

ent, which, for Blanchett, partly licenses her doings with him. Dench discovers the affair and is not only shocked but jealous. Much of the first part of the film gives us Dench's thoughts on the sound track, always phrased with bite and discomfiting insight. Not quite intentionally, Dench becomes Blanchett's confidante, which helps to produce complications.

Dench's performance is exactly what we would expect, which is meant as a high compliment. Nighy is fine, though his role doesn't quite make the most of him. The welcome surprise is Blanchett. Her past work has usually seemed more intelligent than achieved, well planned but just satisfactorily executed. Here she breaks through into vibrant colors that

are strong, even occasionally frightening. We can guess that the skilled Richard Eyre was of considerable help to her. (By the way, as with Penélope Cruz in *Volver*, there is a shot of Blanchett on the toilet. Is this becoming a signet of female stardom?)

Philip Glass wrote the score. It doesn't matter. ■

JED PERL ON ART

Laissez-Faire Aesthetics

What money is doing to art, or how the art world lost its mind.

THE ART WORLD HAS NEVER been so well-oiled a machine as it is right now. Auction records are toppled practically every month, the big international contemporary art fairs have produced a new breed of high-end shopaholics, and in New York's West Twenties the crowds streaming through the galleries are the most elegant on earth. This art scene, which has been fattened and massaged and emboldened by a boisterous stock market, is certainly a spectacle. So it's no wonder that last fall both *Vanity Fair* and *W* got on the bandwagon, devoting special issues to the visual arts. In a *Vanity Fair* feature on "the auction mystique, the new collectors, and the passion driving it all," Tobias Meyer, who is with Sotheby's, argues that the nosebleed prices being paid for new work in the

auction rooms reflect a "democracy of access." What Meyer regards as a democratic principle will strike others as an old-fashioned overheated free-market economy. *Vanity Fair's* editors seem quite taken with this pay-as-you-go democratic spirit: they find another example in the video portraits that Robert Wilson, the stage designer, is now offering to anybody who can cough up \$150,000, a sum that the magazine says "is peanuts in today's through-the-roof

art market." As a come-on, Wilson has done something rather undemocratic, turning out videos of movie stars, among them Brad Pitt, who landed on the cover of *Vanity Fair* with Wilson's ah-sweet-mystery blue light playing over his bare torso and white boxer shorts.

Of course it didn't take the fall of 2006 to tell us that big money likes flash-in-the-pan art, or that we are in a period—

and it's certainly not the first one—when art and fashion and Hollywood are often indistinguishable. Amid the gold-rush atmosphere of recent months, however, something very strange has emerged, something more pertinent to art than to money—a new attitude, now pervasive in the upper echelons of the art world, about the meaning and experience and value of art itself. A great shift has occurred. This has deep and complex origins; but when you come right down to it, the attitude is almost

astonishingly easy to grasp. We have entered the age of laissez-faire aesthetics.

The people who are buying and selling the most highly priced contemporary art right now—think of them as the laissez-faire aesthetes—believe that any experience that anyone can have with a work of art is equal to any other. They imagine that the most desirable work of art is the one that inspires a range of absolutely divergent meanings and impressions almost simultaneously. I used

to be bemused when Lisa Yuskavage, whose lesbo-bimbo figure paintings were featured at the David Zwirner Gallery in October, was praised for channeling, all at once, Disney cartoons and Giovanni Bellini's altarpieces. And I did not comprehend how admirers of John Currin, who defies accusations of misogyny by making the men in his paintings every bit as repulsive as the women, could believe that he is both the direct descendant of Cranach the Elder and a raunchy comic in the *Mad* magazine tradition. My problem, I now realize, is not only that I am looking for consistency, it is that I persist in imagining that there is such a thing as inconsistency. The paintings by Currin and Yuskavage that are now going for hundreds of thousands of dollars are engineered for an audience that believes that a work of art can satisfy radically disparate and even contradictory attitudes and appetites, and satisfy them consecutively or concurrently—it hardly matters. A painting is simply what everybody or anybody says it is, what everybody or anybody wishes it to be.

