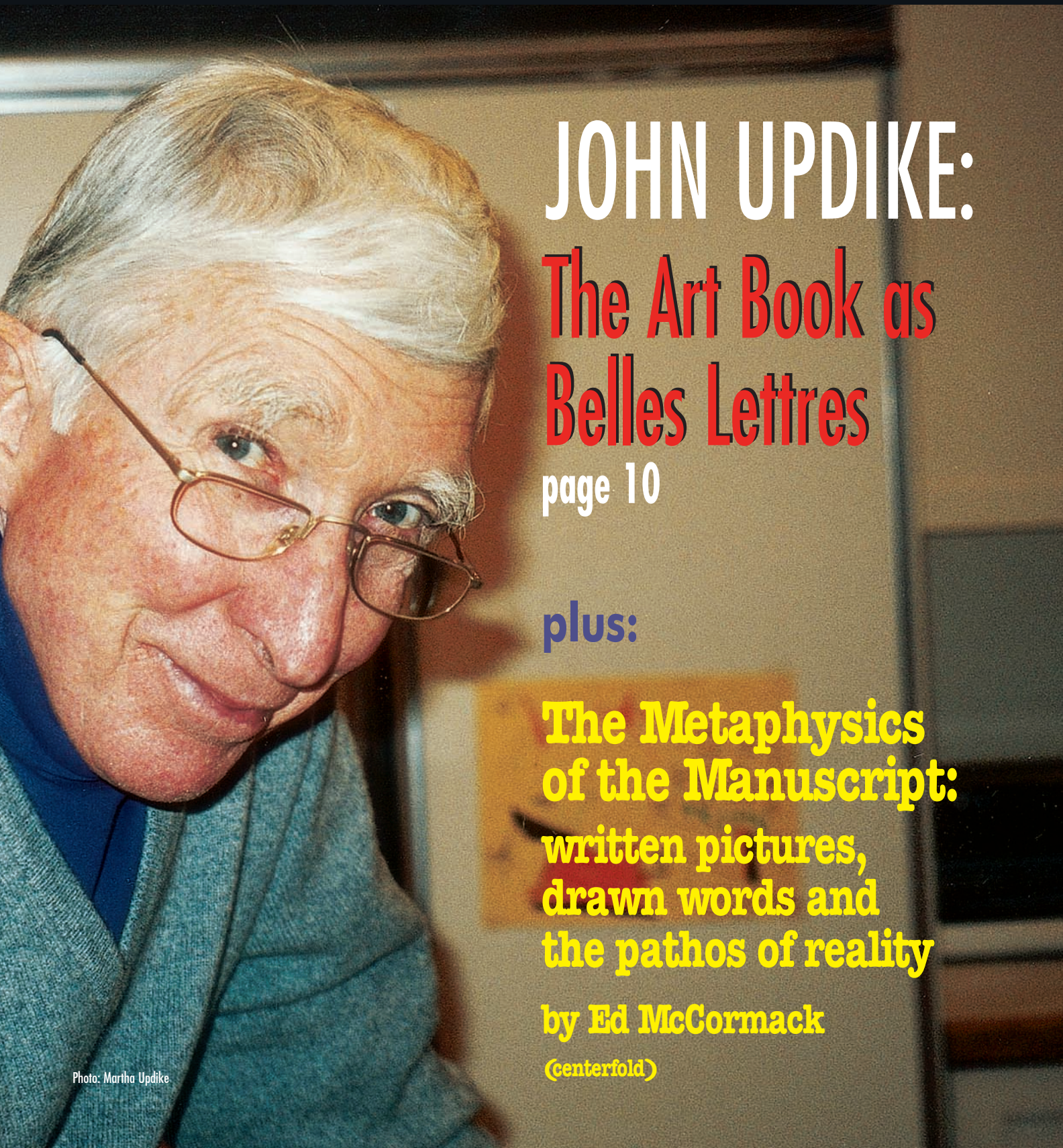
FEBRUARY/MARCH 2006 VOL. 8 NO. 3 New York

GALLERY&STUDIO

The World of the Working Artist



JOHN UPDIKE: The Art Book as Belles Lettres

page 10

plus:

The Metaphysics of the Manuscript: written pictures, drawn words and the pathos of reality

by Ed McCormack

(centerfold)

Photo: Martha Updike

Irresistible
ITALY
Architectural
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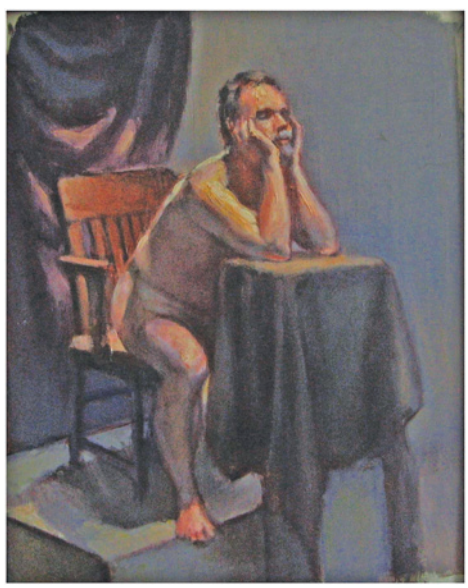

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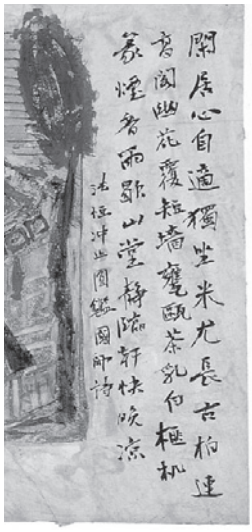
On the Cover:
In the great tradition of belles lettres as practiced by the poets of the 19th century French Salon and the 20th century New York School, ***John Updike's*** *"Still Looking" is that rare and wondrous thing: a truly readable art book.* *–Page 10*

May DeViney, pg. 13

Bernette Rudolph, pg. 19

Jessica Sporn, pg. 34



Yang-dong Kim, pg. 15

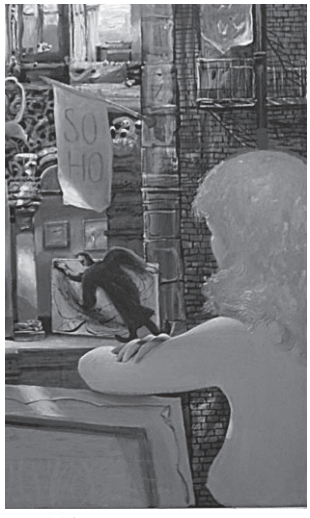
Roger Bole, pg. 7

SM Lewis, pg. 37

Leon Yost, pg. 4

Ryo Toyao, pg. 35

Carol Benisatto, pg. 17



Bushkim A. Zano, pg. 40

Arben Golemi, pg. 6

New York Notebook, pg. 20

Minyung Kim, pg. 31

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James Kelly: Rediscovering an Important Bi-Coastal Abstractionist

There is a species of painting, crucial to the development of American painting in general yet in danger of becoming extinct, which makes an almost moral imperative of a commitment to materials and the physical properties of paint itself. The work of James Kelly, who was born in 1913 and was active from the 1950s until just before he passed away in 2003, fits this profile auspiciously—although he is best known to many as a prolific printmaker with work in the collections of MoMA and The Whitney.

At different times in his career, Kelly was involved in the San Francisco scene and the New York School, both of which put an emphasis on expressive paint handling. And he kept the painterly faith throughout his career, on the evidence of a recent posthumous retrospective of his oils at Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, in The Fuller Building, 41 East 57th Street.

"Vincent's Shoe," a canvas dated 1985-87, demonstrates that well into the latter part of his career, Kelly was still thinking about Van Gogh, with whose work he became entranced while still a student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. This is one of Kelly's juiciest, jazziest paintings, with a kind of cartoony elegance akin to late-period Guston. For without appearing overly influenced by Guston, as many "new image" type painters are today, it is both abstract and figurative in a similarly funky manner, the bold central form vaguely shoe-shaped in a Big Foot sort of way, the palette primarily fiery reds and strident Van Gogh-cornfield yellows laid down in thick, staccato strokes, interspersed here and there with passages of white, blue, and green. It's an audacious knockout of a composition demonstrating Kelly's career-long ability to make the materiality of pigment compelling in itself, even while alluding with a certain witty remove to the world outside the picture space.

In 1996, Kelly's work was included, along with that of his wife Sonia Gechtoff, in "The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism," an exhibition at the Laguna Art Museum that, according to Michael Duncan, who reviewed it for Art in America, "challenge[d] the hegemony of the New York School by providing convincing examples of an alternate, concurrent style of Ab-Ex painting."

"Sticky Fingers" 2002

Duncan also noted that the 22 painters in the exhibition had "more in common with each other (and thus can more easily be discussed as a group) than do the rather disparate New Yorkers." But while it is true that Kelly's craggy surfaces are in league with quintessentially California painters such as Frank Lobdell and Jay DeFeo, his chromatic audacity is more like Hans Hofmann's than that of any other painter in the New York School—marking him as the most bi-coastal of all second generation Abstract Expressionists.

This Hofmannesque quality is especially evident in "Untitled" (1962), a large oil in the Perlow show that is not only chromatically dazzling, with its bold areas of red, green, yellow, and pink, but is also one of Kelly's most gesturally energetic canvases. One stands before this painting, as well as another big, brilliantly colorful blockbuster from the same year called "Taxi," both as vital and immediate as the day they were completed, and can almost weep for a buoyancy and intrepidness that has been all but lost in the cagey, market-conscious strategizing of recent American art.

Even more characteristic of Kelly's mature style, however, are paintings in which tantalizingly allusive yet abstract forms are solidly built-up in thick encrustations of viscous oil pigment of an almost confectionery deliciousness. Tactile tours de force such as "Red Onion" (1986) and "Stable Mates" (1982-86) are typical, featuring strongly delineated forms too inventively freewheeling to be saddled with the specific meanings that their provocative titles suggest.

That Kelly kept the faith right up to the end is evident in "Sticky Fingers," a remarkably vital medium-sized canvas, especially when one considers that it was painted in 2002, just a year before his death.

Just before this show, Katharina Rich Perlow mounted an exhibition of "The Mandala Series: 1960's Color Paintings" by the late John Ferren, who was hailed by Gertrude Stein in her 1933 book "Everybody's Autobiography" as "the only American painter foreign painters in Paris considered a painter," and whose hard-edged canvases were later admired even by figurative colleagues in The New York School such as Fairfield Porter and Larry Rivers. And a year or so ago, the gallery hosted a major survey of work by Robert Goodnough, a living painter who was just as prominent in the 1960s New York art scene and is still active today.

It is heartening to know that there are still gallerists in the city who, rather than trawling the upscale art schools for callow yet malleable aspirants with lots of shelf life to package as The Next Big Thing, value experience and endeavor to fill in some of the more conspicuous gaps in recent art history. Katharina Rich Perlow's long overdue James Kelly exhibition served to do just that.

—Ed McCormack

Leon Yost's Photo-Assemblages Elevate the Art of Travel

The photographic art of Leon Yost might be said to belong to a new attitude toward image-making that first emerged as a contemporary tendency in the exhibition "New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape" organized by William Jenkins at the George Eastman House in 1975. For while Yost, whose work was not included in that landmark show of mostly urban, suburban and industrial landscapes, first became known for photographing ancient sacred rock art sites in the deserts of the American Southwest and elsewhere, he shared, in the broadest sense, with participating photographers such as Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, and Stephen Shore, a preference for terrains upon which man has left his traces.

In Yost's early work, of course, it was early man who altered vast desert expanses ever so sparely yet permanently, with primitive petroglyphs of his gods, leaving echoes of awakening human consciousness in the profound silence. Not only did Yost make a painstakingly vivid record of lost indigenous cultures, he also gave us a visceral sense of what it must have been like to endure the rigors of living on that stark, sunbaked land under the sway of their unforgiving superstitions and myths.

This subject was a large one, compelling enough to occupy Yost for a good number of years, and to result in several extraordinary exhibitions in which he put his own human stamp on a territory that not even the desert views of Ansel Adams had approached with anywhere near as much sympathy, intimacy, or documentary doggedness.

More recently, however, Yost has turned to the great cities of Italy for inspiration, giving us a contrastingly bursting-at-the-seams view of the sacred works of man at their most exquisite and sophisticated, and filtering them through the inner lens of his own unique aesthetic sensibility in panoramic multiple-image compositions that evoke not only scenic and artistic grandeur but the thrilling sweep of history.

"The Windows of Milano"

A documentary photographer by profession whose work has appeared in numerous books and publications, including Time-Life Books and The New York Times, Yost eschews technical trickery, sticking to fast film and available light to capture the many nuances of color and chiaroscuro that lend his images a spiritual suggestiveness at once luminous and numinous.

Yost's 28th solo show in an exhibition history that includes important surveys of his work at Northern Arizona University Art Museum and the San Diego Museum of Man is called "Irresistible Italy," and can be seen at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, from February 7 through 25, with a reception for the artist on Saturday, February 11, from 4 to 6 PM.

Yost has always had a remarkable way of bringing the past alive in his photographs and photo-assemblages, even while being in the forefront of those artists who are making photography one of the most vital and rapidly evolving mediums in contemporary art. That Yost grew up in the Mennonite community, may or may not account for his abiding interest in spiritual manifestations (be they in the ancient cultures of the Americas or the infinitely more complex art of Renaissance Europe); however, that religiosity and simplicity are synonymous in the Mennonite faith surely must give him a singular perspective on the opulent trappings of Roman Catholicism, as they manifest in the stained glass windows, frescoes, Byzantine mosaics, and cathedrals interiors that grace his newest photo-assemblages.

One of his most imagistically eclectic works in this regard is "Looking for

Leonardo," in which Yost juxtaposes different depictions of the Last Supper that either preceded or followed Leonardo's masterpiece, painted in 1497. These images, from the 5th to 16th centuries, photographed in basilicas, monasteries, and other clerical settings in Bologna, Florence,and Milan combine and contrast the visual and tactile qualities of bas-reliefs, frescoes and mosaics in a neo-baroque vertical frieze. The overall effect, with the drama of Christ's last meal before his arrest depicted in a variety of styles, presents us with fascinating variations in the placement and gestures of the two most prominent players, Jesus and Judas, as well as in the reactions of the other disciples to their savior's announcement that one of them has betrayed him, that create almost Roshomon-like narrative disparities. Thus, brilliantly, Yost evokes Leonardo's definitive take on this scene by virtue of its conspicuous absence, thereby offering an oblique critique of the crucial difference between merely great and truly transcendent art.

In another photo-assemblage entitled "The Windows of Milano," Yost juxtaposes the high gothic facade of the Milan Cathedral (the third largest in the world), its spiky spires soaring skyward, with separate images of the magnificent stained glass windows of its asp and its shadowy, candle-lit interior. Occupying the center of the composition, the grid of luminous stained glass biblical scenes rises above the glowing candles like a symphony of symmetrical notes issuing from a pipe organ, to merge chromatically with the colorful garb of the tourists milling about outside the cathedral.

Griffins, those fabulous monsters with the heads, wings, and claws of an eagle and the body and hind parts of a lion, (their avian attributes signify the divine in Christian mythology while their feline characteristics symbolize our more animalistic traits) and winged lions (often symbols of the Resurrection), along with mythological human figures, are among the vertically stacked images of stone sentries protecting the imposing public portals of Padua and Verona in Yost's "Guardians of the Gates."

In contrast to the flat, frontal presentation of these stalwart stone figures, the assemblage Yost calls "The Three Miracles of San Marco" arranges vertiginous views of the Venice basilica's domes and city vistas receding in deep space under a representation of the domes in a related religious mosaic, to evoke the story of the smuggling of Saint Mark's body from Alexandria in a box of pork in the 9th century; its survival of a fire in the original church; and its rediscovery, more than a century later, entombed in a wall in the new basilica, where it was hidden to protect it from thieves.

In these and other recent photo-assemblages, Leon Yost puts his documentary skills to the service of his unique aesthetic vision, juggling and layering basilicas, churches, fortresses, palaces, piazzas, and other architectural and artistic wonders of many centuries in a manner that lends a cinematic velocity to still photography. This is quite a change from the stasis and silence of his desert pictures, yet entirely consistent with the innovative spirit of his work. Like Steven Shore, whose pictures are currently on view at P.S. 1, albeit from a very different perspective, Leon Yost gives new meaning to the term "travel photography," elevating it to the very highest level of fine art.

—Ed McCormack

"Sumi-e: Contemporary Voices": New Directions for an Ancient Art

Attesting to the growing popularity and stereotype-defying variousness of Japanese style ink painting, the Metro-NY Chapter of the Sumi-e Society of America presented its annual exhibition recently at the New York Open Center Tea House Gallery, 83 Spring Street, in Soho.

Founded in 1963, this non-profit organization aims to foster an appreciation of Asian brush painting, create a bridge between East Asian and Western cultures, and facilitate the exhibition of Sumi-e artwork in public and private venues. All of those goals seemed within reach, given the overall excellence of this group show, entitled "Sumi-e: Contemporary Voices."

Sarah Hauser, for example, featured a hybrid creature with wings and a feline face that her titles referred to as "kitty hawks" and "lion hawks." These pictures were not only fanciful but informed by graceful brush work.

Costanza Baiocco put a new spin on Asian calligraphy, interpreting the energy and movement of Flemenco music with rhythmically swirling black lines spiced by intermittent splashes of red. Very much in the spirit of multiculturalism, her spare compositions made Asian characters dance to a Latin beat.

Katia Simonova also took an abstract approach in her "Shells Keeper" series, where monochromatic ink washes flowed like billowing smoke. In contrast to many other ink painters, Simonova saturates the paper, rather than leaving a good deal of white space, resulting in powerfully clotted compositions.

Other bold approaches to abstract ink painting were seen in the work of Einat Grinbaum and Sung Sook Setton. Grinbaum applies roughly rectangular areas of translucent gray ink washes with a broad brush, creating a sense of spontaneity and power akin to action painting. Setton builds her compositions with swift, overlapping calligraphic strokes that float over the whiteness of the paper, creating a sense of grace, movement and flux.

Then there is Susana Endo, who combined traditional Asian subject matter with overriding abstraction in her "Bamboo Puzzle Cross," comprised of five separate images arranged in a cruciform composition. Steve Wada is another artist who likes to test the capabilities of a traditional medium as a vehicle for fresh expression, as seen in his energetic composition of thick black ink lines dancing over a luminously colorful watercolor background, "Festival."

Other exhibitors created representational works that showed great respect for tradition, even while availing themselves of contemporary freedom. Eva Mihovich, for example, showed both an expressively humanistic male head in sure strokes of ink called "The Weary Warrior" and an affecting image of a kitten with upturned gaze, entitled "Adoration." Linda Mulhauser, on the other hand, employed a full range of watercolors to create atmospheric land and cityscapes, such as one small gem of a moody, moonlit landscape called "Marsh at Twilight" and another picture featuring a blue skyline set against an expanse of purplish gray.

Jack Kushnick demonstrated that time-honored Asian theme can still come alive as contemporary expressions, when enlivened by the immediacy of vivacious brushwork, in his skillfully delineated scene, "Returning Home," showing a tiny traveler wending his way through a mountainous landscape. And Roslyn Gamiel's image of vermilion blossoms on a slender bough called to mind for its delicacy and simple beauty a short poem in the Chinese manner by Ezra Pound.

Indeed, all of the artists in "Sumi-e: Contemporary Voices" demonstrated admirably the immutable appeal of ink on paper.

—J. Sanders Eaton

Arben Golemi: The Abstract Embodiment of Memory

Every significant artist evolves a personal language with which to embody experience and the world. Few, however, develop a visual vocabulary as irreducible yet as eloquent and evocative as that of the distinguished Albanian artist Arben Golemi, whose exhibition of paintings was seen recently at New Century Artists, Inc., 530 West 25th Street.

Inspired by the medieval city of Berat, where he grew up, Golemi's acrylics on canvas are achitectonic abstractions that convey a simultaneous sense of history and immediacy. He accomplishes this impressive synthesis through a style that could be compared, for its blunt graphic power, to that of the American abstract expressionist Franz Kline. One of the main differences between them, however, is that while Kline's best work was monochromatic —the famous black and white abstractions of the late 40s and early 50s— Golemi is a subtle and engaging colorist, even when he too chooses to work in monochromes.

"The Chimney"

To confront one of Golemi's canvases for the first time is to know beyond any doubt that one is in the presence of a mature painter at the height of his powers. For his paintings possess a conviction and simplicity that few contemporary painters can carry off as effectively. Form and color are reduced to their pure essences and employed to evoke much more than immediately meets the eye. One can only compare these paintings to the gemlike masterpieces of Paul Klee in the period when he conjured up the mystery of little towns in abstract terms with geometric shapes and glowing colors on a scale resembling Persian miniatures.

Unlike Klee, however, Golemi is anything but a miniaturist; he works on an expansive scale in canvases that, like those of de Kooning (as opposed to the more muralistic productions of Pollock) are in tune with the proportions of the human body. Thus Golemi's paintings are physically impressive yet intimate. They draw the viewer into a realm where severely simplified color areas enclosed in bold outlines evoke specific places yet retain their abstract integrity. Only a painter of the highest caliber can project such a sense of mystery through purely formal means. For it is the alchemy of art itself that we see demonstrated and embodied in these ostensibly austere configurations of form, line, and color.

The shard-like shapes that Golemi favors, the definite outlines, and clear, unmodulated colors in his compositions inevitably draw comparisons to stained glass, with its chromatic luminosity and strips of lead holding the various pieces together. They also suggest the mosaic church decorations that are considered to be among the highest achievements of Byzantine art, and thereby enhance the poetic sense that Golemi's paintings project of medieval cathedrals and other architectural treasures in the beloved city of his birth.

One of the more miraculous facets of Golemi's art is its ability to contain so many resonant echoes of the ancient past within a style so boldly declarative of all that is modern. Not only does this style evoke the architectural grandeur of "The Old City," as he calls one of his paintings, but also its more humble and mundane aspects, as seen in the canvas entitled "The Chimney," where a few simple forms and muted colors convey the subject as succinctly as the thrusting black strokes of the aforementioned Franz Kline evoke the structures of bridges. It is Golemi's great gift to be able to imbue the simplest, most everyday things with picturesque mystery by virtue of his abiding love for them, a love which reaches beyond mere nostalgia into the realm of the spiritual.

None of which is to suggest, however, that Golemi is an artist enamored of the numinous or the ethereal in the sense that Kandinsky and others in his circle were when they sought to create a plastic language through which to capture that which cannot be seen. For Golemi's abstractions invariably proceed from the concrete, whether in nature or in the manmade structures of cities where he most often finds his inspiration.

The large canvas that he calls "The Crowns," for example, evokes sharply pointed mountain peaks with a nearly monochromatic palette of soft blue and gray hues, while another painting called "Evening Street" conjures its subject with a chromatic vividness that is especially akin to stained glass, suggesting the glimmer of nocturnal lights in a manner as poetic as that of the American painter Loren MacIver. Neither painting, however, relies on the literal transcription of actual things. Rather, Golemi evokes atmosphere and creates a mood through the manipulation of abstract shapes and chromatic variations alone.

This insistence on approaching each subject, no matter how specific, in formal rather than anecdotal terms is especially evident in the large canvas called "The Color of the Sunset," in which radiant swatches of red, blue, and yellow hues are arranged within an a irregular grid, as well as in another somewhat monochromatic canvas called "Top of the City." While the former painting is ostensibly brighter, the latter reveals Golemi's skills as a colorist every bit as well for his ability to make variations of gray resonate so memorably.

