

The New York Times

Art

Holding a Mirror to a Mirror of the Past

By CAROL KINO

June 8, 2008

TWO days before the opening of his latest show, the artist Adam Cvijanovic took a break to size up his new installation, which he and two gallery employees had just erected in the back of Bellwether Gallery in Chelsea.



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Although he had been working furiously in his tiny Chinatown studio for the last four months, this was the first time he had seen his paintings as he had intended them to be displayed: glued onto nine 16 1/2-foot-high wooden panels, each of which was attached to a section of wooden scaffolding. Visually it was as if the paintings had been propped on giant easels around the room.

“I never got to see it all in one piece before,” he said. “I never got to see the height.” He still had plenty left to complete: half a panel here, several details there, and a last-minute portrait of his brother, who had just arrived from Los Angeles for the opening. But Mr. Cvijanovic (pronounced svec-YAHN-o-vitch) didn’t seem to care. “It really does what I was hoping it would do,” he said.

In recent years Mr. Cvijanovic, 47, has become known for his “wallpaper” painting installations, which typically render a landscape (a 52-foot-wide meadow, say, or a 21-foot-high glacier) at a relatively monumental size.



His “mental map,” with paintings and photographs that prepared him to paint “Belshazzar’s Feast.”

But this time he has tackled a more mythic monument: D. W. Griffith’s 1916 silent epic “Intolerance,” in particular the portion that unfolds in the court of ancient Babylon.

To create the film Griffith, the pioneer director, had a gargantuan set built in 1915 and filled it with sweeping staircases, plaster elephants and a cast of thousands. Although the movie is now frequently hailed as the diadem of his oeuvre, it flopped mightily at the box office. Griffith’s production company was forced into bankruptcy, and the fabulous set famously rotted in place for years at the corner of Hollywood and Sunset Boulevards as Hollywood grew up around it, mainly because he couldn’t afford to take it down.

In Mr. Cvijanovic’s painted interpretation, called “Adam Cvijanovic’s Colossal Spectacle,” he has chosen to portray Griffith’s dazzling failure — or triumph, depending on your viewpoint — in several different ways.

The show opens with a precisely rendered oil-on-Mylar painting that presents the set as it must have looked when it was freshly built in 1915, propped up on scaffolding and looming over a handful of streets and bungalows.

In another gallery about 30 oil sketches depict Griffith’s set in various stages of development and decay, as well as several scenes from the film. Some show the site as it appears today, a traffic-clogged intersection that is home to the Vista Theater, a gas station and a Vons supermarket. Others depict the Edenic paradise that it was circa 1905, before the movie industry hit town. (In another few days this display may well mushroom in size, given that Mr. Cvijanovic is still at work.)

But the show’s real *pièce de résistance* can be found in the backroom installation. Stand among the easel-like scaffoldings, and you behold a violet-tone rendering of the film’s climactic moment: a feast in the court of Belshazzar, Babylon’s ruler, just as the Persian Army arrives to seize control, as glimpsed from the foot of the palace stairs.

With its towering height and steeply receding perspective, the installation feels spacious but also claustrophobic, a bit like standing inside one of Richard Serra’s torqued ellipses. In the far corner light seems to pour from an open doorway, just as it does in the film. “If you’d been at the bottom of those steps in 1916,” Mr. Cvijanovic said, “this is about what it would’ve looked like.”

Mr. Cvijanovic’s set is also filled with soldiers, eunuchs, priests, slaves and dancers, most of whom he painted from life in his studio. For some he used professional models, like the burlesque dancer Julie Atlas Muz. But most of the major roles went to friends and supporters including the artists Steve Mumford, Inka Essenhigh, Ellen Altfest and David Humphrey; patrons like Jacqueline Lawrence, curator of the UBS corporate collection, and the collectors Bayard Morris and Dan Peyton. (Mr. Cvijanovic cast himself as Daniel, the prophet who read the writing on the wall that foretold Babylon’s demise.)

“I just figured it gives it another personal dimension,” he said. “I thought I was overdue to make portraits, and I couldn’t figure out another way to do it that made sense.”

The piece also includes a Valkyrie-like likeness of Mr. Cvijanovic’s dealer, Becky Smith, who said she had initially been horrified when he outlined his plan to assay portraiture as well as landscape and installation in the exhibition. “I was like, ‘Dude, you can’t!’” she recalled. “‘Name any artist from history who can do both.’”

Although Mr. Cvijanovic remained adamant and Ms. Smith eventually came around, he confessed in an interview that his concept had made him nervous too. “I’m basically making a painting about hubris,” he said, “and it’s tempting fate to do that.”

