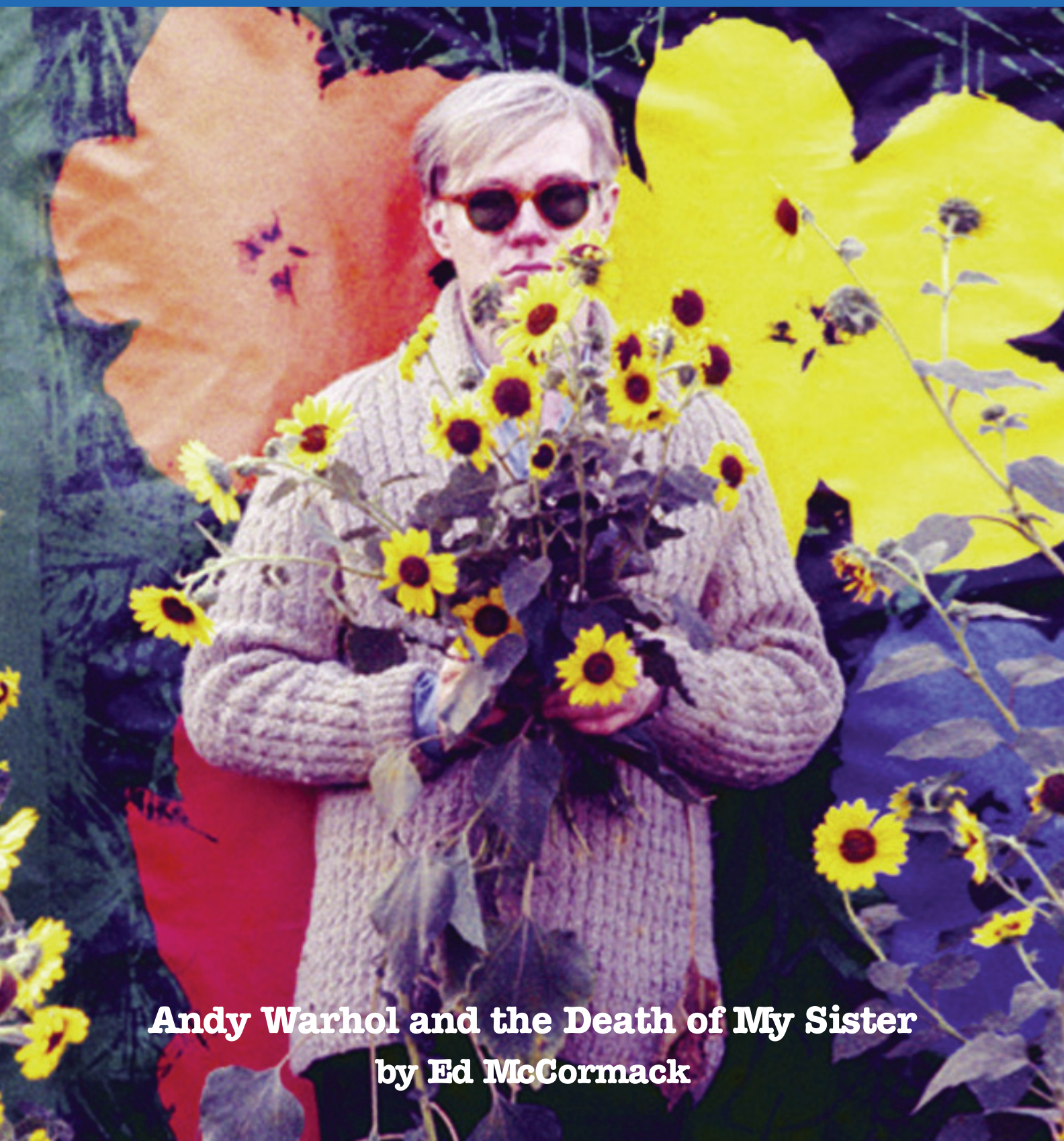
SEPTEMER-OCTOBER 2005 VOL. 8 NO. 1 New York

GALLERY&STUDIO

The World of the Working Artist



Andy Warhol and the Death of My Sister

by Ed McCormack

VINCENT ARCILESI

Arcilesi in Russia

"Dreamers in Palace Square" 2004 - 5 Oil on canvas (3 panels) 9' x 18'

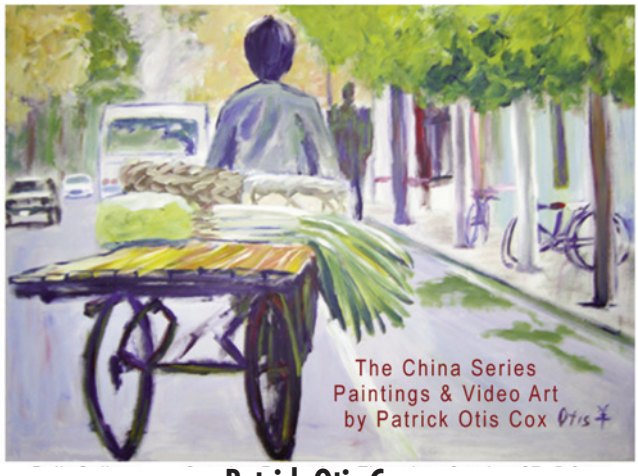
September 27 - October 16, 2005

Broome Street Gallery 498 Broome Street, New York, N.Y. 10013
Tuesday - Sunday 11am - 6pm 212 226 6085

harrietreginamarion

"Foundation," 2005, 18" x 18", mixed media

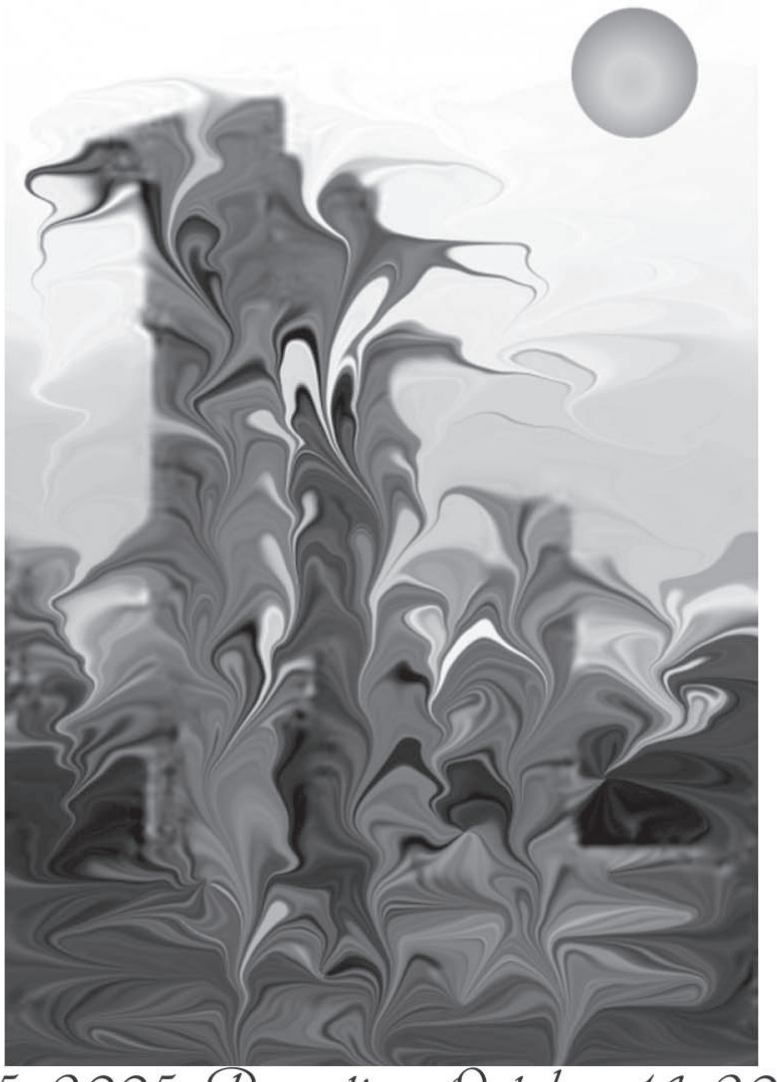
INNERVISIONS:PROJECTED
August 29 - October 8, 2005
N.A.W.A. Gallery, 80 5th Ave., Ste. 1405, NYC



Patrick Otis Cox
Built Gallery 22 Howard Street, New York, NY 10013 (Soho)
October 27th – November 10th, 2005
Opening Reception: Thursday, October 27, 5-9pm
212 226-1466 www.patrickotiscox.com

James Eugene Albert Whiteness

A digital study in black and white "plus"



Acropolis Rhodos, on paper

October 4 - 25, 2005. Reception: October 14, 2005, 6 - 8 p.m.

World Fine Art Gallery

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G&S Highlights

On the Cover:
"Art is not a formal garden, set apart from our daily lives," says the writer of our cover story, featuring the photographs of William John Kennedy, seen recently at Westwood Gallery, 578 Broadway. "It intermingles with our most personal concerns, informing our feelings in unexpected ways." –Page 18

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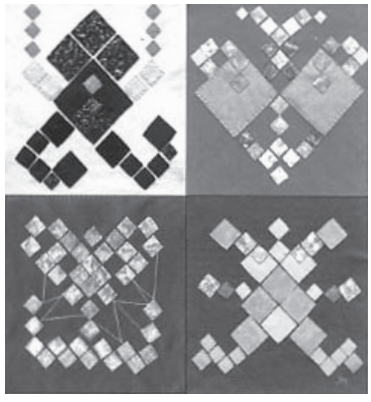

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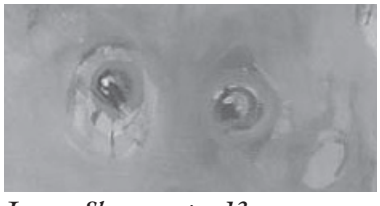

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"SUMI-E: CONTEMORARY VOICES"

ANNUAL EXHIBIT OF
METRO-NY CHAPTER
SUMI-E SOCIETY OF AMERICA
Oct. 29, 2005-Jan 2, 2006
RECEPTION:
OCT 29TH 6-9 PM

COSTANZA BAIOCCO, SUSANA ENDO
ROSLYN GAMIEL, EINAT GRINBAUM
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Primal Abstraction

September 24th - October 10th, 2005
Reception: Thursday, September 29th, 6-8pm

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Stephanie Rauschenbusch

www.stephanierauschenbusch.com
srauschenbusch@earthlink.net ph: 718-832-0161
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noho gallery

530 West 25th St., 4th Fl, NYC, 10001
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Terrain Gallery's 50th Anniversary Exhibition: Merging Multiple Opposites

Founded on a philosophy put forth by the poet and critic Eli Siegel ("All beauty is the making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves"), Terrain Gallery/ Aesthetic Realism Foundation,

Claire Romano

141 Greene Street, has always come on like gangbusters. However, that the foundation is as catholic in its choices as it is strident in its rhetoric comes across clearly in Terrain Gallery 50th Anniversary Exhibition, a sprawling survey on view through September.

Since it opened in 1955, TerraIn Gallery has mounted over 150 shows pairing diverse stylistic tendencies and placing emerging artists alongside well-known figures such as Robert Motherwell, Alex Katz, and Red Grooms, among others. Naturally, the signature styles tend to pop out of this group show like celebrity faces at a cocktail party: Motherwell's characteristically gestural "Calligraphic Study #4"; Katz's somewhat less typical yet instantly recognizable beachscape with footprints; Grooms' gorgeously gaudy freestanding caricature of Chicago mayor Daley sporting vampire fangs.

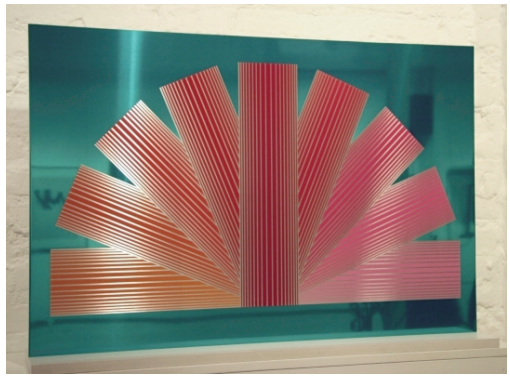
There's also a wonderful full-length oil portrait of an elderly but vivacious woman by Grooms' former wife, Mimi Gross, painted with a vigor and insight suggesting a kinder, gentler Alice Neel. Will Barnet is represented with "The Parrot," an oil incorporating human, avian, and feline figures and notable for its exquisite sense of space. George Stadnik's "Primordial Soup, Green Violet Reflecto, Lumia Meditation" is a graceful chromatic/kinetic dance by an artist renowned for his innovative light sculptures.

Color is also a transcendent element in "Rose Red Rainbow on Green," a silkscreen print on aluminum by Richard Anuszkiewicz. Other important artists we don't see quite enough of these days also put in appearances: Larry Zox with a classic hard edge silkscreen from his "Diamond Drill Series"; Selina Trieff with a painting of a woman with a tiny bird perched on her shoulder in which she employs oil and gold leaf in her usual manner to create the sense of a secular icon; and sculptor William King with a pair of his

Mimi Gross

large stilt-legged figures in vinyl, polyester, and aluminum.

Indeed, this exhibition is filled with unexpected treasures: Hans Namuth's famous black and white photograph of Jackson Pollock sitting on the running board of a Model T Ford, which must have set the style for Ed Harris' characterization of the artist in the recent feature film; "Los Angeles Rooftops," a gem-like little oil by legendary photographer/ poet/painter Rudy Burckhardt; an intricate graphite drawing by Charles Magistro suggesting visionary architecture in a metaphysical landscape; and Claire Romano's painting of fireworks illuminating a nocturnal sky above a river, its romantic atmosphere harking back to Turner.



Richard Anuszkiewicz

Some of the artists in the show have long been associated with the ideas of Eli Siegel, among them Chaim Koppelman, Dorothy Koppelman, and Marcia Rackow. Chaim Koppelman's "Exodus" is a complex mixed media intaglio print featuring a procession of figures. Dorothy Koppelman shows an oil of her father reclining on a beach, notable for its combination of the intimate and the monumental. Marcia Rackow's still life in watercolor exploits the craggy forms, subtle tones, and rough surfaces of clustered oyster shells to striking abstract effect.

Several of the artists in the exhibition contribute statements to the catalog concerning how the ideas of Eli Siegel have influenced their work. However, the sheer variety of styles in this exhibition —far too many to do true justice here—speaks eloquently about the complementary qualities of opposites.

—J. Sanders Eaton

Siena Porta: "Materializing" the Mental Journey of Meditation

Siena Porta creates material metaphors for ethereal states of being, doing so, paradoxically, through that most physical of mediums: sculpture. Although Porta acknowledges "deep roots in my zen practice, which has shaped my artwork for decades," unlike many other Western artists who take up Buddhism and get roped in by the lure of the exotic, Porta chooses not to emulate the traditional zen art forms, such as ink painting, in favor of a more European aesthetic.

Porta's art practice, which most often takes the form of sprawling mixed media installations, incorporating her talents as both a sculptor and a painter, is all the more compelling for her refusal to adopt mediums and mannerisms foreign to her own culture and experience. Rather, her work can be placed squarely in the tradition of older contemporary artists such as Edward Kienholz, Marisol, and George Segal. Porta's tableaux, in which meditating figures and zen monks and other spiritual signifiers often play prominent roles, are possessed of similar presence and drama, even while she addresses issues which are ostensibly more spiritual than sociological.

"Meditation Diary Sky" 2005

Porta often incorporates painting in her installations, either as backdrops for her life-size polyurethane figures (a presumed outgrowth of her experience as a scenic designer for the Metropolitan Opera), or by adding gestural strokes of color to the figures themselves to imbue them with an element of Abstract Expressionist energy, as well as to meld the two and three dimensional mediums in which she excels equally.

Never before, however, has Siena Porta proved herself quite the double-threat as in her new exhibition "Cease to Cherish Opinion," at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from October 4 through 22. For in this solo show of installations comprised of Icelandic landscape paintings and figural sculpture based on source materials from her travels and studies, Porta achieves her most dramatic synthesis of painting and sculpture to date.

Along with an impressive list of other awards, grants and honors, Porta was awarded a residency for painting by the Brisons Voer Foundation in 2003. And while the paintings in her present show depict landscapes in Iceland, rather than the rugged seacoast of Cape Cornwall, England, surely the time that she spent working there in isolation during that residency must have been one of the crucial life-experiences that informs this exhibition.

In Porta's installation "Meditation Diary Sky," 2005, a freestanding frieze of six silhouetted 3-D figures (seemingly representing separate stages in the spiritual journey of a single individual) is set against a large painting of majestic clouds floating in a clear blue sky above hilly land masses and a shimmering body of water. A viewer whose mind is as layered—perhaps a zen practitioner would think "littered"— with memorable images from art history as this writer's happens to be may look at Porta's composition, so luminous in execution, and be reminded by its convergence of cloud, earth, and water of Peter Paul Rubens' "The Miraculous Draught of Fishes," based on the biblical encounter of Christ and the fisherman Simon Peter.

However, significant differences between Porta's painting and that of the old master illuminate contrasts between Christian moralism and Buddhist detachment that the artist herself may or may not have intended. For one thing, some of the figures in Rubens' painting are immersed in the surf as they struggle to drag their overladen nets onto land from their boats, lying low in the choppy water. By contrast, in Sienna's picture the water is still, serene, and the free-standing figures in front of it, unmired in the composition, appear to revel in their autonomy, even as they function visually and symbolically in concert with the painting.

Unlike Rubens' fishermen, who will soon leave their old lives to follow Jesus, becoming his disciples and "fishers of men," Porta's silhouettes follow no man or Messiah. Rather, they stand apart from the painted marinescape, pantomiming the postures of zen meditation in a sequence as animated, if not as antic, as Kara Walker's antebellum shadow plays of slaves and masters in the Old South: They contemplate the big, fat meditation cushion as though it were a boulder to be surmounted; lift a leg to climb up onto it; balance precariously upon it with arms outstretched; topple from it, arms and legs akimbo; persist and regain their equilibrium, achieving graceful repose in the lotus position. And, finally, the last figure in the sequence prepares to stride into empty space, having presumably transcended gravity through that liberating state of higher consciousness called "satori" . . . Or so goes one possible reading of "Meditation Diary Sky," posited by an admitted noninitiate who recognizes that an infinite number of others would be just as plausible and perhaps even truer to the artist's intentions.

After all, Siena Porta's installations, while rooted in the material world, are as intriguingly elusive as zen koans, such as the famous question, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" For like koans, they transcend logic, yet offer enlightenment— if one may use that term in its most secular possible sense.

—Ed McCormack

Miguel Paredes: A Potent Blend of Pop and Neo-Expressionism

Although New York-born artist Miguel Paredes was influenced early in his career by Andy Warhol and Keith Haring, he has since evolved a unique personal style, seemingly inspired more directly by graffiti, hip hop culture, and his Latin roots.

Paredes, who is artist in residence at Agora Gallery, Chelsea, 530 West 25th Street, from September 24 through December 24 (with a reception on September 29 from 6 to 8 PM), graduated from the prestigious Fiorello LaGuardia School of Music and Art, before moving to Miami, Florida, to work side by side with "Continualism" artist Paul Kus. There he continued his studies at the Art Center of South Florida and established himself prominently in the Miami Beach art scene.

In terms of his subject matter and spirit, however, Miguel Paredes remains the quintessential New York painter, capturing the rocking rhythms of the city's streets and subways. The literal underground where the outlaw culture of graffiti was spawned is central to Paredes' "Train Series." Here, as in a previous series called "New York Stories," exhibited some months back in the same venue, the artist mythologizes both the heroes and the victims of this vibrant ethnic youth culture.

Some of Paredes' paintings suggest contemporary religious icons—particularly a

"The Battle for the Matter"

canvas called "The Battle for the Matter." In it a young man in a white t-shirt with a cross dangling from his neck is crowned by a glowing white halo as he stands in a subway car where the graffiti appears to crawl off the walls and float through the air in an hallucinatory manner. Among the florid graffiti forms are multiple images of the cartoon cowboy Yosemite Sam. In context, Paredes makes this familiar character, with his big sombrero and red handlebar mustache, a personal symbol as emblematic as Pop painter Ronnie Cutrone's Woody the Woodpecker figures.