The collectors who made sure that John Currin's show in November at the Gagosian Gallery on Madison Avenue was sold out even before it opened believe that it is their privilege to respond to anything at any time in any way they choose. When they hang a Currin on the wall, they are given permission—more than that, they are given the right—to appreciate this oilcloth horror as a painterly painting as exquisite as a Velázquez, or to enjoy it as an incompetent high-kitsch send-up of classical

LISA YUSKAVAGE
(David Zwirner
Gallery)

JOHN CURRIN
(Gagosian Gallery)

**ART BASEL
MIAMI BEACH**

**BOB DYLAN'S
AMERICAN JOURNEY**
(The Morgan Library
and Museum)

FERNANDO BOTERO
(Marlborough Gallery)

painting, or to assess its value as social commentary, or to laugh at it as a piece of Dadaist stupidity-for-stupidity's-sake. Or they may enjoy their Currin as a financial trophy pure and simple, proof of their buying power. Or they may regard it as an object of delectation, in much the way that they have been instructed by some art-historian-turned-art-consultant to enjoy a Bonnard. They can have it every way. They experience no conflict. And Currin gives them enough cunningly mixed signals that the possibilities seem endless. It hardly matters that what Currin doesn't know about figure painting would fill volumes, since his collectors know even less, if that is possible. (What precisely is it that Currin doesn't know? For starters, he does not understand that volume in representational painting can be—and to some degree, must be—generated through the power of contour as a two-dimensional expression of three-dimensional experience.)

I recognize that the taste for Currin and Yuskavage is in part a continuation of developments that are now a generation old. The what-the-hell attitude with which the new high-end consumers of art confront the whole question of meaning will strike some as reminiscent of the mentality of a number of collectors in the early 1960s. Back then, there was a whole group of big spenders who were turning their attention from Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art and boasting about how much fun they were having now that they had sloughed off the serious themes of the mid-century abstractionists. And it is hard not to see the in-your-face kitsch of Currin and Yuskavage as an extension of the ironic fascination with incompetence that gave birth to the movement known as “Bad” Painting, which was kicked off in 1978 by a show of that name at the New Museum, organized by Marcia Tucker.

Yet there are differences between garbage then and garbage now. Pop Art and “Bad” Painting were self-consciously ironic; they depended on the existence of a standard that was being mocked or from which one was registering a dissent. Irony, even in the whatever-the-market-will-bear forms that it often assumed in the 1980s and 1990s, was generally accompanied by at least the afterglow of a moral viewpoint. The artists were mocking something. They had a target. *This* is what has now changed. Laissez-faire aesthetics makes a mockery of nothing.

Even irony is too much of an idea. It treats everything equally. David Zwirner, the dealer who in recent months has sent Yuskavage's reputation into the stratosphere, has observed in an open letter to the artist that “frankly, I am not sure what your work is about.” He makes this declaration without any embarrassment. And while Zwirner does hasten to add that the paintings are “utterly sincere,” I am left with the gathering suspicion that the meaning of the work is designed to be unresolved, that the work is meant to register as noncommittal, at least from the audience's point of view. This promiscuity can be regarded, I suppose, as a sort of “democracy of access.” Transcendence and stupidity, formal perfection and kitsch: it's all just part of the same big expensive banquet.

II.

THE ART WORLD IS IN MANY respects an insular place. The preoccupations of the most gifted painters and sculptors, when they are alone in their studios, are with tradition and innovation, and can by their very nature never be fully appreciated by a broad swath of the public. Even the most highly touted goings-on in the art world, such as the emergence of an art star like Yuskavage, are the product of forces that the public can scarcely understand. When contemporary art does electrify the public, which is surely the case right now, the art itself is often part of an urban spectacle, a trophy floating atop the cultural maelstrom, and there can be no question that the blissed-out atmosphere in the Chelsea galleries this season has everything to do with New York's emergence as the ultimate amusement park for sophisticated tourists around the globe. On West 19th Street, even as Yuskavage's show opened in the greatly expanded David Zwirner Gallery, you could see, right across the street, the finishing touches being put on Frank Gehry's first freestanding building in New York, Barry Diller's InterActive-Corp. It did not take much of an imagination to make a connection between Yuskavage's ballooning babes and the billowing translucent skin of Gehry's office building. This is the shape of the art-and-design carnival in 2007.

One of the strange facts of our time is that although Picasso and Mondrian and Pollock are household names, the

middle-class public has never entirely accepted modern art, never fully embraced its mystery and its magic. Even in the face of this deep distrust, however, the public has assimilated the old bohemian belief in a community of artists as a sort of freely established aristocracy, perhaps seeing here another version of the “democracy of access.” This past fall, as exhibitions by big-name artists opened in the galleries and museums in rapid-fire succession, the reporting in the newspapers and magazines was all gossipy enthusiasm, as if the journalists were courtiers at some new-fangled Versailles. At the Museum of Modern Art, there was a Brice Marden retrospective, and the artist himself was catnip for the paparazzi, aging but still handsome in the role of everybody's favorite lonesome cowboy, a minimalist now turned maximalist whose strongest paintings remain a few two-color canvases, in milky greens and blues and grays, that he did in the first flush of his fame, in the early 1970s.

