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ImageTwo stylish brothers, Lords John and Bernard Stuart, strike a pose in a painting by Anthony Van Dyck that is one of 29 works discussed in "Glittering Images."Credit...National Gallery, London/Art ResourceWhy "Glittering Images" would confine itself almost exclusively to Europe and North America is as inexplicable as it is inexcusable. How can any serious survey published in 2012 slight the testament of the human condition as expressed in artworks from the world's other civilizations? Anyone who has been following the body count of the culture wars over the past decades knows Paglia for her scrappy public persona, her pungent opinion pieces and boisterous TV interviews. But no amount of apotheosis and breathless encomium will elevate it to be other than exactly what it is — entertainment. Loading PreviewSorry, preview is currently unavailable. She praises Lempicka for being "one of the most strong-willed and fanatically industrious women artists in history," most of whose paintings are privately owned, often by movie stars, a fact that, in Paglia's judgment, "has compromised her reputation among art critics." She prefers Lempicka, "a liberated new woman with her own agenda," to Frida Kahlo, whose self-created "symbolic martyrdom" clearly annoys her. You can download the paper by clicking the button above. Thus Bronzino's chapter checks off the Mannerism box, while the Parisian Hôtel de Soubise embodies Rococo and Eleanor Antin's "100 Boots" installation piece illustrates Conceptual Art. A "technology" is no more than a way of doing something, a means to an end, and throughout history artists have been stimulated by new technological and conceptual ideas. Such cultural tunnel vision is only made worse by her passing over two millennia of European art without including a single representation of Christ. "Star Wars" is not. Earlier in her book Paglia states that art "expresses our soul." If her claim for Lucas's importance is valid, we might well ask what kind of soul we Americans now have that is expressed not by Oedipus, or by Krishna, Lear, Faust, Tristan or Leopold Bloom, but rather by Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi. This argument claims that the conventional fine arts have diminished in significance, leaving only those innovators who have "embraced technology" as worthy of our attention. There is entertainment, and then there is something infinitely richer: what we call "the sublime," the true record of our spiritual condition that we get from serious and complex artworks. Occasionally she can get on a good roll, as when discussing female Egyptian figures, Picasso's "Damoiselles d'Avignon" or Andy Warhol. "Culture," she writes in the introduction to "Glittering Images: A Journey Through Art From Egypt to 'Star Wars,'" "is now largely defined by all-pervasive mass media and slavishly monitored personal electronic devices." The digital revolution has heated up our social interaction to the point where it has severely damaged our ability for sustained analytical thought, making the aesthetic encounter fraught with jarring interruptions and the chatter of competing visual and aural stimuli. There is nothing shockingly modern about the dynamic between artistic creation and technological innovation, be it an intellectual discovery like perspective or a new piece of hardware like the movie camera or the electric guitar. Have we reached a point in time where the very best we have to offer is "Star Wars," a creation that, for all the enjoyment it may have afforded us in our youth, has all the soul and emotional resonance of a video game and ponders the mystery of our existence at the level of a toddler? These are not uninteresting works, but their inclusion is unlikely to kindle the kind of flame that would turn an uninitiated reader into a zealot. In anointing Lucas, Paglia has signed on to a currently popular thesis that blames serious artists who, because of their arrogance, have lost touch with the general public and brought about their own marginalization. But Paglia's choice of examples, coupled with her frequent broadsides on everything from New York gallery pricing to feminist politics to "the in-group of hip cognoscenti" and those wickedly subversive post-structuralists, damages her argument and leaves one wondering exactly to whom she is talking.Choosing 29 examples to sum up several thousand years of artistic activity is a hopeless task for any critic, and such an arbitrary sampling can work only if it is framed as a confession, as an act of love — "These are the artworks that I cannot imagine living without, and I want to tell you why." Paglia communicates such intensity at times in "Break, Blow, Burn," when she writes about the poetry of Dickinson or Donne or Wallace Stevens. This is a thin thread on which to hang the appraisal of a living artist. Written with the proverbial common reader in mind, "Glittering Images" comprises a historical sequence from the ancient Egyptian funerary images of Queen Nefertari to George Lucas's "Revenge of the Sith" episode of "Star Wars." Each work is located in its historical and stylistic context and then subjected to Paglia's "reading." This format follows the plan of her 2005 collection of commentaries on English-language poems, "Break, Blow, Burn," which spans several centuries from Shakespeare to Joni Mitchell. Any book that encourages us to read more closely and to look more imaginatively has to be a good thing, but "Glittering Images" is so agenda-driven and so riddled with polemical asides that its potential to persuade is forever being compromised. What speaks to