



High Drama

EUGENE BERMAN AND THE LEGACY
OF THE MELANCHOLIC SUBLIME

MICHAEL DUNCAN

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WITH AN ESSAY BY

Jody Blake

AND BIOGRAPHICAL ENTRIES BY

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Michael Duncan, Guest Curator



HIGH DRAMA: THE EXHIBITION ◆ For this exhibition works by Berman have been juxtaposed with complementary works by his peers and by contemporary artists. Most works by Berman were collected by Robert L. B. Tobin, who in his lifetime amassed one of the nation's most significant collections of art and materials related to the theatre, a collection now housed in part in the Tobin Wing of the McNay Art Museum. Besides acquiring hundreds of drawings and studies that Berman made for the stage, Tobin assembled a strong collection of his paintings from every major period.

The other artists in the exhibition share Berman's unique sense of theatricality and penchant for the melancholic sublime. By no means definitive, the selections are offered to suggest an alternate strand of the past century's art history. Laden with feeling, sumptuous beauty, dark emotion, and uninhibited fancy, these works demonstrate a startling humanistic fervor.

The styles and themes of the neo-Romantics intersect with those of Berman in various ways. Christian Bérard's stark portraits and artfully decrepit stage settings convey a similar atmosphere of theatrical nostalgia. Pavel Tchelitchev's architecturally inventive sets, as well as his use of the human body as a moody landscape, reflect a similar sense of drama. Léonid's far-off vistas convey a comparable atmosphere of loss and feeling for the unattainable. The stage sets of the English neo-Romantic John Piper often transform decaying English sites into artfully romantic settings.

Following the lead of the early work of Giorgio de Chirico, many artists associated with surrealism created enigmatic cityscapes and landscapes using classical architecture. Fantasy landscapes of Peter Blume, Yves Tanguy, Gunther Gerzso, and Max Ernst offered alternatives to the troubled political climate of their era. Hans Bellmer and Joseph Cornell used obsessive art making as a means of personal catharsis. Women surrealists such as Leonora Carrington, Kay Sage, Leonor Fini, Dorothea Tanning, and Frida Kahlo seemed to relish their roles as social outsiders, proffering works that presented alternative magical realms. American surrealists such as John Wilde, Edmund Teske, Clarence John Laughlin, Jules Kirschenbaum, and the photo collective PaJaMa presented maverick conceptions of history and obsessive sexuality that resonate with Berman's works.

The melancholic sublime remains an undercurrent in contemporary art, surfacing in the work of postfeminists such as Cindy Sherman, Amy Adler, and Patricia Cronin, and in the responses of artists such as Lari Pittman, Thomas Woodruff, and Frank Moore to the AIDS pandemic. Through appropriation of historical images and direct fantasy, contemporary artists such as Jane Kaplowitz, Rob Wynne, Julie Heffernan, and John O'Reilly have inhabited their own fully developed aesthetic realms. Others such as Harold Stevenson, Salomon Huerta, and Julio Galán have indulged in a kind of neo-neo-Romanticism, presenting highly emotional, theatrical visions of their desires.

The works of all these artists of the twentieth century demonstrate the lasting power of the melancholic sublime and the deep-seated nature of content in art. Much as modernism sought to obliterate subject matter in formal facture and pure abstraction; it has clearly reemerged in the art of the past two decades. The art historical progression that leads from Cézanne to Donald Judd does not adequately address or contextualize the art of today. Contemporary figuration and new realist modes deserve an art historical heritage. The works by Eugene Berman and his peers are ripe for rediscovery.



PATRICIA CRONIN ■ American, born 1966, lives in Brooklyn

With a solid grounding in art historical traditions, Patricia Cronin has toyed with gender-based imagery in paintings, installations, and sculptures launched from her own biography and experience. Shunning a conventional male point of view, a group of erotic watercolors (1993 1995) depict intimate lesbian sexual activity from the point of view of one of the actual participants. The installations *Pony Tales* (1996) and *Tack Room* (1997 1998) investigated the obsession with horses that is common among adolescent girls, an obsession that Cronin as a girl had shared.

Bringing together her interests in the cultural and the personal, Cronin's project *Memorial to a Marriage* (2001 2002, plate 29) involved the planning and execution of a tomb sculpture for herself and her lover the artist Deborah Kass. Made from Carrara marble in the style of tombs of the nineteenth century, the sculpture depicts Cronin and Kass embracing in bed, bodies intertwined under diaphanous sheets. Without explicit nudity or prurience, the work honors the relationship and affection of the couple, evoking an air of dignity and serenity that seems beyond political controversy. The solidity, purity, and precise articulation of the stone endows Cronin's work with an unassailable power.

Three years in the making, the sculpture was funded by Grand Arts in Kansas City, where it was exhibited before being permanently installed in November 2003 at a plot in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, one of America's most beautiful cemeteries and the final resting place of several Rockefellers and Vanderbilts. There, set nearly flush with the lawn, the gleaming marble sculpture appropriates the grounds as an extended domestic space.

The tomb is now part of a cemetery tour that includes visits to the burial sites of Herman Melville, Jay Gould, and F. W. Woolworth. Cronin's infiltration of a hallowed American burial ground with her monument is a subversive act. In a culture in which gay marriage is still taboo, Cronin lastingly celebrates a future gay funeral. A survey of Cronin's works appeared at the University of Buffalo Art Gallery, Center of the Arts, in 2004. —Michael Duncan



PLATE 29 *Memorial to a Marriage*, 2001-2002
Plaster, 53 x 26 1/2 x 17 in. Courtesy of the artist and Deitch Projects, New York