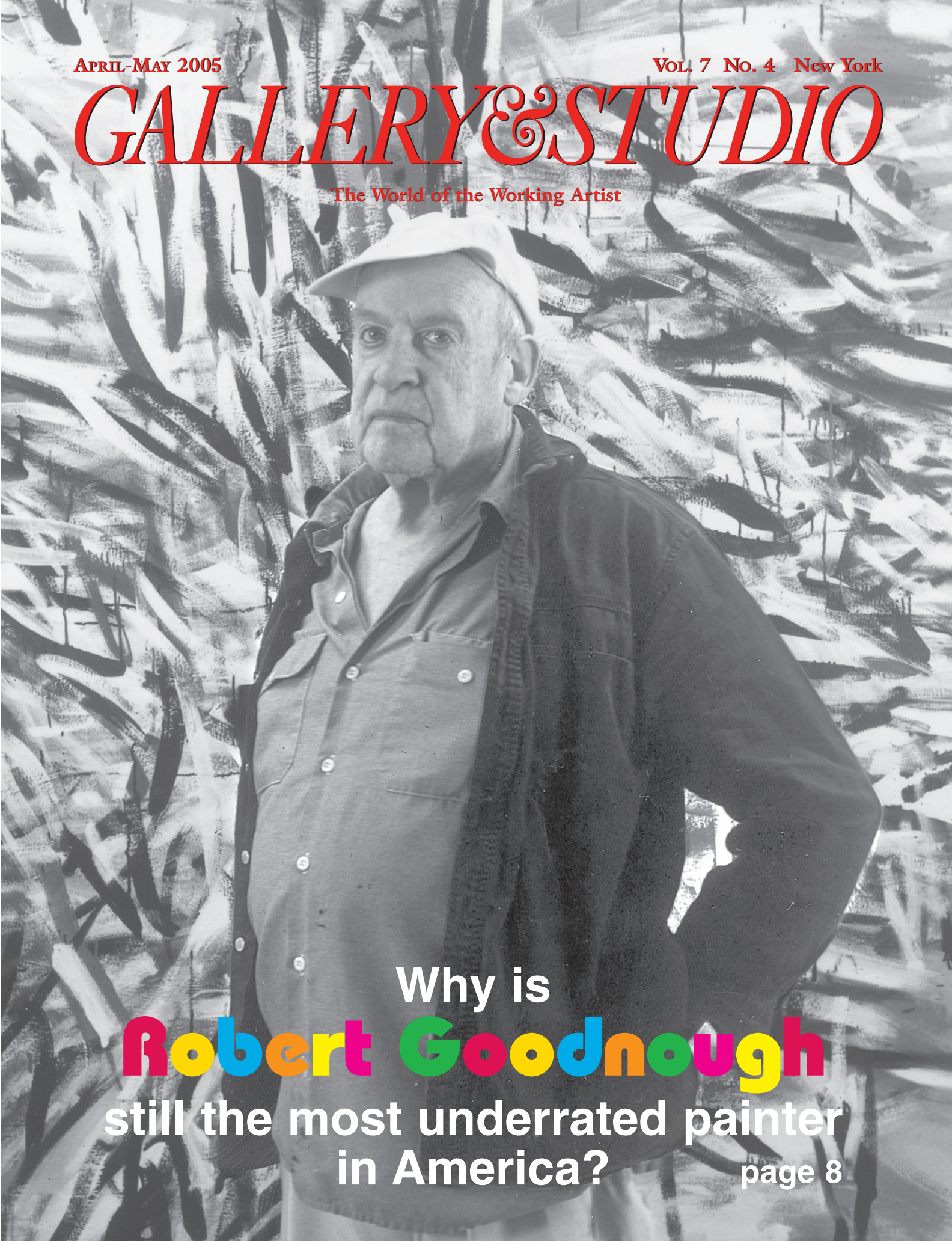
April-May 2005 Vol. 7 No. 4 New York

GALLERY&STUDIO

The World of the Working Artist



Why is Robert Goodnough still the most underrated painter in America?

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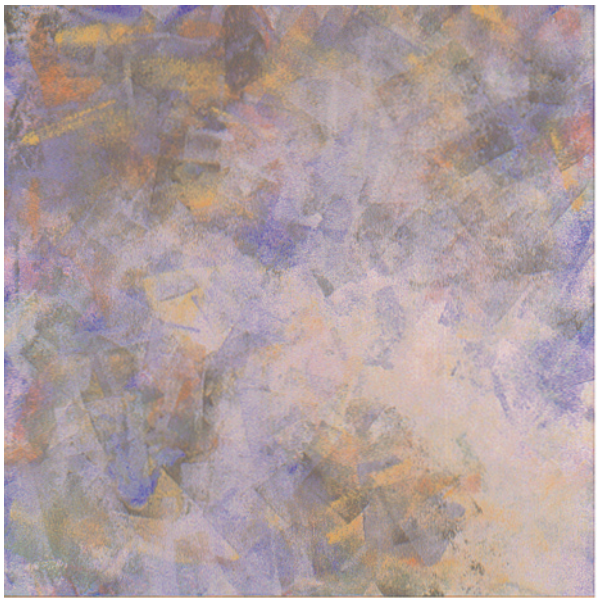

Untitled 2005 acrylic on canvas 36" x 36"

Missy Lipsett
April 5-23, 2005

plane painting

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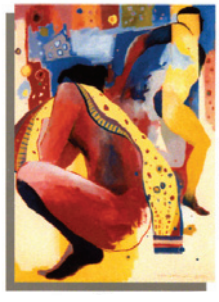

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G&S Highlights

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New York School, Second Generation: Nobody does it better than veteran painter ***Robert Goodnough****, seen here in his upstate studio. And he's been doing it for over 50 years. So why isn't his name on everybody's lips, every critic's Living Masters list? Could it be one of those inexplicable mysteries of human destiny?* *Photo by: Adam Reich*

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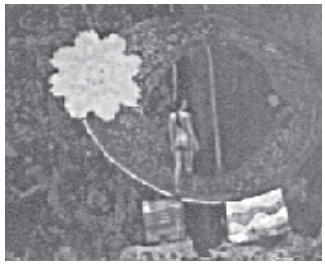

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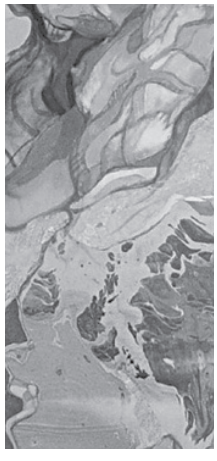

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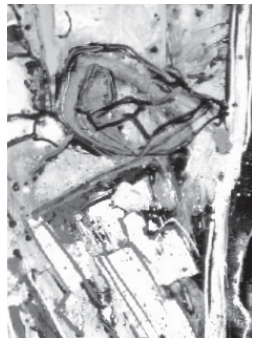

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Missy Lipsett Takes Her Painterly Explorations to a New Plane

"Zen artists understand better than any others the value of empty spaces, and in a certain sense what they left out was more important than what they put in," Alan Watts once wrote. "They lifted just a corner of the veil to excite people to find out for themselves what lay behind."

Although Missy Lipsett, far as one knows, does not claim to be a Buddhist, the same might be said of Lipsett's new solo exhibition "Plane Painting," at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from April 5 through 23, with receptions on Thursday, April 7, from 6 to 8 PM and Saturday, April 9, from 4 to 6 PM.

"Untitled"

Lipsett is one of those rare painters who can get away with making radical changes that would be confusing in another artist and still retain a sense of stylistic consistency. Not content to settle for the stagnant satisfaction of a signature style, she insists on taking risks. Each time she finishes a body of work she becomes restless, she admits, and begins to wonder what comes next. Because she works intuitively, it would seem that one's own guess is as good as her own.

Her new paintings are a far cry from the "water works" that she showed in the wake of 9/11, with their liquescent forms as amorphous as anything that Helen Frankenthaler ever committed to canvas, although in their own way they are often just as spare and coloristically subtle. Lipsett continues to eschew the use of brushes and, since she prefers not to demystify her painting process, part of the fun for the viewer is trying to guess exactly how she achieves her various mark-making effects. The new works are especially rich in texture and "touch"—albeit subtly so. As the title suggests, Lipsett has now introduced planar forms with a decidedly rectangular quality, although it would be a misnomer to categorize her new paintings as "geometric," given how she veils these forms via the liberal use of white overpainting, turning them into chromatic shadows and phantom shapes, so that "emptiness" continues to play an important role in her compositions.

In some paintings clusters of rectangular shapes in various colors overlap in a manner that calls to mind aspects of Cubism, as well as the rhythmically superimposed mountain ranges in traditional Chinese ink painting. The latter reference seems particularly apt when Lipsett's planes are laid down with black acrylic, with subtle variations in tone and texture created by different methods of paint application. Sometimes it appears that paint of a relatively dry consistency has been dragged, or "scumbled," over the tooth of the canvas in a manner that causes the particles of pigment to disperse (a technique resembling "dry-brush" sans the brush), resulting in grays with a grainy quality, in contrast to other, more fluid grays that she creates by diluting her acrylic paints with water until they are as translucent as aquarelle. By mixing these two kinds of grays in a single composition, Lipsett achieves nuances that provide the viewer with opportunities for exquisite tonal/tactile delectation, using her skills as a colorist to invest monochromes with a resonance recalling how the aforementioned Zen ink painters (who always worked monochromatically) managed to suggest an entire spectrum of hues.

Further pleasures are provided, however, when Lipsett adds blue, yellow, green, and red hues that she then paints over with white, letting their half-hidden shimmer bleed through like pentimenti of light. Such palimpsests are especially lyrical when combined with passages where she literally paints parts of her planar forms out altogether with white, creating an optical effect akin to when "sun spots" appear to eat away the contours of an object one is gazing at out of doors, or when an element in a landscape is partially erased by thick fog.

Such effects are made even more dramatic by Lipsett's use of luminous pale yellow hues to flood her compositions with light, although it never seems to be her intention to create natural effects. An adamantly abstract painter, she does not attempt to impersonate nature or even to allude to it. Rather, such effects occur as a consequence of her constant "exploring," as she calls her engagement with process. Indeed, as she hastens to insist at every opportunity, process is everything to Lipsett, taking priority over the finished art work as "product," for it is only through the manipulation of paint itself that she arrives at her own particular truth vis a vis the physical properties of paint as a vehicle for exploring color and space, her two main concerns. Both are autonomous entities in her paintings, free of conscious allusions to atmosphere or landscape (although it is the habit of most of us to Rorschach such references into even the most abstract painting, as evidenced by my own insistence on finding likenesses to Chinese mountains in her compositions).

For Lipsett, though, the chromatic adventure itself is sufficiently engaging, and space has an identity separable from the objects and locations of the known world: It exists entirely within the rectangle of the canvas, to be surveyed, divided, and apportioned by means of an intuitive relation of the artist's body to the picture plane. However—and this is especially important in regard to Lipsett's postmodern approach to spatial exploration—the two-dimensionality of the picture plane is no longer as sacrosanct as it once was to an earlier generation of abstract artists. Lipsett, along with others of her generation, has arrived at the realization that space, at this late date, can be implied as well as actual. One may explore the realm of illusion without falling prey to allusion, and Lipsett's latest paintings appear to be a consolidation and a synthesis of all her earlier forays, in that she has honed and integrated their entire arsenal of attributes into a harmonious and thoroughly satisfying whole.

It is finally this harmoniousness, rather than anything pseudo-exotic or nostalgic, that makes Missy Lipsett one of the few Western exceptions to Alan Watts' assertion regarding the art of Zen, even though she has obviously arrived at her own aesthetic nirvana through the example of Jackson Pollock rather than of Kameda Bosai or Yosa Buson. From the beginning, Lipsett was too savvy a painter to succumb, as others have, to the lure of Pollock's style. She looked to him, however, as a model of artistic freedom, and has found her own way to lift the veil and liberate painting from the dictatorship of drawing.

—Ed McCormack

Susan Sills and Her Band of Art Historical All-Stars

By this point in art history, I think we can all agree that Susan Sills, fresh from major retrospectives in Japan and at the Pensacola Museum of Art, in Florida, owns the art of the cutout. For while painted likenesses cut from wood date back to the trompe l'oeil craze of the 17th century, when they were called "dummy boards," and Alex Katz's freestanding portraits of his artworld friends were probably their first contemporary counterparts, Sills alone has made cutouts the main feature of her oeuvre for decades.

Unlike those of Katz, which are slightly smaller than their models and not particularly realistic, given his deadpan style, Sills' figures are usually lifesize and often as eerily convincing as the effigies in Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum. Then again, the degree of realism in Sills' figures depends on whose style she is emulating, since most of her figures (with the exception of occasional portraits of family or friends or the iconographic self-portrait seated on a stepladder that greets visitors to all of her exhibitions) are appropriated from art history.

Being a virtuoso painter and a witty visual mimic, Sills has an uncanny ability to duplicate any Old Master's style down to the most minute brushstroke. Suddenly encountering one of her figures in a gallery or museum evokes a shock of recognition similar to meeting a celebrity in the flesh. Indeed, visitors to Sills' exhibition "The Cutting Edge," at Viridian Artists, Inc., 530 West 25th Street, from April 26 through May 14, may feel like they're rubbing elbows at some A-list art historical cocktail party—especially if they attend the opening reception on Saturday, April 30, from 4 to 6 PM.)

The centerpiece of the show is a centuries-spanning musical trio, reminiscent of one of those "Supergroups" of the 1970s, with members culled from different rock bands, comprised of a Bruegel bagpipe player (1523) , a Chagall fiddler (1935), and a Manet guitarist (1861). Even aside from trying to imagine what such odd instrumentation would sound like (!), one might think that such a combo would be visually discordant, given the contrasts between the three stylistic sources Sills juxtaposes within a single tableaux.

Like that other great artistic wit Saul Steinberg, however, Sills has the ability to mix and match styles harmoniously, making their differences signify individual quirks of personality, as opposed to creating jarring visual discrepancies. Her painterly skills and sculptors' sense of space imbue her hybrid art form with a compositional and narrative logic all their own. Thus her three musicians seem as unified in their own way as the interlocking figures in Picasso's famous Cubist work on the same theme. And the sense that they share a livelihood, as well, comes across in the actual open guitar case, containing some change and crumpled bills, that Sills places on the floor nearby.

Artist, Susan Sills with her Life Size Wood Cutouts from the Old Masters at Viridian Artists Inc., 530 W. 25th Street from April 26 - May 14. 212 414-4040 www.viridianartists.com

The trio seems to provide musical background for two waltzing figures (she with her red bonnet, he with his yellow straw hat) from Renoir's "The Dance at Bougival"; as well as a Sunday-in-the-Park-with-Georges soundtrack for the couple (he with his top hat, she with her bustle) strolling under a real umbrella, shedding multicolored pointillist confetti onto the gallery floor, in another piece called "Que Sera, Seurat."

Sills also brings us face to face with smaller portrait busts of Gauguin, Van Gogh, Madame Matisse, and several other luminaries (in "Monsieur Magritte and Mademoiselle De La Tour ," the latter looks askance at the former as though wondering why that green apple is suspended in front of his face!). Also included are 2-D still life objects, such as a Van Gogh chair, a Klee fish on a plate, and a Cezanne fruit bowl, among other inanimate props in the ongoing drama of art history.

At once sophisticated and accessible, Sills' pieces proved to be educational, as well, for thousands of Florida school children who were led daily through her recent exhibition at the Pensacola Museum of Art, and later assigned to create their own cutouts. That her cutout based on an Ingres' "Odalisque" had to be draped with a real cloth, lest its nudity offend the religious sensibility of that bible-belt community, only attests further to the profound affect that the lifesize figures of Susan Sills, with their startling combination of the actual and the illusory, have upon art audiences of all stripes.

—Ed McCormack

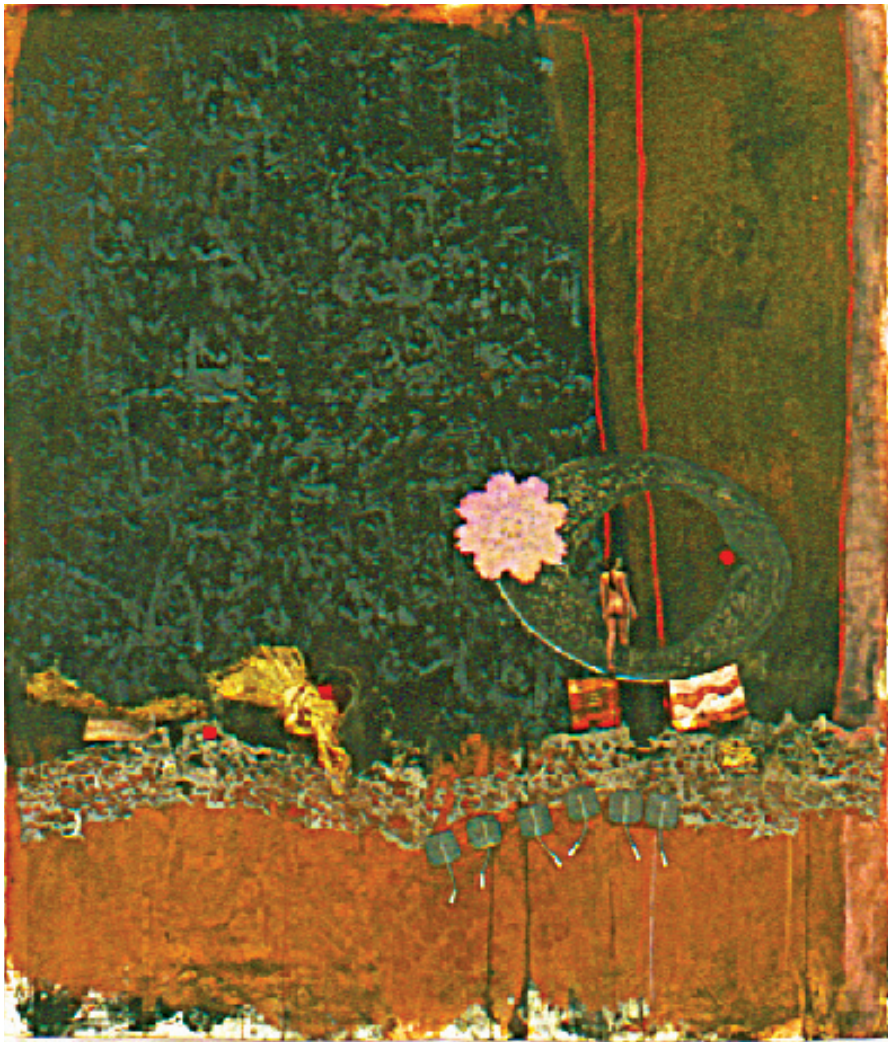
Cecily Barth Firestein: Pushing Beyond the Paternal Tradition

With back-to-back exhibitions at Phoenix Gallery (210 11th Avenue, April 27 through May 21) and Adelphi University Manhattan Center Gallery (75 Varick Street, May 5 through August 10), Cecily Barth Firestein really seems to be hitting her stride. The exhibition at Adelphi is especially auspicious, since it will run long enough to give everyone a chance to catch up with an artist who is long overdue for far greater attention than she has received over a long and distinguished career, even while being greatly admired by fellow artists and included in many prestigious collections.

After all, Firestein first exhibited on Tenth Street back in the late fifties, when precious few women could hold their own in that boy's club made up of boisterous male chauvinists with delusions of being the next Pollock or de Kooning. Firestein did more than hold her own, even though being considered "a real looker," as they used to say, was another strike against her. For, more than one of the guys she regularly outshone in group shows must have asked himself how such an attractive and elegant woman could be such a gutsy painter, back in that pre-enlightened era, when such logic (or lack of it) was as rampant as paint-spattered overalls.

Like many of the best artists of her generation, Firestein studied with Hans Hofmann and obviously learned from that great teacher not only the rudiments of pictorial structure and paint handling but how, as Hofmann famously put it, to "transform the material with which one works back into the sphere of the spirit." Indeed, Firestein seems especially sensitive to the spirit that already exists in the materials themselves, which may be why, unlike most of her peers, she has always preferred paper to canvas, even while working on the large scale and with the gestural freedom that we associate with Hofmann and The New York School.

In this regard, as well as in the innate elegance of her sensibility, Firestein seems akin to the very best Asian artists, even while being quintessentially Western in her tendency to push beyond tradition into areas of the unknown. In Firestein's case, the tradition she pushes beyond is that of Abstract Expressionism itself. However, unlike Larry Rivers and Grace Hartigan, fellow Hofmann students whose way of breaking the paternal yoke was by turning early to the figure, Firestein has gradually evolved a way to bring about a détente between image and gesture, allusive collage and pure painterly endeavor. She has done so not by mushing image and gesture together in the manner of her peers but by presenting them as discrete yet harmonizing entities in compositions which depend on such a delicate balance of elements that one is tempted beyond all reason to invoke the hoary cliché of angels dancing on the head of a pin.



"Coming Out Or Going In" work on paper 61" x 52"

Come to think of it, even that would not be more farfetched than some of the witty and fanciful juxtapositions that Firestein balances so successfully in her recent mixed media paintings, where processions of rabbits, penguins, clowns, ballroom dancers, geishas, and other images that she calls "clones" because of their repetitive nature move gingerly within variegated color fields further enlivened by characteristically elegant bombardments of vigorous strokes and artful drips.

Since the formative stamp of the New York School is indelible in Firestein's work, one is immediately aware that the images in her paintings are visual devices above all, anchoring her compositions by adding more "pull" to the "push," so to speak. Yet, it is obvious that these pictorial elements are carefully chosen by the artist and there is no denying that they also add a poetic resonance that enriches rather than distracts from the purely visual attributes of her paintings.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the recent work on paper entitled "Coming Out or Going In?" Here, the tiny photographic image of a nude woman is not only a pinkly piquant compositional focal point, but seems a pointed autobiographical symbol, as she walks with her back to us into a roughly circular shape suspended within a field of dark, succulent strokes. Immediately below the feminine portal are two colorful rectangles resembling minuscule paintings discarded along the way, as well as a procession of six gray tags with dangling strings that could be price-tags. One given to reading specific meanings into abstract paintings might see these tiny details as symbols of the price that a fiercely independent artist like Cecily Barth Firestein must pay in order to turn her back on worldly temptation and stride with eyes wide open into the great unknown.