The art world, which in the old days of Warhol and Studio 54 was the place you went to get away from your family, has become a family affair. Among the offerings during the whirlwind of Art Basel Miami Beach were visits to the Wynwood neighborhood, where the Rubell Family Collection was open to the public. In a *New York Times Magazine* profile, Mera Rubell commented of the way that she and her husband Don and her daughter Jennifer and her son Jason and his wife Michelle collect art together that “the fighting, the agreeing, the resolution, it's all relevant.” Perhaps the collectors are taking a lesson or two from the new family-friendly artists. One of Marden's daughters, Mirabelle, co-directs a much-discussed New York art gallery, Rivington Arms. Kiki Smith, whose dumb-beyond-belief Whitney show was full of the sort of neo-hippie baubles I wouldn't buy at Target for \$14.95, has built a career out of the fact that her father was the sculptor Tony Smith, a friend of Pollock's whose hard-edged vision is now seen as critical in the move from the “hot” 1950s to the “cool” 1960s. And speaking of '60s cool, in a show at the Jewish Museum this season Alex Katz brought together five decades of his portraits of his wife Ada, the queen of downtown high-bohemian chic. As for the older artists, they are presented as nutty great-aunts and -uncles: Robert Rauschenberg exhibited a series of ut-

terly perfunctory photo-transfer paintings at PaceWildenstein in November, which were perhaps being passed off as the work of an ultra-cool King Lear.

The big galleries don't do shows anymore, they do coronations and requiems. Larry Gagosian has perfected this style. His exhibition spaces are so extraordinarily scaled that on the rare occasions when the art is really good, as was the case with the David Smith show "Personnage" last spring, the grandiosity can feel genuine. But when the coronation is for John Currin, the corruption is almost

do when a name-brand artists exits with excess inventory on hand, and so the critical upgrading has been inexorable. The huge Warhol retrospective at the Modern in 1989 was a turning point for late Warhol, and now these hollow monoliths are cult objects for the baby boomers. They prove, much like the paintings that de Kooning did after his imagination had been overtaken by Alzheimer's, that there is always a future in becoming a gaga hipster grandpa.

Warhol, of course, is the Moses who first saw the Promised Land of laissez-

clowns does collages incorporating his own semen, much as Warhol had his friends and hangers-on piss on canvases to create his "Oxidation" series.

Warhol is the evil prophet of the profit motive. His portraits of Chairman Mao can look positively visionary at a time when container ships full of neo-Pop Art are emerging from China. Warhol was everywhere this season, not only in the galleries but also at Barneys, where there was an Andy-themed holiday catalog, Andy shopping bags, and limited-edition gift certificates with Andy images. I don't especially mind Andy at Barneys. Warhol began his life doing advertising for high-end fashion retailers, and we could count ourselves fortunate if the damage that he did was limited to Barneys.

AMONG THE CHELSEA DEALERS with palatial settings and the instinct for a coronation, Matthew Marks stands out as the man with some taste. Although it may be that for the time being we have seen enough of Ken Price's sensuously shimmering clay sculptures, the aplomb with which Marks presented Price's work in October left a gallerygoer with a champagne high. And in a season when Chelsea has been overrun with artists who are under the delusion that you can make an interesting abstract painting by jumbling together everything and the kitchen sink, it was a pleasure to re-acquaint oneself with Ellsworth Kelly's imperial austerity, new and old, in a Matthew Marks extravaganza that opened in November in three locations. The accusation can be made that Kelly remains too much the captive of a relatively small reservoir of ideas that he developed in the 1950s and 1960s, but I am certainly always glad to see those early works, including a group of black and white drawings that comprised one-third, the smallest third, of what Matthew Marks had to show. The new paintings at Marks are all made of two panels, with the panels painted a single color and then superimposed to create a sort of shallow relief. On West 24th Street, the panels were rectangles in brilliant colors, and piled atop one another they exuded a semaphore-like power. On West 22nd Street, the panels were black and white, and I was especially taken with two vertical works in which the tension between a single curved edge and a single angled edge



