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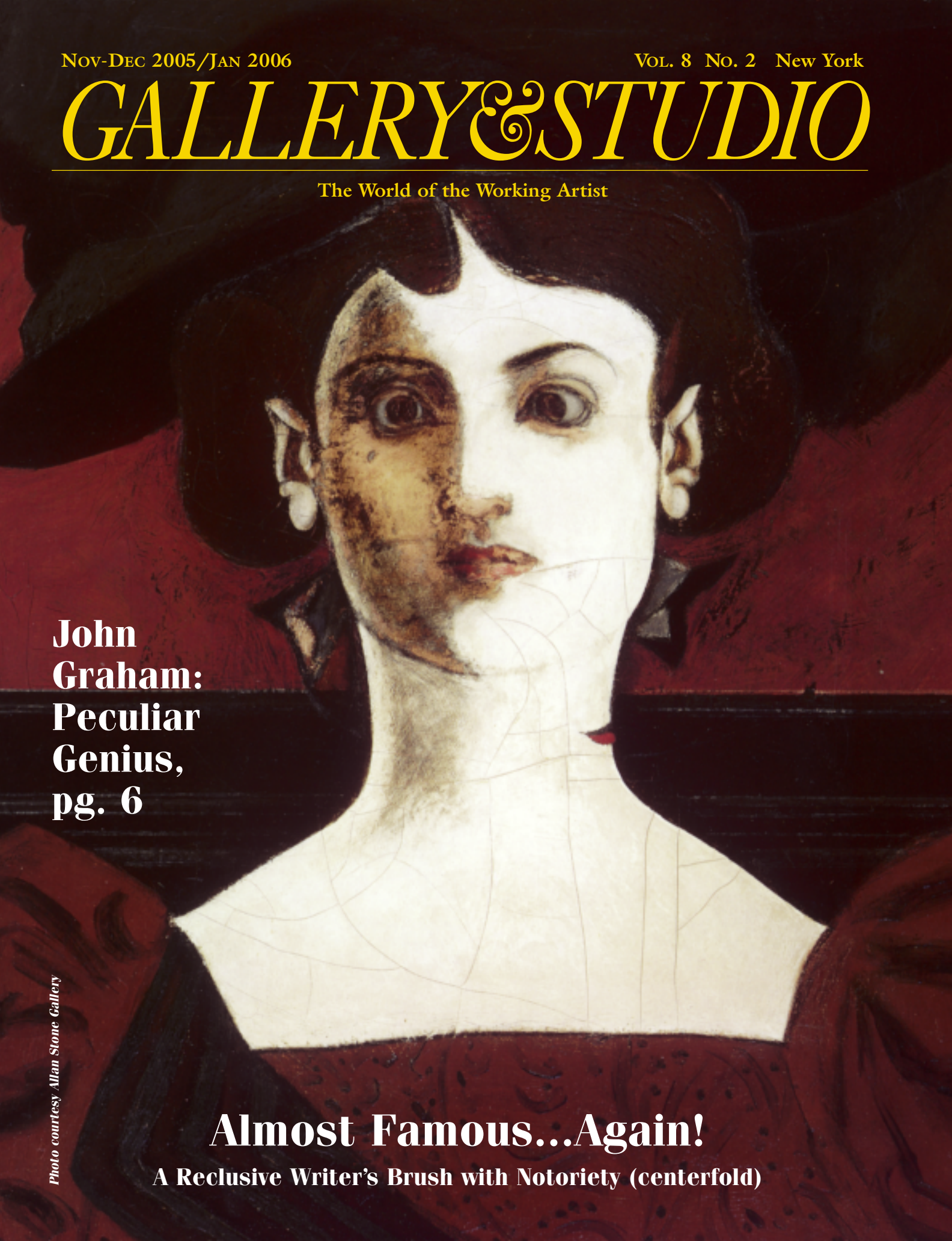
GALLERY&STUDIO

The World of the Working Artist

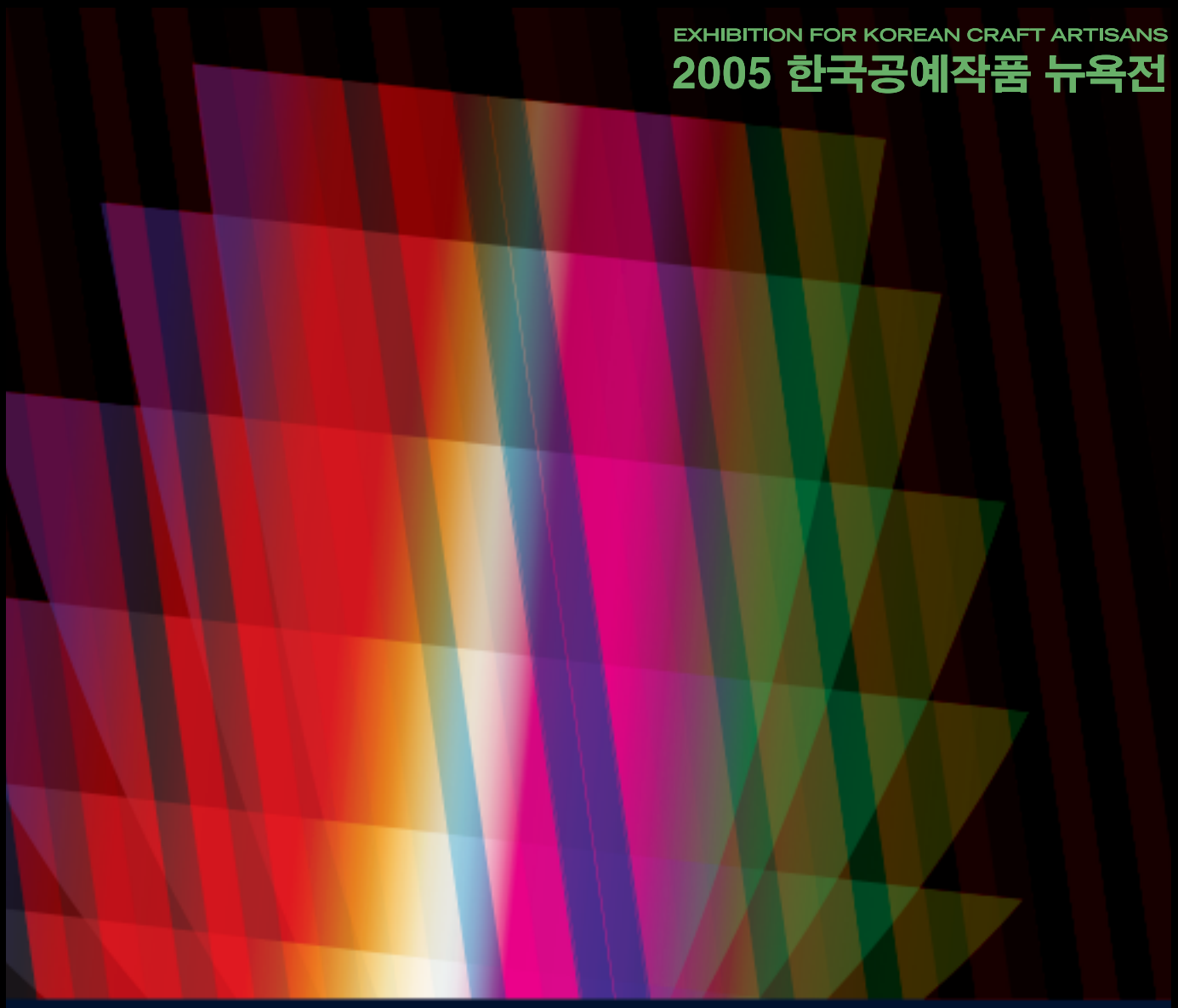


John Graham: Peculiar Genius, pg. 6

Photo courtesy Allan Stone Gallery

Almost Famous...Again!

A Reclusive Writer's Brush with Notoriety (centerfold)



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G&S Highlights

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John Graham *influenced the New York School but was too stubbornly original to jump on its bandwagon. Possibly "the first postmodern artist," Graham is the subject of a major survey at Allan Stone Gallery. –Pg. 6*

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The Magical Mindscapes of Steve Cieslawski

Winter is the witching season, the time when, as John Dyer once wrote, a stray sunbeam "Is all the proud and mighty have/ Between the cradle and the grave." Yet while poets such as Tennyson have celebrated "the level lake and the long glories of the winter moon," few painters since Bruegel have evoked the season as convincingly as Steve Cieslawski, whose new oils on canvas can be seen at CFM Gallery 112 Green Street, from November 4 through December 4.

Although he has an abiding affection for Mexico, where he lived during the early years of his career, perfecting his technique and discovering his singular vision at an unhurried pace that would not have been possible in the hectic pressure cooker of the New York art scene, Cieslawski and his wife, a writer and illustrator of children's books, have been living and working for some time now in rural New Jersey.

According to Neil Zukerman, the owner and director of CFM Gallery, this exile from the sunnier climes he loves may account for the poignant undercurrent of longing that runs through Cieslawski's recent wintry scenes, making them among the most evocative paintings in his new solo show. Tellingly, the exhibition is entitled "Landscapes of the Mind," since only Steve Cieslawski could imbue a scene presumably inspired by a desolate site in contemporary New Jersey with the enchanted atmosphere of a Victorian fairy tale, as seen in his oil "Solace."

One can only assume this to be one of the pictures that caused Teresa del Conde, director of Museum de Art Contemporaneo, in Mexico City, to make glowing comparisons to Caspar David Friedrich after visiting Cieslawski's studio while he was preparing the present exhibition. "Solace" depicts a solitary skater, clad all in black, gliding on one blade on a frozen lake. The tips of her long raven hair, blowing behind her in the wind, rhyme visually with the tips of the bare black trees in the surrounding woods, mirrored in the lake's icy surface. Mirrored, too, are one larger, nearer tree, in which a rustic cabin rests like a giant bird's nest, and a glowing orange orb that could either be an early evening sun or a mutating morning moon. Either way, "Solace" is well named, since like many of Cieslawski's best pictures, it provokes an epiphany that illuminates the special beauty and value of melancholy as a soulful reminder of life's ineffable mystery.

In the oil called "Vernal Equinox," the seasons seem to overlap. While the title and the thawing lake suggest that spring has sprung (as does a lone duck sailing by in the unflappable way of its species), a fine snow is falling on the landscape. However, these natural anomalies are as nothing compared to the more fantastic incongruity of three

"Vernal Equinox"

doll-like children, dressed in pastel silks harking back to medieval times, ensconced like baby chicks in a halved egg-shell balanced on the central ice-floe.

Mouths agape, poised as opera stars or professional carolers, perhaps they are singing madrigals to beckon in the tardy season. It is one of those magical moments that Cieslawski seems to conjure up so effortlessly, in that way he alone has of creating exquisite visual metaphors for elusive feelings and memories. For while it is highly doubtful that anyone else has ever imagined anything like the scene he depicts here, the picture seems to awaken memories of indefinable yet definite emotions one has felt near a lake in intemperate weather— or at very least in some comparable circumstance which produced an atmospheric epiphany one would be at pains to put into words.

Indeed it is just this ability to create visual equivalents for our most subtle feelings that makes Cieslawski such a remarkable artist. His imagery differs from that of other postmodern surrealists in that he never rummages in the movement's dusty attic for shopworn props or indulges in tiresome Freudian clichés. Rather, Cieslawski appears to arrive intuitively at his startlingly fresh imagery, which is at its subtlest in the new oil entitled "Incarnation of Young Byron."

This painting is conceived as a formal portrait, rendered in rich Renaissance gravies in the flawless technique of layered glazes that Cieslawski has mastered, which invariably prompts comparisons to the old masters. Byron is seen as a fresh-faced adolescent in a head and shoulders pose recalling certain portraits of the English Court by Hans Holbein the Younger. However, what differentiates this sitter from those distinguished fellow countrymen with their cool, detached airs (which Holbein depicted as a visiting German fascinated with the icy

reserve of the British nobility), is an undercurrent of sensuality more reminiscent of Caravaggio. This comes across in the unnerving frankness of the youthful Byron's gaze and the almost smugly bemused set of his full, femininely rosy lips.

But if these clues are not sufficient to inform the viewer that this brash youth is already aware of his poetic destiny as English literature's greatest decadent, that the hairs at the top of his head and the tips of his white lace collar morph into shapes respectively suggesting stark winter trees and sharply defined snowflakes, tips one off as to the wild nature lurking just beneath the formal veneer of this brilliant imaginary portrait.

Still within the realm of possibility (if not probability) is the situation we encounter in "Fragile Symbols," wherein a woman and a little girl, both clad in the graceful long garments of no specific period that Cieslawski favors to lend his scenes a sense of timelessness, stand before a gnarled tree from which framed paintings of butterflies

"Fragile Symbols"

dangle by strings. One could speculate endlessly on the presumed meanings of such a picture, but perhaps it refers to the perilous position of a painter who endeavors to create magic in an age generally more hospitable to the obvious and the mundane.

Such practical considerations, however, hardly deter Cieslawski from pursuing his visionary tendencies wherever they may take him, as seen in "Elixir of the Mind," an oil in which intellectual fecundity is personified in the graceful figure of a young woman in a flowing purple robe reading a book in a pastoral landscape of high wheat fields and rolling hills. Her serene expression, framed by long locks, suggests an angel or a saint in a Russian icon. However, in place of a halo, a poplar-shaped cone of verdant vegetation sprouts from her head to illuminate the clouds like a lightning rod.

Here, as in several other sublime canvases in this exhibition, his most impressive to date, Steve Cieslawski reveals himself to be a painter who has perfected his mode of expression to match the seemingly limitless scope of his imagination.

—Ed McCormack

Peculiar Genius: The Resurrection of John Graham

"I was lucky when I came to this country to meet the three smartest guys on the scene: Gorky, Stuart Davis and John Graham," Willem de Kooning told Harold Rosenberg in a 1972 interview. "They knew I had my own eyes, but I wasn't always looking in the right direction. I was certainly in need of a helping hand."

Elsewhere, de Kooning refers to his three mentors as "The Three Musketeers." But while Arshile Gorky and Stuart Davis are familiar figures to anyone who casually attends museums, even some of us who spend an inordinate amount of time looking at and thinking about art may be woefully unacquainted with the breadth and depth of John Graham's oeuvre.

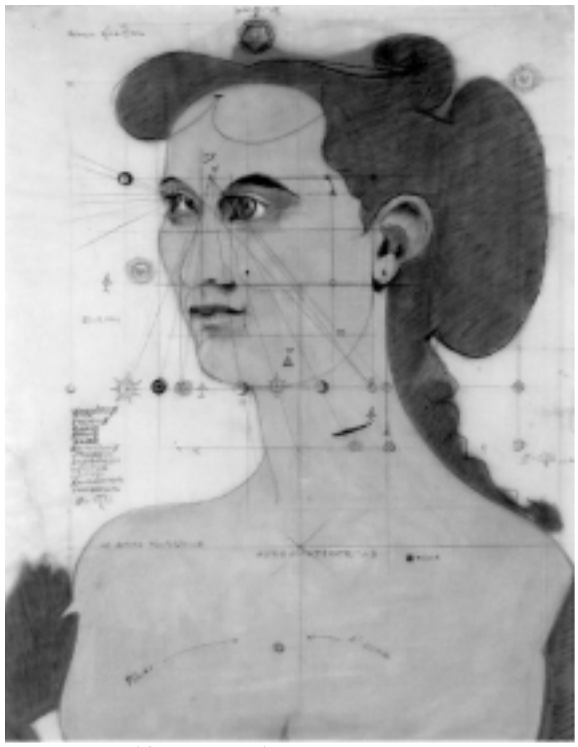
More than likely, most of us have seen and puzzled over "Two Sisters," the painting by Graham in the permanent collection of The Museum of Modern Art. The two figures are seated side by side in somewhat stiff formal postures, as though for a Victorian parlor portrait; indeed the background, though sketchily composed, suggests just such a genteel and spacious sitting room. However, there is something slightly off about these two siblings. Not only is one sister bare-breasted, as she clutches a pigeon in her lap, but both are noticeably cross-eyed— a frequent occurrence in Graham's paintings which, according to Fairfield Porter, the artist once explained as a device for "giving life to the face." In addition, the two women bare their teeth in a feral manner that suggests that they are either demented or are perversely mocking the viewer.

The first time I saw this painting its combination of the classical and the irreverently goofy had much the same impact on me as encountering Marcel Duchamp's mustache slashed across the face of the Mona Lisa. While the formal attributes of the picture are unmistakable—the complementary contrasts between the geometric shapes in the background and the sensual, flowing, organic contours of the figures, flattened on the picture plane; the unusual color harmonies between pale blue walls, wine-red draperies and stridently pink flesh—its content is so strange as almost to upstage them.

Once having met these two comely yet eccentric sisters, I could never forget them. They fired my fancy for all manner of wild speculation. I imagined them as sheltered creatures like Emily Dickinson and her sister Lavinia, enacting some near-incestuous drama of worldly renunciation— or perhaps some younger version of those two reclusive cousins of Jacqueline Kennedy, languishing in cobwebbed disarray in a ramshackle mansion, in the eerie documentary film "Gray Gardens."