—Ed McCormack

George McNeil at Salander-O'Reilly Gallery

There has always been talk about "old art," the work an artist produces in his/her late years. But forget all that! George McNeil, who died at the age of eighty-seven in 1995, was producing paintings that were more audacious, outrageous and immensely energetic until the end of his life. In fact, the older he got, the more powerful his paintings became.

Years ago, he said, "There are three basic periods in a painter's life. First studying and learning up to age thirty-five. Then consolidating until you're fifty-five. Mature work follows to sixty-five. But, there's a fourth period, where you don't give a damn!"

"Herbatim" 1987 *Courtesy of: Salander-O'Reilly Galleries*

Particularly in the late paintings exhibited at Salandar-O'Reilly Galleries, February 8-February 26, 2005, we see George McNeil in the fulness of his creative power. Colors scream off the canvas; lines weave through shapes like a car racing on the thruway; drips, blotches, spatters add to the mayhem of life; George McNeil's life was about what he saw, felt, remembered and imagined.

In the large painting, "Herbatim," (1987), a disconnected tortured face like a child's drawing in red with an open yellow mouth appears to be trapped by the chaos of life around him. Only an irregular rectangle outlined in white contains the nightmare image surrounded by a patchwork of shapes and colors with the riotous sensation of Broadway on a Saturday night.

Unlike the paintings of figures in the Seventies, McNeil uses a kind of shorthand image making in the late work. In the painting, "In The Palm of His Hand" (1991) a huge lemon yellow profile of a woman with strips of green wool for her hair, dominates the canvas. The torso is unimportant here, so McNeil eliminates it. What he portrays is an unattached shapely leg with a high-heeled black sandal cradled by a hand. Both surreal and sexy, McNeil adds tiny cars, airplanes and graffiti stick figures to the seductive vaudeville scene.

Nothing escapes his roving eye in the carnival circus world that is New York. He stores bits and pieces in his mind, seen through the window of a bus as it glides along Fifth Avenue with its mannequined windows showing women in satin gowns. He passes through the cacophony of sparkling neon signs, or glimpses sexy young women gyrating on MTV; the disco dancers, the night life, the hustlers. Exciting, terrifying, grotesque, funny, childlike; Dubuffet, Art Brut, COBRA–it's all there, painted in glaring colors right side up, upside down, along the edges; a macrocosm of life, inwardly felt, outwardly observed, put down on canvas by an artist who was unstoppable.

McNeil, born in New York City in 1908, studied at Pratt Institute, the Art Students League and later with Hans Hoffman in Provincetown, becoming Hoffman's assistant. Afterwards, he received a Masters and Doctoral degree from Columbia University. He was Director of the evening school at Pratt Institute where he taught painting and art history. Summers were spent with his wife and two children in Provincetown and later Kerhonksen, N.Y.

He knew everyone: De Kooning, Gorky, Pollock, Kline, Krasner, Resika, Vicente, the whole New York crowd. But essentially, he was a man who preferred his own company and painting more than hanging out with the Cedar Bar crowd.

Success came early with shows at the Egan Gallery, Poindexter and Howard Wise Gallery. However, by 1967, new trends in art were taking over. In fact, the entire Abstract Expressionistic school was superseded by Pio, Op, Photo-Realism, Hard Edge, Conceptualism and Minimalism, leaving McNeil with few sales and no gallery for many years.

Slowly, in the mid Seventies, the dynamic emotional force and originality of his work began to receive attention once again with exhibitions at Landmark Gallery, Terry Dintinfass, Gruenbaum Gallery followed by Hirschl and Adler, Knoedler and ACA Galleries. There was no question, the artist was on a roll exhibiting and selling his paintings despite the dominance of post modernist art.

With this success, McNeil's art became ever more outrageous with a series of paintings of Times Square and Broadway in 1987. The huge profile face in "Broadway," shows a smiling confident man who dominates the Manhattan landscape as small toy-like buses, cars and buildings fill the background. McNeil was on top of the world.

He had a gentle face with bright blue eyes, but he could be fierce especially during a debate. At an Artists Talk on Art panel discussion at Landmark Gallery in Soho, after hearing the other artists expound, he suddenly stood up, obviously boiling over with anger as he raised his arm hitting the trembling table with his fist loud and hard. Immediately the shocked audience became totally quiet listening to every work he said.

The young naked warrior in the painting, "Resolution," (1980) assumes a samurai position, legs akimbo arms raised, ready to fight. His body dominates the entire space of the canvas from edge to edge. Yet, in opposition to the aggressive figure are two exotic birds, one perched on his lap, the other flying beneath him; his guardians, his other self?

Contrast is one of McNeil's significant strengths both visually and symbolically. "In Spite of All" (1984), a haunting, dreamlike picture, shows another aspect of the artist; introspective, self-questioning. The confident warrior in "Resolution" is now depicted as unsure with scary memories of the past. His nude body turns away from the viewer, his angry face is twisted around like the head of a doll. Beside him are two grim faced ghostly figures who act out a strange dance on the stage. But sitting below is a comical cross-legged little fellow wearing harlequin pants who admonishes them. Is he the joker and they the fools ?

Like McNeil, the little guy has seen it all: the joy, the sadness, the successes, the failures; the ecstasy, the pain. While, "In Spite of All," reveals the artist in a moment of vulnerability, McNeil's life was one of victory. He was always true to himself regardless of the times. As an outstanding Twentieth Century Expressionist, George McNeil painted from the heart, his brush ever ready to record and interpret the astonishing spectacle of life. —Hedy O'Beil

A New Formal Power Enriches the Humanism of Jose F. Rios

Every ethnic neighborhood has its own term for the elderly woman who functions as a benign busybody, spreading gossip, offering advice and keeping an eye on the kids on the block, seeing to it that they are safe and stay out of trouble. In Jewish neighborhoods, she would be called a "yenta," to the Irish she is a "biddy," and to people of Hispanic background she is known as an "abuelita."

"Abuelita" is also the title of one of the most tender and affecting paintings in "Windows," the third solo exhibition of Jose F. Rios, at Gelabert Studios Gallery, 255 West 86th Street, from April 19 through April 30, with a reception for the artist on Saturday April 23, from 5 to 8 PM.

"The abuelitas that cared for me when my mom wasn't around embody the idea that it takes a community to raise a child," Rios says of these "grandmothers of the barrio" whom he remembers fondly from his childhood in Spanish Harlem. Like other recent paintings by Rios, this tribute centers on a window in a tenement building, where the woman in the floral-patterned house dress that is the universal uniform of her calling can be seen feeding the pigeons flocking to her windowsill while keeping one eye peeled on the street below.

"Abuelita"

For Rios, the fond mists of memory have transformed this scene into a secular icon. The old woman has the serene smile and bearing of a saint, and rather than wearing their usual grimy gray homeless overcoats, the street pigeons fluttering to her fingertips are as improbably white as doves. Graceful green vines dotted with delicate pink buds cling to the red brick tenement, encircling the window, its stone molding encrusted with ornate swirls and cherubic ornamentation. Here, as in all of his paintings, Jose F. Rios has given this subject a visionary reality that transcends ordinary reality, a truth that is more poetic than factual.

No painter today depicts transcendence more powerfully than Rios, for whom every picture, regardless of its ostensible subject, is a symbolic self-portrait. Perhaps his signature work in this regard is his now classic image "Hope," in which a white flower is seen growing through a crack in the sidewalk on a city street where the facade of an all-night vegetable stand blazes beatifically and only the equally bright eyes of many tenement windows bear witness this miracle.

Such pictures symbolize the artist's personal journey from the hell of alcoholism and heroin addiction during the decade that he lived on the streets, to his present resurrection as a sober and productive painter who has gained greater recognition among critics and collectors with each succeeding exhibition. Rios, more than most of us, has faced the most brutal depths of reality; yet his vision has been purified rather than sullied by his drug addiction and intermittent jail sentences— a kind of miracle in itself. He has emerged from his personal darkness bearing a vision that illuminates his canvases with a sincere humanism which is rare indeed in the often dehumanized precincts of contemporary painting.

Obviously, there is a certain peril in painting the way that Rios does, especially in a cultural climate such as our present one, so filled with irony and outright cynicism. Yet Rios possesses an intuitive visual intelligence that never falters; his work never crosses the thin line that separates genuine sentiment from mawkish sentimentality. Which is to say, the feelings in his paintings are authentic, rather than feigned, and his absolute conviction impresses itself upon the viewer in a manner that is contagious. Thus like every true visionary, Rios initiates us in new ways of seeing.

Of course, it helps that Rios is such an innately gifted painter. Although an autodidact, he has mastered his materials and technique to a degree that enables him to realize the image that he sees in his mind's-eye or in his memory vividly and make aesthetic statements that are as sound in formal terms as those of the most sophisticated abstract painters. One of the most beautiful examples of this can be seen in his painting of a plant growing out of a Cafe Bustelo can—itself a kind of icon, being the best-selling brand of coffee in every neighborhood bodega in the city— on a window sill. Here, in place of the usual red or faded pink brick generic to most tenements, Rios has made the building a brilliant shade of blue. Auras of indigo suffuse the entire composition, blending with the green hanging plants surrounding the smaller shoot in the Cafe Bustelo can, with its distinctive yellow and red design.

Rio also calls upon his superb skills as a colorist and manipulator of pigment to capture the reflections on the window-glass and to evoke the mellow atmosphere within the apartment. Through his use of soft yet luminous earth tones that create a golden interior glow, Rios suggests all the homey, domestic comforts to which only a man who has lived on the streets and been confined to the institutional coldness of jail cells could possibly give such wistful expression.

Windows have always figured prominently in the paintings of Jose F. Rios, as a backdrop for his portrait of the great salsa musician Tito Puente, as well as in other early depictions of the barrio and the inner city. So it stands to reason that he would eventually focus in more closely on these intimate symbols of family life in the city that he grew up in from the age of two, after his parents migrated from Puerto Rico. What one might not have anticipated, however, is how Rios would exploit the geometric structures of these rectangular shapes to create some of his strongest compositions to date. A passion for story-telling has always been a salient feature of Rios' humanistic art. That has not diminished in the least, even as he invests his newest paintings with an unprecedented formal power.

—Ed McCormack

Why is Robert Goodnough Still the

It seems typical of Robert Goodnough that he did not attend the opening reception of his most recent exhibition at Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, in the Fuller Building, at 41 East 57th Street. In the 1950s and 60s, when he exhibited regularly at Tibor de Nagy Gallery, where he made his debut in the landmark exhibition "The New Generation" in 1950, Goodnough didn't attend many of his own openings either. In fact, his reputation for social elusiveness was such that when he finally did show up for his eighth solo show at the de Nagy Gallery, in 1961, the writer B.H. Friedman noted, "This time he came to the opening, where he seemed to be the only stranger."

"Angular Lift," 1985

Along with Robert Rauschenberg and Larry Rivers, the critic Irving Sandler once cited Goodnough as one of the six or seven artists among the Second Generation of the New York School "most included in exhibitions and publications of the 1950s." But when I asked Sandler recently why he thought Goodnough was not better known today, he seemed as puzzled as I was, saying, "I can't really answer that question. I just don't know..."

Sandler, by far the most reliable chronicler of the postwar period in the New York art scene, also once stated that "the Second Generation's sense of family was even stronger than the first." And if that is true, then Robert Goodnough would have to be considered the distant relation. After all, he's virtually the only New York artist of comparable stature who is nowhere to be found in "The Artist's World," Fred W. McDarrah's 1961 photo book chronicling the movable feast that was the Manhattan avant garde, from loft parties to meetings of The Club; from the Cedar Bar, to communal dinners in Chinatown; to openings on Tenth Street and in uptown galleries and museums.

True, when he was still a student at N.Y.U., Goodnough did help Barnet Newman and Robert Motherwell organize the well-known Subjects of the Artists lectures at Studio 35, and later participated in discussion groups with de Kooning, Motherwell, and Pollock at The Club. He also made a 8 millimeter film called Le Pauvre Artiste with a friend named Marta Fabry about an impoverished artist making a sale to a rich collector in his studio that was, according to B.H. Friedman "as much a spoof of Kerouac's Pull My Daisy as of Murger's La Vie de Bohème. "

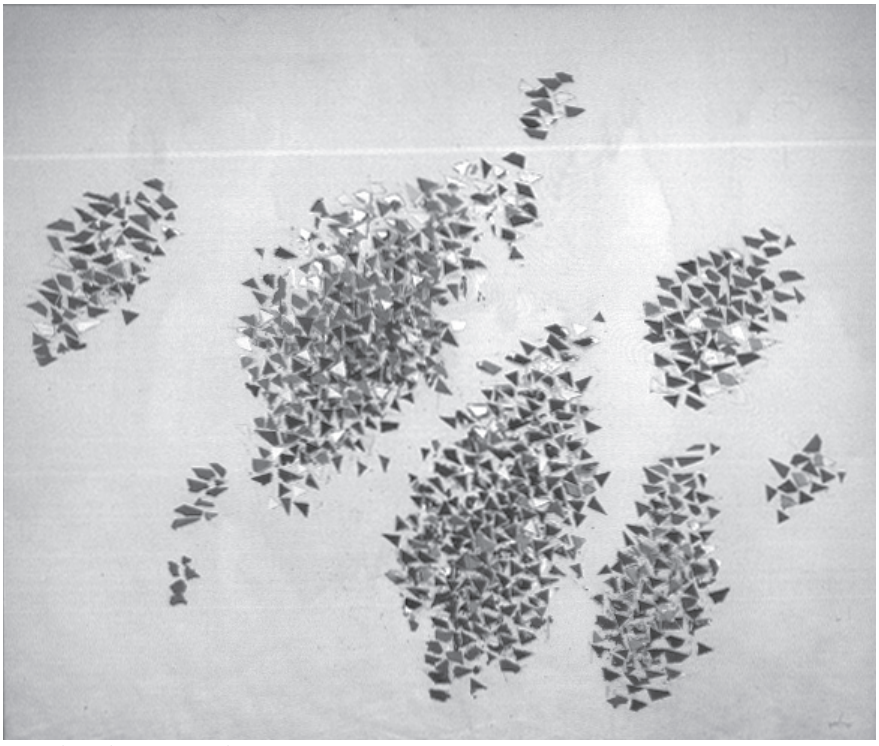
But unlike Alfred Leslie, the painter who made Pull My Daisy with photographer Robert Frank, Goodnough was not a regular participant in downtown happenings. Nor was he by any means a party animal. In contrast to many of his contemporaries, you won't hear stories about him flaunting multiple love affairs á la de Kooning or getting into drunken brawls —or even loud arguments— at the Cedar. ("I had just come to New York and was new to all of this," Goodnough, who was actually from a small town upstate but obviously saw Manhattan as a place apart, told Matthew Rose in a 1987 interview in Arts magazine. And that was the gist of what this reserved provincial, fresh out of the U.S. Army and skimping by on the G.I. Bill, had to say about the fabled watering hole of the New York School. Period.)

His social reserve, however, seems hardly sufficient in itself to explain why, despite being in the collections of MoMA, the Whitney, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and just about every other museum that matters, Robert Goodnough is still the most under-rated painter in America. My own theory is that even more damaging than being dismissed as a party-pooper in perhaps the most socially incestuous art scene in history was the erroneous perception that Goodnough may have been something of a fence-sitter.

"I'm not crazy about labels," Goodnough once stated— but the art world loves them. So what do you do with a guy who studied with and acknowledged as influences both Amedee Ozenfant, a Purist from Paris and a stickler for "discipline and precision," and Hans Hofmann, the let-it-all-hang-out guru of free-form "push and pull"? Goodnough himself didn't help them to figure it out when he was quoted saying things like, "I like to work freely, to slash with the brush and let loose. I also like to work carefully and with discipline."

Not many academic critics and art historians were as perceptive as Barbara Guest, who, like her fellow New York School poet Frank O'Hara, had an intimate grasp of what New York School painters were up to. Noting that Goodnough had been called "that Cubist," by those who didn't really understand his work, Guest wrote: "What that term implies is surprise, wonder that a painter brought up on the New York scene which is a corridor stretching from the studio of Hans Hofmann to the Club, whose walls were constructed and decorated by the Action Painters, should so little appear to be one of the group. As if he had discovered within this corridor a separate passage for his own private use."

Most Under-Rated Painter In America?



"Cool and Warm Colors," 1993

Another problem may have been that while being embraced by Clement Greenberg (who included him in "New Talent," the group exhibition that he organized with Meyer Shapiro for the Kootz Gallery in 1950) could work wonders for strict formalists like Ken Noland and Jules Olitski, the early endorsement by the art world's biggest polemical blowhard could only add to the confusion for a more complex and varied artist like Goodnough.

"I originally met Clem Greenberg in Provincetown when I was studying with Hofmann," Goodnough told the writer Matthew Rose. "He's always gone to my shows and kept track of what I was doing. When I had a studio on Christopher Street, down on Eighth Avenue, he came by one day with John Myers. I had just finished a couple of paintings that were a little more disciplined and the shapes were more isolated. They were not overlapping shapes like some of the other paintings. Greenberg liked this one painting very much—it was controlled. At one point he called for a 'large and bland Apollonian art.' And this painting kind of fit into his scheme."

Goodnough's work overall, however, didn't fit into anyone's scheme, and this made it hard to place in a climate of contention between the critical camps of Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, who became his arch rival when he weighed in with the influential essay, "The American Action Painters." To make a long story short, in the popularity contest between the two First Generation behemoths, Greenberg championed Pollock, while Rosenberg pushed de Kooning. Goodnough, who has composed pictures with both "overlapping shapes" and "more isolated shapes" all throughout his career, never did fit into the polarized scheme that caused the Greenberg-Rosenberg wars. It was perfectly natural for him to move between Greenbergian Apolonianism and Rosenbergian Action Painting, and even to combine elements of both in one canvas, confusing, and perhaps even offending, those who would insist that every New York artist remain loyal to either one camp or the other.

* * *

That it did not respect arbitrary boundaries was exactly what made Goodnough's work seem so fresh and appealing when my wife and I first discovered it in the mid 1960s. Jeannie and I may have looked like stereotypical hippies with our bellbottoms, love beads and long hair, but we much preferred making the rounds of the galleries on 57th Street or Madison Avenue, then the two hubs of the art world, to making the scene at Fillmore East or Woodstock. We made a point of seeing everything, and what struck us immediately about Goodnough's work was that while it could be funky and gestural it didn't look like warmed over Abstract Expressionism. Then again, even when the shapes were more controlled, disciplined and isolated (to use Goodnough's own terms) the paintings didn't look flat and pat like a lot of the hard-edged Pop and Minimalist stuff coming into vogue around that time.

Goodnough's paintings, which seemed to be everywhere, not only at de Nagy, but in numerous group shows in other venues, were often huge. They looked ambitious and even heroic in the way that one wanted New York School Painting to continue being—very much in what Harold Rosenberg referred to as "the tradition of the new." At the same time, some of them also had a funky, almost humorous nonchalance, as though the painter had a wry eye on art history and could make vital and visually witty connections between Gericault's wave-tossed raft, Rubens' spirited steeds, and the sweeping gestural strokes that de Kooning and Kline laid down with broad house-painter's brushes. As Fairfield Porter once put it, "Goodnough is full of respect for tradition, which he uses for new formal ends." Obviously, Goodnough's paintings were very much in what Harold Rosenberg referred to as "the tradition of the new."

What seemed most new to Jeannie and me when we first discovered Goodnough's work was its buoyancy, which made Barbara Guest call him "an innovator" for being the first painter to work outward from the center toward the edges of the canvas, "in order to lift the weight from the bottom of the picture." This weightless quality, further enhanced by the grace and velocity of his forms, sometimes created the impression that Goodnough's huge canvases were on the verge of taking off from the wall like flying saucers!

Goodnough married the romantic and the prosaic with an aplomb that often made us want to applaud, as one would a virtuoso musical performance. There was so much going on in his paintings at once, from flat, geometric areas of pure color, to vigorous gestural thrusts, to graffiti-like passages of raw charcoal drawing that got incorporated into the composition ala Twombly, rather than covered over. Nobody else around at that time seemed to be juggling so many disparate methods of mark-making in such an eclectic and yet coherent manner.

Especially exciting was Goodnough's

(cont'd.)

way of combining strong formal qualities with quirky hints of subject matter—particularly in those compositions where angular, shard-like shapes and patches of color created semi-abstract suggestions of dinosaurs, figures on topsy turvy boats, and carnivalesque crowds. His work anticipated much that would come later, in the pluralist— or postmodern— era, from New Image painting to the variously allusive abstractions of artists like Terry Winters and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

That Goodnough is not better known, even while his work is greatly admired by other painters and coveted by savvy collectors, can only be attributed to one of those inexplicable miscarriages of fortune or peculiar mysteries of the human personality—and perhaps to his stubborn refusal to engage in art world politics or tailor his work to the expectations of myopic critics.

* * *

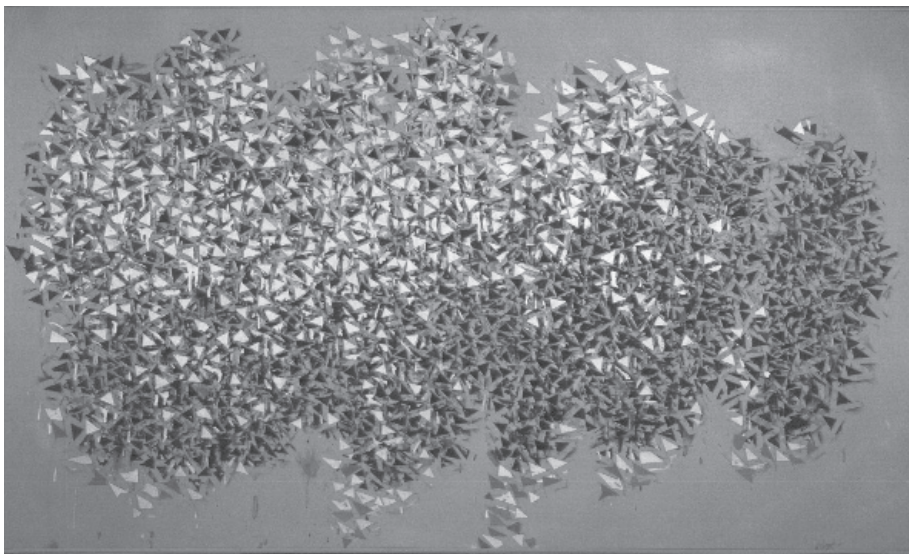
Goodnough arrived in Manhattan soon after being discharged from the army at the end of World War II. He had been drafted in his hometown, Cortland, New York, a year after graduating from Syracuse University, where he had gone on scholarship at the recommendation of a former high school art teacher. Conservative as American art education still was in the early 1940s he did not discover modern painting until he was in the army, stationed in New Guinea, and saw the work of Picasso and Mondrian in a magazine.