In another painting titled "Descending Angels," two small children huddled together in a subway car are surrounded by and entangled within a maze of flowers and vines sprouting thorns. Some of the smaller yellow flowers morph into weirdly distorted psychedelic Tweety Birds, while the clinging kids suggest lost babes in an urban jungle. Here, as in other paintings, Paredes does what few other artists of his generation can: combines eclectic postmodern aesthetics with genuine emotion to capture poignant contrasts between squalor and innocence.

In "The Execution of St. Patrick," the artist suggests the polyglot multiculturalism of the urban scene with an intricate composition in which the figure of a youth in hip hop gear, engulfed by a shower of brilliant green shamrocks, appears to be under attack by cartoon animals shackled to bright red rockets. Meanwhile, at the bottom of the composition, goldfish-shaped flames leap and dance.

Paredes employs a potent blend of Pop symbolism and Neo-Expressionism to create paintings filled with lively imagery and passionate intensity. He has created a visual vocabulary in which cartoon characters and realistic human figures coexist convincingly, reflecting the media-saturated psychological environment of contemporary urban youth. His willingness to take enormous risks in terms of pushing imaginative possibilities to their limits lends the paintings of Miguel Paredes a unique presence and immediacy.

—Darlene Frazier

Aleksandra Nowak: A Contemporary Symbolist's Timeless Vision

Think teenage Natalie Wood in "Splendor in the Grass." Then add a twist of Ibsen. The young girl in the Polish-born artist Aleksandra Nowak's painting "The Meadow" reclines dreamily on a verdant lawn sprinkled with small yellow flowers. The red floral designs along the hem of her long, sleeveless, white dress seem to flow into the grass and mingle with the tiny yellow buds in a perfect marriage of the actual and the metaphorical. Ostensibly, the image is as chaste as the first day of spring and equally laden with undertones of sensual awakening.

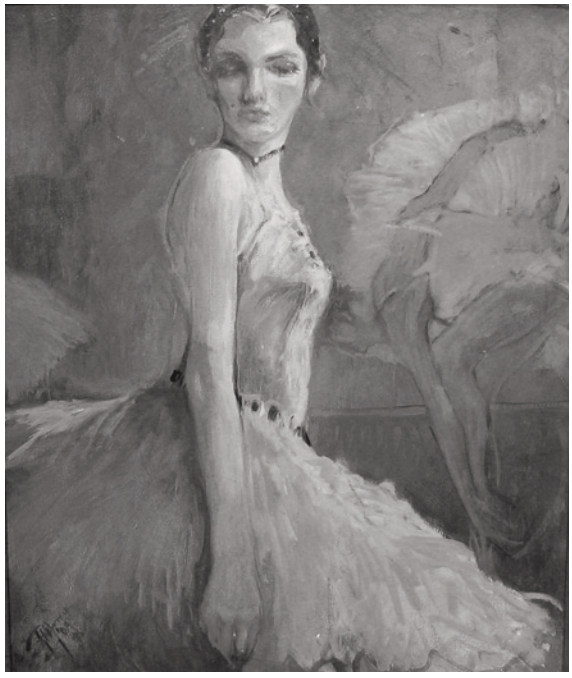
Like many of Nowak's youthful heroines, the girl in "The Meadow" appears poised on the precipice between innocence and experience. Her features are childlike and the artist captures her winning gawkiness through the skillful foreshortening of one naked knee, jutting out awkwardly from the folds of her dress, with her other bare foot resting beneath it. Such details add to the mood of rapturous reverie, suggesting that the girl is either recalling or contemplating her first fumbling tryst.

Just as expressive is Nowak's handling of the white dress itself, which flows like a frothy river over the brilliant green lawn, the sinuous delineation of its contours suggesting a mellower artistic relative of Egon Schiele. Like Schiele, Nowak employs oil paints with the fluid translucency of watercolors in her exhibition at CFM Gallery, 112 Greene Street, from September 16 through October 10. However, while Nowak's temperament is introspective, it is hardly as angst-ridden or obsessive as that of her Viennese predecessor. Her paintings project a subtler sense of melancholy, a lyricism entirely her own.

At the same time, Aleksandra Nowak is quick to acknowledge the influence of the Vienna Succession painters, as well as that of Stanislaw Wyspianski and Witold Wojtkiewicz, two lesser known Polish artists with whom she feels a special kinship. Yet her palette, with its subtle range of gold-tinged earth hues, as well as her finesse with the brush, also relates her work to that of Henri Fantin-Latour, who married the numinous undertones of Symbolism to the painterly atmospheres of Manet and the Impressionists.

What Nowak shares with Schiele, however, is a desire to go beyond the decorativeness in the work of Gustav Klimt and other forbearers in Art Nouveau and The Succession, even while retaining something of their elegance, in order to achieve a stronger sense of psychological intimacy.

Working from life, Nowak often poses her models in garments neither discernibly contemporary nor identifiably antique. In this regard she is similar to Andrew Wyeth, who often depicted his neighbors in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, in nondescript rustic



"The Dancer (Paulina)"

clothing that could have been rummaged from the same costume trunk his father, N.C. Wyeth, used when he was illustrating classics such as "Treasure Island." Nowak, too, seems determined to avoid the limitations of fashion and places her models in a timeless imaginative space.

Although portraits of men play a supporting role in Nowak's oeuvre—the youth with close cropped hair, an intense stare and the rough coat and rakish air of a merchant seaman in her incongruously named canvas "The Alchemist"; the gaunt mustached gent with a marked resemblance to the deceased former Beatle George Harrison in "Man With Dark Scarf" —Nowak's women are obviously her main protagonists. She paints them with with knowing empathy, making each subject, in her own way, a peculiar personification of some aspect of the feminine mystique.

The woman seen in profile in "Angie" for example, her flaming red hair bound with a black ribbon, her long, pale neck curving gracefully, has the regal bearing of someone who is well aware of the power invested in her by her beauty. Yet she also possesses a genteel quality which suggests that she would not wield that power lightly. For integral to her beauty is a sense of character. By contrast, the petulant girl-child in "Innocence" seems anything but innocent. She has all the charm of a malevolent cherub, as she gazes over her shoulder at the viewer with smug disdain. Yet her unexpected sophistication seems less redolent of "Lolita" than of "The Bad Seed".

Although Nowak eschews the props and trappings of modernity, one cannot resist applying such cinematic references to her paintings, so strong is their narrative suggestiveness. But perhaps it would be more in keeping with her aesthetic and actually more accurate to compare Nowak's abilities as a storyteller to those of the aforementioned Henrik Ibsen. For not only do some of her models resemble characters in his plays, but her paintings seem to probe as deeply into the darker corners of the human soul.

In fact, Ibsen was a great favorite of the Symbolist painters and was linked to them by August Ehrard, who wrote, "Symbolism is the art form which satisfies both our desire to see reality represented and our need to go beyond it. It is the foundation for the concrete and the abstract together. Reality has an underside, facts have a hidden meaning: they are the material representation of ideas; the idea appears in the fact. Reality is the sensible image, the symbol of the invisible world."

Ehrard published those words in 1892, but he could have been writing about the contemporary Symbolism of Aleksandra Nowak. For Nowak invests even her simplest subjects with a sense of hidden meanings. Unlike those of Degas, her dancers do not evoke the public performer or the professional practicing at the barre so much as the beautiful woman whose feet ache and whose heart has been broken by a faithless lover. Like the figure seen from behind in Nowak's painting " Mysterious Gardens I," she may don butterfly wings, but she will not transcend the plane of her earthly concerns. Similarly, the mysterious figure clutching its head with upraised hands in "Luna II" seems mired in emotional turmoil, even as it is enveloped in decorative swirls as stylized as those that Mucha devised to convey his interest in esoteric spiritualism.

Indeed, even when Nowak paints still life and landscapes— which she refers to almost denigratingly as her "palette cleansers," and seems to see them as a respite from the intense demands of her human figures—they are permeated with emotional atmospheres. Trees or floral stems twist sinuously, almost sinisterly; peonies or chrysanthemums bloom so poignantly that we cannot but be reminded of their imminent mortality; the eaves of a white house, visible through dense foliage, evoke a gothic mood akin to approaching the cottage in Hansel & Gretel. For it is Aleksandra Nowak's special gift to imbue ordinary things with an exquisite and profound significance.

—Ed McCormack

Vincent La Gambina:
Catching Up With an Elusive Master of the Urban Scene

"Mott Street Festival", Oil on Canvas

Good genre painting will always transcend passing fashions in art and remain relevant by virtue of its vital connection to life as it is lived by the greater majority of people from day to day. For this reason, as well as for its solid aesthetic qualities, it is a pleasure to rediscover the work of the late Vincent La Gambina, a neglected modern master who took New York City for his subject and captured its dynamic energy with his bravura brushwork.

Born in Sicily, La Gambina arrived in New York in 1920, as an eleven year old immigrant already showing signs of artistic talent. Orphaned soon after, he was forced to take a variety of jobs to support himself, while attending the Da Vinci Art School (later he would also study at the National Academy of Design, the Art Students League, and the Academy of Rome). At the Da Vinci School, during a routine tour of the type that politicians are wont to take, he was discovered by Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia, who bought one of his paintings and persuaded other prominent Americans of Italian descent to support the work of this promising young artist.

Persisting in his vocation through the Depression years, despite the difficulty of buying art supplies and paying rent, La Gambina, like many others, survived with the help of the Federal Art Project of the WPA, in which he participated as an easel painter and muralist. La Gambina also took part in the WPA's teaching project at its school on East 14th Street, where he eventually met a young female student who was to become his wife: Grace La Gambina, who works tirelessly on behalf of keeping her late husband's artistic legacy alive to this day.

During the 1930s, too, La Gambina became part of the lively bohemian community in Greenwich Village, where he befriended many of the painters associated with Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in nearby Studio Club. He also knew Isabel Bishop, Reginald Marsh, the Soyer brothers and other painters whose studios bordered Union Square. Like them he took inspiration from the Ashcan School painters— particularly Henri, Glackens, and Luks—who captured the more picturesque aspects of city life a generation earlier.

While obvious comparisons can be made between La Gambina's subject matter and that of his contemporary Reginald Marsh, the vivacity of La Gambina's paint handling and the intensity of his color is more akin to that in the racetrack scenes of the Irish

painter Jack Yeats, brother of the poet William Butler Yeats. Like Yeats, La Gambina enlivened his social realism with Expressionist brushwork at a time when other city scene painters were employing a more restrained technique, as well as a more subdued palette of hues. Eschewing the grimy tones to which some of his contemporaries resorted in their desire to depict "the reality of the slums" with a documentary dullness that would have pleased Jacob Riis, La Gambina often chose more strident hues, to invest his pictures with a sense not only of sunlight but also of the indomitable spirit of urban life.

"Mott Street Festival," an oil from 1955 exhibited in his 1990 retrospective at The Butler Institute of American Art, as well as in another major solo show at the Museum of the City of New York in 1993, is especially exemplary for showing La Gambina's special ability to capture the particulars of a street scene without sacrificing pure painterly vigor. One can only imagine that this scene in "Little Italy" had special resonance for La Gambina, not only because of his Italian heritage, but because the yearly festival took place near Greenwich Village, where he lived from the mid 1920s to 1960, before moving to Brooklyn (which would later figure in many of his paintings). La Gambina's fluid brush captures the procession of people carrying colorful banners, as well as the gaudy floats bearing effigies of saints down the middle of the street, against a backdrop of tenements buttered with sunlight. Fire escapes, shop signs, balloons, and pedestrians watching the parade are evoked convincingly by the artist, yet on closer inspection details dissolve in juicy strokes of pigment with their own autonomous appeal, causing the entire composition to shimmer with a lifelike immediacy that no more meticulous technique could possibly convey. Even the sidewalk comes alive with swirling strokes, while La Gambina's use of thick impasto to make the lacy white decorations on the parade float near the end of the procession as visually delicious as whipped cream on an Italian pastry demonstrates especially well his characteristic synthesis of narrative verisimilitude and sensuous surface.

Another oil that shows his ability to imbue a scene with a sense of the specific without becoming bogged down in fussy descriptiveness is "Washington Square Park, Greenwich Village," an oil from 1943 of a subject that the artist painted many times over the years. Several adults and children are seen strolling the paths of the park and clustering around a drinking fountain located at the center of the composition. All of the figures are faceless, laid down in bold

"Greenwich Village Friends"

strokes of the brush, as are the lawns, the lushly blooming trees, and the shadows on the concrete pavement. Yet the picture projects the timeless atmosphere of a sunny day, capturing an actual moment and subtle qualities of light, rendering a fleeting moment eternal as effectively as a work by one of the Impressionists.

By contrast, in "The Life Cafeteria," an oil from 1936— which may depict one of the downtown hangouts where La Gambina met with other young artists to discuss painting and intellectual ideas in his impoverished yet richly creative early years— the three young women sharing a table in the foreground are depicted in considerably more detail, with the distinctly different features of individual portraits, as they eat, read, or seem to scan the room for romantic possibilities. Yet the composition retains a sense of spontaneity, of painterly vigor, that brings the scene alive in a manner wholly characteristic of La Gambina's work.

Other paintings depict such subjects as amusement rides at Coney Island or carnivals (the 1962 canvas "Parachute Jump" is an especially Rococo example, filled with a lighthearted buoyancy and grace reminiscent of Watteau, while "Merry-Go-Round Gone Wild" has a slightly more grotesque quality, like a cross between Reginald Marsh and James Ensor); bohemian figure groupings such as the trio of young people huddled around a newspaper in the 1980 oil "Greenwich Village Friends," and all manner of other urban scenes conjured up with singular verve in oil or watercolor.

Numerous paintings by La Gambina are in the collections of The Museum of the City of New York, The Butler Institute of American Art, The Wichita Art Museum, and other prestigious institutions. His works have also been reproduced in full color in several major museum publications. Yet, while his paintings are widely admired by critics, curators collectors and other artists, La Gambina remains an elusive master, relatively unknown to the general public. One can only hope this situation will be remedied by future exhibitions, so that Vincent Gambina can take his rightful place in the history of twentieth century American genre painting. —Ed McCormack

Examples of Vincent La Gambina's work can be seen at www.lagambina.com and all inquiries should be made in writing to his widow, Grace La Gambina, at 5624 San Pablo Dam Road, El Sobrante, CA 94803.

Steven John Harris: British Painting's New National Treasure

Without going so far as to agree with Richard Dorment, art critic for the Daily Telegraph of London, that "Today, London is acknowledged to be the center of the art world, a role that once belonged to Paris and New York," one must admit that British art has made great strides in terms of visibility in the past half decade, due in part to the establishment of Tate Modern and all the publicity attending the Saatchi collection. However, that the British are still as slow as we are to embrace homegrown talents who do not come with a proper academic pedigree or fit into an instantly definable category is evident in the case of the immensely gifted painter Steven John Harris, who recently had his second U.S. solo exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway. (Montserrat has since relocated to new quarters at 547 West 27th Street, in Chelsea.)

Although Harris— a scaffolder by trade, a painter by vocation— has been enormously productive for fifteen years, it took a review of his first New York exhibition, which appeared in this publication some months ago, to get him attention in his own country. When Gallery&Studio reviewer Peter Wiley compared Harris to British big guns such as Bacon and Hockney, a veritable publicity blitz resulted: Feature articles appeared in the Times of London, among several other dailies and weeklies, and a TV crew showed up unexpectedly at the artist's door for an impromptu interview.

Unfortunately, however, almost all of the publicity focused on the "human interest" angle ("Meet the next Hockney—But Steve Harris hasn't given up his day job," and so on), as well as on the raunchy eroticism of Harris' subject matter, rather than on his unique gifts as a painter. This seems shortsighted, in view of a freshness and originality that makes Steven John Harris much more than an outsider phenomenon.

In fact, what his second exhibition demonstrated above all else is that, despite being self-taught and difficult to place into any existing art world framework, Harris is a highly accomplished artist with a sophisticated vision that would have made him a perfect fit for "Sensation," the exhibition of the Saatchi collection at the Royal Academy of Arts that shook up London in 1997. (In a more just world, Saatchi and other English collectors would be getting in line with their American counterparts who have already snatched up works by Harris.)

As witty titles such as "Blue Boner Subject," "Suck Conceit," and "Rake Daddy" suggest, Harris' paintings possess a wicked wit and a spitting irreverence akin to that of other British iconoclasts such as Adrian Mitchell or the Sex Pistols. Indeed, like that populist poet and that notorious rock band, Steven John Harris brings fresh new energy to his art form, painting with fearless, prolific, urgency. His formal fluidity and coloristic intrepidness are especially striking in "Eco Lesson," a shocking image of naked humans bludgeoning baby seals, and "Virgin Throes in Blue," in which two nuns in brilliant ultramarine habits appear to be ravishing a crimson female nude. Other paintings such as "Polka Dots Sisters" and "I Don't Like It," and "Open Your Present" address sexual idolatry, bestiality, sadomasochism, and a variety of other kinky fetishes.

Steven John Harris' bodily obsessions are fully as shocking as those of Francesco Clemente; yet he achieves even more ingeniously freewheeling formal solutions than that well known Italian painter, transforming his most extreme fantasies and inner visions into emblematic compositions with bold, flat forms and clear, vibrant color areas. And his quintessentially British vision should put both Tate Modern and Saatchi on notice that they have a new national treasure in their midst.

—Maurice Taplinger

The Abstract Evolution of Helmut Preiss

Starting at age 16, the Austrian painter and printmaker Helmut Preiss, who has exhibited widely in Europe and the U.S., was trained in the techniques of the old masters at the Academy of Art, and for many years was known for a style of painting that he called "Lyrical Naturalism." For a time, his work was also referred to by critics as "Neo-Surrealism." However, in 1991 Preiss took a new direction. No longer satisfied with figurative imagery, he sought more freedom in the abstract mode he is known for today, examples of which can be seen in his solo show at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, Chelsea, where he is artist in residence from September 24 through December 24..

Preiss is a quintessentially European painter, in that his compositions display a finesse and love of color more akin to the second generation of the School of Paris than to Abstract Expressionism. He is a consummate colorist with an ability to harmonize soft and strident hues in compositions filled with an almost confectionery chromatic lusciousness. Yet his compositional gifts lend his canvases a dynamic sense of structure, with their sharply defined forms which imbue a hard-edge geometry with an unusual expressiveness.

Preiss' ability to carry off this synthesis is especially dynamic in his "Mechanical Figure" series, wherein angular—mainly triangular—color areas are employed to compose animated figures that inhabit the picture plane with a palpable presence reflecting the artist's earlier naturalistic phase. Set against the flat, brilliant areas of color that Preiss is known for, his vivacious automatons appear to leap and dance with a joyous abandon that is irresistible. In "Mechanical Figure # 3 (gray)," the figure, its angular limbs filled with colorful forms painted in both a hard-eged and more gestural manner, appears to execute a handstand on a warm gray ground. By contrast, in "Mechanical Figure # 7," two standing figures composed of geometric shapes filled with an even wider variety of precise forms and painterly flourishes are set against brilliant rectangles of rose madder and orange, interspersed with smaller areas of gray and brown.

Although earlier in his career, Preiss acknowledged Dali, Ernst, Picasso, and de Chirico as influences, his most recent paintings have qualities in common with Fernand Leger and Jacques Villon for their highly schematized approach to figuration within an abstract context. Like Preiss, Villon was also an accomplished printmaker, and both men seem to have benefited greatly from this in terms of their ability to impart a striking graphic precision to their paintings. Helmut Preiss, however, displays a much greater formal range, in that he can move easily between the clearly anthropomorphic forms of his "Mechanical Figure" series to more totally abstract compositions such as "New York Dance," a large acrylic on canvas in a square format in which an intricate array of angular shapes akin to those in certain paintings by Robert Goodnough move with a rhythmical fluidity rarely encountered in hard-edge painting.

"Mechanical Figure #3 (gray)"

By contrast, in his smaller works in acrylic and collage on paper, Helmut Preiss, who has been chosen to participate in the 2005 Biennale Internazionale dell' Arte Contemporanea, in Florence, Italy, reveals a somewhat more casual aspect of his formidable talent.

—Peter Wiley

HoSook Kang's Chromatic Orchestrations Capture the Color of Light

"I always contemplate empathy with nature when I paint," states HoSook Kang, a Korean-born artist presently living and working in Brooklyn. "My art can be seen as a movement in silent nature."

