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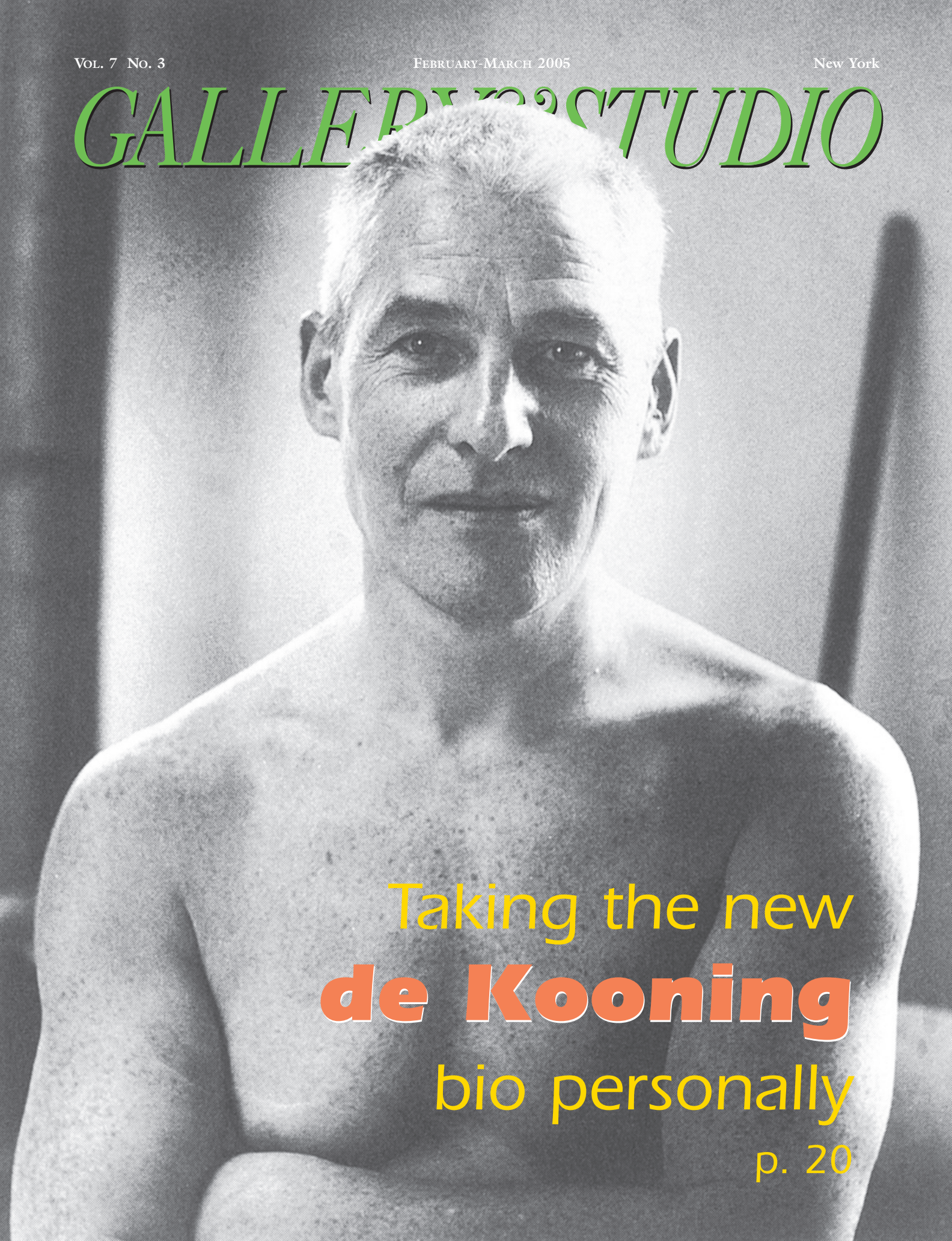
GALLERY & STUDIO



Taking the new **de Kooning** bio personally

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Lotus Lady, 12" x 12" 2004
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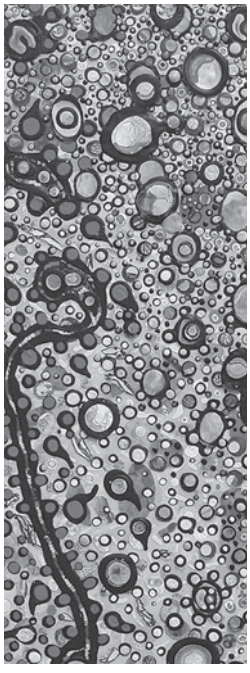

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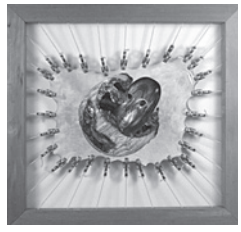

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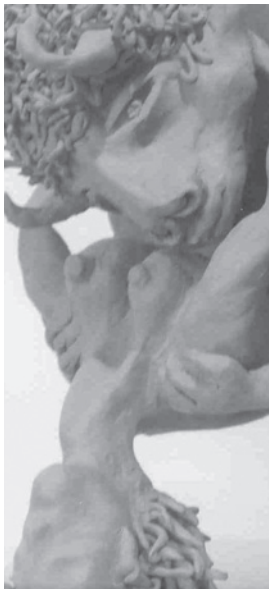

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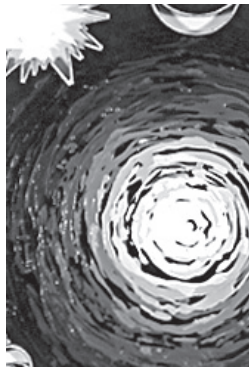

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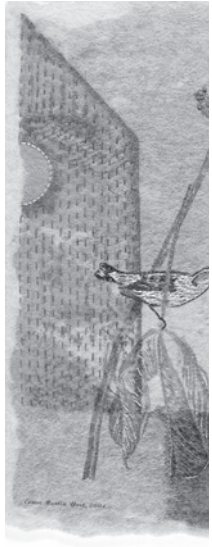

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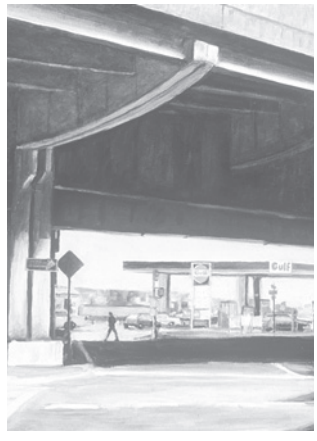

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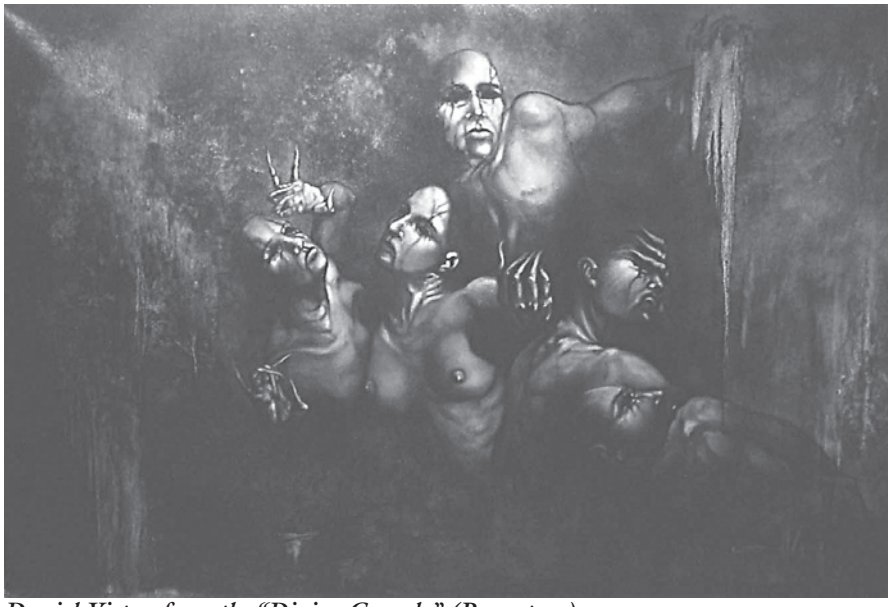
Hart and Victor at CFM: A Rebirth of Passion



Daniel Victor, from the "Divine Comedy" (Purgatory)

While his humanistic neoclassical sculpture was never embraced by art world fashionistas during his lifetime, Frederick Hart, whose work is paired with that of the gifted young French Canadian sculptor Daniel Victor in the exhibition "Metamorphosis and the Human Condition" from March 5 through April 3, at CFM Gallery, 112 Greene Street , never wanted for recognition. His monumental "Creation" frieze of stone figures on the facade of the Washington National Cathedral and his larger than life bronze "Three Soldiers" at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial both established him as an artist whose work will endure long after many of today's hot trends are mere footnotes in the fickle history of postmodernism.

Further evidence of the growing recognition of Hart's contribution came last year when he was honored with the 2004 National Medal of the Arts, the highest award given to artists and arts patrons by the United States Government. Awarded by the president through a selection process overseen by the National Council on the Arts , in previous years the honor has gone to major figures such as Marian Anderson, Saul Bellow, and Willem de Kooning. (It was one of the few official honors that de Kooning, always wary of the establishment, took seriously.)

Hart's nomination (the first to occur posthumously) was especially significant in that he now joins the ranks of past recipients in the visual arts such as Chuck Close, Roy Lichtenstein, Isamu Noguchi, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Motherwell and Jasper Johns—all avant gardists in whose company this writer has always argued that he belonged. For while writers and critics with a conservative agenda have tried to claim Hart as one of their own, he has never been a conservative artist. As I have noted in past reviews, nothing could be more radical than Hart's synthesis of the sensual and the spiritual. This synthesis is most startling in the context of his stone sculptures of male and female nudes for the National Cathedral, some modeled on his beautiful wife Lindy Hart (who accepted the award for her late husband in an oval office ceremony with President George W. and Laura Bush).

However, Hart's marriage of the exalted and the erotic also animates many of the figures in the present exhibition at CFM Gallery, whose intrepid director Neil Zukerman has long been one of Hart's most vociferous champions, bucking the trends in Soho to bring him to the attention of the New York art world for several years.

By juxtaposing Hart's work with that of Daniel Victor, a relative neophyte with the gallery (although he has exhibited widely in his native Canada), Zukerman makes the point that neoclassical art need not be relegated to the past or even placed in opposition to prevailing trends; that it is an adventurous and vital element of the mainstream, in which established masters and emerging talents can share the same stage and complement each other.

Indeed, it can be argued that Frederick Hart is the least traditional of the two artists in terms of his pioneering work in the medium of clear lucite. Several of these sculptures, in which sensual female nudes are realized in three dimensions as well as appearing in more ethereal form within the crystalline material, are highlights of the exhibition. For it is in these works that Hart has fused the earthly and the transcendent in a manner previously unseen in the Judao-Christian tradition. Taken together with his more classical bronzes, such as the stately robed figure called "The Source" and the male and female nudes titled simply "Torso," these luminous sculptures constitute an oeuvre unlike anything else in contemporary art and place Hart in the forefront of the New Humanism.

Although Daniel Victor, who was born in 1964 and lives and works outside Montreal, has been included in previous group exhibitions at CFM Gallery, this joint exhibition with Hart is his first major show in New York. And he acquits himself admirably with a series of oils on canvas inspired by "The Divine Comedy," Dante's fourteenth century poetic masterpiece describing his own imaginary journey through the afterlife, which is concerned with three aspects of the world beyond: the Inferno (Hell), the Purgatorio (Purgatory), and the Paradiso (Heaven). Utilizing dancers as models, Victor imbues his figures with classical proportions—even those that writhe in contorted positions in the purgatorial part of the exhibition, their tormented faces shadowed with cracks like those in ancient sculpture, their exquisitely articulated fingers clawing the sulphureous air.

The raw power of these paintings is enhanced by Neil Zukerman's decision to exhibit them unstretched and unframed, which complements Victor's technique of combining figurative imagery with darkly evocative veils of flowing oil washes and drips akin to the gestural pyrotechnics of abstract expressionism. While this roughhewn presentation is unprecedented for a gallery known for its elegance, it lends Victor's paintings an impact comparable to Leon Golub's huge unstretched canvases of mercenaries and atrocities.

Unlike Golub, however, Victor is no social realist; rather he is a latter-day Symbolist of the highest order, as seen in his large vertical composition "Allegoria," which while not part of "The Divine Comedy" series is one of the highlights of the exhibition. Here, Victor approaches the Symbolist mastery of Gustave Moreau with a mythical vision in which an angelic male figure with majestic white wings and a dancer's physique is poised gracefully above two unicorns with entwined serpentine tails levitating against a dark ground enlivened by luminous vertical streaks as atmospheric as the mists of Avalon.

In this major work, especially, we see the curatorial logic of exhibiting Daniel Victor together with Frederick Hart. For both Hart and Victor take enormous risks, flying in the face of the timidity that makes so many of their contemporaries hedge their bets with self protective irony, gladly venturing "over the top," as they say, in order to make the human figure once again a vehicle for heroic passion.

—Ed McCormack

Deborah Lee Galesi's New Age Vision of Renaissance Aesthetics

The New Jersey-born painter Deborah Lee Galesi, whose solo exhibition fills the entire space of Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, from March 8 to 26, and will also be featured year-round in the gallery's ongoing salon show when it relocates to Chelsea in the coming months, flies in the face of everything that is sacred in contemporary figurative art by trusting totally to her imagination as impetus for her imagery. Which is to say, she eschews commercial strategies such as the irony that many young artists employ self protectively, and by doing so runs the risk of appearing unhip, for all her obvious draftspersonly abilities and painterly skills.

Galesi, however, is obviously too committed to her own personal vision to fret over fleeting fashions, and one need only glance at her resume to see that she is well trained: She holds an MFA in art and psychology from the University of Colorado and has also studied privately in New York with instructors from The Art Students League, as well as at the Villas Schifanoia and the Liceo Artistic in Florence, Italy, where she is highly regarded as a member of the Professional Register of European artists.

Not only has Florence been good to her, in terms of rewarding her talent with recognition, it appears to have become a kind of spiritual home for Galesi, who has been fascinated with the Renaissance ever since she was a child.

Nowhere could probably seem farther from the glories, both architectural and artistic, of the Renaissance, than Paterson, New Jersey, where Deborah Lee Galesi grew up. Yet, that typical American river town has its own unique artistic history, having been immortalized in a great poem called "Paterson" by William Carlos Williams. And it could almost appear that Galesi picked up, perhaps by osmosis, some of Williams' belief in particulars, rather than vague generalities, as the only valid building blocks of art, given the attention that she lavishes on detail in her paintings, approximating the actual appearance of specific things to lend even her most unlikely flights of fantasy a stunning verisimilitude.

Indeed, it is Galesi's consummate skills as a realist that allow her to travel so extensively in imaginative realms, making paintings that defy all the laws of logic yet still manage to project a unique emotional power. There appears to be no image that Galesi will not dare commit to canvas. Her technical ability enables her to take risks that would daunt a less proficient, not to mention less intrepid, painter. Take, for example, the subject of her painting "Metamorphosis of Atlantis" in which sea creatures take flight on butterfly wings amid similarly airborne uprooted trees and a dolphin balances a glowing golden orb that could be the sun on its nose like a circus seal, amid other unnatural wonders illuminated by a neon-pink sky. Like Malcolm Morley in his post-photo realist fantastic expressionist phrase, Deborah L. Galesi seemingly pushes the imagistic envelope as far as it can possibly go in some of her more surreal and jam-packed compositions. Yet she invariably accomplishes the considerable feat of making all of her disparate images blend harmoniously by virtue of her gift for intuitive pictorial organization.

"Nostalgia"

In the painting entitled "Medicine Wheel," Galesi employs the format of a mandala as the organizing principle of the composition. Within its central circle (ornately bordered by stylized ocean waves ala Japanese prints and pink silhouettes of the leaping dolphins that are a recurring motif of her work), she includes sequential images of sorceresses, angels, and other ethereal beings of light in enchanted landscape settings. The painting reflects her interest in New Age and metaphysical disciplines. Her esoteric studies provide her with many diverse symbols, which she often combines in her work, freely intertwining aspects of Christianity, Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism and other religious paths to suggest a universal spirituality.

Even more down to earth subjects are treated in a manner so imaginatively as to transform them into visionary statements, as seen in Galesi's oil on linen "Nostalgia." Here, the figure of an elderly man dominates the center of the composition. Wearing a short sleeved white sport shirt and gray slacks, he sits hand-to-cheek, in a manner reminiscent of Rodin's "The Thinker," except that his legs are more casually crossed. Over him is superimposed the semi-transparent form of a large blue butterfly, and over his head, under a rainbow arch reminiscent of certain Renaissance icon formats, various images are seen in a sequential frieze. They show a child growing into an adolescent and then a young man and finally a mature adult while holding what appears to be a caterpillar in the stages of transformation into a butterfly. The painting, executed in a classically realized style beholden to the Old Masters, yet employing imagery with a postmodern freedom that also harks back to the surrealists, is informed by her admiration for both Michelangelo and Salvador Dali. However, "Nostalgia" makes a deeply personal and highly original statement about memory and metamorphosis, the cycles of life, the specter of mortality, and the hopeful prospect of renewal and rebirth in a manner that is pure Deborah Lee Galesi.

—Maurice Taplinger

Danièle M. Marin Gives Voice to "Womanity"

Once upon a time, popular wisdom had it that men had Ideas and women had notions. Before the dawning of the feminist era it was not uncommon to hear locutions such as "That silly woman had a notion to run for Congress." Could this be why those frills, fringes, ruffles, tassels, and other embellishments used in sewing originally came to be named notions: to drive home the idea that women's thoughts and expressions were mere whims and fancies, decorative afterthoughts added to the overall fabric of life?

In any case, when Danièle M. Marin, an artist recently chosen for inclusion in the 2005 Florence Biennale, incorporates notions into her mixed media paintings, they resonate with a sense of the way women have been marginalized in life and in art. They are at once poignant reminders and powerful symbols, showing how a gifted woman artist can use the very trifles of her oppression to turn the tables in powerful works of art.

"Voices and Images"

Indeed, Danièle M. Marin ennobles the full range of womanly activity, from needle crafts to literature in her exhibition "Converging Realities: Realities showroom of women voices," which ran through January 29 at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street.

Perhaps the direct and witty example of turnabout-as-fair-play in the show can be seen in "Vice Versa," a kind of male odalisque in the unusual medium of acrylic and knitting. The subject of this painting is a middle aged man seated with one leg folded beneath him and one arm resting on the other knee. Although he is distinguished-looking enough with his thinning but well groomed white hair, he is incongruously nude, as women have been captured for many centuries in art by The Male Gaze. Set against a brilliant red ground and surrounded by a frame of red fringe, the naked gentleman is displayed like a trophy of the sexual revolution!

A more subtle and complex statement on the evolution of women in society was expressed in "Knitting Installation: MP/Reading becomes Writing, becomes Speaking Body/5'7" and growing taller." In this mixed media installation, a medium in which Marin has created some of the most intriguing works, the piece de resistance is a long, scroll-like configuration that hangs from the wall, created with many painstakingly interwoven strips of fiber on which the artist has written in pencil in a minuscule script. The bottom of the scroll unwinds into a pile of earth on the floor, while an even longer thread, its entire length inscribed with tiny penciled words, unravels from the top into a red composition book on a nearby pedestal that has been tightly bound with string.

This multifaceted installation hints at a multitude of meanings, none spelled out in any obvious way. Like all of Marin's work, "Knitting Installation" raises questions through the artist's metaphoric juxtapositions of materials and images. Here, one is compelled to ponder issues of shame and self-censorship as they relate to literary women down through the centuries. Even though the installation does not refer to Emily Dickinson directly, its minute handwriting and other elements invite one to consider once again the kind of societal conditioning that made a transcendent genius so diffident about her life's work that she sewed her poems into little booklets and hid them away in a desk drawer, where they remained until being discovered after her death by her sister Lavinia and liberated for the ages. It is women's victories, such as the fact that Dickinson ultimately triumphed over a domineering anti-sufferagist father who had written newspaper articles condemning any feminine ambition beyond providing domestic comfort for men, that the work of Danièle M. Marin Celebrates.

And not all of the women that Marin celebrates are diffident by any means. Three notoriously outspoken French women writers (Colette, Simone de Beauvoir, and Marguerite Duras) are featured in "Unfolding," their formidable likenesses printed by photo-transfer on cloth draped over miniature dress forms and enclosed in a plexiglass vitrine as though to impose a defiant new face on the shrouds and veils, both figurative and literal, that have obscured the true attributes of women for so long. Thus the three draped forms, though of modest scale, appear to loom monolithically, like huge monuments to those literary women who always refused to let their voices be stifled.

The face of Simone de Beauvoir appears once again in a mixed media painting "Voices & Images," superimposed on a dress dummy in a beautifully organized still life composition that demonstrates Marin's traditional skills as a painter, which are formidable. Indeed, while installations dominated her earlier exhibitions, Marin's painterly abilities come to the forefront in this show. In another mixed media painting called "Confluent Realities," a mysterious figure partially obscured by an ajar purple door slumps in an easy chair like Marat in his bathtub, in a room where a blank TV screen blazes brightly and the intricate patterns of the wallpaper turn out, on closer inspection, to be penciled texts torn into many tiny pieces. Here, the scene is evoked with a seamless classical solidity akin to Balthus, while in another mixed media painting, intriguingly titled "Letter to Colette or Tending the Garden," Marin combines charcoal, acrylic, fibers, collage, and etching to create a composition with a scrawled gestural ecriture as vigorous as a Twombly. Disparate as their techniques may be, however, both paintings are unified by the conceptual sensibility that enables Marin to range far and wide stylistically while retaining the consistency of a recognizable oeuvre.

Other highlights were three paintings of female nudes mounted on silky padded clothes hangers; symbolic portraits of Colette, de Beauvoir, and Duras in which Marin's ubiquitous dress forms, surrounded by a sea of folded fabric, took on a presence as surreal as di Chirico's pittura metafisica mannequins; and an installation of small, exquisite mixed media works in ornate Renaissance frames called "Formulation of a Question" that a savvy collector snatched up almost as soon as the show opened.