LISA YUSKAVAGE, *Changing*, 2005

unbearable. I have not found the art world this depressing since I attended the press preview for "The Art of the Motorcycle," at the Guggenheim back in 1998. And when the requiem is for Andy Warhol, whose late work was the subject of "Cast a Cold Eye," an immense two-gallery show at Gagosian's spaces on West 24th and West 21st Streets, the bombast is simply bewildering. There were Maos and skulls and hammers-and-sickles and camouflage patterns and sketchy renditions of Leonardo's *Last Supper*, some more than twenty feet wide. When Warhol died, it was generally agreed that his late work wasn't much, but the art world knows exactly what to

faire aesthetics. Back in 1982, when Ingrid Sischy was the editor of *Artforum*, she published an issue dedicated to art-and-fashion synergy that had a dress by Issey Miyake on the cover and a centerfold of Warhol dollar signs. It has been downhill all the way since then, and Sischy, who helped out on *Vanity Fair's* art issue this fall, hasn't missed much. If Warhol had to die before the art world could go completely to hell, it is surely because his amorality was too deeply stamped with the old morality. But no such qualms darken the thoughts of the artists whom *New York* magazine recently profiled in a cover story called "Warhol's Children." One of these

yielded visual music, as if two strings had been plucked to create two sonorous sounds.

Kelly's tripleheader was a real event, not a media event. The same can be said of Lucian Freud's show at Acquavella in November. I have never been an ardent admirer of Freud's figurative style, and I think such hard-bitten journalistic power as his paintings once had has been diffused in the work of the past twenty years. Still, in these dark times you could receive an education if you walked from Freud's show of figure paintings over to Currin's folly a few blocks south. Freud's manner of modeling the figure with an encrusted pileup of paint may finally be judged a misunderstanding of modernism; his celebration of the painted surface, while probably meant to clarify representational structures in ways we know from the work of Soutine and Braque, amounts to little more than a series of angsty decorative flourishes. But Currin understands so little about pictorial conventions, whether Old Master or high modern, that you cannot even begin to speak about his work in terms of a misunderstanding of modernism.

As always, a gallerygoer who visits only the blue-chip dealers is going to miss a lot of the best work. This fall, Thornton Willis, a veteran painter, showed some wonderfully persuasive abstractions at Elizabeth Harris, comminglings of triangular forms, neither exactly crystalline nor exactly opaque, that suggest an emotional terrain at once rambunctious and saturnine. And a very young artist, Bryan Mesenbourg, presented some cunning constructions, reminiscent of H. C. Westermann in their pokerfaced love affair with old-fashioned gadgeteering, in a group show at Feigen Contemporary. In the midst of this white-hot art scene, however, anything that was capable of holding my attention, whether by Price or Kelly or Willis or Mesenbourg, seemed to exist not even at the margins of the art world, but in something more like solitary confinement, with each artist utterly alone, a lunatic in the padded cell of his own imagination. It is hardly surprising that even the people who still have the capacity to respond to a work of art have been finding it so difficult to get in the mood. The only common language left any longer is the language of reputations and trends—which is to say, the language of money.

In the midst of this supremely sordid season, I visited Art Basel Miami Beach,

the fair that now anchors nearly a week of events in early December that extend well beyond the Convention Center on Miami Beach. And what struck me most forcibly as I wandered the aisles was the noisiness and the vehemence with which prices were announced. Dealers wanted to tell anybody and everybody, whether they were potential clients or just art-world rubberneckers, not only what everything in their booth cost, but how much the discount would be. It was an orgy of money talk. When you take a look at the art market, what you're really seeing is the stock market. The whole art world is like Nobu during bonus week, a freak show of conspicuous consumption. The point is not what the booze or the raw fish tastes like; the point is how fiendishly expensive it is.

III.

TO POINT OUT THAT CULTURE is a business, and sometimes even a moderately big business, is to state the obvious, and I will not argue with those who would say that so it always was and so it always will be. This is true, as far as it goes. The trouble is that a business model has come to drive the entire art world, and like the corporate executive who regards the launch of each new product as a challenge to the success of the last one, because you must keep growing or you will die, the arts community finds itself in a state of permanent anxiety. There always has to be a new artist whom the media will embrace as enthusiastically as they embraced Warhol; there always has to be a show that will top the excitement generated by the last blockbuster at the Modern or the Met. And a lot of the artists and curators are really into the game—they are fueling the system. What you see when you look at a painting by John Currin or Lisa Yuskavage is a business model. From this point of view, the current season is a big success. And this brings all the more forcibly to mind the essential paradox of cultural success, which is that growth becomes the measure of all things. In a world where everybody wants to quantify the value of experiences that are inherently ineffable, who can wonder that the guy who recently paid something like \$140 million for a Pollock feels that he has cornered the market on ineffability?

