

Going for Baroque, by Maria Porges

Prologue

Religion is probably, after sex, the second oldest resource which human beings have available to them for blowing their minds.

--Susan Sontag

Baroque is a complicated, multivalent term—as Humpty-Dumpty once put it, a “portmanteau” word, into which one can stuff a whole weekend’s worth of meaning. It can serve as either noun or adjective; a term of criticism, or a label for a specific historical period that began in Italy during the last decades of the sixteenth century and ended in Germany and South America some hundred and fifty years later. And until the Baroque came back into favor with art historians in the late 1800s, the word was most often used as a synonym for *absurd* or *grotesque*.

Baroque art embodies this bewildering complexity. Its over-the-top theatricality and dynamic exuberance are designed to inspire a powerful emotional response by appealing to viewers’ senses, not their brains. Some Baroque works are so powerful that, even in today’s visually saturated environment, they can still provoke a surprisingly strong reaction. Take, for example, Bernini’s design for the Cornaro Chapel, with its centerpiece sculpture of Saint Teresa. Her eyes cast upwards, Teresa lies crumpled on the ground, in the midst of an ecstatic vision. Bernini chose to portray her at the climactic moment of her experience, when an angel pierces her body repeatedly with an arrow. Like precious jewels, the two figures are surrounded by an ornate setting of gold and colored marble. Arrow in hand, the angel smiles mysteriously as Teresa collapses in an expression of spiritual fulfillment so resembling orgasm that it’s embarrassing to look at her for too long.

Like many other Baroque artists, Bernini was hired by the Catholic Church to proselytize for the Counter-Reformation. The church leaders, spurred by their first real experience of competition in the form of Protestants like Luther and Calvin, set out to persuade believers that Rome was still the center of Christianity. Works of art like Bernini’s over-the-top vision of Teresa’s orgasmic bliss were intended to serve as vehicles for communicating a specific message. (Think of contemporary advertising that uses similarly charged imagery to make us think *I want what SHE’S having*.)

Not all Baroque art was driven by a religious program, however. It wasn’t long before the grandeur, sensuous richness and emotional exuberance of the style became attractive to artists uninterested in inciting Catholic fervor. 18th century Dutch still life painting, for instance, filled with expensive doodads and/or gorgeous flowers, exploits that same dynamic vitality. Its dramas are staged in service of the material rather than the spiritual, but it is still intended to appeal to our senses, making us swoon in an aesthetic rapture.

I use this word in a completely different context from that of the Christian Fundamentalist notion of *the rapture*-- an imminent Last Judgment in which the Saved will rise to Heaven while everyone else sinks into eternal damnation. No, what I am talking about is something else: the dizzying, excruciatingly pleasurable sensation inspired by something so beautiful that it makes your mouth dry, your heart race, your knees tremble. Exalted, you feel uplifted and humbled at the same time. In different ways, both of the artists in this exhibition deconstruct this *rapturous* aspect of baroque style, as does the way the exhibition is

presented in the gallery. Curator Stephan Jost's brightly-colored walls, extravagant velvet curtains and asymmetrical installation of works are an almost complete reversal of modern art viewing conventions as they have developed over the past several decades. We have come to expect a "white cube," in which neutral tones on walls and floor provide a background for evenly-spaced-and-lit art, all hung at a uniform height. Jost even borrows a bit of the drama of a Baroque church by including two pieces of carved wooden religious sculpture from the 17th century. But these works signal more than a self-conscious post (post)-modern gesture. One, a small German house altar, takes the form of an elaborate façade, framing figures of the Virgin Mary, Jesus, and two saints within its arches. The other sculpture, a statue of San Ildefonso barely a foot tall, may have once had a similar carved frame, but now he stands alone, hands raised, eyes cast upwards towards something ineffable. Jost places him away from the wall, on a low pedestal swathed in white silk-- thus emphasizing his miniscule size in relationship to the room. Seen through this little figure's eyes, the gallery's already broad expanse suddenly seems enormous, like the main sanctuary of an imposing house of worship. Such spaces are designed to engender an awestruck sense of one's smallness in relationship to God. By reminding us of this type of highly emotional use of space, Jost enhances the way in which Yr's paintings and Horn's sculpture similarly manipulate their viewers' sense of scale.

Act I

For those who live neither with religious consolations about death nor with a sense of death (or of anything else) as natural, death is the obscene mystery, the ultimate affront, the thing that cannot be controlled. It can only be denied. -- Susan Sontag

Yr's pictures of cloudy, meditative skies invoke pleasures both contemplative and sensual. Like the celestial scenes artists once painted on the ceilings of churches and palaces, her images offer us views into an idealized place—minus the naked cherubs and gracefully-draped angels. Yr's clouds vary only slightly from painting to painting, more a poetic description of her subject than a record of specific meteorological events. Ropy puffs of softly brushed grey lightly tinged with blues, yellows and pinks recede into the distance. Filling the frame, they become the subject, verb and object of these canvases, all of which are titled *Les Barricades Mystérieuses*— the Mysterious Barricades. Yr, who trained as a flautist before turning to art, borrowed this name from a musical composition by Francois Couperin (1668-1733). In this short Baroque work, the notes are flowing and hypnotic, as the same melodic phrase and variation repeats several times. It's not certain what Couperin meant by his title, but clouds are by their very nature "mysterious barricades," so it is apt for Yr's pictures. Those who believe in an afterlife are confident that they know what lies beyond that mystery. The rest of us, Yr seems to be reminding us, are not.