It was characteristic of Danièle M. Marin's wit to title her exhibition a "showroom"—a term evoking images of those glitzy venues in the garment district where manufacturers display their goods on the bodies of young women who function as mute, animated dress dummies— and then to add the sly qualifying phrase "of women voices." Surely, Marin herself is one of the most eloquent of those voices.

—Ed McCormack

Frank Perna: Blood and Gore on the Trading Floor

One of the more amusing protest pranks of the late 1960s was when the Yippee activists Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin smuggled a big bag of dollar bills up to the balcony of the The New York Stock Exchange and emptied it down on the trading floor to watch the traders below scurry and shove like hogs at the trough. (And scurry and shove they certainly did, according to the news reports from that time!)

One was reminded of that frantic scene recently on encountering the paintings of Frank Perna, an artist from Toronto, Ontario, whose solo exhibition "Money Trails II" can be seen at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from March 15 through April 2.

"Blue Bit"

Perna paints scenes from international stock exchange floors, capturing the frenzy that reigns even when paper money is not fluttering down from the balcony like manna from Heaven. He refers to these images, culled from photojournalistic sources and painted in oil on wood in an accomplished Pop/realist style, as "crowd scenes of collective ecstasy and collective insanity."

That all of the paintings are of uniform size (approximately twelve by sixteen inches) lends the series the feeling of stills from a film in which the action grows ever more frantic. The severe cropping of Perna's compositions adds to the suspense and almost unbearable tension, while the blurring of the forms in some enhances the sense of frenetic, fast-paced activity. Yet the images can be even more disconcerting when Perna shifts into sharp focus. In one such picture "Blue Bit," for example, men with rumpled foreheads, screwed-shut eyes, and gaping mouths pump their fists in the air like rioting British football hooligans or punk rock fans in a mosh pit. Although their hyena-like demeanors seem to signify violence, one can only assume that they are jubilant at an upturn in the market. It is an ambiguity familiar to anyone who makes a careful study of media news imagery, in which the semiotics of rage and joy are often indistinguishable.

In another painting by Perna called "Stockrave," white shirted men wave their arms above their heads against the backdrop of a "Big Board" on which their fortunes are being tallied. Theirs is a different kind of jubilation, like that of holy roller religious fanatics in the ecstatic throes of some rubber-limbed trance dance.

Other compositions with titles like "Just a Bit," "Flux," and "Betwixt," focus just as expressively on gesturing hands, computer monitors, sweaty, wrinkled white shirts, and other close-up imagery laden with deadpan symbolism. The smooth, impassive paint surface only adds to the taut power of Perna's images. Perna's technique of blurring forms and slightly heightening colors lends his reds, especially, the quality of wetly glistening viscera. His style seems to marry the slightly off-kilter photorealism of Gerhard Richter to the grotesque emotional dissonance of Francis Bacon (sans the gross distortion) without skipping a beat.

A continuation of his "Obsession" series, in which blurred images of figurative trophies explored "visual perception and materialistic chaos," this new series, according to the artist, demonstrates how popular media "can make the most banal subject into a sensual abstraction." However, Frank Perna makes an even more profound statement in "Money Trails II" about the naked greed that drives the global economy.

—Ed McCormack

WSAC Photography Exhibition Evokes a Sense of Place

Despite its title, "Places I'll Remember," a recent photo show curated for the West Side Arts Coalition by David Ruskin and Jennifer Holst and seen at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at 96th Street and Broadway, was by no means a mere exercise in nostalgia. Rather, it was a sharply focused survey of recent photographic trends.

Co-curator Ruskin, for example, represents the New Romanticism with handcolored prints, which impart the same enchanted quality to Central Park as to Tuscany, Italy. Ruskin's delicate yet luminous tints lend every subject a verdant poetry, be it of hills in Tuscany kissed by pink light or stone steps in Central Park carpeted in golden autumn leaves.

Khuumba Ama invests her pictures of a village in Senegal, Africa, with the emotional power of an African-American artist discovering her ancestral roots. Village children, women in queenly garb, and even gnarled old trees are chronicled by Ama in warm scenes that capture the spirit of a long-awaited journey home.

Scott Weingarten's silver gelatin print of surf and sand on a nocturnal beach is a triumph of subtly modulated monochromes and tonal contrasts "drawn" with light and shadow. Weingarten brings the same draftsmanly eye to another dark, dramatic black and white print of clouds collecting over silhouetted weeds and foliage. Belle Marie Prudhomme, on the other hand, creates color prints that have a narrative quality, like stills from some intriguing documentary film. In one of Prudhomme's pictures, an elderly woman, her eyes shut in reverie, plays a zither in the courtyard of a Seattle cafe, surrounded by empty tables.

Steve Weintraub's digital photographs also have a storytelling quality, with scenes of desolate Americana awash in strident fluorescent hues. Neon skies and conspicuously displayed flags and gothic barns reveal a surreal sensibility akin to that of the film maker David Lynch in Weintraub's eerie prints. By contrast, Carol Carpentieri turns simple images of a white swan on a lake into iconographic statements in her small color prints surrounded by large mats that highlight their cameo quality. Carpentieri's pictures are at once lyrical and formal—little gems that provide visual poetry and strong design in equal measure.

Also intimate in scale but large in ambition, the color prints of Irmgard Kuhn celebrate the pastoral beauty of Parks in New York and Germany with savvy and sensitivity. Kuhn also fools the eye with dynamic images of towering New York apartment buildings shot from angles that turn them into surreal terrains where air conditioners and window plants appear to be oddly shaped natural structures and foliage. Yet another artist who makes less more, Irina Taflan turns the unforgiving landscape of the Arizona desert, with its scrubby plant life and ruddy rocks, into near abstract compositions as compact and intense as the paintings of Marsden Hartley. In one of Taflan's most striking color prints, a red folding chair, hints at a human presence just outside the picture area.

An exceptionally painterly photographer, Robert Helman showed lush color prints evoking autumn woods and other vibrant scenes in Central Park, Delaware and Staten island. Then there was Jean Prytyskacz, a frequent WSAC exhibitor, whose energetic color prints of crowds at a feast in Little Italy and other outdoor festivals and events were among the most lively—not to mention most populated— pictures in a show leaning heavily toward landscape.

—Marie R. Pagano

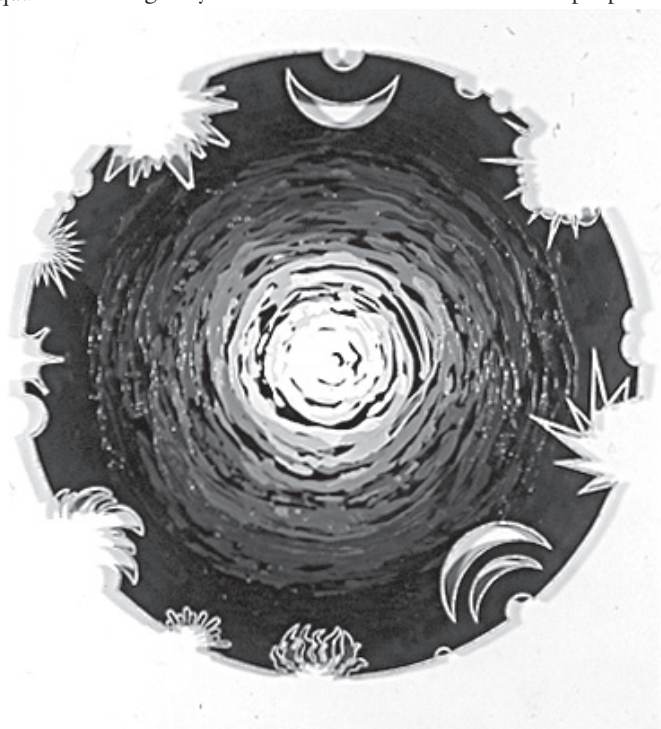
Being Ed Brodkin: The View from Inside

It would undoubtedly be fascinating to be inside Ed Brodkin's brain. One imagines all sorts of crawl spaces in there, like the ones inside the head of the famous actor in the film "Being John Malkovich" (only more intricate and maze-like in the manner of an Escher print). There would probably be many hidden chambers containing vitrines and cabinets filled with untranslatable documents, arcane alphabets, and "primitive" (Brodkin invariably encloses the word in pointed quote marks) implements from vanished tribes and cultures. All the corridors in this place would finally lead to one vast laboratory cum workshop where esoteric notions ranging from ancient alchemical formulas to the latest theories of quantum physics are perpetually in the process of being transformed into physical objects of aesthetic delectation. Here, one imagines, the metaphysical being systematically converted into the physical, the impossible into the actual, the metaphorical in the material.

Naturally, many of the things that finally emerge from this mental workshop to see the light of day in galleries would not adhere to a rectangular format. By necessity, they would assume new, often odd, shapes, like the mixed media pieces in "Mindscapes & Paintings," Ed Brodkin's new solo show at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from March 15 through April 2. (There will be a reception for the artist on Saturday, March 19, from 3 to 6 PM.)

Although the so-called "shaped canvas" has been around since the 1960s, coming into prominence in the work of artists like Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly, Brodkin (who often prefers fiberboard to canvas) employs irregular formats in his own inimitable manner, as much for symbolic and expressive reasons as to achieve a purely formal effect. In "Warriors," for example, four smaller outer panels are affixed to a large central panel, at the top on the left side of the composition and at the bottom on the right. On each small panel, a warrior from a different indigenous culture is depicted in vigorous strokes of a different color laid down on a solid ground in a linear pictographic manner. On the central panel, larger versions of each figure are overlapped, forming a muscular formal configuration akin to Brice Marden's "Cold Mountain Paintings." Only, in Brodkin's "Warriors," the spatial tensions are achieved through the deliberate overlapping of the shapes of the figures rather than by gestural means. Yet the linear shapes, laid down in thick, juicily glistening strokes of green, brown, and red pigment on a dark ground, are paradoxically possessed of a gestural velocity signifying deadly violence. And as always in Brodkin's work, the image reverberates far beyond the relatively small wars of indiginous peoples, expanding to encompass global conflict and inviting us to meditate on the folly of, as the artist himself puts it, "our species more generally."

"Helios," another highlight of the show—its central form a painted image of the sun encircled by brilliant swirls of color —would be a tondo, if not for the ancient sun symbols, culled from various indiginous sources, that Brodkin has cut away from the round rim of the composition. Thus, the white of the gallery wall enters and becomes an integral part of the pictorial space, the interaction of the artwork and its environment approximating a fleeting optical sensation akin to the flashes of light one sees after the eye is exposed to direct sunlight.



"Helios"

Such playful visual gamesmanship is yet another pleasurable aspect of Brodkin's art, as seen once again in "Now and Then," where a frieze of vertically striped identical figures joined at the hand like paper dolls simultaneously seems to allude to both primitive pictographs on the verge of morphing into written characters and the simplified human symbols modern people have evolved to reverse that process in places such as airports, where a multitude of languages now necessitates a new sign-language.

These simplified figures appear to vanish around the bend of a large horizontal scroll/sculpture looming out from the wall in three dimensions. Moving closer, the viewer realizes that the 3-D effect is illusory, accomplished with the artist's skillful undershadowing of a perfectly flat panel, but now more intimate pleasures reward close scrutiny of a painted surface of delicate pastel hues as subtly modulated as one of Walter Darby Bannard's color fields, albeit enlivened by barely legible word-bursts relating to the interminable mystery of time.

Other new works by Ed Brodkin, such as "Quanta II," "36 Stars," and "Anticipation," allude to a diverse range of subjects, from the Fibonnaci sequence to earthquakes; from the symbols indigenous peoples used to chart the cosmos in the context of a modern man's meditation on the night sky; to the way in which we all wait, in one way or another, for some form of enlightenment—or simply to be rescued from the increasingly complex circumstances of our lives.

In the latter regard, "Anticipation" may be addressing what Robert Frost was getting at when he wrote "What you want, what you're hanging around in the world waiting for, is for something to occur to you." Brodkin's characteristically tactile interpretation of the waiting game takes the form of a painting on a rectangular panel of a horizon and perspective lines appearing to emerge from a larger, less regular shape, created with rough material, suggesting a large sack. Here, the contrasts are especially stark between the precise white horizon and perspective lines within the rectangle above and the bold, broad strokes of color slashed across the lumpier shape below. One is reminded that in life in general, and in the work of Ed Brodkin in particular, as Henrietta Temple once put it, "What we anticipate seldom occurs; what we least expected generally happens."

More than most artists Brodkin, who speaks of things being "in the air" as a work progresses, seems to be a receptor-site for ideas. News from near and far, both in terms of geography and time, filters into his vision in ways that we seldom anticipate. Indeed, it is his ability not only to surprise us again and again but to pose questions that provoke thought, making intellect manifest in physical matter in ways that never fail to be visually engaging, that makes a new exhibition by Ed Brodkin something that this writer will always anticipate with great eagerness.

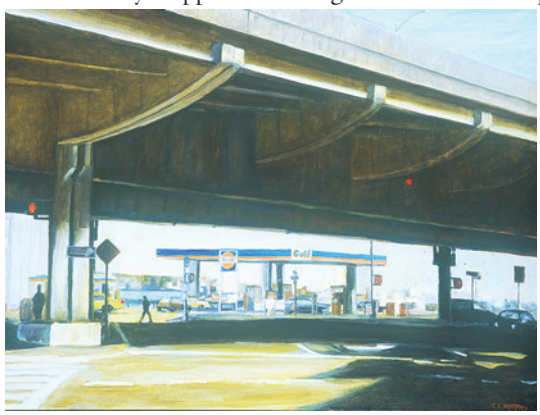
—Ed McCormack

Charles Murphy's Cityscapes Capture Magic in the Mundane

Because he paints the city in a manner so memorable as to make each of his compositions an iconographic image of the urban scene, one is tempted to see Charles Murphy as a less melancholic latter-day peer of Edward Hopper. However, given the austere geometries that bolster Murphy's realism, coupled with his coloristic daring, it seems just as germane to mention that as a young man Murphy, a graduate of the Yale University School of Art and Architecture, studied painting with Josef Albers.

Like his former teacher, who was renowned as a color theorist as well as a painter, Murphy appears particularly partial to yellow. But while Albers made the most luminous of all hues prominent in the cool geometry of his famous "Homage to the Square" series, Murphy employs it to butter the buildings in his paintings with warm sunlight. Touches of yellow also enliven areas of shadow in Murphy's oils and illuminate what he refers to (in an artist's statement for his recent exhibition "New York Impressions," seen through February 2, at the National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park South), as those moments when "the sun breaks through and produces a symphony of light and color."

Although Murphy's color is generally intense, it is never garishly incongruous in the manner of the Fauves; for he is a realist to the core, more concerned with capturing mood and atmosphere than bowling us over with his chromatic innovation. However, his colors invariably evoke a truth that is more than merely factual. For example, there has probably never been a sky so pervasively yellow as the one in Murphy's "Old Police Building." Yet we have all seen such a sky in our mind's eye. What Murphy captures in this composition, where that brilliant sky and the distinctive white dome of the Police Building are bracketed between tenements cast in shadow, as cars crawl over the glistening gutter, is precisely that transcendent instant when the rain relents and the sun suddenly reappears as though at the flick of a celestial switch.



"23rd Street Gulf Station"

For all his impressive formal grounding, Murphy is refreshingly unabashed regarding his desire to instill in the viewer "a deeper, richer feeling of emotional involvement with the world around us." And New York City, his home town, provides him with a plenitude of epiphanies with which to make his own emotional involvement contagious. He does not stoop to nostalgia, however; nor does he traffic in the picturesque. No subject could seem more commonplace, for example, than "23rd Street Gulf Station," where the service station, with its familiar blue and orange logo, is viewed from under an overpass that silhouettes tiny pedestrians with its shadows. Yet Murphy imbues the scene with qualities of color and light that make us see the magic in the mundane, even as he employs the beams of the viaduct to achieve a compositional thrust as dynamic as that in any of Franz Kline's gestural abstractions.

Snow plays an prominent role in some of Murphy's recent oils, either blanketing a park in pristine whiteness during a blizzard, as in "Stuyvesant Square Winter," or piled up in gray mounds along the curb, as in "Gramercy Park Winter," where a solitary figure is seen passing under the awning of the National Arts Club. Other urban contrasts can be seen in "Promenade" and "Chinatown #2."

The former painting is a breathtakingly panoramic composition, encompassing the entire span of the Brooklyn Bridge, viewed over a complex vista of rooftops, bathed in the areas of light and shadow with which Murphy brings his unpeopled cityscapes to vibrant life. The latter canvas looks south down East Broadway, near Division Street, with lower Manhattan's municipal towers looming over receding rows of tenements in the distance, as cars and the M15 bus pause for crowds crossing between the outdoor vegetable stalls and the East Corner Noodle Shop.

Further enlivened by a visual cacophony of signs covered with colorful Chinese characters,"Chinatown #2" captures and tames the bustling energy of one of the busiest intersections in the most vital neighborhood of the city. Here, as in all of his "New York Impressions," Charles Murphy makes a passing moment immutable by virtue of his consummate painterly alchemy.

—Ed McCormack

A New Wildness Enters Erma Martin Yost's "Feltworks"

Erma Martin Yost was raised as a Mennonite and her early work took the quilting tradition of a rural religious community that espouses unworldly austerity into the gritty, secular arena of contemporary art, where it quite miraculously retained its integrity and purity, even while Yost tackled issues, such as the domestic servitude of women, that her forbearers could hardly have anticipated.

Although informed by feminism, Yost's work has never been politically obvious or indulged in what Robert Hughes refers to as "the culture of complaint." Rather, she celebrates the strength and creativity of women in general, and of the quilt-making women in her lineage in particular, paying tribute to them through such devices as quoting decorative motifs from her mother's quilts in some of her own compositions.

Although she showed mostly innovative mixed media variations on quilting techniques up until 1993, since that time Yost has been exhibiting works in an archaic textile form that predated spinning and weaving several thousand years ago, when nomadic people subjected wool to heat and moisture, pounding it until it matted into a rough fibrous mass. Yost continues to innovate in the material that these ancient nomads used to make religious as well as utilitarian objects in "Feltworks: Hand-Felted Stitched Constructions," her sixteenth solo exhibition at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from February 1 through 19.

Other artists such as Robert Morris and Joseph Beuys have worked with felt, the former in "process" pieces consisting of large mounds of the material piled on the gallery floor, the latter combining it with animal fat in installations and performances. Both employed felt as a conceptual element. But neither explored the material's rich aesthetic properties in as painterly a manner as Erma Martin Yost does in her recent works, which combine a palpable physical presence with the intricacy of Persian miniatures.

"I choose the tactile medium of felt rather than canvas because the color is 'one' with the entire thickness of the object and not just on the surface, which results in unusually rich and dense color," the artist says of these works, in which she merges the archaic textile form with modern technology by adding appliquéd images created in PhotoShop.

Yost also employs stitching in various colorful threads, much as a painter might, for mark-making and outlining sinuous shapes, and adds small bits of clay, metal, or bone to some compositions, resulting in sensuous, atmospherically suggestive surfaces of a unique opulence. Despite their intimate scale, the thick, toothy texture of hand-felting lends the pieces a heft suggesting ancient tablets, the effect further enhanced by their ruggedly irregular edges. The felt panels—or "canvases," as Yost refers to them— are often arranged as diptychs, giving the appearance of open pages on which her compositions unfold like fables in a storybook. And indeed her newest pictures are as rich in animal and natural imagery as the tales of Aesop. Whereas Yost's show of two years ago was filled with allusions to shelter and domesticity, including photo-transfers of the farm where she grew up and faded family album portraits of her maternal and paternal grandmothers, an unprecedented sense of wildness has entered her newest feltworks.

"Water Thrush"

Vestiges of domesticity remain in the simplified house-shapes that have long been a recurring motif of her work. Now, however, these symbols often appear slightly askew, as though awash in the saturations of color that render the landscape aquatic, in pictures such as "Sun Song," where one little domicile leans like a drunken boat, buoyed and seemingly kept from sinking only by an orange orb that spirals up like a balloon from the waves formed by a flowing thread.

Such colorful linear forms are a constant in Yost's new works, threading through her compositions and connecting the various natural, cosmic, and manmade elements in pictures like "Night Chamber/Day Chamber," where suns and moons spin off the stitched outlines of superimposed and juxtaposed house-symbols set afloat against veils of deeply saturated blue and brighter yellow hues, the crevice between the two joined panels forming the actual border between night and day. Here, too, subordinate images pile up with a Persian richness: a graceful feminine arm appearing in the window of one house, gesturing enigmatically; the face of a veiled woman with a seashell hair-do filling the arched portal of another.

Water and land are equally fluid or interchangeable in other feltworks, such as "Sea Ladies," where female faces resembling those in old tintypes are superimposed on images of fish in the deep; or in "Two Shores," where a staid-looking Renaissance maiden could resemble both a Buddha in the lotus position and a primly clothed Venus on the half-shell, suspended under roiling clouds between watery expanses and land masses on which gold metallic threads form glittering grasses and tall weeds.

Primitive Venuses and female fertility figures of various shapes and kinds in a variety of materials are another recurring feature of Yost's new compositions: A slender metallic one appears in "Silver Venus," levitating near a leaping purple leopard with yellow spots and turtles cavorting playfully near a water-hole amid lush green trees and purple mountains in a fanciful faux-African landscape; a corpulent clay Earth Mother is the piece de resistance of "Venus Tree," and an angular, Egyptian-looking figure with crossed arms, bordered by colorful beaded designs and bracketed between big green sequined flowers, dominates the sparer composition of "Lotus Lady."

Along with such potent, primal feminine forms, Erma Martin Yost has populated her new feltworks with an entire menagerie of fanciful land and sea creatures, such as the little bone tortoises suspended from strings in "Turtle Kites" or clustered together in a delicately sewn gauze cocoon in "Winter Cradle"; the intricately stitched avians in "Owl Song" and "Oriole Song," and the various underwater critters wending their way through other recent compositions, reminding one of former Beatle Ringo Starr's whimsical song "In an Octopus's Garden."

