people now. Another weird common denominator: They’re all incredibly interested in music. Jan Vanriet, who is a poet as well—he’s more interested in classical music, but most of the others are interested in American country western music. Larry Poons is really fantastic; he can sing and play any kind of country western tune. Paul Manes, who’s from Texas, plays a mean guitar. Poons and Bart Vandevijvere are also really interested in Morton Feldman. Bart plays Feldman all the time when he paints, and Morty was actually a friend of Larry Poons, so there are these kind of strange interactions.

All of these artists have no social persona. None. They’re real artists—they stay in their studios and they talk to themselves and listen to music. Or they read and think. None of them make sketches for their paintings. There’s no strategy, no plan: The

image emerges out of the process, in all cases. For me, that's really important. You don't know where the road is taking you. A lot of the processes they use—again, this was something I found by observation—are Surrealist processes. Not Surrealist imagery, but the Surrealist processes that cause an image to emerge and coalesce. If you look at some of Ed Moses's paintings, they look like Rorschach tests. The viewer interprets, but the painter is evoking the image in the sense that Pollock did. The same is true of a lot of the other painters in the show as well.