April/May 2007 www.galleryandstudiomagazine.com Vol. 9 No. 4 New York

GALLERY&STUDIO

The World of the Working Artist

Neo Rauch at the Met:

Photo: Gregor Hohenberg

German maestro of mis en scene pastiche in a major New York museum show. pg. 14

untitled relief, acylic on unprimed canvas 28" x 34"

Missy Lipsett

April 24 - May 12, 2007

relief

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HILDA GREEN DEMSKY

In the Still of the Afternoon oil on canvas 48" x 36" Photo by Ira Soller

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Group of "Emotionalists" and Friends show.

"Emotionalists" Artists Group lead by prof. Lubomir Tomaszewski for 12 years is multi disciplinary group showing their works all over the world. The group is characterized by not only its openness but also diversity. Its members represent a variety of artistic expression: painting, sculpture, drawing and graphic art, tapestry, photography. They enter other domains as well, and the shows they organize often include improvised music and dance. Accordingly, one could claim their truly renaissance-like pursuit of the synthesis of arts.

G&S Highlights

On the Cover:
Auspiciously named German art star ***Neo Rauch*** *unveils his newest pictorial conundrums in an eagerly anticipated solo show at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. But do they really foretell a Neo-Narrative Renaissance or simply hold a funhouse mirror up to an already surreal age?*
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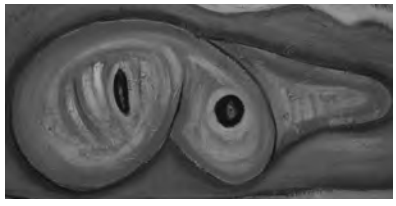

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"Swing Red," 2006 Acrylic 48" x 48"

Hedy O'Beil

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Diverse Styles Animate Agora Gallery's "Collective Exhibition"

A veritable plethora of representational and abstract approaches are seen in "Collective Exhibition," at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from April 10 through May 1. (Reception: Thursday April 12, 6 to 8 PM).

Among the more unorthodox works are Michael Martino's images of animal and botanical shapes on panels. A simplified silhouette of a duck or an oak leaf takes on iconic status in Martino's unique formal lexicon. Whether painting a portrait or a landscape, the Mexican artist H. Ramirez displays an innate chromatic sensitivity. Perhaps Ramirez's background in holistic medicine contributes to the soothing energy his compositions seem to exude.

Bente Stamp, an artist from Denmark enamored of Africa, lends the black and white stripes of a Zebra an impact akin to Brigit Riley's optical abstractions. Stamp also demonstrates that she can project a sense of raw power with a frontal view of a charging rhinoceros set against a vigorously gestural red background. Male prototypes are an iconic presence in the paintings of Antoine Toniolo, who lives in Melbourne, Australia. Apparently, growing up as the son of a professional boxer has given Toniolo an uncanny ability to probe the macho mystique in portraits such as "Shooter" and "Producer." Quite an opposite mystique comes to the forefront in Patricia Valencia Carstens's monochromatic paintings of glamorous women in lowcut evening gowns emerging from dark grounds. Yet some of Carstens's other works have been likened to both Monet and the Abstract Expressionists for their luminous colors and vibrant brushwork.

Montreal painter Laurie Michelle Kader has her own dynamic approach to color, in bold compositions that could appear abstract until one realizes that they are actually based on x-rays and digital images of the human body. Kader has transformed her own experience with illness into an emotional and spiritual triumph in these superbly realized works in a combination of oil glazing and egg tempera. Another highly subjective approach informs the paintings of the American artist Susan Kaufman, with their fiery hues and flowing shapes. Striving to convey her inner and outer perceptions, Kaufman achieves a successful synthesis by virtue of her combination of gestural grace and coloristic adventurousness.

Paradoxically, Ambiorix Santos, an artist from the Dominican Republic now living in the U.S. employs emphatically material means to explore the indigenous spirituality of South America's "Taino" culture. Mixing sawdust, paper, plastic or metals with oil textures, Santos creates emblematic compositions which merge ancient symbolism with contemporary aesthetics.

Mississippi artist Cliff Speaks creates intricate, brilliantly colorful paintings akin to those of Jackson Pollock for their compositional thrust. However, Speaks, who sees painting as " a temporary conclusion to an ongoing idea," combines a process-oriented approach with semi-abstract musical imagery to push the ethos of abstract expressionism into the postmodern present. By contrast, spare linear elements engage the eye in a rhythmic visual dance in the exuberant compositions of Ivan Hilliard Vincent, who studied math and drafting in England but is mostly self-taught as a painter. Now living in Ontario, Vincent complements his animated line with color harmonies at once elegant and subtle.

Germany-born North Carolinian Regine Bloch employs a wide range of materials in her inventive, humanistic sculptures. Working with clay, driftwood, porcelain,wire, and apparently anything else that strikes her fancy, Bloch brings impressive verve and wit to her figurative subjects. Norma RGF employs color so intrepidly that one is tempted to term her a latter-day Fauve. However, RGF also brings a narrative quality and an eye for the telling detail to bear in her affecting paintings of a group of women in red hats or a Native American basket weaver that sets her apart from historical precedents as a highly individual observer of the human condition.

—Maurice Taplinger

Pat Feeney Murrell's "Humans" Navigate Between Heaven and Hell

When we speak of "Body Art," we are usually referring to a dubious form of expression, somewhere between conceptualism and performance art, often with undertones of sadomasochism or even verging on psychosis— as when Chris Burdon had himself shot or Gina Pane cut herself ritualistically with razor blades. However, the term—especially the art part—applies much more accurately, in this writer's opinion, to the work of Pat Feeney Murrell, who once memorably referred to her life-size figures fashioned from handmade paper as "husks for the spirit."

Like Kiki Smith and the late Ana Mendieta in their very different ways, Murrell has elevated Body Art to a higher plane, taking it beyond infantile self-indulgence into far deeper regions of spiritual introspection. In a previous exhibition in 2005 at the Interchurch Center on Riverside Drive, for example, Murrell created a haunting installation in which, suspended from the ceiling or propped up on elaborate supports on the floor, several of her strangely fragmented figures seemed to reflect our thwarted attempts to reach out to and connect with loved ones and others whom we may encounter in the course of our life's journey. Their broken gestures of love had a heartbreaking emotional resonance.

"Human #1"

I thought again of Murrell's airborne figures in that exhibition recently, after seeing a recycled news photo of those bloated bodies floating in the flood waters engulfing New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. For all the graphic horror of such images, iconic and burned into our communal memory indelibly by the ghoulish reiterations of mass media, it was comforting to think of those bodies (particularly that of a portly woman floating face-down in a sodden tent of a house dress that somehow seemed to symbolize her sad anonymity) as mere husks that the spirit had transcended.

These are the ambiguous mysteries that Murrell has chosen to address from varying angles again and again, mysteries of our true identity and ultimate destiny to which Jack Kerouac refers so poetically (again reminding me, retroactively, of the raw, unraveling aspect of Murrell's figures) when he writes so movingly in the final paragraph of his novel On the Road, "and nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old..."

Murrell's new exhibition "Body: Heaven, Hell, Human," which can be seen in an unusually extended stay at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from April 25th through June 2nd, continues her interrogation of our fate, not only through her familiar life-size figures but also through a new innovation in her oeuvre: very large handmade paper artist's books imprinted with human figures.

At the time that the exhibition was previewed Murrell had completed two "Jacob's Ladder" books, two "Flag Books," and two "Triple Concertina" books, with another volume still to be determined. All of the books, being concerned with the concept of "Heaven," are translucent in design, backed with acrylic and pages of handmade paper imprinted with images of "the folks in Heaven," as the artist refers to them. Like Blake's, Murrell's is an earthly Paradise; for her heavenly folks appear as naked as Adam and Eve, indicating that their former banishment has been reversed by a newly enlightened Deity more liberally attuned to the true innocence of human nature.

Yet a lower realm also exists simultaneously in Murrell's new installation, down below on the gallery floor, as a densely berubbled terrain that the artist created by spraying handmade paper pulp over rocks, rusted metal tools, broken wooden boards, and a variety of other detritus of our wasteful culture. These "carpets from Hell," as Murrell refers to them, suggesting subterranean lava flows, are displayed on mirrored acrylic sheets and eerily back-lit from beneath. Although no figures are present here, they are partially reflected on the mirrored acrylic sheets from above, twirling on their invisible threads, just out of reach, suggesting writhing souls on the flip-side of Heaven.

Another new feature of Murrell's sculptures is their bright handmade paper exteriors. Where previously her cadaverously cratered and riven figures were black or in mostly monochromatic blue, gray, or brownish hues, they now burst forth in bright colors that, like the garish union suits of comic-book superheroes, complement their more active postures. Often a single figure (all are designated as "Human," followed by a number) will contain patchy, irregular areas of red, green, orange or other hues, as it runs, dances, strikes a combative pose like one of Leon Golub's early paintings of eroded warriors from antiquity, or points toward some distant horizon in a confident manner that contrasts sharply with the awkward, frozen helplessness of some of Murrell's earlier figures, which she once likened to the eroded human figures of Pompeii and which were also reminiscent of the ancient, naturally mummified figures excavated from the bogs of Ireland.

Indeed, where Murrell once called her figures Remains," implying the ultimate passivity, and even referred to them as being in "some dream/death state," cloaked in their new skins of many colors they now appear vibrantly alive, even as they navigate some symbolic realm between Heaven and Hell. No longer mere "husks," they seem surrogates for us all, as they engage in a vital race to reunite the spirit with the flesh. This amounts to what may well be humankind's most vital endeavor, and Pat Feeney Murrell imbues her "Humans" with a tattered dignity equal to the task.