Other paintings, such as "Red Sky," "Yellow Light," and "The Door" also demonstrate the broad chromatic range, as well as the gestural vigor, with which he excavates the riches of his cultural heritage while creating compositions that initially arrest our attention for their vigorous immediacy. Indeed, the weight and resolution of his forms, the decisiveness of his strokes, his unerring eye for color, and the rhythmic sweep of his compositions invest the paintings of Arben Golemi with undeniable power. *(The exhibition was curated by Ana Matthiesen and the artist is represented by Saga Art Gallery, www.sagaartgallery.com)*

—Jeannie McCormack

Roger Bole: A Chicago Artist Paints New York

To a New York chauvinist, born and bred, Chicago, the only other American city worthy of the name, can seem like an alternate reality. Everything is familiar yet different, dreamlike. A similar sense of the familiar bumping up against the strange—only in reverse—haunts the Chicago painter Roger Bole's solo show "Views of New York" at Viridian Artists @ Chelsea, 530 West 25th Street, from February 28th to March 18th, with a reception on Saturday, March 4th, from 5 to 8 PM.

However, for all the novelty of seeing one's own city from a new angle of vision, so to speak, in Bole's work an atmospheric sense of place is invariably bolstered by formal attributes that lend his mellow oils on canvas an appeal far beyond local color.

Although he was born in Detroit and didn't settle in Chicago until 1990, Bole quickly gained a reputation for being as quintessential an interpreter of the windy city as its distinguished native son, Robert Sutz. Like that older painter, he practices a species of gritty urban realism closer to the literary realism of Saul Bellow and the tough guy reportage of Studs Terkel than to the Art Brut Pop of Chicago's Hairy Who School. And like any true urban dweller in these years of rapid gentrification, he is hip to the fact that the real heart of the city, be it Chicago or New York, can more frequently be found in those obscure neighborhoods that tourists rarely see.

Thus, Bole's views of New York City are not the usual midtown landmarks with which most outsiders become entranced. Rather, he focuses on the less traveled streets in Manhattan and, with an intrepidness not often found in out-of-towners, even ventures into the outerlying boroughs, investing each picture with subtle atmospheric qualities peculiar to its locale. In "Brighten Beach," for example, passing cars in the foreground are somewhat ominously engulfed in the shadows of the elevated train platform, its dark steel girders framing a contrastingly sunny cacophony of sun-lit store fronts and signs. (The artist has stated that one of his intentions is to "make one conscious of the spaces beyond the limits of the painting." And indeed this scene evokes an emotional and psychological terrain far beyond what is literally depicted.)

Bole's unique way of investing out-of-the-way places with an allusive visual poetry is also evident in "Eagle Street," where he conveys a sense of the city's ethnic diversity through the juxtaposition of a hole-in-the-wall Judaica shop and an equally unassuming Chinese take-out joint. The former has Hebrew lettering on its smudgy window and the latter has yellow Chinese characters and, in English,"Chinese North Dumpling" on its faded red awning. The storefronts of

"View From L Train"

the two struggling retail enterprises take on a poignantly anthropomorphic quality, their windows and gaping doorways suggesting skulls or masks. Like the red brick tenements above them, they are relics, suspended in a temporary state of grace, awaiting the approach of the wrecker's ball in the race to make every corner of the city safe for Starbuck's.

Another unpeopled canvas, "View From L Train," just as effectively conveys a sense of anonymous lives lived on the margin of the city with bedsheets strung up on a clothesline strewn across a courtyard between the type of large, run-down apartment buildings that proliferate in the Bronx. Windows with dingy shades drawn halfway down interact with areas of shadow to delineate the geometry of despair, the all too regular patterns of days and nights that lead nowhere. Yet a tall wall extending out beyond the courtyard on the right side of the composition appears bathed in sunlight and is further enlivened by bubble-lettered graffiti tags, as well as a big, buoyant portrait of a serenely smiling woman higher up, suggesting a Picassoid Mona Lisa put there by some intrepid young daredevil with a spray-can and the vision and ambition to transcend such drab surroundings. Here, with a winsomeness akin to Martin Wong's brick-by-brick odes to the East Village slums, Bole conveys a sense of hope amid squalor that highlights the redemptive qualities of what some call vandalism and others call art.

Indeed, few contemporary realists can suggest so much of human aspiration with spidery black fire escapes or haphazard posters on the fence around a construction site. And when actual human figures enter Bole's compositions, they come alive with the movement of crowds streaming past Chinatown fish and vegetable markets, in "129 Mott Street," or converging on a busy intersection under colorful canvas shop awnings in "Canal Street."

Yet for all their bustling immediacy and their unmistakably contemporary t-shirts and jeans, these figures are classically composed; while each possesses a sense of individuality, detail is subordinated to the overall flow of the composition in a manner that harks back to the mythological scenes of Poussin, with their frozen gestures and generalized features woven seamlessly into the whole. It is just this ability to imbue the fleeting moment with a sense of timelessness that makes New York an eternal city, akin to the Venice of Canaletto or the Paris of Utrillo, in the paintings of Roger Bole.

—Ed McCormack

Kazuya Akimoto: Seeking "The Next New Beauty"

"Beauty is beauty so long as it gets over its former beauty and is perpetually reborn," the Japanese artist Kazuya Akimoto has stated, and toward this end she keeps her style in a constant state of flux. Akimoto refers to artists who, in the interest of cultivating a signature style constantly repeat the same images and themes, as "criminals who are in the state of deadly sin."

While such judgments can sound extreme, they are apparently necessary for her to formulate in order to keep her focus. Above all, Akimoto believes that a serious artist must develop "a kind of language system" in order to impose logic on the chaos and confusion that results from a purely intuitive approach to art.

Being as opinionated in her polemic as she is committed in her art, one gets the feeling that Akimoto would differ sharply with any attempt to assess her intentions that departs from her own rhetoric. However, following the trajectory of her development, from her early classically inspired figurative canvases, to the abstract works that she has painted from 2000 to the present, one is put in mind of Mark Rothko's statement that he sought to create "a pictorial equivalent for man's new knowledge and consciousness of his more complex inner self."

"New Map"

At very least, one feels that Akimoto's search is a similar one, as she moves restlessly from one canvas to the next, inventing a new vernacular of forms and colors for each, even while adhering to the notion of an overall language system as a guiding principle. Indeed, it is this latter notion that prevents the very chaos she condemns in the work of others from overtaking her own work; that somehow unifies her oeuvre, imposing upon it the deeper kind of order and consistency that emanates directly from an artist's character, innate and unmistakable as a fingerprint, rather than from the effort to contrive a superficial stylistic signature.

Thus, looking at a selection of recent paintings by Akimoto, one sees great compositional and chromatic variety, ranging from nearly monochromatic canvases in which intricate shapes interlock like rocks in a quarry or form web-like configurations that appear to pulse and swell; to luminously colorful canvases dominated by floating orbs or bold, single shapes that loom monolithically, muscularly, against thickly pigmented grounds as tactile, if not as visceral, as Soutine's sides of beef. For all their compositional contrasts, however, Akimoto's paintings are united by an unfailing sense of Hofmannesque "push and pull," of spatial tension that energizes her canvases and lends them an impressive energy.

Two recent paintings, from 2004 and 2005, respectively, demonstrate especially well how Akimoto manages to imprint her compositions with her own, instantly recognizable aesthetic personality, even while putting into practice her principle that "once we recognize a new logic, we are ready to understand and accept the next newer logic, the next beauty."

The first work, "The Column of Light," features a vibrant yellow rectangle, filled with rhythmic gestural strokes of white, creating a sense of inner illumination, suggesting the phenomenon to which the title alludes. This effect is further enhanced by the two narrow vertical strips of ocher, flecked with bits of red, yellow, and green, on both outer edges of the canvas, which provide a solid, earthy contrast to the ethereal central shape. Although this painting assimilates a thorough awareness of the varied vernaculars of modern art history, such as the aforementioned Rothko's luminous rectangular fields and Jackson Pollock's gestural ecriture, Akimoto transcends appropriation and moves on to "the next beauty" by virtue of her ability to reinvent and reinvigorate such conventions within a thoroughly new context.

By contrast, the second painting, "New Map," is as grounded in matter as the first painting is ethereal, with its big, bold, central oval enmeshed in a multicolored, mosaic-like painterly grid that tethers it to the picture plane like the head of Gulliver tied down by his tiny captors in the land of Lilliput. While one cannot help but see this shape in anthropomorphic terms (and even to read the intricate patterns within it as symbolic representations of the byways of the human brain), as the title suggests, the entire composition simultaneously evokes an aerial view of either some urban or natural cartography, complete with green land masses, arterial red dirt roads, blue bodies of water, and other specific features and elements. As provocative as Akimoto's polemic may be, her complexly evocative paintings speak eloquently for themselves. *(To view the paintings of Kazuya Akimoto, visit her website: www.kazuya-akimoto.com)*

—J. Sanders Eaton

Exposing the Significance of Contemporary Art Quilts in Noho Gallery Exhibition

"To him belongs the honor of being (after Navajo blanket-weavers and Amish quilt-makers) the first American abstract artist," John Updike wrote in an essay on Arthur Dove. But what interests us here, more than Dove himself, is the parenthetical acknowledgment that textiles were the very first medium for abstract art in this country. For this is a fact almost always overlooked, even thirty-five years after the Whitney Museum mounted its landmark exhibition "Abstract Art in American Quilts."

Thus "Exposed!" seems the perfect title for a show that endeavors to reveal what it calls "the art world's biggest secret." Curated by Dorothy Twining Globus of the Museum of Arts & Design, and sponsored by Studio Art Quilt Associates, Inc. (SAQA), an international non-profit organization "dedicated to informing the public about the continuing achievements of the art quilt movement," the exhibition was recently seen at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street.

"Although many insist on distinguishing between art and craft, the selection here reflects a belief that they exist on a continuum, each informing and enhancing the other," says Globus, who selected the works in "Exposed!" from almost 600 entries. "The art quilt still must have physicality to it, evoking a desire to touch it, test its weight, feel the textures. The presence of the hand, recorded in countless stitches, obsessive patching of small bits, and of the eye that shapes a coherent and compelling composition with a sense of color and form, were among the factors that guided this selection. Each of these quilts demonstrates in its own approach the potential of and new ways of painting with fabric as the medium."

Globus really puts her finger on it (if one may indulge in a terrible pun) when she speaks of how these works cry out to be touched. But since touching is a no-no in a gallery, the pieces in this show take on an exquisite tactile tension— the visual titillation which spices all desire that is forbidden! In art, after all, context is everything; thus art quilts really come into their own in a gallery setting, where they shed all domestic associations and assume their true power as art objects.

One of the most radical departures in this regard is "Melted," by Jill Rumoshosky Werner, in which stitched fabric strips are twisted into a freely flowing 3-D configuration that brings quilting into the space of sculpture, suggesting a softer counterpart of John Chamberlain's macho masses of smashed auto parts. However, each of these artists finds ways to "make it new" as Ezra Pound once exhorted modern poets— and by extension all modern artists—to do. Angela Moll, for example, extends the tradition of so-called autograph quilts, with "Secret Diary 2," in which agitated tangles of hand-scrawled and sewn text are interspersed with irregularly rectangular patches of color, creating a raw, emotionally charged surface that belies the stereotype of quilts as placid decorative entities.

Photo-derived screen-prints of a demure woman with neatly waved hair suggesting 1950s family album portraits are juxtaposed with fragments of letter forms, elements of Judaica, and oversized stitches in Judith Plotner's "Deconstructed Memories." Plotner combines a sense of narrative and nostalgia with the lively visual variousness of a Kurt Schwitters' "Merz" collage.

One of the more "painterly" pieces in the exhibition is Joy Saville's "St. Basil's," its intricate abstract, visually kinetic composition created with a multitude of tiny pierced and stitched triangles of cotton, linen, and silk. Saville makes these patches of color shimmer like brushstrokes in an Impressionist painting —an especially impressive feat, since her palette of subdued grays and earthy browns is more reminiscent of Cubism.

By contrast, Jeanne Lyons Butler opts for an austerity akin to Agnes Martin's minimalist canvases in "Edge (White #10:24)", combining paper, bamboo, cotton, silk, and cheesecloth with such subtle refinement that one can barely distinguish between drawn and stitched lines. In Butler's beautifully balanced composition, precise forms resembling blown-up fragments of lined yellow writing paper float against a white-on-white appliquéd field.

Elizabeth W. Fram, on the other hand, builds texture and spatial tension into "Blue Stripe," where the "push and pull" of abstract expressionism is achieved through the juxtaposition of rectangles and irregular abstract shapes. Fram's tactile way with machine embroidery and hand quilting lends a weighty presence to her work.

Two other artists give the lie to the notion of quilts as invariably cheery, cuddly, and comforting: Linda Colsh's "Mole & Henge" is a richly somber composition, in which an optically dazzling interplay of circular and rectangular shapes enlivens a variegated field of mostly dark hues. The expansive scale of Colsh's work adds to its impressive depth.

Deborah Gregory's "Choices and Pathways II" evokes an almost sinister sense of mystery with shadowy forms seen within a fiery red realm—a sort of hellacious "scorched earth" mood that is quite startling in context. Gregory's use of a mesh-like fabric enables her to create effects as amorphous and atmospheric as those in even the most spontaneous abstract painting.

Apparently, the title of Sue Benner's work "Grandmother's Garden IV: Rose Nest" is a play on the name of a kind of traditional floral quilt. However, Benner's approach is anything but traditional, with circular stylized floral forms filling an overall composition that has more in common coloristically and conceptually with Warhol's repetitive, deadpan Pop motifs. Sandra L.H. Woock also draws from popular culture in "Element Series #3," evoking chalkboard scrawls and street graffiti with a funky, energetic vortex of colorful marks swirling against a black background.

In "Lichens #4," Margaret Anderson mixes mediums by adding acrylic paint to a composition that also includes hand appliqué and quilting. Yet the painted elements are so dependent on the sewn ones for their total effect that her buoyant lyrical abstraction seems entirely at home in this exhibition.

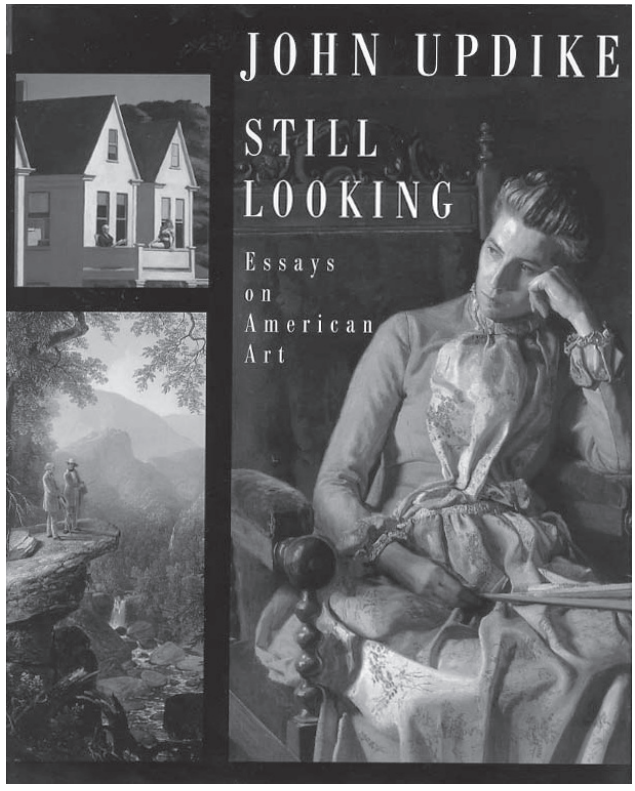
Then there is Susan Ball Faeder, who employs vintage Japanese cottons, plastic netting, and hand appliquéing in a long, vertical format suggesting an Asian scroll. However, Faeder's piece, with its converging planes and rioting patterns, has a fractured elegance and a vertiginous energy all its own.

One could go on and on, as reviewers often do, about the folkloric and feminist implications of contemporary fine art quilts. But what really needs to be said, and what this exhibition makes most clear, is that they are the medium of choice for some of our most innovative mainstream artists.

—Ed McCormack

JOHN UPDIKE: THE ART BOOK AS BELLES LETTRES

by Ed McCormack



In the interest of "full disclosure," when John Updike reviewed Jed Perl's book "New Art City" for the front page of the New York Times Book Review, he took care to confess "I myself have a book of art reviews, infinitely modest, coming out this fall."

He did not mention, however, that both books came out under the imprint of Alfred A. Knopf, which I take care to mention here, not because the review of one of that firm's books by another of its authors amounts to a serious conflict of interest in the notoriously incestuous publishing business, but because Knopf, a mainstream house that also published Mark Stevens' and Annalyn Swan's "de Kooning," which won the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction last year, has now outdone all the competition specializing exclusively in esoteric art texts by putting out the three best art books in recent memory.

Maybe this means a new trend toward publishing art books by real writers, rather than incomprehensible, purposely obscure jargon-happy tomes by art historians who wouldn't know a decent English sentence if they choked on it; or maybe not. In any case, like "de Kooning," (reviewed at length in these pages awhile back), Perl's "New Art City," and John Updike's "Still Looking" are that rare and wondrous thing: truly readable art books.

Before I try to explain why this is so, it might be useful to refer the reader to an essay called "The Poet as Critic," by John Yau, himself a poet and art critic, in the May/June 2005 issue of The American Poetry Review. Crucial to Yau's piece is the point that throughout 1960s, "the writing that appeared in ARTnews and Art in America was very different than the kind that appeared in the pages of Artforum. " The main reason for the difference was that since the 1950s, ARTnews, particularly, had a policy of assigning poets like Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, and later Peter Schjeldahl (now the art critic for the New Yorker), to review exhibitions, while Artforum, which started in San Francisco in 1962, favored more academic art-historian types such Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss, and Barbara Rose, who genuflected at the altar of the curmudgeonly formalist critic Clement Greenberg.

Although Yau, a more moderate sort than the present writer, does not put it quite so bluntly, this meant that the reviews in ARTnews were lively and highly readable while those in Artforum (where, in Yau's words, "writing for the general reader, even if this figure is a fiction, was regarded as frivolous") were deadly dull in a manner which has pretty much become the model for most art writing today.

This tendency took hold after Artforum moved to New York in 1967 and, as Yau sees it, the art world suddenly became "a place for specialists armed with degrees." The academic trend persists today to the point where Jerry Saltz, the art critic for The Village Voice, felt it necessary, in a recent piece on his critical stance, to come clean and confess, "I have no degrees"— as though wondering if that might somehow disqualify him for a position he has filled more than adequately for the past seven years!

In fact, as a former artist who stopped painting and eventually came to the conclusion that writing about art rather than making it was his true calling, Saltz seems infinitely more qualified than most art historians who have never picked up a brush to appreciate and describe the process of art-making from the inside out, so to speak. And the same can be said in spades about John Updike, who after graduating from Harvard with no degree in art history attended the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in Oxford, England— although his innate good taste compelled the famous fiction writer, poet, and essayist to downplay his first collection of art criticism, published in 1989, with the somewhat disingenuous title "Just Looking." (This coyness persists in his designation of the new book as "infinitely modest," which you know he can't mean when he sizes up the competition in a field where good writing is the exception rather than the rule.)

Writerly considerations aside, just how much Updike knows about art should have been obvious to anyone who read his review of Jed Perl's "New Art City" in the Times Book Review (although I should admit I couldn't get into "Seek My Face," Updike's roman a clef about Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, which seemed a tawdry misuse of such knowledge). Indeed, Updike nails Perl's book so well that we lesser lights are left with not much more to say, other than that it is a great read, filled with good insights into the work of celebrated as well as underappreciated artists, piquant anecdotes about the New York art scene during its most crucial years, and lots of black and white photographs and reproductions that no one concerned with contemporary American art should be without.

Updike is especially on target when he notes Perl's affection for "such relatively undersung achievements as Joan Mitchell's scrubbily brushed abstractions, Nell Blaine's nearly naive still lifes, Leland Bell's heavily simplified nudes, and the obscure Earl Kerkam's worried, often incomplete portraits, expressing 'a quieter yearning' as opposed to de Kooning's 'gonzo, exhibitionistic romanticism.'"

In quoting such passages, Updike not only reveals Perl's courage in running against the critical current but gives us a taste of his winning verbal audacity as well—especially in that last bit about de Kooning, where the word "gonzo" lumps him with the kamikaze journo Hunter Thompson, an off-the-wall but oddly apt comparison!

Updike can be picky, as real writers will, when he notes that "Perl coins compound adjectives as if hyphens were raining on his word processor." Yet, giving credit where it is due, he extols Perl "as a fiercely fluent word-spinner" and acknowledges that "he comes laden with a staggering knowledge of American artists and their critics from, say, 1948, when de Kooning had his first one-

man show and Jackson Pollock began to drip in earnest, down to 1982, when Donald Judd began to colonize the flat wilderness of Marfa, Tex., with 100 same-sized aluminum boxes."

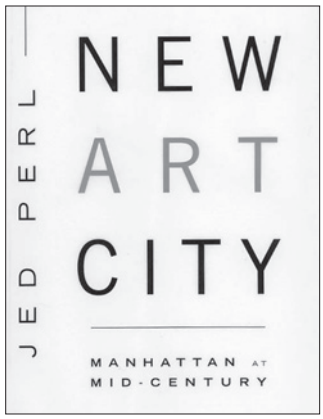
Unlike his review of Perl's book, Updike's "Still Looking" did not make the front page of The New York Times Book Review. It was given so-so placement on page 14, where it was written up by a middling photography critic named Geoff Dyer, who seems oddly intent on upstaging the subject at hand by quoting long, glowing passages from Updike's fiction. Dyer actually begins his piece with the loaded question, "So, does this feel like a sideline, like a great novelist moonlighting?"

Of course, the question is irrelevant when the moonlighter writes about art far more insightfully, not to mention with infinitely more grace, than most full-time critics. Nothing demonstrates this better than Updike's superb essay "Oh Pioneer!" written on the occasion of Arthur Dove's 1998 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. This is an important piece because it rightfully identifies Dove as "the first American abstract artist," a fact which is rarely acknowledged, since we tend to forget that there was any significant nonrepresentational painting in this country before the emergence of Abstract Expressionism. Suffering a similar fate to his near-contemporary Charles Burchfield, Dove, along with Marsden Hartley (the subject of another superb essay in this book) and Georgia O'Keeffe are generally treated as minor Yankee curiosities, just one giant step ahead of the regionalists, but altogether beholden nonetheless to developments in Europe. While nobody would deny that European modernism expanded the aesthetic consciousness of these painters faster than a tab of Owsley acid, it's also true that they developed ways of abstracting forms and colors from nature by direct observation that were distinctly American.

Updike gets this point across when he writes "In 1909 Dove returned from a year and a half in France and, according to Helen Torr, 'when he returned he spent much time in the woods analyzing tree bark, flowers, butterflies, etc.'" He also employs his novelistic gifts to give us a vivid picture of how this "well-combed, white-shirted, scarcely smiling refugee from the upper middle class" who had been disinherited by his father, a brick manufacturer and contractor after he "not only declined to become a lawyer but gave up commercial illustration for pure painting" lived and worked "in such marginal accommodations as an old farmhouse in Geneva, New York, without electricity or running water, a small former store and post office on stilts in Centerport Harbor on Long Island, and, for seven years, a forty-two-foot yawl that he shuffled about the Long Island Sound."

And he earns his wings as an ace art reviewer with passages such as: "His leap liberated Dove to seek out the underlying forms and impulses of nature—the flow, the bubbling tumble, the thrust and concentric swelling of growth. In the next ten years he produced a series of works in pastel, charcoal, and (rarely) oils that, though cautious in color, are bold in their removal from the figurative. Plant Forms (c. 1912) and Sun on Water (1917-20) are especially pleasing, and typical in their oblique allusions to natural phenomena. Plant Forms applies a smoothing microscope to the minute strands and barbed thrusts and eggy ovals in the botanical seethe; Sun on Water perpetrates in charcoal's gray a stained-glass fragmentation of solar reflection and refraction."

