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The Complex 1980s, Viewed by 47 Artists

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER

The 1980s were a complicated decade for American art. New York was back from the brink of bankruptcy, but gentrification was killing bohemianism. The art market flourished, but it also created a lopsided demand for painting and other market-friendly mediums. Art stars were born, but artists were dying of AIDS. All of this serves as a backdrop for “Circa 1986” at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill.



Rona Pondick

“Little Bathers,” 1990-91 (plastic, wax and rubber teeth), by Rona Pondick.

The show features 65 works by 47 artists, made between 1981 and 1991, and was organized by John Newsom, Astrid Honold and Nicola Trezzi: a painter, a curator and an editor. The works are all drawn, however, from six private New York collections, including that of the founders of the art center, Marc and Livia Straus, and their children, Ari and Sarena.

Collectors tend to focus on “things,” objects that can be bought from galleries rather than more ephemeral forms, like performance art. And because collecting involves money, market values get confused with other concerns.

You are confronted with this immediately upon entering “Circa 1986,” where a Jeff Koons sculpture stands just inside the door. Mr. Koons’s market machinations were as much a part of his work in the ’80s as the objects

themselves, and his steel and glass tank with two basketballs floating in distilled water from 1985 is a seminal text in his post-Pop sculpture-as-commodity aesthetic.

Nearby is a work by Ashley Bickerton, who channeled the '80s obsession with consumption and branding into sculptures like "Still Life (The Artist's Studio After Braque) No. 2," from 1989. The work consists of a yellow industrial box mounted on the wall, which parodies Minimalism from earlier decades and stresses art's commercial allegiances with an LED light meter that registers its changing market valuation.

Minimalism is also a foil in several other works here: Nancy Dwyer's "Fate Built," from 1986, a sculpture made of Formica on wood; Moira Dryer's casein-on-wood assemblage, which tilts out from the wall; Richard Artschwager's Formica and wood "mirror"; and Allan McCollum's line-up of urnlike forms. Commodities are showcased in Joel Otterson's "Compact Disc Stereo Love Seats (Hot Wheels)," from 1988, a unit cobbled together with cheap furniture plugged into a compact disc player that blasts music.

Painting was a central collecting-quarry in the '80s, and there is plenty of it here. Rick Prol was an assistant to Jean-Michel Basquiat, one of the most revered American painters of the decade. Interestingly, there are no paintings by Mr. Basquiat, who died of a drug overdose in 1988, in "Circa 1986," but Mr. Prol's large canvas, "I Have This Cat," from 1985, is an apt surrogate, complete with a primitive figure set against a bleak cityscape marked with graffiti-like scrawls.

Another hero of the period, David Wojnarowicz, who died of AIDS in 1992, is represented by a painting that also traffics in Pop-primitivism. "Excavating the Temples of the New Gods," from 1986, includes Native American and Meso-American art motifs, but also collaged dollar bills, a global map and nature illustrations. There are competent, if not stellar, paintings by other luminaries like Julian Schnabel, Elizabeth Murray, Ross Bleckner and Anselm Kiefer and canvases by lesser-knowns like Walter Dahn, Jiri Georg Dokoupil, James Brown, John Walker, Peter Schuyff, David Row and Dieter Hacker.

Critics like to pit the "bad" postmodernism of '80s expressionist painting, represented by artists like Mr. Schnabel or Mr. Kiefer, with the "good" postmodernism of artists who used photography and video as well as painting, often referring to critical theories by Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault or Roland Barthes. Works by artists in this later grouping are included in "Circa 1986." There are bright Cibachromes by Sarah Charlesworth that juxtapose sacred and profane imagery; a classic "Untitled (Cowboy)" "re-photograph" from 1989 by Richard Prince; and a Jenny Holzer sign with words spelled out in red LED lights, as well as photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, Sherrie Levine, Christian Boltanski, Barbara Ess, Mike and Doug Starn, Mark Morrisroe and Clegg & Guttman.

Concerns about the body driven by the AIDS crisis and by psychoanalytic theories of the “abject” and the “uncanny” are also present: Robert Gober’s creepy plaster “Sink With a Drainboard,” from 1984, Mike Kelley’s sculpture made with used stuffed animals and a blanket, and Rona Pondick’s pink spheres embedded with yellowed rubber teeth and scattered on the floor.

What is left out of this show could fill several art history books. As the Guerrilla Girls, a feminist collective that thrived in the ’80s, pointed out in their posters, books and “interventions,” the art market of that period supported the usual suspects of acclaim and fame: white men. A photograph in the catalog of a group of mostly male artists, posed at Mr. Chow restaurant in the early ’80s, supports this claim.

And yet, the catalog also opens up into richer and more fruitful territory. Mr. Newsom’s reminiscences of the ’80s art world, from an art student’s perspective, end with a poignant story about meeting Keith Haring when Mr. Haring was clearly suffering from the disease that would eventually kill him (again, AIDS). Mr. Trezzi’s experimental essay juxtaposes two strains of thought: one about collecting as an art form; the other about what it means for artists to seriously collect art. The first considers how collectors, from the Medicis to the current crop, “influence the course of art history,” while the second looks at artists from Marcel Duchamp, who supported himself by art dealing, to “creative collectors” like Hans-Peter Feldmann and Maurizio Cattelan.

Ms. Honold’s round table with the collectors provides the most sympathetic view of all. We are told of struggling young professionals buying art on layaway — and, much later, getting disgusted with art-fair feeding frenzies in the new millennium. We learn about trips to the “dangerous East Village” and educating oneself via art magazines — even if “much of the art criticism was aloof and pedantic.” We are informed about the differences between “buyers” and “collectors” and the responsibilities of taking care of artworks once you own them. There are a few eye-rolling moments, when the word “genius,” which was theoretically banished by postmodern critical theory, pops up, and when Mr. Koons is mentioned in the same sentence as Moses, Buddha, Michelangelo and Einstein.

But for all its biases and omissions, “Circa 1986” uses its material well. It is a baldly idiosyncratic show in which the risks, rewards and reminiscences of the collector are showcased — sometimes even outshining the work on view.

“Circa 1986” is at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, 1701 Main Street, Peekskill, through July 22. Information: (914) 788-0100 or hvcca.org.