Haunted as I was by Graham's picture, apart from an occasional isolated drawing or painting encountered in a group show or seen in reproduction here or there, I could not satisfy my hunger to know more of his work until the mounting of the present, much needed comprehensive exhibition "John Graham: Sum Qui Sum," which continues through December 22 at Allan Stone Gallery, 113 East 90th Street.

According to Allan Stone's introduction to the exhibition catalog, which also contains an illuminating essay by the critic and author Harry Rand, Graham became something of an obsession to the gallerist and collector as well.



"Venere Lucifera" ca.1951

"I first saw John Graham's paintings in the early 1960s at a memorial exhibition at the Jack Mayer Gallery, soon after Graham's death," Stone writes. "While I had been quite interested in contemporary art, I had never heard of John Graham nor seen any of his work. When I encountered his paintings for the first time at the Jack Mayer Gallery, I was so struck by the mysterious aura of his work that I returned many times to the exhibition. There were many portraits of women and each portrait had its particular eerie magic. The paintings of women were so compelling that I knew I must find out more about this artist. But where could I find his work or any information?"

That Allan Stone was still in the dark about Graham in the early 1960s is telling, considering that he opened his gallery in the first year of the decade and was already acquiring a reputation for his expertise in the work of de Kooning, Gorky, and others among Graham's colleagues in The New York School.

In his catalog essay, Harry Rand suggests that Graham's relative obscurity may owe, at least in part, to the fact that the artist (who was born Ivan Dombrowski in Kieve in the Ukraine in 1887, and changed his name when he became an American citizen in 1927) was "perpetually in the process of reinventing himself." Thus, "The difficulty of finding his art behind the fabled man has not proven an easy task."

At the same time, Rand asserts unequivocally, "John Graham redirected the course of American art." And while this statement could smack of hyperbole, he backs it up by quoting de Kooning: "Graham was very important as he discovered Pollock. I make that very clear. It wasn't anybody else, you know...The other critics came later—much later...It was hard for other artists to see what Pollock was doing."

* * *

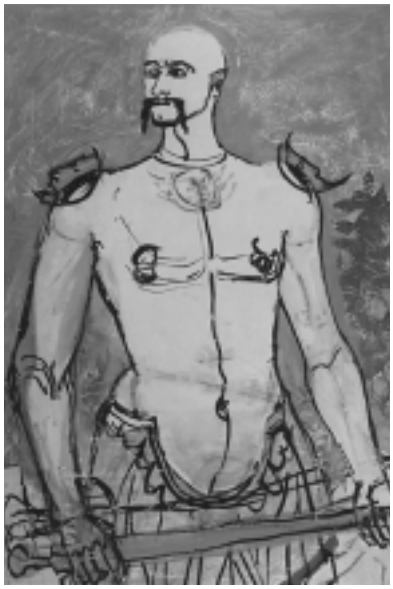
Few seem to have understood Graham's role and value as well as his fellow painter Fairfield Porter, who had his own odd relation to the New York School as a realist among abstractionists and something of a country squire in the age of the cold water loft. In a 1960 essay on Graham, Porter stated, "He is an aristocratic Russian who served as a cavalry officer in the Czar's armies, then with a Russian law degree, he emigrated to the United States and studied art. He comes to art the aristocratic way: through connoisseurship."

After establishing his critical credentials with a much discussed treatise, "System and Dialectics of Art" (published in 1937), and assembling the Crowninshield collection of African art, Graham boosted the careers of the then unknown Americans Pollock and de Kooning by showing them alongside established European painters like Picasso, Braque and Rouault in an exhibition that he curated for the McMillan Gallery in 1942.

"He places the understanding of culture before creation, as a necessary condition to creation," Porter writes, and goes on to say, "Graham bases his own painting and drawing on the art which expressed the West at its height. He went through a period of Picassoesque painting, which he has repudiated, but which has the same essential nature as his present Ingres-or-Uccello-like style. It derives from the paintings and drawings of the pre-Puritan, pre-Protestant West, it is not of the epoch to which he belongs. Neither does he believe that this epoch can have any significant painting. However at the same time he believes in art, and even more in a culture that expresses

itself artistically."

If Porter's interpretation is accurate, it might explain why Graham's work has been so difficult for some to understand and embrace as part of the zeitgeist that propelled American art to unprecedented prominence during his lifetime. Although he may have helped others aboard, Graham was hardly one to go jumping on any bandwagons. Abstract Expressionism, after all, was such a full-fledged revolution that it would seem only natural for this aristocratic former Czarist believer in the value of culture over violent creative upheaval to draw back from it, as he persisted in refining the classically-inspired mode of figuration he developed jointly with de Kooning and Gorky in the 1940s.



"Self Portrait as a Warrier" ca.1957

Yet, what the present exhibition at Allan Stone Gallery demonstrates so splendidly is that a bad career decision can sometimes be fortuitous in terms of an artist's long term development as a unique, if historically problematical, entity. For while nobody can say how great an abstract painter John Graham might have made had he chosen to capitulate to the prevailing trend, what he accomplished at great personal cost by sticking to his unfashionable convictions more than makes up for the handicap of being critically hard to classify.

For who among us would prefer one more big, brash Abstract Expressionist dynamo to the artist who gave us the intimate masterpiece "La Donna Ferita (Lady in Black)," 1943-1945, a work in oil and charcoal on canvas that is one of the highlights of the present exhibition at Allan Stone Gallery? Although she has the "wandering eye" Porter referred to in his essay, she seems entranced rather than deranged. Her flowing black chapeau, puffed shoulders, and porcelain pallor summon to mind Henry James' "Portrait of a Lady" or some romantically consumptive, star-crossed Victorian muse. Her nobility bespeaks a kind of beauty that bears up admirably under adversity, a beauty that endures with serene classical poise, even in the face of Harry Rand's statement that "Graham may have been the first post-modern artist in that his later works assume that the implications of (Occidental) art have been pursued to their ends..."

Indeed, the show is filled with paintings and especially drawings (superb draftsmanship being the armature on which Graham's accomplishment rests) that celebrate various aspects of feminine beauty and the feminine mystique. They range from major oils on canvas like "Celia," "Marya (Donna Ferita Pensive Lady)," and "Woman with Dodecahedron" to works in pencil and mixed media on paper such as "Venere Lucifera" and "Donna Losca."

That the figure in the latter drawing is pierced in various places by graffiti-like nails, swords, and penises could invite comparison with the scrawled asylum portraits of Antonin Artaud—even though Artaud was the eternal outsider, driven by internal demons, and Graham was the most selfconscious and dispassionate of artists. Unlike Artaud, Graham was not a madman nor was he a misogynist. Rather, he was by all accounts an enthusiastic lover of women whose complicated responses to them—like those of his friend de Kooning—manifested in his art in ways that can be easily misinterpreted in a climate hypersensitive to gender politics.

By the same token, it would probably be misguided to put much mystic stock in the seemingly esoteric symbols and snippets of arcane text that enliven many of Graham's drawings (beyond their function as fanciful pictorial embellishments), even while Graham states in his "Dialectics" that "the value of the strange and the absurd lies in their suggestion of a possible unknown, supernatural, life eternal." For, as Porter puts it, "The ceremony he believes in, is, like Houdini's, relegated to the vaudeville stage."

Although women were Graham's main subject, he also painted fascinating self portraits, such as "Poussin M' instruit, 1944," depicting himself and some identical alter ego of a comrade-in-arms in the nude (giving rise to homoerotic barracks buddies speculation), and "Self Portrait as a Warrior, 1957" in which he brandishes a sword, sporting a Ghengis Khan mustache and moon-faced armor-plates on his bare shoulders.

The latter work, along with other paintings and drawings of military figures, harks back to one of the more colorful chapters of Graham's early life: when he served in the Russian cavalry in a fabled regiment that, according to Rand, "dressed in striking exotic uniforms, which appeared to be straight out of the nineteenth century." Rand quotes Graham's reflection that only collecting art taught him "respect for human life," and suggests that it indicates the brutality of his past "as a marauding Czarist cavalry officer." With a literary flair rarely seen in an art catalog, Rand elaborates, contrasting Graham's toughminded refusal to sentimentalize Old Russia with the "loony sweetness" of Marc Chagall's "resurrections of a gone time, from a Jew who should have loathed the pogrom-ridden, Jew-baiting past of discrimination and Cossacks, one of whom might have been John Graham—riding madcap and giddy through a shtetl—dealing death."

This highly speculative vision is hardly calculated to elicit sympathy for Graham. But Rand knows that the last thing Graham needs at this late date is to be presented as a sympathetic figure. Art is not a character contest and Graham's peculiar genius more than makes up for any human failings one might care to attribute to him—and they are several, including being a fabled self-fabricator, a fulsome flatterer of patrons, and often a rat with women, for all his love of them.

As for Allan Stone, his one regret is that he delayed at a crucial moment, missing the chance to buy "Two Sisters" by a day. As he puts it in the catalog introduction, "It had been acquired by MOMA and I shall rue that missed opportunity the rest of my life!"

Stone did, however, end up owning a study for the coveted painting (one of the treasures included in this show). And it probably gives him consolation now to know that the painting having been so prominently displayed in the museum and capturing so many imaginations over the years, as it did mine, is bound to whet the public appetite for the many new revelations in the present exhibition.

—Ed McCormack

At CVB Space, a Savvy Italian Curator Probes Issues of Identity

The thorny question of identity in the contemporary world— which offers so many tempting diversions, such as living vicariously through celebrities, to avoid confronting it— is the latest concern nagging the inquisitive consciousness of Stefania Carrozzini, the curator for D'ARS International Exhibition Projects, of Milan and New York, whose latest philosophical inquiry in the guise of a group exhibition is entitled, "Who Am I." The show opens with a reception from 6 to 8 pm on November 3 and runs through November 26 at CVB Space, 407 West 13th Street.

Typically, Carrozzini raises serious questions in a thoughtful catalog essay (usually including one of her own emblematic photographs) and then proceeds not to answer them, exactly, but to set up an exploratory dialogue between a group of carefully selected artists, Italian and otherwise, whose diverse styles generally amount to a fascinating visual seminar.

With the exception of the Detroit-born sculptor Ed Herman, who made his initial reputation in the New York art scene in the 1970s, all of the artists in the present show draw from the rich range of talent with which Carrozzini networks in her native Italy. However, odd man out that he may be, Herman's lifesize welded steel, bronze and aluminum sculpture "Bachelor" embodies the show's theme as he strides through a geometric portal, a skeletal stick-figure with realistic shoes, briefcase, and umbrella. His necktie and phallus are also in place; the only thing he's lacking is a head, as he comes through the door as if about to shout to his empty rooms the classic sitcom greeting: "Honey, I'm home!"

Carla Iacono reclaims the female body from the invasive Male Gaze by casting it in roles more searchingly complex than those we are accustomed to, in images such as "Escaping," her large Lambda print on aluminum of a nude woman with her head covered by what appears to be a black plastic garbage bag cradling in her arms a large sea-shell, rather than a swaddled baby. Yet the figure exudes a maternal tenderness that is at once wistful and ironic—particularly in regard to the hood that both blinds and hides her—as though the artist is trying on life-options for size in this admittedly autobiographical work.

Perhaps for the painter Ambra Morosi identity boils down to ambiguity, judging from her oddly compelling oil on canvas, in which a featureless white head floats disembodied on a solid, yet subtly modulated ground, like an apparition in one of the 19th century "spirit photographs" presently at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The founder of a decade-old interdisciplinary movement that she calls "Extensionismo," Morosi employs her materials in a relief-like 3-D manner; yet her image appears to be made from "ectoplasm"—the material manifestation of the spirit or the unconscious—rather than mortal matter.

Paolo Pelosini, a contemporary descendent of Arte Povera, takes a visceral view of the figure hinting at the mind-numbing media violence that brutalizes our sensibility every day, blotting out any sense of individual identity. Pelosini's untitled sculpture in found metal and paint hangs from the wall like a contemporary crucifixion featuring a limbless victim of terrorism streaming with rivulets of fresh blood. Seeing such images in news photos from Iraq or elsewhere, we automatically think "That could be me," rather than "Who Am I?"

By contrast Giovanna Pesenti aestheticizes the human figure through a process of abstract transformation in her bold and dynamic acrylics on canvas, with their bright clear color areas enclosed by sweeping linear strokes that lend her compositions a unique rhythmic grace. Pesenti's answer to the question of identity seems simply to assert her artistic facility in such a way as to make each painting an emblematic icon of human beauty and dignity.

Photo By Stefania Carrozzini

Emma Vitti employs digital photography as a medium for making statements so emphatically physical as to make individual identity a moot point. In "Body," she presents us with a solitary head of lettuce set against a black background, inviting meditation on how its network of fine red veins, evoking images of our own bodies and brains. So vividly does Vitti focus our attention that we begin to identify with vegetable matter in a manner that almost makes our sense of self seem a folly of human ego.

Andrea Baj, on the other hand, suggests the interdependency of identity in paintings of figures merging in fluid configurations. In Baj's big colorful semi-abstract compositions, large faces, full bodies, and multiple large eyes intermingle within bold color areas, suggesting how we internalize other living entities with whom we maintain close relationships. The harmonious relationships between the formal elements in Baj's canvases further the idea that identity is finally a function of community: without the others in whose eyes we live vividly we would barely exist at all.

To a poet of course, identity manifests in words, and Sandra Grandesso is above all a concrete poet, employing the typefaces of printing characters to create a personal semiotics. In Grandesso's "Red Curtain," the grid of dangling letters may be undecipherable for one who does not read Italian; but the fact that some letters are reversed and all the question marks are backwards communicates on a level which transcends the specifics of language to address the quest for self amid meanings that remain universally elusive.

Two final artists address the show's theme through a species of painting in which meaning is embodied in matter alone: Livia Carta's oils on paper project a sense of physical being through the manipulation of pigment on the surface, a thick "skin" that seems a surrogate for the armor of personality that guards and conceals identity. Grazia Resta employs earthy tones and powerful primal forms in a mixed media technique notable for its rough elegance. A combination of blithe and somber forms and colors combines with tactile surfaces in Resta's works in resin and other materials, which telegraph concerns beyond their material properties with titles such as "The Sword of My Thoughts."

Once again, Stefania Carrozzini has given us an exhibition so probingly subjective as to merge the roles of the curator and the conceptual artist in a manner characteristic of her best work.

—Ed McCormack

Ilana Dayan Zadik's Synthesis of the Lyrical and the Formal

Among contemporary landscape painters, Ilana Dayan Zadik is especially interesting in that she is both a celebrator of nature and a confirmed formalist who employs a device which sets her paintings at a certain remove from traditional realism.

One is referring to the broad black borders (considerably broader at the bottom than at the top) which Zadik adds to her more or less square-shaped formats. These transform her image area into a long horizontal scheme akin to the "full-screen" option offered when one views a DVD of a feature film. In addition, to the black area on the lower right hand side of each of her paintings, Zadik paints a row of small squares in the manner of a color chart, apparently indicating the exact spectrum of hues she employed to create the landscape within the work.

Painting by Ilana Dayan Zadik

Such formal devices contrast intriguingly with the atmospheric qualities of the paintings in Ilana Dayan Zadik's exhibition, pointedly entitled "Transcending Reality," at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, from November 11 through December 1, with a reception on November 17, from 6 to 8 PM.

These contrasts are especially striking, given the romantic nature of Zadik's landscapes, which evoke idyllic pastoral scenes such as one composition featuring a ttgreen meadow, lush with trees and overgrown foliage, under a clear blue sky, with misty purple mountains in the background and a simple wooden wheel barrow in the foreground. Although one is tempted to quote the famous poem about a wheel barrow by William Carlos Williams, it would hardly be appropriate here, for while Williams' poem involves the confines of a barnyard, Zadik's painting presents us with a vast, verdant panorama.

Indeed, it might almost seem a measure to contain her own tendency toward lyrical celebration that this artist employs the aforementioned distancing devices, which serve to lend her paintings the attributes of abstraction as well as those more literary qualities that we associate with landscape painting down through the centuries. How the introduction of such formal rigor alters our perception of natural depiction is particularly dramatic in Zadik's painting of a field of daisies, where the sheer loveliness of the subject is starkly undercut by the black areas within the composition which, as in all of her pictures, actually occupy more of the total space than the image itself.

One could, of course, read many interpretations into these black areas, most obviously having to do with the unknown elements that shadow all living things. However, one would be willing to bet that the "transcendence" that Zadik alludes to in the title of this show has less to do with such existential mysteries than with rising above the clichés of natural depiction, which if we read an image too literally, can burden it with supposed "meanings" that have little to do with the concerns of serious painting. To guard against this, Zadik undercuts the "picturesque" qualities that are especially pronounced in yet another painting of a majestic tree with an old wagon nestled in the shadows of its outspread branches and farmhouses in the distance.

