

# PAINT IT BLEAK

Contemporary artists are taking Pop in a new direction, with violent, angst-ridden, and disturbing works that comment obliquely on celebrity and politics **BY ERIC BRYANT**

**F**IFTY YEARS AGO THE BRITISH ARTIST Richard Hamilton defined Pop art in sweeping terms: "Pop Art is: Popular (designed for a mass audience), Transient (short term solution), Expensible (easily-forgotten), Low cost, Mass produced, Young, Witty, Sexy, Gimmicky, Glamorous, Big Business." To celebrate the anniversary of Hamilton's pronouncement, Gagosian Gallery in London hosted a far-ranging show last fall that demonstrated an expansiveness beyond even Hamilton's definition. The Pop genealogy included precursors Rauschenberg and Johns alongside such early practitioners as Hamilton, Warhol, Lichtenstein, and Oldenburg, as well as artists like Richard Prince, Jeff Koons, and Takashi Murakami, who expanded the movement in the 1980s and '90s. But there were also a number of less established talents, including Nate Lowman, Aaron Young, and Adam McEwen.

They are among a group of artists, ranging in age from their late 20s to early 40s, who are broadening the movement with new techniques, and, even more jarringly, a violent and angst-ridden vision that contrasts with most earlier Pop art. From McEwen's chewing-gum paintings, which offer an airplane's view of the patterns of destruction in bomb-ravaged Dresden and Cologne, to Wade Guyton's alluring ink-jet prints of flames and skulls and slashing knives, this work is dark. "It is as if they forgot the flower paintings, and all they want to look at are Warhol's disasters and car crashes," says Bill Arning, curator at the MIT List Visual Arts Center.

Pop has traditionally been defined by the appropriation of mass-media and pop-culture imagery as well as by the use of mechanical means of reproduction or rendering techniques that downplay the expressive hand of the artist. With the proliferation of media outlets and the varied means of image production and manipulation available to anyone with a computer, today's artists are able to take these hallmarks in new directions.

Though Pop painting is often described in terms of its content, its formal characteristics are no less significant. Emphatic two-dimensionality has been the norm since the 1960s, thanks in part to the poor print quality of newspaper and magazine im-

ages. Murakami has taken this feature to its logical extreme with his "superflat" cartoon universe. And younger artists continue to play with the formal device: Lowman, for instance, seems to strip away a layer of character from his found imagery with each repeated photocopy, and Guyton's use of ink-jet printing grants even vague symbols a decisive expressiveness.

The more dramatic formal development that can be seen among these artists is the systematic elimination of color. Black and gray are the dominant tones, from Matthew Brannon's

washed-out movie posters to Adam Helms's portraits of freedom fighters and bandits. When McEwen appropriated a protest poster that had been a fixture at antinuclear rallies in Germany in the 1980s, he changed only one thing, rendering the bright green and yellow graphics in bland grays.

"There is a seductive quality to the exuberant colors of Warhol and Koons," observes Elizabeth Dunbar, curator at the nonprofit Arthouse in Austin, Texas. "This work is almost draining the celebration out of popular culture." On the other hand, for a generation that grew up in a world defined in swirling TV-news graphics, such drabness may suggest a sentimental notion of certainty—a desire for a "black-and-white" world.

As important as these formal changes are, what is even more striking—if not entirely surprising—is the gloomy tempera-

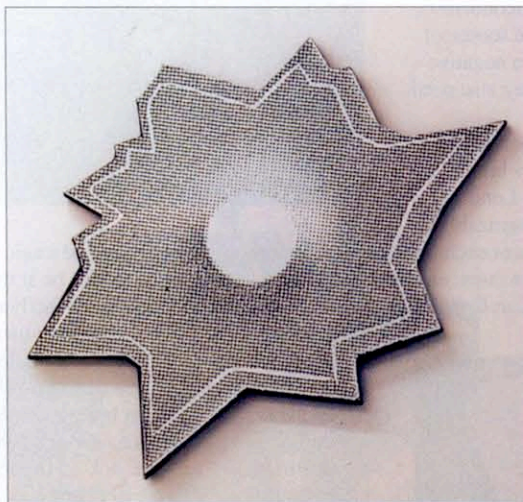
ment these works reflect. Pop has mirrored the mood and mores of society more closely than any movement since Dada, and its latest practitioners continue that tradition. But whether they are tackling such un-Pop subjects as history and politics or the classic Pop motif of celebrity, the dark mood of the times prevails.

The fascination with pop stars can be traced back to Warhol's infatuated vision of Marilyn as candy-colored seduc-

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**OPPOSITE** Using an ink-jet printer, Wade Guyton incorporated gestural drips and smudges in his 2006 series of untitled flame paintings.