Updike ends the essay on an almost elegiac note, modifying his enthusiasm with sober reservations and summoning one of those memorable quotes every good writer saves up like strands of silken string for just such occasions: "Dove is a pioneer of abstract painting but not one of its heroes; his canvases remained sub-heroic in size, and his mainspring remained received sensation rather than vatic promulgation. Now Dove seems all the more worth cherishing in his edgy, earthbound failure to enter the happy but faraway land where, in the words of Clyfford Still, the most vatic of the Abstract Expressionists, 'Imagination, no longer fettered by the laws of fear, became as one with Vision. And the act, intrinsic and absolute, was its meaning, and the bearer of its passion.'"



The "emblematic life" of an artist arguably even more vatic than Clyfford Still is given the Updike treatment in the punningly titled "Jackson Whole." Take this analysis of "Pollock at his peak": "It was a high peak, but a perilously narrow one, sharply falling off on every side. The advantages of the drip technique for Pollock were manifold: the absence of brushwork eliminated the expectation of figuration, surreal or otherwise; his clumsiness and muddiness as a painter were wiped away in bursts of muscular action and pure industrial color. But, being so subjective a way of working, with hardly any guidelines to be found in the history of art, drip-painting leaves the viewer with his own subjectivity." And the denouement is, again, right on the money: "There is an American tendency to see art as a spiritual feat, a moment of amazing grace. Pollock's emblematic career tells us, with perverse reassurance, how brief and hazardous the visitations of grace can be."

As one might expect, given the waspish background he shares with the artist under discussion, Updike is especially insightful as he strolls through the Whitney's 1995 exhibition "Edward Hopper and the American Imagination," stopping before Hopper's 1927 oil Lighthouse Hill to notice how "There is no toylike smoothness and regularity here, as in the stylized landscapes of Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood, yet light and air are given a crystalline firmness; one cannot imagine a single brushstroke other than it is, including the pale hooks of cirrus cloud next to the lighthouse." Yet, for all this, he handily dispels the popularly held notion of Hopper as plein-air realist recording only what he sees by emphasizing that the artist worked from sketches, finishing his paintings in the studio, and adding, "Without turning to an inner reality, Hopper could not have created Hoppers. They give us a now-historic world, with its Automats and empty roads and gilded movie palaces, preserved by a still potent intimacy."

Updike then proceeds to give us a jarring contrast to the mellower America the artist depicted, introducing in the very next sentence a sense of the annoyingly automated present: "While the centrally housed video at the Whitney unignorably droned and shuffled its iconography of 'American imagination,' Hopper's quite personal silence spoke." And then straight on to the here's-looking-at-you, kid-clincher: "Having stood before each of the fifty-nine canvases displayed on the third floor, this viewer at the elevator door had an impulse to run back in again, as at some lovelorn parting, and make the encounter yield a final word torn from the depths of what Henry James might have termed 'the so beautifully unsaid.'"

a Art writing of this caliber harks back to the great tradition of belles lettres as practiced by Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert, Guillaume Appollinaire, and other poets of the 19th century French salons, which inspired and informed the art criticism of New York School poets who thrived in the heyday of ARTnews, before the territory was overrun by hordes of little clement greenbergs from the halls of academe, brandishing their degrees like bludgeons to beat back lively discourse and bury it under the stupefying weight of their incomprehensible rhetoric. They, in turn, were followed by a new wave of obscure postmodern theoreticians, schooled in Baudrillard and Derrida, who muddied the waters even more with all their death-of-the-author decostructivist horseshit.

One can only hope that future critics will take heart from the work of John Updike, as well as the infinitely more modest prose of Jed Perl (to apply Updike's own term more aptly), and make writing about art once again worth reading.

* * *

FROM KOREA:
Abundant Approaches to Function and Aesthetics

In Asia in general and Korea in particular, art and craft are not separated by the barriers that we put up between them in American and European culture. Rather, they coexist as equally esteemed aspects of creative endeavor. And the wisdom of this wholistic attitude was especially evident in "From Korea," a recent exhibition at World Trade Art Gallery, 74 Trinity Place, in downtown Manhattan. (Coordinated in New York by one of the participating artists, Daniel Daeshik Choi, who is also the director of Gallery 31, in Seoul, Korea, the exhibition also traveled to Tokyo and Paris.)

"From Korea" featured a great many of the country's most acclaimed and successful artist/craftspersons; indeed, far too many to be adequately dealt with in any one review. At most, this writer can only hope to include a representative sampling to give the reader an idea of the exhibition's scope and diversity.

One of the categories of the show was ceramics, and several artists showed truly innovative work in the medium. Jong-In Kim's "Ceramic Flower" was actually a conglomeration of spoons and forks arranged in a glass vase and antique steel holder that made it appear to be an exotic plant. Yi-Chul Shin also showed a great deal of ingenuity in his piece called "Mutation Collecting," in which various biological-looking shapes conveyed a sense of bizarre new life forms. Equally impressive in other ways were a rectangular punchong bottle with calligraphic strokes adorning its white surface by Sung-Jae Choi; and Soon-Sik Kim's "Ceramic Frescoes," which combine the qualities of traditional Asian floral painting with an innovative new technique based in part on Guguryeo's ancient tomb frescoes.

Embroidery and dyeing, another medium at which Korean artist/craftspersons excel, was represented at its best in a colorful traditional bridal dress by Ae-Sun Park, who employed natural dyes on silk to create a colorful contemporary version of a traditional wedding dress. By contrast, Kwang-Seok Choi rhythmically arranged, overlapping strips of natural and synthetic fabrics to create nature-based abstractions. Ji-Sook Chung also demonstrated how craft materials can be used to make a fine art statement in her graceful, meditative abstractions in resist printing and dyeing. Equally impressive in another way were Byung-Hun Chung's symbolic compositions dealing with a range of complex issues of human identity through emblematic arrangements of miniature 3-D figures on dyed fabric grounds; Jae-Kyung Nam's gossamer silk scarves, with their pale harmonizing colors and formal geometric designs, suspended in the gallery to function as ethereal light sculptures; and Sung-Min Kim's intricately patterned and coloristically subtle works in polyester and crystal.

In another context, one was especially struck by Ki-Ra Kim's little glass houses, the elegance of the material lending symbolic dignity to these rudimentary dwellings one would expect to see in cruder materials. By contrast, Joon-Yong Kim takes a more functional approach yet still introduces an expressive element in blown glass vessels with cracked surfaces intended to express "the inevitable explosion of inner consciousness" and what the artist refers to as "my occasional bouts of hysteria." Sung-Won Park's tall candlestands showed another innovative approach to blown glass, with their tall colorful stems bent like swaying trees, in sharp contrast to the baroque shapes and ornate motifs Jong-Pil Pyun employs in his lampworking pieces, created with a technique originally developed for chemical vessels but now used for sculpture.

Jewelry design is another area in which Korean artists transcend craft to create art, albeit on a miniature scale, as seen in the work of Daeshik Choi, who is in fact also a painter, and shows exquisitely wrought 14 karat gold representations of thatched houses symbolizing the origins of the Korean nation. Natural forms such as tree leaves and butterfly wings inspire Joong Kim, another artist who creates gold jewelry with an expressive/symbolic content; while Young-Hee Park combines gold, silver, amber, jadeite, coral, and pearl to create whimsical, colorful pieces based on natural forms. Even such everyday objects as hair-pins become objects of aesthetic delectation in the work of Jung-Hun Lee, who employs various metals and other materials to recreate traditional handicrafts of the Chosun dynasty with modern methods.

Strong and durable, Korean paper can be used to create furniture, as seen in Ok-Nyeo Kim's full-size tea table, as well as for artistic expression, as seen in Hyu-Sun Lee's abstract composition with colorful coiled paper. Other examples of its many uses were a decorative jewel box made with laminated paper by Hwa-Sook Sim, and Eun-Hee Noh's works in Korean paper and dye, with their intricate compositions of colorful marks in overall abstract formats. Indeed, there is no division in Korean aesthetics between Chang-Ho Jun's use of Korean Hanji paper to create beautiful, functional geometric lamps and Jung-Sik Kim's use of several layers of such paper to create surfaces with color and sandpaper which function as purely abstract compositions.

Among those artists who work in metal, one of the acknowledged masters is Won-Tack Oh, whose pieces in silver and turquoise often take the form of miniature landscapes of a decidedly Asian type, with waves, graceful trees, boulders, and flaming wicks that lend them a sense of magic and mystery. Landscape themes also appear in the work of Sang-Kyung Kim, whose gold and jade brooch depicts a willow tree, while more abstract geometric forms were evident in works in precious metals by Jae-Young Kim and Jee-Hee Yoon.

Works in natural lacquer and wood were also prominent in the exhibition, exemplified especially well by the mountain climbing sculptures of Tae-Hong Park; Young-Sik Shin's fanciful carving of children playing baseball; Yong-Kee Lee's wood sculptures with their combination of rough-hewn elements and meticulously carved insects; as well as in the scholar tables and of Goon-Sun Kim, the lacquered tea sets of Seol Kim, and the work of others who adhere to more traditional craft objects,

Indeed, the sheer abundance of works on view, although daunting to a critic able to mention only a few of them, made "From Korea" a comprehensive and important exhibition.

—Byron Coleman

Humor and Anger Animate the Art of May DeViney

May DeViney is an artist whose themes are so serious that she wisely takes care to leaven them with an irresistible wit. This double whammy makes her something akin to a thinking woman's Red Grooms, since her work is every bit as entertaining as that of the older artist but also informed by conceptual complexity that adds up to more than a canny carny barker's take on the sideshow that is life.

DeViney's vision is sharper than ever in her latest solo show "Alternate Histories plus the Costume Series," at Viridian Artists @ Chelsea, 530 West 25th Street, from March 21 through April 8, with a reception on March 25, from 5 to 7 PM. But even more impressive is her continuing ability to create material metaphors for themes that touch upon science, religion, politics, the vicissitudes of motherhood and a variety of other loaded issues, especially as they relate to the plight of women in the west and in the rest of the world.

DeViney's "Gimme That Old -Time Abortion," for example, is a powerful indictment of Religious Right's stance of legal abortion, for which she chose to forego the meticulous finish of most of her work in favor of a starkly graphic approach that drives her point across with startling directness. Multiple diagrammatic line drawings of a nude woman with a bleeding crotch are seen within a crude cross, composed of newspaper clippings about new judges being appointed to the supreme court and outlined by a dissembled coat hanger. The cross is set against a green, brown, and yellow background that simultaneously evokes stained glass and camouflage patterns; it is further adorned with quaint images of old-fashioned angels and cherubim, suggesting how self-righteous religiosity can often mask a hidden political agenda. Attached to the bottom of the dark wood frame is a churchly shelf holding other illegal abortion tools, as well as a stout holy water bottle into which tiny effigies of babies are crammed like so many gum balls.

A strong subject calls for strong measures. Although May DeViney is generally known for a subtle symbolic imagery couched in technical finesse, "Gimme That Old-Time Abortion" is a raw cry of indignation fully equal to the most effectively repugnant works of Sue Williams, Ida Applebroog and Kiki Smith.

Just as powerful in a less jarring manner, "Enemy of the State" is a sculptural installation, created with a mannequin and other found materials, centered on the figure of a woman in a burka. Although the rest of her face is covered, her eyes peer out soulfully from its window-like opening like those of a prisoner in solitary confinement. And in the bodice of her dark, floor-length garment is another opening, revealing a pyramid of books— the piece de resistance of a work inspired by books such as "Reading Lolita in Teheran" and recent news stories of women in Afghanistan risking fundamentalist wrath to secretly educate their daughters in the literature and ways of the wider world.

The burka is employed by DeViney as a somewhat more fanciful symbol in "Afghan Flower Child," a work in ink, colored pencil, and graphite, in which one young woman walking in a row with six others in drab fundamentalist garb explodes in psychedelic floral designs, although the artist admits that "it would be hard to imagine this kind of rebellion in real life." True enough, but the wonderful thing about DeViney's art is that it at least lifts the veil a little, so to speak, by positing the possibility of a less repressive future. It also adds a levity to an untenable situation by occasionally introducing a note of near-surreal incongruity, as seen in the installation called "Goth Burka," in which the trappings of Goth, such as chains, safety pins, and "bondage straps" affected by teenagers who follow goth rock groups "mesh so perfectly," as DeViney puts it, "with the restrictive philosophies of the original burka."

"Seduction"

An equal opportunity satirist, DeViney takes on the symbols of Western religion as well—especially the one's held up to women in Renaissance art as moral role models. In "Our Lady of Perpetual Aggravation," for example, the ideal of mutual perfection symbolized by the Virgin and Child is amusingly deconstructed in an acrylic painting in the manner of Fra Angelico. It depicts the Virgin Mother with cracks in her halo going ballistic as she rushes at a not-so-angelic Child who has splattered ketchup all over the pristine tiled floor. Such details as toys scattered on a terrace giving way to a classical pastoral vista and two hands rubbing their fingers together in a gesture of naughty naughty within a cloud extending onto the ornate gold frame add to the characteristic visual wit.

By contrast, the expression on the beautiful countenance of "Modern Girl Madonna" is suitably serene. Yet while her glowing gold-leaf halo remains intact, she is topless, sporting tattoos and nipple rings. In keeping with her swirly art nouveau freestanding frame, this madonna has the decidedly secular appeal of an art nouveau fairy maiden or a Pre-Raphaelite siren as she contemplates, not a baby, but a butterfly fluttering nearby.

Indeed, it is May DeViney's ability to mix and match incongruous elements and materials to make apt visual metaphors that makes her work both entertaining and enlightening. In "Biological Clock," a small digital clock ticks off the minutes between two life-sized clear glass heads, one filled with tiny plastic babies, the other with wrapped condoms. "Seduction" situates a naked antique girl-doll with a bird cage containing an equally naked heart for a head and surrounds her with an army of toy soldiers. The shingles on the doll house that forms the base of another mixed media assemblage called "House of Cards" are unsolicited sample credit cards (some decorated with flags hinting that spending may be a patriotic duty) that the artist and her family have been bombarded with in a single year. Meanwhile, past-due bills spill out of the mailbox like excrement, and a suicide dangles from a rope inside the front door...Need one say more?

Without uttering a word, May DeViney speaks volumes about the ills of the modern world. Yet she never loses her sense of humor in the process. There's a lesson to be learned here about the forbearance and the tolerance (but not the passivity) that it takes to make it better.

—Ed McCormack

Fabian Mowszowicz: The Human Face of the City

Although he was born in Montevideo in 1977, the rich colors and strident strokes in the paintings of Fabian Mowszowicz, who has exhibited widely from Argentina to Milan, call to mind the group of British painters, prominent in the 1950s, known as the "Kitchen Sink School." Led by John Bratby, they were known for their two-fisted approach to portraiture, as well as for everyday subjects and scenes. Like these artists, Mowszowicz is a bold talent, with equal ability in still lifes, cityscapes, and figurative subjects.

The emphasis is on the latter in Mowszowicz's solo exhibition "Visages of Life," at Agora Gallery, 415 West Broadway, in Soho, from February 8 through 28, with a reception on February 9, from 6 to 8 PM. His faces have the immediacy of mug shots; indeed they suggest a veritable rogue's gallery of varied character types when viewed as a group.

Few painters today concentrate as intensely on the human visage as Mowszowicz does here, capturing his subjects with bold yet descriptive strokes of color in a style that goes beyond simply seeking a likeness. For what this artist endeavors to give us is a picture of the inner person. In this regard, Mowszowicz makes one think of Giacometti, although their

Painting by Fabian Mowszowicz

styles are very different, for the sense of struggle to trap a soul in pigment that his paintings project.

Whether these portraits are from life, memory, or imagination seems altogether beside the point. We see them as the cast of an ongoing human drama to which the painter is an attentive and especially perceptive spectator. One man wears a rumpled hat and a shaggy mustache and gazes out at the viewer with an intensity that recalls some of Van Gogh's most striking self-portraits. Another sports a somewhat more natty black fedora and black coat. He has a long pale face and a spectral presence that reminds one of the late Beat generation novelist William Burroughs. Yet another, laid down more roughly, has a haunted look, with the eyes of a trapped animal.

Face after face confronts one, evoking a sense of the variousness of the human character and condition as vivid and immediate as one might get from strolling through the throngs of Times Square or Grand Central Station at rush hour, coming into contact with the good, the bad, and the ugly. While most of the faces that the artist paints are males, and show few signs of beauty in any conventional sense, there is no moral judgment implicit in these portrayals.

The artist seems to accept all aspects of human strength or folly with equanimity, as if to make clear that all are worthy of his brush. He views people with sympathy and brings them alive with strokes of color that are vigorous and swift. His palette, although not naturalistic, is perfectly attuned to his subjects. His colors are the ones that emotions suggest, rather than merely optically accurate imitations of reality. And while some faces are delineated in a fair amount of detail, others are broadly brushed, creating an expressionistic effect. The one constant in the work of Fabian Mowszowicz is its depth and presence. Face to face with his paintings, one is aware of being in the presence of a major painter.

—Peter Wiley

Rose Sigal Ibsen at Berkeley Gallery in Midtown

More than one expert in Asian art has been confounded by the ink paintings and calligraphy of Rose Sigal Ibsen. Often, when she shows up in places like the Asian Arts Center in New York's Chinatown or the Tenri Cultural Institute, a Japanese organization in California, to do one of her frequent demonstrations, onlookers have difficulty reconciling the appearance of this diminutive Romanian-born woman with the silvery pixie haircut and sparkling hazel eyes with the proficiency of her brushwork. They are simply astounded that she was not born into the culture that her art exemplifies so masterfully.

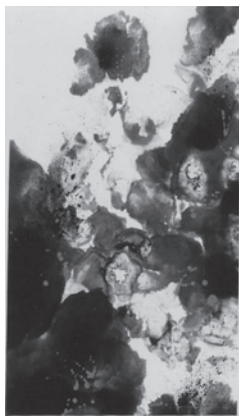
"Why did I, an enamelist, become a calligrapher?" the artist, who learned the art of enameling from her late husband, asks rhetorically. "I really don't know. When I went to China to study, something happened in my heart. The brush, the paper, and I have become one spirit."

It means a great deal to Rose Sigal Ibsen, in terms of legitimatizing her aesthetic enterprise, that she got the "thumbs up" from the great contemporary painter, connoisseur, and collector C.C. Wang before he passed away. She has also been accepted as a peer by Wang Fangyu, the only other contemporary Chinese painter of comparable stature to Wang. And she continues not only to honor the tradition she has adopted but to innovate in subtle ways, making a fresh contribution to Asian painting and calligraphy that has won her acclaim for her exhibitions in China and Japan, as well as elsewhere around the world.

Sigal Ibsen's most recent solo show of Sumi paintings can be seen at Berkeley Gallery, in the first floor lobby of Berkeley College, 3 East 43rd Street, between Fifth and Madison Avenues, from January 15 through March 15. (Gallery hours are Monday through Friday, from 9 AM to 7 PM, and Saturday from 9 AM to 3 PM.)

One of the highlights of the show is the watercolor on rice paper entitled "In Summer Everything Comes Alive and Children Are Playing," in which Sigal Ibsen employs ancient calligraphic forms derived from stone carving. Unlike later Chinese characters, these forms retain pictographic qualities, resembling simplified child-like figures dancing against a watercolor ground of pink and yellow hues with the sunny gaiety of floating confetti. While adhering to tradition on one level, on another the artist imbues this work with a modernity and an originality akin to some of the more buoyant compositions of Paul Klee.

Equally evocative in another manner, "Papa, Mama, and Baby Horse" employs the ancient characters for equine figures in a more monochromatic watercolor on rice paper composition that is remarkable for its calligraphic vigor and economy of form.



"Explosion"

By contrast an untitled calligraphic work, mainly in Sumi ink with just a few splashes of pale blue and red watercolor providing piquant accents, conveys the form and energy of a starkly simplified running figure with just a few bold black strokes.

Just as vigorous while considerably more complex, another work in ink and watercolor called "Nothingness" interprets a Zen proverb with swirling black and splashy red shapes that carry Asian calligraphy triumphantly into the arena of Abstract Expressionism. Other works, as well, such as "Explosion (After September 11th)," with its billowing grey forms interspersed with fiery reds, make this exhibition, curated by Bob Keiber, an auspicious introduction to the work of one of our most gifted exponents of ink and watercolor painting.

—Ed McCormack

Yang-dong Kim: The Paintings of a Master Calligrapher from Korea

While many Asian artists struggle to evolve contemporary styles that reflect their rich ethnic heritage, the Korean artist Yang-dong Kim appears to have arrived at such a synthesis of the traditional and the modern quite naturally. Born in 1943, Kim immersed himself early in a broad range of disciplines, including calligraphy, Chinese, Korean folk art, painting and seal carving.

Unlike many emerging artists today, who begin their careers while still in art school, Kim was so intent on achieving mastery before presenting his work to the public that he did not have his first exhibition until 1996. That exhibition, however, launched him as a respected figure in Korean art, with favorable reviews in art journals and the popular press and a significant response among collectors and fellow artists.

Initially, Kim concentrated the better part of his creative energies on calligraphy and seal carving. Calligraphy is especially esteemed in Korea, as it is elsewhere in Asia, given its importance to the literati tradition of employing beautiful brushwork to inscribe poetry on paintings. More recently, however, the artist has expanded his calligraphic style in a more painterly direction, employing calligraphic techniques pictorially, as seen in the recent exhibition "The Imagery of Korean Beauty: The Art of Yang-dong Kim," at Gallery Korea, Korean Cultural Service New York, 460 Park Avenue.

"Reading and Writing of Poetry"

Employing ink, along with clay and native colors on the sturdy Korean paper called hanji, traditionally used not only for paintings and books but to construct three-dimensional objects such as clothes, armor, and furniture, he has evolved a style uniquely his own. The strength and durability of hanji enables him to work, when he so chooses, on a scale akin to that of the Abstract Expressionists, creating compositions with a strikingly contemporary impact. And his use of clay lends his surfaces a tactile presence that is quite unusual to encounter in ink-based Asian painting on paper, with ridged textures and raised lines that imbue his forms and figures with considerable weight and presence.

Kim's largest paintings, such as the work called "Images formed by Chinese Characters," created in 2005, are generally among his most abstract compositions. While many of his smaller works often include recognizable landscape and figurative imagery, here the calligraphic forms of the Chinese characters are expressively expanded and altered to create a personal ecriture as lively and powerful as that of Cy Twombly. For like that highly regarded American painter, Yang-dong Kim invests written language with internal implications that seem to transcend their more obvious meanings. This metamorphosis seems even more impressive when the artist is dealing, as Kim does, with the characters of a culture that reveres handwriting as highly as it does pictorial imagery, yet subjecting them to rigorous transformations that bring them alive even for those of us who cannot read the language.

Equally exciting from a purely visual perspective is the artist's use pentimento and palimpsests in another essentially abstract calligraphy painting entitled "Vein of Korea," where bold black calligraphy on the left side of the composition is partially covered by milky white overlays of pigment and other characters are engraved (or carved, as one would a seal) in the clay covered surface on the right-hand side of the composition. Here, as in other works, striking contrasts result between the ethereal effects that we are familiar with in Asian aesthetics and the tactile elements (akin to Western bas-relief) that Kim achieves by virtue of his unique technique.