Many people have observed that collectors now prefer to buy in the

attention-grabbing public arena of the auction or the art fair, rather than in the relative privacy of an art gallery. One hears various explanations for this shift. Some say that collectors are worried about being outsmarted by the secret machinations of dealers. Others say that it is simply that the collectors want to have as many people as possible watching them as they spend their money. But there may be something deeper at work here, some fear of the inwardness or the particularity of the experiences that art can offer. By buying art in public, the collector turns a rarefied experience—and what one would hope is the private avidity for art—into a popular experience, a spectacle that unfolds as if under klieg lights in a sold-out stadium.

When the collecting of art takes on that familiar pop-culture buzz, we are seeing a diminishment of the variety of artistic experience, and this variety is among the glories of any culture. Baudelaire may have been the first to point out that one of the great pleasures and privileges open to an educated audience in a modern society is the possibility of experiencing both high art and popular culture. And why on earth shouldn't it be possible to enjoy *The Sopranos* and *Sex and the City*, which we take in with thousands of other people, and also the new work of an abstract painter that may be known to no more than a hundred? The trouble starts when people begin to imagine that all these experiences are equal. The argument for equalization is often presented as if it were a plea for populism, for a "democracy of access." But in practice this equalization is often profoundly anti-democratic, because the assumption is that the man on the street will never be capable of appreciating a Mondrian—or a Poussin—for what it is, on its own terms.

The biggest danger currently faced by people who love painting and sculpture is this unitary view of culture, which in practice amounts to the view that all culture is, or should be, popular culture. I am somewhat baffled by the appeal of such an idea, although perhaps it has something to do with the value that is currently placed on "interconnectivity" and "interface." Of course the organizers of Art Basel Miami Beach are anxious to distinguish what they do from what goes on at the multiplex, but the distinctions that they want to make are less of kind than of caliber. What they really want to do is create haute pop experiences.

The mood in the Convention Center where Art Basel Miami Beach was held was not all that different from the atmosphere at a car show—or, for that matter, at an upscale mall. Fifty years ago, de Kooning's friend Edwin Denby was already arguing that "the miles of New York galleries [are] as luxurious to wander through as a slave market." And some of the critics who went down to report on Art Basel Miami Beach were perfectly aware that they were in the midst of the biggest and most luxurious slave market on earth. You could hear it in their been-there-done-that tone. And you could see critic after critic attempting, without much success, to rise above

far behind. This is not to say that there wasn't some first-rate art to be seen at Art Basel Miami Beach, including significant works by Picasso, Morandi, and de Kooning. I did find myself thinking that for somebody, perhaps for some college kids who found their way here, Art Basel Miami Beach could be an open sesame. But once those kids fixed their attention on that Morandi, who was going to show them the way forward?

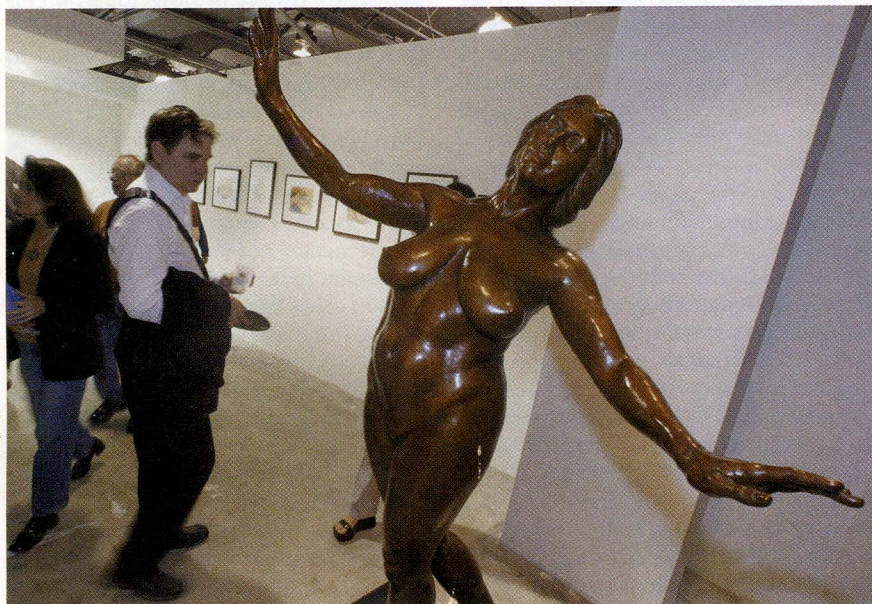
The trouble is that fewer and fewer people are willing to recognize the fundamentally different nature of various forms of cultural experience. And make no mistake, there are essential distinctions that must be made. It is in the

ple are often uncomfortable with privacy, with its challenges and its revelations. The intensity of the high-art experience has everything to do with a disengagement from the pressures of the present. It is the unquantifiable experience par excellence.

