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ART: Reviews and listings of New York art galleries and museums

Marcel Broodthaers, *Décor: A Conquest*

An artist draws the connection between art and war.

By Howard Halle

- Michael Werner, through Sept 15



Installation view

Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York

In a better world than ours, Marcel Broodthaers's underappreciated masterpiece, *Décor: A Conquest*, would be assuming pride of place at the Metropolitan Museum of Art this fall instead of Damien Hirst's jump-the-shark travesty, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. As it stands, on August 29, Hirst's embalmed Carcharhiniforme will be taking up residency in the Met's contemporary art gallery for the next three years (on loan from the work's owner, hedge-fund billionaire Steven A. Cohen). Meanwhile, Broodthaers's work will be departing in a month from the nearby Michael Werner gallery, where it's now on view. Since this 1974 piece is unlikely to return to New York for a long time, if ever, I urge everyone to go see it, if only to understand the groundwork for careers like Hirst's.

The Belgian Marcel Broodthaers (1924–1976) was originally a critic and poet associated with late Surrealism. He turned to art at the ripe age of 40 with the stated aim of possibly selling something and finally making a success out of his life; in fact, he earned little on his artistic efforts. He was that classic figure, the innovator who writes the checks eventually cashed by others. With *Décor*, he arguably created the template for today's

installation art, in which objects collide in a web of narrative associations. He also pretty much invented the category of Conceptualism known as “institutional critique,” a kind of meta-interrogation of the museum’s role in defining culture. (And in the Lila Acheson Wallace Wing, Hirst’s piece might qualify as such. It’ll certainly illuminate how even the Met, eager to lure crowds with a controversial attraction, would allow a Wall Street megacollector to leverage his holdings with the museum’s prestige.)

*Décor* consists of two “period rooms” representing the 19th and 20th centuries. The 19th-century one contains an odd mélange of artifacts displayed on squares of Astroturf: a pair of cannons; two Edwardian chairs; a candelabra; potted palms; and, most notably, a giant stuffed python, rearing up to fix the viewer with a penetrating gaze. There are also a plastic lobster and crab playing cards on a green-felt tabletop, and my favorite, a lobby placard for the 1969 Western *Heaven with a Gun*. In it, actor Noah Beery Jr., of *Rockford Files* fame, can be seen pointing a Winchester at the head of *Twilight Zone* regular John Anderson. The 20th-century room holds modern versions of firearms and furnishings: Wall-mounted cases display ranks of M16s, while a patio-furniture ensemble, adorned with an in-progress jigsaw puzzle of the Battle of Waterloo, serves as a centerpiece.

Broodthaers originally assembled *Décor* for an exhibit at London’s ICA with components from local prop houses—suggesting that its two halves are sets for a sort of historical-epic cinema of the mind. The presence of stage lights reinforces this idea, as does the fact that Broodthaers used the installation to make an accompanying film. Titled “The Battle of Waterloo,” it captures the “Trooping the Colours” on the Queen’s birthday as it passes outside the gallery’s windows (the event happened to coincide with the ICA exhibit). Though it’s shown separately, Broodthaers considered the film integral to the meaning of the work—the missing piece, perhaps, to the puzzle that is *Décor*.

Yet for all of its elegant obscurantism, *Décor*’s overall purpose is fairly clear. Broodthaers is using his exquisite eye to strip away the veneer of taste from the production of art to reveal what lies beneath: brute power. The intrusion of guns into the world of material comfort and the art it affords isn’t some sort of anomaly, the artist seems to insist, but an integral part, the overlooked piece in a jigsaw process that in his own time was beginning to assume a global dimension. A stuffed snake (or shark for that matter), or even a painting of one, only becomes “art” through a series of transactions that ultimately can cost lives as well as money. Whether this involves the fusillades of great-nation confrontations or the muzzle-flash of today’s asymmetrical warfare scarcely matters: Traced far enough back, even the cleanest of art-buying fortunes have some blood on them.

Artists like Hirst know this, of course, though their reactions are usually to laugh all the way to the bank. Broodthaers, on the other hand, had the crazy integrity to insist on something greater than sheer might: the power of ideas. That is, if people are willing to entertain them.