

Exhibition Histories

“Civilization and the Landscape of Discontent”, 1984 Nature Morte, New York

Between the rise of Reaganism, the nascent AIDS crisis, and a market-venerating art world, the early 1980s offered plenty of cause for discontent. Digesting the contradictions *du jour*, curatorial duo *Collins & Milazzo* pulled together a visually restrained cadre of works along with an enigmatic critical text – something unimaginable in the commercial gallery before then.

By Thomas Lawson

In Emile de Antonio's 1972 film, *Painters Painting*, Barnett Newman famously quips that “art critics are to artists as ornithologists are to the birds,” tapping into a widespread rejection of theorised attempts to categorise and label idiosyncratic studio practice. But by the 1980s, a younger generation of critics were sprouting wings, laying claim to a kind of creative practice that gave them insider knowledge because they too were artists. Tricia Collins and Richard Milazzo, working under the moniker Collins & Milazzo, were pioneers of this hybrid practice, using an extraordinary mash-up of high-flying critical language as the glue holding their many enterprises together.

They first made their mark in 1982, writing reviews for *Flash Art*, and quickly launched their

own magazine, *Effects*, to better control the editorial process. In their writing, they took the language of French critical theory and through excess and repetition, created a performative poetry burning bright with portents and hallucinatory indictments, that read as prophecy or pastiche, depending on a reader's patience. Reading it now, it comes across as high-octane conspiracy theory. Gary Indiana, in the *Village Voice*, liked the look of the publication, finding it as stylish as *REALLIFE Magazine* (which Susan Morgan and I had been editing since 1979), but struggled with the content, which he found “filled with serpentine text and gnarled metaphysical telegraphy”. In *Art in America*, Walter Robinson described their writing as “charmingly incoherent, with a daffy Dadaist undercurrent”.



Collins & Milazzo, 1984

Photo: Robin Weglinski

Peter Nagy, who was one of the founders of Nature Morte gallery, in New York's East Village, remembered them fondly in a 1999 *Artforum* piece, writing, “It was Collins & Milazzo – that cross between Deleuze and Guattari and [50s sitcom stars] Ozzie and Harriet – who deserve the most credit for creating the intellectual East Village. They not only brought together (over Tricia's home cooking) the like-minded young artists and gallerists of the neighbourhood, but virtually built the bridge connecting the Pictures Generation with its spawn.” Dinner parties took on the character of a salon, a regular hang out to diss the graffiti-inspired expressionism shown at the most visible East Village galleries, as well as the perceived turn to blatant marketability seen in the more established SoHo

galleries. They were going to do something different. Nagy had an opening in his schedule coming up in the spring of 1984, and plans were laid to make a statement exhibition.

The early 80s were a contradictory time in New York. The threat of municipal bankruptcy had been tamed, by cutting city jobs, closing hospitals, and raising the subway fare and university tuition. In response, real estate grifters like Donald Trump and Harry Macklowe knocked down revered older buildings in the dead of night to build glitzy towers for a new generation of speculators, who were also funding a spate of new galleries showing new art. In the Lower East Side and the Bronx, slumlords were letting old tenement buildings burn, turning families out on the street. Inflation was rampant,



View of "Civilization and the Landscape of Discontent", Nature Morte, 1984

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and the central bank was attempting to bring it under control by raising interest rates, which in turn brought on a lingering recession. On top of the misery caused by this, a mysterious new virus was making its deadly way through the art and fashion worlds, and the Reagan administration, seeing that it seemed to mostly attack gay people, denied funds for research, and mounted a campaign to vilify the victims. As Charles Dickens had written about Paris in the years of revolution, it was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

The title for Collins & Milazzo's debut show was "Civilization and the Landscape of Discontent", and it was intended as a polemical broadside aimed at the larger culture, and also as a corrective within the New York art world. Indeed, a manifesto of sorts was nailed to the

door, demanding the attention of all who entered. In part, this declaration read: "In the extreme, the paintings are, on certain places, duplicit in satisfaction, in that they depict an intensional (sic), willful, virtually exuberant regression of the sophisticated or adulterated mind (Reason) into an uncompromised memory of a New Moral Order." It is difficult to know what this means with any precision, but the general tenor of their position was that expressionistic art was ill-considered and morally suspect, and thus the more restrained work they were championing pointed to a better way forward. And yet for a show with such large ambitions, it was in fact a modest affair, a grouping of small, mostly monochromatic works by a curious group of nine artists. The vibe echoed a visually restrained variant of Pictures art, located

somewhere in dialogue between black and white photography and atmospheric oil paint. Maybe think Robert Longo and Troy Brauntuch as the guiding stars. Writing about the show in the *East Village Eye*, Carlo McCormick found it constrained by "an internalised melancholia. It is unrequited, self-indulgent, intense and ailing."

And this was in an overall positive review – the melancholia was seen as the appropriate response to the ills of Reaganism.