Thus the title "From the Silence," seemed especially apt for HoSook Kang's recent exhibition of acrylics on canvas at Phoenix Gallery, 210 Eleventh Avenue, in Chelsea, where the radiant auras emanating from the artist's overall color field compositions seemed to inspire silence on the part of the viewer as well.

The title was applied to the exhibition as a whole, as well as to each of the monochromatic canvases individually (although numbers were assigned to differentiate them from one another). While the initial effect of the paintings was generally monochromatic, each canvas seemingly covered by a single color, on closer viewing each was found, in fact, to be made up of a seemingly infinite number of tiny strokes, dots, or dashes of various colors that cohered to create an actively shimmering chromatic field, much in the manner of pointillism.

HoSook Kang is as uncompromising a painter in her own way as Agnes Martin is in hers. In an era when novelty reigns supreme, she adheres for the most part to a strict formalist aesthetic which allows little leeway for showy flourishes. Her work requires discipline and integrity, the steady application of deliberate and unvaryingly tiny strokes of color carried out over a lengthy period of time, to achieve a final result.

Such exquisite austerity can be welcome and refreshing amid the raucous circus of contemporary art, turning the gallery into a contemplative oasis, when the artist in question is as consummate a colorist as HoSook Kang, who earned her BA and MFA at two leading Korean universities and also studied painting at Pratt Institute, in Brooklyn.

Indeed, Kang does things with color that one is no longer accustomed to encountering, in an art world where subtlety and quietude have become rather rare qualities in recent years. Her hues seem to alternately brighten and dim as one looks at them, approximating the effects of natural light as clouds move across the sky. This is a primarily retinal art and its rewards are many for those who can endure the "silence," so to speak; who can remain still long enough to bath in and be soothed by the subtle chromatic auras that HoSook Kang generates so skillfully. That said, the ultimate effect of her paintings is, first and foremost, aesthetic rather than therapeutic, although it also should be added that these works have a spiritual component in the same way that the paintings of Mark Rothko do. (Indeed, Rothko insisted on the spiritual intention of his paintings to a degree that often annoyed his formalist peers in the New York School, and his attitude anticipated the more permissive approach taken by abstract painters today.) At the same time, however, the paintings of HoSook Kang are as stringent and bracing as they are spiritually nourishing, and this can be a plus for those of us who like to be challenged as well as comforted and enriched by art.

Painting by Hosook Kang

"I'd like to portray the wind and air —even more, all human life, material, and being itself — as abstract work including time and space, " HoSook Kang says, revealing the almost Quixotic ambitiousness of her project. "As a drop of water comes to the sea, dust falls on the mountains, human beings also in the end exist as tiny specks of dust in nature. Accordingly, I describe the endlessly changeable and circular condition of nature by using dots in a general abstract pattern."

This statement is especially interesting for illuminating the full intentions of a painter whose work might strike some as concerned with formal and optical issues (whatever case those such as myself may wish to make for its spiritual attributes); for it hints at a broader sense of content in her paintings that is essentially postmodern— at least on a conceptual level.

Indeed this statement gives the viewer permission to look beyond the sheer chromatic beauty of HoSook Kang's canvases, which can be hypnotic, and glimpse the inner vision of the artist when she states, "I imagine a painting as various images like wind blowing in the woods, moving water, flowing clouds, and so forth. I enjoy this thinking and feel boundless freedom in the process of creation."

And indeed knowing HoSook Kang's intentions adds an allusive dimension to her work, enabling one to get glimmerings of the subtle subject matter she describes, seeing the movement on the surface of her color fields as more than merely the color of light, catching hints of something swarming and infinite in the molecular multitudes of her strokes. Yet in the final analysis, the true subject of HoSook Kang's paintings is the infinite possibilities of color itself, explored with separate units of pigment that adjoin or slightly overlap in such a way as to create a unified field unfettered by the overt subject matter of pointillist predecessors such as Georges Seurat.

HoSook Kang, however, does not adhere to Seurat's quasi-scientific approach. The colors that she applies to the canvas are unmixed, and daubed it on to achieve the effects of modulation by juxtaposition, rather than by blending. They are chosen "intuitively," to use her own word, and therefore resonate in unexpected ways. That she does not follow a rational, methodical approach invests her paintings with a power and a poetry which transcends even the subtle chromatic shifts she orchestrates so skillfully.

—J. Sanders Eaton

WSAC Celebrates 25th Anniversary at Broadway Mall

Although it is still not as well known as it should be, the West Side Arts Coalition is one of the more valuable cultural resources of our city. The organization's regular exhibitions at West Side Mall Community Center, a vault-like Beaux Arts structure on the center traffic island at 96th Street and Broadway, as well as its periodic surveys at Cork Gallery, in Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center, have made fine art accessible to untold numbers of New Yorkers who may not normally make the gallery circuit part of their daily rounds.

However, knowledgeable collectors and critics also make their way to the Broadway Mall and to Lincoln Center to discover emerging artists from all around the city and its surrounding boroughs, since one need not be a West Side resident to exhibit under the WSAC's auspices. Indeed, these group exhibitions, curated by the artists themselves, are often among the New York art scene's better offerings, given the sheer variety of styles one is likely to encounter and the generally democratic spirit of the shows, reminiscent of the Tenth Street cooperatives in their heyday.

So one anticipated The WSAC's "Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Celebration Multi-Media Exhibition," co-curated by Lori Fischler and Jennifer Holst, with pleasure and was not disappointed by the show.

That said, just under thirty artists is hardly a sufficient number to give a real sense of the organization's scope, even while being far too many to cover adequately in a review of this length. With this in mind, one will make an effort nonetheless to convey something of the show's energy and spirit in the following brief descriptions of some of the works on view (singled out not because they are necessarily superior to others in the show but , rather, for the stylistic contrasts they present).

For example: A Color C-Print of the hood of an old Studebaker car in Cuba by Robin Glasser Sacknoff, its paint peeling off and the photographer herself reflected in its chrome; Mikki Powell's painting of an old red wagon in a rustic setting; and Setta Solakian's watercolor of a wintry landscape in Staten Island—all of which combined a sense of nostalgia with strong abstract design.

Martin Hochberg's silver gelatin print of a jazz musician playing his saxophone in a deserted park, with clumps of snow melting nearby, had a cinema verite atmosphere reminiscent of John Cassavetes' underground film "Shadows;" Margot Mead's lyrical watercolor of a mountainous Chinese landscape projected its own atmospheric poetry; while Gloria Rosenberg's whimsical acrylic painting "Sea Maiden" depicted a human figure among undersea flora and fauna.

A synthesis of art and craft was also evident in some works, such as Khuumba Ama's intriguing assemblage of wire and beads, which resembled an artifact of some arcane religion; Irmgard Kuhn's mixed media piece incorporating crocheted elements; and Lori Fischler's glass painting depicting a landscape in a sinuous linear fashion harking back to Art Nouveau, yet possessed of its own singular charm.

Various modes of abstraction also made a strong showing, as seen in Pud Houstoun's small oils with their flesh hues and a gestural brio suggesting a sense of scale much larger than their actual size; Miguel Angel's subtle silver composition with its delicate, stain-like shapes; and Betty Odabashian's bold acrylic on paper, with its blue and ocher forms laid down in slashing strokes.

Also including works by Leila Elias, Meg Boe Birns, Jean Prytyskacz, David Ruskin, Brunie Feliciano, and other artists who have impressed us over the years, this 25th Anniversary exhibition, while it could hardly be called comprehensive, presented a sampling of what makes the West Side Arts Coalition a significant force in the New York art scene.

—J. Sanders Eaton

Texture and Transcendence in the Paintings of María Inés Lagos

Although Abstract Illusionism, a movement in which certain painters employed trompe l'oeil means to create the illusion of shadows and three-dimensional collage elements in abstract compositions, flourished briefly in the 1970s, it burned when "special effects" upstaged other qualities that we expect from meaningful modes of painting.

María Inés Lagos whose work can be seen at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, Chelsea from October 10 to November 8 employs means sometimes similar to those of the Abstract Illusionists. However she creates compositions of great subtlety and depth that would still succeed splendidly by virtue of their personal poetry, even if the textures that she evokes were actual rather than implied. The fact that the tactile elements, which appear so real that one is tempted to touch them, are actually painstakingly simulated with a smooth and flawless oil technique adds a metaphysical dimension to Lagos' paintings that reinforces the innate interest of her imagery.

Indeed, most of Lagos' paintings are not altogether abstract in any case, and anyone who saw their illusionistic elements as the main point of their composition would be sorely missing the point. What Lagos' paintings actually seem to be about is the fragile nature of the world of appearances itself; for their poetic juxtapositions of image and texture bring into question the role that perception of surfaces plays in our daily lives.

A painting such as Lagos' "Flying Bed," for one fine example, illustrates this point perfectly, for it makes no attempt to convince the viewer that he or she is looking at actual sheets affixed to a flat surface. The illusion of folds and shadows takes place within a painting that also includes the secondary illusion of "deep space," due to the angle at which the bed is situated within the composition. Thus, the trompe l'oeil element is contradicted by the implied perspective and one must read the content in terms more metaphysical than actual.

Something much more ethereal and mysterious than an illusion is going on in paintings such as these, with their delicate qualities of light akin to some of the best canvases of Edwin Dickinson. In "Flying Bed," as well as in another painting by Lagos called "Marks on a Bed," one is compelled to think about the meaning of a bed as an an object where dreams, sex, and death take place. In turn, one must contemplate these resting places, with their snowy white sheets and soft shadows, as symbols of transport, an idea made especially explicit in the title "Flying Bed." Thinking of it in this manner, the sheets then become a visual metaphor for clouds. And although every viewer may not arrive at exactly the same conclusions, Lagos' paintings provide much opportunity for imaginative interpretation.

"Flying Bed"

Other paintings such as "Marks," in which texturally suggestive images are arranged within a grid, and "Tracing Paper Calypso" are considerably more abstract. By contrast, "Footprints" evokes its subject so convincingly that it could appear to be an impression made in moist sand. Yet all of María Inés Lagos' compositions are possessed of a quiet beauty that makes such distinctions quite beside the point.

—Anne Dunne

For Janusz and Arthur Skowron Humanism is a Family Affair

Like Alberto Giacometti and Louis Le Brocquy, the widely exhibited Polish-born artist Janusz Skowron is a painter of evocative and elusive human essences. Although his paintings often depict faces in a format resembling portraits, they rarely appear to be likenesses of specific individuals; rather, they are universal symbols of the isolated human soul, existential meditations on the meaning of being.

Arthur Skowron, on the other hand, often paints specific likenesses, investing them with symbols and meanings quite different from those in his father's paintings. Much to his credit, he has developed his own artistic direction, inspired by Janusz Skowron's example, yet unbeholden to it and fiercely independent.

Father and son, both of whom are associated with the international humanist art movement known as "Emotionalism," present complementary contrasts in their joint exhibition "2 X Skowron," at Piasa Gallery, 208 East 30th Street, from November 4 through 24, with an opening reception on November 4, 7 to 9pm.

Janusz Skowron, "Fear"

Janusz Skowron always completes his paintings in a single session, in order to capture what he calls "moods of the moment." Otherwise, he states, "It wouldn't be genuine, you cannot feel exact emotions twice." In this regard, his spontaneous approach is akin to the "action painting" practiced by some Abstract Expressionists. And, indeed, a somewhat anomalous series of landscapes executed last year in Arcadia, Maine, verges on abstraction, evoking sky, water, and land-masses in bold gestural strokes. However, Janusz Skowron's main allegiance would appear to be to the human figure, which he depicts in an equally bravura manner, invariably capturing the sense of haunting, even harrowing, psychological presences.

Often, Janusz Skowron's faces hover like apparitions at the center of his compositions, emerging from shadowy flurries of pigment, laid down in broad, vigorous strokes. He gives the title "Masks" to one series, yet they are hardly static; their features appear to morph and distort before our eyes like some of the faces of Francis Bacon, another artist of whom this Polish painter seems a kindred spirit.

Skowron, however, relies less on the grotesque than on the conviction and fluidity of his brushwork to project raw emotion, as seen in his acrylic on paper " Fear," where only two wide eyes and a gaping mouth emerge from a welter of swirling blue-green strokes, as well as in "Sorrowful," an oil on canvas depicting a forlorn blue face with similar drama and energy.

Janusz Skowron invests even his paintings and drawings of the female nude with an emotional gravity that recalls Edvard Munch. He seems to be telling us that even beauty contains the seeds of its own mortality. However, his vision is ultimately uplifting, rather than despairing, since his paintings speak eloquently of how the human spirit prevails.

Arthur Skowron, who was born in Poland 1982 and was brought to the United States by his parents in 1990, puts an accomplished realist technique, enlivened by an unusual textural richness, to the service of a deeply private vision. In some works he employs the self-portrait as a vehicle for introspection, as seen in one oil where he depicts himself holding his outstretched fingers in front of his face, casting shadows over his eyes, lips, and wispy mustache.

In this work, simply called "Self-Portrait," the artist's hands form a kind of mask, while in another oil entitled "Echo," Skowron is seen, half in shadow, in the foreground of the composition, thoughtfully regarding a child who almost certainly represents a younger self, since the profiles of both figures are more or less identical. The child stands in the middle distance, clutching what appears to be the torn stump of a sapling in a surreal windblown forest, illuminated by a glowing full moon with the face of an infant at its center.

Although this last detail echoes— as the title of Arthur Skowron's painting suggests— a recurring motif in the paintings of Janusz Skowron, the son pays tribute to the father without appropriating his style; for, even while the light swirling around the moon-infant's face is painted in a loose, gestural manner, the visage itself is characteristically realistic.

Just as "Echo" seems a nobly self-effacing tribute to his artistic heritage, Arthur Skowron's oil "My Parents" is an affectionate vision in which the father and mother of the artist take on the romantic quality of film stars, as they embrace in a scene that suggests the casual immediacy of a family album snapshot. Here, with his longish hair and shaggy Slavic mustache, the father bears a striking resemblance to the son's self-portraits, suggesting that Arthur Skowron is constantly questioning the meaning of identity in his oils, which combine an almost cinematic sense of narrative with a succulent painterliness.

Like his father, Arthur Skowron also paints landscapes, endowing them with a sensuously pigmented tactility; yet like his father, too, his most engaging theme is the expressive human figure.

—Jeannie McCormack

Arthur Skowron, "Echo"

Some of Diana Freedman-Shea's Favorite Things

Every one of Diana Freedman-Shea's paintings is like an anthology of art history. The more you look at them the more you keep catching those "slippery glimpses," to borrow de Kooning's swell phrase, of other periods and modes of painting, past and present.

Not that Freedman-Shea is by any means derivative or given to "appropriation," perish the thought. She is much too original and restless to be influenced unduly by any one painter. It's just that she looks at art too constantly to separate it from life, and her looking enriches her paintings in ways that make them much more than mere mirrors of the world around her.

"From Clichy"

Thus while she paints landscapes, cityscapes, and figures with a verisimilitude that almost anyone can appreciate, she also offers a plethora of auxiliary pleasures to those who know that all good painting is an ongoing dialogue between the living and the dead that occurs in a continuum.

Never before has Freedman-Shea's own place in that continuum seemed more assured than in her new exhibition at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from September 6 through October 1, with a reception on Saturday September 10, from 4 to 6 PM. {{{CHECK IF WE SHOULD LIST RECEPTION.}}}

Freedman-Shea calls the show "Going Places." This seems especially apt, not only because it includes a series on highways and some works inspired by stays in Paris and Amsterdam, but also because the exhibition itself is literally "all over the place." One means this in the best possible way. For unlike some of her more thematic shows in the past, this one is a freewheeling compendium of Freedman-Shea's enthusiasms, such as travel, swimming, and movies (in the case of one noirish canvas of Amsterdam's red light district) — all united by her overriding love for painting itself.

"Long Island City"

The three paintings for which the show is named employ the semicircular curves of highways, sharply intersected by the rectangular shapes of buildings, as vehicles to abstraction. At first glance, the swerving, sun-splashed yellow highways and the flat purple shadows on the sides of the buildings hug the picture plane like geometric emblems. One could be looking at an abstract canvas by some recently rediscovered contemporary of Alfred Leslie and Michael Goldberg. Then, in the blink of an eye, the composition shifts into second gear and we are thrust so convincingly into deep space that we are willing to perceive even the merest linear indication of a boxy form as a moving car in the distance.

Freedman-Shea seems to take pleasure in zapping us with such perceptual ambiguities, perhaps to remind us that, as her fellow realist Fairfield Porter once put it, "painting is a dream, which convinces by virtue of its dreaminess." And her ability to impart her own kind of dreaminess to the most matter of fact scenes comes across in two large canvases she calls "From Clichy," numbers one and two, which are among her finest works.

Both pictures are views from a terrace of factory buildings on the industrial outskirts of Paris. In each, a large plume of smoke flows from a tall smokestack rising up from the cluster of grim, low-lying structures into a spacious expanse of sky. It is typical of Freedman-Shea's preference for the commonplace and often funky over the picturesque and the exalted that she should travel all the way to Paris and select a subject similar to one that might be found not far from her studio in Long Island City! No doubt the smoke being spewed from that French factory is no less funky, no less stinky, no less toxic than it would be back in the States. Yet here, as everywhere, Freedman-Shea captures the atmospheric magic beyond the blight. In "From Clichy II," in particular, with its delicate blending of luminous pink and yellow hues, she invests both toxic smoke and chemical sky with a beauty akin to Turner's "tinted steam" by virtue of her discerning yet democratic eye.

Another recent series called "Bathers" takes on a subject resonant with art history. But Freedman-Shea's "Bathers" do not jiggle and flounce like Fragonard's rosy-bottomed nudes or pose stiffly for posterity in their tighty whites like Cezanne's standing man in MoMA's collection. They are small children and they wade to their knees or flop on their bellies and wiggle like jellyfish, splashing around in the shallow surf in a manner that allows the artist to indulge in vigorous gestural brushwork harking back to Abstract Expressionism. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that Freedman-Shea's most immediate artistic ancestors are second generation New York School painters like Jane Freilicher and Wolf Kahn, who set themselves the task of harnessing the energy of Abstract Expressionism to recognizable subject matter.

However, one also gets a slippery glimpse of something akin to the ethereal light of Edwin Dickinson in one Tuscany landscape and the sketchy, measured grace of a street scene called "Long Island City" even evokes an aspect of Giacometti, as Diana Freedman-Shea ranges freely over art history, making excellent use of much that she finds there.

—Ed McCormack

Symbolic Enigmas Animate the Mixed Media Explorations of Sidh

The artist known by the single name of Sidh, whose mixed media works can be seen at Agora Gallery, 415 West Broadway, SoHo from October 5 to 25, presents us with a new vision which synthesizes the formal and the symbolic in compositions that reconfigure the conventions of surrealism.

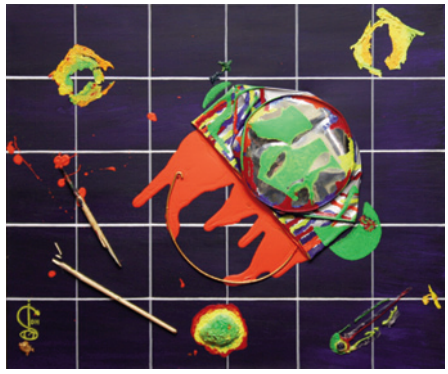
Perhaps Sidh's closest peer, in regard to the strangeness with which he invests the familiar, is the Chicago Imagist artist Ed Paschke. For like Paschke, Sidh employs colors the fluorescence of which lend his work an almost unnerving radiance, as though his images were being viewed from within a neon jukebox. Yet there is also a mandala-like quality to some of Sidh's canvases, particularly those works in his "Becoming Lonely Project" series, where roughly circular shapes radiate like solar orbs from the center of the composition.

This intensity of Sidh's color adds to the sheer visual impact of his paintings. His forms are alternately emblematic or more dispersed into compositions resembling either shattered fragments of some universal puzzle or cracks in the surface of consciousness. These are interspersed with horizontal bands of color suggesting interference in some intergalactic transmission.

