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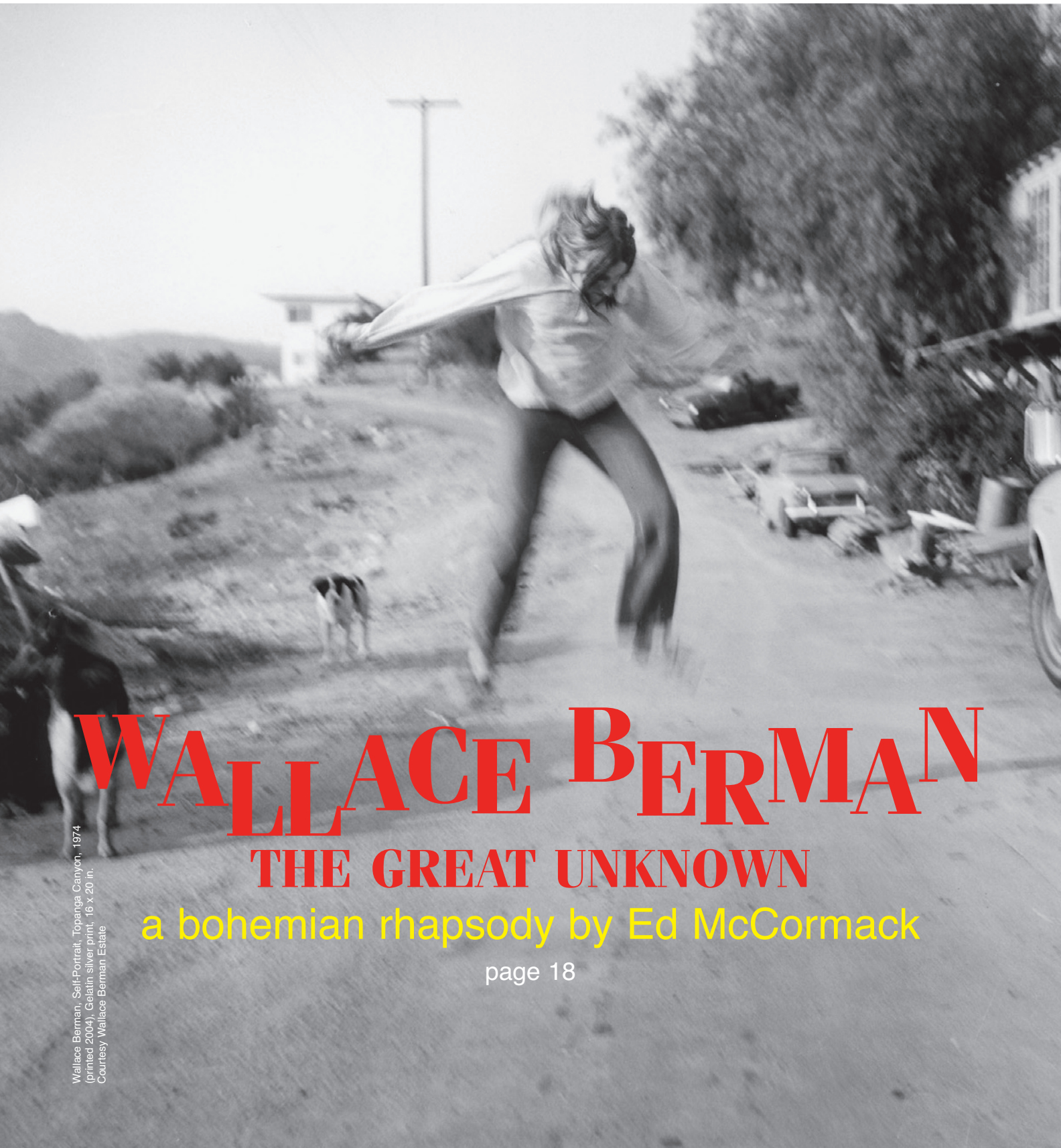
GALLERY&STUDIO

The World of the Working Artist



WALLACE BERMAN

THE GREAT UNKNOWN

a bohemian rhapsody by Ed McCormack

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Wallace Berman, Self-Portrait, Topanga Canyon, 1974 (printed 2004), Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 in. Courtesy Wallace Berman Estate

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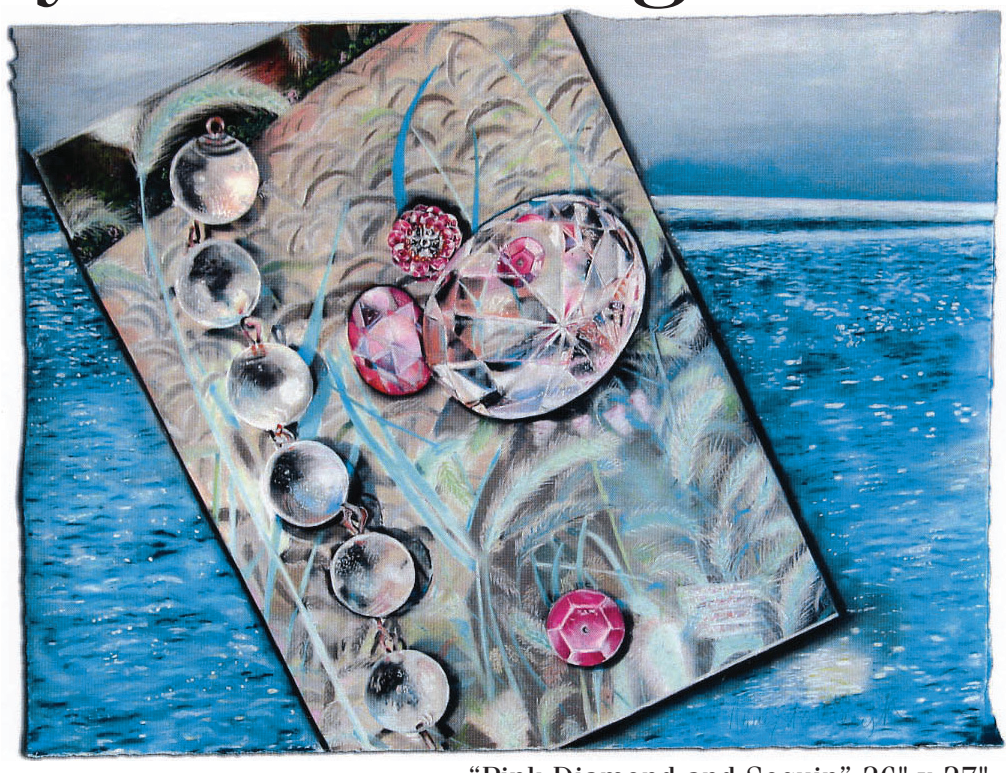

"Pink Diamond and Sequin" 36" x 27"

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monkdogz urban art

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G&S Highlights

On the Cover:
An underground legend in Venice, California, in the late 1950s, ***Wallace Berman*** *was a magnet for serious artists, errant movie stars and "bedbug beatniks." "SEMINA CULTURE: Wallace Berman & His Circle" coming to N.Y.U.'s Grey Gallery in January, positions him as a precursor of postmodernism.–Page 18*

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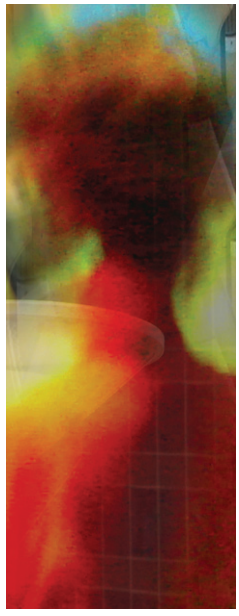
Patrick Antonelle, page 36



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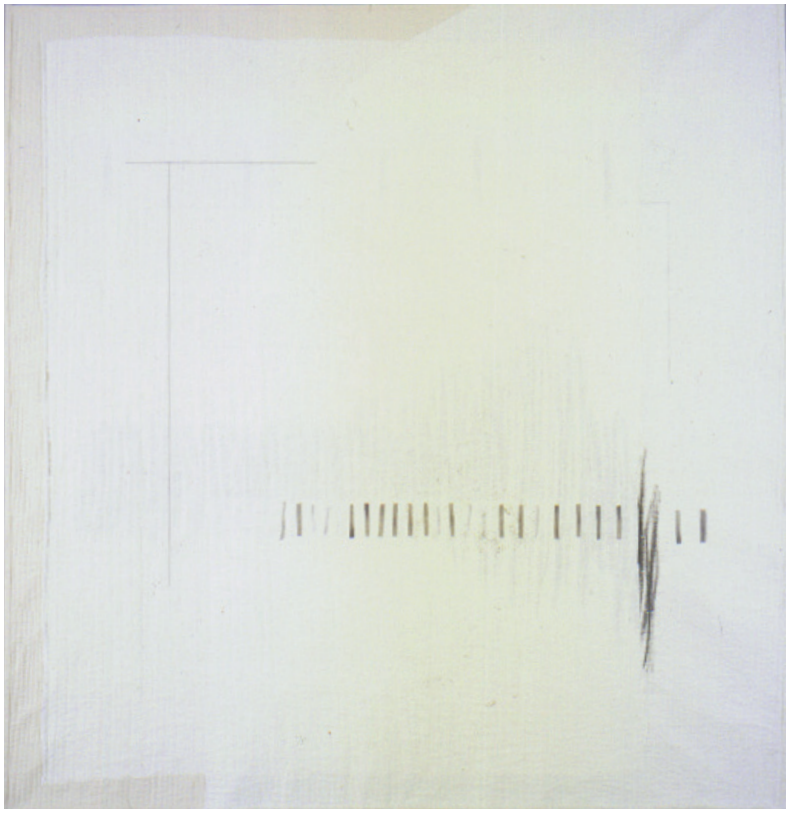
Jeanne Butler's "White Works" Achieve an Exquisite Synthesis

"The absence of color in the work of the majority of artists included in this book is one indication of the poverty of contemporary color theory," writes Alan Sondheim in Individuals: Post-Modern Art in America. "Color is apparently used today in the following ways: A. As local color, useful for differentiating one sculptural or pictorial plane from another. B. As conveying basic connotations—red for 'danger,' and so forth. C. The easy colors of contemporary painting. D. The harsh or muted colors of magazine and television advertising."



"White 10: 135"

Color theory or its supposed absence, however, would appear to have little to do with the work that Jeanne Butler has been focusing most of her attention for the past decade, predominantly in white, an achromatic entity for which even the Oxford American Dictionary of Current English can supply only the most inadequate of primary definitions: "1. resembling a surface reflecting sunlight without absorbing any of the visible rays."

While admitting that she is "still attracted to color," Butler predicts that she will continue to resist being seduced by it for some time to come, and the wisdom of her abstinence is evident in her exhibition "White Rain," at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from November 7 through 25. (Reception for the artist on November 11, from 4 to 6 PM.)

One of the indications of Butler's originality is that one will search in vain for a contemporary context in which to precisely locate her work. For while stating that fiber is now the "foundation" of her art she combines quilting and appliqué with oil paint and graphite in a variegated mixed media technique. Thus one cannot strictly classify her as a textile artist or associate her work too closely with the priorities of those contemporary women artists who adopt materials used in traditional women's crafts to make a feminist statement.

Although she certainly has to be aware of the political implications inherent in her choice of materials, Butler's concerns appear primarily formal in a manner more related to Lenore Tawney's physically imposing yet light as air sculptures created with a loom and linen thread or Agnes Martin's earliest grid paintings (which Eleanor Munro once pointed out "were all near-literal renditions of woven textiles with warp and woof clearly delineated"). Butler's work can be compared to Tawney's for her ability to elevate textile materials to aesthetic realms far beyond their craft origins, and to Martin's for a compositional austerity that is often centered on a spare graphite grid. Butler, however, has developed her own subtle graphic vocabulary, in which fine lines are just as likely to be created with thread as with graphite, resulting in a kind of trompe l'oeil interplay between sewn and drawn elements, which I remarked upon in a previous review but also bears mentioning here.

Within this personal vocabulary, Butler achieves a subtle variety of effects, as seen in "White 10: 135," where a concentration of uneven vertical strokes, apparently drawn with graphite toward the lower center of the composition, is muted under a semi-translucent white square. Painted onto the fine, subtly textured weave of the white appliqué, or overlay, are a row of short, evenly spaced gray vertical units, which are interrupted near the end by one raw vertical graphite gesture laid down impetuously on the outer layer, as though some of the underlying graphite elements have slashed through the gossamer fabric, disrupting the silence and serenity of the composition with their sudden stridency.

Tactile qualities play an even more prominent role in "White 10:87," where the warp of the fiber runs horizontally along the bottom of the composition like waves in a colorless sea. Above, eight precise linear divisions, like multiple horizons in a metaphysical landscape, are intersected by finer white-on-white vertical striations, suggesting the "white rain" of the show title.

In other compositions, such as "White 10: 65" and "White 10:66," finely drawn grids, floating on or within white fields, play host to delicate calligraphic strokes. The assured, spare, grace of these strokes suggests a sympathetic kinship with the literati Chinese ink painting, which also eschewed all the blandishments of color in favor of a pure synthesis of line, tone, and space. Indeed, like those ancient masters, albeit in a more abstract mode, Butler is influenced "by landscape and personal spiritual reflection" and sees spatial spareness as a compositional element that "conveys oxygen and infinity."

Evolving logically from the work that she did after earning her BFA from CW Post College of Long Island University in 1976—which involved the layering of handmade papers and cheesecloth, along with oil paint and graphite—as well as from her early experiments with more coloristically centered quilting techniques, Butler's recent "white works," as she refers to them, are important on two levels simultaneously. For not only do these pieces address certain principles of restraint and exquisiteness more prevalent in Asian aesthetics from a distinctly Western perspective; they also advance the fiber art movement more firmly into the postmodern mainstream, by virtue of their highly original synthesis of sewing, drawing, and painting.

All of which suggests that Jeanne Butler's work is having a positive political affect after all, even as she applies herself most diligently to exploring the innate riches of her singular sensibility.

—Ed McCormack

Moral Courage and Ambitious Scale Mark the Art of Truman Marquez

"Severed Voting Fingers Cast a Shadow Over Doubt"

When I placed a call recently to Austin, Texas, and asked Truman Marquez how the work he would be showing in his upcoming solo exhibition at The New Art Center was coming along, the painter chuckled and replied in that good ol' boy drawl of his, "Well, we'll have to see what you folks in New York have to say about it."

One couldn't blame him for sounding wary, given the unwarranted snobbery and outright chauvinism that the New York art crowd often shows toward artists from other parts of the country (although the Flint Institute of Art, in Flint, Michigan, recently had the curatorial wisdom to purchase his painting "Impadronirsi" for its permanent collection). Marquez, however, made his bones here a long time ago, with a series of killer exhibitions which obliged even the most hipper-than-thou locals to take notice.

Still, although it is now coming up on a decade since I began to follow his progress with great interest, acceptance does not always come easy to a painter who refuses to shy away from controversy and is willing to venture wherever his muse or his naked emotions choose to lead him. The mixed reception that greeted Marquez's painting "Eleven," created and exhibited shortly after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, is a case in point. Although many were moved by this mural-scale oil on canvas, juxtaposing an inverted image of the Twin Towers, a demonic likeness of Osama Bin Laden, and an approaching aircraft, others condemned it as though it were an endorsement of terrorism and sent the artist hate mail.

Of course the opposite was true: Marquez was so deeply disturbed by the attacks on New York, a city he loved as only a country boy can, that he was unable paint for weeks afterward. And when he was finally able to work again, Marquez anticipated that there might be a negative response to the subject he intended to take on so soon after the traumatic event. But, as every intrepid artist in any medium knows, when such doubts arise that is precisely the time one must press forward, in order to test not only the limits of public tolerance for free expression but also one's own dedication to one's artistic vocation. And now, half a decade later, when it is possible to view the painting from a slightly more rational distance, rather than with the raw emotions that prevailed in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Truman Marquez's moral courage is vindicated. For it is clear, above all, that "Eleven," with its powerful composition, built around two of the pregnant circular shapes that often provide the abstract thrust of Marquez's compositions, is an enduring landmark in contemporary American history painting.

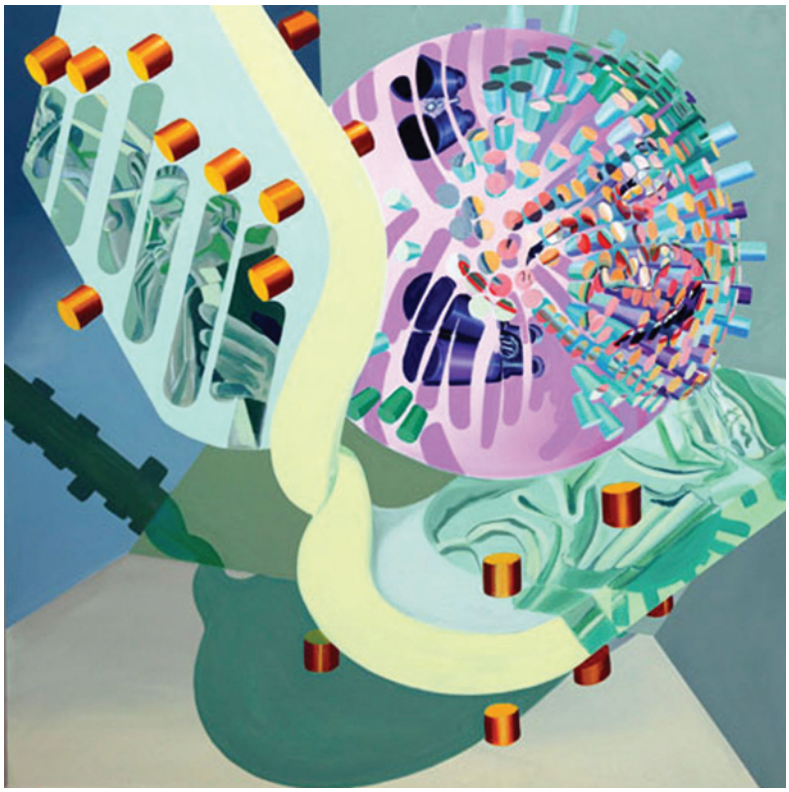
Thus the inclusion of "Eleven", along with several more recent paintings, serves as a reaffirmation of the artist's faith in his vision in Marquez's solo show, at New Art Center, 580 Eighth Avenue, through November 25th. And one is also pleased to see that Marquez has lost none his "edge" in his recent works— particularly those paintings which take serious issue with the leadership of his fellow Texan George W. Bush, as regards his conduct of the war in Iraq.

In the large oil on linen, "Binoculars:

"Moral Divide"

Twisting Our Liberty," a pixilated portrait of the president, grinning like Batman's arch rival The Joker and interspersed with images of binoculars, appears in a massive orb suspended within a twisted shape containing fragmented images of the Statue of Liberty. Here, as in other paintings by Marquez, one is initially struck by the abstract power of the composition, with its dynamic combination of geometric and organic forms, complemented by cool chromatic harmonies between predominantly pale purple, blue, and green hues. Then, on closer inspection, the images within the larger forms come into focus with the effect of a one-two punch delivered by a boxer skilled in throwing "combinations." (This effect is made even more dynamic by Marquez's unique way of extending planes and bending contours as though his forms are being viewed from the perspective of some "Fourth Dimension" that only he has access to.)

Color is considerably more strident in another large canvas that Marquez calls "Severed Voting Fingers Cast a Shadow Over Doubt." Here, the startling image of a middle eastern woman wearing a blue burka, her form as expressively distorted as one of Francis Bacon's figures, is seen wielding a pair of scissors to amputate one of her purple-stained fingers (a reference to the recent elections in Iraq). She is set against a visceral red field, out of which a multitude of other severed fingers seem to spring like fleshy mushrooms. From within the long shadows cast by the severed fingers emerges the figure of a dead American soldier, a casualty in a misadventure of forced democracy in a country that seems intent on settling its disputes by civil war.



"Binoculars: Twisting our Liberty"

The meanings are less specific yet still explicit in yet another major oil entitled "Moral Divide." The ostensible subject is rape, as the classically proportioned yet characteristically fragmented figures of a nude male and female writhe within a dynamically conjoined cluster of large circular forms. However, the painting is actually an allegory for the present geopolitical climate, in which philosophy, ideology and religion do furious battle, as books of contrasting colors sail through space, and only the extended forefinger of God, appropriated from Michelangelo's ceiling in the uppermost sphere, offers the remote possibility of divine guidance.

Such appropriations, long present in Marquez's visual vocabulary, serve both as tributes to the art of the past and symbols of aesthetic aspiration. In another new oil on linen called "A Painter Contemplates the 5th Wall," for example, the viewer gazes down from the aerial perspective of a deciding deity upon the metaphysically abstracted figure of the artist's symbolic surrogate at work in a four-walled enclosure. Surrounding him are paintings by Picasso, Cezanne, Van Gogh, and Warhol. This revealingly titled work, alerts us to the scope of Truman Marquez's ambition, which seems more than justified by the works just discussed and several other major oils in this spectacular new solo show.

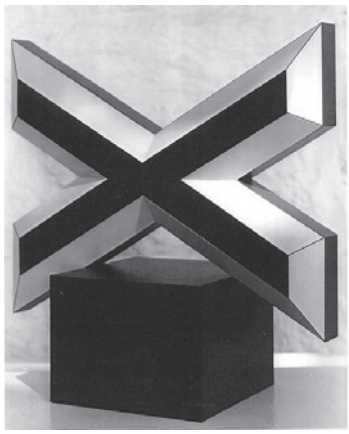
—Ed McCormack

Assessing Harriet FeBland's Major Achievement in 3-D

Since one immediately thinks in sculptural terms when the name Harriet FeBland comes up in the course of a conversation about contemporary art, it may come as a surprise to many familiar with her work that FeBland's 51st solo exhibition is actually her first devoted exclusively to sculpture. This may well be because the sensibility of a master sculptor informs every aspect of this versatile artist's oeuvre—be it a painting, a drawing or one of the large monoprints she exhibited earlier this year at Berkeley College.

Thus it seems relevant to point out that the title of FeBland's new exhibition, at the National Association of Women Artists Fifth Avenue Gallery, 80 Fifth Avenue, suite 1408, from December 2, 2006 to January 3, 2007, is indeed, "Just Sculpture." And although it has been quoted many times, being such a succinct summary of what makes her art unique as to have become a kind of critical mantra, it also seems important to mention once again that Paul Mocsanyi, the former director of The New School Art Center once said of FeBland, "She is the Poet of geometry."

