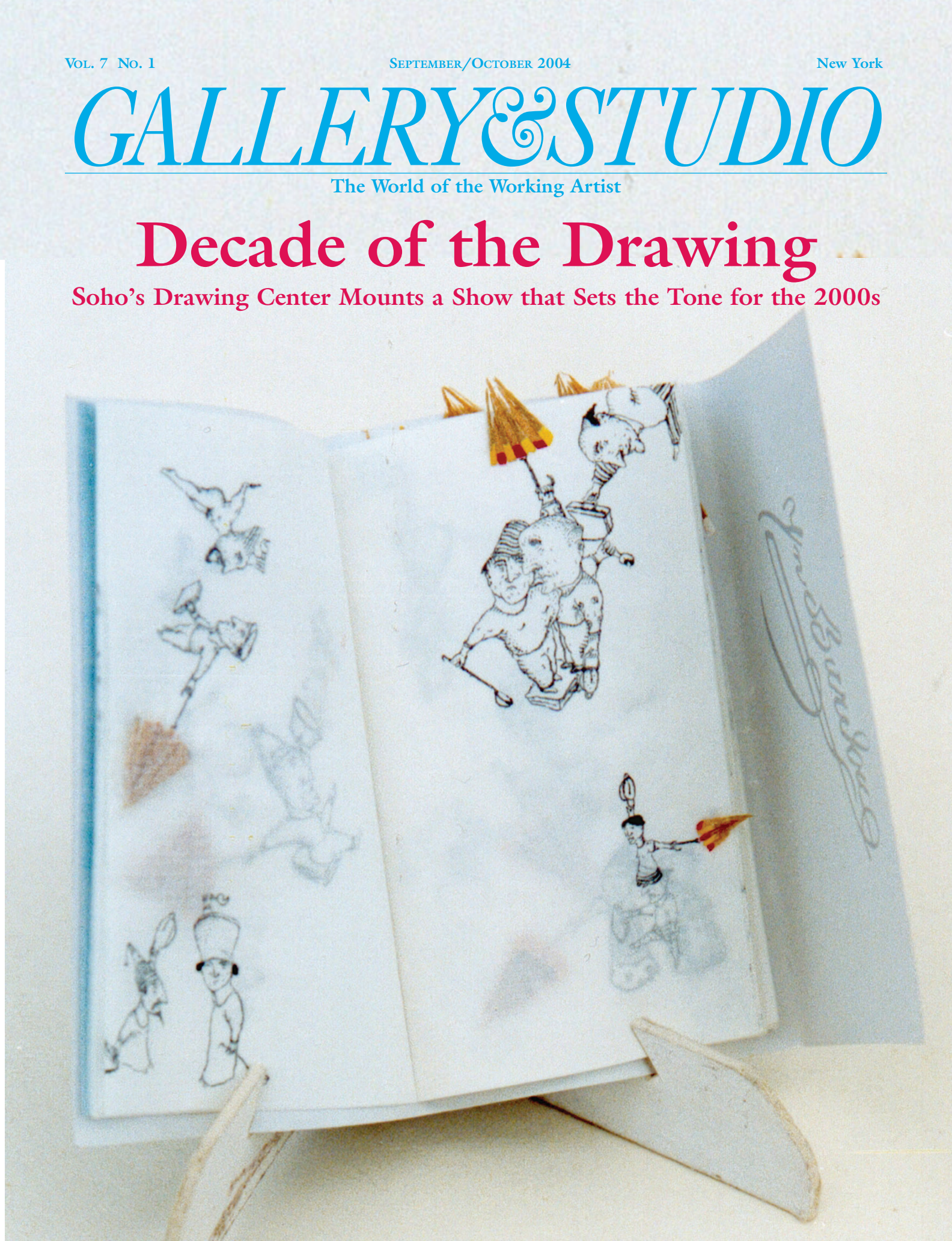
Vol. 7 No. 1 September/October 2004 New York

GALLERY&STUDIO

The World of the Working Artist

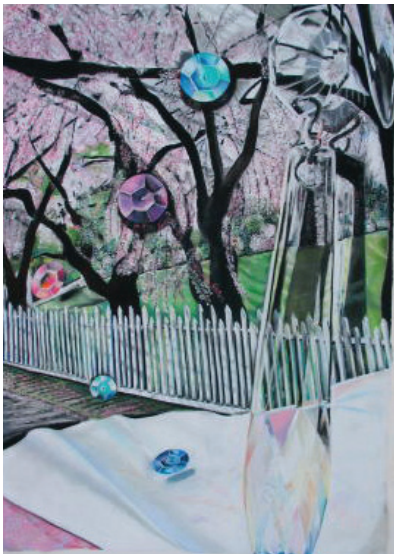
Decade of the Drawing

Soho's Drawing Center Mounts a Show that Sets the Tone for the 2000s



Nancy Staub Laughlin

aqueous worlds of wonder



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G&S Highlights

On the Cover:
No longer painting's poor relation, drawing is emerging as an independent art form. Long one of its biggest boosters, The Drawing Center presents a survey that exemplifies the trend. Pictured is ***Ricardo Lanzarini****'s "Untitled book, 2003-04" Ink and pencil on cigarette paper. 2 3/4 x 4 3/4 in.*
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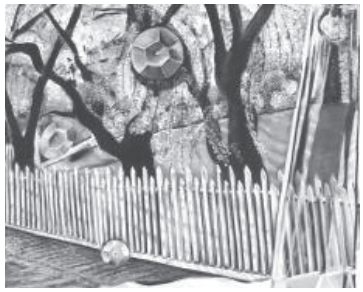

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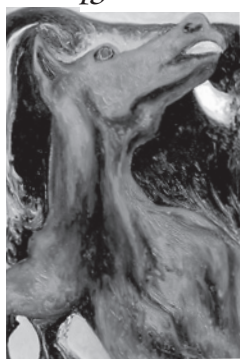

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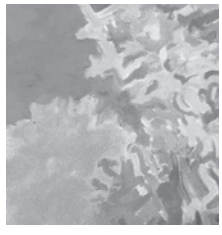

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MANAGING EDITOR **Ed McCormack**
SPECIAL EDITORIAL ADVISOR **Margot Palmer-Poroner**
DESIGN AND PRODUCTION **Karen Mullen**
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Sabine Carlson and the Enigma of the Ordinary

"Shifting Alliances," 2003

The other day a man got on the Madison Avenue bus wearing a t-shirt that said, "Welcome to America — Now Speak English." The message, at once friendly and forbidding, made one think of the tantalizing ambiguity in the work of the widely exhibited painter Sabine Carlson, whose new solo show, "Looking for Felipe," can be seen at Viridian Artists @ Chelsea, 530 West 25th Street, from Oct. 19 through Nov. 6. (There will be a reception for the artist on Sat., Oct. 23, from 3 to 6 PM.)

For the past four years or so, the subject of Carlson's paintings has been the construction barrels one sees along America's highways, with their bold orange/red and white marker stripes (and a few in a more subdued gray/purple hue) to alert motorists to detours, due to work in progress along the road. These ordinary objects are fraught with multiple meanings for the artist, who says, "I am fascinated by the enigmatic qualities inherent in familiar things. The idea that details of the banal and details of the profound, 'dance' with each other, flip flop."

Carlson achieves this sense of "flip flop" by painting in a style for which the most apt term is Abstract Realism. For while her subjects are depicted with a convincing (if somewhat misty) accuracy, the contexts in which she places them simultaneously emphasize their formal qualities and imbue them with a mysterious suggestiveness. Which is to say, the construction barrels in her compositions are seen in configurations that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also convey an anthropomorphic feeling. Suddenly we begin to see them as though they were groups of people participating in various activities, ranging from the familial to the slightly sinister.

Some of Carlson's paintings— especially large triptychs such as "Shifting Alliances" and "Blind Tiger" —suggest narratives as complex as some of Max Beckmann's big allegorical compositions. In "Shifting Alliances," some of the barrels are lying on their sides, partially submerged in grayish purple sludge, while others are upright, receiving doses of the same stuff from long, robotic "arms" that enter the composition from the two outer panels. While one can only speculate on the meaning of this strange insemination, the activities ranging across the three connected canvases are both symbolically intriguing and visually stunning.

Equally fascinating is "Blind Tiger," in which a small white cat with a striped tail that rhymes visually with the stripes on the barrels prowls amid the rubble of what appears to be a landfill or a quarry in the last panel. The appearance of an actual living thing in one of Carlson's paintings is a rarity. Yet, as the title hints, the feline figure lacks eyes, and is rendered thereby no less impassive than the less animate objects in the composition. All are equally stoic, equally "blind," although Carlson states, paradoxically, that she sees all of her subjects as participants in "some sort of quest or journey, looking for something or someone."

In another painting called "Boat people," the barrels are centrally grouped in a manner that, particularly in view of the title, suggests a group of refugees huddled together for companionship and security on the deck of a boat headed toward an unknown shore. The stripes enhance the sense that they are literally "banding" together," just as the soft white clouds in the blue sky above them enhances the marine atmosphere. However, what appears at first glance to be soaring seagulls turns out, on closer inspection, to bear more resemblance to twists of barbed wire intruding into the upper part of the composition on both sides. Thus, before our eyes, instantaneously, the mood shifts from the lyrical to the vaguely ominous.

Carlson asserts that because highway construction barrels "come from the commuter context, a sort of very small scale variation of migration," for her, they "mirror back a transitory aspect of the world." This comes across especially well in the painting she calls "Passage," where, set against another blue sky afloat with wisps of cloud, they could suggest either gaily clad passengers on a ship's deck or striped smoke stacks. In either case, here they radiate calm, rather than anxiety, attesting to the artist's ability to invest almost identical objects with distinctly different meanings by virtue of her considerable compositional abilities and subtle painterly gifts.

Indeed, part of what makes Carlson's pictures so evocative is her handling of oils on canvas. She exploits the sheen and succulence of the medium in a manner that goes beyond its viscous sensuousness to achieve an almost fleshly sensuality.

Obviously Carlson takes as much pleasure in painting her highway construction barrels as Jenny Saville takes in delineating the folds and dimples of her corpulent nude models or her favorite forbearer Philip Guston (to whom the title of her show refers) did in depicting shoes, bottles of booze, and cartoon klansmen. However, that Sabine Carlson manages to make her more stoic subjects every bit as seductive and provocative makes her accomplishment all the more remarkable.

—Ed McCormack

The Passionate Journey of Julio Aguilera, Painter and Sculptor

The first part of Julio Aguilera's biography almost reads like the treatment for a Hollywood film starring some macho Latin leading man like Antonio Banderas. Such a film might begin with Aguilera as a small boy, all of five years old, shining shoes in the streets of Caracas, Venezuela. Most of the other kids who are sent out by their impoverished parents to shine shoes or to beg sniff glue. But little Julio is not interested in using drugs to escape the grim reality of a street urchin. Instead, he becomes intoxicated in a much more exalted way by the smell of the the oil paints being used by an artist who is standing in the street nearby, painting the distant view of the Mountain of Avila.

After questioning the boy to make sure he is actually interested in painting, and not just in sniffing the paints to attain a new kind of chemical high, the artist presents him with some half-squeezed out tubes of oils that he no longer needs. And from that moment on, the boy's path in life is determined...

"War and Peace"

Although his family is too poor to afford canvases, Julio scavenges paper and cardboard from a local meat and fish store to paint on. A neighbor loves his first painting "The Rooster" so much that she buys it for twenty American dollars—an astounding sum! A year later, when he is six, Little Julio's portrait of Simon Bolivar, the central figure in the South American independence movement, wins first prize in an art contest for children sponsored by the Prismacolor company and his confidence is bolstered by official recognition, the first of many such honors to follow.

No doubt it would add excitement to the drama that Aguilera also becomes an accomplished martial artist, as well as a fine artist, traveling to fight in tournaments throughout the world and winning the world championship four times. However, his stint as kung fu fighter would only be a flashy, action-packed subplot. For he ended his martial arts studies in 1978, after being awarded his 8th Degree Black Belt, and henceforth was to apply all of the discipline he acquired in his practice of kung fu to perfecting his technique as a fine artist.

From that point on, the story of Julio Aguilera becomes a different kind of narrative altogether. And what it loses in Hollywood-style melodrama, it more than makes up for in steady aesthetic accomplishment. Since, Aguilera has exhibited his paintings, as well as his sculptures in bronze, widely and won critical acclaim for the passionate approach that caused one critic to call him "the painter of the colors of the heart and soul." Typical of the emotional directness that has won him such tributes is the canvas he calls "Lady Liberty," painted in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, showing the famous statue symbolically cracked but still standing tall, unbowed.

Julio Aguilera's latest exhibition of oils and bronzes can be seen from September 28 through October 28 in the Venezuelan Institute Gallery, 7 East 51st Street.

As the critic Rina Carvajal has noted, from the academic tradition at the turn of the century to the avant garde of today, one of the concerns of Venezuelan art has been integrating its own cultural traditions with European and American influences. Few contemporary artists, it might be added, have achieved this goal as successfully as Aguilera, whose paintings combine a distinctly Venezuelan flavor with mainstream aesthetic sophistication.

Some of the themes that appear in Aguilera's work are those that have preoccupied artists of Hispanic heritage for centuries. Aguilera's "La Infanta," although refreshingly contemporary harks back to the court paintings of Velasquez and Goya. Aguilera's Harlequins, musicians, and bullfighters pay tribute to Picasso, even while interpreting such subjects in his own unique manner. And Aguilera's fiery colors and muscularly expressive exaggerations of figurative forms can also be likened favorably to the powerful murals of the Mexican master Jose Clemente Orozco. However, Aguilera puts his own distinctive stylistic stamp on such subjects in a manner that finally stands on its own merits. While respecting the tradition, he builds upon it like a jazz musician improvising on the chord changes of a familiar melody, and finally transcends it by virtue of his visionary sensibility and a passion that is invariably tempered by formal ingenuity.

As is his practice, for this exhibition, enigmatically titled "If," Aguilera has explored each of his themes in both painting and sculpture. One of the most powerful is "The Minotaur," particularly in its imposingly large bronze version. Like all of Aguilera's works, this piece is autobiographical. The Minotaur is the artist and the nude woman he hovers over and embraces is his wife Elena. This is a theme that Picasso has interpreted many times in many ways in various paintings and prints. Yet he has never fleshed it out sculpturally, as Aguilera has done here, imbuing the figures with unprecedented passion, immediacy, and sensuality by virtue of his personal identification with the subject, as well as through the organic plasticity of his style. In contrast to Picasso's more classical treatment of the theme, which is always coolly removed and somewhat ironic (perhaps mirroring his rakish attitude as serial seducer), Aguilera's Minotaur and his swooning mate project the sense of a profound and lasting love.

This sense of abiding affection also comes across as well in a large portrait of his wife, Elena, as well as in another oil of the artist and his wife kissing, their faces merging almost as one. Both are painted in bold strokes and strong colors, the figures somewhat abstracted yet possessed of the sensual human resonance that enlivens all of Aguilera's oils, making them emotionally engaging as well as formally accomplished.

Along with his autobiographical works, Aguilera also addresses more allegorical subjects with universal ramifications just as affectingly, as both the painting and the sculpture that he calls "War and Peace" attest— the former through fluid shapes and strident colors on the picture plane, the latter through monumental forms flowing in space. Here, the figures of a bull and a horse are intertwined, the dominance of the bovine figure, which stands astride the equine one, sadly suggesting that aggression always seems to have the edge in this eternal struggle.

Yet, as the metamorphosis of Julio Aguilera himself, from champion fighter to world-class artist, also suggests, sometimes humankind's most exalted impulses ultimately prevail.

—Ed McCormack

Anne Bachelier's Own Private "Venezia"

One of the more fascinating facets of the creative process is how a specific experience can be transformed when it is filtered through the imagination of an artist who normally inhabits a private world. The recent paintings of the French artist Anne Bachelier are perhaps one of the more dramatic examples of this sort of transformation to be seen in recent decades.

To begin with, Bachelier, of all artists, needs no goad for fantasy. She could presumably stay at home in Grenoble (the name itself evokes images of a sequestered fairy tale realm) from now until doomsday and generate the fanciful imagery for which she has become world famous. After all, an artist such as Bachelier lives richly in the resources of her singular imagination, and travel in the outer world might seem nothing more than a superfluous distraction from the inner realm that consumes her so thoroughly.

However, in February of this year, Bachelier and her husband, Claude, traveled with her art dealer Neil Zukerman and his partner, Thomas Shivers, to Venice for Carnivale. They all donned elaborate costumes and attended lavish masked balls such as Il Ballo della Doge, joining wholeheartedly in the revelry. The experience (which was documented in photographs of the two couples in a variety of elegant settings and outrageously gorgeous frippery) seems to have inspired some of Bachelier's best paintings to date, including a mural scale work called "Danse Macabre (Midnight in a Palazzo on the Grand Canal)" that may well be her masterpiece.

To unveil these works, Neil Zukerman has come up with a characteristically novel idea. The exhibition, which can be seen at CFM Gallery, 112 Greene Street, from October 10 through November 7, will be preceded by a lavish event called "An Evening in Venezia." Attendance will be limited to the first 125 people on the gallery mailing list to R.S.V.P. All who participate will be required to wear either Venetian costume or black tie and mask, and a Bachelier painting will be awarded for best costume." The evening will be a charity benefit for "Young Will," a non-profit organization which presents specially adopted versions of Shakespeare plays with teenage casts to elementary and middle school students "to introduce young people to classical literature through production, performance, and participation."

The tie-in, if any rationale is needed for combining an art opening with such a worthy cause, is that Bachelier is our most theatrical contemporary painter, an artist whose every canvas is a dramatic event, suggestive of near-Shakespearean plots, sub-plots, and intrigues; filled with all the atmosphere that can be produced with mirrors, smoke, and sleight-of-brush pyrotechnics; animated by exuberant operatic passion rarely seen in the cool precincts of postmodernism.

If this makes Bachelier something of an anomaly in today's art scene, a little hard to place in the ever-evolving parade of mini-movements and "isms," so much the better; for she seems to belong to an older tradition of painters romantic enough to aim their efforts at posterity, rather than vying for quick applause in a critical arena beholden to the trends and fashions of the marketplace. And her originality has endured her to discerning and independent collectors in the U.S., France, and elsewhere abroad.

Even these fond familiars of Bachelier's fantasy realm will probably be surprised by some of the images the relatively reclusive artist's sojourn to Venice has produced. For the shy, introverted Bachelier, the masked balls and picturesque public plazas bustling with revelers trying to outdo each other with their elaborate costumes and assumed personae seemed to provide a perfect hiding place and vantage point from which to observe her inner world merging with reality. Surely her new paintings are among her most inspired, for they seem to have resulted directly from her impressions of a place auspiciously conducive to enhancing her imaginative powers to their fullest.

In one painting, anthropmorphic unicorns serve as gondoliers for travelers trolling other figures submerged to the neck in water along with them as they traverse a canal in a small craft with an angelic masthead at its helm. One cannot imagine any artist other than Anne Bachelier coming up with such a fanciful synthesis of the actual and the invented in reaction to finding herself in a new environment (or, as the case may be, an environment she has visited before but is now viewing with new eyes).

Also something of a departure are a series of new paintings in oils on paper, a new medium for Bachelier, who usually works in oils on canvas. In these pictures, with their luminous turpentine washes, she achieves a sense of swiftness, spareness, and linear grace similar to that in her pen and ink drawings with watercolor washes. However, there is also an atmospheric richness akin to her oils and canvas. The new medium seems especially suited to the subject of masked figures in elaborate costumes and mysterious poses, and the technique that Bachelier employs enables her to combine the qualities of full bodied presences and ethereal phantoms with the mere, magician-like flick of a brush.

