

The Pleasure Posture

It seems to me that in over a century of modernism—from its nervy beginnings in the avant-garde to its pale surrender to the forces of what we call postmodernism—certain aspects of private life and domestic pleasure were lost to us. Works by early European modernists, enthralled by a search for the true self, and late American modernists, bound by their fascination with a material self, all wound up in big white rooms with gray floors and track lighting. Once institutionalized by museums, it seems ideology gave way to style.

Ironically, those artists meant their pictures to invest private space with enormous presence. Since the museums' response was to build bigger galleries in order to maintain a suitable proportion of institution to image, modern pictures were robbed of their physicality. High-minded, well-heeled collectors obligingly altered their residences to resemble galleries, leaving modernism unsullied by evidence of private life. When Ikea began marketing institutional modernism to the apartment set, it was clear that the most mechanistic and mass-produced aspects of ideology had come to dominate a middle class lifestyle with barely a nod to their fine art origins.

Modernism, of course, was initially advanced by artists attempting to cast off the excessive trappings of bourgeois life. But one of the universe's more common lessons is that we become what we hate and so modernism inevitably became the bourgeois lifestyle it had once sought to subvert. In an attempt to purify the bathwater, they had managed to throw out the baby. So much was cast aside as unnecessary artifact of the unwanted past that an artist of such gifts as Matisse was underestimated by a generation of curators for being too concerned with *luxe, calme et volupté*.

For much of this century, it has been somewhat suspect for artists to participate in an ambiance of comfort. References to domestic pleasure and private life were associated with the home, which among other problematic attributes, was the only place where, since the French revolution, women held any measure of power. Should an artist be found rummaging around in the realm of pure visual pleasure—flowers, interior scenes, ornamentation—his work would be relegated to the "feminine." Yet, weren't women as eager to streamline their domestic responsibilities and to be as modern as men? Well, why not? As the power of style shifted to the potent modernist juggernaut, who would want to stand in its way? In the last fifteen years, consequently, the personal and the pleasurable have come to be reconsidered as potent sources for individual artists of both sexes. I have noticed it in the work of artists as disparate as Richard Prince, Judy Fiskin, and Lari Pittman.

This opposition of institutionalized modernism to the subversive nature of private pleasure is clearly addressed in Prince's *First House* (1993), an alternative exhibition which the artist staged in West Hollywood just before his retrospective last spring at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. With a focused selection of his work in a small house, Prince privatized the public



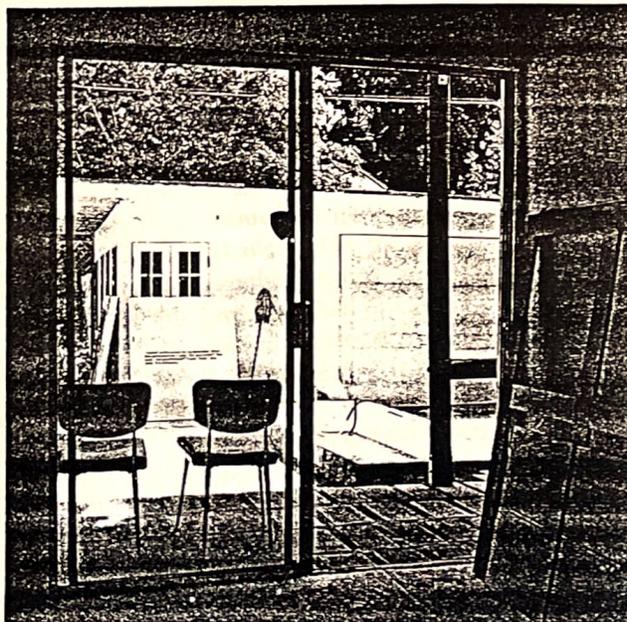
Modernism was initially advanced by artists attempting to cast off the excessive trappings of bourgeois life. But one of the universe's more common lessons is that we become what we hate and so modernism inevitably became the bourgeois lifestyle it had once sought to subvert.



nature of his retrospective. "The public" is filtered through his art to reemerge as "the private." Through rephotography, for example, Prince characteristically takes images from advertising and other mass media and presents them as his own. The walls of the rundown bungalow were stripped to plaster and wall-board: the floors were either glossy wood or covered with paint-splattered dropcloths, an homage to abstract painting and modernism. Appearing like a home in the traumatic process of being converted into a gallery, Prince's paintings were hung formally in the living room but stacked casually against a wall in the kitchen, along with the silkscreens used to produce them. These mostly chalky canvases were lettered in black with the texts of borscht belt jokes, or New Yorker cartoons dripping with gestural sweeps of paint.

Domestic dysfunction is the source of most of the humor in these works, and private psychological problems such as infidelity, sexual identity, loneliness, alcoholism, despair, and agnosticism are recontextualized by Prince in the style of monochrome painting at its most institutional. The jokes date from the nineteen fifties and early sixties, the heyday of late academic modernism; both jokes and modernism are part of Prince's shadowy autobiography. The artist installed works making references to personal history and sexuality—where else?—in the closet. On a storage shelf, Prince arranged a selection of works from his own collection, including an early double self-portrait taken with his partner of that time, Cindy Sherman (the androgynous duo both wearing wigs and lipstick, and dressed in men's suits), and a print by Sue Williams which includes what has become the Prince logo, the Playboy Bunny death's head. Much of Prince's art questions gender-assigned roles, and this house did so explicitly by bringing evidence of the historically male-dominated studio into the traditionally female-dominated arena of the home.