—Ed McCormack

Collage Shape-Shifter Rima Grad Dissects the Anatomy of Family Life

"Block Party," 2007 Collage with drawing on paper 29 7/8 x 8 1/2 inhes

Like all good poets, including visual ones, Rima Grad arrives at the universal through particulars. Her ability to combine specific images in a cinematic manner, at once pithy and profound, made her 2004 exhibition of collages a moving meditation on living in the shadow of 9/11. Grad, whose work has been exhibited widely and is in many prestigious private and public collections, has a way of juxtaposing images on an intimate scale that can call to mind predecessors as diverse as Kurt Schwitters and Saul Steinberg. Yet she is possessed of a singular vision, which shines through "Formative Years," her new solo exhibition at Viridian Artists @ Chelsea, 530 West 25th Street, from April 10 through 28. (Reception: Saturday, April 14, 4-6pm; questions and answers with the artist April 28, 3-4 pm.

"I spent my formative years in a cluster of low red brick buildings in Northeastern Queens," Grad recalls in a statement for the show. "This body of work created from fragmented family photographs, was not intended to be autobiographical. . . It just looks that way. These images are part reality, part fantasy, part dream, part imagination. . . Is this somebody else's childhood, or mine?"

This disavowal of the personal is also expressed in the formal distancing of Grad's austere irregular grids. Yet the restrained quality of her compositions intensifies rather than diminishes the haunting effect of her imagery. And the images themselves seem to answer the artist's question: This is both her own childhood and everyone else's. Which is to say, we can all locate ourselves somewhere in these collages, no matter where we grew up or with whom.

Particularly poignant in this regard is "Happy Birthday to Me," a work in a horizontal format resembling a Chinese hand scroll, in which the figure of a little girl in a pretty dress and pointed party hat is repeated amid fragmented images of apartment building facades, a curving driveway, shrubberies, and other details such as the rear wheel of a tricycle and the grinning visage of a young boy who may be a smartalecky big brother.

There is also a more relaxed-looking image of the same little girl, hatless, casually dressed, enveloped in a sunny yellow aura considerably brighter than the pale pink and blue hues that highlight other areas of the mostly monochromatic composition. However, it is the four colorless snapshot images of the birthday girl, standing as stiffly as the Tin Man in "The Wizard of Oz," her pointed party hat resembling a dunce cap, that compels our attention. For no other artist has so effectively evoked the universal awkwardness so many of us felt on the one day of the year when we were briefly the center of attention, as well as the selfconsciousness of how embodying the innocence of childhood becomes more difficult with each successive birthday.

Other, more adult feelings of ambivalence, loss, and isolation within the family circle are explored in a collage called "Family Dis-Members," in which a woman, a man and two children (the female child cropped headless, propped precariously on roller skates, and resembling a clothing dummy effigy) each occupy their own separate rectangle in a staggered grid amid images of bland building facades and bare winter trees. Curiously, while the man wears the boxy suit of an archetypical 1950s dad, part of his lower body is replaced by that of a nude mannequin with a smoothly neutered crotch.

As in many postwar families, Grad's men are more distant figures than her women. The Steinbergian composite guy in her collage drawing "Cast of Characters—Men's Dept." appears to be doing a slow fade into granular invisibility, and the man in her aptly named monotype, "Mirage," is a transparent green wisp merging with some foliage in front of a high contrast woman sitting pretty in pink on a bench outside an apartment complex.

"For myself and I assume for others, memories come and go in flashes and blurs," Grad has stated. And this truism manifests visually in the alternately faded and more sharply focused images that she splices so skillfully to convey the often elusive narrative of family history. Indeed, the method that she employs to compose her collages seems to mirror how we all must construct a self from the puzzle-pieces of our fractured genealogy, improvising to fill in the blank spaces and flesh-out ghosts of memory through their relationship to other absent phantoms.

Sometimes one has little more to go on than an empty pair of pants in an old-fashioned haberdashery sign or an armless Venus bodice in an untrimmed lingerie window, to awaken vague memories of a wisecracking sport of an uncle or a ditzy vamp of an aunt—perhaps yours or mine, rather than the artist's. Yet juxtaposed as jerkily as a home movie with Queens storefronts, passing traffic, and family album snapshot snippets in Rina Grad's collage "Block Party," such fragments evoke a vivid panorama, encompassing an entire era and milieu.

—Ed McCormack

Marie Sturken's Tactile Marriage of Materials and Meaning

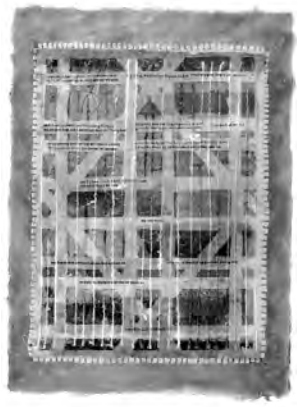
One of the great love stories of all time, told in Homer's Odyssey, is the Greek myth of the hero Odysseus and Penelope, the wife of one year who remained faithful after her husband went off for ten years of war followed by ten years of wandering.

When Odysseus was presumed dead at the end of the Trojan expedition, Penelope was besieged by suitors. But she repeatedly put them off with the excuse that, before she could remarry, she had first to weave a winding sheet for her father-in-law. Penelope wove all day, but at night would secretly undo her work.

Artists have depicted this tale in allegorical compositions over the centuries. In Pinturicchio's painting in the National Gallery, in London, for example, Penelope is seen seated at her loom, surrounded by her suitors, who gesture impatiently, while her maids spin, sew, and wind bobbins.

No contemporary artist, however, has interpreted the myth in abstract terms as effectively as Marie Sturken, in her exhibition "Flaxworks," at The Berkeley Gallery, Berkeley College, 3 East 43rd Street, from April 7 through 30. (Reception: Saturday, April 7, from 2 to 4 PM.)

"The content of the work can be an expression of the material itself," Sturken asserts of her medium, handmade paper, "since the pulp is in active dialogue with it and not merely a passive support."



"Penelope's Loom"

Sturken's technique seems especially integral to her subject in "Penelope's Loom," where vertical lengths of yarn, suggesting those that Penelope unraveled every evening just as painstakingly as she had woven them all day, occupy a rectangle at the center of the composition. Within this rectangle, under the vertical lines of yarn (which can also be read as a protective gate shielding her affections from the ardor of her suitors—or even bars around her captive heart), is a minutely hand-lettered text. Superimposed over intricate geometrical forms in delicate yet luminous hues, it begins, "I yearn for Odysseus always, my heart pines away," and goes on to eloquently describes Penelope's vain labors of love.

Through her skillful use of handmade flax paper embedded with silk tissue, yarn, and silk organza, Sturken makes even the loose strands of fiber protruding from the outer edges of the border surrounding the central rectangle exquisitely expressive of her theme. Indeed, the entire composition not only evokes the affecting fidelity of Penelope but demonstrates the artist's ability to impart new life to an old myth by virtue of her organic melding of form, content, and medium.

In another work called "Aperture," vertical lengths of yarn again appear as prominent elements in the composition, albeit embedded as textural elements in the paper, under a form resembling a rudimentary A-frame house. And although their frazzled red and yellow ends, emerging from beneath a pale green central rectangle, could suggest flaring flames, here, as in other works such as "Paper Tapestry" and "Interplay II," the subject seems less specific than in the previously discussed work.

These ostensibly abstract works are every bit as engaging, however, given Marie Sturken's ability to create compositions that speak to us on some more subliminal level by virtue of their chromatic and tactile richness.

—Ed McCormack

Emerging Artists from Australia and New Zealand in Chelsea

While Robert Hughes's "The Art of Australia" was the definitive tome on the subject when it was first published in 1966, it is clear that artists in that region of the world now have more pressing priorities than throwing off the influence of European and American models. Proof of their autonomous aesthetic identity is on view in "Out From Down Under and Beyond, The Australian & New Zealand Art Exhibition,' at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from May 4 through 24. (Reception: Thursday, May 10, 6 to 8 PM.)

The landscapes of Astrid Dahl, for example, seem at once quintessentially Australian and consummately mainstream for their combination of the earthy and the visionary. Dahl is an especially striking colorist, employing a combination of inks and acrylics to luminous effect. Stuart French employs a somewhat more abstract mode in his strongly schematized compositions with their intense hues and bold forms. Primitivistic figures emerge like radiant apparitions from French's gem-like color areas. Growing up on a farm in a remote rural area on the Australian outback had a profound influence on Sally West, whose acrylics on canvas also pay homage to Aboriginal art. Although West's compositions are ostensibly abstract, their colorful, shard-like, interlocking forms suggest some of the more rugged aspects of nature.

New Zealand-based Ngaire Dunn sends up feminine stereotypes with skillful Pop realist panache. From images of sensual bathing beauties to anorexic Vogue models, Dunn comments wittily on the female image in all its contemporary permutations. Another New Zealand-based painter, Ira McCully, employs a deceptively innocent style with sophisticated results. McCully's homey paintings of family scenes, racing events and other everyday subjects are joyous celebrations, bursting with local color and good cheer. Then there is Sofia Minson, whose landscapes and figure paintings are limned in smoothly modeled monochromatic hues with a dramatic emphasis on shadow-play. Minson makes the atmosphere and mythology of New Zealand palpable to the rest of us through her reverence for nature and national mythology.