Other new works, in her more familiar medium of oils on canvas, depict such subjects as a lissome young beauty in a filmy see-through gown (her nipples and pubic hair clearly visible–-a first for Bachelier!) being fondled by a much larger male figure in a black four-cornered hat and suit; a rear view of another imposing black-clad figure

"Elle se retourne...elle te regarde..."
(She Turns and Looks at You)

seated on a small, blue, crouching sphinxlike creature, scrutinizing three paintings in ornate frames (Bacheliers-within-a Bachelier!) hanging on a gallery wall; and a portrait composition of a young woman with flaming red Medusa hair, only one dark, dreamy eye visible, the rest of her face morphing, ala Arcimboldi, into a bouquet of pink roses that she raises her elbow-gloved hands to embrace, as a somewhat sinister blue male mask appears to nuzzle the back of her neck. The latter painting, particularly, demonstrates how Bachelier's growing mastery enables her to increasingly combine meticulous detail with painterly fluidity, particularly in her loose yet descriptive handling of the pink roses, their petals palpably delineated with creamy pale pink impastos.

The authoritative paint handling distinguishing all of Bachelier's new oils, which bespeaks the freedom that only comes with mature confidence, reaches, its apex in the aforementioned "Danse Macabre." This friezelike five by eight foot composition spanning four connected panels, features a rhythmic procession of several figures, ranging from the angelic to the demonic. Human and hybrid, sporting silken gowns or billowing breeches of a vintage peculiar to Bachelier's timeless realm; brandishing or wearing masks, trailing silken ribbons, prancing grandly, they move amid masterfully evoked areas of light and shadow, personifying all the pomp and pretense of our common condition.

As usual in Bachelier's large, multifigure compositions, there are myriad details to compel the eye and capture the imagination. Each figure evinces highly individual characteristics of costume, attitude, and demeanor that set it apart as an individual actor in the drama unfolding. At the same time, every element is skillfully subordinated to the overall thrust of the superbly unified composition by Bachelier's brilliant brushwork, which melds luminous, light-as-air glazes and weighty impastos into the sumptuously glowing surface of the picture.

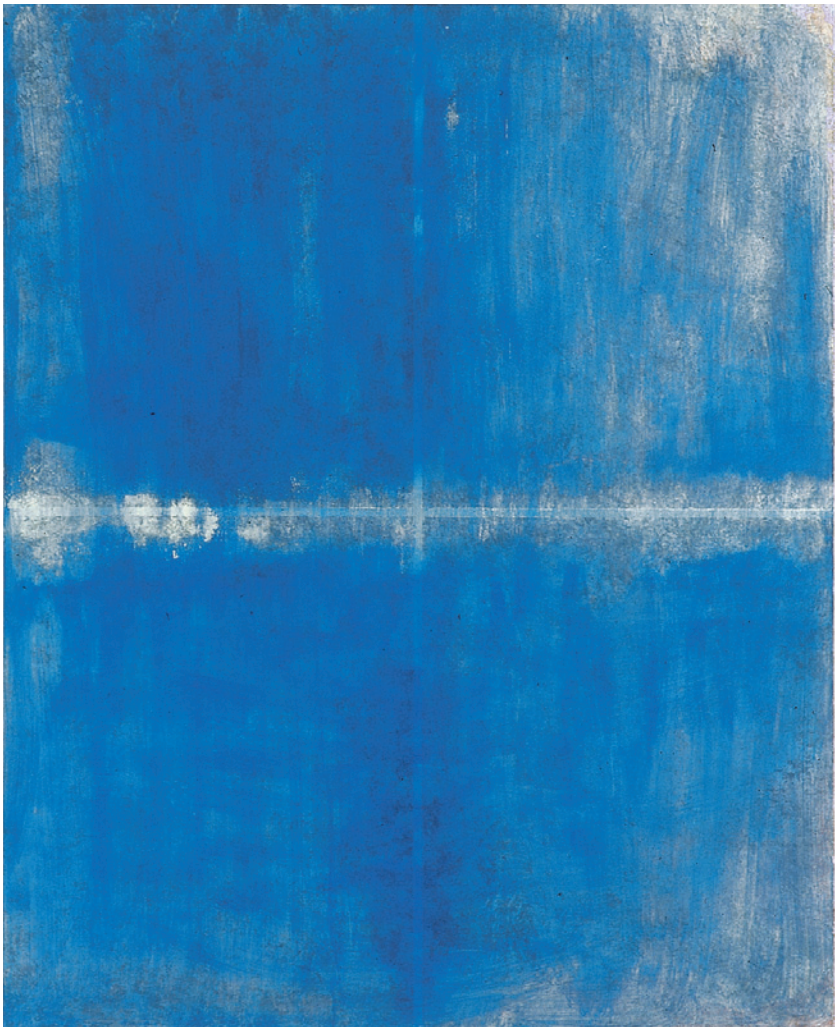
Indeed, as this exhibition makes clear, Anne Bachelier's painterly prowess will play every bit as crucial a role as her imaginative powers in assuring that her work endures.

—Ed McCormack

Vibrant Undertones in the Art of Rosalind Rodburg

Rosalind Rodburg is an especially uncompromising breed of painter. Color, she says, is all her work is about. End of conversation. And for Rodburg, color is more than sufficient to provide interest and command our attention, as seen in her solo show of new abstract acrylic paintings, at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from September 7 through 25. (Reception: Saturday, September 11th, from 3 to 6 PM.)

Rodburg saturates her canvases from edge to edge, creating an expanse of subtle chromatic modulations that one can almost imagine continuing beyond the picture space to infinity. Refusing to ingratiate herself to the viewer with visual "entertainment," she adheres to a stringently formalist stance, relying solely on her chromatic ingenuity to create compositions that seem to envelop one in a shimmering optical environment.



"Blue on Blue"

Although her process involves the painstaking application of many veil-like layers of color over time, evidence of the artist's hand is underplayed in Rodburg's paintings. She employs masking tape to add underlying geometric elements, such as the crosslike configuration dissecting the composition of the large canvas that she calls "Blue on Blue." Here, the underpainting of metallic gold acrylic glows through the blue in places, enhancing the impression, characteristic of Rodburg's paintings, that the composition is illuminated from within. The subtle sense of light that seems to emanate from Rodburg's surfaces is achieved by wiping away some of the many layers of translucent acrylic washes during the painting process to create a kind of coloristic pentimento. In "Blue on Blue," the technique is especially effective, illuminating the horizonline formed by the crossbar of the underlying cruciform in an especially luminous manner. Other tonal subtleties result from the paint application, with vertical strokes in the upper part of the composition and horizontal ones toward the bottom creating contrasts, however subdued, to activate the surface, which has been built up with a variety of different blue hues, resulting in a sense of deep nocturnal stillness.

Paradoxically, Rodburg's paintings are atmospherically allusive, despite her insistence on a purely formal, nonreferential aesthetic. In fact, "Blue on Blue" is as poetically evocative as a view of a distant shore illuminated by moonlight, even though the actual elements of the geometric composition adhere with utmost formal austerity to the two-dimensions of the picture plane.

The sense of stillness and profound silence that Rodburg can evoke is especially compelling in "Twin Golds," a diptych consisting of two sizable squarish canvases painted in a variety of different opaque and semi-opaque metallic gold hues, each with a broad, horizontal band of black at its facing outer edge. These black bars create a palpable sense of tension, like two magnets pulling toward each other, seeming to activate the empty space between the two adjoining canvases in a way that seems the visual equivalent of the "phantom limb" sensation that some amputees are said to experience. Rodburg, who claims that all of her paintings evolve intuitively, rather than as a result of planning, seems to have an instinct for creating such near-metaphysical visual sensations.

In another large gold diptych, the two canvases are joined and the shimmering surface is enlivened by subtle shadings and punctuated by sparse yet definite darker strokes created with metallic brass pigment. Here, Rodburg comes closer than in most of her other paintings to introducing the gesture. However, her customary restraint keeps these darker, more emphatic strokes from becoming dominant; they merely serve as piquant accents, enlivening without negating the overall impassiveness of the surface.

Indeed, Rodburg's control is remarkable, particularly when she employs red, the most volatile of colors, as the dominant motif of one especially sumptuous large untitled canvas. Of course, Rodburg never uses only one shade or value of any color. Rather, she covers the entire canvas with hues that range from the most visceral cadmiums and strident scarlets to softer rosier tones (blended with white to take the edge off), so that a veritable spectrum of reds results, with the piece de resistance being one especially fiery spot of red that burns through the upper right portion of the composition like a votive candle.

Here, too, to the left half of the composition, Rodburg adds strokes of blue that almost appear more like shifting shadows than actual hues, so thoroughly are they subsumed and neutralized by the shimmering red haze that makes the entire composition seem more like an atmospheric event than a construct of pigment on canvas.

In other paintings, such as "My Silver Sphere," Rodburg works with more definite circles, grids, and other geometric elements created with masking tape, and reduces her palette to monochromes mediated by metallic elements and texturally enlivened by applying paint with a sponge. However, even when she limits herself to the most austere palette of hues, Rosalind Rodburg's supremacy as a colorist shines through.

—J. Sanders Eaton

"New Realities" Enliven the West Side Scene

Ernesto Camacho's figurative paintings are filled with a witty sense of life. So it came as no surprise that these qualities carried over in Camacho's role of curator for "New Realities," a group show by the West Side Arts Coalition, seen recently at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street.

Camacho himself was represented by a characteristically lively canvas depicting a glamorous young woman shooting pool in a seedy dive, while several beer guzzling male biker types looked on with bemused grins. Equally intense was Camacho's portrait of another tempestuous beauty in a dramatic landscape, which pushed romanticism about as far as it can go in an art world rife with irony.

Madi Lanier, on the other hand, takes a formal view of nature in landscapes that show the influence of Cezanne yet are informed by Lanier's own sensibility and vision. Her ability to imbue a scene with a winning combination of representational and abstract virtues, striking a fine balance between the two, was especially evident in "Long Island Sunset," with its angular linear elements and luminous areas of color.

Lucinda Prince exhibited two large canvases side by side in the manner of a diptych, both entitled "Prospect Park Lake." Applying paint in juicy vertical strokes, Prince evokes a shimmering effect of water, a grassy shore, and stylized trees in a vigorous neo-impressionistic technique which can more accurately be termed "dash-ism" than pointillism, given her staccato strokes.

Diane G. Casey takes a bold, uninhibited post-Pop approach in paintings such as "Lips Like Sugar," where the big red lips of the title float freely among abstract forms in thick impastos applied with the consistency of cake frosting. Casey's most intriguing painting, however, depicted a cartoon-like figure brandishing a fly swatter as he sat in front of a TV set on which an anchorperson announced, "More bad news. Story at 11!"

Fran Del Re is a realist whose watercolors capture precise qualities of light and atmosphere in an accomplished drybrush technique reminiscent of Andrew Wyeth. Here, Del Re's ability to evoke a mood through weathered wood textures was especially impressive in "The Red Saw," a technical tour de force focusing on the contrasts of light and shadow in a rustic work room.

Carrie Lo gives a fanciful spin to her landscape, floral, and figure compositions. Lo's watercolor of a country road winding between trees is appropriately titled "Pathway to Dreams," while another lyrical painting captures the dreamy mood of a beautiful Asian woman seen in a moment of private reverie.

Linda Lessner's mastery of chiaroscuro lends atmospheric mystery to her pastels and oils. All of Lessner's landscapes evoke a world enveloped in shadow, as though seen through a glass darkly; they are possessed of a peculiar tonal poetry.

Cati Blanche is another artist who evokes a highly original sense of nature, albeit in a more abstract manner. Here, Blanche showed a work called "Nibiru," comprised of four small panels with cloudlike forms emerging from fiery orange fields, culminating in the final panel in a shape suggesting a delicate twig floating in auras of radiant light.

By contrast, Mary Anne Holliday's mountainous Arizona landscapes are created with precisely delineated forms, akin to those in the nature paintings of Marsden Hartley and Georgia O'Keeffe. Indeed, Holliday's sharply focused technique and intense sense of light imbue her desert scenes with a quality verging on the surreal.

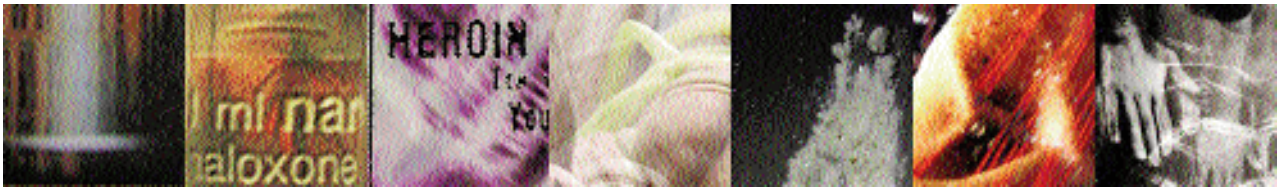
Frequent exhibitor Meyer Tannenbaum was something of an anomaly in this generally referential show for his insistence on pure abstraction. Four paintings from Tannenbaum's "Impact" series, in which graceful linear forms and cotton candy colors engaged in a compelling visual dialogue inspired one astute observer to characterize them as "quiet explosions."

—Byron Coleman

www.jessicaiapino.com
art@jessicaiapino.com

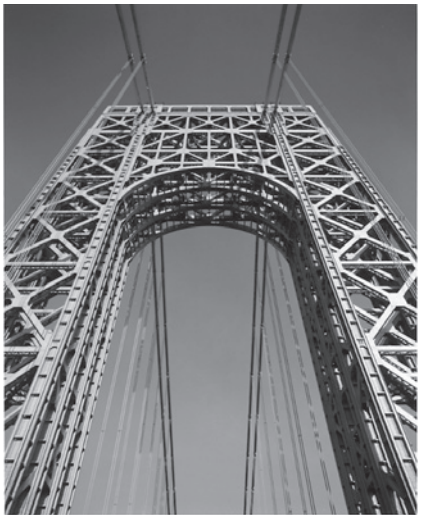
"street-game" 2004
aluminum

preview images from the upcoming show "HERO"



Dave Frieder Photographs

Manhattan Bridge - From Top of Sphere, NYC Skyline.



George Washington Bridge - Upward View from Roadway.

Verrazano-Narrows Bridge - Tower Arch and Roadway.

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Celebrating Salvador Dali's Centennial at CFM Gallery

While Salvador Dali has taken a lot of posthumous flack for his exhibitionism and publicity stunts, the art world has been a lot more permissive toward later artists like Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, and Damien Hirst, who have made cynical media manipulation integral not only to the marketing of their work but to its very aesthetic in a manner that would surely have scandalized even the great surrealist rascal himself. In fact, a good argument could be made that Dali's only crime was being ahead of his time in the lengths to which he was willing to go for publicity. For his was a more puritanical era, when artists were expected to be holier than thou art, so to speak. (Face it, anyone who worried about "selling out" nowadays would immediately be dismissed as naive and just plain quaint!)

And while Dali, admittedly, could also be rather cavalier with his signature, leading to confusion regarding the authenticity of some of his prints, there is no denying that his surpassing abilities as a draftsman made him a natural as a printmaker. Nor is there any question that he produced some of the most exquisitely elaborate prints of the twentieth or any other century. The simple yet important distinction to be made in Dali's case is between the "multiples" that he allowed to be issued in his name and the limited prints that he personally took part in producing.

Among the true treasures in the latter category are the magnificent multimedia graphics that Dali created for the lavish livre d' artiste "Alchimie des Philosophes," published in an edition of 225 in Paris in 1975, on view at CFM Gallery, 112 Greene Street, from September 10 through October 5. The exhibition, in celebration of Dali's centennial (born in 1904, the artist would have turned 100 this year), features one intact book, a massive tome that includes a large circular "mercury dial" inscribed in gold with the artist's initials; separate prints from another copy of the book that has been disassembled; as well as additional prints that Dali executed for "Don Quixote" and "Moses and Monotheism," two other important livres d'artistes that demonstrate his draftsmanly gifts and graphic genius to their fullest.

For "Alchimie des Philosophes," a scholarly compendium of old texts on alchemy in both their original languages and their French and English translations, Dali created ten works, measuring approximately 30 by 22 inches, in a combination of lithography silkscreen and etching, hand embellished with ink and incorporating precious and semiprecious stones. These are the Dali prints that one rarely sees amid the proliferation of lesser items that his enormous popularity has spawned; the sort of works upon which his reputation as one of our greatest modern printmakers, on a par with his undeniable mastery as a painter, must finally rest.

While the sheer textural and colorisitic voluptuousness of these painterly prints distinguishes them as technical tours de force, an even more important consideration is the formal inventiveness that Dali brings to bear, bridging abstraction and figuration with a panache that renders such divisive categories meaningless. Prints such as "Yin and Yang" and the "Labyrinth," for example couch figurative elements within compositions as boldly abstract as anything by Picasso or Pollock.

"The Labyrinth"

In the former print, loosely drawn human and equine figures merge with amorphous areas of yellow, brown, and blue that flow freely, like aquarelle applied wet-into-wet, forming flowing abstract patterns that cover almost the entire picture plane. In the latter, an angular maze of linear forms thickly applied in bright primary hues directs the eye to two joined hermaphroditic figures, one with vagina and a male torso, the other with female breasts and a penis. One can only assume that, as usual, Dali has interpreted the ancient text liberally, making even alchemy an occasion for an excursion into eroticism. "The Labyrinth" of the title becomes a conduit for the polymorphous perversity that preoccupied him for his entire career, seen here as a metaphor for the magic transposition of gender as alchemical event.

Equally sensual is "The Emerald Table," in which four actual emeralds are incorporated, along with a sensual semi-abstract nude female torso, framed like a jewel in its setting, within the precisely drawn outline of a stylized emerald. The latter element hovers at the center of the composition, surrounded by bold globs of green and golden yellow that drip down onto a metaphysical landscape populated by three of the sketchy figures that Dali typically employs as symbolic markers in such terrains. While the viscous character of most of the drips could suggest spermatozoa, the central green shape closest to the bottom of the composition bears a decided resemblance to the labial lips guarding the entrance to the vulva, an association that its placement directly below the nude female torso with its abundant tuft of public hair makes all the more obvious.

In other prints as well, such as "The Dream of the Alchemist," where a linear classical profile is combined with a splashy green form simultaneously suggesting plant life and entwined serpents, and "The Angel of Alchemy," where the barest outline of a figure with skeletal visage emerges from a welter of gold and black strokes, Dali again proves his ability to create compositions of unparalleled power and beauty with a combination of figurative forms and spontaneous abstract gestures.

One of the simplest yet most provocative images among the ten prints Dali executed for "Alchimie des Philosophies" is the picture called "Immortality." This is a frontal head and shoulders portrait of a woman wearing a white sailor's blouse with pale blue trim. Although her face is featureless, filled with smaller symbols and figures set within the outline of a gem and incorporating a real sapphire in place of an eye, it is clear from the shape of the hair surrounding the face that this is a portrait of Dali's wife and lifelong muse Gala. She is instantly recognizable because Dali has made her an icon in countless paintings and prints, literally immortalizing her in a manner than makes the title of this print particularly apt.

Although Dali cited Sigmund Freud's writings on dreams and the subconscious as an important influence on his work, when Dali finally met Freud in 1938, the father of psychoanalysis told him, "What interests me in your art is not the unconscious but the conscious."

This was a telling statement, for while Salvador Dali could practice automatism with the best of them (as the splashier gestural elements in his prints demonstrate so dynamically) he was also the most conscious of artists, a genius of unsurpassed draftsmanly control. And nowhere, it seems, is the combination more effective than in "Alchimie des Philosophes," one of the crowning achievements of his career as a printmaker.

