Vol. 6 No. 4 April/May 2004 New York

GALLERY&STUDIO

The World of the Working Artist

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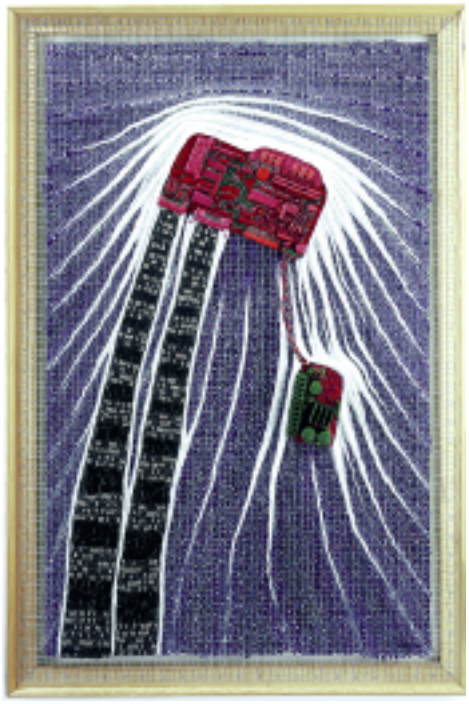
The Funhouse Effect in the 2004 Whitney Biennial

(It's noisy, "intergenerational" and surprisingly good!)



"Surfing The Net," Computer parts on wire mesh 54" x 36" x 3"

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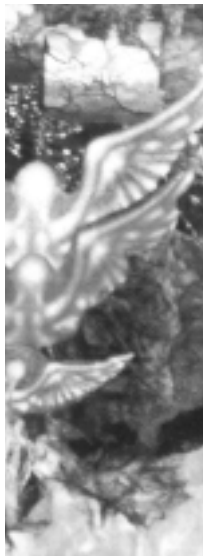
G&S Highlights

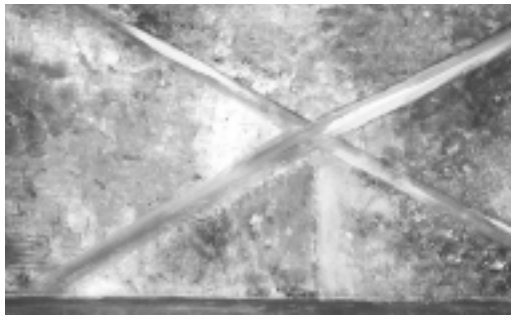
On the Cover:
Sue DeBeer, *"Still from Hans & Grete," 2002*
Two-channel video installation. Collection of the artist, courtesy Postmasters Gallery, New York and Sandroni Rey Gallery, Los Angeles
For more than a decade, the Whitney Museum's "signature" surveys of American art had struck us as moribund affairs. Then, along came the 2004 Whitney Biennial...see New York Notebook (centerfold).



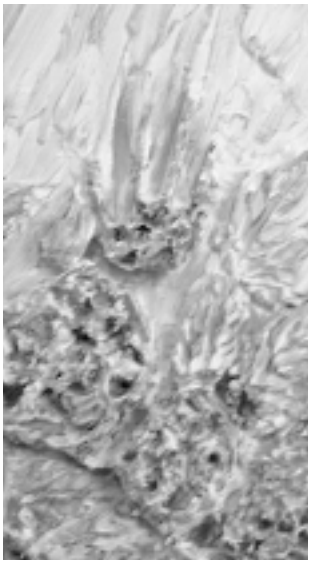
Stacey Clarfield Newman, pg. 31

Gloria Spevacek, pg. 11

Zane Treimanis, pg. 25



GiGi. D., pg. 6



Daniela Camurati, pg. 24

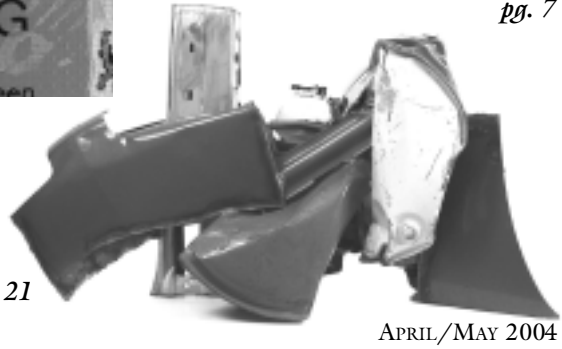
Katrin Alvarez-Schlüter, pg. 20

Rima Grad, pg. 8

Katherine D. Crone, pg. 29

Gertl Bauer, pg. 7

Paul Gazda, pg. 5



Ludvic, pg. 21

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Steve Cieslawski's Fanciful Enigmas

As the sweep of this year's Academy awards by the final filmic installment of Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" trilogy indicates, at present there appears to be an enormous interest in fantasy. One could speculate that this has to do with a communal yearning to transcend the mundane voyeurism of reality TV, as well as the moral ambiguity of our political leaders, and escape into a world where magic and at least the illusion of heroism still exists. But whatever the actual reasons for it may be, this trend bodes well for Steve Cieslawski, whose exhibition of new paintings on view at CFM Gallery, 112 Greene Street, opens May 7th.

Cieslawski's first solo show in the same venue in 2002 caught the attention of critics and collectors for his ability to evoke fabulous figures and scenery in a smooth, meticulous technique reminiscent of the Flemish masters. Moon gazers and ice skaters in quasi-Victorian costumes captured the viewers' imaginations as they comported themselves with quaint formality in landscapes limned in a manner that also appeared to reference the crystal clarity and heightened auras of the Luminists, a branch of the Hudson River School steeped in nineteenth century transcendentalism. Cieslawski, however, took the formal qualities of Luminism a fanciful step further by populating his transcendent landscapes with elaborately costumed figures engaged in all manner of amusing leisure activities and arcane pageantry.

"Listening for the Sea"

Although some of his earlier compositions, particularly one picture of a fabulous procession being led by a stately pagan princess, were quite intricate, Steve Cieslawski has now pared down his pictures in a manner that has caused them to gain in formal power. And while his technique is still meticulous, it has taken on a paradoxical fluidity that reveals his growing mastery. Whereas in his earlier paintings the stoic quality of some figures, along with their Victorian-looking garb, invited comparison with the late graphic artist Edward Gorey, the figures in Cieslawski's newest paintings are considerably more animated.

Witness, for example, the flowing folds in the golden ocher gown and trail of the expressively elongated figure in the oil on canvas called "Oracle's Revolt." Here, the handling of the vertical draperies, set against the horizontal rivulets of blue sky and cumuli, as the wild-haired oracle throws up her hands histrionically, creates a rippling compositional dynamism quite unprecedented in Cieslawski's oeuvre. The painter's growing confidence in his gifts emboldens him to impart new expressive force to the figure, enhancing the sense of abandon in the oracle's apparent tantrum.

Bolder in its formal impact and even more imagistically fanciful is the painting entitled "Unfamiliar Visit," in which a trio of doll-like figures are seen on a sea of gold-tinged clouds with pointed tips that curl up like ocean waves in a vehicle that appears to be a hybrid of a sailing ship and an air balloon. Then there is "Nocturnal Emissary," another mysterious vision of a long-beaked, bent-backed, cloaked avian figure laboriously pulling a sled containing what appears to be a bundled human body across a vast expanse of ice, the entire composition enveloped in deep blue hues. While it is perilous to attempt too literal an interpretation of imagery so fanciful, the symbolism in this work seems fixated on the journey from life to death, from this world into the next.

For all the singularity of Cieslawski's sensibility, the sublime sense of desolation in some of his most recent oils is akin to that of the contemporary Norwegian fantasist Odd Nerdrum. This quality comes across most starkly in Cieslawski's glowing oil "The Birth of Hours," in which the heads of two figures, buried to the chin in snow, are crowned by sun-dials under a hazy solar blaze; as well as in "The Viewing," where two figures in Renaissance garb stand to the waist in an ocean under a cloud-laden night sky. One figure holds a painting of a face in a gold frame, its bottom half hidden behind the passing waves. Could the second picture symbolize the plight of the figurative artist in the contemporary art world, or does it allude to some infinitely more profound subject? One of the pleasures of Cieslawski's pictures is attempting to decode the visual conundrums they pose, which continually test our imaginative resources.

For its sheer visual dynamism one of the most impressive paintings in Cieslawski's present exhibition is also one of the most completely confounding. Entitled "The Last Ingredient," it depicts a woman, her hair and long gown flying behind her, racing across a panoramic vista of pyramid-shaped dunes under a sky enlivened by strata of shapely, dramatically shadowed clouds. As she runs, she cradles in her arms an object that one might expect to be a swaddled infant but which actually appears to be a large, inert organic mass resembling a sheaf of wheat. This is apparently the "last ingredient" referred to in the title of the painting, and the figure's frantic flight, face raised prayerfully to the heavens, implies that it is a matter of great urgency that she get it to its destination in order to complete some magical mission. The golden glow that bathes the entire composition, coloring the clouds, the dunes, the woman's gown, and the object in her arms, further enhances the sense that something alchemical is afoot in this luminous oil, with its graceful abstract interaction of flowing forms accelerating the narrative action. Similarly lovely in the latter regard is the darkly evocative canvas called, "Listening for the Sea."

Steve Cieslawski's new exhibition represents a true breakthrough for this fine figurative painter. If the promise of his earlier work was in merging witty inventiveness with flawless technique, the new canvases compel us with a deeper, darker sense of mystery.

Having initially viewed the world from a somewhat aloof, bemused perspective, Cieslawski has stepped into the fray of life and death. His paintings now take larger risks and gain measurably in increased depth, impact, and power.—Ed McCormack

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Paul Gazda: Public Messages and Private Pleasures

On encountering the assemblage paintings of Paul Gazda, who has exhibited widely across the United States and Canada, including a solo exhibition at the West Valley Museum, in Arizona, one is compelled to consider how sophisticated contemporary aesthetics intersect with the currently hot category of so-called Outsider Art.

After a half decade as a photographic artist, Gazda began to chafe at the limitations inherent in the traditional approach to the medium. Legend has it that one day he glanced anew at a pile of his torn, discarded photographs in a corner of his studio and had an epiphany. Thereafter, he began to assemble collages and felt closer to achieving, as his biography puts it, "a harmony between this technique and his artistic vision."

Gazda gradually started combining collage and paint on canvas and building up his surfaces like bas reliefs with acrylic gels. His real breakthrough, however, came when he replaced canvas with wire mesh, as seen in his aptly titled solo exhibition "Enmeshed," at Phoenix Gallery, 568 Broadway, from March 31 through April 24.

The brilliant rawness that initially strikes one in Gazda's work could almost provoke comparisons with the famous Outsider artist Howard Finster, who also employs bold forms, bright colors, and prominent texts in many of his paintings. Gazda, however, is by no means merely an innocent, intuitive talent, having lectured to cultural groups on his own artistic evolution, as well as on how others can unlock their creative potential. Thus the rough-hewn qualities in his work are more akin, philosophically if not stylistically, to Jean Dubuffet, a consummately sophisticated artist who took a cue from the unschooled and insane on how to imbue his work with primitive immediacy. But while Dubuffet campaigned in incendiary essays against what he called "asphyxiating culture," Gazda apparently has no such axe to grind. Rather, the raw immediacy of his mixed media pieces appears to be a natural outgrowth of a refreshingly direct sensibility—as well as of the rugged character of the industrial mesh he employs not only as an armature to support a variety of objects but also as a prominent element in his compositions.

The almost jarring physicality that Gazda achieves through his use of unorthodox materials helps him to call our attention to issues of ethics and language that illuminate aspects of contemporary life. Computer parts, for example, often appear in his assemblages, as seen in "Surfing the Net," in which an intricate array of 3-D and painted elements creates the sense of a vast global network. Here, prominent against a deep blue digital cosmos, two elongated forms enveloped in sinuous white linear trails could seem a ghostly reminder of the destroyed Twin Towers and suggest the more sinister manifestations of our advanced technology. At the same time, the abstract thrust of the composition leaves it open to any number of other subjective interpretations, encouraging imaginative interaction on the part of the viewer.

Indeed, Gazda's ability to create compositions that compel our attention for their bold abstract qualities alone enables him to address a wide range of topical and even political subjects without becoming irksomely preachy. Such is the pure visual excitement he is able to generate by virtue of his intrepid color sense and use of intriguing personal symbols that he can

"Your Genes"

induce us to digest texts that might strike one as too didactic in a lesser artist.

In the powerful assemblage painting called "Your Genes," the composition is dominated by a large red rectangle, within which the following wry "WARNING" is lettered in bold black letters: "Your genes have been patented by biotechnology corporations. Unauthorized use, copying, transcription or reproduction by any means is strictly prohibited. Contact your local Genetic Royalties Clearinghouse for convenient payment plans to suit your needs and life style." With garish green hand prints superimposed over the letters here and there a border of wiggly, gene-like symbols squirming around the central rectangle, Gazda's composition is as visually emblematic as Robert Indiana's famous "Love" paintings of the late 1960s. However, its message is considerably more ironic, as befits a more ambiguous and complex era.

Even more loaded with multiple implications is the text in a painting called "Enlightenment," in which, superimposed on a ground covered with blue and yellow daubs that merge to become green, like paint being mixed on a palette, phrases such as "The color is green" and "I am good you are bad" are subjected to multiple mutations and interpretations. As the closely packed words appear to swirl dizzyingly within a slightly angular oval shape, the viewer wonders: Is Gazda commenting on racial issues? Green Party politics? New Age self righteousness? Color theory? Or the way the mass media bamboozles us with contradictory messages whose meanings can be bent at the whims of our self-appointed leaders?

Here, as in all of Gazda's assemblage paintings, the medium, as Marshall McLuhan famously put it, is indeed the message and the only safe conclusion one can arrive at is that the artist is urging us to think for ourselves. This is an exhortation it is impossible to underestimate the importance of in a time when we are being subjected to increasingly sinister forms of corporate and governmental manipulation. But Paul Gazda is an artist who also knows how to balance public statements with more intimate subjects. Other works on wire mesh incorporate objects such as a bath mat, gloves, and shoes to provide a plethora of visual/tactile pleasures.

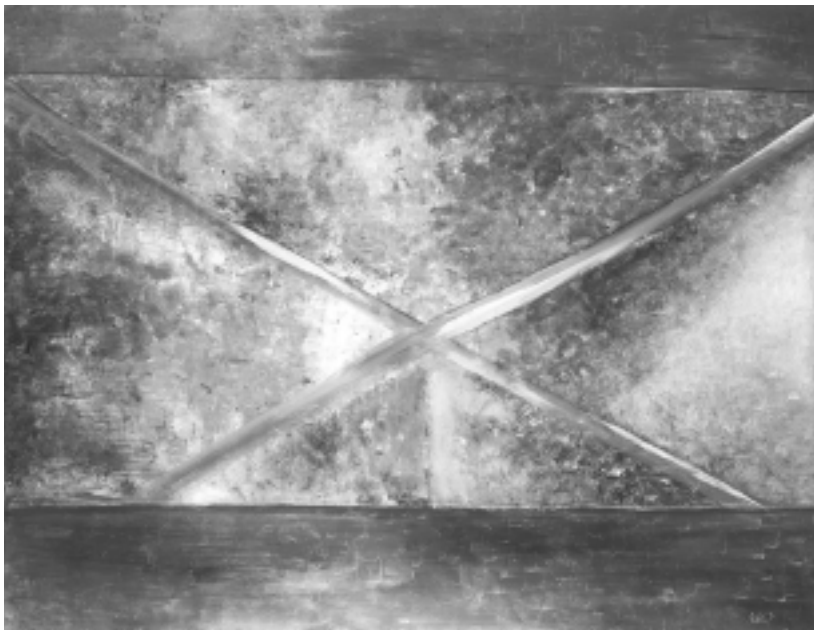
Particularly lovely among the latter works is "Painterly Shoes," in which the artfully paint-spattered footwear is thoroughly enmeshed with bold stripes and rainbow streaks of thick primary pigments. Here, Paul Gazda appears to pay tribute to Vincent van Gogh's famous painting of his clodhoppers and to reference, with characteristic visual wit, the historical tradition of elevating humble everyday objects in art down through the ages. And in doing so, he slyly insinuates that purely aesthetic considerations are at least as important to his work as the urgent moral messages that so many of his compositions contain.

—-Ed McCormack

Abstract Painter GiGi. D.'s Varied Voyages of Discovery

One of the most misguided notions in contemporary art is the idea that an artist should cultivate a "signature style," just as a corporation has a logo to make its product instantly recognizable. This bow to the marketplace makes the work of many artists no more than a form of light manufacturing. Recently, however, we have seen the beginnings of a rebellion against such stylistic pigeonholing. One good example of an artist who has bucked the trend effectively is the painter known simply as GiGi. D., whose solo exhibition was seen recently at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, in Soho.

Obviously, GiGi. D. is aware that real style is a matter of character, of being true to one's own sensibility rather than trying to contrive a "look." For she is an artist to whom each painting is obviously a new adventure, a fresh start. She is not afraid to take risks, to see where the painting will take her, rather than trying to control its direction. It is clear that GiGi. D. refuses to stymie her vision by making all of her compositions follow a preconceived plan. Yet her oeuvre has a consistency, a coherence that goes beyond any superficial recognition factor. What unites all of her canvases, finally, is the sense of exploration, of constant discovery, which made GiGi. D's show at Montserrat Gallery an adventure for the viewer as well.



