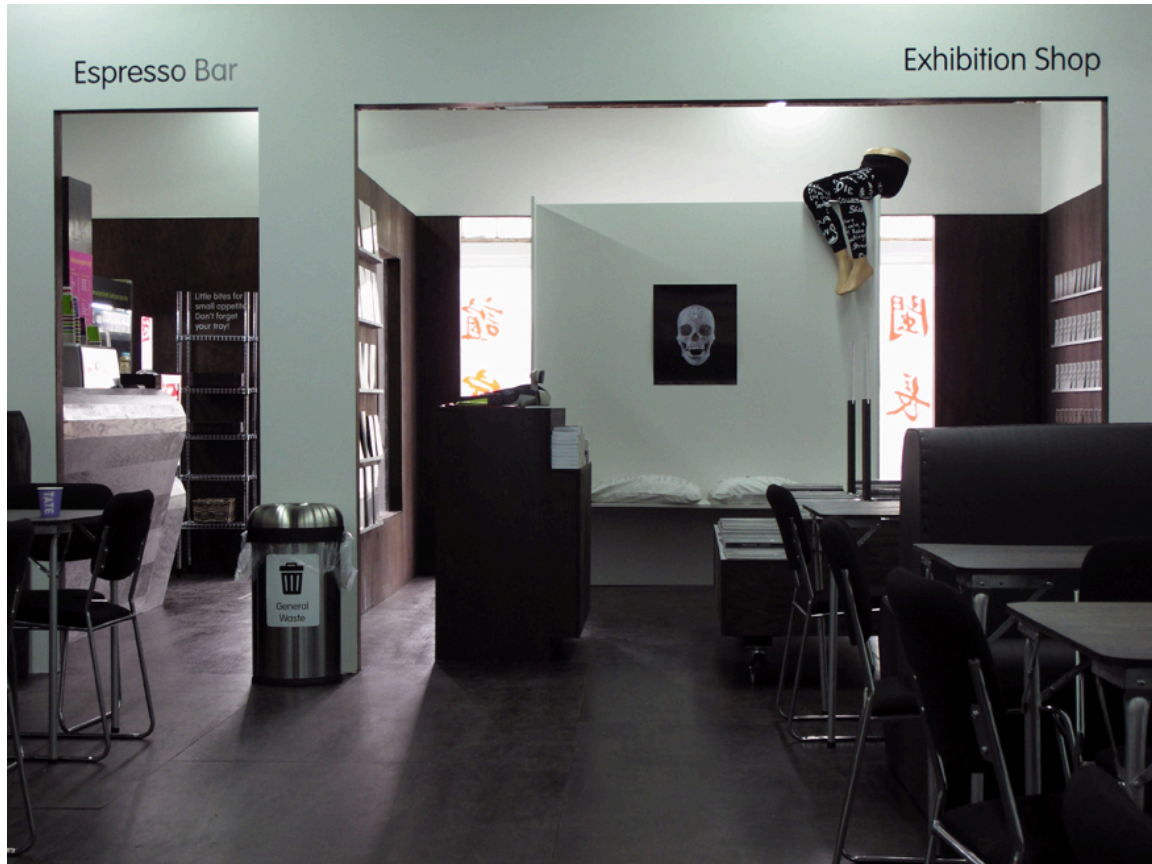


# The New York Times

May 17, 2012

## Merlin Carpenter: 'Tate Café'

By ROBERTA SMITH



For his fourth solo exhibition at [Reena Spaulings Fine Art](#), the British Conceptual painter Merlin Carpenter, a perennial malcontent, is settling a score with its owners, John Kelsey and Emily Sundblad, by tricking out their gallery to resemble one of the retail spaces of an institution he heartily detests: the Tate Modern in London.

The gallery's slightly elevated show space is blocked off with vaguely familiar dark-stained doors labeled "No Re-entry." Beyond them lies a fairly convincing, if scaled-down and semi-functioning, facsimile of the Tate Modern's cafe-bookstore, complete with low, square tables, black metal chairs and a bit of a banquette; a re-creation of the museum's memorably narrow counter area outfitted with paper cups, drinks and packaged food printed with the Tate brand.

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A small bookstore area concentrates on Spaulings-specific items: books by the [Bernadette Corporation](#) (the collective that Mr. Kelsey helped found in 1994); postcards of paintings by Mr. Carpenter and, for the home, two pillowcases printed with pages of signatures from the gallery's sign-in book.