And not a moment too soon: "I was tired of painting people that looked like people, with eyes, nose and mouth in just the right places," he told B. H. Friedman in "Goodnough," a monograph published by Editions Georges Fall, Paris, in 1962.

"This looked like the time to make some changes and free up a bit. It seemed that in order to grasp the true energy of a person more was needed than to show features, arms and legs. People moved and did things; they didn't just sit and pose; and what they did came from underlying energies and drives."

While his degree in Art Education from N.Y.U. would eventually enable him to to teach at the Fieldston School, Cornell University, as well as at his alma mater, he initially supported himself with odd carpentry jobs, and even, for a time, ran a newsstand with a struggling playwright named George Franklin.

In 1947, while sharing a house on the dock in Provincetown with two other young painters, and attending Hans Hofmann's summer classes, he composed some verses about his war experiences, raw, strong stuff with lines such as "Closely I saw the enemy, touched the



"Abstract Development," 1984

hardened forms,/Grinning in a ditch, where they had fallen." However, in another section of the same poem—"As the battle moved/in a great kaleidoscopic pattern"—is even more telling regarding his visual orientation, reflecting as it does the shimmering compositional dispersal that characterizes his best work. In fact, B.H. Friedman observes astutely in his essay that "Even in his poetry, Goodnough's image is beginning to emerge: an image emanating from the tension between rigid form and emotional content..."

Soon Goodnough was supplementing his meager income by writing reviews and articles for Art News, along with other New York School painters and poets like Elaine de Kooning, Fairfield Porter, John Ashbery, and James Schueler, who offered a lively alternative to dry, academic criticism in the heyday of that publication.

"Far out on Long Island, in the tiny village of Springs, with the ocean as background and in close contact with open, tree-studded fields where cattle graze peacefully, Jackson Pollock lives and paints," Goodnough begins his feature article, "Pollock Paints a Picture," in the May 1951 issue of Art News, setting the scene in an atmospheric manner which indicates that he could have made a career in journalism, had he so chosen. But when he gets down to the serious business of describing Pollock's working process, he starts thinking as a painter and reveals his true vocation. Indeed, Goodnough could as well be talking about his own approach to abstract painting as Pollock's when he writes: "The nature of the process is important. It is not something that has lost contact with reality, but might be called a synthesis of countless contacts which have become refined in the area of the emotions through the act of painting."

Perhaps sensing his sympathy to her husband's work, Pollock's wife, Lee Krasner, invited Goodnough and the photographer, Hans Namath, to stay the night, rather than making the long trip back to the city late in the day, after they finished the interview and photo session. Pollock, who was gregarious to a fault when drunk but depressive and withdrawn when sober, happened to be on the wagon at the time.

"After dinner there was an evening to get through," the photographer would later recall. "Pollock was pleasant but he didn't talk much. He hardly said anything. Goodnough wasn't a big talker either, so things got a little boring."

* * *

Rumor has it that Robert Goodnough, who now lives in upstate New York with his Japanese wife, Miko, is still not much of a talker. Well, one would have surmised that this most taciturn of artists would have grown even more so with time; most people's personalities tend to concretize as they get older. Often, with artists, the work can ossify as well. Happily, this was not true in Goodnough's case, Jeannie and I discovered as soon as we walked into the Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery. That the show included both early and recent paintings enabled one who had not seen his work for awhile to reconnect with what initially attracted one to it, as well as to follow the continuity of his concerns.

Goodnough has several different modes of expression which appear to develop more or less simultaneously over several decades, rather than occurring in chronological "periods." For example, the 1997 oil on linen "Horses II" in the show at Perlow harks back to "Rearing

Horses," a 1959 painting inspired by a Rubens copy of Leonardo's "Battle of Anghiari," which was not included in the exhibition. In both the earlier and later paintings, the main emphasis is on capturing a dynamic sense of equine movement in purely abstract terms with long, rhythmical "action lines" that flow upward from right to left over a vigorously worked ground covered with variegated color areas.

Another characteristic approach to which Goodnough returns from time to time can be seen in "Angular Lift,", at 68 X 104 inches, the largest canvas in the exhibition, which while executed in 1985 reminded us of some of his paintings from the mid 1960s. Here, rather than being integrated with the ground, shard-like shapes (the term Goodnough prefers to "forms") in muted red, pink, blue, white, green, and slate-gray tones appear in angular configurations at the center of an expansive field thinly stained with a pale, neutral hue. Further enlivened by the drips that Goodnough does not like to cover "because it's part of the process of doing the work," "Angular Lift" is one of his large yet "weightless" paintings—even though it was created with overlapping shapes.

In both "Color Shapes,1984," and "Reflection, 2002-2004," on the other hand, a multitude of tiny, roughly triangular, isolated shapes soars over a luminous, liquescent ground, resulting in even greater buoyancy. Such graceful formations of small color particles on solid, yet subtly modulated fields, recurring in Goodnough's oeuvre over several decades, provoke a visual sensation as exhilarating as watching a flock of migrating birds sail across the sky.

Recently, however, Goodnough has been working most steadily on a group of paintings similar to ones that he did in the 1950s, with more grounded concentrations of layered and interwoven strokes, often in subdued monochromes interspersed with more strident bursts of red, yellow, and blue hues. Paintings such as the sizable oil and acrylic on canvas "N-R-K-A," 2004, with their vigorous gestures and elegant drips, are akin to some of the works that Barbara Guest was referring to when she wrote, "Goodnough laid down his color in short brushstrokes, again employing the expressive elements of cubism. But he certainly did not construct his painting cubistically. He was very far from that in his path toward the edges of the canvas."

"NRKA," 2004

All of the paintings, early and recent, in Robert Goodnough's exhibition at Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery glowed from the walls with an immediacy and a vitality that made clear once again how long overdue Goodnough is for wider recognition as one of the most innovative American painters active from the postwar period to the present. Unlike many of his contemporaries Goodnough has worked quietly and steadily, with a minimum of posturing. And while it might be said that his avoidance of the limelight has worked against him, perhaps in that final assessment he will benefit from having fabricated no public myth to get in the way of what matters most: the work itself.

—Ed McCormack

Jack Stewart, Ph.D., NA (1926–2005)

We were saddened to learn that Jack Stewart, who proved that being an innovative artist and an old-fashioned gentleman are not mutually exclusive, passed away on March 4. Born in Atlanta, Georgia, on January 27, 1926, Stewart began studying art at the High Museum of Art at age nine and apprenticed to the sculptor and painter Steffan Thomas while still in his teens. Later he earned a BFA degree at Yale University, where he studied with Josef Albers and Willem de Kooning. He also studied architecture at Columbia University and earned MA and Ph.D degrees in art at New York University.

Over the course of a prolific and varied career, which began with his first solo exhibition at the George Binet Gallery, in New York City, in 1950, Stewart became known as an easel painter and completed numerous prestigious commissions for mosaic and ceramic tile murals and stained glass windows. Among his better known projects were a 92 foot long mosaic on the facade of the Versailles Hotel, in Miami Beach Florida, ten mosaic murals on the SS Santa Paula, and a stained glass window for Robin International Corporation of New York City.

Steward was a past president of The Artists Welfare Fund, New York Artists Equity Association, Inc. ; president emeritus of the National Society of Mural Painters; president of the Fine Arts Federation of New York and an Academician of the National Academy of Design. He had been chairman of the art departments of Cooper Union and Indiana State University, and provost and vice president of the Rhode Island School of Design. He published many articles on art and also wrote the definitive work Subway Graffiti, U.M.I, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1989, and Mass Transit Art, published by the Groninger Museum, Holland. His work is in the permanent collections of Yale University Art Gallery, The Museum of the City of New York, the National Academy Museum and many other important university and museum collections nationwide.

He is survived by his wife, Regina Serniak Stewart, his son, Brendon Burns Stewart, his mother, Lil Stewart, and his brothers William and Travis Stewart. A memorial exhibition of Jack Stewart's paintings will be held at the Broome Street Gallery, 498 Broome Street, from March 22 through April 3, with memorial services held in the gallery on Saturday, April 2nd and Sunday April 3rd.

In lieu of flowers, contributions may be made to The Artists Welfare Fund, 498 Broome Street, New York, N.Y. 10013.

At CVB Space, "Secrets" Come Out into the Light

In her catalog text for the group show "Secrets," presented by D'ARS International Exhibition Projects, of Milan and New York, at CVB Space, 407 West 13th Street, hot young Italian curator Stefania Carrozzini makes an important distinction between how the mass media increases ratings "by revealing secret stories, facts and circumstances which sometimes lend themselves to vulgarity" and the more creative secrets revealed by artists who "open up the heart and the mind of man thus bringing to light, revealing something which had never been done or thought before."

The exhibition, which opens with a reception from 6 to 8 PM on Thursday April 7 and runs through May 7, features seven Italian artists and one American, all united by enigmatic qualities that illuminate the theme—or at very least suggest that secrets harbor questions more often than answers.

The American artist Sonja Stoerr creates box assemblages which are the opposite of Joseph Cornell's intimate shadowbox theaters for their hidden, hermetically sealed quality. Vault-like edifices of wood, concrete, metal and resin, contain mirrors and 35 millimeter transparencies, revealing mere glimmers of the secrets within.

The relatively new medium of the digital print must be enjoying unusual popularity in Italy, since it is almost as prevalent as painting in this exhibition: In her digital photos printed on canvas Raffaella Corcione practices concealment by a technique of imagistic blurring that tantalizes the viewer. We contemplate the composition she calls "Secret," in which a sensual pinkish form, surrounded by yellow auras, glows from a dark ground, wondering if it truly is a corpulent nude woman floating like an astronaut in space or something entirely different. Not knowing for certain makes our voyeurism an even more guilty pleasure.

The digital print is employed with contrasting clarity by Maria Rebecca Ballestra in "Capture What's Inside," where three photographic images of the same young woman are arranged like police mug-shots on a brilliant yellow background with the title below them in red block letters. In one picture she gives the thumbs-up sign; in the second she shows us her profile in willing parody of the pose a convicted felon is forced to assume; in the third, she sticks out her tongue. Perhaps with her Neo-Pop approach Ballestra is telling us that the best way to diffuse our secrets is to advertise them as blatantly as one would any marketable commodity.

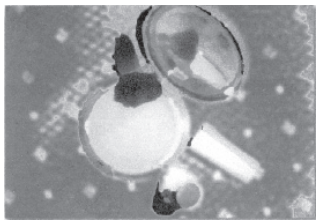
Then there is Maria Teresa Mazzola, who touches upon how some secrets can be hidden by cosmetics in a digital photo printed on aluminum entitled "Make Up." Mazzola, however, employs an image of a mirrored compact and a make-up brush to create a composition that is primarily abstract by virtue of its heightened colors and the formal arrangement of the barely recognizable cosmetic items.

Geppo Monzio Compagnoni, on the other hand, evokes the more serenely blameless secrets lodged in the realm of dreams in an acrylic painting on an oval canvas called "Portrait." In Compagnoni's lyrically surreal picture, permeated by nocturnal blue hues, a young woman slumbers within a bottle that has been transformed into a ship by a paintbrush projecting from its top like a mast, with a brightly-checkered garment serving as a sail. But don't worry: should the sail fail, there's always that smoking cigarette sticking out of its cork to propel this dreamboat like a steamship!

Three other painters take a more abstract approach to the theme: In an oil on canvas called "The Secret Garden," Pierluigi De Lutti suggests that there are secrets we should savor rather than regret. Filled with lush, pastoral colors and buoyant brush strokes, De Lutti's gestural painting evokes a sensual Paradise where only a few dark blue shadows lurk as a reminders that bliss, too, can have consequences.

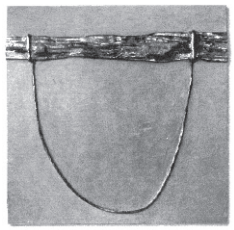
With an insouciant elegance reminiscent of Robert Motherwell, in her collage painting "Hombre," Valentina Cantoni conjures up a crude art brut figure by pasting a fragment of a torn black shopping bag imprinted with the Spanish word for "man" to a gestural landscape of earthy tempera colors. The knots and loop of the bag's white string handle form a "Smiley Face," and also seem to suggest that secrets are something we pick up and carry with us wherever we go. Giorgio Tonti, on the other hand, employs a similarly looping form in an untitled work in mixed media on wood. However, suspended from a steely blue horizontal bar set against a rusty red expanse of agitated brush strokes, Tonti's loop suggests a hangman's noose, raising questions about the more self-destructive aspects of the secrets that we keep.

—Ed McCormack

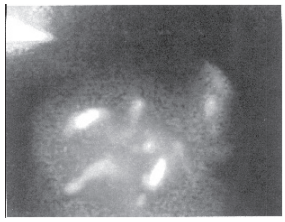


Maria Teresa Mazzola

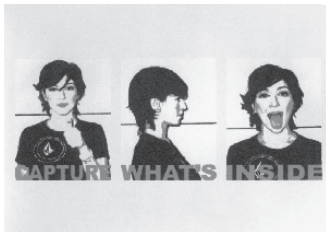
Pierluigi De Lutti



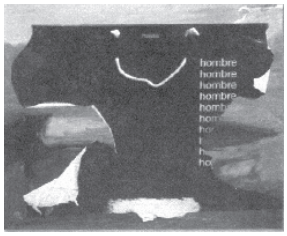
Giorgio Tonti



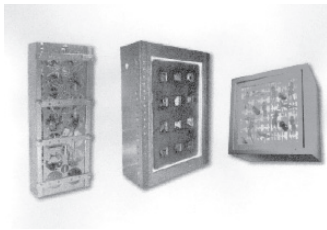
Raffaella Corcione



Maria Rebecca Ballestra



Valentina Cantoni



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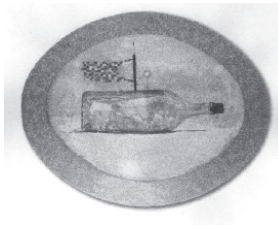


Geppo Monzio Compagnoni

Vernita Nemec Unwinds Her "Endless Junkmail Scroll"

Junkmail and the Art from Detritus Movement is a match made in heaven, and who better to consummate it than Vernita Nemec, AKA N' Cognita, the founder of the movement herself?

Nemec, who has been active in the art world since the late 1960s as an artist, performance artist, and independent curator, has been working for the past year on "The Endless Junkmail Scroll," a spectacular collage installation that will be on view at Gallery Onetwentyeight, 128 Rivington Street, on the Lower East Side, from April 20 through May 14. (With the scroll serving as a stage-set Nemec will perform the first public act of her 7 Years of Living Art Project in collaboration with artist Kazuko Miyamoto and musician Sean Carolan on Thursday and Friday, May 12th and 13th, at 8 PM.)

Since Nemec sees the scroll as representing the endless onslaught of junkmail, reflecting information overload and 21st century complexity, she has conceived it as an ongoing project. "As a response to our market-driven world," as she puts it, she will make fragments of the work available to collectors (who will be able to select sections of it by the linear inch), and after their removal, the scroll will be "closed, re-collaged and re-connected, keeping the work in constant transition."

Recently, invited guests had an opportunity to preview the scroll, which is now over 100 feet long, in a private showing at Viridian Gallery in Chelsea. With the patterned linings of blue and green security envelopes serving as connective tissue for a crazy quilt of varied imagery created with drawings, fragments of text, photographs, painted passages, and all manner of collage elements, the scroll seemed to take off like one of those caterpillar rides in a carnival, twisting this way and that, climbing walls and turning corners, gaining visual velocity as it wended its endless way around the gallery.

Nemec, a recipient of grants from the Jerome Foundation, the Franklin Furnace, and the Field, has done a lot of things in her eclectic career: exhibited and performed in the United States, Mexico, Hungary and Japan; participated in seminal feminist and political and protest art happenings; interviewed numerous art world luminaries for the Artists Talk On Art series of panel discussions (of which she served as Director in the 1990s); curated exhibitions at the Henry Street Settlement; participated in seminal feminist and political events; organized Art from Detritus group shows around the country, and engaged in any number of other projects and activities that have gained her a reputation among fellow artists and others in the know as one of the more vital personalities in the contemporary scene.

However, "The Endless Junkmail Scroll," with its intricate array of symbolic, diaristic, autobiographical, and spontaneous elements, is a defining, career-crowning achievement for Vernita Nemec. Encapsulating the philosophy of aesthetic ecology that prompted her to found the Art From Detritus movement, along with numerous other career-spanning concerns, in an innovative ongoing conceptual format, it is a major statement which seems slated to extend this artist's influence far beyond the underground where it has for too long languished as one of the better-kept secrets of the avant garde. Which is to say: Vernita Nemec is a populist artist in the very best sense of that term, so it's about time she was a lot more popular.

—Ed McCormack

(Note: The Next Art from Detritus Group exhibition will open on April 14th and run through May 22 at the Synagogue for the Arts in Tribecca; call 212-674-0244 or 212-414-4040 for information; and Vernita Nemec will moderate a related Artists Talk On Art panel discussion called "Art from Detritus—10 Years On" with several participating artists at The School of Visual Arts, 209 E 23rd Street, at 7 PM on Friday April 29.)

Vernita Nemec with her installation.

"Arts Ventures" at the Venezuela Gallery: A Vital Survey of Women Artists in Midtown

Founded in 1897, the National League of American Pen Women is one of our more a venerable arts organizations. Its membership encompasses both traditional and avant garde tendencies, with the only criteria seemingly being a high level of skill and professionalism. Several members and guests participated in "Arts Ventures," a memorable recent group exhibition at the Venezuela Gallery, at the Venezuelan Center, 7 East 51st Street.

One honored guest was the Venezuelan painter Oly Dias, whose abstract canvases are all about color and gesture, with bold, buoyant forms that create dynamic compositional rhythms yet resonate with a kind of casual charm. Dias' obvious joy in the act of painting is contagious, enabling the viewer to participate vicariously in the process of laying down bold strokes, dots, and dashes of color in a vibrant visual dance. Her work displays the spontaneity and simplicity, like that of Miro at his best, that only comes with mature mastery.

Equally exciting in a more precise, hard-edged manner was a painting by veteran artist Emily Mehling in which aspects of feminine anatomy were freely abstracted in color areas that resembled stained glass. Mehling has the rare ability to animate geometric forms within bold black outlines in a manner that invests them with a striking expressiveness that one does not often encounter in this mode of painting.

Frequently exhibited New York painter Rebecca Cooperman also made a strong contribution with her canvases in which floral forms painted in naturalistic colors create lyrical rhythmic patterns. Although the abstract qualities of Cooperman's pictures are most often remarked upon, here we also became aware of her ability to evoke an emotional subtext with plant forms that suggest reaching hands and seem to signify a sense of longing. While such interpretations are admittedly subjective, Cooperman's deceptively simple subjects possess a quiet depth and richness that rewards prolonged contemplation.

Claire Clark's glazed stoneware figure tableaux, with people gathered around tables covered with miniature bowls and other utensils evoke a sense of human community, enhanced by their earthy materials, while her sculpture of a single statuesque figure suggests a woman with a lot of Attitude. By contrast Estelle Levy showed a witty postmodern take on Degas' famous sculpture of a ballerina. However, In Levy's piece (entitled "Move of Degas"), the dancer was an anthropomorphic tree-limb wearing a tutu with green and gold metallic trim.

Sculptors made a particularly strong showing in this exhibition, with work ranging from Grace Chin's intricate painted terra cotta bas relief of a young woman followed along a country by a flock of ducks; to Rose Stigliano Craney's ambitious, large scale abstract pieces combining blue neon with aluminum, which create a compelling harmony between physical and ethereal elements; to Tatiana Mamaeva's plaster figure with the face of a grown woman and the body of a baby, poignantly commenting on the perception of women in certain segments of society; to Saskia Sutherland's merger of poetic imagery and geometric form in her small yet powerful mixed media stone sculpture "Imaginary Flowers Outside My Window."

Among the painters, Sonia Grinaeva demonstrated the enduring qualities of plein air in her large canvas "Washington Square Park," evoking brownstones glimpsed through flowering trees, a woman pushing a pram among strolling pedestrians, and other details in a plethora of breezy Neo-Impressionistic strokes. Grinaeva's mastery of flickering light and shadow invested the scene with the feeling of a blustery day in early Spring. Then there was Jeanette Martone, who imbued photorealism, a generally "cool" style, with affecting emotional content in her exacting yet subtly expressive painting of three children in a tropical climate taking shelter beneath a tree. Also laden with psychological impact, the paintings of Adrienne Goldberg employ an impassive style ala Alex Katz to convey underlying tensions, as seen in her image of three black-shawled Arab women cradling infants in their arms at a border crossing in the desert.

Mirel Bercovici, on the other hand, celebrates the joy of life in "Field Flowers," her painting of Gypsies dancing on a grassy hillside, their abandoned gestures mirrored in the rhythmic movement of the clouds above. Bercovici, who had a major retrospective at Westbeth Gallery awhile back, has been exhibiting for many years and her paintings invariably convey a sense of optimism and energy. Energetic in another manner, Miriam Wills' vigorous large collage paintings feature appropriated photographic images of flowers and fruits swirling within rhythmic abstract compositions reminiscent of Futurism. However, Wills's palette, dominated by visceral red hues, is more evocative of musculature and other aspects of the human body and the organic world in general than of the mechanical and industrial forms that inspired her nineteenth century predecessors.