In another large work on paper called "Origin of Korean Beauty," Kim reflects on the agricultural history of his country, spreading clay powder over the surface of the picture to create a subtle color field further enhanced by scattered rice straws. This is not only one of his most abstract paintings, but also one of his most minimal, for its only other elements are a roughly rectangular red form that enters the top left portion of the picture area and a relatively spare calligraphic text which runs vertically down the right side of the composition. Yet through these austere means, Yang-dong Kim manages to evoke the sense of a vast, fertile terrain to celebrate the heritage of a venerable agricultural society.

The artist takes a more representational approach in most of his smaller paintings, some of which utilize the primitivistically stylized elements of Korean folk art as well as prehistoric petroglyphs and decorative carvings—to depict scenes from the ancient literati tradition. Here in the West, we tend to associate these tales of reclusive scholars and Zen masters drinking tea or wine and meditating or composing poetry in their mountain retreats with old China and Japan. However, Yang-dong Kim makes us aware that such a tradition also existed in Korea in "Winter Goes and Spring Comes," which juxtaposes a graceful budding tree and two ornate wine jugs to evoke when the gentlemen scholars would gather merrily to celebrate the new season.

Kim also depicts the more sedate practice of Zen meditation in "Cultivating Mind in a Hut," with its Buddha-like figures seated within simple rustic structures, and gives us other glimpses of the literati life in paintings such as "Reading and Writing of Poetry,' with its lone figure seen in an idyllic landscape. Constant in all of these paintings are calligraphic texts which complement images of nature and daily life in Korea in a manner that can only be compared, in Western terms, to the poetic illuminations of the great British visionary William Blake. But while Blake was a lone eccentric whose hybrid art arose from an inner necessity, unsupported by his native culture, Yang-dong Kim partakes serenely of an ancient tradition in Asian art, which he revitalizes in unexpected ways, creating a harmonious contemporary marriage of painting and calligraphy.

—Ed McCormack

Latin American Aesthetic Currents Flow Through Soho

While the sheer variety of emerging styles recently prompted one New York Times critic to call for "A New Map of Latin America's Avant-Garde," that fanciful tendencies still hold sway is clear in "The Latin American Art Exhibition: Masters of the Imagination," a major survey at Agora Gallery, 415 West Broadway, in Soho, from March 29 through April 18. (Opening reception March 30, 6 to 8 PM).

Born in Chile, Ignacio Gana exemplifies the neo-surrealist school with his enigmatic paintings of mysterious romantic assignations in metaphysical landscapes where one is as likely to encounter beds and full-length mirrors as trees.

Magic realist Amelia Errazuriz also suggests the human presence, albeit sans figures, in mixed media paintings of furniture, shadowy staircases, and patterned tiles and pavements, imparting to these inanimate things an emotionally potent atmosphere of silence, expectancy, and mystery.

Even some of the more abstract artists, such as Jaime Villa, introduce imaginative elements —in this case the transmutation of the vegetation and mountains of the town in Ecuador where he was born— in paintings that combine some of the best qualities of impressionism and expressionism.

Born in Panama to a Jewish father and a Catholic mother, Jane Yechieli explores her multicultural heritage in colorful, richly layered paintings that intertwine elements of the Jewish diaspora and the jungle flora and fauna of her birthplace in rhythmic oils where elements of nature assume a powerful personal resonance.

Cuban artist Noel Morera Cruz also employs nature metaphorically in his lyrical mixed media works on canvas, rendering trees and other elements of landscape hauntingly atmospheric through his expressive paint handling subtle, monochromatic palette.

Inspired by her Mayan ancestry, Luz Maria Lopez merges ancient imagery with contemporary immediacy in her icon-like mixed media paintings, in which the use of metallic pigments in opulent depictions of angels and other mythological figures enhances their spiritual radiance .

A striking synthesis of intuition and intellect informs the mixed media compositions of Mexican and U.S. trained Blanca Ruth Casanova whose luminously layered compositions combine overall abstraction with a subtle anatomical allusiveness.

Just as evocative in another manner, the bronze sculptures of Jaime Vial, with their unusual and subtle patinas, seem to allude to a variety of biomorphically derived forms that command space with an often serpentine grace, yet resist specific definition.

By contrast, the still life paintings of the Venezuelan-born artist Carmela Rakusa apply a meticulous magic realist technique to floral subjects, employing coloristic heightening to lend them her own unique blend of formal beauty and emotional urgency.

Cuban painter Juan Carlos Fuentes Ferrín piles up fanciful imagery—people, birds, and chapeaux that would do the Mad Hatter proud!— with an imaginative inventiveness that prompts one to consider him a neo-surreal visual offspring of Lewis Carroll. Then there is Ignacio Murua, born in Chile, now living in New York City, whose flashy synthesis of color, gesture, and figure is further enlivened by fragments of language that lend his pictures poetic resonance.

Also including paintings by Otimcke, who is reviewed at length elsewhere in this issue, this exhibition is a must-see for anyone interested in what is fresh and original in contemporary Latin American art.

—Maurice Taplinger

Atmospheric Effects Take Center Stage in West Side Photo Show

Atmosphere is an attribute that is often undervalued in contemporary art, especially among those for whom formal qualities in a work of art are paramount. However, that the two things are not mutually exclusive was demonstrated strikingly well in the photo exhibition "Atmosphere," co-curated by Jean Prytyskacz and David Ruskin for the West Side Arts Coalition. Seen recently at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street, this splendid group show presented work by twelve outstanding local photographic artists.

No artist shows more mastery of atmosphere than David Ruskin, who creates exquisite poetic effects in his delicately hand colored photographs, ranging from mountainous vistas to Christo's "The Gates" in Central Park, imbuing each with a misty sense of romance that transforms our way of looking at ordinary things. Eliud S. Martinez also brings a unique sensibility to bear on marshlands under moody skies, elaborate angelic statuaries in a cemetery, and other subjects in digital prints that posses an almost eerie drama. Robert Helman's pigment prints and C-prints capture the mystery of nocturnal New York, with big fat full moons hovering over shadowy skylines— and even being impaled on the spire of a skyscraper in one especially serendipitous picture. Then there is Brunie Feliciano, who focuses on shafts of light streaming into deep, shadowy enchanted forests, in monochromatic silver gelatin prints with rarefied atmospheres enhanced by the black mats surrounding the images.

By contrast, Madeleine DeNitto conveys the exhilaration of color in her C-print of red balloons soaring skyward with "stars and stripes" envelopes attached, as well as in a digital print featuring a luminous red sky. Lucinda Prince conveys the beauty of the commonplace in chromatically intense C-prints of laundry on a line in a desolate "ghost town," autumn leaves, and silhouetted palm trees in Key West. A golden glow illuminates Robin Glasser Sacknoff's digital scenes of plazas in San Marco and empty cafe tables as night descends upon the majestic architecture of the picturesque city. Scott Weingarten's black and white fiber print of raindrops causing ripples in a pond has the lyrical appeal of a Zen ink painting.

Municipal sculptures, architecture, and phantom-like pedestrians in locales ranging from Geneva, to Venice, to Sante Fe provide opportunities for Janice Wood Wetzel to work her peculiar magic in surreally atmospheric digital prints. In Harriet Green's colorful photomontages trees can morph into a "ladder to the sky" or a butterfly can become an abstract mandala, by virtue of the artists imaginative manipulation of images. Patricia Gilman takes in a wide range of subjects, from imposing glaciers and waterfalls in Iceland and other natural phenomena, to a mysterious shadow cast on a stage curtain in a nightclub in Havana, Cuba, provoking a sense of pre-show anticipation.

Then there is Jean Prytyskacz, whose vibrant C-prints of the sun setting over an ocean, silhouetted birds on a beach, and equally atmospheric black and white landscapes, all exemplify atmospheric photography at its best and reflect well on the relevance of the exhibition she co-curated.

—Byron Coleman

Carol Benisatto: An Eloquent Delineator of Souls

"Phoebe"

Drawing is the armature on which almost everything else in visual art rests. Thus we are used to thinking of it primarily in terms of preliminary sketches for painting, of which art history has no shortage of sublime examples. But drawing can also be a full-fledged vehicle for finished works, and as such it has its own uniquely expressive characteristics, as seen in recent exhibitions at The Drawing Center and elsewhere that have focused on the drawing as a discrete and autonomous artistic entity.

One of the most gifted of the new draftspersons who have been bringing drawing to the forefront in recent years and giving it its rightful due as an art form unto itself is Carol Benisatto, whose solo exhibition can be seen at Viridian Artists @ Chelsea, 530 West 25 Street, from February 7 through 25, with a reception on Saturday February 11, from 3 to 6 PM and an artist's tea on Saturday, February, 18 from 3 to 5 PM.

"My most recent body of work is composed of large format drawings of the figure," Benisatto states. "They could be described as character portraits. They are not caricatures, but employ distortion and exaggeration in a similar way. The process begins with a blind contour drawing of my model. The piece is then developed for the rest of the pose. I start with charcoal , and sometimes tone the paper with powdered charcoal to achieve my goal. Depending on the situation, I may also use pastel, chalk or paint. The end result is a drawing that reflects a heightened sense of the energy, emotion and personality of my sitter."

On encountering Benisatto's drawings, the first forbearers who spring to mind are George Grosz and Alice Neel. Then one realizes that Benisatto's view of humanity is considerably more benign than that of either of those worthy predecessors. Certainly Benisatto is nowhere near as despairing as Grosz, whose experiences as a socialist in prewar Nazi Germany seemed to add acid to his strident ink line and leave him with an attitude toward humanity that lingered like a bad aftertaste, even after he relocated to the United States. By contrast, Benisatto's more relaxed charcoal line suggests an abiding affection for her sitters as it lassos their contours and lingers on their features, lavishing as much attention on an old pair of sneakers as on the human visage. One thinks specifically of her portrait "Wesley," where the man's well-worn New Balance running shoes, their rippling rubber soles expressively delineated in subtle grey tones, occupy the foreground of the composition while the prone figure itself recedes in vanishing perspective and is almost entirely linear.

Here, through her almost reverent treatment of Wesley's cushiony clodhoppers, Benisatto seems to be telling us that a person's clothing can tell us as much about their personality as actual anatomy; that every little detail about a person matters because it reveals something personal and poignant about him or her.

Even a piece of furniture can have a distinct personality in one of her drawings, as seen in "Phoebe," where a plump old sofa seems to embrace the reclining figure of a somewhat portly woman with chopsticks in her hair whose body has the same comfortably lived in quality. In contrast to the contemporary anorexic ideal, the Kate Moss Syndrome so prevalent today, Benisatto seems to prefer bodies that are somewhat less than svelte. She seems set on reviving the idea that bountiful can be beautiful with ample forms that make one think of a latter-day Rubens. And even more important, her figures appear to live richly in the resources of their flesh; they are obviously happy with themselves and exude a life-affirming wholesomeness that stands in refreshing contrast to the skin and bones chic of slick, streamlined fashion victims that permeates our mass media.

At the same time, these people have their own more down to earth glamour, personified in "Greta," a portrait of a pensive woman in a short black body suit seated comfortably in midair, apparently on an invisible chair. Here, even more noticeably than in some of her other drawings, Benisatto employs empty space—which is to say, the white of the paper— as an expressive element, played off against the linear contours of the figure, in much the same way that a savvy sculpture animates the air surrounding three-dimensional volumes. In this regard, she has the exquisite spatial sense of those ancient Zen ink painters who created compositional drama by leaving large expanses of the rice or mulberry paper bare.

Such spareness makes Benisatto's line all the more elegant and eloquent in a portrait such as "Collette," which captures a woman in profile wearing a feathered boa (whisked in with lighter-than-air strokes of red pastel) with a swift brevity reminiscent of Toulouse Lautrec at his best, when he was recording his visual impressions of cabaret performers in Montmartre with such casual grace.

In fact, Benisatto seems to have a similarly nonjudgmental, democratic sense of beauty as that great French draftsman, finding it in all sorts of unlikely sitters whose humanity she lays bare with the certainty of a sympathetic surgeon. Thus she gives us a drawing such as "Aileen," which depicts a somewhat eccentric-looking older woman in a black dress and a huge, lacy chapeau encircling her head like a halo or a giant, silken sunflower. Aileen draws back into herself, somewhat suspiciously, as she sits barefoot in her chair. Yet her quiet dignity and her humanity have been preserved beautifully for all to see, attesting to Carol Benisatto's unerring skill in capturing character, even when it is camouflaged by self-consciousness.

—Byron Coleman

Julio Valdez is Starting a Print Revolution in East Harlem

Julio Valdez, a well known painter, printmaker, and teacher, born in Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic, is a formidable presence in the vital stretch of upper Manhattan known as "El Barrio." The Julio Valdez Studio, at 176 106th Street teaches contemporary non-toxic printmaking techniques to students on all levels, and the exhibitions that Valdez organizes at The Taller Boricua Gallery, located in the Julia de Burgos Cultural Center, at 1680 Lexington Avenue, feature emerging talents from East Harlem as well as well-known artists such as Lynda Benglis, David Salle and Erich Fischl.

Most recently, the gallery featured the "Silk Aquatint Show," which has now traveled on to the Center for Contemporary Printmaking, a world class venue housed in a historic 19th century carriage house at Mathews Park, 299 West Avenue, in Norwalk Connecticut, where it can still be seen until March 18. (There will be a guided tour and artist's talk on March 3. For further information, call Chris Shore at the Center: 203-899-7999, or e-mail: contemprints@conversent. net).

Julio Valdez

This is a comprehensive survey of some of the most proficient exponents of the silk aquatint medium from around the United States and Latin America. Surely it is too inclusive to do full justice in this space. At most, one can only hope to give the reader a glimpse of its diversity through brief descriptions of some of the works. A good place to start is with the work of Julio Valdez himself, whose technical skills as a printmaker are matched by his ability to generate intriguing imagery, as seen in his double self portrait enlivened by the rich textures and tonalities characteristic of his style. Remarkably, Valdez achieves a coloristic subtlety and a richness of surface in his silk aquatints that can remind one of Jasper Johns' encaustic paintings. However, Valdez's prints, like his paintings, are more complexly layered with their silhouetted figures, fragments of anatomy, and shadowy forms suggestive of Caribbean plant life.

Marcos Dimas, an artist from Puerto Rico, also exploited the medium's tactility effectively in compositions dominated by wiggly biomorphic forms that called to mind the Chilean surrealist Roberto Echaurren Matta, as well as the more funky graffiti-inspired works of Keith Haring—especially in a lively print called "Figures de Bomba." Like many of our best post-modern artists, Dimas appears able to assimilate diverse influences within a unique formal vocabulary.

Another gifted artist from Puerto Rico, Juan Sanchez, creates a kind of Valentine to the people of El Barrio with the image of a woman in a tenement window, waving a Puerto Rican flag and encircled by a red heart. Sanchez, however, transcends the obviousness and sentimentality of straightforward social realism by virtue of his ability to combine figuration with formal and abstract elements that bring his composition alive in purely abstract terms.

Three American artists also present compelling figurative and abstract contrasts: Meejin Hong in a print called "Sin Titulo," with neo-primitivistic figures delineated in subtle monochromes; Emma Amos with detailed, darkly evocative images of mountain gorillas and mandrills akin to certain macabre works by the painter and illustrator Marshal Arisman; Robert Kelly, of Sante Fe, New Mexico, with elegantly scrawled forms suggesting esoteric symbols inscribed on weathered walls.

The latter artist seems to share a fondness for semiotic ecriture, with the Dominican artist Ezequiel Taveras, whose abstract compositions combine stenciled letters and embossed forms to dynamic effect. Then there is Rigo Peralta, another Dominican, who puts an intriguing postmodern spin on futurism with a fanciful print depicting the mechanized merger of a man and a horse.

"The Silk Aquatint Show," along with an earlier exhibition called "The Solar Plate Revolution," which also originated at the Taller Boricua Gallery last summer, suggests that, thanks to Julio Valdez, a significant print movement is brewing in El Barrio.

—Byron Coleman

Bernette Rudolph Unveils "A World of Goddesses" in Chelsea

Contours speak volumes in the work of the widely exhibited Brooklyn artist Bernette Rudolph. Which is to say: Rudolph achieves the volumic depth that distinguishes sculpture from painting not via the usual three-dimensional route, but through the layering of various elements, mostly created with cut and painted wood, which are so shapely and fluid that they imbue the wall relief with a sense of implied space fully as imposing and sensual as that of freestanding sculpture.

Recently, however, Rudolph has added a wide range of other materials, such as fabric, fake fur, costume jewelry, miniature figures and other found or relentlessly sought-after objects, to her wall sculptures. Her transmutation of the tchochka, so to speak, has enabled her to extend and elaborate upon the witty juxtapositions of imagery that have always made her pieces such serious fun. And the rich variety of colors, patterns, textures, and glitzy special effects that she achieves with such materials immeasurably enhance Rudolph's new series "A World of Goddesses," seen along with a mini-retrospective of older works from 1990 to 2004, at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, through February 18.

"Lilith"

"I never knew until I began this series that there were so many goddesses," Rudolph recently told a visitor to her studio, referring to the genesis of the series, which honors mythological women, from Isis to Lilith, from The Virgin Mary to Lady Liberty and beyond, revered in cultures around the world.

Although the older works in the exhibition will be available to collectors, the Goddess works are not for sale. Rudolph wishes to keep the series intact for future exhibitions and possible purchase by a museum or other cultural institution. And indeed it seems only fitting that "A World of Goddesses" should find a permanent home in such a setting, being one of the most complete and important overall statements in feminist art since Judy Chicago's seminal installation "The Dinner Party."

Very much in the spirit of triumphant, post-struggle feminism, the series was assiduously researched by the artist, who scoured the Indian community in Queens for various baubles, bangles, and beads for the adornments of the Hindu goddess of the arts, Sarasvati; combed Chinatown for silken garments of the Chinese "goddess of a thousand arms" Kuan Yin; sent away to a supplier in Florida for the sea shells decorating the mermaid's tail of Yemaya, the Yoruba "healing mother goddess of the ocean" and the baby figurines riding the backs of bait-shop fish in the waves below her in a shop in Harlem; and obtained the eyes of the two furry cheetahs pulling the chariot of the Viking goddess Freya from a taxidermist in North Carolina.

On view along with the wall sculptures is a book containing original sketches, photosources, and other research materials that offer fascinating glimpses into Rudolph's working process and convey a sense of the conceptual intricacy of the project. The most impressive aspect of the exhibition, however, is the imaginative and witty way in which the artist interprets each individual goddess and myth, creating material metaphors through her use of mixed media for their individual characteristics and properties.

While it would have been impossible, for example, to depict in any literal manner the thousand arms with which the Chinese goddess Kuan Yin is said to "reach out to all beings with boundless expressions of her compassion and mercy," Rudolph endows her figure with no less than twenty arms, all (except for two with hands clasped in prayer) that form shelves to contain miniature treasures such as figurines of children, farm animals, and even a toy yellow cab— suggesting the artist's many trips to the trinket shops of Chinatown and elsewhere in search of suitable materials.

Bernette Rudolph's visual wit is also especially evident in her figure of the goddess Athena, who sports a gold Trojan horse containing stylized spear-bearing soldiers in honor of the strategy she devised for the Greeks in their war with the Trojans; as well as in her image of beautiful Lilith, who in Hebrew legend preceded Eve as Adam's first helpmate, spreading the wings with which she fled him when he became too demanding, many centuries later becoming a model of independent will for the feminist movement. (Another inspired touch here is the window-like opening in Lilith's belly, revealing a photograph of Gustav Vineland's sculpture of swarming babies in Oslo, symbolizing the hundred offspring a day that the rebellious goddess birthed when she flew to the desert to consort with demons.)

Among more exotic goddesses such as the comely Egyptian deity Isis (who also wears wings and embodies feminine strength, as well as the capacity to feel deeply about love and relationships), such familiar and homey figures as the Virgin Mary and Lady Liberty could come off as somewhat mundane. However, Rudolph makes Mary an affecting personification of piety with her rhinestone tears and her gold brocade robe festooned with colorful dime store cherubim, and Liberty a beautiful beacon of hope, her entire body covered with a photo montage encompassing people of all colors and creeds, holding aloft a torch containing a cameo portrait of the artist's immigrant grandparents.

While visitors to Pleiades Gallery will also find much to admire in Bernette Rudolph's earlier works—especially a series inspired by manhole covers around the world— "A World of Goddesses" is the main attraction. For it is a body of work at once educational, entertaining, and innovative in formal terms, and appears destined to endure as a universal monument to feminine beauty, power, forbearance, and ingenuity.

—Ed McCormack

METAPHYSICS OF THE MANUSCRIPT: Written Pictures, Drawn Words, and the Pathos of Reality

by Ed McCormack

When there's a subject worthy
of poetry, poetry finally
proves unworthy of it.

There's no way to write about
the silence at our son's grave.
No words will right the wrong of it.

While these lines, from a long autobiographical poem in progress, may not fit Wordsworth's definition of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquility," at least I'm able now to articulate the futility of trying to put words to such profound loss. But in 1993, when grief was new, words failed me completely. So I began to draw again.

It started during the three weeks that Jeannie and I literally lived at Lenox Hill Hospital, stopping at home briefly each day only to shower, change, and feed our pet birds; sleeping on a sofa in the waiting room of the Intensive Care Unit, where our son Holden lay stricken with fullblown AIDS.

During the many hours that we sat at his bedside, I compulsively covered entire pages in my pocket journal with minuscule marks. Although they resembled overall abstractions, these marks were actually tiny t's through which I hoped, by some supernatural act of will, to transmit some of my own t-cells to my dying son.

I know now that I was caught up in the kind of "magical thinking" Joan Didion would describe several years later, following the death of her husband, the novelist John Gregory Dunne, in her grief memoir with that phrase in its title. To quote Didion directly, I too was "thinking as small children think, as if my thoughts or wishes had the power to reverse the narrative, change the outcome."

Jeannie and I were ecstatic when Holden's t-cell count suddenly shot up to a degree that his doctors found inexplicable, making us think my magic might be working; either that or the megavitamins Jeannie insisted be added to Holden's drug regimen. (In deference to a desperate mother's wishes, the skeptical but kindly doctor instructed the nurses to pulverize the pills and dilute them in our son's intravenous drips.) But the false hopes that sprang up briefly with each small sign of improvement vanished when Holden's t-cell count dropped back down just as suddenly as it had risen.

* * *

Later, I would feel oddly nostalgic for those terrible days and nights at Lenox Hill. I would remember how the nurses that I needed to think of as angelic moved through the halls of the ICU as silently and gracefully as fish in a nocturnal aquarium. I would remember the soft Spring breeze wafting in through the open window, and seeing some of the windows still lit in the apartment buildings across 77th Street, where normal life was continuing as we sat like shadows in the dark at Holden's bedside.

Sometime after midnight a thuggish looking man would come around to empty the trash pails. He was an albino, wore white rubber gloves, had multiple tattoos sleeving his muscle-bound arms. Being shadows, we never spoke to him, nor he to us. In hindsight, I would even miss *him*.

I would remember how we came to relish small pleasures and momentary respites, such as visiting the little room where the vending machines were are at odd hours, after Holden had fallen off to sleep and we felt free to leave his bedside. I don't remember what they called it; probably the commissary or snack bar or something like that. But it was always empty at that time of the night. It had blindingly bright fluorescent lights and they, in concert with the candy and coffee and soda machines, emitted a communal buzzing sound that seemed to enhance the silence like white noise.

It seemed so very peaceful there. And we would savor that and take empty nourishment from sugar before going back and falling off to our own fitful sleep on the sofa in the waiting room of the ICU...only to be wakened shortly after dawn by a slapping and sloshing and bumping sound coming closer and closer.

One of us would wake up first and say to the other, "We have to get up—here comes The Mop!"

To be able to say it that way, with the capital letters clearly audible, provided us with another small pleasure; to make our rueful little joke about the hospital janitor's mop, as it worked its way toward our makeshift bed at the beginning of each day (as though it were some familiar, benign monster); to repeat those same words like some ironic morning mantra, provided us with a small sense of certainty, of continuity, of the ordinary in the midst of our extraordinary misery, our unrelenting agony.

