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Banks Violette's *Untitled* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 2005



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ULTRA-VIOLETTE by Ben Davis

"Banks Violette: *Untitled*," May 27-Oct. 2, 2005, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10021

The first thing you see when you enter the Whitney's first-floor project gallery is the 16 x 20 foot recreation of a burned-out church, slightly elevated atop a gleaming, mirror-like black stage. The beams of the structure are zombie white, gashed here and there, made of salt bonded with polyurethane resin. In places, the structure is broken, the jagged ends rimmed with black as if charred.

As you walk around the construction, the scene is washed over by the murky, dank drone of electric **noise**, throbbing from speakers around the perimeter of the space. The ominous music seems to pulsate with your movements (in fact, it is connected to motion sensors), as if the ruin was haunted and responding to you as you circled it.

The atmosphere is portentous -- but there are no obvious clues as to what it portends. The installation has an opaque, sealed feeling; it does not explain itself, it just growls amorphously.

However, since this sculptural simulacrum of destruction and its ominous soundtrack are the work of Banks Violette, you can be certain that they do have a concrete reference behind them that explains their mystery. Violette (b. 1973), a star at the 2004 Whitney Biennale who has now been rewarded with his own Whitney solo show, is known for making works that focus on the places where art and real life collide, almost always with reference to the culture of heavy metal.

For instance, Violette's installation for the 2004 Biennale was composed of a cryptic series of items, the significance of which was unlocked by the theme of rock-and-roll suicide: It centered around a ravaged drum set, with the surrounding walls decorated by large, exquisitely detailed graphite drawings, including an image of Kurt Cobain, along with a sweeping rendition of the logo of Judas Priest, a band famous for supposedly inciting its fans to kill themselves. In 2002, Violette's installation at New York's Team gallery was even more grim: titled *Arroyo Grande 7.22.95*, it consisted of an array of artifacts (a huge painting of skulls, a grove of drum-kit-like tripods, a painting of weeping eyes...) that became intelligible when the viewer learned that the show's title is the date and location of a notorious incident in California in which three teenage boys gruesomely murdered a young woman to promote their heavy metal band.

Violette's *Untitled* piece at the Whitney has a similar back story, this time connected with a series of events involving youthful black metal enthusiasts in Norway. In the artist's own words (from an *Art Fairs International* interview done during the creation of the piece): "They



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formed bands that basically tried to out-evil one another. As a consequence, within a five-year span in this very small country there were about 60 arsons of churches, there were grave desecrations and a series of murders. The way this whole thing came to light was through a central murder that sparked a large-scale investigation. One member of a band stabbed to death a member of another band. His getaway driver, who was kind of mentally ill -- a really interesting guy -- basically went to the police. So he was the Judas figure."

The driver, Snorre Ruch, went to jail as accomplice to the crimes. Researching the events, Violette struck up a correspondence with Ruch, and for *Untitled* the artist contracted him to compose the turbulent music for the church installation -- itself a 3D recreation of the cover image from an album by another member of the nefarious group of metal heads.

Blissfully and deliberately "amoral" (a word the artist favors), Violette's incorporation of sinister events begs the viewer to be put off, seeming to push buttons similar to Marcus Harvey's portrait of English child murderer Myra Hindley, so disgusting to British visitors to the "Sensation" show in 1997. But the dubious shock factor of Harvey's painting is all on the surface, whereas Violette deliberately keeps his references from being readable at first sight.

Violette's restraint is admirable, though his inscrutability does give his installations a blank-slate-like character that encourages his admirers to project willfully into them. The Whitney catalogue accompanying *Untitled* sees curator Shamin M. Momin crank the critical hyperbole nob to 11, finding in the artist's oeuvre an invocation of mythic symbols similar to Argentine fabulist Jorge Luis Borges, "alien to the progressive, static march of modern history" and "essentially premodern in its storytelling." But Borges' quiet intellectual nightmares only compare to Violette's pop-Goth esthetic if you abstract both from their temperament, subject matter and historical context -- it's like comparing Hemmingway to the Sex Pistols because they're both blunt.

I don't think that you have to take Violette quite so seriously to appreciate his work; in fact, I think taking it too seriously does the work violence. What makes his pieces so unique is not the big issues that they confront, but the unholy marriage that they propose between the high-brow muteness of minimalist sculpture and the creepy, nerdy, *very sincere* culture of heavy metal -- an uneasy coupling that accounts for the fluctuation that I have highlighted between the abstractness of their presentation and the richness of their referential content. In an art world full of conceptual sculpture, what makes Violette stand out is clearly not his acknowledgement, again in Momin's words, of "hybridity, ambiguity, and the slippage (or permeability) of worlds" (isn't this just a cliché about all postmodern art?), but rather his genuine attachment to this subculture, evidenced by his recurrent motifs of smashed instruments, Satanic symbols and spooky black mirrors.

As for Violette's ambiguous references to the particularly "heavy" aspects of heavy metal (violence, murder, etc.), I'd say that they serve as a sort of Trojan horse, giving his work a cerebral shell that lets art about this relatively unsubtle, unironic subculture pass through the gates of the art world. But if one returns to the comparison with Marcus Harvey's sensational serial killer painting, the different degree of seriousness is clear: Harvey's intent was clearly to provoke the audience and test the limits of artistic tolerance, whereas the tale that underlies Violette's *Untitled* is too foreign and esoteric to have much of a gut impact on its American



Installation view of Violette's *Untitled (model for a future disaster)* (2004) at the 2004 Whitney Biennale Exhibition

audience -- it's more a fanboyish display of heavy metal trivia than anything else.

Finally, the Whitney installation is best understood as a sincere homage to power of the music that Violette loves, a monument to metal. The artist's recreation of the church is executed with an endearingly worshipful ghoulishness -- it is literally a piece of heavy metal cover art raised on a pedestal (the black stage) and enshrined. At the same time, the audience-interactive atmosphere of black metal noise increases the funhouse-like feeling, displaying a desire to involve his audience physically in his musical world. Banks Violette makes art that rocks, and that's no small thing.



Installation view of Banks Violette's *"Arroyo Grande 7.22.95"* at Team, New York 2002

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