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At the Met, Baby Boomers Leap Onstage

by Holland Cotter
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Apart from a few years in the 1960s when the New York culture czar Henry Geldzahler tossed some stardust around, the Metropolitan Museum was a fusty backwater for contemporary art, and an object of scorn in the art world. New work seemed to arrive only in bland job-lot batches. Exhibitions kept being awarded to angsty British painters who had peaked before World War II.

A few years ago things began to sharpen up. Modest but on-the-ball displays of recent photography quietly appeared, and, for the first time, video. Damien Hirst's silly shark arrived. Kara Walker was invited in as a guest curator. And now with "The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984," the museum has finally made a big leap into the present, or near-present. A decades-long snooze may be over.

The show is a winner. It tackles a subject – an innovative and influential body of art produced between two major American economic booms – that has been begging for museum attention. It does so at a time when the work in question has particular pertinence to what's being made today. And it gives the subject something like classic old master treatment (decent space, big catalog) at probably a fraction of old master cost.

As for the art itself – painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, video, installation, prints and books by 30 artists, most of them still active and caught young here – it looks terrific. Some of it has become famous. But a lot of it hasn't been seen since it was made in the post-Vietnam 1970s.

The word "generation" in the title is a bit tricky. The artists included here represent only one aspect of art being made at the time, though they are presented as if they were the whole story. No larger context for their work is suggested, though they shared a set of social and political experiences.

They were born in the mid-1940s to early '50s, in a prosperous but paranoia-prone cold war era. They were the first kids to be raised with television, fast food and disposable everything. As teenagers they were soaked in Pop Art, rock and rebel politics. As art students, even in traditionalist programs, they felt the effects of Conceptualism. Ideas replaced objects and images. Painting was pushed to the side. The movement questioned what art was for and redefined what could be art.

John Baldessari, who taught at the California Institute of the Arts near Los Angeles, was one of Conceptualism's more unorthodox gurus. Once art had been emptied of visual matter, he wanted to fill it back up with images, specifically with images lifted from the mass media.

Where art was once assumed to reflect and even shape culture, the mass media – television, film, advertising – was overwhelming and shaping art. For Mr. Baldessari that was a phenomenon worthy of critical investigation, and some of his students – like Jack Goldstein, Barbara Bloom, Matt Mullican, David Salle and James Welling, all big presences in the Met show – agreed.

Similar ideas were being explored by artists elsewhere: by Charles Clough, Nancy Dwyer, Robert Longo and Cindy Sherman in Buffalo; by Paul McMahon in Boston; and by Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, Richard Prince and Laurie Simmons in New York City.

They were all making art that combined elements of Pop and Conceptualism with social concerns about consumerism, political power and gender. Their work kept ideas to the fore but rematerialized them as images. Many of those images were photographic, extracted from everyday life, a life that was increasingly a creation of media culture, as Andy Warhol well knew.

Reductive accounts of the period pinpoint these trends as coalescing in a 1977 group exhibition called “Pictures” at Artist’s Space in SoHo, an event that has also come to define a “generation.” In reality, this was a smallish affair, mostly of brand-new work, with only five artists – Mr. Goldstein, Ms. Levine and Mr. Longo, along with Troy Brauntuch and Philip Smith – with work by Ms. Sherman installed elsewhere in the gallery. The show’s real influence probably derived from a related essay written by its curator, Douglas Crimp.

A few original “Pictures” pieces are in the Met exhibition, which has been organized by Douglas Eklund, an associate curator in the Met’s photography department. They give evidence of certain highly individual styles and signature images almost at full development.

A small sculptural relief by Mr. Longo of a nattily dressed man bending backward as if struck, was modeled on the figure of a gangster shot to death in a Rainer Fassbinder film. In true mediated fashion Mr. Longo took the image from a newspaper reproduction of a film still, and it anticipates his monumental 1981 drawings of similar figures, three of which are hanging in the Met’s Great Hall.

Mr. Brauntuch, now well known for working with archival fascist imagery, had a dim, dark photographic image of Hitler stamped onto a one-color ground like a spot of acid eating into a modernist abstraction.

And we also see Ms. Sherman, already creating the sort of fictional self-portraits, inspired by movies and girlie magazines, that would lead to her renowned “Untitled Film Stills.” Her debt to early feminist art is profound, but her combination of staged self-debasement, cool wit and formal control is her own.

Mr. Smith, a painter, dropped out of the generational story early – he is barely mentioned in the catalog and there is none of his work in this Met show – but Mr. Goldstein, who was born in 1945 and died, a suicide, in 2003, is one of its most versatile figures. By 1977 he had explored performance and sound art, and made a series of short films illustrating the manipulative mechanics of commercial movies. Some of those are here at the Met as well as one he finished a year later called “The Jump,” in which generic figures sparkling with lights dive and float through darkness like moving constellations. The work has the charm of cartoon animation – a kid would love it – and the weight of an open metaphor.

What’s most striking about the Met show, though, is the stylistic diversity of the work, even by artists you think you know. Mr. Salle, familiar as a painter, is seen here as an installation artist. Mr. Mullican, the creator of large-scale prints, is represented by a little collage made up of dead figures cut from action comics.

Playing with advertising is common: in Ms. Bloom’s ersatz travel posters; in rock band concert posters designed by Michael Zwack; in Mr. Welling’s collages of Marlboro ads and Mr. Prince’s later ones.

There’s lots of music, heard and unheard. Artist bands were constantly forming and breaking up in the 1970s and ’80s. Mr. Longo’s charcoal figures, leaping spasmodically in their chic black suits, could easily be downtown club dancers.

The television is always on, of course, with Dara Birnbaum’s “Wonder Woman” video running on one channel, Ericka Beckman’s mordant Super-8 childhood skits on another and Mr. Smith’s infantile dramas on a third. Bad news periodically intrudes, as in Thomas Lawson’s painting of a battered child or Sarah Charlesworth’s blurry photograph of plunge-to-the-street suicide. But even without it, escapist possibilities seem bleak in Ms. Simmons’s photographs of claustrophobic Father-Knows-Best dollhouse interiors.

The view these artists took of American culture, a mix of cynicism, anxiety and nostalgia, is second nature now. You find it almost everywhere you turn in “The Generational: Younger Than Jesus” at the New Museum, an up-to-the-minute, internationalized echo of “The Pictures Generation.” Its artists are as young as the “Pictures” artists were then. They do with digital images from the Internet what their older colleagues once did with images cut from magazines. The generational parallels are so many as to be worrisome.

Has new art come no further than this? Is it still tilling fields all but farmed out in the past?

That these two shows are available for comparison is a stroke of luck. And that the Met, so long out of the contemporary loop, produced one of them is particularly good news. The museum should involve itself more fully with new art in the years to come, but involvement doesn't necessarily mean flashing hot new names. It means doing what the Met has always done best with older art: producing exhibitions based on deep, detailed history.

"The Pictures Generation" can, with some adjustments, stand as the working model. The Met should keep doing exactly what it did here: get a contemporary subject that needs attention (I can think of dozens), get to it first, and get it right.