Indeed, what FeBland's pieces prove most conclusively is that the qualities of formalism and lyricism are nowhere near as distant from each other as we normally consider them to be. For FeBland makes us see the power of precision and the beauty of pure form. Yet for all its precision and purity, her work has a warm, almost anthropomorphic, allusiveness that was hinted at in her recent statement that she likes to show the pieces that she calls "totems" in groups because "they are family."



"Flying Cross"

This familial feeling comes across strikingly when "Harlequin," a piece FeBland completed for this exhibition is seen in close proximity to "Stargazer," an earlier totem that she created in 2004 for the Poughkeepsie Art Museum. While the new piece is enlivened by starkly contrasting triangular areas, reminiscent of the patterns in a harlequin costume, and the earlier work's red, brown and black stripes suggest African tribal art, they share a certain visual velocity. The streamlined vertical shapes of these two works in painted wood are especially complementary, like siblings flaunting their individual identities, yet undeniably related, while other groupings of totems, with their narrow, notched contours, create rippling patterns in space.

By contrast, freestanding sculptures in formica over wood like "Flying Cross" and wall relief constructions in the same medium, such as "Cool White" are possessed of a monumental austerity akin to minimalism. Yet the former work dissects space like a geometric propeller and the latter, with its cropped and clustered rectangular shapes and cast shadows, calls to mind the sun-washed mood of Hart Crane's poem sequence "White Buildings." For it is FeBland's special gift to animate geometry in unexpected ways, making the most formal configurations yield a host of expressive associations.

Also including an imposing wall relief composed of wiggling stripes originally included in her solo exhibition at the Silvermine Guild, among other works large and small, "Just Sculpture" belies its unassuming title. Indeed, this exhibition makes a very strong case that Harriet FeBland's contribution to contemporary sculpture will eventually be seen to exceed even the considerable esteem in which her work is presently held.

—Byron Coleman

Zen and the Art of Jazz: Lisa Lyskava at The National Arts Club

Jazz and zen Buddhism have long been linked in the mythology of the Beat Generation, particularly in the novels of Jack Kerouac and the poetry of Gary Snyder. But no visual artist that we know of has synthesized them so successfully as Lisa Lyskava, whose exhibition "Jazzing Up" is on view at The National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park South, through November 13.

Lyskava, who was born in 1949 in Muenster, Germany, and maintains studios in Germany and New York City, invariably plays jazz recordings while painting, and her gestural thrust and color choices are often influenced by their infectious rhythms and melodies. More recently, attitudes acquired in her study of zen have also affected her art. While some of her compositions remain densely textured, chromatically complex, and intensely gestural, others have become more spare and calligraphic.

In the latter paintings, although adhering to the zen principle of "emptiness" by working on pure white grounds and limiting her compositions to a few swift, deft strokes, Lyskava does not eschew color as zen ink painters in China and Japan have been doing for many centuries. Rather, she brings her consummate skills as a colorist to bear in yet another manner, with variegated

"Breakthrough"

hues flowing through each individual stroke to reveal a rainbow radiance.

As always, Lyskava's colors are fresh and unpredictable, tending toward strident combinations of pink, purple, yellow, blue, chartreuse, and violet hues that suggest a visual equivalent of musical notes more than anything found in nature. Occasionally, she will even throw in a fluorescent orange, as deliberately discordant as a sudden squawk of Ornette Coleman's plastic saxophone, just to kick-start a composition and keep it from getting too pretty.

While the brush is the basic tool of traditional Buddhist painting, Lyskava continues to favor sponges as her primary means of color application, even in her more calligraphic paintings, achieving a sinuous linear grace with them to rival that of any zen master. Indeed, in canvases such as "Nothing Else," "No Compromise" and "Koudaroufa," two or three splashy gestures, converging on a pure white ground, suffice to make the point that in painting, as in jazz, improvisation is the ticket and spontaneity can make all the difference.

However, in "Another World to Know," a canvas inspired by jazz singer Abbey Lincoln, and "Autumn Leaves," where broken-off pieces of sponge enhance an already tactile surface, Lyskava creates contrastingly saturated color field compositions which are notable for their symphonic sumptuousness. Her two distinctly different modes come together brilliantly in "Harlem Nights," where rhythmically curved swathes of deep purple snake over luminous areas of visceral red and neon yellow with a velocity that is truly exhilarating.

Lisa Lyskava recently returned to New York City after a two year sojourn in Europe. This splendid solo exhibition gives ample reason to rejoice that she is back in town.

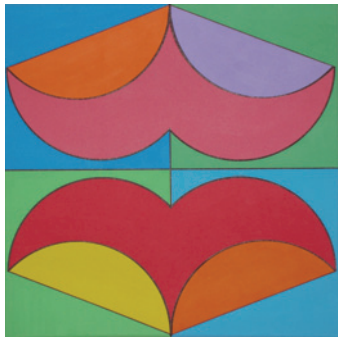
—Andrew Margolis

A Near-Religious Fervor Enlivens Monkdogz Group Show

As its title suggests, the group show "Came to Believe," seen recently at Monkdogz Urban Art, 547 West 27th Street, in Chelsea, was a survey of strongly held convictions, verging on the spiritual, as in the Twelve Step slogan, "I came to believe in a power greater than myself."

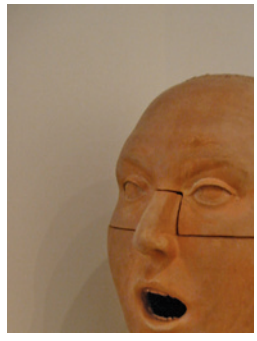
The implication here is that art can be that higher power, offering the possibility of spiritual redemption. And this could apply quite literally in the case of Jean Marc Calvet, one of the exhibiting artists, about whom the story goes that he locked himself in a room, intending to commit suicide, and found a new lease on life by painting all over the walls with some oils and brushes that someone had serendipitously stashed there. Possibly apocryphal but nonetheless intriguing, it is the the sort of thing that a critic should let go in one ear and out the other, even when the gallery director telling the tale

Jean Marc Calvet



Sebastien Aurillon

Marcus Van Soest



Alex Racine

is as credible and entertaining a storyteller as Bob Hogge, who runs the show at Monkdogz in concert with his more circumspect business partner Marina Hadley. But the simple truth of the matter is that Calvet's energetically primitivistic paintings actually do look like the work of a man who started painting only because he was being pestered by a whole population of inner demons but in the process staggered upon his own slightly skewed version of Amazing Grace.

Admittedly, that could seem unlikely, considering that, on one level, Calvet's large, jam-packed canvases could initially remind one of Australian aboriginal "Dreamtime" designs on acid. Yet there is no denying that in a warped sort of way, Calvet's visions of funny little Art Brut figures with penis noses, skulls, snakes, Edward Munch scream guys with the DTs or heebie jeebies, phallic steeples and Chagall-like shtetels under twinkling stars, and a whole shitload of other esoteric images and symbols framed by borders swarming like ant farms with obsessive tribal-looking patterns, do seem divinely inspired.

The other major revelation of "Came to Believe," albeit in a cooler Gallic manner, were the paintings of a young Frenchman named Sebastien Aurillon, which belong to a tendency that, for want of a better term, one would have to call Post-Pop Abstraction. International precedents for this sort of stuff can be seen in the 1960s work of the American artist Nicholas Krushenick and even more obviously in the work of the Italian painter Valerio Adami and the Britisher Trevor Winkfield.

Sebastian Aurillon, however, puts his own unique spin on things. Like the older painters mentioned above, he works in bold hard-edged areas of clear, bright comicstrip colors contained within precise black outlines. Yet while Aurillon's style is uninflected, it is highly animated in an odd Flintstones or Simpsons kind of way. Which is to say: even Aurillon's most ostensibly geometric compositions, such as the chromatically delicious "The Twin Sisters" —which simply consists of two almost identically, outwardly innocuous striped rectangles— are pregnant with offbeat allusions that resonate on the brainpan with a tuning fork "ping."

Consequently, in another canvas called "The Hearts Upside-Down," two other more or less identical forms suspended symmetrically in a four square grid suggest not so much the inverted hearts of the title as two sets of disembodied buttocks gift-wrapped in kandy-kolored panties. More unabashedly figurative is "The Pink Mill," in which a wind-up Don Quixote with a big key sticking out of his back sits astride an equally mechanical-looking purple steed contemplating the proverbial windmill as though it were a crossword puzzle. Then there is another brilliant confection called "The Botanical Garden," in which the sun and all the flowers look like olives with pimento eyeballs and everything dangles languidly as Salvador Dali's limp watches, albeit with the kind of sly coloring-book faux-innocence that is the hallmark of Sebastien Aurillon's style.

Though he was a practicing Catholic and is definitely some kind of icon, Andy Warhol has not yet been canonized by the church. That, however, hasn't stopped the Danish-born painter and musician Christian Tango from regarding Andy as a patron saint. Tango appropriates not only Andy's dayglo silkscreen technique as a regular feature of his aesthetic, but also his iconic images of Elvis and Marilyn. However, he layers and fragments his compositions in manner more akin to that other silkscreen maestro Rauschenberg, creating big, intricate compositions filled with photo-derived imagery, stenciled phrases, snippets of street signs, and other bits of cultural detritus that convey all the franticness and transience of the New York City pre and post 9/11.

Frankly derivative yet paradoxically original by virtue of their subjective take on the familiar, Christian Tango's paintings are as much a symptom of as a statement on our fame-crazed, terror-benumbed century.

By now, many of us are familiar with the strange little sculptures of Steve Oatway. A staple of the Monkdogz stable from the gitgo, Oatway attacks sanctimony and piousness in all its forms with his eerily extraterrestrial-looking baby dolls wearing big ostentatious crosses, and especially one already celebrated voo doo-like effigy of Osama Bin Laden with a toy fighter plane impaling his abdomen. A dead serious survivor of various personal travails, addictions, and blessings in disguise, Oatway continues to fight the good fight with an installation simply called "composition," in which his bloody Osama doll and two of his clerical figures are surrounded by an array of flags, plastic things that look like tied up bundles of dynamite sticks or electric vibrators, bottles of Heinz ketchup, and other artfully disarranged cultural artifacts that future archeologists will surely savor in the wake of the coming apocalypse.

Also featured were equally apocalyptic neo-expressionist figure paintings by Marcus Van Soest, a monstrous terra cotta head with gaping mouth by Alex Racine, and large, vibrant hard edge canvases by Matthew Turov that might have looked out of context among this rowdy bunch if not for their eccentric dialogue between geometric and organic forms. An auspicious boot in the ass to kick off the new season, "Came to Believe" exemplified the winning combination of outsiderish passion and insiderish sophistication that we have come to expect from Monkdogz Urban Art at its best. –

–Ed McCormick

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Sheila Finnigan's Conceptual/Painterly Impeachment of George W. Bush

The Chicago artist Sheila Finnigan seems to have serious issues with father and forefather figures. In her two previous New York solo exhibitions, she dealt with Andy Warhol, the founding father of Pop, with whom every contemporary painter must somehow come to terms, pro or con. In her third, "Georgie-Porgy," seen recently at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, Finnigan confronted George W. Bush, the president whose swaggering cowboy persona has confirmed a lot of the world's worst fears about America.

Finnigan's take on Warhol was rife with ambiguity, acknowledging Andy's enormous influence on his time, while critiquing his myth as irony maven and media manipulator. In the case of George Bush, however, while her humor is just as mordant, her sense of outrage lends the work even more bite. The show is based around the conceptual conceit of a Smithsonian-style historical exhibition—complete with faux-institutional wall labels of the type that might accompany the display of relics such as George Washington's wooden dentures— following Bush from childhood through his present notoriety. Its piéce de resistance is an installation that includes toys purported to have belonged to "Georgie-Porgy" in childhood. These include an actual old-fashioned hobby horse, a hopscotch mat, and toy alphabet blocks spelling out key phrases such as "WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION."

As in Finnigan's previous exhibitions, these found objects, while having a resonant presence as components of the installation, also serve as props for the paintings. Thus, the rocking horse and a ten gallon cowboy hat that is also featured in the installation (along with his severed "constitutional ties") is prominently featured in a painting of a rollicking Boy George at play, accompanied by a wall label explaining that the childhood portrait was commissioned by the president's cousin "Flatte Bush," who was "so happy with the resulting painting that she gifted Bush's hobby horse to the artist in payment."

Like Garrison Keillor's monologues on "A Prairie Home Companion," Finnigan's wall labels transcend the merely factual to apprehend a higher truth through the time-honored American medium of the tall tale. Her synthesis of installation and painting, of the postmodern and the traditional, of the conceptual and the cornball, is essential to the eclectic appeal of her signature style. To enter a gallery filled with Finnigan's varied output is tantamount to strolling onto a carnival midway and hearing the barker say, "Step right up, folks, you are about to enter a world of strange wonders!"

"George III" 72"x 48". Mixed media

Also present in the gallery is an actual World War I field cot, serving both as the most imposing element in the tableaux and the main prop for its two largest paintings: companion portraits of George and Laura Bush in the manner of Jacques Louis David's peel-me-a-grape portrait of "Madame Recamier" reclining on a chaise lounge. (This same furnishing served as a prop for Finnigan's similarly posed portraits of Andy Warhol, as well as two of his favorite subjects, Marilyn Monroe and Jackie O, in a previous show in the same venue.)

The kingly connotation of the title of the portrait "George III" suggests our macho president's lust for Empire, as well as the fact that he is the third American president with that name in a lineage that includes George Washington and his father, George Bush senior. (The first president is depicted on the same chaise in a smaller portrait and our present one is seen in another painting trying on a white Washington wig for size, as though to imply that he would not tell a lie about those weapons of mass destruction.)

In "George III," Dubya is depicted lounging on the chaise in a ten gallon Stetson, a "wife-beater" undershirt, and polka-dot boxer shorts. The flag is draped like a comforter across his knees and he also sports cowboy boots with spurs. His trademark smirk is smeared smugly across his face as he brandishes a toy sixgun with a red banner protruding from its barrel that says "BANG!"

The portrait of Barbara Bush shows her similarly posed but wearing a more placating Betty Crocker smile as she offers up a plate of festive sweets, in keeping with the title "Let Them Eat Cookies," a play on Marie Antoinette's answer to poverty in pre-Revolutionary France. Even in repose, Mrs. Bush is no Naked Maja; always, she is fully dressed and proper. Unlike a previous First Lady, whose Hollywood reputation implied otherwise, she looks like a woman who really would just say "no."

Sheila Finnigan has so much to say about the way we live now in America and so much native wit to say it with, that her showy installations could almost distract from what a fine painter she is. Fortunately, though, her painterly qualities prevail by virtue of their genuine peculiarity, achieved through her use of mixed media on pastel cloth rather than canvas, giving her surfaces a matte finish roughly akin to Leon Golub's paintings on unprimed cotton.

There is a fascinating disparity between the narrative nature of Finnigan's subject matter and the immediacy of her technique: the drips, splatters and other evidences of "process" that activate her canvases. These elements provide a kind of sensual delectation that operates quite apart from her tart commentaries on culture and politics, lending Sheila Finnigan's paintings an autonomous aesthetic value above and beyond the intriguing contexts in which she presents them.

—Ed McCormack

Talent: An Annual Tradition at Allan Stone Gallery

The barechested man in Scott Goodwillie's oil on panel "Outsourced" has the head of an elephant. No big deal. The head fits perfectly on his body and the flesh tones match and the eyes look humanly worried anyway. The waistband of his underwear is showing above his trousers, but not in the way currently fashionable among the young and insouciant; more in the careless manner of an older guy going to seed. And his beer-gut is hanging over it, as he stands there looking befuddled and obsolete with his arms hanging uselessly at his sides, a cigarette smoking like a gun in one hand.

Goodwillie's poignant portrait was among several other standout works in "Talent 2006," this year's Emerging Artists Salon, seen recently at Allan Stone Gallery, 113 East 90th Street. Long overdue for more widespread recognition, Robert Valdes showed a landscape in a long, narrow horizontal format reminiscent of a Chinese hand-scroll; however, rather than unfolding in narrative time, Valdes' stretch of rusty, sun-lit American river appeared as still and impassive as a Warhol soup can.

Past New Talent shows included Andy Warhol, Wayne Thiebaud, Richard Estes, Robert Ryman, Eva Hesse and other now famous names early in their careers. And there's always a good chance that some of the present exhibitors may someday be stellar names as well. Two strong contenders are the painter Anne Connell who makes a meticulous synthesis of early Renaissance and medieval details and design motifs within an overall abstract context, and the trompe l'oeil sculptor Richard Haden, whose "Anonymous Box" makes mahogany and enamel identical to stained brown cardboard and packing tape, evoking the kind of "suspicious packages" that Homeland Security is always warning us to report. Emily Epstein Vines also stakes out peculiar sculptural territory with her small heads of various canine breeds, duplicated exactingly in ceramic clay and acrylic paint.

Paintings of food seem to constitute a mini-movement unto themselves at Allan Stone, or at least a specific species of still life. While Peter Anton's big 3-D wall pieces of open candy samplers have predecessors in Pop, particularly Oldenburg, Duane Keiser's "Watermelon" and Gina Minichino's "Little Powdered Donuts" hark back to the 17th century Dutch masters, depicting their succulent or sugary subjects with a delicious explicitness verging on gastropornography.

Long an even more substantial specialty of this venue, which made its initial reputation in the early 1960s showing Kline, de Kooning, and other Abstract Expressionists, are various overtly painterly tendencies, here represented by the glistening-like-licorice surface of Sandi Cervek's sensual black on black abstraction; the vigorously brushed landscapes of Haden Glatte and Marjorie Glatte, as well as by Pat Mahony's still lifes in oil on unstretched canvas, notable for their exquisitely austere spatial sense and subtly tactile paint handling. Molly Kugler Dickinson also displays painterly finesse in her gouache, "Biggest Bigtop," where the wavering red and white stripes of a circus tent are the piéce de resistance of the composition. And, characteristically, Nguyen Ducmanh strikes a resounding blow for the spontaneous gesture with "Chimba," an acrylic and mixed media on paper, in which bold red strokes laid down on a bare ground take on a heraldic elegance.

Drawing as a discrete and complete art form unto itself, rather than a medium for preliminary studies, also comes to the forefront in Dan Gilhooley's meticulously detailed large-as-life pencil drawing, "Self Portrait at Forty"; Kate Sullivan's photorealist graphite drawings of industrial sites and shopfronts, and Paul Lorenz's "One Object," an abstract composition of densely crosshatched graphite strokes with a small circle of bare paper at its very center.

Allan Stone Gallery has won enviable art world status and respect without adhering to any trendy agenda. As this exhibition demonstrated, once again, its policy of valuing the individual talent over the fashions of the moment continues to pay high aesthetic dividends.

—Ed McCormack

Varied Approaches Animate "The Persistence of Form"

If art is not a form of alchemy, how does one account for an artist such as Lugo? Lugo takes a few bits of charred wood, a scrap of cloth, a length of discarded string, and converts them into an assemblage of a miniature sailboat or a funky little dockside scene under a full moon that is every bit as whimsical and disarming as Paul Klee's "Twittering Machine." Lugo is one among several aesthetic alchemists of different stripes seen in "The Persistence of Form," a group show at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from December 7 through 27. (Reception Thursday, December 7, 2006, 6-8 pm).

Lee Pirozzi, creates sculpture from blue jeans crumpled to create fanciful forms. Particularly ingenious is Pirozzi's "Blue Jean Brain," in which the crumpled clothing morphs wittily into gray matter.

The Alaskan landscapes of the widely exhibited Japanese painter Tohru Aizawa impart their own peculiar magic to vistas of overcast skies, icy peaks, and infinite seas in compositions possessed of an exquisite spareness. Joseph Kim reinvests Biblical and classical subjects with immediacy by casting them in contemporary scenes painted in a flawless realist style inspired by Caravaggio.

Impressionism and post-Impressionism serve as inspiration for the paintings of Graham Denison. Yet rather than imitating the masters he admires, this British resident of Southern Spain updates the plein air tradition with his boldly painted scenes executed with juicy strokes of a pigment- laden palette knife.

Women are the inspiration for Sergey Ignatenko, a young painter from Belarus, whose first models were his mother and sisters. Although his style is more akin to classical realism, Ignatenko imbues the subject of women in domestic interiors with a warmth and empathy akin to certain canvases by Bonnard.

Elizabeth Punches also evokes female figures, albeit from a more fantastic perspective. Punches' s women are as fanciful in their elaborate period costumes as the figures of Maxfield Parrish, although her work is informed by a more contemporary irony, as indicated by titles such as "Wolves at the Door." Fantasy also figures prominently in the paintings of C.G, Rodsant, as seen in one picture of a slender nude nymph seated on a pile of rocks and another in which sailboats are seen under a churlish sky. Rodsant's paintings are enlivened by a meticulously detailed textural suggestiveness reminiscent of the " magic realism" of Ivan Albright.

Animal painting is a specialized field, yet Geraldine Simmons' s colored pencil portraits reveal all the psychological insight of human portraiture. Indeed, Simmons' drawings are never generalized images of a species but tributes to the individuality of each of her animal subjects.

Paul Skurski's paintings appear to celebrate the sensual joys of youth. That some of Skurski's lithe young models are as attractive as film stars and sometimes seen in romantic situations tempts one to coin a term: Pop Realism. By contrast, Robert Van Beurden harks back to the Dutch masters in his treatment of still life. Indeed, Beurden lives and works in Holland, where such painting thrived in the 17th century, and his oils demonstrate still life will never go out of style, as long as there are artists who can imbue an arrangement of edibles on a table with the breath of life.

Whether depicting animal subjects, soccer players in action, or a sinuously delineated floral subjects, Daniela Vasileva, who was born in Bulgaria and now lives in Las Vegas, Nevada, invests her paintings with energy by virtue of her flowing forms and intense colors. Combining realist draftspersonship with Neo-Fauvist chromatics, Vasileva achieves a thoroughly convincing synthesis of seen and the felt elements. —Barbara K. Bernstein

At CVB: Italian Artists Trot Out Some of Their Favorite Things

A tacky shocking-pink purse bursts open like a ruptured pig bladder or a cartoony 3-D wall relief by Elizabeth Murray. Out flies a string of cultured pearls, some sort of fuzzy bunny, a rhinestone tiara and a lacy red and black Miracle Bra. Still contained within are a cell-phone, a miniature keyboard, a diary, a silky something that looks like a red thong, and God knows what else...in other words, the everyday ammunition of your average teenage femme fatale.

This photograph by artist, critic, journalist, curator Stefania Carrozzini graces the catalog cover for her new group show "Personal Belongings," curated for D'Ars International Exhibition Projects, and on view at CVB The Carrozzini von Buhler Gallery, 407 West 13th Street, from December 1 through 15.