Larissa Tormakov combined abstraction with elements of figuration in her painting of an artist and model merging as one, a tour de force of strident color with an almost sinister psychological impact. Another artist known for merging the abstract and the figurative, Elvira Dimitrij showed a group of paintings in which fragmented images of glamorous women's faces, particularly big red lips, are combined with fragments of type, clouds, and Ben-Day dots á la Lichtenstein, in compositions suggesting "anti-ads" for cigarettes and beauty products. All about addictions fostered by mass media, Dimitrij's bold emblematic canvases can only be termed "Pop Surrealism." Then there was Marcia Ostwind, whose bold floral compositions in acrylics combine vibrant colors and expressionist brushwork to convey the rich beauty and energy of organic forms. Ostwind's flower paintings are like loving portraits, in that each petal and leaf pulses with the vital energy of a living spirit.

Various postmodern approaches to abstraction were also in evidence, ranging from Christine Nelson's collage graphics of neon signs and logos juxtaposed and jumbled to create a semiotic Times Square of warring texts; to Arlene Palitz's acrylic paintings with their saturated colors and densely layered surfaces; to Laura Schiavina's small collages in which gracefully flaring forms emerge from dark grounds, enlivened by luminous bursts of color, gestural strokes, and drips.

Also including other fine works by Eleanor Capogrosso, Phylis Flower, Sheya Lederman, and Arlene Egelberg that space constraints prevent doing justice to here, "Arts Ventures" was a recent highlight in a relatively new venue, under the auspices of The Consulate of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, which has considerably enriched the cultural life of the city by presenting exhibitions of consistently high quality.

—J. Sanders Eaton

Sally Ordile: Probing a Dark and Terrible Beauty

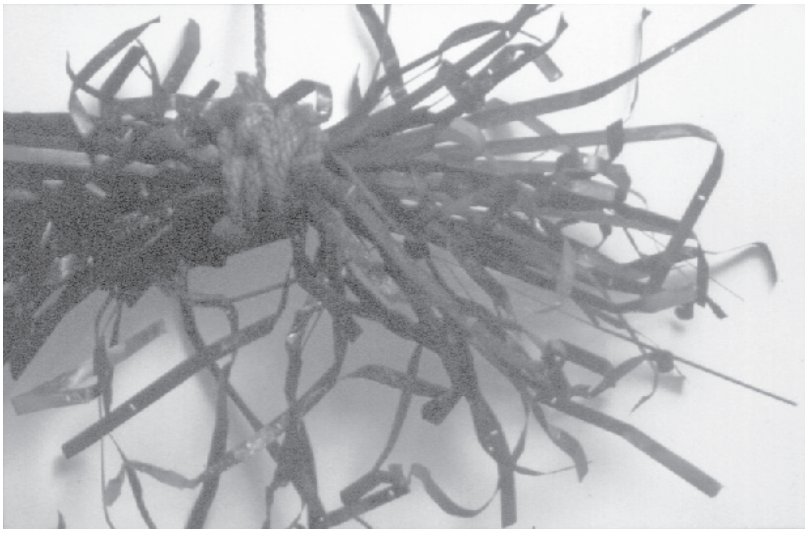
Feminist art did not begin in the late sixties and early seventies, although that was the period when the first overtly political works by women artists exploded into mass consciousness in a movement spearheaded by Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, and other now well known figures who addressed critical issues of injustice. In fact, the feminist sensibility was present decades earlier, before there was a feminist movement as such, in the work of Georgia O'Keeffe, Louise Nevelson, Louise Bourgeois, and many others less prominent but no less relevant.

And women's issues continue to be addressed in a no less urgent manner today in the work of contemporary artists such as Sally Ordile, whose solo exhibition, featuring works from a series she calls "Threads: Conflict & Resolution," can be seen at 2/20 Gallery, 220 West 16th Street, from April 12 through 26. (There will be a reception for the artist on Thursday, April 14, from 6 to 8 PM.)

Ordile, who lives and works in Florida, is well known for her dynamic use of organic materials such as rope, thread, and even the large palm fronds ubiquitous to her home state, in her mixed media pieces and installations. In an earlier exhibition called "14 Stations," which caused a considerable sensation in the press, Ordile created a large installation in which palm fronds that had been cleaned and treated with black gesso were mounted on the walls and dangled from the ceiling, creating an overall environment. The fronds were combined with black lace from women's lingerie and barbed wire to create powerful juxtapositions that spoke volumes about relations between the sexes. Their effect was such that one critic was moved to liken the installation to Marcel Duchamp's great work "The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)."

Sally Ordile has also been compared favorably to celebrated contemporaries such as Kiki Smith and the late Eva Hesse, and such comparisons are entirely accurate, for Ordile has her own way of transforming materials to make highly original and often startling statements about women traversing "the pathway of humiliation and self-sacrifice." Aggressive and expressive in equal measure, her pieces command attention and provoke thought by presenting psychological and emotional content that works in concert with their estimable formal attributes. Although her work, like that of Smith and Hesse, appears process-driven, Ordile puts primary emphasis on the conceptual and intellectual gestation of her pieces.

"I must say that for me the primary pleasure of this 'art thing' is the thinking journey that goes on before the actual hands-on work begins," Ordile stated recently. "The exploration of surroundings, the process of learning and the problem solving, is the true joy. The forms that are produced are an extra-bonus—sometimes lots of fun, sometimes terrifically frustrating. A way of speaking. Another kind of voice."



Threads" series No. 23, 2001

In the works from her "Threads: Conflict & Resolution," featured in the new exhibition at 2/20 Gallery knotted forms are prominent, often within rectangular formats. In these works the dominant color is black—a deep, opaque darkness created with black gesso, to be more exact— which Ordile employs as powerfully as the aforementioned Louise Nevelson, to alternately express what she calls "a deep claustrophobic space that allows no penetration of light" or the womb-like space of "a soft velvety canyon where one is safe from conflict." The all-enveloping darkness of these pieces is as compelling in its own manner as some of the more somber works of Mark Rothko, and possessed of a similar spiritual suggestiveness. Ordile attributes this to the particular qualities of black gesso itself; but this, of course, does not take into account the intangible poetry that the artist manages to impart to her materials. And it is this sense of mystery that lends the "Threads" series much of its haunting presence and permeates the atmosphere of the gallery.

For Ordile is, in fact, dealing with almost unbearable states of being, exploring what she refers to as "inner distresses that culminate in avoidance," as well as "patterns of defeat that offer no settlement," which she expresses with intertwined forms that actually allude to the tortured convolutions of our most troubling thoughts. Yet by virtue of her ability to invest even the most somber subject matter with aesthetic values that impart a "terrible beauty," to borrow Yeats' exquisite phrase, Ordile's work suggests at least the possibility of transcendence and, ultimately, grace.

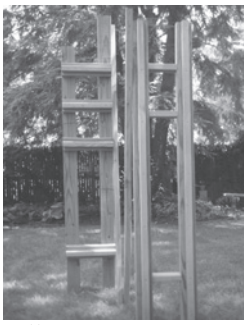
Like the early canvas constructions of Lee Bontecou, with their impassive yet tactile surfaces, Ordile's mixed media assemblages have a rugged materiality that affects the viewer on a level that goes beyond the merely visual to strike a visceral chord. Indeed, their intricately interwoven forms, imprisoned within and bulging against cell-like compartments within black box constructions, can actually suggest viscera and thus provoke a gut-grabbing sense of identification and empathy in the viewer. The tensions that they provoke are almost as palpable as the physicality of the pieces themselves, in works such as "Threads No. 40," where dark, textured, relief-like forms created with insulation and interspersed with dowels suggest ashen foliage in some emotional netherworld every bit as harrowing as the burnt funk assemblages of Bruce Connor. By contrast, in "Threads No. 23," where a thick cluster of metal strapping tied and suspended from a thick, rough rope writhes like 3-D Abstract Expressionist calligraphy, and "Threads No. 24," where a heaping mound of twine and rope is symbolically combined with a string of rosary beads, Ordile's forms seem no less tormented for having escaped from the confines of her black boxes.

Sally Ordile, also known for her serigraphs, is a daringly uncompromising artist. Her work is strong stuff and makes no attempt to ingratiate itself at the expense of what she has to tell us. Yet those who value content over decorativeness will find her exhibition both moving and richly rewarding.

—J. Sanders Eaton

A Temporary Sculpture Park Springs Up in Bridgeport

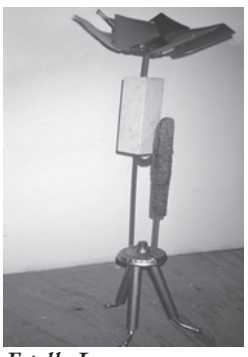
Lila Ryan



Allan Cyprys

Esther Grillo

Herb Rosenberg



Estelle Levy

In galleries, sculpture is all too often treated as art's stepchild—or, as one famous critic infamously put it, "Something you back into while looking at paintings." Out of doors, however, sculpture truly comes into its own, interacting with nature and architecture, making itself at home in the world in a way that painting rarely can.

One especially good example of this interaction between art and environment is a current outdoor show by ten members of the New York-based group "14 Sculptors" at McLevy Park, State Street, Bridgeport, CT. (Sponsored by the Parks Department, Mayor John Fabrizi, and the Rockaway Arts Alliance, Inc., the installation continues through July 2005.)

McLevy Park is a verdant preserve amid the brick and asphalt of a former industrial district. Robert Dell's boxy welded steel sculpture "Crossfeed" alludes to the city's history with kinetic components that rattle in the wind, evoking ghosts of long-gone milling machinery. Allan Cyprys, on the other hand, simultaneously suggests architectural structures and severely abstracted human figure with geometric forms that achieve a striking synthesis of the geometric and the expressive. Thus Cyprys' wood sculpture "Humanscapes" is simultaneously poignant and stately.

Supposedly, Richard Brachman's "Stairway" was conceived as a means of access to the elevated railroad corridor in Chelsea, an anticipated site for public art. However, Brachman's maze-like configuration of massive crisscrossed beams is more like an obstacle course than a stairway, facing the viewer with a formidable conceptual challenge and inspiring Walter Mitty-like imaginative leaps.

"Psychedelic Mushroom," a kinetic steel sculpture by Esther Grillo, is a fanciful ten foot red tower topped by an elaborate circular cap that revolves in the wind. Twirling against the skyline, it calls to mind the carnival rides rather than industrial drudgery—or at very least, weekend escapes from the workaday world.

Estelle Levy adds to the carnivalesque feeling with a mixed media sculpture called "From Diversity to Harmony." Incorporating the arm of a chair, a hubcap, lengths of pipe, used shower heads and other found objects, Levy demonstrates that her heart belongs to Dada with a whimsical assemblage that suggests a Rube Goldberg invention: perhaps a flying hat stand with an umbrella-like propeller!

By contrast, Herb Rosenberg comments trenchantly on our present political miasma with "Black Cloud Over America," another towering piece in which a dark shape that does indeed resemble a cloud is supported by tall steel stilts. To Rosenberg's credit, however, the sculpture transcends the obvious by virtue of its formal power.

Lila Ryan's "Windows on the World" is admirable in another way, since it is an homage to the Twin Towers which addresses that lingering ache in our mass consciousness without becoming mawkish. Rather, Ryan employs bright colors and symbolic imagery within totemic forms to celebrate the human spirit.

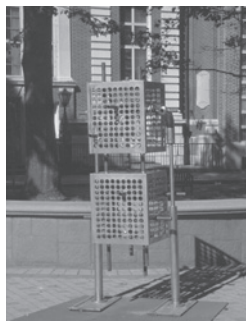
Siena Porta projects a more personal sense of spiritual transcendence with a figure in the lotus position cut into sheet metal and suspended from a large steel frame. The center of the silhouetted figure opens like a window on the park's green lawns, suggesting a sense of oneness with nature achieved through the artist's practice of Zen Buddhism.

In "Blue Landscape," Ursula Clark juxtaposes sycamore branches wrapped in blue yarn with blue spheres to suggest trees and boulders in a formal garden. Influenced by Native American and other indigenous art, Clark's sculpture conveys the civilized respect for nature that characterized so-called "primitive" cultures yet seems to be rapidly vanishing in our own.

Then there is Donald Kapela's sculpture "Stand of Trees," which segments the idea of landscape dramatically, with topographical terrains and topiary shapes emerging from the surface of squared-off columns that suggest vertical sections of terra firma torn whole from the earth's core.

Such thought-provoking takes on the natural world seem especially pertinent in a public park, where we often take the tiny portion of nature still allotted us for granted. However, an exhibition such as "14 Sculptors at McLevy Park" is even more valuable for taking art out of the rarefied realm of the gallery and museum and demonstrating how engaging it can be in the public arena— something that advanced, aggressive, contemporary sculpture of the type seen here is especially well suited to do.

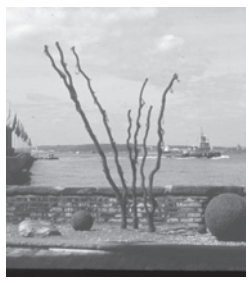
—J. Sanders Eaton



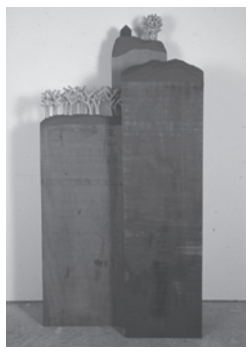
Robert Dell

Siena Porta

Richard Brachman



Ursula Clark



Donald Kapela

The Sculptures of Tom O'Hara Exemplify the Ethos of "Vitalism"

One of the major innovations of modern and postmodern sculpture has been the use of unconventional materials and mixed media to bring about a more organic synthesis of art and nature. Increasingly, the attitude known as "vitalism," which recognizes the metaphysical element in nature and accepts the impossibility of ever completely comprehending living structures, has come to triumph over the more mechanistic modes of expression that prevailed in the early nineteenth century. For in the intervening decades, we have arrived at the realization that even Futurism was a romantic movement, in that it glorified the machine to an equally metaphysical degree, yet without providing the mystery and poetic resonance that attends the unknown, and have therefore come full circle back to nature as a driving force in artistic creation.

No contemporary sculptor embodies this new attitude more auspiciously than Tom O'Hara, whose work also demonstrates the advantages of an art that finds its footing far from the pressures of the New York art scene. Although O'Hara studied at the Art Students League and comes highly recommended by distinguished artist/teachers such as Knox Martin and Bruce Dorfman, as well as by no less venerable an art world figure than Ivan Karp, he initially developed in relative isolation.

For years, before enrolling in the Art Students League and finding his mature style, O'Hara ran a country inn in the Catskill Mountains, near Woodstock, New York. Although he joined the Woodstock Artists Association and participated in their group exhibitions (even setting up a gallery in his inn to show his own work and that of other local artists), he was free to develop at his own pace. Like Lee Bontecou during the long period when she withdrew from the art scene and moved away from the city to explore on her own, O'Hara drew energy from his bucolic surroundings, arriving at a unique synthesis of nature and abstraction which is reflected as much in the materials that he employs as the imagery that he creates .

In the past couple of years, O'Hara has emerged into the mainstream, exhibiting in different venues in Chelsea and now launching a show of fourteen new works at Ezair Gallery, 905 Madison Avenue, from May 1 through 31, with a reception on May 4, from 6 to 8 PM. Yet he still maintains a certain distance from all the hype and hubbub of Manhattan by having his home and main studio in New Paltz, New York, and the benefits are obvious, judging from the ten recent sculptures and four wall reliefs in his new exhibition at Ezair Gallery (a venue that could not be more mainstream, given its close proximity to the The Whitney Museum of American Art), which are unlike anything else being shown around town.

"Nanonest"

With forms that are at once graceful and thorny, some of O'Hara's sculptures thrust almost threateningly, commanding space with their aggressive scale and formal velocity, while others are more laid back and meditative. Everything about O'Hara's mixed media pieces seems to suggest the organic world; yet one cannot quite pin them down as to species. In a freestanding sculpture such as "Gravity's Yoke," for example, intricate, baroquely furling and unfurling shapes soar vertically, suggesting some form of plant life. Yet these strange, sensual shapes evoke a kind of growth unlike anything known on this planet, imparting to the work a suggestion of science fiction–or at very least, of elaborate botanical fantasy.

Employing materials such as shredded cloth, rawhide, large twigs and branches, hardened mushrooms, roots, plants and animal bones, O'Hara creates sculptures that can seem to be 3-D cousins of the Surrealist painter Kurt Seligman's tattered semi-abstract personages, with their mysterious mummy-wrappings flapping in the wind. Indeed, baroque form and surreal allusiveness combine with a similar formal grace in O'Hara's pieces, some of which suggest beasts, both actual and mythic, while others could be jungle plants, perhaps of some exotic, possibly even carnivorous, variety.

The sense of biology run amok permeates O'Hara's oeuvre, inspiring one to read all manner of possible imagery and meanings into some of his fabulous shapes. Both his sculptures and wall reliefs created with paper mounted on canvas, are powerful, paradoxical works, as accomplished in formal terms as they are poetically suggestive. With their tactile surfaces, rich colorations, and a gestural velocity that at times renders any distinction between sculpture and painting moot, O'Hara's pieces possess an often startling immediacy.

Among his most overtly symbolic works are sculptures such as "Valkyrie Rising," in which muscular, leathery, forms with earthy-yet-fiery autumnal colorations are combined with twigs to conjure up a raptor-like creature; as well as other pieces such "Feng Shui Dragon" and "Capricornus the Sea Goat," whose titles tip us off to their mythic subject matter.

By contrast, like the aforementioned "Gravity's Yoke," the large sculpture "Nanonest," invites a variety of more ambiguous interpretations. This is a majestic configuration of tangled branches that flow vertically and list to one side like a ship's mast leaning in a strong wind, entwined by other rugged organic materials that could suggest climbing vines or shredded sails. "Nanonest" is possessed of a sinuous grace that seems to transcend matter, even as it impresses us with the rugged materiality of its surface and the formidable physical presence of its overall form.

While partaking of the free attitude toward form and materials that characterizes contemporary vitalism at its best, O'Hara invests his sculptures with singular imaginative qualities. Thus their technical adventurousness is directed toward unearthing and expressing something profound, mysterious, and far beyond the outward appearances of nature. Obviously, Tom O'Hara is attuned to elusive energies and essences which escape easy definition, yet find vital expression in the dynamic flow of his abstract forms.

—Ed McCormack

Irving Sandler: The Critic as Mensch of the Boulevards

The title of the art critic Irving Sandler's new memoir, A Sweeper-Up After Artists, published by Thames & Hudson, calls to mind an old joke: The guy who works for the circus, shoveling elephant dung, is sitting in a bar complaining about his job.

"Why don't you quit?" asks his drinking buddy.

"What," he replies indignantly, "and get out of show business?"

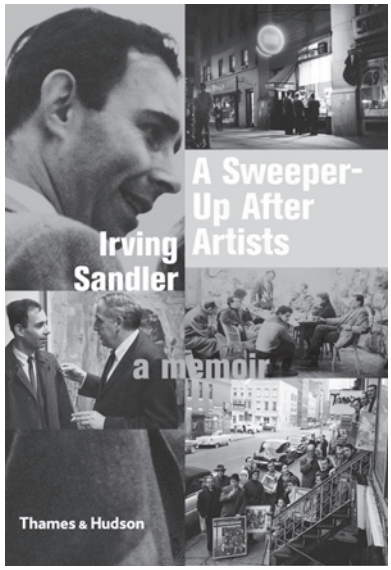
In fact, the title is a translation of "balayeur des artistes," as Frank O'Hara once referred to Sandler in a poem. Apparently, the poet meant it as a compliment, and unlike the dung-shoveler in the joke, Sandler never had a second thought after he befriended the artists of the New York School in the early 1950s and began reviewing their work for Art News and other publications.

Carter Ratcliff once called Sandler, the author of previous books such The Triumph of American Painting, The New York School, American Art of the 1960s, and Art of the Postmodern Era, "The New York School's recording angel." In a recent Artists Talk on Art Dialogue with artist Vernita Nemec, the critic admitted that he became the record keeper of The Club, the loft on 8th Street where the Abstract Expressionists held their lively discussions, simply because he was such an inveterate note-taker.

Although I came to the art scene a generation too late to remember The Club, I once participated in an Artists Talk on Art panel discussion and felt it was probably as close as we come to having a similar forum today. Certainly Sandler, who was one of ATOA's founding board members some thirty years ago, seemed very much in his element as he and Nemec held forth in the amphitheater of the School of Visual Arts for an audience whose timeless bohemian demeanor enhanced the feeling that the spirit of The Club was still with us.

Nemec kept the conversation moving and the suspense mounting with questions that she had written out on strips of paper like the ones in fortune cookies, only bigger—an interview method auspiciously in keeping with her aesthetic as a performance artist and founder of the Art From Detritus movement. She would fish the strips out of a glass bowl and unfold them teasingly, while the obviously bemused Sandler raised his bushy eyebrows like a man with several tickets awaiting the lottery results. Then he would proceed to respond to her questions either with anecdotes from his book or off-the-cuff comments.

When Sandler mentioned in passing that some of the New York School artists could be less than pleasant, the mischievous Nemec pressed him until he named names—or at least one: Joan Mitchell, allowing as to how she could be "nasty." Overall, though, even when writing entertainingly about the eccentric harangues of Aristodemos Kaldis at The Club, the boorishness and brawling of Jackson Pollock at the Cedar Tavern, and the competitive back-biting of his fellow critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg in person and in print, Sandler is invariably generous in his character assessments. His attitude is every bit as upbeat as that of Michel Georges-Michel, an earlier "balayeur des artistes" who haunted the studios of Paris from the turn of the century well into the 1950s.



