

VENUS

MANHATTAN

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In Sickness And In Health.

(...) THIS SEASON of pulse-taking concluded with a curious celebration of the dark side of civilization, a group exhibition titled "À rebours," after Huysmans's quintessential decadent novel of 1884, mounted in a new space called Venus Over Manhattan on Madison Avenue. The brainchild of the collector Adam Lindemann, Venus Over Manhattan is in the same building as Gagosian's uptown operations, to whose gleaming white spaces "À rebours" offered a self-consciously gloomy response, although it also included a fair number of Gagosian's artists, including such international know-nothings as Piotr Uklański (whose authoritarian gestures are delivered with what some must regard as genuine Eastern European authority) and Dan Colen (the one who does the Abstract Expressionist paintings with pre-chewed chewing gum). In a space that felt like an unrenovated shell, with the lighting so low that until one's eyes adjusted it was impossible to discern much of anything, gallerygoers discovered an array of objects that included a gorgeous four-foot-high charcoal and pastel by Redon titled *Le Chevalier Mystique*, a nineteenth-century Jivaro shrunken head, and a Murano glass sculpture by Jeff Koons of a couple in the act. The show had a freaky fascination: in the preposterously low light one could easily avoid the worst stuff and linger instead on a delicious painting by the Swiss eccentric Henry Fuseli and a rather charming sailing ship by Olivia Berckemeyer made of bronze that looked like it was on the verge of melting. There was a sense of an overheated art world trying out castoffs for a new run, with Bernard Buffet, whose early cityscapes are perhaps better than they are now thought to be, represented by a perfectly dreadful late painting of two clowns playing musical instruments. Of course there was a Eurotrash angle to "À rebours": the School of Paris kitsch was recycled in a speculative spirit, the speculation partly aesthetic, partly commercial, and pity those who try to determine where one part ends and the other begins.

Taken piece by piece, "À rebours" was not a very satisfying show, except that the

decadent postures of various contemporary artists—Ukłański with a vast sort of macramé representing a woman’s private parts, Glenn Brown and George Condo with their usual grotesque heads—were energized by the presence of more practiced decadents of an earlier era, including Redon, Fuseli, Gustave Moreau, and the reliably raunchy Félicien Rops. There was something unquestionably fascinating about this high-fashion show dedicated to Huysmans’s hero, Des Esseintes, who was described in the zine given out in the gallery as “an eccentric aristocrat who recoils from the manners and values of conservative Parisian society and flees to the countryside to immerse himself in art collecting and exotic fetishism.”

Huysmans’s novel is of course the great indictment of the taste of a Gilded Age that was controlled, as Huysmans wrote, by “the aristocracy of wealth,” “the tyranny of commerce,” “the destruction of all art.” Doesn’t that sound familiar? “Artists and writers,” Huysmans explained, “in their degradation had fallen on their knees and were covering with ardent kisses the stinking feet of the high-placed jobbers and low-bred satraps on whose charity they depended for a living.” It was this state of affairs to which the organizers of the Venus Over Manhattan show were surely comparing our own time. A page of Huysmans’s novel was included in the zine, with Des Esseintes exclaiming in the face of this demolition of the arts: “Well, crumble then, society! Perish, old world!”

For Des Esseintes, who tried to create his own perfect world of aesthetic contemplation, the cultural landscape of late nineteenth-century Paris was precisely the slaughterhouse that Chuck Close sees in the art fairs today. Yet Des Esseintes, with his dark interiors and his jewel-encrusted tortoise, has often been regarded as the one who led the hopelessly unhealthy life—and by the end of Huysmans’s novel he is obsessively consulting doctors, looking for the solution to a malady that seems to be nothing less than his inability to live in a sick society. For Huysmans, who invented this most enduring portrait of the extremes of the aesthetic life, there may in fact be no final diagnosis. The recoil from a sick society can bring about its own kind of sickness. Do the organizers of “À rebours” know how incendiary the text they have invoked really is? It may be that they are content to regard their turn toward the dark side as nothing more than a Gilded Age gambit, a masked ball with everybody dressed in black. There may be no cure for what ails the art world. But I do find it interesting that the Whitney Biennial included a salute to a painter who died diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic, and surely it is not irrelevant that the season closed with an exhibition on Madison Avenue that saluted Des Esseintes, the greatest loner aesthete of all time. Those who have dedicated their lives to art and have promised to stick by it in sickness and in health have reason to be worried.