

ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

REVIEWS

Judith Schaechter

CLAIRE OLIVER GALLERY

Judith Schaechter's *The Battle of Carnival and Lent*, 2011–12, was first installed at the historical Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia together with sixteen related works of stained glass. These glass pieces remained colorful and exciting here, yet a significant component of the works' original meaning—a commentary on the nature of imprisonment in the early modern era—was lamentably lost in the gallery context.

I've visited the Eastern State Penitentiary several times; it's a rather gloomy Gothic fortress, intimidating from the outside, oppressive on the inside. In its heyday—it was built in 1829 and closed in 1971, and is now a national historic landmark—the jail was where major federal criminals (among them Al Capone and Willie Sutton) were incarcerated in solitary confinement. The building's design was partly based on Jeremy Bentham's panopticon and became the model for many similar such institutions in the US. It was a practical place, with an octagonal center; guards strolled along the radiating corridors, looking unseen into the surrounding cells. An early example of the architecture of the prison reform movement in the US, the Eastern State Penitentiary



Judith Schaechter,
*The Battle of Carnival
and Lent*, 2011–12,
stained glass,
56 x 56 x 2".

was the first prison in this country designed with the express purpose of changing the behavior of inmates. Its small and claustrophobic cells were meant to coax the isolated men to look back on themselves, to repair their own souls. The hope was that they would develop a conscience, a vigilant superego that would keep constant watch on their impulse to commit crimes.

At the prison, Schaechter's windows underscored the ecclesiastical undercurrents of this method of incarceration. Seen in photographs displayed at Claire Oliver Gallery, the stained-glass panes had been

installed in the narrow slits running along the ceiling of each cell, where they bathed the dreary rooms in colored light. The cells came to look distinctly like monks' chambers, drawing attention to the way in which the prisoner—like a member of an order—was expected to contemplate and atone, as if his crimes against society were sins. Light is the basic point of Schaechter's windows: Passing through her multilayered stained glass, natural light becomes spiritual light—a saving grace. Some of the designs are ornamental patterns, with floral shapes; others show single figures, somber and saintly. Sky blue, at once regal and virginal—the color of the Virgin Mary, Queen of Heaven—abounds.

The centerpiece of the Claire Oliver show, *The Battle of Carnival and Lent*, had been installed in the penitentiary's entranceway. Carnival, a season of merrymaking and self-indulgence, precedes Lent, a period of fasting and penitence—restraint and self-abnegation—in preparation for Easter, when Christ was resurrected after being crucified. Carnival is the release before the proverbial forty days in the wilderness and the Revelation. According to Schaechter, *The Battle of Carnival and Lent*, titled after a painting by Bruegel, is as much a battle between light and dark as it is an allegorical battle between virtue and vice. And that struggle is implicitly the conflict that rages in the prisoner's soul. In Schaechter's imagining, that war appears unresolved, dead-ending in chaos—a turbulent clutter of ninety-six figures, not readily distinguishable as vicious or virtuous. They include bird-beaked demons, human-headed snails, berobed men with devil's horns, and ghoulish clowns. They're all part of what seems to be one endless carnival in which the world is not simply upside down but falling apart. The monstrous crowd in Schaechter's work has a certain affinity with the one in James Ensor's *Entry of Christ into Brussels*, 1888, except Schaechter includes no Christ, making it clear this is a triumph of the grotesque.

—Donald Kuspit