"While traveling we must take care of our personal belongings, documents, keys, money, clothes," writes Carrozzini, in her characteristically imaginative catalog essay for the exhibition. "But in the end the most important thing to take care of, our real belonging, is our body. Forget the key! Don't forget your head! Don't forget your heart!"

Carrozzini goes on to say that, in this exhibition, her intention is to bring together "concepts of identification, private property, possession, as well as symbolisms referring to a life story. Personal belongings have a symbiotic relationship with memory, being themselves remembrances of cozy places that never leave; they are our Linus's blanket."

Photograph by Stefania Carrozzini

Of all the artists in the show, Massimiliano Miazzo seems to take the curator's exhortation that "our real belonging is our body" most to heart. Miazzo's photograph "Self Portrait" shows the artist reclining in white Jockey shorts beside what appears to be a ghostly, digitalized robot replica of himself. The artist and his Frankensteinian creation lie head-to-foot, like lovers in post-coital exhaustion.

What other artists consider to be their personal belongings ranges from a pudgy white bird (possibly a toy), half hidden amid blurred green foliage, in another intriguing photograph by Pinuccia Nicolosi, to Giovanni Magli's oil on paper of what seems to be a classical still life set-up. However, when one looks more closely at Magli's painting, the objects on the table are impossible to identify. (Could they be the contents of a Medieval alchemist's pocketbook?)

By contrast, Antonio Massari seems to take the show's theme more literally, giving us an array of more or less ordinary objects presided over by a portrait of a man who looks as though he is posing for a mug-shot. Whether this is a self-portrait or the artist's favorite felon is not easy for an outsider to determine; yet Massari juxtaposes the human image and inanimate objects convincingly in this realist tempera on paper.

Grazia Gabbini gives us a sculpture that resembles an arte povera house plant—which is to say a sickly, scraggly looking configuration of wiry shapes protruding from a beat-up box. The piece has a poignant quality, like something its owner, against his or her better wishes, has grown attached to and can't throw away. More scrutable for its sophisticated treatment of a sentimental subject is a photograph by Anna Maria Chiarvetto of pearls and a wedding band juxtaposed artfully with pictures of a cutely grinning baby. That image seems to hover between the mawkish and the ironic makes it all the more poignant.

What the more abstract images in shows such as this have to do with the ostensible theme is often anybody's guess. But perhaps their presence can be justified—in this case particularly—by the notion that works of art are always the most "personal belongings" of any artist, and the more obscure their imagery the more personal they may be. Anyway, Clara Scarampella's ten small photographic pieces in different colors—a red one is especially tactile, like something carved in wet, red sand—suggest serial mementos of nostalgic significance to the artist. However, on a strictly formal level, these images play perceptual games with textures that appear actual until one comes closer and comes up against the, flat sleek wall of the photographic surface. Similarly, another piece by Gianna Scianname consists of fifteen connected plexiglass panels containing luminously flowing abstract shapes that appear to float within the transparent panels, although they are actually painted on the surface.

Gampiero Reverberi comments tartly on the fact that "plastic" is the key to all too many of our personal belongings with a wall installation of more than forty pieces resembling credit cards. Look closely, however, and some of the designs on their surfaces morph into Jackson Pollock-style drip abstractions. Other abstract works by the painter Mariella Petrini and the assembageists Gianni Lodi and Isa Di Battista Gorini are more difficult to decipher in relation to the show's theme. Yet they compel us nonetheless with their purely formal virtues, as do the sinuously unfurling alabaster sculptures of Davide Alborghetti, which wiggle so serpentinely in space in a manner to suggest the admiration one might feel for the grace of a beloved snake. But that's a stretch, if one will pardon a bad pun; for in the case of such works, one must accept their thematic relevance on good faith.

Indeed, much of what we think of as possessions could very well be anything or anyone that inspires our affection, making us count pets or even people among our personal effects, as in the endless variations in love-song lyrics of the universal phrase "you belong to me." Thus one could regard Norberto Lenzi's lovely line drawing of an androgynous figure draped in off-the-shoulder dishabille as falling into this category. And the same might be said of the vague canine outline, more of a silhouette than an image, in Celestina Avanzini's texturally suggestive photograph.

More overtly in the same spirit, alternating figurative, floral, and automotive imagery are seen within the twelve squares of the painter Marinella Galletti's grid composition in tempera on paper, which is actually titled "Personal Belongings."

Once again, Stefania Carrozzini has given us an exhibition that explores its theme from many directions, some specific, some more obscure, but all equally worthy of attention.

—Ed McCormick

"Creativity: The Artist's Journey," at Synagogue for the Arts

While the flavor of the month mentality prevails at the juncture of art and fashion, where experience is all too often undermined, as the clueless clamor to collect recent MFAs who are rumored to be "hot," working artists with impressive exhibition histories, many belonging to longstanding arts organizations, remain the bedrock of the New York art world.

Thus one anticipates with pleasure group shows such as the invitational exhibition "Creativity: The Artist's Journey," which brings together eleven members of the American Society of Contemporary Artists at Synagogue for the Arts, 49 White Street, from December 14 through January 21.

Founded in 1917 as The Brooklyn Art Society, and initially sponsored by the Brooklyn Museum, the ASCA has included names like Chaim Gross, Adolph Gottlieb, and William Zorach among its past members, and continues to boast some of our most accomplished painters, sculptors, and printmakers.

Like the ASCA, The Synagogue for the Arts, is a nonprofit organization "dedicated to bringing high quality art exhibitions to the general public." Designed by William Berger, it is known for making its space available to all forms of cultural, artistic and educational events, and seems an especially auspicious venue for showcasing several of this respected professional artist's organization's members.

Miriam Wills is known for her Neo-Baroque semiabstract compositions, in which colorful photographic collage elements clipped from consumer magazines are seamlessly integrated with succulent passages of painting. Like many of her collage paintings, Wills' "Party Favors" achieves a successful synthesis of found imagery and painterly panache.

Doris Wyman, long associated with Artists Equity, is one of our most committed exponents of pure gestural painting, as evidenced by her exuberant oil on paper "White Water Wyoming." The ethos of The New York School is still very much alive in Wyman's vigorous compositions, with their bold, rhythmic strokes and winning combination of spontaneity and control.

Sensually billowing shapes that hug the picture plane yet project a paradoxical sense of voluminous sculptural presence are the forte of Olivia Koopalethes, as seen in her work in colored pencil, "Many Ways." Drawing plays a large role in Koopalethes' compositions, articulating edges and lending an allusive quality to her ostensibly abstract compositions.

Painter, printmaker, and "constructionist" Gerda Roze is one of those artists who refuses to fit easily into any one category or adhere to any one genre. Roze regularly traverses the line between painting and sculpture with intriguing results, as seen in her shaped acrylic triptych "Moonlight Sonata II," with its successful merging of asymmetrical and geometrical forms united by painterly vigor.

While not yet as familiar to New York gallery goers as some of the previous artists, Boston painter Elaine Alibrandi belongs in their company, judging from her work in mixed media and oil on canvas, "Wood Nymphs." Alibrandi's evocative composition combines a bark-like surface with forms suggesting elongated vaginal knotholes in a manner akin to the craggy abstractions of Clyfford Still.

Also on view will be work by Hedy O'Beil, who belongs to the tradition of New York painter-critics exemplified by Fairfield Porter and Elaine de Kooning, and has evolved from representational painting to a more calligraphic style in recent years; painter and printmaker Jami Taback, who has had more than fifty solo and group shows, including one at the Ernst Museum; Lisa Robbins, who was featured in the "Abstraction-5" exhibition at Broome Street Gallery, as well as "Artists for a United World," at Tibor De Nagy Gallery; and internationally known abstract painter Jan Wunderman.

(The solo shows of two other participants, Harriet FeBland, President of ASCA and coordinator of this exhibition, and the widely exhibited abstract painter Frank Mann, are reviewed at length elsewhere in this issue.) —J. Sanders Eaton

"Beyond Borders" Showcases Canadian Artists in Chelsea

Canadian art would appear to be auspiciously in tune with postmodern pluralism, judging from "Beyond Borders: an Exhibition of Fine Art from Canada," on view at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from January 2 through 23. (Reception Thursday, January 4, 6 to 8 PM.)

Perhaps the following capsule comments will give an impression of its diversity and scope: Paul Cavilla's paintings combine a sense of narrative with vibrant colors and sumptuous surfaces, accomplished with a palette knife technique, that imbues his figures with a palpable physical presence. The subject of Cavilla's "Thinking Man" appears literally aflame with thought.

Employing a process based on the lost wax technique, Alicja Cetnarowski creates figures that fairly writhe with a sense of life. In their final bronze incarnations, particularly, they seem to embody a host of human emotions by virtue of Cetnarowski's expressive formal distortions.

Equally powerful in a more abstract manner, the bronzes of the artist known as Saya reduce biomorphic forms to their essence. In Saya's sculptures, the serpentinely flowing shapes can seem simultaneously sensual and threatening. The paintings of Louise P. Rouleau, on the other hand, are characterized by fiery hues and boldly blocked-in figurative forms. Employing pastel pigments on canvas, Rouleau employs color as an emotive element through which to reveal the subject's "secrets."

Unambiguously lighthearted, Kathy Meaney's "Ladies of the Lake" paintings depict Rubens-esque matrons frolicking at the sea shore. Like the British painter L.S. Lowry, Meaney employs a "sophisticated primitive" style to capture our common pleasures and foibles with sympathetic wit.

If the work of the next two painters are any indication, a nascent mode of mystical expressionism may be brewing in Canada: The widely exhibited painter Lynda Pogue's works in mixed media, water-based paints and wax transform landscape subjects into compositions that not only compel us with their abstract virtues but convey an emotional resonance. In the composition Pogue calls "Solitude,' for example, a lone tree seems a surrogate for our inner longings. By contrast, Jane Rusin employs a combination of strident red and yellow color areas and precisely rendered architectural forms to evoke a magical mood, reminiscent of Loren McIver's semi abstract urban poetry, in her luminous painting "NYC Glow."

Paula Sommers uses baroque forms and a muted palette of gray, brown, and pink hues to dynamic effect in paintings such as "Urban Diptych" and "Heart Condition Diptych," both of which seem to inhabit that peculiar plateau where the abstract and the surreal converge. Like Matta's metaphysical vistas, Sommer's compositions take us into uncharted territory; yet we seem to glimpse vestiges of reality within the overall abstract thrust of her compositions.

Clifford Jean-Felix, a relative of Jean-Michel Basquiat, paints elongated expressionist figures that recall the sculpted figures of Giacometti. Bathed in shimmering hues, Jean-Felix's svelte, androgynous personages symbolize the commonality of the universal soul. By contrast, Elana Kaufman deals with the details that signify our individuality and the emotions evoked by particular memories. Thus, Kaufman's pictures have titles like "Home" and "Family," and their pale colors evoke the nostalgic pang of faded snapshots.

Atousa Foroohary offers a refreshingly direct take on landscape, particularly in one lyrical painting of a rustic road leading into a forest. Devoid of "isms," Faroohary's compositions are unabashed celebrations of the natural world. Then there is Dergachoff, a sculptor whose figures appear simultaneously classical and surreal. While delving into the realm of myth, Dergachoff's imaginative pieces are animated by an appealing wit.

—Maurice Taplinger

Connecticut Painter Bruce A. Dumas Celebrates the Sacred in the Ordinary

Bruce A. Dumas paints like a man who is in love with the world. Which is to say, he paints the kind of unabashedly world-infatuated pictures that more selfconscious contemporary realists will only attempt with the safety net of irony or the intervention of a clever aesthetic agenda. He paints directly from nature, from personal observation, earnestly and without irony, as though no one ever told him you are not supposed to paint that way today. But that in itself would not be newsworthy if Dumas did not paint well enough to prove that you can still paint any damn way you please, as long as you possess a vision uncorrupted by conformist notions of what contemporary art is supposed to look like and the technique to translate what you actually see into the terms that all good painting demands, fashion be damned.

For this reason, this widely exhibited Connecticut painter's work may come as a revelation to some and a pure delight to others who are still unjaded enough to take a picture at face value and not require a fancy theoretical justification for what they see in his solo exhibition at Patrick's Fine Art, 21 East 62nd Street, from November 30 through January 13, (The gallery is open by appointment only. Call 212-591-1918 or 917-743-9704).

"Lucky Bull"

That said, we all know nobody should paint a picture of swans anymore, right? The only way any contemporary artist could get away with that would be to make a deliberately corny parody of the kind of paintings you see hanging over the sofa in schlock furniture stores or Holiday Inns in some of the redder states, correct? Swans are just too beautiful, too graceful, and for a serious painter to actually attempt such a subject would be banal beyond words, right? Wrong! Dumas' painting "Hanover Swans Five" takes this taboo by the neck, so to speak, depicting a grouping of these living avian arabesques on the reflective waters of a placid lake and making the painting compelling and not at all corny by means of the slightly offbeat casualness of the composition, its superbly balanced color harmonies, among its other formal qualities, such as the precise placement of the horizon line of the opposite shore as an austere geometric foil to the extravagant organic forms of the birds. Thus what Dumas gives us is not some cliched, banal reiteration of the grace and beauty of the swan but an assiduously observed and realized matter of fact observation of these water fowl in their natural habitat. Indeed, Dumas succeeds so splendidly in this painting that to fault the artist for choosing a supposedly hackneyed subject would be as pretentious and asinine as venturing out into nature and applying such critical criteria to the actual creatures and the landscape that they inhabit!

Equally wrongheaded would be to dismiss another remarkable painting by Dumas, wittily titled "Lucky Bull," as simply a mundane picture of a male bovine hanging out in a field with his harem of cows, without taking into account such sophisticated formal virtues as the artist's luminous evocation of beams of sunlight streaming through the overhanging canopy of tree limbs, illuminating the leaves, and casting the shadows of the animals so convincingly on the fresh green grass. For, here, not only does Dumas' handling of chiaroscuro bring the canvas vibrantly alive, but he also captures a great deal of detail without his brushstrokes becoming the least bit fussy, while situating the forms of the animals and the surrounding foliage in a manner that creates spatial tension, of what Hans Hofmann used to call "push and pull," that plays off splendidly against the pastoral calm of the subject, suggesting the sexual relationship between the bull and his bovine harem alluded to in the title, which also comes across in the territorial manner in which the male animal gazes out at the viewer, alert to the possibility of competition for the females and ready to meet any challenge with his horns.

While Bruce A. Dumas may very well be one of the premiere animal painters of our time, investing such subjects with an insight and sympathy that is rare in contemporary painting, it is perhaps in the less specialized field of landscape that his gifts come most clearly to the forefront. In paintings such as "Massachusetts Gorge" and "Marsh Sunset," for example, he seems a latter-day peer of early and mid-nineteenth century Hudson River School painters such as Thomas Cole and later Luminists like Jasper F. Cropsey for his ability to evoke panoramic vistas with a polished and meticulous technique, employing subtle gradations of tone to establish variations in clarity between near and far objects.

In "Marsh Sunset," fields and marshes gradually give way to verdant, distant hills under a dramatically illuminated sky enlivened by gold-tinged evening clouds, while "Massachusetts Gorge" contrasts stately, densely forested corridors of Fall foliage with rugged, leaf-scattered rock-croppings and foamy rushing water in the foreground, the entire composition bathed in auras of pinkish light. But perhaps Dumas' most masterful handling of light comes across most dramatically in the canvas he calls "Spell Bound," a marinescape which captures the metaphysical border between night and day, with the sun resting low in a purplish blue sky, spilling its radiance over the watery horizon to reverberate over the waves and illuminate the rocks rising out of the shallows in the foreground.

By contrast, in paintings, such as "Bethel Farm Morning" and "Spring Hill Farm," Dumas captures the crisp clarity of country daylight delineating the rustic charms of fields and barns, or the tall shadows of slender, bare-limbed trees cast over country roads curving down to distant meadows and hills that seem to stretch to infinity.

Here as in the animal subjects for which he has been awarded numerous prizes. Bruce A. Dumas demonstrates that there is no such thing as a mundane subject when it is seen with a fresh eye and interpreted by a painter of surpassing skills.

—Ed McCormack

Photographic Artists Explore Aspects of Abstraction

In "Abstract Impressions" a photography exhibition by members of the West Side Arts Coalition, seen recently at Broadway Mall Community Center on the center island at 96th Street and Broadway, it was interesting to see how the various participants approached the challenge of creating an abstract image with a decidedly literal medium.

Eliud Martinez solved the problem most directly by photographing brilliantly colored pottery jars artfully positioned so that their glazed or unglazed surfaces and grooves created compositions that looked like abstract paintings. Co-curator David Ruskin's hand tinted photographs of landscapes are painterly anyway, but by choosing some of his most amorphous images of light on water or upside down reflections he too meets the challenge handsomely.

Amee Vega created a luminous linear abstraction with the light streams from passing traffic and blue light pouring through crystal. Lauren Feliciano employed shadowplay skillfully to add mystery to abstractions created from close-up views of bicycle spokes, ropes, tools and other objects. Stephen E. Weintraub's most abstract composition was an image of a brilliant blue bus in which sheer chromatic appeal overwhelmed subject matter.

Shirley Piniat created abstractions by focusing almost exclusively on shadows and light, making chiaroscuro or shafts of sunlight more her subject than the physical spaces in her pictures. Janice Wood Wetzel achieved a synthesis of the abstract and the surreal in her print of a room viewed through a fishbowl, creating a composition in which a window, a red lamp, and the fish seemed to float in the same aquatic abstraction like forms in a blue Miro. Scott Weingarten crossed over almost completely into the realm of the surreal in his digitally manipulated large rainforest images, their intricate foliage taking on a haunting almost hallucinatory quality reminiscent of Casper David Friedrich.

Co-curator Jean Prytyskacz employs small format silver gelatin prints and photograms with great effectiveness, lending her black and white images of buttons, various knickknacks, and other modest objects subtle tonal qualities in a precise abstract context. Don Sichler skirted the picturesque in his compelling picture of birds in an icy winter park but his other prints of buildings distorted by watery reflections or mirrored in the glassy facades of other skyscrapers were more ostensibly abstract.

Harriet G. Green employed photomontage as well as digital manipulation to create images in which familiar things such as building wreckage, rocks, and even a simple twig took on strange qualities that made us view them as abstract rather than specific entities. And Robert Helman seemed to get around the whole issue cleverly by photographing things that are abstract anyway—or at least unrecognizable in context--and creating precise minimalist compositions in his gem-like little pigment prints.

Photographic purists might fault some of the artists in this exhibition for employing digital manipulation to achieve their abstract effects. But to do so is to impose restrictions on them that painters are not and never have been subject to, especially in an era when mixed media has become all the rage. At this late date, state of the art technology offers photographic artists a chance to compete with the freedom that the painter has always enjoyed, in terms of image juxtapositioning and just about everything else. And some of us say it's about time: If all's fair in love and war, why not in art?

—Marie R. Pagano

Lalevga: Scoring the Ore Beneath the Painted Surface

For many artists, the surface on which one paints is a support to which to apply pigment, nothing more. It plays a much more significant role, however, in the work of Lalevga, a painter from Canada, whose work is on view at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from January 2 through 23, with a reception on Thursday, January 4, from 6 to 8 PM.

Working in acrylic on wood, Lalevga not only paints upon but carves and scores into the surface, turning the panel into a tactile arena bearing the alternately rough and elegant scars of many moods. Often several panels are in progress simultaneously, evolving over over "days, weeks, months, sometimes years," as the artist puts it, until each reaches its natural conclusion.

The culmination of all this unceasing effort can be seen in the glowing examples of Lalevga's work at Agora Gallery, which run the gamut from almost minimalist austerity of all-over, single color compositions such as "XIX" and "IVIII," to more chromatically variegated acrylics on wood like "XI" and "XIII," their richly scumbled surfaces revealing an infinite range of primary and secondary colors, texturally enriched by the various scores, scratches, and other "injuries" that the artist selectively inflicts on their wooden surfaces.

Lalevga's practice of affixing Roman numerals to these paintings rather than titles serves the purpose of keeping their origins and meanings mysterious and open-ended. Thus the viewer is free to experience them from his or her own perspective and to draw whatever conclusions might arrive accordingly. This seems very much in harmony with the intuitive origins of the compositions, which are process-oriented, with the different panels or "plates" revealing their hidden mysteries to the artist gradually, over the often protracted periods of their gestation and creation.

Some of the most intriguing of Lalevga's paintings are those that coalesce into more or less specific, albeit abstract images, as seen in "XII," where the central image is an almost-but-not quite cruciform, containing tactile yellow strokes at its center, and enclosed by thick black, white, and red outlines of even width. Here, the narrow vertical format that the artist favors further enhances the stately quality of the image, adding to its iconic suggestiveness.

"VII"

Another intriguing symbol, seen in the work identified as "VII," is a central rectangle intersected by a single bar or stripe that divides the tall panel from top to bottom. These two joined elements, boldly laid down with a bold brush in a fleshy pinkish hue, are set against a ground of deep blue mediated by vigorously brushed areas of yellow. By contrast, another painting called "X" is a veritable extravaganza of bold, tactile strokes of red blue and yellow overlapping with swerving rhythms akin to those of Brice Marden. Here, too, there is even a suggestion of two tiny silhouetted figures resembling African sculptures at the center of the composition.

However, this could be purely in the eye of the beholder, for the great pleasure of Lalevga's paintings is in discovering one's own meanings in the remarkable variety of forms and colors that reveal themselves to the incessant stroking and probing of this immensely gifted artist. —Marie R. Pagano

At Gelabert Studios: Worlds Not So Distant After All

A lively three-way dialogue between artists with widely differing backgrounds is presented in the "Worlds Apart Exhibition," at Gelabert Studios, 255 West 86th Street, from December 5 through 16, with a special preview on Tuesday, December 5, from 5 to 8 PM.

In Outer Hebrides, a group of islands off the coast of Skye, Elisabeth de Las Casas, who lives part of the time in London, paints the remote Scottish coastline. While her rugged treatment of form is akin to that in Marsden Hartley's paintings of Maine fishing villages, de Las Casas' colors are more muted and poetic, as befits this place of flowing tides, moody skies, and stormy gales.

Ari Vais

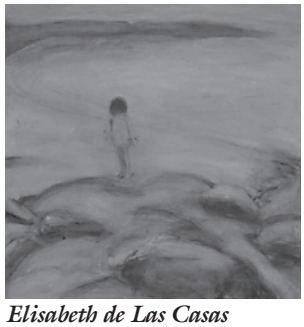
Like "Griminish Harbour No.2," with its subtly modulated blue, turquoise, and ocher hues and softly blurred forms, most of de Las Casas' paintings are landscapes. Figures, when they appear, are subservient to their surroundings. At the mercy of the elements, they stand gazing out to sea or stoop to pick cockles on the beach in postures recalling Millet's peasants.

