

'Younger Than Jesus': made by Generation Why

Blake Gopnik



Cory Arcangel's uniquely titled "Photoshop CS: 72 by 110 inches, 300 DPI, RGB, square pixels, default gradient 'Spectrum', mousedown y=1416 x=1000, mouse up y=208 x=42" is displayed on the wall above Chu Yun's "This is XX," consisting of a female participant, a sleeping pill, and a bed. (Team Gallery, N.Y. and La Gaia Collection, Busca, Italy)

It's said that new art reflects new times. If that's true, what could be a better mirror on our troubled days than a huge survey of the latest art by the latest crop of artists? You couldn't ask for a more thorough pulse-taking than you get in "Younger Than Jesus," the show now filling all four floors of the New Museum's stylish home on the Bowery. It presents 124 works by 50 artists, all 33 or younger, from 25 countries, selected from a 500-name shortlist submitted by an international panel of experts. It's the first in a planned series of triennials the museum calls "The Generational."

Members of the generation in "Younger Than Jesus" are often known as the millennials, and there's something truly end-of-days about the art that represents them in this show. The survey's title is clearly tongue-in-cheek, but it also feels like it's getting at something: There is a sense of waiting, of stasis, of breath-holding that reminds me of the way things are supposed to have felt in Judea in A.D. 27 -- in the moment, that is, just before a new Messiah came in view to sort things out.

Like the unenlightened Jews and Gentiles of the New Testament (you can be a nonbeliever but still understand the Gospels' imagery), the millennials in this show didn't know a change was coming. They're all pre-meltdown babies, brought up on and in the free-spending McMansion era. Their art doesn't foretell its coming end. It rarely pushes against its model in effective ways (none of these young artists is into driving money-changers from the temple). But, whether intentionally or not, this art does give a compelling vision of the hopelessness that comes when values have gone badly wrong. Its mirror is pointed at the moment just before the bubble burst.

Again and again, the works chosen for this show seem to be about the futility of doing just about anything. Polish artist Anna Molska, born in 1983, gives us a black-and-white video called "Tanagram." Gorgeous and slick like a Calvin Klein ad, the video features two barely dressed young Adonises in an artist's loft playing a life-size version of the ancient Asian tile game the video's named for. While uttering random fragments from a Polish-Russian phrasebook, the duo push around big black geometric solids, like minimalist sculptures on wheels, to form larger squares and other simple shapes. Why? "Because" is the only answer. If this isn't a parable for the entire, pointless business of making art in a world with other priorities -- pyramid schemes, for instance -- I don't know what is.

Other pieces seem to invite similar readings. Liz Glynn, from Los Angeles, kicked off "Younger Than Jesus" with a day-and-night performance called "The 24 Hour Roman Reconstruction Project, or, Building Rome in a Day." If Glynn and her team of volunteers had really re-created the Eternal City in a day, disproving the proverb, it would have been a defiant assertion of the power of art, and of community. Instead, all they managed to do was fill one end of the museum lobby with a pile of used cardboard that at its best just about evoked the imperial capital, and which in the end got trashed again in a mock reprise of the original Visigothic sack. Once more, art is presented as a hopeless enterprise worthy of Samuel Beckett's famous "I can't go on; I'll go on." But without even the existential gumption that his phrase implies.

Then there's "It Doesn't Matter," a poignant installation by Czech artist Katerina Seda that has the show's most apposite title. Seda fills one huge wall in the museum with 160 childlike drawings. A nearby video fills us in on the back story: The artist's 75-year-old grandmother, two years away from death, had been falling into apathy, and the only way to rouse her was by getting her to draw the items she remembered from 33 years spent taking inventory for a housewares store. At the end of a long life, all that still holds meaning for her is a list of commodities sold. This strikes me as a powerful echo, on a personal level, of the failure the whole globe's been living -- of the idea that a never-ending growth in goods is the best measure of societal success.

"Younger Than Jesus" presents a pile of work that seems to declare the absurdity of action, artistic or otherwise, in a commodified world.

Frenchman Loris Gréaud, for instance, sets a full-size spiral staircase pointlessly spinning on a pedestal, in an ascension that goes nowhere, forever.

Brooklynner Faye Driscoll presents a video called "Loneliness" that is just her, wrapped in green cellophane, dancing to a recent song reprising new wave angst. The video's damped-down artistic ambitions seem perfect for an era of diminished expectations in all things nonfinancial.

New Yorker Adam Pendleton mashes up 1970s abstractions by formalist Sol LeWitt with words from the same era by black poet and activist Amiri Baraka, as though their differences are lost under art's overarching pall of ineffectiveness.

The members of a collective from Berlin, called AIDS-3D (even the name seems drenched in apathy) set a pair of eternal flames to either side of a shiny black obelisk topped with the glowing letters OMG. IMHO, it's hard not to think that those letters have replaced more potent sacred acronyms: INRI, maybe, at the top of a crucifix, or JHVH on a Torah scroll.



"OMG Obelisk" by Berlin collective AIDS-3D (Benoit Pailley)

The Internet, in all its anomie, is a thread that runs through a lot of this show's art. This isn't the Internet of community action or of open access to information. It's not even the capitalist Internet of efficient video rentals and souvenir auctions. It's a Web of wasted time and goofy videos, where casual friending replaces intimate friendship.

Ryan Trecartin, a Philadelphian who's the only artist in this show to have already hit it big, presents a YouTube-ish, three-video installation. In a careening drift of random, disconnected narratives, the cross-dressing Trecartin and his fabulous friends, smeared with makeup, mug and act out for the camera in something like a permanent gay Halloween. Unlike some earlier art that used masquerading to challenge the straight world's rigid notions of identity (Jack Smith's "Flaming Creatures," an art film from 1962, is the most famous example), Trecartin's videos don't seem to have a thing at stake in them. There's no norm they're pushing against. Structured rebellion has been replaced by party antics, but with a manic edge of despair.

It's at the opposite emotional extreme from a project by Chu Yun, from Shenzhen in China, that provides one of the show's most effective, resonant moments. Chu has simply installed a big white bed in the middle of a gallery, amid the chaos of his fellow millennials' work. Every day for the duration of the show, he's paying women to pop a pill and climb under its duvet to sleep. Where Trecartin and many other artists in this show present futile acting out as the only available option, Chu prefers Snow White hibernation. At least that offers the possibility of waking up to a changed world.

A few triennials into the future, that may be where a new generation of artists will find itself: defined by the meltdown instead of waiting for it helplessly.

The Generational: Younger Than Jesus runs through July 5 at the New Museum, 235 Bowery, New York. Call 212-219-1222 or visit <http://www.newmuseum.org>.

Washington Post, Washington, 17 maio 2009, Arts & Living, online.