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Tamer Cats at Modern Art's High Gates

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A short story by [Franz Kafka](#) reads in its entirety, "Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes a part of the ceremony."

This dreamy little fable serves as an excellent metaphor for the cycles of modern art. The leopards are the artists of the avant-garde, instinctive animals like [Picasso](#), Pollock and [Julian Schnabel](#) who desecrate the hallowed precincts of high art and introduce a wild new beauty and freedom. But then they keep coming back. Their once revolutionary gestures become routine, and they are absorbed into the pantheon.

Considering the artists in "Leopards in the Temple," an illuminating exhibition at the SculptureCenter in Long Island City, Queens, that says a lot about the state of contemporary art, you might ask: Which leopards are these? Are they disruptive invaders or domesticated kitties?

Viewers unfamiliar with what's been going on in art in the past 50 years might find some works outrageous. A modest installation by Kitty Kraus that consists only of squared-off lengths of men's suit fabric lying flat on the floor might seem pretty exotic. To those in the know, however, it will be an obvious, feminist riff on the masculine brick-and-metal Minimalist floor works of Carl Andre. Clever, but far from ferocious.

Latifa Echakhch's distribution of colorful shattered glass from Moroccan tea cups along the foot of one wall can appear aggressively antitraditional. That is if you don't think about the multiculturalist twist it puts on the sculptures [Richard Serra](#) made by throwing molten lead into wall-floor intersections, which focused on materials and process, or Félix González-Torres's candies piled in gallery corners, which were meant to be removed by visitors in a process symbolizing the dissolution of death.

Nina Canell's "Perpetuum Mobile (2400 Kg)" might have been made 50 years ago by an Italian Arte Povera artist. Clouds of electronically vaporized water wafting out of a metal tub are eventually supposed to harden the cement in bags nearby, an alchemy of impoverished materials.

Fionn Meade, the show's organizer and the SculptureCenter's curator, says in an essay that he is under no illusions about which kind of cat he's wrangling. The artists he has picked, he writes, "return to distinct formal vocabularies and art historical trajectories," and they are intent on "borrowing and unsettling rather than wholesale attempts at either remaking or deconstructing." In other words, while working with familiar elements of style they mix and match their sources of inspiration in new but not shockingly novel ways.

Mr. Meade is describing the essence of contemporary academicism, and while he puts a positive spin on this, it could be read as a devastating critique. These are not the bestial vandals so beloved by myth makers of the modern. It's rare for a curator to assess his artists in such honest terms, and in a sense Mr. Meade is operating in the gap between curator and critic. At a time when curators too often function more like smooth-talking hucksters than independent intellectuals, that is good and refreshing.

The show includes a wide range of artists, from young, emerging New Yorkers to internationally known figures like the recent Turner Prize nominee Lucy Skaer and the veteran, anthropologically minded conceptualist Lothar Baumgarten. But here it looks as if they all might have graduated recently from an M.F.A. program that favors semiotic sophistication over the fashioning of compelling objects.

An installation by Lucas Knipscher could almost be a parody of the genre of art based on cultural signifiers. It includes Woolrich brand “Heritage Buffalo Hunting Plaid” blankets draped over metal pipes; lines from “Camera Lucida,” by the French critic Roland Barthes, cut from colorful vinyl sheets and hanging in such a way that you can’t read them; and pictures of rugged male outdoor workers by the photographer Larry Fink. You could construct a narrative out of this disparate material, but would it be worth the effort to arrive at a predictable lesson about the evils of Manifest Destiny?

Strauss Bourque-LaFrance’s assemblages, while leaning toward the rawness of Rachel Harrison’s sculpture, are similarly heterogeneous in their accumulation of signifiers, like a photograph of [Mikhail Baryshnikov](#) embedded in a lump of plaster.

Some works are more clearly focused, but no less theory minded. A piece by a German-born team now based in New York, Das Institute (Kerstin Brätsch and Adele Röder), consists of framed photographs hinged into a racklike book displayed on a shelf. Images of Modernist, geometric compositions alternate with deliberately unflattering portraits of women (the two artists themselves) with tangled hair obscuring their faces. A concise visual essay on age-old associations of the masculine with rational abstraction and the feminine with the messy body, it looks as if it had been made in the 1980s by a second-wave feminist.

Elsewhere there are other artists doing new tricks with old forms. A piece by Patrick Hill in which bands of frayed fabric anchored in a block of concrete are stretched over a near-vertical sheet of glass, holding it at a seemingly precarious angle, is reminiscent of Mr. Serra’s early prop sculptures. A construction of flat, hourglass-shaped metal forms by Aleana Egan hang from the ceiling, echoing Brancusi’s “Endless Column.” Slide projected, severely cropped photographs of people in close proximity at parties and openings by Nina Hoffmann update Jessica Craig-Martin’s party photographs. And Kathrin Sonntag’s amusing film in which she pulls a tablecloth from under a plate, utensils and a glass of water could be mistaken for a Peter Fischli and David Weiss production.

Also Fischli and Weiss-like — and delightfully so — are films by João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva in which seemingly magical events take place. In one, large rocks move by themselves down a grassy hill. In “Fulcrum” a fly lands at the end of a wooden balance beam, its infinitesimal weight causing the board to dip to the floor. Of all the artists here, these are the ones to watch.

No one here, however, is likely to topple the current regime of art, and in that respect these artists stand for the majority of contemporary strivers. They are resourceful, alert and eager to please, but are not wildly imaginative. Call them the mild ones.

“Leopards in the Temple” runs through March 30 at SculptureCenter, 44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, Queens; (718) 366-1750, sculpture-center.org.

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