To put it plainly: what prompts this soliloquy of nostalgia for the worst three weeks of our lives, even now, is the simple fact that our son was still alive then.

* * *

Like other children of hippies, Holden rebelled against rebellion. As little boy, he loved to play policeman. There was a wonderful snapshot that we lost track of over the years, unfortunately. In it, Holden, age four or five, is sitting on the sofa in my mother's house on Staten Island, next to Jeannie and me. He is wearing his policeman's hat, his badge, his holster and toy gun. He has his arms folded across his chest and is regarding his long-haired, flamboyantly dressed parents sternly. Jeannie and I used to joke that it looked as though we were "about to be busted."

Whether by nurture, nature, or whatever, Holden eventually went into publishing, rather than law enforcement. And while he could hardly have been called conservative, his grown-up demeanor was invariably low-key, gentlemanly. Unlike me, he never boasted, postured, or tried in any other cheap way to call attention to himself. Even in the hospital, he was the most gracious and cooperative of patients—except in one regard: While he submitted without complaint to having his veins jabbed painfully several times a day by interns who drew blood with varying degrees of incompetency, he had zero tolerance when they came with a clipboard rather than a needle, asking him to sign a permission form for HIV testing (which he had never undergone, having taken ill suddenly with what he, and we, thought for awhile was a severe flu).

Of course, the doctors had already taken more than enough blood to come to their own conclusions, and Holden knew that since he had been diagnosed with fullblown AIDS, his HIV status was a moot point anyway. Still, he refused to make his HIV status official— ostensibly because he objected on principle to the stigma attached to testing positive, but really, it would later seem to me, because simple stubbornness was his last defense against utter helplessness.

He lay there in that hospital bed, staring into Nothing, and remained steadfast in his refusal, no matter how much the interns (most of whom were roughly his own age and could probably look forward to bright futures filled with all the conventional prizes) pleaded and cajoled. At first, my own rebellious nature quelled by abject terror, I tried to convince him that it might be helpful to his treatment if he signed, even though it seemed to please him to send those interns away clutching their clipboards in frustration. Then it dawned on me that being uncharacteristically ornery about this one last thing may have been our son's only remaining chance to exercise personal power or control over anything at all. And, in the end, I was unspeakably proud of him for the stand he took.

Holden was a Taurus, the most stubborn of all astrological signs, and his HIV status remained officially unconfirmed on May 14, 1993, when he died of complications from AIDS, twelve days after his thirtieth birthday.

* * *

Jeannie and Holden...once upon a time.

After Holden passed away (the euphemism I still prefer) I went through a period of numbness and inactivity during which I was absolutely certain I was through with work of any kind. At one point, I even suggested to Jeannie that we live off our modest savings for as long as they lasted and not worry about whatever happened after that.

Then I started to draw once more.

Though drawing diverted me, I was resistant, as most conscious artists tend to be, to the notion of art as therapy. I was not expecting to be healed; just satisfying my graphomania and keeping my hands busy. I drew incessantly, filling the pages of a Winsor & Newton sketch book with intricate ink lines delineating a strange mental landscape strewn with tiny objects and images: clouds and oozing liquids, broken tea cups, houses and eyeglasses, flowers morphing into flame-like forms, insects, umbrellas, empty picture frames, crosses and teddy bears, scissors and sleep-masks, mountains and mounds of crinkle-cut French fried potatoes, faces and fingers and lots and lots of empty, windblown sport jackets, rows of old fashioned fedoras floating in formation like bomber planes, and stacks and stacks of freshly laundered shirts like the ones Holden had picked up from the Chinese laundry in optimistic anticipation of further life, shortly before he suddenly fell fatally ill.

Empty articles of clothing— orphaned remnants of a life— seem obvious enough. However, I had (and still have) little inclination to subject my drawings to simplistic psychological interpretations. Obviously, a grieving mind is a mind wracked by loss, pain, anger, guilt, and any number of other complex feelings. But I had no desire to illustrate emotional states or contrive conscious symbols for them. I simply tried not to impede the images that flowed effortlessly and profusely from my Japanese fountain pen (which, instead of a steel nib, had a fine sable brush affixed to its tip to facilitate the fluidity).

Although I had no clue as to what most of the images meant, on some level I seemed to know exactly what I was doing. The blind certainty of the process made me think these might be more than mere writer's block drawings. Wishful thinking though it may have been, I began to think of them as poems of speechlessness.

Honed by the journalism—and later, art criticism— with which I earned a living, my word poems had always dealt with specifics. There were no angels or demons in them, but many mundane objects and much evidence of dailiness. These drawn poems, if that is indeed what they were, were consistent with that stance.

Later, when I was able to make poems from words again, I would circle cautiously around the subject of our son's catastrophic illness and death. It was still beyond me to comprehend how a young man who'd been raised as a somewhat sheltered only child and had never before been tested by serious illness could face the direst possible prognosis without a hint of self-pity, accepting increasingly more drastic and painful medical procedures with a stoic courage he certainly had never learned from me. There was no way I could write about Holden's heartbreaking bravery without sounding unbearably maudlin.

Nor could I fathom— much less write about— how Jeannie had found the strength, in the last moments of Holden's life, when all she wanted was to cry out and beg him not to die, to speak to him soothingly as she had when he was little and she'd tell him made-up bedtime stories about "The Land of Somewhere Else," urging him not to struggle, not to be afraid, easing his final passage to "a beautiful, beautiful place..."

So I wrote instead about "the swarming molecular patterns (like cells or atoms) on his hospital gown, so poignantly unchosen, though he'd always been fastidious about his dress," and "the democratic insensitivity with which they adorn us to die."

* * *

In my drawings, as in my poems, I chose to focus on the concrete, even as the recognizable objects that I drew took on a mysterious new resonance in relation to one another. The hope is always that careful attention to mundane particulars may unearth something more meaningful than mere emotional nakedness can yield, sincerity alone rarely being sufficient to sustain artistic statement. (In this case, especially, it seemed important to exercise restraint in order not to have the intensity of the emotions I was experiencing in bereavement turn sincere sentiment into mawkish sentimentality, as can often happen when one tries to deal too directly with profound personal crisis in art.)

* * *

I often write poetry in notebooks while walking around the city, just as I am writing these words now on a bench in Confucius Plaza in Chinatown, in the shadow of a pigeonshit-spattered statue of the immortal Chinese philosopher. Restless by nature, I have always identified with Baudelaire's notion of the flaneur, an incognito stroller who finds solitude and poetic inspiration in the midst of crowds. Here in Chinatown, where some of the older citizens still regard all outsiders as lo fan, "foreign ghosts," my anonymity is even more assured.

After spirited haggling under the umbrellas of the street peddlers nearby, elderly women elbow onto my bench with their fragrant bundles of fruits and vegetables. As they laugh and gossip with each other and the small grandchildren in their charge race raucously around us, I might as well be invisible—yes, a ghost. And while now these Chinese grandmas have entered into this text quite literally, normally they, too, would be invisible in another way: phantom presences, human palimpsests, inhabiting the subtle subtext that lies dormant below the surface of all writing. Yet rereading what I had written to edit or revise it would revive them in memory. For it is part and parcel of the metaphysics of the manuscript that the circumstances of composition, the unseen and unremarked upon events and atmospheres attending it, live as vividly within the text on some subliminal level as that which the text consciously endeavors to evoke. This sense of simultaneity, of overlapping layers of consciousness, informs my drawings even more obviously than my poems, since in their case text and subtext are virtually indistinguishable.

Following my usual peripatetic practice, I worked in my sketch book in bookstore cafes, atriums, and other public places, somewhat surreptitiously. I appeared to be writing rather than drawing, thus avoiding the attention that drawing (which is generally perceived as a less private activity, sometimes even a public spectacle inviting comments from self-elected sidewalk critics), tends to attract. I did not sketch "from life," as the term goes, but rather from inside my head. Yet I have no doubt that aspects of my surroundings insinuated themselves into my drawings in ways that may not be immediately obvious to anyone looking at them. At very least, I'm sure these ambient elements influenced my mood and had some affect upon the imagery that I conjured up subconsciously.

My entranced absorption in the act of drawing was as close to meditation as I have ever allowed myself to come, never having been drawn to esoteric belief systems. In fact, so scornful was I of anything smacking

of the occult that Jeannie and Holden invariably fell silent and grinned like co-conspirators whenever I walked into a room while they were having one of their speculative conversations about the Afterlife, in that happier time before we had any inkling of our son's impending illness.

"Won't there be time enough to find out what happens after we die, after we die?" I would ask, so spooked by what I took to be their morbid fascination with the subject that I sounded plaintive, even while practicing my customary intellectual arrogance. But since Jeannie was born and raised in Virginia and Holden had obviously inherited some of her Southern gothic love of ghost stories and all things supernatural, they would just grin wryly, in the patronizing, half-pitying, way of true initiates humoring a nonbeliever.

As I always tell people now, one becomes a mystic simply by being mystified. And, believe me, nothing will affect that conversion faster than having one's child proceed one into the mystery we all most dread. Nothing ever again makes sense in quite the same way once the natural order of things has been so radically reversed. That said, I did not go so far as to think my drawings were being "channeled" like those of certain "mediumistic" outsider artists connected to the early nineteenth century spiritualist craze. Nor could I legitimately qualify for outsider status and thereby exempt myself from the laws governing sophisticated taste. For while it was true that I had never attended art school, I had been something of a prodigy as a dead end kid growing up on the Lower East Side—the darling of doting art teachers who thought they were saving me from juvenile delinquency! And later, as a young man invested in the identity of artist, I had felt like a whizkid all over again when my work was included in a group show at The New School for Social Research with Warhol, Rauschenberg, and other famous older artists.

That was before I started getting even more attention for writing, a vice picked up years earlier as a teenager enamored of Kerouac and his fellow Beats, which eventually led me into journalism (and, inevitably, into writing about art, an ekphrastic enterprise that granted the best of both worlds, enabling me to experience the artmaking of others vicariously through my natural empathy for a familiar creative process).

Being fully as impressionable as the next egotist, by the time I was writing feature stories about the counterculture for Rolling Stone and struggling with poems on the side, I had convinced myself that words—the perfect medium for indulging my natural garrulousness—were my true calling. Now, though, having resumed drawing only because I was finally at a loss for words, I drew with little regard for the rules of composition (just an old decorator's trick anyway, it was convenient to think). Images swarmed the page with a heedless horror vacua intricacy that we usually see only in the work of isolated idiot savants and mental patients earnestly transcribing their elaborate visions. But I was no visionary; probably I was closer, even in distress, to the selfconsciousness of those early surrealists in Andre Breton's circle who deliberately cultivated a technique of "pure psychic automatism" in the hope of achieving that raw immediacy which is the unique gift of the truly, purely mad.

Eventually, I would explore some of the images that were flooding me more selectively in large collage paintings based on the drawings, but I resisted editing the drawings themselves. While some were better than others and some even struck me as aesthetically indefensible, I saw them, for better or worse, as part of a continuum. To save some and discard others would have meant to cover my tracks: to falsify and possibly even abort an intuitive process that was proving more compelling than any more calculated approach might be. After all, what I had always hoped for in art was to surprise myself, and these drawings held the ultimate appeal of being inexplicable to me. Which may be why it gave me pause when, in one of them, I found that I had inscribed the phrase, "On the shore of language, hold your breath."

I should explain that from the beginning words "drawn" in a minute script turned up here and there among the images I was "writing." Fragmented phrases and obscure sentences materialized, much as messages might turn up on a Ouija board, perhaps by sheer force of subconscious desire. Eager for the sensation of certainty that simply forming the familiar letters afforded me, I welcomed these scant elements of ecriture, poor substitute though they were for the workmanlike satisfaction that comes with conceiving a coherent line of poetry or prose. I may secretly have hoped that by including these snippets of text, as random and seemingly unrelated to the images as the images were to one another, I might break through the writer's block which had driven me to draw in the first place; that random phrases might turn into sentences I could make sense of and even serve as rational lifelines by which I could pull myself out of the increasingly abstract miasma that drawing seemed to be drawing me into.

Still, superstitious mystic that I had become, I was taken aback by "On the shore of language, hold your breath." Was this a warning that words, rather than rescuing me from imagery, might mire my drawings in the literal, in banal specifics that would not jumpstart the writing impulse but merely muck up, even corrupt, whatever silent truths these drawings might yet reveal to me?

Well, if it was a warning, I took no heed of it. A lifelong lover of comic strips, the tiny line illustrations in dictionaries, Chinese literati poem-paintings, the illuminated manuscripts of William Blake, and other hybrid forms— from Apollinaire's "calligrammes" to the avant garde doggerel doodles of Bob Brown and the crude drawings, crawling with scrawled texts, that Antonin Artaud committed to paper in a French insane asylum—I had always toyed with the idea of evolving some personal synthesis of word and image. So I continued to draw words into my pictures written in black and white, the colors of language, perhaps hoping for some brilliant Blakean epiphany—which never arrived, of course...

* * *

Working sporadically, mostly in public places, I completed some seventy five drawings; yet I make no professional claims for them. For many years now, I have earned my living as a writer. Whatever my visual ambitions may once have been, it is writing that I have struggled with and writing to which I have devoted the better part of my time and energy. When it comes to visual art, I prefer to think of myself as an amateur in the original French meaning of the term—which is to say, not so much a dabbler as someone who does something for love rather than for gain or for fame. Given the deeply personal impetus for these draw-

ings I see them as something quite apart from all such ambitions, an intimate exploration that I embarked on with no intention of exhibiting the results.

For this reason, I chose to keep my sketch book intact, rather than removing its pages as the drawings accumulated. I didn't see these drawings as separate art objects or even "originals," but rather as pages of an ongoing pictorial manuscript that would be more appropriate in a book than on a gallery wall. I felt that the drawings themselves should have no more intrinsic material value than their printed facsimiles, which could communicate the same visual information (whatever it might mean) just as effectively.

Given this disavowal of artistic exclusivity or "preciousness," one might validly wonder what made me continue with these drawing after my own period of magical thinking had ended in failure and disillusionment. That question might best be answered in hindsight by a book I came across recently while browsing in the library of Fordham University, Lincoln Center, where Jeannie is studying for a degree in social work so that she can qualify as a private therapist and someday help others cope with the kind of grief she has had to overcome. The book, which I do not own and will have to paraphrase, perhaps simplistically, from notes scribbled in my pocket journal, is called "Art and Existentialism." Its author, Arturo B. Fallico, suggests that we make art in order to replace the innate "pathos" of reality with "aesthetic reality." This, according to Fallico, is not a "rival" or a "substitute" reality but "a parallel reality which is the art formation itself." As such, while it can't "reverse the narrative" or "change the outcome," to borrow once again Joan Didion's felicitous phrases, it can, according to Fallico "force a personal, super-purposive human significance on life," so that "under its spell even death and defeat take on proportions which justify and dignify them." In any case, happening upon Fallico's theories seemed to clarify some of the feelings and yearnings that had driven me to draw so blindly and obsessively years earlier, when it would not have been an exaggeration to say that drawing felt like a form of salvation.

Yet now when I look at those drawings, what they remind me of, more than anything else, are those black and white pages, jam-packed with tiny mail-order advertisements and embellished with cartoon line-art, that I used to pore over as a kid, in the back pages of 1950s comic books. I can't recall ever having sent away for the whoopee cushions, squirting lapel flowers, palm buzzers ("Shock your friends!"), invisible ink (particularly appealing to a budding graphomaniac), or other cheap novelty items that they offered. But for some reason, when I was a solitary child like the dreamy little boy that Holden was to be, finding refuge in comics, as he later would, from a world lorded over by dysfunctional adults, those intricate, jumbled pages of images and words (my first brush with horror vacua!) both fascinated and comforted me.

* * *

"Tripping" on the New Poetic Photography in Chelsea

The emergence of a new lyrical tendency in contemporary photography indicates that a growing number of photo artists no longer feel compelled to prove their avant garde credentials to the detriment of the poetic effects at which their medium excels. This is one of several insights prompted by "Tripping the Light Fantastic: An Exhibition of Fine Art Photography," at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, from March 22 to April 11. (Reception: March 23, from 6 to 8 PM.

Louise Mann's soft-focused photographic prints and C-prints of trees in Western Australia present the viewer with near-abstract interpretations of nature as austere in formal terms as color field paintings. Indeed, the luminous chromatic qualities of Mann's prints conspire with her spare compositions to create images of a singular exquisiteness.

Texas photographer Bob Longoria, on the other hand, adheres to the classic qualities of black and white photography in his silver gelatin prints of gnarled trees and plant forms interpreted with a clarity and tonal subtlety akin to Mapplethorpe's floral studies. Longoria's "purist" vision is auspiciously attuned to the arid west Texas desert subjects that he depicts with such intimacy and sensitivity.

An unabashed romanticist, Vladimir Andreyev, born in Russia, now a U.S. citizen, refers to his work as "poetic photography." Moved by an "orchestral" feeling while watching a sunrise, he says "the confluence of poetry and music became my photographic inspiration." Indeed, all of Andreyev's vibrant color pictures—be they of sun-kissed landscapes, city skylines, or a single hovering butterfly— make his enchantment with the visible world both palpable and contagious.

The peculiar beauty of desolate places would appear to be the discovery of Michael L. Dailey, whose color photos evoke feelings in the viewer similar to those provoked by the paintings of Andrew Wyeth. Dailey makes weathered wooden farm houses, derelict barns, and other structures set within stark, flat landscapes resonate with a sense of human longing that is haunting and poignant.

By contrast, Anne C. Savedge projects an almost baroque quality in her photographs, through which she aims to "transform" her subjects rather than merely record them. Trained as a painter, Savedge has been known to draw on her negatives, scan them, alter them with Photoshop, and use other methods of manipulation to produce the expressive distortions that animate her color prints of floral, landscape, and human subjects, lending them a magic that transcends the literal.

Israeli photographer Amatsia Raanan has his own approach to seeing beyond what is right before our eyes. In his color prints of natural and man-made subjects, he creates compositions that are as notable for their abstract attributes as for their abiding reverence for the things of this world. Raanan's sensitivity to light and texture is especially acute, resulting in pictures that make the viewer just as aware as the photographer of the many varieties of beauty that surround us.

For over thirty years, Patrick Walsh has been creating "photomosaics" by taking multiple pictures of a single subject, then piecing them together to create large-scale panoramic views of landscapes, empty baseball stadiums and other suitable subjects. Some of Walsh's compositions have been known to stretch to eleven feet in length; even on a smaller scale, however, his sweeping vistas imaginatively envelop the viewer like the visual equivalent of Surround Sound.

—Marie R. Pagano

Several Artists Explore the Possibilities of Postmodern Abstraction

By far the most sharply focused annual survey of nonobjective painting by this organization to date, the West Side Art's Coalition's "Abstract 2005" was seen recently at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street.

Sonia Barnett's intimate acrylic paintings are filled with verdant hues and gestural verve. Titles such as "Wonder," "Waiting," and "Celebration" are in keeping with Barnett's apparent desire to capture the emotions evoked by nature, as opposed to its specific phenomena. And she succeeds splendidly in making her feathery, rhythmic brush strokes of vibrant layered color convey a passionate response to sunlight filtering through foliage and other natural events.

Elinore Bucholtz makes the square shapes of her canvas convey a sense of limitless space that is handily abetted by the openness of her compositions. There is a sense in her paintings of light interacting with matter in a way that breaks down the barriers between the physical and the ethereal. Employing a scumbled technique and overpainting, Bucholtz creates a sense of pentimento, palimpsests and other contrasts of transparency and opacity that lend her bold, roughly geometric forms a sense of weightlessness and mystery.

Dripping and spattering, techniques that have by now become part of the arsenal of effects employed by numerous painters, are given a new lyricism in the paintings of Peg McCreary. McCreary employs swirls and skeins of pigment over delicately stained grounds in a manner that effectively unites the modes of very different artists such as Pollock and Frankenthaler to forge a formal vocabulary of her own, with forms emanating from a central source, rather than covering the canvas in an overall manner. As the use of the word "Scherzo" in her titles suggests, McCreary aims for and achieves a sense of compositional and chromatic musicality.

Leanne Martinson's "Helter Skelter" series is also well named, for her compositions daringly court chaos with their busy convergencies of painted and collage shapes, as well as their strident color combinations. However, Martinson knows how to organize seemingly random jumps, and ellipses to create coherent compositions that fairly pulse with energy, and the effect of her paintings is ultimately exhilarating.

Miguel Angel's black mixed media painting is characteristically spare and exquisite. Few other painters combine minimalism and mystery as effectively as Angel, who enlivens a matte but subtly modulated monochromatic field with a piquant little form at the bottom of the composition consisting of a jagged sliver of mirror glass set against a slightly larger piece of black-tinted glass. The title "Solely" completes a painting that is essentially a deeply evocative yet elusive concrete poem.

Emily Rich has solidified her gestural style with more definite forms and delicious pastel colors in her most recent paintings. Tangerine pink, pale blue, and delicate yellow hues soft as sorbet evoke sensual shapes. In Rich's "Summer," the forms cluster at the center of the canvas, while in other paintings they flow outward to fill the composition. In all of her recent works, Rich appears to be exploring the possibilities inherent in the painter process from new and unexpected angles.

Vibrant, electric colors set against deep blue grounds bring the acrylics on canvas of Maryann Sussoni to dazzling life. In works such as "Within the Path" and "Transformation," Sussoni appears to explore notions of flux and metamorphosis with a combination of dynamically balanced angular and flowing forms. All of her paintings are energized by her unique, almost awkwardly expressive sense of space. Sussoni is an intrepid painter, yet her adventurousness is invariably rewarding rather than reckless.

Over the past several years, Meyer Tannenbaum has worked his way through every possible permutation of "process" to arrive at a stringent new synthesis of line and color, at once lyrical and austere. Tannenbaum's painterly project has a conceptual component in the lengths he will go to in order to avoid using a brush. This takes on the power of a moral imperative in his recent "Soft Impact" series, where elaborate masking tape is required to create the graceful black lines that delineate the color areas like a luminous jigsaw puzzle.

The abstract compositions of Mary Hogan suggest dense jungles of tangled lines and saturated colors. Working in acrylic and collage or watercolor, Hogan conjures up an almost ominous sense of intensity that is reflected in titles such as "Scattered," "In Deep #2," and "Don't Go There." Her work seems to proceed on instinct and pure painterly nerve, going deep indeed, and drawing the viewer into a visual vortex that is forbidding yet finally appealing.

Farhana Akhter, on the other hand, creates wide open color field compositions that envelope the viewer in soft chromatic auras akin to Jules Olitski's shimmering veils of sprayed pigment. But unlike Olitski, who once stated that he would prefer "colors sprayed into air," Akhter also provides the viewer a tactile "handle," with swirling textures that create a sensual tension between elusive atmospherics and palpable form.

—Byron Coleman

Symphonic Sweep Animates the Paintings of Seco

Generally, when we hear the term "expressionism," we tend to associate it with strident color, frenzied brushstrokes, and formal distortion. However, the Mexican artist Seco, who was drawn to California both by his love of classical music and its tradition of West Coast figure painting, exemplified by artists like Richard Diebenkorn and David Park, is a unique species of expressionist. For his colors, while strong, are subtly harmonized; his brush strokes, while vigorous, are anything but strident; and his forms, while emphatic, are grounded in classical anatomy.

Thus, one encounters a new kind of formal and emotional expressiveness in Seco's exhibition of acrylics on canvas at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, where Seco's exhibition can be seen from February 24 through March 18, with a reception on March 2, from 6 to 8 PM.