The essential problem in the art world today is that in almost every area, from the buying and selling of contemporary art to the programs of our greatest museums, there is an obsession with appealing to the largest imaginable audience. And in practice this means always operating as if painting and sculpture were a dimension of popular culture. To be sure, I am drawing a sharper distinction than is always the case. Pop culture has sometimes gained in interest when it has adapted some of the fascination with difficulty and obscurity that is a powerful element in the high-art traditions. By the same token, the saltiness of pop can add something to a painting or a sculpture; and at the Museum of Modern Art in the years when Alfred H. Barr Jr. ran the show, some of the marketing ideas of Madison Avenue were used to jumpstart people's engagement with difficult modern art. The problem, again, is not with popular culture, but with the wholesale imposition of its methods and values on an alien terrain. It is this muddling of the realms that fuels the insane art commerce of our day. When we see artists whose careers are barely a decade old dominating the auction rooms, with their work selling for millions of dollars, we are being told that a widespread consensus can crystallize in a moment—and this is a pop culture idea. So, for that matter, is the idea that the way for a museum to attract an audience is by creating a sexy new addition where people can see and be seen. One of the tragedies of the past few decades has been that the museums have lost faith in their own permanent collections, where visitors were once invited to engage, one by one, with works created by the masters, one by one.

IV.

I AM AS TIRED AS THE NEXT PERSON of the high culture versus popular culture debates that obsessed intellectuals for much of a century. There was a deep vein of self-congratulation that ran through those discussions, in which the literati showed off their in-depth knowledge of the



MARY ELLEN SCHERL, "Standing Lady" at Art Basel Miami Beach

the muck by announcing that he or she had made one or two discoveries, something of real value hidden away at one of the satellite art shows, at Pulse or NADA or Scope, which had sprouted in some of the low-income and industrial areas on the mainland. In Miami, the search for integrity was desperate, and ultimately doomed.

Monty Python would have had a field day with those art tours in Wynwood. The invasion of the trendoids was closely watched by the locals, many of whom were obviously living close to the poverty line. But even people who have never heard of Marcel Duchamp can see that when the people with the funny glasses show up to stare at the cubicles full of funny things, the real estate investors with their condo conversions can't be

very nature of popular culture that its pleasures are ones that we share with a wide range of people simultaneously. And it is in the very nature of high art that its pleasures are ones that we experience as individuals. To insist upon this distinction is not to say that one experience is better and one is worse, it is only to clarify the character of each experience. The art in popular culture has everything to do with creating a work that catalyzes a strain of feeling in the mass audience. High art operates in a completely different way, for each viewer comes to the work with the fullest, the most intense, the most personal awareness of the conventions and traditions of an art form. The essential high-art encounter is a private encounter—but we are living in the YouTube era, when peo-

other side of the tracks. Yet there was also a terrific energy about the best of those discussions, a spirit that was fundamentally dialectical and fluid, an effort not to subjugate one side of the argument to the other but to strengthen our understanding of all aspects of the culture through a constant process of comparative investigation.

Laissez-faire aesthetics is fundamentally anti-dialectical, not only because there is no acknowledgment of the need to comprehend the divergent implications of our attraction to high art and popular culture, but also, strangely enough, because there is a refusal to accept the very existence of competing forces. There is no struggle with distinctions because there is no recognition of distinctions. The result is a flattening of all artistic experience. If the clearest expression of laissez-faire aesthetics is to be found in the extent to which fashionable painters are now embraced as simultaneously offering traditional values and Disneyland-style fun, the new mood is also having an impact in the art museums, where pop culture is often sold as the new laissez-faire avant-garde. I still listen to Bob Dylan. I am still caught up in those prickly yet silky lyrics that I first heard in the '60s, when I bought the albums as soon as they appeared. But I question why the Morgan Library and Museum felt the need to present a show this season devoted to the life and times of Dylan, and I was frankly appalled to see "Bob Dylan's American Journey: 1956–1966" competing for attention with a small gathering of medieval illuminated manuscripts and metalwork, a group of drawings by Fragonard and other artists of the eighteenth century, a retrospective of the career of Saul Steinberg, and a show of Mozart manuscripts.

