

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Art

In Chelsea, a Chapter in Abstract Art and Some Long Verse



Robert McKeever/Gagosian Gallery

Anselm Reyle's "Eternity," foreground, and "Philosophy," left, at Gagosian.

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From certain angles right now, the options in contemporary art appear to be purity and impurity. On one side stands art that screams money and off-the-charts fabrication costs. On the other, art of physical modesty that whispers obscure ideas and above-it-all pretense. And yet in both directions you can find slickness and a certain paucity of

content — or substance, sustenance or genuine pleasure. Sometimes it seems more like a case of choosing your poison.

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At the moment two exhibitions in Chelsea define these extremes and their fuzzy dichotomy. On the shiny, happy, money side is the German artist Anselm Reyle's first solo show at the Gagosian Gallery flagship space, on West 24th Street — by now the Fort Knox of contemporary-art galleries. Mr. Reyle's array of metal sculptures and wall reliefs with bright chromed color and occasional LED lights qualify mostly as exceptional high-end lobby art.

The “no money, please, we're-intellectuals” side of the spectrum is represented by the brainy art collective known as the Bernadette Corporation. Its latest efforts consist primarily of a long poem, in a typewriter font, displayed 10 sheets at a time under Plexiglas on 13 attenuated tables, and 38 photographs in black and white and color of wan young models in jeans. The display can be found at Greene Naftali — a purveyor as much of ideas as of artistic product — on West 26th Street.

Both exhibitions are, on the surface, attractive, impeccably presented destination shows, and I enjoyed both, up to a point. Gagosian especially, since light entertainment

seems to be the aim. Even on a normally quiet Tuesday afternoon, the yawning spaces chez Gogo were surprisingly crowded with gallery regulars, tourists and student groups. The gallery is widely known as a reliable source of with-it art spectacle, whatever the level of quality.

In that regard Mr. Reyle does not disappoint. In an interview in Art Review last December, he said he got energy from being called cynical and having his work described as kitsch. So let's just say that, compared with Mr. Reyle's show, a large triptych by the Japanese artist Takashi Murakami (he of the Louis Vuitton handbags) that is on view in another part of the gallery looks unusually impassioned, profound and lovingly hand-worked.

Titled "Picture of Fate: I Am but a Fisherman Who Angles in the Darkness of His Mind," the Murakami is dominated by the exotic karajishi, or "China-lion," who guards the threshold of Japanese Buddhist temples and is a frequent subject of Chinese and Japanese artists. With waterfalls, and pours and drips of paint flowing here and there, this creature stands on a mountain of skulls with richly colored interiors. The painting is a marvel.

Mr. Reyle's show is titled "Monochrome Age" and forms an extended parody of, and homage to, abstract art, which he has said he wants to make popular. Over all his pieces suggest a combination of the gleaming physical perfection of Jeff Koons and the perceptual tricks of Olafur Eliasson, but there are asides to Richard Serra, Andy Warhol, Donald Judd and others.

Just inside the door a gorgeous double loop of bronze surfaced in highly reflective purple (via a process called chrome optics) stands nearly eight feet tall. It wears its title, "Eternity," lightly and almost seems pliant, like a lasso of grape-flavored gum. It belongs to the lava-lamp school of art, and the light-dark grain of its makassa-veneer base adds an Art Deco note. Nearby, "Philosophy," a huge, chromed, double-sided grid, ripples with biomorphic bulges. But it also has flat portions, as if the entire piece were

squeezed between two enormous planes while still molten. It resembles a midcentury Modernist screen on steroids.

The show is up and down. Kitsch may be the only word for a sculpture consisting of several tall, vertical chrome pylons punctuated with drippy, woundlike gashes that glow with changing LED colors.

Neo-Geo Redux seems the proper label for silver-chrome bales of straw (make hay while the sun shines?). Reliefs of a crumpled, Mylar-like material evoke exaggerated disco versions of Piero Manzoni's autochrome reliefs, which were exhibited in this space last year. Heavier numbers involving trash cast into brightly chromed aluminum wall reliefs are tarted-up examples of the oldest assemblage trick in the book.

The show's final gallery, devoted to smaller works, brings back an earlier version of Mr. Reyle, before he was blessed with a seemingly unlimited budget. Especially wonderful is a smallish sculpture in electric blue bronze. It suggests, as if on purpose, a large pile of what inspired the term "filthy lucre."

At Greene Naftali, the Bernadette Corporation is proving that the only thing more uncomfortable than reading small type while standing up, as so much early Conceptual Art required, is reading it while leaning over tables. The poem, "A Billion and Change," has a title that resonates with just about everything these days, and runs to 130 manuscript pages, divided among 13 slim, plain wood tables. (These may or may not be a comment on the tables featured in the ebullient, excess-prone Guyton/Walker show at this gallery last summer.)

"A Billion and Change" shifts from one poetic format to another — free verse, four-line stanzas and so on. It is entertaining line for line, vivid in language and chock-full of references to recent world and art-world events. It also includes some childhood memories that sound real. Little of it sticks, but the totality is extremely polished.

Occasionally Jenny Holzer's aphorisms came to mind ("Driving is not really liberating"). But in the main the consistency of tone is extremely impressive, given the collective nature of the process.

The poem is definitely an achievement, but it is "The Complete Poem" that matters. This consists of the manuscript as well as the tables, which are being sold individually, a clever attempt at commodifying something that is usually widely available in book form. As yet there are no plans for publication.

The poem's shifting genres, coupled with the beautiful young people standing, lolling and flinging their hair about in the photographs, bring the phrase "exquisite corpse" to mind, and with that the idea of the randomness of talent and good looks. But the show's news release set me straight. Bernadette is contrasting two forms of work, writing and modeling. The group commissioned the images from the fashion photographer David Vasiljevic, asking him to organize a shoot similar to one he recently shot for Levi's.

Perhaps the collective is also contrasting work done using one's personal appearance and work done using something more internal and personal. I hope so, but as these two chic exhibitions battle to a draw, I wonder.

"Anselm Reyle: Monochrome Age" and Takashi Murakami's "Picture of Fate" continue through Oct. 24 at the Gagosian Gallery, 555 West 24th Street, Chelsea; (212) 741-1111. "The Bernadette Corporation: The Complete Poem" continues through Oct. 17 at Greene Naftali, 526 West 26th Street, Chelsea; (212) 463-0890.

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