The motivation for "Tate Café" can be discovered in an 18-page interview-cum-press-release that Mr. Kelsey and Ms. Sundblad conducted with Mr. Carpenter. Alternately tedious, self-indulgent and insightful, it covers the misunderstandings and hurt feelings surrounding the dealers' appropriation of Mr. Carpenter's work for their contribution to "Pop Life," a 2009 exhibition at the [Tate Modern](#) (in which they participated as an artist named Reena Spaulings). One of the offending works is a pair of tights printed with phrases from Mr. Carpenter's graffiti paintings ("Die Collector Scum") that was exhibited in the Tate's cafe and is on display here.

This exercise in institutional critique as payback is all a bit hermetic and self-referential. But the cafe is a great place to sit and perhaps wade through the interview, savoring the public-private tension between the slightly mysterious labor-intensive environment and the attempted let's-talk-it-out transparency of the printed words.



*Interiors: 'Edouard Vuillard: A Painter and His Muses, 1890-1940' at the Jewish Museum and 'Merlin Carpenter: Tate Café' at Reena Spaulings Fine Art*

By Maika Pollack 6/05 5:17pm

Through a Glass, Modishly: Barneys Meets Deste Foundation

**IN THE PAST DECADE**, there have been no fewer than three major exhibitions of Edouard Vuillard, starting with the Musée d'Orsay in 2003. France's eccentric painter of wallpaper, his mother and fin-de-siècle interiors has, it seems, been making something of a comeback recently, and not just in museums; in January, Chelsea gallerist Andrew Kreps included a Vuillard painting in a four-person show, alongside pieces by Marc Camille Chaimowicz and William Copley. Now it's the Jewish Museum's turn, with an exhibition devoted to Vuillard and his patrons. A good Vuillard painting looks like the Japanese woodblock prints he collected: the women are stippled poufs defined by textiles and topknots, the wallpaper striped or floral quadrilaterals. If there are pictures on the walls and vases on the sideboards, these are exploited as opportunities for more flat flourish. *Self-Portrait With Waroquy* (1889), made when the painter was just 21, shows his own image reflected in the sort of oxidized mirror that is commonly built in above Parisian fireplaces. The subject presages his taste for conflating people with their furnishings, and the addled surface and Manet-like still life at the painting's front right edge show off an early verve with the brush. When Vuillard was in his prime, as he was when he painted *Woman in a Striped Dress* (1895), every last bit of his canvases was decorative, as if it had been cut from the kind of pretty, expensive paper used to wrap artisanal chocolate bars or fancy soap. Yet his world seems hollow behind all this pattern and color: Pepto-Bismol pinks and mauves bloom on unprimed, cardboard-brown ground. Melting pink and light blue strokes dematerialize the world in *Messieurs and Mesdames Josse and Gaston Bernheim-Jeune* (1905), which has four tiny figures in a living room psychedelically replete with enormous, marshmallowing pastel paintings and carpets; the house is decorated within an inch of its life, and Vuillard's painting itself seems aware of its status as

one more pretty object destined for such a cluttered interior. Unlike his peer Pierre Bonnard, Vuillard had no ambitions to paint nudes or landscapes. “I don’t paint portraits, I paint people in their surroundings,” he once said, and his best subjects are invariably indoors. When not containing his mother, his interiors were often populated with art dealers and editors of little magazines, the kinds of people who made painting such as his possible. His finest works, like *Misia and Vallotton at Villeneuve* (1899), were of Thadée Natanson, publisher of the magazine *La Revue Blanche* (in whose offices Vuillard had his first show in 1891), and Natanson’s pretty wife, Misia Godebska, the radical Russian pianist who modeled for Renoir and Toulouse-Lautrec, and whose salon was attended by Mallarmé, André Gide, Colette and Coco Chanel. Some of Vuillard’s snapshots, taken in 1897 with a Brownie camera, show the Natanson household plastered with patterned wallpaper, thick with ferns, and chock-full of elaborate Thonet furniture; you have to wonder what kind of person takes such obsessive photos of his friends’ chairs. His interest in pattern continues in the red and turquoise stage bills commissioned by the Theatre de l’Oeuvre, and on a wall of color lithographs of wallpaper patterns made for the art dealer Ambrose Vollard. Vuillard continued to paint, but grew increasingly distant from bohemian culture. His patrons changed; he became a perpetual houseguest in a world of wealthy bankers, painting unnecessarily large, usually single-subject portraits in chilly interiors the opposite of the warm, crowded rooms of 1896. When Vuillard tried to faithfully record these—and he grew less and not more abstract as he grew older—he was lost. *Henri and Marcel Kapfer in Their Dining Room* (1912) is not just an uninteresting painting—it looks as though it was made by a different painter.

