ETC

"A Portrait of two modern artists: David McDermott and Peter McGough"

Chris Pfister, John Post Lee Gallery, New York. November 11 - December 18,1993. A Portrait of Two Modern Artists: David McDermott, Peter McGough. A film by Barbara Politsch

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Number 26, May–August 1994

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/35641ac

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)
1923-3205 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this review

Kaplan, S. (1994). Review of ["A Portrait of two modern artists: David McDermott and Peter McGough" / Chris Pfister, John Post Lee Gallery, New York. November 11 - December 18,1993. A Portrait of Two Modern Artists: David McDermott, Peter McGough. A film by Barbara Politsch]. *ETC*, (26), 42–44.

NEW YORK

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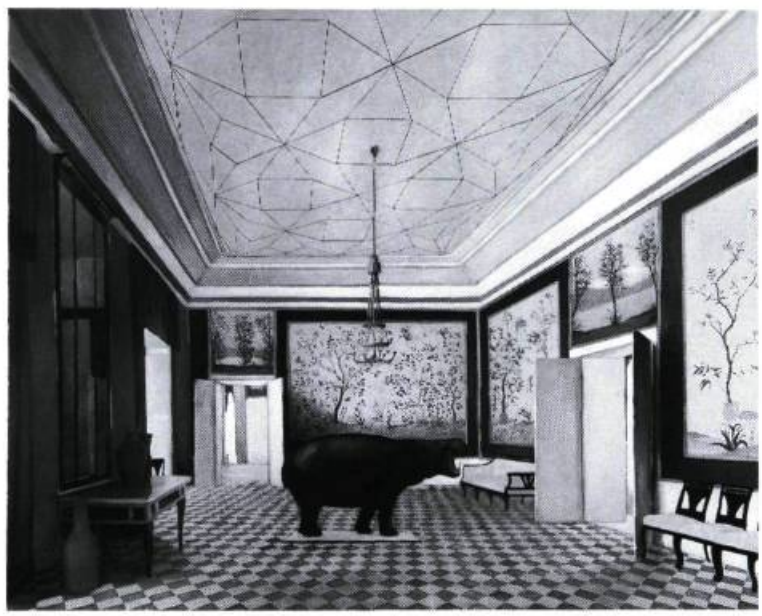
A Portrait of Two Modern Artists : David McDermott, Peter McGough. A film by Barbara Politsch



Chris Pfister, *H. Thierry*, 1993. Oil on linen; 101,6 x 132 cm. John Post Lee Gallery, New York.

Any contemporary painter who chooses to work in the traditional genre of romantic landscape most probably has access to a deep reservoir of irony and not a little bit of intellectual dandyism. Historically, the worshipful depiction of landscape, hence of nature, is intended to conjure a vision of the sublime, to bring us closer to God, perfection and truth. But with God dead and nature on the operating table, in the throes of eco-catastrophe, any convenant man has made with either has effectively been breached if not beyond repair, then certainly beyond the naive and glorious leaps of faith that stirred artists from Poussin, Claude Lorrain, Watteau and Fragonard to George Stubbs, J.M. Turner and the Hudson River School. Elements from all these can be felt in the work of Christ Pfister. But, despite his obvious relish of archaic painterly virtuosities, his lyrical rendition of shrubby masses and verdant foliage luxuriating in the sunlight, or the somber, sentimental melancholia of hill and dale, Pfister is no nostalgic antiquarian. Nor should the sincerity of his gesture be compromised by the stylized, synthetic, appropriative quality of his landscapes. Like other practitioners of new landscape such as Joan Nelson, Mark Innerst, Katherine Bowling and Michael Zwack, Pfister does not set up easel in forest or meadow and paint from life. His decidedly postmodern approach is saturated with a bricolage of art references that bring us not only to the *métier* of landscape but to issues in abstraction and conceptualism as well. Gerhard Richter is, perhaps, the most glorious contemporay exponent of the thin interface, the essential reversibility of abstraction and realism, but Pfister plays in the same arena of art gamesmanship. His paintings are best understood as metaphysical landscapes, the psychic agglomeration of technique and memory, conflating art historical model with the modernist concerns of paint on canvas. As landscapes, Pfister's paintings might seem outward, outdoors, external. They actually point within.

