

How Odd is Odd—and Francesca?

FRESH VIEWS OF NERDRUM AND WOODMAN

BY MARIO NAVES

An nagging question surrounding the paintings of Odd Nerdrum, on display at Forum Gallery, is: Can you still paint like that?

“Like that,” as if the past 400 years of Western art hadn’t transpired; to put brush to canvas, without irony or affectation, in the style of Rembrandt and Caravaggio. To create images without a hint of pop culture, mass media, Cézanne, Picasso and Pollock.

Intimations of a post-industrial apocalypse betray some cognizance of contemporary life. Otherwise, Nerdrum’s paintings are suffused in golden light, soupy washes of umber and mythological portent. They’re Old Masterish.

For those skeptical of modernism and the excesses it set in motion, Nerdrum’s quixotic achievement would seem to answer a need for a return to principles. It’s hard not to be impressed with the operatic scope of his ambition and the dexterity of his touch. Nerdrum’s consistency as an imagist, with those barren landscapes, ritualistic narratives, theatrical flourishes and supple passages of skin and bone, betokens a sense that sheer force of will can right a culture overtaken by trivial diversions.

But Nerdrum’s nightmarish scenarios are redolent of Frank Frazetta, the fantasy artist who specialized in pulpy depictions of otherworldly vistas, towering monsters, nubile maidens and Conan the Barbarian. Nerdrum is a more serious figure—more reactionary, too. At least Frazetta wasn’t pretentious.

In the end, Nerdrum’s peculiar kind of hokum isn’t all that different, better suited as cover illustrations for heavy metal CDs than for inclusion in *The Grand Manner*.

For 30-some years, Cindy Sherman has played dress-up in front of the camera in pursuit of “mortification of the self” and “the exploration of identity.” The photographer Francesca Woodman (1958-1981), who died by her own hand at the age of 22, took a lot of self-portraits as well, and for related reasons: “female subjectivity” and “photography’s relationship to both literature and performance.” That the Guggenheim overview of Woodman’s oeuvre is running concurrently with MoMA’s Sher-



Francesca Woodman, “Polka Dots,” 1976, Gelatin silver print. Courtesy George and Betty Woodman

man retrospective is a fortuitous opportunity to compare and contrast.

To Sherman’s detriment, you can’t help but conclude. True, Woodman was no less prone to theatricality and adolescent notions of self-expression (taking into account, of course, that Woodman barely lived past adolescence). Depending on one’s taste for melodrama, her weakness for the picturesque—dilapidated buildings served as backdrop for many of the photos—and pat religious allusions are likely to strike one as precocious rather than earned. The work’s eroticism is part and parcel of an overweening narcissism and is less appealing because of it.

But Woodman knew how to take photographs—photographs that are rich with texture, isolated blurs of movement, ghostly sweeps of light and rare moments of washed-out period color. Sherman? She doesn’t know a photograph from a deconstructionist hole in the ground.

An early, tragic death is an all but insurmountable hurdle for aesthetic contemplation. Anyone who has seen *The Woodmans*, C. Scott Willis’ devastating documentary of a family rendered dysfunctional by art, knows how inextricably Woodman’s vision is tied to biographical particulars. We do the artist no favors by overinflating (or romanticizing) a flawed but diverting achievement.

The Guggenheim, to its credit, does right by Woodman in setting out the work with jewel-like sobriety. Any serious artist would welcome such an approach. Viewers should welcome it, too.

Odd Nerdrum

Through May 5, Forum Gallery, 730 Fifth Ave., 212-3554545, www.forumgallery.com.

Francesca Woodman

Through June 13, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Ave., 212-423-3500, www.guggenheim.org/new-york.

CLASSICAL

Promising Mozart: Lisa Batiashvili, a violinist born in Soviet Georgia, is a pure and noble soul. She will play the Mozart Concerto No. 3 with the New York Philharmonic. April 26-28, Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center, lincolncenter.org; \$31+. [Jay Nordlinger]

Opera Reinvented: Robert Ashley, droll avant-gardist of common language, premieres “The Old Man Lives in Concrete,” a narrative for solo singers (himself included) about aging, accomplishments and memory. April 25-28, Roulette, 509 Atlantic Ave., 917-267-0363, roulette.org; 8 p.m., \$20. [Howard Mandel]

Two for the Price of One: Matthias Goerne, a leading singer, teams with Leif Ove Andsnes, a leading pianist, for a recital of Mahler and Shostakovich. May 1, Carnegie Hall, carnegiehall.org; 8 p.m., \$15+. [JN]

JAZZ

Bang Every Which Way: Han Bennink, the Dutch drummer who swings freely, turns 70 with a rare U.S. concert featuring equally free improvising friends. April 21, The Italian Academy of Columbia University, 1161 Amsterdam Ave., cuarts.com; 7:30 p.m., \$25. [HM]

Strikingly Different: Drummer Tomas Fujiwara and The Hook Up, a rambunctious quintet, celebrates release of its second album, “The Air is Different.” April 27, Cornelia Street Café, 29 Cornelia St., 212-989-9319, corneliastreetcafe.com; 9 & 10:30 p.m., \$25. [HM]

GALLERIES

Passage to India: British artist John Beech presents collage and painted work inspired by materials found on the street throughout India. One man’s trash is another man’s art. Included are painted works inspired by Indian calligraphy and iconography. Through May 25, Peter Blum Gallery Soho, 99 Wooster St., 212-343-0441, peterblumgallery.com. [Melissa Stern]

Punk Shots: A cute show features some not-so-cute but very revealing photos of Kurt Cobain, photographed by Jesse Frohman. Through April 22, The Morrison Hotel Gallery, 124 Prince St., 212-941-8770, morrisonhotelgallery.com. [Marsha McCreadie]

THEATER

Yo, Stella! Blair Underwood and Nicole Ari Parker head the starry black cast in the dazzling revival of “A Streetcar Named Desire” directed by Emily Mann. Opens April 22, Broadhurst Theatre, 235 W. 44th St., 212-239-6200, streetcaronbroadway.com. [Valerie Gladstone]

POP

One More for La Rue: Widely regarded as the “French Frank Sinatra,” Charles Aznavour is without a doubt the most famous French singer who has ever lived. April 26-28, City Center, nycitycenter.org. [VG]