At the same time, some of this artist's most sensational compositions depict glorious sunsets with vibrant, almost iridescent skies that radiate dramatically and appear to illuminate the surrounding blackness in an especially dramatic manner. Here, the contrasts between light and dark give an entirely different connotation to the the sense of transcendence which invariably enlivens the landscapes of Ilana Dayan Zadik.

—Eric Schickel

Monica Araoz and the Primal Factor in Abstraction

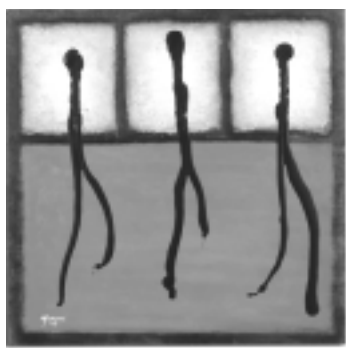
"In order to define my art, I would need to create a name that would fit between Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism," states Monica Araoz, an artist currently living and working in Austin Texas, where she was recently featured in the exhibition "Modern Mexican Masters." Yet Araoz's paintings, which can be seen year-round in the ongoing salon exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, in Chelsea, would appear to require an even more complex definition, given their intriguing combination of elements.

Indeed, Araoz is among that new breed of postmodern artists who have put a new spin on abstract painting, introducing elements of figuration and other subject matter that would have been verboten during earlier periods, when abstraction was promoted as a strict aesthetic doctrine in opposition to so-called "literary content."

In Araoz's acrylic on canvas "Birth," for example, all manner of engaging elements, both formal and emotionally evocative come into play. For while the placement of a simple rectangular shape on a red field does indeed have a minimalist impact, and the calligraphic white forms within it, which suggest rudimentary signs or figures, have the gestural freedom that we associate with Abstract Expressionism, there is also a less tangible quality to the composition that captures the imagination in a more subjective, symbolic manner.

The precise geometric shape may be the dominant factor in the composition. However, the linear strokes within it introduce a more poetically evocative feeling than one normally encounters in the context of minimalism, as do the textural/gestural elements that surround it, which Aroaz often enhances by mixing sand, clay dust and acrylic mediums with her pigments. The combination of precise and seemingly random elements that one finds in Araoz's paintings is further enhanced by subject matter possessed of a primitive power akin almost to cave painting. It is this primal factor which lends Araoz's paintings an emotional resonance that goes far beyond their considerable formal attributes.

Araoz's use of color also contributes to the evocative nature of her canvases. Her reds, for example, are invariably subtly modulated, ranging from a glistening visceral brilliance to a deeply burnished tonal depth bespeaking red clay and other earthy essences. Such chromatic subtleties seem especially significant in another acrylic painting called "Roots II," in which the glowing red field that the three shadowy stick- figures stride across literally suggests the color of blood and evokes a strong sense of ancestral ties in keeping with the title. By contrast, the darker reddish hues bordering the composition and surrounding the three brilliant yellow rectangles behind the figures convey a sense of connection to the earth. In the most direct possible way, this painting speaks of primal relationships that none among us can deny if we wish to remain true to our origins.



"Roots II"

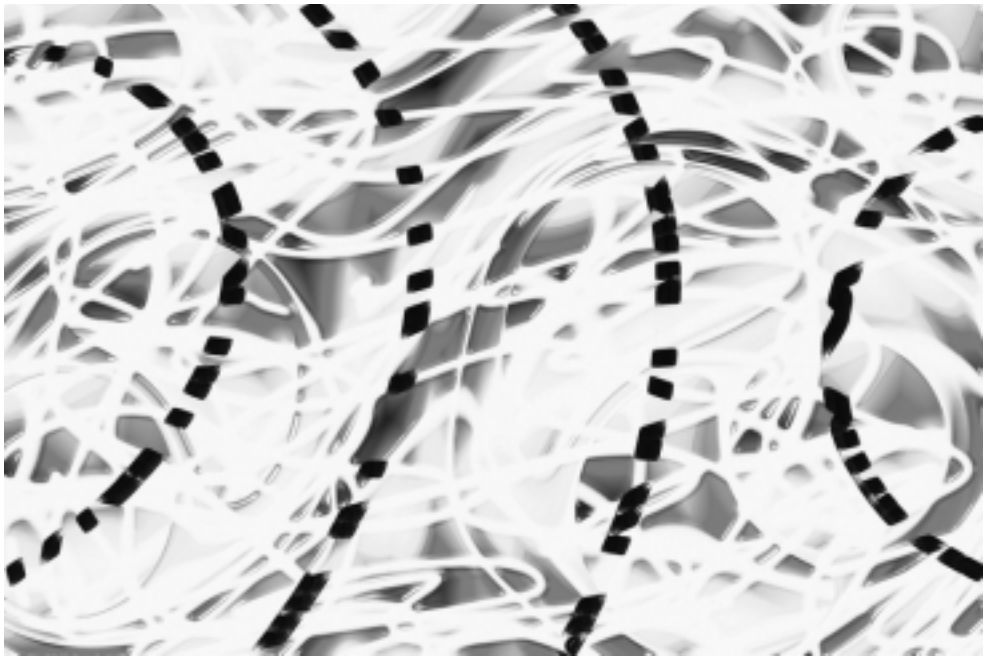
Here, as in another powerful painting called "Togetherness"—where elegant linear calligraphy akin to Mark Tobey's white writing is seen within a rectangular form afloat on yet another subtly modulated red ground—Monica Araoz creates enduring metaphors for the universal nature of the human family, demonstrating how one gifted postmodern painter has evolved a personal vocabulary with which to speak of timeless things.

—Wilson Wong

James Eugene Albert: "Painting" in Cyberspace

"Some digital artists get wrapped up in the technology of huge gigabit images and all of the equipment necessary just to get them into the computer and then onto paper," says the California artist James Eugene Albert. "That's not for me. That takes the creativity and spontaneity out of the process. Even though a computer is involved, I still feel the need to 'paint.' I need to have some immediacy of interaction between the image on the screen and me."

Exactly how the interaction of which the artist speaks occurs may remain a mystery to the uninitiated; however the painterly immediacy of Albert's pictures was everywhere in evidence in his recent solo exhibition at World Fine Art Gallery, 511 West 25th Street, in Chelsea. The exhibition was called "Whiteness: A digital study in black and white 'plus,' " the plus part meaning that some color images were included in the show. However, the main emphasis was on monochrome this time around, as though by paring down his means even further Albert meant to distance his endeavor from some of the facile coloristic tricks many computer artists rely upon.



"Chimera"

Paradoxically, even though color is normally an essentially component of most paintings this paring down process has resulted in prints that are even more painterly than some of Albert's earlier works. This works for Albert in much the same way that it did for Franz Kline, who truly found himself as a painter in his late period calligraphic paintings, which turned out to be his signature works, the most memorable of his career.

Of course, its far too early to make such judgments in the case of a mid-career artist like James Eugene Albert who has done some extraordinary things with color and continues to do so, as seen in one print of a bizarre face with yellow eyes and brilliant red lips in the present show that made one think of the wild and woolly Hairy Who School painters who emerged in Chicago in the mid 1960s and caused quite a stir in the art world with their funky new take on Pop. Since Albert is an African-American artist and this picture has connotations of blackface minstrelry one might suppose that it is meant as a parody of the kind of racial stereotypes that were prevalent in America up until recently and still persist in a more subtle way in certain aspects of the media. If so, it is as scathing an indictment of racist ignorance as anything by Kara Walker.

At the same time, however, Albert appears to be moving in a more abstract direction in the majority of the computer art prints in his recent show, some of which, such as the monochrome composition "Chimera" almost approach Zen simplicity with their abstract linear swirls. Perhaps the most telling work in this regard is "Haiku," which captures the spirit of that well known Japanese short poetry form with its spare composition of black and white linear shapes on a white ground. There is an exhilarating freedom in these new pictures, which appear as fresh, freewheeling and unpremeditated as certain paintings by Miro, with their whimsical shapes afloat in space. Such freedom is tougher to pull off with a computer than with a paintbrush for obvious reasons; yet Albert makes it work by virtue of his apparent ease with his medium.

Then there are works such as "Stroke," in which landscape references are more readily discernible, yet the main thrust of the composition is still essentially abstract. In the case of "Stroke" one is reminded of Arthur Dove and the even more eccentric American abstractionist Forrest Bess, in terms of Albert's ability to create forms that convey the rhythmic nuances of nature rather than merely the lay of the land.

Albert's superb grasp of form makes it possible for him to capture the essential elements of a landscape without becoming overly specific. Perhaps one of the best examples of this is the composition Albert calls "Acropolis Rhodos," where he works with a subtle range of black, white, and gray tones to create flowing, swirling forms with all the gestural freedom of an expressionist painting, yet with a sense of formal remove that can best be achieved by digital means.

Here, too, the forms appear organic and the orb at the top of the composition conveys a sense of nature, yet one could speculate endlessly on what various elements in the composition represent. What comes through is a sense of movement, flux, and organic growth, of natural "events" rather than objects. And this makes Albert's picture all the more "realistic," if one considers that nothing in nature is truly static; every element is constantly evolving.

Even in works where Albert employs color, he shows admirable restraint in this show, as in "Blueness," where the circular forms are simultaneously definite and ethereal as soap bubbles. Indeed, the entire composition projects a sense of effervescence, with the blue orbs bubbling up against swirling lines that enhance the sense of overall liquidity that animates the composition. In other words, while abstract, there is a sense of an implied human presence. In the monochromatic composition called "Dots," for example, two subtly shaded gray orbs behind a wavering linear grid suggest a pair of wide-set eyes peering through a chain-link fence. The picture projects a poignant psychological impact that is all the more powerful for being elusive, impossible to pin down to one specific meaning.

Indeed, it is the element of subjectivity and mystery in the computer art of James Eugene Albert that distinguishes his work from that of many other artists working in this relatively new medium; that makes his images function as "paintings" rather than mere technical feats.

—Maurice Taplinger

Tradition and Innovation in the CLWAC's 109th Annual Survey

Jean T. Kroeber

Karen Whitman

Carol Staub

Marsha Tosk

Nearly 300 women artists from across the United States and Europe participated in the Catharine Lorillard Wolfe's 109th Annual Open Exhibition, seen recently at the National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park South. One of the regular features of this show is the Honored Member section, which amounts to a mini solo show within the exhibition, and this year focused on the work of Ruth B. Rieber, whose woodcuts of the world's cities are notable for conveying a specific sense of place within boldly delineated abstract forms.

The group exhibition itself presents a daunting challenge for the reviewer, given the sheer number of works and mediums covering walls salon-style, unless he or she simply surrenders to the pleasure of sharing enthusiasm for individual works encountered in a context that defies critical analysis. And here is generally much to be enthusiastic about in this annual survey of an arts organization named for a female philanthropist who was the only woman among the 106 founding members of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Each year numerous prizes are awarded by the club, and usually the winners are well chosen. However, the fun for the visitor to a show such as this one is finding one's own favorite works, with little regard for whether or not they have won prizes. Some of the following won awards and some did not, but they all struck a chord with this viewer for one reason or another.

Doris Davis-Glackin painting "Choice Fatigue" combined bold figuration reminiscent of Diebenkorn and the California School with hot Fauvist colors to dynamic effect. Susan Geissler's life-size sculpture "The Potato Man" brought its aged, white-bearded subject alive in almost eerie detail. By contrast, Jean T. Kroeber's stone sculpture "Primavera" was possessed of an almost Egyptian formal simplicity.

Ruth Newquist, well known for street scenes in watercolor in a meticulous photorealist style notable for its snapshot immediacy, showed a characteristic painting called "Uptown," in which the posture of a man standing on a sidewalk while pedestrians strolled by suggested that he was probably waiting impatiently for a woman to finish shopping.

Carolyn Latanision's watercolor of a young woman and a young man speaking on separate outdoor pay phones was called "Dueling Phones." But it just as easily could have been entitled "Adam and Eve," given their scanty summer outfits and the archetypal quality with which the artist endowed their youthful bodies.

Ruth B. Rieber

City scenes were one of the recurring themes in this show, as evidenced by Karen Whitman's evocative print "Nightfall," showing a cat perched on a tenement-top under a crescent moon, as well as by Margaret M. Martin's accomplished aquarelle of crowds outside Saint Patrick's Cathedral painted as though with a brush dipped in liquid light. However, landscapes are always ubiquitous in the CLWAC's exhibitions as well. Among the most evocative ones were Carolyn Hesse-Low's "Morning Field," with its softly diffused "Corot-like trees and clouds; Flo Kemp's "O' Winsome Wetlands," which transformed a rather desolate view by virtue of its abstract qualities; Carol Z. Brody's pristine yet poetic snowscape "Woods at Sunset"; and Dora Atwater Millikin's "A Great Day," which imbued a mundane view of shacks, trailers, and telephone poles with an odd beauty through the artist's gift for composition and paint handling.

Deborah Smith made a wildly amusing social comment with her mixed media sculpture "Fossil Fuel," depicting a yahoo of a businessman brandishing a briefcase and riding the back of a skeletal dinosaur with a toy car clamped in its jaws. Gloria Spevacek's beautiful bronze "Golden Owl" caused one person in the gallery to comment that it looked "like a cross between Brancusi and Paul Klee," and that seemed a perceptive enough statement to let stand here. Another outstanding animal sculpture was Louise Peterson's "Dog Days," a bronze depicting a male canine rolling around on its back with the winning immodesty characteristic of its species.

The reader might get the impression from the works mentioned so far that this show was heavily weighted in favor of representational, if not realist, works and that would not be altogether inaccurate, given the generally traditional tendencies of this venerable organization. However, there were some outstanding abstract works in the show, such as Janet Indick's strong bronze sculpture "Architectural Geometry"; Jinx Lindenauer's organic form in marble "May Magic"; "Weathered," a brilliantly colorful gestural abstraction by Wanda Wilkins; and "Quilled II," an acrylic painting by Carol Staub, in which sinuously flowing calligraphic shapes and indecipherable texts are set against amorphous areas of color ranging from the somber to the luminous.

Mention should also be made of Marsha Tosk's "Florilegium," four beautifully executed bronze bas-reliefs of willowy female nudes juxtaposed with graceful floral forms. However, one's greatest regret in reviewing an exhibition such as this is that space constraints invariably prevent doing justice to many works equally as worthy as those mentioned. The only sure solution is for the reader not to miss seeing the CLWAC's next Annual Open Exhibition firsthand. —Jeannie McCormack

Six Artists Prove the Primacy of the Gesture

For some time before a writer for the Village Voice sensibly suggested that one way to combat having art "reduced to its exchange value" might be for artists to curate their own shows, Helen Levin, a painter based in Staten Island, was doing just that. Levin's latest venture is "Gestural Abstraction: Six Artists," featuring work by Barry Ball, Patricia Schnall Gutierrez, Pud Houstoun, Barry L. Mason, Hedy O'Beil, and herself.

While all of these artists have impressive individual exhibition histories, this group show which can be seen at Synagogue for the Arts Gallery Space, 49 White Street, in Tribecca, from November 3 through December 11, is especially important for showcasing a mode of painting which has been given less than its due in terms of gallery representation in recent years.

While various conceptual, multimedia, video, and installation artists have been garnering the lion's share of publicity lately, certain painters have been quietly exploring and building upon the rich legacy of the Abstract Expressionists, as well as the even more venerable gestural resources of Asian art which influenced the movement that put American painting on the map. The work of the six artists featured in this exhibition makes a strong case for subjective, lyrical expression as a viable alternative to the impersonality of much postmodern art.

Pud Houstoun

The paintings of Pud Houstoun endeavor to apprehend what she refers to as "a rhythmic 'whole' within the abstract idiom." And it is telling that she uses that word, since Houstoun is especially conversant with the idiom to which she refers, employing the entire vocabulary of strokes, streaks, scumbling techniques, drips, and other gestures associated with Abstract Expressionism in compositions which derive their originality from the sheer force of the artist's singular sensibility, proving that style is indeed a function of character.

Helen Levin

Barry Ball

Barry L. Mason states that he sees himself as a "composer" when he constructs his large shaped and sculpted abstract paintings, which are also vehicles for expressing that inner intersection where his admiration for Renaissance grandeur and aspects of his Afro-American identity merge in a potent personal synthesis. In this regard, given their vigor and symphonic sweep, Mason's paintings, with their brilliant colors, dynamic irregular formats, and forms that (for their often angular symmetry) hint at African folk motifs, can be compared to the music of the great American musical composers like Ellington and Mingus, who achieved an exquisite balance of jazz improvisation and classical composition.

Hedy O'Beil, on the other hand, takes her inspiration directly from nature, infusing her acrylics on canvas with a joyful sense of growth and movement that manifests in vibrant colors and swirling calligraphic strokes. Yet even as her palette evokes a sense of natural light and verdant growth harking back to the chromatic razzle dazzle of the Impressionists, O'Beil's exhilarating gestural freedom expresses her stated desire for "that which is spiritual and transcendent."