I realize that even to raise the question—what is Dylan doing at the Morgan?—is to provoke the wrath of the intellectual hipsters. They will point out that the Morgan was the invention of a modern millionaire, and that the pages illuminated by a monk in the fourteenth century were no more destined to be exhibited or collected on Madison Avenue than some album covers produced by Columbia Records in the 1960s. And of course a library that is dedicated to our cultural heritage can arguably embrace a fluid concept of its own collections and exhibition programs. The hipsters will want to make it seem close-minded to question why Dylan memo-

rabilia should be exhibited steps away from the Stavelot Triptych, a masterpiece of the medieval goldsmith's art.

But the question can be put a different way. It seems to me that it is in fact the Morgan that is being close-minded—insensitive to distinctions, to particularities, to the possibility that high culture and popular culture are so wonderfully different that they cannot in fact be put together. I imagine that Steinberg, an artist whose understanding of the relationship between art high and low was as deftly dialectical as that of anybody who has ever lived, could have woven a funny little allegory around the presence of the Bleecker Street hipster troubadour amid the incunabula at the Morgan, but if the people at the museum see any irony in the situation, they are not letting on.

I worry about the Morgan. Renzo Piano's ballyhooed addition, which opened last spring, has transformed what was a series of intimate spaces dedicated to the glories of connoisseurship and scholarship into a bunch of art boutiques in a high-modern mini-mall. This is not to say that the Morgan cannot still offer an unforgettable museum-going experience. Yet the signs are not good. American museums are full of curators who worry about the malling of the museum, and realize that there are other ways to answer the concerns of trustees who want to bolster the endowment and combat rising costs. But in a country as wealthy as ours, what are generally presented as fiscal decisions can also be a cover for deeper philosophical predispositions. There may not be a museum director in America who is any longer willing to look a trustee in the eye and tell him that he is sitting in a museum and it is no place to talk about pop culture marketing strategies. There may not be a museum director in America who is willing to argue that an art museum is a particular kind of place, and that particular places are friendly to particular experiences.

We live in a country in which we have lots of opportunities to enjoy Dylan, and motorcycles, and the sight of Dylan on a motorcycle, and I don't see that it is asking too much to insist that there is a place where the focus is on medieval manuscripts and Old Master drawings and Mozart and the nineteenth-century novel. Make no mistake, there is an agenda behind the Dylan show at the Morgan. "Bob Dylan's American Journey" is an effort to reassure the public that an insti-

tution that might be perceived as off-putting because it stands for some particular things is in fact a laissez-faire institution—a place that will happily embrace whatever the market will bear.

WHAT LAISSEZ-FAIRE AESTHETICS has left us with—all along the line, in the curatorial meetings at museums, in the conversations in the aisles at the art fairs, in the MFA seminars in the art schools—is a weakening of all conviction, an unwillingness to take stands, a reluctance to champion, or surrender to, any first principle. Perhaps it was in response to such whatever-ism that many people of taste found themselves waxing enthusiastic over the intractably maudlin paintings devoted to the atrocities at Abu Ghraib that Fernando Botero exhibited at the Marlborough Gallery in the fall. The enthusiasm that sophisticated gallerygoers showed for these works, which had about as much sense of form and structure as mushy brown gravy poured over marzipan, had a lot to do with the fact that an artist had taken a stand. (It happened to be the right stand.) And the fact that Botero was not selling the paintings one by one, but wanted to donate them all to a museum, could make him seem heroic in the current climate. By the time that Arthur Danto proclaimed in *The Nation* that Botero's paintings were in certain respects superior to Picasso's *Guernica*, we might as well have been back in the 1930s, in the low era of socially relevant art, when images of oppressed workers and handsome soldiers fighting fascism were embraced by an audience that already knew enough of modern art to know that it was not really comfortable with it.

Botero appeals to an old-style philistinism, to the idea that works of art should have meanings so obvious that they grab you by the lapels. If people are running to embrace his Abu Ghraib paintings, perhaps it is because they feel so deeply threatened by the new face of philistinism, which is laissez-faire aesthetics. Perhaps any stand in art now seems better than no stand at all, and never mind the art. For what laissez-faire aesthetics promises is a tolerance of everything—high, pop, whatever: a tolerance so bland that it really amounts to indifference. (This is not repressive tolerance so much as manic-depressive tolerance.) And by now gallerygoers and

museumgoers, even the most astute among them, are quite frankly afraid to insist that high culture always has some element of the prejudicial about it—a preference for a particular style or way of doing things or play of the imagination that is to some degree not supported by mere fact.