As a guest of both the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra and the New West Symphony, Seco had an opportunity to observe these orchestras during closed door rehearsals and capture the immediacy of music-making as few other painters have. The intimacy of the compositions that came out of this experience can only be compared to Degas' pictures of ballet dancers in rehearsal, as well as Romare Bearden's many collages of the jazz world; Seco's grasp of his subject is just that quintessential.

Indeed, in the latter regard, his painting, "Trumpet II," depicting a young horn player seated in a chair, his forelock falling in his face, the bell of his instrument pointed at the floor as he concentrates on getting a note just so, reminds one of the jazz trumpeter Chet Baker. That it actually depicts a symphonic musician, however, gives a refreshingly unbuttoned, spontaneously casual backstage view of the classical music scene than one is not often afforded.

By contrast, the sweeping horizontal composition of "Requiem III" presents us with the majesty of an entire orchestra in performance: the conductor waving his baton at the podium; the violinists sawing away with their bows in a row like a finely tuned machine in the middle distance; the shapely, almost feminine forms of a row of bass fiddles dominating the foreground, their richly polished red wood surfaces gleaming; the white formal shirtings of the musicians toward the rear appearing to rise on the tides of the music like a flock of white birds taking flight. Here, Seco invests the scene with a rhythmic grandeur which approximates in visual terms the grandeur of the music itself, his composition soaring rhythmically to the occasion in a manner that sweeps the viewer away.

"Trumpet II"

Equally strong in another manner is "Passing the Page," another large canvas, albeit a vertical one, of a conductor captured in the act of turning a page of music resting on the podium while wielding his baton. What Seco has immortalized here is the dynamism of a simple, yet essential, gesture in musical creation, heightening the drama by setting the figure in his dark suit against a brilliant red background and dispensing with the more detailed treatment that we see in some of his other paintings to further heighten the effect.

In other paintings of musicians in this exhibition, as well as in a somewhat anomalous yet lovely vision of a crouching nude, Seco— whose ability to tell a story with paint may have to do with the fact that he is also a published author—proves himself to be an artist possessed of singular gifts.

—Peter Wiley

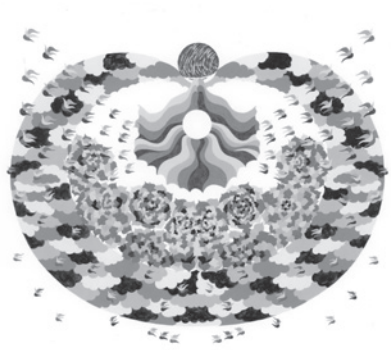
Judith Ellen Sanders' Harmonious Synthesis of Science and Art

The art of Judith Ellen Sanders could appear related to the "pattern painting" associated with Holly Solomon Gallery in its heyday. However, while that type of painting demonstrated that the decorative qualities we admire in Byzantine, Islamic, and Celtic cultures can also enliven contemporary art, there is actually a great deal more going on in Sanders' work than immediately meets the eye.

For the vibrant forms that undulate throughout Sanders' compositions, bringing them brilliantly alive, are not merely decorative elements, but visual interpretations of the energy fields, cell formations, growth patterns, and underlying rhythms of biology and biochemistry, in which the artist holds a Master of Science degree.

"Now it is at the juncture of art and science where I wish to work," Sanders says, and the formal and chromatic discoveries that she makes at that vital intersection can be seen in her exhibition "Color Compass: Paintings on Canvas and Paper," at The Interchurch Center Treasure Room Gallery, 475 Riverside Drive, from March 1 through 31.

While one normally thinks of "hard-edged" painting as geometric rather than organically expressive, Sanders sets sinuously flowing shapes, painted meticulously in brilliant acrylic colors, afloat against pristine white backgrounds. Suggestive of stylized flames, floral forms, sunbeams, ocean waves, drifting clouds, and other natural phenomena, these graceful shapes appear constantly in a state of flux.



"Calm Templation"

In some works, the hypnotically repetitive abstract rhythms of Sanders' resemble those of Eastern mandalas or tantric designs, as seen in the punningly titled "Calm Templation." Yet while this piece initially appears abstract, on closer examination it yields a metaphysical rainbow-colored vision of silhouetted birds soaring in formation from a central spectrum of delicate petals encircled by a skyblue wreath of clouds.

By contrast, other compositions, such as the acrylic on paper "Shells to Birds," employ intricate concentration of equally colorful smaller shapes to convey a sense of natural metamorphosis akin to exploration of visual perception and optical illusion in the etchings of M.C. Escher. Yet other compositions by Sanders, particularly large acrylics on canvas such as "Safe Passage" and "Latitude," both for their intricacy and their mind-expanding qualities suggest drug-free relatives of the psychedelic art of the 1960s. Then there are sparer acrylics on canvas, such as "Circles of Light," which, with their bold and playful combinations of circular and linear shapes seem more akin to certain oils by Jean Miro and gouaches by Alexander Calder.

None of which is to suggest that Sanders is unduly influenced by any of these predecessors; quite the contrary, her work is highly original. However, its complexity and diversity can be related to many diverse tendencies and traditions, both Western and Eastern, which she has assimilated in the formulation of her own visual vocabulary and put to the service of her personal synthesis of science and aesthetics.

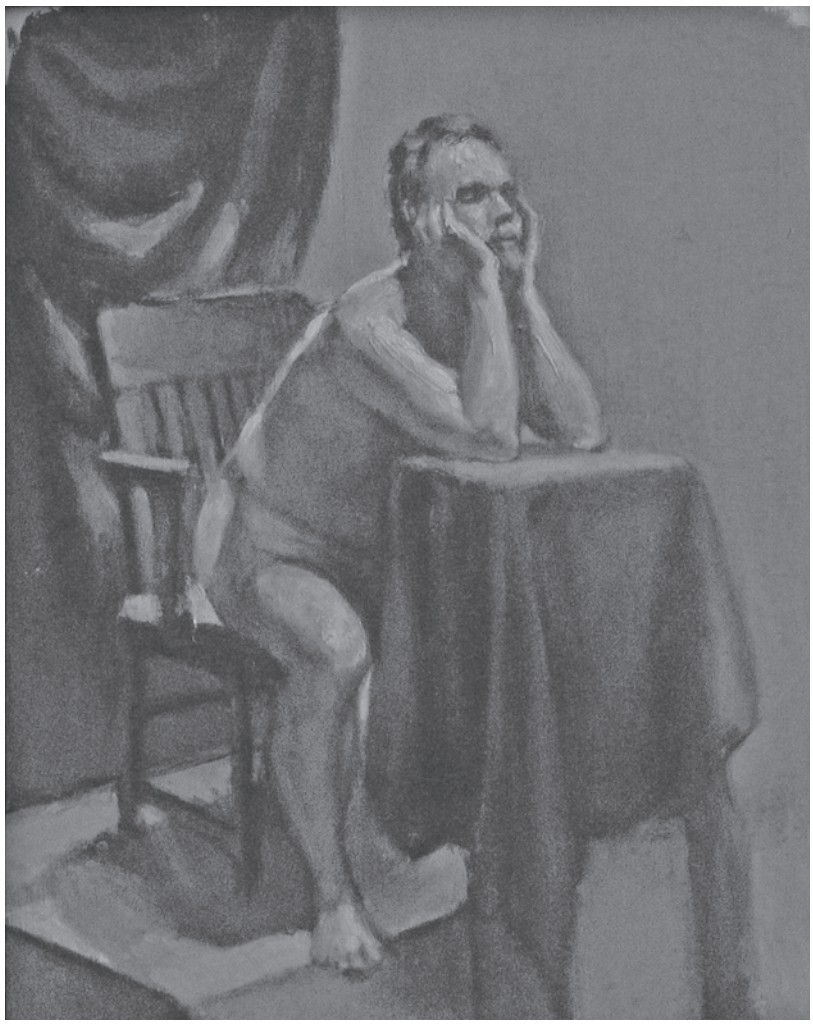
Indeed, along with numerous commercial and public galleries, this widely exhibited painter has had shows in specialized venues such as the Touro College of Health Sciences Atrium and the University of Massachusetts Medical School, where the scientific inspiration of her paintings creates special interest. In the final analysis, however, it is for her purely aesthetic attributes that her work will surely endure.

—Ed McCormack

Min Sin Kim's Abiding Commitment to the Human Figure

Although realism is often just another mannerism in postmodern painting, adopted by ambitious young art school graduates from among any number of other possible "strategies" for gaining art world attention, Min Sin Kim, a Korean-born artist who recently earned her M.F.A. from the New York Academy of Art has very definite, deeply felt ideas about what it means to be a figurative painter.

"As I studied the human figure, I became keenly aware of its subtlety and elegance," Kim says in an artist statement issued by World Fine Art Gallery, 511 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, where her work is on permanent view in the venue's year-round salon exhibition. "I realized that this was not all from the surface but the inner life of the human being and it was reflected in the image that I saw and presented in my art."



"Purple"

At a time when so many other young painters are enamored of novelty and are straining to be trendy at all cost, Min Sin Kim adheres to a venerable tradition, working on easel scale, painting portraits and nudes in oil on panel in a style redolent of art history. Yet what makes her work remarkable is that it comes across fresh and contemporary by virtue of her ability to invest her paintings with conviction and immediacy.

In this regard she seems very much akin to artists such as Balthus and Giacometti, whose figure paintings won the respect and admiration of their avant garde and abstract colleagues, even as they pursued aesthetic paths that ran counter to the trends and tendencies of their time. For like both of those earlier artists, Min Sin Kim is a "painter's painter," if one may revive a somewhat shopworn yet useful term, in that for all her commitment to the human figure as subject matter pure painterly values take priority in her work over anecdotal ones.

One indication of her emphasis on formal values over descriptive ones is that she has named three of the paintings on view at World Fine Art Gallery as "Orange I," "Orange II," and "Green," titles that would almost lead one to expect abstract rather than figurative works if one were to hear them without seeing the pictures themselves (a male nude, a male portrait head, and a female portrait head, respectively). These titles refer to the background colors rather than the figurative subjects, and a detail worth noting in this regard is Kim's habit of leaving an irregular border of the white primer coat on her paint surfaces showing around the edges of her compositions.

This "unfinished" area of the composition, not only lets a sense of "air" into the painting but also functions as a kind of distancing device, making clear to the viewer that while Kim paints the human figure with flawless verisimilitude, illusionism, as such, is not the main point of her paintings. Yes, she is a very committed realist; that much should be obvious to anyone who encounters her work. For she captures her subjects in a manner that not only evokes a palpable impression of the human presence but also conveys a strong sense of their individual character not only through her ability to get a convincing likeness but also through her ability to suggest that "inner life of the human being" to which she referred in her artist's statement.

That said, what comes across just as striking in Kim's paintings is the succulent sensuality of the paint surface itself: how her tactile strokes bring the painting alive in a way quite distinct from the life that she lends to the subject him or herself.

In "Orange I," for example, the youthful male model, somewhat scruffy of hair and beard in a manner suggesting an art student, is frontally posed, unabashed in his nudity. In this oil on panel, Kim's uncompromising realism recalls Thomas Eakins for the play of light over the body and the depth of characterization that the artist achieves.

In another oil, "Purple," the subject is a bearded middle aged man, seated at a small table covered with a brown cloth. Although naked as the day he was born, he projects the thoughtfulness and dignity of a statesman or professor mulling over some vital issue.

Equally naked in another manner is the young man with handsome African-American, or possibly Caribbean, features in "Orange II," although only his head and shoulders are depicted; for Kim penetrates his serious, somewhat somber personality as certainly as she does that of the red-haired older woman in "Green," who gives the impression of a kind of knowing world-weary disposition.

Like the small portrait heads that Eakins painted in the early 1900s, Min Sin Kim's portraits convey an intense psychological presence, even while they engage us just as thoroughly on another level as objects of aesthetic delectation for their muted color harmonies and the restrained expressiveness of their brushwork.

It is especially interesting to note that Min Sin Kim manages to create a sense of intimacy in her portraits without having her subjects meet our gaze directly. That they appear to glance away, deep in their own thoughts, somehow enhances the feeling that we are seeing the inner person, attesting to the singular skills of this gifted young realist. —Byron Coleman

West Side Artists Convey Connections Between Memory and Reality

In "Memories and Realities," co-curated by Elisa Jacobson and Pat Koleser and seen at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street, several members of the West Side Arts Coalition employed approaches ranging from representational to abstract.

Elinore Bucholtz combined symbolic and abstract elements in her acrylic painting "The Ages of Woman," where a female nude and phantom faces merged with flowing areas of color in a vigorous manner enhanced by drips and other lively evidences of process.

In her "Blue Dream" series, Ruth Llanillo Leal schematized natural forms such as trees, flowers, and insects in baroquely decorative compositions that combined New Image inventiveness with visionary passion.

Visionary in another manner are the small oils of Ana S. Cifuentes, who sets window-like rectangles afloat amid clouds, combining Magritte-like incongruity with strong formal qualities in luminous scenes that seem to spring from some intriguing inner Twilight Zone.

Valeria Nisskaya, on the other hand, breathes new life into Academic realism with an accomplished still life centering on flowers in a gleaming silver pitcher, as well as an atmospheric oil of a woman shoveling snow amid bare, scrawny trees in a Moscow backyard.

Robert Halasz brings his own atmospheric vision to an urban scene in "Stage 100," an oil on canvas notable for its subdued color harmonies, and for the artist's way with light and shadow in evoking the many shapes and hues of buildings and rooftops in a manner, that like certain paintings by Edwin Dickinson, lends an ethereal, dreamlike beauty to an ordinary scene.

Shirley Piniat's densely layered, ostensibly abstract collages convey the theme of the show by suggesting how memory fragments reality, with bits and pieces of imagery arranged kaleidoscopically in intricate and rhythmic compositions that teem with life and an almost vertiginous sense of energy.

Elisa Jacobson, on the other hand, belongs to a tendency that inspired one writer for this publication to coin the term "New Naturists"; for her forms convey a sense of organic essences, rather than the lay of the land, through a use of bold forms and vibrant colors akin to American abstract pioneers like Georgia O'Keeffe and Arthur Dove.

A splashy poetry enlivens the watercolors of Byung Sook Jung, whose spontaneous "wet into wet" technique captures the dewy freshness of floral subjects with sparkling color washes; however, the artist also shows a more precise side in an exquisitely detailed little pencil drawing of a single flower in silvery tonalities.

Color and texture figure prominently in Nicole Hahn's oils on paper, in which tactile strokes of blue, pink, ocher, yellow and white convey the movement of wind, water, and other aspects of natural flux with a lyrical vigor reminiscent of Philip Guston's early abstractions— albeit with a gestural signature peculiar to Hahn alone.

"Pastoral" is the word that best describes the pastels of Pat Koleser, who possesses an unerring sense of "touch" that enables her to evoke the subtle play of sunlight on foliage, trees reflected in pond, dappled shadows in a forest, or the softness of clouds, with feathery neo-impressionist strokes that express how all aspects of the natural world fuse in final harmony.

—J. Sanders Eaton

Eco-Fusion: Six Variations on a Timely Theme

In "Eco-Fusion," at West-Park Presbyterian Church, McAlphin Hall, 165 West 86th Street, through February 26 (call 212-362-4890 for gallery hours), six international artists deal with the environment, among other issues. However, what comes across most strongly are the exciting stylistic contrasts that they present.

For example, with their jumbled features, brilliant colors, and intriguing distortions, some of Bernardo Diaz' figures look like escapees from Picasso paintings who have found new happiness in the strident environment of the German Expressionists! Diaz, however, is not an appropriationist. Rather, this intrepid American painter has assimilated and transformed a variety of art historical influences to forge his own unique style. We were especially taken with Diaz's large canvas " Detached Crossing," with its brilliantly colorful figure grouping texturally enhanced through the use of pumice mixed with acrylic paints.

Leila Elias, also American, paints bold semi abstract compositions that are often inspired by flowers with their furling petals blown up big and expressively exaggerated, so that they veer more toward O'Keeffe-like semi-abstraction than literal depiction. Elias often leaves the outer edges of her canvases bare to emphasize a sense of process, as seen in her compositions "Blue Abstract" and "Stone Flower," with their commanding contours and sensual paint quality. Elias also creates lyrical mixed media collages with layered paper and natural materials such as twigs, but her paintings are by far her most powerful work.

From Kazakhstan, Berik Kulmamirov, whose work is signed simply "Berik," is an abstract painter who takes off from nature. Berik's colors are scumbled over one another to create variegated chromatic effects and compelling textures. Natural forms are stylized, as Berik's in "Spring Song," with its simplified white bird flattened on the picture plane in the manner of Braque, dense patterns of overlapping shapes derived from plant-forms, and scalloped elements that suggest decorative ocean waves.

Nature also inspires the fanciful paintings of Spanish painter Ruth Llanillo Leal, in which butterflies and insects alight on slender stalks in the glow of the sun or full moon. One such picture, Leal's "Mid Summer Night Frolic" is especially appealing in a subtly surreal, smoothly poetic way. By contrast, Leal's acrylic on canvas "Blue Dream" departs from the natural theme to concoct a whimsical composition in which sharp abstract forms appear to be gift-wrapped with delicate blue bows.

Rob van Es apparently took the theme of the show quite literally, exhibiting microphotos of plant forms magnified to create fascinating found abstractions. In works such as "Jasmin" and "Strawberry," van Es also includes seed specimens of the actual plants in little windows cut into the mats of his microphotos, a characteristically clever touch by this always lively painter and photo artist from the Netherlands.

The final artist, Andrey Punchenko is from Russia, and her lively acrylic paintings on cardboard, often with hand-printed texts, have the feeling of contemporary icons by way of Basquiat, with their flatly simplified figures surrounded by lively abstract flourishes. Punchenko's compositions also have a narrative element that is especially evident in the intricate composition of "DOM," where two women convene in front of a brick wall while a mysterious figure slips around the corner in an atmospheric nocturnal setting.

Like that of the other five artists in "Eco-Fusion," her work is well worth your attention.

—Jeannie McCormack

Anton Franz Höger: Allegories of Cabbages and Kings

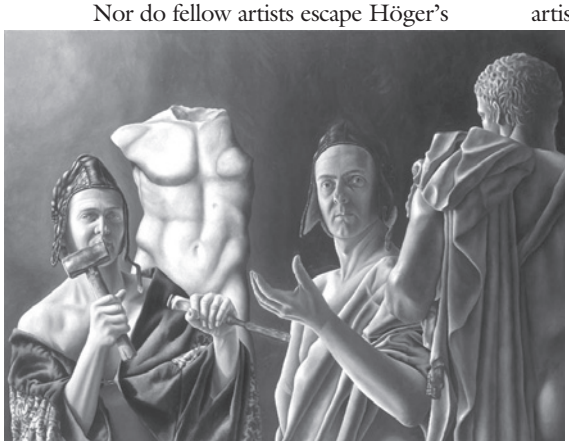
A renowned interpreter of Renaissance music as well as a painter, the German-born painter Anton Franz Höger seems to inhabit a rarefied mental realm where the trappings of the past collide charmingly with contemporary irony in tableaux which allude to a host of human foibles.

A veritable repertory company of antic costumed characters cavorts symbolically throughout the highly expressive series of realist paintings on view in Höger's artist-in-residence exhibition "The Muse of Paradox," at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, from January 6 through April 11.

At the center of the farcical dramas that Höger depicts is the ubiquitous figure of a king who reminds one, with his fey gestures and histrionic posturings, of Taylor Mead, the internationally beloved comedic actor who first came to our attention in the Warhol films of the mid 1960s. Surrounded by a motley crew of doting underlings, this far from royal personage preens and poses, assuming a variety of roles, from drunkard, to dancer, to bumbling spiritual seeker, as though determined to assert his primacy as the lead buffoon in a realm where foolishness reigns supreme.

While one could draw comparisons in his king's persona to that of more than one world leader today, Höger's point seems less political than a general statement about the plight of humanity vis a vis the insurmountable distance between the nobility of our intentions and the sum of our deeds.

Nor do fellow artists escape Höger's scathing satire in paintings such as "The King is Painting" and "The King as a Sculptor," in which court flunkies fawn over the monarch's mediocre creations like the critics, curators, and other camp followers who flock around certain disposable "art stars" until their fifteen minutes expires and they are promptly forgotten in favor of the next flash-in-the-pan success.



"The King as a Sculptor"

Although they are executed in the flawless realist manner of the Dutch Baroque school and are loosely based upon the epoch of The Sun King, Louis XIV, one can't help reading allegories about contemporary life into Höger's paintings. And the artist seems to concur with this view when he states that his king "stands for all of us, in his tragic-comic solitude or in his masquerade intending to hide his real personality."

Höger's vision is truly timeless in its dissection of human character as personified by figures incongruously garbed in flowing robes and sporting World War II bomber caps whose flamboyant yet empty histrionics call to mind the actors in Samuel Beckett's "Endgame."

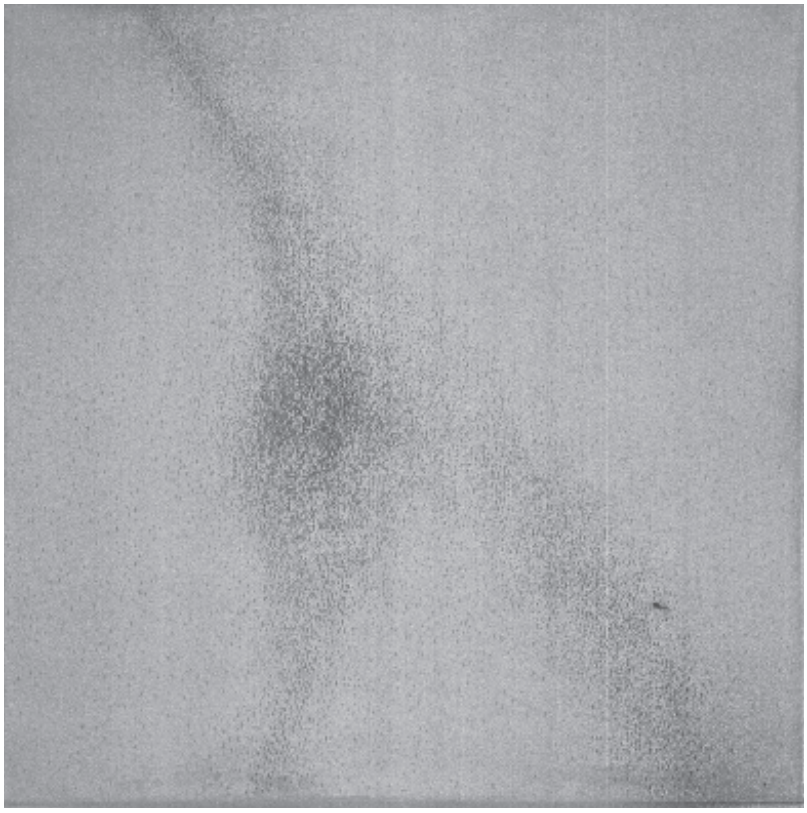
Yet even as we chuckle at the hapless posturings of his pompous protagonists, and possibly even squirm a little at the aspects of ourselves that we see mirrored in their foolishness, we can only marvel at the beauty of the artist's technique. His mastery of chiaroscuro, his handling of draperies, columns, clouds, and other incidental props and details in his artfully staged dramas—all contribute to the enduring quality of his work, making one aware that Anton Franz Höger is not only an insightful commentator on our common condition but a sublime painter as well.

—Eric Schickel

Three Degrees of Separation in the Paintings of Mikyung Kim

One of the more pervasive yet misguided assumptions about systematic and reductive modes of abstract painting is that they are devoid of emotion. In fact, certain artists evolve systems as ways to contain emotion; to reign in feelings that might be aesthetically unmanageable or even be perceived as banal, if they were not filtered through a process of conceptual deliberation.