Yost's ability to create visual poetry by virtue of her metaphoric handling of diverse materials calls to mind the similarly inventive box constructions of Joseph Cornell, while the breadth of her imagination and the fancifulness of her image-symbols, which take on meanings infinitely larger than the sum of their parts, is akin to the magical little masterpieces of Paul Klee. Erma Martin Yost acquits herself admirably in such august company, building in each succeeding exhibition on an oeuvre that grows steadily more surprising and substantial.

—Ed McCormack

Viridian's "Vibrations" Showcases Six New Members

Viridian Artists @ Chelsea, 530 West 25th Street, has maintained its status as one of our most consistently exciting artist-run venues by setting especially high standards for membership. Six artists who recently made the grade were seen through January 29 in "Vibrations: New Viridian Artists."

Carol Benisatto is among a growing movement of artists who employ drawing as a finished medium, as opposed to a vehicle for studies and preliminary sketches. In Benisatto's portraits in charcoal or pastel, fluid, boldly delineated figurative forms are set afloat against expanses of white paper. Like George Grosz, Benisatto often depicts her subjects in a manner verging on caricature. However, her work is less satirical, more sympathetic, than that of the famous German social realist.

For example, she depicts a bald, grossly overweight individual of uncertain gender wearing a backless evening gown without condescension or mockery. Benisatto focuses on the humanity of her sitters, rather than their oddities, celebrating their individuality and peculiar beauty through her ability to isolate the telling gesture, even as her swiftly drawn lines and swelling contours compel us with their abstract vigor.

The oils on canvas in Jack Bolen's "Arcadia" series, based on photographic studies the artist made of monumental rock formations in Maine's Arcadia National Park, and also informed by the tactile qualities of Egyptian tomb paintings, conjure up rugged surfaces and crevices in a pristine yet evocative technique recalling the implied textures in the work of the magic realist painter Ivan Albright. However, Bolen subverts any tendency to read his compositions illusionistically by superimposing small painted rectangles of color over the image here and there, creating piquant accents that reinforce the flatness of the picture plane. Thus, he sets up a tantalizing tension between the representational and the abstract that makes us view his pictures as formal rather than anecdotal entities.

Medieval Illuminated manuscripts do not exert an influence on many painters today, but Rosemary K. Lyons is inspired by them to create works that meld meticulous craftspersonship with contemporary semiotexts and a singular conceptual sensibility. One of Lyons' most striking illuminations casts light on "Catholic Sex Scandals" by combining religious iconography with an elegantly handlettered text citing statistics about nuns sexually abused by priests and other nuns, as well as accounts of a priest who convinced naive young women hoping to become nuns that sleeping with him would bring them closer to God. Just as Shahzia Sikander has revitalized the Indian miniature, Rosemary K. Lyons gives the illuminated manuscript new life as a vital contemporary vehicle for trenchant social criticism.

Marco Garello, on the other hand, translates a life filled with travel and varied experiences into a personal language of geometric forms that sometimes morph into wavering linear patterns. Grids and rectangular shapes created with colored plexiglass are frequently set against grounds painted with metallic silver pigment in Garello's compositions. Often his forms are suspended equidistantly from thin wires set against sheets of plexiglass, creating a floating effect. Garello has apparently evolved a systematic formal vocabulary to express a complex range of personal traits, having recently stated that his works reflect his own personality in that they are "open. contorted but, at the end, connected by a sound 'thread' in a structure that is strong and fragile at the same time."

Two other new members employ different degrees of representation to put a personal spin on objective subject matter: Phyllis Smith is a photorealist whose stated aim is to depict "complex deliberate and precise microcosms found 'close to the earth'." She accomplishes this with a meticulous technique that lends her close-up floral compositions a heightened intensity that is almost hallucinatory, even as she transcribes the botanical characteristics of her subjects with scientific accuracy. Thus in her paintings, pink petals can take on a labial quality that invests them with erotic frisson, dewdrops on a leaf can evoke beads of sweat on a harried brow. For while Smith works from photographs, she subtly transforms them in the process of painting in a manner that lends them a remarkable emotional component.

Roger Bole, who grew up in Detroit and has always been enamored of urban subjects, invests his images of brownstone facades and rooftops set against impassive skies with a sense of romantic longing. But while Bole cites painters of the Ashcan School, particularly George Bellows, as influences, his work also has a strong formal quality, in that his compositions, with their muted colors and clearly defined forms, have strong abstract underpinnings. Endeavoring to apprehend what he calls "the space beyond the limits of the painting," Bole achieves a peculiarly potent combination of architectural geometry and atmospheric poetry.

—Ed McCormack

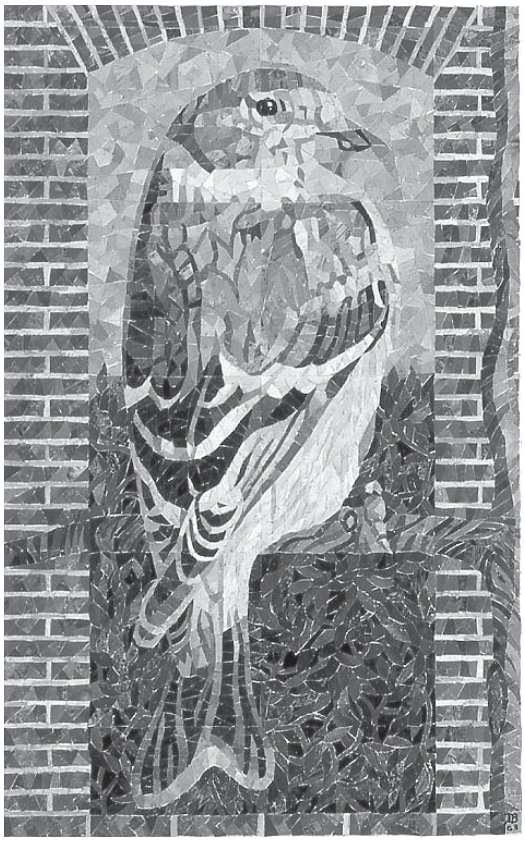
The Collages of Irving Barrett Construct Mythic Realms

Like his grandfather and namesake, the composer Irving Berlin, the collage artist and painter Irving Barrett has an elegant style. When working in collage, he does not overlap edges but creates continuous surfaces with small pieces of paper much in the manner of a mosaicist or an inlayer. Just how meticulously executed Barrett's collages are can be seen in his exhibition "Collages: Selected Works, 1984-2005," at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from February 22 through March 12.

The retrospective makes clear how Barrett's work has evolved over the past two decades. One constant has been the grid, although Barrett has varied its presentation. In earlier pieces, such as a 1984 work in acrylic and collage entitled "The Killer Awake," the squares of the grid served a narrative purpose, as in a comic strip or filmic storyboard. Within the panels are realist images reminiscent of a sequence in the Martin Scorcese film "Taxi Driver," with a t-shirted protagonist moving through a claustrophobic interior as though stalking a victim, the severe cropping of the images and jerky, skewed angles within the panels adding to the impression of a psychopath on a rampage.

The grid is also employed in a sequential manner in Barrett's 1987-88 work in collage and acrylic, "The Hollywood Square," to depict Ronald Reagan giving a speech. Each image is a "talking head" close-up in a manner akin to Warhol's multiple portraits. However, while Warhol's images are deadpan and repetitive, Barrett's portraits are more expressive, capturing the late former president in a variety of facial modes ranging from hammy, to clueless, to outright goofy.

Barrett's compositions grow increasingly more intricate by the early 2000s, in collages such as "Caligula Harvest" (2000) and "Couples," (2001). Fragmented hide-and-seek figures within multicolored grids suggest a kinship with postmodernists like David Salle and Sigmar Polke. In all periods, Barrett moves gracefully between figurative and abstract compositions, as seen in "Against the Wall" and "Derivatives Askew", both from 1994. In the former work, three surreal figures are set against a brick wall and a black and white checkerboard-tiled floor, the rioting patterns creating a dizzying optical effect; in the latter, a gridded structure appears to be deconstructing like a collapsing typography shop, tiny words and letters spilling out. The second picture recalls the use of printed text in some of Kurt Schwitters' "Merz" collages. Indeed, the strip of theater tickets in Barrett's 2002 collage "Timmy and Godzilla" could also appear to be a tribute to that Dadaist predecessor. Characteristically, however, Barrett does not merely glue real tickets into the picture but painstakingly constructs them in his mosaic manner from many tiny bits of paper. And rather than being a Schwitters-like abstraction, his considerably more involved composition expands from this small detail to include a complex variety of still life imagery, including miniature racing cars, toy soldiers, a Godzilla figurine with a stuffed monkey on its back, and a big-headed, cross-eyed, cartoon character in what appears to be a motorized wheel chair. One is at pains to even hazard a guess as to the exact meaning of any of this; yet the imagistic juxtapositions are fascinating in a strangely poignant sort of way, and the composition, like everything that Barrett does, is not only visually compelling but has an impact much larger than its relatively modest size.



"Gold Finch"

Among the most abstract of Barrett's collages are those in which forms that resemble crisscrossed wooden beams are the main composition element, creating an irregular, shattered grid on the picture plane, of which the aforementioned "Derivatives Askew" is an especially intricate and vigorous example. In a seminal work called "Modern Posts" (1989), similar shapes, resembling irregular cruciforms, are superimposed on a serial arrangement of cinematic landscape images.

In 2004, Barrett explores such intricately layered abstract compositions further in "Beer" and "Wine," in which the forms float over grids of brilliantly colorful beer and wine labels. However, in 2003 and 2004 he also embarks on a series of works such as "Gold Finch," "Blue Jay," and "Cat Bird," in which the grid is submerged almost to the point of invisibility within intricate mosaic-like images of birds. These are some of Barrett's boldest compositions for their use of single large forms, yet simultaneously some of his most tender and lyrical pictures, as seen in "Blue Jay," where a single bird is poised on what appears to be an actual mosaic pavement (a perfect synthesis of subject and medium) with a red brick wall behind it and a fat full moon hanging low in the night sky. Here, the tiny creature takes on a monumental quality, the formations of its feathers intricately delineated by tiny bits of pasted paper, the dark, bright eye of its profile rhyming visually with the full moon, its bearing, with its proud, puffed chest, as formidable as that of a knight in full armor. Equally striking in another manner are Gold Finch," in which the little bird is set like an icon within a red brick archway, and "Catbird," an image that verges on abstraction, with the pale blue bird engulfed by green foliage, the patterns of feathers and leaves swirling like vigorous brushstrokes.

Although Barrett's bird collages (the most poetic treatments of this subject since the avian assemblages of Joseph Cornell) are among his sparest pictures, he is not an artist to be easily pigeon-holed, if one may may be forgiven an awful pun. For in 2004, he also embarks on one of his most intricate and ambitious compositions to date: "Collapsed Synapse" brings back the two title characters of "Timmy and Godzilla." Only, now, two years later, we find the big-headed, cross-eyed boy in the motorized wheelchair and the green Japanese film monster somewhat marginalized in an apocalyptic composition where all manner of mechanical toys are piled in heap with a box of animal crackers and other colorful objects that suggest a childhood room well remembered and transformed into a mythic realm. Indeed, the ability to remember and manifest such playfulness well into adulthood is what makes an artist like Irving Barrett so valuable.

—Ed McCormack

The Iconic Flower in the Digitalized Acrylics of Léon Kipping

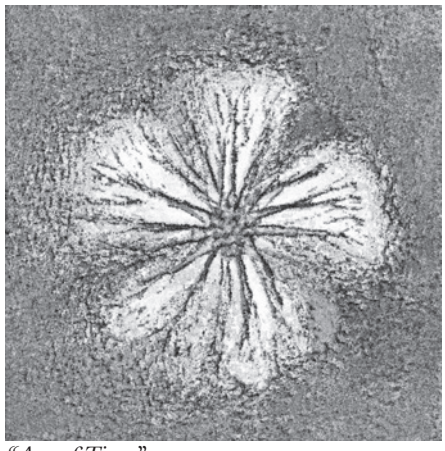
Not since Andy Warhol, has any artist exhibited such iconographic floral portraits as the Dutch artist Léon Kipping, in his recent show at Agora Gallery, 415 West Broadway. However, while Warhol's flowers were characteristically repetitive, each of Léon Kipping's images is as individual as any human portrait. For while both artists employ mechanical means along with handpainting— silkscreens in Warhol's case, digital prints on canvas in Kipping's — Kipping's use of paint is more gesturally expressive.

"Flower Power," for example, with its yellow petals radiating out from a vibrant red ground, has the frontal symmetry of a mandala. Thus, it suggests the widespread interest in Eastern spirituality, as well as the ecstatic benevolence of the hippie era, when the term of the title blossomed into being. Here, too, Kipping's use of texture is especially appealing, with the petals and other elements of the flower laid down in juicy, textural strokes.

By contrast, another work in the medium of digital print and acrylic on canvas, entitled "Moonlight," is more ethereal. In this work, yellow tulips appear to sway balletically on their stems in a night breeze, their forms blurred by motion against a deep blue ground. The chromatic quality of this picture is subtly luminous, the floral forms illuminated by the glow of the moon. Here, too, various secondary green, blue, and purple hues enhance the sense of nocturnal mystery, making for a strikingly atmospheric composition. Indeed, Kipping's "Moonlight" combines the emblematic power of contemporary abstraction with a symbolic lyricism reminiscent of Odilon Redon.

In another work called "Petrified Desire," green and violet hues combine with other, deeply burnished, colors and more pronounced textures, creating a composition that appears to pulse with suppressed energy. The sense of sexual tension inherent in the title is projected through a sensually round, softly defused floral form that appears to hover in space at the center of the canvas. By contrast, in another composition dominated by a single, central floral form, "Age of Time," Kipping employs white petals set against an earthy, monochromatic ground. In this work, rugged textures and scored lines contribute to the archeological sense of a floral fossil that has survived miraculously down through the ages.

Along with floral subjects, Kipping also interprets other aspects of nature, as seen in the composition entitled "Sunset," in which a yellow orb hangs low in a deep red sky, casting its glow over a dark horizon. The artist's use of textures as regular as the weave in a rough-hewn fabric such as burlap, lends an almost sculptural physicality to this image, which, like all of his work,



"Age of Time"

was originally created with an electronic pen on the computer. Kipping then employs design programs to refine his images, before transferring them to canvas and completing them with acrylic paints.

A successful art director and graphic designer as well as a painter, Léon Kipping avails himself of advanced technology to achieve seemingly limitless chromatic variety and conceptual inventiveness. Yet he relies on his astute aesthetic sensibility and the traditional medium of painting to bring his vibrant natural visions to final fruition.

—Gloria Kiehl

Patrick Amarillas Takes a Purist Approach to Photomontage

Collage has been a staple of modern and contemporary art since the early experiments of the Cubists at the turn of the century, but photomontage has been somewhat less ubiquitous. Cutting out and pasting down pre-existing photographic images to make compositions new and distinctly different from the original source materials has a history dating back to the Dadaists. In the First International Dada Fair, which took place in Berlin in 1920, artists such as Roaul Hausmann, John Heartfield and Hannah Hoch showed photomontages that were considered radical innovations for their political satire, social criticism, and ability to shock the general public. Heartfield and Hoch, particularly, went on to become known as masters of the medium. However, apart from the photomontages that Romare Bearden made early in his career, relatively few other artists have done distinguished work in the technique in recent years.

For this reason one was particularly excited by the exhibition of photomontages by an artist named Patrick Amarillas, which took place recently at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway. At a time when computer technology is all the rage, Amarillas is a purist who apparently prefers to persist with paste and scissors. Thus his pictures have an attractively tactile quality that has been largely missing in most work involving the juxtaposition of disparate imagery in recent years.

Although the appropriation of images from the popular print media and other sources has been widespread since the Pop era in the 1960s, few artists have employed them as poetically as Amarillas does in his compositions, which gain in intimacy and charm from their small scale. Unlike his Dadaist predecessors, Amarillas does not seem as concerned with political satire, social criticism, and shock value as he is with setting up surreal situations that provoke a subtler response in the viewer. In this regard, his work is more reminiscent of Max Ernst's rearrangements of images clipped from technical magazines and catalogs to create pictorial novels. However, while Ernst worked with black and white line engravings, Amarillas' use of full color images that he cuts and rearranges in a multitude of startling ways lends his work a considerably wider aesthetic range. It also enhances the visual verisimilitude that makes his imagistic anomalies all the more disconcerting.

That Amarillas does not title his pictures leaves a lot of leeway for imaginative interpretation, inviting a certain amount of creative collaboration on the part of the viewer. One must take such images as elegantly dressed women at a party where wild animals roam freely, or sci-fi scenarios involving robots and Barbi dolls, or giant lobsters scuttling along amid mannequins and skyscrapers at face value and exercise one's own imagination in deciding what to make of them.

Photomontage eventually came to be considered the most important innovation of the Dada movement, indelibly influencing the drawings of George Grosz, among other artists who participated, however briefly, in the movement, and later having an even more profound influence on advertising and other aspects of the popular media. It seems only proper, in an era rife with recycling and appropriation, that a gifted contemporary artist such as Patrick Amarillas should revive the technique in new and original ways.

—Wilson Wong

Mangan: A Rock and Roller's Visions of Humankind

It is not uncommon in our multimedia era for artists to excel in different disciplines simultaneously, particularly in pop music, where four art school lads from Liverpool went on to become world famous as The Beatles. Both Ron Wood, one of the two guitarists in the Rolling Stones, and David Bowie are accomplished painters as well as musicians. More recently, this writer became acquainted with the work of yet another doubly gifted rock and roller from the United Kingdom when the singer Mangan exhibited his paintings at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway.

Unlike Ron Wood (who paints portraits of his band mates in the Stones ad absurdom) and Bowie (who seems to specialize in self-portraiture), Mangan dispenses with the usual narcissism to give us vividly expressive images of high society and lowlife from a delightfully jaded angle. One part Alice Neel, two parts Egon Schiele, Mangan's expressively distorted portraits have the decadent charm of the party pictures on Page Six of the New York Post, although one has to assume that they actually depict the London demimonde in all its still glittery, decadent glory.

With titles like "The Pusher Man," "Superficial" and "Culturephrenia," and "Nonstopfullonbackdropcarryon," Mangan's paintings evoke a woozy world of party animals in full plumage cavorting self-consciously at various functions where it is probably not always easy to tell the socialites from the transvestites. His palette is appropriately electric, given to brilliant reds and acidic yellows that highlight the bleary eyes and bottle blonde shags of his subjects. Mangan is particularly good at capturing the kissy-kissy camaraderie of people who probably hate each other but come together nonetheless to drink, do drugs, and smile for the paparazzi.

"Culturephrenia"

Indeed, life appears to be just one big photo-op for these flaming creatures, and Mangan views them with the wry asides of an insider with certain reservations in his insightful canvases. In one painting a male figure with long frizzy tresses, possibly a rock star, is sandwiched between to young women with equally opulent manes and the desperately gleeful grins of groupies. All three are redheads. All three have smiles like livid, smeared wounds.

Another painting might depict the audience as seen by a rock and roller from the stage. One is a huge cretin with a shaved head. Another is a blonde wearing one of those inane Statue of Liberty headbands. Another wears a skeleton mask. One wears a yellow baseball cap and the morose resentful expression of a mass murderer. Yet another holds up a middle finger in a familiar vulgar gesture. All told, they are a motley crowd and Mangan nails them with the eye and brush of someone who has has seen them from an intimate perspective. Yet another painting called "Mankind," is just as harrowing in terms of this artist's perspective to delineate the features and foibles of a particular segment of society with insightful wit.

Mangan's talent for social critique, however, is hardly the only virtue of his art. He happens to be a skillful portraitist with a sympathetic ability to capture subtle qualities of expression that enable us to see beyond the grotesque social mask that many of his people present in public to the lost human soul trapped within.

—Marie R. Pagano

WSAC Group Show Celebrates Nature's Spell

Several approaches to contemporary still life and landscape subjects by members of the West Side Arts Coalition were seen in the recent group exhibition"Bewitched by Nature," at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street.

In contrast to the overblown scale of much of today's art, two artists demonstrated the intimate charms of miniaturism: Lori Fischler's "Les Fleurs" series depicted floral subjects in severely cropped pastel compositions possessed of great delicacy and mystery. Byung Sook Jung's equally diminutive watercolors captured the glorious, sun-gilded vistas and monumental architecture of Italy and Switzerland in striking detail and luminous washes of color.

Margo Mead, on the other hand, employed watermedia on rice paper with impressive fluency in her bold and colorful floral still life paintings. Mead has mastered Asian brush technique but combines it with a Western coloristic intrepidness reminiscent of Nolde. Another gifted watercolorist, Carol Carpentieri, manages to depict specific subjects with a good deal of verisimilitude without losing the freshness of her medium. This ability is especially impressive in Carpentieri's painting of a hummingbird hovering near gladioli thrusting through a broken fence.

Ava Schonberg's acrylic paintings are most powerful the more stripped-down they get, as seen in her painting of Jerusalem based on Armenian tiles, with its clear color areas, and her picture of a group of women watching a sunset, its simplified forms and vibrant hues reminiscent of Milton Avery. Patience Sundaresan's oils range from an exhilarating view of tiny figures making their way up a snowy mountain pass, to compositions in which various natural elements, such as an oranges and a jellyfish or oxygen particles and the inside and seeds of a papaya, are intriguingly juxtaposed either in grids or adjoining areas in the manner of a diptych.

The pastels of Linda Lessner have a shadowy quality, as though seen through a lens darkly. Lessner's way of making all of her landscapes appear as though dimly lit by an overcast sky lends them with a melancholy atmosphere which is particularly affecting in her picture of decaying driftwood on a wintry beach.