**RIGHT** *Escalade*, 2006, by Nate Lowman.



**RIGHT** Adam McEwen's *Untitled*, 2005, renders protest—"Atomic energy? No thank you"—in gray on gray.



tress, but artists today are more likely to be on the attack. "Celebrity is both the food and the cannon fodder of these artists," says Neville Wakefield, who curated last year's "Defamation of Character" at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, which presented Matthew Barney's defaced magazine-cover portrait of actress Julianne Moore alongside work by McEwen, Lowman, and others. "These artists are latter-day iconoclasts, and celebrity has become the source of the iconography, so there is a negative relationship, but in a way they also need these objects to ridicule."

The British artist Stuart Semple, 27, who had his fourth solo show last fall at Martin Summers Fine Art in London, makes some of the most recognizably Pop paintings. He draws almost exclusively from pop-culture sources for his often large canvases, on which he collages everything from images of Kurt Cobain and the anime character



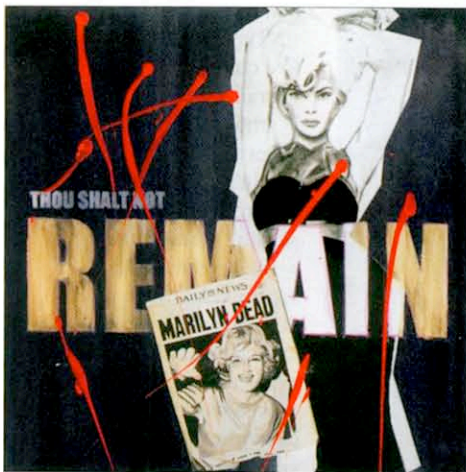
**LEFT** *Untitled Portrait (Little Bighorn)*, 2007, from Adam Helms's series memorializing insurgents of years past.

interests, Lowman says, "It was all around me. I grew up with Court TV and the Simpson trial and serial killers like 'Night Stalker' Richard Ramirez." Indeed, the ubiquity of

brutal and tragic imagery throughout contemporary culture may well be at the root of this generation's ability to refer so matter-of-factly to gun violence, suicide, and carpet bombing.

Lowman's two favorite topics are most succinctly integrated in the bullet-hole paintings. They reproduce in larger scale images from magnets he found in his Brooklyn neighborhood that can bring a comic-book version of violence to any metal surface. Though he talks about the works in formal terms—how he took on the series to prove he could make a "real modern object" and how the outline surrounding one magnet makes it "more cartoony and Pop"—the content is as charged here as in his more overtly political *Higher Powers Command* (2004). That silk screen shows flag-draped coffins barely visible in the darkness of the upper-right corner of a mostly white canvas. The piece is a riff on a Sigmar Polke painting in which the same title is followed by the instruction to paint the upper-right corner of the canvas black.

**S**UCH WORKS WON'T SATISFY THOSE WHO demand political engagement from artists—their ironic distance, characteristic of Pop, seems to render these pieces about the spectacle of politics rather than specific issues. But it is notable that while earlier generations of Pop artists exhibited a similar love-hate relationship with consumer culture and glamour, this group takes on fear and violence.



**ABOVE** Stuart Semple's *Thou Shalt Not Remain*, 2007.

able audience." With tabloid media offering nonstop coverage of the latest star in or out of rehab, the artist never lacks for material.

When McEwen, 42, went looking for a way to engage with celebrity culture, he didn't turn to glossy magazines or TV gossip programs but to one of the most resolutely gray sections of the newspaper: the obituaries. In a series of poster-size works, he presents what appear to be *New York Times* obits for such celebrities as Nicole Kidman and Kate Moss. The texts are perfectly plausible, except for the fact that his subjects are still alive; McEwen tackles the slaying of one's idols head-on.

Rather than focus on the celebrity machine at the heart of contemporary popular culture, Lowman, 28, likes to dig around the edges; he explores the borders between fame and notoriety, and how we are conditioned to see them. For his 2005

**RIGHT** A still from Kota Ezawa's film projection based on the John F. Kennedy assassination, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 2005.