"Fin D'Automne"

The contrasting qualities in three canvases among the several seen in this exhibition, in particular, seemed to demonstrate the range and diversity of this artist's work: "La Ligne Rouge," "Preference," and "Fin D'Automne." The first painting is a chromatic feast of predominantly red hues. In a horizontal format, it features an exquisitely simple composition, the piece de resistance of which is a single horizontal line spanning the center of the canvas. There is also a dark border around the entire canvas, the central rectangle of which is covered by a tactile accumulation of roughly textured rectangular strokes.

These textures, as well as the overall painterly effect of the canvas, identify GiGi. D. as a contemporary artist with spiritual allegiances to Tachisme, or L'Art Informel, the European equivalent of Abstract Expressionism instigated by painters in the second wave of the School of Paris. GiGi. D., however, has her own unique touch, with the juicy strokes of red applied in a scumbling technique over an underlying grid of hues ranging in tone from delicate pinks and patches of opaque white to much darker colors. These squares of color show through the red strokes here and there, making up a variegated field that shimmers brilliantly and is dissected at its center by the aforementioned horizontal line, which is also red, albeit with minuscule strokes of white emanating from it like tiny beams of light illuminating its entire length.

Despite the simplicity of its composition, there is a subtle depth and complexity to "La Ligne Rouge" that is quite remarkable. It is a painting that pulls one in with its seductive surface and vibrant color, a painting that needs no ostensible subject or reason for being other than its own autonomous life as an object of sheer aesthetic delectation.

Equally exciting in a much different way is the painting called "Fin D'Automne," which announces its own independence from referentiality with its very title. This is a contrastingly subdued canvas, limned primarily in earth colors juxtaposed and blended harmoniously with various subtly modulated blue and white hues or combinations of the two. The entire surface shimmers with a sense of light achieved with dense concentrations of strokes applied in an almost neo-pointillist manner akin to that of Jimmy Ernst. The finesse with which GiGi. D. has built up this surface would suggest a kind of teeming cosmos, a sense of infinite space— if not for the radical gesture that she has made by painting a big bold "X" across the face of the composition, as if to cancel any illusion or allusiveness that the beautifully modulated color field may provoke in the viewer. With this bold gesture, the artist directs one's attention back to the two-dimensional picture plane, and thus makes no compromise with the unreal.

Her intention here seems to be to tell us to be happy with what is, with the painting as a physical object, a material entity with no metaphysical pretensions. And indeed, there is much to compel one's attention in the manner in which GiGi. D. has apportioned the space of the composition, with broad borders of golden brown running along the top and bottom of the canvas and the central rectangle divided by a diagonal line down the center in the manner of a diptych, the geometric tension finally completed by the addition of that bold "X" that brings the eye into perfect alignment with the picture plane, asserting its sanctity as an essential tenet of modernism.

This can be seen as an act of reaffirmation of modernist principles at time when so many others have abandoned them. Yet GiGi. D. also makes her own sly reference to postmodernist theory as well, effectively implying depth beyond the "X" by virtue of her brilliantly modulated paint handling, which creates a sense of chiaroscuro, of light and shadow that is mysterious and illusive nonetheless.

However, a quite opposite quality can be seen in the canvas entitled "Preference," where the focal point of the composition is a large rectangle filled with a dense concentration of overlapping blue and white strokes. This central rectangle is bordered on all sides by a white field in which similar concentrations of dark strokes are all but subsumed and now exist only as phantom shapes showing, like faint shadows on snow, through its overwhelming whiteness.

Through this latter device, GiGi. D. activates the entire surface of "Preference" with a sense of energy and light, even while asserting more adamantly than ever the flatness of the picture plane by virtue of the frontal arrangement of the single geometric shape at the center of its composition.

There may be a penchant for lively aesthetic gamesmanship here but there is little ambiguity. GiGi. D. is an artist who seems to know exactly where her allegiances lie and precisely what she wishes to accomplish, even as she embarks on each painting as a separate journey of discovery. Thus, while her art is full of surprises, it is built on a solid armature and appears destined to endure.

—Byron Coleman

Gretl Bauer: Stringed Instruments of Sonorous Silence

Gretl Bauer does more with strings than the New York Philharmonic. Stretched taut across her compositions or flowing loosely off of them, contrasting exquisitely with the ruggedness of her other materials, graceful strings or gossamer threads strike a lyrical note in Bauer's mixed media constructions.

In some works, with the weathered shards of found wood that Bauer often affixes to her canvases or panels serving as frets, threads are arranged in fine rows slightly above the painted surface. Often they, too, are painstakingly painted in luminous hues that make them suggest beams of light streaming into the painting from some unseen source. Only, these light beams, when viewed up close from certain angles, cast their own shadows—a metaphysical paradox peculiar to the art of Gretl Bauer.

"Late October" (For my Mother)

Golden threads, stretched across a rough wooden board with the stately presence of an ancient tablet, stream into the upper right side of the composition as though from on high in "Late October" (For My Mother), one of the works in "Shimmer," Bauer's new solo exhibition, at Phoenix Gallery, 568 Broadway, from April 28 through May 22.

This piece is an elegy, occasioned by the death of the artist's mother last year. Yet for all its sonorous somberness, it also projects a sense of transcendence, reflecting Bauer's statement "It seems that our first task is to maintain hope in the face of all that is so precarious."

Bauer's use of found materials is so sculpturally imposing and prominent in her compositions that one can almost overlook what a fine painter she is. But to do so is to miss one of the major pleasures of her work: the deep and resonant contrasts she achieves through both her subtle use of color, as well as through the subtle interplay between her tactile collage elements and her succulent paint surfaces.

In "Late October," Bauer employs juicy gestural strokes of golden ocher pigment to envelop the entire composition in an autumnal glow that poignantly enhances its elegiac mood. By contrast, in a larger work called "Bayou," Bauer orchestrates a subtle range of grays, laid down in staccato strokes, to create a surface with a drier, more mat quality akin to Jasper Johns's classic early monochromatic canvases.

The main part of "Bayou" is painted on a large oval-shaped board that Bauer took a liking to and combined with a long pole-like shard of wood, to the bottom of which she affixed a thick mop of silver threads. In keeping with the title of the work, this second object, much of its surface also covered by painted strokes, leans against the big oval form like a mojo stick or some other mysterious voodoo object, its tangled silver threads forming a swampy morass at the bottom of the two-part composition. Although here there are no strings attached (if one will pardon a bad pun that seems irresistible in context), the juxtaposition of incongruous elements to create a fine balance between the material and the ethereal, the enduring and the ephemeral, is wholly in keeping with the mixed media aesthetic that Bauer makes so singularly and evocatively her own.

Gretl Bauer's painterly abilities, in particular, come to the forefront in recent works on canvas: "Ondine" is a very large composition in subdued, subtly harmonized hues, in which a profusion of threads, painted a luminous cobalt blue, flow of the bottom of the canvas like a waterfall, creating a glimmering effect that can also be seen in another powerful combine painting called "Baltic," inspired by a recent trip North of the Arctic Circle.

In "Andean," threaded elements and a large chunk of wood strike a sublime balance between ruggedness and delicacy. Here, too, Bauer pulls out all the chromatic stops, expanding her generally restrained palette of hues with brilliant reds applied in a bold gestural strokes that would do any Abstract Expressionist proud.

Freestanding works such as the show's title piece "Shimmer," and "Svolvaer" veer in a more sculptural direction, the former with a furled wire-mesh form sprouting dangling golden strings, the latter with fine rows of white thread stretched tightly over a found wood form with thick white paint scumbled down its craggy surface.

Then, demonstrating an ability to conjure up her characteristic magic with unexpected materials, Gretl Bauer unveils an awesome triptych called "Starlight." In this Minimalist tour de force, layered grids composed of mosquito netting, metal mesh, and other silvery elements have been utterly transformed by the artist in a manner that belies their mundane origins. The combined effect of the three large panels can only be likened to gazing into the intricate workings of a celestial grand piano, causing one viewer to remark, "You can almost hear the silence!"

—Ed McCormack

Rima Grad: Rebalancing a Topsy Turvy World

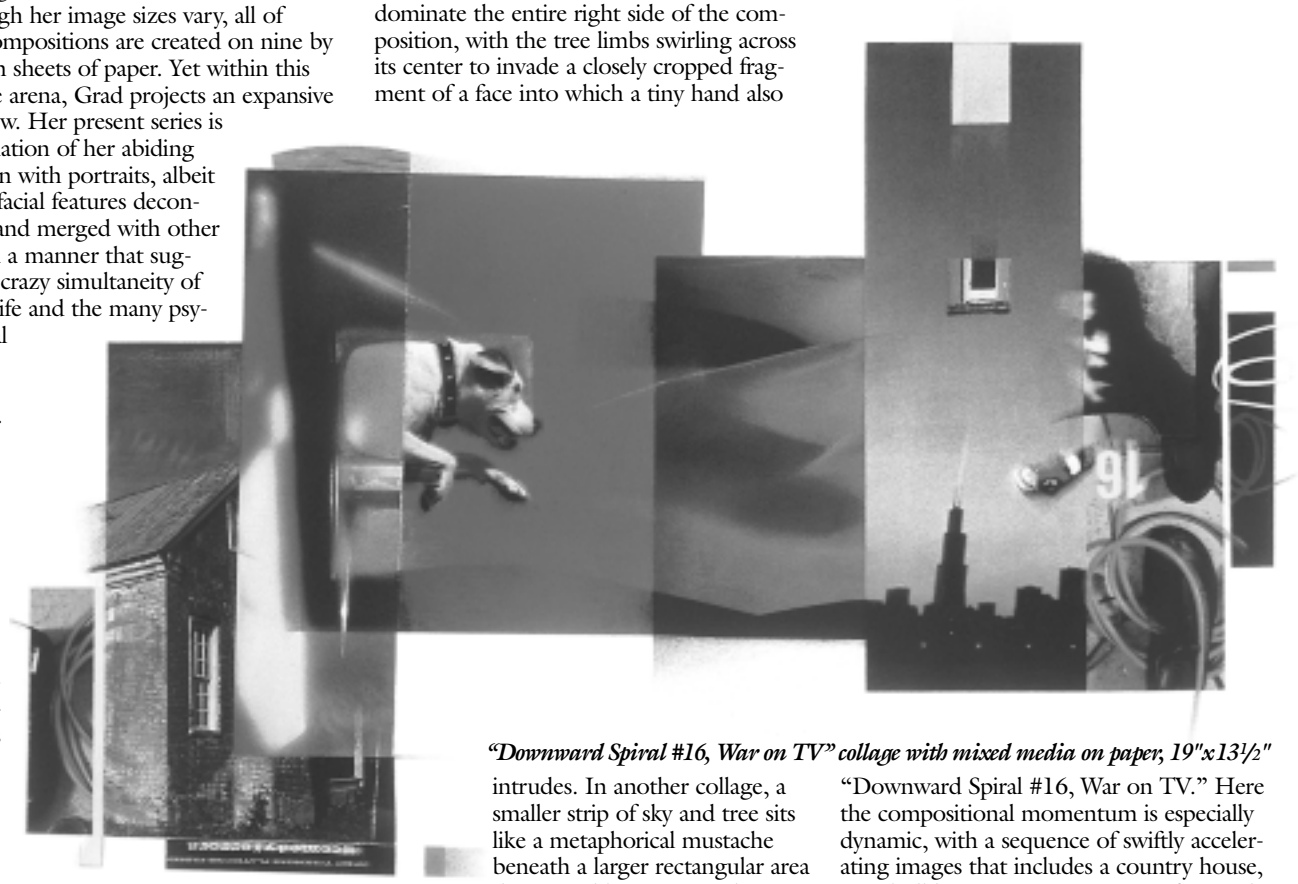
After so many seasons of overblown, often cumbersome productions, one of the more heartening trends in the current Whitney Biennial and in recent art in general is the number of artists who make significant statements on an intimate scale. Rima Grad exemplifies this Intimist tendency handsomely in her exhibition "Eye-Hand Coordination," at Viridian Artists @ Chelsea, 530 West 25th Street, from May 18 through June 5.

Although her image sizes vary, all of Grad's compositions are created on nine by eight inch sheets of paper. Yet within this miniature arena, Grad projects an expansive world-view. Her present series is a continuation of her abiding fascination with portraits, albeit with the facial features deconstructed and merged with other images in a manner that suggests the crazy simultaneity of modern life and the many psychological permutations it provokes.

We live in age of random fragmentation; images from the media merge with reality in various ways at almost every moment of the day. Grad's cool, impassive surfaces and photo-derived images smoothly approximate a constantly shifting mindscape in which the faces of our familiars overlap with those glimpsed in TV news-bites and on celebrity magazines on the supermarket checkout line.

Grad, who has exhibited widely and is included in numerous private and public collections, began her fine art career as a printmaker, working in etching and woodcut. In 1993, however, she gravitated to mixed media collage, combining photo imagery with colored pencil and oil crayon. Having worked for many years as a graphic designer Grad felt at home with images from the mass media. Fragments of magazine photos are central to her collage vocabulary, both in the series for which the exhibition is named "Eye-Hand Coordination," and in a new series entitled "Downward Spiral" also included in the show.

In the first series, Grad set an exercise for herself: Each piece had to include an eye, a hand, and an image of tree limbs flowing gracefully against an expanse of pale blue sky. With these set elements, however, Grad has created a strikingly different mood in each of the several compositions in the series by virtue of her imaginative shuffling of images and inventive method of color combining. In one work, for example, the section of blue sky is arranged vertically to dominate the entire right side of the composition, with the tree limbs swirling across its center to invade a closely cropped fragment of a face into which a tiny hand also intrudes. In another collage, a smaller strip of sky and tree sits like a metaphorical mustache beneath a larger rectangular area dominated by an eye and a nose. Fragmented as the facial features in this series are, Grad considers them portraits and places particular emphasis on eyes.



"Downward Spiral #16, War on TV" collage with mixed media on paper, 19"x13½"

"In the past few years, since September 11 to be accurate, it has become increasingly important for me to establish a connection with the viewer in the portrait work," she states. "I want to make eye contact. A 'who's staring at who' kind of thing if you will. And it is crucial that an emotional state exists as part of that connection, whatever the emotion may be."

In the second series, "Downward Spiral," Grad works in a slightly larger format, creating compositions in which irregularly shaped sequences of images flow horizontally, resulting in the almost cinematic effect, suggesting movement in time as well as in space. This effect is enhanced by Grad's use of various types of spiral shapes that seem to set the sequence of images in motion from beginning to end."

"We live in a topsy-turvy world; we are in a perpetual spiral," the artist says of this series. "These new works tell stories about that world. It may be a moment in time or it may be a general feeling. I can't help but put a negative spin on it. It seems more turvy than topsy these days."

Particularly relevant in this regard is the mixed media collage that Grad calls "Downward Spiral #16, War on TV." Here the compositional momentum is especially dynamic, with a sequence of swiftly accelerating images that includes a country house, a pit bull leaping against an area of visceral red, a silhouetted city skyline, and a shadowy, agitated face ranged over an irregular sequence of staggered rectangles set against the pristine white ground of the backing paper. The printed phrase "comedy of errors," placed upside down at the bottom of the composition, further contributes to the sense of a nonlinear narrative spiraling vertiginously, yet held in check by Grad's exquisite balancing of geometric forms.

While appearing to reference diverse sources ranging from Russian Constructivist Collage, to Dadaist photo montage, to James Rosenquist's immense billboard take-offs, Rima Grad's intimate mixed media works have a singular appeal. At once formal and deeply personal, her poetic imagistic permutations strike a universal chord.

—Ed McCormack

"Growing" as Fact and Metaphor in CVB Space Exhibition

Carlo Petrini

Roy Andrew Beyer

Claudia Chapline

Grazia Lavia

Valentina Loi

Giovanni Bonaldi

In the exhibition called "Growing," the savvy young Italian curator Stefania Carrozzini, of Dars International Exhibition Service in Milan, has once again presented a diverse group of artists with a unifying theme to explore through what she terms "symbolic, organic, and artificial" means.

The show, presented in collaboration with IIC Italian Cultural Institute, New York, can be viewed at CVB Space, 407 West 13th Street from April 1 through 30, with an opening reception on April 1 at 6 PM. Featured are 14 artists working in a variety of mediums, including painting, photography, video and installation. Each interprets the notion of growth in a unique manner.

Giovanni Bonaldi, for example, contributes a composition in two distinctly different parts, combining an image in oil on canvas of what appears to be an unborn baby suspended in a mysterious blue element with a dried flower and a gilded brass solar symbol. Bonaldi's piece has a somber mystery about it, as though revealing through the juxtaposition of these symbols basic secrets of birth, life, and death—in other words, the beginning and end of growth.

Mario Giudici, on the other hand, projects cycles of growth through gestural means with a long horizontal composition in which vigorous concentrations of cursive strokes convey an energy that appears to combine the formal muscularity of the Abstract Expressionists with the fierce velocity of the Italian Futurists. To Giudici, obviously, growth is a process that accelerates at an almost frightening pace.

Painter Grazia Lavia and photographer Roy Andrew Beyer both employ visual imagery in combination with printed or handwritten texts in order to convey the notion of growth as something that takes place more in time than in space.

