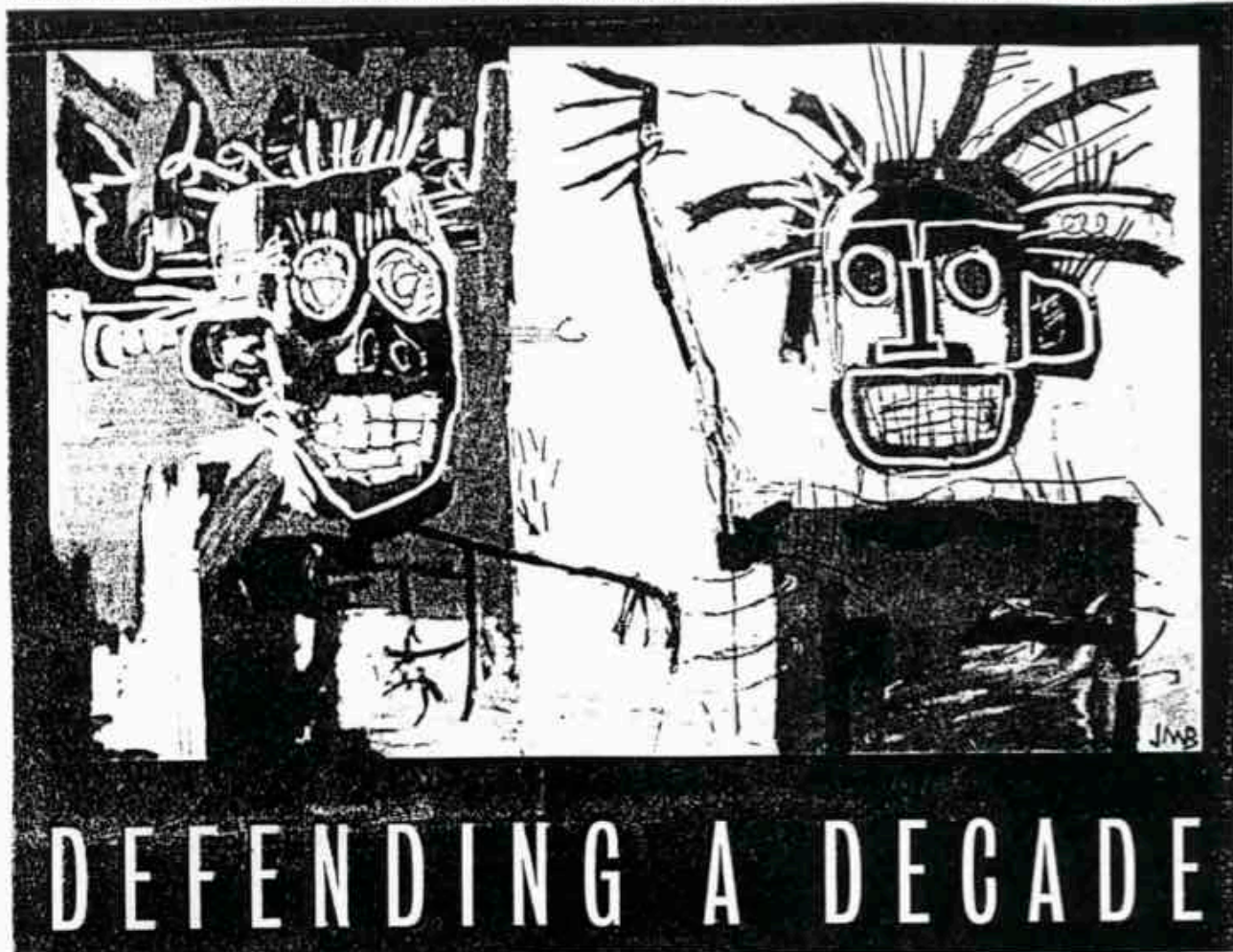


A MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART EXHIBITION LOOKS AT LAVISH WORKS FROM THE '80S, WHEN PAINTING WAS CONSIDERED DEAD



DEFENDING A DECADE

ART REVIEW

BY ELISA TURNER

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Late in 1979, television viewers in New York City were subjected to annoying commercials from the city's premier department store.

"Bloomingdale's is ready for the '80s," a model would purr with a toss of her head. "Are you?"

It turned out no one was really ready for the 1980s, with its bloated spectacle of disease and consumption, the mounting toll from AIDS, the multiplying fortunes in junk bonds — and the resounding crashes that followed.

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Jean-Michel Basquiat's "Untitled: Two Heads in Gold" is representative of the brash art of the 1980s.

