

New York

Jack Goldstein: Films Records Paintings

Mitchell-Innes & Nash

Jack Goldstein: Paintings 1980 – 1985

Metro Pictures

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quietist filmmaking is well-suited to furnishing a backdrop, but nevertheless, when Mangus strides toward us at the start of Act I the eye is drawn away from him by the shots of houses in Peterlee: conventional scenery acts as a prop for the imagination, but when backdrops refer as specifically as these do to the living world, they somehow puncture the veil and become something else.

By regularly switching mood and motif throughout the opera, the Wilsons' video constantly refreshes the background while maintaining a gentle equilibrium. The racing lights that greet us when the characters first come on stage return, and fresh footage is found to suit new developments in the narrative. When Faber begins pursuing Flora, a woman appears on screen, her head glancing about her nervously like the girl on stage; and when, in Act III, the characters take on new roles in their version of scenes from *The Tempest*, imagery of armour and rich regalia appears, evoking a Medieval robing room. Of course, shimmering video backdrops of this sort make themselves an unusually prominent part of the action and their use of stock footage can make them seem over-familiar when that footage has been repeated a few times, but action on stage can bring new life to it: characters occasionally stepped up to the screens when the graffiti-stained limbs of Pasmore's Pavilion were spinning around, and it seemed to transport them entirely, even altering one's sense of their scale on stage.

The Wilsons may well have been engaged to design these sets for the slightly cynical purposes of bringing a little sparkle to a dated opera, and bringing some of contemporary art's fashionable caché to rub off on the Opera House, but they have proved their worth. They won't turn *The Knot Garden* into the next popular craze, but they have made avant-gardism in visual art and opera seem valuable. One would hope they will be back. MF

Mention of Jack Goldstein's inclusion in Douglas Crimp's now historic *Pictures* show of 1977 seems to be *de rigueur* in any comment on the late artist's work. But, more often than not, such comments simply equate *Pictures* with postmodernism and leave it at that. Erased from the historical record is any account of why Goldstein turned away from the temporal researches so central to his earlier film, performance and recording work, and stepped fully into the spectacular fascinations so indicative of his and others' early-80s painting. And no, money isn't the answer.

Whether intentional or not, something of that erasure has been restaged here as a distance – too far to walk – between a pair of gallery retrospectives put on by Mitchell-Innes & Nash and Metro Pictures. Goldstein's work is again roughly split according to the *Pictures* fault line, with Mitchell-Innes & Nash showing the early films and records (and a smattering of the 80s canvases), while Metro Pictures presents a robust selection of Goldstein's paintings from that post-*Pictures* period of 1980 to 85.

Perhaps this is postmodernist schizophrenia simmered to the cliché of a split personality, but to move between the two shows is still to traverse that familiar ideological divide. On the one hand, we have the 'historical' Goldstein, identifiable by the *Pictures* work, and notably collected not far from Manhattan's Museum Mile. This is the Goldstein whose critical engagement with conventions of 'duration' and, more specifically, 'anticipation' places his films in a lineage with the 'radical innovations' associated with late-60s figures like Michael Snow and Joan Jonas.

On the other hand, we have – what to call it? – the Goldstein of the 'commercial spectacular'. This is the Goldstein of exactly rendered lightning-strikes and moon-shots, of toxic-green skies and Pepto-pink eruptions. It is also the Goldstein of a superfluid 80s art market, a moment that seems to resonate with our own. After all, where else would we find such paintings but in Chelsea? Nevertheless, if the first canvas we see there, *Untitled* (1981), is of a night sky unfortunately illuminated by the searing paths of tracers and antiaircraft flak, then it appears only as a redundant and rather opportunistic reminder of the contemporaneity of such scenes.

We must remember, however, that when *Pictures* raised certain postmodern questions, it did so not only in the spirit of a break with the modernist ideology of medium specificity, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in the guise of a recuperation of what Crimp identified as an alternative modernism, one animated by a Mallarméan aesthetic of symbolist criticality, where the play of conventions – the two-step of the text, one might say – overwhelms any stable signification.

Yes, Goldstein turned away from technical media whose dimensions are inherently temporal and heterogeneous, but his painting drew them into its sphere, not to naturalize them but to use them to destabilize the proper name of Painting. His images are eidetic fictions, wholly mediated in form (by chrono-photography) and colour (by RGB balance) and content (by a Mother Nature drawn from the pages of National Geographic). But if those canvases appear no less current now than they must have in the first five years of the 80s, then this is less a testament to painting's integrity as a medium and more a simple fact of our own adjustment to the persistence of spectacle.

To live with the spectacle is, to say the least, a thoroughly postmodern condition, one which was initiated when, as Don DeLillo wrote in 1985, 'we began to marvel at our own ability to manufacture awe'. Like Goldstein's paintings, those days are still manifestly present. JTDN

Jack Goldstein *Untitled*, 1983, acrylic on canvas, 213 x 366 cm
COURTESY METRO PICTURES GALLERY, NEW YORK

