

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

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MODERN GOTHIC (ELUSIVE, DELUDED, AND CHIC, A NEW VERSION OF AN OLD STYLE TAKES HOLD AMONG YOUNG ARTISTS)

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Call it Modern Gothic. As cringe-worthy as my term for it is, there's a lot of work around right now that fits the designation. Young critics are keen on it, magazines are featuring it, galleries are showing it, and next month's Whitney Biennial will have a fair share of it. When certain things become visible they become visible all at once. It was that way with neo-expressionist painting and graffiti art in 1981, Neo-Geo in 1986, and scatter and slacker art in the early '90s. The current Gothic revival is less a movement than a trend. Nevertheless, "Scream: 10 Artists x 10 Writers x 10 Scary Movies," the group show at Anton Kern, has caught the zeitgeist.

Initially, it's hard to see how. "Scream" makes a weak first impression and looks decidedly un-Gothic in this space. (Actually, the best Modern Gothic show in town is Olaf Breuning's demented video installation, *Home*, at Metro Pictures.) I like two of the artists in "Scream" very much: David Altmejd and Sue de Beer. Both will be in the biennial. Both impress here—he with one of his exquisitely odd tabletop sculptures of werewolf parts, artificial birds, and jewelry (the piece conjures an immense fallen symbol in a weirdly World Trade Center-like setting), she with her amazing sense of color in an otherwise cryptic video. **Brock Enright's** kidnapping piece is incredibly annoying but intense; Cameron Jamie is better than this work indicates; ditto Bjarne Melgaard; Matt Greene's Spanish-moss-like paintings are overly familiar and underdeveloped; and I'm still trying to figure out if Banks Violette is more than a latter-day Robert Longo.

The claims made for "Scream" are more interesting than the show itself. According to its curators, Fernanda Arruda and Michael Clifton, the art in "Scream" "combs the dark landscapes of Goth, Black Metal and Sodomasochism," and deals with "horror . . . ghostly shadows . . . unease and terror." In their catalog essays, the 10 writers, including Johanna Burton, Brian Sholis, and Massimiliano Gioni, concur. They use terms like "morbid," "monstrous," "sinister," "sordid," "stalkers," "uncanny," "unnatural creatures," "archaic fears," "secret rituals," "aestheticized death," "the coming terror," and "the fundamentally horrific nature of the human animal." As Meghan Dailey writes in her text on the ersatz-surreal, *New Yorker* cartoon-ish paintings of Michael Wetzell, "Horrors within. Horrors without." Indeed, much of the work in "Scream" has a creepy, melancholy look.

So why Gothic now? First, we need to remember that ever since the Enlightenment killed off Satan in the 18th century, the artistic imagination has relished filling the void. The Gothic has never really left; one hell was replaced by another. Still, the present materialization has a sense of timing to it. On September 11 we all witnessed what could be described as a manifestation of the demonic. Even before then, the bright, busy globalism of the '90s was wearing thin. Since 9-11, America has experienced an alarming reawakening of fundamentalist religiosity, and events have unfolded with an air of inevitability.

None of us knows what will hit us next, but things feel heavy. In the art world, fear and confusion have brought about a return of the metaphysical, even if it's only skin-deep. There's been a shift from the big picture to the little one, from the cultural to the sub-cultural, the outer world to the inner one. Cults are more absorbing to artists than society; optimism has turned into skepticism. But things aren't black and white. Although many claim it's dead, irony thrives. Indeed, almost all art that could be called Gothic has an ironic edge: It's aware of its position, even the absurdity of its position, yet it persists with sincere tongue in ironical cheek. Artists are using images and

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symbols in ways that attempt to short-circuit the sense that things are controlled from without; they're trying to make them more expression-controlled and are investigating smaller systems of making meaning.

The Gothic has always had a contradictory relationship to authority: It believes in hierarchy, but also sees itself as transgressive. In the Gothic, the hero and the villain resemble one another; the wicked can be redeemed. Thus, fluid definitions of sexuality, self, and subject matter are typical. This keeps the Gothic elusive, deluded, and chic. Forerunners to the present moment include Cady Noland, Karen Kilimnik, Mike Kelley, Richard Prince, Paul McCarthy, and the abject art of the early '90s. Punk figures in here too, although it was always more proletarian. Still, we're talking about suburbia, Dungeons and Dragons, Doom, Ann Rice, teenage angst, masculine overdrive, and the Cure, *not* Poe and Hawthorne.

Modern Gothic is many things, some of them promising. Lest we forget, however, most art that is primarily Gothic is and always has been schlock. It's campy, corny, nostalgic, and shallow. Indeed, any art that is essentially one thing is in danger of becoming monotonous. Forms stagnate; cheap thrills and clichés predominate; potent symbols and mock horror are readily embraced. The best Modern Gothic art is way more than Gothic, and that's what makes it worth looking at and thinking about right now.

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