

## Critical Call: Assessing the new season: Highs, lows, kitsch, shtick, and one flamboyant failure

By Jerry Saltz

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New York's new art season got off to a rousing start a few weeks ago when more than 80 exhibitions opened within 10 days. I was raring to go, but ended up more disappointed than not. Last month, I wrote that the New York art world had turned into a "giant sponge"—it sucks things up, including, it turns out, energy. Good exhibitions and bad are absorbed and rendered more or less equal. Almost everyone in the art world has passionate opinions—they like this or loathe that—yet these peppery tête-à-têtes often go wishy-washy in print. Art criticism ought to be at least as lively as the conversations you have in galleries, at parties, or on the phone. Consequently, think of this as an e-mail, hopefully not too superficial or snarky, or a message on your answering machine from a touchy friend who's been to galleries and wants to vent.

There are several high points in Chelsea. Two are Andrew Lord's foxy ceramic sleeper at Kasmin and Thomas Scheibitz's investigational dance with painting at Bonakdar. In contrast, the so-called "Leipzig painters" at Boesky fizzle not just because such geographical groupings are contrived but because too many of these beginners owe too much to Albert Oehlen and Neo Rauch. My opening-month fave is Pipilotti Rist's walk-in reverie at Luhring Augustine. True, Rist is a bit Björk-y and forced. Still, no one has a more velvety touch with video than this Swiss Ms. She makes the disembodied light of the cathode-ray tube feel sensuous and swoony. Gone is the clutter of her 2000 Luhring outing. Here, her colors are full-bodied and her camera movement, sonic sixth sense, and fragmented narrative are intoxicating. Rist is Pop-y and repetitious, but she demonstrates that certain pleasures, however fleeting, are too delightful not to repeat.

The Sam Taylor-Wood and Will Cotton shows aren't the worst in town, but they're conspicuous low points. At Mary Boone, Cotton gives us a group of academic photo-realist nudies that would look at home on the walls of third-tier Hollywood producers or blend in over bars in western movie saloons. Granted, Cotton is adept at rendering and blending; his palette is kitschy and pinkish; his sense of finish polished. And judging from the checklist, his simple-minded confections of scantily clad lasses and supersized candies are quite popular. Whatever—these canvases are bonbons for the rubes; the red dots, proof that nowadays many art buyers are shoppers, not collectors.

Taylor-Wood isn't a particularly deep artist, but she's far deeper than Cotton. At Matthew Marks, she gives us a room full of slick photographs of herself clad in T-shirt and panties, suspended like a side of beef in the middle of an empty loft space. A pronounced scar on her abdomen is a reminder of her much publicized bout with cancer. The pictures have a

momentary fascination. Nearby are pretentious photos of crying celebrities. Ascension, her video of one man dancing over another who is playing dead, is so literal-minded that it might not be art. Taylor-Wood is great at affecting general audiences. By now, however, she has virtually no effect in the art world.

I don't have a clue what Ugo Rondinone's confused installation at Marks's 22nd Street space is about, although I liked the jet-black zodiacal masks. But I was floored by his 2000 video exhibition in this space, and my rule is, if an artist does one thing I like, I'll follow him or her forever. This show makes me rethink that. Regardless, I love that Rondinone is willing to fail so flamboyantly. This is in stark contrast to the wimpy way so many other artists fail these days. For example, Gary Simmons's anemic Metro Pictures show of cast sculptures and smeared paintings. There are free-floating ideas here, and as always Simmons displays a caustic touch. But it's time artists learned to tell dealers, "I'm not ready to show right now." As for Amie Dicke, her cut-up fashion magazine pages at D'Amelio Terras are undeniably alluring. The problem is, they're all alluring in the exact same way. This reduces them to merchandise, or worse, shtick.

Hernan Bas's paintings at Daniel Reich, while obviously earnest and stylish, are way too indebted to Karen Kilimnik, Elizabeth Peyton, and Henry Darger. Bas has a nifty sense of narrative, surface, and color. But this is only a beginning. Meanwhile, at Anton Kern, the promising Brian Calvin certainly has a look, but he needs to experiment with it more, not just paint the same slacker figures in the same slacker way.

On an up note, there's Julianne Swartz, 37 and still a newcomer, who impressed at the New Museum and the Whitney Biennial last season. At Josee Bienvenu, she employs her already signature plastic tubing, PVC piping, and mirrors to let you see the back of your head (I didn't know my hair was so thin on top) and behind doors. The result is a cross between a watchmaker's workshop, a science lab, and a hospital. Swartz excels at excavating interior space. Her ethereal seeing machines connect to Sarah Sze a bit too much, but like Sze, Swartz has a magical way of making the sensed world visible. Her art is charmed and pixilated, but is already becoming routine. She's got skill, vision, and smarts. All she has to do is not pull similar rabbits out of slightly different hats.