Yet a sense of the human spirit and human emotions haunts every winding road, rock, hill, cloud, and stretch of desolate beach in the paintings of Elisabeth de Las Casas, attesting to the artist's final victory over the land's unforgiving beauty.

By contrast, the oils of Ari Vais, born in Moscow, now living in New York, capture the crowded, hectic energy of his adopted city, as seen in "View Up 9th Avenue from 33rd Street, NYC," where trucks, yellow cabs, pedestrians, and a lone bicyclist converge.

With a painterly panache akin to Fairfield Porter, Vais combines realism with the principles of abstraction to make his oils on canvas come alive on two levels simultaneously. "Rainy Lower Manhattan," for example, has all the atmospheric charm suggested in the title. Yet it also shows a formal rigor that transcends even its considerable descriptive attributes.

Whether depicting a busy street, a cruise ship leaving the harbor, or a slender blond nude reclining languorously on a blue and white checkered sofa, Ari Vais combines vibrant color with vigorous paint handling in compositions notable for their tactile immediacy.



Elisabeth de Las Casas

Although trained in Mughal Miniature painting, the Indian artist Sam Rai, now a resident of Florida, has evolved a style that incorporates elements of modern Western painting. Working in watercolors in a refined technique suited to capturing ethereal effects, he combines a respect for tradition with an independent sense of fantasy.

Sam Rai

Graceful feminine figures are evoked in luminous landscapes in paintings such as "Obscure" and "Heavenly Pour," while the two figures in another painting inspired by the theme of Madonna and Child appear to merge mystically with the landscape.

In another series called "Temple," inspired by 10th century Indian sculptures of voluptuous female nudes, Sam Rai reveals his ability to imbue aspects of antiquity with contemporary immediacy.

All three of these artists have evolved strong individual styles with which to address their very different personal priorities. Yet their shared concern with the finer points of painting bring them closer together than the title of this exhibition might lead one to expect.

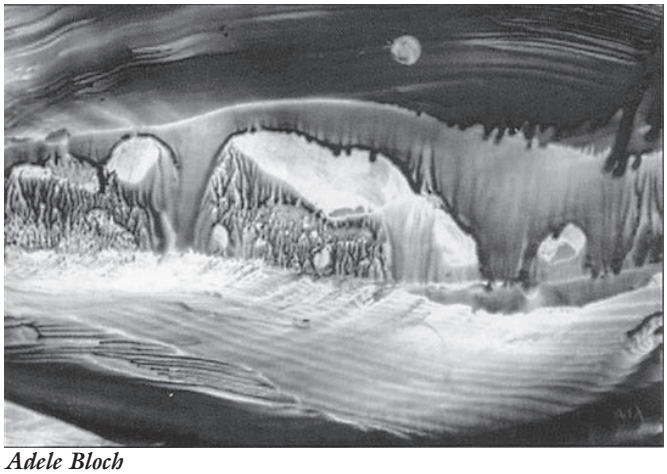
—Maurice Taplinger

The CLWAC: A Tenth of the Way into its Second Century

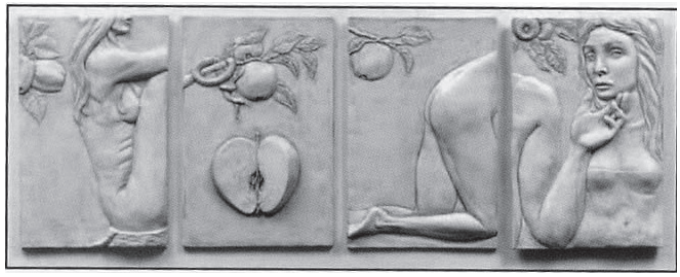
Somehow it always seems relevant to mention that the Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Art Club was named for the only woman among the 106 founding members of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, given the venerable club's continued championing of excellence on the part of women in the arts. Nowhere was this more evident than in the CLWAC's "110th Annual Open Exhibition," seen recently at The National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park South.

This year's Honored Member was the sculptor Elaine Lavalle, a grouping of whose portraits and full-length figures in bronze, marble and hyrdrocal displayed her deeply humanistic aesthetic. Other sculptors, as well, made especially strong contributions to the exhibition, ranging from the animated realism of Sylvia G. Jacobson's bronze "Two to Tango"; to the fluent and witty organic abstraction of Priscilla Heep's "Her First Date," a work in stoneware clay; to Phyllis Rosser's emblematic found wood wall relief "Rivers of Silence."

Marsha Tosk also made an impression with her hydrocal wall relief "Tempted," its four panels imagining the narrative of Adam and Eve with sinuous grace. Janet York's "Cavalier Vase" demonstrated the translucent magic of acrylic sculpture with the figures of two frisky puppies romping within a translucent vessel. Susan J. Geissler's life-size forton figure of a bishop tippling out of a real teacup, "Morning Spirits," was a real crowd-pleasure. Alexandra Martin's "Fist: A Self Portrait," a monumental clenched hand in resin and aluminum was a powerful projection of selfhood. Yupin Pramotepipop's large resin wall relief of a kneeling Asian woman (enigmatically titled "Peace of Me?") was a technical and emotional



Adele Bloch



Marsha Tosk

tour de force. Other sculptors long associated with the CLWAC exhibited work of the quality we have come to expect of them: Jean T. Kroeber with a characteristically elongated female figure in Vermont marble called "Loss"; Amy Bright Unfried" with "Henry at Three Months" a beatifically smiling bronze portrait head of a baby"; Lee Hutt with "Young Noah," a pensive portrait bust in hydrocal; and Gloria Spevacek, one of our finest animal sculptors, with a smoothly flowing, dark patina'd bronze entitled "Seated Black Cat." By contrast, Louise Peterson's feline bronze "Lethal Weapons" projected a less serene energy, arching its back and extending its claws, its tail forming an "S" in the air.

Good painters were plentiful as well, in the upstairs gallery, where Shain Bard's atmospheric oil of a "Suburban Sunset" cast a luminous glow, while Fran Foy's semi-abstract watercolor "Playtime" captured the movement of horses on a farm with swift, angular strokes akin to those of John Marin. By contrast, Fay Moore combined equine and floral imagery with a coloristic lushness reminiscent of Odilon Redon in a vibrant pastel. Emil Nolde also came to mind, on encountering Kirby Kendrick's expressionist acrylic painting "War Terrors," with its fiery hues and frenzied brushstrokes.

Theckla W. Williams created a dynamic abstraction with a closeup of meticulously painted machine parts in her oil "Propulsion." In "My Favorite Daughter," Lucille Berrill Paulsen expressed the affection inherent in the title with a cameo-like oil portrait of a fresh-faced teenager. Joan Lycardi employed a meticulously accomplished pen and ink technique to evoke the nostalgic mood of an antique photograph of three young women in 1920s fashions reclining giddily on a lawn in "Bee, Fern & Barb."

Contemporary takes on Romanticism could be seen in Adele Bloch's blue-hued watercolor "Moonlight," an evocation of a nocturnal snow scene worthy of Samuel Palmer, as well as in Cary Thorp Brown's dreamy, glowing monoprint "Sunlight on Autumn Oaks."

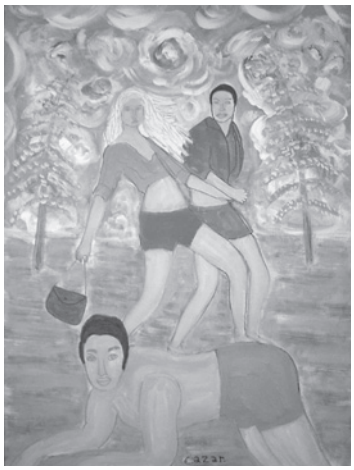
Diverse abstract tendencies were also well represented in Leah Dunaway's vigorous gestural mixed media painting "Open Doors"; Joan Fitzgerald's gemlike color field composition "Silent Water"; and "Birds of Paradise," a dynamic configuration of overlapping planes by Katherine Bleser. Other artists displayed a variety of approaches to the human figure and still life, as seen in Aubrey O'Meara's eerily lit close-up portrait "Heidi Gustafason"; Gabriela Dellosso's full length pastel portrait of a statuesque black woman in a bridal gown; Jean Brinton-Jaecks' oil of a contemporary young woman in a museum intently studying one of Sargent's society portraits, and Doretto Miller's meticulous realist watercolor of images from Beijing juxtaposed with Chinese brushes and scroll-mounting patterns.

Also including strong works by frequently exhibited members such as Holly Meeker-Rom, Gaile Snow Gibbs, Sharon Florin, Joyce Zeller, Jeanette Martone, and Karen Whitman, among others, this exhibition made clear once again that there are many more gifted woman artists at work today than the few token "art stars" whose names are constantly recycled in the press. And perhaps what that indicates most clearly is that now, no less than at its inception, The Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Art Club is an essential cultural resource.

—Jeannie McCormack

Emile Azar: A Painter Whose Work is Full of Surprises

Among those artists who make the distinction between mainstream and so-called outsider art irrelevant, one of the most interesting of them is Emile Azar, whose work can be seen at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from January 2nd through 23rd. (Reception: Thursday, January 4, 6 to 8 PM.)



"Swinging Life"

Born into a large Lebanese Christian family, Azar has been painting since early childhood, and his work retains a childlike freshness of vision. At the same time, however, Azar's acrylic paintings on canvas possess an innate sophistication that comes across both in his color choices and his unerring sense of composition. The combination is especially appealing in paintings such as "Kaleidoscope 1," where the face and bust of a ruby-lipped blond who looks as though she would look right at home on a Coney Island burlesque poster is enmeshed in a welter of red, white, and blue abstract forms.

Azar's unique way of painting the figure as a discrete entity, yet merging it with abstract elements can also be seen in a canvas called "French Gathering," where a simplified couple whose faces appear to merge occupy the center of the canvas, surrounded by bold rhythmical strokes of blue, white, and yellow that read as energy lines emanating from the two figures. Similarly, in "Rendezvous," another truly unique composition, a small image of a couple holding hands at a table occupies the center of a composition dominated by much larger red, blue, and yellow abstract forms that seem to swirl around all four sides of the canvas.

Figure and abstract form, however, are more thoroughly integrated in other paintings such as "Nautilus" and "Redemption," in which the outline of the human form is enveloped by a jazzy array of colorful stripes. In the latter painting, especially, these linear elements create an environment that almost suggests that the figure is en uturo (but symbolically, since its proportions suggest an adult human rather than an embryo!).

By contrast, abstract elements are absent from the acrylic on canvas that Azar calls "Swinging Life," which appears to be a mature outsider's wistful meditation on the freewheeling sexual mores of today's youth. For here, a vigorous-looking couple, the young woman's long yellow hair blowing in the breeze, her midriff bare below a green halter, strolls along while another young man wearing a bathing suit appears to crawl on his hands and knees like an animal. The sky is filled with swirling forms resembling those in van Gogh's "The Starry Night," and two tall trees on either side of the passing couple sway in the breeze. That the elements in the composition of "The Swinging Life" are so specific, yet their exact meanings or relationships remain somewhat obscure, is what makes this canvas so intriguing, just as the stylistic disparity between the quaintly primitive figure in the elaborate tutu, sandwiched between billowing stripe curtains in "Ballerine" and the anatomically correct levitating female nude in "The Flying Woman" can only produce a sense of wonder in the viewer.

Indeed, that each painting seems to be a new adventure, subject only to its own inner laws, is what makes the art of Emile Azar so endlessly fascinating.

—Peter Wiley

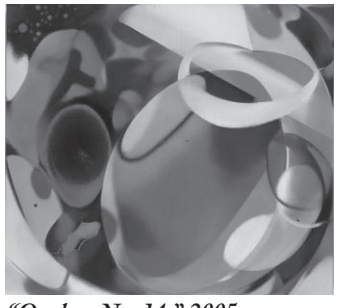
At Berkeley Gallery: Frank Mann's Visual Music of the Spheres

In his "Notations to the Oculus Series," Frank Mann, a widely exhibited artist born in Washington D.C. and presently residing in New York, states that "the subject of this group of paintings is images made of paint (not painterly images)..."

This is an important distinction, indicating the artist's interest in optical sensation rather than mere tactile display. And his point is well taken, its meaning made manifest in Mann's recent solo exhibition, "Paintings from the Oculus Cycle," at The Berkeley Gallery, Berkeley College, 3 East 43rd Street.

Normally, the term "occulation" refers to when one celestial body intrudes upon and obscures the light of another, as when the moon moves between the earth and the sun in a solar eclipse. In Mann's compositions, however, the effect is quite opposite: the interaction results in a chromatic heightening, as circular shapes created with luminous oil colors thinned to a translucent consistency overlap in dynamically swirling configurations. It also should be stated that, for all his denial of "painterly" priorities, there is a velvety sensuality to his smoothly pigmented surfaces that makes them succulently appealing.

Mann's most kindred aesthetic ancestors are artists like Wassily Kandinsky and Frantisek Kupka, whose preference for spherical forms reflected their cosmic inspiration, as these pioneers of abstract painting sought to invent a new visual language with which to apprehend the unknown. Painting at that time truly could be compared to interplanetary exploration, in that these artists were venturing where none before them had been.



"Oculus, No. 14," 2005

As a postmodern painter, Frank Mann's concerns may be, to some extent, more formal and optical when he states that "the image is created in relation to a purely artistic internal model." Yet he also admits that he is still engaged with "the mystery of the experience of seeing" (if not with mysticism, as Kandinsky and Kupka were, in an era when Theosophical beliefs were all the rage among the avant garde) and adds, "The sensual quality of the surface reflects a layering of paint from which the forms are derived in an automatic sense."

Indeed, an exploratory automatism would appear to be at the heart of Mann's art, given the apparently unpremeditated fluidity of his technique and the rhythmic quality of his compositions, in which forms appear to be generated out of other forms in an unending, circular flow. Vibrantly colored spheres orbit each other and overlap, their very roundness mirroring the orb that views them, suggesting a metaphysical mating of the art object and the human eye, which is made all the more implicit in the Latinate mythicness of the series name "Oculus."

However, being a quintessentially postmodern artist, and possibly less intrigued than his late nineteenth century predecessors were by the notion of a "Fourth Dimension," Mann toys with the sanctity of the modernist picture plane, creating forms that shift ambiguously between the two-dimensionality and spatial depth. There is also a suggestion of musicality in his exquisite chromatic sensitivity that imbues his compositions with an undeniable spiritual dimension of the most authentic kind; which is to say, one that does not seem contrived or even striven for in any conscious sense, but results as a natural consequence of an intensely dedicated creative process.

—Ed McCormack

WALLACE BERMAN: THE GREAT UNKNOWN

A Bohemian Rhapsody by Ed McCormack

I was planning to spend Sunday, a day when there are normally not too many phone interruptions, getting started on a piece about the legendary yet still relatively obscure West Coast artist Wallace Berman, who died in an automobile accident in 1976. A charismatic hipster who gathered a vital community of artists and hangers-on around him in the Beat Generation enclave of Venice, California, Berman had his first and last commercial solo show at the Ferus Gallery, in Los Angeles, in 1957. After the show, which included the first issue of his influential handcrafted journal *Semina*, was busted by the LAPD vice squad for "lewdness," Berman withdrew from the official art community, preferring to go underground and "swing in the shadows," as he put it in the now-quaint jazz slang of his era.

Berman had always fascinated me from afar, and since a big traveling exhibition called "SEMINA CULTURE: Wallace Berman & His Circle," would soon be coming to The Grey Art Gallery downtown at New York University, I was looking forward to holing up at home and writing about him.

But our friends Tony and Betty wouldn't hear of it. They thought I needed to get out of my smug urban rut and see more of "America," as I was in the habit of referring to every place outside my beloved Manhattan. So they showed up in Tony's brother-in-law's Subaru that sparkling Fall morning to take Jeannie and me on a long scenic drive upstate to an orchard where city folks, for a price, can have the novel experience of picking their own apples.

All the way across the Tappen Zee Bridge and along those interminable country highways, as Jeannie pointed out the beautiful colors of the turning leaves and tried in vain to disabuse me of the notion that "if you've seen one tree you've seen them all," I complained that I didn't even like apples. If I had to be dragged away from my natural habitat and out into the sticks, I bitched, I would have much preferred being taken to one of those "book barns" I had read about.

But my wife just made her usual jokes about how I was such a creature of concrete as to make even Woody Allen seem like Nature Boy, they all laughed, and after what seemed like an eternity or two, we arrived at a place called Masker's Orchard in some godforsaken town called Warwick, New York.

* * *

As you drive in, blond teenage bumpkins (the further one gets from the five boroughs the blonder everyone seems to become, whether they actually have yellow hair or not) pass handfuls of plastic bags in through the car windows. You fill them, and after inspecting the car like narcs for contraband apples as you drive out, they collect $16 per filled bag before letting you leave the property.

"Apples make people happy," Betty said, after some little Asian kids sitting in the back of a pickup truck waved at us as we followed the map printed on the back of the bags from "Cider Lane" to "Strudel Road."

And later, I almost had to agree, at least to myself, as I sat in a folding chair beside the car, after the others had gone off merrily with their bags, watching entire families swarm the trees in a veritable apple frenzy. One elderly African-American lady working alone nearby caught my eye and grinned, as if to say, "This is my own little tree! All these beautiful apples belong to me!"

Then another woman, driving by in her car, saw me sitting there in my broad-brimmed straw hat like Farmer Brown and flashed me a big neighborly smile. Maybe she took me for one of those long-haired, bearded Vietnam vets who look a little freaky but hold steady jobs and live in the suburbs. In any case, it pleased me to think I must have looked to her like a normal American on his day off, someone who does work that makes sense to people, rather than making a living doing something incomprehensible like writing about art. I even liked the idea that she probably assumed that the Subaru I was sitting by was mine, even though I never learned to drive; never wanted to live anywhere that might make driving necessary.

Wallace Berman Untitled (A7-Mushroom, D4-Cross), 1966 56-image Verifax collage, 45 1/2 x 48 in. Collection of Dan Fauci, Los Angeles

For some reason, such cases of mistaken identity, whenever they have occurred, have always pleased me, just as I've always taken vicarious pleasure in imagining what it might be like to live the kind of conventional life I have been running away from for as long as I can remember, even though I know in my bones that I would not be able to tolerate such a life for even a little while.

The simple truth of the matter is that I can hardly remember ever having wanted to be a normal American. At least since high school, all I've ever wanted to be is a bohemian, by which of course I do not mean a native of the region of Czechoslovakia known by that name, but a citizen of a certain state of mind, philosophy, life-style—whatever you want to call it—that enables one to pursue one's creative obsessions without undue worry over material rewards or what the neighbors might think.

So while I enjoyed impersonating a mensch and even got enough into the spirit of things as the day wore on to pick a few apples, my mind kept wandering back to the life and art of Wallace Berman, an inveterate beatnik like me...

* * *

While it would be going too far to say that only bad art can do justice to a beautiful scene (an argument that art history would easily refute), it does seem safe to say that good art is generally too self-conscious, too self-absorbed, to fall in love with an atmosphere. Thus the "Noctambulists," a school of painters in Paris who sought to capture "the tones of night" are long forgotten, while their contemporaries, the Cubists, live on and on.

Still, questions of artistic quality and originality aside, the very name Noctambulists exudes far greater mystery. And though I'm aware of mixing periods here, it pleases me to picture them, woozy on absinthe, staring entranced at the halos around the gas-lights in van Gogh's "Night Cafe," forever arrested by a beautifully futile bohemian epiphany.

In order to succeed as a bohemian, one must fail spectacularly, like Joseph Delaney, one of the first adult artists I knew in the mid 1950s, as a twelve year old from the Lower East Side, haunting Greenwich Village, enamored of failure's mystique—or at least a species of failure more colorful than that which I saw all around me in my neighborhood and family. The less successful brother of the well-known black painter Beauford Delaney, Joe Delaney was a shabbily elegant gentleman who looked like a down-at-the-heels Duke Ellington and painted a little like Reginald Marsh. Like Marsh, he was a fine draftsman who could impart a classical quality to bustling urban scenes. But his oils of folk singers in Washington Square Park and soapbox orators in Union Square were so pale and starved for pigments he could not afford that the bare bones of the preliminary drawing invariably showed through the thin skin of the paint like elbows poking through a faded sweater.

Perhaps it was Delaney's poverty, his inability to buy proper art materials, that kept him in The Washington Square Outdoor Art Show, among the purveyors of kitsch seascapes on black velvet, year after year, while other serious artists like Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock, who had once hung their early work briefly on the building facades and fences around the park, had moved on to fortune and fame in galleries and museums.

Recently, seeing one of Delaney's street scenes reproduced in a catalog put out by ACA Galleries, I hoped it portended some belated recognition for this kindly gentleman who had been something of a mentor to me. Inspired by his example and encouragement, I'd defy the monitors of the Outdoor Art Show, who'd frequently roust me for being unregistered and underage, and hang my juvenile ink drawings and watercolors of jazz musicians on the same fence outside Judson Memorial Church where the legendary bohemian poet Maxwell Bodenheim once posted and peddled his poem manuscripts for the price of a drink.

A snapshot from around that time shows me seated in my folding chair in front of that fence, surrounded by a group of kids from the Lower East Side who had come to visit me in the Village when those two neighborhoods, while within walking distance, were still worlds apart.

I may have been a mediocre stickball player but my ability to draw a convincing likeness of Elvis or a naked girl made me popular enough among the guys who gathered around me for that group photo like Leo Gorcey's "Dead End Kids." Still, looking at my selfconscious preadolescent self, glowering darkly among gladly grinning normal boys, I can see that the malady of art was already setting me apart, making me ill at ease among my dead end peers.

* * *

By the late fifties, sitting in dank cellars like The Gaslight, on MacDougal Street, or the Cock 'n' Bull, on Bleecker, we aspiring bohemians who swarmed the Village on weekends were already grumbling into our espressos about "the tourists," as though they were squares from Nebraska or Ohio, rather than high school kids from the five boroughs—which is to say, ourselves.

So naturally I was intrigued, flipping through a brand new book called *The Holy Barbarians* in the 8th Street Bookshop one afternoon in 1959, to come upon an atmospheric photograph of shadowy figures huddled in a steamy cafe window with a caption calling it "a real Beat Generation coffeehouse that tourists haven't discovered yet."

The lettering on the window read "Venice West Cafe Expresso," but no "sic" seemed necessary, since everyone, even in the Village, pronounced espresso with the "X" anyway—and, obviously, expression was what the Beat scene in Venice, California, was all about, man!