This internal journey was hinted at in Pfister's earlier work, in which incongruous figures - a *putto* straight out of Watteau, an acrobat or contortionist, a boy playing with matches - were foregrounded against the cliched sylvan settings, as if to conflagrate our vision and add a decadent, illogical twist to the purity of expectation normally associated with landscape. In this, his third New York show, the journey comes full circle, as Pfister literally relocates his landscapes as interiors : large, ceremonial rooms of the type found in museums, embassies, mansions and university clubs, replete with expensive furnishings, wallpaper, wood panelling, draperies, ornate tiling, various knicknacks. And, of course, large landscape paintings hanging on the room's walls, an additional rhyme on the inside/outside dialectic central to Pfister's arch thesis. The fact that many, if not all,

A Portrait of Two Modern Artists : David Mc Dermott, Peter McGough.
A film by Barbara Politsch. A still shot during production in New York City, June 1993.

of these paintings within the paintings are miniature renditions of Pfister's own earlier work is one additional reflection in this overwrought hall of mirrors.

In the center foreground of each painting, dominating the composition, and often returning our gaze with one of their own, are animals. They are large animals, rendered lifesize in relation to their drawing room surroundings : an elephant in a long, vaulted gallery of Versailles; two dromedaries flanked by windows and furniture; a hippopotamus bellowing at the open doors in a Chinese palace. They are dead animals, a taxidermist's wet dream of the *in vitro* stuffed and mounted on pedestals. They are wondrous to look upon, exuding a Biblical glamor as if painted on the day of creation. But in exchanging the theme park of landscape for that of bestiary, Pfister drops neither the irony nor the melancholia. For what a somber, equivocal bestiary this is ! Yanked from their natural habitat, eviscerated, displayed like trophies, Pfister's animals are caught, for all eternity, in truncated motion. (Of course all animals, whether ostensibly dead or alive, appear immobile in paintings, but Pfister takes particular pains to reinforce our definitive impression of carcass).

Are we supposed to feel implicated, as members of the all conquering species, in the death of these beasts ? Or is it the museum impulse that Pfister distrusts, and would like us to examine as well ? The museum impulse : our human need to acquire, collect, display. Our penchant to analyze, define and classify, even if this process results in the death, domestication or confinement of the very thing we are studying, the very thing we hold dear and worthy of our attention. Is this not the ultimate irony, the ultimate sadness ? You always hurt the one you love. Animals and artists both make great trophies.

In the best of all possible worlds, knowledge proceeds apace. Progress is an arrow aiming towards the future, towards our ultimate perfectibility. Perhaps there is a new, empirical definition for the sublime : transcendence through analysis, transcendence through accumulation. But Pfister is, at best, ambivalent. The imperial(ist) chambers he depicts are elegant and rational, crammed with the debris of knowledge and power. The animals have been collected and tamed. The paintings on the wall have been collected and tamed. And the collectors are still out there, waving their nets. This is the garden of dead paintings. To the extent that he identifies with the plight of his animals and his own paintings which hang behind the animals, Pfister has gone beyond landscape, beyond the bestiary. He is making self portraits.

The 28th Instance of June 1914, 10:50 A.M., MCMXCIII', A Portrait of two modern artists : David McDermott, Peter McGough, a film by Barbara Politsch. 16 mm, color and black/white, 56 minutes, 1993

Through the central conceit of time travel, David McDermott and Peter McGough also revel in a self-conscious archaicism, an intellectual dandyism that subjectively recapitulates history as a radical tool for cultural change. In their decade of collaboration, McDermott-McGough have returned to various periods mainly the Victorian and Edwardian passages of the late 19th and early 20th centuries to produce paintings, photographs, films, objects, even a magazine, that recreate a homoerotic past, a past that has, for the most part, been submerged and forgotten by the mainstream. This work employs the stylistic vocabulary of their chosen era, of symbolism, realism, memento mori, the arts and crafts movement, the applied art motifs of fashion, advertising and graphic design, to foreground the history of gay identity.

