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## Burning Inside: Passion, Politics, and Disruption at Paul Kasmin

by Lee Ann Norman

*Bloodflames Revisited* at Paul Kasmin Gallery

June 26 through August 15, 2014

293 Tenth Avenue and 515 West 27th Street

New York, 212 563 4474



Installation view, “Bloodflames Revisited,” 2014, at Paul Kasmin. Courtesy of Paul Kasmin Gallery.

Good exhibitions are designed to create a visual program of content and experiences that communicate affect most effectively. Curators and designers consider a number of factors to ensure that the visual experience — the look and feel — of the space accurately conveys the story they want to tell about the work: What if the art is lighted from below or above? How might the object look hanging from the rafters or on the floor? What if the walls aren’t white? What if the physical environment is not rectilinear?

In March 1947, renowned dealer Alexander Iolas — then director of Hugo Gallery — sought to push the boundaries of curatorial license through a breathtaking environment for modern art in the exhibition “Bloodflames.” The show featured art curated by Nicolas Calas installed in the unconventional Fredrick Kiesler-designed environment filled with bright, bold colors and sloping walls. Works by Gorky, Noguchi, Lam, and Matta among others lay propped against walls, hanging from the ceiling, and jutting out at odd angles. Paul Kasmin, in collaboration with Rail Curatorial Projects, revisited this seminal exhibition through “Bloodflames Revisited,” curated by artist, writer, and Brooklyn Rail publisher Phong Bui.

Filling the expanse of both Kasmin galleries, “Bloodflames Revisited” features work from more than 20 artists, including Will Ryman, Cindy Sherman, Chris Martin, and Roxy Paine. While certainly not as radical and disruptive to the senses as the original — you’ll find no sloping exhibition walls or amorphous blobs interspersed between works of art at Kasmin — this contemporary response to “Bloodflames” presents an effective and thoughtful alternative to the traditional white-cube exhibition as we know it. Upon entering the galleries, viewers are jarred by Crayola-colored walls that stretch from the hay-covered floor to the ceiling. “Bloodflames Revisited” is filled with artwork, although the orange-yellow of the walls and the earthy smell of hay trigger the senses to conclude the opposite. Walking into the exhibit spaces takes a bit of re-orientation that immediately calls into question the visual cues we associate with the display of cultural objects. Is it the color on the walls the risers or the hay beneath our feet that suggests everything we experience and see in this space can be questioned?



Deborah Kass, Daddy, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 78 x 78 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

I walked through the 27th Street gallery as if down a pirate’s gangplank and felt a relationship to the artworks that unsettled me. When we go the gallery or the museum, we stand apart from the art and typically view it from eye level. Standing on the riser, I looked down on Tunga’s sculptural assemblages, and my eyes rested on the top third of Deborah Kass’s and Alex Katz’s paintings. I decided to surrender to the moment, realizing that the exhibition was successful in its premise: it had indeed forced me to interrogate ideas I had internalized about what my relationship to the art should be as a viewer.

Glenn Ligon’s electric blue and neon green Niggers Ain’t Scared (1996), from the Richard Pryor joke paintings series is still jarring, even when viewed from above. “A lot of niggers ain’t scared, you know what I mean?” the text begins in Ligon’s signature stenciling style of imperfection. “I mean like when the Martians landed and shit white folks got all scared.” In an additional act of visual violence, the stenciled words smear down the canvas drawing more attention to the textual dissonance. “Nothing can scare a nigger after 400 years of this shit,” the joke concludes.

Nearby, Lynda Benglis’s giant half sphere of red-orange tinted polyurethane protrudes off of the wall as if floating in space. Benglis developed the brain matter-like forms of her metal and polyurethane half-spheres after combining elements from her work with knotted metal in the 1970s and glass in the 1980s. After discovering she could make knots of glass with her hands using technology, she gained a greater understanding of the material’s properties and began casting concave and convex forms. D’Arrest

(2009) is mesmerizing, due in part to its relationship to light. The pigmented polyurethane seems to absorb light while reflecting it, causing it to act like a proprioceptor. The form appears to change as its jelly-like squiggles catch the light from various angles.

On Tenth Avenue, my viewing experience was altered still. The exhibition continued to use bold colors and elevated platforms, but the limitations of the physical space were brought into view more sharply. The snaking riser connecting the two viewing spaces here felt especially distracting, which encouraged me to step down and freely traipse around through the hay. As I examined Do Ho Suh’s stove from the Specimens series, I was reminded of the relationship between belonging and assimilation. In the series, the artist explores his own relationship to cultural displacement and belonging by making scale replicas of items from his New York apartment using only polyester fitted over wire armatures. The translucent material reveals while it conceals, showing some of the internal structure of the object yet protecting the vulnerable insides.

Much of our visual viewing experience is guided by subtle contextual clues: the height of the walls, the lighting, the props on which art objects reside, etc. What other stories do cultural objects reveal through the environment in which they are presented? How can altering the visual context of an artwork allow us to see it fully? The ideas presented in “Bloodflames” and its modern-day re-imagining emphasize the possibilities in disrupting how we relate to art through the physical space where it is presented. Bui fiddles with some of the contemporary conventions of exhibition design by swapping out sterile white walls and employing our other five senses in the viewing experience. It is a welcomed disturbance. Though Kasmin’s gallery spaces will return to their familiar spotless white and polished concrete in a few weeks, “Bloodflames Revisited” serves as a reminder that the relationship between viewer and art object can — and should be — personal and visceral.