Needless to say, such specific interpretations are purely subjective, but that is part of the appeal of Sidh's paintings: that their unusual formal configurations and elusive, fragmented images open up so many channels in the imagination of the viewer. Evocative titles such as "An Artist's Lucky Day, Kicking the Mirror of Frustration" and "Nature's Prime in Paperbinder Bikini Line" add further to the tantalizing elusiveness of Sidh's imagery. However, the artist then adds yet another layer of mystery to the mix with the contradictory title "Words Don't Mean a Thing."

The latter title seems particularly pointed, since the painting it is appended to features a stylized eye as its central element, set within a desolate surreal landscape with a darkened building and a pair of scrawny trees visible in the background. Perhaps Sidh is telling us that only what we can confirm visually is trustworthy, or that the artist's unjaundiced eye can be our conduit to the truth. As with all of Sidh's mixed media works, multiple interpretations are possible, and if we try too strenuously to put specific meanings to his imagery, we run the risk of proving the truth of his title. No matter, Sidh's paintings present us with intellectual as well as visual puzzles that we cannot help but attempt to decipher.

How, for example, could anyone resist trying to analyze the symbolism of the painting that Sidh calls "Stream"? This intriguing work presents us with what appears to be a geometrically stylized tree with a medical intravenous bag suspended from one of its limbs and injecting a green fluid into its trunk... Or is the chlorophyll-like fluid actually being drained from the tree into the bag, later to be processed in the structure dangling from other part of the same limb that resembles a factory or manufacturing plant?



"An Artist's Lucky Day Kicking the Mirror of Frustration"

As with René Magritte, the meanings in Sidh's paintings are never obvious. And whether our attempts to apprehend them ultimately fail or succeed, Sidh takes us on a visual adventure for which we can only be grateful to this resourceful and highly imaginative artist. —Sean Mortenson, Ph.D

Redefining Imagery at Broadway Mall

That "Images" in art can be either figurative or abstract was the point well made by the recent group show of that title, co-curated by Meyer Tannenbaum and Carole Barlowe, presenting members of the West Side Arts Coalition at Broadway Mall, on the traffic island at Broadway and 96th Street.

Certainly the paintings of Meyer Tannenbaum have gradually grown more imagistically suggestive, even while maintaining their nonobjective thrust. Tannenbaum's "Soft Impact" series differs from his earlier work, in which manipulation of materials was the main event. Now rhythmic linear elements evoke a sense of landscape, even while Tannenbaum's vibrant colors are anything but naturalistic and his compositions eschew literal depiction.

Gesture is paramount in the splashy abstract acrylics of Peg McCreary, to a degree that might make her inclusion in this show seem a stretch. However, as titles such as "Nocturne in Blue" and "Glissando" suggest, McCreary's canvases evoke mental imagery in much the same manner as a musical composition, with their freely flowing, naturally allusive green and blue hues.

Ruth LLanillo Leal, on the other hand, is a New Wave Imagist whose ornately stylized landscapes, like those of Laura Owens, flirt with kitsch yet possess a unique, over-the-top vitality. With decoratively gnarled trees, big fat full moons, and flowers that suggest exploding stars, Leal transmogrifies nature like a punk rock Charles Burchfield.

Marlene Zimmerman is another exponent of the singular image, known for her flatly painted simplified figures and vibrant colors. One of Zimmerman's most delightfully zany oils in this show depicts a woman with bright yellow hair who looks like a femme fatale out of a Dick Tracy comic strip, set against a hot purple Brooklyn Bridge.

K.A. Gibbons also turns up the chromatic volume, albeit in a more Neo-Fauvist manner in her cityscapes. Here, Gibbons showed a group of oils in which water towers and rooftops figured prominently, all painted in the expressive, atmospheric manner for which she is known.

Carole Barlowe is equally fascinated with the urban scene, but captures it in her own inimitable technique, in which figures stand out in relief against precisely painted city architecture. At once expressive and formally austere, Barlowe's paintings with 3-D collage elements are possessed of a singular wit.

Ava Schonberg approaches scenes in the Middle East and elsewhere in a manner that can move freely between realism and a more abstract mode in her acrylic paintings. Schonberg's "Jerusalem" is especially impressive in the latter regard, with its image of an ornate structure evoked in subtly harmonizing pastel hues .

Jutta Filippelli has a refreshingly direct approach to landscape and still life. Equally adept in oils and watercolors, Filippelli makes images of fields dotted with small houses or small figures on sand dunes under a huge overcast sky resonate with personal vision.

Berik Kulmamirov, a relative newcomer to the WSAC, has a darkly surreal style. In one painting a business man in bright red suspenders sports an animal head; in another, a ballerina dances gracefully beside a white flower on a silver plate supported by a huge hand. Kulmamirov's superb oil painting technique enables him to imbue such unlikely subjects with a surprising degree of verisimilitude.

Then there is Bernardo Diaz, another painter heretofore unfamiliar to this reviewer, whose abstract acrylics on canvas are notable for their vigorous paint application and strong color. Diaz employs shard-like shapes combined with fiery and earthy hues to create compositions filled with a verve and energy that makes one eager to see more of his work. Like the other abstract artists included in this show, he employs forms that are allusive enough to be termed "images," even when their meanings cannot be clearly discerned.

—Peter Wiley

Contemporary Drama Enlivens the Classical Realism of Bryan El Castillo Dominguez

While another painter who possessed his flawless technique might be content to merely dazzle us with it, Bryan El Castillo Dominguez combines incisive portraiture with a sense of narrative in his solo show at Agora Gallery, 415 West Broadway, Chelsea, from September 24 through October 4. (There will be a reception for the artist on September 29, 6-8pm.)

In fact, the scenes and situations that Castillo Dominguez creates in his classical realist oils on canvas could almost resemble stills from an imaginary film, given the high drama with which he invests them, as well as the movie star good looks of his models.

One example is the painting called "Emily," which depicts a pretty young brunette woman naked to the waist (and possibly beyond, since the canvas stops there) striking a pose with her back partially turned and her arms twisted forward in a manner that could suggest a Bruce Lee martial arts move. Either that, or she could be engaged in some ritual of an even more esoteric, perhaps even witchly, sort. Either way, her expression, with her eyes slightly squinting and full lips forming an Angelina Jolie moue makes clear that she means business and one would not wish to mess with her!

On the other hand, the shirtless young man in another painting called "Skin and Tears" seems more histrionic than threatening, even though he is actually wearing boxing gloves. Something about his James Dean pose, with downcast eyes and a smoking cigarette dangling from his mouth, makes him appear more narcissistic than combative. This despite the fact that his torso and arms are covered with more tattoos than one is used to seeing on most fashionable poseurs and there are tattered Thai boxing posters on the brick wall behind him.

Indeed, the contrast between the attitudes depicted in these two paintings and the narrative subtleties that they suggest is one of the things that makes the art of Castillo Dominguez so compelling; he has the ability to tell a more complete story than most figurative painters through the details, expressions, and visual props that he includes in his thoughtfully conceived canvases. And one of the threads that seems to run through the stories that he weaves with his powerful portraits is how much we are all influenced by the media— which is to say, how people in our era, particularly young people, tend to see themselves as characters in a reality show called "Life."

"Mend a Broken Heart"

Thus the young blond woman in "Mend a Broken Heart" not only bares a single breast ala Janet Jackson, but displays upon it a thin scarlet slash put there by the razor blade that she holds so daintily in her hand. Tellingly, she is seated alone in what appears to be a theater with red plush seats that match not only her silky red slip but the hardly-lethal wound that she has incised so carefully on her breast.

Other paintings, such as one of a pregnant nude called "Laden" and another shirtless young man striking a familiar pose (sans cross, of course!) called " A Modern Day Christ," also display the symbolic drama that makes Bryan El Castillo Dominguez a painter well worth watching.

—Maureen Flynn

Arcilesi's Angels Alight in St. Petersburg's Palace Square

Vincent Arcilesi refers to his paintings as "unfashionable" with the bemused shrug of a man more than content to follow his bliss. Yet, if over-the-top originality and risk-taking were to replace avant garde academicism and politically correct pandering in today's art scene, Arcilesi, whose work is a highlight of Edward Lucie-Smith's definitive tome American Realism, would suddenly be one of the most fashionable artists around.

For when it comes to casting personal obsessions on an epic scale, few contemporary painters can match the ambitious audacity of Arcilesi's dreamlike depictions of toothsome young nudes posed in the plazas and public squares of the world's great cities—most recently, St. Petersburg, Russia.

"Peterhof"

A far cry from Paul Delvaux's generic nudes sleepwalking through moonlit railway stations, Arcilesi's figures flaunt their charms in broad daylight, among fully clothed tourists and locals. Each is a full-body portrait, possessed, even when classically reposeful, of an idiosyncratic individuality. Such is Arcilesi's ability to marry the aesthetically timeless to the quirkily immediate that the absence of pubic hair on two of the eleven female nudes in the spectacular nine by eighteen foot canvas "Dreamers in Palace Square" simultaneously evokes the smooth marble genitalia of antiquity and yet another recent fetish of the same generation that favors tattoos and body piercings.

Exhibited along with several easel-scale St. Petersburg scenes painted on-site, two other large canvases (one a "Russian Odalisque" set in the red and gold Boudoir Room of the Hermitage), and an installation of unframed drawings further elucidating the artist's working process, "Dreamers in Palace Square" is arguably Arcilesi's most ambitious painting to date.

Indeed, this major work bears comparison with Larry Rivers' muralistic history of the Russian Revolution— although Arcilesi eschews fragmentation and journalistic pastiche to create a more classically organized composition, incorporating such landmarks as a large cutout sculpture of Lenin, the Winter Palace (now one of the main buildings of the Hermitage Museum), The Admiralty, and the Cathedral of the Resurrection, also known as "the Church on Spilled Blood," since Alexander III ordered it built on the spot where his father was slain.

Arcilesi does not hesitate to simplify architectural elements for formal purposes or tweak them with heightened color for expressive effect, and even the clouds above appear to race across the sky with the tumultuous velocity of history. A nude perches, as though on a divan, on one such cloud, inspired by the airborne angels that decorate the ceilings of the Winter Palace —although an Arcilesi angel is bound to be more secularly seductive than the angel stomping a snake atop the nearby Alexander Column, erected to commemorate Russia's victory over Napoleon.

Although greatly outnumbered by female nudes— one sawing away at a violin, that favorite instrument of Muses and angelic musicians in Renaissance painting; others striking studio poses to impart that sense of art's artifice that Arcilesi likes to bring outdoors— three male nudes also appear in the Palace Square. While two are youths on equal footing with their female counterparts, a third, middleaged and bearded, crouches and clings desperately to the leg of his statuesque companion like one of the idolatrous sexual penitents of Bruno Schulz.

While "Dreamers in Palace Square" is the Cecil B. De Mille centerpiece of the exhibition, both in terms of its epic scale and varied cast of characters, the 96" by 77" "Self-Portrait in St. Petersburg" would have to be considered a close runner-up. Its surreal composition contrasts cast iron griffins, adopted from those on the Bank Bridge, with a monolithic nude looming like King Kong among roiling clouds. The contrastingly down-to-earth image of the artist, wearing a trucker's cap as he works away at his portable outdoor easel in the foreground, suggests Vincent Arcilesi's duel citizenship in the everyday world and a Rabelaisian realm of the imagination where, like any true visionary, he seems most at home.

Ed McCormack, 2005

Andy Warhol and the Death of My Sister

by Ed McCormack

I was trying to figure out how I was going to begin writing about William John Kennedy's recently discovered photographs of Andy Warhol in the 1960s when I got a call from a sheriff's office in North Carolina informing me that my sister Maureen, my only sibling, had died suddenly in the middle of the night.

The deputy on the other end of the line, a kindly-sounding man with an Italian last name and a deep Southern accent, told me that when the officers arrived at my sister's house in response to an emergency call from her room-mate, Cathy, they found her face-down on the bathroom floor. Without sounding too judgmental about it, he mentioned that there was "a strong smell of marijuana at the scene" and added that Cathy had told them my sister, who had complained of a lingering headache, had also been drinking wine and had taken a painkiller shortly before she collapsed and died.

The exact cause of death, he said, was unknown pending an autopsy. He offered his sincere condolences, gave me his cell phone number, and told me not to hesitate to call him if I had any further questions or needed anything at all.

* * *

"Dying is the most embarrassing thing that can happen to you, because someone's got to take care of your details," Andy Warhol once said. "You've died and someone's got to take care of the body, make the funeral arrangements, pick out the casket and the service and the cemetery and the clothes for you to wear and get someone to style you and put on the makeup. You'd like to help them, and most of all you'd like to do the whole thing yourself, but you're dead, so you can't."

* * *

Even before I met him and became a contributing editor of his magazine Interview in 1972, when it was still called Andy Warhol's Interview, I had always been somewhat repelled by the bloodless persona of Andy Warhol. Ronnie Tavel, the scriptwriter for some of his films, once called him a "humanoid," and that description seemed apt to me.

I remember standing with Andy one day in the lobby of 33 Union Square West, the building where The Factory used to be, waiting for the elevator. We had just had lunch at Brownie's, a nearby health food restaurant, and he was going on in that stammering way of his about how he wanted my wife and me to come to dinner with him at the Algonquin the following week because there were some people he wanted me to meet: "Uh, Candy Darling will be there, and Peter Beard, and, ah, Peter's uncle Jerome Hill. He's, um, old, very rich... gives us money for the films..."

But I just kept staring at his forehead, transfixed. As we stood there with the sunlight pouring in, twirling the dust particles around, I was noticing for the first time the netting, partially covered by pancake makeup, at his hair-line.

Up until that moment, I had not been aware that Andy's famous white hair was a wig, and I remember thinking that this strange mesh looked like the stitching on the Frankenstein monster...

* * *

What made me want to write something about William John Kennedy's photographs of Andy as soon as I saw them at Westwood Gallery, in Soho, a couple of weeks before I got the news about my sister, was that they made Andy look more human than he had ever appeared to me, either in person or in the many other pictures I had seen of him over the years. You could look at Kennedy's pictures and, for the first time ever, see past the cool humanoid image of the media celebrity to the pudgy little workingclass boy who grew up in industrial Pittsburgh, fantasizing about being Shirley Temple.

* * *

The last time I saw my sister was about ten years ago, when Jeannie and I went to North Carolina to be with her after her son, Charlie, who had recently graduated high school, died in an accident, along with his girlfriend and another boy who had been driving the car and had rammed it into a tree. Jeannie and I knew what Maureen and her husband Richie, a gentle, sentimental soul so devastated by grief that he would soon follow his son to the grave, were going through, having lost our own son, Holden, to AIDS a year or so earlier, just after his thirtieth birthday.

The last time I spoke to Maureen by phone was just a few days before she died. She sounded happy about the new life she was planning to make with Cathy, the woman that the deputy who called to notify me about her death had referred to as her "room mate". They had met some months earlier on the Internet and were thinking of moving together to Seattle, where Cathy's son lived.

"Hold on, Maureen, Jeannie wants to say hello," I said, never imagining it would actually be goodbye.

* * *

William John Kennedy met and started photographing Andy Warhol in 1964 at the original Factory on East 47th Street—the one that we have all read and heard so much about. Unlike the Union Square Factory, which had polished wood floors and glass tables, and where the only bizarre touch was the big, stuffed Dalmatian dog standing like a sentry near the elevator, the 47th Street Factory had been a funky loft covered in silver foil.

At the Union Square Factory, which could have resembled any of the sleek fashion photographer's studios in the same area, there was some semblance of, if not security, exclusivity—especially after Andy was shot there in 1969. The "Silver Factory," however, had been a place where all manner of people came and went freely; where, on an ordinary day, one might have been hard put to tell the socialites from the transvestites, the debutantes from the drag queens.

Into this scene came William John Kennedy with his camera. Besides being a photographer, Kennedy was an avid scuba diver, free diver, and tennis play-

er—the kind of manly sporting type, a bit like Peter Beard, that Andy always admired from afar. By all accounts, he was a very personable young man, and one can only assume that Andy was quite captivated by him, given how willingly he assumed the poses that Kennedy suggested.

In one picture, he had Andy hold the acetate proofs for his silkscreen paintings of Marilyn Monroe in front of his body, so that the screen goddess not only appears to be superimposed over the artist in a manner that reflects the "off register" quality of his portraits, but also his wistful desire to don her glamour like drag. In another shot, Kennedy posed Andy standing on the Factory fire escape with two of his self portraits strapped over him like a sandwich-

board, suggesting the blatant element of marketing that Andy, the former shoe illustrator, introduced into the formerly discreet business of fine art.

Even more surprising in terms of how willing Andy was to drop his untouchable stance for Kennedy's camera is a series in which Andy and the elfin actor Taylor Mead take turns sitting on each others' laps on the john in the tiny Factory water closet. In one picture, Taylor, a sort of fey Charlie Chaplin of the underground, even fashions a crown for Andy's head out of toilet paper. More businesslike—if one can put it that way— is a contact sheet documenting the filming of the Warhol movie "Taylor Mead's Ass," with Taylor posing nude, like a harem girl, while Andy plans the shots and mans the camera.

But perhaps the most remarkable pictures in the exhibition, curated by James Cavello, the puckish co-director of Westwood Gallery, are the ones that Kennedy took of Andy standing in a field of flowers, cradling a big bouquet in his arms, with one of the flower paintings he was doing at that time propped up behind him.

Inspiration for this series, exhibited as large scale archival pigment prints, came about when Kennedy discovered a field of giant black-eyed Susans growing wild in a vacant lot in Queens, and somehow convinced Andy to go out there with him. It was chilly that day and instead of the black leather jacket that was his usual uniform back then, Andy is seen wearing a bulky gray cardigan sweater that belonged to the strapping young photographer. That the sweater, an uncharacteristic garment to begin with, is much too big for him, gives him a youthful, waif-like quality. Andy looks winsome, as though it is the most natural thing in the world for him to be standing in a field holding an armload of flowers.

This despite the fact that Andy Warhol was about as far from the hippie-go-lucky ethos of 1960s Flower Power, so prevalent around that time, as one could get. In fact, he had only painted flowers at the suggestion of his friend and mentor Henry Geldzahler, who felt that after Andy's earlier series of paintings of car crashes, it was time to lighten up a little.

* * *

Like Andy, I escaped my workingclass origins early. I became an artist, became a hippie, became a writer, and had a lot of senseless adventures in the wider world, as I traveled around writing feature stories on rock stars and movie stars for Rolling Stone—marveling all the while, like the proverbial fly on the wagon wheel, at all the dust "we" kicked up!

My sister, born three crucial years later, stayed at home and got stuck in the Crazy Glue of our family soap opera. As a kid, I'd had the privilege of spending my formative years in the culturally vital ghetto of the Lower East Side. My sister grew up in bland, conservative suburban Staten Island, where our parents had moved with all the best intentions, thinking they were moving up in the world, and where I touched down infrequently thereafter, like a visitor from another reality.

Well into her twenties, Maureen lived under the roof and unforgiving gaze of our mother, who applied much sterner standards to her daughter than to her son. In Irish workingclass families, it is generally

Andy with Taylor Mead

accepted that boys drink, get into trouble, and make asses of themselves periodically or even often. But let a girl do the same and she's the next worst thing to Mary Magdalene.

* * *

My sister and I had a running joke about our father. It consisted simply of a punchline: "Ask your mother." Those were the famous last words with which he had invariably avoided making any decision regarding any of our childhood activities, and he grew even more noncommittal and distant as the years went on.

For awhile, after she was grown and was still living at home, Maureen waitressed in a Mafia nightclub on Staten Island modeled on the Playboy Clubs, where she was required to wear fishnet stockings and dress like a Playboy Bunny—only without the patented cottontail and ears.

By the time her shift ended at four in the morning and she waited for another waitress to drive her home, our father, a longshoreman, had already left for his long commute by bus, ferry, and subway, to Pier 57 on the Manhattan waterfront. But Maureen had such a horror of him seeing her in that scanty costume that she always made sure to change back into her street clothes before going home. The single exception was one morning when her coworker was in a special hurry for some reason or other and she didn't have time to change.

She let herself into the foyer without making a sound, but she had to go through the kitchen to get to her room.

Photos of Andy Warhol by William John Kennedy, courtesy of Westwood Gallery

And there was our father, sitting alone at the kitchen table in the dawn's early light, smoking a Lucky Strike and finishing his breakfast beer.

My sister never got over the way he looked at her—as if it was the most natural thing in the world to see his daughter come creeping in at that ungodly hour, dressed like a dancehall floozy from the Old West— and said, "Good morning, Maureen."