In Lavia's wall installation a photograph of a family in what appears to be a small village merges in both upright and inverted form. The word "memory" is printed repeatedly over bold red painted stripes onto the photograph, which is a also covered with hand-scrawled meditations reflecting on the passage of time.

Beyer also employs old family portraits, albeit poignantly enshrined within a format that includes various mementos in his "Insulinde," while another in picture called "Food for Thoughts" a spoon is suspended suggestively in the crack of an open book. For Beyer the notion of growth takes in the sentimental, the sacred, the profane and the surreal.

Video artist Valentina Loi creates kinetic metaphors for growth with images of a road superimposed over her own face, suggesting a literal inward journey. Loi also treats us to a peep show focusing on fully clothed areas of a woman's body, perhaps suggesting that frustrating our voyeuristic expectations can also provoke a kind of growth. Then there is Claudia Chapline who incorporates the ancient medium of Chinese brush painting within the context of contemporary installation, employing the image of a flowering vine and its roots, stems, leaves, and flowers to celebrate organic materials and processes.

By contrast, Carlo Petrini employs a precise photo realist style in his accomplished oil on canvas. In a monochromatic palette of subtly modulated blue hues, Petrini's painting depicts a plethora of thick wires wound like sinuous vines around densely layered configurations of squared-off pipes jutting every-which-way like tree-limbs in an overgrown artificial forest.

Perhaps one of the most direct ways to convey the concept of growth is through the process of painting itself. And, indeed, this would appear to be the point made by the work in watercolor and India ink by Giampiero Reverberi with its freely flowing forms so fluidly brushed as to appear to be growing before our eyes. In any case, this exhibition explores its theme through the sheer diversity of approaches it presents, convincingly advancing its curator's point that the creative act is "like a metaphor for man to render himself immortal and discuss this issue of growth and rebirth transcending time and having no end or no beginning."

Also including work by Clelia Aglieri, Massimo Berruti, Carla Crosio, Tsering Frykman-Glen, Ruggero Maggi, and Marino Ramazzotti that was not available for preview in time to make our deadline, this promises, like all of Stefania Carrozzini's recent projects, to be a thought-provoking and highly enjoyable exhibition.

J. Sanders Eaton

"Visions of a Culture": Celebrating the African Diaspora

Every year Black History Month brings a number of important exhibitions to the city. While a huge exhibition at the Puck Building features well known African American artists, another annual show, by members of the West Side Arts Coalition, at Broadway Mall Community Center, 96th Street and Broadway, introduces emerging talents. This year's WSAC survey, "Visions of a Culture," co-curated by Khuumba Ama and Elton Tucker, was one of the best to date.

"Granny and Me" by Enid Richardson Moore depicted an old woman and a little girl walking together hand-in-hand on a winding road between autumnal trees that became an enchanted forest via the magic of memory. Moore's canvas transcended sentimentality by virtue of its sheer painterly conviction. Another fine figurative painter, Mikki Powell's "Harlem Gentleman" also did its subject justice by capturing, in a manner simultaneously precise and expressive, the stylish dignity of an older man, wearing his hat at a rakish angle, sporting a pink suit and leaning on his cane.

Both of the show's curators made striking contributions: Khuumba Ama with "Spirit Dancer," in which a starkly simplified figure's sinuous dreadlocks flow like the branches of a beautiful black tree, as she dances triumphantly in a metaphysical space where a symbolic heart glows in mid-air; Elton Tucker with a powerful, large-scale celebration of African-American womanhood called "Chocolate Girl," juxtaposing a poetic text with vigorously painted faces in a composition both funky and elegant.

Joey Infante conjured up ancient roots with a painting combining Egyptian figures, insects, snakes, the anserated cross (or "Ankh" symbol), and a variety of other lively forms. By contrast, Cornelia Barnes captured an everyday scene with simplicity and sympathy in her insightful little watercolor of three seated figures, "The Older Generation."

Romantic realist Ernesto Camache evoked the urban experience atmospherically in a detailed subway scene, with a jazz trio holding forth in the 14th Street Station as the Number 5 train rounded the curve and a female passenger descended the staircase amid transcendent shafts of light.

Among the figurative painters, the work of Elaine Mokhtefi was notable for its skillful realism in capturing reposeful portrait subjects in intimate settings, as well as for the artist's bravura brushwork. Betty Thornton also made a strong impression with her severely simplified portraits of African-American women, which combined the flattened forms and clear colors of folk art with contemporary sophistication. Khadijah Salaam employed hard edged shapes as well, albeit along with severe compositional cropping verging on abstraction, in her dynamic painting focusing on the upper portion of a woman's face and her expressive, dark eyes.

Young Me's large, vigorous abstraction suggested a window view of a gathering storm with bold, gestural strokes. Miguel Angel Mora showed strong assemblage paintings in which circular forms within rectangles paid tribute to Yoruba goddesses. Then there was Ina Simmons, who employs cut paper to create compositions in which simplified figures within organic abstract forms convey a universal sense of human interconnectedness. In the context of this show, Simmons' piece "Together" seemed especially auspicious.

Joseph Infante

—Lawrence Downes

Gloria Spevacek's Sculptures Invent New Shapes for Nature

Gloria Spevacek is that rare contemporary sculptor who, like Jean Arp, seeks to unearth what the French critic Michel Seuphor once referred to as "the quintessence of palpable things." This is what made Spevacek's most recent solo exhibition, "Voices in Stone & Bronze," at Denise Bibro Gallery, 529 West 20th Street, so valuable in a time when so many others are producing only art about art.

Although the show at Bibro concentrated on Spevacek's abstract work, it is relevant to note that she is also known for her animal sculptures, which capture the individual character of various species with similar brevity and grace. Spevacek is a member of the Guild of Natural Science Illustrators as well as of the National Sculpture Society. Thus the forms of nature are felt in everything that she carves in marble or casts in bronze. As with the aforementioned Arp, even Spevacek's most reductive forms echo the phantom essences of actual things, making the word "voices" in regard to her show's title seem especially apt.

This is nowhere more true than in the magnificent piece in Carrara marble that Spevacek calls "Echoes of the Past," with its smoothly configured abstract forms so gracefully interlocking, as though in some long remembered embrace. Although these forms are by no means specific, they are obviously derived from the figure. When subjected to Spevacek's formal permutations, however, the figure takes on a fluidity that seemingly has more to do with emotional flux than with physical movement.

"Molden Passion"

In "Echoes of the Past," too, the formal thrust of the piece is at once severe and baroque in a manner peculiar to Spevacek's work. Circular forms suggesting featureless heads are cowled in more angular ones; curvaceous forms halved by shadow-catching crevices culminate in a sharp ledge at the squared-off base of the piece. The pristine, glistening whiteness of the Carrara marble with its faint veins serves here particularly well to meld the contrasting contours in the organic synthesis that is invariably a salient feature of Spevacek's work.

By contrast in another large stone sculpture called "Molden Passion" (one can only assume the title is a pun melding "molten" and "mold" to signify the sculptor's role of solidifying ephemeral states of seeing and being), Spevacek employs the darker, more definite patterns of the marble in an almost painterly manner. Brownish lines swirl like bold brushstrokes around the beige-burnished contours of the piece, enfolding and unifying a more complex configuration of merging curves and crevices.

Here, too, as the title suggests, there is the sense of an at least metaphorical embrace, although the piece yields no clues as to specific anatomy: rather, it projects sensuality even more effectively through the autonomous abstraction of its interwoven shapes.

Gloria Spevacek's painterly use of the surface variegations of marble is again especially clear in "Against the Rain," where the fine, vertical white lines in the blue-gray stone enhance the effect (more obvious here than elsewhere in the show) of a severely simplified, featureless figure huddled in a downpour. Conversely, the sense of a figure's physical movement (rather than of the figure itself) is evoked in the rhythmic flow of "Flash Dancer" with shapes that curve gracefully in space, creating a sense of sinuous rhythmic shifts and turns. Contrastingly still and serene, "Winter Sleep" suggests a reposeful swan, with its single flowing form curving gently into itself in a smooth circular manner that the pure white surface of the marble handsomely enhances.

The particular attention that Gloria Spevacek pays to surface as an adjunct to significant form carries over into her work in bronze, as seen in "Star Visitor," where the gleaming, polished surface of the piece contributes to the intergalactic suggestiveness of the sleek shape. In the same manner, the relative roughness of the surface in other bronzes such as "My Hobby Horse" and "Small Memorial" enhances the blithe playfulness in the former (which freezes a rocking motion in space), and accentuates the poignancy of the latter piece, which furls up like a small eternal flame or a flag at half mast.

Making frequent trips to Pietransanta, Italy — a veritable mecca for marble sculptors— to work in an atelier there on pieces that she later completes in her New York studio, Gloria Spevacek is an artist who has managed to preserve and extend the traditions of twentieth century modernism, even while forging a highly original formal vocabulary. While bowing to the innate beauty of natural things, her sculptures invent new shapes to convey their more elusive qualities and suggest their ineffable mystery.

J. Sanders Eaton

At Viridian, "Focus 3" Zeros in on Select Gallery Artists

Like its two predecessors, "Focus 3," at Viridian Artists @ Chelsea, 530 West 25th Street, sparked a lively dialogue between a select group of gallery artists.

Susan Hockaday often includes calligraphic lines or other drawn elements within her color photographs, although she never manipulates the image after shooting it. Sometimes she will move the camera to blur a drawn image or to increase its gestural velocity, or she will even make a drawing then shoot it through water to enhance its fluidity. Fascinated with patterns and rhythms in nature, she emphasizes them in extreme close-up to create compositions which are essentially abstract. Nothing is quite what it seems : sand, sea, foliage, or sky or a striped cloth subtly altered by drawing can appear to morph into something entirely different, imbuing Susan Hockaday's pictures with a mystery akin to aesthetic shamanism.

The mixed media paintings of Marjie Zelman are winningly insouciant, with their drawn imagery covered by sheets of clear plastic affixed to the support by rows of push-pins. Although Zelman's approach is deliberately primitive, with an almost dashed-off look, her work abounds in sophisticated art historical commentary and oddball aphorisms akin to those in the work of Wiliam T. Wiley. Quotes from Matisse, Picasso, and other masters have a way of turning up in her compositions in witty cartoon-like line drawings. There are also scrawled texts, such as a funny fake letter from Jackson Pollock to his art dealer Betty Parsons apologizing for exhibiting a drop cloth rather than a painting due to time constraints. The fun part of Zelman's work is attempting to decipher her intentions, while appreciating the lively linearity and compositional daring that makes her pieces oddly appealing in their own right.

Another intriguing maximalist, Susan Lyons, employs collage elements in a spontaneous, stream of consciousness manner, as launching pads to vigorous painterly flights of fantasy. In a powerful and acerbic assemblage called "Americana," Lyons extends her bizarre imagery into three dimensions, employing doll heads, party hats, and tiny flags to create a tableaux at once comic and chilling. Here, as in her populous collage paintings of apocalyptic terrains and dreamscapes, Lyons' bold paint handling carries the day. Her gestural energy lends new vitality to surrealist incongruity.

The intimate, gem-like abstract paintings of Shasha Linda Wasko, also a gifted photographer, are sinuously suggestive, yet elude easy interpretation, with their smooth, creamy surfaces and chromatic richness. One can almost discern— or perhaps simply sense— the presence of the figure or a landscape, yet her paintings refuse to yield an identifiable image. Rather, Wasko entices the viewer's imagination with gracefully flowing, rhythmic shapes that seem to serve as formal metaphors for things unseen: the magical essences and spiritual forces underlying nature. Indeed, Shasha Linda Wasko seems a contemporary soul-mate of such American abstract pioneers as Arthur Dove and Georgia O'Keeffe for her ability to evoke a luminous metaphysical dimension through pure form and color.

In "A Whole Fish Two Ways — Six Varying Species," Lisa R. Gould creates an intriguing conceptual conceit in a photographic sequence recording the subtle variations in the fish heads from a particular dish (same recipe, six different species) as left on the plate, in part or in whole, by several patrons in a restaurant she frequented over a period of time. Gould's visual research results in gastronomic drama akin to such restaurant themed films as "Dinner Rush" and "Big Night"— albeit centering on varying degrees of human hedonism and squeamishness.

Japanese painter Taeko Imai has evolved a unique personal synthesis with lyrical canvases in which the tiny figures of children at play in water and on a foggy beach emerge faintly from what appears at first glance to be a monochromatic color field painting. Taeko's luminous oil and wax technique imbues her paintings with dreamy atmospheres that lend them a tender, elegiac quality suggesting nostalgia for the lost idylls of youth.

Another gifted painter, Bernice Faegenburg brings about a successful synthesis of Eastern lyricism and Western "objectness" in a large, fan-shaped work in mixed media on canvas, in which delicate limbs and flowers suggestive of classical Chinese motifs take on unaccustomed physical presence and heft. Here, as in two smaller acrylics in a more gestural manner, Faegenburg explores tensions between poetry and raw power.

—Peter Wiley

See page 24 for review

Liberation Through Color in the Paintings of Maria Del Pilar

Color means different things to different artists, but few seem to have as personal a relationship to the spectrum as Maria Del Pilar, a painter who grew up under the Franco dictatorship in Spain and asserts frankly that, for her, colors can be equated with personal freedom.

"I would only wear black and white, since those colors were safe," Del Pilar recalls in statement issued in connection with her recent exhibition at Agora Gallery, 415 West Broadway, in Soho. "I felt no one would be able to tell what I was thinking or how I was feeling. Wearing colorful clothing , I thought, would let my inner world become visible. Today, I use color to put into images what I have been unable to put into words."

Trained as an architect, Del Pilar has lived and worked in France, as well as in Vancouver, after emigrating from her homeland. Finally returning to Spain, she began to paint in the more relaxed political climate of the post-Franco era. Giving vent to her natural inclinations, she flowered as a colorist.

When we think of Spanish artists we do not particularly consider color foremost in their work. Goya comes most immediately to mind, a great painter more known for his blacks than for his colors. Even Picasso, although he used a great deal of color, did not make color the major factor, as did French painters such as Bonnard and Matisse; he was more of a draftsman and a formal innovator than a colorist.

By contrast, Maria Del Pilar says, "Color has been a constant presence in my life, a measure of my emotions and a gateway to my earliest memories." And these sentiments are made manifest in her mixed media paintings, which reach back in time to achieve their immediacy, reflecting her memories through her palette: Her reds reflect the visceral, drama of the corrida; her earthier colors evoke the richness of the Spanish soil; her vibrant yellows, the blinding intensity of the Mediterranean sun; her greens, the lush foliage; her blues, the clear, luminous beauty of sea and sky.

Yet even as they reflect the hues of nature and the gradations of emotion, colors also achieve their own autonomy in Del Pilar's vibrant mixed media abstractions, which have a dynamic formal thrust to match their chromatic evocativeness. Her forms billow up like great clouds of "tinted steam," to borrow a phrase from the English master J.M.W. Turner. Indeed, the movement of some of Del Pilar's compositions can recall the circular movement as well as the mysterious sense of light in some of Turner's paintings, albeit with a more contemporary sense of pure abstraction.

"Printemps"

What strikes one finally about the paintings of Maria Del Pilar is the joy that she finds in her coloristic freedom, which she conveys to the viewer in a most contagious manner. Bold and sumptuous, these compositions, with their radiant colors and expansive forms, are exhilarating to encounter and can provide a truly transformative aesthetic experience. —Marie R. Pagano

Sheryl Ruth Kolitsopoulos Achieves a Shimmering Synthesis

A perfect marriage of subject and technique is something that occurs rarely in contemporary painting, given a tendency to take shortcuts to success. However, Sheryl Ruth Kolitsopoulos, who received her early training at the Parsons School of Design and the Art Students League, revealed a technical finesse that seemed inseparable from her themes in her recent exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, in Soho.

In her figurative and landscape paintings Kolitsopoulos achieves the best of two worlds, creating compositions that are as pleasing for their formal virtues as for their heartfelt depiction of human and nature subjects. When Kolitsopoulos paints the figure, particularly in her portraits, she not only captures the character of the sitter but also gives us a sense of the world that the subject inhabits.

This is particularly striking in "Stavroula with African Violets," a large painting of a formidable mature woman, impeccably dressed, seated near a window, tending her potted plants. What comes across here is the vision of an orderly and dignified life. In a single image, Kolitsopoulos imparts to the viewer an almost novelistic sense of an entire milieu.

The foundation of Kolitsopoulos' art is

"Elafonisos-simos beach"

obviously her drawing ability, as seen in the splendid large charcoal drawing "Women of Kefallonia," in which a group of women in traditional peasant dress are depicted with a bold mastery that renders them timeless. Stripped to its bare bones in her drawings, Kolitsopoulos' technical skill is impressive indeed. However, it is in her paintings that her vision comes into full flower, particularly in a picture such as "Elafonisos-Simos Beach," a panoramic composition in a horizontal format, in which Kolitsopoulos' ability to imbue inert pigment with a sense of light and life approaches a kind of alchemy.

Working in oil on linen and availing herself of all the subtle effects only possible in that time-honored medium, Kolitsopoulos has evolved a style which weds the chromatic shimmer of Impressionism to a more realistic manner of depiction. Which is to say, while her canvases capture qualities of light and shadow with a freshness that recalls the great French movement, they also possess a degree of detail that sets them apart as products of a singular postmodern sensibility.