Murray Swan honed the streamlined sculptural style that has garnered favorable comparisons to Brancusi as an aircraft engineer in both his native Australia and the United States. Employing highly polished stainless steel, copper, titanium and brass, Swan creates soaring shapes that are notable for their combination of grace, velocity, and formal economy. Inspired by music, the abstract paintings of Sonya Veronica juxtapose fluid areas of color, often in the red and yellow range, to create fluid linear forms possessed of great chromatic vibrancy. Veronica's bold, smooth strokes invest visual art with an impressive musicality. John Weeronga Bartoo brings his own unique ecriture to Australian Aboriginal dreamtime painting, resulting in a brilliant synthesis of the traditional and the personal. While employing the "dot" patterns endemic to this genre, he invests each of his paintings with the force of his personality in a manner that transcends folkloric conventions, achieving a formal autonomy akin to sophisticated mainstream abstraction. Working mostly in acrylic, sometimes with elements of the composition extending beyond the confines of the canvas in a manner akin to Red Grooms, Vittoria Marie Vieceli evokes the Australian landscape with a unique painterly vigor. Vieceli sees color as a conduit of joy and her work is enlivened by a goodnatured visual wit. An Australian painter trained on scholarship in Budapest, Hungary, Lauren Wilhelm integrates European influences in Neo-Baroque compositions that employ elements of appropriation in a highly subjective context. Combining an accomplished classical technique influenced by Velasquez with a post-modern conceptual sensibility, Wilhelm gives us the best of two worlds in her accomplished canvases.

Indeed, one of the true pleasures of this exhibition is discovering how, having evolved their own unique artistic voices, these artists from Australia and New Zealand now add confidently to traditions against which they once had to struggle. Their contribution to the larger culture is all the richer for it.

—Marie R. Pagano

Tradition Begets Innovation in the New Work of Missy Lipsett

"Don't understand me too easily," Norman Mailer once cautioned in print. And the same warning might be issued to those who would attempt to categorize the artistic endeavors of Missy Lipsett, who it might seem has made a career of diverting interpretation of her work down unexpected avenues.

That said, while most of us tend to take the shorter view of what influences an artist to branch off in a new direction, painters such as Lipsett are often motivated by factors more complex—or more simple, depending on how one looks at it—than we think. Given, too, that artists are often involved in an ongoing dialogue with their predecessors that spans centuries, the impetus for those changes can be more far-reaching than the evidence at hand might suggest.

An excellent example would be the works in Lipsett's new solo show, "Relief," at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from April 24 through May 12, with receptions on Thursday April 26 from 6 to 8 PM and Saturday, April 28, from 4 to 6 PM.

In less than a decade, Lipsett has established herself as a presence to be reckoned with by those who believe that artistic innovation is more stimulated by an ongoing conversation with the past than a superficial chat with the aesthetic fashions of the moment.

From the beginning, however, Lipsett has confounded those who would attempt to pigeonhole her stylistic allegiances in too simplistic terms. Given the gestural exuberance of her first exhibition, for example, comparisons to Pollock might have abounded, had Lipsett not found a way to reconcile the two opposing poles of abstract expressionism, locking so-called "action painting" in a stasis more akin to that of Barnett Newman, Pollock's main theoretical antagonist in the formalist branch of The New York School. (How, exactly, she managed to "freeze" the gesture in this manner taxes the capability of words to apprehend a purely visual phenomenon; yet it is there in her early paintings for all with eyes to see.)

Then, just when it appeared clear that she could have mined this vein of postmodern conflict resolution profitably for several shows more, Lipsett appeared to abandon her primarily gestural mode for a species of compositional amorphousness and chromatic saturation that could have prompted comparisons to Jules Olitski and Color Field painting— although her inspiration for these more "open" works actually emanated more organically from the ancient wellsprings of Zen than from the aesthetic gamesmanship of the recent past.

To some extent, Lipsett herself may have added to the confusion attending her intentions by attaching pat labels such as "Plasticity" and "Plane Painting" to her works in series. As titles for her previous exhibitions, these labels did not seem to illuminate the paintings they were applied to any better than "Reliefs," the title of her present exhibition, serves to clarify the genesis of her new series of works in acrylic on unprimed sewn canvas.

"Untitled"

One thing, however, that Lipsett hastens to make clear in order to dispose of the elephant that immediately lumbers into the room whenever a female artist employs sewn elements in any capacity, is that these pieces definitely do not reference traditional women's crafts or feminism. For worthy as these concerns may be, they are simply not at issue here. Rather, Lipsett's new pieces evolved because, as the artist puts it, "I needed to actually feel and shape the canvas rather than use it as a surface for a painted illusion. I was interested in questioning what makes a painting and at what point a painting, in being released from its supports, becomes sculptural."

At the same time, even as they emphatically assert their matter-of-fact material presence—their "objectness, so to speak" — one would be in error to relate these new works too literally to the Minimalist ethos of the art object altogether divorced from illusion. For although their intriguingly irregular folded and sewn shapes, liberated from the rectangular format of stretcher bars and laid flat against the wall, "shift the visual reality of painting to include the space around it," as Ellsworth Kelly once said of his own work, Lipsett's reliefs actually evolved from her fascination with drapery—most particularly in Greek and Roman sculpture and Renaissance painting.

Knowing something of the source of inspiration for these graceful configurations of painted and sewn canvas, as ingeniously intricate yet streamlined in their foldings and furlings as origami, adds yet another dimension to our enjoyment of them. For now, even while color has been freed from the contingencies of gesture, each hue saturating the unprimed canvas surface as an independent overall entity, the particular way a brown form may unfurl from under a tan one and fold over an adjoining green shape becomes a material metaphor not only for the layered fabrics in a Renaissance costume, but for the more metaphysical resonances of underpainting and pentimento.

At the same time, the autonomous character of each chromatic component suddenly makes one more aware than ever before of Missy Lipsett's skills as a colorist. Indeed, some of the particular pinks, yellows, and greens that she employs in concert with deeper browns and blues call to mind the offbeat combinations of the inimitable Darby Bannard, who showed at Tibor de Nagy Gallery and wrote knowledgeably about color theory for Artforum in the sixties and seventies. However, unlike Bannard, who employed an elaborate system of color charts and formulas, adhering to her longterm practice, Lipsett arrives at her color choices more or less intuitively.

As a result, her reliefs appear to "breathe" naturally, and besides providing tactile pleasure with the many variations in the density of their "drapery," delight us with subtle traces of process, such as an area in one canvas where a particular blue hue bleeds down off the precipice of a fold onto a flat canvas surface, culminating in a slender line that unites the sculptural and the painterly with a single stroke. Even more germane to the success of her new series, however, is how, in harking back to sculpture and painting's classical past, Missy Lipsett points to possibilities for their abstract future.

—Ed McCormack

Marilyn Mazin Miller: Finding a Formal Language for Feeling

The present period in art history appears to be a time for uniting diverse tendencies once thought to be irreconcilable. However, humanism and pure plasticity are still considered poles apart in some quarters, and sculpture, particularly, has always been an area where such distinctions are most firmly determined by the solid substance of the materials themselves. Yet the contemporary sculptor Marilyn Mazin Miller brings such supposed disparities into impressive harmony by virtue of her ability not only to move easily between figurative and abstract modes but to merge them, creating a highly effective postmodern synthesis of form and feeling.

And while Miller has exhibited frequently and been collected widely over the past decade or so, this synthesis seems more successful than ever in her new solo show, "Outpourings," at Viridian Artists @ Chelsea, 530 West 25th Street, from May 1 through 19. (Reception May 5, from 4:30 to 7 P.M.)

"Raised with a strong background in the fine and performing arts, I believe that my first solid step towards clay came when I took my first ballet class," Miller recalls. "There I discovered the deep, primordial joy of being centered within my body and expressing myself through the freedom of movement."

"Sophisticated Lady"

This freedom of movement and its attendant joy are encapsulated with striking economy in the figures that Miller models in clay, a material that, in her hands, invariably suggests the evocative term "the human clay." In fact, she often finishes her clay pieces with oil painted patinas that enhance their warmly allusive vitality. Color also adds a painterly quality to certain sculptures, such as the work in painted malone clay called, "Sophisticated Lady," one of Miller's more naturalistic sculptures, where the face of a beautiful woman with finely delineated features emerges from a flowing abstract shape that surrounds it like a cowl. That the cowl-like form is pink while the face is a deep red hue, however, is an unexpected touch that lends the piece a certain mystery and keeps one from viewing it too literally, since it is hardly Miller's intention to be taken for a realist.

Although many of her pieces are cast in bronze, more recently Miller has been exploring stainless steel as a medium for some of her more abstract sculptures, such as "Looking for Peace" and "Reflection," where the highly polished sheen of the reflective metal enhances the visual velocity of shapes that can simultaneously appear streamlined and baroque, demonstrating her unique ability to tackle contradictions in terms that would confound a less intrepid talent.

While the former sculpture can appear like the offspring of some improbable mating between a Brancusi bird and a Jeff Koons bunny, the latter, a severely simplified anthropomorphic totem of shiny stacked bubbles, could suggest the Michelin Tire Man slimmed down on the Giacometti Diet. Such is the innate formal wit of some of Miller's pieces that it is possible to make the most farfetched connections!

While some of her sculptures range far afield from the human figure only to circle back upon it, others, even more ostensibly abstract, are among Miller's most sensually allusive configurations, as seen in the "Up to You," another work in painted clay, where the smoothly flowing contours of the curvaceous form and the way its soft white patina reflects light and cradles shadows in its billowing folds conveys something unmistakably feminine.

Miller's unfailing ability to convey a strong sense of the body, even when departing radically from the normal conventions of anatomy, seems equally remarkable in her bronze "Fandango," where below the featureless circle of the head, the dancing figure metamorphoses into a fluid configuration of curves, resembling a flying saucer on the verge of whirling right off its pedestal. At the same time, the piece clearly conveys a credible, if greatly distorted, expression of human exhilaration in the throes of terpsichore. Somewhere in between Miller's naturalistic and abstract modes is a painted clay piece called "Swirling," where vestiges of anatomy, however minimal, remain to identify another dancing figure. Although featureless, she holds the ends of an ample skirt which melds into a single form that balances on the sculpture's base with such grace that she appears about to levitate.