An artist who appears to have found a fertile formal niche in the process of coming to terms with strong personal feelings is the young Korean-born painter Mikyung Kim, whose solo show "Untitled Songs," can be seen at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, from March 14 through April 1, with receptions on Thursday, March 16, from 5 to 8 PM and Saturday March 18, from 3 to 6 PM.



"No Where"

In her persona as well as her paintings, Mikyung Kim exudes a quiet strength, a decisiveness masked in restrain, that is immediately impressive. At least this is the impression one got from visiting the artist in her studio in D.U.M.B.O and listening to her explain the genesis of her work.

In 1997, when she first came to New York to study fine art at Parsons School of Design, Mikyung Kim says, she experienced a painful sense of separation from her family and could not stop thinking about her mother back home in Korea.

"My mom has three children and we're her whole life; we are everything to her," she told us, as we stood in her tidy work space, surrounded by her austere, mostly white mixed media works on canvas. "Alone, faced with new surroundings, all I could think about was the difference between her situation and mine...how she was being affected by the path I had taken."

At first, working out her feelings in the most direct possible way, as artists often do before they find their footing, Mikyung Kim started making figurative paintings— not portraits exactly, but images of her mom. Even after she got her M.F.A. in 1999, Mikyung Kim continued painting her mom. Then, after four years, her work underwent a radical change. She began covering canvases, large and small, with smooth, pearlescent layers of marble dust, usually white, sometimes delicately tinted, and covering them with tiny, meticulous, numerals faintly drawn in graphite.

She used only three numbers: 1,2, and 3. For a long time, she thought of them as representing herself and her two siblings, the three children of the woman she had left back in Korea, whose image she had painted for the previous four years.

However, over time, as she worked on her new paintings, the meaning that these three numbers held for the artist broadened; they came to seem less like the obsessive dates a prisoner facing a long sentence might scrawl on a cell wall; less like symbols of loneliness, homesickness, or filial devotion. Rather, Mikyung Kim says, "the action of writing the numbers began to feel like performing, and even though the marks I was making stayed the same, they seemed to expand from my mom out to the world."

She felt, she says, as though she were moving toward "more abstract ideas, a more infinite kind of experience."

Indeed, for all their subtlety, silence, and absence of specific subject matter, or even symbols— apart, that is, from the rudimentary abstract signification of the three endlessly repeated numerals— there is a profound sense in Mikyung Kim's paintings of the universal journey we all must take. Into their exquisitely smooth surfaces, so delicately inscribed with faintly penciled marks, it is possible for the viewer to read the trajectory from the pure white emptiness that precedes birth; through the blind, secure, comfort of the womb; out into the hubbub of the world (where we mingle with other mere numerals in the cosmic scheme of things)... only to finally disperse and become particles of infinity.

Interestingly enough, in the context of Mikyung Kim's compositions, which are as calmly refined as the penciled and stained grids of Agnes Martin, there is nothing disconcerting about the journey from one emptiness to another. Quite the contrary, the effect is pleasantly transcendent, in much the same way that mediation might provide a sense of detachment, allowing one to see "the larger picture," so to speak.

In some paintings, such as "Follow Your Heart," the tiny penciled numbers are grouped together in somewhat irregularly rectangular configurations at the center of the composition and surrounded by white space. In others, denser concentrations of numbers in some areas of the composition result in subtle, shadowy forms such as the graceful organic curve discernible among the fainter marks in the smallish canvas called "Nowhere," where the square format that Mikyung Kim frequently favors lends the painting a sense of scale much greater than its actual dimensions.

In other compositions, the three numbers are dispersed over the entire surface in an overall manner, creating a sense of flux and flotation. In yet others, green or yellow pigment is mixed with the marble dust to create monochromatic fields, over which the pencil marks are inscribed. In yet others irregular pale pink or yellow stains, more suggestive of light than solid color, enliven the pearly white surface here and there, as though seeping or glowing through from within.

Through a process of formal filtration, Mikyung Kim has apparently arrived at a system for transforming emotional energy into manifestations of spiritual purification and serenity. Her paintings, at their most effective, enable the attentive viewer to share in this epiphaneous experience.

—Jeannie McCormack

S.J. Scotland: The Emotional Force of the Gesture

We are probably long overdue for a new term to describe what Clement Greenberg called "American style painting" and what is more commonly referred to as "abstract expressionism"—one that locates it in the present tense rather than in the art historical past. For proof positive that painting driven by gesture, color, and texture continues to thrive and evolve in contemporary art, one need look no further than the work of S.J. Scotland, represented in the year-round salon exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 547 West 27th Street.

Born in Oakland, California, educated in Texas, Scotland moves easily between abstract and representational modes of expression by virtue of an ability to make everything in each painting hinge on the primacy of gesture. Thus, a painting such as "Get Real," a mixed media image of a female head with those words, clipped from a newspaper or magazine headline, collaged beside it, and the more ostensibly abstract compositions in Scotland's "Bursting" series, essentially spring from the same painterly source. For while the vigorous brown brushstrokes in "Get Real" are descriptive enough to convincingly evoke the subject's leonine mane of hair, they too are essentially abstract, as are the linear gestures that further animate the space around the head, where subtle hints of pink, yellow,

"Get Real"

and other hues glow through the grayish ground.

This is to say: While the subject matter in the more overtly representational works is engaging, as in "Sitting Horse," where the equine figure of the title can be discerned in loosely brushed expressionistic terms, what really brings the painting alive is Scotland's way with form, color, and texture. Here, in particular, strident strokes of yellow, slashed over a vibrant blue ground and combined with a more sparing use of red, provide much chromatic and tactile delectation to further enliven the painting's bold graphic thrust.

In an artist's statement provided by Montserrat Gallery, Scotland expressed the intention of "promoting a desire to feel and touch" on the part of the viewer; and certainly this impulse is almost irresistible for one encountering these works. The tactile seductiveness is particularly evident in one composition in the "Bursting" series where strands of twine are embedded in the paint surface, forming a kind of rough grid that plays off effectively against feathery, freely flowing strokes of color. However, it can also be seen in another painting of a female head, entitled "Face Me," where the subject is conjured up in thick, nearly monochromatic impasto —evoking the sense of a palpable human presence rather than of its specific features— as well as in the more craggily compelling surfaces of abstractions such as "Park Land," and "The Waterfall," with their chromatically shimmering configurations of clotted, coloristically variegated pigment .

In the same artist's statement referred to earlier in this review, S.J. Scotland explains that the "Bursting" series "is an exploration of space and color," and adds, "I wanted to use color, texture and space to stimulate an emotional response." And indeed these paintings succeed admirably by virtue of the artist's ability to invest each canvas with an emotional urgency that springs directly from the force of the gesture itself.

—Maurice Taplinger

Diverse Digital Directions Emerge in "Pixel Perfect"

One of the most revolutionary aspects of digital art is how effectively it combines the best qualities of photography and painting, a point made clear by the cleverly named exhibition "Pixel Perfect," seen recently at Agora Gallery, 415 West Broadway, in Soho.

Edward Michalec, for example, creates carnivalesque compositions reminiscent of both Ensor and Escher, in his intricately surreal digital collages, where faces, figures, and fantastic architecture merge with vertiginous complexity. Like the best surrealist painters, Michalec has that rare ability to make incongruous elements meld fluidly, taking on their own unique logic.

Inspired by x-rays of skeletons and magnified cells, Hewaida O. Ramly's darkly evocative pictures transcend specific representation, becoming spectral suggestions of strange mental terrains, achieved through her use of extreme close-up. Ramly seduces the imagination with elusive imagery, subtly illuminated by flashes of chromatic brilliance.

By contrast, Richard X. Cutrona shows us new ways to look at familiar things, with his wry, witty, and elegant Neo-Pop compositions, in which amusingly banal imagery is enmeshed in colorful patterns that dazzle the eye and tease the intellect. In an aesthetic lineage that includes John Wesley and Ray Johnson, Cutrona celebrates the ineffable mystery of the commonplace.

Our culture's fascination with death, as reflected in popular TV shows such as "Six Feet Under," is referenced from a more profound perspective in the work of Jeff Derose, whose images of mummy-like figures created and photographed by the artist have a haunting presence, akin to the emaciated sculptures of Giacometti. In "Derose's "Remains" series, however, the process of decay becomes oddly beautiful, devoid of morbidity.

The artist who calls himself T. Mikey, on the other hand, cranks up coloristic volume and oddball content to a delightfully manic degree. With ironic compositions in which animals, human, and cartoon characters coexist in a postmodern Peaceable Kingdom, T. Mikey proves himself to be a maestro of magical juxtapositions.

Conceptually rooted in fractal geometry, the abstract compositions of Vicky Brago-Mitchell ambitiously tackle the theme of infinity through the endless repetition of sinuous forms and motifs that take on cosmic dimensions. Brago-Mitchell's rhythmically swirling visions combine the disciplines of science and art to create a striking personal synthesis.

Michael Friedman, an artist recently featured on Jon Stewart's "The Daily Show, conveys a sense of metamorphosis in his luminous, monolithic images of human beings, flowers, and other subjects that appear to shift shape and meaning before our eyes. Friedman brings such subjects vividly alive by virtue of his skillful color manipulation.

Richard Schneider's chromatic intensity and dynamic sense of light and shadow infuses his pictures with a singular mystery, transforming ordinary objects into abstract configurations that hint at the unknown. Schneider's layering of images results in subtle perceptual insights for the viewer, as he or she searches these ostensibly abstract compositions for clues that only reveal themselves under prolonged scrutiny.

The human hand is the main expressive element in the digitally manipulated photographs of Virginia Marin Magan. Isolated within color-saturated abstract spaces, grasping at various objects and surfaces, these hands become symbolic surrogates for a broad variety of emotions and psychological states in the work of this innovative Spanish artist.

Indeed a marriage of technical innovation and subjective vision was the thread that united all of the participants in "Pixel Perfect."

—Wilson Wong

Landscape: Four Ways of Looking at a Timeless Subject

"Painting is alchemy," writes James Elkins, getting right down to basics in his excellent book What Painting Is. "It's materials are worked without knowledge of their properties, by blind experiment, by the feel of the paint. A painter knows what to do by the tug of the brush as it pulls through a mixture of oils, and by the look of the colored slurries on the palette."

What Elkins describes in such vivid, tactile terms is what we often forget amid all the transient trends and "isms" of contemporary art: the magic that can occur when artists enamored of what is truly timeless set out to evoke the effects of nature with, as Elkins puts it, "fluids (these days, usually petroleum products and plant oils) mixed together with powdered stones to give color."

Gail Gardella

Renee Baley

Elkins' bare bones description of the process seems especially apt when one considers an exhibition such as "In Our View," seen recently at Synagogue for the Arts Gallery Space, 49 White Street. Featuring landscapes in oil by Renee Baley, Gail Gardella, Sandra Nystrom, and Sherri Paul, this was a show devoid of gimmicks, with no novel thesis to distract us from what painting really is at its purest and most direct.

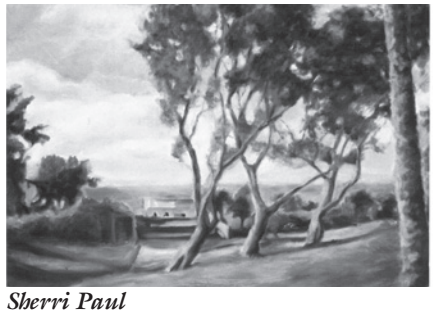
Boughs and blossoms are paramount in the paintings of Renee Baley. One looks at a work such as Baley's "Rambling" and is moved by the contrasts she captures between the sharp forms of the slender, graceful tree limbs and the masses of pink and yellow buds, as softly amorphous as clouds or cotton candy. Yet an even more significant contrast occurs in the lower part of the composition, where Baley's mastery of chiaroscuro presents a counterpoint to the lightness and lyricism above. Saturated with shadows, the darkness of the ground anchors the composition, lending it gravity and depth.

Sandra Nystrom

The title of Gail Gardella's "Quiet Sentinels" refers to the two tall stone apartment buildings looming above the tree tops of Central Park. However, these stately sentinels are upstaged by the sun-drenched foliage and the glassy surface of the lake below, which mirrors the surrounding greenery and the purplish tint of the boulders at the shoreline. Nature triumphs by virtue of Gardella's finesse in capturing crystalline chromatic subtleties in an oil technique with all the delicacy of pastels.

Sandra Nystrom, on the other hand, simplifies natural forms to a degree approaching abstraction, even as she evokes trees, hills, and other elements of the landscape convincingly, in her painting "Pond View." Nystrom presents us with a vista of heightened visual sensations and visually rhyming pictorial rhythms, wherein the shimmering pond and fiery pink and orange sky, while not adhering exactly to what the eye perceives, convey an emotional reaction to the scene that brings it to vibrant life.

By contrast, Sherri Paul is a romantic realist who employs softly diffused hues to imbue her pictures with atmospheric resonance. In Paul's "Haifa," for example, the tall, swaying trees on the grassy knoll in the foreground, the blowsy, breeze-blown clouds floating overhead, and the pink stucco structure in the middle distance, convey both atmospheric immediacy and a sense of the land's ancient history.



Sherri Paul

Through her muted color harmonies and a composition that bolsters casual observation with an underlying formality, Paul renders a fleeting moment immutable, accomplishing that alchemy at which all four of these artists, in their very different ways, excel.

—Peter Wiley

Exploring Jessica Sporn's Imagistic Peaceable Kingdom

Jessica Sporn is an artist of lavish, one dares say baroque, gifts. She employs them abundantly, to advance an aesthetic philosophy based on unbounded optimism over the possibility of universal unity.

"In my artwork, I seek to illuminate how our hopes and dreams impact the world, and how we all bring our pasts with us as we step into the future," Sporn enthused in a recent artist's statement. "I explore the reality that the people of the world share histories and experiences that make up a single fabric and relate to one another."

If that sounds naive, like the wishful thinking of a latter-day flower child—and it could to those of us who see only a violent divisiveness reflected in today's headlines— Sporn is not deterred. A practitioner of Vinyasa yoga, she is guided by a sanskrit prayer which translates as "may my actions contribute in some way to the peace and happiness in the world." And this principle was made manifest in the unrelentingly upbeat thrust of her solo exhibition, "Ancestral Voices," seen recently at The Interchurch Center Corridor Gallery, 475 Riverside Drive.

Featuring acrylic and mixed media works on canvas and paper maché, the show was a tour de force of richly layered maximalist imagery and energy, often presented in the context of "spirit houses" and altars inspired by the artist's yogic practice. These works juxtapose religious icons, shells, semiprecious stones, beads, family photographs, medals, found objects, and personal memorabilia in a manner that transcends the eclectic and the subjective to take on a larger significance.

Judeo-Christian and pagan symbols coexist happily in Sporn's imagistic Peaceable Kingdom, achieving parity as symbols of devotion in an eminently democratic aesthetic domain. In her alter piece "Goddesses," for example, a reproduction of a Madonna and child from a Russian icon is juxtaposed with a sun symbol, a primitive fertility figure and other found objects that suddenly seem not at all disparate in context. It is as though Sporn is in tune with underlying harmonies which give the lie to senseless conflicts and philosophical disputes that cause global strife.

Such insights, however, are only part of what makes her Sporn's art so appealing; for its purely visual attributes are equally arresting, suggesting a synthesis of Paul Klee's formal fantasy with Joseph Cornell's "dime store alchemy" (to appropriate the poet Charles Simic's swell phrase). Her

"Coming Forward"

chromatic talents are especially evident in collage paintings such as "Lady of the Lake," where a primitive mask superimposed on a robed figure is juxtaposed with a family album snapshot of three young women on vacation and strategically placed mussel shells awash in luminous aquatic blues; as well as in "Sacred Feminine," in which photo-images of beautiful adolescent girls take on an exotic, odalisque-like lushness, outlined (as though drawn) with strings of beads and surrounded by areas of gold leaf and sinuous linear patterns reminiscent of art nouveau.

The device of "drawing" with strung beads is also employed effectively in another opulently worked collage called "Coming Forward," to create the halo-like aura surrounding the flowing hair of a grinning little girl, seen in photographic grisaille, who appears to be spinning around ecstatically in that carefree way happy children whirl like dervishes in circles for no other reason than to further intoxicate themselves. Her arms outstretched like wings in the regally ornate gown that the artist has fashioned for her out of colorful scraps and pieces of semi-translucent paper, she is set against an equally bright mosaic of photographic fragments, suggesting familial and ancestral faces forming a solid foundation of love and support from which she sallies forth into a world of wonderment.

The image of a beloved and holy child enveloped in auras of love is also the central theme of "Protected by Angels," while a sense of nostalgia for one's own years of carefree innocence comes across in "Children Once," in which stylized birds and other fanciful figures emerge from luminous abstract color areas.

Here, as in all of Jessica Sporn's acrylic and mixed media works on canvas and paper maché, the separate elements of the composition— be they images or objects such as stones, shells, or beads— seem to serve as aesthetic amulets invested, at least symbolically, with transformative powers. Indeed, like the similarly maximalist collages of the late California cult artist Jess Collins (or simply "Jess as he signed his work and preferred to be known), Sporn's mixed media paintings and paper maché assemblages have an aura of actual magic about them. For while they are elegant in execution and conceptually sophisticated, they project an emotional intensity that one normally only encounters in primitive religious artifacts and the work of so-called outsider artists motivated by personal obsessions far beyond the contingencies of art world gamesmanship.

For while the formal qualities in her work are never less than knowing, Jessica Sporn is nonetheless willing to risk appearing naive in order to achieve a resonance for which no better word than the overworked designation of Spiritual will do.

—J. Sanders Eaton

Enigma and Material Metaphor in the Art of Ryo Toyao

One could consider Ryo Toyao's shift from the traditional Japanese art with a contemporary feeling that he was doing up until four years ago to the combination of assemblage and conceptualism that characterizes his work today a radical departure. However, as his recent exhibition at Caelum Gallery, 508-526 West 26th Street, made clear, Toyao has retained some of the more austere virtues of his native tradition to make his new mixed media works all the more compelling.

The most immediately obvious of these are the expanses of white space that play a primary role in the compositions of his assemblages, all of which are exhibited in white frames that further enhance their pristine quality. Indeed, the frames sometimes become a part of the picture area when the elements of bas-relief that dominate most of Toyao's compositions cast shadows upon them.

Most ubiquitous and significant of these 3-D objects are the realistic human hands, always seen singly, cast from the artist's own hands or those of his wife, that figure prominently in many of the compositions. Although eerily realistic, with fleshy folds and minutely detailed shadows, and although disembodied, these hands never have the grotesque, wax museum or grand guignol effect that we see when someone like Robert Gober uses similar imagery in his sculpture. But somehow in Toyao's work such imagery comes across more poetic than grisly, even in his floor installation of individual fingers propped up on tiny discs and pedestals decorated with peace symbols and words and phrases such as "think" and "no war." This may be in part because, rather than being flesh-colored, Toyao's anatomical fragments are chalky white, although the whole hands that emerge from white grounds in his assemblages also have reddish fingertips and nails, which call to mind (for this viewer, at least) the evocative phrase "the human stain." Such stains could suggest dried blood, the soil to which we all must finally return, the more symbolic taint of Original Sin, or something else entirely, depending upon the viewers' individual experience and frame of reference. In any case, there is something especially affecting about those stained fingers that seems to provoke a primal, almost visceral response.

The object most frequently juxtaposed with the hands in Toyao's assemblages is a simple ball that appears to be frozen in midair, as though being caught or tossed. In "If...," the show's signature piece, for example, the ball hovers above the hand, which is seen palm-out, while in "What's new?" it seems suspended (like a yo-yo) from by an invisible string from the hand, the stained forefinger of which points directly at the viewer.

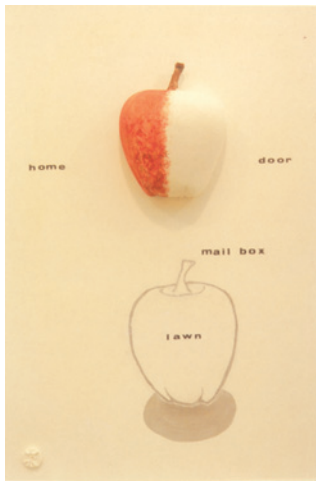
"From the origin"

In all the pieces involving a hand and a ball, the combination of expressive and impassive elements can suggest the pathos of human yearning, as well as a host of other complex meanings which, as others have noted, Toyao evokes with the most minimal of means. In other pieces, however, the artist employs both drawn images and/or sculptural constructions of even simpler objects, such as chopsticks, apples, and even shapes resembling lima beans to equally dramatic effect. Three of the latter shapes, precisely positioned on the white ground, are seen in the work entitled "It shines everywhere." Since two of these bas-relief shapes are pale lima-bean green and one is white, the title could suggest that the white form represents the sun which gives verdant life to the other two, thus provoking a perceptual shift, making one suddenly see the cool white ground as "white hot."

This sense of ambiguity also manifests in Ryo Toyao's juxtapositioning in some of his compositions of real shadows cast by bas-relief objects in his compositions with painted trompe l'oeil shadows in a manner that is not only optically confounding but conceptually challenging, forcing one to consider the elusive nature of what we generally consider reality. Toyao's shadow-play is especially engaging in "Seize the Day," an assemblage in which two ornate chopsticks cast real shadows simultaneously with painted shadows codified geometrically with graduated stripes of gray that grow lighter toward the outer edges.

Adding to their conceptual dimension, constituting a kind of concrete poetry, fragments of text also come into play in some of Toyao's works. Especially intriguing among these is the assemblage called "Is anybody home?" One can only guess how isolated words and phrases such as "home," "door," "mailbox," and "lawn," juxtaposed with two images of an apple (one in bas-relief, the other drawn in a linear manner) might resonate for Japanese viewers. For Americans, however, they invariably evoke memories of the "Dick and Jane" textbooks we were given in first grade, with their cheery pictures and simple words, from which we first learned to read.

For like the words in those elementary school textbooks, the words and symbols that Toyao presents here suggest an idealized suburban lifestyle, free of complication and conflict, which very well may be a universal fantasy. Yet the title "Is anyone home?" has a more ironic meaning, for in the American vernacular those words are often used sarcastically, to question whether someone is paying attention —or is even awake!



"is anybody home?"

In this regard, Toyao's work seems to gain rather than lose meaning in translation, although one suspects that its content would come across just as vividly in any language.

Because Ryo Toyao is an artist who manipulates enigmatic images in a manner that often verges on the transcendent, he has been accurately termed a "metaphysical sculptor." No single descriptive category, however, can encompass the whole of his work, which is multifaceted and finally fascinating for the material metaphors it sets forth.

—Ed McCormack

Otimcke Seduces the Viewer with Stories and Dreams

In painting as in literature, the narrative thread that holds a story together has become less linear in the postmodern era. Like some of our best contemporary novelists, Otimcke, a painter from Paraguay, finds new ways to narrate an inner reality in her enigmatic figure paintings, on view at Agora Gallery, 415 West Broadway, from March 29 through April 18, with a reception on March 30, from 6 to 8 PM.

Acutely aware that we are living in an age when the old stories of history, the bible, and classical mythology no longer hold sway, Otimcke creates subjective myths for a new age. Working in oil and acrylic on canvas in a style as clear and pristine in its formal components as that of Will Barnet or Alex Katz, albeit with a more imaginative dimension, Otimcke places her figures in settings that are neither landscapes nor interiors—at least not in the sense that we are used to thinking of either. Rather, they are abstract environments beholden to the factual appearances of neither. Nor are Otimcke's figures constrained by clothing as they inhabit a realm where forms that are not quite trees and not quite cruciforms, chromatically sparkling with a patchwork spectrum of brilliant hues, sometimes serve as a backdrop for their ideal nudity.