In the beachscape referred to above, for example, areas of sand, water, and sky all come alive by virtue of minute strokes which simultaneously knit the entire composition together and imbue it with an overall radiance, capturing the distinct differences between direct and reflected light. Kolitsopoulos has a unique ability to give equal weight to physical and atmospheric elements, capturing such particulars with a seemingly effortless freshness that makes her natural subjects magically evocative.

In both her figure paintings and her landscapes, she demonstrates her command of color, light, and spatial relationships. Whether depicting a couple relaxing in a garden amid lush foliage, children at play, or any number of sparkling Greek landscapes, Sheryl Ruth Kolitsopoulos invariably achieves a perfect synthesis of a specific moment and those eternal qualities which make for a truly memorable painting.

—Lawrence Downes

Bong Rim Han's Sculptures Liberate Form from Function

In Korea, Bong Rim Han is a celebrated sculptor and distinguished university professor, best known for employing the traditional medium of ceramics to create innovative fine art, as opposed to functional pottery. His aim is not so much a revolt against function, he has made clear, as an act of personal aesthetic liberation. His uncompromising stance has gained him much favorable critical attention. His work is in many important private and public collections, including major museums, and he has exhibited widely throughout Korea, as well as in Europe and the United States.

Although Bong Rim Han has gained recognition with large outdoor pieces, a more intimate facet of his work can be seen in his brilliant solo exhibition at Tong-In Gallery New York, 16 West 32nd Street, suite 503. The show dates are April 1 through 30, with a reception for the artist on April 6, from 5 to 9 PM.

In the past, Bong Rim Han has worked with freely flowing organic forms, as well as with spiky totemic configurations that could suggest abstract cacti, especially when seen in an outdoor setting. The latter shapes were often encrusted or combined in various ways with egg-like ovals that, while peripheral in earlier pieces, have now become the focal point of his most recent series of ceramic sculptures.

In the show at Tong-In Gallery New York, these simple shapes are subjected to an infinite variety of subtle variations that suggest a preoccupation with primal origins as a vehicle for a complex range of expression. This recent concentration on a single form, however, seems not so much a move toward minimalism as a means of exploring the deep significance of this basic shape from which much of life emanates.

"Life"

Each of Bong Rim Han's austere egg-like ovals is a discrete entity, possessing great power and presence. Each piece projects a sense of its own unique formal identity, as one encounters it in the gallery. One is struck initially by the beauty of the overall form, its restrained sensuality and aesthetic purity. Rather than form following function, to paraphrase the old adage, these particular forms break new ground by drawing our attention to themselves in a way that makes us see the familiar with fresh vision.

After being seduced by the contours of the shapes themselves, by the quiet authority with which they command space as autonomous objects, one is then drawn to the equally compelling qualities of their surfaces. Obviously Bong Rim Han lavishes great care on these surfaces, with their painterly subtleties of color and tone, their light-catching glazes, and the regularly spaced yet slightly varied horizontal ridges that encircle many of his pieces from top to bottom. Even more significant, in terms of imbuing each piece with a particular identity and poetically evoking the sense of an evolutionary— or "birthing" process— are the small cracks, crevices, and other distinctly different elements in the individual sculptures. These vary greatly, from gaping orifices to forms that partially deconstruct, with separate shards lying beside the collapsed central form, suggesting shattered eggshells from which it is possible to imagine that some determined avian creature has fought its way to the outer world, claiming its precious purchase on life itself.

Perhaps in a broader, more symbolic sense, these shattered elements in some of Bong Rim Han's sculptures could also be seen to suggest the triumphant escape from tradition that this important Korean artist accomplishes in putting a functional medium to such highly original, independently expressive ends.

—Ed McCormack

David Beck"s Universe of Unnatural Wonders

While irony abounds, whimsy has been in short supply in the art world for several years. David Beck, however, recently filled the vacuum to overflowing in a brilliant exhibition inspired by 17th century Cabinet de Curiosités "La Naturecanique," at Allan Stone Gallery, 113 East 90th Street.

Beck is a delightful anomaly whose meticulous craftsmanship in carved wood, brass, bone, horn, mother of pearl and other materials imbues his sculptures, objects, and books with a rarefied quality impossible to compare to anything else in contemporary art. Enclosed in glass domes, boxes, or vitrines, his tiny, intricately carved elephants, insects, fish, and moths all have movable parts which can be activated by turning cranks attached to the mechanical gadgets incorporated in his pieces.

Strolling from one to the other in the gallery was an experience akin to taking in the displays in some fantastic Museum of Unnatural History, where one might encounter a fat little fish with the beak of a bird or another aquatic vertebrate sliced into sections containing even more miniature undersea flora and fauna— as though some wizardly sushi chef had wielded his knife to lay bare the inner workings of the food chain.

A makeshift cinema was set up in a little house in the garden of the gallery, where one could view a film by Beck, in which his sculptures came alive in all their zany kinetic glory. To a jazzy musical score composed by the artist (and on which he played saxophone accompanied by other musicians), a mechanical elephant raised its trunk and kicked its rear legs in the air like a rotund donkey. Then the fat little fish with the bird-beak did a fluid little hula hula dance, wiggling its fins and tail seductively, rolling its eyes coquettishly.

Cut to the artist's hand working the crank like The Hand of God cranking up the sideshow of Life Itself. In another scene, the omnipresent hand held a fountain pen and, in an elegant script, wrote out "Mothcanique," as the shadow of a robotic insect fluttered its wings dramatically on-screen.

Mostly in black and white—except for a brief split screen sequence where one side was in color–-Beck's film was like a cross between the primitive yet lyrical little avant garde movies made by Edwin Denby and Joseph Cornell in the 1950s and those ancient Max Fleischer cartoons, in which the characters crawled out of a bottle of India ink to cavort for awhile before leaping back in.

David Beck has had two solo shows at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, has exhibited in numerous other museums, including the Met and the Guggenheim, and has been showing at Allan Stone since 1976. His work has been compared to everything from European cabinetry and Gothic carving to American folk and Outsider art. Yet, he incorporates these influences, among several others, to create a singular universe-in-microcosm which wittily parodies the mechanistic aspects of nature with a visionary brilliance belonging to him alone.

—Ed McCormack

"La petite pêche énorme, 2001"

AMUSEUM:

The Funhouse Effect in the Whitney Biennial

We already had our sneers fixed firmly in place as we walked into the press preview for the 2004 Whitney Biennial. The mood of the event reminded us of a couple of days earlier when we ran into a big ruckus on East 42nd Street: TV news vans, cameras, a crowd of gawkers standing out in the drizzle as on-air reporters rehearsed their soundbites and checked their hair. Obviously something of great moment was about to happen. We asked a young woman beaming on the edge of the crowd what was up.

"We're waiting for Martha Stewart!" she said, as though reciting a mantra for our publicity-crazed age, and added breathlessly that the newly charged felon was scheduled to meet with her future probation officer in a nearby building.

Now, for all the hubbub, as the news crews lugged their cameras into the Whitney, we were expecting the same kind of non-event. After all, there had not been a decent biennial in at least a decade and a half, maybe longer. They all tended to merge in Memory: "The Minimal Biennial," "The Conceptual Biennial," "The Political Biennial," "The Millennial Biennial," "The Return of Painting Biennial" (as if it had ever gone away!)...

For all the thematic trumpeting, it was hard to distinguish one from the other. So we had no reason to expect this one to be any better, as we watched the camera crews swarm around Debra Singer, one of the three curators. Considering that nobody had ever heard of her before, she must have suddenly felt like Sofia Coppola when the directorial prodigy was still expected to take home an Oscar for "Lost in Translation". In fact, with her black hair, black clothes, and full lips, Singer could have resembled a slightly elongated Sofia. Certainly she was more mediagenic than the gray-bearded conceptual artist Hans Haacke, who got similar star treatment in the 2000 Biennial for a political imbroglio with bombastic art critic Rudy Giuliani.

We didn't stick around to hear what Debra Singer had to say, since we were not yet aware that, aside from a few misguided inclusions, she and her fellow curators, Chrissie Ilses and Shamim M. Momin, had put together by far the best Whitney Biennial in recent memory... Besides, we had to go to the bathroom— where we were about to be ambushed by an unanticipated artwork.

It was dark in there, with only a weird purple haze to see by. There was a shrill, unrelenting siren-sound, like one of those alarms that wakes you up in the middle of the night because some scum-bag skulking around out on the street has broken into a parked car; the kind of noise that sets your teeth on edge and that you know is never going to stop...

On the way out we noticed the card on the wall near the rest room door. It said that we had just experienced an audio work by Jim O'Rourke. It's title was "We're all in This Together." But that was not the least bit reassuring.

One thing we should warn you is that this biennial is very noisy. Don't expect a moment of silence, even in the stairwells, where another audio artist named Julianne Swartz has piped in off-key voices humming "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" for your listening pleasure. Everything being relative, Swartz's sound installation is almost pleasurable compared to Aïda Ruilova's video installation of people who appear to be in the kind of emotional distress that usually calls for near-lethal doses of Thorazine screaming phrases such as "NO NO!" "LET'S GO!" and "COME HERE!" over and over at hair-raising volumes.

We'd like to believe the biennial catalog when it informs us that "Ruilova's works subvert both horror movie and music video cliches, pitting the overplayed drama of the former against the rapid fire editing of the latter." Still, it would be nice if works such as this would endeavor not to be even dumber and more annoying than that which they are supposed to be subverting.

Elizabeth Peyton "Live to Ride (E.P.)"
Private collection; courtesy Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.

Not that we're adverse to art that draws its energy from popular culture. Comic books, punk rock concert posters, fanzines and other arguably low-rent art forms are turned to high art purposes very effectively by both Raymond Pettibon and Zak Smith. Although Pettibon is an entire generation older than Smith, both similarly revitalize drawing as a discrete art form, rather a minor or preliminary medium.

Pettibon's sprawling installations combining clusters of works on paper with drawings made directly on the museum walls and wry hand-printed texts exemplify the funhouse effect at its best. For all its funky irony and sometimes silly humor ("Who," says one owl on a limb; "Whom," corrects its mate), Pettibon's work is important because he employs comic book draftsmanship for its honest expressive possibilities, rather than merely parodying it. Unlike his Pop predecessors, who were still in the long shadow cast by Clement Greenberg, and often seemed to be holding their inspiration at arm's length and holding their noses with the other hand, Pettibon never comes off like he's slumming in low culture.

Pettibon has obviously inspired Zak Smith, whose "Pictures of What Happens on Each Page of Thomas Pynchon's Novel Gravity's Rainbow" is a grid of 755 small pictures illuminating rather than merely illustrating Pynchon's huge postmodern novel. Although Smith's piece has the overall impact of a large abstraction, up close it yields a nonlinear narrative of intriguing images that are quite beautiful, with their angular figurative distortions and finely crosshatched pen-lines.

A more traditional kind of finesse can be seen in the work of Ernesto Caivano, another new discovery who elevates the status of an often dismissed medium by presenting

Yayoi Kusama "Fireflies on the Water"
Whitney Museum of American Art; courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.

drawing as a finished art form. Inspired by fairy tales, the art of the nineteenth-century German romantics, nature lore, and a private mythology involving a metaphysical knight and his shape-shifting wife, Caivano creates drawings of exquisite delicacy, their graceful ink-line and elegant spotting of blacks suggesting a semi-abstract incarnation of Aubrey Beardsley.

In contrast to the above three artists, who demonstrate the true potential of drawing, Chloe Piene's anti-erotic pictures of women masturbating, dashed off in charcoal on vellum, are flimsy sketches, despite their overblown scale. Piene's debts to Egon Schiele and George Grosz are just obvious enough to make her suffer by comparison. Her line is loose and wobbly, and her attempts to make a connection between sex, anorexia, and death in our diet-obsessed culture by making parts of the body skeletal are trite and obvious. Equally silly is the attempt of the obscure, portentous prose in the catalog to convince us, in language as fuzzy as the drawings themselves, that Piene depicts "the moments when throbbing desire violently breaks into the spaces of the real."

Although she works in a similar vein of figuration and came of age around the same time as John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage, Elizabeth Peyton is a more appealing painter than either of those two artists. We were initially put off by Peyton's schoolgirlish subject matter—pretty-boy film and music idols like Leonardo DiCaprio and the late Kurt Cobain limned in limpid oil glazes—but have learned to appreciate her for a sincerity that contrasts refreshingly with the facetious slickness of her colleagues. The smooth, succulent surfaces and and overall preciousness of her small oils complements her reverence for youthful beauty perfectly, making for as auspicious a synthesis of form and content as anything around. Peyton's range of subjects has expanded as well, judging from the works in this biennial. For while her portrait of Julien Casablancas, the willowy lead singer of The Strokes, is to be expected, her picture of Walt Whitman is a surprise. True, he's younger, not the grandfatherly Walt we are used to— but pretty he definitely is not! We were also quite taken with Peyton's oil on board "Live to Ride (E.P.)," a self portrait in which she makes herself as androgynously appealing in her red motorcycle logo t-shirt as any of her pop music subjects. Here, she reveals a healthy self-regard, rather than a groupie's idolatry, as she enters her own pantheon of the forever young and pretty.

We've never indulged in the "painting is dead, painting is back" game. Painting doesn't die; it just gets ignored, while curators go ga-ga over newer, more novel media. Happily, that's not true of this biennial, which includes a fair number of fine painters. However, over-rated Saatchi discovery Cecily Brown is not one of them. The trendy Brit's big, messy expressionist nudes with black backgrounds are ostensibly Valentines to Goya; yet they struck us as watered-down Francis Bacon. Frankly, we preferred Brown's earlier paintings, which were watered-down de Kooning with copulating couples playing peek-a-boo among the drippy brushstrokes as though they were bushes in some orgiastic theme park.

Amy Sillman, on the other hand, gets better all the time. Sillman's new paintings of somewhat skewed Texas landscapes have that combination of cartoony imagery and abstract ambiguity that has always made her work intriguing. Only now her surfaces are more impastoed, juicier, informed by real painterly panache. We were also impressed by a mural-scale work in acrylic and ink on canvas by Julie Mehretu, who was born in Ethiopia, raised in Michigan, and now lives in New York. Combining architectural plans, maps, and graffiti with geometric elements, Mehretu's varied mark-making merges solid compositional structure reminiscent of Robert Goodnough with a gestural energy akin to Cy Twombly. Another very large work in oil and acrylic by Laura Owens was a whimsical Bambi fantasy, featuring all kinds of wild critters in and around a big tree shedding blobs of thick paint instead of leaves— a delightfully perverse postmodern Peaceable Kingdom.

Conversely, Barnaby Furnas makes blood and gore appear almost festive in his epic battle scenes, with their whizzing bullets and splashy areas of red that pull his compositions together even as they deconstruct his figures. The sheer violence of Furnas' big canvases—exploding heads, scattered limbs, the works—could be seen to reference post-9/11 trauma. Since most of the work in the biennial was produced in the past two years, the curators were obliged to acknowledge solemnly that 9/11 "triggered a profound response" among artists they screened to make their selections, even while admitting that it was "not necessarily reflected in the content of the art we saw."

Nor do we feel that it necessarily has be. While protest, outrage, and elegy have a time-honored place in art history, they are not the only appropriate responses to a tragedy of such magnitude. Art has the even more important job of simply continuing in the face of despair, and the vitality of this show seems to indicate that its capacity to uplift has been stimulated rather than diminished by recent events.

This is reflected in a diversity of approaches: Hernan Bas addresses themes of gay identity wittily with a Boy's Life outdoor adventure illustration style in a mixed media technique incorporating Slim Fast diet drink and fruit juice. Kim Fisher paints luminous diamond forms in oils on raw linen, offsetting the precision of her minimalist compositions with excess linen that flops off her stretcher bars, creating a dust ruffle effect that is peculiarly winning in a sloppy sort of way. Lecia Dole-Recio combines graphite, glue, paper, vellum, tape, and paint in layered abstract collage paintings notable for the subtle interplay of visual and tactile elements.

Indicating a growing trend toward Intimism, Amy Cutler and Laylah Ali both create smallish works in gouache on paper that contradict the misguided notion that size equals significance. Cutler's pictures depict a cast of predominantly female characters engaged in surreal rituals in a pristine storybook style. Ali tweaks issues of race, class, and gender with severely simplified brown skinned figures and insect-like configurations of multiple legs in basketball shorts, sweat socks and sneakers. Her style suggests ancient Egyptian art and the social realism of Jacob Lawrence deconstructed and reassembled in a singular synthesis.

Compared to the work of some of these younger painters, veteran minimalist Mel Bochner's flippant oils of brightly colored, block-lettered words such as "KAPUT," "DEAD," "ZILCH" and "FART" now look simply cranky — like the efforts of an old fart (if you'll excuse the appropriation) trying to ape

 continued from page 17

punk aggression. That said, the stated intention of the curators to make this an "intergenerational" biennial is certainly commendable, and if it indicates a growing awareness that ageism, like racism, and sexism is politically incorrect, all the better. By the same token, why not give exposure to older artists who have not received the recognition they deserve, rather than already famous ones like Robert Mangold and David Hockney? Granted, Mangold's "Column Paintings" exemplify the Minimalist aesthetic at its most stately and Hockney's large watercolors of his California studio are characteristically handsome. The inclusion of Alex Hay, however, offered more of a revelation.