You can revisit the decade at North Miami's Museum of Contemporary Art, which is showing *Mythic Proportions: Painting in the 1980s*, an eye-popping look back at the upstart art of that brash era featuring works by artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, David Salle, Julian Schnabel, Keith Haring and Eric Fischl.

The rapid ascent to celebrity and fortune of those artists mirrored the macho, self-aggrandizing mood of the time — engendering attacks that continue to this day.

"The art world was swamped with canvases which endeavored to present their importance through quantity and energy, churned pigment and portentous symbolism," essayist Arthur C. Danto wrote about the early 1980s. "It was what I called Importance Art . . . There were reputations and money to be made."

But forget the hype and the criticisms inevitably woven into our perceptions of that decade, urges MoCA director Bonnie Clearwater, who curated the exhibit.

"I want you to look at the work as if it's the first time," she told the audience assembled for a Salle lecture last month.

MoCA captures the bombast of 1980s art

Salle mused on the difficulty of thrashing through labels, of social history piled on interpretations of artwork.

"More teachers than artists want to change the world," he said. "But artists have enough to do by making art."

Then with resigned but amused frustration, he asked, "How do you encourage people to put their art eyes on?"

Thankfully Clearwater has once again designed a handsome exhibition that encourages visitors to "put their art eyes on" — in this case, to contemplate the explosive and brawling energy artists such as Salle, Schnabel and the less-celebrated George Condo, as well as the influential Germans Sigmar Polke and Anselm Kiefer, brought to painting, a medium many considered dead in 1980.

Clearwater is arguing for a revised look at this period by making the persuasive case that these '80s artists, many dubbed Neo-Expressionists, are revisiting the Abstract Expressionists and remaking Modernist ideas for their own time. And, she argues, they did not sink into a decadent replay of the exhausted virtues of market-driven, living-room-ready painting.

Decadent, perhaps not. But bombastic, surely.

The show opens with two gracefully subtle paintings from 1979 and 1981 by Susan Rothenberg and Elizabeth Murray, meditative fusions of abstract brush strokes and organic forms with one of Rothenberg's spectral horses emerging tentatively from a dark gray mist.

Round the corner and you face three sprawling, confrontational paintings by Schnabel — gritty with his famously broken crockery, lathered with mustard-thick paint — that conjure an intimidating forest of barely-there figures.

Schnabel's dramatic acreage of cracked cups and plates and nervy compositions brings to

mind two remarks by Murray.

"Art is an epiphany in a coffee cup," she once said, referring to the inspiration offered by devices of daily life. And in a related observation, she opined that, "People forgot how to work with all the material [Jasper] Johns gave us. Schnabel brought that back."

So what you have in this show is not so much an epiphany in a coffee cup, but a guiding path through a forest of coffee cups and suburban coffee tables with beacons posted by artists who chose the old medium of paint to express the new frenzy of their controversial decade.

Salle, for example, plays variations upon Abstract Expressionism by assembling a cluster of images plucked from Dutch still lifes, girlie magazines and kitschy 1950s interiors, all sideswiped next to abstract ovals and fields of color.

They democratically resist the usual imposition of hierarchies of importance and meaning, with Old Master drawings shedding as much — or as little — light on daily experience as do coffee tables and signage for a similarly bombastic relic of pop culture, the movie *King Kong*.

After dosing us with the daunting presence of the so-called "bad boys" of 1980s art, the show leads us to a small gallery featuring work by Italian artists, including Francisco Clemente, whose *Perseverance*, with a large nude man cradling a little Parthenon, does little to advance the cause of his narcissistic imagery.

Far more compelling is Sandro Chia's *Two Boys on a Raft*, painted in Key West in 1983. Floating in a luscious field of rippling strokes of metallic blue and bronze are three figures, one waving to others about to drift away on a tiny raft.

It's a show that moves us through an extraordinary range of painting, from the tortured stories that undercut

Eric Fischl's suburban tableaux to Gerhard Richter's sensuous layers of abstraction, to Condo's jazzy network of signs.

Cool irony comes through in Peter Halley's stringent canvases, evoking a constrained society of cells and mazes. It also comes through in Allan McCollum's spectacular array of "plaster surrogates" — mock paintings that critique a commodity-obsessed culture but also, in spite of themselves, resemble a gorgeously crafted modern-day mosaic.