"Venice West," the caption of the next photograph (of a funky beachside boardwalk and the tall-columned facade of a derelict resort) rhapsodized, "slum by the sea...old Venice imitated in pipe and plaster, peeling now, where a disaffiliated, dedicated poverty is a way of life in the pads of the holy barbarians..."

Just as atmospheric, an interior shot of Venice West Cafe Expresso, looking like the beatnik dive in Roger Corman's lurid B-movie, "A Bucket of Blood," showed bearded hipsters and their cool-looking chicks digging a jazz group playing in front of a wall scrawled with the words " 'ART IS LOVE IS GOD'—WALLY BERMAN."

Although that slogan caught my attention, years before the drug culture made such Oh Wow Insights commonplace, there wasn't much to be learned about Berman in *The Holy Barbarians*, which turned out to be a commercial exploitation of the Beat Generation almost as corny as Corman's film, released the same year.

In fact, the book's author, Lawrence Lipton, was a conflicted former screenwriter, publicist, journalist, and poet-manque who once confessed ruefully, "I always looked like everything I was not, and worse: I was capable of doing the very thing I had the most contempt for—and doing it well!"

Savvy hack that he was, Lipton knew that most readers (myself admittedly among them at that time) would rather be entertained by "case histories" of composite characters with colorful pseudonyms like "Itchy Gelden" and "Angel Dan Davies" than read about actual members of the Southern California art and poetry community like Wallace Berman and Stuart Perkoff (who make cameo appearances in the book only to lend the ring of truth to Lipton's fictionalized account of a suddenly popular social phenomenon).

Being the kind of kid who had always preferred Captain Marvel to Superman, Lash LaRue to Roy Rogers, the slightly outre and offbeat to the popular, Venice (later to give us Jim Morrison, another too-late beatnik of my generation who parlayed histrionic coffeehouse doggerel, set to ponderous rock music, into a notorious career as lead singer of The Doors) appealed more to the teenage romantic in me than did the better known west coast Beat scene in San Francisco.

But when I confessed as much to Allen Ginsberg many years later, as we sat in his kitchen on East 12th Street sipping tea, he acted as if I had committed blasphemy and launched into a tirade about phony, sandal-wearing Maynard G. Krebs-type "bedbug beatniks" who gave the whole scene a bad name that struck me as hilariously ironic coming from the Beat Generation's most outrageous publicist.

Allen's collected poems had just come out and I'd spent several hours following him from one appointment to another—or as he put it when he inscribed a copy of the book to me: "a day in both our Eternities from Radio to Gallery to Harper publisher to Lawyer to Home Office." Sadly, he seemed more like a harried, cranky businessman than the famous free spirit of yore. I couldn't help thinking that maybe his success was making him feel like he'd failed as a bohemian.

"But Allen, as a kid all that bedbug beatnik stuff was exactly what fascinated me about the Venice scene," I explained, "particularly as it was depicted in Lipton's book.

"That book was such a potboiler! Kerouac hated that book!" Allen scoffed, as if that settled it.

Then he stood, put on a jacket, smoothed it over his little pot belly, and said, "How do you like my new black leather jacket? I've always wanted one, but could never afford it before now. Every beatnik should have a black leather jacket, don't you think?"

* * *

It seems more than apt that "Semina Culture," which originated at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 2005, before traveling to three other cities, and opens on January 16 at Grey Art Gallery, 100 Washington Square East, will be seen in the Village, where the ghosts of old bohemians like Joe Gould, Maxwell Bodenheim, and Edna Vincent Millay still haunt the streets, even as New York University, the very institution presenting the exhibition, does everything in its power to disrupt the human scale of the surrounding architecture and turn traditionally funky Washington Square Park into its own sterile campus plaza.

Wisely, Michael Duncan and Kristine McKenna, the co-curators of the exhibition, make the personalities and communal myths of Berman and his circle every bit as important as the art they produced, in this comprehensive survey of paintings, drawings, sculptures, writings, photographs, and artifacts by more than fifty artists and poets associated with *Semina*.

The only glaring omission is Jay De Feo's legendary 2300 pound tactile albatross "The Rose," a huge abstract composition that the artist piled white oil paint onto for seven years, giving herself lead poisoning in the process. Touted wistfully in the exhibition catalog as "the visual masterwork of the Beat era," its absence leaves a hole that not even the inclusion of a curious, paint-encrusted object entitled "Footstool (Used during the painting of the Rose, 1958-1965)" can fill. Last seen in The Whitney Museum's 1996 survey "Beat Culture and the New America," the painting is just too cumbersome and fragile to travel. Yet it haunts this exhibition in absentia, not because this overladen and overblown abstract starburst composition really is the masterwork that the catalog hyperbole claims—far from it—but because it so perfectly exemplifies heroic bohemian failure.

In fact,"The Rose" is a monolithic anomaly; for while other Los Angeles painters, such as John Altoon, Joan Brown, Wally Hedrick, and Arthur Richer created relatively large canvases, most of the artists in Berman's immediate circle tended more toward intimism than gargantuan painterly productions.

The favored mediums were drawing and collage. That the occasional larger work was usually assemblage, created with found materials, suggests that poverty, as much as a taste for the funky, could have been a determining factor for some. However, a shared intimist sensibility fostered by a close relationship between art and literature not unlike that of the Dada movement seems more to the point. And that small works are portable and can be created in sketchbooks in the kind of cafes where bohemians hang out probably played a part as well.

For the most part, specialization and

Wallace Berman and various contributors Semina (editions 1–9), 1955–64 Mixed media limited edition artist's publication, dimensions variable Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University Library, Gift of the Marie Eccles

"professionalism" of the type seen in the New York art world— where a poet such as Frank O'Hara might collaborate with a painter like Larry Rivers on a print or book project, but their disciplines would rarely overlap—were not highly prized in Venice West. Visual artists frequently wrote poems and poets often drew, painted in watercolors, or made collages in their notebooks.

Many of the works in this show are hybrids of the two forms dashed off in emulation of William Blake's illuminated manuscripts. Encouraged by each others' work, visual artists like Berman and George Herms and poets like Diane DiPrima and Robert Duncan all displayed a freewheeling artistic ambidextrousness. For others, the time and place itself was the catalyst for creativity.

As John Arthur Maynard points out in his book Venice West: *The Beat Generation in Southern California*, "A few people, like Wally Berman, were already artists before they settled in Venice, but most took up painting or drawing or writing poetry because it was what their friends were doing, and because they believed in the creative act as an end in itself....Anyone could be an artist, they told each other; it was a matter of belief, not talent or preparation."

Kristene McKenna puts the best possible spin on this democratic attitude in the catalog: "It was a world where art and poetry were created to be given as gifts and as an expression of love, rather than as a means to a career, and there was a respect accorded to poverty that's almost unimaginable today."

To their credit, the curators sifted assiduously through the ruins of this bohemian utopia, selecting works by artists such as Joan Brown, Bruce Connor, John Altoon, and others who went on to have impressive careers despite their respect for poverty; but also including— if not just "anyone" who thought they could be artists— enough marginally interesting work by lesser known local characters to provide us with a vivid picture of a subculture within a subculture.

To the latter category belong people like the spooky satanist Marjorie Cameron Parsons Kimmel. A poet, painter and occult practitioner, Cameron, as she preferred to be known, advocated the sexual magick of Aleister Crowley and, working in a candlelit studio, painted fantastic, wraith-like female figures in a style whose surreal eroticism owes something to Leonor Fini. (It was a drawing by Cameron of a couple making love doggy-style, included among the *Semina* material in Berman's exhibition at Ferus Gallery, that raised the ire of the LAPD.)

Another arresting personality, although perhaps more of a dabbler in drawing and writing than an artist in any legitimate sense, was DiDi Morrill, a drug addict and former girlfriend of the jazz saxophonist Gerry Mulligan, who began hanging around the Beat scene as a teenager. Morrill's poem-manifesto, Dido, reads like a criminal resume ("Thief, fraud, con—educated by masters —on the street—travel—prison.... Adept with weapons, with no fear of violence...."), suggesting the scene's infatuation with a certain outlaw glamour and existential danger akin to the dark, Mansonoid flipside of Flower Power.

Genuinely gifted artists also fell victim to the drug scene in Venice. One was Ben Talbot, whose satirical collages and zany mixed media assemblages, such as "Shrine of the Great American Weaner," were in a league with those of Ed Kienholz. Talbot participated in group exhibitions at Los Angeles' prestigious Dwan Gallery and had a solo show at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1961. But his alcohol and drug abuse accelerated over the next decade, after his once supportive wife left him, and he became yet another drug casualty in 1974.

Following Berman's lead, many who drifted into his orbit took up collage and photomontage as the most expedient mediums for direct, unschooled expression. Their overwrought efforts often resemble nothing so much as pages in the "trip books" in which itinerant hippies would record their drug experiences with intricate doodles and scrawled, disjointed texts.

Influenced by George Herms, one of the better known artists in this show, the collages of Bobby Driscoll, a former child actor who was washed up in films by the age of sixteen and dead of a drug overdose by thirty, belong to this genre. So do Stuart Perkoff's compositions made up of images clipped from 1950s girly magazines and superhero comic books, interspersed with cryptic snippets of newspaper text, although Perkoff was a local poet of some note and made it into Donald Allen's landmark anthology "The New American Poetry."

Other artists in Berman's circle, however, display a raw graphic wit that predates by decades the comicbook-derived drawings of the contemporary Los Angeles artist Richard Pettibon, who graduated from punk album covers and fanzine illustrations to major museum recognition. The poet painter Aya Tarlow, for example, created drawings in her "Beat Scrapbook" that employ linear elements akin to David Stone Martin's classic covers for fifties jazz albums. In the late sixties, Tarlow also made underground films with cameo appearances by musicians such as Donovan and Ringo Starr which were forbearers of the video collaborations between visual artists and punk-rock musicians that took place in the East Village in the 1980s.

It should come as no surprise that the actor Dennis Hopper, who has always been something of a hipster, hanging out with James Dean in the 'fifties and at Andy Warhol's Factory in the 'sixties, also made the scene in Venice. But who would have guessed that Billy Gray, best remembered as Bud, the clean-cut teenage son on TV sitcom *Father Knows Best*, had been a closet bedbug beatnik?

After meeting Wallace Berman and George Herms in 1961, Gray started working in stained glass, and when a pot bust a year later ended his Hollywood career, was free to devote himself to speedway motorcycle racing and creating artsy tchotkes such as "Untitled medallion (cross), Leaded stained glass, 1962."

Other Hollywood actors found their way to Berman's circle, less as slummers, it would seem, than as refugees from Tinseltown superficiality. Unlike some of the dabblers, Dean Stockwell, who starred in *Compulsion* and Russel Tamblyn, of *West Side Story* fame, both became committed artists, working in a similar vein of surreal photomontage. Stockwell continues to exhibit his own photomontages under the name of Robert Dean Stockwell, and Tamblyn says, "The death of my own father didn't affect me as much as Wallace's death did."

* * *

That it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the art from the ephemera in this exhibition is not necessarily a drawback. Often, Berman himself didn't seem to make this distinction; yet, even his most casual photographs of his wife Shirley, which appear all throughout the exhibition, can hardly be called artless.

Shirley Berman was obviously her husband's muse. A slender beauty with a great bone structure and huge, kohl-encircled raccoon eyes, she appears able to assume a multitude of roles. For the cover of *Semina 4*, she is posed in close-up wearing a Little Girl Lost expression, suggesting a hipster parody of 1950s kitschmeister couple Walter and Margaret Keane's enormously popular paintings of big-eyed urchins— the very antithesis of hip taste! The resemblance to the Keane waifs seems ironically underlined by the title Berman gave to this picture: "Wife."

In other photographs by her husband, Shirley Berman is illuminated by a shaft of sunlight that transforms her into a Botticelli jazz angel as she stands in front of a junkshop window with a hocked saxophone hovering above her head, or reclines nude, elongated as a Modigliani, on a small boat with the ankh symbol on its bow, embodying the male fantasy of a beatnik dream chick.

Other Venice artists, as well, were inspired by Shirley Berman's cool, intelligent beauty. Photographer and video pioneer Charles Brittin caught her with her electric pixie-cut (possibly a model for the frightwig of the young Bob Dylan) flared up like tips of flame, as she lent the simple act of purchasing a jelly apple from a stand on the Ocean Park Pier the enigmatic grace of a mannerist allegory. Another local photographer, Edmund Teske, created a memorable print by superimposing a mysterious image of Shirley with closed eyes over a shadowy double exposure of workmen demolishing his old grammar school, while artist's model and collageist Patricia Jordan merged her own photograph of Shirley Berman's regal profile with the Byzantine icons, Pre-Raphaelite nudes, and Egyptian goddesses in a collage scroll called "Golden Damsels Descending from the Clouds."

While she bore a more superficial resemblance to the later Warhol super star called Viva, Shirley Berman was on the level of Edie Sedgewick, the most charismatic beauty ever to emerge from the Factory, as the physical embodiment of an era. But unlike the starcrossed Edie, who succumbed to drugs and a too-much-too-soon lifestyle in the limelight, Shirley comes across as a domestic madonna (particularly in her husband's many photographs of her with their young son Tosh), serenely immune to the pitfalls of the surrounding scene. Yet, even without a Warholian media glare to enhance her aura, she had an innate ability to impart a fashion model elegance to the thriftshop castoffs with which every bohemian artist's wife was obliged to make do.

* * *

Style-sponge that he was, Warhol may have picked up some pointers for his Factory entourage when he came to Los Angeles for his 1963 show at Ferus Gallery and met Berman and his circle. Certainly the big painting of electric chairs that Andy silkscreened the same year was influenced by the altered still of Barbara Stanwyck strapped into an electric chair, from the film "I Want to Live" that Berman ran on the cover of *Semina 7* two years earlier.

Both artists employed grids of images, Warhol's silkscreened, Berman's Verifaxed. But while Warhol repeated likenesses of celebrities and the society types who commissioned his portraits, Berman multiplied symbols drawn from the Kabbalah decades before Judaic mysticism became trendy among movie stars and pop tarts like Madonna.

The compositions for which Berman is best known repeat several identical Verifax images of a hand-held transistor radio within the squares of a grid. Within the body of each radio is a different image appropriated from the mass media or drawn from the artist's own archives.

Michael Duncan sees these compositions as "a resonant metaphor for Berman's broader role as a transmitter of images and ideas that were metaphorically 'in the air.' " These and other images of a nude Shirley Berman, marijuana plants, snakes, and couples in erotic embrace, were often overlaid with Aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, regarded by Kabbalists as "the spiritual root of all other letters."

That the Aleph became Berman's most prominent symbol—painted or photocopied on paper stained to look like papyrus, walls, rocks, and even motorcycle helmets—could be dismissed as an affectation not unlike the later hippie infatuation with the trappings of Eastern mysticism. But growing up in the Fairfax district (as close as L.A. came in the postwar years to having a Jewish ghetto like the Lower East Side, with Hebrew lettering on shop windows) had to imbue such symbols with deeper meaning for Berman— a sensitive high school dropout, then still making ink drawings of jazz musicians that now strike me as remarkably similar to my own early efforts to delineate the hipster mystique.

Poet David Meltzer, a frequent contributor to *Semina*, suggests that, in Berman's Verifax collages, "the overwhelming banality of media imagery is held at bay" by the Kabbalistic power of this letter. And Stephen Fredman states just as credibly that the "obsessions of Berman's life— his family, his friends, his devotion to jazz, his love of sexual display, his outrage at society as death-affirming—are all brought under the sway of the sacralizing function of Aleph."

Fredman does not seem to notice, however, how this "Sacralizing" can take a more negative turn when aspects of drug addiction are naively equated with religious ritual, as in two photos by Berman in *Semina 2*, showing artist Robert Alexander shooting heroin, the tie around his forearm suggesting the "tefillin" that orthodox Jewish men wrap around their forearms for morning prayers, one of Berman's Aleph pieces visible over his shoulder.

* * *

After his obscenity bust, while continuing to work on the Verifax collages for which he would eventually be best known, Berman concentrated much of his energy on *Semina*, producing nine issues between 1955 and 1964. Laboriously printed on a handpress in editions of only a few hundred,

its pages of poems and artworks stuffed into envelopes unbound, *Semina* was closer to what we now call an artist's book (albeit in serial form) than a traditional literary journal. Indeed, that Stuart Perkoff, a beatnik coffeehouse bard at best for all his good luck in getting into the Allen anthology, is cited in the exhibition catalog as "the most accomplished poet associated with the 'Venice West' group" does not say much for the native writing talent that Berman had to draw upon. However, by soliciting contributions from San Francisco poets like Diane DiPrima, Michael McClure, and Robert Duncan, as well as world class bohemians like the Scottish writer Alexander Trocchi (who lived in Venice briefly), and augmenting them with translationsof classic French texts by Baudelaire, Cocteau, and Artaud, Berman managed to give *Semina* a rich mix of literary content, bolstered visually by his own work and that of fellow artists like John Altoon and Bruce Connor, among many others.

These artists are now acknowledged as forerunners of hippie psychedelic art, funk and junk sculpture, new wave painting, graffiti, punk, and various neo-dada tendencies that would emerge in the 1960s, '70s and '80s. Certainly *Semina*, with its loose-leaf format, was a precursor of "mail art"—those odd scraps of images and text that Ray Johnson sent us in the mid sixties, which we wish we'd saved rather than glanced at and tossed in the trash. And with their privileging of visionary expression over formal innovation, many in Berman's circle can now be seen as progenitors of postmodernism. Directly or indirectly, their influence still filters down to inspire young artist-hipsters struggling to create bohemian utopias of their own.

Given the present cultural climate, however (in which a recent issue of *The New York Times Magazine* actually saw fit to headline a feature article about trendy downtown D.J.'s and party promoters "New Bohemians"), few are able to experiment or embrace poverty as freely as the laid-back Beats of Berman's time. Still, "Semina Culture" is an exhibition to be savored; for it presents a spirited counterweight to the forces of fashion, finance, and real estate that hold the art world hostage today.

Epilogue: One Arm Drawing, One Writer Clapping

We came to own the picture on the wall opposite our bed, where I am writing this, because one freezing winter night a few years ago, as I escorted Jeannie home from a class she was taking at N.Y.U., we saw an arm sticking out of a pile of old blankets on the sidewalk outside the Grey Art Gallery. The pile of blankets was surrounded by one of those fortresses of shabby belongings that the homeless are given to constructing around themselves—in this case a shopping cart filled with many rolls of paper most prominent among them.

As we came closer we could see that the hand at the end of the arm was holding a pencil and putting the finishing touches to an intricately detailed drawing of an owl on a large sheet of paper spread out on the pavement. The owl was perched on a gnarled, Asian-looking bough, and as I noticed this I also noticed that the artist, from what I could see of his face under the shadowy layers of blankets in which he was almost entirely cocooned, also appeared Asian. In fact, with his stringy white hair, sparse beard, and lined, weather-beaten face, he looked like one those literati artists who once lived as hermits amid the craggy mountain peaks of ancient China and Japan (most of whom, in today's Manhattan housing market, would be homeless, too).

He seemed oblivious to us as he went about his work, which he must have been at for some time before we arrived, judging from the detailed color pencil composition, with a crescent moon hanging in the sky above the owl's bough and every feather individually delineated. When he produced a red pencil from somewhere beneath the blankets and began to inscribe a symbol resembling the "chops," or seals, with which Asian artists sign their work, I knew that the picture was finished and asked him if I could buy it. When he nodded and I asked "How much?", he held up both of his hands, opening and closing his fingers twice. I gave him a twenty and he rolled the drawing up, put a rubber band around it, and handed it up to me. Then he disappeared back into his bundle of blankets like a turtle withdrawing into its shell, and we knew it was time for us to go.

I am looking at the picture now and marveling, as I always do, at the expression in the owl's eyes. They are the first thing you notice, but not in the way you notice the big, insipid eyes of the waifs in those Keane kitsch paintings or the creepy eyes on those plastic busts of Christ that seem to follow you around the room. My owl's eyes are startlingly soulful, as though the artist had put something of his own suffering into them. Of course, people in my line of work are not supposed to talk like this: as if such a mystical transference were possible. We're supposed to know better—or at least pretend that we do. One could even think that I'm projecting this haunting quality into the picture because of what I know about the artist (who I look for every time I'm around N.Y.U., by the way, but have never seen again); but I don't think so. I think that homeless literati hermit captured something extraordinary in the picture on my wall—something you don't see in a lot of the art hanging in galleries these days.

It's beyond bohemian; it's art for art's sake. And I suspect that Wallace Berman would have dug it, too.

* * *

Exploring "Intimate Spaces" at Carrozzini von Buhler Gallery

In Alberto Bovio's black and white photograph "Personal Horizons," an old man sits alone on a bench overlooking a body of water, his feet resting on the railing as he reads a newspaper. The sky is overcast and the empty promenade around him is slick with rain. Yet his solitude is complete; he appears perfectly content. There is no sign that he envies the inhabitants of the grand-looking buildings a few yards away their private comforts. He has made his own intimate space in public.

"Intimate Spaces" is the name and theme of artist/curator Stefania Carrozzini's latest exhibition, featuring several widely exhibited Italian artists, organized by D'Ars International Exhibition Projects, based in Milan, Italy. Exploring what Carrozzini refers to as "the most important and precious things we have," the show can be seen at the Carrozzini von Buhler Gallery (CVB), 407 West 13th Street from November 7 through 30.

Following her recent practice of contributing a work of her own, which is also used for the catalog cover, to each of her exhibitions, Carrozzini jump-starts the theme with an intriguing photo of yet another solitary soul achieving privacy in public, as he snoozes in a chair in a garishly lit, mall-like space suggesting a hall of mirrors or one of Escher's interminable mazes.

Enza Santoro's untitled color photograph printed on forex puts a different spin on the show's theme. Yet no one can deny that a close-up of the softly shadowed cleft of a peachy pair of buttocks, gracefully encircled by vines of delicate pink flowers, constitutes an especially intimate space. Similarly, but somewhat more ambiguously, an abstract mixed media sculpture by Giampaolo Osele called "Dream of an African Night" has its own erotic resonance, suggesting a tribal vaginal fetish object created with natural materials that might also be used to construct a hut.

The notion that intimate spaces can sometimes confine more than they shelter comes across in Giuliana Malanca's mixed media painting, "City," where wire mesh stretched over a nocturnal expanse atmospherically evoked in oil on canvas creates an ominous enclosure suggesting a detention pen. By contrast, Marco Pucci's 3-D photo installation, featuring the image of a young man in a doorway extending a restraining hand, while a mask-like face projects into the viewer's space from its frame, seems to signify the game of invasion and evasion played between celebrities and the paparazzi who intrude upon their intimate spaces to penetrate the public mask of fame.