Here, as in the bronze that she calls "Enraptured," depicting yet another graceful semi-abstract dancer, Miller appears to express the joy that she has taken in the creative act since that first ballet class of which she spoke at the onset, as well as to reflect what she refers to as "the spiritual connections people make in coming together through this dance of life that we all share."

However, none of Marilyn Mazin Miller's humanistic goals as a sculptor, however laudable, could have been realized apart from the purely plastic attributes that make her work so appealing in formal terms. Indeed, what she gives us is the sculptural equivalent of Wordsworth's definition of poetry: emotion recollected in tranquility.

—Ed McCormack

Following Hedy O'Beil's Stylistic Trajectory at Westbeth Gallery

"The Dance"

If there were true justice in the art world, the work of Hedy O'Beil would have been featured in the National Academy's survey "High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975," for O'Beil is one of those who kept the faith all through the years that painting was supposed to be dead.

The good news, however, is that O'Beil's inclusive new solo exhibition "A Passion to Paint," at Westbeth Gallery, 57 Bethune Street, from April 14 through May 6, with a reception on Saturday, April 14, from 5 to 8 PM, affords us a comprehensive sampling of her work from the early sixties to the present. And no matter how many clueless articles general interest magazines like New York run about the "Return of Painting" (usually accompanied by photos of trendy kids fresh out of fashionable art schools) what this show demonstrates most conclusively is that it never went away.

Talk about hard times, Hedy had a few early in her career, when sexism was still so prevalent in the art world that female artists were routinely dismissed as "flower painters." She reacted by putting big, muscularly-wrought roses into some of her large canvases, as if to say, "I'll show you!" One such flower dominates the foreground of "The Vest," upstaging even the symbolic male garment of the title. Here, too, O'Beil dispenses with color for a palette of steely grays more suggestive of a machine shop than a florist. And while overt feminist references wouldn't enter her work until the seventies, when the Women's Movement got fully underway, she was ahead of the curve in the early 60s, when she painted two powerful large self-portraits, also mainly in monochromes. In one, the artist stands at her easel, turning her head as she works to cast a defiant gaze at the viewer. In another she towers like an Amazon over a row of sketchy male heads lined up like trophies near bottom of the canvas. While these heads can be seen as an homage to Lester Johnson, O'Beil's self-portrait preceded by several years the female figures Johnson later introduced to his oeuvre, painted in a remarkably similar manner. Why not?The New York art scene was a much smaller world back then and influences did not discriminate; rather, they swung both ways.

O'Beil first caught the attention of a lot of us with her still life paintings in which figurines of goddess deities, armless Venuses, bottles, jars, shells and other objects appear lined up but hardly ever touching, almost always with the edge of the table acting as a horizon-line that ties them to the picture plane rather than evoking deep space. One could compare these compositions to Morandi for their formal simplicity and to late period Guston for their oddity, but what sets them apart is O'Beil's distinctive painterly handwriting. The vigorous strokes that enliven her early figurative work, despite its somber colorations, persist in the brilliantly colorful abstract paintings of today.

In her fine catalog essay for the present show, Helen Levin notes how moving to a new studio on a high floor at Westbeth with an unobstructed view of the sky a few years ago made O'Beil start noticing "the shapes of the ever-changing, fast-moving clouds," as well as suffusing her canvases with a new sense of color,space, and light.

The compositions of these paintings do not suggest literal "skyscapes" in the sense that John Schueler's do; for O'Beil employs intense reds and greens along with pale pink, purple, violet, and blue hues, and her brush strokes are often calligraphically sharp or sinuous, rather than soft and stratospheric.

"It Was Still The Great Mystery"

However, they can also be loose and juicy in a manner akin to Joan Mitchell, and O'Beil's luminous yellows —a relatively new yet ubiquitous element in her abstract paintings— invariably fill her compositions with a sense of shimmering sunlight that chromatically animates major canvases such as "The Dance (2006)," where the color takes on a slightly hazy quality in contrast to the brilliant reds and blues at the center of the picture, and "Swing Red," where somewhat more strident yellow hues are laid down in slashing strokes. But when whirling yellow passages are densely layered with cursive scrawls of vibrant reds, blues, and greens, as in "Jazz Yellow (2006)," neon comes as readily to mind as sunlight.

Like most artists of her generation, as a young woman O'Beil began to paint in the thrall of the Abstract Expressionists, and the active brushwork of the movement informed her style, even after her quest for her own artistic identity led her into her symbolic still life phase. Indeed, the value of this show at Westbeth is that, by juxtaposing her still life paintings and abstractions, it enables one to see how consistent were her concerns from the start. What has happened is simply that, as a mature painter, fully in command of her gifts and no longer feeling that she has anything to prove, Hedy O'Beil has returned wholeheartedly to her roots. Lush and effusive, exploding with color, her new canvases are as liberating for the viewer as for the artist herself. Surely, they will provide the thrill of discovery for those who are ready to catch up with one of our most ageless painters at the height of her powers.

—Ed McCormack

Catching Up With the CLWAC Members' Exhibition 2007 at The Broome Street Gallery

Known as the "Great Lady of Madison Square," the scholar and philanthropist Catharine Lorillard Wolfe was the only woman among the106 founding members of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her spirit of innovation persists in the Members' Exhibition 2007 of the Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Art Club, which can still be seen through April 15 at The Broome Street Gallery, 498 Broome Street.

In "Comfort Zone: Above the Pain," frequent exhibitor Harriet Regina Marion combines an Abstract Expressionist gestural immediacy with baroque elements of 1980s-style Pattern and Decoration painting in a lively stylistic synthesis. Few painters could keep so many balls in the air, so to speak, and arrive at as coherent a composition as Marion achieves in this energetic mixed media painting.

Dora Atwater Millikin

Dora Atwater Millikin makes a trenchant comment on the decline of small town America in her painting of a gray day on the outskirts of a trailer park, "Main Street, U.S.A. However, the innate drabness of the scene is relieved by Miller's prowess as a realist painter in the manner of Fairfield Porter and her oil on linen provides considerable aesthetic pleasure that overrides strident social commentary to ennoble its subject.

Similarly, in her mixed media work "Dreaming of You," Joyce M. Hill employs an ostensibly offhand technique to arrive at a rough elegance. Juxtaposing an exquisite drawing of a woman reclining in a black slip, apparently torn from a sketchbook, with vigorous abstract paint handling and even a bit of gauzy black fabric hanging off the bottom edge of the canvas, Hill makes a statement notable for its poignant immediacy.

M. Williams-McGowan evokes a sense nostalgia for the 1950s with "Classic Reflections." However, Williams-McGovern bypasses the easy irony of Pop to endow her accomplished pastel of a shiny black convertible set against a sumptuous red background with a sensual abstract impact.

Joyce Zeller

There is a stark beauty to the sculptures of Yupin Pramotepipop, particularly her piece in hydrocal, "Confidence." For, here, the unabashed stance of the youthful subject projects not only the quality of the title but an "in your face" attitude that makes it all but impossible to objectify her nudity and ignore her humanity.

Another formidable figure confronts the viewer in Enid V. Hatton's oil portrait, "Dress Rehearsal." As the title hints, however, the young woman wearing the bodacious red hat and brandishing one of those elongated cigarettes ("You've come a long way, baby") is clearly playing a role, and Hatton sees beyond the costume to her wide-eyed little girl innocence.

Known for her figurative pastels, with their strongly defined, skillfully modeled forms and intense colors, Jeanette Dick takes a somewhat gentler approach in "Dream of a Red Star." While the softer, more subdued hues in this rear view of a seated female nude with pale purple shadows playing over her curvaceous form do not represent a radical stylistic departure for Dick, they do reveal a more lyrical side of this gifted pastelist's aesthetic sensibility.

Jeanette Dick

Like the late visionary Loren McIver, Fleur Byers captures the atmospheric magic of every subject she paints through her ability to suggest the transient and intangible, as well as the palpable, aspects of nature. Byers's oil pastel "Rainy Evening" is typical of her poetic approach, imparting a subtle phantom quality to the landscape through her use of softly flowing forms and delicate monotones.

Holly Meeker Rom is another artist with the refreshing ability to speak softly in a noisy age. "Carin," Rom's delicate watercolor of a young dancer in her tutu captured in a moment of thoughtful repose, is possessed of an effortless grace by virtue of the artist's spare handling of pale yet luminous washes and her skillful deployment of the white paper as an important element in the composition.

Bernice Hoyt's watercolor "Kyoto Geiko," on the other hand, employs elements of abstraction to serve a very specific subject. Although the refined features, bouffant hairdo and elaborate silken costume of a kneeling geisha are delineated in considerable detail, form and color provide the main thrust in Hoyt's composition.

Holly Meeker Rom

Animal portraiture presents particular problems for a serious artist, but Joyce Zeller surmounts them splendidly in her oil "Kayla," which depicts a rust-colored canine resting on a verdant lawn in front of an impressionistic flurry of red, white, and pink flowers. Not only does Zeller capture the pet's gentle demeanor with a sensitivity and affection one normally only encounters in a human portraits; she also endows a potentially sentimental subject with a formal rigor that makes the picture successful in purely aesthetic terms as well.

