

A Visitor Responds to Ballyhoo

Visitor Feedback Ballyhoo Show at Black Rock Center for the Arts September 22, 2019

Many gallery openings smell like cheap wine: beautiful works chained to the walls scared to be bought into slavery; some red dots marking the unfortunates who will depart from their family and their creator; rubbery cheese cubes; noisy drinking and chewing sounds; shopping for a birthday gift to compete with a polyester bathrobe last Christmas to aunt Luci. It is a sad contrast to human inspiration, innovation and skill.

Today Anna took Sophie and me to Elizabeth Casqueiro's exhibition opening at The Black Rock Center for the Arts. We were skeptical, but went after school to support the cause. The exhibition was fantastic, perhaps the best opening I have ever attended. Eleven out of ten on the Russian scale, where the top grade is 9 out of 10 - unless you are Jesus (then 9.25).

I have never heard of Germantown. Would it be a town full of Germans, or town which looks like Potsdam, or maybe another Centreville, or Athens, Ohio. Maybe the first citizen was a German who bumped into a linden tree, or an Irish who drank with two Germans. We did not see any town, nor Germans, but in a large parking lot we found "Black Rock Center for the Arts" written behind an iconic concrete column finished with some melted texture. My brain split into several directions: was it black rock because of the concrete columns; what is a center for the arts doing in the middle of Perdue chicken countryside; were the concrete columns finished rough to suggest lava, nuclear explosion, Mars, cement clinker - black rock. A concrete column which looks like the Berlin Wall watchtower in Germantown gives much to think about. We enter a clean, modern, wonderful space full of light, which reminded us of the top floors of the Centre Pompidou (minus the view).

Inside we discover several elegant visitors. The light is streaming in, people are moving slowly from one painting to the next. Their faces seem happy, thoughtful, reflective, spiritual even. There is a feeling of a cathedral, or perhaps of a village church. Everything looks like it belongs in a quality art gallery - Tate style - with some thoughtfully curated, well labeled, spaciouly placed paintings - a lot - but not too many, not a lot of people, not a lot of noise, not many artists - just one. Good one. Enough. The art is amazing. It is the kind of modern work which is like the creative energy of Tchaikovsky' Six, exploring the Library of Congress catalogue, Bach, or the Bible: you feel small compared to the wealth of knowledge, genius and opportunities, when you clearly know that you can't possibly understand it all, know it all, feel it all, enjoy it all, get on par with it all - ever - but it inspires to create, try, innovate, learn, imagine, feel, pray - whatever it is that true art does. I think this exhibition and this art does exactly that - it creates the emotions, energy, and wealth which is not measured in red dots or sales, but centuries of value creation.

We must have spent at least two hours discussing the paintings. Not enough. Not the weather, not the wine, not the friends gossip, not the price, but paintings hung right there in front of us with an artist graciously listening to Sophie's and my debates, enthusiastically sharing her own thoughts and creative experience: how an exit was to be an entry, superwoman, her laundry line. The other visitors stopped to add their views, the intern jumped from figuring out the cartoon sequence of a rabbit-thief (with which Sophie did not agree). Old, young, whatever - all involved.

There were three works which especially fascinated us. If I remember the names right, they were: diptych with the left side called Entrance and the right side (which could have been another left side) Exit. Another diptych where the second half was missing, because it had been sold separately. The remaining side was "super woman in her garden". The final painting was probably not a diptych, it is called "Stop, Thief!" I pretend to be super-fluent with the word diptych, but in all ignorance I thought diptych was a religious painting, and in fact I was more familiar until today with a triptych, for example those Italian Catholic triptychs with the third carved door missing. It seems many Italian triptychs miss one of the doors, just as Italian statues miss arms and heads. It is hard for Italians to keep track of things, they probably sing a serenade by the time the third door needs to be attached, and there it goes, lost in a road ditch. In that sense the second painting fits this category, as it became uno-ptych after the second half got kidnapped by some buyer of half-paintings. I am fascinated by this story. Imagine you want to buy a small Vermeer, but have only \$3K, not \$600M, so you tell Sotheby's "cut me a bit of Vermeer, dear, 3K worth, fresh bit here, closer to the middle if you would, a spot of an eyelash perhaps".

Sophie and I have figured out these stories for each painting: the Entrance-Exit diptych (can't resist to type it again) is a story of a circus, where people enter at the exit on the right and exit at the entrance on the left as in Hebrew writing, and as we do in V&A, Hermitage or Louvre following the well-perfected USSR skill of finding the right wrong door to avoid the lines. The first to enter on the right was a superhero in a helmet on a motorcycle. We discussed the helmet's color, it looked black, but it was not black. It was kind of blackish that trained artists create against all the rules of chemistry to avoid using any black to paint black. His purpose to enter is to protect a woman who has entered a bit earlier holding her elegant blue hat in hand, and discovered a tiger wandering around, escaped from his cage. The tiger jumps at the woman along the many kinetic lines, and cuts her legs. The superhero interrupts the tiger's lunch. He kills the tiger, and transforms his motorbike into a wheelchair for the new invalid woman, who now wears his helmet because the tiger chewed up her hat. There is a pyramid to suggest that everything is happening in Egypt in a circus or Cairo Opera House, in which case the woman may be Aida, the superman is Pavarotti, and the tiger was not killed, it was a rug on the cave's floor for Radames. In any case the painting is fantastic because in addition to imagining any number of theatrical flow of life discourses one can see all kind of cleverness, skills, training about the composition, the colors, the lines, the shapes which seems at the same time as well engineered as a cathedral, and as spiritual as singing a psalm. If we don't try to come up with a story, I would think it is a religious painting which catalyzes faith and prayer. I can easily imagine it in "L'église Saint-Yves, moderne et mystérieuse" in St Brieuc, especially since that church is also made by incorporating some impressive concrete design, even though it is not called Black Rock. I will spare you our other painting stories, unless of course you would like to hear them.

My last thought from the exhibition is that art cannot be cheap, cannot involve many spectators, does not need to be mixed with wine or cheese (a good lunch before or after is necessary), and cannot be sold, nor owned. It is a sad thought, because the artists want and must sell their work "to make a living", and priceless does not transform into a red dot. I don't know what is the solution, probably there is no solution. Maybe some part of a solution is to have more events like this one, where several people could enjoy the art for what it is - a priceless imagination.

Don't shoot!
Gregory Bernstein