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A Closer Look at the Tenure of
PHILIPPE DE MONTEBELLO
at the Metropolitan



by Miles Mathis

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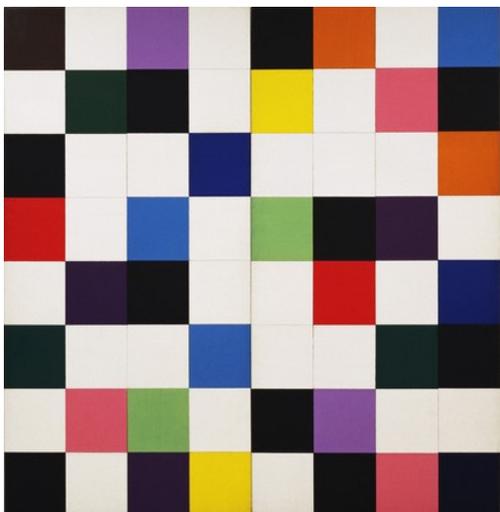
Philippe de Montebello was the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art from 1977 to 2008. In the recent Robert Hughes film *the Mona Lisa Curse*, he is presented by Hughes as an exception to the Krens, Hoving rule of directors of major museums. That is, he is presented as he always is, as the patrician old-school director who knows what he is doing. And while he certainly comes off better than Krens and Hoving do in the film, we still aren't quite convinced. De Montebello has a wonderful mien, a nice French accent, and wears lovely suits. But since he runs in these circles and was hired by these people, how good could he be? He looks like royalty (he is in fact a count), but we remember that Obama looked good, too. The powers-that-be know to lead with their best coat and tie.

We also remember that Tullio Lombardo's *Adam* was destroyed under de Montebello's watch, as was an important della Robbia. It takes spectacular levels of incompetence to allow things like that to happen in a museum, since of course managing the assets is job one. Like the chief officers at Exxon, de Montebello somehow dodged responsibility for these catastrophes, but as the director, he is ultimately responsible. If the curator or sculpture staff were incompetent, he should have known it. Beyond that, I never heard him show much remorse. In Italy or Japan he would have been forced to cut his own throat on the town square, but we let him off the hook in the US with a shrug. He said the work would be repaired in two years, "so that only the cognoscenti would know." Almost a decade later, the sculpture is still in repair, and leaked reports admit that a blind man would know, since the sculpture was blasted into a million pieces. This is a tragedy beyond description, since the *Adam* was one of the greatest sculptures in the world, only a half-notch below the *David*.



[In fact, after a bit more research, I am not so sure the sculpture's destruction was an accident. The base that the sculpture had stood on firmly for centuries was replaced by a slender plywood base just months before the fall. That is suspicious. Why was there never a criminal investigation, by either the city of New York, the state of New York, or by the federal government? This is priceless sculpture, one that would be worth above 10 million on the open market, and is therefore a great public asset, one that is now gone. There apparently was an assumption that no one would want to destroy this statue, but that isn't good enough for me. I don't trust such assumptions. When something terrible happens under suspicious circumstances, you investigate it. You don't just assume it was an accident. This fall is almost like a death, and you don't assume a death is not a murder for no reasons. You investigate it. If this had happened in Japan or Europe, they would have investigated it. For all we know there may be a satanist or a violent homophobe working at the Met, and he may still be there. We know there are psychopaths everywhere. Are we sure nothing is being covered up at the Met? The della Robbia that fell was Michael the Archangel. Again, suspicious, and I am not a Christian.]

Now let us move on to de Montebello's exhibition record. Although he was known as much less friendly to Modernism than Hoving, it is worth noting that Hoving gave us the Andrew Wyeth show in 1977 right before he left, while the first living artists de Montebello did solos show for were Ellsworth Kelly and Clyfford Still (both 1979).



Right after that we had the students of Hans Hofmann and then Hofmann's Renate series. Hofmann was fairly recently deceased, but of course his students weren't.