The multi-layered simultaneity of modern urban life is captured with style and wit in JoAnn Bishop's painting of a young woman sitting in a window seat in Starbucks with a cell phone in her hand (representing yet another distracting facet of our environment's sensory-overload). However, the coffee shop's interior, reflections on the window, and other details are melded harmoniously by virtue of Bishop's compositional skills and solid brushwork, demonstrating how art can impose order on chaos. By contrast, Jacquelyn A. Cattaneo celebrates the grandeur of the natural settings that still exist in her landscape "Ramah Rd. Surprise." Employing soft pastel as a full-fledged painting medium and exploiting all of its coloristic possibilities to maximum effect, Cattaneo conjures up craggy rock formations and a dense pine forest, evoking their natural majesty with suitably rugged strokes.

Also including Laurence Seredowych's classical still life "Fox Gloves, with its rich cornucopia of fruits and flowers rendered in chiaroscuro, among works by several other talented artists too numerous to mention here, this exhibition attests to the ongoing contribution of women to American art.

—J. Sanders Eaton

Sensuality and Suffering Inspire the Art of Diamanto Tsitouras

Metamorphosis is everywhere evident in the mixed media paintings of Diamanto Tsitouras, an artist of Greek heritage, albeit born in Montreal, Canada, who often finds anthropomorphic symbolism in the structure of trees, in the year-round salon at Montserrat Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, in Chelsea.

At times, the shapes of trees strike Tsitouras as erotically charged. At other times, as she makes clear in an artist's statement, she perceives a quality of sadness, of suffering, in the tumorous formations on their rough bark surfaces, among other abnormalities that remind her of similar conditions in human beings. Trees, for Tsitouras, take on all the qualities of sentient entities and inspire a natural empathy that is quite unprecedented in most people's experience.

The nude human figure is another subject that Tsitouras employs expressively—and, indeed, in a similarly tactile manner as her handling of trees—as seen in her paintings in the gallery's year-round salon show, respectively titled "The Visit," numbers I, III, and III. These mixed media works would appear to be related to a passionate poem called "Just Visiting" that the artist, who appears to be doubly gifted, wrote in 2006.

With lines such as "How longed for, this visit with you" that give way to misgivings ("Once we dress again we cover our bodies yet uncover our needs") the poem seems to deal with the pain of passion that leads to thwarted love, and the paintings follow suit. For the shapely limbs of the nude bodies, powerfully delineated in bold strokes of monochromatic pigment and charcoal, appear to writhe on their torsos like tree branches almost torn loose from their trunks in a storm.

"The Visit III"

Tsitouras' mixed media technique is raw, rough, spontaneous, possessed of what W.B. Yeats might term "a terrible beauty." Often, large sheets of paper are glued over the surface, the drawn forms flowing over the deckled edges from one to the other, the rectangular borders giving the composition a jumpy cinematic sense of movement. Liberal swathes of white paint sometimes flow over the darker lines that define the figure, alternately strengthening and obliterating the image. The forms are largely feminine, with curves that suggest ample breasts and hips, the figure somewhat deconstructed by the artist's impetuous strokes in a manner harking back to the violence of de Kooning's "Women." However, in Tsitouras' paintings, the figures retain their feminine charms, rather than becoming grotesque. Unlike de Kooning's monolithic femme fatales, they are not monsters, but monumental goddesses whose curvaceous shapes engage by virtue of the artist's ability to invest her compositions with rhythmic grace.

Color is minimal, the palette limited to black, white, a variety of grays, and a deep, dark red suggestive of dried menstrual blood. This association appears most explicit in "The Visit I," where clotted red strokes could be seen to flow from between the legs of a single central figure. However, since all of Diamanto Tsitouras's compositions seem constantly in flux, rather than stable, and her figures can appear to split and reform as phantom couplings, this visceral hue could just as easily evoke the symbolic stigmata of all who are martyred by love.

—Margaret Dodd Weisler

"Black Renaissance" Ranges From the Afrocentric to the Abstract

One of the more impressively varied group exhibitions seen recently was "Black Renaissance," co-curated by Sonia Barnett and Elton Tucker for Black History Month at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street.

Among the members of the West Side Arts Coalition featured, Sonia Barnett herself showed vibrant acrylic paintings of jazz musicians in performance and in repose. Barnett's portraits of a suave young Duke Ellington and Billy Holiday set against a brilliant background were emblematic, while her painting of female backup singers enveloped in shadow was an atmospheric tour de force, the figures as ethereal as wisps of smoke.

Printmaker Bradford D. Branch is an accomplished draftsman of a sort one rarely encounters anymore, capable of lending equal interest to a neo-cubistic still life called "Vase with Oranges," or a series of exquisitely linear etchings of winding mountain roads. One of this writer's favorites, however, was a simple symbolic linocut called "Man in a Box" in which the sense of monumentality that Branch achieved on a small scale recalled the best graphic work of Rockwell Kent.

Mikki Powell's acrylic paintings on canvas combine the austerity of Will Barnet and the expressiveness of Jacob Lawrence in a potent brew of form and color. Here, Powell showed two portraits, one of Duke Ellington (a popular subject!) and another of her grandfather, in which the subjects' half-hidden faces enhanced the mystery, as well as the abstract quality, of her compositions.

African masks provide inspiration for Joseph Boss, who takes off freely from their conventions in mixed media assemblages featuring stylized heads as circular shapes at the center of the composition. Surrounded by textural grounds in muted hues, these heads possess a presence like lunar orbs in an earthy cosmos and compel us with their fetishistic power.

The woodblock prints, lithographs, and Giclee prints of Robert Lee Jones treat African themes with great sensitivity in a variety of techniques, ranging from semi-abstract works on exquisite Asian paper to monochromatic allegorical figures in the manner of Charles White. Some of Jones' most impressive prints are lively images of African dancers and drummers in which the individual character of his subjects upstages their tribal trappings.

Elton Tucker is a realist painter with an upbeat style who employs the brilliant colors and distinctive patterns of dashikis and other African garb to animate his paintings of a young father braiding his daughter's hair or making a prayerful gesture over the head of his son. Tucker's strong sense of racial identity animates his work with a positive energy that is universally affecting in his "Single Father Series."

The psychology of human relationships, especially romantic ones, is the ostensible subject of William Hunt's large charcoal and pastel drawings, which most often involve smaller figures enclosed within large heads whose facial figures are formed by their limbs and other body parts. However, here Hunt's most powerful statement was "Two Visions of Jesus," in which black and white versions of the Christian savior were bound together, back to back, by a shared crown of thorns.

Erica Mapp, the most abstract artist in the show, is a unique talent who has evolved a pristine geometric style in her subtle serigraphs. Employing pale pastel hues and linear rectangles, Mapp creates meditative mazes that share a certain kinship with the grid compositions of Agnes Martin yet possess a delicate poetic power all their own.

—J. Sanders Eaton

Sunjoy Jeergall Creates a Formal Context for Our Universal Journey

There is a species of painterly abstraction which runs counter to the gestural mode for its solid treatment of form flattened on the picture plane. In his post-cubist phase, Georges Braque may be one of its earliest exponents. But other artists, down through the decades, have explored a similar mode in various ways, none more expressively than the Indian-born painter, now living in Virginia, Sunjoy Jeergall, whose solo exhibition was recently seen at World Fine Art Gallery, 511 West 25th Street.

"Soul Restless"

What makes Jeergall's work especially interesting is that while it is ostensibly abstract, he has evolved a highly allusive formal vocabulary with which he is able to convey a rather complex array of ideas. These take the form of abstract notions put into palpable action in a painting such as "Life's Mutual Dependency," where an organic maze of intricately interlocking linear shapes illuminates the concept of the title with remarkable clarity. The painting also has considerable autonomous visual appeal, due to Jeergall's subtle skills as a colorist and appealing way with form.

Often, though not always, his fluidly rendered shapes suggest figures, both human and animal. In "Pieta," for example, a group of shapely yet undifferentiated vertical and a single horizontal form are combined in a manner that gives the clear impression of a group of people carrying an injured comrade. In "Mission Accomplished," the juxtaposition of the three primary shapes suggest stretcher bearers and an inert body. Despite the stark simplicity of the shapes, they are affectively suggestive, due in part to Jeergall's use of warm, earthy colors in the brown and yellow ocher range. Indeed, his burnished, harmonious hues are highly appealing, lending his pictures a muted pathos that plays off against their considerable formal qualities. And while the compositions are stripped bare of melodrama, it is these formal qualities and the artist's exquisitely austere apportionment of space which endows his oils on canvas with subtle tensions and emotional undercurrents.

Jeergall's ability to imbue simple abstract shapes with so much human suggestiveness calls to mind Paul Klee, an artist who seems a kindred spirit to him, although Jeergall is less graphic and more painterly in approach. In other words, if Klee was fond of saying that he liked "to take a line for a little walk," Jeergall relies less upon line than on form, color, and texture for his peripatetic explorations of our common condition. And although they are not overly large by today's standards, his paintings often project the heft of ancient tablets (an effect abetted by their earthy tonalities) and the forms within them can suggest sun bleached fossils or bones recovered from the desert. Indeed, the sense of an existential desert, a metaphysical terrain of the mind, comes across in paintings such as "The Eclipse," with its central shape resembling some strange stucco beast sweltering under a black sun, and an actual desert materializes in "Flowers of the Desert," where the botanical forms alluded to in the title appear as parched and shriveled as Giacometti's withered personages.

One of the more remarkable features of Sunjoy Jeergall's visual language is its ability to evoke not only situations but a host of subtle states of being, as seen in "Soul Restless," where an odd embryonic form that could resemble one of Philip Guston's disembodied cartoon boob-heads bobs along in a vibrant blue river, bracketed between undifferentiated areas of battleship gray sky and land.