As he readily admits, he has been burned by hubris in the past. At the age of 17 he dropped out of high school in Cambridge, Mass., to devote himself to painting. “I wanted to cut off my options,” he said. “No teaching, no second profession, no out.”

By his early 20s Mr. Cvijanovic had become well known in the Boston area for being “a kind of prodigy making figurative paintings,” said Gary Garrels, chief curator of the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, who was working in Boston at the time.

In 1985 Mr. Cvijanovic moved to New York, and his expressionistic narratives — one presented a mammoth Lower East Side streetscape filled with people — allowed him to crest the 1980s market boom. By the end of the decade, while living off a gallery credit card, he began to incorporate wire, fabric and even cars into his work. The resulting installations and reliefs were a critical flop, and his market began to dry up.

He said he had been stunned and wounded by this fall from grace, something he now ascribes to hubris. But Mr. Garrels said he saw the situation differently. “I think that Adam felt that painting came too easily to him,” he said. “His facility was so natural that he had to create problems that he had to solve.”

During the art market crash of the early 1990s Mr. Cvijanovic turned to decorative painting to get by, and specialized in landscape murals. (One early client was the collector Henry Buhl; Mr. Cvijanovic’s trompe l’oeil painting helped transform Mr. Buhl’s SoHo loft into a Renaissance palazzo.)

When Mr. Cvijanovic resurfaced in the art world some years later he was painting grandly scaled landscapes that seemed to embrace many of the conventions of 19th-century American painting, like its sublime take on nature and its awe-inspiring illusionism. Made with house paint and Flashe, a French vinyl acrylic, on Tyvek, the paintings could also be moved and reinstalled with ease. Mr. Cvijanovic referred to them as “wallpapers,” a contrarian stance that put him precisely in tune with the post-postmodernist times.

At least that was Ms. Smith’s reaction when she discovered Mr. Cvijanovic in late 2001, when she was running an earlier incarnation of Bellwether in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Like John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage and Elizabeth Peyton, he was making “genre-based painting,” she said, but also “combining it with installation in a way that was just profoundly interesting, using the gallery as the frame.”

Apart from the critical edge, “there was an emotion to it,” she said, adding that she was also taken by the work’s ambition. “His enterprise is athletic and heroic,” she said. “It’s, like, Olympian.”

In 2002 she exhibited “Disko Bay,” an enigmatic vista that depicts a body of water filled with icebergs, and Mr. Cvijanovic’s career was reborn. He is now the oldest artist in the Bellwether stable.

“I really feel I’m a much more comfortable fit in this moment than I was in my own so-called moment,” Mr. Cvijanovic said. “But even with the moment I’m in, I’m off in left field, doing my own thing.”

Witness his remake of “Intolerance.” He had been familiar with Griffith’s film since the age of 9, he said, when he saw a two-page photograph of the set in a Time-Life coffee-table book. But he never thought of turning it into an artwork until early 2006, when he walked into an Oscar night television party given by Ms. Altfest, another Bellwether painter. “I thought, ‘Why don’t I do this?’” he said.

He said his initial research had convinced him that he was on the right track: Griffith had modeled his Babylon on several 19th-century academic history paintings, including “Belshazzar’s Feast” by John Martin and “The Babylonian Marriage Market” by Edwin Long, both British Romantics, and “The Fall of Babylon” by the popular French Salon painter George Rochegrosse. “This painting is like a hall of mirrors,” he said.

He immediately jettisoned the idea of repainting the set directly from photographs. “I didn’t want to meditate on photography,” he said. “I wanted to do a painted reconstruction of a film.” (His foot-of-the-stairs panoramic viewpoint never appears in the film.)

He watched the movie over and over on his computer, slowing it down and examining it frame by frame until he had learned the set by heart, to the point that he could “rotate it in my head like a 3-D model,” he said. Only then did he start painting.

The first piece he made, a 10-foot-long frieze of the set that Bellwether exhibited at the 2006 NADA fair in Miami Beach, took several months to complete. Two months later, in time for the 2007 Armory Show in Manhattan, he produced a 15-foot version. The current installation, whose cast of humans made it far trickier to pull off, took him about four months.

Because of his working method, which involves copious research and then a relatively short period of actual painting, he sees himself as being a bit “like a filmmaker,” he said. Yet there are other ways he can be likened to a film auteur, and perhaps even Griffith. Mr. Cvijanovic said, “I saw this project as a great opportunity to make a giant history painting, the likes of which the art world hasn’t seen in a long time.”