



Review

From Chicago: Afterimage

By Randall Miller *October 9, 2012*

The year 1969 was canonical for the Chicago Imagists. After a series of successful shows in the late '60s at the Hyde Park Art Center, then under the direction of the artist and curator Don Baum, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago presented a show titled *Don Baum Sez "Chicago Needs Famous Artists"* curated by Baum and Ruth Horwich. More than forty years after Baum's titular statement, museums and institutions throughout the Midwest continue to carry a torch for the Imagists and their historical relevance, most recently in a show at the DePaul Art Museum titled *Afterimage*.

The show is a clear—though not entirely successful—attempt to further entrench the Imagists' legacy by exhibiting works from a dozen of the movement's original artists in the same space as twenty-four contemporary artists whose works tread similar conceptual and visual terrains. It seems like a fair premise, though the curators, Thea Liberty Nichols and Dahlia Tulett-Gross, have split the show between two floors of the museum, with the original Imagists in a single gallery on the ground floor and the younger artists in two galleries on the second floor. If the intention of the show is to create dialogue between past and present and assert the influence of the Imagists on today's artists, why split the show into separate galleries on separate floors? It would have been interesting to see a side-by-side exchange between Suellen Rocca's painting of a dismembered *Dream Girl* (1968) and Selina Trepp's photograph *The Painter* (2011), in which Trepp portrays a figure reflected in a mirror and holding a



Selina Trepp. *The Painter*, 2011; chromogenic print; 19.5 x 27.7 in. Courtesy of the Artist and DePaul Art Museum, Chicago.



Rebecca Shore. *09*, 2010; oil on canvas; 30 x 45 in. Courtesy of the Artist and DePaul Art Museum.

portrait over her face, suggesting the complex process of identity construction. The same goes for Art Green's formally inventive window painting *Cold Facts* (1979) and Eric Lebofsky's kaleidoscopic *Time Machine (Hinda II)* (2011), or Gladys Nilsson's sexy cat-woman in *Big Kitty* (1993) and John Parot's sexy guys in *Navarro's Problem* (2010). If the Imagists still hold some authority, why not invite direct comparison?

In truth, I have never been convinced that the array of artists gathered under the Imagist banner have all that much in common artistically. Broadly speaking, the artists whose work Baum exhibited in the late '60s were incorporating pop-culture references such as underground comics or beauty parlor advertisements, exploring formal questions regarding the construction of an image, and utilizing the grotesque in ways that were antithetical to the chilly Pop and Minimalism coming out of New York at the time. But *Imagist* has become a blanket historical designation for these artists despite the wide disparities between their practices. Phil Hanson's paintings of sterile, ornate interiors have more in common with De Chirico than a contemporary like Barbara Rossi, whose *Shep Step II* (1973) combines a '60s interior-design palette with cubist structure; neither artist has much to do with Jim Nutt's self-cannibalizing zombie woman from *Toot-Toot Woo-Woo* (1970). Crassness may be Jim Nutt's game, though his morbid housewife vamp comes across as all the more stunted in the presence of Rocca's nuanced image of female identity in *Dream Girl* and the sense of sexual self-ownership portrayed in Gladys Nilsson's *Big Kitty*.

As for the upstairs galleries, two may have been one too many. Rather than amplify the influence of the '60s artists, the uneven quality of work on display only reinforces the possibility that *Afterimage* is largely an exercise in historical—and likely market-focused—fluffing. With that said, there are some standouts that deserve mention. Amy Lockhart and Marc Bell's animated video, *The Collagist* (2009), is a fun Philip Guston-meets-Barry McGee rumination on the tedium of artistic process. In her painting *09* (2010), Rebecca Shore has arranged a selection of silhouetted symbols ranging from pop-culture references to women's hairstyles to highlight the shorthand of visual culture. Men's heads get wrapped up in all kinds of absurdity in Richard Hull's swirling, fleshy painting of a human bust, *Adolescence* (2011), and Justin Cooper's photograph of a neck-tie-mummified head, *Untitled (ties)* (2010).

It's hard to say whose interests this show serves. One thing is for sure: this won't be the last time the Imagists' legacy gets burnished by a major institution, as such practices have become a Midwestern micro-industry. Fifty years later, the art establishment still says, "Chicago needs famous artists."

***Afterimage* is on view at DePaul Art Museum, in Chicago, through November 18, 2012.**

Art Practical: A Beautiful Concept of Far, issue 4.2 (October 9, 2012)