Such structures are especially prominent in pictures such as "Alma Tuya...Alma Mia" and "Plegarias," where they provide compositional ballast and also appear strongly symbolic. In the former painting, a female nude that crouches under two such shapes in a position of supplication over what appears to be a white cloth partially covering a single rose. The prayerful feeling is supplemented by an actual crucifix that dangles on its chain from the larger structure. In the latter canvas, another comely nude sits pensively in front of a single such shape, as though meditating at the foot of a strangely festive cross.

By contrast, another painting called "Secretos" seems to dwell on a sense of tension and distrust between two nudes in one of Otimcke's fanciful invented landscapes. Although they are seated in close proximity to each other they are obviously poles apart, a scattering of rose petals further emphasizing their estrangement.

Equally engaging in another manner, Otimcke's "Nostalgia" centers on the seated figure of a classically proportioned nude, seen in profile. The setting is more suggestive of an interior, where a graceful red ribbon, draped over a low bar, dangles down and is absently fondled by the young woman, as she supports her head on her bare knees, deep in a daydream or rapt romantic reverie.

Like all of Otimcke's compositions,

"Alma Tuya . . . Alma Mia"

"Nostalgia" provokes a wide range of intuitive responses that are open to subjective interpretation, involving the viewer in a process by which the painting can serve as a mirror of one's own inner states. Here, however, the symbolic conflicts that enliven some of her other canvases are hushed and suspended, as we are drawn into the serene solitude of the beautiful dreamer.

—Marie R. Pagano

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Discovering the Exalted Urban Angles of Photo Artist SM Lewis

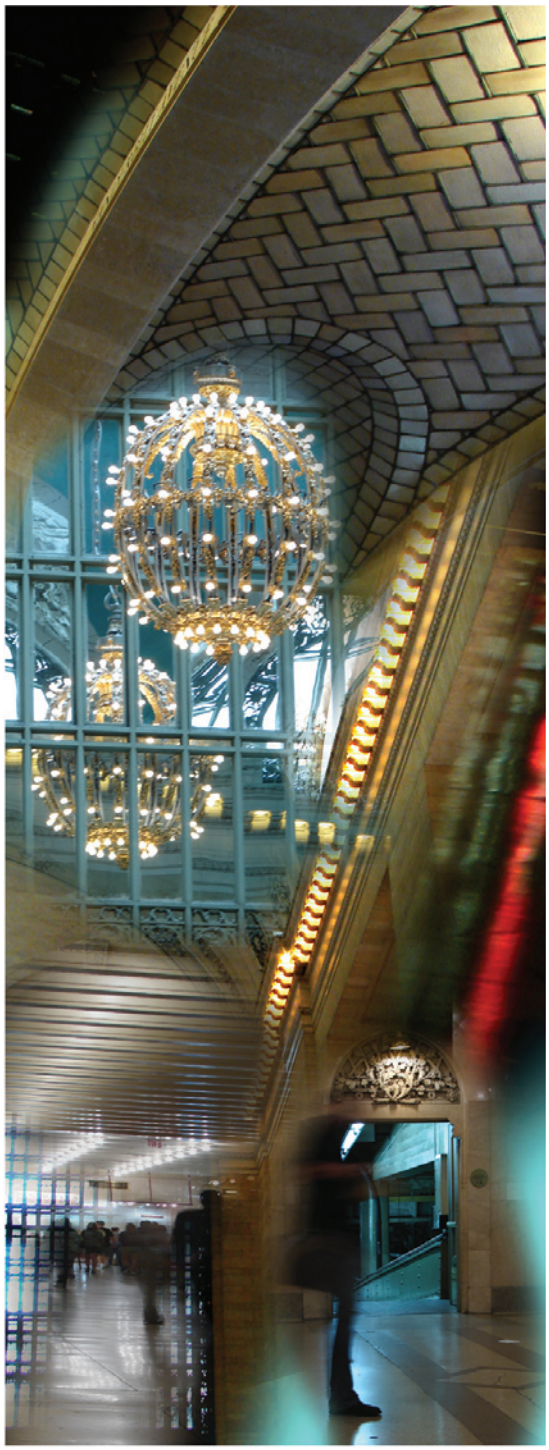
Even a writer who is still amazed on an almost daily basis by the extent to which his computer has become a literal extension of his mind may find it difficult to imagine how state of the art technology can be every bit as subjective a medium of expression for a visual artist. That is, until he encounters the digital photo montages of SM Lewis, in his revelation of an exhibition at Amsterdam Whitney Gallery, 511 West 25th Street, from February 3 through 28.

Lewis employs his medium as freely and with as personal a stylistic signature as any painter, creating images with a haunting romantic resonance. Especially evocative in this regard are what he refers to as "my New York centric works," in which he subjects familiar urban locations and scenes to processes of transformation ranging from the lyrical to the phantasmagoric.

Indeed, the dictionary definition of a phantasmagoria as "an optical effect by which figures on a screen appear to dwindle into the distance or rush toward the viewer with enormous increase of size" accurately describes the formal dynamism of Lewis' montages. However, it cannot begin to do justice to the imaginative and poetic qualities which make Lewis' work so much more than a tour de force of special effects. For like all true artists, Lewis creates images that resonate on a level much deeper and more primal than any mere account of their documentary or representational components would suggest.

Peter Conrad stated in 1984 that New York City is "one of the supreme subjects of our century," and so it remains today. SM Lewis belongs to the great tradition of artists who mythologize the city and in doing so make it all the more vivid to us. His is an elegant, intimate, private vision, tinged with a kind of nostalgia for a former gentility that evokes the prose of Henry James and F. Scott Fitzgerald, as well as the poetry of Hart Crane. His kinship with Crane, particularly in poem sequences such as "The Bridge" and "White Buildings," seems especially apt to note; for Lewis has a similar ability to make the city's architecture itself speak eloquently, taking on an almost anthropomorphic life of its own.

Indeed, architecture is the main actor in Lewis' theater of the mind, where the human figure is usually seen as shadowy, spectral, dwarfed by structures that seem to upstage its significance as thoroughly as the looming mountains undermine the tiny travelers in Chinese scroll paintings (which, in fact, the long, vertical formats that this artist favors suggest). Paradoxically, here as in those ancient masterpieces, however, the human consciousness looms even larger than the landscape (or cityscape) in the phantom presence of the unseen artist who imparts to the picture its soulful essence.



"Grand Central Splendor"

How else to explain the potent psychological atmosphere that permeate Lewis' digital photo montage "Grand Central Splendor," where the elaborate chandeliers, intricate ceiling tiles, majestic staircases, vast gleaming floors, and shadowed recesses of the terminal take on a cathedral-like grandeur and a brooding melancholy reminiscent of a scene in Elizabeth Smart's enigmatic 1940s cult novel "By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept"?

Equally atmospheric in a quite different manner, "Shadow Barrier" evokes a contemporary sci-fi mood, with small figures silhouetted on the balconies of a modern apartment building zooming skyward at a vertiginous angle on the left side of the composition, juxtaposed with a dark grid illuminated by luminous green and yellow hues on the right. One feels here a sense of loneliness and urban alienation akin to Edward Hopper, yet updated to suggest the somewhat more eerie angst of post 9-11 New York City.

The fantastic fluidity that Lewis achieves with his medium is especially evident in the work entitled "Architectural Ooze," where grey stone archways and yawning portals become ethereal, porous, and translucent, appearing to flow and overlap in shifting planes in a composition notable for its consummate grace. The viewer is carried along by pictorial rhythms that suggest a visual symphony of light and shadow, wherein that which is by nature most stolid and concrete appears to melt like Gaudi's molten architectural marvels and confound visual perception as compellingly as M.C. Escher's metaphysical mazes.

Yet it is Lewis' special gift to impart to such anomalies of form an emotional resonance all his own, as seen in "New York Towers, Tree, and Water," where the elements of the title interact to create graceful compositional cadences; "Gated Reservoir Run," with its complex layerings of iron bars , foliage, and golden auras streaking through the sky like flood-lights; and "The Rambles," which depicts the primordial quality of a secluded section of Central Park notorious for nocturnal assignations, with craggy rocks, gnarled branches, a glittering pond, and the surreal addition of an all-seeing eye in the sky.

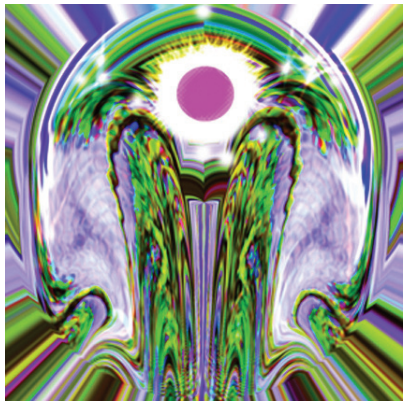
Indeed, that eye may symbolize the omnipresent perspective of SM Lewis, who like that earlier photographic artist, André Kertesz, appears to view the city from all manner of exalted new angles. Lewis, however, sets himself apart from even his worthiest predecessors by virtue of his masterful manipulation of digital photo montage to advance an individual vision that is as imaginatively fertile as it is technically accomplished.

—Ed McCormack

Painter Edith Suchodrew Navigates the Starry Cosmos

Although computer art is a relatively new art form that often tends to attract aesthetic neophytes with technological rather than fine arts backgrounds, Edith Suchodrew, an artist born in Latvia, who has lived and worked in Germany since 1991, also has a long and distinguished history as a painter in more traditional media.

Trained at the Latvian Academy of Arts, Suchodrew has exhibited her oils, watercolors, and graphic works throughout Europe, winning numerous prizes and prestigious awards. Along with "symphonic" landscapes, she is known for her portraits and figurative allegories on tragic and humanistic themes.



Computergraphic Painting

Suchodrew refers to her new pieces as "computergraphic paintings," and indeed they possess a chromatic richness and a fluidity that is far more painterly than one is used to encountering in digital art. For Suchodrew, the computer appears to be a tool for extending her imagistic capabilities rather than a departure from her previous work, judging from the compositions on permanent view in the year-round salon exhibition at World Fine Art Gallery, 511 West 25th Street, in Chelsea.

Pressed to pinpoint Suchodrew's expressive pedigree, one would have to cite Symbolism as a primary source of inspiration. The sinuous linearity and the swelling sensuality of her forms harks back to Art Nouveau, and the Byzantine spirit is also present in her compositions, with their intricate arcs and circular rhythms. At the same time, her computer graphics suggest secular mandalas, with their optically hypnotic shapes and electric colors.

The very title of the series that Suchodrew calls "Birth of the World" indicates the breadth of the artist's ambition and her aesthetic vision is equal to her theme. For the series suggests the primal origins of abstraction itself in the early 1900s when Kandinsky, Mondrian, and other pioneers of nonobjective painting, inspired by their newfound interest in mysticism and the occult, sought to find new forms to express the theretofore inexpressible.

Suchodrew picks up the thread of that tradition, and with the tools of state of the art technology at her disposal, brings new light and life to it via the starry cosmos that glows within the computer screen. Indeed, she locates that mysterious juncture at which science and magic meet in her luminous graphics, with their glowing auras contained by formal configurations hinting at the patterns and structures underlying the visible world.

In "Birth of the World I," for example, the central form appears to be a stylized star composed of pure white light and contained within a formal netting of overlapping lines, suggesting the contractions of a geometric womb. Admittedly, an such interpretations of an abstract composition is bound to be subjective; yet there is a literalness to this image that cries out to be recognized, and this is further supported by the explicitness of the title.

Other works in the series, such as "Birth of the World II" and "Birth of the World III" are similarly evocative, suggesting a metaphysical and spiritual synthesis of form and color, the former with three white forms that glow like votive candles against a dawn-blue ground; the latter with yet another variation on the starburst pattern —albeit here with the linear elements dispersing as though the "net" has given way to an irrepressible force. In this series and in other recent computergraphic paintings with subtle figurative and floral allusions appearing among cosmically suggestive chromatic patterns, Edith Suchodrew reaches an exciting new plateau in her ongoing aesthetic journey.

—Maurice Taplinger

Traversing Stylistic Borders in West Side Group Show

Co-curators and participating artists Carole Barlowe and Rini Hunter assembled a diverse group of talents for the recent West Side Arts Coalition group exhibition "Art Without Borders," at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at 96th Street and Broadway.

Although she also showed other vigorous landscapes, Nicole Titus' "Emerald Pond" was an especially succulent oil, evoking its subject with near-abstract horizontal streaks and strokes of thick pigment, yet capturing the shimmer of sunlight on water with striking verisimilitude. Linda Lessner revealed her own superlative skill as a landscape painter in an atmospheric oil called "View from Olana," with fields and foliage in the foreground giving way to distant purple mountains, the entire composition creating a mood of pastoral serenity. Her smaller works in pastel were equally atmospheric in a somewhat more modest way.

By contrast, the frequently exhibited and much admired Carole Barlowe captures the city's crazy pace in relief assemblages created with acrylic on canvas and cut-out form core, focusing on the significance of ordinary moments with lively wit. Of special interest in this show were "Park Residents," effectively merging photo images of park benches and painted sleeping figures, as well as a beautifully spare early acrylic painting by Barlowe akin to the best works of Milton Avery.

Sylvia Zeveloff also impressed one with her small acrylic paintings on paper, evoking the sometimes destructive forces of nature with vigorous strokes, as seen in "Tsunami,"as well as in her contrastingly sumptuous and serene appliqué quilt, "Tapestry with Lilies." Joseph Boss, on the other hand, thrives on a kind of visual agitation in his brushy works in acrylic and oil over raised oval forms representing primitive heads resembling African masks. Most often, Boss arranged three such shapes one above the other in long vertical compositions, achieving a kind of sculptural presence that enhances his subject matter considerably.

Rini Hunter also employs mixed media to evocative effect in her two companion works "Herd I" and "Herd II." In both, multiple forms created with metal wire on sand mixed with acrylic suggest herds of animals, casting their shadows as they traverse a vast desert as though involved in some symbolic migration. Hunter's work is remarkable for her ability to evoke such a specific subject through abstract means.

Conversely, Elton Tucker creates compositions with striking abstract attributes, while painting the human figure in a manner of realism akin to Larry Rivers. Tucker's "New Day" is exemplary in this regard, with its multiracial range of vigorously painted faces juxtaposed with an inspirational stenciled text : "Today is a beautiful day and I am vibrantly alive." Another multiple figure composition by Tucker, entitled "Pride,." depicts figures in colorful African-patterned garb and incorporates actual costume jewelry as collage elements.

Patience Sundaresan also lends impressive formal thrust to realism in a large oil on canvas "Bullfighter II." Sundaresan simplifies and flattens the figures of both the matador and the bull on the picture plane in a manner that lends the composition great velocity, and further animates the composition by making shadows appear as solid as the other elements in the scene.

Here, as in other recent exhibitions, the diverse members of the WSAC make a convincing case for postmodern pluralism.

—Byron Coleman

WSAC Artists Explore the Sense of "Touch"

Subjective expression was the sole subject of "The Personal Touch," a recent group exhibition by members of the West Side Arts Coalition at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center Island at Broadway and 96th Street.

In Miguel Angel's paradoxical assemblages, a bent spoon, a rusty, flattened tin can, a small mirror, and other urban detritus become elegant and expressive symbols. Angel's "Be Born Again/The Past is Present/The Future is Now" was a three piece installation demonstrating his alchemical amalgam of the funky and the hard-edged.

Tomasa Perez is an exciting discovery whose works in colored marker on cardboard have a primitive power akin to those of the celebrated outsider artist Bill Traylor. However, that Perez's pieces, with their roughly incised organic shapes are abstract makes them all the more mysterious.

The infinite possibilities of pigment itself is the subject of Farhana Akhter's "Color Series," in which overall compositions enlivened by scumbled textures, painterly palimpsests, scraped surfaces, and other evidence of process create palpable excitement. Akhter's commitment comes through in the depth and chromatic subtlety of her oils.

Emily Rich's "Rooftop Series" translates complex urban architecture into colorful compositions that marry the fractured planes of cubism to the gestural energy of abstract expressionism. Edgy and vigorous, Rich's rooftops, water towers and spires are animated by a sense of "touch" that exemplifies the theme of the exhibition.

Maryann Sussoni's acrylics on canvas consist of single, youthful, dancing figures defined by boldly simplified color areas, engaged in what appear to be animated Hip Hop moves. Painted with neo-expressionst intensity, they are strongly composed and invested with an upbeat sense of positive energy that is reflected in titles such as "Give Love" and "Dancing for Peace."

Carolyn Kaplan's mixed media painting 'Cuenca II" featured bright yet subtly harmonized, not-quite-hard-edged, shapes set against a blue ground and juxtaposed with a photo-image of an abstract sculpture at the bottom of canvas. Eccentric, yet engaging, Kaplan's approach is daringly off-kilter in a way that challenges our perception of what makes an abstract composition tick.

Betty Thornton also took an unorthodox approach in her faux-Egyptian compositions, combining angularly stylized figures with hieroglyphic symbols in mostly golden ocher and deep red hues contained within black outlines. The overall effect was campily appealing, like ancient history filtered through a Pop sensibility.

By contrast, Ava Schonberg's still life compositions are notable for their fluent brushwork, fully rounded forms, and subtle tonal and chromatic qualities, among other sober aesthetic virtues. The recurring presence of a large blue pitcher in each picture, juxtaposed with various fruits and floral arrangements, lent Schonberg's series the sense of an ongoing inanimate narrative.

The watercolors of Byung Sook Jung are romantic evocations of scenes in Italy painted on a miniature scale with a delicacy that harks back to 18th century British masters of the medium. Byung Sook Jung's use of sepia tones enhances the lyrical quality of her exquisite little pictures.

Then there is Sonia Barnett, whose luminous acrylic paintings can appear at first glance to be nonobjective overall compositions. Then one notices one small work clearly delineating shore, sea, and sky and realizes that all of her paintings refer to nature, if not as overtly. Like the other artists in this show, she reveals her "personal touch" in unexpected ways.

—Maureen Flynn

Discovering the Visionary Cityscapes of Bashkim A. Zano

Bashkim A. Zano's paintings possess a strident strangeness that puts such highly-touted young guns as Dana Schutz and Jules de Balincourt to shame.

However, rather than being a rising young art star with a waiting list of affluent collectors eager to latch onto the "next big thing," Zano is a middle aged former art professor from Albania. Now living in New Jersey, he has an impressive resume of exhibitions, some in major museums in corners of the world where culture is continuous and enduring rather than instant and disposable. He is also an acclaimed theatrical set designer, credited with creating backdrops for major productions by the National Theater and the Theater of Opera and Ballet of Albania—a sideline that has obviously taught him to charge every inch of his canvases with high drama.

While Zano's recent exhibition at New Century Artists, Inc., 530 West 25th Street did not generate as much art world buzz as it rightly deserved. This consummate painter's work came as a revelation to some of us who were not previously familiar with it and it seems only a matter of time before other critics and collectors unbeholden to the dictates of fashion catch on.

"The Family in Soho"

The overriding theme of the show was New York City, which Zano seems to see through a phantasmagoric lens. Baroque, gargoyle-barnacled Upper West Side and Wall Street building facades appear to melt and drip like deconstructing birthday cakes in compositions that appear on the verge of imploding under the sheer weight of the pigment that Zano piles onto his canvases. Here is a species of Expressionism as curiously subjective in the audacity of its distortions as that of Malcolm Morley, albeit informed by even more surreal anomalies such as stylized angels of a distinctly Slavic cast that mingle with more realistically rendered pedestrians. Also present among the throngs are members of the artist's family, mythical figures and others in the traditional costumes of Albania seeming not at all incongruous, given the broad range of ethnic types one can encounter on any day in midtown.

"Folklore, songs, architecture and history surrounded life in a medieval city like my hometown," Zano says of Gjirokastra, Albania, where he was born. And those memories appear to superimpose themselves on Manhattan in a manner that gives rise to haunting atmospheres, such as those in his epic canvas "Timeless," wherein a voluptuous female nude, an archaic peasant leading a horse, and other incongruous figures are juxtaposed within a panorama of rivers, bridges, and a city skyline that combines elements of the old and new worlds.

In other paintings with titles such as "11th Avenue and 82nd Street" and "Broadway," Zano's mastery of chiaroscuro enables him to capture the way light plays on urban surfaces, casting long, devouring shadows, turning flesh and blood figures into ethereal beings as they dart through traffic or vanish into the colorful tapestry of signs and storefronts. Looming buildings encrusted with gables, balconies, and intricate ornamentation afford the artist an opportunity to combine observation with memory and imagination. He indulges his penchant for impasto like a mad pastry chef, turning the city into a tactile, succulent maze of sensual shapes and confectionery hues.

Meanwhile, gathering clouds appear pregnant with a sense of impending apocalypse as scrawny urban trees spread their claws, black iron gates loom ominously, and sidewalks swoop at angles that produce a delicious sensation of vertigo in the viewer. Familiar Manhattan landmarks like the Flatiron building, The Stock Exchange, and Saint Patrick's Cathedral make cameo appearances in Zano's paintings. Yet they seem simultaneously transformed into medieval castles fortresses, just as the municipal spires and steep facades of the financial district morph into forms resembling mountainous terrains and poplar trees. Everything is constantly in flux.

Zano's intrepidness as a colorist heightens the hallucinatory effect, with visceral reds, blinding yellows, and electric blues lending his compositions an emblematic abstract impact that makes them visually arresting, no matter how much detail he packs into each picture. Indeed, one of the pleasures of studying his paintings is discovering all the small dramas unfolding in different parts of the canvas.

In the painting called "The Baby," for example, one seems to view the entire scene through the eyes of an infant and its mother on a stone stoop in the foreground of the composition. Before them, the city unrolls its wonders like a vast carpet of intricate and dazzling design, making one recall how the entire world was a circus, a fascinating spectacle, in childhood. Zano is one of very few contemporary artists (the late Chinese American watercolorist Dong Kingman was another) who is capable of capturing such innocence of vision through paradoxically sophisticated means.

This freshness of perception is never more vivid than when Zano turns his gaze on some of our more fashionable neighborhoods, as seen in oils such as "Meat Market," '"Tribeca" and "The Family in Soho." Seeing such places through the eyes of an emigre enamored with locale color, Zano enables us to view them anew in compositions where the familiar is infused with sudden mystery. In "Meat Market," for example, weathered brick building facades, fire-escapes, and abandoned loading docks signify a neighborhood in mid-metamorphosis from the home of packing plants and wholesale butcher shops to city's newest chic gallery district. By contrast, "The Family in Soho" captures the carnivalesque atmosphere of streets where tourists and artists toting paintings swarm in and out of long-established galleries and boutiques amid colorful flapping flags. Transcending trendy travelogue by virtue of sheer painterly power, Zano invests such scenes with a sense of the eternal.

Bashkim A. Zano acknowledges the influence of Byzantine painting on his work, particularly in his fondness for "decoration, anti-perspective, and stylization of the figure." However, he filters such elements through an exquisite postmodern sensibility to create compositions which can only be called visionary in the very best sense of the term. *(The exhibition was curated by Ana Matthiesen and the artist is represented by Saga Art Gallery, www.sagaartgallery.com)*

—Byron Coleman

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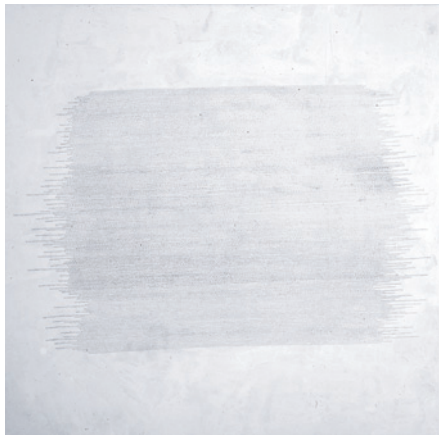

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