

## TALES FROM THE CITY: New York

words JONATHAN T.D. NEIL

Let's make no mistake, 'mid-career' is a term of commerce, not of art. This is not meant to demean those responsible for its increasing usage. There is surely something worthy, and perhaps necessary, in identifying those artists whose talents aren't so much 'discovered' as they are 'recognised'. But when we talk about mid-career artists, we are inevitably talking business. "Christopher Wool is not considered a mid-career artist", one friend recently remarked to me, "because his paintings are not just beginning to sell." And by 'sell', he meant sell well.

It may not have begun with curator Katy Siegel's admirable *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975* (with the estimable painter David Reed acting as advisor), which ran at the National Academy Museum in New York this past spring, but it certainly gained serious momentum from it. Hailed as bringing to light the work of many artists, such as Roy Colmer, Mary Corse and Ree Morton, whose names have not been much heard in the intervening 40 years due to the historical dominance of pop, minimal and conceptual art discourses on the one hand, and the sensibility, drawn from militant theoretical circles, that painting had passed away for good sometime around 1965, *High Times, Hard Times* served at once as a demonstration of (art) history's cruelty and of its potential for redemption.

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But then Siegel's show also stepped into the coke-and-booze-fuelled bash that seemed to follow wherever was heard the name 'Dash Snow'. The artworld had to have its Paris Hilton, its jack-off artist. But all the blame cannot lie at the feet of one young and perhaps overly handled kid, or at Ariel Levy's stupefying depiction of him in the pages of *New York Magazine*. (Levy wasn't the first, after all: let us not forget about Nick Paumgarten's October 2005 profile of Leo Koenig

in *The New Yorker*, which would have one think that being drunk and young in Brooklyn provides the sufficient, if not the necessary, conditions for artworld success.)

The arrival of the mid-career artist into the marketplace must signal, then, a certain fatigue with this stunted culture of permanent adolescence which attended the rise of the 'emerging' artist. But it may also signal a renewed appreciation for those institutions that have evolved to parallel the (fantastical) trajectory of art student to MFA to group-and-then-solo-sold-out-show. Next to this we find the collegiate instructor, the not-for-profit arts organisation and exhibition space, the artist registry, the residency programme, the artist's grant programme. Such are the incubators of creative enterprises which do not lend themselves so readily to follow-the-money tastes.

Perhaps specifically within the US, and certainly in New York, many of these 'alternatives' have a tendency to be viewed as repositories of the marketplace's also-rans, which would be a pitiful sentiment were it not complete nonsense. The work of figures such as Miranda Maher, who has been active independently for more than 15 years, or Joan Waltemath, educator at Cooper Union and critic for *The Brooklyn Rail*, is rightfully gaining visibility in New York, and not least because of these artists' dedicated and intelligent efforts in such 'alternative' roles and venues. On the other side, Alexander Gray, of Alexander Gray Associates, appears poised to demonstrate that it is not that there has been no market for such mid-career artists' works, only a lack of dealers willing to bring them to market in the first place.

So as a new season takes flight this autumn, I will be keeping my ear attuned to talk of the mid-career artist (or, more ironically, the *emerging* mid-career artist). And I will continually remind myself, as I will others, that the distinction it seeks to carve out for those described as such is unconnected to the quality of their work, which, as always, must stand or fall on its own. We can take comfort, however, that it is something these artists already know, otherwise they would not have made it this far.