

Tom LeClair

World's Fair

SAFELY IN the new millennium, we're done with those lists of Great Inventions of the Past Thousand Years, but I have a belated addition: the small press, without which we would not have Miles Beller's first novel, *Dream of Venus (Or Living Pictures)*. No large press, operating under the umbrella of a large media corporation or an even bigger multinational conglomerate, would likely print a book as eccentric and enraged as Beller's fictional reconstruction—and demolition—of the 1939 New York World's Fair; for publishing has become like that fair—a gigantic purveyor of largely gimcrack entertainment.

Two notable novelists—E. L. Doctorow in *World's Fair* and Richard Powers in *Prisoner's Dilemma*—have sent protagonists to the 1939 fair, using it to bring out qualities of character. Beller reverses their conventional fictional strategy and makes the setting much more important than his single character, a painter named Zeke Lichtenquist who supports himself by doing charcoal portraits at the fair. Zeke has no intimate relations. Instead, he is the eyes and ears through which Beller reports, invents and comments on the scene, the plutocrats and boosters behind the scene,

the media that shill for the fair, and the gullible Americans who attend.

Beller presents his novel as a scholarly study. He provides a "Foreword" that thanks nonexistent institutions for their research help

Dream of Venus (Or Living Pictures)

C.M. Publishing

298 pages

Miles Beller



and a "Bibliography" that lists real and invented books. In between, chapters include documents and drawings from the time and cameos by historical figures such as Albert Einstein and Grover Whelan, the director of the fair. Some of the buildings Beller describes—including the Perisphere and pointed Trylon—are factual, but it would take a team of scholars to determine how much of the popular culture that Beller includes—radio programs, songs, products, advertisements, slogans and other throwaway stuff—is real and how much imagined.

As for the plot, I'm pleased to report there is none. Pleased because a plot worked up from Zeke's personal conflicts would detract from Beller's ingenious and chancy experiment: to make the novel like the fairgrounds, a static collection of "wonders" through which viewers/readers wander as they wish. Beller then ups the risk by repeatedly deflating the wonders, mocking the technology-based optimism of 1939—as well as any possible nostalgia for it.

Futurama Hall, for example, presents the "Glorious Age of 1960" as "free from hunger, fear, sickness and grief; the temporal transformed into a garden of plenty where coiled serpents had been scientifically eradicated and the family of man basked in freedom and happiness." When Zeke goes to Futurama, he is knifed by a purse-snatcher.

Beller is a Hollywood journalist, and his novel appears to owe some of its grotesques and monologues to Nathaniel West and his tinseltown novel, *The Day of the Locust*. Beller's style and attitude, though, are more similar to William Gaddis in his vast fiction about historical pretense, *The Recognitions*. Like Gaddis, Beller uses the speed-shifting consciousness of a failed and embittered artist to mix high intentions and low productions.

To make sure no one mistakes *Dream of Venus* for a conventional novel gone awry, Beller takes his title from a multimedia work by Salvador Dali that was exhibited at the fair.

In Dali's surreal funhouse, "recorded hysterics of slaughterhouse steers screamed from speakers shaped like pus watches. In counterpoint, a kaleidoscope merry-go-round sprouted from the center of a white torso . . . hammering out a melody vertiginous and strained."

Dream of Venus the fiction (I've given up calling it a novel) is sometimes strained as it hammers away at the hucksters of kitsch Americana, particularly those who promise future happiness through consumerism, insurance, investment and salvation. Beller's parody and satire would soon exceed its occasion if his target were only the fair of 1939, an easy target to hit sixty years after the fact. But

Beller's bigger game is the present and recent premillennial past, which have a lot in common with the smug, good-times confidence of the fair's creators.

Beller's fair-weather futurists make a number of predictions that did not come true. Germany and Japan did not "become part of the United States sometime around October 1963." The 1939 visionaries also failed to foresee that one of the fair's wonders—"talking radio" or "tele-vision"—could interlock with the exposition's scrubbed fantasies to produce Planet Disney. The fair gathered distant cultures and crafts to New York. Now New York and Hollywood export simulacra—"living pictures"—to every

distant nation.

C.M. Publishing has matched Beller's courage in bringing out this choleric, witty and occasionally off-putting fiction. "Too far, too much," I sometimes said to myself as "banality followed banality."

Yet I kept coming back to *Dream of Venus* for its ravaging critique of an American popular culture that has become bigger and worse since 1939. Some of the fair's structures were torn down and melted into scrap to make bullets for the war to come. One wonders what our amusement parks will be used for in our future. ■