—Byron Coleman

Birds are Messengers in the Socially Engaged Art of Gloria Waslyn

Hunt Slonem, who works in a studio where he is surrounded by a flock of exotic feathered friends, may have been the first contemporary artist to attract widespread attention for painting birds. Although Slonem employs various colorful species primarily as formal elements in his paintings, often making the bars of their cages function as grids that tip one off to his essentially abstract intentions, other artists such as Walton Ford, Ann Craven, and Peter Edlund treat avian subjects more symbolically. Indeed, recent exhibitions such as "For the Birds" at Artspace, in New Haven, and "Birdspace: A Post-Audubon Artists' Aviary," at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, attest to the fascination that birds have for a growing number of artists working in a variety of media.

No other contemporary artist, however, has made birds not only her subject— but her medium— in the manner of the New York-based photographer Gloria Waslyn, who for the past six years has billed her two Gold and Green Macaws, Baby and Merlin, as "Unofficial Ambassadors to Save the Rainforest and Protect All Nature."

The ambassadorial title was actually bestowed by the Venezuelan Consulate General, one among the multitudes of individuals that Waslyn has confronted and delighted with her engaging pets, as she makes her rounds of the city and the country. Because these extemporaneous meetings between birds and humans are documented in photographs that are exhibited in art galleries, Waslyn's work has been compared to that of William Wegman, the artist best known for photographing his Weimaraner dog, Man Ray, in all manner of absurd situations. Such analogies are not entirely accurate, however, since while Wegman contrives incongruous canine costumes and sets up his photographs as static tableaux, Waslyn's pictures are the end products of a process more akin to public performance art.

Gloria Waslyn, Merlin and Baby

Baby and Merlin take the role of "public characters," a term coined by social historian Jane Jacobs in her book "The Death and Life of Great American Cities." According to Jacobs, the term means "anyone who is in frequent contact with a wide circle of people and is sufficiently interested to make himself a public character. A public character need have no special talents or wisdom to fulfill his function—although he often does. He just needs to be present, and there need to be enough of his counterparts. His main qualification is that he is public, and that he talks to lots of different people. In this way, news travels that is of sidewalk interest."

Photograph by Gloria Waslyn

Since Gloria Waslyn is an artist with a very definite social agenda, she does not hesitate to serve as a mouthpiece for her colorful public characters in their sidewalk encounters, spreading the news about saving the rainforest, preserving endangered species, and working for peace, the plight of missing children, and other vital issues. Meanwhile, the birds do their part by endearing themselves to her listeners and letting them experience first-hand what will be lost if we don't all learn to live together and respect all living things on our planet. Baby and Merlin (who happens to be the female parrot of the pair, named for "her magical personality" and also introducing a lighthearted note of gender-identity politics) make it possible for the artist to get her point across without preaching.

Rather, the engaging antics of the two outgoing avians creates an atmosphere of humor and goodwill that makes people automatically receptive to the message of the equally outgoing, casually clad, tousle-headed photographer. And this feeling comes across not only in their public performances, but also when one encounters Waslyn's photographs in a gallery. One can't help but smile at an image of Baby and Merlin insinuating themselves into a performance by a group of Mexican musicians on the subway; schmoozing with a beefy cop sitting in a squad car; or stealing the show by perching on the legs of grinning break dancers cavorting on a city sidewalk.

While Waslyn's pictures of her parrots hamming it up with a variety of street performers, protesters, and other public characters are invariably amusing, some of her most affecting pictures are of their interactions with ordinary citizens. For in these pictures we see most clearly how these unexpected encounters can brighten and elevate an ordinary day with the gift of an epiphany. Whether posing with (and for) camera-toting Japanese tourists; or blissing out with chanting Hari Krishna devotees; or clowning for children in Central Park; or nuzzling and nibbling the pearls of elegant matrons shopping in Saks Fifth Avenue; or bringing a much needed moment of joy to rescue workers at Ground Zero (where they were regular visitors in the wake of 9/11), Merlyn and Baby have clearly made a positive impact in the lives of many New Yorkers.

The art of Gloria Waslyn is multifaceted, combining aspects of social realism, conceptualism, and performance. She is also a fine documentary photographer in the most conventional sense of the term, capturing precisely the right image to convey her message of peace, love, and the preservation of our environment and all the creatures in it. Yet her work goes beyond the obvious populist appeal and human interest that would seem to make it the stuff of Sunday supplements— even though, unlike most ambitious artists, Waslyn would rather regale one with the story of how she fell in love with her birds and talk about their exploits than spout profound aesthetic theories. At the same time, however, through her charismatic cohorts Baby and Merlin, Gloria Waslyn proves that spreading simple joy may be the most profound message of all.

—J. Sanders Eaton

NOTE: Gloria Waslyn can be contacted at gloriawaslyn@AOL.com, or babyandmerlin@AOL.com

Luis Fernando Ceballos: A Mexican Digital Surrealist

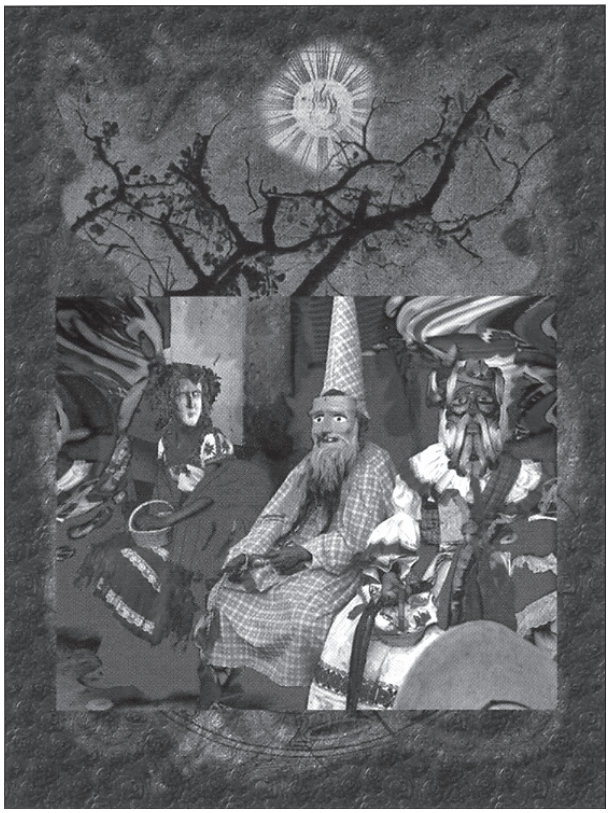
As the work of several emerging artists in both the 2004 Whitney Biennial and the newly refurbished Brooklyn Museum's "Open House" exhibition made clear, some of the most exciting developments in contemporary art are occurring at the juncture where photography meets digital technology. But by far one of the most imaginative uses of this new medium can be seen in the work of the Mexican photographic artist Luis Fernando Ceballos, who has exhibited widely in the United States, as well as abroad, and whose most recent exhibition, "Unreal Encounters," was seen at Jadite Galleries, 413 West 50th Street.

Born in Uruapan, Michoacan, Mexico, in 1953, Ceballos was awarded the Lorenzo el Magnifico Gold Medal and Diploma for photography in the 2003 Bienniale Internazionale dell' Arte Contemporanea, in Florence, Italy. This prestigious prize is only one among many honors that this innovative artist has garnered in an exhibition career that began in the mid 1970s and has continued to gain momentum ever since.

The exhibition at Jadite, a venue well known for introducing many of the best artists from Spain and Latin America to the New York art scene, showed Ceballos at the height of his mature powers. Several large digital photographs were featured, in which he explored aspects of Mexican cultured filtered through a sensibility deeply affected by Surrealism. Indeed, as Teresa del Conde, the Director of the Museo de Art Moderno in Mexico City has pointed out, Andre Breton, the "high priest" of the movement , found Mexico to be "a Surrealist country par excellence" when he visited in 1938. After all, as del Conde put it, " fantastical elements have formed an integral part of the visual repertory of Mexican artists and artisans for over a thousand years." Del Conde attributes their ability to "subtly illuminate hidden or unsuspected aspects of everyday life" to the country's "perpetual cult of death," as well as to the unique manner in which the Mexican people have managed to syncretize pre-Coumbian polytheism and Catholicism.

Ceballos continues and expands upon this tradition, albeit from a radically new angle, employing state of the art digital photographic technology to create complex compositions in which fantastic imagery and glowing color convey a sense of the numinous, the ineffable. His prints are Baroque extravaganzas incorporating colorful masks, skulls, costumed figures, architectural structures, and elements of the Mexican landscape. These diverse images merge to create an almost psychedelic effect that is heightened by Ceballos' coloristic daring. Radiant, almost iridescent hues illuminate his pictures, lending skies, particularly, a dramatic luminosity that imparts to his scenes an unearthly quality, a visionary force, that is utterly unique.

By employing what is essentially a collage technique, rendered seamless by digital manipulation, Ceballos achieves a painterly fluidity that enables him to evoke a dramatically atmospheric Boschian realm. The effect is especially intense in the print entitled "On the Verge of Time," where storm clouds gather in a luminous red sky and figures wearing grotesquely grimacing masks gather in a shadowy mountainous terrain where the imagistic piece de resistance is a crucified infant. Hanging horrifically on a rough cross bearing the family letters "INRI," the baby Christ is an arresting atrocity, a vision of suffering innocence that imbues the picture with a peculiar power.



"The Meeting"

Less grim but equally arresting in its own manner is the digital photograph that Ceballos calls "The Meeting," in which the frontal, formal arrangement of the three seated masked figures recalls the great Mexican graphic artist Jose Luis Cuevas' grotesque reworkings of certain figures from the court paintings of Goya. Ceballos. however, sets these figures (a wizard flanked by two cohorts in elaborate period dress) within a rectangle afloat on a purple ground where sinuous tree limbs writhe and an ornately stylized sun blazes brightly. Thus, the overall effect is considerably more surreal than anything either Goya or Cuevas ever came up with.

Tree limbs, a frequent motif in Ceballos' visual lexicon, also figure prominently in the print that he calls "Illusionaries," rising like massive antlers from the top of the large mask that dominates the composition. Here, there is the suggestion of a shamanic ritual, although the imagery in all of Ceballos' pictures is open to a wide range of interpretations. Indeed, it is the subjective quality of his imagery that makes it so mysterious and evocative, as seen in another composition entitled "Silent Witness," in which yet another masked figure in bright peasant garb appears to rise from a sea of ornate ceramic pots set against the backdrop of a majestic stucco suggesting the facade of a Mexican mission. Is the artist alluding here to the convergence of pre-Columbian polytheism and Catholicism cited earlier; or referring to Picasso's use of masks in his masterpiece "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon"; or is he inviting us to attach our own private meanings to this intriguing picture? The question proves finally moot, since the real power of the picture is undeniable, affecting one in a manner that requires no rational explication. As with all of Ceballos' compositions, it speaks to us on a subconscious level: We have all encountered similar figures in dreams and nightmares.

Phantasmagoric figures, however, do not appear in all of Ceballos' compositions. Indeed, he can convey just as much mystery in a landscape, as seen in "Nocturne," where the gothic spires and steeples of a cathedral climb to the night sky, which is enlivened by a shooting star streaking by. Here, too, a large tiger lily and other brilliant red and pink floral forms float weightlessly in the foreground, enhancing the hushed, magical atmosphere.

In these and other digital photographs in his recent exhibition at Jadite Galleries, Luis Fernando Ceballos, who was trained at the atelier of the Mexican master Alfredo Zalce, as well as at the National School of Painting and Sculpture "La Esmeralda," in Mexico City, revealed himself to be an imagistic shaman on a par with Carlos Castenada's "Don Juan." And that he combines such timeless powers with a sophisticated contemporary aesthetic sensibility, enhanced by modern technology, makes his work all the more fascinating.

—Lawrence Downes

Robert Baribeau's Genius for Gesture

No contemporary art gallery honors and perpetuates the legacy of Abstract Expressionism— the movement that put American painting on the international map and caused New York City to replace Paris as the art center of the universe—more authoritatively than the Allan Stone Gallery, which has been showing the work of such stellar lights of the movement as de Kooning, Kline, and Gorky since the early 1960s. And no contemporary artist better exemplifies the ongoing vitality of vigorous gestural enterprise than Robert Baribeau, who has been exhibiting with Allan Stone since 1979, and whose most recent solo show, "Field Paintings, Still Lifes, and Objects" was seen recently in the gallery's present exhibition space, at 113 East East 90th Street.

Although all of Baribeau's paintings are untitled, the term "field paintings" refers to his large compositions in which broad horizontal strokes that appear to have been applied with a large palette knife or trowel are the dominant motif, creating the sense of a vast, tactile terrain. These sweeping strokes —or streaks— have a palpable physical presence that is enhanced by the distinctive manner in which their edges furl up and out from the canvas or paper, forming ridges of thick pigment. Other juicy elements such as blobs and drips of oil paint laid down over collaged bits of newsprint, plastic sheeting, or fabric with polka dots, stripes, or floral patterns, add to the richly layered complexity and gestural dynamism of Baribeau's surfaces.

While there are no overt references to landscape, the overall thrust of these paintings calls to mind Jack Kerouac's descriptions in the final paragraphs of "On the Road" of "all the raw land that rolls in one unbelievable bulge" across the plains and highways of America. For like Kerouac's energetic prose passages, Baribeau's field paintings evoke a mythic, even heroic, sense of American vastness, American possibility, American poetry, that may very well spring from his Oregon origins.

Although hardly more referential, the paintings that Baribeau classifies as "still lifes" are generally smaller and employ spare, vaguely floral forms as a central motif of the composition. Standing on slender stems, these bulb-like shapes are set against vigorously worked grounds. They possess a singular physical presence that is almost portrait-like. At once static and energetic, they project a quiet power akin to that in Nicholas de Stael's still life objects, albeit informed by a more organic suggestiveness.

Then there are the "objects," created with oil and mixed media on cigar boxes. In these small pieces, particularly, Baribeau's

Untitled (000469), 2003

use of paint takes on a truly sculptural dimension, with bold abstract forms built up in thick clots of pigment ballooning buoyantly off the squat geometry of the boxes. The combination of intimate scale and aggressive painterliness suggests an almost unimaginable synthesis of Abstract Expressionist aesthetics and the boxes of Joseph Cornell, another artist whose work has been featured at Allan Stone Gallery.

Robert Baribeau, the recipient of a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, among other awards and honors, puts his own contemporary spin on the tradition of sensuous paint handling and gestural immediacy that made Abstract Expressionism the dominant American art movement. To encounter his work in all its rough beauty is to realize that the loaded brush still has a lot of juice.

—Ed McCormack

Humberto Chau: From Machu Picchu to the Modern World

Born in Peru, educated in China, the painter Humberto Chau has a broad range of references to draw upon that place him squarely at the center of the multicultural trend in contemporary art. In his recent exhibition at Agora Gallery, 415 West Broadway, in Soho, Chau showed oils on canvas evoking scenes in South America and Asia in a distinctive style merging Western realism with Eastern poetry.

This personal synthesis reveals itself impressively in Chau's handling of light and shadow. His painting "Fishing in the Morning" was especially lovely in this regard, capturing the surf rolling into the shore, where Chinese fishermen and fisherwomen tend to their nets and baskets of catch, their conical hats gilded by the early light.

"Nature is the fountainhead of art creation," Chau has stated and puts this belief into practice through his almost Turneresque ability to capture precise atmospheric nuances, such as the mists shrouding distant mountainous vistas behind the small, graceful figures of women carrying baskets to market under tall trees in "Morning in Bali Hamlet." Equally exquisite—not only for Chau's handling of the luminous sky, sea, and clouds, but for the classical configuration of the figures on the shore— is the oil called "Pulling at the

"On the Amazon River"

Fishing Nets," in which an everyday event takes on an almost surreal glow by virtue of the artist's intense clarity of vision.

Another painting by Chau that takes on a rarefied quality, both for its innately picturesque subject matter, and the artist's unique ability to embellish it atmospherically, is "The Song of the Andes." Here, a shepherd who could just as easily be an ancient being or a living man far from the trappings of modernity, plays a simple flute in a mountainous landscape filled with golden light as a pair of baby llamas look on. Through his flawless technique, Chau invests this timeless scene with remarkable immediacy.

Along with historical scenes, such as another accomplished oil called "Hiram Bingham Discovers the Lost City of the Inca —Machu Picchu," and "On the Amazon River," a romantic image of an indigenous couple in a canoe watching a small dolphin leap playfully over the waves, Humberto Chau also creates canvases set in unmistakably modern times. One such picture is "On Bali's Kuta Beach," in which a woman wearing sunglasses and a bikini patterned with the stars and stripes reclines on an exotic beach, conversing with another woman, more modestly clad in a traditional costume, seated nearby. Although the two figures are enjoying an intimate tete a tete, they obviously inhabit very different worlds. Thus, Chau appears to comment simultaneously on both the universality of human experience and those cultural distances we must traverse in order to find common ground. Also combining elements of the old and the new, "An Indian Girl Spinning" is an insightful portrait depicting how ancient crafts and attitudes persist, even when their exponents adopt aspects of modern dress and manners.

Here, as in all of Humberto Chau's paintings, the combination of technical finesse and sympathetic observation result in a memorable image.

—Marie R. Pagano

Nigerian Sculptor Osamede Obazee's Universal Synthesis

Art has lost its traditional function in modern Africa. First colonialism and then independence have disrupted or destroyed the structures in which it once served the people, binding the community together in tribal religious rituals. Now, contemporary artists are obliged to find new ways to make those vital connections, to forge new social contexts in which African art can regain some of its spiritual power, even while forging ahead and taking its rightful place in the mainstream of modern aesthetics.

The sculptor Osamede Obazee, born in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria, in 1965, is one of its brightest hopes in this regard. Benin, renowned for the work in copper produced by the Huntunji in the 17th century, when its southern area was controlled by the kingdom of Fon, has produced several notable sculptors in recent years: The Dakpogan brothers, Calixte and Theodore, create sculptures from found automobile parts that have been compared to the figure of the 19th century Fon vodun priest exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art in 1936. Georges Adeagbo, who spent time in Europe absorbing avant garde influences, has attracted considerable attention for his installations and assemblages. Then there is Romuald Hazoume, who while influenced by the traditional West African vodun religion, creates masks from odd materials such as broken TV sets, discarded oil cans, and vacuum cleaner parts that are secular rather than ritualistic.

While all of these artists are producing interesting work, none possesses Osamede Obazee's singular ability to affect a kind of mysterious aesthetic alchemy, transforming the detritus of a society in transition into sculptural statements distinguished by unprecedented classical attributes. For while the absence of foundries have severely limited his production of works cast in bronze, and Obazee has no choice but to work with recycled scrap metal like the other artists mentioned, he alone employs it to create figures with both a palpable physical presence and an emotional subtlety that crosses all cultural barriers to make a universal statement.

While some of Obazee's pieces are more abstract than others, all embody the figure with a classical grace and fluidity that lends them universal appeal. Like all good artists, however, Obazee seems to know that one can only arrive at the universal through the particular, and in his case this means by celebrating the specific qualities that make his own people, the Edo, unique. Many of his figures depict characters from tribal history, such as the Benin King and Queen Idia, the Queen mother who, as legend has it, "bravely fought to end a civil war at the beginning of her son's reign."

In a recent project called "Queen Idia Renaissance," presented at the University of Benin, Obazee exhibited sculptures inspired not only by the first woman to be elevated to a goddess but also by other mythological figures from the ancient kingdoms of Nigeria. Like all of Obazee's figures, they are remarkable not only for their monumental realism, but for their fluidity, which is highly unusual in welded metal, a medium that requires a patchwork approach to building form.