Towards the bottom edge of these pictures, a distant watery horizon can be seen, punctuated only by what seem to be tiny islands or mountains. But this far-off indication of land only serves to emphasize the overall mood of exalted emptiness. Bathed in an austere northern light, we are insignificant specks, seemingly hovering over a vast ocean. (Yr, a native of Iceland, has the scenery of her childhood firmly embedded in her imagination.)

On closer inspection, however, something altogether un-Baroque is taking place. These pictures appear to be disintegrating in places. Like slits in sky or water, narrow wounds in their surfaces reveal multiple layers of paint that have been scraped and sanded away—sometimes, down to the raw wood of the panel beneath. These ruptures are reminders of the superficiality of style: that, in the end, a painting, no matter how beautiful, is only skin-deep. At the same time, Yr's ironic theatricality strikes an oddly plaintive note. Her ripped clouds are a metaphor for the struggle artists face in a time when what they make is not

supposed to either describe or assuage spiritual needs-- even when that might be something artist and viewer might need.

Act II

The pleasures of love are pains that become desirable, where sweetness and torment blend, and so love is voluntary insanity, infernal paradise, and celestial hell -- in short, harmony of opposite yearnings, sorrowful laughter, soft diamond.

-- Umberto Eco, *The Island of the Day Before*

The forms of most Horn's works included in this exhibition are based on eighteenth century designs for jewelry, enlarged to a point far beyond wearability. Handmade crystal "gems" (some, as big as grapefruit) nestle in loopy settings of shiny nickel-plated bronze. These pink and purple confections have a louche, almost raffish air, suggesting the embodiment of a risqué joke about inanimate objects swelling with desire (or steroids). This is not to say that these pieces are comical. There may be a punch line, but the story being told is a kind of historical fiction, interweaving fact and imagination with a dark kind of humor. Jewelry, Horn seems to be reminding us, is more than decoration. His pieces reflect on its role in attraction and seduction, not to mention as an expression of power and dominance through the display of social position and wealth. (During the historical period referred to in this work, gentlemen wore jewelry at least as much as ladies.)

Like a lot of Pop art, there is a tinge of sex and death in Horn's aesthetic—a subtext revealed in part by titles with more than one reading. *Love Muscle* consists of a hefty heart-shaped crystal pendant. And the name *Extravagant Cockscomb*, given to a fountain of scarlet ostrich feathers mounted on a configuration of similarly- vivid oval gems, suggests many possibilities. In another piece-- hung so high on the wall that we have to turn our faces up, like little San Ildefonso, to see it—round jewels about the size of a cookie fill a heart-shaped frame. The dimpled surface of the jewels must have suggested both parts of the piece's name: *Jam Fancy* (*school sores*). For American viewers, this translates roughly as *fancy little jam-filled cookies* (*impetigo*). The latter is a highly infectious skin affliction spread through touch that begins as weeping blisters and becomes crusty, bubbly sores.

In two pieces in this show, Horn takes his investigation of the meaning of baroque sensibility in a different direction. After modeling a mirror surrounded with elaborate carving and a decorative wall sconce in wax, he cast both pieces in an amber-colored translucent rubber. These visceral-looking interpretations of 18th century design are baroque as in *grotesque* and *absurd*. Their dynamic asymmetry throws us off-center, as we are simultaneously attracted and repulsed. Like viewers of Bernini's Saint Teresa, we don't know quite where to look. Just as Yr's mysterious skies draw us into their infinite depths at the same time that they flatly deny their own illusion, Horn's strange inventions invite our desire while laughing at its Lilliputian futility.

Epilogue

Curtailed and painted like a set for a period drama, the gallery suggests a stage. Yet the action is unfolding within us as much as it is in front of us. Our emotions are the puppet-like players, their strings jerked around by Yr and Horn's adroit mastery. Modern life makes us wary of such manipulation, since it is

usually employed for commercial rather than spiritual reasons. But is it so bad to experience strong feelings in response to art? Maybe it's what we need, in these strange and twisted times of holy wars, natural cataclysms, and a general sense of dread. Asserting that sometimes history repeats itself in a good way, these artists are going for baroque.

Bernini's artistic flexibility and vision led him to borrow techniques from other arts, and he must have been influenced by theatrical practice early in his career. In his actual works for the theater he tried to make stage effects as "real" as possible in order to intensify the dramatic impact. We read of an actual fire on stage, of a realistic sunrise, and of a staged flood seeming to threaten the audience. These devices tended to break down the psychic as well as the physical barriers between staged drama and human spectators. – Howard Hibbard, *Bernini*, Oakland, 2006