



"The Hand Submits to the Intellect" by Carlo Maria Mariani, 1983

SHOCK OF THE OLD

The new art—
remembrances
of things past

The Old Masters often "paraphrased" compositions and motifs from earlier art. Goya, for example, borrowed from Velázquez, and Manet took cues from both Raphael and Giorgione. But to the Modernists, the past was for academics, and only the new was of interest. Inevitably, the wheel has turned; artists associated with Post-Modernism are rifling the storehouses of art history, sometimes combining images or styles from cultures geographically and chronologically very distant from one another. No doubt mass reproduction, which makes the whole of world art simultaneously available everywhere, accounts for this mixing and mismatching of historical styles that critical jargon is calling "appropriation."

This year, the fourth Biennial of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art pays homage to contemporary artists who directly derive their inspiration from the past. Titled *Second Sight*, the exhibit focuses on a mixed bag of nineteen European and American painters and sculptors who have appropriated the past the way novelist Umberto Eco, in *The Name of the Rose*, used monastic life in the Middle Ages: as a point of departure for telling a story, using a myth or image to build a structure that reverberates with layers of accumulated meaning. Organized



Architecture as sculpture: Siah Armajani's "Closet Under Landing," 1985

by Graham Beal, SFMMA chief curator, *Second Sight* finally makes some sense of this retrospective tendency. That a contemporary museum curator has exercised some critical intelligence and imagination in concentrating on a theme that cuts through a wide cross-section of work is remarkable. Most curators today are content to pick up a load of stuff from their favorite dealer, or just arbitrarily grab one piece here, and another there, as they sightsee abroad.

If one could find a single common denominator in the works selected, it would probably be an ironic attitude toward the past as its ghosts haunt the present. The Russian émigré team of Komar and Melamid employ Stalinist Socialist Realism as a contemporary kitsch style, which has gained them much admiration in the West. Quite remarkable is the story of the ascendancy of post-war American art in Mark Tansey's "history" painting, "The Triumph of the New York School," which depicts the French Army surrendering to the United States in a composition based on Velázquez's "The Surrender at Breda." In Tansey's campy "The Key," a couple dressed for a formal art opening attempt to unlock "The Gates of Paradise"—Ghiberti's famed Renaissance bronze doors. In a similar vein, Roger Brown paints a narrative of Chicago art history in a bow to Giotto's Arena Chapel frescoes in Padua. In Brown's case, however, the classical temple is made out of nasty modern garbage cans.

Pat Steir, Michelle Stuart, and Siah Armajani (surely one of the most gifted sculptors in America) make use of historical imagery without irony. Steir's new watery paintings, based on Hokusai's prints, Leonardo's deluge drawings, and

Courbet's waterfalls, are not going to win any prizes for originality. But they are well done and show a great commitment to the long tradition of painting.

In much, if not most, of the work in *Second Sight*, there is a dream-like quality that we associate with Surrealism, which also had a heavily academic sense of style. Now, years later, it is suddenly very modish again to overload art with literary content. Sometimes the storytelling element is too heavy, and obscures the formal or visual component of the work. At other times—most notably in Armajani's curious architectural sculpture—enough mystery is left to permit the visual qualities to predominate.

Most of these artists create a sense of fragmentation and dislocation, as if they were deliberately illustrating Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. There is, however, a lot of talent here, and the statement is an effective one—that the debased media images of our mass society are disturbingly insubstantial in contrast to the grandeur of the classical past. —BARBARA ROSE



The scale of a history painting, the look of a news photo—"The Key" by Mark Tansey, 1984