

Strange Powers

Laura Hoptman

*"It is to be remembered that all art is magical in origin—music, sculpture, writing, painting—and by magical I mean intended to produce very definite results."*¹

William S. Burroughs

In the years immediately following the Second World War, the painter Barnett Newman rather fantastically identified art as the proper balm to assuage what he called the "universal condition of terror" that gripped the newly nuclear world. No representation, interpretation, or even mere abstraction could do it; only a "true creation" could. For Newman, it was necessary to distinguish between creating a work of art and merely making one. To make was to illustrate, a workaday activity, akin to copying. To create was an act of conjuring that brought something forth that had never previously existed, something far more than a mere "picture." Art was a thing of transformative power, and its creation the result of primal, inchoate magic.

The notion of art as a supernaturally powerful thing, or even as an object of some ethical or therapeutic consequence, might initially strike one as uncomfortably portentous—unless perhaps we take into account that we are in a moment when human calamity has begun to clash with an

increasingly banal visual culture.

There is no doubt that these fearful and cynical times have encouraged a certain lowering of expectations when it comes to the role of art in our society. No doubt too that this in turn has created the perfect environment for a self-absorbed preciousness and a radical solipsism that, over the past five years in particular, has dominated an increasingly object-oriented contemporary art milieu. "Glue and glitter" souvenirs of privileged adolescence and gee-whiz re-appropriations of the tiniest elements in the observable world have become popular because they are equal parts nostalgia for what we may have experienced, dreamed of experiencing, or perhaps just saw on television, and reiteration of objects or states of mind which, gestalt-like, offer the satisfaction of instant recognition. With its almost scientific interest in subjective minutiae, work of this kind offers no portal to the world outside of the self, and no comment on anyone or anything outside of the object and

its relationship to those who consume it. That this kind of work might emerge at a time in the world that for many could not seem more desperate is a phenomenon worth pondering. Why, as one cultural critic has succinctly put it, "At just the point that [culture has] begun to think small, history has begun to act big?"²

The answer to this question remains open, but there is no doubt that the challenge of circumstances, in the form of history "acting big," has sucked the insouciance out of the found object aesthetic, and the charm from the re-appropriation of vignettes from daily experience. Even the most profound examinations of the mundane might seem to some merely artful now, causing us to yearn for its mirror image—the straightforward description of the profound. In mass culture since the turn of the millennium there has been a plethora of movies, television shows, books and magazines on the subject of the Christian apocalypse, fantasy worlds, ghosts and other esoterica. The popularity of television shows such as "Medium" and fantasy series ranging from *The Lord of the Rings* to the more overtly religious *Chronicles of Narnia* and *Left Behind* indicate a longing for an explanation—any explanation—for the baffling

events that have defined our era. In contemporary art, the search for metaphysical explanations is made evident by a wide variety of symptoms, including the reemergence, after more than fifty years, of an absolutist abstraction that makes reference to the work of such Modernist mystics as Piet Mondrian and Newman, the use of religious and mythological imagery, the fascination with the psychedelic and the hallucinogenic, and a curiosity about the paranormal. *Strange Powers* offers a modest examination of contemporary forays into this last topic, one with an admittedly vast pedigree. Art and magic have met on equal ground throughout history, from the animal bone amulets of prehistoric France to Newman's talismanic zips. These kinds of works that were meant to be magic, as distinct from works *about* magic, are rare in the contemporary milieu. Today there are plenty of examples of art that adopt magic as a subject or that bet magic tricks, but this exhibition is not concerned with them because although they might reflect an interest in the supernatural, they do not profess a belief in it. That the works in *Strange Powers* do profess one is significant not so much because they prove the existence of paranormal

phenomena (they don't, at least not convincingly) but because they exemplify the ambitious and powerful notion that art can be a vehicle for transformation. Whether or not this kind of art succeeds in the smaller tasks of cleansing, conjuring, predicting, protecting or laying a curse is less important than the assumption that it can do all of these things.

A number of works in *Strange Powers* are magical objects in the most traditional sense of the phrase. The poet, artist and beat shaman Brion Gysin's (1916–1986) calligraphic and word drawings fall squarely in the tradition of the spell, and indeed were based on its classic formula. A sometime scryer (crystal ball gazer), a consulter of mediums and a Sufi initiate, Gysin claimed to be the victim of a curse that was placed on him in the 1950s through an amulet stuck in the wall of a restaurant he owned in Tangier. The amulet included a small square of paper that was gridded out and written upon in two directions—the accepted form of a kabbalistic spell. It became a model for Gysin's own spells, written in a personalized script that married both Japanese and Arabic calligraphy.³ Like Gysin and James Lee Byars, in whose work Buddhist and alchemical influences cohabitate, Senga Nengudi uses her knowledge of diverse traditions—Buddhist, Shinto, African

and Native American—to construct powerful, hybrid amulets, shrines and sacred spaces. In Nengudi's work, as in Gysin's, the purpose of the magic often remains obscure; its presence, however, in the agglomeration of stones, shells, earth, sand, fruits, plants and numerous other materials sacred to a panoply of cultures, is self-evident.

Charms, or talismans, are contributed by Jennifer Cohen and Jim Lambie, whereas Eva Rothschild offers both a crystal and a crystal ball in a kind of face-off between Old World and New Age esoteric power. Other artists in the show have provided supernatural services themselves or have enlisted others to do so for them. Christian Cummings allows his spirit contacts to express themselves in drawings via a Ouija board. In one of his first "forays" he managed to make contact with none other than Barnett Newman, who chose to express himself with a figure drawing rather than a signature zip. Euan Macdonald brings viewers the benefit of a healer via digital video, while Miranda Lichtenstein has brought in a spiritual cleanser for the exhibition space. Photography, drawing, sculpture, audio and video are used as vehicles to present evidence of supernatural occurrences (Carl Michael von Hausswolff presents an apparition

of his fellow spirit researcher Friedrich Jürgenson, and Anne Collier uses her camera to record the colorful auras of her artist friends), as well as for documentation of a search for it. If the photo of the visage of the deceased Jürgenson appearing on a television screen is an attempt to provide concrete evidence of a spirit world, Pawel Althamer and Artur Żmijewski's series of videos concentrate purely on the exploration of alternate universes. Recalling the beat notion of the "spiritual astronaut," Althamer uses various consciousness-altering methods—including drugs both hallucinogenic and narcotic—and hypnosis to explore the possible existence of other realms of being. Żmijewski, with feet planted firmly in this dimension, records each one of his friend's expeditions with the sangfroid of a NASA researcher.

That even a small number of contemporary artists in the U.S. and Europe would find this kind of magical thinking of interest is significant and offers an element of hope in this uneasy cultural moment, marked as it is by rapid change, startling violence and a kind of cultural helplessness. If the times have encouraged a measure of timidity and solipsism in some contemporary art, they have also

inspired works that embody a renewed faith in the power of art as an active, if not activist, element in contemporary culture. This kind of magical art is as arch-typical as it is profound. Newman once speculated that the first human sound was not a cry, but a song. One might also imagine that it was no mere tune but a full-throated incantation.

NOTES

¹ From "Ports of Entry: Here is space-time painting," William S. Burroughs, in "Art as Evidence of an Extra Sensory Experience", in Jose Ferez Kuri, ed., Brion Gysin: *Tuning in to the Multimedia Age*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2003, p. 29.

² See Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*. New York, Basic Books, 2003, pp. 101–02.

³ Gysin was trained in both, and was fluent in Arabic.