Obazee's sculptures are also impressive for the degree of detail that he lavishes upon them. Detail is important, he maintains, since the Edo, like many African tribes, have no written history. In the past, customs and myths of historical significance, were passed on orally, down through the generations. With so many of the old ways vanishing, however, now Obazee feels that it must be part of his artistic mission to record and preserve the cultural, religious, and tribal history of the Edo and Benin for future generations.

At the same time, Obazee is an ambitious contemporary artist, fully cognizant of the fact that progressive art must also address the world at large, and he accomplishes this magnificently by virtue of the formal attributes that make his sculptures equally valuable as sophisticated aesthetic and humanistic statements. In this regard, his work belongs as much to the great traditions of Western art as to those of African art. Indeed, the sense of mass and movement in his pieces belong very much to the realist tradition of Rodin, although it is achieved not through the modeling of figures in clay to be later cast in bronze, but through a particularly arduous welded metal technique that Obazee describes as "the art of absorbing pain like no other sculpture can."

This technique involves cutting sheet metal to the required size with a hacksaw or metal scissors, then bending and hammering it into convex or concave shapes. The bending is done while the metal is still cold, before the actual welding that completes the piece is begun.

"Metal is no doubt a difficult medium of artistic expression to work with, but it is such difficult challenges that make the finished product very unique and which inspires me," Obazee states. "The ability to rise above these constraints to evolve an art form that exhibits symmetry, balance, and recognizable forms and shapes makes all the difference to me."

How successfully Osamede Obazee rises above these technical constraints to achieve the formal synthesis of which he speaks can be seen in three upcoming exhibitions: The Amherst Fine Art Show, in Amherst, Massachusetts, on September 25 and 26; "Off the Main" at The Puck Building, 295 Lafayette Street, from October 7 through 10, 2004; and at Gelabert Studios International Gallery, 235 West 86th Street, from February 6 through 26, 2005.

"Nature of Woman"

While Obazee's sculptures of male figures, such as warriors and kings, are powerful and compelling, his female subjects are especially appealing. One detailed sculpture of a woman dancing barefoot in a tribal head dress and long shift is outstanding for its expressive handling of facial features and graceful evocation of movement. Another piece is an angularly abstracted nude torso, an African Venus de Milo, its lithe form further illuminating how much Picasso and other Western artists learned from tribal sculpture. Then there is the statuesque full-length figure called "Nature of Woman," seeming as immediately, flawlessly alive as the Jamaican-born American supermodel Naomi Campbell, yet possessed of the more eternal beauty which belongs to art alone.

—Byron Coleman

Cornelia MacFadyen's Compelling Dualities

While Cornelia MacFadyen has roots in Abstract Expressionism, she also has a mystical bent. Which is to say, the paintings MacFadyen showed recently at Agora Gallery's Chelsea venue, 530 West 25th Street, were as fascinating for their mysterious allusiveness as for their bold approach to form and color.

The painting called "M2," for example, could be appreciated for its vibrant hues as well as its vigorous brush work. But it also conveyed a profoundly spiritual mood with its masklike faces emerging from the color areas like phantoms inhabiting a rainbow.

MacFadyen imbues even her most abstract forms with multiple meanings. In "The Hands," for example, the gracefully overlapping textural strokes, created with oils and spackle on canvas, could also resemble luminous golden wings fluttering against a deep blue nocturnal expanse. By avoiding making her images too literally descriptive, yet imbuing them with considerable suggestiveness nonetheless, MacFadyen manages to create abstract compositions with a great degree of allusiveness.

Another oil called "The Mountain" is also intriguingly ambiguous, for it can immediately be seen as exactly what its title implies: a reddish mountain range sandwiched between areas of red and green, signifying land and sky. At first glance, one might liken it to the earthy, hot hued landscapes of Marsden Hartley. But then it also has qualities akin to the ruddy nudes of Modigliani, when one suddenly realizes that the image is twofold: not only a landscape but a reclining nude—the embodiment of a mythic Earth Mother. The active surface, with its rugged, textured strokes, also has tactile qualities in common with the more recent figurative paintings of the former Abstract Expressionist Milton Resnick. However, only Cornelia MacFadyen seems capable of imparting so many simultaneous meanings to such a boldly simplified composition. She does so by virtue of her energetic paint handling, as well as her unique talent for making forms suggests more than one thing at the same time.

Some of MacFadyen's most dynamic compositions center on circular forms with a decidedly sensual, feminine quality. Some of these are nonspecific, such as "Entry," a painting in oil and spackle on canvas in which both the rounded contours of the shapes and the membranous surface suggest something of the birthing process. Another work in oil and mixed media called "Identity Swirl," with its luminous reds and pinks set against a deep blue ground and its bold central form seeming to ascend, also convey a sense of something coming mysteriously into being. MacFadyen's use of colors possessed of great chromatic subtlety that imbue her forms with a seemingly contradictory sense of the solid and the ethereal enhances the quality of pregnancy, of hovering possibility, in many of her paintings.

"Sandstorm"

By contrast, she comes back down to earth in canvases such as "Waiting," a monumental female nude, or "Solitude," a brooding blue figure in a mysterious setting that may be a night forest, demonstrating the diverse yet harmonizing qualities that make Cornelia MacFadyen a singularly evocative painter.

—Stuart Leslie Myers

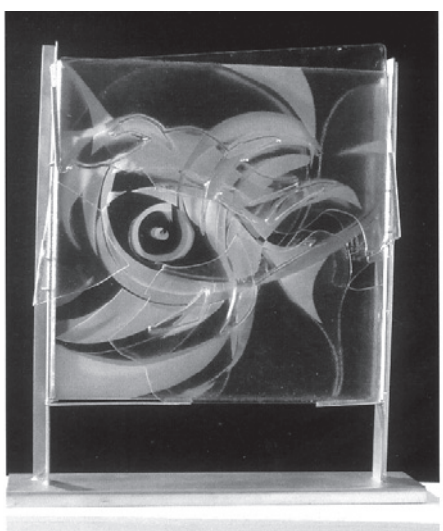
Annie Abadi: Creating Multileveled Worlds in Glass

The frontier between painting and sculpture is still largely unexplored. How Annie Abadi, an artist born in Maracaibo, Venezuela, claims this fertile territory and makes it her own was seen in her recent exhibition, "Insight Reflections," at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway.

Working with four layered sheets of glass in large and smaller formats, Abadi creates compositions in which swirling forms and colors create a sense of overlapping inner and outer spaces. The various levels in Abadi's works, which have all the compositional and coloristic complexity of paintings yet are mounted on freestanding "legs" like sculpture, lend her work a multidimensional appeal.

Abadi's forms and colors inhabit deep space, like prisms reflecting numinous realms. Her decision to work with four sheets of glass corresponds to the different worlds and dimensions inhabiting the same reality referred to in the Kabbalah, the ancient Jewish mystical text which has inspired not only contemporary artists such as Abadi and Archie Rand, but has also recently been taken up and publicized by popular entertainers like Madonna and Sarah Bernhardt.

Abadi, however, brings to the Kabbalah a seriousness and a depth of vision that is generally missing in the work of other artists who adopt it in a more superficial manner. Her pieces project a sense of radiant spirituality and affirmation, with their intricately flowing forms inhabiting light-filled strata that suggest infinite spaces.



"Reflejo de una Vision Framentada"

In an artist's statement accompanying the exhibition at Montserrat, Abadi spoke of her art as a "reflection of my life and internal workings in this stage of my existence," and went on to explain, " What surrounds me is the reflection of myself. It is my inner search and the interior eye that we need in order to see and understand what we are and why we are what we are. The outside is a mirror of ourselves and we are a mirror of the outside."

In a very real sense, although abstract, Abadi's pieces appear to be spiritual self portraits in which the perceptive viewer can also glimpse reflections of him or her self. Yet, at the same time, these works can be appreciated in purely formal terms for their luminous beauty and the interplay of shapes and hues that Abadi sets in motion through her skillful handling of her medium.

Indeed, Abadi studied techniques for working in glass in Sweden, Hungary, and the United States, as well as in her native Venezuela. However, she puts her acquired knowledge and natural virtuosity in the medium to the service of an exquisite aesthetic sensibility, creating works that finally transcend considerations of craft. Inhabiting space with an impressive sculptural presence, yet partaking of all the chromatic and formal fluidity of painting, Annie Abadi's pieces achieve the best of two—or perhaps one should say four—worlds. It seems no wonder, then, that she has been recognized with numerous prizes and awarded prestigious commissions in private homes as well as in public venues ranging from synagogues to navel schools. —Wilson Wong

Classicism Meets Conceptualism in the Art of Jessica Iapino

In contemporary art, we are in the habit of regarding the conceptual and the purely visual as opposing tendencies. We hardly expect to encounter notable drawing and sculpting skills or any of the other classical attributes in the work of a young artist who adamantly asserts that her work is "mainly conceptual." Which is what makes the work of Jessica Iapino, a young Italian artist living and working in Rome, so unusual and appealing. Iapino's oeuvre includes drawings, sculptures, and digital imagery. Each facet of her work is a discrete entity, yet each must be viewed as a component in an overall statement, since all are philosophically united by Iapino's unique conceptual vision.

"Angels' ex"

To hammer this point home, Iapino calls her sculptures in bronze, cast aluminum, gesso, and various assemblage materials "3D concepts." Some of her bronze pieces, such as "Physique Divine," depict angelic-looking figures in a manner apparently inspired by Rodin, given the combination of flowing and craggy forms, which lend these figures both mythic grace and a rugged monumentality. Other bronzes, however, are considerably more abstract. "The Key (Of Being)," for one example, is an imposing triangular form with a vaginal opening at its center, its labia forming two facing human profiles, one upside-down. Although many subjective interpretations can be read into this piece (not the least of them being the duality suggested by the fact that while the piece is wholly feminine when approached frontally, it is decidedly phallic when seen in side view), it also succeeds splendidly in purely formal terms for its command of space, tactile patina, and impressive totemic presence.

In her mixed media sculptures, Iapino takes on even more complex concepts and visual conceits. One of her most startling recent pieces in this regard involves an accurate replica of a human brain cast in aluminum. Affixed to the brain is a common toilet-chain. It is seen within a cylindrical plexiglass form partially filled with blue liquid, suggesting the laboratory containers in which human organs are preserved for transplant. (It could also suggest the pickled embryos and other grisly specimens once seen in sleazy traveling carnivals and tent shows, thereby commenting, not altogether obliquely, on some of the Frankensteinian aspects of modern medical research.) The title of this piece is "Brain Flush," suggesting the spin cycle with which we are brainwashed by a media whose far-flung corporate interests preclude truth in broadcasting.

Shadows cast by the corporate monopoly on our very lives are evoked in another medium, digital printing, in Iapino's tellingly titled work, "Nike —Human Race," where the sneaker company's streamlined boomerang-like white symbol is seen streaming in multiple (like so many spurting sperms!) through a mysterious cosmic expanse, toward a human embryo contained within a planetary orb. At once an expression of fecundity and a science fiction vision of the universal proliferation of logos and

"Brainflush"

brand names, here Iapino has created a far-reaching statement on how, for many, the material goods of the global economy have almost become biological necessities— virtually a part of our DNA. If the Pop artists of an earlier generation celebrated such symbols of commercial banality as benign entities, the implication here is of something infinitely more chilling.

Being a consummately postmodern artist in her willingness to mix and match mediums and angles of aesthetic attack, Jessica Iapino also partakes of and updates elements of Arte Povera, the influential Italian movement prominent in the 1960s which elevated humble, often cast-off materials to the status of high art. In particular, her use of aluminum as the printing surface in some of the pieces she calls "Scratch Artworks" recalls Michelangelo Pistoletto, one of the leaders of the movement, who placed life-size figures on large pieces of the same material, creating mirrors in which the viewer could see him or herself reflected.

Iapino, however, takes a much different approach in her pieces incorporating digital images printed on aluminum such as "Angels' Ex," scratching off parts of the image with an iron tool which she also uses to add drawn elements, such as the wings on the photographic nude figure, or to roughly inscribe words or phrases in the manner of graffiti. In such works, the contrasts between realistic images and more expressionistic additions has a relationship to Arnulf Rainer's photographic self-portraits altered with paint— albeit with the more mythical quality integral to Iapino's vision.

Also quite powerful among the "scratched" digital works is "Heads — a Tribute to Mapplethorpe," in which Iapino appropriates and reinterprets an image of two bald men by the late photographer with drawn outlines that give them an "Old Master" look, as well as adding the linear suggestion of a Punchinello mask to one profile. Here, the artist alters the image by employing the considerable draftspersonly skills that can also be seen in her nude figure studies from life. In keeping with her conceptual approach, these drawings are intended as more than mere anatomical exercises; rather, she conceives of them as nude "portraits," in which the bodily attitudes of her sitters reveal their inner essences.

Most recently Jessica Iapino has embarked on a new series entitled "Hero," consisting of seven very large format digital artworks dealing with the theme of heroin addiction. These daring explorations of a controversial subject, incorporating her scratch technique, will be printed on aluminum and featured in an upcoming exhibition of conceptual artworks in an as yet undecided location (probably in Rome).

One can only anticipate the event with pleasure, since Jessica Iapino is a unique talent whose daring versatility warrants widespread attention. (Examples of Jessica Iapino's work in several mediums can be seen on her website:www.jessicaiapino.com)

—Ed McCormack

DECADE OF THE DRAWING:

The Drawing Center Launches the New Season with an Exhibition That Will Set the Tone for the 2000's

Drawing is the bare bones of visual art, the armature upon which all else rests. When an artist gets an idea, usually his or her first impulse is to reach for a pencil, pen, or other drawing instrument to preserve it. Exploratory freehand drawing— or "taking a line for a little walk," as Paul Klee so aptly put it— is also a great way to get the creative juices flowing and generate spontaneous imagery. In a well known essay called "Drawing and the Hand," Rene Huyghe of the Academie Francaise once noted, "Of all the creative acts performed by the artist, the most directly legible is drawing."

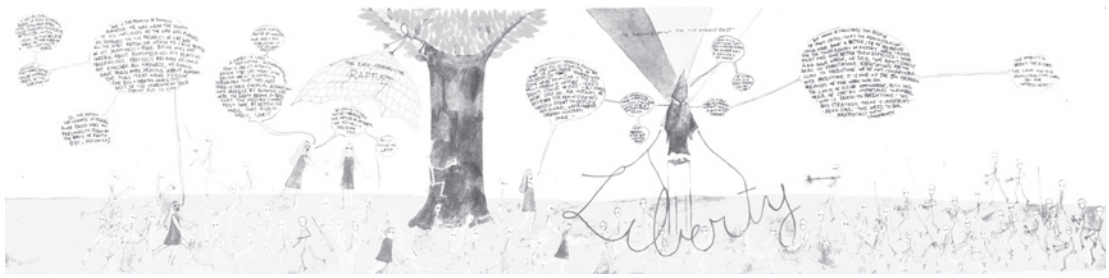
Yet, up until very recently, drawings were generally treated like painting's poor relations by gallerist, curators, and collectors in the New York art world. This dismissive attitude became even more firmly entrenched with the advent of Abstract Expressionism. As canvases grew increasingly larger, becoming arenas for the gladiatorial drama of avant garde ambition, anything relatively small and on paper was regarded as minor— a crumb fallen from the groaning board of postwar culture. And the subsequent rise of Minimalism and Conceptualism all but reduced drawing to diagrams, plans, and project notes with little or no expressive content.

In recent years, however, perhaps partly as a result of the loosening of formalism's stranglehold and postmodern permissiveness toward subjective statement and more narrative forms of expression, and partly due to the widespread interest in comic books and graphic novels, we have seen a resurgence of interest in drawing among younger artists, a growing number of whom present drawings as full-fledged, finished works of art , rather than as a vehicles for sketches and preliminary studies.

The 2004 installment of the Whitney Biennial (always a good barometer, for better or worse, of emerging tendencies) featured several artists who make drawing their primary art form. Most prominent among them is Richard Pettibon, known for his complex installations of ink drawings employing comic book style ink drawing, along with enigmatic handwritten texts. There was also an installation of 755 drawings called "Pictures of What Happens on Every Page of Thomas Pynchon's Novel Gravity's Rainbow" by a young artist named Zak Smith; a series of works on paper by Ernesto Caivano, another relative newcomer who employs an exquisite ink line to delineate an elaborate private mythology, and a mural-scale graphite drawing by Robyn O'Neil, whose compositions of many tiny figures in landscapes suggest unsettling narratives related to fate and the human condition.

What Pettibon and Smith share in common is that they employ the techniques of comic book art for their honest expressive possibilities rather than parodying them in the manner of an earlier generation of Pop artists. Caivano appears more influenced by gothic fairy tale illustrations and the graceful lines and elegant spotting of blacks in the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley; while O'Neil seems to be inspired by the swarming peasant scenes of Bruegel, yet invests her pictures with a sense of postmodern anxiety and alienation rather than communal revelry.

All four of these artists are in the vanguard of the new drawing, in that they make drawing central to their art, as opposed to a prelude to painting or sculpture.



A Glimpse of What Life in a Free Country Can Be Like #6 (detail), 2004 Pencil and watercolor on paper , 6 x 24 in.

Pettibon is especially important in this regard, having started out as an illustrator for punk rock posters and fanzines, a fully committed member of a subculture that reveres popular culture— particularly various genres of cartooning and pulp illustration— as much as fine art. In contrast to earlier artists like Lichtenstein and Warhol, however, Pettibon does not treat comics as kitsch or hold them up to ridicule. Rather, he takes them seriously for their expressive possibilities (even when introducing a note of irony ala Lichtenstein's paintings of weeping ingenues appropriated from romance comic panels) and often combines them with texts inspired by his wide readings, ranging from literary novels to noir crime stories.

Regarding so-called low and high culture with equal respect is a characteristic of the new drawing, which is influenced to varying degrees by—hang on, intrepid reader, here comes a real rollercoaster ride of a list!—: classic cartoon art, Japanese manga, and graffiti (particularly the prolific, cartoony graphomania of the late Keith Haring as opposed to the more painterly ecriture of the late Jean-Michel Basquiat); the underground comics created by Robert Crumb, S. Clay Wilson and others at the height of the hippie era in the 1960s; the psychedelic poster movement of roughly the same period; the compulsive, horror vacui intricacy of so-called Outsider art; the funkier, cruder approach to Pop subject matter employed by the Chicago movement called Hairy Who (who also took some of their inspiration from their contemporaries in underground comics and psychedelic art, as well as from Art Brut); the present proliferation of new wave graphic novels and "comix" (the term preferred by exponents of the form such as Art Spiegelman and Chris Ware, whose attitude toward

cartooning in Spiegelman's seminal comix publication "Raw" was considerably more scholarly, less populist, more selfconsciously artsy than the "do your own thing" stoner ethos of their freewheeling hippie era graphic heroes like Crumb and Wilson); as well as by the homemade Xerox broadsheets and fanzines of the punk movement... and, finally (whew!), those who assimilated its irreverent, vigorously slapdash aesthetic in a fine art context like the aforementioned Pettibon, the first artist working in this vein to be featured in a major solo exhibition at The Drawing Center.

The Drawing Center, the only not-for-profit institution in the country dedicated exclusively to the exhibition of drawings, both historical and contemporary, has been our most important and influential champion of diverse graphic tendencies ever since it first opened its doors in 1977, at 35 Wooster Street, in Soho (from where it will eventually relocate to join the conglomerate of cultural institutions planned for the The World Trade Center Site). The Center, which has longstanding relationships with such established museums as MoMA, The Met, The Whitney, Tate, and The Pompidou Center, has presented drawings by masters such as Michelangelo, Picasso, and Ensor in numerous historical surveys, as well as major solo exhibitions of drawings by contemporary artists such as Philip Guston, Louise Bourgeois, and Ellsworth Kelly, among many others. (Two shows at The Drawing Center that we found especially enjoyable were "Shadow of the Hand: Drawings by Victor Hugo," featuring the darkly evocative and little-known ink drawings of the great French novelist, and a wonderful survey of watercolors by Charles Burchfield, an American original who has been under-appreciated precisely because most museum curators tend to categorize watercolor as a drawing rather than painting medium and relegate it to the back bins.)

