

A Trip Through the Revolving Doors of Perception

Paul McCarthy fans are in for a shock. They will find almost nothing of what this Los Angeles master of transgressive provocation is famous for in "Central Sym-

metrical Rotation Movement: Three Installations, Two Films" at the Whitney Museum of American Art. No psychotic clown-

ART REVIEW

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ing, no scatological food play, no pornographic vaudeville, no raunchy political satire, no gross self-abnegation.

What they will discover instead is a smart, tightly focused study of the formal and conceptual underpinnings of Mr. McCarthy's art: his work stripped to its bare, abstract yet still metaphorically resonant essentials. Organized by Chrissie Iles, a Whitney curator, the show of about 22 works dating from 1966 to the present includes three major sculptures, two early short films and assorted drawings, photographs and videos.

Two basic motifs connect the various pieces: the room and rotational movement, or spinning. An early example is a three-minute black-and-white film from 1971 ("Spinning Camera, Walking, Mike Cram Walking") that Mr. McCarthy made by rotating a camera on a tripod in a mostly empty room. The view goes round and round, alternating bright windows and dark walls and occasionally giving a glimpse of a man walking in circles in the room.

A recent effort is "Mad House," which was conceived in 1999 and completed this year. It consists of a large steel-framed wooden box mounted on a powerful motor. A door in the box reveals a room with a padded seat inside. (There are also three square windows.) When turned on, the room rotates at high speed while inside the chair rotates too, though not necessarily in the same direction or at the same velocity.

"Mad House" is intended as a ride, but as it is now set up, it is

Paul McCarthy's "Central Symmetrical Rotation Movement: Three Installations, Two Films," is on view through Oct. 12 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street, (800) 944-8639, whitney.org.



ANDREW HENDERSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Paul McCarthy's "Spinning Room" (2008) at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

too dangerous for anyone to try it because it's going too fast. Regardless, a viewer naturally imagines himself seated in the spinning chair in the spinning room — a scary thought.

Besides the formal tension between the containing structure of the room and the centrifugal dynamism of spinning, a preoccupation with perceptual experience links "Spinning Camera" and "Mad House." In the film you have the sense of looking out through the eyes of someone who is spinning around in a room. "Mad House," with its two eye-like windows, also suggests the idea of being in someone's head — someone whose mind is spinning out of control.

For "Couple" (1966), a 15-minute film that is the exhibition's earliest piece, Mr. McCarthy set the focus on his camera at two feet and then roamed around a room with it, creating a blurry, aimless tour. Two naked people, a man and a woman, appear intermittently. It is like seeing through the eyes of a restless infant who has not yet learned to focus.

In "Spinning Room," which was conceived in 1970 and also completed this year, things get really complicated. Four video

Central Symmetrical Rotation Movement

Three Installations, Two Films
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cameras rotate on a gleaming high-tech machine within a square, walk-in enclosure made of rear-projection screens. Images recorded by the cameras pass through computers and then to projectors stationed outside the enclosure. The projectors direct streaming video pictures of people inside onto the screens.

If that sounds complicated, wait, there's more: The rotating pictures on the screens may be live, delayed, upside down, reversed or in photographic negative. Different image streams are layered over one another, and overhead lights are going on and off. All these feedback loops create a trippy, kinetic Cubism reflecting a distinctively modern delirium of perceptual and cognitive overload.

In the design of the exhibition Mr. McCarthy has amplified everything by making one long wall bisecting the Whitney's second floor into a mirror, visually doubling the show and turning it into

a bewildering fun house.

The exhibition's third major sculpture, the scary and noisy "Bang Bang Room" (1992), adds to the atmosphere of a mad carnival. It does not spin, but it has four hinged, motorized walls that open and close like giant butterfly wings, imparting a slight illusion of propellerlike rotation. Each wall has a door that keeps opening and banging shut. Step into the room; as the walls close around you and the doors of perception slam wildly, you'll feel like you're in a surrealistic horror movie.

Those experienced with Mr. McCarthy will note his influences, including the filmmaker Michael Snow, and the sculptors and video makers Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci and Dan Graham. Unconcerned with stylistic uniqueness, Mr. McCarthy is a cheerful, unabashed borrower of forms and ideas.

But his project has its own gripping mission. Over and over Mr. McCarthy returns to the human fact that we are inescapably at the mercy of what our senses tell us about the world and what our brains manage to make of that information. We may go out of our minds, but we can never get out of our heads.