Besides being a critic, Georges-Michel was an amateur artist ("amateur," to the French, is not a dirty word; it means to be the opposite of a whore, to do something "for love"). He drew, as well as wrote, just about every significant artist of his time. Indeed, Sandler's book reminds one of Georges-Michel's memoir, From Renoir to Picasso, its American edition published by Houghton Mifflin in 1957, but now unfortunately out of print. Like Sandler's, Georges-Michel's book is full of wonderful stories, such as the one about how Utrillo and Modigliani drunkenly came to blows over who was the best artist. Each insisted that the other was best and when the other disagreed they decided to settle the manner with their fists. In a denouement demonstrating that Sandler's buddies in the New York School were no nuttier than their forefathers in The School of Paris, Georges-Michel tells us that Utrillo and Modigliani ended up "in the gutter, where they went to sleep, and woke up at dawn to find that they had been robbed."

Unlike Michel Georges-Michel, Irving Sandler never became even an amateur artist, but at least he took a stab at it when de Kooning, after complimenting him on his writing and asking if he had ever painted, said, "How can you write about what you have no training in?"

Sandler took de Kooning's words to heart. But after a brief period of private study with painter Landes Lewitin, a stern taskmaster who had him copying illustrations of cubes, cylinders, and cones ad absurdom, he decided to stick to writing. Still, he admires artist critics like Fairfield Porter and Elaine de Kooning, singling out the latter's art reviews as especially insightful in his talk with Vernita Nemec. In his book, Sandler also credits the poets who wrote reviews for Art News in the 1950s with helping him to determine his own critical stance, saying, "My criticism would be a record of my singular encounter with art in as a lucid, and hopefully vivid, prose as I could manage. This was the approach of the art critics to whom I felt closest, namely poets, often referred to as the New York School of poets: Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler, and Barbara Guest, and their younger associates Bill Berkson, Carter Ratcliff, and Peter Schjeldahl. Unlike them, however, I did

not have a personal literary style. Consequently, I decided that the only way for me to write was clearly, which may have yielded its own kind of style; at least, so I hoped. Moreover, I believed that I owed it to artists to be clear. They were, often, mystified by reviews of their work. They simply could not understand the relationship between most art writing and their work."

Amen!

Sandler goes on to say: "I would not restrict my criticism to formal considerations, as Clement Greenberg urged critics to do. Nor would I make it my primary goal to tell good from bad. Greenberg claimed that a critic had to declare his or likes and dislikes in order to establish his or her credentials. Standoffishly giving grades to art, as it were, went against my nature, which was to be an enthusiast. I wanted to expose myself to new art and try to understand it—and my response to it."

What distinguishes Sandler from so many other critics is his genuine love for art, the fact that he views it from the perspective of a fan and an advocate rather than a foe. He has never made a career, as so many others have, of showing how smart he is at art's expense by wantonly attacking the honest creative efforts of others in obscure jargon which has no other purpose than to make the reader feel stupid. Sandler takes the opposite approach, writing in plain English with a clarity and a genuine humility that comes across in his statement that "for me the telling mark of a great work of art was a rush of feeling that left me momentarily dumb. Writing about this rare sensation would be my greatest anguish. I aspired to make verbal language worthy of art."

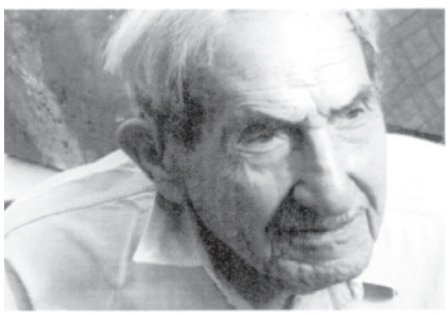
Sandler achieves that goal admirably in A Sweeper-Up After Artists, not only offering crystalline insights into the origins of Abstract Expressionism but bringing an entire era to life through his affectionate word-portraits of the painters who became his friends and teachers. He delights in the blunt humor of de Kooning, who when invited to dinner with the Rockefellers, greeted his hostess with, "Gee, Mrs. Rockefeller, you look like a million bucks." He regrets being "totally unprepared" for his friend Philip Guston's evolution from abstraction to funky, cartoon-like figuration and disappointing the artist. But above all, he remembers days and night spent in studios, at the Club, at the Waldorf Cafeteria, at gallery openings, and the Cedar where he listened avidly to the endless talk of his artist friends, always with his note-pad at the ready.

Especially poignant during his talk with Vernita Nemec at the School of Visual Arts were Sandler's recollections of how the New York art scene in the 1950s was still a small, close-knit community where artists led the way rather than following the cues of dealers, curators, collectors, and critics. When someone in the audience began to ask a question about "today's art world," we were heartened to hear Sandler interject something that we've been telling people for a long time: "There's more than one art world."

Artists, especially, need to hear this; for too many of them seem to feel irrelvevant because they are not showing at Gagosian or Mary Boone and being featured on the front page of the Times' Arts & Leisure section. In fact, anywhere that there are galleries showing art and collectors buying it constitutes an art world unto itself.

Yet, while allowing as to how the expansion of the art world is not necessarily a bad thing—there are many more galleries, more exhibition opportunities for women and minority artists, and "a great deal of money sloshing around"— Sandler, the gracious and self-effacing "sweeper-up after artists," seemed genuinely nostalgic for the less-moneyed but more intimate art scene he recalls so vividly in his highly readable memoir.

Philip Pavia: The Sculptor as Curmudgeonly Legend



Nobody personifies what Irving Sandler refers to as the "unwritten motto" of The Club, "We agree only to disagree," better than Philip Pavia, the scrappy sculptor who was its main organizer and most vociferous voice.

Of the terra cotta heads in his exhibition at O.K. Harris Gallery, 383 West Broadway, through April 9, which are a departure from the abstract black and white marble sculptures he showed at Broome Street Gallery a couple of years ago, Pavia says, "I like to think these heads shoot up with skyscraper space and have the psychology of the New Yorker."

Pavia, born in 1915 and one of the few sculptors among the Abstract Expressionist group, once said of his earlier work that painter friends like de Kooning, Pollock, and Kline "inspired me to carve directly into the stone to make carving an adventurous happening." Pavia was the publisher of the influential avant garde art magazine IT IS, and his work has been exhibited at MoMA, The Whitney, The Met, and the Albright Knox Museum, among many others.

photos by Marisela La Grave

But Pavia is still exploring, judging from the work at O.K. Harris, the only gallery in town with a cigar store attached, where its director Ivan Karp, another great gent of the same generation, holds forth in a haze of curmudgeonly perfume that also permeates the entire exhibition space.

Pavia would probably crown me with this mallet if I told him to his face that his heads have a presence akin to ravaged Job-like Everymen of Leonard Baskin, a sculptor he probably detests just on New York School principle. But since he's not in striking range, I'll say it anyway, while admitting that Pavia's heads have a formal power beyond Baskin's reach, a monumental quality that transcends humanist pathos.

Twice as large as living heads, their rugged surfaces bearing the imprint of the sculptor's hands as expressively as brush strokes, they shimmer with subtly colored patinas and chromatic under-painting. Their features, craggy or eroded (depending on which angle you view them from), are set defiantly, suggesting the faces of ancient emperors recovered from an archaeological dig.

Pavia, being Pavia, would probably deny it, but they are self-portraits, showing the gritty genius of a man whose stubborn persona bleeds through the terra cotta like some indelible human stain.

—Ed McCormack

Santiago Zarzosa Paints Poignant Portraits of Our Human Foibles

From an early age, Santiago Zarzosa, who characterizes himself as a "European artist from Spain, established in Minnesota since 1997," says that he "liked to be alone and get lost in my imagination." And although he studied intensely in schools in Spain and Minneapolis and spent countless hours in the museums here and abroad, his work has never lost a certain childlike sense of wonder.

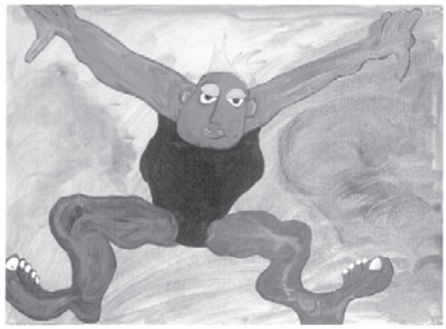
In his recent show at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, Zarzosa revealed how retained innocence can be combined with graphic sophistication in a series of oils on paper notable for their imagistic freedom and symbolic content. Each of Zarzosa's paintings was accompanied by a wall-label containing a short text by the artist. While these were enjoyable and added to one's understanding of Zarzosa's artistic intentions, his visual images spoke eloquently for themselves.

All of Zarzosa's figures are painted in bold outlines enclosing brilliant color areas with a Pop-inflected, cartoon-like quality akin to that of Jim Nutt and other members of Chicago's "Hairy Who" school. Zarzosa, however, has his own brilliant palette, influenced by his formative years amid the colors of the Mediterranean. The earthy browns, green vegetation and the various blues of the sea and the sky enliven his compositions and impart unexpected beauty to even his most down-to-earth subjects.

In his painting "Hungry," for example," the boldly exaggerated female figure is seen in the process of devouring a kind of baguette sandwich popular in Spain called a "bocadello," the equivalent to our hero or submarine sandwich. It is hardly a heroic subject, yet Zarzosa paints it with a combination of warmth and humor akin to that of Red Grooms, showing the woman eating "on the run," with houses and other details of the street in the background adding to the hecticness.

Indeed, a bemused compassion for the human condition appears to be at the heart of Zarzosa's art, as seen in his painting "Shy,' where he personifies a sense of the childhood embarrassments, disappointments, and traumas that we carry with us throughout our lives in the poignantly distorted figure of an awkward, clown-like man with clumsy, oversized feet. But he also captures simple joy in an equally bold portrait of a nude pregnant woman entitled "Expectation," as well in another painting called "Speed of Blonde," where a peroxide babe on a motorcycle is seen racing down a city street, and by virtue of his vigorous drawing style and vibrant colors, Zarzosa enables the viewer to experience the exhilaration of her velocity vicariously.

In another painting called "In Your Face," Zarzosa makes a strong statement with the image of a barebreasted woman in profile, set against a brilliant blue background; while "Recycled Aviator" transforms a zany pilot at the stick into a metaphor for renewal.



Painting by Santiago Zarzosa

All of Santiago Zarzosa's paintings, in fact, are brilliant embodiments of humanity in all its delightful variousness, captured in images that become powerful, yet lighthearted, symbols of both our beauty and our human frailty. He is an artist who holds a mirror up to the viewer, enabling him or her to smile at the pathos of our common lot. —Maureen Flynn

"Blacker Than Thou" And Better Than Most

African-American History Month invariably exposes the tokenism at the core of the American art world by acknowledging established masters like Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, while ignoring emerging artists of African descent who deserve notice not only in February but all year long. Fortunately, shows such as "Blacker Than Thou," curated this past February by Al Johnson for the West Side Arts Coalition at Broadway Mall, on the center island at 96th Street and Broadway, help to remedy this situation.

Johnson himself showed his recent evolution from symbolic Afrocentricity to urban realism, in a group of powerful recent canvases. They ranged from a funky inner city street scene reflected in the shiny car of a slick player in shades; to a Neo-Ashcan School vision of undergarments flapping on a tenement clothesline; to a pair of tense-look- ing dudes peering through an uptown window as though under siege. All of Al Johnson's recent acrylics skillfully combine edgy snapshot immediacy with classical realism.

By contrast, Nicole Folkes brings a more nostalgic perspective to "Visual Messages of the Black Experience," to quote the show's subtitle. In an expressively exaggerated figurative style akin to Benny Andrews, Folkes paints older folks dancing at church socials or playing cards with goodnatured wit and captures a sizzling kiss between two entwined adolescents on an atmospheric city street populated by stoop sitters and other neighborhood denizens who mind their b-i-business while young love blooms like flowers in a window-box in their midst.

Although executed in oil on canvas, the figure compositions of Imo Nse Imeh are more drawn than painted. Imeh's heroic figures belong to the African American graphic tradition of Charles White. However, Imeh's draftsmanly configurations of linear forms also possess a spontaneous energy akin to abstract expressionism.

More in a painterly mode, the iris giclee prints of the artist called Anton combine abstract areas of red and ocher with a decidedly African feeling with silhouetted figures elongated in a manner reminiscent of Alberto Giacometti. Anton's compositions are characterized by a bold gestural elegance.

Diane Pryor-Holland bills herself as The Klothkeeper and creates large works in cotton fabric and batting that merge African fabric motifs and patterns with modernist aesthetics. Pryor-Holland's dynamic wall hangings are further embellished with miniature masks and figures that lend her compositions a sense of ritual and mystery.

Vickie Fremont is another gifted fiber artist, creating large compositions in which various floral and paisley patterns are seen sequentially in large grids created with sewn fabrics. One of Fremont's wall hangings conveys the verdant renewal of Spring with various green hues, while another employs red to evoke the all-enveloping heat of Summer.

Nicole Titus energizes her portraits of people of color with vigorous brushwork. Titus conveys the tensions inherent in the lives of her sitters through her gestural finesse, which simultaneously captures a sense of character and brings the surface alive in purely painterly terms. Anthony George, on the other hand, employs a more exacting realist technique in paintings of flowers that have the frontal quality and individuality of portraits. Indeed, George's floral subjects are as portrait-like as his actual portrait of a beautiful African woman in a costume as elaborate and colorful as an entire bouquet of flowers!

Also including characteristically fanciful Afro-Cuban-inflected acrylics on canvas by the coloristically intrepid Joey Infante and a group of conceptual sketches by fashion designer Xiomara Goodsell Grossett that transcended commercialism by sheer virtue of their linear zest, "Blacker Than Thou" amounted to an outstanding mini-survey of recent trends in African-American art.

—Peter Wiley

Philip Martin: Romance Meets Postmodern Allegory

Those who know him best for jazz scenes tinged with a melancholy lyricism akin to that in the best poems of Langston Hughes may be surprised by the allegorical subject matter in Philip Martin's new exhibition of drawings, inspired by Tiepolo, at Belanthi Gallery, 142 Court Street, Brooklyn, from May 2 through 28. (There will be a reception for the artist on Saturday, May 7, from 6 to 8 PM.)

A superb neoclassical draftsman, Martin is as adept as Reginald Marsh at delineating the curves of voluptuous female figures. Yet one gets the feeling that Martin is as much in love with the humanity as with the feminine beauty of the women he draws. In the present exhibition his affection is made especially explicit in an exquisite pencil portrait of a radiant young woman with a winsome expression tellingly titled "A Lady," as well as in a pen and wash drawing of an artist at his easel contemplating a comely, fully clothed model. One senses a palpable electricity crackling between the two people in the latter drawing, even before noticing the neatly lettered inscription "Beware the jaguar in repose" at the bottom of the composition and the tiny jungle cat reclining near the model's chair.

Other drawings by Martin suggest more ambiguous relationships, with monumental

"Standing His Ground II*"*

female figures looming like wrathful Amazons to dwarf men. In one such picture, "Standing His Ground II," a tiny guy in a battered top-hat makes a gun-gesture with his finger at three female giants striking bodacious rhythm and blues trio poses, as they dance ankle deep in a flood that appears to be devastating the landscape. Although two of the women are wearing clinging dresses, one is nude and has the head of a lioness.

Another drawing called "The Goddess Music" features a statuesque nude sporting a spiked crown suspiciously like that of Lady Liberty. Clutching a violin to her breast and brandishing its bow like a sword, she stands high above the palm trees of a small island surrounded by a sea that could be anywhere in the world where mighty powers cast their shadow in the name of a dubious interests. But then again, since the artist has stated that he depicts music as a goddess rather than one of the Muses because "at its greatest, music soars above her sister arts," one can only assume that all interpretations of this intriguing drawing are bound to be subjective.

However, a far less ambiguous sense of how politicians can defraud us into sacrificing even our precious children comes across in another masterful pen and wash drawing by Martin called "Chicken Hawk." Here, a procession of women cradling babies in their arms or clutching their pregnant bellies marches toward an outdoor Punch 'n' Judy podium where a grotesque male creature with a rooster's crown raves and waves his arms in the air.

Here, as in his other recent superbly executed pen and wash drawings featuring a cast of symbolic characters, Philip Martin approaches the graphic power of Goya's great series "The Disasters of War," even while enlivening his allegories with an irony that is decidedly postmodern.

—Ed McCormack

Atmosphere Equals Poetry in the Oils of Regina Miele

Regina Miele works in a manner for which the most accurate term is "poetic realism." What romanticism exists in her work is created through her careful attention to what actually exists, rather than through imaginative invention or fantasy. And the effectiveness of this approach was everywhere evident in Miele's recent exhibition at Agora Gallery, 415 West Broadway, in Soho.

Even while adhering to the evidence at hand, however, Miele creates magical atmospheres and auras akin in some ways to those in the paintings of the more abstract artist Loren McIver, well known in the 1950s, whose work has been featured in several recent exhibitions. Indeed, like McIver, Miele has a way of enveloping all of her pictures in atmospheres that create the gentle inner glow of something fondly remembered as well as something carefully observed. Space and light conspire in her exquisitely refined oils on linen to create the sense of a genuine epiphany in a way that few other artists are capable of doing who work only with the subject at hand and do not distort it for emotional effect.

In Miele's painting "Bryant Park," for example, the elements of the composition are extremely simple, almost minimal: five outdoor chairs positioned in a seemingly random manner on the lawn in a familiar public park in New York City. However, the artist creates the sense of a pastoral oasis in the midst of the urban miasma with a brush that appears to have been dipped in liquid light. Luminous yellow hues are combined with cool blues (almost reminiscent of some of the colors in Monet's paintings of his garden in Giverny) to create a sense of transcendence that is made all the more remarkable by the fact that this picture actually depicts an urban setting.

Apparently, Miele is able to imbue any scene with a sense of serenity that makes her paintings delightful anomalies in contemporary art. Her work indicates a singular sensibility combined with impressive technical finesse, as seen in a small oil on panel titled "Roof Top," with its panoramic view of clustered houses under a darkening sky, as well as in the much larger oil on linen called "Above Harlem," where the various furnishings and fixtures of a room interior with daylight flooding in create a formal composition that while true to its specifics can also function as an austere geometric abstraction.

Miele's drawings are also extraordinary for her ability to invest the medium of graphite with a painterly finish, particularly in the atmospheric "Alley, 14th Street," with its subtle, overcast tonalities. Especially

"Rooftop Morning"

evocative, however, is the oil on linen entitled Autumnal Equinox," with its tiny figure in a shadowy landscape contemplating a vast night sky, which projects a sense of nocturnal mystery reminiscent of the German romantic painter Casper David Friedrich. Here, as well as in "Vernal Equinox" and "Winter Solstice," two tall vertical oils centering on the full-length figure of a young man in a shadowy interior, Regina Miele displays a poetic gift which sets her apart as a realist painter with a unique angle of vision.

—Maureen Flynn

Adrián Jesús Falcón's Marriage of the Indigenous and the Modern

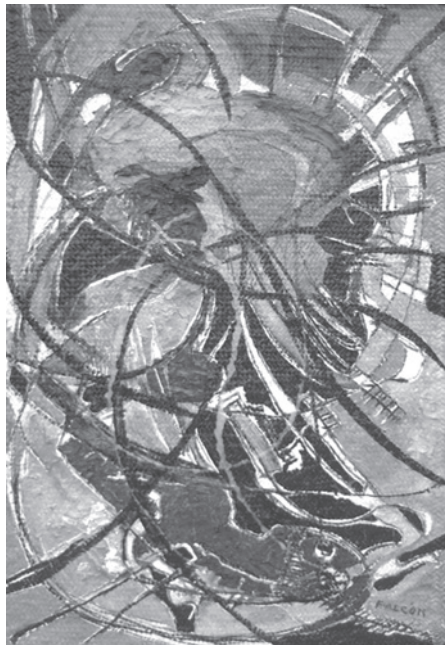
Adrián Jesús Falcón, an architect, painter, and sculptor who lives and works in a border town in Texas, has found a unique medium that he has recently made an integral part of his aesthetic. In his first New York exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, Falcon showed four large paintings on "petate," large mats hand-woven from palm leaves by an indigenous tribe in Mexico. Petate are traditionally utilized for a variety of purposes in Mexico— including as surfaces for drying coffee beans, for floor coverings, as bed mats— and are said to date back to the Mayans and the Aztecs.

Employing oil paints, acrylics, wood-filler, glue, and charcoal, Falcon creates brilliantly colored compositions that are all abstract, except for one picture called "Haven," in which a large hook-nosed face looms in profile like an oversized puppet in a Punch and Judy show. This picture is called "Haven," a title that suggests that the figure may be seeking shelter by getting lost among the surrounding abstract forms. Yet it ends up standing out as distinctly as the sharply silhouetted figures in Toulouse-Lautrec's posters for the Moulin Rouge.

Stylistically, Falcon's work seems most akin to the Dutch painter Karel Appel; however Falcon's brilliant color areas, filled almost to the bursting point with rhythm and movement, declare their originality as surely as the woven textures in the petates that he paints on declare their indigenous origins. His palette, dominated by hot reds, brilliant blues, and ochers, also recalls the fiery qualities of Orozco, Rivera, and the Mexican muralists. Yet he employ such hues with an even more brutal force.

Falcon fills large areas of his textured surfaces with color, then works over them with vigorously slashed lines that appear to allude to both human and animal anatomy without quite spelling anything out. Even in his most abstract compositions there is the spirit, if not the actual appearance, of the figure in the energetic thrusting of his brush and the sense of velocity that it injects into the picture space. There are also hints of landscape space in Falcon's abstract shapes, as though to suggest that all things in nature must ultimately meld.

A painting called "Militant" lives up to its name by virtue of its gestural violence. By leaving an area of the woven petate bare of paint in another work called "Idiom," Falcon seems to call attention to how a language—or in this case a craft form— can epitomize a particular people. And in a composition called "Ambiguous," the way in which lines intersect suggests how any gesture can be interpreted in a variety of different ways.



"Militant"

Indeed, it is his ability to invest his paintings with a many meanings, even as they impress us on a more immediate level with their brash beauty and bold scale that makes Adrián Jesús Falcón's first New York exhibition an auspicious event. —Peter Wiley

Will Brady: An Aesthetic Holden Caulfield Takes His Best Shot

As the "East Village" exhibition at The New Museum demonstrated earlier this year, youthful iconoclasm can have an irresistible energy. It is necessary from time to time to blow fresh air into the cultural atmosphere, even if the only way to do so is by trashing all that has come before. And that is exactly what a young artist named Will Brady seemed determined to do recently in his jocularly titled "A Very Famous Exhibition," at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway.

