

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

May 3, 2007

Art & Dubai

Filed under: [Pamela Anderson](#) — alecsothblog @ 10:28 pm

Yesterday, [the Mirror reported](#) that Tommy Lee and ex-wife Pamela Anderson are buying a luxury home together in Dubai. Lee and Anderson bought "Greece" – one of the three hundred man-made islands forming The World off the coast of Dubai:



We're going for Greece because I'm Greek originally, says Lee, "Pamela actually turned me on to the whole thing. Life is good now. I'm happy because I'm seeing my boys again."

[Once again](#), where Pamela goes, the art world follows.

In the May issue of [Modern Painters](#), Matthew Collings writes about visiting the first Dubai DIFC Art Fair:

Pampered seminude white people cross my field of vision, give the Indians a glance, and disappear, and just as I'm thinking, "Wow, Martin Parr, great capturer of new social stereotype situations, should be here photographing all of this," Martin Parr himself appears and takes a picture.



Dubai. 2007. Martin Parr/Magnum Photos

The way people dressed and their demeanour was very Bling," writes Parr on the [Magnum Blog](#), "not a word I have encountered much, but you know it when you see it."

But the highlight for Parr wasn't the blue-chip art:

Just before I left I was taken to a small souk in Sharjah where they actually sell things old, not an easy thing to locate in Dubai. There, to my amazement, was a fantastic selection of Saddam Hussein plates, vases and ornaments...So I returned, rather pleased with myself, with a huge bag full of Saddam pottery.

In the Modern Painters article, Matthew Collings talks about the "transubstantiation of bilge into stuff of awe." But the bilge he's talking about isn't cultural ephemera like Saddam pottery:

It's only a matter of time before the emirates' superrich have the same funny relationship to contemporary art that we have in the West: alienated familiarity. We've gotten used to a spectacular culture of art in which we both question the bullshit and buy the bullshit. The bullshit is bullshit but at the same time it's a status symbol: "Look at me! I own the bullshit they're all questioning!" This is the paradox the art-fair people are now in the process of selling to the wealthiest people in the world.

7 Comments

1. i read frankfurt's "on bullshit" several months ago. it defines bullshit entertainingly and well.

Comment by aizan — May 3, 2007 @ [10:51 pm](#)

2. So very interesting. And sad at once.
I'd probably be more interested than sad if I was selling to "The Wealthiest People in the World".
But that's a modern problem I guess.

Last year the New Yorker did a wonderful story on Dubai and the new architecture in an Art and Architecture issue.

These island got a mention. Great reading and photography if you can find a copy.

Comment by [Don Guss](#) — May 3, 2007 @ [11:25 pm](#)

3. Dubai, it's island world and the art fair seem to be crying out for a JG Ballard novel.

Comment by [guybatey](#) — May 4, 2007 @ [2:18 am](#)

4. I'm not surprised that British papers, commentators and artists figure prominently here. The British obsession with wealth (and where it came from), class (where you came from), and taste (what you spend your wealth on) is well known, but seems to be going global as a new global aristocracy (based on earnings from pop culture) establishes itself, and gradually imposes its tastes on the rest of us. You can sneer but you can't hide... Irony is no defense against wealthy vulgarity in the 21st century, any more than snobbery was in the 20th. John Berger, where are you when we need you?

Comment by [Vinegar Tom](#) — May 4, 2007 @ [4:43 am](#)

5. dear alec..

i would have left things on a more intelligent note.
keep up the good work. pamelalee is so ten years ago. it is all postmodern.

Comment by [louis friend](#) — May 5, 2007 @ [5:30 pm](#)

6. What is it about Martin Parr or rather what his photographs represent that touches our collective unconscious so deeply?

While working in India recently I was staying in Varanasi for the fourth time in the last two years. While millions wax lyrical about this city that is older than time itself and photojournalists flock there to trade blows with the local gangs for the privilege of photographing burning corpses, I personally have found the day to day experience of the city falls far below my expectations such as the level of touts, tourism and hassle that one experiences there. The ubiquity of cameras being shoved in the face of every limbless Saddhu can make you, as a photographer, feel like the worst kind of leech.

And so it was that I was standing at the so called 'burning ghats' one evening at sundown, when three enormous row boats filled with Japanese Christian students pull up alongside the pyres of burning bodies. Perhaps a hundred and fifty teenagers in matching face masks and identical navy t-shirts snapping, recording and finally praying in unison as the rowers commenced rowing and the boats disappeared off down the ganges and the sun dropped. I stood and watched the proceedings and all I could think of was Mr. Martin Parr.

Two days later I saw two flies mating on a pile of sugary candy on the side of the street.

Enough said. India like everywhere else is calling Martin...

Comment by ross — May 7, 2007 @ [12:54 pm](#)

7. Vinegar Tom going on in baffling way about Brits problem. Certainly confusing message. Seems to think irony is synonym of blankness. Surely it's clear even from the short quotes that the gist of my article is a critical comment about art and wealth? Isn't invoking John Berger, big poshie, a snobbery (and therefore class) thing?

Comment by [matthew collings](#) — June 8, 2007 @ [9:57 am](#)