

Mournful reflections

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Offbeat views on problems of our times



Pawel Wojtasik's "Below Sea Level" is a long multichannel video of New Orleans scenes displayed, cyclorama-style, on screens that completely encircle the viewer.

By Sebastian Smees
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NORTH ADAMS - If you've grown accustomed, resentfully or otherwise, to the frivolity and antics of the contemporary art world, the recent shift in mood toward elegy and soulfulness can be discombobulating, and even rather hard to take. Are we really to take seriously the Weltschmerz and despair of brutally ambitious young turks just out of art school, prospering denizens of Chelsea, or millionaire friends of Elton John?

THESE DAYS: Elegies for Modern Times

At Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, through Feb. 28. 413-664-4481, www.massmoca.org

Sam Taylor-Wood, one of the six artists in "These Days: Elegies for Modern Times" at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, fits that last description. That she has also survived cancer and a recent divorce from her dealer, Jay Jopling, and that her art peddles in the fundamental themes of love and loss, doesn't, unfortunately, change the fact that it has always been trite.

In almost everything Taylor-Wood does, you can feel her sniffing the winds of popular appeal, art-world cachet, and tabloid sensation, and pitching her work at the point where all three meet.

If clowns in art are suddenly all the rage again, Taylor-Wood will take photos of clowns (see here her photos of dejected clowns in "After Dark (with Flower)" and "After Dark (Trapdoor)"). If David Beckham has been caught sleeping around, she will make a video of him sleeping innocently like a god. And she will never miss an opportunity to borrow gloss and gossip value from her many other celebrity friends, from Robert Downey Jr. to Woody Harrelson.

Still, precisely because she has the knack of keeping things simple, Taylor-Wood occasionally hits the mark, and one of her works in "These Days," a video filmed in time lapse called "A Little Death," has rightly become a modest sort of classic. It shows a hare and a peach in a still life arrangement reminiscent of paintings by Chardin, the hare's leg nailed to the wall, its head slumping on a table. Over the period of just a few minutes, we see the hare efficiently disassembled by maggots, while the peach remains absolutely the same.

The sight is at once incredible (how systematic these maggots are!), banal (you die, and this is what happens; get used to it), and mysterious (how to explain the immunity of that peach? Is it somehow a metaphor for the death-defying powers of eros, bolstered by the sexual reference in the work's title, which in French refers to orgasm?). It's as pithy an updating of the still life tradition of the "vanitas" as you could ask for.

In spirit, "These Days" relates most closely to the mood of late Romanticism. The artist is seen as a sort of mournful outside observer of various catastrophes, his or her capacity for poetic expression providing but a fragile bulwark against the great debacle at large. *Continued...*

Page 2 of 2 -- It's apt, then, that the Connecticut-based artist Robert Taplin has taken as his inspiration Dante's "Inferno," from "The Divine Comedy." Taplin's series of sculptures and dioramas made from wood, polychromed resin, lights, plaster, and Plexiglas take their cues from scenes in "Inferno," updating them as allegories of contemporary strife.

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The series begins with quiet scenes in familiar-looking interiors: Dante, a portly everyman figure based on Taplin himself, rising from bed, or sitting at a table, his head down, being summoned by two figures, Virgil, his guide, and Beatrice, his love.

Each subsequent work in the series takes us to another of the circles of hell: the smoky aftermath of a roadside bomb in what could be Baghdad; gathering crowds of refugees trying to cross the River Styx; a cave populated with refugees, many of whom meet our gaze; and so on.

The interpretations are sufficiently offbeat and unexpected to escape the dangers of kitschy illustration. The best one, I thought, was No. 5, "I Saw Shadows Carried on That Wind," which has us looking through a window out over a courtyard in the gloaming. The ravishing sky is streaked with clouds and punctuated by two airplanes. The intimate courtyard below, its depth enhanced by Taplin's stage-set-style tricks with perspective, seems forlornly abandoned, yet freighted with significance. The only evidence of life is a man disappearing behind a wall.

The show's curator, Denise Markonish, has taken the first part of her title from a Jackson Browne song covered by Nico (these elegiac shows tend to have abstruse origins - see, for instance, the New Museum's recent "After Nature," which took its name from a poem by the late German writer W.G. Sebald and its inspiration from a diverse array of literary sources).

Markonish has been inspired by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, and, wanting to temper the show's overriding mournfulness with glimmers of hope, she adorns the small exhibition brochure with some lines from Rilke's "Sonnets to Orpheus": "And all things/hushed. Yet even/in that silence/a new beginning,/beckoning,/change appeared."

Is it change we can believe in? Up to a point yes. Like almost all such shows, "These Days" is hit and miss. But it has haunting moments, and, impressively, it complements several other displays currently at Mass MoCA, including a huge room devoted to somber but thrilling works by the German artists Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer and a group show offering a wistful take on the state of the environment called "Badlands: New Horizons in Landscape."

The cumulative effect is not exactly uplifting, but it has a real emotional pull, like a complex chord that echoes in the chest and threatens to constrict the throat.

To go from Taplin's haunting worlds within worlds to Micah Silver's concocted environment inspired by Yves Saint Laurent's Safari Jacket, or Chris Doyle's lame video animation riffing on various artistic representations of the apocalypse, is inevitably to be disappointed. But the show has other high points, including a series of works by George Bolster, an artist in his mid-30s who was born in Ireland and lives in San Diego.

Bolster riffs on the morbid ecstasies of religious experience. His contribution comes in two forms: One is a dramatic installation featuring a narwhal suspended by red strings from a ceiling. The room is lined with mirrors. Its ceiling is decorated with scenes from the Day of Judgment. A song by Radiohead, "Reckoner," plays from speakers. It's a bizarre but very singular scenario.

Bolster's second contribution, in a neighboring room, is a series of drawings in pencil, silver, and pen on Maplewood veneer, each of them very private and evocative versions of well-worn religious subjects, with contemporary detailing and flickering sexual undercurrents. "La Vierge Et L'enfant Et Son Dior," for instance, shows a short-haired woman - the Virgin Mary - with a unicorn on her lap in a pose recalling the Pietá. Bizarrely, a Christian Dior handbag dangles from her arm.

The elegy here seems to be for the loss of religious belief - but it is all a little too cool and savvy for us to feel carried away by a sense of conviction.

The other strong piece, "Below Sea Level," is a long multichannel video displayed, cyclorama-style, on screens that completely encircle the viewer. It's by Pawel Wojtasik, a Polish artist living in Brooklyn, and it's a kind of collage of scenes from New Orleans, adding up to both a tribute and a lament.

It has its longueurs, but that is in the nature of elegies, is it not? One can mourn only so long before life leaks back in.

Sebastian Smees can be reached at ssmees@globe.com. ■