*For much of this century,
it has been somewhat suspect for
artists to participate in an
ambiance of comfort.*



Judy Fiskin
from the 1988 series, *Portraits of Furniture*
Courtesy AsherFauré

Richard Prince
First House, 1993
Installation view
Photo: Susan Einstein
Courtesy Regen Projects

Plenty of artists now adopt the pleasure posture as a strategy of survival, a means of silencing the critical parental voice of the modern.



Modernism at its most institutional privileges the “masculine” attributes of heroic endeavor. Domesticity at its most traditional privileges the “feminine” attributes of pleasure and privacy. These last two came to be undervalued during the twentieth century as the status of masculine identity was challenged by the advances of women in society. In the late nineteenth century, symbolists, impressionists, and post-impressionists, mostly men, regularly represented their private life. Any painting of a salon interior was full of changeable moods, states of love and loss, bliss and boredom, all chronicled with minute and subtle care. In less than a generation, such activity was met with disdain and dismissal.

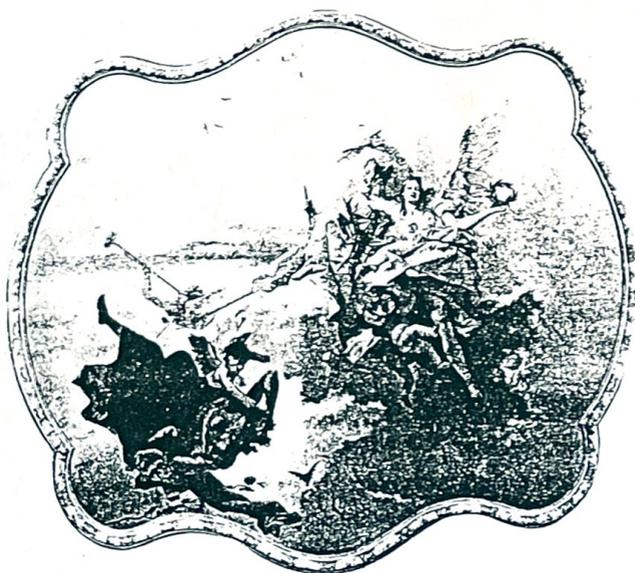
In our time, Judy Fiskin finds it appropriate to photograph a Victorian room recreated in a museum—a feminine domestic space captured in a masculinized and institutional one. Diminutive in scale, and in black and white, she presents a proper salon of comfortable chairs and overstuffed sofas, wallpaper and *objets d'art*. This appears as the premodernist domain of some prosperous matron and her family. It represents the taste of a woman, and is evidence of the power most common to women of that era—that of influence. Fiskin ascertains that the institutional context of the room now disguises the origins and motives behind the creation of the furniture and paintings in it. By pho-

tographing the scene, she literally takes it, and reintroduces to it the destabilized notion of private pleasure into it, which is fluid and unstable when compared to the public order of the institution. Fiskin would seem to document the argument that contemporary art attracts styles and contents that were marginalized during the exclusive reign of modernism.

Plenty of artists now adopt the pleasure posture as a strategy of survival, a means of silencing the critical parental voice of the modern. For example, the tension between the seductions of private pleasure and the demands of public duty is elaborately written into the feminized language of decoration and ornament in the work of Lari Pittman. He is a Tiepolo for our times, spelling out his concerns and desires as literally as that eighteenth-century painter. Only the *putti* have been replaced by pilgrim boots. In Pittman's hands, style is political. His lavish vocabulary spells out questions of morality and responsibility—issues that were once the mandate of modernism. In a series titled *A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation* (1992), weeping willow trees and nude bodies wrap around one another in a baroque space that supports signs: S.O.S. (Save Our Souls); 2 Live, 2 Love, 2 Work; E.Y. (Fuck You). It cries out the importance of pleasure in the face of fragile mortality. In private, subversion takes place; the politics of the bedroom is the consciousness with which each of us must sleep. The furbelows and embellishments of Pittman's picture of a fantastic lost city remind us: *How sweet the day, after this and that, Deep Sleep truly welcomed.*

And sleep we must, so let us pull up the eiderdown and snuggle into pillows, ready for our private pleasures, our secular salvation dreaming of Tiepolo's palace of clouds, where brave and virtuous deities offer the solace of comfort. For Pittman, like Fiskin, Prince, and their strange bedfellows, the pleasure posture remains the best revenge.

Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is Chair of the Department of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Otis College of Art and Design, and a contributing editor to *Art issues*.



Lari Pittman
Untitled #2 (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation), 1992
Acrylic and enamel on mahogany panel
82" x 66"
Photo: Douglas M. Parker
Courtesy Rosamund Felsen Gallery

Giovanni Battista Tiepolo
The Triumph of Virtue and Nobility over Ignorance,
c. 1740-50
Oil on canvas
126" x 154 1/2"
Courtesy The Norton Simon Foundation