Patricia S. Gutierrez

Patricia S. Gutierrez combines layers of earth, plaster, wax, and pigment to create lusciously tactile surfaces that serve as compositional arenas for a broad range of symbolic mark-making. She describes her process as a "meditative exploration" into the unknown, and her sumptuous mixed media works on large wooden panels, which seem to share a kinship with forbearers like Adolph Gottlieb and Theodoros Stamos, often present the gesture as a "frozen" entity, hovering dramatically in space, creating a sense of the tension between movement and stasis.

Barry L. Mason

Helen Levin is enamored of the untrammeled gesture, creating canvases that, like those of Joan Mitchell, her closest peer among the older generation of gestural painters, are all about movement and flux, with rhythms that arise from what she calls "fragments of nature." Levin employs areas of deep, rich color, accented with sinuously graceful linear elements whose cadences are characterized by a buoyancy and velocity that expresses the artist's life-affirming aesthetic mission.

Hedy O'Beil

By contrast, Barry Ball employs blunt, blocky areas of vigorously troweled on color, sometimes overlaid by linear scrawls or scumbled passages with underpainting showing through, making the palpable materiality of paint itself an occasion for contemplation and sensual delectation. Citing Kandinsky's goal of creating "a language that surpasses all boundaries," Ball aims for an "emotional connection" and succeeds splendidly by virtue of the refreshing directness of his work, which makes little attempt to endear itself to the viewer yet is immediately engaging.

Indeed, all six of these artists demonstrate that the emphatic painted gesture, which springs spontaneously from the nervous system or the subconscious, can still be a powerful medium for a human empathy that goes beyond theories to touch us where we live.

—J. Sanders Eaton

NewsArt at Viridian: Beyond Current Events

The role of a curator can vary from that of an anthologist assembling a collection of diverse talents under a loose thematic rubric to that of an artist working with found objects or collage to create an exhibition which is as much the expression of an individual sensibility as a showcase for a varied group of artists. In the case of Vernita Nemec the latter approach invariably prevails. Nemec, after all, is the leading light of the Art from Detritus movement, as well as a performance artist and a long time political activist, is an artist first and foremost and collage is her primary medium.

So it stands to reason that "NewsArt: Art from Another Reality," the exhibition that Nemec recently curated at Viridian Artists @ Chelsea, 530 West 25th Street, would be another knock-down-drag-out free-for-all like the topical shows in the same venue that Nemec has invited gallery members and other artists of her acquaintance to participate in for three years running. These raucous, content-driven group exhibitions have been among the more lively offerings in Chelsea in recent seasons, reminiscent of a time, such as the Tenth Street era, when the art world was less mercenary and more concerned with community and the common good. And the enthusiastic response to them indicates a real hunger on the part of gallery goers for art that is socially engaged and does indeed present "another reality" to counter the version of reality presented by the mass media as what Robert Brustein once termed "news theater" veers increasingly toward Theater of the Absurd.

Of course, one can only hope to upstage a circus—or at least reflect its antic atmosphere—by creating a context every bit as wild and woolly as that which it parodies, and Nemec succeeded splendidly in assembling a veritable rogues gallery of artists whose diverse styles and overall energy created a welcome contrast to the staid, self-conscious, see-no-evil-hear-no-evil ethos that has come to rule so many recent group surveys in museums as well as galleries as the art world has gentrified and boomed itself beyond all relevance.

The delightfully impolite attitude of "NewsArt" was exemplified by William J. Whalen's funky assemblage "As Seen on TV," in which Barbie dolls, candy wrappers and a variety of other found objects, embedded in entrail-like forms protruding from a real TV screen, suggested the unending stream of dreck that the mass media literally vomits in our faces on a daily basis. Equally fierce in another manner was May DeViney's collage "Gimme That Old-Time Abortion," in which multiple diagrammatic images of bleeding women were combined with a red-stained rag in a composition that made its point with emblematic and unsparing bluntness.

View of the NewsArt exhibition at Viridian Gallery

The New York Times, our so-called "newspaper of record" figures prominently in this exhibition, both as a conduit for misinformation and "spin" that Washington deems "fit to print" and as an actual component of several works. Ed Herman's conceptual piece "Yesterday's News" featured the paper's front page with comments scrawled by the artist, each succeeding day added and the previous one framed and stacked on the floor below it for the entire length of the exhibition. Vernita N'Cognita, artistic alter ego of the curator, contributed a piece called "Yesterday, Four Years Ago, and Forever," in which the outline of a nude woman's torso, cast in the New York Times and altered with acrylic and fire, suggested both envelopment in questionable information and a breastplate to armor oneself against it. The latter idea was attacked from another angle in Wally Gilbert's lambda digital print mounted on Sintra, "War Effort-2005," which recalled the embarrassing questions posed by an irate G.I. to a posturing, well armored Donald Rumsfeld slumming in Iraq, with headlines such as "U.S. STRUGGLING TO GET SOLDIERS UPDATED ARMOR."

In her piece, "9/11 2001," Kelynn Alder recycled an affecting grid of victims' faces that she created for an an actual newspaper. Bill Allen used newspaper and tape to construct a rudimentary toy soldier called "Death" with mortality written all over it. Katherine Ellinger Smith's "Too Much Information" set a flimsy little A-frame structure adrift in a sea of scribbled over newsprint, suggesting the White House adrift in the blowback from Hurricane Katrina. In "Monkey Man," Marc Pollack used articles from a newspaper in New Delhi, pasted on canvas and painted over with synthetic polymer, to embellish the myth of an elusive East Indian criminal and obliquely reflect U.S. politics with headlines such as "MONKEY BUSINESS GETTING OUT OF HAND." Marjie Zelman provided viewers a forum for scribbling their own comments on the present administration by including Post-It stickers in her mixed media work "The Bushies and Wasps...What Do They Have in Common?"

Other artists allude to current events in a more abstract manner that puts one in mind of William Carlos Williams' famous statement "You can't get the news from poetry, yet men die miserably every day for want of what is found there." Barbara K. Schwartz showed a characteristically muscular abstraction whose title alone, "We Are All in the Warrior's Embrace," tipped one off as to its content. Susan Sills presented an oil on wood cut-out of a man in a bowler hat with a green apple smack in the center of his in her oil on wood cut-out "Magritte Head: He Couldn't (Wouldn't) See Past His Nose," seemingly suggesting the blind arrogance of our notoriously myopic president. Marcia Raff wittily evoked the possible puzzlement of future archeologists inspecting the ruins of a self-destroyed civilization with her bronze of a broken column covered with McDonald's slogans.

This show was so chock full of relevant content as to provide an embarrassment of riches that sent a viewer used to being lulled by the aesthetic gamesmanship of art for arts sake reeling from one work to the next. While the sheer sensory overload was almost too much to digest in a single visit, one came away with flashbacks of memorable works such as Paul Greco's "Shock and Awe" with its juxtapositions of Bush goons, snakeskins, an iron cross, and a 3-D mylar Jesus; as Susan Newmark's lacerating collage painting "The Wifebeater/Blood on the Carpet/Mud in the Gravy"; Kathleen King's intricately zany mixed media assemblage "Chasing Happy"; Lisa R. Gould's group of laminated Fuji-archive prints "Three Years of Global Warming...Can You Guess Which One Belongs to 'G.W.'?"; and Robert Smith's chilling "Bin Laden Shame Poster."

Also including Taeko Imai's poetic ink drawings on rice paper, Bernice Faegenburg's witty silk screen, color transfer, and collage work "Fair Weather Friends", Mock Ul Lee's serene still life "Spring," and Bernice Sokol Kramer's pen and ink reworkings of newspaper sex ads from her "Red Light in Black and White" series—as well as too many other worthy works to do justice here—"NewsArt" more than proved its curator's contention that meanings in art "can go far beyond their moment and far beyond the words that provoked them." —Byron Coleman

At Cork Gallery, Avery Fisher Hall: A Compelling Choir of "Voices"

Normally one thinks of Lincoln Center as a musical venue, but it is also a place to see art. In particular, the regular exhibitions mounted by the West Side Arts Coalition at Cork Gallery, Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center Plaza, 65th Street and Broadway. Their most recent offering was "The Artist's Voice," which featured several diverse styles in painting and sculpture. This show lived up to its title by presenting a veritable choir of visual "voices," each with its own visual tone and timbre, adding up to a surprisingly harmonic whole.

Among the new discoveries were two artists from Kazakhstan: Gali's large, exquisitely painted oil "Formulia X," expressed the artist's concerns about war, global ecology, and other pressing issues with mysterious forms that express what he calls "the condition before mutation" through an intriguing synthesis of surrealism and abstraction. Berik Kulmamirov, on the other hand, combines ancient esoteric symbols derived from astrology, cosmology, and the anthropology and architecture of Kazakhstan to generate ruggedly textured yet elegant oils with a striking neo-primitive power.

Lori Lata's oils employ traditional still life motifs as a starting point for subtle explorations of form and color that expand from a contemporary perspective on certain discoveries in Cezanne and Picasso, evolving in the process a singular postmodern style. By contrast, the watercolors of Carol Carpentieri appear to be freewheeling explorations of the artist's psyche, in which colorful networks of lines laid down spontaneously in the manner of an "action painter" evolve into fanciful faces, figures, and birds in full plumage.

Trees are subjected to neo-cubistic fracturing in the watercolor and tempera paintings of Madi Lanier, with their subdued, dark colors and bold, sure brushstrokes that demonstrate the ongoing vitality of landscape composition. Like a contemporary cousin of John Marin, Lanier explores big themes on an intimate scale, making nature a casual conduit for formal statement. Robert Schultheis takes a different approach in his oils on canvas, turning building facades rendered in a precise magic realist style with each individual brick delineated into compositions that are essentially abstract, yet also can convey meaning, as in "Window Patriot," with its draped flag.

Meyer Tannenbaum's ongoing "Soft Impact "series of abstract acrylics has been one of his most fruitful to date, in that he appears able to work endless variations upon it. In the four canvases included here, Tannenbaum combines luminous color fields with black linear elements that divide the composition in the manner of a jigsaw puzzle, yet through some inexplicable aesthetic alchemy manages to make these discrete elements cohere in a characteristically dynamic fashion.

Two other artists take cityscapes in innovative directions: In his "Yellow Sky (Brooklyn)" series, Yookan Nishida turns streets lined with warehouses and residential brownstones into a still, subtly surreal realm where areas of light and shadow and soft, subdued hues cast an atmospheric spell. Conversely, Ava Schonberg presents us with exotic structures in Jerusalem delineated in an exacting hard-edge style and pastel acrylic hues, set against dark skies with full or crescent moons that add to their storybook quality, akin to the fanciful little semi-abstract towns of Paul Klee.

Lucinda Prince also creates a strong sense of place in her scenes from Taos, New Mexico, in which Pueblos, Indian villages, desert churches, and quaint local restaurants are captured in earthy, sun-baked colors that convey a tangible sense of the arid climate and desolate character of the landscape. Another kind of landscape figures prominently in the oils of Mary Anne Holliday, whose vistas of rolling hills dotted with lollipop trees are painted in an folksy faux-primitive style reminiscent of American regionalists such as Grant Wood; Holliday, however, also appears to have a strict formal agenda, and for all their atmospheric charms, her panoramic pictures possess underlying abstract virtues that make them work on two levels simultaneously.

To one mainly familiar with her paintings, Meg Boe Birns' mixed media sculptures of mythical heads swirling with Day-glo and metallic colors come as something of a surprise; yet her gold-faced Queen of Sheba and equally ornate "Wood Sprite" both possess a baroque quality wholly characteristic of this adventurous and experimental artist. Painter Sacchi Shimoda obsesses on the meaning of Marilyn Monroe to make post-Pop statements regarding life and art. Here, Shimoda substitutes a Mondrian painting for the subway grate in the iconic image of Marilyn with her skirt blowing up to create compositions that forge witty connections between the screen goddess and "Broadway Boogie Woogie."

Sculptor Patricia Anne Mandel employs an almost archeological sense of fragmentation to imbue isolated objects with mythic significance in her bronze of two small wings placed on a pedestal like delicate relics of antiquity, while demonstrating that she can also achieve a more classical sense of form in another bronze of a woman's head wearing a pensive expression. Erica Mapp also has a poetic side, judging from titles such as "Butterfly Migration" and "Going Home": however, Mapp's box sculptures created with silkscreen on plexiglass and mirror are sublime examples of Minimalist austerity, compelling our attention for their formal qualities alone.

Margie Steinmann harks back, for the tactile surfaces and sheer chromatic sumptuousness of her abstractions built on still life motifs, to The School of Paris; yet Steinmann's compositions also possess an immediacy and a gestural vigor akin to that of The New York School, making them exciting hybrids in the best tradition of postmodernism. Then there is Margo Mead, whose fluent handling of landscape and floral still life subjects in watermedia on rice paper demonstrates the virtues of multiculturalism, through her use of time-honorored Asian materials and techniques in the service of a contemporary Western vision.

Indeed, all of the artists in this skillfully curated exhibition at Cork Gallery demonstrated the persistence of tradition in the midst of innovation that gives the present period in art history its unique flavor. Surely, these artists seem to be saying, our century will be remembered as the one in which artists delved into the rich archive of past history with an unprecedented sense of scholarly sophistication to evolve their own subjective styles, incorporating and resolving once opposing tendencies in new and enduring ways. "The Artist's Voice" exemplified this spirit in spades.

—Maurice Taplinger

Segimon Pedragosa: Spanish Painting's Maestro of Many Moods

Although he paints a variety of subjects, including still life and marine scenes, the Spanish artist Segimon Pedragosa, widely exhibited in Barcelona and now featured year-round in the ongoing salon exhibition Montserrat Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, in Chelsea, appears partial to the kinetic energy of cities.

Passengers crossing at a busy Manhattan intersection are depicted by Pedragosa in staccato strokes that create jazzy compositional rhythms in one painting, while in another, figures and parts of signs appear fragmented, as though mirrored in reflective storefronts. Elsewhere, the neon marquee of Radio City Music Hall glows from nocturnal darkness amid traffic lights and the illuminated windows of towering office and apartment buildings—the entire glittering scene evoked in bold, juicy strokes with semiabstract panache.

Pedragosa also gives us views of weathered Paris streets as atmospherically mellow for their earthy colorations as Utrillos, as well as a splendid painting of a mature gentleman in a fedora and overcoat—embodying the figure of the flaneur or casual stroller so prevalent in French literature—pausing to inspect the newspapers and magazines on a kiosk in Paris, with a lively visual cacophony of signs and posters decorating the facades of buildings in the background. This is an especially busy subject, yet Pedragosa demonstrates considerable skill in orchestrating its various details in a composition which is especially pleasing for its sense of a moment in time captured on the run yet rendered immutable.

Painting by Segimon Pedragosa

Another painting of a young woman gazing out through the window of a cafe on a winding side-street where an older woman walks her dog is equally evocative, conveying a real sense of the contrasts of the urban environment. Here, we see a sophistication akin to street scenes of Balthus, with whom Pedragosa also reveals a kinship in his compositions featuring youthful female nudes in domestic interiors.

In one such painting, a nubile model is seen from behind, her lower limbs partially enveloped in a white cloth, as though she is toweling herself down after a bath; in another the model wears a silky white slip, one strap falling off her shoulder as she strikes a dreamy pose on a divan in front of French doors, light streaming through their glass panes. In the second work there is a whimsical quality that also can be compared to Lisa Yuskavage's paintings of comely young models. However, Pedragosa eschews easy irony to give us a more intimate evocation of a solitary girlish reverie that is infinitely more charming and romantic.

Other figurative works by this artist show an affinity for film noir, especially one of a couple in a boudoir, the woman reclining on the bed, bundled in a dark robe and gazing at the man, who sits on its edge with his bare back to her, smoking a cigarette and gazing off as though preoccupied with his own thoughts. In this especially dramatic picture, such details as the dingy walls and the brass headboard contribute to the feeling that this couple has reached some sort of an impasse in their relationship, attesting to Segimon Pedragosa's unusual ability to evoke a v ariety of subtle moods that would elude a lesser painter.

—Peter Wiley

The Royally Enjoyable Art of Anton Franz Höger

Working in an expressive yet meticulous figurative style inspired by the Dutch Baroque school, the German-born contemporary painter Anton Franz Höger often chooses the figure of a king for its symbolic qualities, explaining, "He stands for all of us in his tragic-comic solitude or in his masquerade intending to hide his real personality."

In his exhibition at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, Chelsea, from November 11 to December 1, Höger, (who besides being a visual artist is a renowned interpreter of Renaissance music), also depicts musicians who cavort like court jesters for the King's entertainment. All are garbed, incongruously, in leather World War II bomber caps that add Pop panache to antiquity, suggesting a timeless theatrical realm where the props of various centuries intermingle.

In Höger's imaginary monarchy the King behaves as oafishly as the commoners, who appear more like henchmen than subjects. At the same time, the King's posturings are more pompously histrionic, even when he tipsily hoists a pewter goblet while clutching a gaudy cloak to his flaccid nakedness in the oil on panel called "The King is Drinking."