Then Barnett Newman's drawings (see under title). Gorgeous, isn't it? What a talent! Newman died in 1970, but I am going to let these recently deceased artists stand in the “living” category, since they aren't old masters by any stretch of the term. Their promotion continues to cement the modern definition of art, while all the antique and old master shows obviously do not.

Then John Marin (1981):



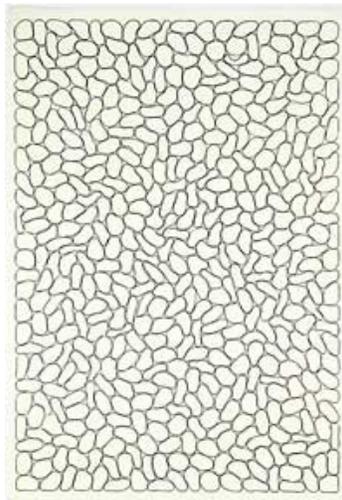
Yes, that's just bad early Kandinsky.

Now, I will admit that the Met had a lot of great shows during de Montebello's tenure, but they were all shows of antiques of one kind or another. There were no shows—zero—for serious contemporary painters or sculptors (the closest we got was a Balthus retrospective in 1984 and a Lucian Freud show in 1993). Instead we got a constant and heavy promotion of art by the new definitions. I will go down the exhibition list, year by year, to show this.

2008: Jasper Johns, Jeff Koons, and Pop Art



2007: Frank Stella, Tara Donovan, and Video Media



That's Tara Donovan.

2006: Kara Walker, Betty Woodman, Transgression in British Fashion, Sean Scully, Nan Kempner (2006 was a banner year at the Met, thanks to the aristocratic taste of de Montebello):

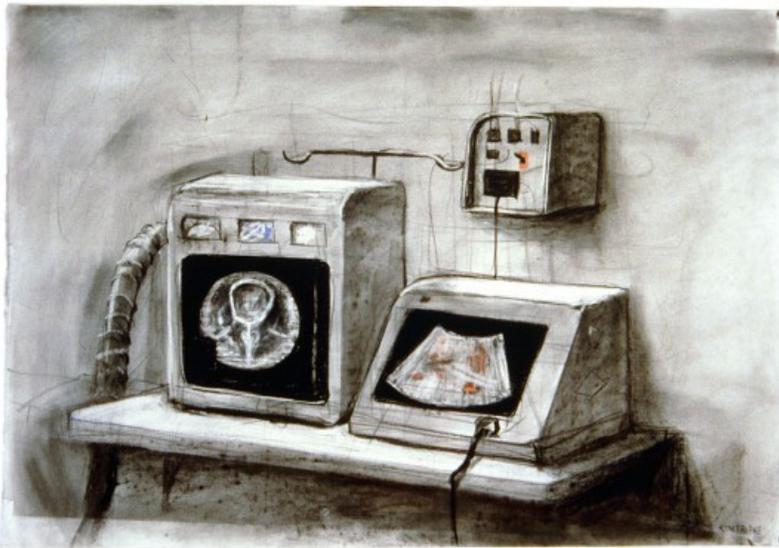


Nan Kempner was just a rich lady with a lot of clothes. The Met show was a show of her wardrobe, basically. I'm just surprised de Montebello didn't do a show of Imelda Marcos' shoes. The public would have mobbed to see it, of course.

2005: Sol Lewitt, Tony Oursler, and Rauschenberg:



2004: Christo, Andy Goldsworthy, William Kentridge, Romare Bearden, and WILD Fashion Untamed



That is Kentridge and Bearden.