In *Rub-a-dub-dub, Three Boys and One Tub*, a painting which precisely depicts this bathroom ritual; in their phrenologist series of cross-sectioned male skulls,

diagrammed with emotional humors, and underscored with legends such as He loved boys, hairdressers and sailors; and in their photographs and vitrines of starched collars, cuffs and other turn-of-the-century paraphernalia, McDermott-McGough posit a material and emotional continuum that would make Oscar Wilde proud. But it is their daily life, which can be regarded as an ongoing piece of performance art, that most clearly enunciates their æsthetic intentions. McDermott-McGough live in a past of their own assiduous reconstruction. They have adopted the clothing, manners, furnishings and lifestyle of a bygone age, to the exclusion of any contemporary reference, and have established the personnæ of perfect Christian gentlemen living in a society of gay fellowship, spiritual harmony and humanistic reverie. This synergistic melding of life and art, or more precisely, of life *as* art, has earned them comparison with the English conceptual duo, Gilbert and George. But unless one knew McDermott-McGough, or met them at a gallery opening, one might be unaware of how completely their life animates and amplifies their work.

Fortunately, a fascinating new documentary film by Barbara Politsch, *The 28th Instance of June 1914, 10:50 A.M., MCMXCIII*, provides an anecdotal but compelling introduction to the universe of McDermott-McGough. Politsch is no strict *vérité* documentarist. Rather, she skilfully interweaves interviews and other staged scenes with footage of what seems immediately available. A long pan through the studio, a former bank building in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn with its wrought iron, frosted glass doors and teller windows still intact, might reveal paintings in various stages of completion, an old record player, period bric-a-brac, and, almost by accident, a dozing artist (McDermott) ensconced in his overstuffed armchair. It is a rare moment of silence and serenity. More often, McDermott (the more vocal of the pair, and a natural ham) mugs for the camera, reading from quaint Victorian manuals of advice, self help, etiquette and character building. At one point he declaims a cautionary Christian poem, *Once I Was Pure As The Snow*, which details the falling off from this pristine state of grace to the part that McDermott really seems to enjoy, his shrill pronouncement of burning in Hell.

Wearing blue painters smocks in the old style of the studio (their assistants wear light brown), the artists discuss their theory - that all time exists at the same time and everything is in repetition - and how it affects their work. Supplementing these discussions with McDermott-McGough are interviews with art historians, critics and collectors, each introduced by their name handwritten on an index card protruding from an old wooden box. Richard Marshall, former curator of the Whitney Biennial, reveals how McDermott-McGough's work is appropriationist and textual. Carl John Black speaks of their status as dandies. Robert Rosenbloom notes that the impulse to nostalgia and historicism can spring from a fear of the future. Quentin Crisp, a stately fop in his own right, comments favorably on the artists' urbanity and politesse, and invokes the image of Marlene Dietrich. Diego Cortez cautions that the archaic appearances of McDermott-McGough's art can appeal to conservative values.

But as it should be, the real stars of the film are McDermott and McGough. We follow their morning ablutions, in which strict adherence to period (and corresponding lack of modern plumbing) requires them to empty chamberpots and basins out the window. We join them in domestic bliss as they sit in their parlor and mend old clothes. We watch them don tweeds and knickers from an enviable collection of antique clothing, and take their dog for a stroll. McDermott discusses the proper stropping of a straight razor and his fondness for expensive English shaving soap. We witness a business discussion, conducted over old 1920s telephones (the type with separate earpice and mouthpiece), in which McDermott, McGough and a studio assistant politely accuse a printer (offscreen) of improperly composing their *Cottage* magazine on offset rather than letterpress, a definite violation of period. McDermott firmly assures the printer that he will fulfill the terms of his contract. Later on, a couple of art movers arrive to transport a painting just completed by McGough. He warns them that it is still wet. Once they carry it downstairs, he hurries after them to sign it, in the street.

A documentary can only be as good as its pairing of subject and film-maker. There are some dreadfully dull art documentaries in which too little is said too artlessly. In this regard, the collaboration of Politsch and McDermott-McGough seems particularly inspired. While generally maintaining a detached and observational viewpoint, Politsch is not afraid to render the subjectivity of the artists' gaze. Thus, although most of the film is shot in color, it does revert to black and white when McDermott-McGough are ostensibly travelling back in time; for example, when they mount their 1914 roadster for a trip to their farm in the Catskill mountains north of New York City. At first, this color coding can appear artificial and a bit self-conscious, but, we soon realize, no more so than the stylized distillations of the past that McDermott-McGough employ on a daily basis to construct their work and their lives. In *The 28th Instance of June 1914*, artifice begets artifice, and let the dandy take the hindmost.

STEVE KAPLAN