The artists in the show were an eclectic mix, mostly familiar to the downtown scene. A few had begun to exhibit regularly, most had not. Ross Bleckner had been showing paintings of birds on



Ross Bleckner, *God Won't Come*, 1983
Oil on canvas, 213 x 152 cm

Ross Bleckner's paintings were medium-sized abstractions romantically suggesting moonlight on water, which spoke eloquently about a sense of loss.

a striped ground for several years with Mary Boone, to an-aemic interest. But in the summer of 1983, he began a series of darkly atmospheric works he called "weather paintings". These were medium-sized abstractions romantically suggesting moonlight on water, which spoke eloquently about a sense of loss at a time during which we were only beginning to understand the losses to come, as our communities would be ravaged by AIDS.

Bleckner's painting was titled *God Won't Come* (1983), and hanging next to it was James Welling's apparent rebuttal, six small narrow black and white photographs, stacked vertically so that they commanded a similar amount of wall space. But while the Bleckner was all interiority, the Wellings spoke mutely of process. The images were arbitrary arrangements of chunks of ink-soaked gelatine, the elemental material of silver-based photography arranged as product, the result severely beautiful, but blank.

The other two artists with some commercial recognition were Mark Innerst and Michael Zwack, who were both part of the sprawling network of Longo acolytes, Innerst as a studio assistant, Zwack an old friend. Both also worked with dark landscape motifs that were easy to dismiss as escapist, but the Innerst showed a broken memorial lost in

the forest, an image that Milazzo claims is in fact one of the first deliberate responses to AIDS. And the Zwack, a fairly large landscape made of dark blue, grey, and black tones rubbed into paper can also be seen to have a funereal aspect.

The other artists in the show had less conventional careers and are not so well remembered. They all showed paintings, mostly dark and gestural, but as Collins & Milazzo said, "the work is primarily expressive in its ordering principles, rather than expressionistic or ego-instantiated." Looking back now, what is perhaps more interesting than these paintings is the fact that they took their work and ideas beyond the studio. Peter Nadin was something of an intellectual gadfly, a sometime collaborator with Jenny Holzer, and also one of the driving forces behind the mysterious conceptual project "The Offices of ...", which offered practical aesthetic services. Stephen Aljian operated another of the East Village galleries, Christminster, offering another take on the role of the artist as more expansive and collaborative. And, perhaps most interesting of all, Susan Beschta-Springfield went from being the lead singer of the Erasers, a CBGB nightclub regular, to becoming a human rights lawyer and judge. That perhaps was the new moral order.

From 1982 to 1992 TRICIA COLLINS & RICHARD MILAZZO, working as Collins & Milazzo, developed a critical and theoretical case for a group of artists who positioned themselves as heirs to the Pictures Generation and antagonists of the Neo-expressionists. The duo did this work as publishers and editors of Effects: Magazine for New Art Theory, as essayists, and as curators for a long series of group exhibitions that they presented as critical statements, pioneering something commonplace now, but once considered tawdry: curating shows in commercial galleries. They developed many of their curatorial ideas during dinner parties hosted at their East Village apartment, parties that brought together a new generation of artists, writers, and gallerists plotting to take over a perceived establishment in SoHo.

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"The works in the [Civilization and the Landscape of Discontent] show function as theoretical landscapes which link the most ulterior part of the mind (the Subtended Psyche) to the most exterior part of Nature (Space).

"The work is primarily expressive in its ordering principles, rather than expressionistic or ego-instantiated, insofar as Concept is involved in a disparate instrumentality which can move guiltlessly in World Space from the return of the referent (repressed content) to the New Content of the meta-Spectacle.

"The images are private, solemn in their romantic facticity, even where they are hyperexternalized; and where any given work as a whole propositionally declares itself as a social construct, the images nevertheless remain for the most part unrequited.

"In particular, some of the paintings are regressive in their soft (deceptive) negations, the work representing only things that are at a distance from us. But rather than becoming an aesthetical conceit, the distance 'comes clean,' so to speak, operating as a kind of explicit (site-specific) deceit, which is the essence of any transformational ethics. In other work, this distance is 'oceanic,' state-like, and atmospheric in aspect, and the historical displacements transport existential life into the unrequited differentials of essence itself.

"In the extreme, the paintings are, in certain places, duplicit in satisfaction, in that they depict an intensional, willful, virtually exuberant regression of the sophisticated or adulterated mind (Reason) into an uncompromised memory of a New Moral Order. Whereas in other works, it is the ethos of structural negation, in conjunction with the morose history of Beauty and the hysterical rationality of critical consciousness, which embodies the Human Promise itself, without denying, however, the failure implicit in History as the Absolute Spectacle.

"The nebulous temporality and expressive structure of the work in general, the abstract color- and light-distributed configurations and disturbances, and the tentative dominion of World Objects which govern the space, conclude finally in the gray splendor and subliminal shifts of a latent imperative.

"While all of the work participates simultaneously in the scrutiny and gratification of images, none of it grants any political specificity to the images. Here, sensation is the cutting edge of theory. In this regard, the exhibition ultimately and boldly ends in the disturbing depiction of the institutional sublime."

COLLINS & MILAZZO

Exhibition text for "Civilization and the Landscape of Discontent", Nature Morte, 1984