

Exhibition of the Week

'Pioneering Modern Painting: Cézanne and Pissarro 1865–1885

Museum of Modern Art, New York; through Sept. 12

French painters Paul Cézanne and Camille Pissarro met in 1861 and became fast friends. In the process, modern art was invented, said Ariella Budick in *Newsday*. Often they painted almost exactly the same scenes—orchards and small towns and farmer's fields. But this "hefty double show" allows their differences to come through clearly. In two 1877 paintings identically titled *Orchard, Côte Saint-Denis, at Pontoise*, Pissarro's "slender trees form a scrim over an amiable backdrop," while Cézanne's dark trees are all "impenetrable bulk." Pissarro was optimistic and fatherly; Cézanne tortured and rebellious.

Cézanne and Pissarro were united, however, in their disdain of convention, said Holland Cotter in *The New York Times*. When asked once how one might best advance art, Pissarro said, "Burn down the Louvre." Pissarro, nine years older than Cézanne, was born in the Caribbean, the son of a Jewish businessman and a Creole woman, while Cézanne came from the provincial South of France. The two unorthodox outsiders were shunned by the established artistic circles in Paris. But they prospered in their collegial but competitive "two-man collective, exchanging information and rotating roles."

Still, Cézanne utterly kills Pissarro in the comparison, said Jerry Saltz in *The*



Cézanne's *Landscape, Auvers-sur-Oise* (1872-74) (top), Pissarro's *L'Hermitage, seen from the Rue de la Côte du Jalet, Pontoise* (1875)

Village Voice. The Museum of Modern Art loves these pairings of great artists, having hosted "Matisse Picasso" and

"Picasso and Braque" in recent years. But rather than illuminating the specific genius of each artist, as "Matisse Picasso" did, the show reveals Pissarro to be utterly "done in by the massively talented, super-radical, wild-card Cézanne. This, despite the fact that Cézanne might not have been Cézanne without him." They were both early pioneers of the Impressionist style. But Cézanne broke the rules, while Pissarro only bent them. Pissarro's fields are very pretty fields, but Cézanne flattens the earth, making abstractions out of grass and hills. With his blocky swatches of color standing in for trees, Cézanne became "the first completely modern artist."

Cézanne has long been hailed as the founder of modern art, said Peter Schjeldahl in *The New Yorker*. MoMA, in particular, has advanced this view. Now, again, we can see why. Pissarro's pictures are pleasant enough to look at, with their picturesque tiny humans wandering off down bucolic paths. But Cézanne's landscapes are difficult, with multiple horizons and centers and "overlapping planes and textures—anticipating the nested bumps and hollows of tactile space" in cubism. The exhibition documents the back-and-forth of artistic influence. But its most valuable contribution is its vivid illustration of the difference between talent and genius.

King Tut II: Are museums selling out?

"Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art "resembles a high-end theme park," said David Pagel in the *Los Angeles Times*. The collection of objects from the tomb of the boy pharaoh, who died more than 3,000 years ago, is impressive. But the gilt vessels and ebony chairs are "drowned out by the silliness," tricked up with melodramatic lighting, cheesy backdrops, and distracting videos. No surprise there, said Edward Rothstein in *The New York Times*. The exhibition, mounted by the Egyptian government to raise funds for antiquities preservation, is being rented out by the second-largest rock-concert promoter in the United States. Egypt hopes to make \$10 million at each of four venues; LACMA, which is charging \$30 for admission, pays a fee to the promoter. Tut also launched the first museum blockbuster, when 8 million people came to view his remains at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1977. But in blockbusters, the profit motive can overshadow scholarship and education—the very goals of a museum. "Mass commercial appeal is not the incidental byproduct of this exhibition; that is its very goal." There's nothing wrong with that, said former Metropolitan Museum director Thomas Hoving, also in the *Los Angeles Times*. Sure, "these shows can be a little crass." But millions of people get to see stunning artifacts that otherwise could be sampled only by those with sufficient money and leisure. If the cost is "slightly higher ticket prices and a little crowding, so what?"

Where to Buy . . .

A selected exhibition in a private gallery

Josh Dorman at *George Billis Gallery, Los Angeles*

New York-based painter Josh Dorman buys antique maps, then desecrates them. He paints over their yellowed hills and valleys with volcanos and spiders and gnarled, leafless trees. They come out looking like underwater floating worlds or a savvy child's reworking of a guide to Middle Earth. Some of the maps leave aside strict topography in favor of colorful geometric mounds, like small abstract towers purloined from an installation of minimalist sculpture. They also resemble skyscrapers, torn from the cement and placed back down near pink elephantine shapes, swirling eruptions, and the stamp of the U.S. Geological Survey. The buried landmarks underpinning Dorman's fantasies make them seem like factual representations, maybe not of the immediate world but of an alternate or possible one. Like the best science-



Spolsions (2005)

fiction writers, Dorman mines the recent past for a queasy, intimate vision of the future. *Prices range from \$1,500 to \$9,500.*

Through July 30; 2716 S. La Cienega Blvd., (310) 838-3685; georgebillis.com