

Miami's Bass Museum Blows the Lid Off Tradition With "Endless Renaissance" Show



Courtesy the Artist

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, "Two Planets: Manet's Luncheon on the Grass and the Thai Villagers," 2012

by Scott Indrisek

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Billed as six solo shows under a common umbrella, "Endless Renaissance" opens at the **Bass Museum** in Miami today and is on view through March 17. While it's difficult to tease out the explicit thematic links that draw the work together (from **Hans-Peter Feldmann's** puckish interventions to **Walead Beshty's** smashed-glass FedEx experiments) one common theme is a willful, almost gleeful irreverence — toward art history, tradition, and religion.

Visitors first encounter Feldmann's contribution, a series of carpeted rooms in which the artist displays paintings and a few sculptures. The walls and ceiling have been painted a vibrant-but-tacky royal blue. A number of the pieces are appropriated paintings by unknown or semi-anonymous artists

— one canvas of a full frontal female nude is signed ‘J. Larry’ — that Feldmann has made minor adjustments to. Most of the nudes are augmented with black censorship rectangles, which are placed over the eyes rather than the naughty bits. Another naked woman, sprawled on a couch, has been given tan lines. In the largest room, a picture of Lenin has been tweaked slightly, the eyes now crossed; a number of other portraits get the same treatment, dignity transformed into idiocy via this simple gesture. All of this is pretty accessible and entertaining, if not shocking. Feldmann seems compelled by the same anarchic spirit that leads someone to Sharpie a dick on a subway advertisement, and who’s to say that a finely rendered subway-advertisement dick can’t be art, too? Some of the other works are a bit quieter, less plainly jokes: A doll-sized foot, painted in flesh-tone and severed at the ankle, displayed in a glass cube on a plinth; a series of three borrowed paintings (Country maid with a bucket, death of Marat, still life of plums) hung against a red square painted on the wall.

The main downstairs space of the Bass is taken up by photographs and a series of videos by **Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook**. These works depict groups of ordinary Thai people — identified as villagers or farmers — viewing and discussing famous works of art by **Millet, Manet, Renoir, and Van Gogh**. In the videos we see the group from behind, seated outside as if in a makeshift classroom as they dissect the paintings without pretense. If Feldmann’s works are about keeping the context of contemporary art-viewing the same, but changing the art itself to provoke effect, then these pieces ponder what happens when the art is removed from its surroundings and digested without the trappings of high culture.

To reach the remaining four artists’ projects one has to walk up a ramp past works from the Bass’s collection of 15th-, 16th-, and 17th-century paintings (by the likes of **Botticelli, Ghirlandaio**, and the studio of **El Greco**) depicting Christ and the Virgin Mary. These set the scene for what’s to come, starting with a roomful of **Barry X Ball** sculptures which mine the art historical canon in a decidedly modern way. The most striking work is of a pair of two-sided, screaming heads — Ball on one side, his peer **Matthew Barney** on the other — with large spikes driven through their skulls. Ball takes after **Fiona Apple** in the sheer wonderful bloatedness of his titles, which are more like obsessive and poetic catalogues of each work’s material and intent; the title of the Ball/Barney piece includes the lovely phrase “with mannered, attenuated, crown-like cranium-top shatter-burst exit wounds.” Most

of the sculptures here are busts of some sort, rendered in a variety of materials — Pakistani and Mexican Onyx, for instance — with awesomely complex and gnarled surface topographies. One head, “vertically distended by a factor of 2,” according to its title, recalls the optical illusion distortion of **Evan Penny** (Ball’s gallery mate at **Sperone Westwater** in New York) or **Robert Lazzarini**.

Walead Beshty’s work in “Endless Renaissance” is of several types. There are six huge panel ‘paintings,’ dubbed “Soft Pictures,” composed of malleable, white petroleum wax, and a series of “copper surrogates,” rectangles of metal climbing the wall like a Judd stack. In the center of the room are two glass sculptures, purposefully allowed to fracture and break while being FedEx’ed. (Surely others have pointed out the resemblance to a **Larry Bell** piece that’s been dropped on the floor by a butter-fingered art handler.) Beshty has also created a wonderful wall mural, seemingly made by applying layers of latex paint and then sanding, scratching, and buffing parts of the surface down. The artist shares with Barry X Ball a love of material and art history, but here the materials are more rudimentary and readymade, the art history more to do with the legacy of Minimalism than classical sculpture.

Ged Quinn’s room of paintings reads like a punk retort to the aforementioned religious works from the Bass’s collection, and also connects nicely to Feldmann’s appropriated canvases. Many of these pieces look like traditional woodland or nature scenes that have been vandalized with modern imagery and Surrealist symbolism: hippy runes carved into tree trunks, heads floating in space. But clearly it’s what we might call the Kitten Christ painting that will draw the most attention and nervous laughter here. Entitled “Father Don’t You See I Am Burning?”, this small canvas features a feline bearing a cat-sized cross, wearing a crown of thorns and bearing stigmata on his paws. The painting is funny, of course, but it goes beyond a simple pun. What makes a cat-martyr any more ridiculous than the Son of God? (And have you seen some of those earnest Christian paintings, the ones where Jesus’ wounds spurt blood into a fountain that’s then tapped by thirsty cherubs like a 7-11 Slurpie?) Quinn’s four-legged deity perhaps deserves the same reverence as any straight-faced Christian painting: He meowed for our sins.

The same uneasy treatment of religion carries through into the final project by **Eija-Liisa Ahtila**. In this excellent three-channel video, the artist prepares to re-enact the moment in which an angel appears to the Virgin Mary and tells her that she’ll soon be miraculously bearing the Christ child. Mary is played by an eerily-pretty woman with dreadlocks. The angel’s role is taken by a slightly frumpy middle-aged woman wearing enormous wings of black feathers. A third woman herself coaches the actors in how they might run the scene. Mary, she says, could react in one of three ways, based on depictions from paintings: friendly, frightened, or humble. The crew goes to borrow a donkey; the angel is trussed up in a harness and taught how to fly, suspended from wires. After these

rehearsals, they shoot the scene, which we see with professionally cinematic clarity. The angel flies through a window to deliver her unexpected prophecy; dreadlocked Mary cowers slightly; the set darkens.

“Endless Renaissance” is a complex exhibition that takes its share of risks. While the six distinct projects hold together a bit tenuously at times, they all are concerned with art’s ability to question the status quo, upend expectations, and turn history inside out. And the occasional disrespect — of tradition, or the canon, or faith — should prove refreshing to those with open minds.