Brady's show was an installation consisting of two paintings, three large bins stuffed with old books and a scrapbook filled with snapshots and cryptic notes, all seemingly making an autobiographical statement about the trauma of leaving the detritus of childhood behind and moving into the uncertain realm of adulthood. Brady approached this theme from the perspective of an archeologist sifting through the debris of his own psyche. The artifacts of self that he assembled made an overall statement that was artlessly glib yet cumulatively effective in creating a psychological portrait of a particular sensibility.

The entire installation was redolent of American adolescence viewed from the jaded perspective of one moving toward a new definition of self, yet already nostalgic for the dubious comforts of home, where there was always someone to tell him to clean up his room. Indeed, some of the more amusing images in the show were a series of photo album snapshots of a room, presumably in a college dormitory, so cluttered with garbage of all descriptions as to seem an installation in itself. Of course, there are precedents for this kind of disorder in so-called "scatter art," as well as in the much more elaborate installations of older installation artists such as Jason Rhoades and Mike Kelly. Brady, however, manages to make more of less, while striking a posture as studied in its psuedo-dumb nihilism as that of Sean Landers.

Ironically, the two paintings included in the installation reveal serious artistic ambition, even while appearing to sneer at craft and give the finger to art history. Both were painted on what appeared to be pieces of found wood. One had a simple red triangle as its central motif; the other featured a roughly brushed figure, possibly inspired by a cartoon action figure or science fiction character, emitting gray rays that streamed outward from it to the edges of the composition.

Although both paintings made every effort to appear dashed off (with the artist's initials signed in pink bubble-letters resembling the Warner Brothers logo and evoking the specter of Bugs Bunny!), they actually revealed a strong sense of composition and a certain neo-expressionist panache that may prove talent is something that cannot be easily disposed of simply by affecting a flippant attitude. By the same token, one would have to be either naive or a fool not to realize that "A Very Famous Exhibit" is a conceptual gesture of contempt aimed at "the goddamn phonies" of the art world by a young artist adopting the persona of an aesthetic Holden Caulfield. As such, Will Brady's show was an unqualified success.

—Marie R. Pagano

William Goodman: Erotic Elegies and Southern Gothic Pop

In William Goodman's "Junkyard Portrait," in his recent solo show at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, Chelsea, a structure that the eye initially reads as a run-down house-trailer, but is actually an abandoned railroad car, sits forlorn in an overgrown field in an overall orange haze. Its side is scrawled with indecipherable graffiti and the stenciled face of a woman who could be a punk rock star or the mass murderer Gary Gilmore's skinny brunette girlfriend Nicole. Overlaid with artful splashes of blue that conjure up the mood as much as the hue, the entire scene suggests unspeakable desolation. And how, one wants to know, did that railroad car find its way out into the middle of that field? Only one thing's for certain: It's the End of the Line, baby...

Part of what makes Goodman's mixed media works so intriguing is trying to decode meanings that are not exactly spelled out, but merely alluded to in cryptic fragments of text, photo-appropriations, and painterly gestures laid down with slapdash elegance. Though never sure where Goodman is taking us, we're willing to follow him into the heart of a darkness that he alone knows how to navigate.

A native of Jackson Mississippi, where he is now artist-in-residence at the Fondren

"Junkyard Portrait"

Center, Goodman appears to belong to the visual branch of the Southern Gothic School we normally associate with such literary figures as Carson McCullers and Eudora Welty. Yet he inhabits a more media-saturated era than their bygone magnolia realm; so his frame of reference is a little— shall we say— funkier? He partakes of the the same Punk/Pop sensibility as Southern rock bands equally conversant with Sid Vicious and John Lee Hooker in a picture such as "Erotic Cinema," where a line-drawing of a handgun is superimposed over a shadowy face and juxtaposed with stenciled store hours more suitable to a nursery school than a porn theater.

Let's just say Goodman puts the flash in white trash with images of sultry sirens straight off the phone-sex classifieds who lure us from within lurid Dayglo worlds where broken neon signs blink out a stuttering concrete poetry, at once erotic, elegiac, and downright mysterious. In "Billboard Junkie," for instance, a ghostly hipster face in Rocky Raccoon mascara, taking a drag on a cigarette, fills a window near the roof of a structure with only the letters "K" and "R" visible on its facade. Above the roof is a bleary blue sky with one wan orphan cloud drifting by, and above the face in the window is one of those stone gargoyle-like lions that often adorn old architecture, supposedly to guard against evil spirits. . . But don't count on it in this particular Heartbreak Hotel!

In "35 mm Drop Box" and "Hotel Memories" corroded signs, crumbling walls, and gated windows are juxtaposed with wicked vixens striking mock-sexy poses as they loom iconic above it all, distantly scorning the desire they inspire among marks, johns, and other suckers who still possess the capacity to dream.

Such images are bathed in hellacious layers of fluorescence and further enlivened by luscious drips that rain down like torrents of crocodile tears on this neon netherworld that William Goldman evokes to such pitiless perfection. —Lawrence Downes

Andi Kavaja: An Albanian Artist's Gift to the United States

One of the privileges of the postmodern era is the permissiveness that enables certain painters to mix genres which once seemed irreconcilable. While the Symbolists, for example, felt obliged to react against the scientific objectivity of the Impressionists by bathing their scenes in artificial auras, artists today seem able to resolve such conflicts amicably by integrating disparate elements.

A splendid example of such a synthesis can be seen in the work of Andi Kavaja, an artist born in Albania in 1970, whose paintings are on permanent display at World Fine Art Gallery, at 511 West 25th Street, in Chelsea. For one of the salient features of Kavaja's oeuvre is his ability to invest his pictures with personal poetry and emotional immediacy, even while capturing nuances of light and other aspects of landscape with unfailing accuracy.

Since the late 1980s, Kavaja has amassed an impressive exhibition history in his hometown of Durres, the second largest city in Albania, as well as in Italy and elsewhere. (Italy has been particularly receptive to his work, with prestigious exhibitions, prizes, and press coverage awarded to the artist in Udine and Verona.) More recently, he has begun to attract favorable attention in New York City, where his combination of direct observation and subjective interpretation seems a refreshing anomaly in an art scene all too often mired in self-conscious stylistic schtick.

Kavaja's sun-drenched Italian landscapes and cityscapes are especially exhilarating for the artist's ability to capture a sense of light and life with breezy strokes and a palette of incandescent yet subtle colors. His skies are especially luminous in a view of pedestrians congregating in a plaza amidst majestic European architecture; as well as in a landscape where the rooftops and steeples of a small village are set against mountains, the chromatic magic achieved through a harmonious melding of violet, purple, and blue hues.

In one particularly vibrant canvas, a lush autumnal tree blazes before a tall stone steeple rising into a bright blue sky that is enlivened by rhythmically rolling wisps of cloud. In another strong landscape, the dominant element of the composition is a yellow ocher field dotted with red flowers. On the high horizon, clouds billow up like white smoke behind a row of verdant hills and trees in one of those brilliant blue skies that Kavaja conjures so convincingly. Indeed, he seems equally adept at capturing the serenity of nature and its more tumultuous qualities, putting a visionary spin on both that heightens the impact of the everyday world.

Andi Kavaja's portraits and figure paintings are equally exciting for his ability to invest his subjects with character and the

Painting by Andi Kavaja

sense of an underlying narrative or personal allegory rife with intriguing symbolism. One especially appealing example is his painting of a white-haired, white-bearded painter seated at a table in his studio, a bottle of wine and a candle on the table before him, a canvas on an easel in the background. The sage-like artist gazes contemplatively at a graceful feminine figure, seated primly across from him. The spectral quality of the second figure suggests that she may be a Muse, rather than a living model. Also in the background is a cabinet on which plates are arranged, as in a tidy peasant home. This detail, with its folkloric associations, seems to suggest Kavaja's awareness that an artist must remain true to his ethnic heritage, even as he enters the mainstream of contemporary art, in order to imbue it with his own unique cultural riches.

—Ed McCormack

Savoring Jung Ahn's Gestural Dialogue with the Natural World

"Nature speaks in silence sometimes and at other times loud as thunder," states Jung Ahn, who earned her BFA at the University of Minnesota and her MFA at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. "I keep searching to find my personal internalized alphabets."

Ahn, exhibiting as artist in residence in the Chelsea location of Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from April 9 through July 9, employs nature as a starting point for her abstract oils. Calling upon a palette of earth colors and subtle secondary hues, Ahn creates compositions that alternately brood and shimmer with strong chromatic contrasts. She applies pigment in bold gestural strokes that alternate between tactile opacity and translucent glazes. Deep browns reminiscent of Cubism's measured monotones, but even more redolent of earth itself, merge with golden ochers, frosty whites, and crystalline blues to infuse Ahn's compositions with an impressive lyricism.

The actual size of Ahn's canvases range from a foot square to over six or eight feet, yet all suggest seemingly limitless wide open spaces by virtue of her ability to invest every picture with a monumental sense of scale. She also has an ability to evoke a poetic sense of light, water, and sky, without overtly delineating or even alluding to any specific topology. Rather than any pictorial approximation or visible illusion of landscape, what we feel in her compositions is the forces and energies of nature freed from the constraints of specific subject matter. Without having the lay of the land mapped out for us in conventional terms, we navigate Ahn's painterly terrain as an overall

"Refuge"

environment. We experience light and air as ethereal yet palpably pigmented elements, simultaneously material and possessed of a more metaphysical reality.

Indeed, Jung Ahn's paintings are as much about the nature of painting itself as about the artist's perceptions of phenomena in the visible world. One gets caught up in the sheer sensuality of her surfaces, with their vigorous variations between smoothly flowing passages of virtuoso paint-handling and roughly scumbled textures apparently achieved by piling on thick layers of impasto. Often, Ahn appears to rake paint across large areas of the canvas, resulting in streaks that create an effect like sunlight reflecting on water or ice, particularly when she employs luminous golden yellow hues, as seen in the large canvas called, aptly enough, "Reflection." And while Ahn obviously makes no attempt at literal depiction, her use of variegated vertical streaks of color in some compositions, such as the smaller painting "Going Deep," also suggests the visual sensation of viewing a landscape through sheets of heavy rain. Likewise, in the medium-size painting "Refuge," the amorphous white forms create an inescapable sense of floating cloud formations.

Even as one hastens to caution the viewer against reading too many specific references into her paintings, lest he or she be distracted from their purely abstract attributes, there can be no denying that Ahn's gift for evoking natural atmospheres enhances the lyricism of her compositions. Thus the viewer would be better advised to approach the paintings of Jung Ahn with no preconceptions at all; to simply savor them with a fresh eye for the singular pleasures they provide.

—Peter Wiley

A Mixed Bag of Styles Enlivens "Opening New Worlds' Group Show

Works by several artists associated with the West Side Arts Coalition were seen in the exhibition "Opening New Worlds," curated by Ina Simmons and Lucinda Prince at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at 96th Street and Broadway.

Simmons, best known for her cut-paper works, showed two pastels from her "Transformation Series," featuring abstracted floral forms, seemingly in a process of metamorphosis. Their sinuous organic shapes were as similarly graceful as those in her cut-paper pieces, albeit with softer edges and more muted colors.

Lucinda Prince showed two oils depicting scenes in New Mexico, to which her earthy tones and strong sense of composition imparted a formal quality that worked well in concert with their more picturesque aspects.

Yookan Nishida finds beauty in desolate areas of Brooklyn's waterfront in subtly surreal oils where warehouses, small sheds, bridges, and shadows project a sense of poetic mystery under luminous yellow skies. By contrast, Erica Mapp advances a stringently abstract aesthetic in serigraphs composed with rectangles of subtly harmonizing color, their poetic titles hinting at meanings beyond their considerable formal appeal.

Bernardo Diaz suggested the complexity of human relationships in his neo-expressionist painting "Family Portrait," in which bizarrely distorted figures are connected by strange abstract forms, hinting at the sometimes negative emotional ties that bind us by blood. Patricia Tallone-Orsoni also explored human connections in a large mixed media collage juxtaposing pencil portraits torn from sketchbooks, painted passages, architectural images, and raw strips of packing tape, all combined with tactile vigor in a catch-all composition aptly titled "Human Package."

The paintings in Meyer Tannenbaum's "Soft Impact" series seem a culmination of all his earlier experiments with paint manipulation. Their vibrant colors and map-like forms are so pleasingly evocative that one can only hope that this notoriously restless painter will exhaust all their possibilities before moving on to whatever new challenge catches his fancy.

A new, more lyrical facet of the ever-engaging, sometimes over-the-top Joey Infante's work was evident in a group of charming French landscapes, especially a view through a rustic window with brilliantly colored fields resembling the patterns in a patchwork quilt.

Like the California artist Jess Collins, Reena Kondo is a consummate collageist, here represented by a cosmic tondo called "Levels of Reality," with intriguingly ambiguous imagery aswirl in blue nocturnal infinity. Sacchi Shimoda makes Marilyn Monroe an icon for a variety of themes: painting her on a small canvas affixed to a larger composition copied from Mondrian in one work, casting her as Lady Fortune dealing out a Joker in another, to comment on the nature of fame and fate.

Another gifted figurative painter, Jeremy A. Sykes puts his own spin on photo-realism, painting such subjects as city streets, a couple sitting on a sofa, and preening mall-dolls with a kind of snapshot panache that lends his acrylics on canvas considerable impact.

Then there is Miguel Angel, who continually demonstrates a singular ability to transform unlikely materials into exquisite aesthetic statements at once formal and poetically penetrating. In Angel's "Immutable," a shiny compact disc, a fibrous material that may or may not be decomposing carpeting, and the artist's unerring eye for exactly where everything belongs create a material metaphor at once intriguing and elusive.

—Maurice Taplinger

Tomas Patrick Quigley: Lighting Up the Dark Side of Life

Tomas Patrick Quigley, a widely exhibited British painter and poet who recently showed at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, and whose work is included in the gallery's year-round salon, has an ability to simplify the human figure in a manner that amplifies its emotional impact. Quigley's figures are stark, often featureless, yet they never seem generalized. Indeed, he invests his figures with a visceral presence akin to (if not as gratuitously grotesque as) the figures of his famous countryman Francis Bacon.

In Quigley's large canvas "The Weekend," a pale nude figure modeled with blue shadows merges with the labial folds of an overstuffed orange sofa to the point where it appears decapitated. The sofa floats within a deep blue ground, suggesting an island in the sea, in keeping with the figure's quality of profound isolation. Given the title of the picture, and the Ostrich-like retreat of the figure, one might assume that this isolation may be of the type that one must endure in the throes of a terrible hangover.

Quigley's canvases are often accompanied by verses such as: "If I paint / Let it be with gold / And my hands / And the butter of colour / And if I sculpt / Let it be Men / And Women." In this case, both the poem and the painting are titled "Wax," and the figure does indeed look waxen with its yellow flesh and its liquid contours seem to be literally melting against the glistening red ground. Here again, the plastic qualities of the image suggest existential distress. Indeed, Quigley seems to specialize in depicting those extreme moments in a life when the dark night of the soul is made manifest in the flesh.

Indeed, even Quigley's painting of two lovers merging into one polymorphous mass, glowing with incandescent gold and green hues and against a deep red ground pulsing with rhythmic strokes, suggests that there may be hell to pay later on for their all-consuming passion. For all its sensuality, in other words, this image is almost as visually harrowing in its own manner as Edvard Munch's "The Scream."

Among all of Quigley's paintings, perhaps the most diabolical is a very large horizontal canvas called "The Bar at the End of the World," in which a group of figures seated at a bar is delineated in a sinuous, continuous line that glows like molten neon out of a deep blue background. "Share a drink with me / Etch a memory," implores the accompanying couplet, and it could very well be the Devil himself speaking, given the atmosphere of melancholy decadence that permeates the picture.

Yet the line linking the drinkers, each of whom displays a unique attitude of hellish languor, is possessed of an impressive draftsmanly grace and the glowing colors have an autonomous beauty that makes the painting throb like Allen Ginsberg's hydrogen jukebox. For Tomas Patrick Quigley is somehow able to illuminate even the darkest nights of the soul by virtue of his radiant aesthetic abilities.

––Lawrence Downes

Pioneer Spirit Persists in the Abstractions of Rachelle Ayres

The English painter Rachelle Ayres is a lyrical expressionist who has reduced her painterly vocabulary to a few basic forms and gestures with which she succeeds splendidly in conveying a wide range of moods. In her recent American exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, Ayres seemed especially partial to wavy lines that filled her compositions with a sense of swelling and contracting rhythmic energy.

Ayres is also a cunning colorist, capable of making even areas of brown and tan resonate chromatically, in the canvas she calls "Comfort." However, she by no means restricts herself to subdued hues, as seen in the painting she calls "Dreamer," where unlikely combinations of pink and gold enliven a composition built on sinuously swirling forms. Here, she invests colors that could be considered gaudy in another context with a rare beauty by virtue of her fresh approach to form, as well as her ability to meld and reconcile opposites effectively through some inexplicable aesthetic alchemy all her own.

Ayres' non-referential approach to color construction recalls Hans Hofmann's statement, " I hold my mind and my work free from any association foreign to the act of painting." This is true even when her forms verge on more figurative themes, as in paintings such as "Untamed," where the subject is ostensibly an ocean wave. For all such imagery appears to be merely a starting point for painterly exploration in Rachelle Ayres' canvases, which show a purity of intent that is unusual in postmodern art. Also quite unusual, not to mention intrepid, is Ayres' willingness to let each painting determine its own stylistic direction, making no attempt to contrive a "signature" style like so many of her peers on both sides of the Atlantic.

This enables her to veer from the cursive forms of the aforementioned canvases to the vocabulary of rectangles and staggered lines in the painting that she calls "Shimmer," where thickly impastoed squares of gold are set against a red stratospheric color field. While the diagrammatic composition could almost suggest electrical circuitry, this painting projects a sense of something infinitely more spiritual. Yet, here as in all of Ayres' paintings, one attempts to interpret them at one's own peril. For her compositions are, above all, characterized by an abstract autonomy that makes subject matter seem quite beside the point.

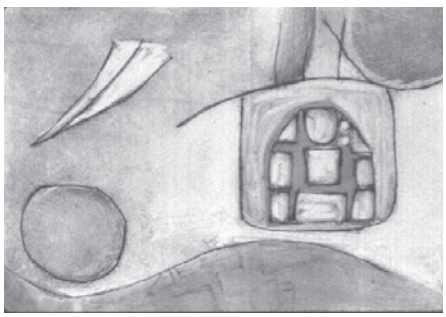
Indeed, as titles such as "Inner Mood" and "Heather's Rage" indicate, her inspiration appears to spring from emotions and states of being more than from tangible phenomena in the external world. Perhaps more than other contemporary artists, this desire to capture the ineffable relates Ayres' paintings to the work of Kandinsky, Malevich, and others who invented abstract painting in their attempts to find a language for the esoteric, rather than that which can be seen. Their pioneering spirit appears to persist in the paintings of Rachelle Ayres, even as she charts new territories to explore. It is her combination of talent and daring that makes this gifted British artist an exciting discovery and makes one look forward to her future forays onto these shores.

––Maurice Taplinger

At New Century Gallery: 5 Five Postmodern Visions

"Drawing is the new painting," a fellow critic recently declared, and while one would not wish to join him out on that shaky limb, this publication did run a cover story a few issues back called "Decade of the Drawing," and it does indeed appear that works on paper in general, have come into their own in the past couple of years.

One show among several that signaled the trend a year ago was "Express: Five Emerging Artists," at New Century Artists, 530 West 25th Street, and now the same group of artists has returned to the same venue with "Express 2: Dreaming." (The exhibition runs from March 29 through April 16, with a reception for the artists on Saturday April 2 from 3 to 6 PM.)

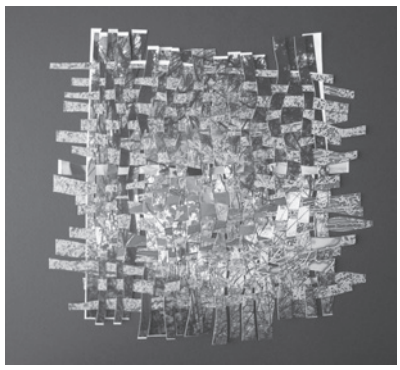


Linda Dujack

One of the featured artists, Linda Dujack is primarily a printmaker; however, her drypoints and collagraphs display all the best attributes of drawing, with their casual linear grace and their buoyant forms that float as freely as air balloons on the picture plane. Although Dujack's prints are inspired by events in her life, she has evolved a lively abstract shorthand with which to convey a host of elusive yet evocative meanings. Dujack's art presents us with a world of intriguing private symbols that we can either attempt to decipher or simply savor as formal entities. However, given their suggestive biomorphic shapes and Dujack's ability to invest every line with a sense of life and lively incident, it would be difficult not to find her compositions evocative on several levels simultaneously. For example, only a complete dullard could fail to be seduced by the fanciful poetry of the exquisite little drypoint that Dujack calls "Moonhouse."

Mark Lerer

Mark Lerer can say more in the rudimentary medium of pencil on small sheets of paper than many artists do with a full palette of colors and large canvases. In fact, one of the virtues of Lerer's drawings is the directness and simplicity not only of his means but of his imagery. From comicstrip super heroes, to the sculptures of Rodin, to his most recent pictures of an Afghani soldier raising his weapon, an uncharacteristically pensive Harpo Marx surrounded by grinning admirers, or a stereotypical Old West cowboy and stagecoach, Lerer makes every subject resonate with the peculiar qualities of an inner world where diverse figures of popular myth all share a grainy, media-inflected graphite vernacular. By imparting the same sense of nostalgia to yesterday's news photos as to older sources remembered from childhood, Lerer neutralizes contemporary anxiety by inserting it into a comforting alternative reality. Even when commenting trenchantly on current events, his drawings freeze his subjects into iconic images, providing the viewer with a fictive refuge from the relentless onslaught of what Robert Brustein calls "news theater.".