Here, as in all of Höger's paintings, we see this gifted artist's ability to marry aspects of the Classic Baroque and the Romantic

"The King is Searching"

Baroque in a brilliant contemporary synthesis that combines the restraint of Poussin with the abandon of Caravaggio. The result is an art at once antic and formal—in other words, capable of entertaining us with its comic qualities while compelling us with its abstract virtues.

In the oil entitled "The King — The Day After," for example, we find the monarch in the throes of a monumental hangover. Slumped against a marble pillar, wearing the bomber cap he apparently dons to be "one of the boys," cloaked in the same green and yellow robe he sported during the revelries of the day before, he also wears a pallid, queasy expression, as he clutches a big bucket that he is apparently about to vomit into. It is a sorry spectacle, to be sure, yet Höger paints the scene with such exquisite finesse, creating a composition so innately pleasing as to vindicate the subject matter by virtue of its purely plastic qualities. Just as his predecessors could make even a bloody subject such as a crucifixion aesthetically palatable, Höger makes the King's hangover a thing of formal (if somewhat grotesque) beauty through his mastery of form and color.

These same formal qualities ennoble the work called "The King is Dancing," in which the monarch strikes a flamboyant pose while flanked by a trumpeter and a drummer in ridiculous dishabille. While all three characters are democratically crowned in the leather dunce caps of their buffoonish fraternity, there is no doubt that the central figure is in charge of the festivities as they party near an ornate arched portal giving way to a baroquely delineated view of blue sky and foamy floating cumuli. Somewhat more mysterious is the painting entitled "The King is Searching," in which the king and one of his underlings crouch amid boulders and clouds in a landscape every bit as dramatically desolate as one of Odd Nerdrum's strange terrains.

Unlike the perpetually somber Nerdrum, however, Anton Franz Höger invariably introduces a note of levity into the timeless realm he conjures up with such flawless skill, suggesting the absurdity underlying the human condition in a manner that makes his paintings fully as much fun as they are aesthetically engaging.

—Byron Coleman

Almost Famous...Again! —A Recovering Exhibitionist's Perilous Brush with Notoriety

by Ed McCormack

Every once in a great while, a former life comes back to haunt one. This time it arrived in the form of an email to my wife from someone named Stroma Inglis in London:

"Dear Jeannie,

I have been trying to track a contact down for Ed for about three weeks and finally I have an email for you. I am writing to you with a filming request for Ed regarding a show that we are filming for Channel 4 in the UK. It is part of the UK Music Hall of Fame series 'World's Greatest Gigs.' One of the featured concerts is Elton John and John Lennon at Madison Square Garden in 1974 and I understand that Ed was at the concert and party and interviewed Elton."

Heartening as it was to learn that it had taken her so long to track me down, a request like this could only mean trouble. I thought immediately of something Susan Sontag once wrote about still photography, a medium that I consider far less invasive and threatening than film or video:

"Although reason tells me the camera is not aimed like a gun barrel at my head, each time I pose for a photographic portrait I feel apprehensive. This is not the well-known fear, exhibited in many cultures, of being robbed of one's soul or a layer of one's personality. I do not imagine that the photographer, in order

Photo: Anton Perich

Attitude: Ed McCormack (center) preens between Warhol film director Paul Morrissey and rock star Lou Reed at Max's Kansas City in the 1970s.

to bring the image-replica into the world, robs me of anything. But I do register that the way I ordinarily experience myself is turned around."

Several years ago, I decided to experience myself differently and give everyone else a break as well. I stopped drinking and made a conscious effort to become a phantom of print. That I pretty much ceased at that time to exist as a social entity has since been a great comfort and a point of pride to me. Being disembodied, so to speak, has spared this recovering exhibitionist untold embarrassment and remorse, providing him with at least the possibility of aging gracefully. Now I was being asked to break the solemn covenant I had made with myself and once again let the demon of my narcissism out of his cage. Frankly, the thought of it was more terrifying than any rational person may be able to understand.

So, ignoring my wife's protests (although Jeannie, perhaps more than anyone, understands the reasons for my retreat, she also thinks I go too far and am in danger of becoming antisocial), I fired back the following email:

"Dear Stroma,

Yes, it was a great gig. As I recall, John was wearing a big rhinestone (diamond?) pin on his jacket that said 'Elvis' and sang 'Whatever Gets You Through the Night' while chewing gum, which struck me as quite a trick. And the after party was fun because Elton had a kind of hissy fit at some woman and her husband, calling her a 'fookin slag' and demanding that they be thrown out. But as for your request that I go on TV to talk about the event, thanks but no thanks. I'm busy writing at the moment and am one of those people who is better read than heard I'm afraid. Really, I'm sorry, but I'm kind of reclusive and don't have any reason to want to go on TV. I wish you all the best with your project, however."

And that, I thought, was that, until Stroma wrote back, "That is such a massive shame as your stories are so fantastic. I would love you to change your mind as our director is really lovely and we would only need you for a short amount of time."

This time I didn't reply at all. But Stroma was not to be deterred; next, she left a message on our answering machine, giving her cellphone number and imploring me to "get back for a chat."

It was beginning to feel like harassment and I was prepared to ignore the phone call, too. But the sound of an actual pleading human voice seemed to activate Jeannie's innate altruism, as well as her better business sense.

"Please stop being so stubborn and just do it," she said. "How do you know the publicity from something like this won't somehow be helpful to us in the long run?"

Not only is Jeannie my wife, a formidable position in itself (I think of John Mortimer's name for his character Rumpole's spouse: "She Who Must Be Obeyed"), but as editor and publisher of the magazine that I write for she is also, technically speaking, my boss. So, I skulked over to the computer and laid out my terms: The interview (assuming I agreed to it) would take place "in the room that I laughingly refer to as my study, which is covered with books, pictures, and all kinds of other crap and is my natural habitat"; it could not take too long and we would have to do it in the next couple of days, since "as with a dental appointment, the longer I have to think about it the more chance I might cancel."

"There will be no drilling or scraping but I can't promise no bright lights," Stroma wrote back. Then, after saying how "gutted" she was that she would not be able to come along with the crew, she hastened to mollify me with the facile flattery of her trade: "I will talk to Ryan (our lovely director) today and let him know to make the interview as short as possible. You are such a star and I really appreciate this, Ed."

* * *

Wednesday turned out to be a bad hair day for The Star, who woke even more reluctantly than usual and barely grunted grudging assent when Ryan the lovely director, rang up at ten to confirm if it would still be possible for him and his crew "to call by at eleven."

"When I told him it was still on, he went 'Brilliant!'" I said after hanging up the phone.

"That must be the British equivalent of 'Awesome,'" said Jeannie.

* * *

Led by my wife, the instigator of my misery, they came tromping into my study like an RAF patrol with their tons of equipment. While Ryan, who with his shaven head looked like the rock star Michael Stipe, chatted me up amiably, telling me what a fan he was of my writing for Rolling Stone, his three elves—the camera man, the sound man, and the lighting man or "gaffer"—went about efficiently transforming the room into a TV studio. They covered all three windows and set up tripods, reflectors, and umbrellas. The two chairs from my writing desk and my drawing table were positioned to face each other for the interview. Ryan scanned the cluttered walls, asked if he could "borrow" a large photographic portrait of Jeannie and me as glamorous young hippies, then instructed one of the elves to place it on an easel near the chair in which I would sit.

I didn't bother to ask if this was the first time they had ever had to schlep all their gear to a fifth-floor walk-up, but I was fairly certain that such exertions wouldn't be necessary in a few days when they would fly to L.A. to shoot Christina Aguilera. As if to compliment me for not being quite so much of a prima donna, Ryan made a point of complaining about the pop diva's demand for an outrageously expensive makeup artist.

They sat me down in the chair; the sound technician lifted my shirt, ran a wire up my torso and threaded the tiny microphone through a buttonhole. Bryan sat opposite me, cleared his throat, assumed his David Frost position and rifled through his notes. I caught a glimpse of myself in the monitor at my feet, looking like Howard Hughes after he went into seclusion and let his hair, beard, and fingernails grow out like Bela Lugosi in The Wolf Man. It occurred to me that some with unfond memories of "McCormack the sleek party panther" (as author and former friend Seymour Krim once dismissed me in an irate letter to the editor after I pounced on one of his books in a flippant review) would rejoice in this video verite portrait of a latter-day Dorian Gray.

"Jeannie, come in here and see what

Continued on next page

they're doing to me!" I screamed to my wife, who was tending to the refreshments in the kitchen, drawing chuckles from the assembled Brits.

When she peered through the doorway, Jeannie would later tell me, "You looked so trapped... like a prisoner being interrogated, surrounding by all those guys and the equipment and bright lights, that I almost regretted making you go through with it."

* * *

In fact, as I sat there watching Ryan frown at his notes, while the tech elves scurried about making last minute adjustments, I felt less like I was about to be interrogated than executed. My whole professional life seemed to flash before me, freeze framing on the early seventies when I, too, was "almost famous," as my fellow former Rolling Stone feature writer Cameron Crowe titled his autobiographical feature film.

I was churning out frequent cover stories on Bette Midler, Bob Marley, Aerosmith, and numerous other music personalities. My pieces were running with photographs by the incomparable Annie Leibovitz, and in two instances I was teamed up with movie stars who moonlighted as photographers—Candice Bergen for a feature on Alice Cooper and Diane Keaton for an article on gambling in Atlantic City.

My editors were passing along fan letters to me from people like the journalist Nat Hentoff, the TV commentator Gene Shalit, and the novelist John Knowles. I was getting so blase about it all that I even shrugged off a mention in Liz Smith's column that one editor said he himself "would kill for." Nor did I disagree when Tom Wolfe insisted all too graciously, at a party celebrating the serialization of his book The Right Stuff in Rolling Stone, that my "outrageous piece" about the lewd opening night festivities of The New York Porn Film Festival was "actually the best thing in the magazine."

Since Rolling Stone was the only mass circulation magazine with one foot in the underground and the other in the Big Time it had a credibility in the hip scene on a par with that of rock music itself. Those of us who wrote for it were in a unique position: While the old farts from Time and Newsweek waited outside the dressing room for a brief put-on interview (don't trust anyone over 30!), we belonged to the same generation as our subjects and blended effortlessly into the entourage, getting the inside dope, both literally and figuratively. When it came to the rest of the press, most Rolling Stone writers had a hipper-than-thou attitude. Few, however, flaunted it as flamboyantly as I did.

There's a photograph of me with Warhol film director Paul Morrissey and rock musician Lou Reed, taken in 1971 by Anton Perich, publisher of the chic party tabloid

Photo: Bob Gruen

Rock 'n' Roll Circus: On tour with the Alice Cooper band, Ed McCormack (center) and actress/photographer Candice Bergen schmooze with Alice's manager Shep Gordon.

"Night." The picture was blown up to poster size and displayed for a time right inside the entryway of Max's Kansas City, the downtown dive bar that Andy Warhol and his menagerie of flaming creatures made famous. Paul is seen in pensive profile, hand to chin; Lou is covering his face with both hands like a shy mobster. I stand between them, one hand hooked in my belt, hair flowing below my shoulders, looking right into the camera with an expression that tells you all you need to know about me back then. It is a picture of Attitude with a capital "A", so blatant, even for that foppish era, that the first time I walked in after it had been put up, one painted and tainted scene-maker, haunting the bar like a Valkyrie in a feathered boa, started warbling an off-key rendition of Carly Simon's "You're So Vain."

It didn't take long for my swagger to turn into a stagger, as I made my stuporous rounds of the kind of parties you read about on Page Six, nodding out in other people's limousines, being fawned over by sleazy press agents, acting as if my writing was merely an accessory to my hectic social life. My writing, too, began to take on a drunken recklessness, going from irreverent to mean spirited, as I lost my objectivity, becoming more and more like the people I satirized in print. As my delusions grew ever more grand, the rock stars and other celebrities I was covering turned into bit players in my feverish mental movie about a swashbuckling hipster journalist who showed up with a sixpack instead of a tape recorder and was too cool to even take notes . . .

By the end of the decade I had already abandoned a book called *New York Satyricon* (all about Max's, The Factory, and other decadent scenes) that I had been contracted to write for the Viking Press. Now I was working on a new book for Anchor/Doubleday called *Paper Pop Star: Confessions of a Second-Generation New Journalist.* Pitched as "an audacious autobiography," the second book would chronicle how writing for Rolling Stone had almost ruined my health, wrecked my marriage, and robbed me of my sanity. I had already gone through the advances from both books, and hoped, at very least, to be able to bring the second one to an inspiringly redemptive conclusion. The only hitch was that, rather than really being rehabilitated, I was still in the prime of my decline. . .

* * *

Now, drug-free and sober as a judge for many years, a mature man serenely distant from all the vulgar madness of the popular music scene and totally committed to writing about a more exalted subject—my first love, visual art— I felt just the slightest internal shudder of a Jekyll and Hyde transformation taking place, as I sat cornered in my study, staring into those infernal lights.

Rather than believing I would deliberately attempt to sabotage the interview, I prefer to think that I unconsciously assumed vestiges of an old persona simply to psyche myself up for an ordeal that bore no comfortable relation to the person I am now. Perhaps I ended up playing to the bleachers, so to speak, in order to meet the expectations of my inquisitor for a geezer with some remnant of cool 1970s charisma—if not Keith Richards, at least some Paper Pop Star facsimile. Or maybe it was just my usual social hysteria kicking in big-time.

In any case, I found myself responding to Ryan's questions about that long ago concert with rambling rants that made me sound like I was back on amphetamines and Tourettes-like outbursts of obscenity that would probably necessitate punctuating many of my sentences with a flatulent cacophony of bleeps.

At one point, when asked about a certain

female rock star, all I could think to blurt was that she had bad breath. Other gratuitous indiscretions extended to the principals of the concert themselves, hardly an auspicious approach when you consider that these Hall of Fame tributes are invariably idolatrous affairs. For example, I described Elton John as looking like "the bastard mutant offspring of Leon Russell and Liberace...all done up like some kind of demented parade float."

As for his music: How could I possibly take it seriously, I asked, having had the good fortune to grow up in New York City where, as a high school kid, I could pop into a downtown dive called The Jazz Gallery and catch back-to-back sets by John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk? Although aware that such condescension toward a national icon would hardly play well on the British telly, I made clear that Elton's musical abilities were a lot less interesting to me than his irrational tantrum at the party after the concert, yelling and waving a menacing finger "like Truman Capote playing The Godfather."

Toward John Lennon, I was much more favorably disposed. Still, I couldn't resist going on about what a "naive Brit" John was when it came to choosing his friends in New York: people like yippie-turned-yuppie Jerry Rubin and the pot-activist and public nuisance of a street singer David Peel—buffoons he seemed to mistake for authentic revolutionaries (and with whom he became so identified that our clueless FBI followed the derelict Peel around the East Village for weeks, thinking they were trailing the "subversive" former Beatle himself!).

Of course, I was quick to add that Lennon's naivete was a facet of his spontaneity— one of the things that had always endeared him to us—and to say how great it was to see him back onstage at Madison Square Garden, after his years of holing up in the Dakota in self-imposed exile from the public eye. In fact, I waxed so genuinely rhapsodic about his energetic reemergence, pumping his guitar and chewing gum as he sang, that Ryan began to grin and nod encouragingly, as if to say, "Brilliant! Just what we want! Please carry on, mate! "

After I had finished raving about the event, going so far as to call it a "kind of symbolic resurrection" (even though John had never been dead yet), Ryan crossed his legs, made a steeple with his fingers, and in his best neo-David Frost manner, said, "As you must know, that was to be John Lennon's last public performance...Why do you suppose he... didn't do more?"

I, too, paused significantly, thinking maybe I should say that, like that other famous recluse Jack Kerouac—and, for that matter, like most real artists who initially discovered their creativity in the solitude of private epiphanies—John always seemed to have an uneasy relationship with his fame. So perhaps, hit with the full force of the adulation that greeted him that night at the Garden, he was feeling like the proverbial moth flying too close to the flame...Surely that would have been the sort of shameless speculation fans love to hear about their heroes—especially when they're no longer around to say what a lot of rot it is.

Probably as he sat across from me, still smiling encouragingly, that's the sort of thing Ryan was hoping I would say. But instead, choosing my locution with the British viewing public in mind, I admitted, "I don't have the foggiest notion."

* * *

Early the next morning, I woke before Jeannie, made myself a cup of tea, and took it into my study. I sat there at my desk with a cool breeze blowing in, savoring the stillness, the privacy, the delicious solitude. Surrounded by my many art books (a few of which, in my present incarnation, I had written or contributed essays to), I reflected that I am basically the most bookish, the most introverted of men... But had I so much as read a single book in all the years I wrote for Rolling Stone? I really couldn't recall.

Sipping my tea, gazing from my tenement ivory tower down the block to the lush greenery of Carl Schurz Park, it felt so good to know that all I had to do today was write an art review or two. That, after all, was what I did best. Art was what I had always cared most about anyway. All that other stuff been one long detour, prompted by youthful hedonism and suddenly finding myself in the very eye of the Zeitgeist, in the grip of a reportorial exhilaration similar to what ancient scribes must have felt watching Rome burn...

