

# Nostalgia for modern times

VISUAL ARTS

## Younger Than Jesus

New Museum, New York

This survey of artists under 33 puts its finger to the pulse of the youngest generation and finds it very faint indeed. The show's overwhelming dreariness suggests that, despite the messianic title, the coming of art's saviours is farther off than ever.

These are the Millennials, born since 1976 and natives of the digital nation. You might expect them to be gazing forwards but, with a few exceptions, they are either afflicted with nostalgia or destitute of fresh ideas. They seem to have taken to heart the environmentalists' dictum: recycle, recycle, recycle.

Cory Arcangel mimics a stereotypical modernist abstraction by duplicating the Adobe software's colour spectrum on a large scale. The upshot is an iridescent blue field, eye-catching but ultimately dead. Part smirk, part homage, it simultaneously mocks and honours mystical modernists such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. Arcangel seems to long for a time when artists saw themselves as prophets.

Keren Cytter's film, in which two sylphs taunt a 42-year-old woman about her shrivelling sexuality, also resurrects a once-invincible avant-garde. The characters speak in pseudo-poetic fragments; fantasy bleeds into reality; narrative halts and doubles back on itself. Cytter reheats the terse cuts of Goddard and the self-conscious poetry of Bergman into a melange of warmed-over appropriation. It's a stale brew indeed.

Guthrie Lonergan turns his scavenger's eye to the internet, mining it for ready-made tedium. He splices together bits of video in which MySpace users introduce themselves. The material is by definition boring



'Pilzschiel' (2006) by Mariechen Danz

and repetitive – how many ways are there to say "hello?" Whatever his point, Lonergan makes it the hard way, subjecting us to long-winded, haphazardly shot monologues that are less revealing than enervating.

Elad Lassry attempts to breathe new life into old forms by appropriating ads from magazines, censoring the product name but leaving the rest. "His goal," a panel informs us, is "a renovation of the ancient convention of the still life." A mixture of callowness and grandiosity derives from that misguided ambition. If the still-life genre really needed reinvention, Lassry's limp cabbages would hardly do the trick.

Any large group exhibit includes some dross, but the trio of curators – Lauren Cornell, Massimiliano Gioni and Laura Hoptman – has kept the overall quality pristinely low. This was not easy: a vast network of experts recommended more than 500 applicants, of which 50 made the cut. I suspect that in sifting through these mountains of creativity, the curators noticed a few artists who looked back in irony or rearranged existing material, and immediately declared it a trend. From then on, it was simpler

to cherry-pick work that conformed to the idea of a generation of borrowers, than to explore the diversity of youth. Or maybe – a far more depressing thought – *Younger than Jesus* really does represent the best of the best.

Not everything here is so imaginatively depleted. Cyprien Gaillard's mesmerising half-hour video, "Desniansky Raion", is neither original nor technically virtuosic; but it bespeaks a good eye and a curious mind. Gaillard is a kind of aerial documentarian, looking down on the bleak urban landscape of mid-20th century social housing. It's a video in three mournful acts. I: Russian hooligans enact a ritual brawl in a St Petersburg parking lot. II: A festive light show animates the facade of a housing estate in France, which then decorously implodes. III: A little plane with camera on board, buzzes the Desniansky Raion, a Stonehenge circle of grim apartment buildings in Kiev. These vignettes of decrepitude on an imperial scale chronicle the failure of modernist architecture to deliver on its utopian promise.

The Armenian videographer Tigran Khachatryan enlists the YouTube aesthetic to comment on the art of social change. He intercuts clips of roving teenagers with scenes from classic Soviet cinema, and *Lo*, how the disenfranchised have fallen; the seamen in *Battleship Potemkin* rose up against their oppressors; the revolution's aimless descendants hurl themselves down concrete ravines in fits of giddy nihilism.

Khachatryan and Gaillard make deft use of imagery that looks mined from today's immense quarry of amateur video, even when it's not. They embody the artist as curator, culling, assembling and trying to find some sense, however vague, in the global abundance of visual resources. They share that approach with many other participants. In a sense, the organisers were auditioning colleagues when they made their selections – which is another way of saying the curators saw themselves as artists. I'm not sure the boundary between creator and curator is one that bears blurring.

The show also draws a different line that seems arbitrary: the one between generations. To group art by the age of its makers is to imply that the young have a special relationship with innovation, that as a group only they can produce a ferment of fresh ideas, unburdened by habit or received wisdom. In fact, what you get is little more than a student show, heavy with influence and anxiety. The artists may feel like they are carving out a freewheeling space in a culture rigidified by commerce. But the museum has simply trapped them in a marketing concept.

**Ariella Budick**

Runs until June 14, tel +1 212 219122,  
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'Game Over' (2004) by Cao Fei