In "Soul Restless" the suggestion is of our blind journey through the mystery we call life, while another oil canvas, "In Search of Light," appears to mock our often hapless spiritual strivings by embodying them in semi-abstract creatures that appear more animal than human. Like beastly cousins of the characters in Beckett's "Waiting for Godot," they stand on four legs as rudimentary as those on a table, stranded in one of those desert-like spaces in which Jeergall stages his nonlinear masques. They seem to be like stand-ins for all of us who entertain the delusion that we may in some way decipher the mystery to which the previous painting, "Soul Restless," alluded less hopefully.

Other oils on canvas, such as "The Blue Bird," which projects a more exuberant mood with its brighter red and blue hues, and "The Empty Bottle," which appears to pay homage to Cubism from a playful postmodern perspective, also attest to Sunjoy Jeergall's adventurous aesthetic. Indeed, few contemporary painters engage so readily with so many different avenues of plastic exploration. But it is to Jeergall's credit that all of his efforts appear pointed at conveying something of our mutual struggle to make sense of the world in which we find ourselves—or at least to find a way to live fruitfully in it and create meaning where none may be.

It is this that makes Sunjoy Jeergall a rare and valuable artist whose work raises provocative questions of universal significance, even while it pleases us on a purely visual level with its skillful color harmonies and its refined formal balances.

—Maurice Taplinger

Al Pounders: The Emotive Earth

There is a vertiginous quality to the compositions of some of Al Pounders' large oils on canvas which can be every bit as unexpected as the veering perspectives in the northern California landscapes of Wayne Thiebaud, his gallery mate at Allan Stone Gallery, 113 East 90th Street, where Pounders' recent solo show was seen.

Enamored of tilting planes and contrasting angles of sight, Pounders takes delight in "the choice to reshape space, to arrive at the idea of 'place'."

In "View with Melone Farm, 2000-2003," for example, a turbulent sky filled with subtle secondary hues seems to splash, like surf pounding a shoreline, over a rolling mass of hilly fields as variously colorful as a patchwork quilt. Although situated in the distance, the hills themselves appear to rear up, as if about to topple onto the farmhouse situated on a smaller hill in the foreground. The plowed fields in a larger oil called "Mystic Scene, Umbria, 1990" limned in deeper hues with less sky visible, appear creased toward the top of the composition, as though the land is rippling back upon itself. The effect, which justifies the painting's title, has its own peculiar logic in the context of the panoramic approach to the Italian landscape which Pounders has evolved over a career that spans nearly fifty years.

A Professor Emeritus of painting at Purdue University, his only influence would appear to be the rugged beauty of the region. At the same time, he is obviously aware of belonging to a romantic landscape tradition that dates back to the Renaissance. Only, liberated from the biblical allegories to which it was normally subordinated in that time, the land itself unveils its innate spiritual substance in Pounders' paintings.

"Italy is a country of miracles," the artist said in a1992 artist statement. "Each little town has its patron saint. The saint was born there, or credited with a miraculous healing. Something supernatural crowns the least and most remote village in Italy."

Pounders projects this sense of numinousness through his dramatic handling of chiaroscuro, employing light and shadow in a dramatic manner that makes the entire terrain almost seem a sentient thing, possessed of human emotions. Thus light bursting through cumuli constitutes an ecstatic event. And when shadows fall over sweeping vistas of vineyards, woods, and fields dotted with stone farmhouses, a brooding mood permeates the picture.

Pounders is a consummate colorist, creating his compositions with staccato strokes

"From the Gritti Vineyards I," 2006

in a manner that mingles Impressionist chromatics created with pale, luminous hues such as pastel pinks and lemon yellows with earth colors laid down in successive layers over months and years. In "Monte Tezio, 1994-1996," fantastic cloud formations, shot through with subtle pink and violet highlights, appear to flow up from the fields rather than hover above them. And that light seems to emanate from within the burnished ocher fields in "Vineyards in June 1, 2006" rather than reflecting off them, gives further proof of the artist's ability to impart a visionary intensity to nature.

Indeed, Pounders, who has rhapsodized verbally about the "valleys carpeted in mist" and other visual pleasures of Monte Acuto, just above Umbria, is a voluptuary of natural events and effects. —Ed McCormack

Tradition Meets Innovation in Postmodern Photography

Perhaps the most prevalent trend in contemporary photography is a turning away from technical trickery toward a more "purist" approach, indicated by the number of photographic artists who eschew digital means (and, some cases, even color) in the excellent exhibition "Tripping the Light Fantastic," at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, Chelsea, through April 6.

One example are Alex Braverman's pictures of dancers. Born in Lithuania, now a resident of Texas, Braverman often captures his lithe subjects in mid air, immortalizing their athletic grace in pictures that exemplify the term "poetry in motion."

Russian-born Dmitry Chetverukhin has garnered international acclaim for pictures that combine formal austerity with a strong sense of narrative. Chetverukhin's ability to invest fine art photography with the aesthetic of high fashion is especially striking in cunningly conceptualized period pieces such as "Trance 1930's."

Widely exhibited and honored photographer, performance artist and journalist Donna L. Clovis explores issues of gender and identity, often by integrating aspects of photography into three dimensions in sculpture and performance, as well as in projects such as a partnership with MIT involving the use of digital photography in installation works. For all her technical sophistication, however, Clovis also excels in capturing intimate moments in candid genre photos such as "Cuban Woman" and street scenes like "Salute."

Wildlife photography achieves high art status in the well traveled New York photographer Chris Dei, who focuses on the wild kingdom in far-flung corners of the globe, particularly Africa. Kenya provided Dei with one of her most memorable images: a racing zebra herd, their stripes merging kinetically.

California photographer Heidi Fickinger seeks a synthesis of natural and man-made beauty in her crystalline prints of majestic clouds or the black girders of a bridge as boldly framed as one of Franz Kline's calligraphic paintings. Indeed, Fickinger, who studied fine art at Utah State University, applies a particularly painterly vision to her chosen medium, both in terms of composition and her concentration on texture and chiaroscuro.

Painterly qualities also come into play in Louisiana resident Eleanor Owen Kerr's poetic topographical views of land masses and waterways, with their dramatic shadowplay and luminous reflections. Seeking the landscape's "mysterious hidden depths," Kerr exerts control over subtle tonal modulations during the printing process in her darkroom.

Gloria Marco Munuera, a Spanish-born professor of photography in Florence, Italy, does away with the camera altogether, employing a technique known as photogram to create images with light on photo-sensitive paper. Mythic feminine figures emerge like apparitions by virtue of Munuera's skillful manipulation of the unpredictable process.

Pennsylvania photographer Jennifer L. Pum, an alumnae of the Art Institute of Philadelphia, aims for emotional impact in both her figurative and landscape imagery. Toward this end, Pum employs a blurred effect to suggest a muddled state of mind in a picture of a woman ruminating in a window or brings a sharper focus to bear in an image of a tree as tellingly detailed as a portrait.

Closeup images of the human body are both abstract and suggestive of landscape elements in the photographs of P Tymchuk who states that her greatest satisfaction is when viewers are attracted to her work "on an intuitive level." Saturating her prints with radiant color, contrasted with areas of shadow, enhances the sometimes baffling beauty of Tymchuk's pictures.

Another fine colorist, Caroline Valenti, who lives and works in Perth, Australia, often photographs willowy young women in wistful postures in nondescript settings where peeling walls or other textural details contrast sharply with their ethereal presence. Valenti's apparent preference for pale hues in soft focus lends her pictures a delicate lyricism akin to Degas' pastels of youthful ballerinas.

Also including photomontages by the versatile artist Alex Hiam, whose work was reviewed in our February/March issue, "Tripping the Light Fantastic" is a valuable survey of current trends in art photography.

—Maureen Flynn

Neo Rauch, Maestro of Mise en scene Pastiche,

by Ed McCormack

Across the steakhouse dining room, their white shirts glowing in the woodsy gloaming, a posse of yuppie guys was singing "Happy Birthday" to a buddy. Pumped up on beer, red meat, and testosterone, they made it sound like some hoarse, hostile war chant.

Jeannie and Betty were freaking out over that weird news story about the female astronaut who drove 900 miles in diapers to attack her rival in a love triangle, and Tony was regaling me with his diabolical plot to save up a large garbage bag of dog shit and dump it on the porch of the neighbor who regularly lets his German Shepherd poop in his driveway in Riverdale, when the waitress wheeled a cart over to our table.

On it, hefty slabs of raw beef, an Idaho potato, asparagus stalks, and the largest Maine lobster any of us ever saw were lined up, as though in a protein-heavy version of one of those 1950s charts showing "the basic food groups." A petite young Dominican woman in a bowtie, she held them up, one by one, and went into a well rehearsed spiel about the taste, tenderness, and preparation method of each, as though these common staples of the American diet were objects of exotic origin.

It was difficult not to smirk and make cheap jokes during her performance, especially when she got to the lobster, which brandished its bound claws and struggled furiously, as she displayed it for our delectation. But one suppressed this smartass impulse, knowing she had to be weary of being treated as a figure of fun by pseudo-sophisticates who think overpaying for dinner qualifies them as Algonquin Round Table wits.

Although our own dinners were prepaid by gift-card, no one in our party of four was tempted by the monster crustacean. After the waitress went off to place our order, the only sentient thing on the cart continued to struggle valiantly. Its writhings aroused the infinite creaturely empathy of Jeannie, who wondered if we should offer it water.
(In a world lousy with sneering ironists, who could blame me for falling fatally in love with such unembarrassed kindness, of which I have been chief beneficiary over many seasons of "for better and for worse?")