In the early 1960s, Hay was a prominent figure in the New York avant garde, an associate of Rauschenberg known for his Pop paintings of sales receipts, legal pads, and other deadpan subjects blown up to huge proportions. Then he stopped painting for over three decades, withdrew his work from public view and was not heard from again until resurfacing in this Biennial. Reportedly, Hay only started painting again last year, producing the two canvases seen here, literal close-up transcriptions of the grainy wood surfaces painted in meticulous detail that read as exquisitely restrained overall abstractions.

Another surprise was the reappearance of avant garde legend Yayoi Kusama, famous in the New York art scene of the 1960s for covering furniture with phallic protrusions and naked people with polka dots. While many artists exploit their compulsions quite happily, Kusama apparently considered hers a clinical liability. Returning home to Japan at the height of her fame in the early seventies, she voluntarily committed herself to an asylum for the mentally ill, where she has lived ever since. Still, she continues to make art and has been enjoying something of a revival in the past couple of years.

Kusama's installation "Fireflies on the Water" is one of the real sensations of the 2004 Biennial. One viewer at a time is admitted to a darkened room where a short runway is surrounded on all sides by water. The walls and ceiling are mirrored and 150 tiny twinkling lights are multiplied myriad times in the mirrors and in the water. In contrast to the cacophony of noise in other parts of the museum, the space Kusama has created is sublimely silent. One has the feeling of being suspended weightlessly in some infinite cosmic expanse, utterly alone. It is a kind of artistic near-death experience, at once exhilarating, a little bit scary, and profoundly beautiful.

It's instructive to see a real sixties figure like Kusama juxtaposed with a sixties nostalgia act like the lowercase collective of retro-art elves who call themselves "assume vivid astro focus." The name sounds suitably spacey, but if the intention was to revive the ambience of, say, the Velvet Underground jamming at The Factory, this dayglo psychedelic room installation tends more toward the faux psychedelic decor of glitzy sixties boutiques like Paraphernalia or Serendipity. "Where's the whiskey, can I bum a cigarette," croaks a Lou Reed impersonator on the audio track, backed by a droning bass guitar, as you enter a tacky head shop environment of dayglo wallpaper and multimedia kitsch that smacks of Peter Max.

The curators' catalog introduction suggests that the nostalgia for the sixties and early seventies on the part of several of the artists may spring from their sense of that time as "a period in which international conflicts, domestic tumult, political scandals, and economic downturns formed a combustible climate as crisis-driven as our own." But it actually seems more wistful than political in the case of artists too young to actually remember Vietnam and Watergate. Tarrytown native Sue de Beer seems slyly aware of this in her video of a suburban teenage wasteland where catatonic Deadheads in hippie wigs play air-guitar with real guitars in a garish bedroom plastered with posters. By contrast, Mary Kelly's "Circa. 1968" is a photo-derived image of a political demonstration conveying the personal passion of one who was old enough to be a participant. That this image was created with compressed lint scavenged from the filter screen of her clothes dryer is a wry feminist touch, suggesting that Kelly is still engaged in political struggle on the home front.

One area in which this biennial seems sadly deficient is sculpture, the long acknowledged stepchild of modern art, which one famous critic notoriously dismissed as "something you back into when you're looking at painting." There are a few notable inclusions: Olav Westphalen's life-size handcuffed men; Jim Hodges' glass tree-limb and bird's nest; Erick Swenson's figure of a white buck wiping visceral matter from its antlers onto an oriental rug; Taylor Davis' austere Neo-Minimalist pieces made with mirrors and wood; and Liz Craft's grotesque bronze of a skeleton riding a motorcycle. However, most of the sculptural objects here are seen in the context of installations. Among these, we especially enjoyed Rob Fischer's huge mixed media installation of auto and machine parts in a hand-built dumpster (which, on second thought, might qualify as a sculpture since everything is stuffed into one container); Christian Holstad's campy camp-site with its camp-fire of stuffed fabric logs, woolen flames, and tangled yarn smoke flowing up to the ceiling; Virgil Marti's deliciously kitschy mylar room with chandeliers made from pink deer antlers and fake flowers; and Tom Burr's "Blackout Bar," where overflowing ashtrays, overturned bottles, toppled bar stools, and a floor littered with black plastic tablecloths suggests the aftermath of a bad night in the Soprano crew's topless joint, the Bada Bing.

Photography, a medium that has turned several corners and truly come into its own in recent years, is seen most advantageously in the work of Katy Grannan, Catherine Opie, Alec Soth, and Emily Jacir. While somewhat haunted by the ghost of Dianne Arbus, Grannan's Chromogenic color prints of upstate residents nude or in various states of dishabille in stark outdoor settings have their own queasy insights to offer. Contrastingly lyrical, Catherine Opie's images of California surfers as tiny specs in the majestic coastal waters of the Pacific have a misty, dreamlike lyricism reminiscent of Bruce Brown's classic film "The Endless Summer," as well as of classical Chinese painting. While acknowledging Robert Frank's great road trip series "The Americans" as an influence, Alec Soth brings his own harder edged sensibility to his big color prints of people who live along the

Erick Swenson "Untitled" (detail)
Cooper Family Foundation; courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York and Angstrom Gallery, Dallas. Photograph Greg Weight.

Hernan Bas "Ilaocoön Sons"
Collection of Stanley and Nancy Singer; courtesy Deitch Projects, New York. Photograph by Tom Powell Imaging.

Alec Soth "Charles, Vasa MN"
Collection of the artist; courtesy Yossi Milo Gallery.

Amy Sillman "Hamlet"
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Photograph courtesy Brent Sikkema Gallery, New York.

Jim Hodges "A View From In Here"
The Rachofsky Collection; courtesy Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photograph by Stephen White.

Barnaby Furnas "Hamburger Hill"
Collection of Dean Valentine and Amy Adelson, Los Angeles; courtesy Marianne Boesky Gallery New York. Photograph by Jean Vong.

banks of the Mississippi and their living spaces. Most notable among the latter is an image of an old easy chair beside a brick fireplace with a copy of Hustler magazine on the rug below. Born in Saudi Arabia but possessing an American passport, Emily Jacir set out to fulfill simple wishes within Palestine for exiles unable to return home. Documented in thirty photographs with corresponding texts in Arabic and English, as well as one video, the project records such simple humanitarian tasks as bringing gifts to family members, watering a tree in a beloved village, or visiting a dead mother's grave with a poignancy that transcends conceptual gamesmanship .

Emerging into daylight after spending hours in a show that alternated between being exhausting and engaging, but finally triumphed by virtue of its genial take on an elusive Zeitgeist, the first thing we saw was a folding table set up on the sidewalk right in front of the museum. Presided over by an enterprising young MFA named Eric Doeringer, it held what Doeringer calls his "bootlegs": hand painted, scaled down copies of canvases by Mel Bochner, Robert Mangold, Cecily Brown and other artists in the 2004 Whitney Biennial. The only ones that even came close to being convincing at a quick glance were the fake Peytons, since they were about the same size as the originals. So, assuming the high quality of the current survey indicates a new trend for the Whitney, we won't expect to see Doeringer's crude appropriations in the 2006 Biennial. Then again, stranger things have happened.

Ernesto Caivano "Philapores Navigate the Log and Code" (detail)
Collection of Victor Masnyj. Photograph by the artist.

Amy Cutler "Campsite"
Private collection; courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York © Amy Cutler.

* * *

The 2004 Whitney Biennial is at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street, (212) 570-3676, through May 30.

For Juan Kovacs, the Nude Embodies " Divine Conscience"

For many centuries, artists have been trained by drawing from the nude, and until relatively recent times, for various cultural reasons, male models were more often used for this purpose than female ones. Modern times, however, have seen such a concentration on the female nude as subject that the question of The Male Gaze has become a loaded political issue.

Less fraught with political peril nowadays is the Male Gaze in regard to the male body, as seen in the work of well known contemporary artists from David Hockney to Luis Caballero. However, the young Mexican artist Juan Kovacs approached the subject from another angle, reviving an idealized, heroic vision of the male body in his recent exhibition of paintings at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, in Soho.

"My paintings do not capture a particular moment in time, but instead show feelings I have had throughout my life," Kovacs has stated. "The human body is like a blank canvas in which these feelings can be expressed...Our bodies are reflections of the souls within: They are the bearers of different feelings and thoughts. For me, the nude is the most perfect physical demonstration of divine conscience, therefore I conceive my creations as beings filled with meaning and eroticism.'

Although a female nude appeared in one canvas in the show entitled "Adam and Eve," the overwhelming number of Kovacs' paintings featured the male body enveloped in intense areas of color. With a painstaking technique involving oils applied over an acrylic underpainting, Kovacs creates sensuous surfaces to complement the sensuality of his figures, employing not only brushes but a soft cloth to mix the paint directly on the canvas.

Kovacs is an especially intrepid painter where color is concerned, employing hues that range from blues, to vibrant red and orange , to strident yellows to imbue his compositions with a dynamic chromatic impact. At the same time, his mastery of classical anatomy lends his figures a palpable physical presence that comes through the romantic auras in which he casts them, creating a paradoxical synthesis of earthy and mythical properties.

In one powerful canvas called "Flowing Dream," the figure emerges from overall areas of nocturnal blue that lend the painting a lyrical quality. In another work, entitled "War," dark red-violet hues convey a grimmer mood and the figure, even while characteristically idealized, appears to personify a symbolic sense of male violence.

In another powerful canvas called "Combustion," two male nudes face off amid brilliant coloristic fireworks; here, however, the mood is more erotic than combative.

"I believe that paintings should tell stories," Kovacs states. "The messages and symbols contained must flow through the narrative structure of the work, leading to a variety of interpretations. It doesn't matter how these messages and symbols are perceived, as long as emotions are stirred."

Not only do Kovacs' paintings succeed in narrative terms, but in purely visual terms as well. Above all, his canvases convey the sense of a painter thoroughly in command of his technical powers and passionately committed to sharing his vision.

—Robert Vigo

Anomalies Abound in the Art of Katrin Alvarez-Schlüter

An accomplished writer as well as a painter, Katrin Alvarez-Schlüter has exhibited widely throughout Germany Switzerland, and Israel. She revealed herself to be a dazzling conjurer of intriguing neo-surreal visions in her recent New York exhibition in the Chelsea venue of Agora Gallery at 530 West 25th Street.

Such is Alvarez-Schlüter's technical facility that she can render her most farfetched visions remarkably convincing in her oils, mixed media works, and Conte drawings, in which a varied cast of characters enacts pictorial dramas that appear to allude to a wide range of social and poetically personal themes.

One of this artist's most interesting devices is to combine figures of greatly differing sizes in the same composition, the disparities of scale suggesting that they actually inhabit different worlds yet are meeting on some unearthly plane with its own symbolic logic. Anomalies abound in her compositions, which startle us in a manner akin to that other collector of figurative oddities and ironies, the late Gregory Gillespie. Alvarez-Schlüter, however, has her own unique imaginative realm, in which it is possible to encounter a languorous beauty in a chic mini-dress and knee-boots inhabiting what appears to be a daydream in the company of tiny human and animal figures that may or may not be figments of her imagination.

"Borderline"

Reality and fantasy are obviously both up for grabs in Alvarez-Schlüter's contemporary allegories, where the figures are often seen in dreamlike environments, evoked in minute detail with a flawless realist technique. These often take the form of room interiors where odd vegetation appears to be growing out of cracks in the walls and objects can be seen that are not readily recognizable yet are depicted so skillfully that we feel they must serve some mysterious purpose.

In one particularly disconcerting picture, its complex composition beautifully delineated in Conte, sinuous vines issue from a large ear-shaped form affixed to the wall, encircling the head of a seated figure and culminating in a small tree that sprouts from the top of his head. Such images seem to spring directly from the artist's subconscious and something about the juxtaposition of figure, environment, and object strikes an emotional chord in the viewer. While some compositions are intricate and detailed, others have a slightly more abstract quality, with stylized figures distorted in an expressive manner for psychological impact. Burnished colors and intriguing textures often add to the overall atmosphere and aesthetic appeal of the latter compositions.

But it is Alvarez-Schlüter's ability to induce us to suspend disbelief that makes her paintings especially remarkable. For example, a human figure will have the head of a bird or some other anatomical anomaly will be depicted so convincingly that the viewer will accept it as though it were completely natural. We take her imagery at face value because she presents it with utter verisimilitude, with a stylistic consistency that makes it totally believable in context.

One could cite Hieronymus Bosch and certain of the Surrealists as stylistic antecedents of Katrin Alvarez-Schlüter. However, her work seems to spring not from art historical sources, but from her direct observations of the human condition, which she transposes into visual symbols that are as psychologically perceptive as they are visually engaging.

—Peter Wiley

Grandeur Reborn: The Paintings and Sculptures of Ludvic

The infrequency of the heroic gesture in recent art could lead future archeologists sifting through our rubble to conclude that we were a cartoon culture devoid of epic ambition. The pervasive irony of the post-Warhol era has provided shelter for a multitude of minor talents. Adopting the smirking persona of the nightclub comic enables them to hedge their bets, lest their conceptual conceits fall flat, by attaching disclaimers to their work that declare, "Only kidding!"

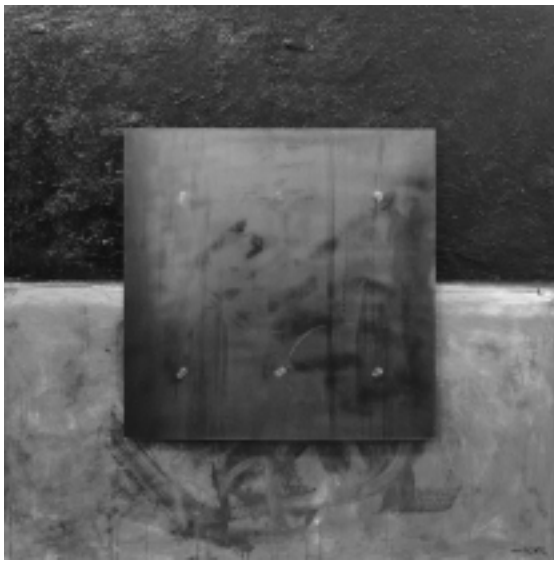
We can only be thankful, then, that there will always be a handful of artists in any given age willing to risk passionate engagement with serious aesthetic issues. One such uncompromising individual, just beginning to receive exposure commensurate with his gifts, is an artist known professionally by the single name Ludvic, whose mixed media paintings and sculptures are featured in two major surveys: "The Apparent Intersection of Near and Far: International Perspectives in Contemporary Art" at The Hunterdon Museum of Art," 7 Lower Center Street, Clinton, New Jersey, through May 16; and "Transcultural New Jersey: Crosscurrents in the Mainstream," at The Zimmerli Art Museum, 71 Hamilton Street, New Brunswick, New Jersey, through July 31.

Born in Egypt, educated in Europe, presently residing near Princeton, New Jersey, Ludvic established his initial reputation in Canada, where he lived and exhibited widely for over a decade. Settling in New York City in the mid-1980s, he obviously absorbed the spirit of one of the mid- twentieth century's most significant American art movements, as reflected in his statement, "Although the subject matter of my work is derived from Egyptian and western culture, the reference to American abstract art is part and parcel of my process, gesturality like Pollock and de Kooning and painting objects like Rauschenberg and Stella."

Unlike many immigrant artists, however, who appear myopically fixated on American models, the more recent the better, along with the rich cultural baggage of his Egyptian heritage, Ludvic arrived on these shores with a wide variety of international influences. In Europe, he had apprenticed with an impressive trinity of world-class mentors: Karel Appel, Bram Bogart, and Marino Marini.

Appel, a leader of Scandinavia's influential Cobra movement must have encouraged Ludvic's painterly intrepidness, and perhaps Marini, who began as a painter but become one of the world's most renowned sculptors, set the example that has enabled Ludvic to move easily between two and three-dimensional modes of expression. In any case, the weighty richness of the European tradition and the immediacy and ambitious scale of Abstract Expressionism merge harmoniously in Ludvic's work as both a painter and a sculptor. Indeed, his aesthetic ambidextrousness makes him a double threat, since he is equally adept in both mediums and they tend to overlap in the three ongoing series featured in his present museum exhibitions: "The Quiet Temple," "The X File," and "Steel Jam Session."

In the first series of large mixed media paintings on wood panels, Ludvic often affixes steel plates as a central motif of his compositions. In these works the synthesis of painterly gesture and sculptural presence is especially effective. Pieces in the darker register such as "The Quiet Temple I " have a brooding, somber, spiritually-suggestive majesty akin to the stately late paintings of Mark Rothko. By contrast, other works in "The Quiet Temple" series, such as "The Outer and the Inner," with its broadly brushed, squared-off calligraphy set against a golden ocher ground, have an almost brutal gestural energy more reminiscent of Franz Kline. Ludvic, however, eschews the monochromes for which the latter artist was best known, contrasting glistening blacks (achieved with a mixture of oil paint and tar) with earth colors and visceral reds to create sumptuous, juicy surfaces as tactile as they are visually compelling.