In the beginning it had been enormously seductive and, admittedly, even yesterday, after all these years, as relieved as I was to finally have the interview over with, I felt just the tiniest bit sorry when they turned off those bright lights.

"I'm afraid I was a bit hyper; I hope you got something you can use," I said to Ryan as the elves started to disassemble and pack their gear.

"Oh, we got lots," he said. "You gave us great sound-bites."

And I flashed on the image of a rabid beast, showing its fangs.

* * *

JIM HANS' "100 HOBOKEN FIRSTS": GLIMPSES OF GENIUS

In the early-to-mid 1960s, when his innovative paintings and collages were being snatched up by Vincent Price, Robert Scull and other notable collectors, Jim Hans was on a career trajectory that promised to give him parity with Warhol, Lichtenstein, Rauschenberg, and others at the top of the Pop movement.

Then, Hans abruptly withdrew from the New York gallery scene, moved to Hoboken, and took up a brand new obsession: "The Mile Square City" itself, where he shot an avant garde feature film called "The Hands of Time Are Soon Defiled, Eternity Will Turn Upon Itself," which in a more equitable cultural climate would be a cult classic to rival that other famous Hoboken flick, "On The Waterfront."

Hans also ran a unique curios and collectables store called The Hoboken Calendar Shop of Current Events with his wife Beverly that became a nerve center for the local arts community, founded The Hoboken Historical Museum, and served as its president until 1981. But for decades his main project has been a massive tome on Hoboken history that has been pretty much kept under wraps and has, over the years, taken on mythic rumor-status akin to Joe Gould's "An Oral History of Our Time." Unlike Gould's apocryphal masterpiece, however, Jim Hans' "History" actually does exist, as this writer can attest, having been privileged with a tantalizing preview of its many large, profusely illustrated pages.

While that magnum opus remains a work in progress, a monumental ongoing conceptual art project with no known deadline, we are fortunate in the meantime to have "100 Hoboken Firsts" by Jim Hans, a large format paperback recently published by The Hoboken Historical Museum.

Designer Joy Sikorski has done an excellent job of preserving the look and spirit of Hans' visuals, and the author's witty and informative text not only covers an amazing spectrum of Hoboken Firsts (ranging from the nation's first ice cream cone and baseball game to its first computer class) but gives illuminating glimpses into a singular life and mind.

Admittedly, these are minute glimpses, hardly sufficient to suggest the scope of Hans' accomplishment. Still, they reveal one casual aspect of a man many believe to be one the unheralded geniuses of contemporary art. —Wilson Wong

(Copies can be ordered directly from the author: Jim Hans, 206 3rd Street, Hoboken NJ, 07030 (201-653-7392.)

"Talent" Comes in All Styles and Sizes at Allan Stone Gallery

For four decades Allan Stone Gallery, now located at 113 East 90th Street, has given as much credence to quirky personal obsessions as to formal innovation. Thus it has anticipated many of the trends that we now call postmodern, even while building a solid reputation for expertise in the New York School with works by Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Arshile Gorky and others of similar caliber.

Along with the big guns of Abstract Expressionism, Stone has always embraced more intimate, poetic tendencies, exemplified in its long term association with Joseph Cornell, and continues to discover unique, often eccentric visions, among emerging artists, as evidenced in its recent salon-style exhibition "Talent 2005."

David Barnett, for example, employs soldered wire, glazed rice paper, and other found materials to construct surreal little flying machines with moving parts that suggest the comic grandiosity of human aspirations. And the mixed media box construction that Cornell pioneered is given a singular new spin in Anne-Marie Levine's tableau of tiny, delicate paper-doll ballerinas practicing in a Lilliputian rehearsal studio with a polished wood floor. Then there is Oriane Stender, who shreds and alters real dollar bills to make madcap collages, which seem to comment slyly on the meaning of money.

Duane Keiser's oil of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich is so loving in its meticulous description of the spongy Wonder Bread, the smeared butter knife, and the equally besmirched wax paper as to evoke a staple of American "comfort food" with the finesse of an eighteenth century still life master. Other artists who give new life to venerable traditions include Eric Barth, Brandon Soloff, Gina Minichino, and Anastasia Rolfe Pollard, all four of whose moody landscapes and/or portraits tempt one to coin the phrase "New Atmospherists." By contrast, Richard Harper casts his monumentally looming rear-view of a female nude in clear, cold light; yet the figure comes off more sensual than Pearlstein-clinical.

Another tendency that Allan Stone Gallery has been quietly championing for years is art that imbues solitary objects with a subtle metaphysical dimension, as seen in Robert Valdes' watercolor of a beat-up baseball set against an earthen ground and Gary Spradling's bronze sculpture of a crowbar with realistic human fingers on both ends. Through a kind of 3-D trompe-l'oeil, Richard Haden's sculpture of an old gallon bleach bottle turns elegance on its head by convincing us that painted mahogany is crumpled plastic.

A peculiarly subjective strain of Neo-Surrealism, akin to that of the late Gregory Gillespie, can also be seen in Lucien Dulfan's collage painting of upright and inverted infants, their heads encased in antiquated sci-fi oxygen bubbles; as well as in Brian Haverlock's miniature Boschian visions, painted in a manner resembling hand-tinted tin-types.

Outnumbered but not outgunned, four abstract artists hold their own admirably among all these novel approaches to subject matter: Katrin Roos with a minimalist composition of glued gum-balls; Paul Lorenz with dazzlingly intricate linear graphite drawings that are said to be "rooted in architectural schematics," yet are poetically evocative for all their rigor; Madeline Silber with oddly compelling oils of wiggling biomorphic forms in candy-apple hues; and Nguyen Ducmanh, with two new paintings in which his once isolated gestural shapes are now integrated with an equally energetic and colorful painterly ground.

—Ed McCormack

"Fancies" Raise Funds for Phoenix Gallery's Projects Room

One of the most important and popular events of this or any other art season is "Phoenix Fancies," the annual fundraiser for the Phoenix Gallery's Project Room, from December 7 through 22 (with a reception from 5 to 8 PM on December 8), at Phoenix Gallery, 210 Eleventh Avenue.

The term "fancies" refers to small works created by gallery artists especially for this fundraiser, exhibited in Gallery I and all priced below $100. All proceeds will go to the Project Room and purchasers will be able to take take possession of the works immediately, rather than having to wait until the end of the exhibition.They can also purchase tote bags decorated by gallery artists to carry their purchases home in. In addition, there will be an exhibition of larger works by gallery artists in Gallery II, and 50% of the proceeds from the sale of these works will also go to support the Project Room.

Phoenix Gallery more than lives up to its name, having renewed itself in various locations over the years, since its beginning in 1958, as part of the legendary Tenth Street scene. Its vitality, however, has more to do with its ability to change and remain relevant, rather than simply resting on its laurels as the oldest continuously existing artist-run gallery in New York City, with 33 artist-members from abroad, as well as all over the United States.

One facet of Phoenix Gallery's relevance is its multicultural orientation. It received support from the Lower Manhattan Cultural Center as an umbrella for an exhibition by the Asian American Women Artists Alliance in 2001 and 2002. As part of its community outreach programs, it also hosted residencies by The New Renaissance Chamber Artists; Intuflo Poetry Group; and the Linda Diamond Dance Project, which during its year-long residence invited children from the Gifted and Talented School in Harlem to performances and lectures at the gallery.

The Phoenix Gallery's Project Room exhibitions provide a free venue for artists whose work is deemed to be of environmental, social, cultural, and ethnic interest. Proposals for exhibitions are reviewed and judged by a special committee appointed by the gallery.The first Project Room exhibition was the group show "Through the Eyes of Women," which coincided with the Gay Games Cultural Festival, New York, in 1994. The second, later the same year, was "Winged Victory: Altered Images, Transcending Breast Cancer, the Photography of Art Myers."

Other exhibitions benefited the Northern Lights Alternatives for AIDS, the American Indian Community House, Canine Companions for Independence, Green Peace, and organizations for the homeless. The art community, too, was immeasurably enriched by the Artists Talk on Art events that took place at Phoenix Gallery every Friday night from 1997 through 2003, before being relocated to the auditorium at the School of Visual Arts.

Auspiciously timed for the holiday gift-giving season and billed unpretentiously as "cash 'n' carry art, priced to go," "Phoenix Fancies" offers an opportunity to collect good art at better than good prices while supporting numerous good causes.

—Jeannie McCormack

Seung Lee's "Collections" Encapsulate Time

"If I could put time in a bottle," goes the haunting refrain of a popular song from the 1960s that one will never again be able to hear without thinking of Seung Lee. For in his art, Seung Lee does just that, reconfiguring his often decades-old paintings and drawings, which he cuts or shreds, then casts in resin and stuffs into glass bottles or plastic food storage bags that literally become personal time capsules.

The resulting works, at once poignant and oddly beautiful, can be seen in Lee's solo exhibition "Collections," in The Project Room at Phoenix Gallery, 210 Eleventh Avenue @ 25th Street, suite 902, from November 2 through December 3, with a reception on November 10 from 6 to 8 PM.

"Art making is a spiritual activity occupied with time (past, present, and future) and space (pictorial and personal)," Seung Lee states. Then, as if to make clear that his seeming "destruction" of former works in the process of creating new ones is not as wanton as it may at first appear, he adds, "I see the present as the pivot on which the past and future revolve, the only solid point of orientation for time."

Time has a special resonance to Lee, an assistant professor at Long Island University who has exhibited widely in the U.S., Japan, and Korea, and whose work in one earlier show was accurately described by Helen A. Harrison in The New York Times as "an extended meditation on the tempo of modern life."

Born in a small village in Korea, the youngest of six children, Lee was obliged to scavenge in garbage to survive after his father died when he was six and his mother took seriously ill. Several, years later, after benevolent relatives sponsored the family's relocation to the United States, Lee was putting himself through art school at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn by driving a cab in Manhattan when he lost all his belongings in an apartment fire and had to start scavenging again.

Forced to refurnish his life with other people's orphaned objects, he experienced an epiphany that one is tempted to liken to the dubious legend about how Joseph Beuys started using animal fat and felt in his work after he was shot down in the Crimea as a Luftwaffe pilot during World War II, and nomadic Tartars saved his life by insulating him with those materials. Lee, however, is more down to earth than that famously self-mythologizing German when he explains, "Many of the subjects and materials in my works are discovered on the street or in other surroundings: wood scraps, dishes, tree roots, broken TVs, VCRs and other found materials. . . . Those objects seem to have a history which is compelling to me."

While a critique of our wasteful throw-away society lies at the heart of his recycled art, Lee is hardly one to pontificate against modern society's wastefulness. Rather, his aesthetic ecology is populist in nature, without pandering to Philistine taste by simplifying his conceptual approach. Yet his work is invariably accessible and engaging on several levels simultaneously.

"Bottled Memories" *Photo: Michael Bubolo*

For example, in a previous exhibition called "Expressway" at Dowling college, Lee created a mixed media installation incorporating tall arches made with car mufflers, a wall covered with hubcaps, and video images of a car meandering along a highway with the voices of the artist's two daughters, then four and seven, repeating phrases such as "Where are we going?" and, "How far is that?" and, "Are we there yet?"

While the expressway served as a metaphor for the life journey, anyone who had ever set out on a long trip, with impatient youngsters in the back seat and the golden arches of McDonald's reappearing every couple of miles along the way, could readily "get" the installation on a more basic level.

The mood of Seung Lee's new installation at Phoenix Gallery is more meditative yet no less compelling. Walking among carefully arranged configurations of graceful antique bottles of different hues in a seemingly infinite variety of shapes and sizes (ranging from elegant cut glass cognac bottles to wine coolers and decanters), the viewer is reminded of the role such vessels have played in still life painting down through the centuries, from the early Dutch masters to Morandi and beyond.

Here, however, the situation has been reversed: the painting is in the bottle rather than the bottle being in the painting. Thus the content of the painting is obscured, its composition fragmented far beyond the planar fractures of Cubism and further disrupted by the prismatic play of light on the glass. Within Lee's various vessels, only tantalizing glimpses of forms and colors can be discerned to remind us that for anything gained something of equal value invariably must be lost.

That we will never be able to see these earlier paintings by Seung Lee in their original wholeness and entirety provokes an elegiac pang, adding further piquancy to the new works he has made from them, with their sense of encapsulated time frozen in stasis under translucent layers of resin and glass. Indeed, the poignancy of the new works, their content hermetically sealed like ashes in an urn, is reflected in the title Seung Lee has given to an anthropomorphic arrangement of vessels, which winds through the gallery in a manner suggesting a funeral procession: "Bottled Memories."

Just as radical in their implications of self-erasure are works such as the pointedly named "Coffin Lid" and "Italy Painting," where the shredded, resin-cast artifacts of self are encased in transparent zip-lock food storage bags and displayed in elaborate gilded frames, as if to insist that, though they have been subjected to a process of willful deconstruction, these pieces remain connected to a venerable painterly tradition.

This treatment seems especially significant in the latter work, which refers to Italy, where Lee spent time studying on a scholarship in Florence, and gained the perspective to move beyond the representational mode of painting and drawing he had practiced up until that time. Indeed, all of Seung Lee's work charts one man's journey through time and the creative methods he has devised to stanch its relentless flow—which should be of interest to all of us who strive, if not to outwit mortality, to stave it off until we have reached our intended destination.

—Ed McCormack

Beyond Post-Blackness: "Blacker than Thou"

One of the more burning ethno-aesthetic controversies in the art world was prompted by a 2001 exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, for which the curator, Thelma Golden, coined the term "post-black art." The implication was black artists were abandoning overtly racial themes in order to be judged on their artistic attributes alone and not be relegated to a critical "ghetto."

However, a newer exhibition, pointedly titled "Blacker Than Thou," makes just as strong a case for the idea that, given historical realities which persist to the present moment (need one even mention the name Katrina?), an awareness of racial identity is not only morally inescapable for artists of the African Diaspora but can enrich expression immeasurably, making the work's aesthetic qualities all the more relevant.

"Blacker Than Thou" can be seen at the Taller Boricua Gallery, in the Julio de Burgos Cultural Center, 1680 Lexington Avenue, opening with a reception at 6pm on Friday November 18 and running through January 7, 2006. Curated by Al Johnson, one of the participating artists and Fernando Salicrup, the gallery's executive director, the show includes artists from the United States, Africa, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, and elsewhere working in a wide range of styles and mediums to "engage the complexities of Blackness."

Al Johnson himself is a vocal example of the kind of artist who revels in blackness, with powerful compositions that capture the many moods and tempos of life in the hood, ranging from the hectic action of "106th Street" to the fond nostalgia of "Grandma's Church." Johnson brings his professional experience as a storyboard artist to bear to endow his realist mixed media and acrylic paintings with an impressive narrative immediacy.

Rod Ivey is another gifted realist who captures the life and movement of street scenes he knows well in compositions that sometimes combine monochromatic passages with the grainy quality of news photographs and bursts of color, particularly on the facades of tenement buildings recalling the sunlight urban structures of Edward Hopper.

By contrast, David Shrobe improvises like a jazz musician in semi-abstract compositions that combine jaggedly fragmented forms, vigorous neo-expressionist paint handling and found objects such as an old washboard to dynamically funky effect. Anton, another energetic exponent of the painterly mode, takes fragmentation even further in acrylics on canvas that combine disembodied faces resembling African tribal masks with brilliant colors and graffiti-like gestural elements that show a kinship with Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Joey Infante, on the other hand, pursues a more quaintly primitivistic approach in his painting of a comely young Caribbean woman with dangling gold earrings and dreadlocks spilling out of a floppy fedora bedecked with large exotic flowers. Nicole Titus also deals with island themes in her paintings of people in marketplaces, with the figures strongly simplified to create formal unity, even while capturing a convincing sense of the random happenings in such places.

An opposite approach is taken by Imo Nse Imeh, who strives for a monumental symbolism in the manner of Tom Feelings and Charles White in oils and mixed media works on canvas that display a superb grasp of human anatomy combined with strong abstract design, a winning combination that makes the expressive figure a conduit for emotion.

Diane Pryor-Holland expands on the tradition of Southern black quiltmaking in her large fabric pieces, filtering folk art influences and inspiration through a sophisticated aesthetic sensibility in abstract compositions that project a proud sense of heritage merged with formal innovation. Erica Mapp may be the most adamantly abstract artist in the show, yet she too manages to convey a sense of "the complexity of blackness" through her geometric compositions comprised of subdued yet resonant hues. Then there is Monica Hand, who improvises with materials such as decorative paper, sound objects and foamcore mat board to create book art and 3-D sculptural objects that draw inspiration from Nina Simon lyrics and other aspects of African-American culture.