**IF VUILLARD’S INTERIORS** are the painterly equivalent of Marcel Proust’s prose, all layers of lush and evocative hushed domestic detail, Merlin Carpenter’s “The Tate Café,” which ended its run at Reena Spaulings gallery this past weekend, evoked Michel Houellebecq. It was a jaundiced look at the late-capitalist reality of contemporary art-making. The show reproduced with exquisite fidelity the gift store and espresso bar of the iconic London museum Tate Modern, where, during the museum’s “Pop Life” exhibition in 2009, Mr. Carpenter’s dealers at Reena Spaulings exhibited knockoffs of his artworks without his consent. On the wall at Reena Spaulings were Yayoi Kusama and Damian Hirst posters, as well as stacks of current issues of the English newspaper *The Guardian* next to banks of plastic ersatz Marcel Breuer chairs. There was a nonfunctional cooler filled with rotting sandwiches, yogurts and fruit. Among the items for sale were Carpenter-themed leggings (full disclosure, this writer purchased a pair for \$100) and pillowcases made from pages reproduced from the Reena Spaulings guest book. Galleries are feeding into the contemporary art museums at an ever-increasing metabolic rate: Richard Prince’s *Spiritual America* took 30 years to go from Rivington Street to the Tate, but Mr. Carpenter found his work in the Tate gift shop in just three. Gift shops supplement the museum by offering small reproductions of artworks for visitors to take home; they represent the n+1 of art viewing. The Tate Café puts that cultural excess

inside a commercial gallery again, creating a mise en abyme of cultural capital generation.

The Tate Café functioned as the younger, more sinister and hyperbolic post-Marxist cousin of the grand Romantic gesture by Urs Fischer five years ago in which Gavin Brown's gallery floor was scooped out to a depth of eight feet. While Mr. Fischer's installation made you consider the material workings of the gallery—its plumbing, electricity, cavernous emptiness and physical relationship to the city-as-site—Tate Café exposed the vampiric cultural capital creation (refrigerator magnets, tote bags) that shadows any successful venture in contemporary art. Mr. Carpenter's show was an extension of F.T. Marinetti's position: His museums are mausoleums, yet now populated by curators who suck the life-blood from newly created works of art and toss their victims to gift shop managers. To the extent that Reena Spaulings is profiting from the exposé, Mr. Carpenter's work protests too much. A self-conscious online text that accompanies the show, an interview between Mr. Carpenter and gallery owners John Kelsey and Emily Sundblad, was also redundant in the face of the singularly articulate installation. Still, the show is on my short list for best gallery exhibition of 2012; like Vuillard's work, it investigates the kinds of interiors in which we view art—not the private sitting rooms of the bohemian or wealthy, but the vast new temples of contemporary art tourism.

[editorial@observer.com](mailto:editorial@observer.com)

# CHOWHOUND

## 點心在永順 / Dim Sum at Wing Shoon 165 East Broadway

I recently visited the exhibition by Merlin Carpenter (Tate Cafe) at Reena Spaulings Fine Art, a gallery on the second floor in the back of 永順 (yong shun) or Wing Shoon Seafood Restaurant, and had to check out this busy place.

I happened in just in time for the dim sum cart being pushed from table to table and decided to forgo a plate of 1/4 roasted duck and try some of the dim sum. I had not had dim sum for a while. Tea is offered and best to bring friends, or co-workers. The offerings are quite good, though brush up on the types of foods that are offered in these small circular trays.

What I ate:

\$2.00: three huge meat ball / 兩塊錢:大的豬肉丸

\$2.00 one small plate of pork with bone / 兩塊錢: 小盤排骨

Tea is free, of course.

The art show (instillation), which does contain food, is quite interesting, and though the Tate is a favored museum of mine, can't say that I found its cafe anything but the usual for a museum. I do appreciate the angle of Merlin Carpenter takes in this anti-establishment show, and you can ask if the cafe food articles are up for sale, but I would not bother and head to the front of the building's first floor.

So, go see the Tate Cafe at Reena Spaulings Fine Art, and see if you can save your appetite for the first floor's dim sum.

# Cambodian Times

*Capturing the times*

Art In Review:

## MERLIN CARPENTER: 'Tate Caf'

International Herald Tribune Thursday 17th May, 2012

Reena Spaulings Fine Art  
165 East Broadway, at Rutgers Street  
Lower East Side  
Through June 3

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