

Photos document a taxing ordeal in Paris

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Imagine a Vogue photographer documenting a natural disaster and you'll begin to picture what Parisian Martin d'Orgeval has done in his pictures on view at Adamson Gallery.



William Kentridge doesn't challenge the senses as much with "Three Shadows" as he has with past creations. (Gallery Plan B)

The catastrophe in question happened in February 2008 in Paris. A short circuit caused a fire that devastated Deyrolle, the city's taxidermy shop incroyable, est. 1831. A remnant of pre-Starbucks society, Deyrolle boasted shelves lined with fish skeletons and crystals, cases of pinned butterflies and angry beetles, stuffed bears standing at attention, and geese readied -- eternally -- to fly. The blaze disfigured the shop but didn't destroy it. D'Orgeval documented what remained, his lens finding those animals that were partially singed or spared entirely (many more were ruined). All stand against walls that are transformed by fire into something that looks like blackened reptile skin.

These are gorgeous, hygienic color pictures. The stench of fire and burnt fur -- it must have churned stomachs on that February day -- is gone. Not only does d'Orgeval spare us the true horror of destruction, he serves it up as a nearly entrancing affair in his photographs. Can destruction have its attractions? Yes, I think so. The crocodile burn pattern d'Orgeval shows us on the wall is as enviable -- in the worst sort of way -- as the acquisition of a rare pelt might be.

You may also be prompted to book a trip to Paris, where you, too, can eat up the old traditions before they die a natural death. D'Orgeval's gorgeously colored pictures are a requiem for a certain slice of Paris, the tiny streets where tea shops and stationers and lingerie shops still hum.

The underinsured Deyrolle has struggled since its fire. A charity auction helped raise cash to restore some rooms and acquire a small zoo's worth of new stuffed animals.

Robert Brown Returns

Most of us remember Robert Brown's print gallery, an R Street fixture that died an excruciating death in 2006. Appointment-only for months while the building's new owner determined Brown's move-out date, the gallery shuttered for good in September of that year, 15 years after opening on the site.

As for Brown, he continued dealing, splitting time between New York and Washington. Though his regular buyers maintained contact with his potpourri of artists, the rest of us lost out. No longer could we pop by to see Brown's singular exhibitions, steeped as they were in American formalism, along with curious pockets of Russian and Chinese works on paper.

Now Brown is back, lovable duds and little gems in tow. He's borrowed Gallery Plan B and hung a group show that feels like a reunion with old friends. Even his mediocre artists deserve a warm embrace.

Though Brown exhibits plenty of mainstream artists -- documents of Andy Goldsworthy's environmental works and Brice Marden's easy, ribbonlike abstractions are both included here -- his attachment to China and Russia remain strong. A passion for vintage Chinese advertising posters continues to this day; here a circa-1930 example shows a demure young woman hawking fabrics. Brown deals in Asian antiquities, too -- a little 18th-century Chinese chest sits in Plan B's window.

Regarding Russians, Brown's choices have always proved impenetrable. Here the obscure Russian abstractionist Oleg Kudryashov offers etchings with hatched lines set off against passages of pooled watercolor. Their stern titles ("Construction," "Composition," "Relief") bespeak the influences of Suprematism and Constructivism but remain otherwise mute. Nutty artist duo Rimma Gerlovina and Valeriy Gerlovin show up here, too, in a pair of c-prints featuring Rimma, with signature pleated hair and vacant expression, enacting kooky symbolic vignettes.

We owe Brown our deepest thanks, though, for introducing us to William Kentridge. Back in 1999, several years before the Hirshhorn presented its mid-career Kentridge extravaganza, Brown delivered an unforgettable exhibition of the South African's etchings and works on paper. Kentridge's vision of apartheid-crippled South Africa pierced but didn't skewer -- there was a hint, always, of empathy toward even the cruelest of oppressors, some inkling of humanity that made his pictures work.

The Kentridges at Plan B aren't that tough. Most contrast darkened silhouettes against cream paper, offering opaque images open to wide interpretation. The dancing half-figures of "Three Shadows" -- they're crude polygons with legs, really -- could be Three Graces, albeit one an Atlas type hefting a cube over its head. A rhinoceros collage has a stately heft that demands repeated looking, but the picture doesn't challenge as other Kentridges can.

If you'd like to purchase these memories of a gallery past, note that an unusual scheme is at hand. Brown split his exhibition down the gallery middle: on one side, a silent auction that ends May 10; on the other, works (by some of the same artists) priced as marked. Brown hopes the auction's variable prices will make parting with your greenbacks more fun, with the possibility of a bargain thrown in. The fixed-rate works are standard print-edition prices.

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