* * *

My sister could never find a way to get out on her own, until one day, years later, while still living at home, when she suddenly phoned from a nearby hospital to tell my mother that she had just given birth to a healthy baby boy. Although my mother had been noticing for awhile that Maureen appeared to be gaining weight, she had dismissed it as beer bloat, denial of all kinds having always run rampant in our family. Now, from the hospital, perhaps hoping to soften the moral blow for Mama (who would soon suffer a stroke), Maureen hastened to add that she had been secretly married to her boyfriend Richie for some time.

* * *

I never cared much for the people around Andy. Like me, most of them had grown up Catholic, and while I had no problem with individual Catholics, being around too many of them at the same time revived bad memories of catechism class. Andy himself actually still attended Sunday mass; his silkscreen assistant Gerard Malanga looked like a parochial school "Fonzie" from Mulberry Street; Paul Morrissey, who directed most of the later Factory films, reminded me of an about-to-be-defrocked Irish priest; and both editors of Interview that I worked with, Glenn O'Brien and Bob Colacello, were Catholics, too.

Colacello actually had a theory that we lapsed Catholics tended to gravitate to The Factory because the confession box and other religious ordeals of our upbringing had left us with a deliciously guilty "taste for decadence." Maybe so; although I tended to hang out mainly with the errant Jews in the Warhol orbit: Lou Reed, with whom I drank frequently and talked poetry; Fran Lebowitz, who'd complain to me at every party we went to about how boring and witless everybody around us was.

My friendships with these two, especially, impressed my sister, who was familiar with Fran from her appearances on Letterman and had seen Lou perform with his band on Saturday Night Live. One cousin would later tell me how bored she and her brothers got of listening to Maureen brag about all the famous people her Big Brother knew. And although I never would have admitted it, I felt a little sheepish hearing that, knowing how shamelessly I dropped names around my sister. I suppose I did so because she seemed to get off on the vicarious glamour of it all— and, frankly, because I enjoyed impressing her with what a Big Shit I had become. (Maybe I was trying to make up for when we were kids and I was as tongue-tied and withdrawn as my little sister was cute and outgoing, and everybody always said, "Maureen's the one with the Personality.")

In truth, though, audacious as it may sound coming from someone raised on the pre-gentrified Lower East Side, when I went up to the Factory, I actually always felt like I was slumming. Aside from a handful of genuinely talented people who passed through there on the way to somewhere better, a lot of The Factory regulars struck me as pathetic exhibitionists who Andy exploited mercilessly, getting them to act out their psychodramas for his camera and then dropping them without ceremony as soon as their fifteen minutes was up.

And Andy himself, alternately fawning and bitchy, dithering and malevolent, always struck me as smaller than life. Nor did I have a particularly high opinion of his work, no matter what people like Arthur Danto said. And I still don't, despite Jan Avgiko's recent Village Voice review of "Dia's Andy: Through the Lens of Patronage," in which he raved, "It's a rare occasion—that Wow! moment —when art stops you in your tracks and makes you forget everything you thought you knew."

The McCormack family in the 1950s. Maureen (lower left) had "all the personality."

Avgiko goes on to extol the show's "Spielbergian intensity," which I suppose is a high compliment if you happen to like Spielbergian schlock. It happens I do not, but I'll have to reserve judgment, not having seen the show at Dia yet. However, a few days before my sister died, I was passing one of those tacky frame shops with a lot of prints displayed haphazardly in the window, and saw among them one of Andy's Marilyns.

I wasn't sure if it was an original silkscreen or a reproduction of one, and didn't stop to find out because, when it came to Warhols, that had always struck me as a moot point anyway. All I thought was that it looked right at home where it was.

Then, right after I talked to that sheriff who called from North Carolina, while I was still shaking and all kinds of incongruous things were racing and colliding in my mind, and all I wanted was to run away from all that I knew it would now fall upon me to do, for some reason it occurred to me that the real substance of Andy Warhol's work may have to do with death, numbness, and avoidance. Belatedly, I was forced to consider that there might be more hidden depth to those banal, deadpan images than I had previously guessed...

And now when I look at William John Kennedy's photograph of Andy in a field of black-eyed Susans, holding a bouquet in his arms, all I can think is: Those flowers are for Maureen.

Select Shows in Leading New York Galleries Celebrate the 130th Anniversary of the Art Students League

While M.F.A.s from schools like Yale and Columbia can be handy trophies in today's status-driven art world, to learn studio skills and become a real artist, you do what serious artists have done for generations: enroll in the Art Students League.

Jackson Pollock, after all, didn't bother with degrees. But in the 1930s, when he was finding his footing as a painter, he studied at the League, as did Mark Rothko and David Smith. An exhibition of early works by all three giants is at Joan T. Washburn Gallery, 20 West 57th Street, from September 8 through 29, as part of a coordinated "Salute to the 130th Anniversary of the Art Students League" by several participating galleries.

In historical terms, one of the highlights of the celebration is Robert Henri: The Painted Spirit, at Gerald Peters Gallery, 24 East 78th Street, from October 27 through December 10. Henri, one of the leading lights of the Ashcan School, taught at the League between 1915 and 1924, and it was there that he delivered many of the lectures collected in his inspiring book The Art Spirit.

Bruce Dorfman, the contemporary abstract artist who has taught at the League since 1969 shows selected assemblage paintings at Kouros Gallery, 23 East 73rd Street, from September 6 through 24. Two other popular present teachers are featured in Instructors at the Art Students League—Robert Neffson and Timothy J. Clark, at Hammer Galleries, 33 West 57th Street, from September 19 through October 8. Of special interest here is Neffson's "Fifty-seventh Street Galleries," a panoramic photorealist view of the street that houses both Hammer Galleries and the school itself.

Although The Art Students League is beyond the picture's vanishing point, at 215 West 57th Street, The League Then and Now, a survey of works from the school's permanent collection by recent and early League students (including such strange bedfellows as Georgia O'Keeffe and Norman Rockwell) can be seen from September 19 through October 16. Also included are photographs and ephemera from the League's archives.

Lee Bontecou, the 1960s art star who stopped showing in 1972 and vanished into voluntary obscurity for decades, then reemerged with a major retrospective at MoMA, is featured at Knoedler & Company, 19 East 70th Street, from October 11 through 22. Bontecou, who attended the League from 1953 to 1956, recently returned to the school for a seminar and spoke glowingly of her former teachers Robert Brackman, Morris Kantor and William Zorach.

Robert Neffson, "Fifty-seventh Street Galleries," 2003. Courtesy of Hammer Galleries.

Another exhibition Gifford Beal: The Art Students League Years, at Kraushaar Galleries, 724 Fifth Avenue, from September 10 through October 12, exemplifies the ongoing relationship that many artists maintain with the school. Beal, who studied at the League with William Merritt Chase and Frank Vincent DuMond, not only taught there in the1930s, but also served as its president from 1920 to 1930.

Other shows featuring former League students and instructors include: William King: Early Works, at Alexandre Gallery, 41 East 57th Street, from October 20 through November 26; Will Barnet and His Contemporaries, at Babcock Galleries, 724 Fifth Avenue, from September 19 through November 11; Hello Steve: The Work of Steve Wheeler, at David Findlay Jr. Fine Art, 41 East 57th Street, from September 29 through October 20; Frederick Brosen: Still New York, at Forum Gallery, 745 Fifth Avenue at 57th Street, from September 8 through October 15; Daniel Greene, Burton Silverman and Sharon Sprung, at Gallery Henoch, 555 West 25th Street, from September 15 through October 8; Red Grooms, Marlborough Gallery, 40 West 57th Street, from September 15 through October 15; Burgoyne Diller: Fifteen on Paper," at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 24 West 57th Street, from September 10 through November 5; Rudolf Baranick and May Stevens, at Mary Ryan Gallery, 24 West 57th Street, from September 13 through mid-October; Paintings and Works on Paper by Artists of the Art Students League of the 1930s and 1940s, at Susan Teller Gallery, 568 Broadway, from September 16 through October 22; Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Kenneth Hayes Miller, Katherine Schmidt and William Zorach, at Zabriskie Gallery, 41 East 57th Street, from September 10 through October 29; and Printmaking Instructors at the Art Students League, at The Old Print Shop, 150 Lexington Avenue, from September 6 through October 8.

This tribute by a diverse group of galleries indicates the esteem in which the League is held in the art world. Surely no other institution has developed so many talents and made such a long and lasting contribution to visual culture.

—Jeannie McCormack

Gregory King: Nature Painting as "Silent Shout"

Gregory King is a very special kind of landscape painter, in that rather than being celebrations of nature, his paintings are poignant pleas for its preservation. Growing up in Poland, on the picturesque Wieprz River, near the woods of the Roztocze, King witnessed firsthand how so called "human development" can gradually degrade a beautiful landscape, rendering its trees, meadows, and waterways desolate and forlorn.

An autodidact with a natural affinity for his subject, he vowed to put his painterly skills to the service of his ecological concerns, evolving a suitably expressive style. Realism takes on a haunting resonance in King's work in his exhibition at Agora Gallery, 415 West Broadway, SoHo, from November 22 through December 13. (There will be a reception for the artist on December 1.)

Perhaps King's closest stylistic ancestor is the great German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich; for his canvases have a similarly atmospheric quality. However, while Friedrich employed the mystery of nature as a metaphor for the spiritual isolation of humankind, it is the tragedy of nature itself that King conveys so convincingly. He does so by virtue of a style that can often be simultaneously dark and luminous. Indeed, it is through dramatic contrasts in tonal values, apparently achieved through the layering of many translucent oil glazes, that King creates the atmospheric intensity which makes his compositions so affecting.

Invariably present in his paintings is a sense of metamorphosis. We see the de-evolution from vital, richly blooming trees flooded with sunlight to bare, craggy branches, clawing at overcast skies like arthritic hands.

Through the juxtaposition of such images, King sees his canvases as "calling dramatically, but with a silent shout, to slow down this crazy rush of civilization that destroys nature and eventually the man." And his paintings convey this message in no uncertain terms, with their subtly glowing tonalities and sensitively delineated forms. Like the aforementioned Caspar David Friedrich, King combines meticulous realism with intense subjectivity to achieve an almost unsettling visual poetry.

Citing nature as his greatest teacher, King observes the play of light and shadow on various surfaces with an unerring eye and gives careful attention to the textural details of overgrown weeds, tree bark, and other natural substances, evoking their tactile actuality in a manner that makes his perennial theme of organic transience all the more powerful. A sense of untimely decay is everywhere in evidence in his compositions, with

"No. 2"

their ravaged forms and dark shadows contrasted with the brilliant light that offers the only hope of transcendence .

These contrasts are especially dramatic in the oil on canvas called "No. 2," where a pale full moon illuminates the sky between bare, skeletal trees and simple thatched houses, as well as in "No. 8," where a single, pitifully scrawny tree seems to rise from a puddle of stagnant water, set against distant mountains enveloped in smoggy mist.

By numbering, rather than titling, his paintings Gregory King wisely avoids editorializing about the wanton destruction of our natural wonders that concerns him so deeply. After all, nothing could make that point more powerfully than the "silent shout" of his art, which speaks eloquently for itself.

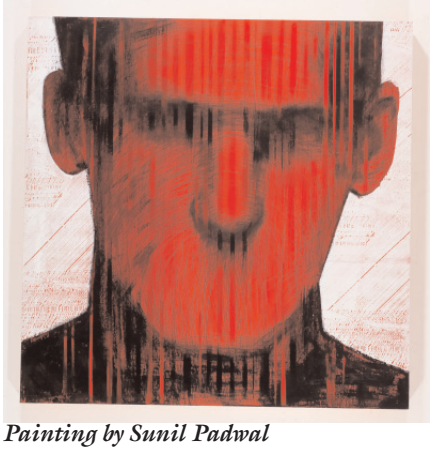
—Peter Wiley

Primal Man: Sunil Padwal's Archetypal Images

Sunil Padwal became a painter somewhat unexpectedly, as it were. Born in 1968 in Mumbai, India, he was trained in applied rather than fine arts, and was a successful illustrator whose drawings were featured regularly in the Times of India, before Harsh Geonka, a patron of Indian art who was impressed by his work, organized his first exhibition.

Since, Sunil Padwal has exhibited widely throughout India, as well as in Hong Kong and elsewhere, establishing himself as an artist to watch by virtue of his powerful approach to the symbolic human figure. In his exhibition at Agora Gallery, 415 West Broadway, in Soho, from October 5 through 25, Padwal presents images as affecting for what they imply about the human condition as the work of Marshal Arisman, another painter who first became known as an illustrator.

Like those of Arisman, Padwal's paintings often depict the human figure in isolation. Padwal, however, has evolved an even more emblematic style. He himself referred to it in an interview some years ago as "simplistic and graphic," but that description does not do full justice to the emotional impact of his style. "Stark and unsettling" might be a more apt way to describe the total effect of Padwal's paintings of faces and heads that are



Painting by Sunil Padwal

almost featureless, except for a shadowy indication of the eye sockets and the vague outline of a nose.

That these faces lack a mouth seems germane to their meaning. Padwal's people—men, to be more specific—are silent, voiceless. Whether they choose not to speak by their own volition or because they have been muzzled by some outside force is up for debate. In either case, the absence of an organ of communication lends these all but featureless faces a poignant, thwarted quality. At the same time, however, they are very definite presences. Their silence, it could be said, speaks louder than words.

The impact of Padwal's compositions derives in great part from three sources: the artist's strong sense of composition, his boldness as a colorist, and his mastery of a kind of graphic ecriture achieved with intricate networks of lines, as well as by scraping, scratching, and otherwise distressing the surfaces of his paintings. By this latter technique, he builds depth and complexity into his imagery, even while retaining the compositional starkness that lends his pictures their impact.

The tactile quality of his work is also enhanced by his habit of often working on "found" surfaces that he hunts down in India's "thieves markets" and bazaars (the equivalent of our flea markets), selecting "old and interesting objects," as he puts it, that will harmonize with his aesthetic aims.

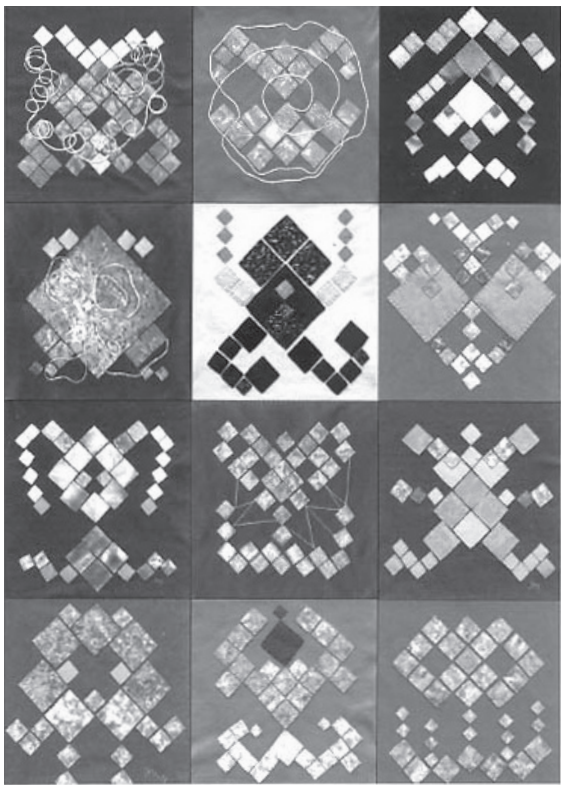
"I don't title my paintings or my exhibitions" Padwal says. "I feel that if I title my paintings I am restricting them, and in turn lose out on the vastness of the subject."

And his subject is vast, indeed, for it encompasses all of our mortal concerns boiled down to brooding archetypal images of the human form. Once you have come face to face with Sunil Padwal's paintings (as you would with yourself in a mirror) you will not easily forget them. —Scarlet Greenburg

Gita Lapin Treimanis Pays Tribute to Her Diverse Aesthetic "Inheritance"

Gita Lapin Treimanis called her most recent exhibition "Inheritance," and one can only assume that the title has a double meaning. For while Treimanis, who was born in the small East European village of Tirza, in Latvia, descends from a long line of artisans—specifically, wood carvers, potters, and weavers— she also draws freely from Native American culture, for which she seems to feel an affinity every bit as strong.

As a young woman in her native Latvia, Treimanis was schooled in the theatrical arts and, her biography tells us, "was performing in the theater when the horrific reality of World War II forced her to flee her homeland and emigrate to the United States." Here in the U.S., perhaps because of the social and cultural fracture of immigration, she found herself drawn away from the public realm of theater to the more private area of fine art. She studied and took up painting and sculpting and explored various media earlier in her career. In recent years, Treimanis has been drawn to working with fabric, her family medium, reminding one of Donald Richie's realization, in his recently published book "The Japan Journals," that he has finally reached maturity "because there are waves of memory, a tide that wants to sweep me back to where I came from."



"Inheritance"

At the same time, Treimanis' wall hangings are anything but the folk crafts she grew up with. They are complex and sophisticated abstract compositions, often incorporating feathers, bits of hammered copper, lengths of string, and other unorthodox materials, that combine Native American influences with a purity of design reminiscent of Constructivism and the Bauhaus. Indeed, Treimanis' most significant kinship with the Bauhaus may be her insistence on integrating iconography adopted from primitive spiritual traditions with advanced Western aesthetics.

Treimanis seems to arrive at this synthesis intuitively, in the course of creating a personal, geometry-based language for translating her experience in purely visual terms, achieving in the process a style with universal implications much in the spirit of postmodern multiculturalism. Hers is an art at once intensely personal and public in its spiritually uplifting aspects, which were immediately evident in her recent show at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea.

The first thing that struck one on entering the gallery was that this was less an exhibition in the usual sense than an installation. For the unusual arrangement of Treimanis' colorful panels of fabric on the walls mirrored the movement of the forms within her individual compositions, creating unpredictable patterns that moved up, down, or sideways in various directions. One felt almost as though one had walked right into one of her pieces, surrounded and optically saturated as one was by dancing squares of color and reflective materials, interspersed with swirls of thread that add a more organic element to the mix.

While Treimanis' affinity for indigenous cultures may be the most obvious and immediate thing that one notices about her work, given the materials that she uses and her unpretentious presentation, it soon becomes clear that she must also be viewed in relation not only to sophisticated mainstream artists such as Barry Flanagan who have made fabric pieces, but to hard-edge painters such as George Ortman and Alfred Jensen, who transformed geometric forms into a vocabulary of personal symbols.

For despite the resemblance of her compositions to Native American motifs and designs, which is enhanced by the often totemic arrangement of her fabric panels, Treimanis does not follow any of the rigid guidelines for tribal iconography. Which is to say, specific shapes do not have set meanings in her work, as they most definitely do in Indian art, where a triangle will represent a tent and other shapes such as concentric circles will signify other aspects of tribal life. Rather, Treimanis' forms follow no rules but her own intuitive sense of what works aesthetically in any given piece. Thus, her works have a freshness and a quality of innovation that sets them quite apart from the sources of her inspiration, whether in indigenous American culture or the folk designs that are part of her own Eastern European heritage.

Much has been made in previous reviews— and rightly so— about Treimanis' use of Indian sounding titles, and particularly of the tribute and fellowship inherent in the title of her preceding exhibition, "My Other Brothers," last year, at Pleiades Gallery. However, one can only do a disservice to the broader implications of this artist's vision by placing too much significance on her ethnic inspiration. Above all, what "Inheritance" makes clear is that, even while acknowledging Gita Lapin Treimanis as the heir to diverse traditions, one must now view her oeuvre on face value for the innovative use she makes of a strict, self-determined formal system.

For when one regards Treimainis' work from this broader perspective, one sees clearly that the scope of her true inheritance also encompasses other kindred spirits such as the Russian painter Liubov Popova, arguably the most progressive woman artist anywhere in the world in the early 1900s, as well as the whole of the Constructivist movement, even though Treimanis prefers fabric to the industrial materials favored by her predecessors. This, of course, is an important difference, since Treimanis' admiration for primitive cultures is diametrically opposed to the faith that Vladimir Tatlin, the movement's founder, placed in machines as a liberating force for building a better society in the wake of the Russian revolution.

All the same, Treimanis' art has been referred to as "Neo-Constructivist," and that designation is certainly apt in regard to her use of brilliant colors and clearly defined forms — especially since the definition of the term has evolved in recent times to mean roughly the equivalent of "geometrical abstraction."