2003: Bravehearts: Men in Skirts, Philip Guston, and Roy Lichtenstein



2002: Claes Oldenburg



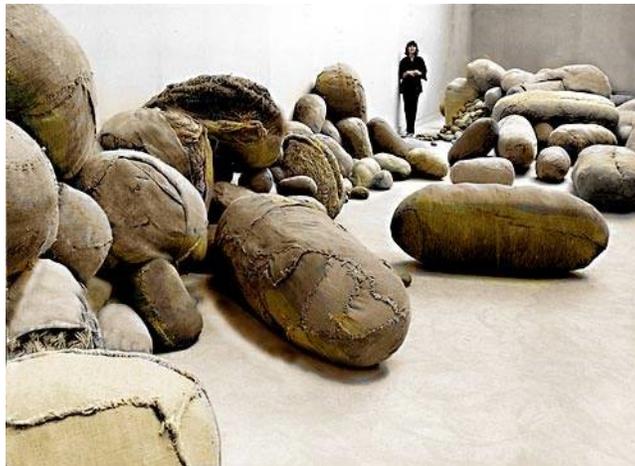
2001: Terry Winters, Joel Shapiro, Extreme Beauty Fashion Show



2000: Sean Scully (again, see 2006), David Smith



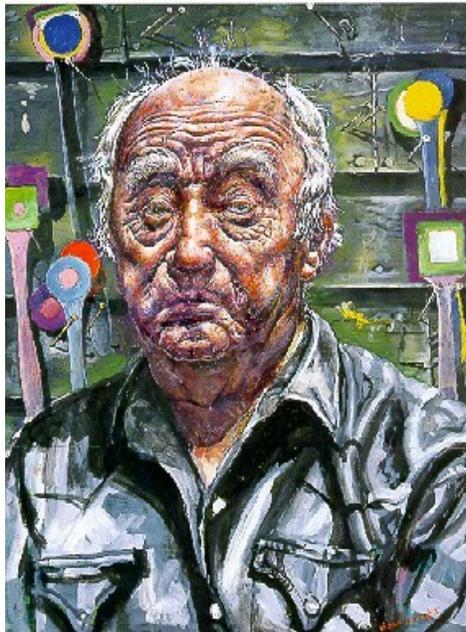
1999: Abakanowicz, Baseball Cards



1998: Ellsworth Kelly (again, also see 1979), Judith Rothschild, Anselm Kiefer



In 1997 we got Ivan Albright, “magic realist.”



Does that look like magic realism to you? Looks like a nightmare to me. In 97 we also got Richard Pousette-Dart and Gianni Versace:



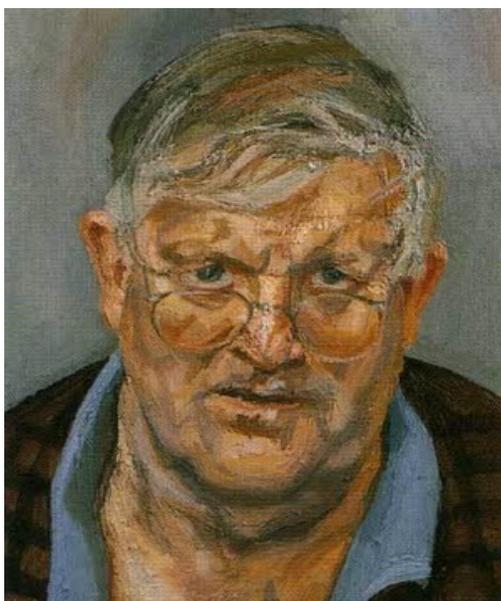
In 1996 we got “Artists for Victory,” an exhibition suggested to de Montebello from the Pentagon, no doubt. We also got two fashion shows: “Bare Witness,” and Christian Dior. Not a great year for contemporary art at the Met.

In 1995 we got R. B. Kitaj, Haute Couture, American Schoolgirl Needlework, and Howard Hodgkin:



We needed a count to give us that kind of quality, I guess.

In 1994 we got Madame Gres (another fashion show). In 1993, we got Lucien Freud, Diana Vreeland, Infra-apparel, and baseball cards.



That's David Hockney by Freud. Realism, I guess, but ugly as it gets. Let me ask you one question: if Lucian Freud was such a great painter, what was he doing hanging out with Hockney? Birds-of-a-Feather.

