



Tempest in a Teapot

Henry Taylor:
Has Anyone Seen My Cat?
2023, Acrylic on canvas
214 × 182.6 × 4.5 cm

The art world knows only one center: We could call it awe, or perhaps astonishment. In the beginning, it may have been a fortress. Later, a castle. Many Gothic cathedrals rose up to heaven, inspiring awe and wonder. In the 1970s, huge works by American artists sprang up in the Southwest of the USA, causing much amazement, less as travel destinations than as media attractions. Christo built a mile-long “Running Fence” in California with the express aim of eliciting awe. In the 1980s, cities extolled spectacular postmodern museum buildings. In 1997, Frank O. Gehry’s popular *Guggenheim Museum* in Basque Country temporarily served as a powerful example for municipal leaders. After that, it was more and more the prices that inspired awe. Unfortunately and fortunately, we don’t marvel at the same thing for long. There is space and time, there is the man or woman of sensibility and intellect who likes to think and wants even more to be positively surprised. “Stupor” was the name Daniel Richter gave his exhibition of perhaps too many similar paintings in the London gallery *Ropac*. **Wonder, shock, and powerful emotion translate into intense, maximal admiration. It’s all about the sudden, entirely predictable moment when cognition, emotion, and sensory experience coincide. But if high prices no longer trigger astonishment, perhaps the opposite will provide the desired shock.** “A blood bath” was what an Asian market participant reportedly called the result of an auction in Hongkong on October 5th, according to *Artnews*. “Two businesses that Mr. Liu and his family built over the years have recently run into difficulty,” the *New York Times* reported hours earlier on the exact same day. For a decade, Liu Yiquian’s multi-part *Long Museum* in Shanghai was in the spotlight with spectacular purchases and no less spectacular exhibitions, whether with Olafur Eliasson or James Turrell. Liu, who was often seen on the street at openings wearing his slightly mocking grin, and Wang Wei, his refined, cultured wife, who within a very short time personally met with many Western art luminaries and invited them to extravagant installations, embodied the Power Couple in East Asia. Liu told an interviewer that he bought a Modigliani painting for \$170 million at *Christie’s* because the auction house had put the painting on the cover. In 2014, in front of a live camera, he drank from a small teacup from the Chenghua era, a period of the Ming Dynasty, which he had bought at auction for \$36.3 million and ostentatiously paid for with his AMEX card. The newspapers were filled with pictures of him. China presented itself to the West with an air of self-confidence, especially in view of the rise of its domestic art market.

Shanghai seemed to be overtaking Beijing and very nearly Hong Kong at the same time. The Paris *Centre Pompidou* urgently wanted to open a branch there. Across the street from the *Long Museum*, the late Budi Tek opened his *Yuz Museum* in 2014, where he hosted an impressive Chinese retrospective of Alberto Giacometti only two years later. Not long before, he had not known any Western artists besides Warhol and Picasso. We are not using the word “bloodbath” here, given the terrible wars and terrorist attacks of our day. **The negative shock was triggered by the fact that both the unexpected auction of major works from the *Long Museum* and the subsequent Evening Sale at *Sotheby’s* Hong Kong only sold 74% of the lots and the *Long Museum* only realized 60% of the expected lower estimate.** The result was so embarrassing that from then on, if you are not registered by name, all you get to read in *Sotheby’s results* is “bidding is closed.” But wait. The other auctions, especially in London from October 12 to 15, went back to normal, with sales rates reaching 90% and 95%. Sales expectations were also met, although often that was more true of the lower estimates. **So where is today’s shock? It is individual galleries that advance conspicuously in difficult times or, to put it in Gothic terms, soar to lofty heights.** Pilar Corrias, London’s best-kept secret among highly talented gallerists for more than a decade, presented an exemplary exhibition of paintings, displayed on subtly rose-tinted walls, by the queer artist Christina Quarles, who had recently exhibited at the *Hamburger Bahnhof* in Berlin. Everything was sold on opening day for prices ranging from \$400,000 to \$1.2 million. In Paris, on October 14th, ahead of the local *Art Basel, Hauser & Wirth* opened a two-story space in a venue six meters high on the lower floor, located neither in the Marais nor on Avenue Matignon. The address is 26 rue François Premier. Henry Taylor presents more than thirty new works here, not only the stunningly charming, confidently painted images of his friends and relatives but also “mixed media” including shoes, used plastic bottles on stands, and almost blaringly obtrusive text paintings. The large paintings, as recently shown at the *Museum of Contemporary Art* in Los Angeles, now cost around \$750,000. The gallery writes that Taylor, born in 1958, builds on a “disruption of tradition.” **Which brings us to today’s concept of shock. “Disruption” no longer implies “disturbance” or “interruption,” which is especially important where awe and wonder are concerned. We speak of artistic disruption with pleasure when it has already had a massive effect and triggered sales miracles.** In this sense, the most advanced galleries today are the beguiling fashion of the hour. They sell what leading public museums have recently exhibited as “game changers.”

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