

Sensational art: Shocked in Brooklyn

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The exhibit at the Brooklyn Art Museum that has caused a furor in New York and generated reams of material for editorial pages is titled "Sensation." That title offers a good clue about the commercial interests behind the show. The museum was hoping to earn a media stir with the exhibit, which includes animal parts preserved in formaldehyde, images of penises alongside schoolgirl faces, and a collage of the Virgin Mary decorated with elephant dung and clippings from porn magazines. When New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani denounced the exhibit as "sick stuff" he was—besides venting his sentiments and positioning himself in next year's Senate race—providing the museum with just the publicity it was seeking.

Some commentators have said that the controversy over the exhibit demonstrates that art is still a powerful and significant force. That's doubtful. Art can (if it works at it) cause a sensation, but that does not mean that the particular works of art (or art in general) are communicating to us in powerful ways. On the contrary, the sensationalism may be a sign that art is powerful only as a form of spectacle. Rather than being valued for the way it reveals reality and explores truth (the traditional role of art), art in our post-Christian age tends to be seen as a momentary diversion, most interesting when it's an occasion for moral outrage or political posturing. The creators of "Sensation" seem to have absorbed this lesson all too well.

What was artist Chris Ofili doing with "Holy Virgin Mary"? Actually, his collage of an African-featured figure set against a glittering yellow background turns out to be much more engaging than the descriptions have indicated. The dung, a common medium in African folk art, is undetectable to most observers, and is hardly the splash of excrement that detractors suggest. Which is not to say that the work is significant. Indeed, we have yet to hear anyone talk about what it reveals about Mary or anything else, whether wonderful or disturbing. The silence on these matters by museum officials and other defenders of the show suggests that the art is insubstantial, not worth arguing about on its own terms.

The debate about the Brooklyn show has centered almost entirely on issues of censorship, First Amendment rights, and government funding of the arts. These are important topics, but they are procedural and political. With these topics we are on familiar ground, far from the mysterious territory of the true and the beautiful, the ugly and disturbing.

"Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," Shelly said, and the Romantic movement extended the sentiment to include all artists. Whatever the merits of Shelley's original declaration, the Brooklyn exhibit shows how laughable such notions are today when the art community joins the hucksters of the world, right alongside Howard Stern and Jerry Springer.