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A to Z of Contemporary Art

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PHAIDON

amongst other things, the wheel, the 60-minute hour, the 24-hour day, written language, mathematics, the Code of Hammurabi that provided the basis of a legal system, and some of the fundamental origin narratives of the Old Testament, including the parable of Noah, which appears to have originated in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (c.2100 BCE). The refusal of common ground leads to intolerance and persecution in the present but it also denies a possible future because, in the globalized economy of late capitalism, survival means co-existence and exchange.

I don't know whether Okwui Enwezor had in mind the annihilation of ancient artefacts and monuments when he introduced his theme 'All the World's Futures' for the 56th Venice Biennale with a reference to Walter Benjamin's description of Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* (1920). In what is perhaps the most famous passage of his essay *On the Concept of History* (1948), Benjamin writes: 'This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet.'

I can't help but picture jackhammers, bulldozers and something still replete with meaning, 3,000 years after it was made, disappearing in a billow of smoke. The focus of Enwezor's central exhibition is the way in which art and artists are responding to our turbulent global present — both its problems and its possibilities. As his title suggests, it asks what role art could have in imagining, or working towards, a future that might acknowledge the needs and desires of 'all the world'.

Enwezor's exhibition is not utopian — on the contrary, the inclusion of many works that focus on dark histories and present horrors creates, at points, an atmosphere of hopelessness that feels suffocating. Perhaps this is appropriate for a moment in which the future seems so uncertain. However, at times like these, the art and architecture of the past — the illusion of timelessness that we seek in places like Venice or Rome — can hold a particular solace, as evidence that civilization has seen turmoil before, and endured. They remind us that we are part of something that is much bigger than ourselves. The best contemporary art — including the standout pieces from this year's biennale, many of which are featured in this issue — does likewise, though often not by emphasizing permanence, but rather frailty, fleetingness and the blood-and-bones materiality that has always made us human.

The Future is Now by Amy Sherlock
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Religion

GLENN BROWN ON GERHARD RICHTER



Gerhard Richter, *Seestück (Seascape)*, 1998, oil on canvas, 290 x 290 cm

It appears that Gerhard Richter has been drinking his own urine. The brew is now so concentrated that it might have rendered a less self-reliant man senseless. He has stated that 'nature knows no meaning, no sympathy and is absolutely mindless and inhuman. Its stupidity is absolute. The beauty in landscape, its enchanting colour and magnificence, is our own perception, which if switched off reveals appalling horror and ugliness'. He is always, it seems, outside of nature. Caspar David Friedrich's God, embodied in the landscape, is dead. To create things of beauty then, Richter must get drunk. The *Übermensch* must suck on his own aesthetic supply, at once intense, acrid and divine.

Two large *Seascape* paintings (both 1998), and the work *Waterfall* (1997) form the heart of this exhibition [at Anthony d'Offay Gallery, 1999]. But it is small abstract paintings that populate this exhibition most heavily. Looking at them is like looking at the earth. I began to doubt their intense beauty. The Baroque detail in every crevice takes our breath away. Irregular scoured grids and deep angry lines of intent make us wonder what, if anything, the paintings tell us about the artist, the artist doing battle with nature. The magma tries to follow its sedimentary ways — alluvial deposits form crusts, but 'higher beings' must have their way. Striation lines drag and torment the layered paint. The creative and destructive pressure of the squeegee dominates.

The largest, darkest, paintings have flesh wounds. Irregular patches of removed skin reveal an ugly history of long-term abuse. The regal orange of five rhomboid paintings glows with warm rectitude, covering darker moments. Perhaps Richter



can find redemption in the monarchical reign of colour. The rhomboid is a shape that, like purple, should only be worn by emperors and popes. These different forms of Richter's abstract powers show us what he has always excelled at: chance encounters. A surprise flaw or mistake in an understood process forms a branch that he then investigates with a controlled series of accidents. When this abstraction has the drama of Turner, the violence of Soutine and the camp richness of Boucher, how much responsibility does he take? Perhaps this is the captured material nature of paint? But if nature is 'without meaning, ugly and cruel', this cannot be.

In 1991 Richter exhibited *Betty* (1989) for the second time in London. To advertise the

Gerhard Richter, *Domecke (Cathedral Corner)*, 1987, oil on canvas, 87 x 122 cm

exhibition the Tate Gallery produced a poster of the painting. Although the original was stunning, the poster (a lithograph of a photograph of his painting of a photograph of his daughter with her back towards us, facing a grey Richter monochrome) had the power to make you weep. In 1995, Richter exhibited a photographic edition of his painting *Klorolle* (1965). In this show he has made a photographic edition of *Cathedral Corner* (1987). Herein lies the romantic spirit of German painting, shamefully placed below stairs.

Two rhomboid photographs in the same room look like enlarged, colourful mixes of paint. I don't know if they are palettes, paintings, or made solely as objects to be photographed. I suspect the latter, though it is rare in Richter's work that concept outweighs aesthetics.

One steel and one solid-gold cross hang high on the gallery wall, symbols that reflect the exhibition as they allude to images of the crucified Christ, which have dominated European painting. But where in Richter's imagery is Christ? There is no God in this painted valley, in the water or in the sky. Richter has stated that art itself is the only thing that can replace a bankrupt Christian faith. In this *Totenlandschaft* he declares a world that is traumatized because it has lost its religion, which is like mourning the death of a parent whom you never met, while denying their importance to you.

I asked if Richter had hung the show, but was told he was too ill to come. He was at his home, which is built in the shape of a cross. Many artists have crucifixion fantasies, though usually played out a little less literally. Friedrich, on principal, never painted Jesus, only mountain-top implications

of him. The Richter who paints sublime abstracts may be in danger of filling the cross with himself.

What Richter does brilliantly is paint without drawing. Sigmar Polke defines form over form with the drawn and fluid structure of Cézanne, the man with X-ray eyes. Richter is more late Monet; a hopeless romantic with failing eye sight. If the viewer wishes to read Richter's grids, or his photographic library, or the scars in the abstract paintings as a kind of drawing, then that is up to them. But while drawing according to Polke is about revelation through dissection, Richter works by devout disbelief. There was a grin on the faces of the higher beings that made Polke paint flamingos when he wanted to paint flowers. Richter's refusal to draw denies him this wise humour. I can understand his political ambivalence, although I'm not sure I can say the same about his lack of irony. The alchemic abstraction employed by these two Shamans of 'Capitalist Realism' will, without satire, begin to pall.

Gerhard Richter at Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London, reviewed by Glenn Brown. Issue 44, January–February 1999