Along with offering educational programs, scholarly publications, public forums and artists' services, The Drawing Center also presents important exhibitions by emerging contemporary artists, such as one of the most comprehensive group surveys of the new drawing to date, which can be seen from September 9 through October 16.

Called "Talespinning: Selections Fall 2004" and billed as "allegorical drawings inspired by mythic narratives and everyday stories," the show features work by fourteen artists chosen from The Drawing Center's Viewing Program. It purports to offer an overview of the strategies and techniques a varied group of emerging artists are using to "create new allegories of the fantastical, the iconic, the uncanny, and the mundane."

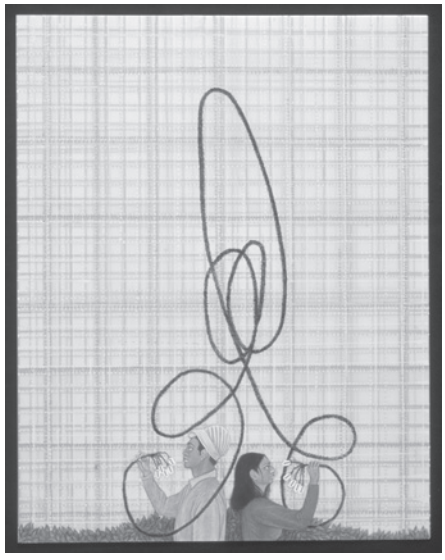
The allegorical aspect of the new drawing seems especially prevalent in the work of Nancy Jackson, a Los Angeles artist who concocts imaginative narratives such as "Causeway," from her series "Telescope," 2001. This gouache on paper depicts a young woman with long, lank hair obscuring her face as she crouches in a cave clutching what could be a miniature sculpture, a voo doo doll, or some similar mystical effigy. At the mouth of the cave, a long, two-tiered curved banquet table, covered by a pristine white cloth contains an intriguing altarlike arrangement of small miniature figures, trees, animals, and other fanciful objects that elude specific description. In the distance, two hikers stroll along a stream that winds toward the cave through a mysterious, craggy landscape, limned in line and delicate washes of color. Is the young woman an artist or a shaman or a little of both? Are the two people in the distance approaching for a studio visit or for some sort of healing ceremony? Is this an allegory about the isolation of the artist or about the search for meaning amid all the mad bric a brac and chotchkas of modern existence?

Like those of Amy Cutler, the artist with whom she seems to have the most in common, Nancy Jackson's metaphysical narratives are open to a broad range of interpretations. Influenced by German Romanticism, Shaker visions and testimonials, Surrealism and Venetian genre paintings, they evoke a rarefied private world.

It seems to be in the nature of contemporary allegories to be open-ended, ambiguous, more elusive than allusive; to flirt with meaning rather than to embrace it, as seen in the drawings of both Ambreen Butt, of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Zoë Charlton, an artist from Baltimore Maryland. Working in graphite, gouache, watercolor and thread on mylar, Ambreen Butt's compositions, influenced by Persian and Indian miniatures, are visual puzzles at once spare and ornate. In one untitled work from her "Home and The World" series, the flatly rendered figures of a young man and young woman, both with distinctly Asian features, stand back to back near the bottom of a sheet of gridded paper. Graceful linear arabesques flow high above their heads, culminating in two floral shapes that they hold up to their mouths like karaoke microphones, perhaps suggesting the universal impingements of Western popular culture. Although Shahzia Sikander's Indian background may give her more legitimate cultural claim on this socio-aesthetic territory, Ambreen Butt's peculiar take on the miniature tradition makes her work noteworthy nonetheless.

The combination of large scale and worked-up mixed media (graphite, acrylic, oil, and latex on paper) in the work of Zoë Charlton almost verges more on painting than drawing; yet her pictures are still grainily graphic in the dark tradition of Alfred Kubin. Indeed, Charlton's "Homeland Security," with its predatory, phallic airplanes hovering above a grotesque, somewhat simian nude figure sprawling on

Nancy Jackson
Causeway, part I from the series "Telescope," 2001, Gouache on paper
14 1/4 x 20 1/4 in.
Collection of James F. Jensen



Ambreen Butt
Untitled, from the series "Home and the World," 2001, Watercolor, gouache, graphite, and thread on Mylar, 14 x 11 in.
Private Collection

Zoë Charlton
Homeland Security, 2004, Graphite, acrylic, oil, and latex paint on paper, 42 x 40 in.

Tucker Nichols, EVERYTHIN, 2004, Colored pencil on paper, 6 1/2 x 10 in.

its back with upraised legs spread wide suggests some surreal species of political cartoon.

Brooklyn artist Jonathan Herder also conveys a political message in his allegories of American warfare, incorporating historical postage stamps. So much so, in fact, that we find ourselves searching for the hidden message in even a relatively serene scene by Herder such as "Untitled (Night Desert)" — wondering if it represents the lull before the "shock and awe" Invasion!

Larger than most paintings at 67 by 80 inches, Geoff Grogan's "The Kicker" demonstrates the broad range of scale in contemporary drawing, especially when contrasted with the tiny ink drawings of the Uruguayan artist Ricardo Lanzarini, executed in ink on tiny gossamer sheets of cigarette rolling paper. Grogan, another native of the prolific borough of Brooklyn, reimagines the heroic figurative style of Marvel comics super heroes as drawn by masters of the trade like Jack Kirby in his pictures created with acrylic paint and recycled pages of the New York Times. In Grogan's "Kicker," a muscular hulk kicks down a door, sending splintered shards flying in a dynamic composition suggesting Futurism on steroids.

Ricardo Lanzarini, on the other hand, builds on the tradition of grotesque figuration, social satire, and refined draftsmanship in Hispanic art that stretches from Goya to the contemporary Mexican graphic artist and printmaker Jose Luis Cuevas. The minuscule dimensions of Lanzarini's drawings enhances their power, giving them the quality of contraband smuggled out of a jail cell or missives created surreptitiously and hidden away from a repressive political regime.

Outsider— or unschooled— art also influences many artists today, as an alternative to formalism, a way of breaking free from the well-trod paths of art history and evolving a more subjective style, a tendency that The Drawing Center seemed to acknowledge in 2000, when it mounted a major exhibition of art from The Prinzhorn Collection, the preeminent collection of art by the mentally ill.

Because her protagonists are troops of stalwart little girls, Jersey City artist Amy Wilson has been compared to the reclusive outsider Henry Darger for her fanciful narrative works in pencil and watercolor.

Geoff Grogan, The Kicker, 2004 Newspaper and acrylic, 67 x 80 in.

However, while Darger's drawings are violent and doom-ridden, Wilson's appear buoyant, cheery, almost utopian, with their childlike figures and bright green lollipop trees, until one reads the handwritten texts in the comicstrip speech balloons: incongruous references to the war in Iraq, apparently appropriated from political commentaries in the press. Wilson's series, "A Glimpse of What Life in a Free Country Can Be Like" is caustic and ironic, yet far less perversely disturbing than Darger's fantasies of genocide and pedophilia.

Another salient characteristic of the new drawing is its ability to transform familiar creative conventions, sometimes while expanding the definition of what constitutes drawing itself. Landscape, for example, is revamped by the British artist Cathy Ward, who employs ink on gesso in the manner of scratchboard, a technique used by commercial artists to imitate the look of old-fashioned woodcuts and engravings. In Ward's baroque compositions, waves and rivulets of flowing human hair mimic the enchanted forests in gothic fairytale illustrations with their dense foliage and bubbling streams, as seen in her "Love's Labours Lost." The effect of Wilson's elaborately wrought drawings, with the dangers and disappointments of romantic relationships embodied by and enmeshed in landscape imagery, is eerily reminiscent of the San Francisco poet Helen Adam's spooky rustic ballad "I Love My Love," about a man who murders his wife to escape her possessiveness, only to be strangled by "the living fleece of her long bright hair," which rises from the grave to ensnare him, singing, "I'll love my love with the hairs of my head, I'll never, never let him go. Ha! Ha! I'll never let him go." Cathy Ward's scratchboard drawings are just that exquisitely macabre.

By contrast, yet another Brooklyn artist, Eung Ho Park, traces his cultural roots through an intricate network of intertwined lines elegantly delineated in ink on paper, while Japan's Noriko Ambe has her own unique approach to landscape, slicing deep ravines through hundreds of newspapers and atlases to create near-sculptural terrains that read as "emotional topologies."

Jennie White, of London, Ontario, also

Alice Attie, "The Burrow" Franz Kafka (detail), 2003, Ink on paper, 22 x 30 in.

stretches the definition of drawing with her works in perforated paper, the many minute holes ornately updating the tradition of the domestic sampler, heartwrenchingly tweaking its Hallmark banality with phrases such as "It Doesn't Hurt Anymore."

Words also play a prominent role in the drawings of Alejandro Diaz, Tucker Nichols, and Alice Attie: Diaz, a resident of Forest Hills, New York, creates hand-written signs, such as "Mexican Wallpaper," a work in marker on cardboard that transcends its deliberate crudity to achieve a casual elegance akin to Motherwell and Twombly. Inspired by highway billboards and overheard phrases, Nichols, who lives in Mill Valley, California, creates a kind of punning concrete poetry akin to Edward Ruscha's word-paintings, as seen in one colored drawing with the single word "EVERYTHIN" block-lettered in white capitals on a solid purple ground.

By contrast, Alice Attie painstakingly hand-letters entire monologues and fragments of texts by Kafka, Faulkner, and Joyce in ink on paper in serpentine configurations that swirl sinuously, forming rhythmic patterns. Like the "Calligrammes" of the French surrealist poet Guillaume Appollinaire, Attie's drawings chart the mysterious territory between word and image, the frontier from which all language originates.

This splendid exhibition is probably one of the most important surveys you will see this year, for it is sure to be remembered as a landmark of the decade in which drawing as an independent and autonomous art form finally came into its own.

Complementary Solo Shows by May Bender and Joan Schreder at New Art Center

The stamp of individual sensibility came to the forefront in two separate but concurrent solo exhibitions seen recently at New Art Center, 580 Eighth Avenue, featuring, respectively, ink drawings by the painter May Bender and photographs by the doubly gifted photographer/painter Joan Schreder. Despite their different mediums and approaches to subject matter the work of both artists can be seen in complementary relationship to one another. For both possess a command of their medium, a casual authoritativeness informed by personal vision, that makes it possible to discern kinships between them, even as their particular qualities set them apart from others whose work may appear superficially more similar.

The Surgical Lyricism of May Bender's Drawings

In a review of a previous exhibition of her paintings, May Bender was extolled for eschewing "the self-protective strategies of postmodernism in favor of reviving the sense of daring that made Abstract Expressionism so fresh and exciting." And although her paintings are notable for their coloristic as well as their gestural qualities, the same daring and freshness can be seen in Bender's works on paper.

Like the drawings of Richard Diebenkorn, the drawings of May Bender cast new light on the spatial dissections that make her paintings so special. Which is to say, seeing Bender's compositions stripped down to their bare essentials, to tones created with gray ink washes on white paper, enables one to examine the underlying dynamic that animates her aesthetic, the literal rhythmic motor that sets the areas of color in her paintings in motion and functions to enhance their chromatic charge.

Even more relevant here, however, is the distinct qualities of the drawings themselves, which offer autonomous rewards quite apart from the insights into the more familiar aspects of artist's oeuvre that they provide. For Bender's works on paper combine an immediacy and a swiftness akin to Zen ink painting with a peculiarly Western ability to imbue gesture with weight and depth. Their bold linear excursions produce muscular configurations that simultaneously enclose and explode space. Bender employs her brush with surgical precision, slicing into the whiteness of the paper with visceral ruthlessness, yet producing a paradoxically lyrical result.

Although filled with allusions to the figure and still life, Bender's compositions transcend specifics by virtue of their gestural grace and the sheer buoyancy of their forms, which appear to have been conceived with a kinetic inevitability than can only be compared to a panther's pounce. May Bender's works on paper are just that exhilarating for their unique combination of forceful execution and formal finesse.

Joan Schreder's Travel Epiphanies

Those previously only familiar with Joan Schreder's visionary little paintings, with their faux primitive technique and fanciful storybook landscapes, might, at first, be surprised by her travel photographs. However, that Schreder's overall vision is seamlessly imaginative becomes increasingly clearer the longer one looks at the pictures she has taken in sites as diverse as the the Kyushu Volcano in Japan, the Anazazi Pueblo cliff dwellings near the Picoris-St. Clara Reservation, in New Mexico, and the Temple of Apollo on the Greek island of Naxos. Yet Schreder's pictures of all of these places are possessed of singularly abstract qualities that cause us to question what we are seeing. Yes, these are undeniably pictures of specific locations possessing an authentic sense of place. Their documentary aspects are well-defined, but at the same time, there is something slightly skewed about these views that makes them more than travel pictures in ways that one is hard put to define.

It is no more necessary to know through what technical means Schreder achieves this delightful imagistic ambiguity than it is to examine the imaginative processes by which she creates her paintings. The only thing that finally matters is that wherever Schreder travels in the world, she manages to impose a powerful subjective vision on her surroundings and transform them through the filter of her own sensibility so that we take away an entirely different impression than we could otherwise possibly have of a specific place.

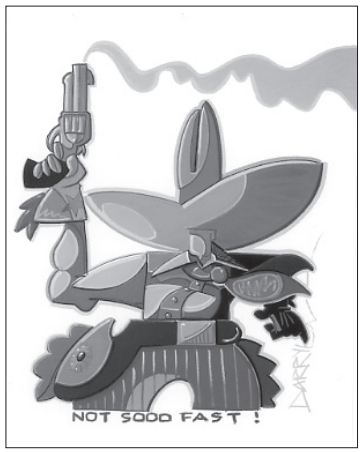
In doing so, Joan Schreder merges, however improbably, the documentary tradition of exotic travel photography with the more fictive elements that have come into play in the experimental photo art of recent years, giving us something closer to the personal epiphany that inspired the picture than a literal transcription of a specific terrain.

—Maurice Taplinger

Pecos Bill Meets Picasso in the Art of Darryl Willison

Who can deny that the myths of the Old West hold a place of affection in every American heart? Darryl Willison, a painter/sculptor born in Austin, Texas, currently residing in Albuquerque, New Mexico, who bills himself as "America's Drawing Cowboy, brought those myths to life in his own unique manner in his recent exhibition of pastels at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway.

Don't get the idea, though, that Willison approaches his cowboy subjects in the romantic realist mode of Frederic Remington, wringing nostalgia from misty visions of saddle tramps and sagebrush. Being the son of the abstract artist Jane Willison, known in the 1970's for her neon-color serigraphs, Willison grew up with an awareness of modernist aesthetics to match his love of the Old West. Thus, he has evolved a vibrant cartoon-inflected post-Pop mode of expression akin to Elizabeth Murray's way of distorting and abstracting objects to create dynamic formal configurations.



Pastel by Darryl Willison

Some of Willison's figures, particularly the hombre with the ten gallon hat and the huge LeRoy Neiman handlebar mustache in the pastel called "A Cowboy Poet" can remind one of Bug Bunny's old nemesis Yosemite Sam or the legendary cowpoke called Pecos Bill. However, Willison's brilliant areas of clear primary color and Picassoesque formal permutations create compositions that also function in purely abstract terms.

No matter how freely he distorts his forms, flattening them out on the picture plane to create configurations that would do any cubist proud, Willison invariably preserves the character of his bodacious buckaroos, as seen in "BangBangBang," where a wrangler in chaps and the inevitable ten gallon Stetson confronts the viewer with both six-shooters blazing and the percussive title is included in the composition.

Equally striking are other pastels such as "Heading South," in which a figure on a bucking bronco is deconstructed in fractured planes of brilliant color, and "Day Break," where the sheriff's star, chaps, and attitude of the subject are accented as though through a zoom-lense or fun-house mirror.

Then there is another delightful drawing of a fetching cowgirl in boots and ornate miniskirt called "You Ready to Shake Your Groove Thang?!" Politically correct it may not be; but even the staunchest feminist would probably have to smile at this affectionate image of a sassy latter-day Annie Oakley who looks as though she would be more than a match for even the most ornery male chauvinist varmint.

Indeed, humor is an important element in the work of Darryl Willison, who says, "I love creating art that is fun! If you look at my work and smile or laugh (or better yet do both), then I have succeeded in sharing with you my passion for the West and my outlook on life."

What the art of Darryl Willison proves conclusively is that fun and serious artistic achievement need not be mutually exclusive. For even while we enjoy his pastels as thoroughly as Garrison Keillor's humorous radio skits on "The Lives of the Cowboys," we are able to savor his skills as a first-rate draftsman and colorist just as enthusiastically.

—Lawrence Downes

Fiona White's Soulful Portraiture is Seen in Soho

Norman Mailer once said something to the effect that the variety of experiences endured by people of the African Diaspora often impart more character to their faces than one generally sees in other races. And while Mailer has never shied away from controversy—or politically perilous hyperbole, for that matter!—the portraits of the Australian painter Fiona White, seen recently at Agora Gallery, 415 West Broadway, in Soho, appear to bear him out.

Using photographs she has taken of people in Sydney (as well as New York and Chicago during a stint in the States), as source materials, White creates works in mixed media on board that combine an expressive humanism reminiscent of Alice Neel with a formal quality akin to Romare Bearden. Her faces have the angular beauty of African masks, implying a lifetime of experiential nuances through her delineation of form. Perhaps because she engages her sitters in conversation and listens closely to their stories, she also invests her portraits with narrative and emotional nuances, even when their expressions are outwardly impassive.

In contrast to her monochromatic handling of the actual figures, White enlivens other elements of her compositions with a riot of acrylic colors applied in thick impastos. Clothing and backgrounds explode with brilliant hues, and her preference for coating her finished pictures with several layers of glossy lacquer further enhances the opulent quality of her work.

In the portrait called "Rita," for one dramatic example, the woman confronts the viewer in close-up, her large eyes drinking one in, as intricate white and yellow ocher patterns swirl almost psychedelically around her. Even more riotously colorful is "Marion's Music," In which a woman playing an accordion is seen in an interior, surrounded by a cosmos of starlike yellow wallpaper patterns set against a bright red ground. Here, too, a vibrant blue floor brackets the figure dynamically, creating a composition with a formal power to match its emotional resonance.

Other paintings by Fiona White take on the quality of fanciful personal icons, as seen in "Captain Carlos Rides Neddy With His Chook." One need not know the exact meaning of the title (although it suggests a complex narrative indeed) to appreciate the appealing eccentricity of the smiling man with the tall pompadour who wears an elaborate, Napoleon-like costume as he poses on horseback with a large rooster on his shoulder, clutching the reins with a hook rather than a hand. Whether this is an actual event


"Henri's Heart"

or a depiction of the man's fantasy, it is a compelling image, particularly for the manner in which Fiona White combines realistic portraiture with a somewhat more primitive handling of the rooster, the horse, and other elements of the composition.

Here, as in other paintings such as "Henri's Heart," where an intense gentleman actually displays said heart on his breast, Fiona White gives ample evidence of her own heartfelt regard for her subjects, coupled with the technical skill to translate her feelings into affecting works of art.