All told, "Blacker than Thou" suggests that the African Diaspora is far too rich in content and the concerns of black people are far too pressing to be subjugated to an exclusionary aesthetic agenda. Artists can make a difference, at least in terms of raising consciousness, as this exhibition proves admirably well. —J. Sanders Eaton

Patrick Otis Cox Captures China's "New Cultural Revolution" in Painting and Video

Aside from the work of courtroom sketch artists, reportorial art has been pretty much relegated to the past ever since cameras became portable. That is, until Steve Mumford decided to go to Iraq to draw the war and another enterprising contemporary artist named Patrick Otis Cox made it his business to document a more subtle subject: "the emotions created by the cultural upheavals occurring in China."

While Mumford, hoping to emulate nineteenth century visual correspondents like Frederick Remington, stuck to drawing and painting, Cox combined the traditional medium of painting with state of the art video presentation to document China's "new cultural revolution" of "free enterprise, cell phones and dog eat dog business deals."

The results can be seen in Cox's exhibition "The China Series," at Built Gallery, 22 Howard Street, through November 10. As a painter, Cox takes his cues from both the Impressionists and the Expressionists, filling his acrylics on canvas with shimmering, light-filled colors and boldly delineated forms. "I believe in painting as quickly as I can, to capture the true feelings I have of the scene," the widely-exhibited Kentucky-born artist has stated, and his unpremeditated, spontaneous approach served him well in documenting the frenetic pace of downtown Beijing in the style that he refers to as "Postmodern Impressionism."

The contrast between modern and traditional modes of travel in the rapidly changing city are especially dramatic in "The Transporter." Cox's painting is a rear view of a man transporting food on a wagon attached to the back of his bicycle. This deceptively simple subject, painted in sure, swift strokes and sun-dappled hues, captures

"Dragon: The Great Wall"

a sense of simplicity amid complexity, as the man peddles along between oncoming cars and parked bicycles.

Unlike Mumford's images of Iraq, which are detailed and illustrational, Cox's paintings capture a truth that goes beyond the merely factual. He filters the scene before him through his subjective vision in a manner that transforms it into a vivid emotional expression, as seen in "Beijing Hu Tong," an acrylic painting on plywood. The Hu Tong is a historic neighborhood where Cox stayed while he was in China in order to immerse himself in the daily life of the people rather than living like a tourist.

His painting depicts a woman standing in the entryway of an 800 year old building in bold, impasto strokes of brilliant red, yellow, orange, and blue hues that evoke rather than describe the subject. While the simplicity of the forms and the vigorous brush work verge on abstraction, the composition conjures up a sense of place more atmospheric, and therefore a more emotionally accurate sense of this ancient district than any more exacting technique or treatment might yield.

Besides capturing the dynamic changes evident in the urban centers of modern China, Cox delves into the country's historical landmarks in "Yi He Yuan: The Summer Palace" (a magnificent panoramic 54" by 105" triptych) and "Dragon: The Great Wall." In the latter work, he employs visceral reds and other strong hues to suggest the harsh history of blood and toil that went into the building of this vast wall that he shows slithering over the landscape like a massive serpent under a turbulent sky.

Cox also shows us that the sense of unrelenting struggle that characterizes Chinese history takes other forms today in his painting "Beijing Art Academy." Far from being an idyllic view of the groves of academe, this is a Munch-like vision of a young woman riding a bicycle on a campus path with sinuous trees on either side and a shadowy figure in the distance. The picture is permeated by fiery hues that make one think not only of Tiananmen Square, but also of the fact up until recently artists in China were severely persecuted if they dared to depart from the party line.

So even while Cox succeeds in capturing the vital, optimistic energy of the campus, he also conveys the undertone of danger that must linger to haunt art students endeavoring, as he puts it, "to maintain the traditional while moving into the modern."

Indeed, this is the subject of the accompanying video documentary, "Artists of Beijing," for which Patrick Otis Cox interviewed 19 contemporary Chinese artists, conveying the fascinating complexities inherent not only in China's burgeoning art scene but in the newfound freedom of its daily life. —J. Sanders Eaton

Architecture and Metaphysics Merge in the Art of Marcela Pittner

Marcela Pittner paints the living city as fragments from antiquity. Most often the city that she paints is Buenos Aires, Argentina, the city of her birth, and no artist since Jorge Luis Borges has done it more justice than Pittner in her subtle and evocative oils.

On view year-round in the ongoing salon exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, in Chelsea, Pittner's paintings are filled with an elusive sense of mystery that can only be compared to certain pictures by the American artist Edwin Dickinson. Fairfield Porter once wrote of Dickinson that he "perfected a tactile point of view in which everything goes from soft to crisp." The same might be said of Pittner, whose refinement is such that much of the appeal of her paintings has to do with the subtle transitions that she makes between stone and sky in her paintings in which ornate architectural fragments appear to float freely in space.

Such paintings have a dream-like quality, with the grand facades of old buildings appearing to crack and deconstruct as their decorative statuary takes on a phantom quality, merging with night skies. Soft and crisp edges play off each other to create a kind of tactile delectation suggested through subtle shifts of color, tone and touch, rather than by the piling on of impasto. Pittner offers many pleasures to the true connoisseur manipulating pigment in such a manner as to call one's attention to the act of painting, even as she evokes subject matter with convincing verisimilitude. Her art is one of beautifully organized checks and balances that reward the observant viewer with continual textural and chromatic epiphanies of the subtlest kind.

None of what Pittner does, however, is gratuitous; all of her sensitivity and skill serves her vision, which is ultimately poetic as well as plastic. For while her formal gifts are formidable, they appear dedicated to advancing a metaphysical theme so personal that no amount of interpretation can possibly do them justice. Accurate as they well must be in describing specific architectural entities in loving detail, her paintings are concerned with something that is ultimately intangible, that by and large eludes language and rational explication. If one were to attempt to express what she does as a painter in literary terms, one would have to say simply that she is creating poetry rather than prose.

Thus, in her "Testigos mudos," one need not know the exact location of the facade, decorated with classical sculptures, that rises up against an impassive sky, its beige walls and shattered windows nibbled along the edges like a half-eaten wafer. Nor does one have to understand what has befallen the equally majestic structure, ornamented with

"Testigos mudos"

stately columns and balconies, that stands stripped bare as a two-dimensional stageset against the sky in another painting entitled "Recuerdos del pasado."

Nor, for that matter, need one know the history of the church steeples, statues, and other architectural fragments that appear to be deconstructing before our very eyes within a luminous expanse shot through with transcendent pink light in yet another picture by Marcela Pittner entitled "Fision," in order to realize that one is in the presence of an artist with formidable and enduring gifts.

—Byron Coleman

West Side Artists Examine Varied Angles of Vision

In the recent group show "Looking Out/Looking In," members of the West Side Arts Coalition explored point-of-view at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the Center Island at Broadway and 96th Street. Another salient feature of the show was the variety of mixed media elements employed by some of the artists for tactile effect.

Among the abstract painters in the show, the canvases of Bernardo Diaz stood out for their sandy, relief-like surfaces and earthy yet vibrant colors. In terms of their rugged surfaces, one would be tempted to compare Diaz's paintings to the "tachisme" of Tapies; however, this young New York artist has a evolved a vocabulary of enigmatic and lively signs and symbols that owe nothing to the somber Spanish master.

Shirley Z. Piniat also made a striking impression with collages composed of mosaic-like shards of magazine photographs, which she employs to create intricate overall compositions, enhanced with painted passages.

Frequent exhibitor Miguel Angel employs diverse found materials in combinations that create a unique species of metaphysical abstraction. Two works by Angel combined strong geometric elements with glass additions that added a poetic dimension to the composition, particularly in "Temple of Invisible Forces," where a ghostly grid appears in the smoky mirror at the center of the composition.

By contrast, Elinore Bucholtz achieves an unusual degree of formal fluidity with liquefied acrylic colors that run, drip, and blend as though her paintings were left out in a rainstorm overnight, lending them a sense of spontaneity that is their main asset. Irmgard Kuhn, on the other hand, creates an intriguing illusion of liquidity in two small mixed media paintings called "Splash," in which shiny blue baubles, beads, and bits of thread, set against a photographic background, create a witty impression of raindrops bouncing off a stone wall.

K.A. Gibbons, best known for her large landscapes, surprised us with an intimate pastel entitled "Looking Through: Teapots Ad Infinitum," in which the overlapping pots in red, blue, green, orange and purple created a charmingly chiming chromatic do-re-mi effect. Berik Kulmamirov also caught one's eye with acrylics on canvas in which primitivistic forms and figures on densely textured acrylic grounds appeared to allude to a host of elusive esoteric meanings.

Texture is also paramount to the mixed media compositions of Leila Rosalind Elias, created with folded paper, beans, broken shells and other found materials. Awash in pale yet luminous hues, these tactile elements evoke natural forms and forces.

Two adamantly figurative artists round out this varied exhibition: Joey Infante establishes a romantic mood in faux-primitive oils on canvas wherein even familiar scenes, such as a couple rowboating on the lake in Central Park take on the exotic quality of an Amazon jungle view. Infante is an unabashed visionary who seems to see the world through his own vivid distorting lens.

Gali, another singular talent combines a science fiction sensibility with a strong sense of abstract design in smoothly accomplished, large canvases with a truly bizarre quality. Here, two compositions called "Game" depict robotic figures interacting with equally surreal "toys," contributing to the general impression, especially strong in this show, that some of our best artists today are finding new ways to bring about a synthesis of the formal and the imaginative.

—Peter Wiley

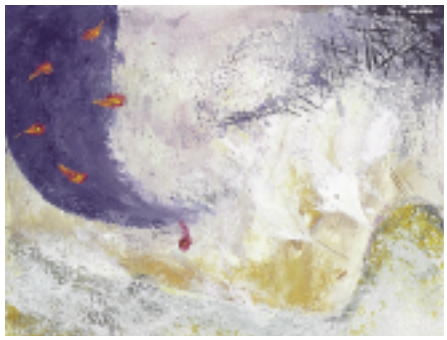
Mayumi Takagi: Purple Moons as Visual Metaphors

The Japanese-born artist Mayumi Takagi, who has exhibited widely both in Japan and the U.S., and now resides in New York City, has evolved an especially successful synthesis of East and West, of the timeless and the timely, in her abstract oils on paper, on view in the 10th Annual National Art Exhibition at Saint John's University. (The show can be seen at Dr. M.T. Geoffrey Yeh Art Gallery/Sun Yat Sen Hall, 8000 Utopia Parkway, in Queens, New York, through November 31.)

While nature often serves as a springboard to abstraction both in the East and the West, Takagi's use of space seems culturally specific. For it suggests the vast vistas in scroll painting, as well as the especially Asian concept of "emptiness" as it filters down through Buddhism. In addition, the visual rhythms in her compositions, while ostensibly abstract, also appear to allude to the endless terrains of mountains and mists that are major motifs in Chinese and Japanese painting.

At the same time, however, Takagi's bold and various palette runs counter to the monochromatic tradition of Asian ink painting and the tactile quality of her surfaces is more in keeping with the materiality of Abstract Expressionism. Thus her compositions are activated by the lively tension between a sensibility nurtured in a poetically ethereal cultural environment and an equally apparent affinity for the more palpable physicality of Western painting.

Of course, these disparities have long been at the heart of what makes modern —and now postmodern—art by Asian painters especially interesting, dating back to the 1950s and earlier, when Japanese abstract painters such as Kanayama Akira and Shiraga Kazuo gave as good as they got in their cross cultural dialogue with Franz



"Blue Moon"

Kline and Willem de Kooning. (Indeed, one could make much of what Kline, especially, got from the early masters of Zen ink painting, but that discussion must be saved for another context.)

Mayumi Takagi, however, is especially exemplary among postmodern painters for her ability to assimilate so much of the underlying spirit of her aesthetic heritage into her work without getting bogged down in specific cultural references or archaic stylistic tics which feed into the Western taste for a patronizing Orientalism which, as Bert Winther once put it, "imposes an exotic otherness on a subject constructed as Japanese."

In fact, Takagi's transcends all such stylistic stereotyping by virtue of having evolved a highly personal painterly vocabulary which can just as readily evoke comparisons to the early abstract mode of Philip Guston as to any Japanese model, old or new.

Takagi also adds something inimitably evocative and lyrical to the mix, judging from the two paintings in the series called "Purple Moon," on view in the exhibition at St. John's University, in which the dominant form is a large lunar crescent that swoops into the composition like a sling-blade. Juxtaposed with this strong shape are smaller, less aggressive elements.

In one painting, these take the form of crisscrossed calligraphic strokes of a golden ocher hue, suggesting bamboo leaves or weeds. Here, the comparison to a blade seems especially apt, as though this stylized purple moon, flecked with strokes of red, turns into into a scythe. In another painting in the series, the dominant shape sweeps in from the opposite direction over a textural color field with softly defined forms in its lower portion that evoke the feeling of a stream running between verdant fields and mountains.

It should be pointed out, of course, that such interpretations are purely subjective, it being perilous at best to Rorschach specific imagery into compositions as patently abstract as those of Takagi, who says that her paintings are "visual metaphors based on universal ideas which can be read as dreamscapes." She does, however, specify in relation to her "Purple Moon" series that these works are "simply about the influence of nature and the nature of the moon and its influence on our lives." She adds, "Purple is a color of nobility. For example, the highest class of people and the highest priests are allowed to wear purple costumes in past Japan."

All such questions aside, however, the formal qualities of Mayumi Takagi's paintings are formidable enough to stand on their own. Indeed, her "Purple Moon" series is an impressive achievement, making clear why, although she only began studying art in October of 1998, and is currently still enrolled in The Art Students League, her work has already found its way into private collections in the United States and Japan.

—Byron Coleman

Rob van Es and the Art of Unmitigated Delight

What Keith Haring did for the 1980s, Rob van Es, an artist widely exhibited in the Netherlands and now beginning to make his mark in New York, could do for the 2000s and beyond with his archetypal images, which summarize the human situation with energy and wit. As with Haring, there is a generous, upbeat spirit to van Es' work, as though he sincerely believes that art can be a force for the common good.

However, there are significant stylistic differences between the two artists: While some of van Es' more simplified single-figure compositions in only two or three brilliant colors can be as hard-edged and precise as Haring's radiated babies, other works partake of a gestural vigor and coloristic complexity akin to the Fauves or their contemporary Scandinavian offspring the Cobra group. In either case, van Es is definitely some kind of wunderkind, on the evidence of the work to be seen in his upcoming exhibition at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, Chelsea, from January 6 through 28, 2006, with a reception on January 12 from 6 to 8 PM.

Some of van Es' most immediately winning works are the paintings that he calls simply "Guys," in which brilliant primary colors are employed within bold black outlines laid down in unmodulated areas,

"Kiss"

as in a comicstrip. For all their deceptive Smiley Face simplicity, however, the overall impact of these pictures (or perhaps one should call them pictographs) is more like Ellsworth Kelly than Art Brut, less child-like than deceptively sophisticated— even when the subject is as ostensibly silly as two bright red figures nuzzling each other from opposite ends of a yellow field.

By contrast, van Es' portraits, although brilliantly colorful in their own manner, are considerably more realistic in technique— even in an enigmatic painting called "Self Portrait," whose vertiginous composition places the viewer inside the artist's head staring down at his feet. In another portrait, a man with a blue cast to his skin clutches his nose as though to shut out an unpleasant odor; in yet another, a round, ruddy face fills the canvas, tilting at an angle as though gazing down on one from a great height, making viewer feel like a newborn baby in a crib being ogled by a slightly tipsy uncle.

Indeed, it is his ability to tap into such primal feelings and sensations or to simply share his delight in the surfaces of simple things such as a cluster of glistening red strawberries or a purple shirt set against a brilliant yellow ground that makes Rob van Es such an irresistible painter. His joy in both the visible objects of the actual world and the entire bestiary of creatures, both human and otherwise, that exists inside his head is so contagious that after viewing his paintings one's own view of the world may forever after be similarly skewed.

So perhaps it would be in the public interest at this point to issue a warning: Don't go to see the paintings of Rob van Es at Agora Gallery unless you are prepared to see the world in a whole new way and accept the consequences of unmitigated delight!

—Maureen Flynn

Artists Who Come Highly Recommended at Pleiades Gallery

Since Pleiades Gallery is one of the more established and discriminating artist-run galleries in Chelsea, one is always curious to know who among their peers its roster of first-rate talents recommends. And the place to find out is at the 11th Friends of Pleiades Invitational Show, at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from December 20 through January 7, with a reception on Thursday, December 22, from 5 to 8 PM.

Although it's scant evidence on which to base an overall evaluation, Norma Behr Menczer's watercolor and wash drawing of a crouching female nude makes one eager to see more of her work. For Menczer has her own angular way with anatomy and manages to invest a drawing that could be classified as a mere study with considerable style

Norma Behr Menczer

and personality, suggesting a synthesis of Nancy Spero and Modigliani.

Howard Siskowitz is another artist with a strong graphic signature, and a "collaboration of art forms," in which he and the photographer Peter C. Cook both exhibit portraits of the Playwright Christopher Durang, creates an auspicious context in which to show it off. Siskowitz captures Durang's big eyeglasses, turned up nose, and thatchy Dennis the Menace bangs, suggesting a puckish personality in a swift line drawing with Zen-like economy of means.

