

CHICAGO

Contemporary History Painting

Gallery 400

University of Illinois at Chicago

400 S. Peoria St., 312/996-6114

This exhibition suggests that among the many facets of Postmodernism has been a reinvestigation of the pictorial pursuits of earlier ages—in this particular case, the now seemingly exhausted tradition of history painting. Through didactic narrative drawn from mythology, cultural tradition, or current events, artists once sought to inform, inspire, and occasionally uplift their audiences through public pictures which were story-telling in nature and metaphoric in effect.

Curator Laurel Bradley brought together paintings by Milet Andrejevic, Roger Brown, Leon Golub, Komar and Melamid, James McGarrell, Nancy Spero, and Mark Tansey in an attempt to examine whether such a mode of communication exists between artist and viewer today; whether the artist can again assume the role of keeper of the social cultural flame, rather than the more personal and self-revelatory intent of Modernism. It is an ambitious and thoughtful effort and, in an odd sense, what I see as its failure is also its success: with a roomful of pictures Bradley evoked the oft-noted dilemma of our age—that efforts to impose order and meaning on our collective experience will almost always wither in the face of the emptiness that lies at the heart of our self-knowledge, and our never-ending quest to confront that emptiness, to be in awe of it, and to try to fill it.

The exhibition, then, became an examination of tactics. They ranged from the archaicizing—Andrejevic's empty efforts to find Arcadia in Central Park, Brown's witty but ephemeral appropriation of mythology—to the propagandistic—Golub's paean to indictment and recrimination, Spero's elegy to an alternative vision of history, Komar and Melamid's deconstruction of the tactics of propaganda itself—to the isolate vision of McGarrell, whose world revolves around the holy sanctum of the artist's studio, to the acts of appropriation and reconstruction of Tansey, which finally become an act of surrealism.

In the last analysis, these are not history paintings because the artists—or Bradley—intended them to be so. They mimic and ape a mode of being, of knowing, and of communicating that now can only speak in broken sentences, that now can only move with halting steps. We sense this frustration, and we exult in it; the exercise shown in this exhibition becomes one akin to lighting votive candles at the altar of art and a system we no longer believe in but nonetheless respect and hold dear. It is a Pyrrhic failure.

James Yood