The best, and least bombastic, section of *Mythic Proportions* belongs to a chapel-like

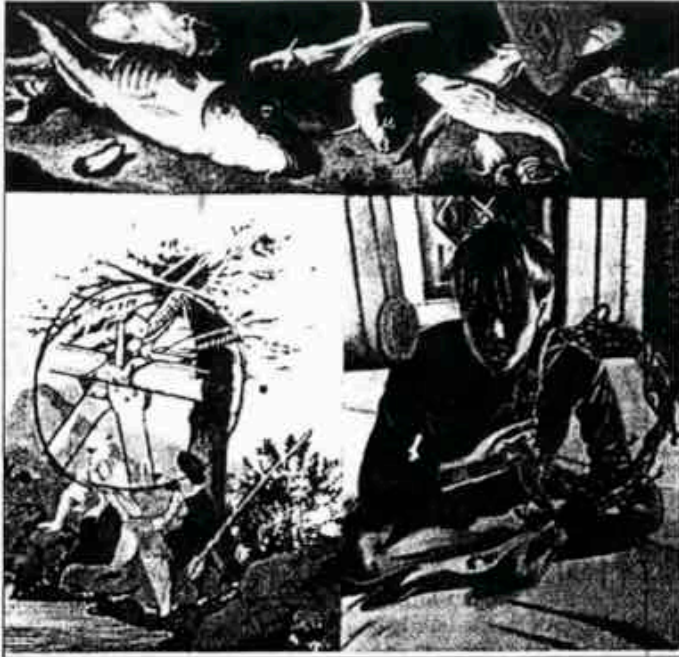
room with luminous, layered paintings by Ross Bleckner. They are lights in the cluttered forest of signs observed by so many of the artists in the show.

His 1987 *Knights not Nights* glimmers with falling stars and tiny hands, defiantly facing charges of sentimentality as he creates these memorials to lives lost to AIDS, and homages to the ephemeral glow of life itself.

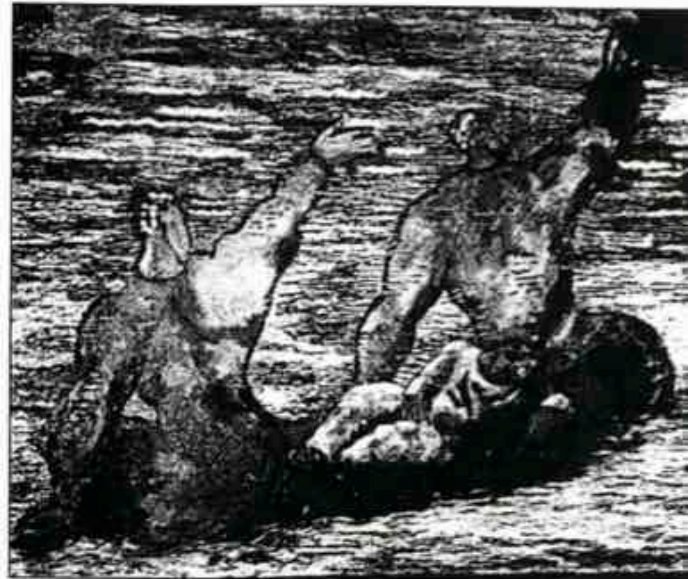
We're more than ready to revisit Bleckner's view of the 1980s.

Elisa Turner is The Herald's art critic.

Cont
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'How do you encourage people to put their art eyes on?' asks artist David Salle. His canvas 'Bryon's Reference to Wellington' is among those exhibited at MoCA's new show.



Sandra Chia's 'Three Boys on a Raft' was painted in the Keys in 1983. A political as well as an artistic commentary, it is included in the North Miami Museum of Contemporary Art's show: 'Mythic Proportions: Paintings in the Eighties.'

NEW ART EXHIBITS

Mythic Proportions: Painting in the 1980s is at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 770 NE 125th St., North Miami through May 13. Hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. Admission is \$5 for adults, \$3 for seniors and students with identification, and free for museum members, North Miami residents and children younger than 12. The museum is open from 7-10 p.m. on the last Friday of each month in conjunction with **Jazz at MoCA** performances, admission by donation. Information: 305-893-6211 or www.mocanomi.org

GLEE: Painting Now is at the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art, 601 Lake Ave., Lake Worth, through April 15. Hours are noon to 6 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday, and noon to 8 p.m. first and third Fridays. Admission is \$3 for adults, \$2 for seniors and students, and free for children under 12. Admission is free first Fridays of the month. Information: 561-582-0006 or visit www.palmbeachica.org

PBICA events coinciding with **GLEE: Painting Now**:

- ▶ 7 p.m. Thursday: Artists' Talk: Peter Halley and Jim Isermann in conversation with curator Amy Cappellazzo
- ▶ 6:30 p.m. March 16: Poetry Slam
- ▶ 7 p.m. April 12: Distinguished Artist Lecture: John Baldaessari

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