George C. Olexa

Linda Ganus, on the other hand, blows drawing up to epic proportions, investing her works in charcoal on paper, graphite on vellum, and charcoal and acrylic on canvas with all the scale and presence of ambitious painting, yet retaining the linear qualities that we associate with drawing. Thus Ganus' large painting "Two Figures after Titian (Sacred and Profane Love)" —in which two women, one wearing a bridal veil, the other in dishabille, lean on a white piano— displays her draftpersonly abilities as prominently as her black and white drawing of a Sphinx with Mona Lisa's face perched atop another piano in a marinescape as the surf rolls in. While the latter image may sound surreal, it is actually pervaded by the sense of narrative angst that makes all of Ganus' work so compelling: Even the most outlandish imagistic juxtapositions in her pictures take on a logic that is more psychological than picturesque, suggesting that we are privy to some dark internal drama.

Linda Ganus

George C. Olexa, who exhibited edgy digital photographs of urban subjects in the previous installment of "Express," has turned more recently to pastels of the Irish countryside, abstract compositions in encaustic, and photo-collages. One of his pastels, "Cliffs of Moher" appears to merge elements of Cezanne with both the lyrical abstractions and contrastingly funky figure paintings of Philip Guston. However, Olexa takes a totally different approach in his collages, cutting some of his photographs into strips and weaving them back together to create new works in which fragments of imagery flash evocatively from abstract grids. Like Lucas Samaras, Olexa appears to be one of those artists who relies on a quirky conceptual sensibility rather than a signature style to impose a consistent vision on his various projects.

Although he exhibited a group of portraits last year with a decidedly "art brut" quality, in his recent series of thirty small black and white pen and ink drawings, Fritz Erismann employs a refined and fluid line in the meticulous manner of a medieval manuscript illuminator to weave intricate visions he refers to as "Dreamscapes." Generated subconsciously through meditation, mixing memory and desire, infused with hints of a baroque eroticism, Erismann's ornately convoluted compositions merge human, animal, landscape, and archaic architectural elements with sinuous linear grace.

Whether or not one agrees that we are in the midst of a new graphic renaissance, "Express 2: Dreaming" is an exhibition which proves beyond a doubt that some of the most exciting work to be seen these days is by artists who broaden the definition of contemporary drawing to include various mixed media and just about anything else that can be done on paper.

Fritz Erismann

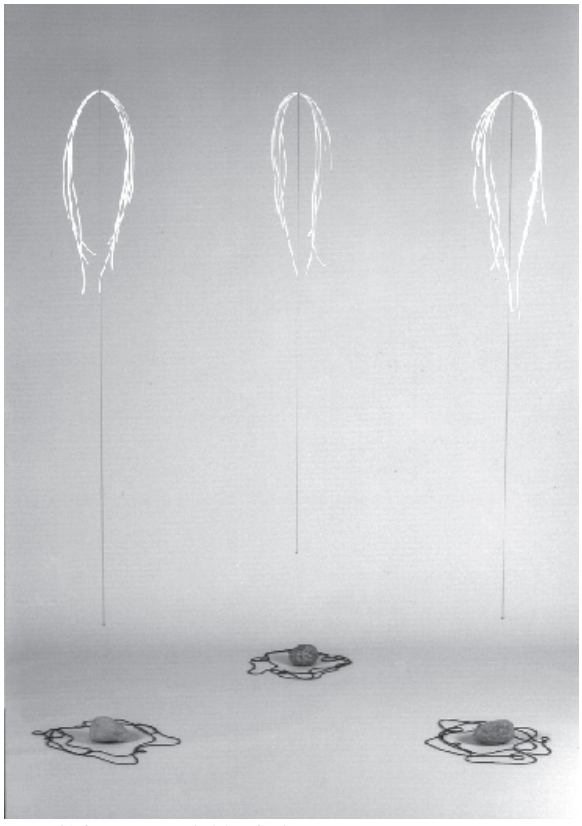
—J. Sanders Eaton

Hope Carter's Unlimited "Fields" of Imaginative Possibility

With the over-hyped spectacle of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's mammoth project in Central Park still fresh in memory, one encounters the more modest oasis of Hope Carter's intriguingly ambiguous installation, "Fields of Fire," at Phoenix Gallery, 210 Eleventh Avenue, from March 30 to April 23. (There will be a reception for the artist on Thursday, Mach 31 from 6 to 8pm.).

While "The Gates" seemed to interiorize nature by cutting off the sky when one walked the footpaths under those billowing saffron skirts, Carter's installation, entitled "Fields of Fire," brings nature inside in a manner that can be quietly awe-inspiring.

When the Phoenix Gallery moved to its new quarters in Chelsea last year, Hope Carter was called upon to design the space. Consequently, every artist who exhibits there will benefit from now on from her exquisite eye for proportions. As for Carter herself, she says, "It is quite an experience to be able to show my work in a space that I personally created," and the airy feeling of the gallery is auspiciously suited to her installation.



Detail from "In Fields of Fire"

Air has always been an important element in Carter's work anyway. To enter into one of her pieces— and one is invariably invited to walk through her installations rather than viewing them from outside as discrete entities— is to become aware of one's own breathing and the subtle fibrilations that every movement sets off in the delicately poised components, charging the surrounding atmosphere.

In the new piece, some thirty clustered forms, created with long, thin strips of mat board tied together, are suspended with invisible monofilament from the gallery ceiling, forming willowy arcs. From the center of each of these forms, a black string dangles down with a small red lead weight attached to its end. On the gallery floor, about eighteen inches immediately below each weight, sits a medium-size gray river stone. While some of the stones are bare, others are tied with a red string in linear patterns seemingly as varied as the veins in a leaf. All of the stones, whether bare or tied in this manner, are encircled by a thicker length of black yarn laid out on the floor in a loose, graphic manner.

These linear configurations made this viewer think of the rhythmically swerving lines in Brice Marden's "Cold Mountain" paintings, and by extension of the waves and rivulets in classical Chinese scroll painting. Only, Carter achieves her calligraphic evocation of natural forces with yarn and string, rather than a brush, and the overall effect is like a Japanese rock garden that has suddenly become animated by the machinery of natural movement. Viewed in this way the yarn flowing around each stone could appear to be ripples around a river rock and the graceful white arches of clustered strips could suggest foamy splashes bouncing up from rain drops!

Of course, this is just one admittedly subjective interpretation (very different from the fiery fields or aftermath of a forest fire to which the title appears to allude) among many that this installation will indubitably inspire. Indeed, Hope Carter admits to being surprised and fascinated by how everyone always seems to find different meanings in the limitless range of physical metaphors that she creates with the most unlikely materials.

"There is symbolism to spare in the piece; none of which was deliberately conceived," she says of her latest installation. "Therefore I will leave it to the viewer to discover their own individual response to the many ideas that can be drawn from a walk through these 'fields.'"

—Ed McCormack

Dorothy A. Culpepper and the Alchemy of Embedded Memory

To paint as Dorothy A. Culpepper does is a profound act of faith. For Culpepper persists in believing in the power and passion of Abstract Expressionism in an era rife with post-pop irony, technological gimmickry, and conceptual gamesmanship.

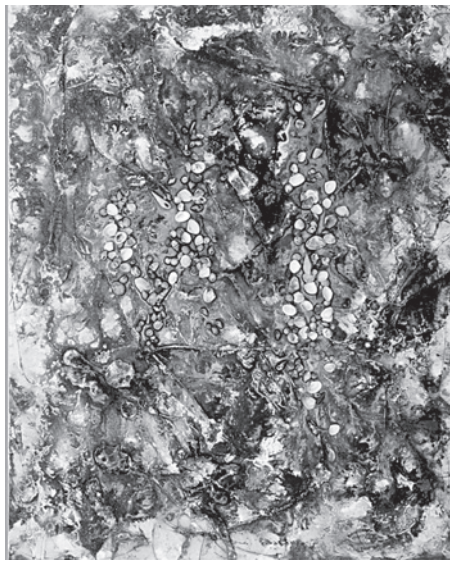
However, the power of Culpepper's conviction comes across emphatically in her new exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, from March 29 through April 16, leaving no doubt in the mind of the viewer as to the wisdom of her decision to pursue her lonely, lyrical path.

Born in Cincinnati, Ohio, and raised in Alberquerque, New Mexico, Culpepper has exhibited widely in New Mexico, as well as in Paris and New York. She has won critical acclaim, particularly in her exhibitions at Montserrat Gallery in recent years, for her spontaneous style. Often working on a large scale in acrylic and mixed media, Culpepper employs the by now time-honored technique of poured paint, albeit controlling the flow in such a way that she can achieve deliberate effects rarely seen by others working in a similar manner. Indeed, her paintings are filled with carefully choreographed rhythms created with skeins of pigment that she lays down in many successive layers, building up sumptuously tactile surfaces that compel one as much for their materiality as for their lyrical sense of movement.

Culpepper often enhances the ruggedness of her surfaces by adding nails, bits of wood, wire, shells, glass, or other materials to her pigments as textural elements. However, in some of the most recent pictures on view in the new show at Montserrat Gallery, these elements have taken on an even more significant role, functioning not only as textural enhancements but as prominent parts of the composition.

One such work is the painting that Culpepper calls "Escape Through the Window," where lengths of rounded wood create a roughly rectangular form at the center of the composition, suggesting a barred window in which some of the bars have been removed to facilitate the escape of the title. Here, too, a concentration of nails scattered within the wooden rectangle suggests a glittering constellation, an effect which is further enhanced by splashes of white pigment. Within and all around the window-like rectangle, green and yellow hues splashed into the deep blue ground suggest a view of a nocturnal sky through foliage and trees.

However, while "Escape Through the Window" is a highly evocative painting



"Shell Shocked"

and can be read quite literally by those with a literal cast of mind (many of whom would probably come up with their own interpretations differing greatly from the preceding one), it is hardly necessary to explicate Culpepper's paintings in this manner. For while such second-guessing can be enjoyable, her compositions function sufficiently in purely abstract terms to provide limitless funds of aesthetic pleasure.

At the same time, the artist herself does little to discourage such interpretation; in fact, it would seem that she enjoys provoking it with playful titles such as "Shell Shocked." This is a composition in which sea shells play a prominent role in the composition, scattered among flowing areas of blue, yellow, and red hues, their white surfaces adding not only tactile accents to the composition but also enhancing its swirling sense of movement in much the same manner that buoys bobbing in ocean surf will amplify the rhythms of the waves.

In other new paintings by Dorothy A. Culpepper, the collage objects come even more prominently to the forefront of her compositions, even, paradoxically, when they are submerged more deeply in pigment, lending her painted surfaces the quality of bas-relief. One such example is in the composition called "Here Comes the X,Y,Z's," where shards of wood, large cut-out alphabet letters, and other substances too thoroughly embedded in paint to be readily identifiable, are employed in a manner akin to some of the relief paintings of Jasper Johns. Indeed, these elements—particularly the cut out letters—suggest that a more semiotic component is surfacing in Culpepper's work which may make itself felt even more overtly at some point in the future. For now, though, the gestural emphasis still holds sway, with the added objects most often covered entirely by densely layered skeins of splashed and dripped color (here again the primaries to which Culpepper seems partial), even as their contours assert themselves more prominently than in her previous paintings.

Coloristically, one of the richest among Culpepper's new group of paintings is the work that, with characteristically punning playfulness, she has titled "Log On," in which a configuration of stacked wood that does indeed resemble a log pile is positioned at the center of the composition, where large, triangular expanses of blue green and red converge and are overlaid by the inevitable skeins of dripped paint, here laid down in a particularly rhythmic manner in looping white strands that whip over the surface with tremendous velocity.

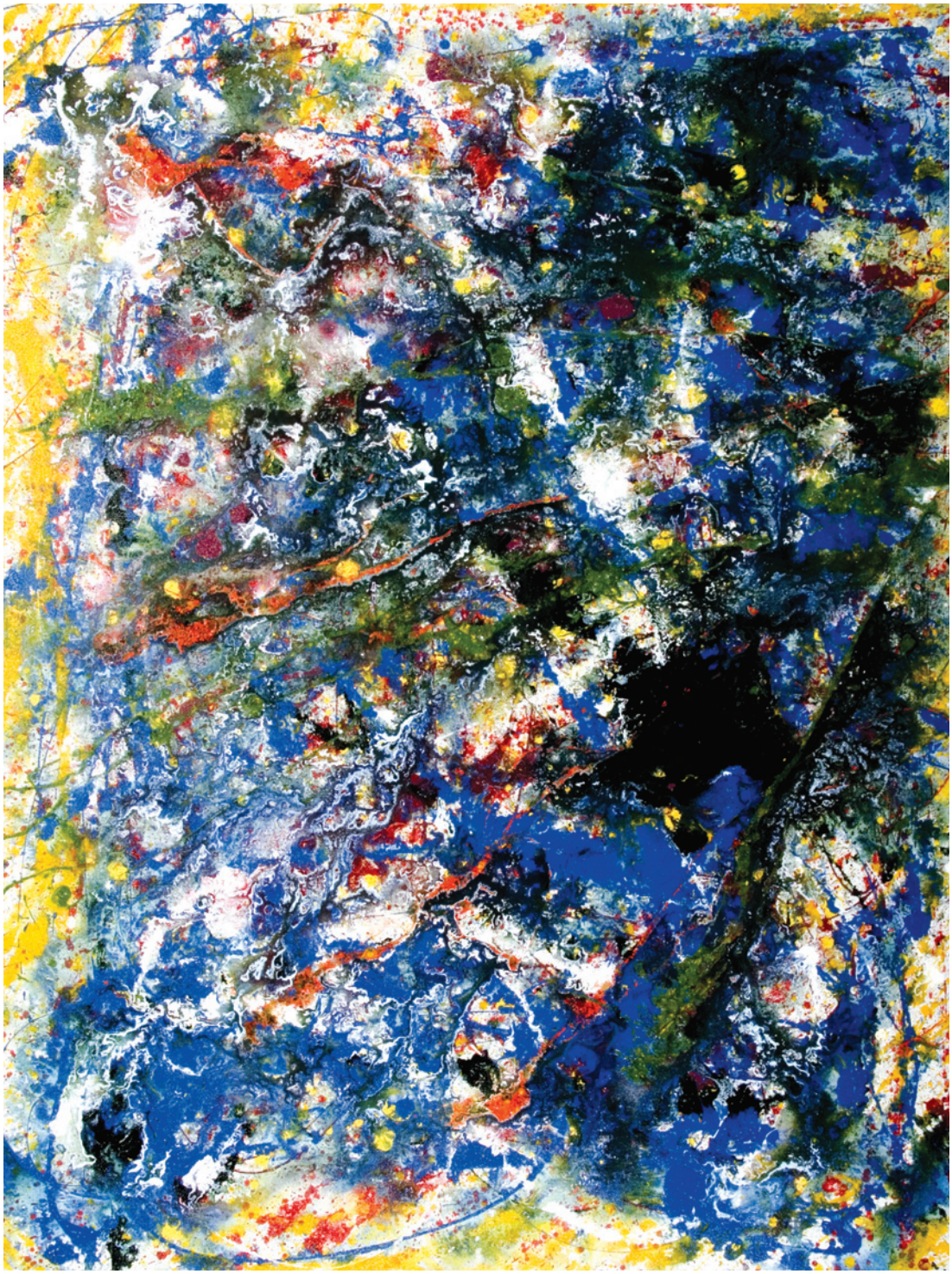
One of the first things that strikes one on entering a gallery filled with Culpepper's work is the sheer physical presence of her paintings, even when they are on easel scale, like many of the pieces in her present show. Whether working in large, medium-size, or relatively intimate formats, Culpepper imbues her paintings with a sense of scale that transcends their actual dimensions. By virtue of her overall approach to space, she convinces us to perceive her surfaces as vast terrains, even without the obvious natural signposts that we see in the work of certain other abstract painters who allude more overtly to landscape.

By the same token, a bucolic feeling comes across in a painting such as "In the Garden of Uncounted Souls," where fluid areas of green and blue could suggest an aerial view of verdant land masses and waterways. Here, too, layered drips are conspicuously absent and the piece de resistance is a multitude of brightly colored beads clustered at the center of the picture space, with bent twigs creating counter-rhythms around them. The beads suggest the ones on an abacus; yet rather than being bound to a rigid wire to be slid back and forth for purposes of counting, they are clustered like flowers in a garden, which lends poetic resonance to the title Culpepper has given this work.

Fairfield Porter, a realist who was particularly sensitive to abstract painting, once stated that "art is measured by an interior intensity," and this would seem to apply

especially well to the paintings Dorothy A. Culpepper, which shimmer with an inner vitality that we normally associate with living organisms. Porter went on to say that a painting only possesses this interior intensity when "somewhere along the way the greatest possible attention has been paid to something whose importance to the artist is a measure of its reality to him."

Although it is not always as obvious as in the previous exhibition that she dedicated to the memory of her late husband, one gets the sense that Dorothy A. Culpepper's compositions always result from the careful attention that she pays to things of great importance to her, metamorphosed as they may be by the process and language of painting itself. Encountering a painting such as "A Moment in New York," her exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, for example, one knows for certain that it really does commemorate a unique moment in the specific city to which the title refers. One need not know, however, the particulars of the memory or why Culpepper has chosen to juxtapose colorful beads and vigorously applied areas of brilliant primary hues to feel the intensity of the moment. It is inherent in every inch of the composition, with its rhythmically flowing areas of fiery color. And like all of Culpepper's paintings, it does what all good abstract painting is supposed to do by capturing a sense of the ineffable.



"War of Hearts and Flowers", Acrylic 48"x36"

Clement Greenberg once stated, "The subject, the references of a work are not the same thing as its content." And indeed, the ostensible subject of Culpepper's paintings is invariably the material substance of paint and the physical phenomenon of what happens when forms and colors are combined in a certain way to bring about an aesthetic epiphany. However, the content of her work is far more mysterious and elusive; for it has to do with the metaphysical phenomenon of how the material can become metaphoric when it is enriched by the subtext of human experience. This, in fact, is a form of alchemy, and Dorothy A. Culpepper accomplishes it several times over in her newest exhibition at Montserrat Gallery .

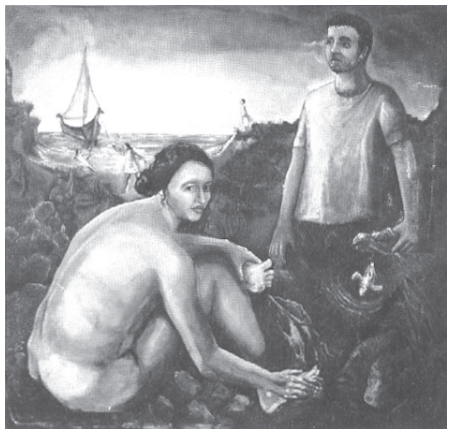
—Byron Coleman

Discovering Elissa Lieberman's Eerie Contemporary Allegories

In the past two decades, we have witnessed a resurgence of narrative and allegory in figurative painting, most recently in the large canvases of Elissa Lieberman at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway.

Lieberman's work is firmly rooted in the tradition of the old masters, yet filled with signifiers of contemporary life such as the Bic cigarette lighter brandished by one of the women in the large canvas called "Our Lady of the Highways." This is a somewhat eerie figure composition in which several women are gathered on a hillside around a religious statue resembling the Virgin Mary. Below them, cars with glowing headlights stream along a dark highway. The women appear solemn as they engage in a ritual that suggests some sort of vigil for those who have perished in automobile accidents—or else a prayerful ceremony on behalf of the safety of those still traveling. The artist shows considerable skill in evoking a nocturnal atmosphere, her handling of light and dark reminiscent of Georges de La Tour. In Lieberman's painting, however, the Bic lighter substitutes for the candlelight La Tour often used as illumination in several of her paintings.

Elissa Lieberman's "Our Lady of the Highways" also calls to mind Alfred Leslie's paintings memorializing the death of the poet Frank O'Hara for its bold approach to



"Resting"

introducing an epic quality to contemporary figure painting. Lieberman, however, employs a more expressionistic technique and adds elements of romanticism to invest her large canvas with its own peculiar poetry.

In another large nocturnal scene, a beautiful woman in a clinging, patterned dress stands amid a flurry of pigeons that swirl up into the night sky, turning shadowy as they recede in the distance. Dark city buildings with illuminated windows can also be seen in the background, as well as a cluster of men who turn in the woman's direction, their silhouetted forms defined at the edges by light that may emanate from a lamp-post. Their predatory attitude suggests that the woman might be in danger were she not protected by some unseen force.

Such subjective projections on the part of the viewer lend Lieberman's paintings a dark psychological drama that can also be seen in a smaller canvas depicting a man sandwiched between two women in a cafe, the moon visible through the picture window at their back. Even to this ostensibly simple subject, Lieberman brings a mood suggesting a tangled, emotional menage a trois. Somewhat more surreal is another canvas entitled "Dream," in which a sensual sleeping nude is juxtaposed with a large egg, a snake, and human figures riding the backs of large birds. Here, the title itself gives the artist leeway to indulge in especially fantastic imagery, while a larger oil called "Resting" depicts a nude woman and a clothed man in a pastoral landscape where smaller figures in gossamer white garments romp near an ancient sailing ship on a distant beach. Only, the broken and bloodied birds that the man clutches disturb the serenity of the latter scene, limned in limpid twilight hues with the consummate skill that makes Elissa Lieberman such a convincing conjurer of dark personal myths.

—Maurice Taplinger

Luminism Updated: The Landscapes of K.G. Weiss

"I like to think that my scenes are responsible for lowering a few heart rates and could even help you to see or (at their best) think more clearly," states K.G. Weiss, a painter whose solitary childhood spent in marshes and woods left an indelible impression that lingers in the landscapes he exhibited recently at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, some of which can be seen in the venue's year-round salon.

Weiss describes himself as a Luminist, claiming spiritual kinship with a movement in mid-19th-century landscape that John Baur, who coined the term, described as "a polished and meticulous realism in which there is no sign of brushwork and no trace of impressionism, the atmospheric effects being achieved by infinitely careful gradations of tone, by the most exact study of the relative clarity of near and far objects, and by a precise rendering of the variations in texture and color produced by direct or reflected rays."

