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The Best of the Basement

Rooting through MoMA’s century of deep storage for her “Artist’s Choice” show, Trisha Donnelly reveals herself.



Odilon Redon, *Rocks on the Beach* (ca. 1883)
Photo: Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York

I don’t often go to curator or artist walk-throughs of exhibitions. For a critic, it feels like cheating. I want to see shows with my own eyes, making my own mistakes, viewing exhibitions the way most of their audience sees them. Fresh. But I wouldn’t have missed Trisha Donnelly’s magical tour of her brilliantly visionary artist-choice exhibition, now up at MoMA. For me, Donnelly is a rare case of artistic love at first sight—one I still haven’t gotten over, even though her work can be abstruse and hard to parse. I admire her work so much I’ve never spoken to her, afraid I’d act like some dorky fanboy.

My Donnelly love bloomed at 7 p.m. on April 5, 2002, when she rode into Casey Kaplan’s 14th Street gallery on a white horse. She was costumed like some Napoleonic messenger. The small crowd stood agog as she gave a brief speech, ending with “The emperor has fallen, and he rests his weight upon your mind and mine, and with this I am electric. I am electric.” By the time she rode out into the night, I was smitten. As it happens, Laura Hoptman, a MoMA curator, had been similarly dazzled by another Donnelly performance. “I was hooked irredeemably,” she later wrote, adding, “This kind of artist love is rare for me.” She eventually invited Donnelly to curate this show.

For the opening, a week after Donnelly had reportedly lost her home and much of her work to Hurricane Sandy, the artist came to MoMA and explained to a very small group of lucky onlookers, including me, how she chose what she chose out of the museum’s vast collection. She said she was after “striking voices I couldn’t let go of ... paths of encounters and building poetic structures ... images that go beyond the images themselves.” One of the three permanent-collection galleries she’s filled is devoted to the little-known mid-century photographer

Eliot Porter, who shot birds with cameras and techniques of his own invention. (He also documented newborn spiders and the life cycle of the mosquito.) Calling Porter “an amazing weirdo,” Donnelly pointed at pictures of birds feeding their young, nesting, and in mid-flight, and said, “That birds still exist now is a miracle. The speed of their lives is so different from ours ... There’s such an insanity and logic of birds.” Insanity and logic together are keys to Donnelly’s aesthetic. Pointing at a picture I hadn’t noticed before, she said, “That hummingbird is a heroic force.” I looked. Boom! It became a tiny god. Gesturing at a barn swallow twisting in midair, she observed, “Every bird Porter saw was a path ... when he shot images, lines between him and the bird exploded.”

Profuse paths, lines, and explosions ricochet in this exhibition. On the way into one of the galleries, Donnelly has placed a 1955 George Platt Lynes photograph of a naked man, seen from behind as he’s looking at an image. The rear end is perfect. At his hip is a cushion depicting a devil’s face. The artwork this Adonis looks at resembles a mirror. In fact, it’s a painting by Russian surrealist Pavel Tchelitchew, whose Hide-and-Seek was once among the most popular images in MoMA’s collection. It’s a tip-off to her thinking, a clue to understanding the show. Tchelitchew has fallen out of art-historical favor, and his work lives mainly in storage. Donnelly is plumbing ideas of unsanctioned and homoerotic beauty, and of unseen, forgotten, and overlooked art.

Another of her galleries contains a number of large grid images. I thought at first that they were minimalist drawings, or maybe drawings by the insane. It turns out these cosmic-looking diagrams are renditions from the mid-eighties of silicon microprocessors. Donnelly described them as “movements of paths of thought.” I gasped, and saw the warp of the world tapestry in them, maps that would contain multitudes, change life, move information at unimagined speeds, and create unfathomable possibilities. These drawings aren’t just invention or innovation. They’re great art.

Near those diagrams is a radiant 1938 painting by a forgotten American, Patrick J. Sullivan, a picture of figures standing on some forlorn orb looking up at a Van Gogh sky filled with shooting stars, planets, and other galactic phenomena. Donnelly talked about this painting “of the Holy Grail of art, the rotation of the planets, including the one you’re looking at and standing on.” I looked. She’s right.

In the remaining gallery are moments of aesthetic ecstasy. I sighed aloud at an intense, awkward 1942 masterpiece by Marsden Hartley that hasn’t been on view since MoMA was rebuilt. This impenetrable painting of white waves crashing on brown rocks as black clouds drift in a sooty sky reminds me why Hartley is my favorite prewar twentieth-century American artist.

Then another work I’d rarely seen: a waist-high 1966 carpeted object by lesser-known Joe Goode. It looks just like a staircase. Your parents would surely say, “Honey, this isn’t art, is it?” As Donnelly marveled that Goode had fabricated “a fact,” I saw this work in ways I’d never seen it before. In shows like Donnelly’s, we see the tantalizing tips of enormous artistic icebergs, representative pieces that open multiple visual thought-structures. As I’ve said in the past, MoMA didn’t apportion nearly enough space in its new building for its vital permanent collection. Bravo to Donnelly and the curators for fighting against their building’s infuriating limitations with electric efforts like this.

By Jerry Saltz

Artist’s Choice: Trisha Donnelly
Museum of Modern Art.
Through April 8.