—Peter Wiley

The Installations of Goran Petmil Reveal the Secret Lives of Objects

Of all the other art forms, installation is perhaps closest to poetry in its endeavor to make metaphors —albeit from physical objects rather than words. As in a good poem, a successful installation alludes to an experience through sensory immersion and oblique symbols, rather than through the linear descriptiveness that we associate both with prose and with the more figurative species of painting and sculpture.

Taking this analogy a little further, Goran Petmil, an artist born in Yugoslavia, presently living in West Hampton, New York, can be compared to John Ashbery, the quintessential postmodern poet, for the richly allusive yet tantalizingly elusive material metaphors he creates.

Like Ashbery, Petmil eschews an art of closure, saying, "I believe in process rather than the final product. I am interested in the actual act of putting a hundred or a thousand pieces together. My installations are never finished, always in process."

Even more than most installation artists, Petmil seeks to deconstruct—or perhaps one should say to "explode"—the notion of the discrete, self-contained art object. His installations are composed with a plethora of diverse natural and manufactured components that he scatters about the gallery in sprawling configurations, suspended from the ceiling of the gallery or spilling down from the walls onto the floor. These many pieces seem to envelop the viewer in a manner that recalls the eerie lyricism of the scene in Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11" where thousands of sheets of paper—mundane detritus of the information age dispersed and made suddenly almost sacredly symbolic by an unthinkable tragedy— float through thick clouds of smoke in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers.

Of course this is a subjective interpretation, based on my having recently seen and been moved by Moore's film, as well as on the similarly indelible impression made by the first installation by Goran Petmil that I ever encountered.

It was last year, in a 9/11 theme show at Viridian Artists@Chelsea, where Petmil's imposing installation of dangling shards, a ladder, and abandoned workman's tools hit one like the proverbial ton of bricks. For it spoke eloquently of terminated lives and work left unfinished, in a manner both poignant and powerful.

All it took was that one installation to make clear that Goran Petmil is an artist to watch, and its promise is more than fulfilled in "Avis Important," Petmil's premiere solo exhibition of mixed media installations at Viridian Artists, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, from September 28 through October 16. (There will be an opening reception on Saturday October 2, from 5 to 7 PM, and coffee and conversation with the artist on Saturday, October 9, at 3 PM.)

The overwhelming sense that one gets from seeing an entire gallery full of Petmil's installations—diverse yet surprisingly coherent as an oeuvre— is of something haunted, gothic, spooky, unspeakably lonely. For all of their complexity, in terms of Petmil's use of copious accumulations of diverse found materials, his work seems to convey a mood of epic existential desolation by virtue of his way of making inanimate objects remarkably redolent of the human condition. Indeed, by their sheer proliferation and accumulation, objects appear to take on the quality of swarming life, as seen in the installation called "Paper Boats," where dense concentrations of them appear to infest a corner location, clinging like insects to a wall and spilling down onto the floor.

One is told that Petmil supports himself and his wife by working as a caretaker for a large estate in West Hampton. This news, with its suggestions of solitariness, seems to fit auspiciously with the atmosphere of offbeat romanticism that his work generates. Accurately or not, given his Eastern European origins, one is tempted to think of him as a soul in exile, a loner and a self-styled shaman in the manner of Joseph Beuys, sifting through the rubble of a landscape to which he still feels alien, scavenging for clues and amulets.

Petmil has stated that he finds most of his materials around the railroad tracks and on the beaches of Long Island. From the manner in which he assembles them to make his installations, one gets the impression that these pieces of driftwood, rusted metal, and and bone that he combines with bits of plastic, rubber, photographs, and other unexpected materials, possess transcendent properties for him. At any rate, he imbues them with new significance in installations that combine elements of art povera, earthworks, and conceptualism in a peculiarly postmodern synthesis.

In "Yellow Worrier," a bright yellow and white machine resembling a lawn mower is surrounded by what appear to be small plastic flags furled conically and affixed to the floor by slender rods; most of the flags are either solid yellow or solid white, although a few purple ones are interspersed here and there. While intriguingly obscure, the title has an odd aptness, for the central object seems to radiate an odd anxiety, as though in some way menaced by the smaller objects around it.

"Balkan Outhouse"

In "Dream," a large white form resembling the "thought balloons" in comic strips appears on the wall above an eclectic pile of objects, some dark, others brightly colored, strewn in a corner. The balloon, however, is blank, devoid of thought. In contrast, the mood of "Dream II" is considerably less benign: shards of wood, rusted tin cans, bricks, and other objects, all tied together with rough rope, spill out of an old industrial-type sink like knotted entrails. It is an image as disturbing as any of Robert Gober's installations in which disembodied legs emerge from a wall—although Petmil manages to unnerve us without resorting to grotesque figuration.

In other, equally enigmatic installations by Goran Petmil, rudimentary rustic outhouses, constructed from weathered boards, are beset by swarms of small objects that appear on the verge of consuming them like conquering armies of termites; or else the structures already appear on the verge of collapse, like bombed-out ruins (as in "Balkan Outhouse").

All of Petmil's installations share one thing in common: They employ inanimate objects to create metaphors for our common condition in a manner that makes Petmil one of our most eloquent physical poets. And that we can not pin down exactly why we are so moved by these odd conglomerations of castoff odds and ends only makes the art of Goran Petmil all the more mysterious and alluring.

—Ed McCormack

Dave Frieder: Major Photographic Artist Miscast As Media Character

Manhattan Bridge, Self Portrait and Tower

The journalistic adage that "any publicity is good publicity, as long as you spell the name right" may apply to show business—particularly popular music, where simple notoriety has increasingly come to have the same cash value as honest fame—but it does not always hold true in the art world.

Take the case of Dave Frieder, whose exhibition of photographs, which can be seen through October 30, at B. Thayer Associates, Inc., 19 West 44th Street, 18th floor penthouse, is one of the highlights of the season. (Call 212-564-2750 and ask for Sandra or Jane to see the exhibition by appointment.)

Frieder, started photographing New York's bridges in 1993. Only three years later, he was honored with an exhibition of 73 of his prints, sponsored by S.I.T.E.S (Smithsonian Institution of Traveling Exhibition Service), that traveled around the country for four years. To date, he has climbed and photographed fifteen of the city's bridges; his work has been included in numerous important exhibitions, as well as in books such as "The Creation of Bridges" and "Six Bridges —The Legacy of Othmar Ammann." He has also appeared on numerous educational television programs and given slide lectures of his work to historical societies and civic groups.

It has long been Frieder's dream to have a major art publisher bring out a lavish coffee table volume of his pictures, and the idea seems logical and long overdue. Yet he is still best known as the subject of so-called "human interest" stories in numerous publications and novel segments on TV shows. Because of his apparent fearlessness in climbing to hair-raising heights to get the perfect image, columnists and reporters tend to spin him as the photographic equivalent of "Spider Man." They love to dwell in how this wiry New Jersey guy with an agility honed by gymnastics training once "dangled over the edge of a Brooklyn tower, workers' hands affixed to his ankles, so he could photograph the spider web of cables from yet a new angle that no one had ever snapped before"; or "walked a one-inch beam atop the Queensboro Bridge, carrying some 50 pounds of camera equipment"; or "stood atop the ornamental steel ball atop the Manhattan Bridge so he could capture the feel of the bridge under the clouds."

The human fly angle was tailor-made for the Sunday supplements, and was followed more recently by a new spate of stories such as one that appeared in the Metro section of The New York Times on Sunday, April 27, 2003, headlined "He's Climbing the Walls to Climb Bridges Again: Post 9/11 Security Has Clipped Wings of a Photographer." These updates focus on how the new anti-terror measures have made it impossible for Frieder to indulge his passion as freely as before; how the MTA even asked him to remove some photographs of the Verrazano-Narrows bridge from his web site for security reasons ; and how overjoyed he was ("I was truly in heaven," James Barron of the Times quotes him as saying) when he finally got official clearance from the Port Authority to go back up on the George Washington Bridge ("my favorite bridge" — the one he first fell in love with as a kid while being driven over it by his father and still refers to with affectionate familiarity as "the George") to climb to a tower some 600 feet above the Hudson River.

Unfortunately, like the first wave of articles, these more recent ones have been long on human interest and short on aesthetic appreciation. While Frieder's passion for his subject and detailed knowledge of engineering (most recently featured on a lengthy segment of the TV show "The Souls of New York) truly are impressive, the constant focus on them can work against him. Typecasting being rampant in the realm of the sound-bite, continually being promoted as "Dave,The Bridge

Man," tends to overshadow Frieder's more significant talents as a fine art photographer in the tradition of his artistic hero Ansel Adams.

In fact, Frieder studied with John Sexton, personal assistant to Adams, and Jeff Nixon, the great photographer's workshop assistant. He was also mentored by Morley Baer, another accomplished photographer who worked with both Adams and Edward Weston. It was Morley, he says, who inspired him to start photographing bridges when he wrote him a letter saying, "Dave, your photographs reflect much work and understanding. Put your excitement to work on a subject that you care dearly about."

Taking this advice to heart, Dave Frieder has produced the photographic equivalent of Hart Crane's great poem "The Bridge." Indeed, his pictures can be seen as stanzas in an epic visual poem celebrating bridges as material metaphors for humankind's highest aspirations. In Frieder's compositions, their girders intersect against the sky like the bold calligraphic strokes in Franz Kline's great Abstract Expressionist canvases; their cables soar like Hart Crane's "choiring strings." The grandeur in these pictures is such that one cannot help but share the photographer's awe at the symphonic beauty of these magnificent mechanical marvels.

Like Ansel Adams and Edward Weston before him, Dave Frieder pursues a purist vision that runs counter to the trendy eclecticism of current photographic fashion, eschewing color and digital technology to create black and white prints characterized by meticulous technique, sharp-focused clarity and picturesque subjects.

Unlike those earlier masters, however, Frieder chooses to reveal the picturesque qualities of man-made structures, as opposed to natural ones, representing them "truthfully... without trick, device, or subterfuge," as Weston once expressed his own artistic aims.

At the same time, these monoliths of steel are set within the grander scheme of the natural world; of the skies against which they strive and the rivers that they span. Frieder's mastery of light and shadow enables him to dramatize the interplay of luminous clouds, glittering waters, and gleaming steel in a manner that lends his vertiginous views a breathtaking beauty.

It is in his pictures, the final products of his passion, that Frieder shares his epiphanies with us, enabling less daring souls to experience, however vicariously, "The High," as he calls it (invariably adding that no pun is intended).

At B. Thayer Associates, where some twenty of his images (a mere fraction of the many he has created over the years) are installed in an airy, light-filled gallery that complements their transcendent atmospheres auspiciously, one is made particularly aware that Dave Frieder is a great deal more than a personality who has garnered publicity in the popular press.

Indeed, while his novel subject matter and risk-taking antics have all too often upstaged his true aesthetic value, it seems clear nonetheless that Frieder is a major photographic artist whose images will endure, commanding more sober attention from serious collectors, critics, and museum curators long after all the human interest hoopla now surrounding his persona and his work is yesterday's news.

—Ed McCormack

Brooklyn Bridge, Brooklyn Tower

Triborough Bridge, Beacon, clouds, NYC skyline

Inger Lonmo's Elegant Fancies

Inger Lonmo, a native of Norway, is that delightful anomaly in contemporary art: a witty graphic talent whose pictures make us smile for their subject matter even, while surprising us with their considerable aesthetic qualities. Which is to say, more like certain great literary humorists than like most visual artists today, Lonmo creates compositions that are aesthetically pleasing without seeming to take herself too seriously.

In her recent exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, Lonmo displayed an elegant line and a sharp eye for the pretensions and caprices of what is commonly called High Society. Her style, while reminiscent of both Aubrey Beardsley and Florine Stettheimer, was quite unique for her manner of combining unusual collage elements, such as feathers, sequins, and bits of fancy fabric, with pen and ink drawing.

Lonmo's point of view, as well as her clever use of collage, could be likened to that of the late great New Yorker illustrator Saul Steinberg for the imaginative spin that she puts on the more mythical aspects of American life, apparently culled from Hollywood films. Perhaps as a Norwegian, Lonmo shares with the Roumanian-born Steinberg a foreigner's fascination with American popular culture, in which a certain imaginative distance and a fresh, unjaded eye makes the art grow fonder (if the reader will forgive an irresistible pun!).

In any case, Lonmo captures her colorful, campy cast of quaint characters and brings them to life in a manner that combines economy of line with the psychological insight of a fine comic novelist. Indeed, she revives the kind of gently satirical drawing that once distinguished magazines such as Vanity Fair and The New Yorker back in their heyday in the 1930s but has been in short supply in recent decades.

The drawing Lonmo calls "Broadway," for example, features a femme fatale who could have stepped right out of Damon Runyon's "Guys and Dolls" posing seductively near a pillar which becomes a prop signifying some glitzy setting such as a prohibition nightclub. These two elements, placed precisely on the austere stage of the white paper, are all that is needed to evoke an entire era.

Equally succinct are "Cotton Club," which recalls the days when society folk from downtown congregated in Harlem with the figure of a classic flapper, and "Beverly Hills," where a California Cleopatra languishes glamorously in a bathtub while her pampered kitty looks on. A similarly pampered pooch accompanies the female figure in the charming drawing titled "5th Avenue." Here, the dog's mistress positions herself languorously, like a classic vamp, on a suitcase (suggesting that she really gets around). Her shapely legs protrude seductively from a dress created with real bits of black gauze. Lonmo also employs collage elements to brilliant effect in "Park Avenue," which depicts another willowy beauty strutting bodaciously, decked out in an ensemble decorated with real feathers.

Pictures such as these, especially, invite comparison with the aforementioned Florine Stettheimer. But while Stettheimer was in fact a participant in the New York fin de siecle of the 1920s, Lonmo's wistful distance from her subjects makes her work all the more fanciful and fun. Indeed, Inger Lonmo is a unique kind of artist, and for anyone who appreciates a lighthearted wit combined with impressive drawing skills her work should be a welcome addition to the American art scene.

—Chris Weller

Dramatic Contrasts in the Art of Evelyne Drouot

Not long ago, any artist who wished to be taken seriously was obliged to take sides in the battle between abstraction and representation. However, as the lionizing of Gerhard Richter's aesthetic ambidextrousness by museums and the critical establishment attests, the tyranny of a trademark style no longer holds the art world in thrall. This new liberalism regarding content or the absence of it—perhaps the most radical facet of postmodernism—- paves the way for Evelyne Drouot, a widely exhibited painter whose oils were seen recently in the Chelsea location of Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street.

Drouot who grew up in France and later lived in Vietnam, Thailand, and Armenia before settling in the United States, moves easily between figurative and abstract modes of expression. Bulls dominate some of her compositions, painted in fiery hues that suggest the visceral spectacle of the corrida. Their dark, formidable forms are set against boldly brushed areas of red and yellow that merge into harmonious masses, blurring figure-to-ground relationships. We experience these animals both as palpable living presences and as formal entities. Yet what compels us most immediately is Drouot's ability to simultaneously invest the subject with verisimilitude and make the composition function abstractly. (That she accomplishes this without indulging in the reckless

"Touraeg Bird"

painterly histrionics that Elaine de Kooning employed in her sketchy paintings of bulls, derivative of her husband's famous paintings of women, is much to Drouot's credit.)

In one radically foreshortened composition of a cow, confronting the viewer as though through a zoom-lens, the docile bovine is set against a luminous blue sky laden with fragmented clouds amid tall yellow grasses. More detailed than her paintings of bulls, this canvas seems related to another composition called "Orange Field," in terms of her ongoing dialogue between realism and abstraction. For "Orange Field," while accurately depicting a grassy field and a horizon line, presumably in the golden glow of sunrise, is actually an abstract exploration of subtle, shimmering relationships between reds and yellows, further enlivened by the succulent tactility of Drouot 's neo-Impressionist paint application.

A similar concern with exquisite nuances of tone, touch, and texture carries over into Drouot's abstract grid paintings, with their all-over compositions and muted color harmonies, as seen in "Red Letter," where the dialogue centers on the contrast between the precise structure of the grid and the soft blurring of edges. The sense of a steady, intense light emanating from within the surface adds further to the visual drama, revealing how Drouot combines her formidable formal gifts with more ethereal elements, suggesting the romantic sensibility that comes into full flower in paintings such as "Touareg Bird." The latter is a mysterious, shadowy painting of an anthropomorphic avian figure akin to some of Leonard Baskin's powerful drawings of mythic birds of prey, albeit on a larger scale and fleshed out by Drouot's deeper, darker painterly propensities.

It is just this freedom that Evelyne Drouot grants herself to explore various expressive options, rather than limiting her vision to suit some arbitrary notion of stylistic consistency, that makes her work so vital.

—Wilson Wong

A Few of Nancy Staub Laughlin's Favorite Things

Nancy Staub Laughlin is an artist who goes to great lengths to convey a sense of the intangible through incongruous arrangements of tangible objects— little more than trifles and trinkets, albeit seemingly invested with talismanic qualities—which she transforms profoundly by placing them in tanks of water outdoors and combining them with landscapes that are made visionary by their presence.

After assembling the kind of objects that are cataloged in the popular song "Baubles, Bangles, and Beads" and tossing a few glittering sequins, colorful ribbons , scraps of patterned fabric, ripe fruits, and floral blossoms into the rich imagistic stew for good measure, Laughlin photographs them in bright sunlight. The fluid distortions that result then become fodder for meticulously executed pastel paintings such as the ones in her fascinating solo exhibition "aqueous worlds of wonder," at Noho Gallery in Chelsea, 530 West 25th Street, from October 19 through November 6.

For her flawless technique, Laughlin can only be compared to such consummate masters of photorealism as Richard Estes and Audrey Flack. Indeed, the sheer opulence of her compositions, with their emphasis on the play of light on various surfaces, is especially akin to that of the latter painter. Yet, because she puts her technical prowess to the service of an intense interior vision, her closest peer in terms of the rarefied private realm she creates is the great assemblageist Joseph Cornell. For like Cornell, whose famous box-works have been called "theaters of the mind," Laughlin assembles hermetic private worlds that Sam Hunter, the distinguished professor emeritus of Princeton University and art critic who wrote the catalogue essay for her present exhibition, rightly likens to "miniature stage settings."

However, in Laughlin's pastel paintings (and it is important to designate them as such, since she employs pastels as a full-fledged painting medium, rather than a drawing medium) natural and artificial elements merge and meld with a power peculiarly her own. The device of submerging the objects she calls her "props" in tanks of water creates a host of special effects that Laughlin carries off with dazzling virtuosity. Some of the objects float or sink while others remain suspended, creating the "intense shadows, vibrant color, ghostly reflections, and shimmering auras of light" that the artist attests to favoring. The intermediary step of photographing what she calls her "simulated still lifes" adds yet another dimension to the finished pastel paintings, since, as Laughlin puts it, "the camera's eye sometimes sees things that your own eye does not pick up."

The multilayered effect is further enhanced by the landscape vistas that Laughlin incorporates, which add a sense of illimitable space to her pictures. These panoramas of verdant or snow-blanketed fields, lushly blooming or ice-glistening tree branches, and other gracefully delineated natural elements, variously serve as backdrops to her floating objects and are reflected in or altered by their transparent surfaces. The rivulets and bubbles of the water in which they are submerged also enhance metaphysical juxtapositions that trigger not only intriguing optical responses but subtle emotional ones as well.

"Springing Sequins"

The composition that Laughlin calls "The Confetti of Snow," for example, with its strings of colorful beads set against overlapping images of a hushed white landscape, evokes the sense of a winter wonderland filtered through the lens of childhood memory. By contrast, "Snowstorm and the Candlestick," another tour de force of a pastel painting, presents a more austere, yet no less magical atmosphere, with shadowy hills seen through dense concentrations of falling snowflakes, partially magnified by baroque configurations of dangling crystals that appear to loom emblematically in mid-air.