Bushra Shamma is another artist whose unique color sense lend her scenes a highly personal atmosphere, particularly in her oils of a silhouetted, low-lying city skyline under a vast stratosphere streaked with luminous pink,yellow, and blue hues. However, Shamma can also evoke drama with more subdued near-monochromes, as seen in her painting of a gray sky over a gray body of water, where her vigorous brush work is the piece de resistance. K.A. Gibbons, on the other hand, is a latter day Fauvist, whose landscapes and city scenes are invariably filled with brilliant hues that heighten the effects of nature, as seen in one painting of figures gathered near a thick, curving tree-trunk outlined in neon red, with a sinking sun similarly illuminated. Here, as in another oil, where brilliant clouds float over purple and yellow rooftops and water towers, Gibbons invests her canvases with chromatic radiance.

Miguel Angel, also reviewed elsewhere in this issue, shows two abstract tributes to fond feline subjects (one living, the other deceased), in which his characteristically geometric mixed media assemblage shapes are softened by a new painterly lyricism.

—Peter Wiley

Pia DiStefano Paints Her Inner Inferno

Pia DiStefano, who has her studio in Florence, Italy, and will be included this year in the prestigious Biennale of Florence, is a painter with a compelling view of the human condition, in which images of sensuality and mortality invariably intermingle. These are not the paintings of a happy go lucky soul, yet they are deeply moving and profoundly engaging in strange and unexpected ways.

The centerpiece of DiStefano's recent exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, was an epic unstretched canvas, ten feet high by twelve feet wide, nailed to the wall as though crucified—an appropriate presentation, since it was called "Purgatory." DiStefano brought this classic theme of Dante and Virgil alive anew in her boldly conceived oil which, despite its heroic scale and formal complexity, was made all the more immediate by the painter's improvisational approach.

"The paint hypnotizes me as it reveals something that could not be expressed in words," DiStefano has stated. "Forms slowly reveal themselves as already having been there. Like a dance with inner conversation, painting for me is the language of feelings and self awareness."

Traces of process are everywhere visible in DiStefano's paintings, invigorating her accomplished realist technique with areas that appear unfinished, drips, and other spontaneous elements. These seemingly unresolved notes add an unusual, almost

"Purgatory"

brutal, energy to her symphonic compositions, enhancing their brash authenticity.

Like the late Paul Georges, another intrepid figuratiist, DiStefano appears to invite chaos into the canvas, yet somehow makes all of the diverse elements in the composition magically cohere. In "Purgatory," some figures are classically proportioned while others are wrenched wildly out of scale, so that a hand looms monstrously, clutching at the body of a ripe female nude entangled with other naked figures (one wearing a death's head for a face) in a mass of bodies writhing above heaping tongues of flame. Yet somehow, nothing appears out of place; for the distortions depict emotional and psychological states, as opposed to merely physical circumstances or conditions.

As with Bosch, we know that DiStefano is portraying an inner inferno, a realm of visions and nightmares that take on verisimilitude in direct proportion to how far she is willing to go in revealing them. And she is willing to go very far indeed, in this and other paintings such as "Torn," where a nude self-portrait with pensive, downcast eyes is included with other unclothed figures in a less fiery but, in its own way, equally purgotorial scenario.

Nakedness in DiStefano's paintings is invariably a state of the soul as much as of the body. She strips her figures bare, revealing their inner demons, even as she employs succulent oil paint as a surrogate for sensuous flesh. In another large canvas called "Abyss," a pair of seemingly disembodied hands reach out from darkness to rest on the shoulders of a voluptuous female nude. Are they the hands of a lover, partially obscured in shadow, or of malign spirit reaching out for her from the Other Side? That we cannot know for sure and that the artist herself may share our uncertainty makes the paintings of Pia Stefano all the more powerful.

—Maureen Flynn

"Facts & Fantasy" are Juxtaposed in WSAC Group Show

In the West Side Art's Coalition's, "Facts & Fantasy," seen recently at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at Broadway at 96th Street, co-curators Lori Lata and Pud Houstoun left a lot of leeway for works ranging from the everyday to the fantastic—perhaps making the point that they're not that far apart.

The canvas collages of Irina Taflan suggest both autumn leaves and something more cosmic, with their swirling patterns and splotches of color like musical notes in some elusive melody. The brilliantly colored oils of Yookan Nishida, on the other hand, imbue the empty streets of a small town with a surreal quality akin to de Chirico, so that even a sign for a soda fountain takes on an otherworldly quality.

Pud Houstoun engages us on a chromatic and tactile level with vigorous abstract oils in which the pleasure is in the the fleeting gesture, the painterly palimpsest of one luminous color scumbled over another, the mystery of matter, the silent language of a sinuous brushstroke floating like a string on the wind.

Lori Lata revealed her own gestural virtuosity, with dark, juicy strokes of oil color converging in calligraphic configurations to evoke a deep sense of nature, of bucolic vitality and earthy essences evoked in bold, brash strokes laid down with an authority suggesting an intuitive grasp of the hidden energies underlying landscape.

Frequent exhibitor Miguel Angel never fails to surprise the viewer, here with a hard-edge composition called "Fly Away: Life/Balance/Death," suggesting a geometric red sun, its beams radiating out from a central orb, to which an actual dead housefly is affixed— giving new meaning to the term "mixed media!"

Jane Deeken transforms the ordinary in her bold acrylics, whether making a semi-abstract statement with three fat red tomatoes on a green plate, tilted frontally on the picture plane against a blue and yellow ground or capturing "Mrs. Cezanne" in a portrait that effectively quotes her husband's succulent strokes.

Erica Mapp breathes new life into Minimalism with acrylic paintings built on overlapping and serially organized rectangles and subtle color harmonies, but really hits the bull's-eye with "Seraph's Wings," an angular diptych of matching mirror-image shapes created with mirrored plexiglass tinted in pale pink yellow and blue hues.

Fernando Uriel Salomone returns again and again to the image of simplified lollipop trees on a hilly terrain, back-lit by burnished golden hues, the mysterious illumination suggesting something wonderful and mysterious beyond those rolling mounds, lending these oddly stylized oils a tantalizing atmospheric appeal.

A symbolic capsule biography of the doomed screen goddess Marilyn Monroe, appears to be the theme of Sacchi Shimoda's intriguing sequence of oil portraits, showing the platinum-tressed actress, distinctive mole and all, alternately juggling pills, making a mask of her own face, and flashing cards like a fortune teller, her eyes starry, her lips like a livid red wound.

Another frequent WSAC exhibitor, Ina Tumova Simmons, known for her innovative works in pencil on paper, showed three meticulously executed tondos floated on clear glass, pointedly juxtaposing the Peace, Yin-Yang, and Fallout Shelter symbols within circular shapes with cut-out areas revealing the white gallery wall.

—Chris Weller

Sculptor Philip S. Drill Revives the Spirit of "Vitalism"

Because, in his mid-seventies, besides being a widely exhibited artist with numerous solo and group shows in galleries and museums to his credit, Philip S. Drill presides over a third-generation family construction business in West Orange New Jersey, he has been the subject of human interest stories in the local press. By its very nature, however, such publicity only touches lightly upon what really makes Philip S. Drill newsworthy: his formidable gifts as a sculptor. Indeed, given the magnitude of Drill's aesthetic gifts, such publicity can only be compared to if Wallace Stevens had been covered in his hometown newspaper in Hartford, Connecticut, as a local insurance executive who just happened to write poetry in his spare time !

In terms of playing down the importance of his sculptural contribution it does not help matters that, like his distinguished but folksy predecessor Alexander Calder, Philip S. Drill happens to be an unpretentious man, who instead of making grandiose statements and spouting lofty aesthetic theories, is quoted saying down-home things like, "Since it requires patience, it's really a challenge. I enjoy the shapes. I can't believe I do it."

"Flight" by Philip S. Drill (Photo: Jason Klandella)

Artists like Drill, who are deeply rooted in family and community and do not run around in bohemian circles with an entourage are often underestimated. Yet it is their very connection to life as most people live it, rather than to the politics of the art world, that makes their work so deeply felt and valuable. One thinks of other artists in the American grain, such as Charles Burchfield, who forged impressive oeuvres while living quiet lives far from the usual haunts of the avant garde. Indeed, although Burchfield was a watercolorist, and Drill is a sculptor the two men have something in common: They have both evolved a personal idiom for interpreting the power and beauty of the natural world.

Since the rhythms of nature are cyclical, circular shapes predominate in the sculptures that Philip S. Drill shows in his exhibition at the Venezuela Gallery, 7 East 51st Street, from March 1 through 25.

Being a contractor by trade, it stands to reason that when Drill first started to sculpt in 1975, his first medium was welded steel, with which one constructs a piece much in the manner of building a house. However, after Drill became enamored with a shell he found on a beach and realized that he would need a more malleable medium to capture its organic flow, he began modeling his forms with plaster and clay, later casting the pieces in acrylic, bronze, stainless steel or glass. In this phase of his work, Drill acknowledges Jean Arp and Henry Moore as influences, and traces of the former artist can be seen in the grace and purity of his forms, while observation of the latter artist's formal strategies have obviously helped him to establish his method of integrating positive and negative spaces. Yet Drill's most important lessons have come from the natural world.

"Natural forms inspire me," he has been quoted as saying. "A walk in the woods, a stroll on the beach or a city street, even bones from the remains of a meal have served as a catalyst for creating a design."

One of the most striking aspects of Drill's work is his use of negative space to enliven the interior of his pieces, often taking the form of holes connecting one side of the sculpture to the other. These are especially striking in Drill's luminous cast glass piece "Interiors II." Here, as in other pieces, particularly in this ethereal, translucent medium, which captures light as an integral part of the sculptural statement, Drill makes "emptiness" as palpable a presence as solid form. The intricately curving contours within the piece could suggest a multitude of natural forms such as shells, caves, or the sockets and other orifices in animal skulls. At the same time, the luminous beauty of the surface also evokes more fleeting, less physical aspects of nature, such as the subtle movement of daylight as it plays upon the surfaces of rocks, foliage, or water. The combination of the material and the ephemeral is one of the salient features of Drill's pieces in cast glass, alternately suggesting the physical and the spiritual, creating a synthesis of the earthly and the numinous.

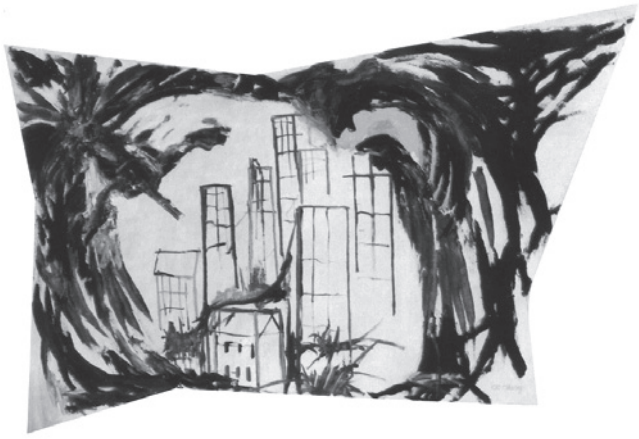
Another facet of Drill's art can be seen in "Flight, a work in cast bronze and glass in which layered circular and wing-like shapes evoke a soaring velocity and abstract avian grace. One can read all manner of meanings into this piece, but its formal attributes speak for themselves, operating autonomously to provide us with pleasure on a purely visual level, evoking poetic allusions that evade specific interpretation.

Indeed, the ultimate value of Drill's work is in his ability the stimulate the imagination by evoking the movement, energy, and essences of nature without becoming bogged down in its particulars. In this regard, Philip S. Drill is very much akin to Henry Moore, who according to Sir Herbert Read, author of "Art and the Evolution of Man," believed that " behind the appearance of things there is some kind of spiritual essence, a force or immanent being which is only partially revealed in actual living forms." Like Moore, Philip S. Drill is a "vitalist," in that his work attempts to apprehend the metaphysical qualities of organic life. In his early rejection of welded metal—a linear, constructed, mechanical medium—for more fluid casting techniques, Drill embraced a vitalistic aesthetic through which he continues to explore what Read refers to as the "ponderability" of organic form. And in doing so, he aligned himself with the sensitivity to volume and mass that characterizes the great sculpture of the past, even as he continues to evolve new shapes with which to evoke the spirit of the natural world.

—J. Sanders Eaton

The Shapely Compositions of Turkish Painter Ali Aksoy

Since the 1960s, certain artists, particularly of the minimalist persuasion, have employed the shaped canvas to depart from the traditional rectangular format and to lend painting a sculptural dimension. Few, however, employ it as successfully as Ali Aksoy, a painter born in Turkey in 1957, seen in a recent solo exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, in Soho.



Painting by Ali Aksoy

What distinguishes his work is how successfully his gestural style jibes with the various odd shapes in which he works, creating a perfect synthesis of subject and support. For the most part, Aksoy's compositions are abstract. Most consist of linear gestures, shapes, and color areas akin to the paintings of the American artist Brice Marden for their mazelike configurations. However, Aksoy occasionally includes certain simplified recognizable shapes as well, such boldly outlined floral forms, or a helicopter, or an automobile, or the rudimentary houses and other architectural shapes in the largest canvas in his recent show at Montserrat. Here, sketchy buildings were clustered at the center of the canvas and bracketed between vigorous strokes of red, blue, yellow and black laid down with a broad brush. These roughly curving strokes extended to the edges of the canvas, which jutted out like wings at the top of the composition, giving the large painting a buoyant feeling, as if it were about to take flight. The feathery quality of the brushwork further enhanced the wing-like effect— although Aksoy obviously makes no attempt at surreal symbolism and would seemingly prefer for us to view his paintings for the formal rather than their allusive qualities.

Yet, like Elizabeth Murray, another artist who employs shaped supports consistently and effectively, Aksoy's work invariably suggests imagery above and beyond the abstract qualities that lend his paintings their main thrust. Indeed, these suggestive bits of imagery imbue his paintings with a unique evocativeness which adds considerably to their appeal. That said, we can do nought but marvel at the skill with which Ali Aksoy dissects space and animates the picture plane with bold swerving lines, often in black overlaid with tones of red blue or yellow that convey a spiritual kinship with Mondrian's palette of brilliant primaries.

Aksoy, however is very much the gestural painter, employing line calligraphically in the manner of an action painter, and the odd shapes of his canvas contribute to the sense of movement in his work by alternately nipping certain shapes in the bud with their abruptly cut away edges or allow others to expand and continue where the limitations of a rectangular canvas would restrict or abort them.

Aksoy exploits such compositional opportunities thoughtfully, providing us in the process with an exhilarating new way of looking at the painting, of visually inhabiting its space, and being pleasantly taken aback by its compositional anomalies, its sudden unexpected departures from the norm. In the final analysis, there is little more that we can ask from any artist than to surprise us. And that is one thing that Ali Aksoy manages to do consistently, catching us off guard and stimulating us again and again with his energetic and engaging shaped canvases.

—Chris Weller

Maria K. Bolster: Dreams Woven into Tapestry

While painters often talk of how their medium leads them to their imagery, the manipulation of pigment itself suggesting various possibilities for improvisation, we normally think of weaving as a more deliberate process, every detail of which must be planned in advance. It has been said of Maria K. Bolster, however, who was born into a family of artists in Poland, that she prefers to "weave her dreams into tapestries." And the accuracy of that statement was made clear in Bolster's recent exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway. Although she does not create mere "peintres-cartoniers" and painting imitations, Bolster works like a painter in that her imagination is stimulated by experimentation with her materials. Her engagement with "sight" and "touch" in the process of creating her gobelin tapestries often inspires her to depart from the original design, leading to new discoveries that often make her pieces turn out quite differently than she initially visualized the project. Indeed, she makes preliminary studies in pastels and the spontaneity of that medium often carries over into the tapestries that she creates, in which she employs colors reminiscent of the Fauves, their intensity enhancing the painterly quality of her compositions. Although she learned the craft weaving techniques from her mother, who was trained as a gobelin artist at the Lodz Art School, Bolster earned an MA in art history in Warsaw (currently she continues her passion for the subject as a cicerone at Fonthill Museum, in Doylestown, Pennsylvania), and her knowledge enables her to elevate her medium to the level of fine art.

Just how successful she is in endowing her tapestries with high aesthetic value was especially evident in her landscape composition "Perpetual Motion," with its brilliant colors and sinuous linearity reminiscent of both Art Nouveau and the paintings of Edvard Munch. Here, too, the lake that dominates the composition is particularly dynamic, its wavering lines creating a sense of fluid movement, and the entire picture comes alive with a mystical intensification of nature akin to that of the Nabis. It is rare to see such a personal, emotive element in any craft medium; Bolster, however, transcends craft to invest her tapestries with a subjective power wholly her own. Someone once said of her work that its "synthesis of color and form suggests mental images rather than records direct visual experience," and this statement is certainly accurate in regard to Bolster's ability to make every image that she weaves an artistic statement that not only compels us for its subject matter but succeeds in purely abstract terms as well. One especially fine example of this is the tapestry entitled "Fanfan Two Lips," its composition dominated by fiery red and yellow hues. This bold composition in linen warp/wool and mohair weft ostensibly depicts a floral subject, yet as its wittily punning title hints there is also a labial suggestiveness to its sensually flowing forms. At the same time, one can savor the composition for its abstract attributes alone, which rival those of any abstract painting for their bold beauty.

Other floral tapestries, such as "Roses: Super Star '60," with its bouquet of pink roses exploding out of a stout blue vase also reveal the formal virtues that make the tapestries of Maria K. Bolster serious and enduring works of art.

—Dorothy Whittemore

Julio Aguilera: A Venezuelan Artist Makes His Mark in North America

Julio Aguilera with painting

"He knows neither what he wishes for, nor what he can hope for," wrote Goya in his seventy-ninth year, reflecting on the life of an artist. "He is celebrated for his restlessness, his angers, his passions; he is full of curiosity; he frequents fairs and popular fetes, taking a lively interest in circus animals, acrobats and monsters. He paints, draws, engraves, learns lithography and initiates himself in all the technical discoveries. His lucidity is absolute."

One is reminded of Goya's words on a visit to the midtown Manhattan studio of the painter and sculptor Julio Aguilera, as he prepares for his upcoming solo exhibition at the Embassies and Consulates of Venezuela, 1099 30th Street, N.W., Washington D.C., from March 7 to April 1.

For evidence of the artist's restless creative energy is everywhere: In the half-completed paintings on the easel and lined up along the walls; in the forms being modeled in clay, later to be cast in bronze, on the sculpting table; as well as in the squeezed and scattered tubes of oil paint on the palette and the lumps of fresh clay on the floor. However, while Goya was an aficionado of the bull ring, as he directs one's attention to a recently completed canvas called "Matador," Julio Aguilera declares, "I am an enemy of bullfighting!"

He says this with the conviction of a man who once excelled in a violent sport as a four-time international karate champion, but finally renounced violence for the life of an artist. His contempt for an even more violent blood sport in which the odds weigh heavily in favor the human participants, while their unwilling animal opponents are summarily executed at the finale of the ritual, is obvious in his painting.

"Matador" shows the bull triumphant, for once, the matador slumped over his powerful back like a limp rag in his green suit of lights. A horse the color of fresh blood ("All of my horses are red," says Aguilera) rears up directly behind the bull. Presumably, it is the mount of a fallen and gored picador, the bull's most cowardly tormentor. The horse is turned in the opposite direction from the bull, creating the effect of a single mythic creature with a head at each end. Both animals appear more noble than the defeated matador .

Other paintings by Aguilera, of a clown from his "Circus" series, and of a voluptuous female nude, although addressing less weighty themes, are similarly strong in execution, their forms practically carved out of thick, juicy oil impastos that lend them a physical presence akin to his sculptures. Conversely, Aguilera invests his sculptures with the fluid movement and gestural force of painting. The two mediums enrich and complement each other as the doubly gifted artist works back and forth between them, often interpreting the same themes.

Splendid examples of this can be seen in the two sculptures entitled, respectively, "War and Peace" and "Minotaur," both of which have also been realized as paintings. In "War and Peace" (a more monumental version of which has been commissioned for a building on Park Avenue), the theme is embodied in the rhythmically intertwined forms of a bull astride a struggling horse, seemingly symbolizing how the aggressive forces unfortunately prevail over more placid ones. In "Minotaur," the big woolly head of the fabled man-beast, nestled between the breasts of a swooning female nude, conveys the more positive power of erotic passion. Both pieces are possessed of a formal fluidity, coupled with a craggy ruggedness of surface, akin to the best sculptures of Jacques Lipschitz.

"War and Peace"

In another recent sculpture by Aguilera, commissioned by a collector named Rafael Rojas to grace the board room of the Venezuelan firm Venro Petroleum, tall conical oil rigs and drilling machines metamorphose into robotic, dinosaur-like beasts of burden. Thus the sculptor creates a memorable metaphor for how such machines serve the modern world's needs for transportation of fuel and heating oil.

In Julio Aguilera's studio, next to some snapshots of him posing cozily with his pretty blond wife Elena, there is a convincing photograph of the artist standing with an arm around the shoulders of a seated Pablo Picasso. Of course, since Aguilera was only eleven years old when Picasso died and is fully grown in the photograph, the picture is obviously a mock-up, an affectionate joke. Yet it is clear that Aguilera, who refers to Picasso as "The Old Man," sees the Spanish master as a spiritual father. And indeed the spirit of Picasso is present in the bold figurative distortions of Aguilera's paintings and sculptures of bulls and horses; of musicians and harlequins; of minotaurs and female nudes with sensually swelling contours.

However, even when locating himself firmly within the traditions of the masters he admires (as he does in his bows to Hispanic forbearers like Goya and Velasquez such as his witty contemporary reworking of "La Infanta") Julio Aguilera emerges as a highly original and thoroughly committed talent. Indeed, Aguilera has remained true to his calling and his unique vision ever since, as an impoverished five year old shining shoes in the streets of Caracas, Venezuela, a local painter made him the gift of a handful of half squeezed tubes of oil paint. Thus began a journey that has brought Julio Aguilera to his present prominence as arguably the most dynamic artist from Venezuela at work in the United States today.