Indeed, like Naum Gabo, who finally broke away from the notion that art must serve an obvious social purpose in order to explore a direction of spiritual uplift, Gita Lapin Treimanis, by merging Constructivist aesthetics with an almost shamanistic transmutation of tribal designs, has evolved a vibrant contemporary synthesis so distinctive as to assure that her work will surely endure as one of the more innovative manifestations of the multicultural movement.

—Byron Coleman

Katrin Alvarez-Schlüter's Paintings Transmute Experience

Although Katrin Alvarez-Schlüter is already well known in Germany, Switzerland and Israel, her work came as a revelation to many of us who encountered it for the first time in an impressive exhibition at Agora Gallery last year. In her new show at Agora Gallery 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, where she is artist in residence from September 24 to December 24, one sees yet other facets of this accomplished neo-surrealist.

While some of Alvarez-Schlüter's paintings can remind one of a "cabinet of wonders," with their intricate array of compartmentalized images, her compositions can be just as potent when she makes relatively spare statements. Take, for one example, the small work in oil and mixed media called "Mother I Hate You," in which the artist not only departs from her familiar horror vacua approach to composition, in which most of the picture is filled with imagery, but also eschews realism for a severely simplified approach to the figure. Two stark, practically silhouetted female forms are seen in profile, one formidable and forbidding, the other smaller and frailer, its eyes bulging and mouth open as it presumably exclaims the words in the title. Here, as well as another stark image of two fiery red profiles (title: "Shut up!") Alvarez-Schlüter creates images as memorable in their own way for their expression of raw emotion as

"Puzzle"

Munch's "The Scream."

Also something of an anomaly for this artist is "Papagena," an oil on canvas of a hybrid creature with the head of a bird and the body of a woman seated in profile on an invisible chair. The fact that this work is rendered realistically, in contrast to the previous two pictures, makes the image even more powerful for its contrasts of verisimilitude and pure fantasy. Yet the vibrant orange ground, on which a faint rectangle is inscribed near the figure, also adds an abstract element to the composition.

Another oil on canvas, called "Puzzle" is more characteristically intricate. In it, the frontally positioned face of a young woman is seen within what appear to be several layers of partitions, resembling weathered wallboards partially torn or rotted away, their jaggedly irregular edges convincingly depicted in a trompe l'oeil manner. Her pale blue eyes gaze out at the viewer imploringly, like the eyes of a martyr in a religious icon, as her face cracks and decomposes in small, shard-like sections, as though being pulled apart by the tendril-like edges of the final partition. It is a profoundly disturbing image, like something out of a nightmare, yet Alvarez-Schlüter somehow manages to make it aesthetically palatable by virtue of her flawless technique and her ability to present even the most extreme subjects within a pleasing abstract design.

By contrast, although juxtaposed with the large insect and other slightly disturbing images, the face of a pretty young woman, presumably a self-portrait, is seen whole and serene composed in the exquisite drawing in crayon on board tellingly titled "I Survived My Childhood."

Here, the implication is that while Katrin Alvarez-Schlüter, like many of us, has had traumatic experiences, she transmutes them through her own peculiar alchemy into visions that are finally uplifting for being both beautiful and universal, making of these base materials the precious substance of her art. —Maurice Taplinger

Bernice Sokol Kramer: Abominable Snow Women with Venus-Envy

Just as we think immediately of the famous film star, rather than the formidable New York painter who was his father, when someone says "DeNiro," chances are you never heard of the sculptor Bernice Sokol Kramer—although you may very well know of her actress sister, Marilyn Sokol.

Up to now, despite having an exhibition history that includes solo shows at 14 Sculptors Gallery and other prestigious venues, Kramer has been one of those secrets that an art world more concerned with marketable hype than enduring value keeps all too well. If justice prevails, however, "From Ghost to Goddess," her first solo show in ten years, at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from September 6th to 24th, should go a long way toward getting Kramer the attention she so rightly deserves.

The show's title comes from a poem by Dennis Corbett called "The Ladies of Bernice Sokol Kramer," with the lines "In the dirt of play the ladies from ghost to goddess / queens and mothers nuns and daughters / dip and dance in static measures / swim and parcel the eternal feminine."

A muse to more than one writer, Kramer also inspired avant garde novelist Frederick Ted Castle, in an essay for the catalog of one of her exhibitions, to celebrate a series of wall pieces that she created based on her grandmother's apron as "telltale remnants of a life of wear and tear."

Some of the most powerful works in Kramer's present solo show are the six large suspended sculptures to whose "skirts upright and inverted" Dennis Corbett refers in his poem. These mixed media pieces hang like Soutine's sides of beef from the gallery ceiling. They are cast in papier mache from furniture parts, large vases, and other found objects that coalesce to create vaguely anatomical forms with a presence at once physically imposing and eerily ethereal.

In "Strumpfelsack" (a faux Germanic made up word that Kramer imagines has something to do with "hosiery falling down"), the figure hangs from chains with its empty hood pointed toward the floor, its entire surface covered with images and type from the pages of The New York Times. In other works, the "skin" of the figures is created with sexy photographs from the kind of ads for massage parlors and escort services that appear in the back pages of The Village Voice, New York Press and other hipster tabloids. Within the gorgeously ungainly contours of Kramer's figures,

"Trunkenbold"

which seem like distant, more disheveled relatives of Nikki de Saint Phalle's "Nanas," swarms of curvaceous young women in skimpy lingerie strike seductive, come-hither poses. Their bodacious bimbo postures contrast sharply with the stoic bulk of the sculptures, yet invest them with an internal energy, suggesting the fantasies of sex-bomb empowerment harbored by hapless frumps stuck with the thankless shitwork of the hausfrau.

Kramer also uses these sex-ad newspaper pages as the basis for drawings, working in ink, paintstick, or charcoal over the photographs of nearly naked women, turning them into sinuous semi-abstract compositions reminiscent of harem scenes and odalisques, imbuing funky subject matter with classical grace. Kramer's almost alchemical ability to transform base found materials is evident here, as well as in other small works where stuffed figures, almost like puppets, pop out of interior settings in 3-D.

Like Marisol and Red Grooms, Kramer is endlessly inventive in creating tableaux that evoke gritty urban reality through unexpected juxtapositions of incongruous found materials. All manner of detritus is combined with cut wool, canvas, rags, newspaper soaked in acrylic mediums (and apparently anything else that comes immediately to hand) in a manner that lends her pieces a uniquely kooky elegance.

One of Kramer's most startling works is the large hanging piece she calls "Kapellmeister," an upside down figure entirely covered with small shapes cut from newspaper that protrude from it like a fur of layered tongues. Although "Kapellmeister" flaunts no obvious feminine attributes (unless they be those of an Abominable Snow Woman), one designates this and other ostensibly genderless figures by Kramer as feminine because they all seem, in a very real sense, to be psychological self-portraits.

In this regard Kramer shares qualities in common with Kiki Smith, another artist whose oddly discombobulated figures seem to project an inner sense of the female condition, in answer to the "male gaze" perspective on the female body that has dominated art history for many centuries. Yet while Kramer's use of materials is every bit as casually radical as Smith's, her pieces—particularly her large, suspended ones— also possesses formal qualities more akin to Louise Bourgeois' synthesis of the funky and the monumental. The combination is especially striking in Kramer's "Trunkenbold," which she says means "a little tipsy," where the headless torso, all four limbs partially amputated, hangs upside-down from chains, simultaneously projecting a poignant human quality and commanding space as successfully as Tobias Putrih's massive sculptures made with many layers of corrugated cardboard.

Bernice Sokol Kramer reveals to us what Dennis Corbett calls "the ubiquitous sacred buried in the trash," making an apt metaphor for what we must strive to salvage from the detritus of daily living in order to achieve spiritual transcendence.

—Ed McCormack

Online Artists Materialize "for Real" at Venezuela Gallery

The Online Artists Guild is a new kind of coalition of professional artists, in that its members all met on the Internet. Launched in 2003, their website (www.onlineartistsguild.com/nyc) functions as a meeting place for affiliated artists from around the country and the world, enabling them to show and discuss work in progress and share a sense of community, even when separated by thousands of miles. However, the group also exhibits together in the real world, as seen in "Representing Reality," their recent group exhibition at Venezuelan Center's Venezuela Gallery, located at The Consulate of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, 7 East 51st Street.

The invitation to exhibit in New York came about when a Venezuelan OAG member brought the group to the attention of the Center, where twelve members from around the country were joined by Edgar Queipo, well known in Venezuela for his figurative work. Here,Queipo showed an exquisite drawing in ink and watercolor of a couple posed formally in old-fashioned dress, as if for a tintype. Queipo's elegant and expressive line, combined with delicate washes of color, is reminiscent of Ben Shahn. However, Queipo's figures have a distinct period flavor and a nostalgic poetry all their own.

One member of OAG long familiar to New York gallery goers is realist painter Beth Kurtz, who is also a frequently exhibited member of the West Side Arts Coalition. Kurtz showed "Uptown Train," an oil in which a young woman wears the mask-like expression often donned by those who travel alone on public transportation, as well as "Night Train," an equally insightful portrait of a young Asian man wearing a knit cap and an expression of wary alertness, the window behind his head scrawled with graffiti. Both paintings, as well as another oil called "Riverside Bus," showed Kurtz's ability to imbue everyday subjects with luminous beauty by virtue of her smooth application of oil glazes.

The salt shakers, paper napkin dispensers, condiment bottles and other table settings in typical American homes and diners are the elements that Gary Hoff, an artist from Des Moines, Iowa, depicts in his anthropomorphically suggestive still life compositions. A single salt shaker takes on the regal bearing of a king in a shiny crown in one of Hoff's oils on panel. In another painting, an old toaster, its tin surface reflecting a nearby bottle of hot sauce, hints at relationships far more complex than those between inanimate objects.

In her oil on linen "Notre Dame," North Carolina painter Susan Matthews employs vigorously scumbled blue and violet hues to make the majestic cathedral resemble a crystal palace soaring above the tree-tops. By contrast, Matthews' bravura brushwork projects a romantic mood in "Carnival," in which two mysterious masked and costumed figures occupy the foreground while other revelers gather in the shadows of the distant piazza.

By contrast, Jeff Gola's paintings of small town streets in his native New Jersey are executed in meticulous detail in egg tempera, as seen in "Crosswicks Vernacular," where every blade of grass on the lawn appears separately delineated, and "Autumn on Ferry Street," in which intricately patterned oriental rugs hang from porch railings to dry in the sun. Gola's pristine technique is especially impressive in another painting of motorcycles lined up under a snow-covered tarp in front of a small shop.

Idaho artist Richard Bingham stages his nocturnal oils on linen like a film noir director, as seen in "Girl with Key," where a young woman in a red evening gown crouches beside an antique automobile with its lights on, holding up a key that she has apparently taken out of a small metal box. Equally dramatic, albeit in a more domestic manner, is another painting by Bingham called "Waiting Up, "in which a woman in a nightgown snoozes in a chair with a collie dog resting its head on her knees.

Chris Cart, of Hallowell, Maine, brings a more restrained drama to oil portraits such as "Night Drummer," in which a young man pounds a conga drum on a porch under the stars, and "Young Guitar" which depicts a lank-haired aspiring rock star diligently practicing chords. Somewhat more lyrical, "Etude," is a softly limned image of a willowy teenage girl in faded jeans playing a flute in a genteel interior, while a kitten snoozes on a nearby chair.

Carl Toboika, of Kingston, New York, ranges freely from a majestic mountain view reminiscent of the Hudson River Valley School, to fantasy subjects such as "Snap Dragon Faerie," in which a voluptuous young woman with wings stands amid unearthly pink flowers that match her science fiction bikini, as a huge dragon soars against a planetary orb above. However, Toboika's most affecting oil is "Generations," which depicts a young father and his little girl crouching stealthily in the snow to sketch a wild deer in a wooded landscape.

Chicago artist Lori Kiergaard reveals a unique approach to still life in a series of six related oils on panel in which elaborate arrangements of objects such as crystal bowls, glass vases filled with colorful flowers, china tea cups, silver pitchers, and other objects are exploited for their reflective or transparent surfaces, with various suburban settings visible in the background. In one especially effective panel, "Dinner at John's," the face of a man plays hide and seek among a plethora of objects, the sheer profusion of which activates the entire composition with swirling energy.

On the other hand, Cindy Procious, a painter from Milton, Massachusetts, puts her own spin on straightforward portraiture in "Girl With a Pearl: Redux." The title is a sly play on the famous painting by Vermeer that inspired a recent feature film. However, the young girl that Procious depicts in the same pose as Vermeer's composition is a pre-teen, considerably younger than actress Scarlett Johanson, and the innocent mischief in her glance is evoked by Procious with such skill as to make the painting more of a tribute than a parody.

Other artists in this group of avowed realists allude to the Old Masters in their own manner. One is Craig Luzum, a painter from Atlanta, Georgia, whose oil on panel "Lucia" depicts a young women, wearing a silken head-scarf that could belong to any century, and gazing out at the viewer as she rests her head on her arms, which are covered by full sleeves that also suggest an archaic costume. Along with a flawless realist technique, Luzum has the ability to delve into a personality and present its essence, here reflected in the frank yet pensive gaze of the sitter, her radiant person glowing from the gravy-brown background in a manner that suggests an almost saintly purity.

Pennsylvania artist Brian Tutlo is a superb draftsman whose miniature portraits in silverpoint, etching with drypoint, and aquatint with drypoint, delineate delicate faces with an ethereal, phantom-like quality. The etchings of Rembrandt would appear to be an inspiration to Tutlo, who has mastered the technique of cross-hatching to create subtle tones and shadows that lend his tiny images of the human visage a timeless beauty.

Another artist who works small, yet manages to make a memorable impression, is Brié Dodson, of Fairfax, Virginia, whose intimate oils on linen panel of oddly juxtaposed still life objects have a subtly surreal quality. In one of Dodson's most intriguing compositions, "All Dressed Up," a jeweled earring dangles from the tip of a baroquely curved gourd; in others, tiny ribbons, colorful baubles and other objects are combined with grapes and other small fruits to create exquisitely refined little pictures that are the visual equivalent of tone poems.

—J. Sanders Eaton

The Bodacious Mixed Media Maximalism of harriet regina marion

"Lobster Brunch"

Like the famous American modernist poet e.e. cummings, harriet regina marion prefers for her name always to appear in lowercase letters. And she displays a wit and whimsy that the poet would surely have appreciated, in both the titles and the content of her mixed media works, which begin with color digital sketches that she collages, paints, and draws upon until it's impossible to tell whether the brushstrokes, drips, and varied textures in her compositions are actual or virtual.

Yet cummings, although a wonderful and highly original poet, also fancied himself a painter, an art in which he was not at all gifted, while marion is one hell of a fine artist, on the evidence of her solo show "Innervisions: Projected," which can be seen at N.A.W.A. Gallery, 80 Fifth Avenue, suite 1405, through October 8.

One of the things that makes marion's mixed media works especially fine is her ability to work in relatively small formats (respecting the ecology of art in a way that some of her more overblown contemporaries should take heed of), and yet project a seemingly limitless sense of scale. For like that other intimist Paul Klee, marion seems to realize that scale has nothing to do with size; some artists can create a world in a few inches, while others can reduce a huge canvas to the scale of a toenail.

Nor does marion find it necessary to impart spaciousness to her compositions by keeping them simple. If anything, she is more of a Maximalist than a Minimalist, for her mixed media compositions are generally jam-packed with a lively array of colorful forms and collage elements that appear almost windblown, as they float, dance, and wiggle over the picture plane.

Some of these shapes are quite literal, as seen in marion's "Watermelon & Clam," in which the two edibles of the title are clearly defined among the more abstract elements in the composition; as well as in "Lobster Brunch," wherein one can discern pink, ridged shapes suggesting crustacean-tails and the circular collage shapes like those little paper parasols that sometimes decorate fancy drinks.

In other works by marion, however—the greater majority of them, in fact—the freely floating forms are allusive yet elusive; which is to say, they suggest many things, yet can't be pinned down to any specific object or meaning. In works, such as "Rolled, Tucked & Buttoned Up," "Church=Fort, Religion=War," and "Splunk Map," for example, riotously colorful cut-out shapes, blobs of brilliant pigment, checkerboard squares, painted or printed polka-dots, torn, semi-translucent overlays of vellum or tracing paper, fragments of yellowed Chinese newspaper, and any number of other painted and collaged elements converge, disperse, and interact in compositions that can only be called kaleidoscopic.

Yet for all their bodacious, hellzapoppin animation and busyness, these compositions are possessed of striking grace and an innate elegance. In fact, one can't help thinking that if Knox Martin and Robert Motherwell had married and produced a prodigiously gifted child, her name would have had to be harriet regina marion.

—J. Sanders Eaton

Fernand Vanderplancke: Bronzes that Marry Wit to the Monumental

Because of the heavy and unyielding nature of the material itself, we tend to think of bronze sculpture as a stolid and stoic enterprise. Yet nothing could be further from the truth in regard to the sculptures of Fernand Vanderplancke, who has been a master of the medium for nearly half a century, and whose work can be seen in a superb exhibition at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, where he is artist in residence from September 24 to December 24.

Vanderplancke, who lives and works in a seaside studio in Westhoek, Belgium, has been chosen by the Belgian Ministry of culture at various times over the years to work in various countries including Hungary, Poland, Japan, Israel, Portugal, and Italy. He has also served as the Chairman of the Belgian National Council of Plastic Arts at UNESCO, participated in numerous international exhibitions, and received many prestigious commissions to create large-scale public works.

None of these honors, however, has caused Fernand Vanderplancke to put on pompous airs in his work or lose the buoyant wit that makes his sculptures such a pleasure to encounter.

A consummate craftsman who casts his own sheets of plaster, from which he creates the molds used to model his bronze works, Vanderplancke creates figures, both human and animal, that are animated by humor but command space with grace and authority. The bronze titled "The Eloquent Reciter Speaks," for example depicts a spindly-legged orator gesturing self-importantly with a variety of simplified shapes that simultaneously capture a sense of character and make a strong abstract statement.

Similarly elongated forms are employed by Vanderplancke in another piece called "Struggle for Life." However, as its title indicates, this figure presents a sense of pathos rather than absurdity by virtue of the sculptor's ability to make semi-abstract forms encompass a broad range of emotional expression. Sometimes the forms veer toward total abstraction, as seen in the bronze entitled "Stand Up with Elegance" —although vestiges of the figure invariably remain in the vertical thrust of the piece.

The degree of figuration can vary greatly, however. In "Shame," for example, references to the figure are minimal. The piece might very well be read as completely abstract with its autonomously flowing, non-specifically organic shape; yet something in the way the abstract form seems to double in on itself suggests the emotion of the title.

In other pieces, such as "L'Inconnu" and

"Shame"

"My Favorite E.T.," the figurative elements are unmistakable. In the former piece, a characteristically long-legged figure with angular features appears to strut and swagger like the comedian Steve Martin doing his "wild and crazy guy" routine. In the latter piece a rotund character with what appear to be long, floppy rabbit ears kicks one stubby leg out into the air like a clumsy ballerina practicing at the bar.

Despite the playful reference in the second title to an extraterrestrial, both of these pieces, like all of Fernand Vanderplancke's bronzes, seem to refer with great sympathy and wit to the human foibles that we all share. Indeed, it is his ability to convey such things with winning charm, yet create forms that will surely endure, that makes Fernand Vanderplancke an important sculptor.

—Wilson Wong

"Cheshire Cat"

"Advice from a Caterpillar

Anne Bachelier in Wonderland: A Match Made In Heaven

"Anne is one of the few artists who understands the difference between a painting and an illustration," the gallerist Neil Zukerman says of his friend and collaborator Anne Bachelier, whose interpretation of the two most important works of Lewis Carroll he recently published back-to-back in a single lavish edition. "An illustration is a moment in a story, a painting is the story." (The original illustrations are on view from October 16 through 30 at CFM Gallery, 112 Greene Street, where deluxe editions, collectors additions, and regular editions of the book are available for purchase during the exhibition.)