"The Quiet Temple"

Paradoxically, for all their palpable physicality, Ludvic's surfaces also convey ethereal qualities of light that make the heavy steel plates bolted to the center of some of his compositions appear to levitate against his vibrantly colored grounds.

Donna Gustafson, senior curator at The Hunterdon Museum, is especially eloquent in a catalog essay regarding this series, citing Ludvic's "profound appreciation for great art and his constant study of artists that empowers his ambitions and creates his vision of significant art." Gustafson concludes by stating, "It is the center, the interior space where all artists take the mess of life to task and create organization, form, and harmony. This personal yet universal space where such ordering takes place is the quiet temple within."

Other works in the series dispense with steel plates, yet convey a similar physical presence through Ludvic's handling of luminous color in mixed media impastos built up to relief-like thickness. Here, too, the rectangle is a central motif, albeit more irregularly laid down with broad strokes of a loaded brush. It is in these works, particularly the three numbered companion paintings entitled "Royal Regalia," that this artist's kinship with the Abstract Expressionists is most immediately evident. At the same time, the textural heft of Ludvic's surfaces also calls to mind such European exponents of Tachisme as Pierre Soulages and Antoni Tapies.

Sculptural elements come more aggressively to the forefront in "The X File" series, where clustered configurations of twisted wire, pipe, and industrial mesh writhe as though crucified on welded steel X-shapes mounted on painted wood panels or on free-standing X's placed in front of other paintings mirroring the same shape. (While one would not wish to burden the work of so adamantly abstract an artist as Ludvic with unwonted symbolism, it is interesting to note that the letter X is also a symbol for Christ or Christianity, and when the tau cross or ankh, the ancient Egyptian symbol for life or the soul, is superimposed over it in other works in the series, the juxtaposition of the two potent signs is extraordinarily powerful.)

In the third series, "Steel Jam Session," Ludvic extends his aesthetic into free-standing welded steel sculptures that appear akin to both the monumental mode of David Smith and the crushed automobile configurations of John Chamberlain. Especially evocative among these is "Mephistopheles of Detroit II," a six foot tall configuration of car parts and other found metal stacked vertically in a manner evoking some fearsome industrial Moloch. This impression is furthered by the fact that in medieval demonology Mephistopheles is seen as one of the seven chief devils and in Geothe's "Faust," he is depicted as a crafty, sardonic, and scoffing fiend.

Once again, however, it would be a mistake to dwell overly much in possible symbolism. Art of this stature stands or falls on its formal virtues, and those are plentiful indeed in the work of Ludvic, an artist with the massive talent to match his epic ambition.

—Ed McCormack

María de Echevarría: Making the Numinous Palpable in Paint

After a long period in which it was taboo, it has become fashionable once again to speak of spirituality in art. Very often, however, the term is misused. Only rarely does it seem to truly apply, as in the case of MarÍa de Echevarría, whose exhibition "Toward Another Dimension" was seen recently in a solo exhibition at the Consulate General of Argentina Art Gallery, 12 West 56th Street.

Working for most of the year in New York City and part of the time in another studio in New Mexico, de Echevarría produces paintings that convey a sense of the ethereal. In some paintings, beings of light are seen traversing a landscapes that seems to transpose the climate and landscape of New Mexico onto an imaginary realm. In other oils on canvas, the landscape alone conveys a sense of the spirit world.

"Toward Another Dimension"

One of the most striking works in de Echevarría's most recent and by far most impressive exhibition for its breadth and scope was a canvas called "Silence," which seemed to depict a group of mourners gathered around a coffin that was about to be lowered into the ground. However, the mourners had about them a decidedly ghostly aspect, suggesting, perhaps, that the soul about to make the journey to "another dimension" was the only one who was truly alive. Similarly, in another painting entitled "Encounter," two pale white beings convene under a full moon in a misty nocturnal landscape with a decidedly otherworldly atmosphere. De Echevarría's smooth paint application and luminous colors, akin in certain ways to those of Georgia O'Keeffe, another artist attracted to the arid landscape of New Mexico, contribute to the haunting beauty of "Encounter."

Even more than O'Keeffe, however, María de Echevarría appears to be a kindred spirit of Mark Rothko, another artist whose work can be called spiritual, albeit for slightly different reasons. This kinship seems especially clear in de Echevarría's extremely simplified landscape compositions in which the canvas is divided into horizontal bands of color. Unlike Rothko, however, whose compositions were invariably reductive and abstract, de Echevarría's paintings always evoke the sense of a terrain.

This is true even of her most ostensibly abstract compositions, such as the remarkably beautiful large canvas called "Opening to Another World," where two numinous rectangular forms, one blue, the other a glowing white loom against an expanse of sky. Here, as the title suggests, de Echevarría appears to depict the literal portal between the earth and some otherworldly realm. The earth, however, is in shadow, while the other world is entered through a gateway of light.

In these and other paintings—many depicting strata of clouds and mountains enveloped in atmospheric mists and clouds illuminated by a rainbow range of auras—María de Echevarría paints with the conviction of someone in possession of special, intuitive knowledge. She evokes a rarefied realm that most of us have only visited in our dreams and, by virtue of her impressive painterly gifts, imbues it with a startling verisimilitude.

—Maurice Taplinger

Correction

Feb/March 2004, p. 27: In our review of the French painter François Lyres, the artist was mistakenly referred to as "she," when, in fact, it should have read "he." Our apologies to Monsieur Lyres!

The Smoldering Southwestern Landscapes of Lynne Friedman

New Mexico boasts more than its share of good artists, many residing in or around Santa Fe, which has a lively gallery scene. However, Lynne Friedman, a painter from Kingston, New York, brings a fresh eye to that much documented landscape in her exhibition "Dancing Ground of the Sun — Paintings from New Mexico," at Noho Gallery in Chelsea, 530 West 25th Street, from May 11 through 29. (There will be a reception for the artist on Saturday, May 15, from 4 to 6 PM.)

Friedman has worked on site in a variety of diverse settings, including the Hudson Valley, Maine, and the coast of Cornwall, in England. In the Fall of 2003, she spent six weeks painting in New Mexico, thanks to a residency at the Wurlitzer Foundation, in Taos.

"In the staggering spaciousness of earth and sky, light is the vital force, the majestic rhythm, the master painter," she states of the landscape she found there. "I was entranced by the remarkable quality of the light and the austere beauty of the land. One feels in direct contact with elemental life and my paintings seek to convey the mountain-life, cloud-life, air-life, earth-life and sun-life."

If that sounds like a tall order, Lynne Friedman succeeds splendidly in this exhibition at making the metaphoric qualities she describes palpable in pigment. She displays the coloristic sensibility of a latter day Fauve—albeit one who has been liberated by the pluralistic possibilities of postmodernism and is more determined to honor the specific qualities of the landscape than to subjugate it to the formal agenda of any given art movement.

Friedman employs vibrant hues with an

"Valdez Arroyo II"

exhilarating intrepidness, to heighten the intensity of the Southwestern light, as one must in order to transfer something so ethereal to canvas and accomplish the paradoxical alchemy of imbuing it with material weight. Her ability to invest a scene with a sense of actual heat, as well as of light, comes across especially well in a painting such as "De La Tierra II," where the red hills radiate with a sensuous warmth that can only be compared to the heat that emanates from the rosy flesh tones of one of Modigliani's nudes. If any landscape can be called sultry, this one certainly can, with red, purple-violet, and fiery orange hues creating a chromatic smolder that also enlivens "Valdez Arroyo," where brilliant blue mountains, a yellow field, and flame-like foliage conspire together to dazzle the eye.

Bravura brushwork is another vehicle by which Lynn Friedman invests her pictures with energy, as seen to particular advantage in the oil on canvas called "Rio Grande Gorge II," where she generates considerable gestural excitement with her vigorous treatment of craggy rocks, a favorite subject.

In these and other intimate-scaled yet commanding oils depicting the aspens, the arroyos, the sacred Taos Mountain (El Monte Sagrado), the sandstone cliffs, and other subjects, Lynn Friedman demonstrates a refreshing painterly directness and chromatic skills that put her in the first rank of contemporary colorists.

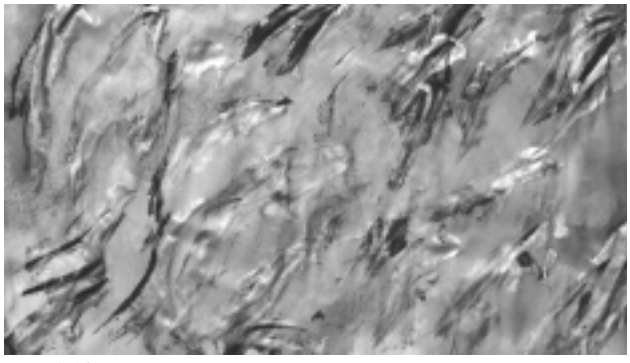
—J. Sanders Eaton

Spirit and Essence in the Art of Gretchen Mary Tresch

The term "New Age" has been applied to certain artists in various mediums and disciplines in recent years, but often for the wrong reasons. Hearing that term can make one visualize images of unicorns or interminable musical compositions with spiritual pretensions. Thus one hesitates to apply it to the lyrical abstract compositions of Gretchen Mary Tresch, even though she is an expert in Feng Shui and the author of a self-help book entitled "Instant Power," as well as a painter of obvious gifts.

In her recent exhibition at Agora Gallery, 415 West Broadway, Soho, Tresch seemed to be related in her approach to artists such as Morris Graves and Mark Tobey, who have been inspired by Asian art and spirituality, yet have forged strong individual styles that also reflect their western origins.

"I want my artistic images to excite fantasies of discovery and energy," Tresch asserts, and indeed her mixed media paintings do project a sense of aesthetic adventure that is quite exciting to encounter. One feels that she is not merely attempting to create a formal effect, but to allude to an infinite variety of profound feelings and experiences. We often forget that abstract art, as explored by pioneers like Kandinsky and Klee, was prompted by a desire to express the unknown, the unseen. These artists were motivated by a climate of spiritual seeking that permeated the early nineteenth century and is being revived today in a variety of ways by people who wish to achieve a sense of balance in our increasingly materialistic society.



"Dolphin Dance"

The work of Gretchen Mary Tresch seems to spring from this venerable tradition. For while her paintings ostensibly project a splashy gestural spontaneity that could invite comparison to the pyrotechnics of Pollock and other Abstract Expressionists, there is also a stillness underlying her compositions which simultaneously conveys a somewhat paradoxical sense of serenity and repose.

Tresch's colors are applied in luminous washes, rather than impastos, and her linear elements dance freely, rhythmically, rather than delineating discernible forms. Her compositions evoke energies rather than things, even when her titles refer to blossoms, dolphins or other natural subjects.

At the same time, her paintings prove to be formidable material entities with their colors ranging from delicate pinks to deep blue hues and flowing fluidly in overall configurations that inspire admiration for their subtle chromatic qualities as well as for their sweeping compositional rhythms.

One is told that Gretchen Mary Tresch has an engineering and architectural background and that, before turning to painting, she held several executive positions within the technology industry. This is certainly an interesting history for an artist of her caliber and one can only wonder if in some way it accounts for the transcendence she achieves in her present line of work. In any case, Tresch is a painter well worth watching.

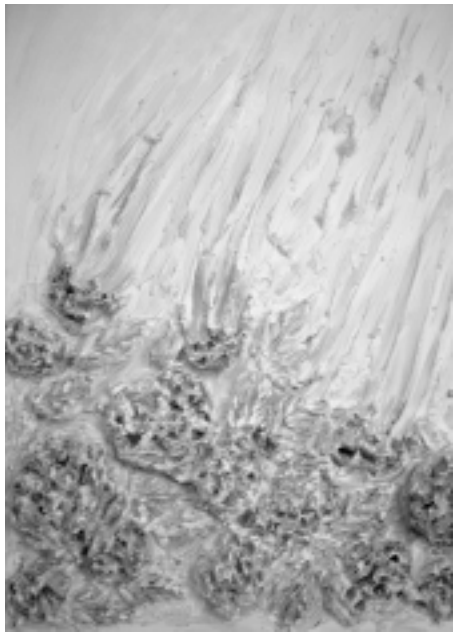
—Lawrence Downes

Nature and Intuition in the Paintings of Daniela Camurati

Palpable physical qualities can bridge the gap between painting and sculpture in the work of certain artists to whom the material properties of pigment are an end in themselves. One such painter is Daniela Camurati, whose work was featured in a recent exhibition at Agora Gallery, in Soho, 415 West Broadway.

Not only does Camurati break down material barriers, she also merges the abstract and the representational by creating compositions that, while ostensibly depicting floral or landscape subjects, also function in purely formal terms. This is as much a result of Camurati's bold approach to form and color as to the manner in which she piles oil pigments thickened with paste mediums onto her painting surfaces to build up relief-like textures in a manner akin to that of Lawrence Poons, Antoni Tapies, and others who turn the canvas into a kind of earthy topology.

Gracefully floating pink flower petals can take on sumptuous weight and depth, filling an entire canvas in an overall manner that verges on sculpture; yet the sense of light that also permeates Camurati's canvases can send a contrastingly ethereal message. The tension between the seen and the felt, the real and the imagined, is so convincingly evoked that the canvas functions on several levels simultaneously. Light and matter become one; material substance takes on the shimmer of the visionary; nature makes itself felt as a pulsing entity and is mirrored in the process of painting itself, rather than through traditional pictorial means.



"Hydrangea"

Sensual of form and sensuous of surface, Camurati's compositions affect the viewer in visceral as well as visual terms. One experiences these paintings for their physical actuality as well as for their atmospheric effects. Camurati captures not only the chromatic qualities of light and shadow falling on a field of flowers or a grassy knoll, but a sense of the growth energy, the juicy immediacy of vital organic matter. The abstract qualities in her work are not calculated formal strategies; rather they spring directly from the abstract states of nature to which she is so acutely attuned, having the ability to respond directly and to translate those responses intuitively in painterly terms imbues her pictures with the energy of living matter.

In Camurati's paintings, a corn field materializes convincingly in all its brilliant yellow majesty; ocean waves flow in rhythms that appear carved rather than merely painted onto the canvas. No attempt is made to delineate either subject through a fussy realist technique. Rather, nature is evoked in a manner much more immediate and real than can be achieved through timid approximation of landscape particulars.

Indeed, it is her innate gift for making the drama of nature unfold in the pure language of painting, rather than through literal transcription, that makes Daniela Camurati a painter to be admired and emulated.

—Linda Rosenfeld Gerber

The Group Show as Installation in "Elements of Nature"

In group shows there is a tendency to cluster, according to Khuumba Ama, who co-curated the recent exhibition "Elements of Nature" with Elton Tucker for the West Side Arts Coalition in its gallery at Broadway Mall, on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street. Each artist is allotted a certain area of the wall, and that is where his or her friends and collectors will tend to cluster during the reception, depriving themselves of the opportunity to experience the exhibition as a whole.

For this reason, the curators of "Elements of Nature" made sure to disperse various works by each artist throughout the gallery. But the real news is that this comes across as more than a group show. The way in which they dispersed the works and the way in which they interact, creating the sense of a natural flow, of an implied landscape if you will, makes this exhibition seem more like an installation than an ordinary group show.

Start with Leila R. Elias's wall hangings, created with batik scarves, decorated with natural patterns, suspended from bamboo poles in the manner of Chinese scrolls. Treating the fine line between fine art and craft, Elias's pieces sort of set the tone with their elegant casualness.

Moving on to Khuumba Ama's collages created with leaves, dried flowers and other natural objects set against a green watercolor background and covered with liquid laminate, the organic flow of the show continues. Although she is best known as a designer of unique jewelry, Khuumba Ama reveals another aspect of her talent with these lyrical, light-as-air collages.

Then there are the photographs of Adoniiah Arif Hakim, who has a particular gift for glowing color, as seen in one especially beautiful picture of a small bird in a tree amid lush leaves. Hakim's prints of floral subjects, particularly one of a bee perched on a yellow flower, also show his ability to capture intimate moments in nature.

Elton Tucker's collages employ fragments of mirror, dayglo hues, streamers that hang off the canvas, glitter, and other glitzy elements that are about as far as you can get from nature. Yet through some paradoxical process of aesthetic alchemy, Tucker manages to create a natural effect, suggesting falling leaves, running water, and other elements and forces of landscape in a celebratory manner.

Babette P. Meltzer also employs unlikely materials—dominoes, dice, mah jong tiles, and other oddities arranged in intricate and precise box constructions that might also seem antithetical to what we normally think of as nature. However, in context, Meltzer's jazzy assemblages convey a sense of the orderly forces underlying the seeming randomness of natural events.

Then there is Rosa Maye, who works on an intimate scale with pastel and pencil on paper, creating freely flowing semi-abstract compositions with their own lyrical charms. Adding beads to some of her pictures as collage elements, Maye makes visual statements that express the joy of creation—which is, of course, to be seen everywhere in the natural world.

—Barbara K. Bernstein

Zane Treimanis and the Aesthetic of Buoyancy

Zane Treimanis The Trip Club 72" x 84" x 5" wood construction from the City People series
Solo show REAWAKENING at Pleiades Gallery, May 11 - 29, 2004 www.artzane.com

Without being anything so clearly definable as a school or a movement, certain contemporary women artists, in particular, seem united by their use of brilliant color and sensually rounded biomorphic forms that convey a joyous sense of energy. The cartoon-influenced shaped canvases of Elizabeth Murray and the vivacious installation art of Judy Pfaff are perhaps the best known examples of this exuberant tendency.