—Ed McCormack

New York Notebook

Taking the Definitive

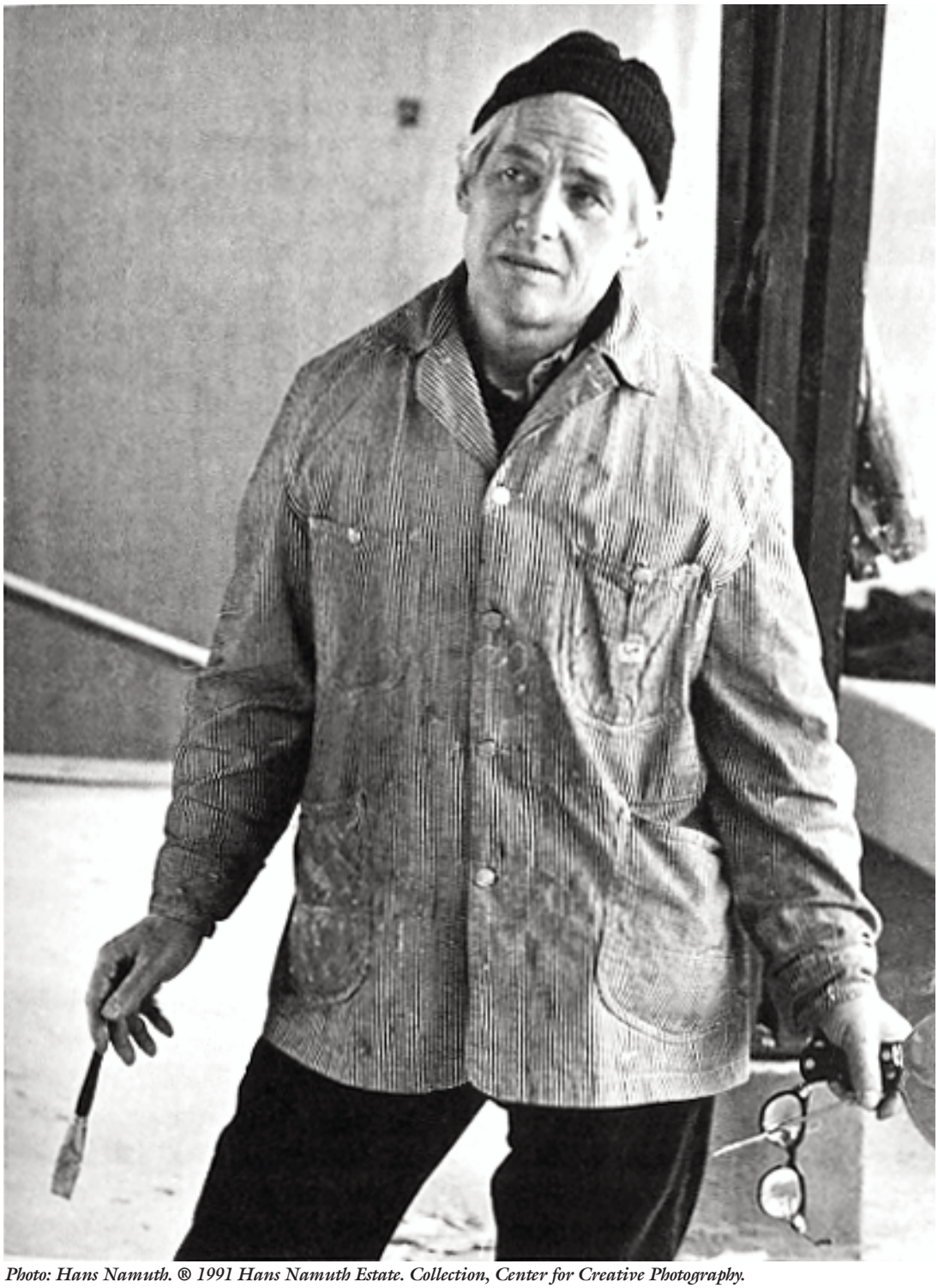


Photo: Hans Namuth. ® 1991 Hans Namuth Estate. Collection, Center for Creative Photography.

de Kooning Biography Personally

Briefly, as a young artist in the 1960s, showing at the Brata Gallery on East Tenth Street and damned near starving, I took a part-time job knocking off "de Koonings" in a kind of artistic sweatshop in a downtown loft that produced paintings for the lobbies of apartment buildings, banks, movie theaters, and other places that strove to affect an artifice of culture for the clueless. They weren't exactly forgeries, because I didn't sign de Kooning's name to them (nor my own, God forbid!). But at a quick glance—or what de Kooning himself referred to in his wonderful Dutch-inflected English as "a slippery glimpse"— they might have fooled the undiscerning eye.

It was easy: Every artist on the Tenth Street gallery scene, which started when he had his studio there, knew de Kooning's style—those fleshy pinks, vibrant yellows, and brilliant blues; those juicy, gestural strokes— by heart. Imitating de Kooning was part of paying one's dues; you had to work through him, to get him out of your system, before you could arrive at something halfway original.

Now, it was fun to wallow once more in the manner of the master —and get paid for it besides. But my very admiration for him eventually made what I was doing untenable: de Kooning was such a god to me that it came to seem almost sacreligious, and I just had to quit.

I might have been less rash had I known then all that I know now, having recently read De Kooning: An American Master, the definitive new biography by Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan (Alfred A. Knopf, $35). Who knew, for example, that in his own early struggles to survive and support his art, Willem de Kooning actually did window designs for A.S. Beck Shoe stores, freelanced "pretty-girl and pretty-boy pictures" to Life magazine, did hairstyle illustrations for Harper's Bazaar, and—shades of Andy Warhol!—even put together a portfolio of fashion illustrations?

Those of us who came later had an exaggerated fear of "selling out" that would have made fashion illustration, especially, seem impossible to reconcile with our macho mental image of the man we strove to emulate. Fashion and art had not yet met. Young artists back then did not dude themselves up in chic black designer duds. Like de Kooning himself, we wore evidence of our vocation spattered all over our proletarian dungarees as blatantly as a heart on a sleeve.

* * *

According to Stevens and Swan, Tenth Street was "the center of the art world in the late 1950s." But by the time my generation arrived on the scene in the mid-sixties, all that remained was the low-rent atmosphere and the communal spirit. Yet, there were still raucous openings on Friday nights, where even winos from the nearby Bowery could wander in, help themselves to cheap wine and feel like they'd stumbled into Seventh Heaven. Indeed, the line of demarcation between Bowery bums and hard drinking artists often grew vague. We had all heard the stories (confirmed in the present biography) about de Kooning's friends sometimes discovering him sleeping off a drunk in the gutter. Far from being put off by them, we found such excesses romantic.

After the Tenth Street openings we'd often continue to party at the Cedar Tavern, where our heroes once drank, emulating world class boozers like de Kooning, Pollock, and Franz Kline with an enthusiasm that caused more than one of us to succumb to alcoholism and others to eventually go on the wagon.

Stevens and Swan evoke the ambiance of the Cedar vividly: its smell of "spilled beer and tobacco smoke," its low light, its "existential aura," which "owed more to Brando on the docks than Sartre at Deux Magots." They also provide memorable word portraits of its patrons: Pollock was pugnacious, boorish, given to "cowboy-on-spree drunks." Kline, a more sophisticated drinker who prided himself on his resemblance to the suave film actor Ronald Coleman, was a nimble conversationalist who "invented a kind of fantastic double-talk." Although tense and reserved when sober, after a couple of drinks, "de Kooning began to talk in a way that seemed to undermine authority, confront unspoken rules and crack language itself into surprising new pieces."

With its cast of colorful characters, delicious gossip, and steamy sexual intrigues, this book is such an entertaining read, that one can't help casting the movie in one's mind. The main question is: What Hollywood leading man will play Bill de Kooning? Jude Law looks right for the role and might be a logical choice, given that the painter emerges as a womanizer to rival "Alfie" himself.

At the same time, Mark Stevens, the art critic for New York magazine, and Annalyn Swan, a former senior arts editor for Newsweek, both write knowledgeably about art. They cover every important development and period in de Kooning's career, from his fruitful early friendships with Arshile Gorky who "provided the critical model and moral outlook that helped de Kooning decide how he would live his life"; to his early figurative works; to his seminal abstract expressionist paintings; to his sensational "Women" series; to his rapturous abstract landscapes of the early 1960s and the controversial paintings he produced late in life, befogged by Alzheimers and increasingly manipulated by studio assistants. They are especially enlightening about technical matters, such as his use of safflower oil instead of the standard linseed oil to get that lush, "blubbery" quality, as he called it, that he liked in his paint surfaces. And they give us invaluable glimpses of the artist's origins in the book's first chapter, "Hard Beginnings," assiduously researched in Rotterdam, where de Kooning was born into poverty in 1904, the abused child of divorced parents.

We follow young Willem, whose drawing ability was recognized early, to his first job as an apprentice in a commercial design studio at age 12, and on to the Academy, where he studied classic art and guild techniques. Not far from the academy was the bustling seaport's red-light district, where he reveled in the rakish subculture of sailors, shipbuilders, slumming businessmen, confidence men, pimps, and prostitutes. It was here, watching the whores who would sometimes flash their breasts provocatively to attract customers, that de Kooning first became fascinated with the "slippery glimpse," as he would later describe what he tried to capture in paint. The authors explicate it as "those quick, oblique but illuminating moments that the eye registers almost subliminally."

Arriving in New York as a stowaway in 1926, he lived for awhile in Hoboken, New

Jersey, birthplace of that other mythic personality, Sinatra. (Musing morbidly late in life, the painter would say "I would like to have Frank Sinatra's record 'Saturday Night Is the Loneliest Night of the Week' played at my funeral and imagine that all my friends' eyes should be drowned in tears.") In Hoboken, de Kooning found work as a house painter, and, remembering that time, would later often say, "I learned a great deal on how to mix pigment with water and oil."

Fellow artist Conrad Marca-Relli, who met de Kooning soon after he arrived in America recalls, "He was like the Dutch Boy on the paint cans, blond and blue-eyed. He was like a little boy. He had a thick Dutch accent. He was a very Chaplinesque character, that little immigrant. His whole manner was very humble. If he came into a room, he was awkward, like with his hat in his hand..."

Photo: Estate of Rudy Burckhardt/Artists Rights Society (ARS) New York

Although de Kooning never lost either his accent or his outwardly humble manner, he gained a great deal more confidence as he became a part of the vibrant art scene already brewing in downtown New York. By 1929, he was living in Manhattan with his first American girlfriend, a vaudeville performer named Virginia "Nini" Diaz. He designed window displays for A.S. Beck shoe stores during the day, toured art galleries on his lunch hour, and sometimes hurried home after work to paint modernist canvases indebted to Matisse.

Fast forward to 1938. De Kooning is living with a Martha Graham dance student and sometime artists model named Juliet Brown, who will later marry the famous surrealist Man Ray. While cohabiting with Juliet, de Kooning is having an ongoing affair with his former live-in girlfriend Nini Diaz. At one point, returning from abroad after a vaudeville tour, Stevens and Swan tell us, "Nini arrived in New York with no money and nowhere to stay. And so she turned to de Kooning for help. For awhile, she recalled, she slept in the same bed as Bill and Juliet with Nini on one side of Bill and Juliet on the other."

Obviously, the little Dutch Boy from the paint can had undergone a radical bohemian transformation. His relationships with women were both casual and complex. Although he was not yet successful in worldly terms, he was already known downtown as a rising painter, and his good looks and charismatic manner attracted lots of groupies. There were one-night stands with women he picked up at the Cedar, as well as relationships that went on for years, all often occurring simultaneously.

* * *

Bill finally met his match in Elaine Fried, an art student from Brooklyn, soon to become the painter Elaine de Kooning, who came into his life in 1938 and remained an important part of it, in one way or another, up to the very end. Beautiful, brilliant, artistically ambitious, Elaine was the first woman de Kooning actually fell in love with and the only woman he ever married. Yet, as he was soon to find out, she was not only as ambitious about painting as he was but had no interest in keeping house or submitting to the double sexual standard that was routine among downtown painters and their wives in their era.

Stereotypically Dutch in his desire to have a hausfrau who kept a clean and orderly home and put a good meal on the table, de Kooning was probably as dismayed by Elaine's disinterest in housekeeping or bearing him children as he was by her extramarital affairs. ("Vot ve need is a vife," he once declared, surveying the mess in their shared studio, a line that thereafter became a bittersweet shared joke.)

Elaine caught a lot of flack for being a schemer and a manipulator. Yet no male painter was regarded as harshly for exploiting others both professionally and sexually, causing one to wonder if Elaine was simply condemned for being a feminist before her time:

"She was determined to assume the privileges ordinarily accorded to men," the authors tell us. "Those privileges extended to sex. Like many men, she saw nothing wrong with playing the field." However, they also note, "This relationship, in which she and Bill remained soulmates whatever the passing distractions of love and sex might bring their way, was not just a facade: it always remained true for her."

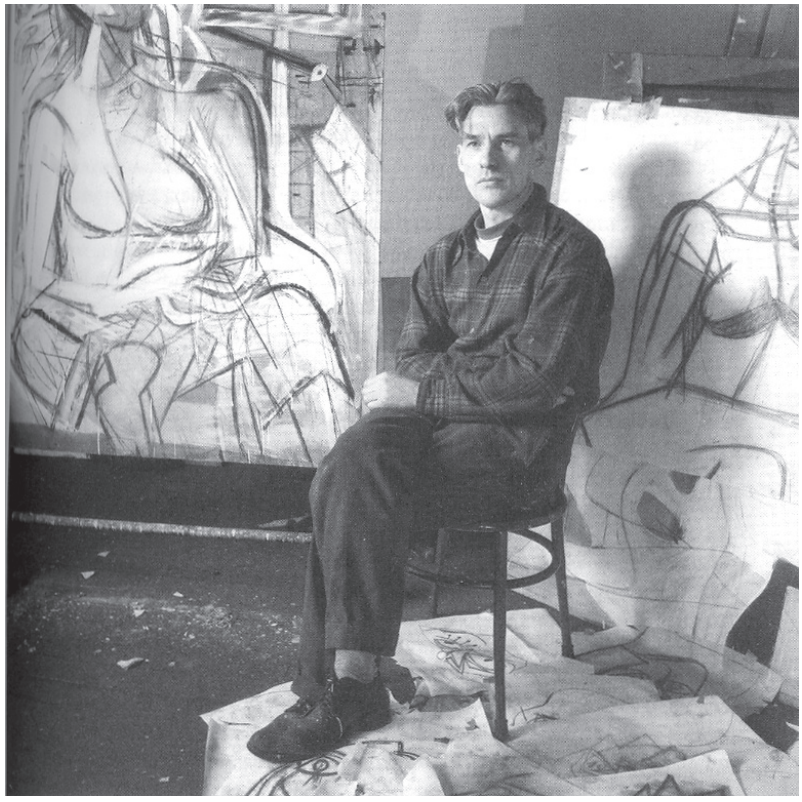
Their marriage survived even Bill's permanent liaison with the artist Joan Ward, mother of his beloved daughter Lisa. Ward, however, soon realized "that the birth of Lisa would not transform de Kooning into a responsible father or renew his love for her. De Kooning, it was clear, was simply not going to inconvenience himself —or his art—to accommodate other lives. It would instead be Joan and Elaine, the women with the greatest claim upon him, whose lives would be upended."

Although Bill and Elaine lived apart for most of their marriage, they never divorced. Elaine was Bill's biggest champion, promoting him with as much wifely partisanship and pride as Lee Krassner hyped her husband, Jackson Pollock, in the "friendly enemies" rivalry between the two big guns of abstract expressionism. Each was intent on protecting her husband's reputation as "the most significant American painter of his generation." In this way, although both women were painters themselves and independent spirits, they remained traditionally supportive spouses, to some extent subordinating their own ambitions to those of their men.

If the sheer novelty of Pollock's drip technique had gained him more publicity and earlier success, by 1952 de Kooning had turned the tables with "Woman I," which boldly defied the contention of Clement Greenberg, Pollock's biggest critical booster, that the only possible direction for progressive painting was now abstraction. This monstrous female icon with fang-like teeth and a voluptuous body slashed down in ferocious strokes was seen as shockingly misogynistic by some, a masterpiece by others. Perhaps synthesizing the public impact of screen goddesses like Marilyn Monroe and the painter's private power-struggle with Elaine and the other women in his life, "Woman I" was a radical departure from "Excavation," the abstract tour de force he had exhibited at the 1950 Venice Biennale, and which the authors acknowl-

edge as a masterpiece, "a synthesis of the contrary passions animating painting during the first half of the twentieth century."

"Woman I" was hailed in glowing essays by Tom Hess and Harold Rosenberg, the two leading critics for ArtNews. Rosenberg's piece, especially, was so fulsome that some art world skeptics regarded it as "thunderous bullshit." Stevens and Swan speculate that "Hess and Rosenberg each found in de Kooning a way to build a reputation: a critic often enters history on the back of a great artist." A writer more given to vulgarity than Stevens and Swan might be tempted to amend that last phrase to read "on the belly of a great artist's wife." For the two biographers inform us that in the late 1940s and early '50s, "Elaine had affairs with de Kooning's two main critical champions," and, a few sentences later, add "Many, in fact, believed that she chose to sleep with the two critics in order to promote her husband's career."



Henry Bowden. Courtesy of the Charles Campbell Gallery, San Francisco

* * *

Before I gave up drinking for good several years ago, I preferred to drink with people who could keep up with me. One such person was Ruth Kligman, a painter several years older than myself, who'd had a superb mentor in that regard: Jackson Pollock. In the mid-seventies, we sat in a brown, bummy gin mill downstairs from Ruth's loft on West 14th Street and she regaled me with tales of Jack The Dripper. She had published a breathless memoir called "Love Affair," all about her romance with Pollock some twenty years earlier, when she was a beautiful young art student and he was in the prime of his decline. However, the stories she told me privately about his drunkenness, impotence, depressions, and inconsolable fits of weeping seemed more pathetic than romantic.

As much as she seemed to enjoy reminiscing about her role as the femme fatale of the Cedar crowd, Ruth (who would later be portrayed by Jennifer Connelly in the film "Pollock") never told me that she also had an affair with de Kooning. I only learned of it recently in Stevens and Swan's book:

"In this extravagant period, the star of the scene took a theatrical lover. Hardly anyone at the Cedar who heard, in 1957, that de Kooning was seeing Ruth Kligman could believe it. Or perhaps it was poetic injustice. Kligman was the survivor of the car crash that killed Pollock and Kligman's friend, Edith Metzger. In the eyes of most artists, she was the hot young thing who had swooped into the drunken Pollock's deteriorating life, driven away his wife, Lee Krassner, and behaving with a va-va-voom flamboyance new to the art world. Elaine called her 'pink mink.' Franz Kline preferred 'Miss Grand Concourse.' What understandably excited and impressed the armchair psychiatrists at the Cedar was how psychologically strange and revealing the relationship appeared. Was Bill still competing with Pollock, even now, after Pollock's death?"

Perhaps Ruth chose to emphasize her affair with Pollock because her innate flair for the dramatic told her that it was more compelling for a love story to end in tragedy. Certainly it was more flattering to her own image to be seen as the bereaved lover of the starcrossed James Dean of the art scene than as a calculating groupie who moved in on Pollock's only remaining rival almost as soon as the body was cold. Still, she was with de Kooning quite a bit longer than she was with Pollock, even convincing the reluctant traveler to take her to Italy. And if this book as a whole is the stuff of a major Hollywood movie, their affair alone was certainly tumultuous enough to qualify as a TV miniseries:

"Ruth relished the society and the heightened mood of la dolce vita. Among the Italians, she was likened to—and occasionally mistaken for—Elizabeth Taylor. Sometimes the paparazzi photographed her and de Kooning for the cheap papers and magazines. She bought as many clothes as de Kooning could afford, and persuaded him, too, to buy some fine Italian suits. But she and de Kooning often fought, especially when they had been drinking heavily, which shocked the Italians, who were unaccustomed to late-night noise and brawling."

While the authors note that the affair with Ruth "with its daily pattern of long lunches, late nights, and heavy drinking seriously compromised de Kooning's work habits," they also acknowledge that she could also be something of a muse, reinvigorating the aging painter with her youthful enthusiasm:

"Coming into de Kooning's studio one day, not long after their relationship began, Ruth Kligman saw a large blue and yellow painting on the wall and immediately exclaimed, 'Zowie!'— a piece of art criticism de Kooning relished. It might remain the ambition of de Kooning and his friends to create a 'masterpiece,' but in the late fifties it would seem corny and hifalutin—and too European—to use a word like that. 'Zowie' was, instead, the sort of sinewy street slang that de Kooning and other painters of the period relished. In Ruth's eyes, de Kooning had knocked one outta da park. Hit the jackpot. Scored big time. Kaboom!"

"Ruth's Zowie," as de Kooning named the painting, is one of several major works reproduced in full color in the book, and the authors read a great deal of erotic meaning into its "explosive coming together of brushstrokes,"its "knotting of forms into a climactic burst," "feminine V shapes," even attributing to the paint application itself "a slip-and slide quality that was sexual." Anyone who writes about art can understand the temptation to seize upon the sensuality of such a painting and make easy assumptions about it's connection to the artist's personal life—especially since de Kooning's affair with his young mistress lends itself so well to salacious musings. Yet whether or not this 1957 canvas is any more sexually inspired than many of de Kooning's other paintings is debatable, given the pervasive sensuousness in the oeuvre of the artist who once said, "Flesh was the reason why oil painting was invented."

Stevens and Swan are entirely correct, however, when they tell us that Ruth's Zowie is "an early example of de Kooning's muscular imperial style," for he "seemed to throw his own body (not just an arm or a wrist) into the rhythms of the painting; the picture has his physical impress. This was the work of a painter at once public and personal, a master of his milieu, whose autobiographical 'mark' created wonder and applause. His eye was his 'I.'"

* * *

I told myself it would be a nice gesture to show up with a bottle of something when I went out to East Hampton one afternoon in 1982 to interview de Kooning for Rolling Stone. Having profiled celebrities in print for years (after discovering it was less stressful than trying to make a living as a painter), I was not in the least impressed by famous people. Most of them turned out to be smaller than life. But this was different. De Kooning was more than merely famous; he was someone I had always revered, and I thought a drink or two would relax me. So I was not happy when I asked at the local liquor store what Mr. de Kooning liked to drink and the formidable matron behind the counter answered pointedly, "Far as I know, Mr. de Kooning is not supposed to drink."