Zukerman's point is so well taken that one might ask in this regard why Bachelier need bother to illustrate books at all, given that every one of her own paintings is a veritable epic of visual storytelling, populated by a fantastic cast of characters that would do Carroll himself proud. And it once would have seemed even more to the point to ask if we really needed new versions of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There," given that none of the previous ones published over the years, including a gonzo version by the superb contemporary British illustrator Ralph Steadman, have surpassed the original illustrations in the 1865 edition by John Tenniel. For that matter, few have rivaled the crude charm of the drawings Carroll himself did for the elaborate hand-lettered manuscript (later published in facsimile) when he was still calling the story "Alice's Adventures under Ground."

Neil Zukerman must have known this better than any man alive, since he probably owns every edition of Alice worth the paper it is printed on, being an avid collector of fairy tales and other illustrated books. Yet, also being one of our most innovative publishers of deluxe limited editions, besides being Anne Bachelier's art dealer and biggest booster, and having previously published her brilliant "Rose Daughter," a retelling of "Beauty and the Beast" with a text by Robin McKinley, Zukerman obviously also knew that no living artist could give us a more definitive new view on Alice than she.

Some of us had high hopes, awhile back, for Steadman's version. Surely, we thought, the man who illustrated Hunter Thompson's "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" would come up with a suitably gaga take on a book that was way ahead of its time in terms of its innately "psychedelic" qualities. But that turned out to be precisely the problem: Steadman got carried away with his unrestrained ink-splashing and florid anatomical distortions, turning Alice's journey down the rabbit hole into what was known in the sixties as a "bum trip."

Unlike Steadman, whose book was also a massive ego trip, Anne Bachelier possesses the self-effacement, rare in an artist of her caliber, to surrender completely to Carroll's story and yet embellish the text with her own special vision. Indeed, Anne Bachelier's illustrations for the Alice saga seem nothing less than the pictures that Lewis Carroll himself would have created for his twin masterpieces had he possessed draftsmanly gifts to match his literary ones.

Perhaps one of the most striking examples to back up this conclusion, both for the similarity of the compositions and the contrast between Carroll's own rudimentary ink drawing and Bachelier's elaborately fleshed out mixed media conception, is the scene captioned in the new edition "Advice from a Caterpillar." In Carroll's drawing the hookah-smoking caterpillar sitting atop a mushroom dispensing sage advice is awkwardly anthropomorphic, as though the author was not

"The Caucus Race"

quite sure how to concoct a worm-like creature that could appear believable in conversation with a little girl. So he compromised and concocted a figure that resembles a paunchy pasha. Here, as all throughout Carroll's illuminated manuscript, Alice, with her disproportionately large head and lank hair, appears as stiffly Victorian as a line engraving advertising children's frocks and pinafores in an antique Sears Roebuck catalog.

Of course, it really isn't fair to compare Carroll's sketches (which are not without their own amateurish attributes) to the superbly realized visualizations of Bachelier, except to make clear how successfully the artist realizes what was beyond the author's grasp. Bachelier's electric blue caterpillar, for example, is a fanciful yet entirely plausible creature—at least in the context in which it appears: enthroned on a glowing gold mushroom, delivering a lordly lecture to the little girl below.

As for Alice herself, in contrast to her somewhat dowdy previous incarnations, Bachelier reimagines her as a fantasy princess in gossamer white taffeta, with long tresses that trail above her head as she plunges down the rabbit-hole in the illustration called "Falling," where the artist has also accessorized her for the occasion with a flowing red sash. This glamorous make-over of the book's main character, so thoroughly in keeping with Bachelier's elegant style and penchant for opulence, is perhaps her most radical departure from the precedents set by the author and all previous illustrators of his text.

However, Bachelier's innate visual intelligence justifies the liberties she takes with Carroll's character in the episode where Alice's neck temporarily elongates so much that she can converse with a bird nested in the uppermost branches of a tree. While even the best previous attempts to visualize this metamorphosis took on a giraffe-like grotesqueness, in Bachelier's "Alice and the Bird's Nest," the little girl's long white neck, coupled with the fluffy white gown, transforms her into a creature gracefully suggestive of a swan. Here, too, the long, vertical composition, depicting long-necked Alice, the white bird, its red nest, and the sinuous tree-limbs with their artfully placed scatterings of aquamarine leaves, lends the scene the ornate beauty of a Japanese scroll or decorative screen. Bachelier's stylistic opulence also endows more intricate fold-out color plates, such as "The Caucus Race" and "The Tea Party," with an unprecedented lavishness, while her delightfully scruffy "Cheshire Cat" boasts the most winningly wicked grin in the long history of Alice illustrations.

Neil Zukerman had the creative foresight to realize that Anne Bachelier and Lewis Carroll had to be a match made in heaven, and he designed the book accordingly, creating a unique vertical, flip-over format with "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" on one side and "Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There" on the other. He augmented Bachelier's large mixed media illustrations for each text with smaller watercolor chapter-headings, adding decorative details to other pages to unify the design in a manner that will surely make the volume a treasured find for generations of collectors to come. And although he might not say so himself, he proved in the process that Anne Bachelier, Lewis Carroll, and Neil Zukerman is a menage a trois made in heaven!

—Ed McCormack

Marga Duin: A Sense of Place in the Abstract

Working in a seaside studio in Zandvoort, the Netherlands, Marga Duin has evolved an atmospheric mode of abstraction with which she can convey a seemingly limitless variety of moods—all while making strong formal statements by virtue of her unerring eye for form and color .

Duin's acrylics on canvas are at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, where she is artist in residence from September 24 to December 24.

Initially we are drawn to them by their evocative color harmonies and bold compositions, in which flat painted forms are combined with more gestural elements in a manner that lends them both considerable chromatic and tactile appeal. The longer we study Duin's compositions, however, the more it becomes clear that there is a great deal more content to these pictures than initially meets the eye.

Traces of imagery emerge from among the shifting planes of color: angular shapes that suggest fragments of architecture partially obscured by fog, roughly rectangular forms evoking rustic windows, and other elements that conjure up a sense of landscape.

One of the most overt compositions in the latter regard is the acrylic on canvas that Duin calls "Schakering," which, with its deep blue and purple hues, suggests a nocturnal landscape where squared off hills or icebergs converge with sea and cloud. While "Schakering" evokes a northern wilderness possessed of a harsh climate and an unforgiving beauty, another painting by Duin, entitled "Afgemeerd" presents more blocky shapes suggesting clustered buildings which could be factories or fisheries. Yet both paintings function primarily as abstract compositions. The imagery that emerges from their boldly delineated forms shifts in and out of focus like some lingering, dreamy reminiscence.

One of the things that makes Marga Duin's paintings so evocative is her paint handling, with frosty white impastos often scumbled over earth colors or blues in a manner that evokes a sense of mists, clouds, or smoke floating over land or sky. Yet her forms are so starkly simplified as to cause a tension between the abstract and the literal, between the atmospheric and the geometric elements in her compositions. This tension between the descriptive and the formal tantalizes the eye and the imagination.

In the painting entitled "Iquacú," for example, the orange and purple shapes, amorphous yet bracketed between sharply drawn lines, appear as abstract as certain paintings by Nicholas de Stael, with whom Marga Duin seems to share a sensuous

"Eigen wereld"

delight in placing blocks and patches of pigment in precise proximity to each other for their own sake. And surely one can appreciate this composition for its luscious forms and tactile surface alone. However, the mind plays tricks on one when confronted with Duin's canvases, and suddenly the subliminal image clicks in of vibrant, sun splashed land masses caught between pale blue sky and river, casting their brilliant reflections below.

Even in Duin's most ostensibly abstract canvases, such as "Eigen wereld," with its bluntly squared off blue and brown forms seeming to shoulder each other in shallow space, there is a sense of atmosphere and a specific sense of place. Inevitably, Marga Duin takes us someplace new and unfamiliar, even while conjuring compositions with formal attributes that more than justify their creation.

—Laurie Swan Lovinger

Focusing on the Many Faces of Contemporary Photography

Surely ours will someday be seen as the era in which photography, youngest of the established arts, father to film and video, finally found its footing and came into its own. No recent exhibition makes this clearer than "Tripping the Light Fantastic," at Agora Gallery, 415 West Broadway, from September 10 through October 1.

The show is especially useful as a microcosmic panorama of current trends, from the digital revolution to neoclassicists who adhere to the aesthetic of black and white— such as Dennis Mecham whose exquisite gelatin silver prints of nudes and other subjects have a decidedly surreal quality— to photo-abstractionists like Nancy Lee, whose bird's-eye views transform highways and concert crowds into visually vertiginous compositions.

Equally evocative are Suzanne Russo's "Organic Vessels," in which land masses, gorges, and other natural subjects take on the dynamic gestural and textural qualities of Abstract Expression paintings, and Lindsey Chiet's lyrical, ethereally blurred color images of butterflies in flight or alighting on flowers. Erik Simanis prefers sharply focused black and white to endow birds or human divers in flight with the solidity of shadowed marble, while the digital photographs of Jake France often focus on brilliantly colorful floral forms to sensual effect, creating images of endangered tropical beauty that speak eloquently for environmental protection. Along with nudes, Nathan J. Lester also photographs flowers, albeit in the manner of a portrait artist in his close-up gelatin silver prints, which are at once erotically suggestive and austere, with their subtly modulated monochromes.

Muted of color, Tara Bishop's images of weathered, rusted surfaces and crumbling interiors give poignant evidence of time's decay and silence, in contrast to Enrique Crusellas Prieto's riotously intricate digital print of Keith Richards and Mick Jagger figurines in a novelty store window further enlivened by a visual cacophony of street reflections. Mexican-born Enrique Rubio captures the eerie atmosphere of nocturnal suburbia and deserted public parks, their shadowy paths illuminated by street lamps, in his dreamily atmospheric digital prints. Lindsey Meyers often includes poetically evocative words or fragments of text in her C-prints, which invariably have a sense of drama suggesting stills in an imaginary film, as seen in one image suggesting a shutdown filling station in a Mexican border town.

Beth Parin transforms reality in her own fashion in her black and white photographic prints of enigmatic places and activities, bringing yet another kind of drama to the fore with pictures that both please and tantalize the viewer for their elusive symbolic qualities. Michelle Melo, who has exhibited widely throughout South America, plays off gender stereotypes in images such as one portrait of an elderly woman who could be a stand-in for everybody's grandmother puckering up to bestow a kiss, creating wry yet dead-serious social commentary on the various ways in which women are either demeaned or doted upon as sex objects and fashion victims.

"Tripping the Light Fantastic" is aptly named, for the exhibition reveals possibilities that those unfamiliar with the many innovative directions contemporary photography has been taking in recent years will certainly find both fantastic and educational. This show is a must-see for anyone who wishes to familiarize him or herself with what is new and exciting in this ever evolving art. —Peter Wiley

Exploring Tom O'Hara's Wild Kingdom

This Thing is called "Nature Bride" but you can't help thinking "Bride of Frankenstein." It's built around the skull of an actual wild boar, the sort of object Tom O'Hara might just happen to have lying around his studio upstate in New Paltz , New York, much as other artists might have brushes, tubes, of paint and other more conventional supplies on hand.

Entwined with and twisting in and out of this fearsome-looking fossil are strips of cut hide. And as befits a bride, it wears a dainty tiara fashioned from wild flowers, and has a long train of the same cut hide trailing behind it, onto the gnarled tree root on which the sculpture is mounted.

"Nature Bride" is only one of the creature features in Tom O'Hara's new solo exhibition of sculpture and wall reliefs, at New Century Artists 530 West 25th Street, from September 1 through October 1 (reception: Thursday, September 8, from 6 to 8 PM). It is a companion piece to "Capricornus the Sea Goat," another startling sculpture first seen in O'Hara's exhibition at Ezair Gallery on Madison Avenue this past May. Indeed, they make a great couple, as creatures go in O'Hara's wild kingdom.

Some folks encountering O'Hara's work for the first time might find a piece like "Nature Bride" a little scary. But the artist himself says, "It's only scary if you want it to be. I see it as more mysterious than macabre, and think it symbolizes the absence of compassion in nature."

Looking at it this way does put a different complexion on The Thing. You begin to see the poignant side of this monster bride, all decked out for her nuptials in the dog eats dog world of nature, where everything must die and decay. Then it dawns on you: Nature, inescapable even in the hives we call cities, is where we all reside anyway. And while those of us a little higher up the food chain may look down our snouts at our fellow critters scurrying below, we all meet the same eventual fate; all return to the same organic stew from which O'Hara gathers the materials to make his assault upon our oh-so-civilized sensibilities!

In his own quiet way Tom O'Hara, whose work has been lauded by art world figures as diverse as Bruce Dorfman, Knox Martin, and Ivan Karp, is every bit as radical an artist as Francis Bacon at his most harrowing, or Bruce Connor, when he was making his frightening junk assemblages of melting baby dolls tethered to charred potty-chairs, or Bruce Nauman in any of his shrieking video and neon tantrums. From the detritus of nature, its twisted roots, clinging vines, dried plants, hardened mushrooms, flayed skins, and animal bones, O'Hara concocts symbolic configurations that can all but set your hair on fire, so close

"Deep Space"

do they cut to the core of our mortal meaning (whatever we may, in our mortal ignorance, believe that to be!).

Other writers have written of the formidable formal qualities in O'Hara's pieces—their earthy colorations (akin in the most offhandedly natural way to chromatic aspects of Cubism), and the tactile, thrusting, almost Abstract Expressionistic velocity he achieves with various raw organic materials in his assemblage paintings and wall reliefs. All of these observations are right on the money: O'Hara is as rooted in art historical relevance as he is in the woof and warp of the natural world. At the same time, though, O'Hara is a maverick talent bent on wreaking botanic mayhem to show us just how pitiless nature can really be. His scorched earth policy in regard to materials results in surfaces that bubble and boil with a sense of ruthless organic activity. In assemblage paintings such as "Crucible," 2005, skeins of sinuous fronds or other unidentifiable tendril-like plant forms swirl in intricate patterns within a fiery overall atmosphere of acrylic pigments as subtly various as one of Jules Olitski's shimmering color fields.

The very title of O'Hara's "Deep Space," a 3-D combined media piece also created this year, presents a challenge to the sanctity of the flat picture plane as perceived by strict formalists who insist on a segregation of sculptural and painterly concerns. Here, hovering clumps and knots of tactile organic matter, floating rhythmically over a lyrical gestural field of burnished reddish brown hues flowing into nocturnal blues, convey a sense of earthly and cosmic relationships hinting at the ultimate transcendence of natural cycles of decay and death. At once rugged and ethereal, "Deep Space" speaks eloquently (at least to this reviewer) of spiritual release from what O'Hara calls "the absence of compassion in nature."

Also suggestive of transcendence is O'Hara's combined media sculpture "Icarus," 2005, its monolithic organic form thrusting into space like a barnacled Brancusi from a characteristically rough, rustic base. For while some Renaissance moralists sometimes cited the fall of Icarus as a cautionary tale, a warning against going to extremes and a call for moderation, others interpreted the myth as a symbol of humankind's intellectual questing and sense of adventure. And it is the spirit of this latter interpretation that O'Hara's "Icarus" appears to embody by virtue of its sheer vitality—or "Vitalism," as one critic referred to the artist's plumbing of the metaphysical element in nature.

Yet the uncertainty and darkness of the world we inhabit continues to be a recurring theme as well in O'Hara's art, as seen in three large horizontal wall reliefs, respectively titled "Prelude," "Intermezzo," and "Finale," which hang together in this exhibition as a triptych. Together, their ruggedly encrusted surfaces enveloped in overall blackness, with luminous touches of red glowing through like embers, they comprise a terrain tantamount, as their titles suggest, to a somber evolutionary symphony. As stately and elegiac in its own way as the brooding canvases of Mark Rothko, this sonorous frieze-like installation is one of Tom O'Hara's crowning achievements.

—J. Sanders Eaton

Ethel Schlesinger Confronts Nature's "Terrible Beauty"

"Maybe it's because I'm a native New Yorker, a lifelong city person, that nature holds such mystery for me," says Ethel Schlesinger, whose new exhibition, "Works from Nature," can be seen at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from September 6 through 24.

It is just this sense of mystery, conveyed with almost pantheistic passion, that invests Schlesinger's collage paintings and sculptures, which incorporate twigs, vines bark, moss, burls, sand, driftwood, and other natural materials, with such power and presence.

One especially exemplary piece in this regard is the mixed media sculpture that Schlesinger calls "Under the Stump." It combines the ceramic form of a tree-stump with thick vines which flow from it like writhing serpents, and a large clump of moss. At its base is a network of root-like forms as intricate as entrails. All of these elements, either foraged or formed from the earthy medium of fired clay, are layered in a such a way as to suggest a cut-away chunk of matter literally torn from the earth. The piece has the fanciful quality of a tenement for elves or nature sprites uprooted by some cataclysmic upheaval in Middle Earth. Yet, on a deeper level, Schlesinger appears to be in touch with the same underlying energies that Dylan Thomas must have tapped into when he penned his inspired line about "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower."

"Eruption"

Indeed, Schlesinger's ability to channel such forces and energies enables her to arrive at abstraction in the most natural manner: through the distillation of essences, rather than by design (in either the figurative and literal sense of that term). And her intuitive process imbues her forms with a metaphysical dimension far beyond the reach of conventional landscape representation.

In this regard Ethel Schlesinger's true aesthetic ancestors are artists such as Arthur Dove, Georgia O'Keeffe, and others in the Stieglitz circle who, early in the twentieth century, before Abstract Expressionism usurped the European avant garde, forged a homegrown version of modernism rooted in our own native soil. Schlesinger extends the explorations of these worthy forbearers through her expressive and inventive treatment of forms that, as someone once wrote of Dove, manage to "cull the pastoral out of improbable situations."

For just as Dove was able to suggest not only the funnel-like forms of fog horns but their mournful vowel-sounds bellowing out over billowing waves, Schlesinger evokes not only the physical qualities of prehistoric creatures but a more metaphysical sense of their ancient origins in her combine painting "Primordium," with its fossil-like forms set against a richly textured field of acrylic mixed with sand.

Yet Schlesinger's equal ability to also make the rugged tactility of a simpler subject palpable in pigment can be seen in another work called "Bark." Here, painterly images of hefty, gnarled tree limbs, built up to almost bas-relief thickness with earthy umber and ocher impastos, are seen locked like geriatric lovers in a knotty embrace. The paint surface, apparently attacked with a sharp instrument, is scored with crevices as deep as those in an elephant's skin, adding to the tactile appeal of the composition, which projects a compressed power akin to the gestural explosions of so-called "action painting"— albeit pregnantly arrested in motion by the sheer weight of its material substance.

Although trees have been a standard subject of numberless artists for as many centuries as landscape painting has existed, few others have boiled down their stolid strength to express the abstract essence of "treeness" anywhere near as effectively as Schlesinger does here. By contrast, other works by Schlesinger, such as "Vines" and "Coral," convey more fluid facets of nature through a sinuous linearity that can remind one, at times, of Brice Marden's "Cold Mountain" paintings. In "Vines," actual vines, interspersed with yellow forms resembling flowers, are employed as calligraphic elements on a surface with irregularly shaped contours that further enhance the flowing organic rhythms of the composition. In "Coral," pictures of actual coral and pieces of bark are swept up in washes of luminous acrylic color to exhilarating effect.

Here, as in all of Schlesinger's paintings, the collage elements are so completely subsumed and saturated by the thickly pigmented surface as to become indecipherable as individual images, blending into the whole and contributing to the overall thrust of the composition in an almost subliminal manner, like those minor rhythms and resonances in a poem or a piece of music that almost go unnoticed, yet are nonetheless indispensable to its success.

For all her ability to project a tangible sense of natural essences, however, nature is more than a subject for Schlesinger; rather, it is a vocabulary through which she can express a spectrum of emotions ranging from the joyful to the elegiac. In the latter regard, although she asserts that she never creates a painting or sculpture to "comment" directly on something in the news, profoundly catastrophic events that shadow all of our lives occasionally find their way into her work. Thus the assemblage that she calls "Afterwards" echoes the public trauma of 9/11 with pale twigs flaring like flames from within a blackened dish drainer affixed to a dark ground. The very banality of the found object (which one cannot help but see in context as an engulfed and charred architectural skeleton), adds to the poignancy of the statement, suggesting how such events must now be integrated with the mundane moments and implements of daily living.

