

# KANTOR / FEUER GALLERY

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## The Undead of Art History

**A melancholic world of old soldiers, grande dames, torpid dandies, and tormented souls.**

by Jerry Saltz

October 11th, 2006 6:30 PM

For her uneven but tantalizing New York solo debut, 29-year-old, Russian-born Dasha Shishkin has boldly painted all the walls of this warren-like gallery fire-engine red. Interspersed and seamlessly blended into this retinal onslaught are eight reddish drawings on Mylar. It's hard to make out where the walls end and the drawings begin. Everything blends together; it's optical overload, vertigo, a cognitive nervous breakdown.

As enticing as Shishkin's drawings are, they can also look a bit academic and illustrative. What saves her is her dauntless confident touch and her deeply freakish imagination. For this show, cryptically and belligerently titled "W.A.M. Who Gives a Damn if You Procreate," Shishkin depicts humanoids who lounge in ritual circles, feast on desserts, and give birth to monsters. Some of these characters resemble the tortured bodies from Grünewald's 16th-century Isenheim Altarpiece; others are so penetratingly odd that they're straight out of Dickens, the Brothers Grimm, and Kafka.

In *Moisturize, Moisturize, Moisturize*, Shishkin portrays six small open caskets, each with a yellow infant; old women reach for or play with the babies. In *Potatoes*, nude women recline in open coffins or model for one another; it's a lesbian wake from a turn-of-the-century department store by way of the aimless characters from the 1961 new wave film *Last Year at Marienbad*. These orgies of lassitude turn feral and cannibalistic in *Human Flesh Is Sweet to Taste*, a drawing of a bloated legless dog suckling five plump pups as female lovers wrestle with or try to devour each other. Shishkin's work is a riot of styles and artists: Bacon, Brueghel, Bonnard, Lautrec, and Henry Darger meet Japonisme, the decorative painter Ludwig Bemelmans, and various demented children's-book illustrators.

Shishkin's is a melancholic world of exiles, outsiders, old soldiers, grande dames, torpid dandies, and tormented souls. She gives us a sort of penal colony populated by zombies from history, literature, and fantasy. This is an empire in rot.

In addition to the already mentioned influences, Shishkin's exhibition is haunted by a particular variety of art-historical ghost. These wraiths and shades of styles-gone-by provide an intriguing key not only to her art but for why a certain period of modernism has evoked such a pull on succeeding generations.



**Dasha Shishkin's *Potatoes*, 2006**

photo: Dasha Shishkin/Courtesy of the Grimm Rosenfeld Gallery

**Dasha Shishkin: W.A.M. Who Gives a Damn If You Procreate**  
Grimm/Rosenfeld  
530 West 25th Street  
Through October 28

As with the expressionists, Shishkin portrays a cathartic limbo where narrative, beauty, humanity, and nature turn animalistic. Like her antecedents, Shishkin's style is at once decorative and a mess; her colors, garish and brash.

The expressionists occupy this no-man's-land of art history because all of them worked at the exact same moment that Picasso, Braque, and the rest were inventing cubism in France, and numerous others—from Dalí and Duchamp to Mondrian and Malevich—were formulating surrealism, Dada, De Stijl, and constructivism. These movements are the jewels in the crown of modernism.

Expressionism is all about innerness, essences, fever dreams, and angst. Instead of the rules and ideology of cubism, constructivism, et al., expressionism has attitude. That attitude, however, is what may make it continually appealing to young artists. Expressionism is a free-floating rebel—an ism with nothing left to lose. This often makes for god-awful, derivative art. Almost every BFA student passes through an interminable expressionist phase (some never come out of it). The ersatz expressionistic paintings and sculptures in my childhood suburban synagogue were among the ugliest works of art I have ever seen. To this day, expressionism is responsible for much of the bad art that you see in street art fairs.

As appalling as expressionism can be, however, it is also frequently a powerful door opener; it's better than spending a lifetime as a self-satisfied 100th-generation School of Paris painter. The "return to painting" in the 1980s was led by neo-expressionism. At the end of the decade expressionism was instrumental for a true imp of the perverse, the American princess of the bittersweet kingdom bordered by fiction, fashion, photography, history, and sheer weirdness, Karen Kilimnik (whose current show at 303 Gallery is sadly unfocused). These days young artists like Kai Althoff, John Bock, Terence Koh, and Dana Schutz are also using expressionistic modes to new effect.

All of these artists are far too controlled, rigorous, ironical, and self-conscious to be called expressionists. The same goes for Shishkin. Rather, she crawls inside the skin of history, investigates self-destructiveness and desire, dwells on what-might-have-been, and invents an ironic world of spectral phantoms, laughter, and suffering. Shishkin refigures a style unmoored from ideology. She serves as an irritant and a generator of chaos.

Saltz, Jerry. "The Undead of Art History." The Village Voice, 11 Oct 2006