Fifth International SITE Santa Fe Biennial

Though the ‘grotesque’ may seem at first glance to be a fine rebuttal to ‘beauty’, curator Robert Storr is quick to point out that his ‘Disparities & Deformations: Our Grotesque’ is not an answer to Dave Hickey, nor to Hickey’s ‘Beau Monde’ approach to the last biennial here. Storr’s notion of the grotesque reacts against its common pejorative use, instead insisting on the rich history of the term, beginning in Renaissance Rome (though its psychological dynamics extend much further back). He cites the accidental discovery in 1480 of the vaults under what was Nero’s house of decadence, and the creative shock produced by the florid caricatures of unnatural man/beast combinations that decorated the long-hidden walls of the grottoes. A more recent point of departure for Storr is a 1989 essay by Mike Kelley which first appeared in Artforum, arguing for caricature’s redemption and depicting classical idealized beauty, like caricature, as an exaggeration of a few simple traits; the popular form is thereby elevated, the canon pulled down.

Such debates between the high and the popular arts figure in Storr’s grotesque (at one point in the excellent catalogue he boldly defines Modernism as ‘the mongrel litter thrown by the fertile misalliance of high and low’), but so do other dialectics, including Modernist attacks on ornamentation as feminine, illusory, frivolously decadent. The fact that ornament is associated with ‘arabesques’ and Islamic decoration adds an element of aesthetic xenophobia into the mix.

So what is the grotesque? Storr sees it as a child of ornament and caricature, a unity of opposites that never really gels, ‘freez[ing] our consciousness in the moment of their impossible conflation and completeness’, a commingling of imagery that doesn’t normally go together, but then kind of makes sense. (Hickey described his SITE Biennial as ‘a melting pot in which nothing melts’

– which in a way could also describe the grotesque.) In the almost-synthesis of the grotesque each opposite amplifies the other by its very presence and stubborn inseparability. Beholding the grotesque, we are cast into a state of ‘soul dizziness’ (a term Storr borrows from the early 19th-century writer Jean Paul), a vertiginous distress borne of the tension between humour and terror.

The chief goal of ‘Our Grotesque’ was to make the case for a pervasive underside of Modernism, cleansed from the main narrative by institutions such as The Museum of Modern Art in New York, Storr’s previous employer. While there, he seemed to struggle with the museum’s deference to the dominant story; the shows he mounted, beginning with an earlier foray into the grotesque in 1991, seem faintly haunted by the interests that motivate his fascination with the topic here. A secondary aim, consistent with the first though too broad to find sufficient support in this exhibition, is to position the grotesque as a core concept that contains and connects artists’ interests in other arch ideas such as the uncanny, the Sublime, the scatological, the abject and the Gothic (and perhaps beauty as well).

The show itself, including over 50 artists and more than 100 works, was one of those rare exercises that distinguished itself from the all too common curatorial grotesque, where theory and art come across as incongruous, if not mutually antagonistic. Many artists worked wonderfully in support of Storr’s thesis. Christian Marclay’s exquisite corpses of sutured pop album covers from his ‘Body Mix’ series are perfect illustrations, as are Cindy Sherman’s monstrous filth portrait Untitled #190 (1989) and Tom Friedman’s exploded self-portrait Untitled (2000), made from construction paper, in which the violence of the scene is set against the childish craftiness of the materials. Jennifer and Kevin McCoy’s endless horror-flick chase, in which a fear-stricken man tries to escape from a villain who never arrives, unfolds as a deft combination of terror and comedy.

Carroll Dunham’s Red Sun in the Morning (1999–2000) carried the banner of

the crucial but absent Phillip Guston (dead artists were excluded), though some earlier pieces of his might have worked better for this topic. Similarly Sigmar Polke, John Currin and Bruce Connor might have been represented with finer works; Conner's Max Ernst-like collages seem more germane than his ink-blot drawings shown here. Laurie Simmons' and Lyle Ashton Harris' photographs are relevant in their own ways, but Simmons' collaged interiors, culled from a variety of decoration manuals, also open the door to half the art world.

A few pieces lack the complexity to stand up in this context, even if they seem to conform to the theme. Adriana Varejão's one-liner wall piece of gore and ceramic tile, a particularly strange Jörg Immendorff and a horrid Francesco Clemente from 1994 all detract. The perpetually baffling Elizabeth Murray has no place here, and even Storr can barely muster a cogent argument for her inclusion. But Inka Essenhigh and Kara Walker have never made more sense to me than they did here; Walker premièred a impressive leap forward into animation and film (finally) with her brand new Testimony: Narrative of a Negress, Burdened by Good Fortune (2004), as did Raymond Pettibon with his animated Repeater Pencil (2004), both first-time forays made at Storr's urging. Jim Nutt's exquisite portraits of women were the best paintings in the show and nice complements to the better-known Lisa Yuskavages.

Indeed, Nutt – along with Conner, Peter Saul, Gary Panter, Robert Crumb, Mark Greenwold and Charles Burns – fleshes out an alternative strain of Modernism found among the West Coast contingent of Lari Pittman, Pettibon, Jim Shaw, Paul McCarthy and Kelley that is rooted in Bruce Nauman. Seeing these artists in such proximity to one another – McCarthy and Saul, in particular – is one of the show's great thrills. Together they compellingly constitute a humorously sinister and Absurdist/neurotic brand of art-making that is about pollution of all kinds, drawing on and implicating a great range of American popular culture and beliefs.

A major question is why Storr refuses political readings of his concept. He seems to think that such approaches rely too much on that level of the horrific grotesque which he wishes to problematize. While the similarity between the pose of Friedman's twisted figure and, say, the burnt bodies lynched in Falluja this spring exists primarily on such a level, the complex dynamics of anxiety that underscore his topic relate to current political realities.

We can read Storr's combination of caricature and ornament, for example, as an uncomfortable hybrid of Western and Islamic traditions, which invites discussion of the forced experiment currently failing in Iraq. One blunder of the Bush and Blair administrations in this outing has been their failure to see pluralist democracy as the complex and disturbing grotesque that it is, the whole of which cannot be easily defined or comprehended apart from its multifarious and sometimes opposing constituents. As the débâcle shows, the balance of oppositions that democracy demands can appear unnatural, terrifying and perverse when viewed across a wide cultural divide. Is there a lesson here? In his opening lecture Storr remarked that, while he advocates discomfiting aesthetic experiences, he can barely stomach the commonplace 'soul dizziness' induced by a ride on a county fair Ferris wheel. The problem, it seems, comes when you try to apply what sounds good on paper or looks good on a wall to the messy real world.