In 1992, we got Fashion and History. In 1991 we got Clyfford Still again (see also 1979). In 1990 we got Jean Michel Folon and American quilts.



That's enough to go on, I think. But I needed to study the exhibition lists to show that what we are told of de Montebello is nothing but propaganda. It is very much like my study of [Obama's votes](#) at Thomas.gov, to see that the truth is always inverted. Even today Donald Rumsfeld is implying that Obama is soft on defense, since Obama is talking about a few minor cuts. This while Obama is bombing a half dozen countries off the map. In the same way, Wikipedia—as just one example—tells us that the only or main criticism of de Montebello is that he was not a loud enough cheerleader for contemporary art. As proof we are given that he didn't like Chris Ofili. But as we have seen, de Montebello did nothing but promote the Modern agenda (when he wasn't promoting fashion shows or society ladies or baseball cards). The only small nod I remember from de Montebello to critics of

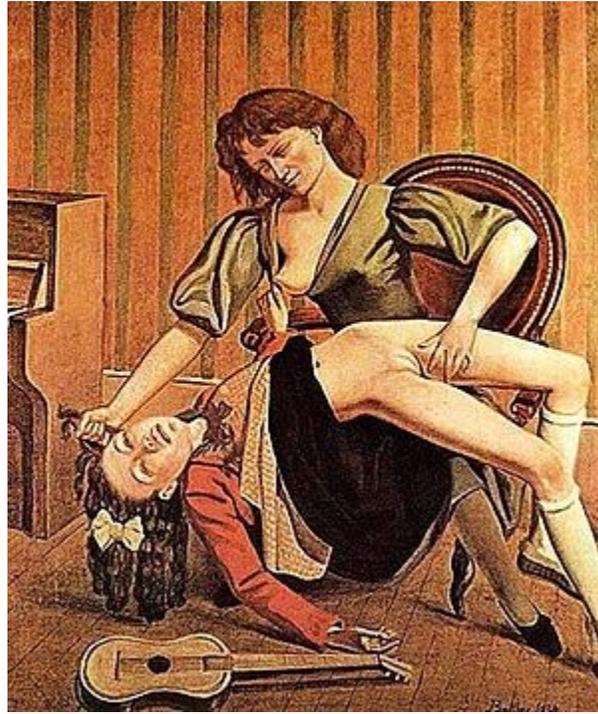
Modernism or postmodernism was his positive comment on Roger Kimball's book *The Rape of the Masters*. But of course we would expect de Montebello to defend the old masters. It is easy to defend the old masters since they are untouchable, they are a continuous draw, and no one is successfully raping them anyway. It is less easy to defend living masters, and de Montebello has shown no interest in defending them, much less in promoting them, even though they are raped all the time in plain sight. Realism has been slandered every year since 1910, and it is still being slandered daily. If you don't know this, it is because you aren't keeping up with the literature, from *ARTnews* to *Forbes*. I suggest you read my other papers.

The Metropolitan also found time to promote photography as art, with at least two major exhibitions a year from 1977 to 2008. That's fine, I have nothing against photography and many of the shows were wonderful. My problem is that again de Montebello chose to promote photography instead of serious contemporary painting and sculpture. We are told that the major museums don't have time for realism because it isn't serious, it isn't relevant, it isn't skilled enough, and so on. See Greg Hedberg's statement at the Art Renewal Center and elsewhere that realism still hadn't jelled in the 90's. Or we are told that realism is just kitsch—too popular—not cerebral enough. The double standard couldn't be more obvious, since de Montebello brought in photography, baseball cards, fashion and all the rest simply because it was popular. He didn't bring it in because it was relevant, politically savvy or up-to-date, cerebral, or any of the rest. I know a lot of realism that is “heavier” in every way than most of the photography shown in museums and *all* the fashion and baseball cards shown there. It is also worth reminding the reader once again that the contemporary art that *was* shown at the Met (and other museums) in this period was not heavy or intellectual or political in any way. Just look at the images above one more time. Are these artists supposed to be intellectual or political heavyweights? Most “new” art, back to 1920, isn't heavy in any way, and was never meant to be. The critics and academics try to load it down after the fact with a lot of theory, but most of that stuff is false and all of it is bombast. Just look at the images, please. Given that, it is absurd to tell people that realism was left out because it is made by lightweights. If it was not left out for the reasons you have been told, why was it really left out? *Ask yourself that.* Also ask yourself this: why are you being snowed with false reasons? Why can't they just tell you the real reason realism is left out? If it is a good reason, they shouldn't need to hide it, right?

