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THE TURN OF THE SCREW BY BENJAMIN BRITTEN

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At the Bass on Miami Beach, the Renaissance lives on

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"The Endless Renaissance" runs through March 17 at the Bass Museum of Art, 2100 Collins Ave., Miami Beach; www.bassmuseum.org. Open noon-5 p.m. Wednesday-Sunday. Tickets \$8 adults, \$6 seniors and students with I.D. Free for members and children under 6.

BY ANNE TSCHIDA
SPECIAL TO THE MIAMI HERALD

The Endless Renaissance, now at the Bass Museum, is an ambitious exhibit. It combines masterpieces from the permanent collection with contemporary video, sculpture and painting from six international artists, who incorporate ideas, concepts or imagery first forged in the Renaissance into their 21st century creations. This means there are some direct references, such as religious iconography in the work, and more highly conceptual and abstract connections that still attempt to thread a history of art throughout.

The most fascinating and enjoyable pieces in the exhibit are on the first floor, from Thailand's Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook. They include large photographs and a delightful video, where the artist plays with co-mingling Western art and Eastern culture. She took paintings so well-known to a Western audience, such as a Rembrandt and a Van Gogh, and put large prints of them in front of Thai villagers, both men and women. The juxtaposition posed within the photos is simply beautiful. In one we see only the backs of the farmers, sitting on the ground in a lush green bamboo forest, staring at Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* encased in a baroque frame.

Grass encased in a baroque frame.

She has rightly named the work *Two Planets*. It's incongruous to see this painting positioned in the open in tropical Southeast Asia — not how most Westerners view our classic art, usually in museums. What are these villagers to make of the French Impressionist's depiction of fully dressed men and a naked woman? The settings are both pastoral — but worlds apart.

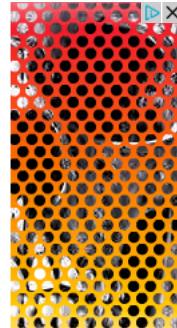
We get to hear what the villagers have to say in the darkened video room. While looking at a Van Gogh, they question and exclaim things such as "their ox carts look different from ours." Or, "what, no bamboo. How do they do it?" "Is that a beard, is that a man?" And then they try to figure out how the French farmers are "thrashing the rice" when they are hauling hay. In this case, the 19th century farmer in Europe and in today's Thailand do not appear too distant from each other; they would have similar concerns, and humorous observations, about everyday rural life.

On the ramp leading to the second floor we are fed examples of the real deal from over the last 500 years. From the Bass collection, there are paintings from the Flemish, Austrian and Florentine schools, each with their own tell-tale marks and coloring. Hanging here are a Rubens, El Greco, a Botticelli, and a huge tapestry covering one wall, from the 1500s. Most of these paintings depict scenes from the Christian Bible, with the ubiquitous inclusion of the Virgin Mary and various saints.

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That easy familiarity with famous works dissipates as you walk onto the second floor. Barry X Ball's portrait busts draw directly from a Renaissance heritage, but these are disturbing sculptures, ones not likely found in a Tuscan villa. The California native uses an amazing array of materials to make these busts, which can seem to be in frightening pain as they sit on their pedestals or hang from the ceiling. Crafted from unusual stone and steel, they appear to be melting or disintegrating.

Some of the portraits are based on famous sculptures that you'll recognize; others are based on contemporary art-world figures such as Matthew Barney. There are some very lovely moments in Ball's room too: The first duel grouping of busts that hang from the ceiling as you enter the room throws off incredible shadows. A shiny black figure of Belgian black marble reclines in the corner, looking so sensuous to the touch. The figure has breasts and a penis, and is called *The Sleeping Hermaphrodite*.

Figurative form altogether disappears in the next space, and so too does the clear connection to a Renaissance art history. But London-born Walead Beshty's abstract, conceptually complex pieces are a highlight. There is a lot about process here. For instance, his copper panel sculptures are installed without gloves, leaving smudge marks all over them. The white "paintings" have a similar quality and look dirty from a distance, but the more you study them, the more interesting they become. His FedEx boxes also record a process, a journey, that has not changed much since the time of Michelangelo: artwork has always been shipped, bought, resold, ending up in a time and a place far removed from its origin.

Han-Peter Feldman and Ged Quinn's paintings are a complete departure that can be difficult to digest. Liverpool native Quinn's surreal allegorical paintings are in vogue across Europe. Scenes set in Romantic-era forests might include a bubble house, historical figures, a bleeding martyr or a crucified cat. The link to art history is overt here, intentionally over-the-top, but they aren't to everyone's taste.

You'll need to take some time to figure out all that is going on in three large video screens that make up *The Annunciation*, from Finland's Eija-Liisa Ahtila. Like the video on the ground floor, this is special for its simplicity of its everyday "characters." Of course, the annunciation is one of the most depicted scenes in art since the dawn of Christianity, the gospel of how the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that her child will be the son of God. Here on screen it is reenacted in a studio by some friends (not actors). They too look at classic paintings and discuss them — how much did the angel really scare Mary? — along with talk of why donkeys are wandering around Finland ("don't they belong in warm countries?" one asks).

The Bass came up with a nice mix of styles and forms for this exhibit, from some important artists on the world stage today. It might be hard for the viewer to keep up with the *Endless Renaissance* thread; each room feels like its own show, and, in fact, they are described as six solo projects. That's OK. In fact, when exhibits try and force a theme, lead an audience down one path, it often doesn't work. These speak for themselves, individually, and out of the broad scope of the artists' work, you can take away what you want.

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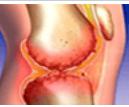
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