Weiss's light-filled oils—which qualify on all counts as contemporary manifestation of the Luminist sensibility—are created with a palette restricted to five basic colors: red, yellow, black, blue, and white. With them, however, he mixes a limitless spectrum of hues that evoke all the many nuances of nature in compositions that capture a heightened sense of nature. Although his medium and methods are quite different, Weiss's ability to heighten the effects of nature and imbue every picture with a remarkable expressive intensity can be likened to that of the great American watercolorist Charles Burchfield.

Amazingly, Weiss claims to have "only produced about one picture annually" for a period of twenty years before picking up a more prolific pace in his mid-thirties. This suggests an artist in tune with his own inner rhythms, with little regard for the pressures of the marketplace, and that independent attitude is reflected in his work: Each one of his pictures looks inevitable, authentic, utterly original.

"Bay Point," for example, is a large view of a swampy landscape in which the sky dominates, with its streaks of yellow and touches of pink that appear to bathe the entire composition in glowing natural auras. With a stagnant pool of water surrounded by high grasses, the atmosphere of the scene is at once desolate and transcendent. The raw wood frame, reportedly made by the artist himself, with its pronounced woodgrain patterns, is an integral element, contributing to the rustic quality of the overall statement.

"Milkweed," on the other hand is an unambiguously exhilarating picture. Three slender stalks of milkweed are seen in the

"Seven Stars in Cowtown"

foreground, sharply focused and rendered in great detail. They stand tall against one of those luminous, subtly colored skies at which Weiss excels, and in the distance is a softly blurred row of verdant trees. Here and there, the composition is enlivened by breeze-blown milkweed; the delicate white puffs of pollen float through the air like lyrical accents, filling the canvas with a sense of movement and immediacy.

In these and other landscapes in his recent exhibition, K.G. Weiss succeeded admirably in capturing what he calls "an orchestration of all things living together in a syncopated moment of time."

—Wilson Wong

Golden Auras Illuminate the Abstractions of Maria Teresa Quiñones

Abstract painting has had to find new directions in order to survive as a viable tendency in the climate of postmodernism. One artist who has arrived at a unique synthesis of pure abstract form, atmospheric color, and fin de siecle decorativeness is a painter, born in Colombia, widely exhibited since the 1960s: Maria Teresa Quiñones. In her latest exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, Quiñones showed several works in mixed media that were both aesthetically pleasing and highly original, not only in technique, but in their formal configurations as well.

"Snail Looking for Light"

One of Quiñones's most striking paintings was the large composition called "Snail Looking for Light," in which the piece de resistance is a slender spiral of brilliant gold metallic pigment which culminates in a long vertical form rising against a field of luminous golden hues. The symbolic form of the snail becomes a graceful abstract symbol characterized by a sinuous, serpentine grace reminiscent of Art Nouveau design. Quiñones's use of gold pigment, here thickly applied to the level of bas relief in the central form, also recalls the decadent beauty of Gustav Klimt and others of the Vienna Sucession movement. However, Quiñones sets this ornate golden shape within a formal context more akin to the early Color Field paintings of Jules Olitski, albeit also suggestive of a sky with faint cloud formations illuminated by sunlight. The painting appears to be a hybrid creation that moves in bold historical leaps toward a new species of postmodern baroque abstract imagery. Here, too, the artist creates compelling contrasts between the thick gold impasto of the snail symbol and the smooth, subtly modulated ground.

In another intriguing painting, "From the Wisdom Series II," Quiñones employs exquisitely fine golden lines in a formation resembling a glittering spider web superimposed over a vibrant blue field. The painting has a timeless quality, simultaneously suggesting natural and philosophical sources melded into an oddly compelling yet elusive image, while a companion painting from the same series employs a golden spider web against a yellow ground to somewhat more subtle chromatic effect.

Although some of Quiñones's compositions are notable for their combination of formal finesse and delicacy, others are contrastingly rugged, even while possessed of a characteristic elegance. With its jagged band of gold running vertically down the center of the composition, Quiñones's "Golden River," for one example, has a craggy, crusty quality akin to the uncompromising large abstract canvases of the fiercely independent American painter Clyfford Still. Indeed, part of Quiñones's talent is her ability to employ geometric and organic forms with equal effectiveness, introducing a great deal of formal variety into her compositions without sacrificing those unique qualities which unify her entire oeuvre.

Whether working with sensual curvilinear or more austere rectilinear shapes and color areas, all of the paintings of Maria Teresa Quiñones share a compositional dynamism, coupled with a chromatic shimmer, that sets them apart. Her passion for form and her love of light infuse her pictures with a rarefied quality unlike that of any other abstract painter at work today.

—Peter Wiley

Madalina: A Consummate Colorist Strikes an Emotional Chord

When those who do not understand abstract painting attempt to condemn if for its lack of "content," they are often misguided about what content actually means. If one takes it to mean specific, recognizable objects, then there may be some merit to their argument. But what about feelings? Are they not another form of content, and perhaps even capable of touching upon a broader range of human experience?

"My paintings are not about sorrow and pain, but about hope, courage and a strong belief in miracles," states the artist who goes by the single name Madalina, making her intentions clear in a way that few other Color Field painters do. While painting of this sort is often presented as a purely formal endeavor, Madalina is unabashed in her desire to connect with the viewer emotionally in the works she exhibited in her recent exhibition in the Chelsea space of Agora Gallery, at 530 West 25th Street. (As artists in residence, she will also exhibit in Agora Gallery's Soho branch, 415 West Broadway, from April 16 through May 7.)

And indeed, she invests her large acrylics on canvas with qualities that go far beyond their considerable formal qualities. In compositions enlivened by subtle chromatic nuances and striking tactile qualities, Madalina succeeds splendidly in projecting a sense spiritual resonance. Indeed, contemplating her paintings can be a meditative experience: one becomes engulfed in radiant auras created with layered translucent glazes that evoke something at once material and ethereal. Indeed, the paradox in her paintings is how successfully they engage us with their purely physical properties while simultaneously transporting us to a realm beyond the physical. It is this tension between the succulent sensual presence of the paint itself and the suggestion of transcendence in her subtly shadowed surfaces that makes Madalina's work so consistently engaging.

Her abilities as a colorist are especially evident in paintings such as "Celebration I," where a seemingly infinite range of softly modulated red hues evoke a visceral sense of passion, as well as in other canvas, such as "Harmony" and "Golden Light," where she explores the possibilities of metallic gold pigments in combination with other hues to create chromatic effects of an almost Turner-esque radiance.

These latter works are among Madalina's most opulent compositions, bathing the viewer in chromatic auras of a peculiar richness. Standing before them, one becomes caught up in their tactile surfaces and the sense of infinite depth that their delicate tonal modulations project. She also displays her consummate skills as a colorist in "Hidden Shadows," where softly modulated blue and purple-violet hues seem to flit across the surface, playing hide-and-seek with the viewer, as well as in the relatively monochromatic canvas "Purity," with its amorphous, gold-tinged central form floating like a phantom cloud in a glowing white field.

"Harmony"

Madalina brings a refreshing new energy to Color Field painting with her unabashed desire to convey emotional qualities through abstract means. And she succeeds splendidly in engaging the viewer in her cause through her ability to strike just the right chromatic chord. At the same time, all abstract painting must finally stand on its purely visual attributes, and Madalina provides the sophisticated viewer with much to appreciate in this regard as well.

—Chris Weller

From the Angelic to the Sublime: Another View of Deborah Lee Galesi

One of the centerpieces of Deborah Lee Galesi's recent solo exhibition at the 584 Broadway location of Montserrat Gallery (which will include her work in its year-round salon on moving to its new space in Chelsea), was a large oil on canvas called "Look Inside," which took its inspiration from the biblical Psalm 23: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

The painting presented a kind of freeform contemporary version of The Last Supper, populated by an eclectic cast of characters, some in full color, others in grisaille, representing several nationalities. They were gathered around a circular table split down the middle, as if by an earthquake, its pyramidal opening revealing a rainbow-vibrant realm of cosmic phenomena, mountain ranges, waterfalls, winding rivers, and verdant foliage. Within this vast visionary landscape, which could represent an earthly Paradise, a woman in native dress bathed an infant in shallow water, while white swans glided along, porpoises leapt through the air in formation, and a luminous angel waded nearby. For all its multilayered imagistic complexity, as the title "Look Inside" suggests, the message of the painting seemed profoundly simple: Look past the conference tables where bargains are struck between government leaders and politicians negotiating the fate of humanity to one's own inner being, where the real truth of existence lies within easy reach.

"Swept Away by the Dolphin Vortex"

One of the things that makes Galesi's work so fascinating is her willingness to take risks that would daunt a less intrepid painter, as seen in another large canvas called "Infinite Quantum Leap: Infinite Possibilities," which has become an emblematic work of her career, having been repeatedly reproduced in the Village Voice and other publications. In this composition a prehistoric hunter and another figure who appears to be a medieval knight brandishing a long sword ride the back of a fire-breathing dinosaur, while a huge wave of water whooshes up behind the huge creature like a jet-trail, a white dolphin discernible within its white foam. And far be it for Galesi to stop there: the figure of a shaman sitting in the lotus position holding a ceremonial staff and a sort of sparkler god with luminous, wiggling rays emanating from his entire body can be seen levitating in the deep, nocturnal darkness surrounding the main figures!

In this large oil, too, the artist appears to be paying tribute to indigenous inspirations and imparting wisdom channeled from the ancients. Yet the real triumph, in strictly aesthetic terms, is how successfully Galesi balances all of these disparate images within a composition that goes far beyond the efforts of other international Neo-Expressionists in her all-out willingness to share the truth of her experience with the viewer. For Galesi, a native of Patterson New Jersey, this means calling upon the technical skills that she honed at the Art Students League in New York City and during a long period of study in Florence, Italy, where she soaked up the methods of the Renaissance masters who were her earliest inspiration, in order to make every image that she paints a palpable representation of her inner reality.

This a complex undertaking indeed, since Galesi's inner reality is fed by a variety of esoteric sources, which include her fascination with everything from Native American Culture to the art of the Etruscans and the ancient Egyptians, as well as the New Age theories of Deepak Chopra, among any number of other passing interests which invariably find their way into her pictures. An image especially emblematic of Galesi's spiritual path is the oil on canvas she calls "Infinite Dance of Bliss," in which a figure that appears to be a symbolic self-portrait floats above a volcanic landscape in a stratosphere where smaller beings of pure light seem to surf on streams of purplish illumination emanating from the stars. Here, on a canvas whose perfectly symmetrical square format enhances the composition's sense of infinite space, is a vision of transcendence to rival those of no less delightfully daft a British visionary than the great William Blake! And while this could seem an enterprise fraught with peril for a contemporary painter, Galesi possesses both the technical skill and the spiritual conviction to make the painting succeed.

Even more startling in conceptual terms, yet just as successful in its own manner is the large oil called "Swept Away by the Dolphin Vortex," in which a dolphin with the body of a woman rises like a Botticelli Venus out of the sea, set against a watery swirl that gives Galesi the opportunity to flaunt her virtuoso painterly skills in one of her boldest, most dazzlingly Expressionistic compositions to date.

Deborah Lee Galesi has already amassed an impressive exhibition history around the country and in various places abroad: France, Japan, Australia, and particularly Italy, where she is especially esteemed. She has also exhibited in New York City in the past. However, the sheer range and scope of her most recent solo show at Montserrat Gallery (which included many more paintings than those described here, among them smaller works such as the pensive nude "Solitude," presenting a more intimate side of her talent) seemed to make it a landmark in her career.

—Maurice Taplinger

Bob Tomlinson's "Salome" Paintings: Anatomy in the Abstract

Perhaps the most radical innovation of the postmodern era is the artist's embrace of a variety of sources, including literature, as starting points for an art that respects no boundaries. Bob Tomlinson, a scholar of French literature and aesthetics as well as a painter, exemplifies the permissive attitude of postmodernism when he states that "the frontier between figuration and abstraction is an illusion."

Indeed, Tomlinson makes this point with great visual conviction in his solo exhibition "The Dances of Salome," at Viridian Artists @ Chelsea, 530 West 25th Street, from May 17 through June 4, with a reception on Saturday, May 21st from 3 to 6 PM.

The biblical story of Salome has inspired countless artists down through the centuries. Being a postmodernist, open to a wide range of influences, Tomlinson takes his inspiration not only from the original legend, but from Gustave Moreau, Gustave Flaubert, Stephane Mallarme, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and other predecessors who have produced memorable works on Salome.

Perhaps taking to heart the French literary critic and semiotician Roland Barthes' theory, in that a text—or a painting, for that matter—does not release "a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God)" but a variety of meanings "which blend and clash," Tomlinson creates compositions in which subject, sign, and gesture seem to be in a constant state of flux. Just as Barthes asserts that meanings in language are inherently unstable, Tomlinson exploits the ambiguity inherent in what we see through tensions between figurative and abstract elements and the finesse with which he resolves them.

While he does not "appropriate" in the sense that some postmodern painters adopt preexisting imagery to their own uses, Tomlinson puts into practice Barthes' idea that a text or other work of art today must necessarily be "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture." In his present series, he does so by grafting the spontaneous gestural calligraphy of Abstract Expressionism onto the romantic subject matter of Symbolism, resulting in a vital synthesis of line, color, form, and allegorical meaning that lends the story of Salome new energy and immediacy.

Tomlinson's use of mixed media—usually oil paint with collage areas of patterned paper highlighted by gold and silver foils—further enhances the sense of spontaneity, coloristic richness, and subtle tactility in his work. His compositions appear to be process-oriented, the figurative references emerging from the abstract forms during the act of painting, rather than the other way around.

"Dance #1: The Alternation" oil and collage on canvas 40x34"

This imbues Tomlinson's work with a striking velocity, the drama of the painterly gesture animating the drama inherent in the subject matter, as seen in his oil and collage on canvas "Dance #1: The Alternation." Here, the animated abandonment of the partially nude dancing figure, her bare breasts and shoulders emerging from a loose garment that flows sinuously to the bottom of the composition, is evoked in a linear, graphic manner reminiscent of Toulouse-Lautrec, both for its draftsmanly authoritativeness and the spare elegance of its mixed media technique. Employing red, orange, and ocher hues on a cream-colored ground, Tomlinson flattens his figure emphatically on the picture plane, and his use of pasted papers as integral elements of the composition calls to mind the sharply articulated two-dimensional shapes of the Abstract Expressionist collage artist Conrad Marca-Relli, as well as the baroque decorative qualities of contemporary Pattern Painting.

Tomlinson's mastery of classical anatomy, however, enables him to reintroduce the beauty of the nude human body into the contemporary aesthetic dialogue, even while retaining the abstract autonomy of his forms. The sensual contours of his figures enhance the flowing compositional rhythms in "The Apparition," where the ghostly head of the prophet hovers Moreau-like above the voluptuous Salome, dancing nude with her arms thrown up, as well as in "Cantique of Saint John," an equally languorous male nude in predominantly blue hues.

Indeed, with their graceful balancing of allusive and purely plastic elements, the paintings of Bob Tomlinson prove that it is still possible to create compelling abstract compositions without sacrificing the human figure and the rich range of symbolic and emotional associations it invariably evokes.

—Lawrence Downes

At Broadway Mall, a Complementary Convergence of Art and Craft

Similarities, as well as the disparities, between fine and applied arts were explored in the recent multimedia exhibition "Craft Art Plus," curated by Elton Tucker for the West Side Arts Coalition at Broadway Mall Community Center, Broadway at 96th Street.

Leila Elias showed the interplay between art and craft more overtly than some in her dyed silk wall hangings, which took the form of stately yet colorful vertical triptychs, their gossamer components suggesting more variegated cousins of the saffron skirts suspended from Christo's "Gates."

Babette P. Meltzer's emblematic assemblages of dice, mirrors, and other oddities have always had an element of craft about them; however, their zany intricacy is also akin Alfred Jensen's paintings based on mathematical and metaphysical systems.

Ruth Lianillo Leal harked back to the heyday of the East Village, in her painting of a big, octopoid blue tree reaching toward a fat full moon hovering over mountain peaks that looked like they were topped with glittering costume jewelry. Like Laura Owen, one of the stars of the 2004 Whitney Biennial, Leal is a delightfully quirky talent.

Curator Elton Tucker goes out on a limb in his own way by combining austere geometric forms reminiscent of Mondrian with explosive Dayglo color fields. The dramatic contrast between formal and freewheeling elements animates Tucker's paintings in peculiar ways.

Vickie Fremont's installation of boldly patterned pillows mounted on the gallery reminded one of Andy Warhol's floating pillows at Castelli many years ago. Freemont, however, seemed to be making a different kind of point by also showing a selection of her hand-made jewelry on the wall and thereby making us view craft items in a whole new way.

Two other artists showed us new ways of seeing folkloric elements: Painter Madi Lanier positioned a brilliantly colored papier mache angel in a corner of the gallery in a manner that made it take on a surprising sculptural presence, making clear how much in contemporary art has to do with context. Tomasa Perez showed intriguing handmade dolls and collages in which cutout figures of little girls had a poignant presence akin to the work of outsider master Henry Darger as well as two abstract watercolors with rectangular forms in muted hues.

Other artists in this show appeared to be visitors from some purely painterly realm, particularly Margie Steinmann, who combines School of Paris color with New York School gestures in a highly successful synthesis. Steinmann is not afraid to be chromatically seductive and rugged at the same time, resulting in compositions at once vigorous and sumptuous.

Betty Thornton's willingness to embellish her paintings with potentially jarring collage elements pays off handsomely in her picture of a woman meditating by a pool with 3-D foliage and fragments of mirror floating in the air. Despite their miniature scale, Lori Fischler's watercolors (often no bigger than postcards) do not come off as artistic tschotkas; rather, they convey a sense of high artistic purpose with their lyrical, soft-focused treatment of landscape subjects.

Miguel Angel skirts craft altogether to turn careful arrangements of commonplace things into pure works of art. Here, Angel worked his alchemy with children's marbles and crushed bottlecaps within a sandy-textured hinged support, creating an object as oddly poetic as a Joseph Cornell.

—Robert Vigo

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Richard Hickam Dances on Painting's Slippery Slope

We get so accustomed to certain conventions in even the most progressive painting that, usually, when something is really fresh, at first it looks a little wrong—or at least a bit "off." Of course, few paintings in our shock-proof era could seem as initially monstrous as de Kooning's "Woman I" did before time made it a masterpiece. But it is still possible, every once in a great while, to encounter work that looks "wrong" in just the right way.

The paintings in Richard Hickam's recent solo show at Allan Stone Gallery, 113 East 90th Street, were a wonderful example. Initially the colors could strike one as strident almost to the point of garish. And why should a face or a figure be so lusciously painted yet so comically distorted? Then you realize that it is exactly his willingness to negotiate that slippery slope between high art and caricature that makes Hickam's work so daring, so exciting.

In his first solo show at Allan Stone Gallery 31 years ago, Hickam's realist figure paintings looked flawless in a smooth, glisteningly juicy manner influenced by Wayne Thiebaud. Then he got restless and started painting small expressionist heads and larger, looser figures in a manner influenced by Richard Diebenkorn. Over time, after a fruitful foray into abstraction in the 1980s, Hickam returned to the figure and assimilated the influences of Thiebaud and Diebenkorn, making them peculiarly his own. The juicy afterglow of Thiebaud is still present in his work, but it has been liberated by Hickam's unique gestural velocity. And if Diebenkorn paints generalized "figures" that serve as mute compositional place-holders, Hickam paints people, with all the messy emotional baggage that distinction implies.

As in the case of most good painters, the real subject of Hickam's work is painting itself. However, to ignore the human subtext in his paintings would be to do the breadth of his talent a serious injustice. Yes, his pictures are filled with delectable painterly tidbits, such as "blubbery" impastos (to borrow de Kooning's terrific term) that appear to shake like the jowls of a hanging judge denying an appeal, as well as all kinds of splashy, drippy effects that activate the surface in pure visual/tactile terms. But Hickam also creates characters of an almost Dickensian subtlety. Flaunting the former taboo regarding the "literary" in gestural painting with post-modern panache, he makes us become engaged with his people, even as we savor his paintings for their abstract virtues.

"The Tenor" 2004

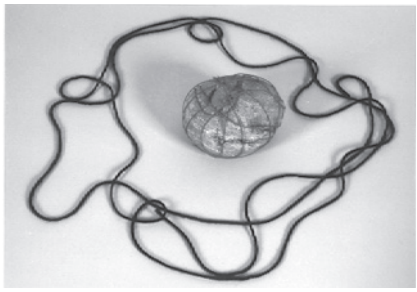
Consider for example, the self-satisfied fellow in the painting Hickam calls "The Teacher," with his thatchy yellow hair, his goofy white grin splashed into his scrubby brown beard, and his tumescent red necktie. Bracketed between vigorously brushed color areas, a rogue splash of pale purple enlivening his brilliant blue blazer, "The Teacher" radiates an edgy energy akin to Robin Williams playing an eccentric academic. In a larger canvas called "The Tenor," the singer crouches on one knee clutching his throat histrionically, occupying center stage in a drama of scumbled textures and drips. He appears to be bleeding pigment as he warbles his swan song in a smashing crescendo of dynamically converging content and form.

Then there is "François the Flirt," a real piece of work with his big clodhoppers planted firmly on the orange floor, as he leans off his chair into the vibrant area of green at the edge of the large canvas, presumably schmoozing some object of his affections just outside the picture area. Hickam captures this oily character's personality in the very viscosity of the paint surface, making for a perfect marriage of message and medium, just as he makes oils a palpable surrogate for mostly bare flesh in another large canvas of a voluptuous and abandoned female dancer wittily titled "Fall Exhibition."

In the latter picture, especially, the creamy colors highlighted by incandescent edges are most beholden to Thiebaud. However, Richard Hickam dances to his own wild drummer and his paintings, with their expressively distorted forms and deliciously confectionery colors, are in a class all their own.

—Ed McCormack

Hope Carter



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