

Letters

CORNERED

I am writing in response to the review by Laura McLean-Ferris in the October issue of *Art Monthly* (AM340) on the exhibition 'Cornered Rooms', Waterside Project Space that included my pieces from the 'Saturday Afternoon, 1st of December, Leeds' series. I consider this critique of my work requires a response.

The review states that my work is 'spread a little thinly in terms of mixed media and mixed metaphors'. However, all my work attempts to avoid any metaphorical approach, as well as any excessive experimentation in mixed media. Although material concerns are significant in my work the crucial choices made are conceptually grounded, and cannot be considered in terms of formal innovation. The work is concerned with the social, with reality, and any references to abstraction cannot be understood as symbolic or metaphorical: my interest is in the affect of ambiguity – between the real and abstraction. In the context of 'Cornered Rooms' the impossibility of distinguishing between these two notions could be called the contemporary claustrophobic condition.

McLean-Ferris refers to the metaphor of the city of Leonia (Italo Calvino). However the work does not – as she assumes – adopt its function as metaphor but metaphor as an example for a mode of expression, not to expand representation through metaphor. Metaphor is indeed rejected through the form and placement of the table that builds a physical and literal tension of a diagonal facing the corner. In the audio, not only the author of the text (Calvino) is meaningful but the voice of the one reading the text, Zygmunt Bauman: a sociologist who, in his works *Waste Life: Modernity and its Outcasts* and *Liquid Love* adopts Calvino's texts to develop his view of ambivalence and uncertainty as conditions of the postmodern. Only when considering the sound piece as a commingling of literature and theory can interpretation go beyond the explanations of the Leonia based on metaphor.

The viewer's reflection on the relationship

between the painting *A Sense of Perspective and Other Attempts* and the sculpture *From A to Infinity*, should not be based on secondary information of painting purporting to be an abstraction of a news image situated in a box somewhere else in the space. Viewed from that perspective there might be indeed very little to connect the two. Instead there are many other questions that can be asked regarding these works relating for example to the pictorial representations and to the potentiality of non-figurative aesthetic traditions, as well as to the notions of reality, truth and illusion.

My work has developed through modest but invested and time-consuming means (especially through painting) to contribute to the creation of spaces that allude to a contemplative atmosphere. A discreet approach not complicit with techniques of seduction is what is important. I believe that this is how to awaken reflection on socio-political issues, existential matters and art itself in a way that is neither authoritarian nor vogueish. I am very conscious of the risk my work takes, of appearing too 'thin' to some of the visitors or too 'thick' to others. It is true that the scope of references is broad. But that in my opinion is the current state of how the world reveals itself to us. ■

ANNA OSTOYA
New York

LAURA MCLEAN-FERRIS'S REPLY

I cannot help but feel that Anna Ostoya's letter reveals precisely the same problems that the individual piece of work presented to me as a reviewer of a highly conceived group exhibition, involving several dramatically different approaches to art making and calling into play two architectural theory texts before the games had even begun. There are limits, and there are word limits. If one were to explain, within the context of a review, each work in a group exhibition, were one to list every reference, and why this or that reference is important and meaningful within the context of the

broader ideas and references which are the curator's, this might conceivably represent nothing more than a required reading list, as a host of great thinkers, philosophers, writers and artists (some canonical, shared references, and some niche and involved) are called to the table to act as supports on which a set of artworks is rested. Unlucky reader. The need to legislate about the meaning of one's work in an art magazine after the fact, too, appears to be problematic, particularly when one has invoked ambiguity and ambivalence, and, further, this seems to presume that a work involving multiple references requires more critical space (and now here it has found it) than a work that does not. If I am correct, the message is that, if one misses or misreads a reference, then one has missed the work. This may be so, but if the potential for this is high, then it seems to be a case of: unlucky viewer.

However, it is not so much Ostoya's letter as an individual instance that I am responding to, but more a general trend in art of the last five or ten years, in which sets of references appear to be being used as the primary material of the artwork. As Ostoya mentions, this wide scope of references may reflect 'how the world reveals itself to us', but occasionally (and let me be clear that I am not talking here about Ostoya), this referential gaming appears to add up to precisely nothing at all. A 1970s gig with an audience of nine here, a German expressionist film there, a philosophical text here, a little-known lecture there. Is there any concession in such work for a viewer to whom this set of references is not familiar? And, if not, then this raises the question: who is the work for? Who is the ideal viewer for whom the work is being made, who knows everything that the artist knows? Of course, visual, material and contextual references can be, and have been, used to great effect. It may, indeed, be the work emerging from our contemporary, cut-and-paste world. But something in the use of such must reach to the viewer beyond. If not, what we see is the sum of a well-chosen set of highly admired parts. ■

David Jablonowski
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Myriam Mechita
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Bloomberg SPACE
50 Finsbury Square
London EC2A 1HD
+44 20 7330 7959
gallery@bloombergspace.com

www.bloombergspace.com

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