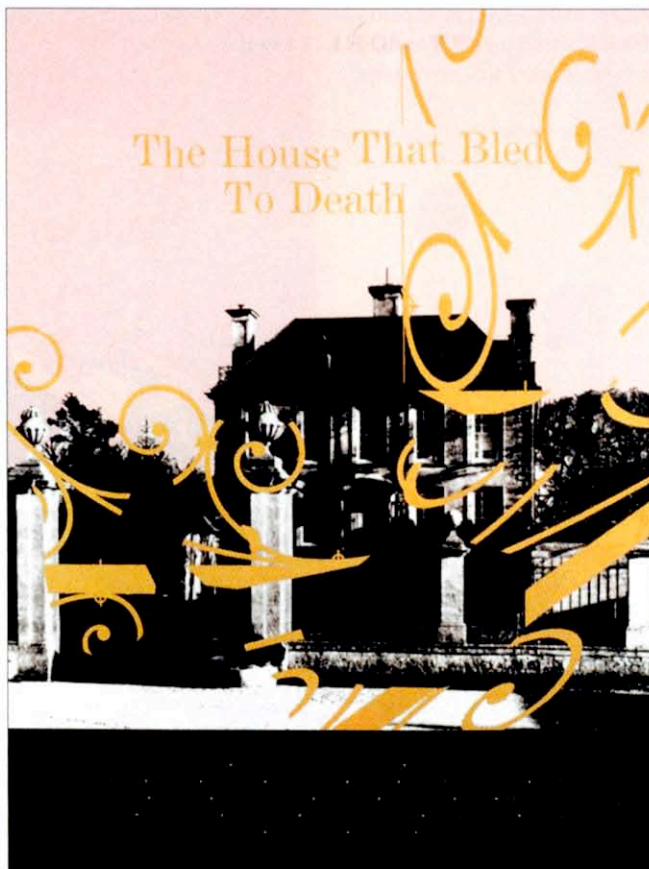
Some artists approach politics more obliquely, through history. Helms, 33, first gained attention for his drawings of members of a fictitious militia dressed in fanciful uniforms. The work in his show last fall at Marianne Boesky Gallery in Chelsea made use of historical photographs of bandits, rebels, and militants from the United States and abroad, over which he painted what appeared to be hoods. The starkly graphic and vaguely nostalgic works screened on vellum have a visual intensity that is unmistakably Pop. Lined up on the gallery walls, these subjects seemed to be connected through time, though their narrative never quite jelled.

Instead of implying a story, Kota Ezawa's light boxes and animations rely on narrative, and familiar ones at that. They offer a bleak selection of significant historic moments in deadpan representation. Drawing rough outlines by hand—his style has been compared to the TV show *South Park*—Ezawa, 38, achieves a faithful, noninterpretive translation of such images as Timothy O'Sullivan's famous Civil War battlefield photograph known as *Harvest of Death*, the Lincoln assassination scene from D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, the Zapruder film of John F. Kennedy's murder, and the televised reading of the O. J. Simpson verdict. As Dunbar says, "It is interesting to ask what meaning is left in these images after we have seen them a thousand times."

**E**ZAWA'S REWORKING OF THESE MOMENTOUS visual documents is another example of the free hand these artists exercise when borrowing imagery. Brannon, 36, makes posters for nonexistent movies in a mode that, as with McEwen's fake obituaries, might be called appropriation of form. Brannon is best known for enigmatic prints that combine stark silhouettes—botanicals, knives, and housewares are frequent designs—in sometimes sickly colors amid phrases like "teachers fuck students" and "everything I want, you have." Formally, the works' graceful compositions call on the decorative arts and their texts have the pithiness of ads, but anxiety is the pervasive mood.

Brannon's silk-screened posters promote movies with titles like *House of Rot* and *Sick Decisions*. Cinematic images of gloomy homesteads printed mostly in layered shades of gray, these works deftly manipulate the conventions of the genre. "He is co-opting the movie poster form and placing his own

**BELOW A faux movie poster, *The House That Bled To Death*, 2001, by Matthew Brannon.**



narrative upon that to find something personal," says Jonah Freeman, the artist who curated "Slow Burn," a show last year at Galerie Edward Mitterrand in Geneva of work made using production techniques from mass media. "One way to look at it is that direct appropriation has been so fully articulated, mediating these genres seems like a strategy that has a lot of potential."

Indeed, the appropriation of pop-culture imagery has evolved from being a radical gesture to being a basic device, as commonplace as making a sketch. When seeking to understand artists' relation to such raw material, Chrissie Iles, senior curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, who has included McEwen and Guyton in recent biennials, says there is an important distinction between artists under 35 and those who are older.

"Younger artists have grown up really thinking within the context of the Internet. They want this, and they hit a button, and 5,000 references come up for them to choose from," she says. "And the Internet flattens everything into information. History and knowledge and everything is equal—the most appalling and the most erudite have equal status." This

easy access to imagery has resulted, paradoxically, in images losing their individual impact.

In some ways Guyton, 35, is the most adept of these artists at capturing today's fragmented, decontextualized visual culture. His material comes from all manner of print sources, including catalogues, textbooks, magazines, and typography. But the elements are isolated. In part, he is exploring how few clues are needed for the viewer to recognize and assign meaning to a piece of visual information. A Gothic font has become synonymous with Ketel One vodka ads, for instance, while flames (a frequent motif in Guyton's most recent show at New York's Friedrich Petzel Gallery) call forth myriad meanings. And although he uses an ink-jet printer to transfer his work to canvas and paper, he manipulates the works to create smudges and tears that increase the sense of dislocation. As Guyton pushes the Pop esthetic toward abstraction and meaninglessness, he infuses his works with anger and aggression.

From the beginning, Pop art was hailed by supporters and derided by critics for its embrace of the kitschy and banal. One of the most interesting questions raised by the latest generation of practitioners is when, exactly, the violent and tragic became banal. ■