

NEW YORK

# PAUL MCCARTHY

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

In an unexpected twist, Paul McCarthy's recent exhibition at the Whitney set aside the grotesque Pop imagery for which he is known to highlight the abstract spatial thinking that has informed his work since the mid-'60s. Building on the psychological disorientation in seminal works by Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham, among others, McCarthy's show, titled "Central Symmetrical Rotation Movement," edged toward a potentially nauseating effect. The emphasis was dizzying bodily sensation over heightened mental self-awareness.

The show's main attraction was *Spinning Room* (2008), originally conceived in 1971 but realized only now for this exhibition. With rear-projection screens for walls, *Spinning Room* was turned inside out by four exterior projectors connected to a set of surveillance cameras rotating on a turntable at its center. Walking through the installation, one saw one's own image roll by, sometimes upside down or else at a slight delay, punctuated by blue blasts of video feedback, as cameras and projectors came into momentary alignment. As one was torn away from oneself, feelings of disembodiment crossed incongruously with a heightened sense of one's own physical presence.

*Mad House* (2008), which McCarthy hopes to license as an amusement park ride, offered a similar head rush. A spinning chair in a bare room that also rotates either with or counter to the motion of the chair, *Mad House* would have been a thrilling, if not vomit-inducing, ride. However, for safety reasons, visitors to the Whitney were limited to watching from the sidelines as the empty house swirled into motion. This detachment had the fortunate side effect of opening the work up to an allegorical reading. A cartoonish model of existential alienation, *Mad House* underscored the black humor in McCarthy's outlook. Deemed less threatening to viewers, *Bang Bang Room* (1992) allowed people to stand inside the work as its hydraulic-powered walls slowly closed in. But the oddly restrained slamming doors were, like the special effects of a B horror movie, more laughable than uncanny. Regrettably, the work's lighter comedy distracted from its more serious play with the authoritarian undertones of domestic architecture.

The show's two films, both recently rediscovered by McCarthy, demonstrated the artist's early interest in fractured architecture. In *Couple* (1966), the camera rapidly spirals through a vaguely defined domestic space. Only occasionally do specific details (a man eating cereal, a woman watching television) come into sharp focus. *Spinning Camera Walking*, *Mike Cram Walking* (1971) likewise fragments the space it captures on film; the camera spins, catching glimpses of a friend as he walks the perimeter of McCarthy's empty studio, to deform the area he is in the process of delimiting. In both films, as in the installations *Mad House* and *Spinning Room*, rotation decenters the viewer in an irrational space.

In addition to these formally linked works, the exhibition included several drawings, videos, and photographs that further elaborated on its central conceit in both direct and unexpected ways. The video *Spinning Edit #1* (1970) shows McCarthy twirling in a corner with his arms extended to barely brush against the walls around him. His steady rhythm and stony face suggest a trancelike state. *Meditating Financial Federation Drawing* (1971), a ballpoint pen sketch on letterhead from a Culver City insurance agency, likewise explores vertigo as an altered state of consciousness. The drawing depicts motion arrows swirling around and flowing through a head seen in profile, below which reads a short poetic phrase: "Be so quite to catch a small part. Waiting for a stream to flow through." Like a Sufi dervish, McCarthy embraces dizziness as a way of dissolving the ego.

Two additional works more obliquely delved into this same headspace. Hanging from the ceiling, *Looking Out*, *Skull Card* (1968)

is a cheap sheet of cardstock with two eyeholes and a smear of charcoal between suggesting the nasal cavity of a skull. Installed by the exhibition's mirrored back wall, the piece offered viewers an imaginative glimpse of their own skull. *Santa's Village Cave; In and Out* (2005–08), two color photographs of the strangely ear-shaped faux-rock opening to an abandoned attraction in a dilapidated theme park, further evoked the skull as a spacious cavern. The diptych reframed McCarthy's other amusement park architecture as similar models of the abstract space of the mind in tension with the literal space of the head.

Reveling in the bodily, "Central Symmetrical Rotation Movement" recast Disneylandesque thrills as a cheap way to lose one's sense of self. Exploring nausea, dizziness, and vertigo as transgressive states, the exhibition called attention to an analytic slant sometimes overlooked in McCarthy's more provocative installations. With the cynicism surrounding McCarthy's market success and bad-boy reputation threatening to cloud the earnest dialogue around his work, this deftly curated exhibition served as an important reminder of the multifaceted themes underlying McCarthy's practice. —BEN CARLSON

BELOW: Paul McCarthy, installation views of *Mad House*, 2008, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