By contrast, in Peter C. Cook's tonally exquisite black and white photograph, the playwright projects a more owlish image, as he takes the viewers' measure with one eyebrow arched over his specs and his black suit jacket wrapped around his shoulders like a monk's cowl.

M. Brooke Taney shows a strong oil of milling crowds at a New York City green market painted in a manner akin to California figurative artists like Diebenkorn and Paul Wonner, with figures and bits of

Carol Tatham Smith

local color blocked in with broad strokes in bright hues that function more abstractly than anecdotally. Another consummate painter, Karen Kappe Nugent was represented by an acrylic on canvas called "Tuscan Vision," in which a stucco villa, earthy fields, poplar trees and other elements of a panoramic landscape were generalized in smooth, warm hues.

Indeed, this show is especially strong in works that render the cliché "painting is dead" patently ridiculous: Carol Tatham Smith's monochromatic oil of a poker faced middle aged man in an ill-fitting 1950s suit posing as though in a Times Square photo booth; Elvira Dimitrij's equally deadpan oil of a strange disembodied head set against a painted text that repeats the phrase "White Flame" ad infinitum; and Andrea Geller's "Floating," its shadow figure situated diagonally on a luscious blue field of painterly delectation.

Two other painters are notable for their quirky individuality: Sungmo Cho paints intimate, brightly colored compositions in acrylic on mat board in which fragmented images of veiny trees, full moons, and mountains are arranged in maplike configurations, suggesting a Kerouacian road journey viewed from a Korean traveler's perspective. Renée E. Rubin's head-and-shoulders

Renée Rubin

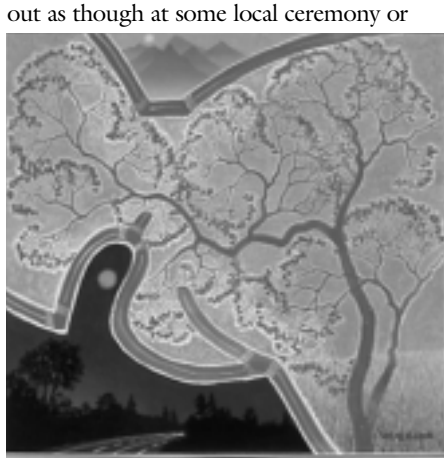
self-portrait "That's Me," limned in smoothly luminous oil glazes, is a tour de force of Magic Realism. With red punk-spiked hair and matching apron, holding a mahl stick like a wizard's wand or queenly staff, the artist confronts us in an attitude of glowing professional pride that is more than justified by her mastery of her medium.

Just as masterly in their own medium are the woodcuts of Ruth B. Reiber, which combine linear images of streets and cities with overlays of transparent color to dynamic abstract effect. In Reiber's "Durango," old fashioned horse-carts on a Western Street are enlivened by swirling areas of yellow and blue that lend the staid subject a kaleidoscopic sense of movement.

Photography now stands on equal footing with painting in shows such as this and two fine photographic artists demonstrate why: Gary E. Hirschberg's original 33 millimeter transparency "Mount Edgecumbe, Sitka, Alaska" is a magnificent view of clouds hovering over a vast snowcapped peak, dominated by the breathtaking clear blue hues in the sky, mountain, and water, which invest the scene with an unearthly beauty. Connie Rakity's profoundly human-

Connie Rakity

istic digital photo of indigenous people in Peru contrasts two grizzled old gents in battered fedoras and drab, rumbled jackets with a fresh-faced young mother and her bundled baby, both in brightly colored traditional costumes. As the group huddles near a rough wood and stone structure, gazing out as though at some local ceremony or



Sungmo Cho

spectacle, the two latter figures take on the ethereal and eternal qualities of a classical Madonna and Child.

Like the others in this wonderfully varied invitational, Hirschberg and Rakity, in their very different ways, demonstrate a level of aesthetic quality and individual vision that has won them the respect and support of fellow artists who exhibit regularly at Pleiades Gallery.

—Jeannie McCormack

Beate Epp Invests Life on the Farm with a Visionary Beauty

When we say that a painter is a "natural," we are not always speaking of the unschooled, purely intuitive quality that we find in the work of so-called "outsiders." Just as often, we are referring to a directness and a purity of vision that can only be found in the most innately sophisticated of painters. This is certainly true of Beate Epp, an artist born in Germany in 1964, who settled in Canada in 1999, and whose work can be seen year-round in the ongoing salon exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, Chelsea.

Epp's emotionally charged oils and acrylics, with their vibrant colors, rugged paint handling, and bold forms, are at once refreshingly direct and aesthetically knowing in a way that calls painters like Georgia O'Keeffe and Marsden Hartley, as well as Rockwell Kent (best known for his pen and ink illustrations for Moby Dick and other classics but actually one of our most magnificent nature painters). Perhaps the latter comparison was prompted by Epp's painting "Pride of the Prairies," which is dominated by a massive white cloud that flows across the entire composition like a massive white whale set within a sea-blue sky. In the far distance a lone white house can be discerned on the horizon line. Afloat in verdant expanses like a ship far out in the ocean, it lends the entire painting an otherworldly quality that suggests the daily tribulations of life on the prairie, as well as the sheer natural beauty that makes enduring them worthwhile. (Here, too, the fortitude of those who settle in such unforgiving places and endure their hardships seems to be symbolized by the two daisies standing side by side on the left side of the composition, undaunted by the high winds that regularly disrupt the pastoral calm of these wide open spaces.

Equally powerful in another manner is the painting that Epp calls "Long Gone—Memories of the Past," which depicts rough, ramshackle cabin in the middle of nowhere with two jagged clouds hovering above it in one of those breathtaking ultramarine skies that appear frequently in Epp's paintings. The isolation of this humble dwelling, now apparently abandoned, lends the picture a somewhat eerie quality, echoed in the elegiac title. With a square of sky peeking through one window and the other black, this little house could evoke a winking Jack-o-lantern or even a skull propped atop the earthy shoulders of the flat terrain. There is a blunt beauty to this image, especially, that reminds one of the best paintings of the aforementioned Marsden Hartley. For like that great predecessor, Epp achieves a unique formal presence in her work by merging aspects of Cubism (possibly absorbed unconsciously) with more overt elements of Expressionism in a subjective synthesis that is both knowing and poetic.

"I am Yours"

Beate Epp gives full vent to her Expressionistic impulses in landscapes such as "Pleasant Point," with its country road receding in deep perspective under turbulent nocturnal clouds and "Fire in the Sky," where the severely simplified treatment of the subject can almost be read as an abstract composition composed with horizontal bands of heightened color. Equally reductive and luminous are pictures such as "God's Playground" and "Rest on the Prairies," where color verges on iridescence and Epp's paint handling is at its most energetically expressive.

By contrast, the draftspersonly abilities that underpin Epp's coloristic and gestural freedom, lending it structure and meaning, come to the forefront in her equine subjects, of which she has painted many since moving to a farm in Saskatchewan with her husband. She paints these gentle creatures with a boldness that recalls Franz Marc, juxtaposing their graceful forms with rolling hills limned in intense Fauvist hues. Especially affecting is "I am Yours," in which she depicts the harmonious relationship between a red horse and its blue mate grazing in a green and orange landscape. Here, as in other paintings by Epp, horses take on a mythic quality, seen in brilliant blue, red, and purple hues, their curvaceous contours expressively exaggerated to harmonize with their surroundings in fanciful compositions possessed of a unique poetry.

Life on the farm is also imbued with visionary intensity in paintings such as "Blue Rainbow Pig," its porcine subject confronting the viewer in close-up, as well as in a series depicting a contemplative cat perched in a window gazing out at a yard where the chiaroscuro playing over sheds and fences mirrors the intricate patterns of its own stripes. Indeed, whether painting landscape, animal, human, or still life subjects, Beate Epp invests every inch of her compositions with a singular vigor that makes her one of our most dynamic new discoveries. —J. Sanders Eaton

Ecriture and Energy in the Recent Paintings of Sheila Hecht

Sheila Hecht continues to refine and expand upon her distinctive gestural fireworks in her third solo exhibition at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from November 15 through December 3. Her new show is called "Inside Out," and the title seems especially apt, given how Hecht's personal ecriture— or painterly "handwriting"— engages the viewer on the picture plane, alternately advancing on its surface with sumptuous swathes of color and receding into maze-like linear configurations that crisscross in such emphatic layers in which one cannot help but feel the pull of deep space.

"Hot and Heavy"

Indeed, Hans Hofmann's theories of "push and pull" have no more adamant exponent than Hecht, whose compositions prove that the manner in which spatial tensions animate an abstract painting is still as relevant today as in the heyday of the New York School. Few postmodern painters, however, are as unwavering in their belief in the primal force of the Gestural with a capitol "G" as Hecht happens to be. So few are able to demonstrate its continuing vitality as convincingly.

Take for one dynamic example a canvas such as "Stretch # 1," which is comprised of sheer gesture— a flurry of bold, pinkish-tinted white linear strokes set against a vibrantly "breathing" blue ground. Laid down with absolute authority, seemingly in one continuous action which can only be compared to a spontaneous outburst of dancing inspired by some irresistible rhythm, they swerve over the surface of the canvas and circle back upon themselves in muscular, knotted loops. This is a brave painting for any artist to pull off at this late date since it relies completely on the conviction of the strokes rather than on any of the formal or imagistic devices that have come to define postmodern aesthetics.

To paraphrase something Frank O'Hara once said about Helen Frankenthaler, which seems to apply just as appropriately here, Sheila Hecht is an artist who appears willing to "risk everything" on a momentary inspiration. She rushes headlong into the composition, yet one gets a sense and would be willing to wager that her impetuousness is informed by an overriding critical sensibility which would never allow her to expose an inferior gesture to the public gaze. Either that or, as Bob Dylan once said in another context, she is one of those rare artists who "has never been known to make a wrong move."

Another thing that strikes one as especially brave about Hecht's new works is that they take on a great deal without availing themselves of the large scale that one has almost come to expect from this species of painting. Which is to say, with just a couple of exceptions, most of the canvases in the present show are not wall-scale, but easel scale, and this departure from the normal format of Abstract Expressionism requires Hecht to be even more on the ball in terms of deriving maximum impact from the sheer velocity of the gesture, rather than by overblown theatrics.

Of course, one could say that Mark Tobey created gestural paintings on a relatively small scale. But Tobey was an intimist by nature, living on the West Coast and influenced more by Asian calligraphy, while Hecht is driven by energies more akin to New York painters like Franz Kline and his less celebrated but nonetheless excellent contemporary Jack Tworkov, which normally require the full sweep of the arm and the body rather than the wrist. Yet she manages, in paintings such as"Stretch # 1" and its somewhat more densely configured companion piece, "Stretch #2" to convey a sense of full-bodied force and energy in a mere few inches, giving the painting a presence which is quite astonishing.

While one has singled out the preceding two paintings for their remarkable disparity of actual size and projected scale, larger canvases such as "Subject to Change" and "Up Close and Personal" are every bit as exciting in different ways. The former work is especially exciting both coloristically and in textural terms, with its thickly clotted concentrations of rosy red and ocher pigment playing the pretty against the willfully ugly, the lyrical against the rugged in especially intriguing ways. The latter painting is a another work that makes no attempt to endear itself to the viewer with its vigorously troweled on yellow, green and reddish brown impastos violently layered in broad, coarse strokes that form a large circular clump at the center of the canvas, with the white primer visible at the edges. Yet both paintings, for all their raw, don't-give-a-damn impetuousness are possessed of a strange beauty, like some rough, thorny natural object that takes a little getting used to but rewards continued contemplation with infinite riches.

Other paintings such as "Hot and Heavy," with its almost erotic interaction between juicily glistening reds and white-streaked blues, and "All That Jazz," where broad, sumptuous yellow and white strokes emerge from a dark ground like light gleaming off a golden saxophone, are also enormously seductive in purely painterly terms.

Yet both canvases succeed more by virtue of the artist's almost reckless gestural conviction than for their considerable chromatic attributes. For Sheila Hecht is finally too tough and uncompromising a painter not to take those extra risks that make her paintings not only drop dead gorgeous but constantly challenging.

—Ed McCormack

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Iwo Birkenmajer Beckons Us to a Timeless Golden Realm

Limned in luminous hues and distinguished by sensitive draftsmanship, the paintings of Iwo Birkenmajer, who resides and works in Kraków and Vienna, are steeped in art history yet possessed of an immediacy that aligns them with various emerging tendencies in postmodern figuration.

Widely exhibited throughout Europe, Birkenmajer brings his fantastic visions to the New York art scene in an accomplished solo exhibition at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from December 6, 2005 to January 3, 2006, with a reception on December 8, from 6 to 8 PM.

In Birkenmajer's world, there appear to be no boundaries between dreams and waking reality. Often, his figures move through atmospheric mists evoking visions of Avalon, their feet barely seeming to touch solid ground. This apparent freedom from the constraints of conventional gravity not only endows Birkenmajer's paintings with a sense of the ethereal, it also enables him to enjoy an unusual compositional fluidity. Unanchored to either the picture plane or terra firma, the various elements of his pictures exist in a timeless space which hints at the infinite.

Cloaked in graceful, flowing garments that cannot be pinned down to any specific century or country, his porcelain-complected ladies drift like beautiful sleepwalkers through realms that range from pastoral summer fields to stark snowscapes akin to Bruegel's wintry little villages. Yet, while one series of paintings is subtitled "the cycle of four seasons," Birkenmajer's spectral feminine figures maintain an aloofness that transcends temperature. They seem altogether unbeholden to the weather or their surroundings, as if insulated by some private poetic reverie which holds them firmly in its thrall.

Birkenmajer's use of metal foil along with oil paints as an integral component of his compositions lends them an icon-like opulence that enhances their otherworldly atmospheres. It also functions as an elegant formal device, illuminating his surfaces and adding a literal shimmer to the dark, smoky passages that fill his compositions with such striking tonal drama.

The device is especially powerful in the series entitled "The story about the wine and the bread," in which still life objects take on a magical dimension and a grandeur not generally associated with the genre. Here, loaves of bread, their thick crusts lovingly evoked with old masterish skill, deep claret bottles of wine, ripely shining bunches of grapes, and other elements appear to float freely in space, creating the sense of an inanimate biblical allegory.

In other paintings by Birkenmajer, animals figure prominently: magnificent steeds kicking up their hooves, anthropomorphic birds, a white unicorn and even a hybrid

"Winter — the cycle of four seasons"

creature called "a sea unicorn," its golden body gleaming against an oceanic deep blue ground.

In other paintings, gold is employed by the artist as a conduit and symbol of spiritual radiance, as seen in compositions such as "My Golden Daughter" and "A Portrait of the Mother," where metallic auras suggest unlocalized halos enveloping the figures in the manner of protective white light.

Indeed, Iwo Birkenmajer is a consummate spiritual artist, eschewing fashionable, flash-in-the-pan irony in order to celebrate deeper meanings and mysteries that rarely make themselves known in the cool to frigid precincts of contemporary painting. Thus his vision is not only refreshing but restorative for a jaded age, burning like a golden beacon through the gloom and beckoning the viewer to transcendence. —Peter Wiley

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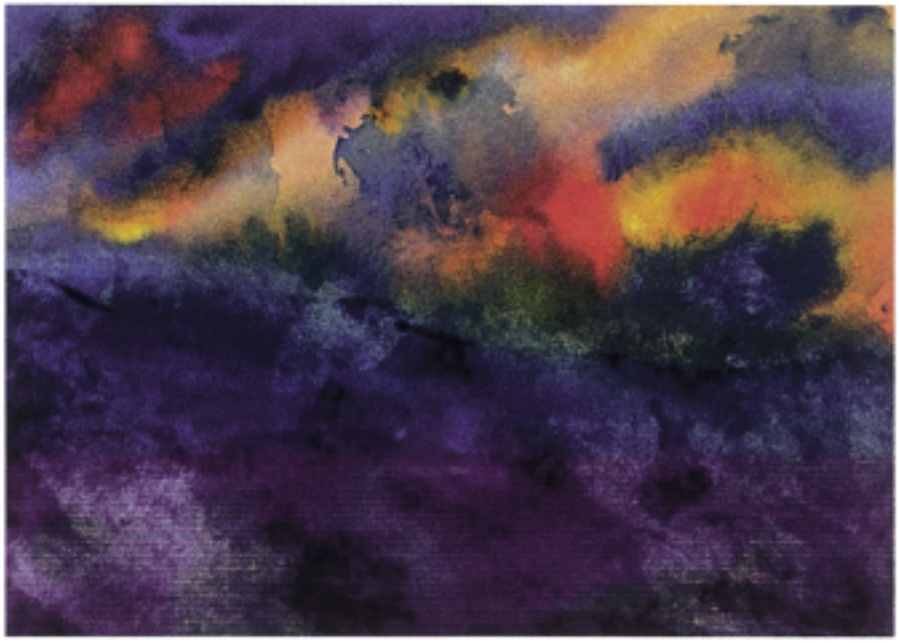

Summer Squall, 2005, Chris Coles

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