SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


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CHECKLIST

Claudio Bravo, Chilean, 1936–2011
Portrait of a Martyr, 1972, oil on canvas
Gift of Joachim Jean Aberbach; P.974.373

Rineke Dijkstra, Dutch, born 1959
Self Portrait, Marnixbad, Amsterdam, 1991, C-print
Purchased through the Sondra and Charles Gilman Jr. Foundation Fund and the Contemporary Art Fund in honor of Derrick R. Cartwright, Director of the Hood Museum of Art, 2000–2004; PH.2004.52

Y. Z. Kami, Iranian, born 1956
Untitled, 1996–98, oil on linen
Gift of Hugh J. Freund, Class of 1967; P.2002.56.1

Loretta Lux, German, born 1969
The Drummer, 2004, Ilfochrome print

Eileen Neff, American, born 1945
Here and There, 2012, C-Print mounted on Plexiglas
Purchased through the Sondra and Charles Gilman Jr. Foundation Fund and the Elizabeth and David C. Lowenstein ’67 Fund; 2013.5

George Segal, American, 1924–2000
Girl on Red Wicker Couch, 1973, plaster and wicker couch
Purchased with a gift from Joachim Jean Aberbach and a matching grant from the National Endowment for the Arts; S.975.7
Modern Melancholy

The gaze of the melancholic turns the world to stone. Like Medusa, she drains the vitality from animated form but fills it with ambivalence and introspection, rendering the world a relic of time passed and a cage for mourning. Overcome with a sense of loss, she feels betrayed by the objects of history but clings to them in order to re-enliven them (Iversen, 56).

The medical definition of melancholy originated in ancient times with the concept of the four humors, bodily fluids that were believed to comprise the ideal temperament when equally distributed. The melancholic, with her excess of black bile, is self-absorbed, irritable, and prone to isolated contemplation. She is deeply self-conscious and understands herself to be as much a “text . . . to be deciphered” as a “project . . . to be built”; in either case, “the process of building a self and its works is always too slow” for her (Sontag, 117). In her critical relation to the martyr, a work of Claudio Bravo, courtesy of Marlborough Gallery, Portrait of a Martyr, Chilean artist Claudio Bravo metaphorizes martyrdom as a melancholic experience. Bravo coincides with the photorealist movement in Western art, and while he insists on painting after a live model, this work’s pristine surface and hyper-real level of detail sucks the air out of an otherwise timeless and spatially ambiguous scene and replaces it with a fatal stillness. In fact, Bravo appears to have secularized the old master painting theme of the Resurrection, applying a deadpan approach to an otherwise emotionally charged scene. The skull also serves as a memento mori, its juxtaposition in a symbolic triangle that also includes the martyr’s lifeless body and stiffened flag reinforces the thematic tension between mortality and immortality. On the other hand, Bravo’s brilliant treatment of light emphasizes the physical presence of these objects and commands a tactile response in the viewer. This “mysticism rooted in materiality” characterizes the ambivalent condition of the melancholic, who fluctuates between the exaltation of life’s decay and a mournful sense of apathy, “horror of death and increased awareness of life” (Kiblansky, 233).

From Albrecht Dürer’s Melencolia I (1514) to the countless current examples, this extremely fraught temperament has inspired numerous artistic renderings. And melancholy’s redemption, in fact, lies exactly within those infinitely unfolding creative and intellectual possibilities that it reveals. As Susan Sontag explains, “[The melancholic] sees ways everywhere. Cheerfully engaged in reducing what exists to rubble, [he] prefers metaphor to the crossroads” (Sontag, 132). Keenly aware of life’s transience, it is the melancholic who is best equipped to enliven it with her excess of black bile, is self-absorbed, irritable, and prone to isolated contemplation. She is deeply self-conscious and understands herself to be as much a “text . . . to be deciphered” as a “project . . . to be built”; in either case, “the process of building a self and its works is always too slow” for her (Sontag, 117). In her critical relation to the martyr, a work of Claudio Bravo, Portrait of a Martyr, Chilean artist Claudio Bravo metaphorizes martyrdom as a melancholic experience. Bravo coincides with the photorealist movement in Western art, and while he insists on painting after a live model, this work’s pristine surface and hyper-real level of detail sucks the air out of an otherwise timeless and spatially ambiguous scene and replaces it with a fatal stillness. In fact, Bravo appears to have secularized the old master painting theme of the Resurrection, applying a deadpan approach to an otherwise emotionally charged scene. The skull also serves as a memento mori, its juxtaposition in a symbolic triangle that also includes the martyr’s lifeless body and stiffened flag reinforces the thematic tension between mortality and immortality. On the other hand, Bravo’s brilliant treatment of light emphasizes the physical presence of these objects and commands a tactile response in the viewer. This “mysticism rooted in materiality” characterizes the ambivalent condition of the melancholic, who fluctuates between the exaltation of life’s decay and a mournful sense of apathy, “horror of death and increased awareness of life” (Kiblansky, 233).

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