As it turned out, de Kooning's down to earth personality immediately put me at my ease. Although he had a brush in his hand when we arrived and I felt a little sheepish for interrupting his work, he seemed genuinely amused when Alan McWeeney, the photographer assigned to my piece by Rolling Stone, exclaimed in his thick Irish brogue, "Why, you look like the living prototype of Gully Jimson!"

"Yah, is that so?" de Kooning said, obviously tickled to be likened to the mad artist protagonist of Joyce Cary's novel "The Horse's Mouth."

When McWeeney insisted on dragging de Kooning out into the chill evening air to photograph him in what was left of the natural light, his young assistant, Tom Ferrara, didn't seem crazy about the idea.

"Well, at least put a coat on, Bill," he said, draping a shabby tweed sportjacket over the old man's shoulders before he was led out into the yard to pose gamely, as though for a firing squad, a long-ashed cigarette shivering in his lips.

"I guess this is the wages of fame," I told him, trying to finesse the situation.

"More like the wages of sin maybe," de Kooning quipped.

Back in the studio, when Ferrara demonstrated the new mechanical easel, custom built to turn and tilt large canvases at the touch of a button, de Kooning mock-groused, "Never mind the paintings, that's the first thing he shows off! To tell you the truth, that thing embarrasses me. Don't you think there's something creepy about it?"

Noticing two female figures sketched lightly in charcoal on a large canvas nearby, I asked if he was gearing up to paint a new series of "Women."

He shrugged. "Could be, but I never know for sure what will happen. They may just disappear into the paint. It happens all the time." Then, pointing to another large canvas across the studio he said, "So many of them turn out to be dogs like that big purple one over there. At a certain point, there's nothing you can do about it, so I just stop..."

Studying the painting, an unfinished abstraction in his late, linear, "ribbon" style, of which it would have seemed presumptuous for anyone else to make so flippant an assessment, he shook his head and said, "Boy, what a dog!"

Then, after a moment of reflection, he added, "I probably shouldn't complain, now that I have everything I need. It's nice not to worry about eating or being able to pay the light bill anymore, like when I lived in a loft on Tenth Street and my lights were shut off and I had to run a wire out into the hallway to steal electricity from the landlord. But a funny thing, painting never gets easier. Wouldn't you think it would get a little easier after all these years? But, you know, finishing one painting never solves the problem of the next one. You always have to start over the next day. Every morning when I come into the studio to work, I feel like I could have the potential to do better somehow. I still want to do just one terrific painting yet..."

His candor was disarming. Here was the greatest painter of our time and he was talking to McWeeney and me as though we were just three guys sitting around bullshitting about this and that. Admittedly, he was sometimes forgetful and repetitive when he spoke of recent events. But he was quite lucid when he reminisced, especially about his old friend Arshile Gorky, of whom he said, "Gorky was the cat's meow. Even though he was self-taught and I had my training from the Academy in Rotterdam, he was way ahead of me. But even before he got so sick and his wife left him, he was always such a sadsack. You know, I could never understand why Gorky was so melancholy. After all, life is difficult enough without making a big deal out of it."

* * *

"During the spring of 1981, Gorky, never far from his thoughts, became a particularly powerful presence. 'In a way,' de Kooning said in the early eighties, 'I have him on my mind all the time.'"

The passage above appears in the chapter of Stevens and Swan's book called "The Long Goodbye," which chronicles de Kooning's slow but steady decline into Alzheimer's dementia. Elaine had started living with de Kooning again for the first time in many years in 1978, weaning him from booze; taking over the hiring and firing of household and studio help; carefully refashioning his image: "As the aging de Kooning increasingly withdrew into his private world, Elaine created a seductive persona for him. He became the grand old man with a mop of white hair, a Matisse for the late twentieth century, walking about in his painting overalls, lost in profound reveries and yet smiling and full of charm."

Although Elaine was not present to monitor him on the day that McWeeney and I visited, this was indeed the docile master we met. And, despite his forgetfulness, de Kooning remained productive, averaging "almost a painting a week" from 1983 to 1986. According to Tom Ferrara, "for the most part his mind stayed largely intact for a very large time, even after he started to repeat himself and do things that made him outwardly seem off his rocker. He was capable of putting together very complex ideas."

Disturbingly, however, in the late '80s, as de Kooning's dementia progressed, Elaine, who "stood to gain enormously from the sales of recent art" encouraged his studio assistants to take a more active role in the production of his paintings. A new assistant named Antoinette Gay, who was not trained as an artist, sometimes laid out his palette and "chose awkward colors." Other assistants "selected drawings to project and then drew them onto the canvas for him, to start him painting." Sometimes they would even "combine parts of different drawings to add variety."

"I tried to keep some sort of sense about them that would relate to what Bill was working on at the time," said an assistant named Robert Chapman. "Not deviate drastically."

However, as Tom Ferrara admits, "The temptation was to be overzealous," and as the authors point out, "The problem was not that such interventions took place, but that the paintings continued to be treated as if they were completely de Kooning's."

Intervention or not, one such painting, from 1987, caught my eye the first time I flipped through de Kooning: An American Master, after receiving the book up from publisher's publicist. Although reproduced in black and white, its flowing biomorphic forms instantly reminded me of Arshile Gorky. Then I noticed the title: "The Cat's Meow."

—Ed McCormack

* * *

The Existential Allegories of Romanian Artist Camelia Crisan Matei

Painting by Camelia Crisan Matei

In recent decades there has been a rebirth of narrative painting. Unlike in earlier centuries however, when the narratives were often tied in with communal myths or existing institutions such as the church and were therefore beholden to an established agenda, contemporary narrative paintings often take a more personal, poetic form.

One of the more interesting of these was encountered in the recent exhibition of Camelia Crisan Matei, at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway. Born in Romania in 1954, Matei, who has exhibited widely throughout Europe and the United States, worked for several years as an art restorer at the National Art Museum, in Bucharest, and elsewhere. This experience probably contributed to her impressive technique in oil on canvas, which lends her paintings a classical quality, despite their highly original approach to subject matter.

Camelia Crisan Matei's figures appear to inhabit a timeless realm. Although the settings of her pictures have urban qualities, they cannot be identified with certainty as belonging to any known city or century. Some of the paintings shown at Montserrat Gallery belonged to a series that the artist calls "The Hole." One such work depicted a group of men in various stages of nakedness on a white rectangular form suggesting a raft after a shipwreck or a small island on which they were marooned. However, it was adrift on a sea of dark faces in an enclosure that could have been the bottom of a well. One man appeared to be levitating. Another was elderly, with a white beard and a hefty book beside him suggesting a sage who had fallen on hard times, perhaps at the hands of some sinister political regime. In fact, the setting itself could have suggested a subterranean gulag with the only light entering from a circular opening far above the men's heads: The Hole.

In another painting by Camelia Crisan Matei from the same series, our vantage point seems to be that of the men below, for it depicts a circular shape ringed by the faces of men peering down into the hole amid beams of light streaming through. These are obviously privileged beings who live in the outer world, the world of daylight. Thus Matei makes us see the The Hole from both sides and to empathize with the apparent victims of her powerful existential allegory. Perhaps it is intended to tell us that we are ourselves alternately victims and victimizers in a world for which the hole is a personal metaphor.

In another painting, we seem once again to be more fortunate voyeurs, peering through two long narrow skylights down onto huddled crowds of men who also seem to be either inmates or workers. That one cannot be exactly certain of their role is one of the things that makes Matei's paintings so intriguing, for contemporary allegories, in order to be convincing, must reflect the ambiguity of our anxious age.

Another thing that makes the work of Camelia Crisan Matei convincing is the quality of her painting. Working mainly with muted earth hues accented here and there with brighter colors, she evokes muted atmospheres that contribute to the somber mood of her scenes. While reminiscent of Goya's dark view of humanity, these paintings reveal the vision of a uniquely contemporary narrative painter.

—Chris Weller

Venturing "Beyond Borders" at the Venezuelan Center

Carlos Osorio got special billing in the exhibition "Beyond Borders," at the Venezuelan Center gallery, 7 East 51st Street, since the show was announced as a fine arts exhibition by "Metropolitan Artists and one Venezuelan Artist."

As many of us who follow the New York art scene know, Metropolitan Artists is a twenty-five year old arts organization operating under the auspices of West Side Arts Coalition, and boasts among its membership some of the more interesting and frequented exhibited New York painters and sculptors.

Osorio's inclusion with this group was obviously contingent on the venue, a cultural arm of the Consulate of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, and he emerges as an exciting new discovery. His paintings are relatively modest in size but have an impact that transcends scale by virtue of his ability to surprise us with unexpected juxtapositions. In one picture, for example, a large snake encircles a tiny rabbit like a serpentine arabesque. In another, a large crocodile and a small turtle stroll along together in an oddly companionable manner. In a third canvas, a bird emerges from a shell in a natural setting codified in a semi-abstract style notable for its formal and textural qualities. For Osorio, the animal kingdom becomes a metaphor for a wide range of concerns. His depictions of wild critters engaged in the struggle to survive resonate with a host of human meanings.

By contrast, in Barbara Yeterian's "Bird Series,"subject matter is employed mainly to launch furious gestural abstractions. For while Yeterian's parrot-like avians are formidable in a manner that recalls Leonard Baskin's black and white "Raptors," often paired with poems by Ted Hughes about birds of prey, her primary concerns are painterly. Brilliantly colored plumage provides her an opportunity for generating richly pigmented pyrotechnics derived from the vocabulary of action painting. Thus Yeterian's "Bird Series" engages us on an optical and visceral level with a flurry of brushstrokes that simultaneously deconstructs her subjects with and projects an immediate, highly kinetic sense of their energy and flight through her use of vibrant color laid down in tactile impastos.

Jennifer Andrews, on the other hand, employs the most muted colors and the sparest possible paint application to create large figurative compositions in a stain technique on raw linen and unprimed canvas. Andrews' combination of thinned down oil washes, beeswax, and charcoal lends the figures the qualities of phantoms. However, they are not apparitions of the supernatural kind, but, rather, ghosts of memory. In one composition, a woman in a filmy white slip stands at what appears to be a kitchen counter, while the heads of two women are seen in the foreground and the partial figure of a man is truncated abruptly by the right hand edge of the canvas. The sense of fragmentation recalls both de Kooning's early figurative paintings and the work of Larry Rivers. However, Andrews also conveys the sense of a submerged narrative with elusive psychological implications. Equally suggestive in another manner is large painting in which Andrews depicts two water birds wallowing in a desolate industrial landscape, their willowy, graceful forms contrasting curvaceously with the hard geometric lines of the mechanistic structures with which we impinge upon their natural habitat.

Those of us familiar with the previous nonobjective paintings of the adamantly hard-edged artist Michele Bonelli could not help being taken aback by the degree to which she has allowed recognizable elements to enter into her compositions in the series that she calls "Urban Abstracts." Yet these new works are some of Bonelli's most engaging canvases to date, with the austere yet jazzy allusions to architectural details, water towers, subway cars, and other actual things delineated in sharp black outlines and bright, flat areas of color that simultaneously make one think of comic strips and the American Scene modernism of Stuart Davis. This mode of post-Pop abstraction seems a logical and fruitful direction for Bonelli, an extension rather than a reversal of her longstanding aesthetic agenda.

Meyer Tannenbaum, a frequent co-exhibitor and artistic colleague of Bonelli, has also undergone a somewhat startling transformation in his "Soft Impact" series, where allusions to landscape have increasingly informed his formerly process-oriented aesthetic. Lyrical and rapturous, Tannenbaum's latest canvases are enlivened by sweeping rhythms and buoyant pastel colors that evoke, without descriptively depicting, a sense of rhythmically rolling hills, as well as the chromatic richness of nature. It would appear that in his recent work, Tannenbaum has embraced the alternate definition of the abstract as "the concentrated essence of a larger whole," (as opposed to something devoid of specific reference), without sacrificing any of the purely formal and material qualities that have always distinguished his paintings.

Brian Tepper is a toughminded sculptor whose work has an appealing crankiness that does not endeavor to endear itself to us but invariably does anyway. Tepper's "Suspended," a work in marble and steel, is a wiggly vertical form that inhabits space with what can only be termed an awkward grace. The same can be said of other sculptures in marble or in limestone, wood, and cement, in which Tepper manages to invest lumpish forms that are not innately beautiful with a fresh, funky elegance.

Estelle Pascoe is another artist who flies in the face of ordinary beauty with her rough-hewn mixed media dimensional wall pieces which hover between painting and sculpture. Craggy and twisted, saturated with so much color that the various hues tend to cancel each other, Pascoe's hybrid works seem more like archeological finds rescued from antiquity than deliberately conceived art objects. Pascoe's "Blue Zen" is particularly engaging with its combination of deep and electric blues and its flaring, layered forms overlapping in space like calligraphic brush strokes rendered in three dimensions.

Miriam Wills also made a strong impression with her peculiar brand of neo-cubistic structuring in vortex-like compositions combining photographic fragments snipped from magazines with vigorous expressionist brushwork. Wills' palette of brilliant reds, greens, and blues imbue her compositions with a glistening, jewel-like quality, the sheen of her paint surfaces matching the glossy printing inks of her collage elements in fanciful floral compositions that fairly burst with ripe vitality. Like the other artists singled out for mention in this extensive exhibition, she has arrived at a distinctive personal style.

—Lawrence Downes

Paradoxes of Ruggedness and Delicacy in the Oils of Young-Doo Song

In his native Korea, Young-Doo Song is highly esteemed as a representative of all that is progressive in contemporary painting. His inclusion in exhibitions such as "The Waves of Korean Contemporary Art" at the Insa Gallery, Seoul, and "Korean Fine Arts Today," at the Seoul Arts Center, among other prestigious surveys, positions him among the vanguard in a country where art is at a point of national pride. He has also shown extensively in the United States, most recently in a brilliant solo show at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, on the strength of which one may safely predict that he should soon have a considerable following in this country as well.

All of the paintings in the latter exhibition were oils on canvas in Young-Doo Song's distinctive style of abstract color construction akin to that of the Russian-born artist Nicholas de Stael, who became one of the leading painters of postwar France. Like de Stael, Young-Doo Song applies paint thickly, apparently with a palette knife in impastoed areas of vibrant color. Although there is a hint of landscape space in his compositions, as well as a sense of atmospheric mists, suggesting natural allusions, his paintings are essentially abstract. They are complex structures built with broad, generally rectangular areas of color, distinguished for their luminosity. Blue and green hues are prominent in some of his paintings, offset by areas of purple and yellow that lend the composition a chromatic subtlety.

Texture also plays an important role in the canvases of Young-Doo Song, especially in the places where his forms converge, creating ridges of rolled back pigment that one can only assume are achieved with the palette knife technique and which add not only tactile appeal but also a subtle linearity to his compositions. However, these are the pictures of a "pure" painter—which is to say one who puts all of his trust in painterly rather than draftsmanly processes. Thus Young-Doo Song's paintings would appear to owe little to the Asian ink painting tradition. Perhaps traces of other, more folkloric forms of Korean art could be turned up by scholarly research, but for the most part the main thrust of these paintings would appear to be much in the Western tradition. They are concerned with materiality, as opposed to the ethereal nature of much Eastern painting. At the same time, there is a paradoxical lyricism to them as well, a poetic quality, a certain counterbalancing delicacy alongside their ruggedness, which lends them a decidedly metaphysical dimension as well.

"The Mythic Mind"

Indeed it is such contrasts and contradictions that make the paintings of Young-Doo Song so engaging. For here is a painter obviously enamored of the physical act of painting and willing to let it lead him wherever it may go. And the discoveries that he makes along the way regarding the physical properties of form, color, and texture, as well as the host of associations they can evoke, makes following him on his journey a highly pleasurable and enlightening experience.

—Lawrence Downes

Todd A. Mosley: A Midwest Painter Celebrates Spain

Todd A. Mosley, an artist from Cincinnati, Ohio, whose paintings were recently featured in a solo exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, has obviously absorbed a great deal of inspiration from an extensive period of residency in Spain. While abroad, working part time teaching English as a foreign language, he was able to devote most of his free time to painting, as well as to travel throughout Europe.

Returning to the United States in 2002, Mosley brought with him a body of work distinguished for its merger of realism and expressive brushwork. His paintings are filled with great drama, light, and texture that extends to both his landscape and figurative subjects. Turbulent cloud formations, picturesque architecture, and subtle color combinations all contribute to the atmospheric quality of his compositions, which invariably impress one with their freshness and immediacy.

Mosley's triptych "Andalusia in Fall" is comprised of three long, horizontal panels in which areas of sky and earthy terrain are evoked in thick green and ocher impastos that lend weight and depth to the landscape, with its groves, stretches of earth, and frosty, roiling cloud formations above. Taken together, the three panels are like stanzas in an ode to the ripe beauty of the land, which the artist makes manifest in the lushness of the pigment itself.

Mosley's ability to conjure up not only the appearance but the spirit of the land also comes across in paintings such as "El Pueblo de Conil de la Frontera," and "Ronda," with their dramatic juxtapositioning of austere white structures, dramatic skies, mountains, waterfalls, and other natural and man-made elements in compositions that compel our attention with their sense of, color, light, and space. Indeed, Mosley's landscapes are invariably as arresting for their formal attributes as for their ability to conjure up a specific sense of pace.

The human figure also plays a prominent role in some of Mosley's paintings, as seen in the pictures entitled, respectively, "La Esposa Gitana" and "El Gitano y su Perro Bailarin," the former is an evocative study of an old peasant woman, while the latter depicts an elderly man with a crumpled hat blowing a bugle while a little dog in a dress dances on a leash. While this scene may sound surreal, it actually depicts a street performer, capturing his humble little act with great sympathy and humor.

Mosley's ability to capture character is also evident in a series of paintings based on flamenco musicians and dancers. "La Guitarra Flamenca" is a large painting of a bearded, longhaired guitarist set against a vibrant blue ground that calls to mind some of Picasso's early figurative works. By contrast, a series of smaller compositions in a horizontal format captures the colorful costumes, energy, and movement of flamenco dancers. Here, too, Mosley's abilities as a colorist and compositional skills make these intimate compositions enjoyable for their abstract qualities as well as for his ability to capture the flair and verve of his subjects.

Yet another facet of Mosley's work can be seen in his nocturnal city views, their dark skies streaked with luminous pink and yellow hues that set off the majestic Spanish architecture and lend these paintings a heightened sense of atmosphere verging on the visionary.

—Wilson Wong

Drawing as Finished Statement in the Art of Sara Kaiser

As a feature article on an exhibition at The Drawing Center in Soho in this publication made clear some issues back, drawing has come into its own as a major art form as opposed to merely a vehicle for studies and preliminary sketches. One artist whose work personifies this trend is Sara Kaiser, whose exhibition of mixed media drawings was seen recently at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway.

Kaiser's decisive draftspersonship is a joy to behold. She draws beautifully and selects subjects that enable her to make all manner of poetic allusions. She has obviously studied the old masters, as well as contemporaries such as Gorky, de Kooning and Larry Rivers. The elliptical nature of her compositions is especially reminiscent of the latter artist. She takes figurative or still life subjects that in the hands of another artist might be academic and transforms them through a variety of deconstructive strategies.

In Kaiser's collage drawing, "Recollections of Kentucky," for one splendid example, she conveys a diaristic sense of time spent in that state through various fragmented images which, although scattered over the picture space in a seemingly casual way, cohere marvelously, creating an impression of the lyrical fragmentations of memory. Some of the images include a pair of eyeglasses precisely delineated in pencil, an unfinished sketch of a horse's head, a collaged fragment of a map of Kentucky, and the scrawled word "stop." Although one has no way of knowing for certain, it being part of the charm of Kaiser's drawings that they are filled with arcane personal references that one can only attempt to decipher, the latter element could almost suggest that the artist is reminding herself to stop the drawing while it is in that exquisitely spare state that is so characteristic of her style. And indeed, each of her compositions is very much like a good poem in the sense that the addition of one more thing could possibly threaten its beautiful brevity and perfect aesthetic balance.

Even more spare is a drawing called "Doctor Land," in which an airplane is dynamically angled in sharp lines on a runway, the ostensibly banal subject yielding unexpectedly lovely spatial tensions. Equally dynamic in formal terms is a drawing called "Shunga Piece," the title referring to the generic term given to traditional Japanese erotic paintings and prints. Here, the subject is an explicit image of a couple making love, possibly inspired by a specific Shunga of the type that has appeared in prints and books in Japan for centuries. However, rather than in the clear outlines common to the genre, Kaiser has treated the figures in an expressionistic manner, with their forms defined by a welter of pencil strokes that activate the image in a new way. Now, instead of being a static image, the drawing has a kinetic quality suggesting the actual rhythmic movements of fornication. At the same time, the image is paradoxically formalized and abstracted so that its aesthetic rather than its erotic content is its most salient feature.

It is just her ability to transform whatever she draws in this manner that makes Sara Kaiser a fascinating and highly rewarding exponent of drawing as a discrete and self-sufficient medium.

—Maureen Flynn

The Enchantment of Gort's "Classical Surrealism"

Born in Catalonia and trained at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Madrid, Josep Maria Gort, generally referred to only as Gort, represents surrealism in its classical form, in that his accomplished, crystal clear figurative technique is reminiscent of Dali and Magritte. He resembles those masters for his meticulous transcription of dreamlike imagery in a manner so flawless as to render even his most fanciful visions oddly believable. However, being a man of the postmodern era, obviously attuned to the all-encompassing way that the mass media, with its relentless proliferation of popular imagery, has intruded on contemporary consciousness, his work also shows a decided Pop influence as well. Which is to say, Groucho Marx in the company of a young female nude with the proportions of a Playboy centerfold is as likely to turn up in one of his paintings as Durer dressed in a business suit with the Mona Lisa leaning over his shoulder.