The magic of a milder season is captured every bit as convincingly in "Springing Sequins," where blue and purple baubles appear to float like breeze-blown blossoms against trees abloom with vibrant pink buds. Here, too, a large pendulous form, like the crystals that dangle from chandeliers, swings into the right side of the composition, magnifying and rendering fluid the pristine white picket fence below the brightly blooming trees. Every element in the picture, including its palette of soft, subtle hues, contributes to the buoyant mood, evoking all the fragrant freshness of Springtime by virtue of its incongruous, yet oddly complementary, components.

In another pastel painting called "Fall of the Pearls," Laughlin makes a complex compositional as well as coloristic statement with a procession of unstrung pearls seemingly falling from the sky, down over a hilly profusion of densely packed, multicolored trees, and rolling across a shimmering body of water to gather beneath several large green leaves resting on the shore in the foreground.

That each pearl is approximately the same size and casts its shadow on sky, hill, and water suggests that the landscape may be illusory rather than actual. Yet it is Laughlin's special gift to invest each image with such vitality that the viewer tends to take the scene literally and accept "The Fall of the Pearls" as the depiction of a visionary event on a par with a miracle.

A similar perceptual ambiguity enlivens another picture entitled "Double the Sparkle." Here, a small covered bowl and a pale purple peach rest on two squares of fabric in front of what may be two adjoining paintings of trees covered with white blossoms. The pieces of cloth on which the man-made and organic objects rest are also covered with an intricate array of small circular shapes that could suggest either sequins or illuminated shadows of the individual blossoms, cast onto them by some mysterious metaphysical process.

Somehow, the eye wants to see the two rectangles not as canvases or panels on which the trees are painted, but as the two separate panes of a window through which one is viewing them. On closer inspection, however, one notices that the two pieces of cloth with the objects on top of them appear to be floating on water, rather than resting on a solid surface!

Exactly how Nancy Staub Laughlin accomplishes such imagistic alchemy is difficult to pin down. Suffice it to say, she calls into question the very nature of perception in a manner at once visually dazzling and strangely affecting. —Ed McCormack

The WSAC Mounts an Abundant Stylistic Sampler

The regular group exhibitions of the West Side Arts Coalition are invariably a barometer of emerging tendencies citywide. Especially useful in this regard was an even-more- inclusive-than-usual-show entitled "A Mid-Summer's Dream," co-curated by Lori Weinless Fischler and Jennifer Holst, at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street.

In Beth Kurtz's still life, "Honesty," dried flowers in a Chinese vase and a scattering of pennies were limned with characteristic meticulousness and ability to imbue even the most mundane objects with a subtle symbolism. Jutta Fillipelli's unique angle animated her oil "Beach Scene," where the silhouetted figure of a fisherman intrudes on the curving shoreline from the lower right corner of the canvas. David Ruskin's hand-colored photographs have a surreal effect—especially one image of large trees set against a purple sky.

Miguel Angel Mora transforms random urban detritus into a cool formal statement in "Summer Chill Dreams Alert," a geometric assemblage of found metal with a crushed can as its piece de resistance. Also notable for its formal virtues was K.A. Gibbons' floral oil, "Basically Blue," its forms locked into vibrant color areas. Elton Tucker, however, revels in informal splash and drip dynamics, further enlivened by shards of plastic that lend his canvases tactile appeal. By contrast, Marianne McNamara's narrative paintings are all about story telling, particularly her witty acrylic "The Prodigal Son Comes Home," in which the main figure is only partly visible but his presence creates consternation among the other family members seated in a primly patterned living room.

Lori Weinless Fischler has the ability to imbue her smallest monotypes with an impressive presence, particularly in "The Magic Forest Series," where trees and foliage create vigorous abstract patterns. Khumba Ama transcends her craft medium to make a unique aesthetic statement in "The Wedding Broom Wreath," an assemblage apparently referring to the rituals of early African-American marriage ceremonies. Meg Boe Birns employs delicious, almost edible-looking textures, in her acrylic and mixed media paintings, building fanciful subjects such as a beaming sun-face up to almost relief-like thickness. Carole Barlowe also employs relief-effects in her lively New York City scenes created with layered, painted foam core, so that figures and backgrounds inhabit different levels of the picture plane. By contrast, Renee G. O'Sullivan's park scenes in watercolor, with their bright hues and swift lines, have the breezy charm of a latter day Raoul Dufy. Then there is Mary Laren, whose aquarelle "Backyard in Woodside," turns an obscure site in Queens into a memorable image by virtue of her expressive depiction of a large tree in the foreground.

Photography has made real inroads in achieving parity with painting in recent years, as seen in major museum surveys, as well as here. Particularly impressive were Jennifer Holst's exquisite little color prints, one a vista of canyons, the other an exhilarating image of giraffes racing across an exotic landscape; Scott Weingarten's darkly dramatic black and white prints of subjects such as sunlight glittering on water and a solitary stroller along the surf; Jean Prytyskacz's lyrical landscape and animal pictures; Robert Helman's close-up of a sleeping feline face, aptly titled "Cat Nap." Also including topnotch work by frequent exhibitors such as Betty Thornton, Mikki Powell, Shirley Piniat, Lucinda Prince, Lori Lata, Fran Del Re, Gloria Waslyn and Meyer Tannenbaum, "A Mid-Summer Dream" was one of the WSAC's most abundant recent surveys.

—Peter Wiley

Yael Zahavy-Mittelman Posits Lyricism As Antidote to Angst

Ostensibly, the paintings of Yael Zahavy-Mittelman are abstract. However, the political and human realities of Zahavy-Mittelman's homeland, Israel, are such that no artist can avoid being affected by them. Thus Zahavy-Mittelman's paintings, for all their free-wheeling lyricism, revealed a subtle subtext of undeniable humanism, in her recent exhibition at Agora Gallery, 415 West Broadway, in Soho.

Although she recently left Israel, the atmosphere of that embattled land, of its turmoil and its beauty, still informs her work. An art therapist who helps others to find wholeness through personal expression, Zahavy-Mittelman chooses not to dwell pictorially in the problems of her homeland. Rather, she projects a positive alternative to angst by flooding her canvases with forms and colors that uplift and offer hope to the human spirit. And if traces of the trauma that is unavoidable for any sensitive soul who has had to cope with a war-torn environment remain in the powerful gestural force of her paintings, they are redeemed by the overall lyricism of her compositions.

Indeed, a sense of yin and yang, of the tensions that the Abstract Expressionist doyen Hans Hoffman called "push and pull," activates her canvases with a peculiar dynamism. Colors applied not only with

"The Lord of the Land"

brushes, but with palette knife, cardboard, and even the artist's bare hands, converge on a virgin white ground. Amorphous forms and veils of color are interspersed with more definite shapes and gestures that suggest landscapes and/or figures without resorting to literal description. Each painting constitutes a spontaneous sensation, a rhythmic event composed with a virtuoso array of mark-making techniques that cumulatively convey a memorable visual experience. Each composition is filled with a sense of light, life, and movement. Yet there is ample room for the viewers' imagination to roam among the boldly intermingling forms, Rorschaching imagery that eludes easy definition, even while provoking a powerful visceral response.

In "The Lord of the Land," there is the sense of a landscape being either exploded or imploded, with forms that suggest shards of deconstructed organic matter and billowing smoke creating a composition at once violent and lyrical. (Admittedly, this is a subjective interpretation. However, knowing the artist's country of origin invariably invites such speculation.) By contrast, other paintings by Zahavy-Mittelman, such as the majestic oil on canvas "Cloudy Figures," with its softly floating forms and gentle palette of pale yet luminous hues, project a more serene, almost ethereal, feeling.

Then there are paintings such as the diptych "Flame of Flamenco" and "La Luna," in which, despite the fiery colors and frenzied paint application, the overall thrust of the composition remains upbeat rather than fierce. For Yael Zahavy-Mittelman is an artist capable of conveying as many shades of emotion as she has colors on her palette. Indeed, especially sumptuous in this regard is the vertical composition called "Tapioka Girl," with its rich combination of nocturnal blues, verdant touches of green, and soft, rosy hues which merge to create a muted chromatic music of surpassing melodic beauty.

—Maureen Flynn

Fromm's Transcendent Dialogues With Absent Colleagues

Steeped in art history, Jessica From is a painter astutely aware of the tradition to which she belongs, which happens to be that of the Abstract Expressionists. Yet one never gets the impression that Fromm regards abstract painting as either a historical imperative or a position that must be upheld at all cost against the rising tide of postmodernism.

Rather, it seems clear that abstraction comes as naturally as breathing to Fromm; that it is simply a way of responding to the known world as fully as possible, given her innate gift for form, gesture, color, and that increasingly elusive quality called "touch." In other words, you get the feeling that no representational mode of expression would be expansive enough to encompass the broad range of experience and sensation that Fromm wishes to embrace.

Only by availing herself of the entire arsenal of effects that the style sometimes known as "action painting" affords can Jessica Fromm give expression to all of her painterly impulses, which come across more convincingly than ever in her new exhibition of oils at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from September 7 through 25. (There will be a reception for the artist on Saturday, September 11, from 3 to 6 PM.)

"Tectonics"

Although not being billed as a retrospective in the ordinary sense of that term (which normally implies the summing up of an oeuvre and would seem inappropriate to a painter so consistently engaged with process and evolution), the exhibition includes some older paintings as well as new ones. Occurring on what the artist describes as "the cusp of a new era in my life," the show apparently calls for a bit of looking back as well as forward, in order to put Fromm's enterprise into perspective for artist and viewer alike.

Of her newest paintings, Fromm states, "I find myself currently more concerned with 'describing' in paint the shadowy dimensions of experience and accrued knowledge, which underlie the visible. To this end paint is applied more heavily/layered and rhythm is often slowed, revealing a close-up examination of these forces."

For an artist as fully committed to painting as Fromm, "dimensions of experience and accrued knowledge" invariably involves engaging in an ongoing dialogue with those painters who have preceded and made an impression upon her. In this regard, two of her most recently completed paintings are continuations of canvases that she began some time ago and abandoned until she could sort out why they appeared "familiar" to her.

One of these two oils on canvas is entitled "Thoughts of Siqueiros." Obviously, Fromm does not have a great deal in common stylistically with Siqueiros, a social realist who, along with Orozco and Rivera, was one of the three most important Mexican muralists. Yet she obviously admires his commitment not only to social causes but to innovative techniques of painting. For while it is not widely known— or, at least, not often acknowledged— Jackson Pollock was one of Siqueiros' assistants when he painted murals at the New School for Social Research in Greenwich Village, and it was Siqueiros who introduced the younger painter to the use of industrial paints for fine art, as well as to the techniques of spattering and dripping pigment that would make Pollock world famous. So while one has no way of really knowing precisely what thoughts Fromm was having when she called this painting "Thoughts of Siqueiros," it is interesting to speculate that she may have been imagining how the great muralist's work might have evolved if, rather than allowing his vigorous spatters and drips to eventually be covered by successive layers of more controlled paint application, he had chosen to let them stand, expressing his angst about the plight of Mexican peasantry abstractly rather than figuratively.

In any case, Fromm's painting, with its swirling blue and green forms, possesses an energy and vigor that does her ruminations on Siqueiros proud, conveying passion, violence, and intensity in her own inimitable manner. It is not only exciting for its own immediate qualities, but is an important painting in an even more significant sense for exemplifying the kind of vital dialogues that occur between diverse artists over time, transcending such temporal matters as life and death.

While it is not spelled out in the title, Jessica Fromm seems to be having a similar dialogue with Willem de Kooning, a painter much closer to her own stylistic leanings, in the second abandoned-then-continued canvas, which is called "The Works." Indeed, in this buoyant oil, with its predominance of yellow, pink, and baby blue hues and sinuous shapes, Fromm completes a circle for the late, great Abstract Expressionist, combining juicy painterly passages with more linear forms. Which is to say, she suggests a synthesis of de Kooning's early and late modes, even while creating a painting in her own distinctive style.

Again, although she does not spell it out in her artist's statement, Fromm appears to be showing us what might have been had de Kooning lived long enough to merge the full-bodied sensuality of his earlier style with the spare grace of the more linear paintings he created toward the end of his life. However, both "Thoughts of Siqueiros" and "The Works" are by no means "appropriations," but highly original statements in which Fromm addresses other painters sympathetically in her own distinctive voice.

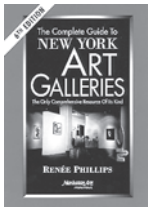
Other paintings in the exhibition, such as "Tectonics," "Veritas," and "Reflections" demonstrate Fromm's versatile visual vocabulary at its most eloquent, ranging from the succulent layered strokes of thick oil impastos with which she builds the forms in the first two canvases to the softer colors and combination of amorphous masses and incisive gestural flourishes that she employs in the latter painting.

Fromm's remarkable ability to combine disparate elements can perhaps be seen most dramatically in the diptych she calls "A Lid For Every Pot." Here, the panel on the left is a tumultuous composition of vigorously convoluted linear tangles, while the one on the right is an almost minimalist color field composed with pale, soft, subtly modulated hues. That she manages to meld these two seemingly irreconcilable panels into a strikingly harmonious aesthetic statement, bringing about a synthesis of the explosive and the serene that illuminates the amusingly offhand title, makes one think that Jessica Fromm is a painter who could get away with almost anything!

—Ed McCormack

BOOK REVIEW:

Renée Phillips and Ian Chilvers



The problem with most art reference books and guides is that the art scene changes so rapidly that they soon become obsolete. Renée Phillips, the well-known consultant, coach for art professionals, frequent lecturer at The Learning Annex, and all-around Artrepreneur (a term she had to coin— and trademark!— to cover all of her diverse activities) has overcome this by coming out with six editions of "The Complete Guide to New York Art Galleries" since 1995. And it's a good thing, too, since this book is in a class by itself, being the only comprehensive resource of its kind.

The 6th edition, published by Manhattan Arts International, is the most comprehensive to date, with over 1,000 detailed profiles of commercial galleries. private dealers, museums, universities, alternative spaces, non-profit organizations, artist-run galleries, corporate art consultants, independent curators, and other professional listings. Also included are artists' studios and web sites—an important new addition, since more and more artists are opening their studios to the public by appointment and using their web sites as virtual galleries.

Although the book is a great fact-checking resource for writers and editors, it is especially invaluable for artists in search of career opportunities—like having a little Renee Phillips sitting on one's shoulder whispering into one's ear sage advice culled from two decades as prominent New York art maven.

The first thing all artists should know is which galleries will be interested in their work and who to talk to when they call. Being busy people, Gallerists have no time for artists who have not done their homework. Fortunately, Renée Phillips has done it for them. (Contact: www. manhattanarts.com)

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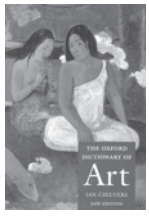

Another fine reference book that every artist and art lover should own is "The Oxford Dictionary of Art," edited by Ian Chilvers and published by The Oxford University Press of New York, a division of the Oxford Press in the United Kingdom .

The recently published third edition of this hefty hardcover tome is thoroughly revised, updated, and expanded, with over 3,000 entries covering every period and movement, as well as an in-depth chronology of major works in their historical context, and an index of galleries and museums around the world. It provides everything one would expect from a historical text published by a press that is a department of the University of Oxford and purports to adhere to the "objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education" of that lofty institution. What is rarely expected of such histories, and is such a pleasant surprise, is how well-written this book is. One gets so used to dull, pseudo-professorial pretentiousness in art writing as to be hardly prepared for the literary quality and liveliness of this highly readable volume, with its up-to-date entrees on newer artists like Julian Schnabel and Damien Hirst, as well as newer media such as video and installation.

The only quibble this writer had after perusing it at leisure was that, while Jean-Michel Basquiat was listed, Leonard Baskin was nowhere to be found in the same alphabetized section. This is a woeful oversight; for, while Baskin may not be currently as fashionable as Basquiat, he had a distinguished career as a sculptor and graphic artist and contributed beautiful illustrations to books by the late Ted Hughes, former Poet Laureate of Great Britain.

That, however, is a minor fault in a reference book that is actually fun to read. (Contact: www.oup.com) —Lawrence Downes

Protest and "Roots" in the Art of nya'

Meeting the young African painter nya' (he only uses capital letters for the name of God and the apostrophe he affixes to his own name is accentual rather than possessive) and listening to him expound on his art reminded me of being in Kingston, Jamaica, in the late 1970s (around the time nya' was born), listening to the late great reggae star Bob Marley explain the origins of the universe to me in his spacious yard, while he reclined across the hood of his BMW smoking a spliff the size of a Sno-Cone.

For nya' (who says that his name means "nephew of the great legend" and explains with great humility that his grandfather once ruled an African country twice the size of England) speaks of profound and mystical matters with a moral certainty and a spiritual fervor that is rarely heard among young artists in the Age of Irony.

So it struck me as more than a coincidence when nya' mentioned in the course of our conversation that Marley's music is the only thing he listens to while he paints—especially since his mixed media paintings have a raw power akin to the thumping backbeat of reggae, a music born of fervently Afrocentric ancestral memory arising rhythmically in the shantytowns of Kingston. Shadows of the rebel spirit that animates Marley's songs also flit through the poems that nya' writes to annotate his paintings (all lowercase in the manner of an African e.e. cummings), which thud to the drumbeat of destiny with lines such as "as i tread along the weary path to greatness/to be covenant to my people/a light to the nations and a beacon to/oppressed spirits/help me to understand my past, lest i be/bitter..."

Indeed, that nya' sees himself without irony as a child of destiny was everywhere evident in his recent New York exhibition, "journey to my roots," at Gelabert Studios Gallery, 255 West 86th Street. Nya's healthy self regard (think Schnabel with a soft-spoken intensity in place of the girth and bombast) seems more than justified by his talent, which is so formidable that one can only be taken aback upon entering a gallery filled with his mature, accomplished paintings and immediately meeting the youthful artist.

And on learning that nya' creates his paintings with natural materials such as ox blood, ashes, and cow dung one can't help remembering the big stink about a painting of the Virgin Mary incorporating elephant dung. Nya,' however, integrates such organic materials without the slightest whiff of sensationalism. For his compositions, while fresh, powerful, and immediate, possess a finesse and a restraint that can only be called phenomenal in a young painter as hungry as anyone else his age for recognition. Which is to say, they show none of the desperation to grab attention with novelty for its own sake that marks—or mars—the work of so many of his contemporaries. Despite the ox blood, the cow dung, the ashes, the bent twigs, scatterings of cement nails, shards of rusted metal, and other unusual materials that nya' employs to add tactility and heft to his compositions, the power and presence of his paintings rests on a deeper, more significant formal armature and an aura of spiritual connectedness that fairly glows through his work. The ox blood provides him with reds of visceral radiance unlike that of the most brilliant cadmiums, and the cow dung produces browns of an earthiness that cannot be matched by the raw umbers or siennas put out by any manufacturer of standard artists' pigments.

"Mburuchusi" (tel. 1-917-887-0051; website: www.musacapital.com)

These hues that nya' salvages from the natural resources of South Africa resonate with the rich and bloody history of the first African nation to achieve independence. And, while nya' asserts emphatically that he has not studied the work of modern European artists other than the monolithic Picasso, it should be stated that his work, for all its rootsy Afrocentric authenticity, also possesses a European-inflected aesthetic sophistication one can only attribute to the fact that Zimbabwe boasts a National Gallery and private galleries, in contrast to other parts of the continent where museums and contemporary art centers are few and far between.