Photo by Stefania Carrozzini

To Adalgisa Romano, however, the whole question of intimacy or its opposite takes a more metaphysical direction in a digital print called "IN/S," in which a mysterious verdant bubble, floating against a clear blue sky, embodies what the artist refers to as "my obsession for INNER / EXTERIOR, CONTENTS / CONTAINER."

Paolo Cavinato's sideline as a stage designer for theatrical productions in Rome and Paris has obviously influenced his video and installation art, here exemplified by an installation called "Tears," in which glass, metal, and bright circuit lighting are employed to suggest an intimate enclosure as austere as a monk's cell in a cloister.

The naked human body, that most intimate of all spaces, is again employed by Marcello Diotallevi, a visual poet and mail artist, who superimposes closely-spaced typewriting on a xeroxed photo-image of an inverted female torso in "Letters from Kythera," implying both the physical and epistolary intimacy of a love affair.

Of all artists, perhaps painters allow themselves the most leeway in interpreting themes such as that of this exhibition, given the freedom of their medium and their need to make make emotions and ideas palpable in pigment, rather than expressing them intellectually. Thus the faux primitive figure painter known simply Marrius gives us an oil on canvas called "The Hug," in which the bodies of a couple are united as a single formal and coloristic entity so successfully as to eliminate any space between them, intimate or otherwise.

In Gabriella Ceccherini's equally bold Art Brut portrait, a huge, perplexed-looking head, its misplaced features squeezed in swirls straight from the tube, its bloated contours spreading over the canvas like a tactile, topographical map of an island, conveys the notion that an intimate space can also be a place of isolation, as opposed to comfort. Yet an opposite mood comes across in an abstract painting by Rosa Prizzi, where rhythmically superimposed shapes and harmonious blue hues, interspersed with bursts of red, convey the sense of a sanctuary. Then there is Pino Chimenti, whose hard-edge painting in acrylic on wood depicts an array of fanciful abstract and figurative forms as intricate and meticulous as those of Oyvind Fahlstrom or Trevor Winkfield, the intimate space in this case being the mysterious mental place from which the artist draws such a wealth of personal signs and symbols.

Indeed, in her catalog introduction, Stefania Carrozzini makes clear that the intention of this exhibition is to explore not only physical spaces but "mental spaces, spiritual spaces, the space of our minds," in order to reflect upon "the border between visible and invisible, public and private sphere." The artists she has chosen do this and more in ways that not even a curator as imaginative and savvy as Carrozzini could have anticipated.

—Ed McCormack

Mauricio Toulumsis: Secular Icons of a Painter's Spiritual Search

Widely exhibited in both Mexico and the United States , Mauricio Toulumsis has given himself a unique artistic project: to explore his belief in eternal life in the medium of painting. The female, seen as "the central figure in the process of life, as the stewardess of birth and creation," is the primary protagonist of Toulumsis' paintings, featured in "Masters of the Imagination: The Latin American Fine Art Exhibition," at Agora Gallery, Chelsea, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, from October 21 to November 10. (Reception: Thursday, October 26, from 6 to 8 PM.)

Working in acrylic on canvas, Toulumsis depicts his female figures in a fantastic realist style comparable to the imaginatively distorted surrealism of Victor Brauner. Peculiar to Toulumsis' figures, however, are distinctive forms that project from their heads like tree-branches, antlers or antennae. These seem to be attributes of the spirit-world that Toulumsis' figures appear to inhabit and project a sense of supernatural energies that evade rational understanding. One can only imagine that Toulumsis has arrived at some intuitive understanding of how these spirit beings would appear, which he makes surprisingly convincing by virtue of his artistic skill and conviction.

Other anatomical anomalies in Toulumsis' paintings are figures that morph below the shoulders into forms that resemble the roots of trees, as seen in "Woman Eclipsed," or that culminate in Baroque arabesques like the figures in "Flesh, Soul & Spirit." Despite their unusual attributes, however, we experience these female personages as palpable presences in Toulumsis' paintings—as specific portraits of imaginary beings rather, than generalized depictions of anthropomorphic symbols or archetypes.

"Soul & Spirit Creations"

In the painting called "Soul and Spirit Creations," for example, we encounter three such feminine beings in one of the artist's most chromatically vibrant canvases, while in "Later, We Will Follow You," four figures are clustered together harmoniously, the central one having the aforementioned root-like configurations visible below the shoulders. In these, as in other paintings by Toulumsis, there is a strong sense of spiritual inquiry, in keeping with the note in the artist's biography that he has been involved for over three decades in a process of self exploration, as well as a "philosophical search for meaning in life, meaning in death, and truths about the corporeal and spiritual human."

One of the most complex of Mauricio Toulumsis' recent acrylics on canvas is the large composition entitled "The Revelation of Women's Feelings." In this work, which resembles a kind of secular contemporary cousin of the Romanesque icon, the figures of several mysterious woman, submerged below the shoulders in a ring of clouds from which three upraised hands also protrude as though to hail them, are interspersed with seven representations of the cross. While one would not attempt to analyze this painting's specific meaning, it projects a powerful sense of something esoteric, just beyond understanding.

Indeed, one could spend many hours studying the paintings of Mauricio Toulumsis, digesting their symbols, and attempting to decipher their esoteric meanings. However, it seems sufficient to take them at face value, as mysterious and ultimately unknowable manifestations of one man's search for truth transformed into objects of considerable aesthetic appeal.

—Peter Wiley

Emerging Artists Are Featured in West Side Showcase

"New Contemporary Art," curated by Erica Mapp and Nichelle Ryan for the West Side Arts Coalition and seen recently at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street, was a refreshingly unpretentious survey of emerging artists selected by two of their peers. Indeed, the co-curators set the pace with the quality of their own work:

Erica Mapp showed two abstract serigraphs from her "Rosa Mystica" series, in which rectangular forms printed in a linear fashion over areas of rosy violet projected a mood at once lyrical and austere. Like the French painter and printmaker Jacques Villon, Mapp has a particular gift for making the most formal configurations resonate with subtle emotive qualities.

Nichelle Ryan's large oil pastel on paper, "Little Girl Blue," gave visual voice to the somber mood of the great jazz standard of that name, with the simplified figure of a woman burying her face in her hands, bathed in melancholy blue auras. Ryan's bold handling of folds in the woman's garment imbued the composition with further urgency.

Renaldo Davidson exhibited an iconic triple image of soulful superstar Stevie Wonder, his dark glasses gleaming, that contrasted handsomely with an equally accomplished portrait of a little girl in a purple dress squirming restlessly, as children will, when asked to pose. Both works were brought to life by Davidson's vibrant color and expressive line.

Esther Hyneman is a gifted portrait painter in the manner of Lucian Freud, judging from her two oils of an elderly woman, her indomitable character shining through in the artist's juicy oil impasto. However, Hyneman's painting of a solitary New York City pigeon had its own considerable appeal.

Carole Randall has a radically funky approach to assemblage, seen here in two large works on foam board, entitled "Milkmaid's Tits" and "Milk Tits and Milk Bars." Randall combines a variety of urban detritus, including what appear to be brassiere cups, to generate a riotously energetic effect as oddly compelling as an early Ornette Coleman saxophone solo.

By contrast, Julie Tersigni showed a gridded installation of nine same size square mixed media works in which the yin yang sign and a variety of other symbols and spirals suggested all manner of esoteric meanings. Tersigni's use of glitter, along with gold mica and acrylic on canvas gave her pieces a kind of over-the-top Pop pizzazz that made them sensually seductive.

Shirley Piniat never fails to surprise us with the variety of lively compositions she creates with mixed media and collage. Generally small and densely layered, Piniat's collages, with their jagged torn-paper forms and vigorous brush work, are ideally seen in groups of at least four (as here), where they conduct a dialogue.

LeNoira Naune's mixed media works have a raw, primitive power which can only be compared to the work of the American visionary Forrest Bess. Naune, however, has a unique way of integrating glass panels, paisley fabrics and other found materials into compositions notable for their tactile directness and subtle sense of mystery.

The printmaker Rosa Santos showed a group of six monochromatic etchings, lithographs, and woodcuts in which the particular qualities of black and white were employed dramatically to convey a specific images that seemed to suggest deep personal meanings. The face of a veiled woman, a female nude, a litter of lion cubs, or a saintly face are all invested with equal significance by virtue of Santos' exquisite sensitivity to line and tone.

—Marie R. Pagano

Nancy Staub Laughlin: Beyond Seductive Surfaces

In artists whose work is simplistic or obvious, changes can be stark. Extreme shifts signal a new direction or stylistic digression. In the case of more subtle and complex sensibilities, however, every minute variation seems pregnant with meaning, the smallest details give one an inkling that something significant is going on. So it is with the ever-evolving imagery of Nancy Staub Laughlin, whose second solo exhibition at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, "Pastels and Photographs" will open on January 9, 2007 and continue through February 17.

"Waterford in the Winter"

Laughlin still adheres to her rigorous process, photographing objects submerged in tanks of water or reflected off rippling surfaces to create carefully calculated distortions, then painting them in a meticulous photorealist technique in pastels. She still chooses an odd and eclectic array of baubles, bangles, beads, sequins, and other dimestore tchotkes as her "props," combining them with mirrors, glass, strings of pearls, and photographs of natural landscapes, either serving as secondary images within her compositions or setting the scene for her tableaux. Through her peculiar aesthetic alchemy, she transforms these disparate elements into glittering little worlds, microcosmic material metaphors in a visual poetics so densely layered as to almost defy deciphering.

As its title suggests, a new twist in Laughlin's present exhibition is that the "photo studies" which she creates as preliminary references now share center stage with her pastel paintings. Not only do these large color photographs, far from mere studies, hold their own admirably as discrete works of art, they also possess peculiar qualities of their own, particularly a crystalline clarity that lends their surreal juxtapositions a startling veracity. Their imagistic juxtapositions are as surreal as those in the collages of Max Ernst, while their bright, slick Better Homes & Gardens colors project a piquant Pop wit— like calendar art gone ga-ga!—suggesting that Laughlin could launch a whole separate career in the forefront of the new tendencies in postmodern photography.

Then again, Laughlin's enterprise has always had something playful about it, harking back to childhood games and reveries. Her pastels, with their softer, more lyrical qualities, transport the viewer back to those remembered realms of innocent imagination where ordinary things take on auras of the supernatural; where piles of marbles and bottlecaps in a cigar box, say, can become a pirate's chest of precious jewels .

Much can be made of the fantastic element in Laughlin's work, of her intuitive ability to create dazzling juxtapositions of object, shadow, and reflection. Surely few contemporary artists are as adept as she at conjuring chromatic magic, provoking prismatic sensations, or presenting us with luminous layers of illusion. However, to lean too heavily on her "special effects" would be to trivialize the seriousness of Laughlin's project. For there is much more than immediately meets the eye in her compositions, which only begin to reveal the full depth of their riches with prolonged contemplation.

In the pastel "Waterford in the Winter," for example, a picture postcard of a snowy country scene with tiny baubles and miniature multicolored leaves scattered over it is set within an intricately carved crystal bowl. The bowl itself is set within what appears to be an actual snowy landscape (though given Laughlin's gift for illusion, one never knows), mirroring the landscape in the postcard. However, among the swirling snowflakes are a few grains of rice. This single detail, suggesting the handfuls of rice flung at the bride and groom at a wedding, seems to turn a winter wonderland, much like the ones in those novelty snow-globes that fascinated us in childhood, into a chillingly adult meditation on marriage. This, of course, is only one possible interpretation among many.

By contrast, in another pastel, "Elegance of Sequins," the same crystal bowl figures just as prominently. Only here it is seen in an infinite field of delicate white wildflowers, with a photograph of a lush summer tree set amid many colorful baubles at its center, seeming now to suggest the high hopes of youthful romance.

Not that anything is spelled out quite so specifically in Laughlin's compositions; it is simply that they resonate with submerged narrative meanings far beyond their seductive surfaces. At the same time, those glittering, shimmering, or translucent surfaces themselves seem symbolic of the supernatural, as seen in "Window of Paradise," in which a gossamer white curtain wafts diagonally across the top of the composition like a veil between worlds in a mysterious interior where luminous orbs float weightlessly. In the equally metaphysical pastel "Pink Diamond and Sequin," a close-up of the objects named in the title is seen within a rectangle floating at a sail-like angle on a glittering blue body of water.

For reasons, as usual with this artist, that are difficult to define, one of Laughlin's most haunting recent pastels is the stately triptych called "Fall of the Sparkling Flowers." Its three narrow, separately framed panels evoke a panoramic manicured country garden with dense foliage in the foreground and spacious green lawns stretching into the distance beyond. While a jewel-encrusted floral pin dominates the center panel, large stone garden urns are prominent in the compositions of both side panels. Although both overflow with pink flowers, larger crystal floral forms spill from the vase in the right-hand panel. Elongated, pendulous crystal forms are also suspended midair in the adjoining panels. In contrast to some of Laughlin's more intricate compositions, this relatively sedate triptych has an eerie, almost funereal quality akin to the "Vanitas" paintings of Audrey Flack.

Indeed, like Flack, Laughlin resists the tendency of many artists who can be loosely termed "photorealists" to confine themselves to a limited range of subject matter through which they display their technical proficiency, while establishing a signature style with deliberately banal subjects such as Charles Bell's images of gumball machines or Ralph Goings' paintings of pickup trucks and fast food stands.

For an artist to employ similar means to probe more deeply into the nature of reality with complex visual conundrums is to risk a complexity that can be daunting in the age of reality lite and the sound bite. Obviously, Laughlin is willing to take the risks necessary to make images that lodge themselves in our consciousness with a persistence that suggests a major talent at the height of her powers.

—Ed McCormack

BOB DYLAN is the only two-legged genius in jukebox music. (The Beatles had eight legs and might have gone on wanting to hold our hand forever, if not for his influence.) Thus the former Robert Zimmerman rates "Bob Dylan's American Journey: 1956-1966," an exhibition of song lyrics, films, paintings, photos and other artifacts related to his most relevant decade, at the Morgan Library and Museum (no less!), 225 Madison Avenue, through January 6.

* * *

Since the internationally celebrated Venezuelan painter and sculptor **JULIO AGUILERA** is a nonstop cigar smoker, it seems apt that his new exhibition will be seen at the upscale tobacconists Davidoff of Geneva, 535 Madison Avenue (corner of 54th Street), from November 16 to February 23, 2007. The opening reception, on November 16 from 7 to 9 PM, should be aromatic as well as artistically edifying. (A lengthy review of Aguilera's exhibition will follow in our February/March issue.)

* * *

One never knows quite what to expect when **HOPE CARTER**, one of our most innovative and oddly lyrical installation artists, unveils a new exhibition. Her latest is called "Contemplating the frail intensity of red." Intriguing title? All we know is that it can be seen at Phoenix Gallery, 210 11th Avenue, in Chelsea, from November 1 through December 2, with an opening reception on Thursday, November 2, from 6 to 8 PM. Expect the unexpected. Period.

* * *

Leave it to the hip and cheeky gallerist and curator **JAMES CAVELLO** to discover an Austrian princess with the eye of a paparazzo. Only, **PRINCESS MARIANNE SAYN-WITTGENSTEIN**, now 87 and resting on her laurels, didn't have to hide in the bushes to get great shots of Jackie O, Audrey Hepburn, Elton John, and countless other socialites and celebrities. She was welcome everywhere, and like her good buddy Andy W (one of her favorite subjects, as amply evidenced here) she always brought her camera. "WARHOL and Other Photographs from the Sayn-Wittgenstein Collection" is at Westwood Gallery, 568 Broadway, now through December.

* * *

RICHARD SEGALMAN's paintings occupy a timeless space. Dreamy young women sit on tenement stoops, sun and shadow evoked in bold, buttery strokes. Or else they perch on windowsills staring out at the red brick facade of the tenement across the street. Segalman paints a world that is vanishing, yet is eternal. His pictures make one nostalgic for the tawdry romance of the Lower East Side before it was gentrified out of existence. He is a strong, mellow, somewhat melancholy painter: Neo-Ashcan School with a dash of Ab-Ex brio. His show makes one remember what oil painting is all about, at Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, 41 East 57th Street, from November 7 through December 2.

* * *

Blame it on the Big Guns of Abstract Expressionism: all too often large scale is equated with significance. **DOUG SAFRANEK** proves the fallacy of such thinking in his exhibition "Both Sides of the Bridge: New York in Egg Tempera," at ACA Galleries, 529 West 20th Street, through December 2. Safranek's "Gung Hay Fat Choy (Wishing You Prosperity)" encompasses a mere 4X3 1/4 inches, but it captures a panoramic stretch of East Broadway in Chinatown in meticulous detail, from individual pedestrians strolling past shops and restaurants, to a tiny bicycle chained to a parking sign, to the municipal spires of the financial district soaring skyward in the distance. But here, as in other miniature street scenes depicting our ethnically diverse neighborhoods, Safranek is concerned with much more than how many New Yorkers can dance on the head of a pin. In fact, he proves himself a peer of Cadmus, Tooker, Marsh, Wyeth and others in "Masters of Tempera," running concurrently in Gallery II.

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exhibition

AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS 88th Annual, "The Best of ASCA: 2006," Nov. 7 - 19 at Broome Street Gallery, 498 Broome St., NYC

Spiritual Auras Illuminate the Domestic Scenes of MG deButts

"I try to imagine what it would be like to open your eyes to the physical world for the first time, not with the immature mind of an infant, but with a fully developed consciousness," says the Virginia-born painter MG deButts. "Color, movement and random energy agitating against the vertical and horizontal planes would be a stunning assault on the senses. Everything interconnected and yet singular. Most of all human faces would seem inscrutable—fraught with both expectancy and judgment."

The visionary sense of wonder that deButts strives for comes across strongly in her oils on canvas, on view at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from December 7 through 27. (Reception December 7, 6 to 8 PM.)

On one level, the subjects that deButts chooses to paint are as domestic as those of Fairfield Porter. Adults and children are seen in pleasant, presumably upper middle class settings, at ease on grass lawns and in gardens, amid all the trappings of an affluent suburban lifestyle. Yet color is heightened and the commonplace becomes exotic, as though familiar scenes have suddenly become as exotic to the artist as Gauguin's first impressions of Tahiti. Indeed, deButts shares with that great post Impressionist a love of resonant color and fluid form that invests her canvases with a sense of energy and life. Although her figures are as anatomically accurate as those of any realist, they are invariably defined by bold, colorful outlines that resemble auras. One gets the sense that deButts is seeing through exterior appearances to the spiritual essence of each person that she paints.

"Agua"

Thus while the little girl standing in the backyard swimming pool in deButts' oil on canvas "Agua" is wearing a Mousketeer cap with ears and appears on one level as casual as any kid captured at play in a candid snapshot, she is also as much of a formal and symbolic entity as a figure in a religious icon. And the same can be said of the two boys in the foreground, one holding a garden hose, or the child romping with a butterfly net in the distance. Enveloped in their bright individual auras, each figure seems to signify the sacredness of existence—as though the artist truly is opening her eyes to the physical world for the first time and sharing her heightened vision with the viewer.

Conversely, the painting called "Comprehension," appears to convey the same idea from the perspective of the "seer," its composition dominated by close-up views of three babies who stare out at the viewer with what appears to be wide-eyed astonishment. Here, the thick outlines around the figures, along with deButts' characteristically bright, flat color areas, create a kind of Pop effect akin to that in the early paintings of Tom Wesselman.

However, while deButts' figures are just as emblematic as those of the Pop artist, they possess a spiritual presence, which comes across with special force in canvases such "Kate's Duck," in which a child and her toy loom monolithically in an enchanted garden, and "Suzan and Henry," a double portrait where a mother and child share the same golden aura.

—Maureen Flynn

A West Side Group Show Celebrates Silent Eloquence

One of the more lyrical recent group shows, "Silent Words," curated by Ruth Llanillo Leal for the West Side Arts Coalition, was seen recently at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street.

Leila Elias showed fanciful oils, such as the avian fantasy "White Mother Bird," and mixed media prints with titles like "Butterfly Dreams." Elias makes poetic statements with figurative subjects painted in softly harmonizing hues, as well as with photo-derived images juxtaposed surrealistically.

Miguel Angel demonstrated his knack for evoking ethereal feelings with unlikely materials, achieving a kind of transcendence in the process. In Angel's black on black assemblage "Enigma," a single bold black stroke, enlivened by subtle inner swirls, appeared on the reverse side of a glass panel, exquisitely counterbalanced by a shard-like shape in low relief.

Joey Infante's four small oils on panel of the same scene in Central Park at different times of the year showed how the seasons paint the earth with their varied palette of hues. Equally enchanting was Infante's "Normandy, France," an unabashedly picturesque view of a flock of sheep traversing a path under sheltering trees in a pastoral landscape.

Bernardo Diaz's abstract canvases are as aggressively suggestive as their titles. In both "Revenge-Crazed" and "Propagandist," Diaz employs bold angular shapes, areas of a strident color, and abrasive collage elements to make the point that the world, although a harsh place, can surprise us with sudden bursts of beauty.

Ivan Sherman, on the other hand, juxtaposes the burning Twin Towers with a quote from Whitman celebrating "high growths of iron, slender, strong, light, splendidly uprising toward clear skies" to chilling effect in his digital print "Manhattan." By contrast, Sherman's large assemblage of hand-cut and painted corrugated cardboard layered in pyramidal shapes and mounted on canvas is a tour de force of geometric complexity.

Ruth Llanillo Leal's meticulous and accomplished acrylics are at once as austere and sensual as the figure paintings of Will Barnet. Leal's "Lost in Space" sets a single, fleshy pink floral form and its sinuous umbilical vines against a smooth black background, while her "Dreaming" depicts a slender, pale blue female nude as graceful as a living arabesque.

Berik Kulmamirov is a contemporary exponent of classical surrealism, employing incongruous images to evoke a sense of the uneasy relationship between dreams and reality. In one of Kulmamirov's oils, a spigot on a grand piano drips water into the mouth of a parched lizard; in another, a penguin perches on a desert ridge, under which three camels stroll— images that, like those of Magritte, defy logic yet resonate in the subconscious.

The oils of Mary Anne Holliday imply cosmic and oceanic subjects while scrupulously avoiding specific description in favor of a kind of phenomenological formalism. In Holliday's "Coming and Going," colorful spheres splash into areas of dense black strokes; in "Beyond Beyond," similar shapes appear to bounce like ping pong balls above moon-crators to buoyant effect.