"L'emperadriu Tiziana"

However, the centerpiece of Gort's most recent exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, was "L'emperadriu Tiziana," in which he simultaneously pays tribute to and transforms the great classical court painting. In Gort's version, the royal lady, with her intricately braided hairstyle and elaborate gown of silk and brocade is set within a fragmented composition containing multiple images of herself superimposed over fragments of landscape that are also multiplied, appearing in both a painting-within-the-painting on an easel and seen through an open window.

The composition is fascinating for its synthesis of classical balance and postmodern imagistic deconstruction. Gort's own classical grounding and mastery of old masterish oil painting technique enables him to make this synthesis not only convincing but aesthetically appealing in a manner that transcends time periods and aesthetic fashions.

Confronted with "L'emperadriu Tiziana," we know immediately that we are in the presence of a painter who can make his own rules and give all manner of incongruous elements a unique coherence by virtue of his combination of technical mastery and imaginative reach. One becomes completely submerged in Gort's private world, where all things are possible and the unexpected is commonplace.

Another painting in the recent exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, for example, depicted two men in a landscape that might serve as a stage set for one of the existential scenarios of an avant garde playwright like Samuel Beckett or Eugene Ionesco. One thinks of Beckett's "Waiting for Godot," or Ionesco's mixture of surrealism and social satire, viewing Gort's untitled oil of these two men, wearing aprons, one propped up on the other's shoulders like an acrobatic clown in a desert-like space under roiling clouds, painted in Gort's characteristically precise, yet expressive manner. Surely they must be actors in some absurdist drama complete with props such as birds atop long poles, the precise meaning of which eludes easy explication. Yet the situation somehow resonates for the viewer, presenting us with an aspect of the human condition that we somehow intuitively understand, even if it is impossible to explain. Indeed, it is this ability to delineate the inexplicable in terms that compel our admiration that makes Josep Maria Gort, whose work can be seen year-round in Montserrat Gallery's ongoing salon exhibition, an artist of the first rank.

—Byron Coleman

Formal and Figurative Enigmas in the Art of Nigel Bowen-Morris

"Devil and Broken Angel"

Pop Art came about as a reaction to Abstract Expressionism. By introducing elements of the cartoon and other banal subject matter into the theretofore purist precincts of modernist painting, a younger generation of artists critiqued the pious lyrical excesses of their elders. The contemporary Welsh-born painter Nigel Bowen-Morris, however, has evolved a peculiarly postmodern resolution to the conflict that divided his predecessors.

As artist in residence at Agora Gallery's Chelsea location, 530 West 25th Street, from January 4 through April 4, Bowen-Morris' work is on view for an extended period of time, and deservedly so, since his paintings present a successful and witty synthesis of opposing tendencies. Working in oils, yet employing them in the flat, hard-edge color areas that we generally associate with acrylics, Bowen-Morris creates large canvases reflecting the epoch-making scale and ambition of both the Abstract Expressionists and their Pop vanquishers. Yet there is a wit and levity about Bowen-Morris' work that is uniquely his own. It has to do not only with the deadpan quality of his paint surfaces, which are as impassive as Buster Keaton's facial expression, but with the weird suggestiveness of his forms, never fully figurative, never wholly abstract. Slippery shapes shift between abstract forms and cartoon-like personages defined by flat, bright color within bold, black outlines.

One may discern kinships to both Keith Haring and Nicholas Krushenick in Bowen-Morris' work for its clarity of color and form. However, he is considerably more abstract than the former painter, yet more allusive than the latter. In other words, his pictures are impossible to categorize, even as they suggest sympathies with sources as diverse as Dubuffet's doodle-like "Hourloupe" series and the Chicago school of painters known as The Hairy Who.

The figurative references are most overt in paintings such as "Devil and Broken Angel," where the two white forms wiggling on a solid red ground do indeed suggest supernatural personages distilled to their cartoon essence, and "Spilt in Trinity," where even genitals and rib cages are suggested by Bowen-Morris' loopy outlines. Yet even these paintings fascinate us more for their formal configurations than for the narrative elements that their titles suggest. (None of which is to say that the two odd characters in the latter painting, who resemble inflatable extraterrestrials with the air partially let out, do not exert a certain extra-formal fascination!)

Some of Nigel Bowen-Morris' most evocative paintings, however, are an untitled series of large horizontal canvases executed entirely in lamp black, cobalt blue, and titanium white, in which the forms are less figuratively suggestive than evocative of landscape and a wide range of natural (and perhaps even cosmic) phenomena. In these paintings, a variety of flat, precisely rendered yet irregularly expressive, shapes inhabit the picture plane like wiggling spermatozoa and other vital organic matter viewed through a microscope. At the same time, these shapes could also suggest clusters of oddly shaped comicstrip speech-balloons, albeit enigmatically devoid of dialogue. Indeed, it is the ability to create such conundrums, infinitely redolent of the human condition, yet just as compelling for their purely plastic qualities, that makes Nigel Bowen-Morris a uniquely rewarding painter.

—Lawrence Downes

Abstract 2004: Picturing the Sublime

If abstract painting had become so undervalued by the mid 1980s that it could be degraded by a parody movement such as Neo-Geo, the past three decades have seen a revitalization of nonobjective painting and sculpture that has been heartening to behold. Its ongoing evolution was evident in "Abstract 2004, an exhibition by the West Side Arts Coalition, at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at 96th Street and Broadway.

Peg McCreary's lyrical paintings feature splashes, spatters and drips of color on white or cream colored grounds. Although McCreary mines a mode of expression pioneered by Pollock and others, she employs a more deliberate, formal method, containing all of her energetic pyrotechnics as a discrete entity within the rectangle of the picture area.

Texture is paramount in the paintings of Diane G. Casey. In one particularly compelling painting she creates a tactile grid of impastos applied with a palette knife, while in another composition, incised forms enliven a field of red and blue hues. All of Casey's paintings appear concerned with the subtle qualities of materiality, the painting as physical object as opposed to allusive vehicle.

Maryann Sussoni, on the other hand, allows a subtle allusiveness to enter into her paintings yet resists specific description. Thus it is possible to speculate on the suggestiveness of her blue orbs and thorny linear swirls in paintings such as "Centering" and "Shamanic Consciousness."

Leanne Martinson's works in oil and oil pastel from her "Midtown Traffic" series combine formal stasis and inner movement. Boldly articulated shapes hold the surface, while vibrant bits of color glow through Martinson's dark linear networks, creating a tantalizing chromatic "push and pull."

Miguel Angel (as he now prefers to be known) increasingly comes across as an abstract mystic in mixed media assemblages such as "The First Day of the Rest of My Life." With its silvery frame, areas of glass, and electric backlighting, Angel's austere composition evokes dawn breaking in a window and projects an affecting spiritual aura.

Pud Houstoun's small, paintings are filled with swagger, verve, and panache. Their decisive strokes, artful drips, and richness of both color and gesture create miniature odes to the abstract expressionist aesthetic, suggesting a scale and a scope much grander than their actual physical dimensions.

The paintings of Leila R. Elias suggest not so much the shapes of specific flowers but the energy of organic growth. Elias' deep, rich colors and sensually articulated biomorphic forms belong to the tradition of Baziotes and Stamos, yet transcend it to become deeply personal statements, possessed of mystery and a reverence for the natural world.

Other innovative approaches to contemporary abstraction were seen in Lori Lata's compositions of sensual forms in an offbeat pastel palette, transforming actual subjects such as a balcony in the Canary Islands or the figures of a man and a woman into codified color areas; Farhana Akhter's "Camouflage" paintings, with their darkly dramatic colors and fleeting suggestions of figures that make the title of the series seem especially apt; Eleanor Gilpatrick's dramatic abstract evocation of landscape in bold streaks of color; Brunie Feliciano's tantalizing combination of stately geometric formalism and fluorescent chromatic fireworks; and new paintings from Meyer Tannenbaum's breakthrough "Soft Impact" series, discussed elsewhere in this issue.

—Carl Farber

Liquescence and Suspension in the Art of Jessica Houston

Jessica Houston is a painter whose natural element appears to be water. Houston, whose list of exhibition credits includes a group exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, not only collects water samples from around the world, but creates oil paintings in which figures are seen swimming in bodies of water.

Several of her paintings and a large tray, suspended from the ceiling and filled with plastic containers of water from exotic rivers such as the Ganges, were seen in Houston's recent solo exhibition, "Fathoms," at Jadite Galleries, 413 West 50th Street.

"The oil paintings investigate the physical and psychic suspension of figures underwater, apprehending a momentary stasis before an inevitable disappearance," Houston wrote in an artist's statement accompanying the show. "The infinitely transparent element of water reveals the impermanence of the subject, suggesting an ephemeral buoyancy—a suspended instant of held breath, a fleeting idea, a swell of emotion."

Obviously, Houston knows just what she is aiming for, and her paintings succeed splendidly in capturing that instant of grace, as in "Buoyancy Effect," where a nubile female nude takes on an ethereal quality, soaring in a luminous watery space. Although the figure is depicted in a detailed realist manner, her aqueous surroundings are evoked more fancifully, with white bubbles rendered in a stylized linear manner. By departing to some degree from naturalistic interpretation, Houston infuses the composition with a sense of magic, a metaphysical

"Internal Waves"

dimension.

By contrast, a smaller painting called "Surface and Depth Interface," depicts only an expanse of water, sans figure, in convincing aquamarine hues, with subtle variations of light and shadow adding to its verisimilitude. Here, too, however, there is the sense of a lingering human presence, as though the swimmer has just left the picture space—conveying that sense of "inevitable disappearance" of which the artist speaks.

An impressively resourceful painter, Houston brings a wide range of techniques to bear on her subject, making each picture a unique interpretation of the experience of plunging into those watery depths. In the show's largest oil on canvas, "Buoyant Vortex Rings," for example, the nude female swimmer is suspended weightlessly against a luminous blue expanse. Here again, the artist undercuts the overall realism of the composition with the addition of white linear swirls that capture a feeling closer to the larger truth of the experience than to its obvious actuality. Thus the painting takes on a visionary power that transcends representation, a mystical aspect that expresses the artist's deep fascination with water, which she has explored in poetic prose texts, as well as in the medium of oil painting.

Other canvases, such as "Dis/appearance II" and "Instability," capture the sense of discombobulation that one can experience in water through dramatic cropping and energetic brush work, with parts of the figure either abruptly amputated by the edges of the canvas or deconstructed by vigorous gestural paint handling.

Indeed, the fluidly liquescent qualities of her subject enable Jessica Houston to combine figurative realism with loose, painterly passages akin to abstract expressionism, making her compositions not only symbolically evocative but compellingly immediate in purely visual terms.

—Maurice Taplinger

Fetish and Fascination in the Art of Steven John Harris

The British painter Steven John Harris, born in Plymouth Devonshire in 1955, is an autodidact with a highly sophisticated approach to composition. Confronting one of Harris's paintings, we are often confounded by what appear to be anatomical anomalies of a most peculiar kind, until we sort out the different parts of different bodies appearing in extreme close-up and are able to piece them back together in some logical order in our minds. For Harris has an odd, sometimes vertiginous, way of cropping his pictures that makes them at once disconcerting and seductive in ways that made a visitor to Harris's recent solo exhibition at Montserrat Galley, 584 Broadway, immediately aware of being in the presence of a delightfully quirky and highly original talent.

Although Harris is self taught, there is nothing naive or innocent about his work. Rather, his paintings are almost wickedly knowing about the convoluted entanglements of human relationships. The people in his pictures interact in ways that suggest all the possible permutations of love, lust, obsession, and sometimes thwarted desire. Indeed, for his fascination with the human body as a conduit of emotional tension, the only other painter one can compare Harris to is Francesco Clemente, the contemporary Italian artist, who once said, "My overall strategy as an artist is to accept fragmentation and to see what comes of it."

Like Clemente, Steven John Harris makes use of ambiguity, employing it to endow his paintings with a strong sense of psychosexual drama. Harris, however, also has an abstract element to his work that lends it an autonomous visual impact. He employs brilliant color in clear, boldly delineated areas much in the manner of a hard edge abstractionist to make his pictures practically leap off the wall and accost the viewer with their curvaceously sensual forms.

In one painting, entitled "Mary Lips," the head of a woman with big red lips appears to have a nude body of a smaller person draped over it like a bizarre hat. Harris makes this strange occurrence appear somehow logical by virtue of his ability to bend all the rules of composition so that the viewer makes imaginative leaps between the symbolic and the actual quite effortlessly.

In another painting called "Heels," we are plunged into the realm of fetishism in a composition where a languidly statuesque female figure in stiletto heels that seem to dominate the composition from the angle that the artist chooses to present them to us casually gooses a companion while a third figure, seen in the foreground, radiates an anxiety reminiscent of the haunted subject of Edvard Munch's famous work, "The Scream."

Face to Face with Harris's "Hunger," in which a blue man reaches out needily to caress a pair of pink breasts, and "Blue Guys," where two similarly colorful figures are seen in voyeuristic proximity to a nude woman, we too become fascinated voyeurs. To the league of modern British artists, such as Bacon, Hockney and Hodgkin, whom we admire as much for their quirky qualities as for their solid aesthetic attributes, we can now add the name of Steven John Harris.

—Peter Wiley

Discovering Kathleen King's Gorgeous Gum-Ball Universe

A quirky biomorphism has long been a salient feature of much of the best art emanating from The Windy City. Many of us first became aware of the qualities peculiar to Chicago art when The Hairy Who, a group of artists associated with the Art Institute of Chicago, first burst upon the scene in the 1960s. Suddenly New York Pop look pallid and constipated compared to the zany havoc that artists such as James Nutt, Seymour Rosofsky, and Gladys Nilsson wrought upon the human figure. One thing was immediately clear: While even many figurative painters in New York were somewhat swayed by the austere formal strategies of Minimalism, Chicago artists were Maximalists to the core, cramming every inch of the picture space with a hair-raising variety of lively visual activity.

A similarly teeming vitality is turned to more abstract ends in the paintings of Kathleen King, a former adjunct assistant professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, now an adjunct professor at Loyola University, whose first New York solo exhibition "Plastic Pictorials" can be seen at Viridian Artists @ Chelsea, 530 West 25th Street, from March 15 through April 2. (There will be a reception for the artist on March 19 from 3 to 6 PM.)

"Squigglesque" 2005 24 x 17 1/2 x 1 1/2"

Two important catalysts for the generation of Chicago artists that preceded King were Jean Dubuffet, the French father of Art Brut, who lectured at the Chicago Arts Club in 1951, and the Chilean surrealist Matta, who taught at the School of the Art Institute during the same period. While her Hairy Who predecessors seem to have been most influenced by Dubuffet's raw figurative style, derived from the art of children and mental patients, King's work veers more toward Matta's merger of the abstract and the surreal. Indeed the swarming profusion of shapes in King's compositions hark even further back to the work of Yves Tanguy, whose odd biomorphic forms obviously influenced Matta.

The critic James Thrall Soby once termed Tanguy's infinite spaces filled with imaginary objects "a sort of boneyard of the world." However, in contrast to the somber hues and desolate atmosphere of Tanguy's deserts of irregular organic forms, King's invented realm is more like a candy-colored cosmos: a gorgeous gum ball universe of almost edibly luscious pinks, reds, yellows, and blues.

King employs photographic floral images altered with a computer as collage elements (although by the time she finishes with them they have been transformed beyond recognition), along with drawn and painted passages, in her vibrant mixed media paintings. Like Joe Brainard's intricate fetish altar collages and Fred Tomaselli's assemblages made with thousands of pharmaceutical pills, floral designs, leaves, and animal cutouts, King's compositions present us with a baroque profusion of fanciful forms. In King's case, however, they defy specific interpretation, yet appear to allude to a wide range of biological and cellular phenomena animated by imagination and intuition.

"It's about taking the bits and pieces directly from life and reassembling them to make poetic or metaphorical statements about the experience of being alive," King stated in a recent interview. And her paintings do indeed convey a generalized sense of joie de vivre that, as the artists puts it, touches upon "the poetic, musical, and picturesque as opposed to just the socio-political."

In King's acrylic and mixed media collage on canvas "Ellipse, 1," a central saucer-like form swirls dynamically among various brilliantly colored orbs resembling the stylized eyeballs favored as imagery by Japan's "Superflat" movement. However, King's painting is characteristically cosmic, rather than cartoon-like, making it far more poetically allusive and evocative.

A large leaf-shape dominates the emblematic composition of another mixed media work called "Ellipticity," creating the sense of a botanical icon; while more intricate configurations of organic forms enliven King's "Botanica Series," an installation of several oval and circular canvases. Other mixed media collage paintings such as "Bubblelacious" Squiggleseques" feature overall compositions aswarm with a multitude of colorful, roughly circular shapes (albeit interspersed in the latter work with sinuous linear elements).

Kathleen King's mixed media pieces can be compared to those of Lucas Samaras for their hypnotic horror vacuii intricacy, which rewards careful study with multiple levels of visual/intellectual stimulation. Obsessive, suggestive, elusive, the imagistic and chromatic richness of her compositions draw the viewer into an inner world at once mysterious and informed by a unique wit. King, whose work has been seen in numerous venues in the United States and abroad, brings a singular sensibility to bear in this auspicious New York solo debut.

—Ed McCormack

Joan Albright: A Painter's Journey to Realms Unknown

Artists arrive at their aesthetic direction by a seemingly limitless number of methods and inspirations. Few, however, employ means as mystical as those of Joan Albright, an artist born in Toledo, Ohio, and trained at the American Academy of Art in Chicago and the Denver Art Museum who has exhibited most widely in Colorado and California and whose work is in private and public collections in the U.S. and overseas. For Albright claims to have made a breakthrough with supernatural implications in her "channeled paintings," which are on view permanently in the ongoing salon exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, in Soho.

"Planetary Harmony and Equality"

In a recent artist's statement, Albright explained that her method involves "allowing myself to become an instrument of the cosmic energy beneath all form and matter, to become unencumbered by the manipulation of my intellect, beyond words and thoughts, pure in its own expression of color and light..."

Whether or not one subscribes to such notions, one cannot help but be impressed by the rhythmic grace of the forms and the chromatic brilliance of the colors in Albright's acrylic, oil, and watercolor compositions. As titles such as "Intergalactic Communication," "Interdimensional Doorway," and "Canyon of the Unconscious" indicate, her paintings evoke images of both outer and inner space—of actual cosmic expanses and forms that emerge from plumbing the subconscious in dreams or meditation. Perhaps they touch upon dimensions where intuition and imagination converge. In any case, they are intriguingly evocative and compelling for their intricate linear permutations, which flow and flare in compositions charged with undeniable energy and further enlivened by a unique radiance.

Unlike some visionary artists, who create by intuition alone, Albright has made a conscious progression over the years from a more or less traditional realist style to her present mode, which she terms "semi-abstract philosophical expression." Thus her work has a solid foundation in sophisticated formal exploration that makes her paintings every bit as exciting for their pure plastic values as for the mystical ideas that they propagate. In other words, one can enjoy her work on a variety of different levels, but one will probably get the most out of them by being willing to take the imaginative journey that her paintings suggest.

Surely those of us who remember the psychedelic art movement of the late 1960s will perceive a certain affinity in Albright's work with the intricate compositions of artists such as Mati Klarwein and Isaac Abrams. Albright, however, has a way with forms and colors which also suggests a kinship with an older tradition of fantastic landscape painting, as well as with the early, spiritually-inspired abstractions of Wassily Kandinsky.

Her compositions often suggest unearthly terrains, as well as the underlying energies of nature and elements such as fire and water, moving in rhythmic waves, forming maze-like configurations that appear to swell and waver before one's eyes, projecting a constant sense of flux.

However, this sense of energy is achieved with smooth paint application and clear, translucent color areas, rather than through spontaneous paint manipulation or gestural agitation, as though Joan Albright is indeed meticulously transcribing visions and forms that emanate from some mysterious and marvelous source outside of herself.

—Pheobe Harrison Wood

Troy David: Passionate Visions of Mythic Forbearance

Pastels are often typecast as a genteel medium, employed primarily for landscape, still life, and figurative subjects in a conventional realist manner. Of course, this notion has been given the lie by the innovative pastels of artists such as Lucas Samaras, and more recently, another highly original artist named Troy David has emerged as an enfant terrible of the medium in his recent exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway.

Born in 1969 in Minnesota, now living and working in North Dakota, David is known for his vigorous expressionist figurative works, painted to the accompaniment of rock and roll music, which appears to influence his strident use of color and bold compositional rhythms. The versatility of pastels is such that it can be applied as either a drawing or painting medium, and David's work is decidedly in the latter category, for he lays down dry color in concentrated strokes, building up his surfaces much in the manner of a painter in acrylics or oils. Indeed, his pastel painting "Solitude" calls to mind Edvard Munch for both its vibrant colors and the violence of David's strokes in his depiction of a sensual female nude.

By contrast, in both "Uncertain Future" and "Street Corner Santa" David gives us affecting images of down-and-out individuals as vividly evoked as the oils of the intrepid Depression era social realist Philip Evergood. Indeed, like Evergood, David does not hesitate to go slightly over the top to get us to empathize with the plight of the homeless citizens who increasingly haunt the streets of our cities. His destitute Santa is an especially strong statement, clutching his beggar's cup, his fake beard half falling off like an errant bib.

David's willingness to push the envelope, so to speak, is especially apparent in his picture "The Head of Christ," in which brilliant red blood trickles down the face of a Jesus as expressively distorted as one of Francis Bacon's portraits. This is an intensely visceral interpretation, close in spirit to the tortured Christ figures of Gruenwald, albeit with the lurid colors and Pop-inflected flair unique to David's work.

This contemporary quality, resonant of iconic media images, also comes across in "The Watchman," a lean and mean male head that regards the viewer from under a wide-brimmed Stetson with the squint-eyed stare reminiscent of Clint Eastwood in "A Fistfull of Dollars." Similarly redolent of macho male mythology is the bearded wayfarer in "Ordeal of the Traveler," who looks as though he has been through some tough travels and put a lot of rocky road behind him, yet bears his lot with indomitable stoicism of a born survivor.