That said, what is truly remarkable about nya's work is how thoroughly he assimilates such modernist elements into a postmodern style that meets all the progressive mainstream criteria while projecting a highly subjective sense of African identity. Particularly powerful in this regard is the painting nya' calls "botso," an African word for the spiritual banishment that befalls one who ignores a rebuke from his mother and does not reconcile with her before her death, thereby "poisoning the roots of love." In this composition, the boldly abstracted outline of a women— "the shadow of the mother," as nya' puts it— merges with a rugged landscape and an actual spear affixed to the canvas. The latter object is a symbol of the manhood forfeited by the cursed individual whom nya' addresses in the poetic annotation to "botso": "in disrespect of her power/ the grandeur of her rebuke/you abuse her splendour/the seasoned speech from lips you/disregard and beckon away from discipline/in the stillness of moments, peril pursues,/prosperity eludes and multiple misfortunes/paint your every footstep..."

The choice of the verb "paint" in the last line of the poem seems telling in that it indicates the almost metaphysical power that nya' attributes to the physical act of painting—a power that comes across forcefully in the composition called "mburuchusi." This is a term for a process by which an ever-tightening strip of bark tied around a bull's testicles gradually tightens and castrates the animal, making it docile enough to pull a plow. In nyas"s painting, the bull becomes a metaphor for the man whose masklike faces, outlined by bent twigs, overlap rhythmically. In sharp contrast to these docile faces and the literal stick figures lined up below them, the blood reds and other fiery hues of the canvas reflect the anger of the following lines from the accompanying poem: "why silence my people/a people/enchained by sterile rulers/enslaved by virtues of greed and hate/stripped of a common vision..."

Other paintings and poems by nya', such as "captives of inheritance," and "spiritual masturbation," are also as fierce as Bob Marley's most potent protest songs. By contrast, compositions such as "tribal legacy," and the exhibition's title painting, "journey to my roots," express the artist's abiding love for his people and his culture through their lyricism. All, however, share qualities in common that make this immensely gifted young South African artist an exciting new discovery.

—Ed McCormack

Kerry Johns: A Consummate Painter from Australia

There's no denying that Sidney Nolan is an Australian national treasure, or that the Aboriginal painting which has become something of a tourist industry in recent years is at least as interesting as anything that we call "outsider art" in this country. Still, the success of Nolan's folkloric faux primitivism and the "dreamtime" dot paintings of the Aborigines have saddled Australian art unfairly with the stereotypical assumption of Crocodile Dundee provincialism. One would almost get the impression that visual art of advanced formal stature could not arise from Down Under.

To learn that nothing could be further from the truth, one has only to take into account consummately sophisticated Australian painters such as Jon Molvig and John Passmore, who assimilated aspects of the European avant garde without losing their unique national identity. These artists and others of their post-war generation laid the groundwork for the generation of Australian painters that includes Kerry Johns, who was born in Brisbane in 1947, and whose outstanding solo exhibition "landmarks" can be seen at Ezair Gallery, 905 Madison Avenue, from October 1 through 31.

"Mythic Landscape 4," 2004, Acrylic on Canvas 43"x 36"

Like John Passmore, in particular, Kerry Johns has spent an extensive period of time traveling in Europe, studying the great works in galleries and museums there first-hand. Yet she finds inspiration for her own work in the landscape of her native Australia.

"In the landscape it is the infinitesimal that inspires me," states Johns, whose articulate analysis of her aesthetic goals belies the intuitive appearance of her canvases. "The individual elements of leaf, rock, branch, water, ground, cloud, atmosphere that make the whole, all seem to have an equal weight as if in balance, a tapestry woven of the same stuff. I start with these tiny parts, building up a disordered assemblage of marks, colors, tones from everywhere, alternating this build-up with a dissolution of the same, until the sense of a whole place eventually forms. I feel that this method of working with no preconceptions allows the energy and subtle life within a place to be absorbed and emerge, then to speak for itself. My approach relies on gesture, touch and attention, and a continuous build-up of hundreds of markings from life. Placing a grid through the painting surface has been a useful device at times to lay down a foundation of order, through or over which the necessary disorder can play out."

"Gesture" and "touch" are key words in regard to Kerry Johns' work. Few contemporary artists are as acutely attuned to the subtle nuances of paint handling. One would even be tempted to call her a "painter's painter," if that designation did not imply the limited appeal of a cult phenomenon or ham-fisted clichés of the "loaded brush." For while encrusted pigmentations played a tactile role in delineating the rugged, mountainous terrains in Johns' previous New York solo show in the same venue in 2002, more lyrical linear elements have increasingly come into play in her recent canvases. And although the complex saturated color relationships and palpable physicality of Western painting remain salient features of her oeuvre, the intricate network of linear rhythms that grace her newest compositions bear a certain relationship to the infinite vistas of classical Chinese landscape painting.

At the same time, Johns' paintings have grown more abstract, giving us not so much the lay of the land as its energies and essences, as seen in her "Mythic Landscape" and "Tidal Creek" series, where layered linear strokes dance gingerly over the picture plane, creating compositional rhythms that suggest the contours of mountains and the movement of clouds or water without alighting on particulars or resorting to other forms of pictorial description.

Doing the aforementioned John Passmore— who took from Cezanne the notion of viewing a still life object or landscape from several angles simultaneously— one better, Kerry Johns locates herself, and in turn us,within the landscape by virtue of a subjective immersion that provokes a more visceral response than that of the traditional "viewer."

While the sweeping rhythms of her strokes can be compared both to the linear movement in Brice Marden's "Cold Mountain" paintings and Gary Snyder's Zen-influenced epic poem "Rivers and Mountains Without End," the grid that serves as a formal armature, anchoring her vigorous gestures on the picture plane, imparts a paradoxical stillness to her compositions akin to that in Agnes Martin's contrastingly austere geometric paintings.

Indeed, it is the exquisite tension between vitality and restraint that makes paintings of Kerry Johns so exhilarating and has endeared her work to collectors in Australia, Europe, the United States, and Hong Kong.

—Ed McCormack

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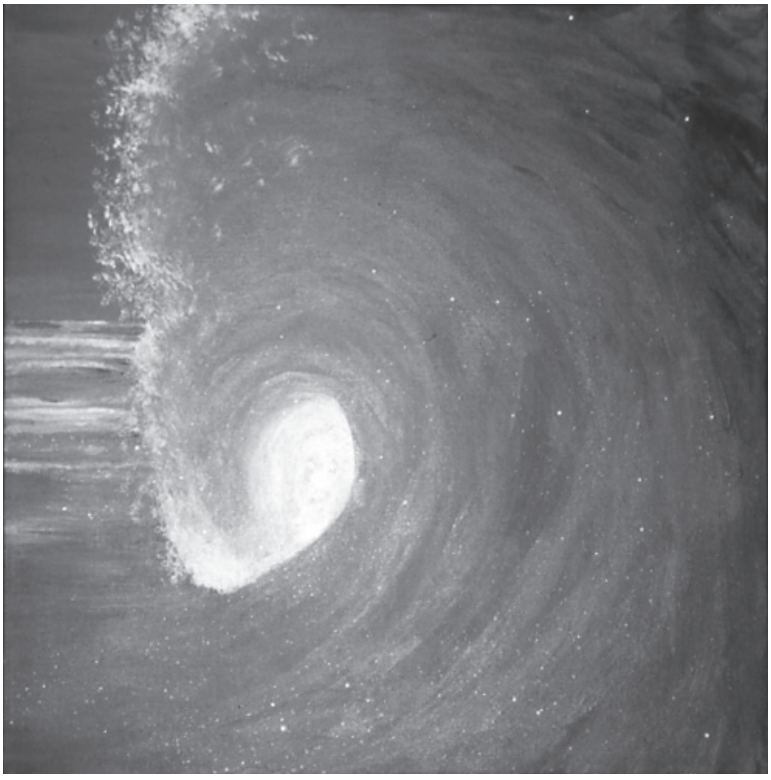
Vision and Energy in the Art of JMK

Just how far a young artist can go on energy and nerve nowadays, creating art that is the visual equivalent of certain forms of rock or hip hop music in its mass appeal, can be seen in "Urea: The Science of Art," an exhibition by a brashly talented newcomer named Jason-Michael Karpiak who prefers to be known as JMK.. The show, sponsored by Creations Unlimited, at the Union Cultural Center, 1027 Stuyvesant Avenue, Union, New Jersey, opened on August 27 and continues through September 9, with a portion of the proceeds from sales going to the American Cancer Society and the Union Cultural Center.

JMK is a gutsy young painter whose work has a rough charm akin to that other hyphenated wunderkind, the late Jean-Michel Basquiat, whom JMK reportedly admires. JMK however, has his own approach—or perhaps one should say two distinctly different approaches, depending on whether he is working acrylics on canvas or markers on canvas. In the former medium, he works with thick impastos, piling on pigment almost to the level of bas relief to give his paintings a rugged tactile appeal. His forms are rudimentary and his colors are bold, almost garish. He obviously relishes the physical properties of paint and employs them to imbue his forms with a heft and presence that lends his canvases a crude Neo-Expressionist power.



"Blue Wave Crashing"

By contrast, when JMK works in the rather declasse but highly effective (for him) medium of markers, his forms become more intricately linear. Markers are used by teenagers to commit the offenses against polite society and private or public property that we normally classify as graffiti. Thus they have a reputation as an instrument of vandalism rather than of fine art, for the most part. JMK, however, employs them on canvas, and in this manner makes clear that they can be an instrument for fine art as well. Indeed, by doing so, he celebrates the graffiti tradition that spawned Basquiat, Keith Haring, and other young upstarts who exploded like gangbusters on the art scene in the 1980s, making "tags"—graffiti signatures—an integral part of their street-smart styles.

While JMK pays tribute to those funky predecessors, his work with markers also harks back to earlier "outsider" artists and autodidacts such as Adolf Wolffli and Joseph Yoakum, who also elevated common or even discredited materials such as ball-point pens and children's wax crayons to fine art status, as well as to contemporary painters such as Jean Dubuffet, Jim Nutt, and Norris Embry who appropriated their rawness for more sophisticated aesthetic purposes.

JMK's acrylic paintings on canvas are concerned with immediate visual and tactile sensation and experience, as seen in his vigorous seascape composition depicting a large, foaming wave. One thinks immediately of the Japanese printmaker Hokusai's famous image of the same subject. JMK, however, has taken a distinctly Western approach, imbuing his wave with a palpable physical presence that has more in common with German Expressionism than with linear Eastern lyricism.

JMK gives equal weight and gestural immediacy to floral subjects, as seen in his acrylic painting of large white flowers, their petals speckled with blobs of thick pigment,

"Scare"

set against an earthy brownish red ground, and further enlivened by dense concentrations of foliage, created with splashes of green and yellow laid down in a drip technique harking back to Jackson Pollock.

JMK's handling of acrylics is more controlled and specifically descriptive in an anomalous painting of a young woman with bare shoulders and big liquid eyes, set against a dark ground enlivened by a yellow moon, a painting that combines unabashed romanticism and irony. And his descriptive impulses are indulged even further in his compositions in markers on canvas, as seen in one especially intricate composition featuring a large, grotesquely grinning face reminiscent of Batman's sinister nemesis The Joker, juxtaposed with a smaller female nude and other figures, all linked in black outlines augmented by pale pastel hues in a manner akin to Dubuffet's "hourloupe" paintings, with their distinctly delineated shapes like sections of a jigsaw puzzle.

JMK's marker pictures have the freedom of doodles that have been consciously refined in the process of drawing, even while seeming to flow in an unbroken stream straight from the artist's subconscious or nervous system. In another such drawing, for example, two figures are combined with a snake, an apple, and sinuous tree branches. At first, one registers the picture as an interpretation of the Adam and Eve myths, but on closer inspection the figures— one African, the other Caucasian; one nude, the other clothed— appear both to be female. Are they interracial lesbians in an Eden of their own making? Or are we meant to read some other meaning into this intriguing picture? Who can say for certain and what does it matter? All that does matter, finally, is that JMK is a gifted and provocative young artist whose work seems to ask all the right questions and challenges the viewer to provide imaginative answers.

—Lawrence Downes

Sheila Finnigan's Ambivalent Tribute to the King of Pop

In the early 1970s, as one of the original contributing editors of Andy Warhol's then fledgling magazine Interview, I spent time in Andy's company at The Factory and various restaurants and parties, but I can't claim that I really knew him; nor have I ever known anyone who honestly could.

I knew that he was an inveterate gossip, a master manipulator, and a man who did not like to part with money (which made working with him kind of dicey, at times). But as close as Andy ever came to candor was when, as we chatted casually about art over lunch at Brownie's health food restaurant one afternoon, he referred to de Kooning and the other Abstract Expressionists, almost wistfully, as "real artists who paint." This I took to be rather telling, a confession that he considered their work somehow more authentic than his own.

Sheila Finnigan, a real artist from Chicago who paints, never met Andy Warhol. Yet Finnigan put a unique spin on Warhol's public persona in her recent solo show "One-Stop POP!" at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 24th Street, in Chelsea.

Finnigan, who has exhibited widely in venues ranging from the Chicago Arts Club, to the Hunter Museum of American Art Center, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, to ABC No Rio, in New York, likes to say that she "picked up the gauntlet from the German Expressionists." And, indeed, her work has inherited some of their fierce emotiveness and frenzied brushwork, as well as some of the nutty vernacular qualities of fellow Chicagoans like June Leaf and the Hairy Who School.

Finnigan's innovation, however, is that she merges painting with installation in a peculiarly organic manner, turning the gallery into a total environment where one encounters a delightfully skewed view of the Warhol phenomenon—a kind of Andyland Amusement Arcade replete with a game called "Andy Marbleous" (played with marbles, naturally), Andy t-shirts dangling from a clothesline, an old fashioned washtub that plays fellow Pop icon John Lennon's "Imagine" when you crank its handle and sundry other attractions that reference Andy's odd juxtaposition of the campy and the banal.

The installation piece that struck a personal chord, reminding me of a surreal dinner that my wife and I attended with Andy and his entourage of Superstars, society folk and dragqueens at the Algonquin Hotel, was punningly called "Andy's Last Souper." It consisted of a large picnic table littered with empty Campbell's Soup cans, party balloons with the word "Pop" painted on them, and dinner plates splashed stridently with a red hue that resembled both tomato soup and blood. The latter touch seemed especially apt in terms of the social vampirism that Andy trafficked in, as he trotted his traveling circus of transvestites and other flaming creatures into the drawing rooms of the rich and famous, trawling for portrait commissions.

"Homage (after David's 'Death of Marat')" 48" x 60"

There was also a companion painting of the same title, featuring thirteen Andys seated at a long table before thirteen bowls of Campbell's tomato soup painted the same visceral shade of scarlet. Here, instead of party balloons there were comicstrip speech balloons containing characteristically Andyish monosyllabic utterances such as "What?", "Oh," and "Nothing."

The identical figures seemed to reference Warholian repetitiveness, aping mass production. However, Finnigan did not appropriate the garish dayglo-like colors that we normally associate with Warhol paintings. Rather, her own distinctive palette of black, white, and red lent the image a more grisly Goya-esque mood. These were ghostly Andys, even paler than he was in life, their granny glasses black as the sockets in skulls.

Just as powerfully ghastly was another work, combining a large canvas with an installation, called "Homage (After David's 'Death of Marat')". The painting showed Andy slumped like the Raggedy Ann doll's boyfriend Raggedy Andy (a character he actually resembled with his dilly dally languidness and wig of silvery straw) on a wheelbarrow, about to be "wheeled offstage," as the saying goes. He wore a glittering shroud—symbolizing, perhaps, all the glitz of his public persona and career—and clutched a red-dripping brush in one lifeless but presumably rigor mortised hand, below which an equally bloody knife suggested both the surgical incompetence that caused his demise and the back-stabbing social milieu in which he thrived. Near the painting, a real wheelbarrow stood, draped with a real sequined shroud and real sunglasses.

Like the other paintings and objects in Finnigan's brilliant exhibition, "Homage" was an ambivalent tribute to a subversive genius who became an artistic icon by dealing "real painting" an almost fatal Oedipal blow. The good news is that real painting survived Andy, and that Sheila Finnigan is around not only to exemplify it but to tell the tale.

—Ed McCormack

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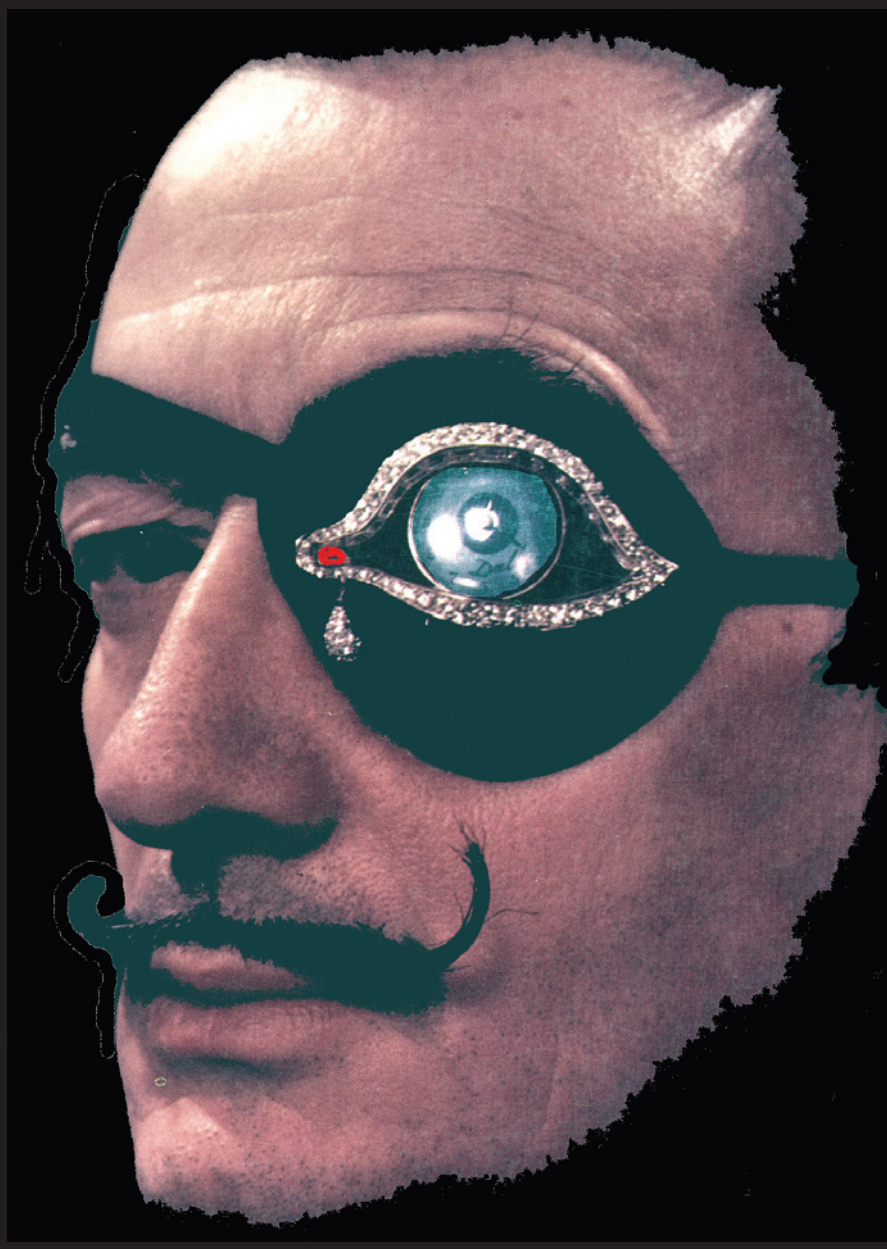

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