Still, when my darling reached for her glass, as if about to do just that, I hastened to suggest that management might frown on one customer administering first aid to another's future entree. And, just then, when the birthday boys across the room started stomping their feet, pounding the table, and clashing beer mugs like storm troopers in a Third Reich beer hall, I began to feel as though we were all trapped in some surreal scene by Neo Rauch, whose new show of paintings opens at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on May 22.

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"Vater, 2007" Oil on canvas 78 in. x 59 in. (200 x 150 cm) Courtesy Galerie EIGEN + ART Leipzig/Berlin & David Zwirner, New York ©Neo Rauch /Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Photo: Uwe Walter

Neo indeed! Could any postmodern art star possibly ask for a more auspicious name? Born in Leipzig, East Germany, in 1960, Rauch often sets his paintings in a dreamlike version of that manufacturing city, where he still has his studio and has spawned a cult of younger artistic acolytes known as the New Leipzig School. In contrast to the young German artists who goose-stepped under the banner of Neo-Expressionism in the 1980s, the New Leipzigs are less identified with strident painterly pyrotechnics than with a confounding figurative hybrid one critic dubbed "Pop-Surrealist Social Realism."

Not only is that term descriptively serviceable, but its awkward syntax matches the ungainliness of the eclectic stylistic schtick none manages more successfully than the wunderkind himself. Applying the visual vernacular of the Eastern Bloc political posters and wall murals he grew up with to a plethora of narrative incongruities that would make even Rene Magritte dizzy, Rauch claims, "I am only acting as a sleepwalking director in my own private theater."

Yet even as he resists interpretation, telling one interviewer his work is "without intention, like a natural phenomenon that cannot possibly be brooded out in dry cerebral recesses," earnest critics continue to puzzle over the possible meanings hidden in the thickets of his unrelenting pictorial prolificness. Frowning figuratively (like the bearded professor types who often appear among his cast of stock characters, poring over plans laid out on tables or ruminating over strange scale models), these critics make significant connections between the locomotives that sometimes appear among the mechanical motifs in Rauch's paintings and the death of his parents in a train wreck when he was six years old. Or else, like Roberta Smith of *The New York Times*, they attribute his imagistic profligacy to the fact that he was pretty much cut off from art outside East Germany until the Berlin Wall fell when he was thirty, suddenly swamping him with a host of invigorating influences.

"Warhol, Leger and Magritte could number among his current interests," Smith wrote in a review Rauch's 2002 New York show at David Zwirner Gallery. "Or he may be trying to rectify Georg Baselitz's early hero paintings with Sigmar Polke and Martin Kippenberger's sense of the absurd, as well as his own more academic background."

Or maybe Smith's supposings simply demonstrate the disparity between the intuitive methods of many artists and the "cerebral brooding out" of critics. Indeed, what many critics who have never themselves painted may be missing is that even artists of Rauch's ilk direct most of their conscious cunning toward visual solutions, and as far as subject matter is concerned, are quite content to proceed on automatic pilot. Of course, no matter how much he may protest to contrary, no artist minds having his work freighted with critical significance, no matter how far off base. And no artist provides more fodder for making such assumptions than Neo Rauch.

* * *

at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

A typical Rauch is large, even mural scale. There is little differentiation between exterior and interior spaces, although the composition is likely to be set mostly out of doors, amidst low-lying factory structures or tacky suburban dwellings. In some paintings, alpine-looking mountainous vistas loom overhead. In others, Strip Mall Moderne structures of glass, steel, and concrete perch atop hills or cliffs. These and other architectural elements often appear abandoned, in disrepair, and have a way of petering out into sketchiness, as though the painter got lazy or could not figure how to cram the perspective into the already busy picture plane convincingly, or— subverting the narrative with self-conscious artiness— decided it would be cool to leave traces of "process" by affecting a deliberately "unfinished" look. (Indeed, Rauch routinely juxtaposes a tight retro-illustrational mode and slapdash painterly effects within a single canvas.)

"Jagdzimmer, 2007" Oil on canvas 43 in. x 63 in. (110 x 160 cm) Courtesy Galerie EIGEN + ART Leipzig/Berlin & David Zwirner, New York ©Neo Rauch/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Photo: Uwe Walter

Almost always, the mise en scene terrain is cluttered with unidentifiable mechanical or organic objects with which Rauch's mostly male figures appear to be physically engaged in a manner that suggests labor, but of no known kind, toward no apparent purpose. Sometimes these hapless workers wield useless-looking implements that could recall Richard Brautigan's line "loading mercury with a pitchfork" or struggle with viscous substances that, depending on their color, could either be gobs of paint, entrails, or excrement. (Here, again, self-conscious artiness intrudes, as though Rauch wants us to see these gooey shapes as little "abstractions" and nod knowingly.)

Like those in the early paintings of the British artist R. B. Kitaj, Rauch's figures often have a flat, cut-out look, like paper dolls pasted onto a backdrop.They can also be wildly out of time and scale, even when occupying the same plane, as when a 19th century dandy in a tophat wanders into a modern setting carrying a Mini Me replica of himself.

While vacationers in bathing suits may wade nearby in puddles of industrial waste, the primary activity in Rauch' paintings is invariably some sort of work. A recurring character is a man hoisting on his shoulder a huge mammoth-tusk. He may be alone or join a procession of laborers emerging like yoked gulag prisoners from a subterranean factory in a snow-covered cave. One crew of men may toil around an object that resembles a gigantic manual water pump towering toward a sky filled with acidic yellow clouds shaped like irradiated turds. Another group might interrupt their work to gaze up mesmerized as corporate logos appear above the rooftops like religious visions. Or else soldiers may sit in the back of a military transport, hardly seeming to notice as woman wearing a fur collar drags the limp body of a man dressed incongruously in 17th century knee britches and stockings along the sidewalk.

"It's clear that there's a problematic core to them that's grounded in the Apocalypse," Rauch admitted when an interviewer commented that he appeared to be creating "an atmosphere of catastrophe."

* * *

The two new paintings that the senior press officer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art was able to provide me with images of before our deadline (the others, I was told, were still in progress), are set somewhat atypically in interiors, and the figures are more solidly painted than usual, as though Rauch may be trying to measure up to the art historical company he will be keeping in that bastion of classical painting. Perhaps this could also account for the more somber palette of gravy browns and deep blues which have replaced his usual bright billboard hues, as well as the atmosphere of candlelit chiaroscuro, of La Tour-like sfumato, and the suggestion of a Renaissance Virgin and Child in the composition of the canvas called "Vater." (After all, it would be just like Rauch, who has included artists being interviewed by reporters in some of his paintings as his own art stardom has accelerated, to indulge in such self-conscious irony.) Here, however, both figures are adult males, although the one being cradled in the others' arms is infant-size. The nurturer, dressed in dark frockcoat, old-fashioned cravat and grotesquely enlarged yellow clown gloves, regards the viewer with a serene expression that can only be seen, in context, as maternal. As in a La Tour, the scene is illuminated by a row of candles (albeit shaped vaguely like miniature nuclear reactors), near which a third man, also somewhat out of scale but not as much so as the infant with adult proportions, stands fiddling with a camera, as though preparing to photograph the two main figures in the foreground.

"Jagdzimmer," the second new painting for the show at the Met is set in what appears to be a rustic hunting cabin, an impression enhanced by the dead fowl hanging from the low rafters and laid out limply on a rough table around which three men and a middle aged hausfrau are gathered. While the woman prods the dead bird on the table with her finger, a bearded older man reaches up toward the dim ceiling lights as if to warm his hands on them, as one younger man lights another's cigarette. This might seem a relatively benign scene if not for the cross-bows that all four figures keep strapped to their bodies or resting within arms reach, which make them appear less like vacationers than Resistance fighters holed up in some dank bunker.

For his show at the Met, Neo Rauch has apparently made some stylistic concessions but his thematic thrust remains the same. At their best, his paintings still suggest an edgy new species of surreal allegory. At their worst, they degenerate into something resembling those trite perceptual puzzles, rife with obvious incongruities, that appear in children's publications under headings like "What's Wrong With This Picture?"

Then again, I was thinking, as we dug into our bleeding steaks, maybe what Rauch is telling us is that, in times like these, best and worst are often indistinguishable.

* * *

"Neo Rauch at the Met" is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art ,1000 Fifth Avenue and 82nd Street , from May 22 through September 23.

At the Salmagundi Club, the AWS Celebrates the Glories of Watercolor

Although water-media has long been a broad category, encompassing tempera, gouache, and, in more recent decades, acrylics, the term "watercolor" still applies most properly to paintings in translucent hues, with the white of the paper, rather than white pigment, providing the lighter tones. And while mixed media and "body color" (pigment mixed with white) put in an occasional appearance, the overwhelming majority of the works in the 140th Annual International Exhibition of the American Watercolor Society were accomplished in this manner.

Thus this sweeping survey, on view at the Salmagundi Club, 47 Fifth Avenue, through April 22, offers a valuable overview of the medium's wide range of effects from a predominantly purist perspective, even while making liberal concessions to mixed media and other recent variants of traditional aquarelle techniques.

One of watercolor's most appealing characteristics is the sort of swift spontaneity exemplified in Nell Dorn Byrd's painting of an elegant dining room. White curtains, a vase of flowers, a table setting, and other details are implied, rather than literally delineated, by the artist's fluid strokes. Even with the apparent addition of opaque body color, however, Serge Hollerbach employs a brisk visual shorthand in an atmospheric painting of two tiny figures walking along a curved stretch of shoreline at night while white sailboats dot the dark river. James Michael's beachscape, with scrubby weeds blowing in the breeze and a watery horizon kissed by golden light is also possessed of a striking simplicity and economy of means, akin to a Zen ink painting.