You will say, “Wait, you don't like Freud because he painted ugly, and painted ugly on purpose to appeal to the Moderns (as you have said elsewhere), but what is wrong with Balthus?” Well there is a lot I like about Balthus, especially this:

BALTHUS IS A PAINTER OF WHOM NOTHING IS KNOWN. NOW LET US LOOK AT THE PICTURES. REGARDS.
B.

That is what he wrote for his 1968 retrospective at the Tate Gallery. You have to love that. He also knew how to paint, and never caved to the Modern cry that easel painting was dead. But regarding the paintings, I am not convinced. As with Freud (and Nerdrum and Currin and Saville, etc.), I have this niggling feeling that Balthus chose his subjects to appeal to the perverted Modern sensibility. If I could be sure Balthus was a genuine pervert, I would be much happier. But if Balthus demands we judge the paintings without any personal knowledge of him, I have to say that the paintings don't look genuine. He is trying too hard from the beginning, and even in 1933 we see heavy signs of academic criticism on these canvases. You don't just jump into full-fledged perversion like that (at age 25), unless it is scripted.



That's more interesting than most things we have seen in the 20th century, but mainly it looks like an illustration for an early fetish journal. As now, you needed to do a lot to stand out in 1933, and this achieved that. We also have to remember that Balthus, like Wyeth, came from a wealthy art family, so he was free to ignore some of the rules that applied to other artists trying to make it. He doesn't get full credit for ignoring the ban on representational painting, since, being who he was, he was free to ignore it. He was not free to ignore the requirement to stand out, however. He never tried to ignore it, and settled into the chosen niche comfortably. After the early success, he never strayed from it. My current opinion is that Balthus is overrated, but he is far *less* overrated than most of his contemporaries. I don't seek out Balthus in any museum, but I would much rather be locked in a room of his paintings than in a room of Warhols, Rothkos, Pollocks, Klees, de Koonings, or any of the rest of the big names.

The point in this paper is that Balthus made it into Met based on his weirdness, not on his skill. If he had chosen less lurid subjects, you would never have heard of him.

But back to de Montebello. I will close by sharing one last, personal reason I know that he is not any sort of defender or real lover of art. Many years ago I sent pictures of [my triptych](#) to him, and got only a polite brush-off. So you can understand that when I hear that realism is being ignored because it is not ambitious enough, not deep enough, not serious enough, not skilled enough, not intellectual enough, and so on, I know for a fact I am hearing misdirection. I know I am not being told the truth. I look at my triptych sitting here gathering dust, and I compare it to the work I see being exhibited and promoted at places like the Metropolitan. Some have tried to tell me that it is all a matter of marketing, but these people know I am here. I (and others like me) haven't been lost in any shuffle. Nor is it a matter of administrative incompetence. I am not arguing that de Montebello is incompetent. No, he is very competent at toeing the party line. Work like my triptych is being ignored in favor of vastly inferior work, and this is not an accident or oversight. I agree that it is sad that I have to be the one saying this, but there it is. If anyone else were defending me, I wouldn't have to do it myself, would I? If anyone else were defending traditional painting and sculpture, I wouldn't have to do it myself, would I? I have a few allies, but they mostly stay in the shadows. Like the physicists who read my science

papers, they are afraid to speak out. I can't even find more than a handful of people brave enough to sign a petition. And you wonder why things are like they are.