The oils of Margie Steinmann, on the other hand, appear to allude to clustered figurative forms and landscape shapes without sacrificing their abstract autonomy. In canvases such as "Sweet Danger" and "Keeping Track," for example, Steinmann generates a rhapsodic chromatic and gestural energy by virtue of her softly diffused yet vibrant colors and muscular paint handling.

—Maurice Taplinger

A Symphonic Flow Animates David Tobey's Abstractions

Although other visual artists have drawn analogies between abstract painting and music, David Tobey can speak with special authority on the relationship between the two art forms, being both a painter and a professional violinist who has been performing for over thirty years. In fact, recently when Tobey's painting "Exuberance" was reproduced on the program cover for the Music Conservatory of Westchester's 75th anniversary concert at Alice Tully Hall, as well as on a large poster displayed outside Lincoln Center, Tobey performed as guest conductor for part of the program.

Growing up in Westchester, as the child of the well-known historical illustrator and muralist Alton Tobey and the renowned concert pianist Rosalyn Tobey, David Tobey got a firm grounding in both of his artistic disciplines from an early age. But while his father was his first art teacher, the fact that he eventually gravitated toward abstract painting—a genre closer to music, which by its very nature is the most abstract of all the arts—indicates that he may have been even more influenced subliminally by the sound of his mother's piano, presumably as it resonated from another part of the house as she practiced or rehearsed. In any case, the visual / musical synthesis at which Tobey arrived, after graduating from the Julliard School of Music and studying at The Art Students League, seems a natural outgrowth of that formative experience.

For those, like myself, however, who have been familiar with only Tobey's paintings since his first solo show in New York City in 2003, the sculptures also included in his latest exhibition will reveal a whole new facet of this artist. The show, a benefit for the National Scholastic Chess Foundation, can be seen at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from November 7 through 25, with a reception on Thursday November 9 from 5:30 to 8:30 PM.

One should not be surprised that Tobey would endeavor to capture an equally musical sense of movement, rhythm, and spontaneity in his sculptures as in his paintings; yet one cannot help but be impressed nonetheless by how well he succeeds, given the unyielding nature of his medium, welded metal. However, Tobey exemplifies the approach that the Spanish sculptor Julio Gonzalez espoused when he pioneered this medium in the 1920s: "drawing in space." Tobey achieves a unique draftsmanly fluidity in metal, surpassing even that of Gonzalez, as he duplicates the forms in his paintings in three dimensions, particularly through his use of gracefully curved rods to convey a similarly linear quality, or uses organic shapes in combination with more geometric forms to invest the contours of his pieces with a sense of flow and flux.

Those who saw Tobey's first Manhattan exhibition may remember that he titled it "The Structure of Energy." That felicitous phrase still applies in terms of encapsulating what his work is really about: the synthesis of energy and form, of vitality and control. And while it was descriptive in the first instance of his paintings, the same dynamic applies to his welded steel sculptures like "Junk Yard Dog," in which various found metal objects, such as a large spring, screws, bolts, and other other salvaged industrial detritus are employed much in the same way that Tobey layers skeins of pigment in his acrylics on canvas.

The main difference, of course, is that in Tobey's sculptures, form alone must do the work of form and color. This could seem a formidable handicap, since in his paintings, Tobey is a sumptuous colorist, combining brilliant hues, both with the brush and with a pouring technique, in a densely layered and saturated manner, to achieve qualities that make immediately clear why the term "chromatic" is used in both painting and music.

David Tobey with works in his exhibition at Pleiades Gallery

However, Tobey more than makes up for the absence of color in his sculptures by virtue of the fluidity of his forms, in pieces such as "Conductor," where the metal rod at the top of the piece, supported by a welded welter of more baroque, anthropomorphic shapes, wittily suggests a baton. Other metal sculptures such as "Quixote" "El Toro" and "Moon Archer" also emulate the hide-and-seek element of figuration that animates Tobey's abstractions, where one is initially seduced by formal elements only to encounter allusions to the visible world on prolonged viewing. Although it is a delight to suddenly discover the mounted knight within the freewheeling abstraction of Tobey's "Quixote," or discern the contours of the horned bovine in "El Toro," this sense of delayed recognition is especially appealing in "Moon Archer." For here, the circular shape at the top of the piece seems to function both as the simplified head of an abstract figure aiming an arrow and a lunar orb, making concrete metaphor for the poetic title.

As for Tobey's paintings, they continue to evolve at a pace with his native talent, as seen in the brilliantly colorful and richly configured large canvas called "Bishop Takes Rook," which according to the artist emulates how "chess masters strategize to formulate a dynamic approach to the game while creating concealed patterns and relationships within," with linear images of chess pieces hidden within the composition's intricate configurations of swirls, set against a brilliant red ground. While the artist's use of gracefully sweeping loops of black and yellow poured paint as the dominant forms in this work might recall Jackson Pollock, the more deliberate calligraphic dance of the underlying linear networks is more akin to the work of Mark Tobey, a namesake to whom, as far as one knows, David Tobey is not related.

Among several other strong paintings and sculptures, perhaps the centerpiece of David Tobey's new exhibition is "Fallen Angels 9/11," a large acrylic on canvas, painted in 2002, that alludes to the video images of the terrorist victims who were forced to leap to their death from the burning Twin Towers, which have been burned indelibly into our communal memory by the news media. Through the merciful auspices of abstraction, the artist transforms the horrific into the symbolic, creating an image as mythical as the fall of Icarus. In this powerful, vertiginous composition in a palette dominated by red, white, and blue, David Tobey demonstrates that his visual music can be somber as well as uplifting.

—Ed McCormack

Kimberly Berg: Restoring the Power of the Great Goddess

Like the late John Lennon, Kimberly Berg would probably classify himself as a "male feminist", judging from the work on his website (WWW.ISISRISING.NET) which evokes the spirit of the mystical matrilineage that Gerda Lerner celebrates in her seminal text The Creation of Feminist Consciousness From the Middle Ages to 1870.

Like these early mystical feminists, Berg propagates a holistic spirituality based on what Lerner terms "the concept of the divine female, Great Goddess, procreatrix, " in mixed media and pastel images of the female nude as the embodiment of all that is beautiful and humane in our world. Although Lerner's writings are not among them, Berg's website also includes a variety of texts, including an intriguing treatise called "The Natural Superiority of Women," citing Ashley Montagu's theory that "The love of a mother for her child is the basic patent and model for all human relationships," as well as articles on the powerful roles played by women in several ancient cultures.

"Mandala ll"

But by far the most convincing aesthetic case is made by the drawings themselves, in which the female figure invariably takes on a monumental quality, displaying its power, even in repose. Especially outstanding in this regard is a series entitled "Meditation. " In these mixed media works the voluptuous nude figure is seen in solitude in a forest setting, the subtly modulated earth colors that dominate the series emphasizing the primal relationship of women and nature. Here, as in all of Berg's drawings, spiritual and erotic qualities are combined in a secular manner that would not have been conceivable in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, when artists such as Hildegard of Bingen, and Margery Kemp still labored under the religious strictures of patriarchal thought. Yet such early visionaries, who devised their own, more surreptitious, ways of expressing the radical notion that spirit and nature were not antithetical are surely among Berg's artistic ancestors.

More overtly mystical than the "Meditation" series (despite its title) are a group of exquisite pastels entitled "Mandala," in which female figures are juxtaposed with glowing circular symbols executed in luminous hues akin to those in the pastels of Redon. The nude figures, the artist explains, are "a metaphor for a certain mental nakedness that is required of us before we can enter through the first gateway of the Mandala."

While no rationale is needed for any of Berg's nudes beyond the beauty that more than justifies them in aesthetic terms, the figures in another series of pastels entitled "Woman & Mirror," bathed in sensual blues, could symbolize naked introspection. In any case, like all of this artist's work, they succeed in fulfilling his desire "to restore that part of ancient goddess culture that honored women for their sacred, life-giving, life-affirming powers."

—Maureen Flynn

Nature and Metamorphosis in the Paintings of Ada Gabriel

Rather than with transcribing the particulars of landscape, the award-winning Canadian painter Ada Gabriel, whose work is handled through Lambert's Gallery, in Vancouver, appears to be concerned with a deeper apprehension of nature in the abstract compositions seen on her website: **www.ada.gabriel.name**.

"My interest is in creating art that connects the seen and the unseen," Gabriel states. "Beginning with that intention, I allow process to carry me. Birth, creation, change and metamorphosis seem to be my themes."

These linked themes are splendidly addressed in works such as "Biorhythm," where a calligraphic green shape is set buoyantly afloat against a luminous yellow field, as well as in "Untitled #5" and "Abstraction #3," with their more intense colors, gestural brushwork, and landlocked forms. By contrast, in the series of abstract compositions that Gabriel calls "The Butterfly Analog," the colors are clear and luminous, the gracefully flared shapes at once fragile and monumental.

There is a primal quality to all of Gabriel's paintings; each shape seems essential, derived directly from a natural source, rather than from some preconceived notion of abstract design. The artist appears acutely attuned to the patterns and cycles of nature—a refreshing stance in an era when too many others can't see the forest for the pages of Artforum! Verdant greens and sunny yellows are among the recurring hues, lending many of Gabriel's works on canvas, paper, or mylar an overall ambiance of landscape, even when the forms are relatively amorphous and do not even remotely suggest the lay of the land.

Gabriel's work goes well beyond de Kooning's famous remark that "all abstract painting is based on landscape" by virtue of its all-enveloping natural atmosphere. Thus, while the title of a large canvas "Prosperity," which won first prize in an annual juried exhibition, could suggest a monetary state of being, its lyrical composition of floating yellow, green, and blue color areas makes immediately clear that the reference here is to the rich bounty of nature. And when Gabriel's softly defused forms verge on the geometric, as seen in "2 Soft Rectangles/Kissing" and "2 Soft Rectangles/Loving," the vibrant colors imply a nontraditional treatment of a romantic idyll in a pastoral setting.

The more texturally defined but equally elusive elements in "Startled" and "Uprising" suggest an emotional response to such phenomena as flowing water and fresh, swaying grass. Even in her "Rock Series," where the more tactile paint application may appear to allude directly to the solid substance of rock and hills, Gabriel refuses to descend to finicky descriptiveness, giving us instead powerful formal metaphors for natural forms, forces, and essences.

This approach also comes across in Gabriel's graphite drawings, with their delicate, fossil-like linear traceries, as well as in her photographs focusing on close-up images of plant forms. Far from being minor entities, included on the website to cast light on the genesis of her paintings, these works possess their own unique qualities, particularly the drawings, with their fine shadings and exquisite sense of space. Indeed, all of her explorations in various media reveal Ada Gabriel's singular synthesis of "the seen and the unseen."

"Biorhythm"

—J. Sanders Eaton

Aaron Morgan Brown: Souls Adrift in the Shopping Malls

It is easy enough to see how some who view the website of Aaron Morgan Brown (**www.aaronmorganbrown.com**) might compare his paintings superficially to those of Edward Hopper, since both artists project a poignant sense of social isolation. However, Brown deals with a far harsher contemporary environment and a more intense sense of depersonalization than the genteel, now almost nostalgic, melancholy that we associate with Hopper. Others more versed in the postmodern scene might just as readily liken Brown to Eric Fischl. But they too would be wanting in insight, since Brown's paintings rely less on the obvious, the sensational, and the perverse, and he is by far the superior painter.

Evoking the artificial atmosphere of Mall-Land, U.S.A., Aaron Brown tells us a great deal about the desolate state of our present reality. Yet the most impressive single thing about his paintings is that he freezes the fleeting, even banal, moment with a formal elegance recalling Vermeer. Indeed, the real drama in Brown's paintings emanates not from such details as the guarded posture of the hefty cleaning lady in the red babushka in "Borderlands number 2," as she stands with her broom, surrounded by ghostly shadows and reflections, gazing into the yawning maw of an empty escalator like Saint George contemplating the dragon. Rather, it comes from the manner in which the artist arranges all the elements of the picture to make an overall statement that is finally more significant than the sum of its literary components.

"Borderland No. 2"

At the same time, it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge that disturbing relationships and symbols abound in Brown's paintings: the stunted little man who appears about to accost the dark-skinned child with the bare-midriff amid a funhouse maze of glassy storefronts in "Borderland, number 1"; the small girl with pink ribbons in her hair wandering alone through a murky cocktail lounge in "Borderland number 4"; not to mention the full length skeleton in a glass vitrine waiting to greet the two small boys engrossed in a more innocuous display nearby in "Museology number 1."

The latter series, like much of Brown's work, is an amalgam of memory and fantasy based on childhood museum visits. In one painting, mountain goats in a brightly lit panoramic landscape dioramas appear more of this world than the shadowy, shuffling visitors who view them. In another, a worker who appears to be a preadolescent boy washes a skeleton in a morgue-like workroom "backstage" at the museum. Brown makes gleaming corridors, blank video monitors, and even fire-extinguishers take on strange symbolic significance.

Especially impressive is one large oil on canvas entitled "Ann, Contemplating Something Other Than the Weight of History," in which a beautiful Victorian society lady in a white silk dress, holding a book in one languid hand, gazes out from her gold-framed portrait at the back of a young man sporting the black garments of a contemporary "goth" and looking defensively uneasy in the elegant interior where the portrait hangs.

For here, while retaining characteristically contemporary psychological tension, Aaron Brown boldly invites comparison to John Singer Sargent and demonstrates that his technique is equal to the task.

—Ed McCormack

Barbara Rachko's Surrogates for Our Inner Demons

Because of her non-traditional approach to perspective ("I pick a point as my perfect vertical, but as you go out to the right and the left the verticals slant"), everything is slightly askew in the large, vibrant pastel paintings of Barbara Rachko, seen on her website **www.barbararachko.com**.

This befits Rachko's subject matter: folk art figures from Mexican mythology—a bright red devil, an angel, a villainous representation of Judas, an insect with a human face— acting out bizarre personal allegories amid the trappings of the modern kitchenette, livingroom, or bedroom, in compositions with oddly haunting titles such as "Truth Betrayed by Innocence" and "No Cure for Insomnia."

How close to home they are is hinted at in the title of the first painting Rachko did after losing her husband in the plane that crashed into the Pentagon on 9/11: "She Embraced it and Grew Stronger." Rachko's husband had long been her artistic helpmate, using a wide angle lens to photograph the elaborate tableaux that she sets to work from. After his death, she literally had to start over as an artist, taking courses in photography over the next couple of years, as she tried to regain her bearings while dealing with her grief. Now her photographs have become an integral part of her art and are often exhibited along with her pastels.

The figures that Rachko collects on frequent trips to Mexico (some associated with the Day of the Dead and other festivals and rituals), form a kind repertory company that the artist employs to evoke a host of subtle meanings in her emotionally-laden compositions. Thus the same colorful crab that crawls out of an open oven door to do battle with a mounted warrior in "The Magical Other" might be called upon to loom on a toilet seat-cover over a fallen ape in "He Lost His Chance to Flee."

"She Embraced It and Grew Stronger"

Horned or winged, leering or wearing a frozen smile like the figure in the floral patterned skirt, backed against an empty bookcase by a menacing semi-circle of fellow statuettes in "She Embraced it and Grew Stronger," Rachko's characters function as stand-ins for the fears and demons that reside within us all.

In technical terms, the way Rachko's heightened colors lend coherence to her intricate compositions, with their stark tonal contrasts, saturated shadows, and patterned fabrics, can remind one of the well known realist Jack Beal. (Surely her use of pastels on sandpaper is every bit as detailed yet defined as Beal's use of oils on canvas, although the very nature of her subjects lends her pictures a more abstract, emblematic quality.) But while Beal depicts figures and still life objects as discrete entities in a more conventional manner, Rachko merges them in a whole new way. Which is to say: because Rachko's protagonists are inanimate, yet are so dramatically juxtaposed that they become convincing, emotionally-laden surrogates for ourselves, all the commonplace props surrounding them also come weirdly alive. Ordinary domestic settings, very much like our own apartments, seem suddenly sinisterly charged with a sense of danger. Suddenly an open doorway leading to a darkened room looms like a slightly lopsided abyss; an ordinary picture calendar, hanging over a kitchen stove, seems a sinister portent.

Indeed, it is their strange psychological resonance, amplified by their taut formal tensions, that makes the pastels of Barbara Rachko some of the most deeply compelling images in recent art. —Jeannie McCormack

Ingo Karwath: Authentic Heir to a Great Artistic Legacy

The Expressionist tradition is alive and well in Germany, judging from the paintings on Ingo Karwath's website (**www.inka.biz**). Nor is one referring to the watered down Neo-Expressionism, which subverted that tradition with fashionable irony when it was all the rage from the late 1970s to the mid '80s. No, Karwath is the real thing, a painter thoroughly committed to a strain of subjective vision that had its origins in the expressive distortions of Gruenwald and reached its apex centuries later in the The Blue Reiter works of Franz Marc and August Macke.

"Venetian Cocktail"

Like those fellow countrymen—and particularly his fellow countrywoman Paula Modersohn-Becker who so successfully assimilated the formal influence of Gauguin and Cezanne—Karwath employs color fearlessly. His oils have a remarkable chromatic resonance, particularly in his "White Lines" series where nudes and other figures have an almost ghostly quality, delineated linearly against shimmering color fields dominated by incendiary reds and yellows.

By contrast, "Hot in the Summer Tonight" and "Night Sky" are more somber in their nocturnal colorations. The former work is especially atmospheric, showing shadowy figures beside a body of still water in which the trees and lights on the opposite shore are reflected, while the former is a near abstract image of luminous yellow stars glowing from a nocturnal sky whose brilliance all but subsumes the verdant landscape below .

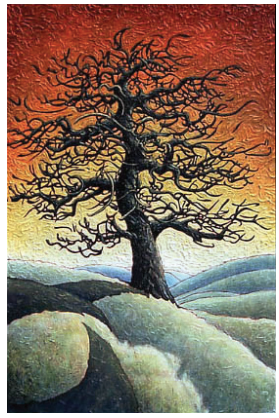
Although "Night Sky"—or Nachthimmel" in German—is a large oil on canvas, it has all the freshness and fluidity of one of Emil Nolde's tiny watercolors. Equally spare in execution and something of a departure from Karwath's Expressionist roots for its subdued colorations is another large oil executed in a spontaneous manner that one normally associates with watercolor. Entitled "Manhattan #41," this painting depicts pale gray figures moving somnambulantly through a pink mist in a rain of sooty particles reminiscent of 9/11.

More characteristically colorful and vigorously gestural, the paintings in Karwath's "Fingerprints" series include sensual nudes, and "Red/roter Pullover," a dancing figure in a crimson shirt that suggests a flickering flame, and a powerful composition centering on a crucified figure twisted like a lover around an anthropomorphically bent cross that harks back to Gruenwald. Even more brightly hued, as well as more formal in composition, are the oil pastels that Karwath creates when he works on structured cartons, such as "Samoa Session" with its seemingly inexhaustible range of figurative floral and landscape imagery in hot tropical colors and bold outlines. Also outstanding are an entire rogue's gallery of portrait heads in which Ingo Karwath adds a soupçon of Picasso-esque formal ingenuity to his already formidable oeuvre. —Byron Coleman

Encountering the Arboreal "Portraits of Chris Bowman"

"Trees and stones will teach you that which you will never learn from books," wrote Saint Bernard, and this seems a sentiment with which the painter Chris Bowman would readily concur, given his recent solo exhibition at Jadite Galleries, 413 West 50th Street through November 30, in which trees are the single and more than sufficient subject.

Working in acrylic on canvas, but employing the medium with textures akin to those in the oils of van Gogh, Bowman manages to imbue his subjects with an almost anthropomorphic expressiveness. For even while depicting arboreal "anatomy" with unfailing accuracy, he imparts to his trees emotive qualities that invariably provoke a sense of human empathy. Thus, even before one reads its title, Bowman's painting "Alone," depicting a single tree amid rolling hills, evokes the sensation of loneliness.



"Life"

Part of the power of Bowman's paintings resides in their overall tactility. Not only is the textured tree made palpable in pigment but the surrounding sky intersecting its branches is also realized in thick impasto. Thus the entire canvas appears to palpitate, with negative and positive spaces composed of equal heft and weight. The tree and the entire landscape that it occupies take on a pregnant presence. At the same time, however, the overall composition comes alive with a sense of light and movement.

While one can compare Bowman's ability to animate nature to that of the great American watercolorist Charles Burchfield, Bowman's rugged yet controlled paint-handling lends his canvases their own special qualities. Chief among these is a succulent paint surface composed with short rhythmic strokes that "knit" the various elements of the composition together, imparting a sense of formal harmony to his pictures, reflecting the underlying patterns that unite all natural forms.

Indeed, Bowman's trees seem to relate not only to the terra firma from which they emanate but also to all manner of unseen universal forces, as they writhe and strive toward the sky. This symbolic synthesis is especially evident in the large acrylic on canvas entitled "Life." Unlike most of Bowman's other trees, with their lush, thickly configured concentrations of leaves, this lone tree bares its naked branches as it claws at the air. Indeed, its sinuous limbs can suggest the fingers of a huge hand (although the resemblance is not exploited as obviously as in Pavel Tchelitchew's "Hide and Seek"). Here, too, the red sky hovering around the veiny branches enhances the visceral effect, heightening the sense of struggle that makes this large canvas especially dramatic.

Each of Bowman's paintings resonates with its own inherent drama, as titles such as "Be True (Triptych)," "Consciousness," and "Memory of a Sunrise" suggest. Each has the presence of an arboreal portrait, embodying its own emotional makeup, projecting its own psychological impact. Thus, while the large canvas called "Resonance," in which a single tree seems to totter precariously on a slanted slope, provokes a vertiginous sensation in the viewer, the small, vertical composition called "Bamboo" presents a contrasting sense of stolidness.

Unlike what Clement Greenberg once termed "art that wants to be loved in a hurry," the paintings of Chris Bowman do not attempt to win the viewer over with novelty. Rather, they captivate him or her in a more subtle and enduring manner, by revealing new meaning in something long familiar.

—Peter Wiley

Drew Tal: Postmodern Romanticism Meets State of the Art Technology

Although he employs state of the art digital technology, Drew Tal, an Israeli-born artist who has lived and worked in New York City since 1981, appears to take inspiration from Victorian and Edwardian predecessors such as the American Symbolist F. Holland Day, who obsessively photographed himself as Jesus Christ, and the Swedish Romantic photographer Oscar G. Rejlander, who employed multiple negatives to create elaborately fabricated allegories, inspired by classical and romantic painting.

