Rahel Alma

Before there was normcore, there was Art Club 2000 (AC2K). In 1992, dealer Colin de Land convened a collective of seven Cooper Union art students, Malcolm McLaren style. He was interested in youth and identity formation; they were interested in collective practices and art world celebrity culture. De Land offered them a show the following summer at his space American Fine Arts (AFA) – which became an annual affair – and played both mentor and manager. Their inaugural 1993 show “Commingle” was based on megaretailer and harbingers of gentrification The Gap, which had recently set up shop in the East Village. True to their promise to dissolve by the year 2000, like a millenarian pumpkin coach, AC2K became defunct in 1999.

A number of works from this inaugural exhibition are on view in the tight retrospective at Artists Space in New York. More accurately, the 1993 show is restaged almost verbatim, which adds to the show's time-capsule effect. A large orange wall bisects the space; one corner has stair-like crenelations cut out, with shoeboxes stacked beside, as if holding it up. A number of walls are emblazoned with lines from dumpster-scavenged customer service, or loss-prevention manuals that also feature in seven black-and-white photographs and some ersatz merchandise display installations. Standees featuring AC2K in plus animal costumes, all puppy-eyed and droopy-eared, complete the picture. It’s all fine in an anodyne, clean-cut kind of way. Best in show are the AC2K’s iconic group portraits featuring the GAP-clad gang (clothes were_chunky returned post-shoot) donning double denim and Axl Rose bandanas in Times Square,

dressed in stripes in the Art in America library, the verticality of the shelved tomes satisfyingly echoed in a row of slat-backed chairs, playing Scrabble while reading ArtNews, lounging in living rooms and diners and at the Angelika Theater. (The art press, unsurprisingly, adored them.) We’re at the right aesthetic-temporal distance to receive these images: the 1990s revival is over but has not yet completed its churn through fast fashion. Their vibes feel on point in a comfortable, classic kind of way.

The rest of the exhibition features a number of other bodies of work and archival materials that highlight their interest in the gentrification of SoHo, the spectre of downtown New York, their turns abroad, gallery labour, and the art world’s self-mythologising impulses. They flirt with institutional critique, most successfully in the sharp scrolling LED sign Untitled (Statements Relating to the Death of the Author) (1998) and a suite of CRTS (cathode-ray tubes) featuring prominent downtown artists reminiscing about the 70s. In an area devoted to recreating their second show at AFA

arranged according to section headings in the accompanying booklet, replete with a colour-coded map. It’s a show that feels peer-reviewed in every sense of the word, whose limitations aren’t of scenography or curation but the work itself, presented as-is. And it is, ultimately, a very solid retrospective of a group that arrived on the scene with such a bang, and whose
influence, along with contemporaries Bernadette Corporation, can be felt decades later, but whose later work boasts all the fizz of a long expired Alka-Seltzer. Who wants to be a historical footnote or worse, an academic citation? Wouldn’t you rather be the caption below the ad?

There’s another through-line here, however inadvertent: the terror of white representation. The past few years and especially this summer, meanwhile, have seen a much-needed corrective to the marginalisation of BIPOC artists in the US art scene. Now it may be happenstance that six white and one Asian friend formed a collective in art school and decided to make group portraits, though we can see in it a reflection of both art school demographics and the pervasive invisibility of whiteness as universal, unremarkable, a blank canvas and so on. When displayed in an exhibition context, however, we read intention into aesthetic choices. As a result, their imagery feels threatening, especially to a non-white viewer at a time when racial tensions are especially high.

I suspect AC2K might enjoy the irony of this, given the emphasis they placed on cultural context and scaffolding, along with their engagement with the poststructuralist theory of the death of the author (or artist). But a lot has changed in a few short decades. For every generation, there’s a Gap, and some gaps might just be too wide to breach.

Rahel Aima
