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Still Crazy, But That Was The Concept

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y.—Art between the 1960s and the end of the 1990s was out of its mind. That’s what was exciting about it. Painting and sculpture held their ground, while all this other stuff swarmed in: bare bodies, disembodied ideas, flickery little films, weird sounds, angry words, dances on fire escapes, bulldozers in the desert. At various points, manically, everything was happening at once.

Since no one knew what to make of it all, it was, and is, left to museums to tell the story. Most of the big ones tackle the job in a certain way. They go into chaos-control mode, sorting art into movements, periods and stars. The history that results is tidy; it is also tranquilized and in some ways untrue.

By contrast certain smaller institutions, like the new Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College here, don’t seem to feel compelled to make artificial sense of the past or of the present. Enscorched in an academic setting, based on an ethos of experimentation and free of charge to visitors, they can let art stay crazy and exciting, which is what the Hessel does.

Physically, the museum is a 10-gallery expansion of the existing Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard. The original building, designed by Goetsch Partners, looked like a bunker. Now it looks like a bigger bunker. The center itself was founded more than a decade ago in large part with money from Marieluise Hessel, who put her contemporary art collection at its disposal as a student resource. She also provided $8 million toward the new museum, and with the opening of its inaugural

Wrestle

“Untitled” (North), with 15-watt bulbs, by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, at the Hessel Museum of Art in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.

show, titled “Wrestle,” on Sunday, at least part of her collection will always be on view.

Its range is wide but patchy. Ms. Hessel started buying in Europe in the 1960s, and her tastes and interests have skipped around. She went through a Pop painting phase, an Arte Povera phase, a Pattern and Decoration phase. She clearly found work related to identity and gender politics of the 1980s and ’90s particularly gripping. Consequently the collection has a fairly high percentage of art by

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women, and of work related, however obliquely, to AIDS. Yet everyone of course will have a list of artists who “should” be there and aren’t.

Holland Cotter

ART REVIEW

"Wrestle" opens on Sunday and continues through May 27 at the Hessell Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.; (845) 758-7398.

Not looking to analyze or categorize hectic, exciting images from the 1960s on.

in a ghostly recent werewolf drawing by Rosemarie Trockel, a German artist whose Michael Hessel has, precociously, collected in depth. And ghostly is the right word for the work of another favored artist, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, whose "United (North)" (1993), a cascade of white lights dedicated to a friend dead of AIDS, is installed in one of the larger of the new galleries, along with a beautiful Sol LeWitt wall painting.

They make a calm center point for the exhibition, which pursues its unhinged progress around them: in 1972 performance photographs by Valie Export (she huddles like a refugee in a stairwell and lies stretched out against a curb on the street); a balletic video about love and bondage by Isaac Julien; and an extraordinary Sigmar Polke painting of cartoon silk-screened on swatches of cheap, pigment-swiped patterned cloths. (Two additional Polkes hang in the Center for Curatorial Studies galleries across the lobby, where "Wrestle" continues.)

By the time you’ve circled around to the last two galleries in the new museum, one with a video of a naked, masked punch-drunk Mr. McCarthey beating himself to a pulp, the other with a photo-and-text piece by Cindy Noland about the hard-drinking, truth-telling Watergate sibyl Martha Mitchell, you’re likely to have a soaked-in sense of the contemporary art’s potential for disorientation. This is not an experience provided by big museums of late, with two exceptions. The Whitney’s recent permanent collection show, "Full House," had its moments. So did an unusually stimulating reinstallation of the Museum of Modern Art’s contemporary galleries by Klaus Biesenbach and Roxana Marcoci last year.

Like that reinstallation, the Hessell show, accompanied by an excellent book of writings by women, edited by Rhea Anastas and Michael Brenson, focuses on art as a rupturing rather than an enrapting phenomenon. Messy, unmanfully, irritated, compulsively posing questions. Isn’t that the business of art and its institutions? It was, though at the moment the market is making decisions that museums once made, and most new art is about as crazy and unpredictable as a pocket calculator. No wonder "Wrestle" feels like an adventure. I assume Bard will make every effort to sustain it.