In this regard, Tal can be compared to Joel-Peter Witkin, another photo artist who has rejected the dominant shoot-from-the hip naturalism of Robert Frank and others in favor of a more premeditated and baroque approach to portraiture. However, the resemblance ends there; for while Witkin courts monstrousness with his images of freaks and corpses, Drew Tal celebrates human beauty in all its ethnic diversity.

"Faith"

Starting early age, Tal has traveled the world, studying and sketching a multitude of cultures. Eventually he gravitated toward photography as his medium of choice and, in a few short years, became a successful fashion photographer. But he finally found art photography more gratifying, and taking up digital software in the early '90s enabled him to introduce new dimensions of color and texture to his pictures, which he prints on a large scale on canvas to enhance their painterly attributes.

Tal's recent exhibition at KFMK Galleries, 515A West 29th Street, a relatively new venue in Chelsea whose spaciousness and elegance seemed especially well suited to the presentation of his pictures, featured a large selection of his work. In a well-lit outer gallery, several large portraits were hung at eye-level. Although most focused on single faces in dramatic close-up, a composition called "Faith" focused on the faces of several Buddhist monks, their hands prayerfully clasped under their chins. Like most of Drew Tal's subjects, all of the monks were youthful and good-looking, suggesting an unusually comely group of spiritual novices. Their shaven heads and symmetrical Asian features, as well as the uniform positions of their hands, contributed to the harmonious rhythms of the frieze like composition.

In contrast to the monochromatic austerity of "Faith," other compositions by Drew Tal are lushly colored and suggestively sensual. One picture, called "Blue," is saturated by a vibrant shade of that hue. It depicts an androgynous countenance, reminiscent of some of the faces inFellini's great film "Satyricon," bracketed between two tactile steel panels with rugged rivets and rusted bumps that contrast sharply with the smooth skin of the subject. By contrast, "Rose of Kashmir" centers on a beautiful, decidedly female, face with large almond eyes and full red lips framed in an ornate rose-colored veil; while in "War," the more somber tones and the dark line separating two sides of a single, glowering face simultaneously suggests not only external conflict, but the divided self and ambivalent soul of a soldier.

Off the main gallery, in a dramatically darkened room, several other large portraits functioned as an overall installation. Set higher up on the walls, the glowing images appeared as though suspended in space. Viewed together as a single entity, these faces created an impression of spiritual struggle and diversity.

Especially powerful was a portrait of an Asian woman entitled "Tibetan Tears." Bathed in a pale blue hue that made the blood-red streaks issuing from the woman's eyes even more stark, this haunting visage suggested the specific subject of the strife that the Tibetans have been subjected to by China, while also making a broader comment on religious and cultural persecution in general. In another print called "Bliss," a small shadowy meditating figure, set against the huge, enigmatically smiling face of a luminous gold Buddha, conveyed a sense of spiritual transcendence. Conversely, "Within" juxtaposed the large head and prayerfully clasped hands of a serene living monk surrounded by a brilliant aura with various smaller devotional images.

In other pictures, Drew Tal makes symbolic use of ornate temple walls, stone carvings, weathered facades and other exotic elements photographed in his travels to remote areas of Asia, India, North Africa and the Middle East as backgrounds and props that play off the equally exotic features of his carefully selected models to create a composite drama.

For a piece called "Messiah," for example, Tal superimposed an ancient-looking cross over the Christ-like countenance of a young Spanish artist to create a mystical effect, while his "Portrait of an Indian Maiden" is a study in sepia tones in which a young contemporary model resembles an idealized version of a Native American in a daguerreotype of the Old West by Matthew Brady or Laton Alton Huffman.

However, unlike such intrepid pioneer documentarians, Drew Tal belongs to a generation that seeks less definable frontiers. Indeed, it just may be that Tal's work is in the forefront of a nascent movement of postmodern romanticism.

—Maurice Taplinger.

The Syncretic Vision of Painter Photographer Phyllis Smith

One of the significant differences between the work of Phylilis Smith and that of other artists who can be termed photorealists is that Smith does not merely employ photographs as source materials for her paintings but often exhibits them along with her paintings in exhibitions as autonomous works unto themselves.

Just how related yet discrete these two facets of Phyllis Smith's work are can be seen in her new solo show at Viridian Artists, Inc., 530 West 25th Street, from November 7 through 25, with a reception for the artist on November 11, from 4 to 6 PM. Photos and paintings, rather than being separated, are exhibited in close proximity to each other and create a complementary visual dialogue.

Another distinguishing characteristic of Smith's work is the intimacy of her imagery. Rather than depicting the landscape entire, she prefers in both her photographs and her paintings, to give us a close-up view of nature, zeroing in on what she calls "precise microcosms found close to earth." She is particularly interested in the interplay of water and solid matter as a way of expressing contrasts between the mutable and the stable, between that which is constantly in flux and that which is rooted in the earth, yet also alive and growing.

"Flaming Swords"

Through her intense concentration on detail, Smith achieves a heightened sense of her subject matter akin to that in the work of the pioneering photorealist Audrey Flack. Like Flack, Smith does not strive for the impassive surfaces one normally associates with a good deal of photorealism; nor does she strive to approximate in painting the flattening effect of the camera or other aspects of the photographic vision of reality. She does not, in other words, make photographic effects the subject of the painting in order to impose a sense of ironic "distancing" to her compositions. Rather, like Audrey Flack, one of the true pioneers of photorealism, Smith tweaks the visual information found in the photograph to heighten intensity of her subjects. For example, in one of her recent oils on panel, the intricate folds and shadows in a close up view of a mushroom appear to writhe and billow, taking on a sense of mystery made all the more dramatic by her use of chiaroscuro, with deep, earthy hues giving way to fiery reds and luminous yellows. One gets the sense less of a specific subject than of mysterious forms and essences akin to the nature-derived abstractions of painters like Gregory Amenoff and Bill Jensen.

Some time ago, after being captivated by one of Smith's paintings of a floral subject in a group exhibition at Viridian Artists, I commented in my review on its "hallucinatory" quality. Appropriately enough, one of the paintings in this exhibition, Mescal," depicts the plant that the hallucinogen mescaline is synthesized from. And, indeed, Smith imparts to its sensual white leaves, with their thorny edges and subtle pastel pink and blue-green shadings, a not only mesmerizing rhythm but also a sense of the sometimes slightly sinister consequences of artificially expanded consciousness. This seductive plant truly looks like something that might ensnare one's spirit with ultimately precarious visionary delusions.

Not surprisingly, Smith's photographs are equally evocative, as seen especially in "Silver Lily Long Wood," where two slender phallic shoots with blood-red heads spring from an unearthly blue liquescent surface, surrounded by large, startlingly silver pods that appear to be floating over to engulf them with their triangular openings in some sort of erotic natural water ballet.

Indeed, this photograph is more suggestively surreal than the companion painting that Smith calls simply "Water Lillies," which has its own more formal attributes, with its limpid forms, delicately delineated green leaves, overall chromatic phosphorescence, and oddly oxidated infrared effects. Phyllis Smith's triumph in this painting is to have achieved a kind of lyricism that bears no relationship to that of the famous painting by Monet in whose shadow any contemporary painter attempting this subject must labor. Which is to say, she has made it new, as Ezra Pound insisted all modern artists must do who endeavor to extend or expand upon an existing poetic or aesthetic tradition.

Perhaps one of the most radically abstract of Smith's paintings is "Flaming Swords," in which the intricately tangled green and purple zebra-striped fronds of the plant with that botanical name are interwoven with golden leaves of the same species at a different stage of their development in a composition possessed of a dazzling optical energy. However, a similar energy enlivens the photograph entitled "Melinda's Rocks," which focuses on a dense concentration of variously colored, wetly glistening stones, many with veined or speckled surfaces that relate to the stripes in "Flaming Swords," leading one to conclude that it is her singular sensibility and vision that enables Phyllis Smith to syncretize her two mediums so harmoniously that each provides equal rewards for the viewer.

—Ed McCormack

Contemporary Impressionist Patrick Antonelle at The National Arts

For a regular guy from Long Island to be dubbed "the American Renoir" could be daunting. But Patrick Antonelle, whose solo exhibition can seen at the Trask Gallery, National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park South, through December, 2006, takes it in stride.

Nor did the good natured Antonelle seem to mind when one interviewer recently mentioned his name in the same breath as that of Thomas Kinkade, although he should have. For while Kinkade is a popular schlock phenomenon, known for his cozily artificial treatment of light, Antonelle is a real painter with an unerring sense of natural light who just happens to have a popular following. Which is to say, not only is Antonelle's work in numerous corporate collections and prestigious private collections of contemporary art, it has also been purchased over the years by people like Leonard Bernstein and Frank Sinatra, as well as by serious collectors who are normally more likely to buy a Renoir or a Monet than a work by a living painter.

An unabashed adherent of Impressionism and Pointillism, Antonelle updates the techniques of both movements to create his New York City scenes, as well as his landscapes of Nantucket and European locations in England, France, and Italy. Indeed, he is one of the few contemporary painters who has mastered those techniques sufficiently to capture subtle qualities of light on different surfaces as proficiently as his Parisian predecessors. In his New York views, particularly, he shares their ability to invest scenes of everyday life with freshness and vivacity.

"Tuscany Path"

Of course there has always been an American Impressionist tradition, going back to Childe Hassam and other members of The Ten. In recent decades, however, the tendency has been to imitate the superficial mannerisms of the movement without making the thorough study of light that has always given Antonelle's paintings the edge. One of the reasons for this is that Antonelle, who has gained his following over the past three decades, has always known what he wanted to do in painting.

Ever since his student days at the School of Visual Arts, the Brooklyn Museum Art School, and The Art Students League, Antonelle has known what he has wanted to do and has been sharpening his skills toward that end. Anyone who has spoken with him knows that he is quite aware of and knowledgeable about abstract painting.

Still, like Fairfield Porter, Wolfe Kahn, and other New York realists who were not in opposition to Abstract Expressionism, Antonelle (who had the respect of his abstract peers when he showed at Gallery 84, one of the original Tenth Street Galleries, after it relocated to 57th Street in the 1990s) has always preferred to apply abstract principles to recognizable subject matter. That he has also obviously absorbed certain principles of Asian painting is evident in works such as "Winter in the Park," a scene in which tiny figures can be seen traversing the snowbanks in Central Park. The diminutive scale of the figures, here as in most of Antonelle's paintings and prints, hints at the insignificance of the human being in the total scheme of things, which has always been a prominent feature of traditional Chinese landscape painting. Here, too, the misty quality of the tall buildings looming over the park and its bare, slender trees also harks back to the misty mountains seen in Chinese scrolls, although the falling snow affords Antonelle the perfect opportunity to display his pointillist technique as well. And while most Chinese painting is basically monochromatic, being accomplished with gray tones in variously diluted shades of black carbon ink, Antonelle also brings all of the chromatic subtlety he acquired in his study of the Impressionists to bear in the soft pink tints of the sky and the variety of delicate hues he employs to the sense of waning afternoon light on the snow in this exhilarating winter scene.

By contrast, Antonelle is able to indulge his love of lush color and richly textured foliage in another New York scene called "Gramercy Park Summer," with its sliver of clear blue sky peeking through the verdant trees and lawns, while a person walks a little dog along a purple path dappled with the shadows of the leaves. Here, particularly, one sees the artist's almost transcendent way with light in his handling of the yellow

"Winter Stroll, Central Park"

accents on the grassy areas bordering the path, as well as in the shimmering atmosphere he evokes where the trees recede into the distance on the lawn.

As a young man, Antonelle considered becoming an architect, and this has inspired him over the years to make the landmark buildings of old New York some of his favorite subjects. But while these paintings are tinged with nostalgia for the older style of architecture that he prefers over the glass facades of more recent buildings, his command of firm, architectural linear strokes, along with his softer handling of the more ethereal elements of light and shadow, have long made his city scenes favorites of discerning collectors.

More recently, however, Antonelle's European landscapes have become just as prized, particularly his scenes of Tuscany, Italy, with its hilly topography and fertile vegetation, which he evokes with great vigor. Particularly exemplary in this regard is "Sunflowers– Tuscany," where clusters of the big, brilliant yellow flowers dominate the foreground of the composition and recede into the distance, where red-roofed rustic houses are visible, set against the verdant hills. Flowers and fields are also featured elements in other canvases, such as "Poppies and Wheat, Tuscany," and "Country Road, Tuscany." The latter painting is especially striking, with the narrow dirt road winding over a hill bordered on both sides by tall russet foliage dotted with red flowers.

Something of an anomaly among Antonelle's recent paintings is the composition called "Spring Birches," in which he depicts his subject with a detailed precision reminiscent of Andrew Wyeth. Here, too, not only are his brushstrokes less Impressionistic but his composition is sparer and his colors are somewhat more subdued, indicating that those of us who thought we knew every facet of Antonelle's art well can still be surprised by his versatility. Indeed, this exhibition at the National Arts Club is one of his most varied and impressive to date.

—Byron Coleman

Catching Up With the Contemporary "Action Painting" of Peg McCreary

Peg McCreary keeps the faith; which is to say: she is one of the few painters today who exemplifies the ethos of what Clement Greenberg termed "American-Type Painting," what some call "Action Painting," what others think of as "New York School" painting, and what most of us still refer to as Abstract Expressionism. Moreover, she does so without seeming in the least bit retrograde or resorting to the distancing strategies that any number of her contemporaries use to justify working in a manner that goes against the prevailing conceptual grain.

"Glissando"

In McCreary's case, not only does her faith in the primal vitality of pure gestural expression pay off handsomely, but it proves once again that this species of painting can be every bit as relevant (if not as revolutionary) today as it was when the explosive emergence of Pollock, de Kooning & Company first established New York City as the art center of the world. The proof is everywhere evident in McCreary's exhibition at the Cornell Medical Center Lobby Gallery, 12 West 72nd Street through December 28.

McCreary still speaks of painting the way artists did in the Tenth Street era, when the conversations held in the now-gentrified cold water lofts or at the legendary Artists Club was not all about how to make gallery connections or schmooze curators and collectors, as all too often it is today, when she says, "Abstraction is not allegory; it is not a one-to-one correspondence between the object in the virtual space of the canvas and its referent in the actual space of our lives. But we sense a deep morphic resonance between the composition, colors and spaces on a canvas and the rhythms, moods, and conflicts of our lives, and it is to the increasingly rich visualization of this resonance that my work is committed."

One of the most interesting facets of McCreary's work is that the resonance of which she speaks shifts easily between her inner and outer worlds. Her sinuously linear brushwork (which seems to spring directly from the artist's nervous system as if it were an actual monitor of her biological impulses) alternately delineates turns and twists in her personal journey ("Traversal No.2"), her reactions to a film by Stanley Kubrick, ("Odyssey No, 10") or her response to nature—particularly "lush vegetation emerging from a phosphorescent lake" ("Blue Grotto").

Working either in oil or acrylic on canvas—choosing the former, one presumes, when a subject requires its dense viscosity and the latter when its quick-drying properties are called for—McCreary apparently proceeds with the certainty of a painterly conquistador, engaging a complex range of challenges with her vigorous handling of pigment to capture the flow and flux of her feelings in form and color, unmediated by the cautious strategizing that characterizes so much postmodern artistic enterprise. Immediacy and sensuality are the keynotes of the oil on canvas "Blue Grotto," with its deep blue hues merging muscularly with milky white impasto to achieve a surface at once smoky and succulent, while rhythm and speed distinguishes the acrylic on canvas "Traversal," where the paint quality is somewhat thinner and the composition is driven by a whiplash linearity.

Qualities of both are combined in "Glissando," where acrylic takes on the tactile richness of oil, yet the composition is animated primarily by a calligraphic swiftness, further enlivened by the artful placement of subsidiary splashes and drips. Here, the title, which refers to a rapid sliding up and down the musical scale, alludes specifically to the artist's background as a former professional musician, playing double bass with several symphony orchestras. However, it is the innate musicality of Peg McCreary's work that makes all of the paintings in this exhibition equally exhilarating.

—J. Sanders Eaton

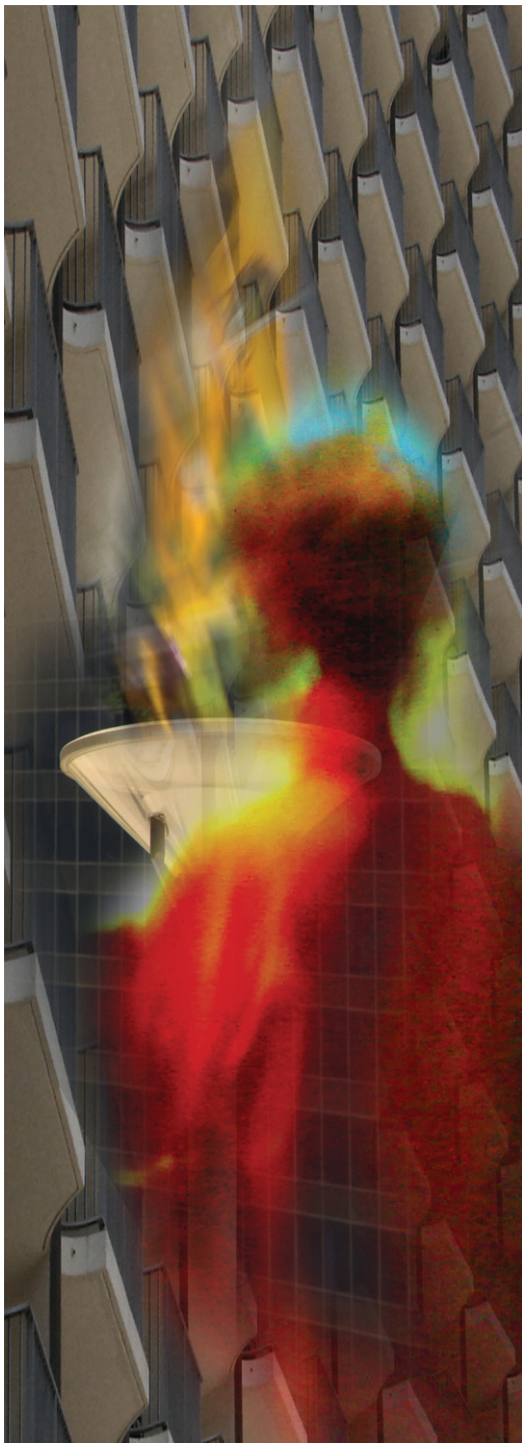
SM Lewis: A Contemporary Master of Photomontage

Although photomontage falls under the general category of collage, which changed the course of art history through the formal innovations of Cubism, the manipulation of photographic imagery is more akin to the dreamlike juxtapositions and psychological resonance Surrealism. Whether through cutting and pasting, double exposures, the printing of different negatives onto the same sheet, or, more recently, digital alteration, photomontage always possessed its own special power. Photographs, after all, generally represent moments in time and are perceived to capture "reality." In photomontage, perceived reality can take on startling new dimensions. Depending on the skill and imaginative breadth of the artist, the possibilities for subjective expression are virtually limitless—especially given the range of effects now possible with advanced digital technology.

SM Lewis exploits this technology more effectively than most artists, creating compositions that transcend the artificial categories normally imposed by critics of art and photography. Just how successfully Lewis does this can be seen in his new solo exhibition at Amsterdam Whitney Gallery, 511 West 25th Street, from November 3 through 28.

"While the montage components are derived from reality, the photomontage as a work is created in the mind," Lewis stated recently, adding, "When photomontage is judged by the rules of photography the determination of good and bad is often too easily influenced by the constraints inherent to judging photography."

Although Lewis probably knows from whence he speaks, having had his work misunderstood or misinterpreted by those who think "within the box," as they say, most viewers will require no critical guidelines to appreciate his digital photomontages. Indeed, one falls effortlessly under the spell of a magically atmospheric picture such as "Madison Square Park," which evokes the sense of an urban epiphany with the lone figure of a man seated on a bench, enjoying a moment of pastoral respite in the midst of the city. Here, the visual components are somewhat less overtly surreal than in some of Lewis' other pictures. However, some of the brilliant red and orange flowers appear to float beyond the low iron fence surrounding a patch of lawn like botanical phantoms and hover holographically in the foreground of the composition. And portions of the clouds around The Empire State Building seem to drift down around the seated figure, where they morph into pink mists evoking a perfect moment of solitary reverie with which any viewer who has ever experienced such a moment can easily identify. By virtue of SM Lewis' imagistic and chromatic manipulations the viewer is transported by this picture just as effectively as he or she might be moved by viewing the park scenes of Seurat, Renoir, or others among the Impressionists in an earlier century.



"Architect's Flame"

Considerably more radically symbolic in its overall effect, "Architect's Flame" superimposes the ethereal outline of a human figure over what appears to be the type of ongoing memorial devise known as an "eternal flame" in a manner that appears to ignite the figure in a brilliant red blaze accented here and there with subsidiary auras of blue, green, and yellow. Behind, partially in front of, and seen through the fiery figure in its most translucent areas, are conical geometric shapes that form repetitive, evenly spaced patterns. This image could suggest many things, but above all it seems to allude to the confluence of creative fervor and rationale thinking, of inspiration and reason, required for the realization of enduring works of art, be they architectural or in SM Lewis' own medium of digital photomontage.

Whereas the figure was most often subordinated to architectural structures in Lewis' previous exhibition in the same venue in February of 2006, appearing for the most part as shadowy pedestrians glimpsed in passing, phantom-like figures, prominently placed, also dominate the new compositions. In the punningly titled "Beach Buoy," for example, the semi-translucent outline of a young boy is combined with a large clump of dried beach vegetation with leaves that protrude like tendrils, shadowy smaller images of similar plant forms, and the distant silhouette of a buoy afloat on a body of water, suggesting a mysterious submerged narrative provoked by a childhood memory. This image has a haunting quality akin to some of Jasper Johns' self-portraits containing silhouettes of his own body amid objects, symbols, and forms of obscure personal significance to the artist.

Unlike earlier masters of photomontage, such as John Heartfield and Hannah Hoch, both of whom were active in Berlin during the Dada period and subject to the limitations of cutting and pasting, SM Lewis has a host of subtle, sophisticated technical possibilities at his disposal. But rather than indulging them recklessly, as a lesser artist might be tempted to do in order to produce flashy effects as vulgar as those we see in contemporary fantasy and science fiction films, Lewis employs them with admirable restraint in the service of a singular aesthetic vision. It is for this reason that his work appears destined to endure and to continue speaking to future generations, long after our current fascination with the new technology has waned.

—Ed McCormack

Patrick Antonelle
Paintings
through December

Central Park Spring

National Arts Club
15 Gramercy Park South, New York, N.Y.

JOHN WALLACE

"Self Portrait with Telescope, The Pleiades and Saskia"

January 2 - 27, 2007
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