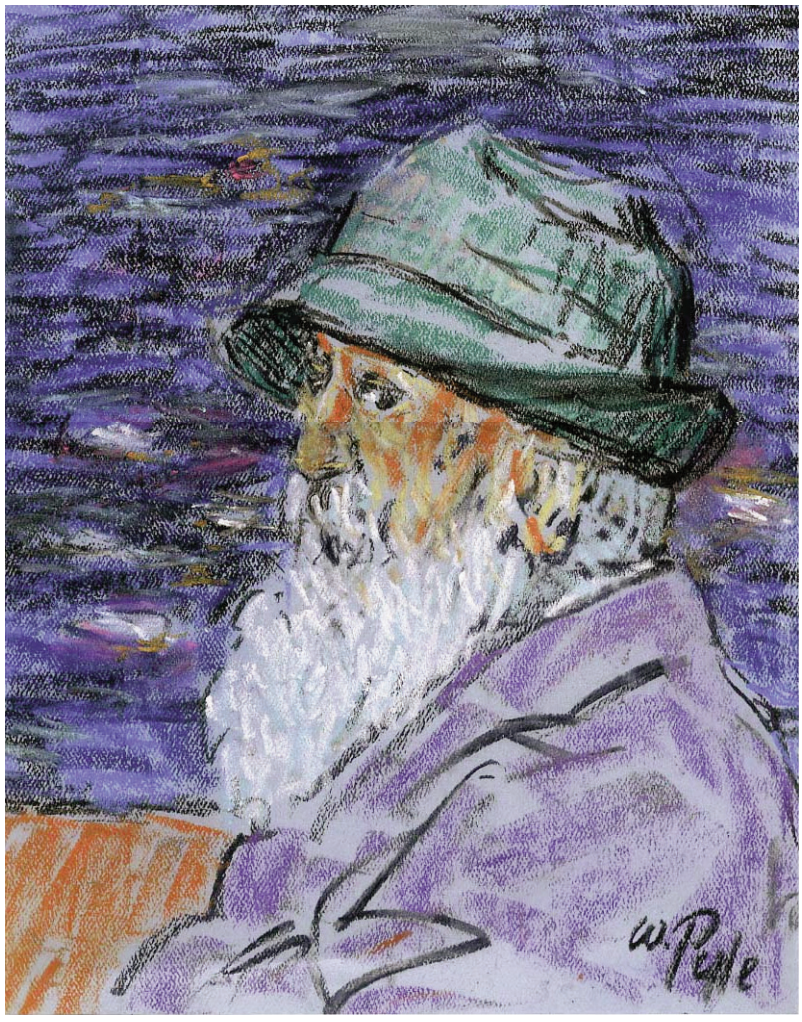
Similarly, in the larger composition that Schlesinger calls "Eruption," the terrible beauty of the violent, rushing rhythms and aqueous forms evokes the force of the recent tsunami that tore through several coastal areas in Asia, taking so many lives and homes. Here, too, while the intermingling streams of shimmering blue and visceral red hues should not be interpreted too literally, Ethel Schlesinger conveys with characteristic intensity how the magnificence of nature can turn suddenly malevolent , sweeping away all that we hold dear.

—Ed McCormack

Willis Pyle Pays Tribute to His Art Historical Inspirations

Willis Pyle, whose work was last seen in the Soho exhibition space of Montserrat Gallery and will now be featured regularly in the ongoing salon exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, Chelsea, 547 West 27th Street, continues in a great tradition of artist/illustrators that includes Toulouse Lautrec, Honore Daumier, Constantin Guys and a select circle of others, down through the centuries, who have chronicled the human spectacle with timeless verve and wit.

Pyle's vision is populist, embracing the whole of life with a gusto unknown by those who regard the realm of aesthetics as a formal garden set apart from the gritty, sometimes gaudy, environs of daily life. Painting with the eye of a boulavardier and the heart of a lover, he imbues genre subjects such as race track and circus scenes with a rakish charm rarely seen in contemporary painting.



"Monet"

Perhaps his only peer in this regard among his contemporaries is Red Grooms, who would have to appreciate what Pyle was getting at in his most recent exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, Soho, which featured portraits of some of the most revered European modernist masters. For like Grooms, who has created memorable narrative assemblages of art historical events such as the dinner given in honor of Henri Rousseau in Picasso's studio in 1908, Pyle remains a quintessentially American artist, even when he pays tribute to beloved forbearers from Montmartre to Tahiti.

Indeed, the inkjet prints on acid free paper that Pyle exhibited at Montserrat Gallery recently captured exalted figures such as Degas, Cezanne, and Gauguin in the most delightful way, rendering them as entertainingly accessible as one's favorite comic strip characters: making Van Gogh in his yellow straw sombrero seem as down-to-earth as Dick Tracy; Manet in his top hat as eccentrically distinctive as Smoky Stover!

Or perhaps a better analogy would be to baseball trading cards, since Pyle is so obviously a true fan of these great predecessors. His affection comes across in the easy familiarity with which he depicts them, bringing his characteristic wit to bear so tellingly on their individual personalities. For example, one looks at Pyle's portrait of Degas with his hand to his chin in a gesture of thoughtful contemplation and can almost see the ballerina that he is contemplating as a subject, pirouetting just outside the picture space. This seems an especially sympathetic portrayal, since Pyle has painted ballerinas as well, putting his own unique vernacular spin on them— if the reader will pardon an unpardonable yet irresistible pun!

Another artist with whom Pyle must feel a particular kinship is Toulouse-Lautrec, for like that great predecessor, Pyle is attracted to what some might consider the seedier amusements of humankind, finding more vitality at the race track and in the circus ring than in the tonier aspects of society. Unlike Toulouse-Lautrec, however, who had aristocratic origins but whose dwarfish appearance and alcoholic overindulgence made him something of an outcast—a member of the very underclass he depicted—Pyle is a dapper and worldly gentleman who seems to view such scenes from the slight distance of a bemused boulevardier.

Indeed, Pyle's background reflects his cosmopolitan style, having over the course of a long and varied art career been an animator for Disney Studios, contributed drawings to chic magazines such as Harpers and Vogue, created the animation for numerous TV commercials, and originated The Society of Illustrators' Hall of Fame. Yet, even since turning full-time to easel painting a few seasons back, Pyle has retained some of the special skills of the illustrator, as did Toulouse-Lautrec, whose best paintings have the same animated qualities as his posters for the Moulin Rouge. And Pyle's portrait of the dissolute little genius, with his big hat and beard, is one of his most winning recent works, capturing both the pathos and dignity of its subject.

Renoir is another artist to whose image Willis Pyle does great justice in a portrait, depicting him with jaunty cap and white beard, the very picture of mature health and vitality. Anyone who has seen Pyle's paintings of voluptuous nudes frolicking in the countryside, wherein even his brushstrokes seem bemused by the bountiful beauty of nature, both human and vegetable, can safely assume that Pyle must regard Renoir, the painter of rosy, undraped milkmaids, as a kindred spirit. For both artists exemplify a kind of wholesome hedonism that transcends style and artistic period.

One of Willis Pyle's most remarkable qualities as an artist is his ability to balance compassion and ironic detachment in a manner that makes his work at once affectionate and insightful. And these qualities are everywhere in evidence in his equally impressive portraits of other artists he admires, such as Cezanne, Gauguin, and Monet. Indeed, this series, in which Pyle pays timeless tribute to his artistic inspirations, is one of his finest accomplishments to date.

—Maurice Taplinger

Contemporary Latin Rhythms at Agora Gallery, Chelsea

As major group surveys at MoMA and other museums have made abundantly clear, Latin America has a rich diversity of contemporary art. While no commercial venue could attempt a definitive overview, "The Latin American Fine Art Exhibition," at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, presents an auspicious sampling of styles from October 18 through November 8.

Alicia Sotomayor creates sparking watercolor compositions in which two empty rowboats on a beach or a single rose convey an inexplicable emotional poignancy. Sotomayor imparts to such subjects a sense of solitary drama, yet the real beauty of her work derives from her sense of form, color, and the tropical light of her native Puerto Rico.

By contrast Eliardo Neves Franca's "Land of Veracruz" combines visual wit and expressive figuration in visual narratives akin to Borges' literary forays into folkloric metaphysics. Franca's expressively stylized dancers and musicians seem to exist in a timeless cafe society where high-life meets lowlife and all class distinctions are banished by a joyful hedonism.

The Mexican painter Gabriela Orcí bathes her abstract acrylics in golden auras that suggest solar radiance. Her compositions, with their sweeping, boldly brushed forms, are vigorous gestural excursions possessed of an improvisatory freedom and an energy akin to the most uplifting jazz music. By contrast, Dieo Ramirez' still life paintings of objects suspended from string have a tantalizing quality of expectancy. Ramirez, who has exhibited throughout Columbia and the United States, invests an image such as a pair of faded blue jeans hovering in space with an almost numinous mystery.

Whether working in oil on canvas or the less traditional medium of industrial paint and oil on a long horizontal sheet of iron, German Rocca, who received his degree in Fine Arts from the University of Chile, invests large-scale realist figure paintings with narrative drama and visual impact. Rocca's paintings of swimmers and figures in boats are notable for the artist's unique use of space. Patricia Lujan on the other hand finds the monumental qualities in simple still life compositions. Working in mixed media, Luján paints fruits such as oranges and lemons in close-up, their surfaces subtly defined through her skillful manipulation of color and texture, the sensual forms swelling to the edges of her dynamically compressed compositions.

PJ Pereira employs images of the fierce-looking deities of the Yoruba religion to create mixed media paintings that celebrate the vibrant cultures of Africa and Brazil. The mask-like faces that Pereira commits to canvas in acrylic or mixed media project an awesome power, even as one savors them for their purely aesthetic pleasures.

Alejandro Balbontin, who studied architecture at the University of Chile before discovering his true vocation, reveals that training in the structuring of his acrylics on canvas, in which the figures that emerge from his unique manner of color construction have the chromatic shimmer of stained glass. Like the American painter Abraham Rattner, Balbontin marries the fractured planes of Cubism to the vigorous brushwork of Expressionism to create a sensual personal synthesis.

Also including work by María Inés Lagos, whose solo exhibition is reviewed elsewhere in this issue, this skillfully curated showcase presents several talented artists who exemplify the diverse vitality of Latin American art.

—Marjorie Perloff

Sheila Finnigan Puts a Post-Pop Spin on History Painting

Sheila Finnigan, a much exhibited figurative painter from Chicago, whose work is characterized by the funky eccentricity for which the art of that city is known, called her recent exhibition at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 24th Street, in Chelsea, "iconomics." The title seemed an ironic comment on the fact that to be an iconoclast can be a lonely position in an era driven by celebrity worship and greed. Finnigan, however, probably wouldn't have it any other way, for the superficiality and rampant materialism of America today gives her much to react against. Indeed, her work benefits immensely from a jaundiced view of recent history that she expresses in a style for which she has coined the term "Cross Pop Culturalism."

Here, as in her earlier solo exhibition in the same venue a little over a year ago, Sheila Finnigan presented Andy Warhol as sort of Pop ringmaster, presiding over the exhibition with his rag doll persona and mop of silver hair—particularly in one full-length portrait where he stands in a bowl of Campbell's tomato soup beating on an old army drum. In her more recent exhibition, however, other icons such as Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy shared center stage with Andy, creating the sense of a three-ring mausoleum for media manipulators and martyrs.

In a group of three large compositions that Finnigan dubbed "American Dream," each of these personalities was painted reclining on an antique chaise lounge in the manner of the French neoclassicist painter Jacques-Louis David's "Madame Recamier." David, of course, is an auspicious painter for Finnigan to identify with, since he invented a new kind of history painting, concerned with current events rather than ancient or mythological ones. In her previous solo show at Pleiades, Finnigan painted Warhol after David's famous 1793 masterpiece "The Death of Marat, "in a rocker rather than a bathtub, with Campbell's tomato soup substituting for blood. In the new painting, there's a Campbell's soup can on the wall behind Andy as he reclines as languidly as a Matisse odalisque on the chaise with a paintbrush in one hand.

Real blood rather than metaphorical tomato soup mars the same pink Chanel suit and pillbox hat that Jackie Kennedy wore on the day of JFK's assassination, as she lounges like a grieving ghost on the same chaise lounge as Andy in another large painting by Finnigan. Nearby is a shadowy picture-within-the-picture of Lee Harvey Oswald brandishing his rifle, eerily accenting this memorable tribute to our most glamorous modern widow.

The proximity of Finnigan's painting of Marilyn, JFK's one-time mistress, occupying the same chaise lounge while holding a rose, near a lampshade decorated with red pom poms worthy of a bordello, creates symbolic symmetry, commenting on how the private soap operas of the rich and famous become public spectacles in our age of instant history spewed out for a ravenous public by an omnipresent and obliging media.

"American Dream: Marilyn Monroe"

Finnigan's strong moral streak informs such imagistic juxtapositions with multiple layers of irony and meaning, which are enhanced by her habit of including some of the dramatic props seen in her paintings as installation elements in her exhibitions. In her previous show, an actual picnic table littered with empty Campbell's soup cans and party balloons seemed to signify that the party of Pop idolatry had ended; here, along with the old army drum seen in the aforementioned Warhol portrait, the main prop is the chaise lounge that appears in the paintings after David, sitting empty and adding to the overall mood of elegy—not so much for the individuals depicted as for all that they once signified in the public imagination.

Other icons such as Albert Einstein and Leonardo da Vinci (the latter a rare departure from modern subject matter painted in tribute to fellow Chicago Imagist Ed Paschke) are depicted in much larger than life close-up portraits that, while less complex than Finnigan's allegorical compositions, call even more attention to her painterly finesse. For in these works, the "action" is in the manipulation of the paint itself. Finnigan often works on pastel cloth rather than canvas, employing a unique mixed media technique to produce "blurred" effects that lend her paintings an exhilarating fluidity. The technique enables her to transcend the pigment-clogged clichés of Neo-Expressionism, even while employing spontaneous gestures and drips to lend her compositions a sense of movement and immediacy.

One of the most exciting works in the present exhibition, in terms of its historical sweep, is the diptych called "Pop!" The title, although something of a double entendre, refers to a popping balloon in the picture, signifying dashed illusions or hopes rather than the art movement to which Finnigan appears to feel a somewhat ambivalent affinity. The composition presents a procession of figures resembling a Medieval parade of fools, even while including among its ragtag company geniuses and statesmen such as James Joyce, Albert Einstein, and Winston Churchill.

Also woven into the mix are a bull recalling the gored beast in Guernica, an Egyptian mummy, figures personifying ancient Greek and Aztec civilization (with an emphasis on the ritual bloodletting of the latter), among other disparate symbols of humankind's eternal folly. Although revealing roots in the raucous Chicago Imagism of older artists such as June Leaf, Ellen Lanyon, and Seymour Rosofsky, this ambitious multi-figure historical frieze is tempered by the post-Pop irony mixed with wry humanism that sets the art of Sheila Finnigan apart.

—Ed McCormack

The Postmodern Landscapes of Stephanie Rauschenbusch

For some reason, perhaps having to do with the instant empathy we feel in our very bones when we see the human image—not to mention its erotic appeal and the opportunity it affords for novelty and even sensationalism—our recognition of what is truly innovative in contemporary landscape painting always seems to lag a little behind our appreciation of new figure painting.

This seems especially shortsighted when one thinks of the major role that landscape has played in the development of modernism, particularly in regard to Cezanne, as well as its ongoing vitality in the work of artists of artists such as Stephanie Rauschenbusch, who have found new ways to make landscape relevant to the aesthetic evolution of the the postmodern era.

A graduate of both Harvard and Columbia universities who has exhibited at the Florence Biennale, A.M. Sachs, and Katharina Rich Perlow galleries, among numerous other venues, Rauschenbusch first caught my attention with a superb series of large watercolors that she showed at the Painting Center, in Soho, in 2003. In a review of that exhibition I cited these works, inspired by Cape Cornwall, a remote and rugged region of Southwest England, where the artist spent part of a summer as a recipient of The Brisons Veor Residency, for "their transcription of the landscape into rhythmically jotted forms that fairly writhe with energy."

Rauschenbusch's most recent solo show, "Afternoon Light: American Landscapes in Oil and Watercolor," at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, was every bit as impressive and even more varied, encompassing locations ranging from the Grand Canyon, to the Seattle waterfront, to the Christo Gates in Central Park, as well as scenes in Pennsylvania, Maine, Ithaca, San Francisco, and Brooklyn. One of the highlights of the show was "The Grand Canyon, April Snowstorm," a panoramic oil in a horizontal format, painted in 2002, that takes on an almost metaphysical dimension, with its surreal-seeming yet factual contrasts of swirling snow and the sunlit mesas of the Painted Desert. However, the balance that Rauschenbusch maintains between detailed description of the mesas, with their colorful bands of red and yellow sediment and bentonite clay, and a tactile succulence and fluidity that distinguishes the picture in purely painterly terms, upstages even the atmospheric contrasts of the contradictory weather conditions.

While the epic composition of "The Grand Canyon, April Snowstorm" suggests a spiritual connection to the transcendent vistas of The Hudson River Valley School and the Luminists, "Grand Canyon Suite," a large watercolor from the same year,

"Grand Canyon Suite"

reveals Rauschenbusch's kinship with that now woefully neglected American master of the medium, Charles Burchfield. Indeed, few artists since Burchfield have wielded watercolor as dynamically as Rauschenbusch does here, exploiting its sparkling translucency and linear capabilities to fill the composition with light and delineate the sinuous rhythms of roiling cloud formations, craggy rocks, and desert vegetation, even while imbuing the scene with a depth, a presence, and a sense of scale that one normally associates with oils.

For less actively picturesque subjects that do not naturally lend themselves to similar treatment, Rauschenbusch employs a grid, a device she developed in her early still life phase, to rhythmically energize and enhance her compositions in a manner as effective in its own way as the more ostensibly abstract mark-making of Jennifer Bartlett and Joan Snyder. The method is especially dazzling in the series of oils she calls "Christo's Gates Reflected in the Conservatory Boat Lake."

Its paths and bare trees blanketed in snow, Central Park could appear relatively austere compared to the panoramic wilderness and dramatic climatic contrasts of Rauschenbusch's Grand Canyon paintings—even somewhat enlivened by the bright orange skirts of Christo's vast conceptual conceit. However, Rauschenbusch brings the composition to dazzling life with juicy strokes of the same fiery hue, segmented within the squares of the grid, where they intermingle with brilliant blues, to lend the watery reflections in the Conservatory Boat Lake the electric charge of snaking neon.

A similar approach is employed by Rauschenbusch to softer, more lyrical effect in the sizable watercolor "The Gate of Heaven: Brooklyn Botanic Gardens #3." Here the lush green foliage surrounding the graceful Asian arch and the watery expanse in which it stands are seen within a grid that animates the serene subject and its reflection ever so subtly, subjecting its stillness to slight optical shifts that call attention to the sensual strokes of color that are its chromatic components and investing the entire composition with an overall pastoral shimmer recalling Monet.

The device of the grid is employed in an even more subdued manner in other works, such as the watercolor "Seattle Waterfront #2," where it serves to emphasize the geometric foundations of sailboats, ferries, and motorboats, as well as to anchor diverse elements seen at various distances—such as watery waves, the city skyline, verdant hills, and a small automobile idling along the dockside— securely to the picture plane, thus unifying an especially busy composition.

In her oil on canvas "The Brooklyn Bridge, Twilight," however, the artist again dispenses with the grid, finding the thrusting verticals and horizontals of the structure sufficient to provide "push and pull" at the top of the composition and exploiting its luminous mirror-image dissolving in the river to create equal visual interest down below. The result is a work which, like all of Stephanie Rauschenbusch's oils and watercolors, makes a strong formal statement while remaining faithful to the subject at hand by honoring those eternal verities on which the value of all good realist painting invariably must rest. —Ed McCormack

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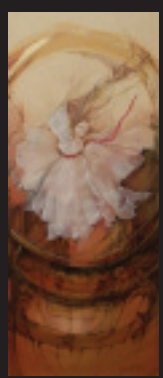

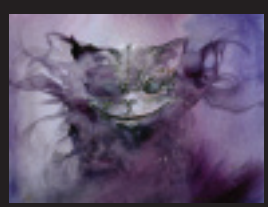

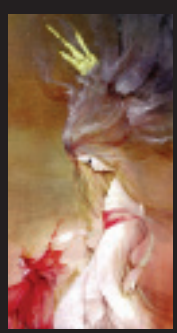

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