

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2007

## Going the Way of All Flesh, Artistically

It's coming up roses on the Chelsea real estate front, but at certain addresses death hangs in the air. Or, more accurately, on the walls. Two galleries, by coincidence, are presenting group shows about the only fate as certain as taxes.

**ROBERTA SMITH**

**ART REVIEW** Their message is that all art, basically, is an attempt to explain, fend off or accept death; to commemorate, or communicate with, the dead or deities; or to defy death by making something that lives on. Not surprisingly, both shows are rampant with skeletons and skulls — as universally essential for physical life as they are symbolic of its inevitable end.

"I Am as You Will Be: The Skeleton in Art" at Cheim & Read is strictly upper echelon. Enscenced in a blue-chip Chelsea gallery of the ground-floor concrete-on-concrete variety, it consists of 44 works by 33 artists and is rife with historical chestnuts dating to the late 1800s.

"Death & Love in Modern Times" at Dinter Fine Art is altogether scrappier, starting with its tiny upstairs space in a bustling rehabilitated building. Its 41 works date almost entirely from the 21st century, and most of its 24 artists are living.

It is a tribute to the vitality of art-making that neither show is a downer.

The Cheim & Read effort could have been organized by a museum, especially if it had fewer Cheim & Read artists. It is also heavy on Belgians, not only contemporary artists like Jan Fabre, Jan Van Oost, Wim Delvoye and Michaël Borremans, but also James Ensor (1860-1949), Léon Spilliaert (1881-1946) and Paul Delvaux (1897-1994). (Delvaux, a Belgian Surrealist who made his reputation between the two World Wars, is represented here by little-known postwar works.) The Belgian presence may say something about national sensibility or simply reflect the interests of the Belgian curator Xavier Tricot, who is an Ensor scholar and worked closely on the show.

It begins stunningly with Jenny Holzer's "Lustmord Table" of 1994, which deconstructs a skele-



DINTER FINE ART/DEREK ELLER GALLERY

ton or two, laying out single bones and vertebrae in orderly rows on a homey wood table that adds an air of intimate domesticity. Nearby, Delvaux revisits the Renaissance with a large ink drawing that shows Jesus as a crucified skeleton in a courtyard full of rioting skeletons; that drawing resonates with Ensor's lively "Christ Tormented by Demons," an 1895 etching, and with Matthew Barney's gossamer pencil study of a skeletal Gen. Douglas MacArthur. Salvador Dalí's 1950 watercolor "The Toady" evokes the decadent fleshiness of his early work.

With Ms. Holzer, three other Cheim & Read artists — Alice Neel, Lynda Benglis and Louise Bourgeois — give the show its spine. Neel's 1964-65 painting "Natura Morte" depicts a skull isolated on another homey table, its tones of yellow and orange bathed in a distinctly New York light. That calm, even optimistic acceptance of death is shattered on the opposite wall by an ink drawing in which Neel depicts herself as a harrowed skull weeping black tears or perhaps blood.

A marvelous sculpture from 1991 by Ms. Benglis shows a completely different side of this Process artist's sensibility. The small

bronze totem poised on an elliptical chunk of rock is titled "Man/Landscape," but it might also depict Charon, guiding his boat across the River Styx. In the final gallery Ms. Bourgeois's "Arched Figure No. 2" from 1997 makes the departure from life more literal: it suggests a partly abstracted torso in its death throes.

As Damien Hirst's diamond-encrusted platinum skull has recently indicated, Death's formidability often encourages extravagance. Mr. Fabre covers a skull in brilliantly colored beetle shells; Mr. Van Oost casts one in silver (with a hand poking its eyes out). Angelo Filomeno renders a skeleton life-size in exquisite embroidery enhanced by crystals and small stainless-steel spikes.

But just as exquisite and more arresting is Roland Flexner's postage-stamp-size drawing of a skull seeming to materialize in a mist of graphite. Another standout is Delvaux's 1945 painting of a skeleton in his studio. It is both living model and artist's prop; the palette, textures and setting anticipate Lucian Freud.

Ingrid Dinter has succeeded, by far more modest means, in making "Death & Love in Modern Times" unpredictable. Her show

### Two shows, but many perspectives, on death.

includes a few usual suspects — Leon Golub, Ana Mendieta and Andy Warhol — mixed in with larger numbers of emerging or overlooked artists. Also here are artists whose success is not art-world-centered, like the musician Daniel Johnston, the cartoonist James Romberger and the Japanese drawing wizard Tomoo Gokita.

The show's title refers partly to the AIDS epidemic, a theme established early by the presence of two well-known artists who died of that disease. Peter Hujar, who died in 1987, is represented by a notably prescient 1963 photograph of a skeleton in a once-white dress lying in a glass coffin, from his Palermo Catacomb series. David Wojnarowicz, who died in 1992, is commemorated in a recent drawing by Dan Fischer, known for a devotional, small-scale brand of Photo Realism: a meticulous

**I Am As You Will Be**  
The Skeleton in Art  
Cheim & Read

**Death & Love in Modern Times**  
Dinter Fine Art

graphite rendering of a famous photograph of Wojnarowicz's face almost buried in dirt.

Bracketing these works, three recent drawings by David Dupuis evoke the ravages of AIDS using delicate collages of eyes and faces, supplemented by shades of brilliant blue and refined renderings of skulls, one with a third eye.

The show never recaptures the intensity of these initial works, but there is plenty else to see, especially by relatively unfamiliar artists like Mike Walton. Aaron Simft and Tomás López Rocha. A particularly avian human skull in glazed ceramic by the abstract painter Phil Sims is arguably better than any skull in the Cheim & Read show.

A notable rediscovery is Dan McCleary, a realist painter who hasn't had a solo show in New York since 2001. He contributes five etchings, each an unsettling image of a single mask from the Mexican Day of the Dead tradition. They are still lifes that aren't quite still.

Mr. Tricot's essay in the Cheim & Read catalog provides a coda for both shows. In a startlingly Beckett-esque quotation, extracted from the work of the noted 17th-century Spanish writer Francisco de Quevedo, Death admonishes a reluctant victim: "What you call to die is to finish dying and what you call birth is the beginning of death and what you call to live is dying as you go on living."

"I Am As You Will Be: The Skeleton in Art" continues through Nov. 3 at Cheim & Read, 547 West 25th Street, Chelsea; (212) 242-7727. "Death & Love in Modern Times" is on view through Oct. 27 at Dinter Fine Art, 547 West 27th Street, Chelsea; (212) 947-2818.