us in a work of art and makes it resistant to the passage of time is the depth of the humanity it expresses. The staggering advances in engineering that enabled the building of the medieval cathedrals and the introduction of the hammered piano, which allowed Beethoven to conceive a music of immense physical and emotional force, were both the result of technological advances. The films of William Kentridge, the serene Land Art of Andy Goldsworthy, the paintings of Anselm Kiefer, "Einstein on the Beach" — all these are sublime. To see George Lucas as the "greatest living artist" is to repeat an error especially common among Americans, which is to measure an artwork's importance by its reach rather than its depth. The book is full of similar noisy art-historical proclamations that are better suited to the blogosphere than to a cogent historical survey that hopes to expose its readers, and particularly young readers, to the immensity and subtlety of artistic creation. But the greatest burden that the reader of "Glittering Images" must carry is knowing from the start that the history of Western art will reach its apparent apogee with "Star Wars," about which Paglia writes, "Nothing I saw in the visual arts of the past 30 years was as daring, beautiful and emotionally compelling as the spectacular volcano-planet climax of Lucas's 'Revenge of the Sith.'" Lucas's importance lies in his ability to turn "dazzling new technology into an expressive personal genre." There is something deeply depressing about having to argue over the cultural dominance of an immensely successful and beloved filmmaker like George Lucas in the context of art history. Kahlo's current popularity among liberals and feminists only confirms Paglia's suspicion that political orthodoxy has succeeded in distorting the valuation of certain artists, punishing them because they do not conform to accepted left-wing anti-establishment behavior standards. Paglia seems distinctly uncomfortable with this most archetypal of all images in Western art, and her stubborn omission is exacerbated by her preferring to empower second-tier artists (or worse) like Magritte, John Wesley Hardrick and the Art Deco celebrity portraitist Tamara de Lempicka. Looking at art, then, is a discipline Paglia believes will help us retrieve the necessary stillness that can "realign our senses and produce a magical tranquility." Hence "Glittering Images," a primer of sorts that takes its reader on a tour of 29 of Paglia's favorite artworks, a list that includes the "Laocoön"; Donatello's "Mary Magdalene"; paintings by Jacques-Louis David, Monet and Picasso; as well as examples of more recent trends like Pop, Conceptual, Land and Performance Art. Lempicka has thus been ignored because she belongs to a class of artists that "does not support the ruling paradigm of art as leftist resistance." Nearly half of "Glittering Images" is devoted to the 20th century, and as the book approaches the present it becomes increasingly agitated and punctuated by conversation-enders: "Painting has never recovered from the birth of Pop." "Pop Art projects an innocent child's view of the world." "No one has closed the gap between art and technology more successfully than George Lucas." Describing the decades bridging the 20th and 21st centuries, she writes that the fine arts "steadily shrank in visibility and importance," leaving only Lucas as the major voice of pioneering boldness. Continue reading the main storyCamille Paglia's new personalized "journey" through Western art history was born of her deep-seated concern that Americans today are so overwhelmed by the constant onslaught of visual images that we are in danger of losing altogether our capacity for contemplation. She is nonetheless first and foremost an educator, having taught for the better part of 30 years at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, and thus it's not surprising that "Glittering Images" has the feel and tone of a course overview. But too often she just appears to be going down a checklist of stylistic categories. What matters is not the technology itself (and your 9-year-old will tell you that the original "Star Wars" films look fairly clunky by today's standards). Paglia, who knows her Emily Dickinson and her Kafka (both artists with zero "fan base" in their lifetimes), has journeyed to the wrong continent, and what she has found glittering there is fool's gold. The book's premise is to chart the history of Western art in "an attempt to reach a general audience for whom art is not a daily presence." There is humility and sincerity in such a goal, and one is reminded of the work of Carl Sagan, or Bertrand Russell's layman's introduction to relativity, or Aaron Copland's "What to Listen for in Music," books intended to demystify important subjects in science and art for those who might otherwise be too intimidated to engage with them. The achievement of Lucas, like that of Disney, is indisputably a defining element of American culture. But aside from its polemical heat, "Glittering Images" feels chilly and too caught up in the parsing of styles and historical epochs to generate the kind of enthusiasm to which it aspires. The result is that some of the deepest and most profoundly human artists of all, painters and sculptors like Giotto, Michelangelo, El Greco, Rembrandt, Vermeer and van Gogh, are pretty much ignored, while others like Agnolo Bronzino, René Magritte and Renée Cox receive full chapters, presumably because each represents some unique stylistic advance. Art and technology have always moved hand in hand from one epoch to the next.

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