

**No longer art's given, beauty, says Dan Cameron, has become a problem to explore**

**F**rom Matisse's famous, if generally misunderstood, *pensée* about a painting being like a good armchair—something to relax into at the end of a long working day—to Jeff Koons's shrewdly ambiguous remarks about the liberation that comes with accepting banality, 20th-century artists have maintained a love-hate affair with beauty. Indeed, for many, artists and audience alike, the line that runs from German Expressionism and Dada down through contemporary artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andres Serrano seems to have required that artists give as much consideration to the possibilities of aesthetic repulsion as to the rules of attraction. Nevertheless, even though some would insist that beauty is the furthest thing from most artists' minds today, the fact is that a concern with it—or, better, a concern with the rhetoric and history, the discourse, that surrounds it—has become a theme in recent art. Beauty is no longer art's given: it has become a problem to explore. So rapid and multi-directional has this development been, however, that it sometimes seems hard to say where the struggle to define beauty leaves off and a more direct, if unexpected, experience of it takes over.

Part of the current confusion lies in the fact that there is no longer any broad public consensus over the principles, technical as well as philosophical, that once provided some objective foundation for the otherwise highly subjective concept of beauty. For example, while in many quarters it is not surprising to hear the beauty of Robert Ryman's work spoken of with utter sincerity, in others the very notion that his paintings *might* be seen as beautiful would be viewed as diluting the ideas behind his work into an exercise in mere pictorial nostalgia. However, in less clear-cut cases, the problem is not so much forging a contemporary definition of beauty as it is recognizing those fine shades of difference that separate the intelligent exploration of aesthetic problems from an indulgence in categories so familiar that they have been literally drained of all resonance and force. Of course, there is some work, like that of the team of French photographers Pierre et Gilles, that makes its greatest impact precisely by playing with these unstable distinctions, albeit naively. The pleasure one takes away from their work depends upon its near-subversive indulgence in a spent iconography that does not just cast friends and acquaintances in the roles of saints, sinners and gods, but also organizes these archetypes according to laws of composition and

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framing that make them seem all the more irrelevant to our times. ("If you do pictures of saints you can present the violence and misery in the world, but also the gentleness and purity of their hearts," they have said in all earnestness.) The collaborative duo gets away with this heresy, however, by infusing every aspect of their hand-painted photographs with a campiness so seamless that the spectator is torn between awe at their technical expertise and astonishment at their success in using traditional images as a weapon against the limitations imposed on subject matter—and meaning—by the modern (and even postmodern) world. They achieve an unexpected, and unsettling, synthesis of the obsolete with the forbidden.

A handful of New York painters, including Marilla Palmer, Elliott Puckette and Philip Smith, have been instrumental in developing a new pictorial language that defends the integrity of beauty, while at the same time attempting to expand the ways in which it is understood. In Palmer's paintings on synthetic fabrics, lyrical brushwork, erotically charged (if reductivist) imagery and surfaces that flicker and glow with the changing light all act to rebut the current tendency to confuse a feminist intent with the need to put the viewer on the defensive. In like fashion, Puckette's deep black paintings are scored with a graceful arcing line that meanders through the entire composition, creating loops and spirals that overlap in a kind of lyrical free play that belies the work's technical simplicity.

Smith's paintings also promote a kind of ambiguous space between the underpainting, the surface and the close-hatched, quasi-primitivist drawings that crowd the composition even as they manage to remain half-concealed.

In each of these examples, the artist has anticipated the viewer's potential doubts about the relevance of the beautiful and countered them by offering an edge of irony that is at least as disarming as the images themselves. One need only compare their work with the newest paintings by a past master of the indulgently beautiful, Robert Kushner, to see where we—and beauty—have gone in recent years. While Kushner's work is intelligently grounded in the late-1970s confrontation between phenomenology and desire, his paintings have lost their discursive, self-aware edge by dint of their creator's refusal to see beauty as, first and foremost, a problem. Technically rich and sensual to the point of overkill, Kushner's new paintings are nevertheless hin-



Vong Phaophanit in his  
Neon Rice Field.

## critical edge

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dered by his apparent conviction that beauty functions best when there is more than enough of it to go around.

Still, merely to acknowledge beauty as a culturally complex issue is to win but half the battle. *Neon Rice Field*, an installation work by Laotian-born sculptor Vong Phaophanit, takes the problem further. The work focuses our attention on two materials that are certainly culturally loaded: rice, the primary food staple in most of Southeast Asia, and neon, which has become a signature element in the work of such major artists as Dan Flavin, Bruce Nauman and Mario Merz. Concealed under long furrows of uncooked rice so that they emit a soft, contourless glow, however, the white neon fixtures in Phaophanit's installation, which won the artist a nomination for the 1993 Turner Prize, take on the look of something that has been gently lifted out of the realm of the cultural and returned to the territory of the (no less man-made) aesthetic sublime.

Hugh Steers's most recent paintings of gay life in the age of AIDS propel the discussion of beauty in yet another direction. Patterned after Social Realist styles and depicting such public realities as the murder of an American sailor by his mates in a men's room and such private

realities as a nude man embracing his dying lover in a hospital bed, these paintings straddle the precarious line between pure emotion and a bathos engendered by the artist's deliberately awkward technique. Steers's work succeeds partially by calling into question the viewer's psychological relationship to the subject. Does the quest for art, and by implication beauty, ultimately turn us into voyeurs, transfixed by morbid details and decadence as we square off against works whose goal is, in part, to outlive us all? By reintroducing the melancholic aspect—so well known to the critics of the past—Steers, with his emphasis on the fleetingness of life itself, reminds us that beauty is so often a compound of loss and hope.

But that is only one definition. We can no longer confine ourselves to thinking about beauty in one particular way. Rather, as these artists show, it is a broad spectrum of possibilities, including some that might appear mutually exclusive. So be it. Beauty's contemporary manifestations contribute to a balanced, if problematic, view of the world by bringing us closer to the paradoxical realities of our lives instead of providing a simple means of escaping them. *Dan Cameron is the contemporary editor of Art & Auction.*