More recently, one can add the name of Zane Treimanis to that raucously distinguished company, on the strength of Treimanis' solo show "Reawakening," at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from May 11 through 29.

Treimanis, who holds a BFA from Pratt Institute and an MS from Brooklyn College, has an extensive exhibition history and her work is in several prestigious corporate collections. Her new work is something of a departure, however, for as she herself puts it in an artist statement, "it's not often that I attempt a multicolored series, so when I do it is an extended commitment. Experiments with a varied palette and contrasting colors become magical for me."

In the 1990s, Treimanis was best known for works executed all in white or all in black, examples of which are included in her present exhibition. Of the former works, she asserts, "I must be spiritually positive to create white on white pieces"; of the latter, she says, " Many of the black on black pieces are emotionally intense."

The all-white works in this show, such as "Crosswaters" and "White Water II" are wall assemblages composed with baroque configurations of painted wood shapes. Layered with a baroque complexity, they waver and flow with a dynamic sinuousness. Sharply pointed shapes contrast with more sensually rounded ones, creating the effect of something ethereal, like a star or a flash of light, given material form. The layering creates a sense of depth, and in the white works cast shadows add yet another ethereal element to their palpable physical presence.

By contrast, Treimanis' all black painted wood wall constructions such as "Scorpio" and "Yala," while created in a similar manner, have a spiky, spidery quality that can seem almost sinister—or at very least slightly forbidding. Both series, however, are equally pleasing in aesthetic terms, with their evocative array of layered shapes.

Neither series, however, prepares one for the explosion of color in the new painted wood wall reliefs that Treimanis calls "City People." These celebratory pieces are inspired by her experiences with her Adult Education students, who have obviously had a bracing affect on her aesthetically as well as personally. Thus the show's title, "Reawakening."

One of the pieces in the "City People" series is an abstract portrait called "Medicine Man Edwardo," inspired by a student whom Treimanis describes as " self taught artist and medicine man" who for years "has made remedies with rainwater, herbs, and plants." She pays tribute to this eccentric individual with flowing shapes that coalesce into a fanciful simplified figure. Composed of colorful ribbon-like shapes, suggesting an exotic shaman brewing a potion in a pot licked by orange and red flames, the piece has a presence at once playful and powerful.

Another work called "The Trip Club" is inspired, according to the artist, by "a group of energetic, vibrant, multicultural students who formed a friendship and loved taking trips to experience NYC." Treimanis captures their camaraderie and exploratory joy with brilliantly colored interwoven wood shapes that project a sense of movement so energetic that the piece appears about to fly off the wall. Severely abstracted references to arms, legs, breasts, stylized hair and other anatomical details lend the shapes the quality of living, breathing arabesques.

For all its fanciful distortion, "The Trip Club" conveys an affecting sense of human community through its formal and coloristic relationships. Equally exciting in another manner is a piece called "Self-Portrait," in which the literally abstract artist raises one wiggly red arm above her head. In contrast to the interconnected figures in the previous piece, the artist/observer must finally stand alone, apart from the crowd; yet she reaches out to wave or to embrace life.

In other painted wood assemblages such as "Cell Phone I" and "Cell Phone II," Treimanis shows an ability, similar to that of the aforementioned Elizabeth Murray, to employ mundane everyday objects as springboards for fanciful formal forays. Here, the simplified shapes of the phone and what appear to be the fingers of a caller morph into red, yellow, blue, and violet contours that call to mind brilliant tropical flora.

In these and other pieces in this upbeat exhibition, Treimanis employs bright colors and biomorphic shapes to convey a refreshingly optimistic view of the human condition. But don't let the delightful lightheartedness of her work fool you: For in the tradition of Matisse, Miro, Calder and others who could appear playful at times, Zane Treimanis does things with color, shape, and space that reveal real formal mastery.

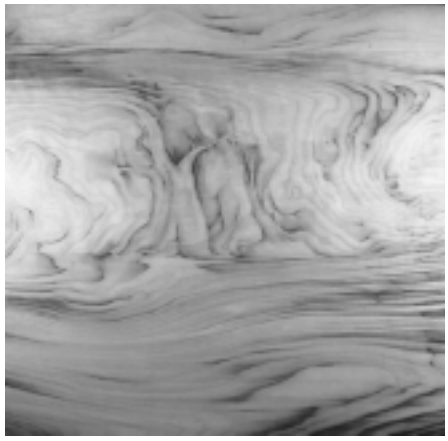
—J. Sanders Eaton

The Drawings of Kathy A. Halamka Chart an Inner Terrain

As Holland Cotter recently noted in The New York Times, "Drawing is the medium, or technique of the moment in New York." What Cotter did not specify, however, is that drawing has come into its own not only as a preliminary medium, a way of making sketches to base paintings upon, but as a complete, finished means of expression for certain artists.

One such artist who caught this writer's attention with her recent exhibition in the Soho space of Agora Gallery, 415 West Broadway, was Kathy A. Halamka. Halamka began her career as something of a prodigy, exhibiting professionally in galleries by the age of 12 and regularly competing in scholarship and community art contests. Along with a B.A. in Studio Art from Stanford University in California, she holds a post-baccalaureate certificate from the Tufts University/School of Fine Arts, in Boston, where she is currently a candidate for her Master of Fine Arts Degree, and has exhibited nationwide.

In her most recent body of drawings, Halamka employs charcoal on birch wood, working with and against the grain to create compositions that evoke rhythmic mindscapes with gracefully swirling linear configurations.



"Memory and Longing: Dream"

"Mysteries of in-between states and spaces have always seduced me because they are beyond simple understanding, " Halamka says of these works. "Anthropologists use the terms 'liminal' or 'betwixt and between' to refer to being out of ordinary time and space. The liminal world shaped in my work reveals the hidden beauty and intrigue within the threshold of the wood surface and the concealed potential of the grain."

Halamka's drawings suggest complex mental terrains, vast vistas of flowing lines that evoke the sense of being "out of ordinary time and space" of which she spoke. They transport us in a manner at once grand and intimate by virtue of the artist's ability to explore and discover the mysterious innate properties of her natural materials: wood and charcoal, which is created by burning wood. The very nature of these materials imparts an organic integrity to her drawings that enhances their natural mystery. What emerges from Halamka's intricate network of rhythmically swerving lines is both the sense of a landscape as palpable as those craggy terrains in Asian ink painting, as well as a more abstract sense of the unseen forces that underlie the landscape: the elements and energies that imbue the land with its vitality.

Yet even more relevant are the boundless imaginative spaces that Halamka's compositions invite us to enter into, which refer, as some of her poetic titles indicate, to states of memory and longing. And it is these rarefied inner spaces and places that make the drawings of Kathy A. Halamka so alluring and affecting, for they literally appear to chart the private domain of the human mind and heart.

—Maureen Flynn

Claudine Varesi: Nurturing the Metaphoric Rose

Although we are all familiar with Gertrude Stein's famous assertion that "a rose is a rose is a rose," the very fact that I can see through the window in front of my computer desk at this very instant the green awning of a florist shop emblazoned with the words "Rose Boutique" suggests that a rose can have many meanings. Claudine Varesi appears to know this, too, judging from her recent exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, in Soho.

For Varesi, a widely exhibited artist who grew up in Mexico, Peru, and Switzerland but currently lives in Virginia, the rose is a seemingly limitless vehicle for both formal inspiration and personal expression. Her paintings at Montserrat Gallery employed the flower as a motif for compositions which could be appreciated both for their abstract qualities and their emotional evocativeness.

Like Georgia O'Keeffe, Claudine Varesi has the ability to imbue inanimate objects with an almost portrait-like intensity, making them resonant symbols, as well as images of a surpassing sensuality. There can be no denying the erotic qualities of roses, with their labial folds and their warm tones. Yet Varesi does not exploit these qualities in any obvious way. Rather, she paints her flowers in a pristine style, employing their flowing contours as a springboard to abstract form, which is further enhanced by her heightened sense of color, even while delineating their particulars in a more or less realistic manner. At the same time, she employs roses to convey a variety of moods, investing them with subtle emotional qualities that she also conveys through her expressive use of color.

In one of her larger canvases, "From Within," the idea of inwardness implicit in the title comes across in her choice of especially vibrant red hues that project a visceral quality. Here, too, the severely cropped composition, with the petals of the rose seen in extreme close-up, suggests a swirling vortex. Few painters of floral subjects have managed to suggest such angst with the image of a single flower as successfully as Varesi does in this powerful composition.

By contrast, a more meditative mood comes across in the canvas that Varesi calls "Enlighten," with its luminous pink hues combined with sinuous blue-violet outlines which emphasize the graceful contours of the flowers in a manner that is particularly pleasing. Varesi's abilities as a colorist also come to the forefront in "Caress," with its combination of warm pink tones and cool green highlights, as well as in "When We Play," a grouping of four small canvases notable for their subtle dialogue between various red and pink hues.

Another large canvas called "Our Embrace" generates a heat in keeping with its title through Varesi's use of softly diffused red hues in a literally "rosy" register. Then there is a much smaller work on paper called "You Are Here With Me, I Am With You," which is somewhat anomalous in that it is rendered more naturalistically as an actual still life depicting a rose in a vase of water.

The latter painting, quite lovely in its own right, seems to tell us, "This is where it all begins" — with a simple, poignant flower that Claudine Varesi transforms in her larger canvases into powerful metaphors for a variety of human emotions.

—Marie R. Pagano

A Mixed Bag of "Revelations" at Broadway Mall

Abstract and figurative works were balanced gingerly in "Revelations," in a recent group show by members of the West Side Arts Coalition, at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street.

In her "Subway Series," Gail Rodney seemed to qualify in both categories by striking an austere balance with muted colors and paint handling that suggests a fondness for Cezanne. At the same time, Rodney's oils capture the postures and attitudes of subway passengers in a manner that also creates human interest.

Ava Schonberg also ignores barriers by showing works in two distinctly different manners: painterly realism and hard-edged semi-abstraction. Both styles, however, explore architectural themes.

Leila Elias creates collages from gossamer sheets of colored paper which often incorporate silhouetted images of a bird, a seahorse, or a floral form within an abstract context. Elias combines a Braque-like emblemism with a poetic quality, enhanced by her use of materials, that lends her pieces their uniqueness.

Joey Infante is the figurative enfant terrible of the WSAC. Here, this irrepressibly amusing painter showed intimate oils contrasting the elegant gentility of waltzing couples in Vienna with the raunchy charm of hookers in New Orleans bordellos. All were distinguished by that intrepidness of form and color that makes Infante an engaging painterly personality.

By contrast, Barbara Eison-White employs an equally direct style to convey a sense of nostalgia in her intimate genre paintings of such subjects as a tropical woman carrying a big basket of eggs on her head and two young women in their Sunday best walking along a country road toward a simple house of worship.

Natural and abstract elements also combine compellingly in the watercolors of Madi Lanier, in which stark black tree limbs form a dense linear network over a ground enlivened by patchy areas of deep blue and green. Lanier's little paintings are particularly impressive for the artist's ability to simultaneously evoke the natural mystery of a forest and make a nuanced formal statement.

Then there is Cati Blanche, who merges a spiritual sensibility with elements of New Image painting in her evocative canvases, with their subdued yet subtly glowing colors and phantom-like forms that linger lyrically between the figurative and the abstract. Spare and stately, Blanche's compositions are possessed of great mystery.

The abstract acrylic paintings of Mary Ann Sussoni employ bold outlines and a pared-down palette of red, blue, and deep yellow hues to create jazzy, enjambed visual rhythms. Often working with angular forms resembling shards of stained glass, Sussoni creates dynamic visual tensions.

Meyer Tannenbaum's work has recently taken a turn for the lyrical that may surprise fans of his earlier, more process-oriented paintings. His "Impact Series" appears to open up infinite possibilities with lush colors, sensual forms, and compositions that can only be called symphonic.

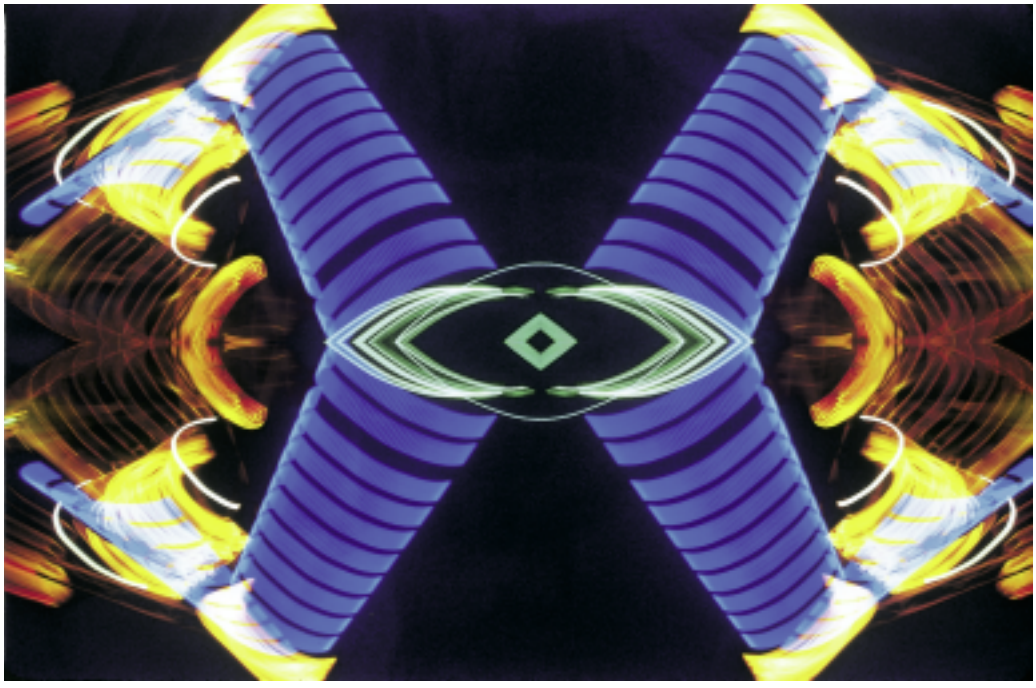
"Muscular" is a word often applied to abstract painting, yet nowhere does it seem more appropriate than in the acrylics and pastels of Farhana Akhter, whose gnarled forms writhe in space with a kind of knotted energy. Akhter's somewhat gritty color sense adds further to the visceral quality of these compositions.

Miguel Angel Mora was also well represented in this exhibition with a single large combine-painting in a circular format incorporating a large metal object resembling a crushed hubcap or trash bin lid at its center. The tondo is an especially effective format for Mora, whose geometric compositions are invariably possessed of poetry at once funky and transcendent, as reflected in the title of this powerful work: "My Revealed Universe is Being Locked up."

—Lawrence Downes

Two Visionaries: Marilyn Stevenson's Blakean Inspiration

Andreas Serrano, Adam Fuss and others whom it would be more accurate to term photographic artists than photographers in any traditional sense have expanded the boundaries of the medium in recent years in a manner that probably calls for a new definition. Few have explored the possibilities of the camera as thoroughly or as consistently as Marilyn Stevenson whose new solo exhibition "Light Moves," can be seen at New Century Artists, 530 West 25th Street, from May 4 through 29. (There will be two receptions for the artist: Thursday, May 6th from 6 to 8 PM; Saturday, May 15, from 4 to 6 PM.)



"Forests of the Night"

Stevenson refers to her pictures as "photographic light drawings," for she does not employ laser beams or enhance her images through the use of a computer, as many artists do today. Rather she creates her "light drawings" by manipulating the camera in a manner that makes one think of "action painting," employing a range of gestures to actually draw with light in space. Since she can not see her drawing until she develops the photograph, she must anticipate how her movements of the camera will translate in the final image. Obviously, through practice she has perfected and learned to control her gestures to a remarkable degree, judging from the draftspersonly refinement and finesse evident in the large limited edition Chromogenic prints in her new show.

In recent years, Stevenson has also begun to explore imagistic inversion by combining mirror images taken from the same picture, a technique through which, as she puts it, she can "fully expand upon my abstract exploration of form, color, movement and spatial relationships."

Given the mandala-like symmetry that she achieves through this technique, it seems fitting that she has chosen to name one of her new pieces "Fearful Symmetry." This, like other titles in the show, is a line from William Blake's Great Poem "The Tyger"—or "The Tiger," as Stevenson updates its spelling. One can also presume that she has chosen the great British visionary as an inspiration for the eight works shown here because she identifies with him, given her own visionary tendencies, which come to the forefront in the almost psychedelic intensity of her newest body of work. Indeed, she seems to complete this identification by creating compositions that seem the abstract equivalent of the cosmic imagery that enlivens both Blake's poetry and the fiery watercolors with which he illuminated them.

Since her exhibition in the same venue in 2002, Stevenson's compositions have become considerably bolder, in terms of both their chromatic brilliance and their formal thrust. While her earlier pieces were comprised of intricate linear networks with a maze-like quality, new works have simpler forms and a more frontal impact, as seen in "Forests of the Night," with its mirror-images of an imposing tubular shape emanating brilliant blue auras, and ""Fire of Thine Eyes," where a radiant red form is encircled by bracelets of golden light.