I will be told, "If you want to bring your stupid triptych into it again, it is because that thing is passé. No one cares about the past any more, much less poetry, much less Shelley." I can't tell you how many times I have heard that, but again, I know it is misdirection. If the past is disallowed as subject matter in art now, why is it not disallowed in literature or criticism? People can't get enough of historical novels. Antonia Byatt was not told that *Possession* was disallowed, was she? If people aren't interested in history, then why do we continue to get best-selling non-fiction books on 18th and 19th century composers, artists, and writers? Why do we continue to get movies about them? If no one cares, then why do we continue to get references to the past in all kinds of writing? As just one example, we may look at Robert Hughes' article from 2004 in the *Guardian*, the one I just critiqued last week. In it he spends several paragraphs talking about Reynolds and Blake and the Royal Academy in the 18th century. When critics do that, they are "erudite." When I do it, it is passé?

I am not denying [I broke a lot of rules with the triptych](#). But my question is, WHY ARE THE RULES THERE? Why is the past outlawed in painting but not in any other field? Why can writers, critics, historians, and film directors do what I do, but painters can't? A second question is, why are we told that avant garde artists get credit for breaking rules, but I don't get credit for breaking rules? Why is breaking one set of rules "transgressive," and breaking another set of rules just a guarantee of being ignored?

As I have shown with de Montebello, it is because the rules I have broken were set up to protect the *status quo*. They were set up to protect an entrenched mediocrity against real art and real artists. They were set up to protect galleries and museums from having to deal with real living artists, who are not as easy to control and promote as fake living artists. But the sort of rules the fake living artists "transgress" are not really rules. They are just bowling pins set up to be knocked down, so that those who knock them down can look like rebels. Contemporary artists are rebels in the way James Dean was a rebel. What did James Dean ever do, really? He *played* a rebel in movie. He slept around, with both men and women. He drove a car very fast. Wow. What a hero. Contemporary artists are rebels in the same way. They stand around with cigarettes and bad haircuts, trying to look cool for the camera, but you won't see them breaking any real rules.

In a short digression, let us look at the whole "rebel without a cause" idea. First of all, the 1955 movie was based on a 1944 book by a psychiatrist, who argued in the book that a rebel without a cause was actually a psychopath. Not a hero, a psychopath. Ignoring that, Hollywood stole the title but inverted the logic, making a modern-day hero out of Dean. But just consider the definition of "rebel." To rebel, you have to rebel against something. You cannot rebel against nothing, because that doesn't fit the definition. So a rebel without a cause is a contradiction in terms. Besides, there were plenty of causes in 1955, and still are. A rebel who can't find a cause must be an idiot. The problem of any real rebel is to limit the causes, so that he can focus on just one or two. I don't want to dive off into conspiracy theories here, but Nicholas Ray, the director of *Rebel*, went to the University of Chicago and was a protege of Frank Lloyd Wright. Soon after he began making strange propaganda movies for Hollywood, movies like *They Live by Night* and *Johnny Guitar*. In these movies, as in *Rebel*, the Rebel can't find a cause (except robbing banks, gunfighting, or playing chicken) and comes to a bad end. Clint Eastwood was to take up where Ray and Dean left off, portraying "rebel" characters who have no causes. We also see this if we study Eastwood himself, who, despite being sold to us as an American hero, never has a word to say about any important topics. Apparently the new world order is fine by him (he endorsed John McCain, along with all the other rebels).

This is not a complete digression, because the Modern and postmodern artist has been the same sort of rebel with no cause, or, in the best cast, a rebel with a manufactured cause. The most avant artist is sometimes against something like the Holocaust or rape, but how rebellious is that? Who *isn't* against the Holocaust or rape? It is sort of like being sold as a hero for liking chocolate ice cream. And, as with Hollywood, art is now nothing but propaganda, selling an inverted world of upside-down definitions and outright lies embedded in psychological tricks and brainwashing. Philippe de Montebello was sold to us as tonic to this brainwashing, or at least as a toning down of the lies, but he was just another turn of the screw.