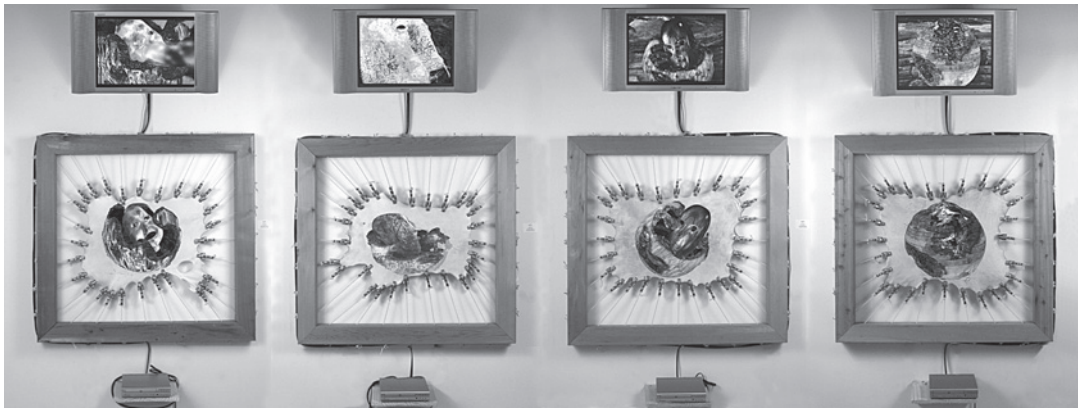
Indeed, such paintings appear to be symbolic, if not literal self-portraits. For Troy David is apparently an independent artistic spirit whose vision flies in the face of much that is fashionable in contemporary art in order to make deeply felt personal statements. There is no trendy irony in his work and seemingly even less fear of coming across mawkish or sentimental. He is obviously more deeply committed to expressing his belief that injustice must be met with courage and forbearance than to kowtowing to the aesthetic tastemakers, and his work is all the stronger and more passionate for it.

—Byron Coleman

LiQin Tan: Uniting Nature and Technology to Uncover the Tao of Digital Life

One of the more fertile frontiers in recent art is the merger of modern computer technology and ancient philosophy as it occurs in the work of LiQin Tan, an assistant professor of art at Rutgers University, New Jersey, who has garnered considerable critical acclaim for his "Digital Primitive Art."

Born in China, now residing in New Jersey, Tan has been exhibiting his work widely throughout the world since the 1970s, but his major breakthrough seems to have been his exhibition at Rutgers' Stedman Art Gallery in 2004. For this was the show in which he unveiled the first installment of his synthesis of Taoism and digital 3-D animation, an innovation that may yet prove as influential to future generations as the work of the pioneering video artist Nam June Paik. A second exhibition followed at Philadelphia's innovative Union 237 Gallery in December of 2004, and the third installment of Tan's ongoing project, "Burl + 4," can be seen in another prestigious Philadelphia venue, the Da Vinci Art Alliance, 704 Catharine Street, from February 5 through 27, with a reception for the artist on Saturday, February 5, from 6 to 9 PM.



"Burl + 4"

Although Tan, who has taught computer animation and graphics for over a decade and employed state of the art technology for even longer as an art director, and graphic designer, and animator, he places primary importance on the ancient underpinnings of his work, as indicated by his statement, "I would suggest that any modern technology would be changed or replaced; however, the primitive systems of signification retain their significance. As the ideologies and technologies of society change, today's state-of-the-art technology will be tomorrow's primitive skills."

Indeed, although much of Tan's recent work involves digital 3-D films and prints, as well as multimedia installations, he has a thorough grounding in traditional Asian brush and ink painting as well as Western figure painting. This background is especially evident in works such as "Burl Body," Tan's powerful assemblage dominated by four partial figures within a long, horizontal natural wood shadow box. These imposing torsos, created in a technique that Tan invented for this show, in which three-dimensional computer-generated animation and modeled images are printed on natural wood surfaces and shapes, have a presence akin to the darkly evocative figure drawings of the late Rico Lebrun. The process of mixing natural surfaces and new technologies is carried even further in a work called "Burl Nuts," in which four burls frontally arranged on a natural wood backing with four flat video screens mounted above them, showing other facets of the same objects, providing a fascinating interplay of actuality and image.

These works, inspired by the natural wood shapes of the burls that Tan selects for use, as well as by primitive sculpture, folk art, nature, and contemporary art, are the most recent development of Tan's work. However, the present show also includes what he calls "digital parchment prints" and "digital parchment projections." In the former, 3-D animation/modeling images are printed on a rawhide surface by a digital ink jet printer, while in the latter 3-D animation is projected on both sides of parchments simultaneously, the semi-transparent material providing a perfect surface for a variety of unique coloristic and animation effects, bringing the composition alive with light and movement.

In creating these works, LiQin Tan was obliged to overcome formidable technical challenges, particularly in the process of printing on different parchment qualities, thicknesses and hygroscopicity. While going forward technologically, he was also obliged to go back in time, approximating the arduous processes by which primitive peoples made vellum and parchment, starting with the skins of calves, deer, and goats, which had to be washed and stripped of hair or wool, then stretched on a frame to be scraped free of further traces of flesh, and finally whitened with chalk and flattened with pumice. In Tan's case, too, the backs of the skins had to be sanded down for the digital printing and projection.

The laborious process seems more than justified by the resulting prints and projections with their luminous surfaces, which are mounted like primitive artifacts on strings stretched tautly between beautifully finished natural tree limbs, lending them a striking sculptural dimension. At the same time, LiQin Tan's more traditional skills as draftsman and painter also come into play as a prominent element of these works, seen in the piece titled "Horse and Sun," where equine figures stylized in a manner resembling cave paintings are limned in brilliant red and yellow hues, as well as in "Digital Queen," where the piece de resistance is a feminine figure in an elaborate, apparently tribal, costume which itself seems to incorporate the old and the new in terms of being at once primitive-looking and neo-figurative.

Perhaps the most sensational work in the exhibition is the installation piece called "Digital Dancing," in which the figure of a beautiful virtual woman, created by Tan on the computer is projected in three dimensions on an animal skin stretched on an aluminum frame made to resemble a large tree limb. However, all of the pieces in the show function as a whole to unite the five fundamental elements of Chinese Taoist philosophy (metal, wind, earth, water, and fire), which serve as metaphors for the interrelationship of all things, with state of the art computer technology in a seamless synthesis, at once poetic and profound.

Asserting that "Taoism is one of the most important philosophies of my personal life," LiQin Tan goes on to say, "As an artist, it is essential to overcome the reasoning that nature and technology oppose each other. Instead, technology undergoes an evolution that is tied into its relation with nature. Ultimately the evolution of technology may lead digital media to become one of an extension of our own natures; I call this the Tao behind digital life."

His point is well made. —J. Sanders Eaton

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Brian D. Fox: A Compelling Marriage of Photography and Painting

We have seen numerous permutations of photorealism, painterly photography, and mixed media. Few artists, however, have so successfully merged painting and photography as Brian D. Fox, whose "pola-paintings" were seen recently in the Chelsea location of Agora Gallery, at 530 West 25th Street.

From 1968 to 1973, Fox studied at the Institute of Design at Illinois Institute of Technology with teachers trained at the Bauhaus with Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, and Maholy-Nagy, and that solid grounding in craft and aesthetics is very much evident in his work today. Equally important was the early experience of being tutored in oil and watercolor by his father, an art teacher who instilled in him the respect for time-honored subject matter and solid technique which is still a feature of his work.

Indeed, it is Fox's traditional training, combined with his innovative use of photography, that lends his work its unique qualities. His pictures partake of all the imagistic possibilities of photography while endowing them with tactile qualities that belong to painting alone. The synthesis results in works possessed of a singular clarity and sensuality, in which the combination of specific subject matter and shimmering color creates an effect of hyper-realism bolstered by strong abstract design.

Not to be underestimated is the quality of "touch" in Fox's work; for all his use of modern technology, his surfaces are energized by an extraordinary expressiveness. By virtue of his painterly virtuosity, every inch of the composition is activated both texturally and chromatically in a manner that lends a new vitality to photo-derived imagery.

Surface tension and heightened color add excitement and mystery to Fox's polapaintings, as seen in "The Affair," which has all the drama of one of Cindy Sherman's simulated film stills. Indeed, this compelling close-up of an alluring woman wearing a black Lone Ranger mask, her red lips brightly glistening as she holds a silver revolver, exemplifies the intriguing narrative element running through Fox's work. For while each of his compositions functions autonomously as a discrete and memorable image, taken together they suggest a submerged story-line.

In another work called "Weekender," for example, we see a red convertible parked in what appears to be the sun-drenched courtyard of a low-rent motel, perhaps in Philip Marlowe's Los Angeles of rootless dreamers, schemers, and grifters. Thus, while the picture is compelling for its purely formal qualities, akin to those in a painting by Richard Diebenkorn, it also engages the imagination like a scene out of film noir. One senses that

"Weekender"

one may be privy to some clandestine assignation— perhaps between the woman in "The Affair" and her lover!

In the same way, even though another picture of three rubber rafts in a pool comes across as considerably more abstract, it is permeated by a similar suggestiveness, as though perhaps the participants in some sinister menage in another part of the same local, the same story, have just stepped or swum out of the picture space.

In these and other polapaintings in his recent exhibition, such as "Play," "Cattle Call," and "Contemplation," Brian D. Fox creates works of art at once technically innovative and symbolically charged.

—Maurice Taplinger

Dixie Dudemaine Paints Panoramic Moments of Eternity

The Long Island painter Dixie Dudemaine is a consummate realist whose work demonstrates that no mechanical instrument, not even the most state-of-the-art modern camera, can capture as effectively as the human eye the way we actually view the world. In her recent exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, Dudemaine showed two triptychs on an epic scale, each depicting panoramic vistas around Harvard University in such remarkable detail and with such attention to subtleties of light that one was reminded once again how only an accomplished painter can conjure up not only the outer appearance of reality but also the intangible qualities that lend a scene a vitality beyond mere optical verisimilitude.

Both Thomas Eakins and the contemporary realist Rackstraw Downes came most immediately to mind, as one stood before the three mural-scale canvases that comprise Dudemaine's magnificent triptych "October Blue." One thinks particularly of Eakins' famous painting "Max Schmitt in a Single Scull" as a predecessor for the sparkling clarity that Dudemaine achieves in her depiction of the tiny rowing teams, as well as the reflective surface of the lake that dominates the three connected panels.

Yet Dudemaine's composition is considerably more complex, encompassing not only the lake but an intricate and highly detailed array of surrounding pedestrian walkways, lawns, architectural details of buildings such as the Riverside Technology Center, as well as many minute figures strolling or going about other disparate activities on the perimeter. Each treelimb, window, lamppost, shadow and wisp of cloud in the clear blue sky of the exhaustively detailed scene is lovingly limned. Yet the entire composition coheres seamlessly and displays a freshness which never verges on the fussy. For more like Eakins than Winslow Homer, or any other nineteenth century American realist—or contemporary realist such as the aforementioned Rackstraw Downes for that matter— Dudemaine is an artist whose compositions are systematically orchestrated to take into account how each minuscule element must add to the overall effect of the whole without presenting a jarring or disharmonious note.

Indeed, it is through her ability to balance a host of details and meld them so thoroughly, that Dudemaine achieves a clarity and a vitality verging on the visionary, even while apparently including no single thing not actually seen; which is to say: the cumulative effect of the composition is simply so dazzling that reality takes on the quality of a vision or a dream.

It is remarkable, too, that Dixie Dudemaine is able to sustain the same level of visual intensity in another large triptych called "Scene from Harvard," in which the composition is considerably less panoramic and the figures play a more prominent role in the composition. Here, students are seen strolling near the gates to the Harvard campus, with its red brick buildings and leafy trees. Flowers bloom brightly behind the fence, and each cobblestone and shadow on the street is clearly delineated, as is the entrance to the nearby subway station. However, the piece de resistance in the composition is an area of sky where a thin sliver of jet-stream appears to strike a belfry in one of the campus buildings. For it is this single, exquisitely evoked detail that Dixie Dudemaine captures an instant in Eternity, rendering it immutable for all time.

—Wilson Wong

Some Notable Recent Exhibitions

Valerie Hird: Cycles of Faith, Cycles of Fiction

"Influenced by trips down the length of Spain and into the mountains of Morocco, and disturbed by the dissonance of fundamentalist rhetoric everywhere including the U.S., I've tried in my new work to explore religious and cultural ambiguities found in our disparate cultures," Valerie Hird stated in the catalog for her solo show, "Cycles of Faith, Cycles of Fiction," at Nohra Haime Gallery, 41 East 57th Street.

Hird's warm, earthy hues, evoking ancient, sunbaked walls suffused with buttery light, are combined with luminous cadmium reds and gilded areas reminiscent of those in Christian icons, Medieval manuscripts, and Persian miniatures. The classical organization of her compositions (wherein complex groupings of figures in contemporary dress may share the picture space with mounted knights in full armor dating back to the crusades; or personages of diverse cultures and time periods may congregate incongruously in unexpected settings) is especially striking in large oils such as "Lysistrata Revisited" and "A Last Supper." The women of opposing backgrounds gathering near a battleground to avert war in the former work, and the unlikely diners breaking bread in the latter (with Leonardo's rectangular windows given a more mosque-like cursiveness), both bespeak a wistful vision of human community.

In Hird's exquisite small illuminated drawings, however, the differences that still divide us are made manifest in militant quotes from sources as diverse as the Likud Platform, the Quran, Osama bin Laden, and George W. Bush.

In terms of technical finesse and her ability to reinvest contemporary realism with some of the lost grandeur of past centuries, Valerie Hird can only be compared to Balthus. However, unlike that master of personal obsession, Hird's artistic vision encompasses global scope.

Valerie Hird, Nohra Haime Gallery

The Anxious Image at The Painting Center

Like The Drawing Center, its neighbor in Soho, The Painting Center, located at 52 Greene Street, is one of those indispensable institutions dedicated to perpetuating the eternal verities in contemporary art. According to its director, Christina Chow, The Painting Center was born in reaction to the bizarre absence of painting amid the glut of so-called "new media" in the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Now in its eleventh year, this non profit organization's varied exhibitions have featured established exponents of the art such as Milton Resnick, Pat Passlof and Paul Resika, as well as emerging artists whose vitality demonstrates that periodic rumors of the death of painting could not be further from the truth.

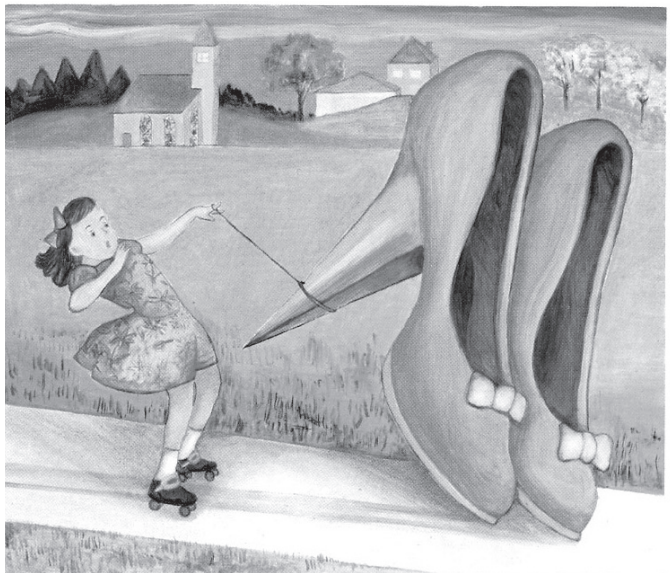
"The Anxious Image," curated by Jimmy Wright and David Sharpe and made possible by anonymous funding and The Wolf Kahn and Emily Mason Foundation, featured several painters known for their edgy aesthetic: Peter Saul, who to painting what Robert Crumb is to underground cartooning, was represented with a grotesque untitled portrait that turned Picassoesque displacement of facial features on its head to whacky effect. Three leading lights of Chicago Imagism, June Leaf, H.C. Westermann, and Roger Brown showed characteristically quirky works: Leaf, a mythic, anthropomorphic bird stretching its wings in a visionary expressionist landscape; Westermann, a noirish watercolor of a nude woman rising from the water near a funky nocturnal pier; Brown, a silhouetted figure overlaid with an enigmatic hand-painted text: "He has started out to that which has become a circle."

Bonnie Lucas, Charles Parness, Paul LaMantia, Maryan, Olive Ayhens Martha Diamond, Mark Jackson, Barbara Takenega, Jeff Way, and Stephen Westfall also conveyed a sense of angst that justified their inclusion in this show. Even more germane, however, each displayed a solid commitment to the pure painterly values that The Painting Center consistently supports.

Noho Fiber

Although Noho Gallery in Chelsea, 530 West 25th Street, shows works in many media, the fact that seven leading fiber artists are included in its roster was sufficient reason to mount an exhibition that was more than justified by its excellence.

Marilyn Henrion's hand quilted pierced triptych combined stately forms with bold colors and patterns, exemplifying the Byzantine formalism that has won her wide recognition. Jeanne Butler's black and white fabric collages exploited contrasts between drawn and stitched elements to create tactile trompe l'oeil effects in spare compositions that played off the graphic and the sewn. In Arlene Baker's mixed media fabric constructions, bands of somber-hued silk, studded with the tiny heads of straight pins, resulted in minimalist compositions of exquisite sobriety. Katherine D. Crone's bookworks featured photographic images from the artist's life and travels printed on gossamer fabric, layered in graceful folded forms to approximate fleeting figments of phantom memory. Virginia Davis' small, square-ish, gridded geometric compositions with acrylic pigment embedded in hand-woven linen canvas integrated a formal stance akin to Robert Ryman with haunting echoes of traditional women's



Bonnie Lucas, The Painting Center

Marilyn Henrion, Noho Gallery

handicrafts. For her works in handmade paper, Pat Feeney Murrell incorporated vegetal material, twigs and even potting soil in compositions notable for their rugged, sometimes ragged, fibrous forms afloat on solid-colored grounds.

Also including "feltworks" by Erma Martin Yost, whose solo show is reviewed elsewhere in this issue, this exhibition offered an abbreviated overview of some of the the more vital tendencies in contemporary fiber art.

Broome Street Gallery: 15th Anniversary Exhibition

In September of 1990, The Broome Street Gallery opened at 498 Broome Street with an innaugeral exhibition called "The Anatomy of a Commissioned Work: The Brain Painting" by Jack Stewart that was hailed by critic Lucio Pozzi as "one of the most important works of symbolist-precisionist painting of our time." In the decade and a half since, the gallery, a project of New York Artist Equity, has presented the work of Jacob Lawrence, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Philip Pavia, Louise Nevelson, and numerous other distinguished artists. Its recent 15th Anniversary Exhibition, included works by ten artists associated with New York Artists Equity.

Jack Stewart returned with three mixed media paintings in which the inclusion of concave mirrors lent images of waves a glimmering vitality. In these relatively spare compositions, no less than in the "The Brain Painting" or his epic 2004 canvas "State of the Union," showing Bush and his cronies afloat on a new Raft of the Medusa, after wrecking the ship of state, Stewart's work is especially notable for his ability to imbue a pristine technique with rare expressive power.

Although the gentrification rampant in Manhattan recently forced Violet Baxter to relocate her studio to Long Island City, she was represented by the Union Square scenes that she painted from her studio window there for many years. Here, Baxter's bird's eye-view of the Union Square Green Market in watercolor demonstrated her ability to suggest the specific through with a loose technique. (Come to think of it, Violet Baxter and Jack Stewart appear to succeed for exactly the opposite reasons!)

Doris Wyman was represented by one large oil that showed her gift for combining some of the best aspects of color field painting and abstract expressionism. Wyman's painting lived up to its poetic title, "Dancing Above the Sea," with graceful linear strokes soft gestural elements set against a vibrant blue field.

Marianne Schnell, another painter known for her lyrical brushwork and chromatic sensitivity exhibited paintings in both acrylic and watercolor in which her forms, characteristically, suggested windblown leaves afloat against vibrant colored grounds. Schnell's use of lines laid down with silver marker to lend her watercolors further velocity was especially appealing.

Mark O'Grady employs a whiplash black line on white paper with the sure swiftness of a Zen ink painter. Only, O'Grady also infuses his compositions with wit and humanity by virtue of his skill in capturing the sense of a figure and a suggestion of character with a few spare calligraphic stokes.

By contrast, Regina Stewart embeds ink and photo-imagery in acrylic on canvas to create compositions possessed of a layered complexity suggesting various levels of time and space. As though suspended in an emulsion of memory, Stewart's images allude to an array of personal and public events, creating what another writer for this publication once called "a new species of history painting."

Glass figures prominently in Lisa Feldman's mixed media assemblages, as seen in "Glass Book," where a cast glass tome with open pages suggesting wings about to take flight is set atop a stack of real books, merging the ethereal with the material. Here, as in other assemblages featuring glass, fur, feathers, and various found objects, Feldman excels and making objects perform as metaphors to evoke surprising perceptual shifts and visual sensations.

Roy Gussow, a veteran sculptor who studied with Moholy-Nagy and Archipenko and has work in the collections of many major museums, including MoMA and the Whitney, has a unique ability to make minimalist form sensual. Especially evocative in this regard is Gussow's tall, totemic sculpture in painted black walnut and acrylic, "Forest."

In two oils from his "Oculus" series, Frank Mann, another artist included in important museum collections, employs circular forms in organic abstractions notable for their gracefully flowing rhythms and their luminous yet softly shaded colors. Mann's visual language, while abstract, is invariably allusive of the mysterious cosmos within the human body and psyche.

During a visit to Vienna, where she was born, New York artist Diana Kurz made a series of drawings to, as she puts it, "recapture my relationship to the city." Especially affecting were Kurz's view from the window of her temporary studio, adjacent to where her father's office had been before World II, and a powerful composition comprised of pencil, ink, and pastel sketches of partially eroded and leaning tombstones, among other details of a cemetery in Prague, arranged cinematically in a large grid.

—J. Sanders Eaton

Diana Kurz, Broome Street Gallery

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