Laissez-faire aesthetics is the aesthetics that violates the very principle of art, because it insists that anything goes, when in fact the only thing that is truly unacceptable in the visual arts is the idea that anything goes. At times, amid the chic hedge-fund maelstrom of Art Basel Miami Beach, it could seem that what had died was the modernist century, with its vehement advocacy of certain aesthet-

ic principles. Perhaps we have to accept that it has gone. But what is really in danger now is something much bigger than modernity. It is nothing less than the precious exclusivity of the high-art experience, which stretches from the Tanagra figurines and the Romanesque manuscripts to the paintings of Rembrandt and Poussin and Corot and Mondrian. There is nothing laissez-faire about any of these masterpieces. When we contemplate them in all their particularity—in the almost delusional extremism of their varied visions and in the insistent singularity of their poetry—we are constantly reminded that high culture is anything but easygoing, that it is always daringly, rightfully, triumphantly intolerant. ■

knowledge all function in the same manner: as palimpsest maps of time.

Yeats yearned for the “Land of Heart’s Desire,/Where beauty has no ebb, decay no flood,/But joy is wisdom, time an endless song,” and probably men and women of all ages have shared his desire. But the notion that time functions for humans as it does for the earth is actually a modern concept, and it owes much to the two men whose stories are told so vividly in these two little-big books. That humankind has a history was clear to Aristotle and to Aquinas and to Luther, but that the Earth had a history was another matter altogether. Wrinkles on the face of an old man are a testament to long years of love and disappointment and anger and hope, but could the same thing be said of “wrinkles” on the face of the Earth? If God created a perfect Earth, could the present state of the natural world really be a key to its past?

Oren Harman

Sermons in Stone

THE SEASHELL ON THE MOUNTAINTOP: A STORY OF SCIENCE, SAINTHOOD, AND THE HUMBLE GENIUS WHO DISCOVERED A NEW HISTORY OF THE EARTH
By Alan Cutler
(Dutton, 228 pp., \$23.95)

THE MAN WHO FOUND TIME: JAMES HUTTON AND THE DISCOVERY OF THE EARTH’S ANTIQUITY
By Jack Repcheck
(Perseus, 247 pp., \$26)

I.
VAST ... HORRID, HIDEOUS, ghastly ruins.” These are not the words of an observer of a latter-day war zone or a witness to the effects of an ecological disaster on a city of yore. Rather, it was the typical reaction of the seventeenth-century tourist when chancing upon ... the Alps! If this seems surprising, then consider also the pronouncement of Thomas Jefferson that there exists a riddle “beyond the investigation of human sagacity.” Had Jefferson been referring to the conundrum of human consciousness, or the problem of free will, or perhaps the confounding paradox of a benevolent, all-powerful God who allows

evil in this world, we would be remiss in expressing our confusion. But the elusive puzzle too great for the powers of the human mind was the mystery of seashells embedded in stones atop mountains nowhere near the sea—what Jefferson called “the origin of shells in high places.” And what about the equally astounding admission by Isaac Newton that the universal laws of mechanics that he had painstakingly described were doubtless suspended in the beginning of time to accommodate God’s twenty-four-hour, six-day adventure of the creation of the world? That the world was born on October 23, 4004 B.C.E., was an obvious certainty to the Archbishop of Armagh, James Ussher, in his *Annales Veteris Testamenti*, in 1650.

It is all exceedingly strange to us. But two wonderful popular renditions of the history of geology, by Alan Cutler and by Jack Repcheck, take us back in time, geological and historical, to a world very different from the one we live in today. The story that holds the key to unlocking such curiosities of human understanding, it turns out, is a story conceived layer upon layer, in which the appearances of stones and ridges and fossils, the rise and fall of cities and empires and professions, the vicissitudes of mundane and celestial politics, and the evolution of human

II.
NICOLAUS STENO WAS BORN Niels Stenson in Copenhagen in the winter of 1638, a decade before the Peace of Westphalia would finally bring some quiet to a Europe ravaged by war. Contemporary observers of the debates between creationists and evolutionists, or between advocates of stem-cell research and their foes, might be surprised to learn that science and religion were not always at loggerheads, but rather nestled very comfortably in centuries past into a cohesive and reassuring worldview sanctioned by scripture, belief, and observation. Centuries before the word “scientist” was coined (this happened in 1840), alchemists, experimental philosophers, natural historians, and natural philosophers plumbed the depths of the observable world, searching out the patterns and forces that would have been put in place by a benevolent God. The heroes of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century were almost all devout Christians; the chance to demonstrate the regularity of the universe as conceived by a merciful deity was a tempting prospect for a clever young lad growing up at the time, and the dutiful Steno kindled to the challenge.

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