Also including a video presentation in which moving images drawn from her still photography are combined with a musical track, Marilyn Stevenson's new exhibition should serve to win many new fans for this much exhibited, highly innovative photographic artist.

—Byron Coleman

Katherine D. Crone's Book Works: Memories Make Metaphors

Wordsworth's definition of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquility" manifests in a peculiarly physical form in the art of Katherine D. Crone, whose mixed media assemblages successfully unite elements of book and fiber arts.

Crone, who holds an MFA from Yale University, has exhibited extensively in group exhibitions centering on both of those vital movements, in venues ranging from the American Craft Museum, to the Center for Book Arts, and the New York State Museum, Albany, among others. However, unlike some contemporary artists whose careerist impulses race ahead of their creative ones, causing them to start lining up exhibitions while still in art school, Crone has perfected her technique and amassed life experience before embarking on her first solo show.

The wisdom of her restraint is everywhere evident in her superb exhibition "Memories/Dreams," at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from March 30 through April 17.

Most of Crone's pieces spring from her own photographs, often chronicling her travels to sites in Japan, China, Belgium, and elsewhere in the world. Some of her recent works include images of her late husband, an award winning lighting designer who passed away four years ago. Yet while these images are fraught with personal meaning, they are subject to the same rigorous formal restraint that characterizes all of Crone's pieces. Thus the fine line between sentiment and sentimentality is never crossed. One is initially impressed by the austere formal beauty of these works, with their delicate hues and subtle images distanced behind plexiglass panels or boxes, that function like vitrines in an inner museum of memories or dreams.

The mundane yet lyrical beauty of a vanished, cherished day in a place called Sea World in Tokyo, Japan, is preserved as in a time capsule in one panoramic diorama in a plexiglass box titled "Tokyo Sunday." Here, as in other works, Crone uses linen thread and alternating hitch bookbinding stitching, along with silk organza, digitally altered photography, and archival ink-jet printing, to advance an aesthetic that is invariably wedded to the tradition of the book, no matter how adventurously she chooses to depart from or deconstruct its usual format.

Although Crone employs bookbinding thread and stitching in various ways in different works, in "Tokyo Sunday" she uses it to suspend within the plexiglass box overlapping strips of filmy fabric imprinted with images of a tree-lined pathway leading to Sea World. The arrangement of these fabric strips, although relatively shallow, creates the illusion of deep perspective. In the distance, central among other small figures strolling toward the attractions in the aquarium is a gray-haired man, casually dressed in the manner of any tourist, carrying a camera.

"Miho" (detail)

It is not necessary for the viewer to be informed that this man is the artist's late husband in order to appreciate the piece. One need not know this any more than one must know the private impetus behind a well-written poem. This knowledge, however, imparts a poignant sense of personal significance to the universal quality that the piece projects of a perfect moment preserved as in a soap bubble; of the ephemeral given material form and thereby rendered immutable, even eternal.

A tiny image of the artist's husband, aiming the camera that was "for him like an appendage," according to Crone, also appears in another piece related to another visit that the couple took together to a museum in Japan. Entitled "Memories: Miho," it is printed on four clear plexiglass panels and features images of passing Buddhist monks in the foreground, with the museum building itself seen within a bold circular shape occupying the center of the composition.

Other works are considerably more abstract. One series focuses on images of light on water that the artist photographed in such far flung places as Japan, East Hampton, Belgium and Brooklyn, printed in color on overhead projector film. Mounted under plexiglass panels of identical dimensions and hung at regular intervals on the wall, the individual pieces make up a serial installation that sets off a lyrical chromatic shimmer in the eye of the beholder.

By contrast, other works on the theme of water take on more sculptural shapes, with fabric folded, rolled, and contoured to create gracefully flowing forms that could alternately suggest floral sensuality and billowing, wind-filled sails, even while ostensibly depicting nothing more than the colors and patterns of moving water.

Printed texts also appear in some pieces, reminding us once again of the bibliophilic (as well as bibliopegic) nature of Crone's aesthetic preoccupations. Two such works, which Crone calls "broadsides," since they occupy a single surface, juxtapose verses by Jon Hutcheson, a friend of the artist, with piquant images.

One work superimposes a longing-filled lament for a missed romantic opportunity over the photographic image of a young woman wearing a backpack and turning away. The other combines intricate, layered images of the Hong Kong waterfront with similarly rhythmic phrases such as "ferries, junks, and freighters, floating fish bazaars, rickshaw men in plastic shoes." (That besides referring to a single printed sheet "broadside" is also a term for the side of a ship that is seen above the water-line adds yet another allusive nuance to the latter work.)

In yet another textual work, Crone merges her own photograph of rocks and water with a classic Ukiyo-e print of Mount Fuji, creating compelling imagistic contrasts with their own peculiar logic. To the plexiglass panel, she also adds her first haiku: "Often cloud covered/Will I ever see Fuji/Maybe next journey."

It seems only logical for an artist so consumed by the book as object to venture into composing her own texts. Whether this particular artist continues to do so, however, seems quite beside the point: Katherine D. Crone has already demonstrated her unique poetic gift for making color, form, and image speak eloquently, creating material metaphors with which we can all find common ground in our own memories and dreams.

—Ed McCormack

Beata Taschner Puts a New Spin on Color Field Painting

To place Color Field painting into a historical context, critics and scholars often refer to it as "post painterly abstraction," a term that Clement Greenberg, the monolithic critic and formalist champion, coined for the title of an influential exhibition he curated at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1964.

Beata Taschner, whose luminous oils on canvas were recently exhibited at Agora Gallery, 415 West Broadway, Soho, would appear to be a direct descendent of Jules Olitski, Ellsworth Kelly, and other renowned Color Field painters who were featured in that landmark exhibition. However, while they involve fields of color, Taschner's paintings could hardly be called post-painterly. For unlike her worthy predecessors, who generally treated the canvas as a single plane, and in the case of Kelly, often employed a single color, Taschner employs myriad, subtly modulated strokes of various colors to bring her canvases alive. Her paintings are hardly impassive and definitely not hard-edged. And even when she appears to employ a single overall color, such as red or blue, subtle modulations and tonalities can be discerned on closer perusal, and the hand of the artist is much more visible than one normally finds it to be in this sort of painting.

"NGC 1011 "

Indeed, it could be said that Taschner effectively bridges the gap between the more lyrical variety of Abstract Expressionism, as seen in the early paintings of Philip Guston (whom one critic, further complicating the matter, referred to as an "Abstract Impressionist") and the subtler species of Color Field painting in which Jules Olitski specialized. But while Olitski finally resorted to a spray-gun to achieve his overall surfaces, in which color particles appeared to coalesce, Taschner still builds her compositions in the traditional manner with a brush—albeit a brush that appears to have been dipped in liquid light rather than ordinary pigment!

While Taschner's painterliness is admirably austere, it is very much present nonetheless. Brilliant primaries are blended to create delicate secondary hues that radiate out from the canvas to envelop the viewer in shimmering auras. The effect of standing in front of one of her canvases is very much like experiencing the subtle shifts of light that occur at certain moments in early morning or late afternoon.

Taschner is acutely attuned to minute chromatic variations that can easily escape the attention of those who are less observant. She has the rare ability to make them immutable for the rest of us by capturing them in pigment. And her process has very much to do with it. For the prismatic effects that flicker across the surfaces of Beata Taschner's paintings could only be achieved by an artist in possession of surpassing painterly finesse.

—Wilson Wong

Natural Essences in the Paintings of Kwija L. Cho

Floral still life has been such a staple of art history for so long that it presents a real challenge to originality. So many artists who paint flowers appear to be more influenced by the masters of previous centuries and by the conventions of still life painting in general than by a direct response to nature. Fortunately, this is not so of Kwija L. Cho, a Korean artist with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Marymount Manhattan College whose oils on canvas were seen in a solo exhibition from March 18 through 31 at Gallery 32, 32 West 32nd Street.

Kwija L. Cho's originality springs from her obvious love for her subject, as well as her refreshingly direct approach to form and color. Her compositions are marked by a distinctive boldness and a clarity of form that lends her paintings a dynamic impact. Flowers in her paintings appear to possess individual personalities, lending them the presence of portraits—particularly when she paints them in close-up.

In one of Cho's strongest paintings, two large sunflowers are featured, their brilliant yellow petals and large green stems and leaves set against a clear blue sky. Each element in the picture is painted with strong strokes that emphasize its particular contours. Such details as the veins in the leaves are fully delineated, yet for all the artist's sharp focus on such specific aspects of the plants, the overall formal thrust of the composition is almost abstract in its boldness. Indeed, it is the natural abstraction that Cho discovers in actual things that lends her paintings their emblematic power.

In another painting by Cho, we see a

"***Unity***"

group of red flowers arranged frontally in a horizontal format, suggesting a group portrait. Here, as in other oils by the artist, the blue background suggests a sky and contributes to the sense of air and light that makes Cho's paintings come alive as parts of nature, rather than elements in a studio interior. Like the famous American painter Charles Burchfield, Kwija L. Cho invariably captures the vitality of her subjects by amplifying their forms and colors. What one sees in her work is not only a visual representation of the natural form but an emotional response to its beauty that makes it more vivid, more vibrant than any mere transcription of its literal appearance could possibly see.

Her ability to capture the individual essences of her subjects can also be seen in other paintings featuring white or pink flowers with large shapely petals fanned out against areas of blue sky. The severe cropping of these compositions, as well as the manner in which the flowers seem to dance rhythmically across one's field of vision, lends them an almost Art Nouveau quality. Yet Cho's compositions are never merely decorative, for there is always the sense of a living entity about them, as well as an expressiveness that provokes a real response in the viewer. Her chromatic intrepidness, manifesting in a willingness to set equally brilliant hues against each other, enhances the overall intensity that we see in several other lyrical canvases. The dynamism of Cho's floral compositions carries over into her landscape paintings as well, conveying the passion for nature that informs all of her work with power and conviction.

—Maureen Flynn

Stacey Clarfield Newman's Kaleidoscopic Metaphysical Vistas

In 1992, when Stacey Clarfield Newman was chosen to create a mural honoring donors to a new AIDS wing at Albert Einstein Medical Center, she suggested instead that the center consider a mural conceived and executed by the patients themselves, as a tribute to those who are HIV positive.

Sadly, when the mural, for which Newman taught twelve terminally ill patients her own method of creating collage with hand-painted papers, was unveiled at a dedication ceremony two years later, Newman was the only participant still living.

Yet creating the mural was a mutually profound experience for all involved, and several years later, the spiritual quality that has made the artist much sought after by other mural clients and art collectors, is much in evidence in Newman's latest solo show, "Renewal," at Viridian Artists @ Chelsea, 530 West 25th Street. (The exhibition will run from April 27 through May 15, with a reception for the artist on Thursday, April 29, from 6 to 8 PM.)

"The Ascent"

To Newman, renewal means "To reassess and reconfirm the past. To approach the future wiser: more tolerant, accepting, with integrity and grace." These ideas manifest the artist's ability to introduce dreamlike imagery seamlessly within a broader abstract context. Gossamer sheets of painted paper are cut into graceful shapes and layered to create compositions of a singular delicacy and rhythmic grace. Unexpected imagistic juxtapositions arise within kaleidoscopic panoramas which appear to bend space—and by extension, time—so that an almost Einsteinian sense of simultaneity enlivens Newman's pictures, with their seemingly infinite metaphysical permutations of figure, landscape, and fantasy.

While Newman's integration of image and abstraction makes her an heir apparent of Robert Rauschenberg, as are most contemporary American collage artists, her work has a markedly more romantic quality. If Rauschenberg, in a blunt attempt to distance himself from the introspectiveness of his Abstract Expressionist predecessors, once stated "I don't mess around with my subconscious," Newman appears to embrace inwardness. The lyricism in her work is of a particularly personal kind, as though she has the rare ability to reach down into the deepest recesses of her psyche and come up with complete aesthetic statements.

At the same time, Newman differs from many surrealists (another category in which short-sighted critics might attempt to place her) in her ability to conjure up imaginative visions without resorting to the hackneyed props of old fashioned surrealist incongruity. Rather, the visual poetry in her pictures springs from her apparent ability to channel subconscious imagery effortlessly through her extemporaneous technique.

In "Galactic Creature," for example, she conjures up the unearthly being by combining sinuous green, blue and purple-violet forms cut from paper she has painted with colorful swirls and two large photo-collage eyes lined up vertically, rather than horizontally, in the composition. Here, as in "Circle Game," where tiny children hold hands and dance like sprites in an abstract enchanted forest, and "Flotation," a particularly bold work in which large blue butterflies flutter against buoyantly brushed areas of blue, violet, and green, Newman's visions seem to grow out of process rather than premeditation. Like that late, great master of collage Romare Bearden, Newman employs the medium with an easeful fluidity that she refers to as "painting with paper," and indeed she wields scissors or Xacto knife with painterly panache, making the contours of her cut paper forms flow as freely as the most spontaneous brushstrokes.

Newman's compositions, which range from emblematic boldness to complex intricacy, impress one initially for such formal virtues as their graceful forms and their chromatic harmonies. Then, on closer perusal, they yield a host of fascinating images—butterflies, dragons, flowers, among many other fanciful forms— that speak to us on that poetic level where the fairy tale atmospheres of childhood remain lodged in adult consciousness. Witness in this regard the stylized angelic creatures soaring against colorful cumulus shapes in "The Ascent," the lunar/architectural fantasy "Manhattan Moon," and the fanciful brilliance of "Emergence," where graceful butterflies swarm out of an entire spectrum of luminous hues.

Although Stacey Clarfield Newman alludes to a variety of themes from ecological and political concerns, to sharp social commentary, and any number of other subjects, what comes across most persistently in her collages is a sense of transcendence, of the sublime. She is an artist who appears to be thoroughly attuned to the ineffable mystery of existence, and while most of her compositions are not especially large by contemporary standards, the mental vistas they encompass appear boundless.

—Ed McCormack

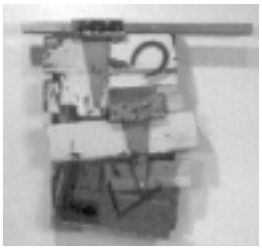
At PhilosophyBox: A Lively Dialogue between the Brodkins

The border between Yorkville and Spanish Harlem may seem an unlikely place for a new art gallery. However, PhilosophyBox, located at 1511 Lexington Avenue, is a cozy space, and its director Yu-Whuan, a gifted artist in her own right, has impeccable curatorial taste.

At least that was the impression one got from her decision to mount a joint exhibition by Ed Brodkin and Kiki Brodkin, two artists who are married to each other but generally show separately. Their compatibility was evident as soon as one entered the austere storefront gallery where a small but representative sampling of works by each of the two artists was on view.

Since Kiki Brodkin's two most recent exhibitions in Chelsea featured her computer images and encaustic paintings, one could almost lose sight of what a fine sculptor she is. Here, she reminded us especially well with a rugged assemblage called "Penny's Shoe." Mounted on the wall, the work was made primarily of large pieces of painted wood held together by big metal hinges. It also included a real horse shoe and what appeared to be a large railroad spike, both gorgeously rusted.

Other sculptures by Kiki Brodkin were comprised of contrastingly smooth forms carved in walnut. "Uneasy Calm" conveyed the ambiguity inherent in its title with a sinuous shape that rose from its base, then snaked horizontally in space, as though about to change direction.



Kiki Brodkin

Ed Brodkin

"Upright Figure (85)" was a severely simplified semi-abstract piece conveying the flowing contours of a full-figured female body and commanding space with an impressive plasticity that has become increasingly rare in recent sculpture.

Ed Brodkin's "Multitudes" was a characteristically complex conceptual statement couched inventively in visually dynamic images. It took the form of a large gilded panel decorated with masks from different cultures painted in brilliant hues, with the letters "A-T-A" and "C-G-C" cut out of the left side of the panel in a manner that makes the initials for the chemical bases of human DNA (Adenine, Thymine, Cyosine, and Guarine) resemble esoteric glyphs.

Two other large pieces— "Voices," with its grid of universal symbols painted in acrylics on squares of canvas laid down on an expansive burlap backing; and "One, Zero, One," in which the contours of the large numerals create a shaped panel conveying the binary basis of computer technology in bright areas of color—demonstrate Ed Brodkin's special gift for making the barely comprehensible brilliantly accessible.

It is to the credit of both Brodkins that each of them manages to coexist so harmoniously with such a strong opposite. One can only assume that it makes for interesting dinnertable conversation at home, judging from the stimulating aesthetic dialogue they conducted in this engaging exhibition at PhilosophyBox Gallery.

—J. Sanders Eaton

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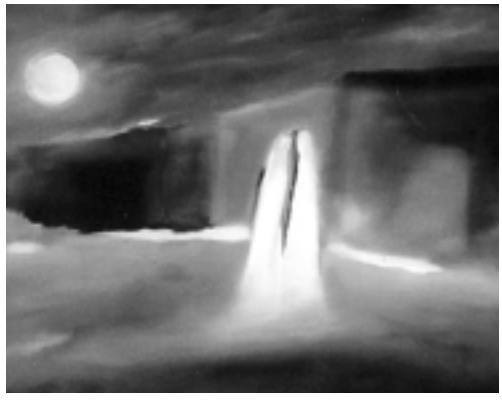

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