James Michael

At the opposite extreme, demonstrating the versatility of the medium, are paintings such as Richard Sabin's meticulous realist still life centering on a silver pitcher and several porcelain tea cups, as well as Kiff Holland's equally exacting composition featuring an array of drinking glasses glimmering in semi-darkness. Both artists display an ability to capture the play of light on various reflective surfaces in convincing detail while retaining the sparkling freshness that distinguishes watercolor at its best.

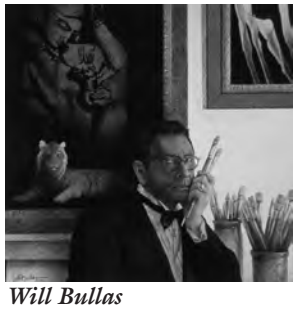
Another superb performance, in regard to capturing all the subtle nuances of a highly complex subject without succumbing to a fussy descriptiveness unsuitable to the medium, is John T. Salminen's street scene with figures huddled around the marquee of a movie theater under a billboard of a huge angel. Not only does the artist orchestrate the eclectic visual cacophony of the area into a harmonious composition but also creates compelling contrasts between transcendent and down-to-earth imagery. By contrast, Angela A. Barbalace's relatively austere composition of people taking a break in Bryant Park casts each scattered figure in a scene of public solitude reminiscent of Canaletto's Venice.

John T. Salminen

Chiaroscuro, the modeling of form with gradations of light and dark, is another area in which watercolor can be every bit the equal of oil painting, as demonstrated in Keiko Yasuoka's evocative still life of pillows and an open book on an unmade bed bathed in sunlight. Alvaro Castagnet's picture of chefs at work like wizards in a restaurant kitchen amid billowing clouds of steam is another example of the medium's effectiveness in evoking dramatic tonal contrasts. Then there is Patricia Herlihy's saloon scene, reminiscent of the Ash Can School, with a row of men languishing at the bar under silhouetted moose heads as sunlight blazes in the window like some alien apparition intruding on their shady nook.

Alvaro Castagnet

Portraits are yet another subject that most people normally associate with oil on canvas. However, a good watercolorist can impart special qualities to the human image, as Will Bullas demonstrates with a formal portrait of an elegant middleaged artist in a black bowtie and tuxedo, posing in his studio with a savoir faire suggesting James Bond in a casino. Somewhat more symbolic, yet also depicting a specific individual, Sheryl Luxenburg's Magic Realist monochromatic aquarelle depicts a beautiful young woman gazing at the viewer dreamily through a rain-streaked window to which she lightly touches the palm of one hand. A similar gesture, sans window, has an entirely different effect in a portrait by Kim Johnson of a graybearded man with closed eyes raising one hand absently, as though trying to summon a memory, painted in a looser representational style, replete with expressive drips that add to its sense of snapshot immediacy. Also outstanding for its revelation of character, Charles Santopadre's watercolor of a waitress taking a break with a newspaper at the shiny formica counter of a diner, smoke curling up sinuously from her cigarette as she glances askance, also incorporates elements of still life in the artful arrangement of ketchup bottles, salt shakers, bowls and fruits on a shelf behind the figure, among other incidental props. Another painting of a solitary female figure, this one seen in a rather bleak landscape with a white barn in the distance, by Joseph Alleman appeared to be an improbable yet successful synthesis of the very different styles of Andrew Wyeth and Will Barnet.



Will Bullas

Edwin C. Shuttleworth

As expected for a medium ideally suited to plein air painting, fine landscapes and cityscapes abound in this exhibition. In Edwin C. Shuttleworth's snowy forest scene, a fat full moon glows through the bare branches of expressively distorted trees, while Dan Burt's lively street scene is evoked in vigorous dashes of color— reminding one, respectively, of two great American watercolorists: Charles Burchfield and John Marin. Other works demonstrating the medium's on-the-spot efficacy are Jean H. Grastorf's pedestrians passing one of Robert Indiana's "Love" sculptures on a busy city street; Robertson Massie's mounted jockeys on the back-lot of a racetrack; Jeanne Dobie's aerial panorama of vibrantly patterned fields and farmhouses; and Linda Baker's strong "abstract realist" composition of fire-escapes casting geometric shadows on the facade of a loft building.

Jean H. Grastorf

These and numerous other works that space limitations, unfortunately, prohibit mentioning here make this an indispensable exhibition for anyone who wishes to be aware of the latest developments in contemporary watercolor painting.

—J. Sanders Eaton

The Synthesis of Violence and Grace in Hendrik Smit's Paintings

A certain visceral directness which, by and large, has been absent in much contemporary art for quite some time, comes to the forefront in the work of the Dutch painter Hendrik Smit, whose work is featured in the year-round salon exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, in Chelsea.

"Escape no. 9"

This viscerality may have to do with the fact that Smit, whose work is in important public and private collections in Europe and the United States, often dispenses with brushes and paints directly with his hands. From photographs that one has seen, he appears to be a big man, and this is reflected in the scale of some of his canvases as well as in the expansiveness of his strokes.

There is also a muscularity to Smit's forms and a raw vibrancy to his colors that can remind one of his fellow countryman Karel Appel, although Smit delves more deeply into abstraction than either Appel or any of his colleagues in the Cobra group, all of whom remained tethered to the figure in one way or another. Although Herbert Read once wrote of Appel that his work gave the impression "of a spiritual tornado that has left these images of its passage," this seems even truer of Smit's compositions, in which all vestiges of the known world are swept away by the pure force of the untrammeled gesture.

Indeed, the velocity of Smit's strokes and the voluptuousness of his paint surfaces is closer in spirit to the more abstract canvases of that other "flying Dutchman" de Kooning, although Smit has his own sense of gesture, his own intrepid approach to color. What impresses one most about Smit's compositions is the balance that he achieves between violence and grace. One can't help thinking in this regard of the slow-motion massacres in the films of the American director Sam Peckinpah, given the balletic beauty of Smit's painterly gore-spattering—particularly in his entrail-like skeins of glistening cadmium red and alizarin crimson in combination with fleshy pinks, strident yellows, verdant greens, and deep, nocturnal blues.

Admittedly, one may be doing a disservice to the actual character of an essentially gentle man by leaning too heavily on the metaphor of violence. Yet the brute force of Hendrik Smit's painterly attack lends his canvases an immediacy akin to Chaim Soutine's bloody sides of beef, an inescapably jarring effect that accounts for much of the visual impact. At the same time, Smit's manipulation of thick pigment with his hands and fingers results in a sumptuous tactility, an elegant physicality that is hard to resist.

Although the term "action painting" has fallen into disuse in recent years for no better reason than that we rarely encounter such immediacy in works of art anymore, it can be applied most accurately to Smit's compositions, with their bold forms and calligraphic strokes projecting an exuberant sense of movement. Standing before these paintings, one is swept up in their rhythms, which appear to be occurring in real time. The vigorous gestural forms read to the eye as ongoing events, rather than frozen remnants of motion, and one gets caught up in the abstract drama of form and color that Hendrik Smit conjures so convincingly.

—Peter Wiley

West Side Artists "Think, Dream, Create" at Broadway Mall

Artist Margo Mead recently curated a group under the upbeat title "Think, Dream, Create," featuring members of the West Side Arts Coalition, at Broadway Mall Community Center on the center island at 96th Street and Broadway.

Mead herself invariably projects a positive view of nature in her works in watermedia on rice paper, combining the inspiration of Asian painting with a decidedly western way with form and composition. Here, Mead showed three beachscapes in which her angular delineation of rocks and other natural elements in a fluid ink line were set off by luminous blue and purple washes accented with touches of opaque white to capture the movement of gulls with calligraphic grace.

Madi Lanier is another artist with a highly personal approach to marine subjects who employs expressive linear elements as salient features of her compositions. In Lanier's monoprints, such as "Marshes by the Sea," and works in watercolor and monoprint such as two variations on the theme "Ocean Mist," fine, gracefully swirling lines with an etched quality overlay pale washes of color to convey not only the contours of natural forms but a sense of nature's underlying forces.

The paintings of Ruth Llanillo Leal merge an almost psychedelic intensity with a pristine formal quality. Leal's hard-edge acrylics on canvas in this show featured the baroque forms of butterflies, an especially suitable subject for her eccentrically engaging style. By contrast, Terry Berkowitz's acrylic on canvas, "Sunflowers" treats a similarly fanciful subject as an occasion for a near abstract overall composition with its own considerable poetic appeal.

David Saphier's mixed media works, on the other hand, evoke deep natural rhythms and earthy essences through densely layered forms, colors, and roughly handled collage elements that enhance the tactility of his allusive abstractions. Saphier's "Blue Tree" is especially engaging in the latter regard, with actual leaves enhancing the textural quality of the lyrical composition.

Refreshingly uninhibited artist Carol Carpentieri employs bits of newspaper and other collage elements with boldly drawn figurative forms that seemed to flow like stream of consciousness visual poetry. Although primitivistic, her drawing style is highly expressive with ornate forms that morph into gnomish angels and fantastic creatures possessed of an unorthodox imaginative resonance.

Rini Hunter also employs collage, albeit to create exquisitely spare compositions in which evocative yet indefinable forms converge at the center of darkly painted grounds with ridged surfaces. In two pieces titled "Victorian I" and "Victorian II," Hunter creates a sense of suspension and tension that registers on some level below conscious cognition.

The technically ingenious abstract artist Ivan Sherman creates complex geometric compositions with ordinary corrugated cardboard. The imposing and remarkably elegant configurations that Sherman constructs with these common, rather mundane packing materials amount to a unique form of aesthetic alchemy.

Three other artists demonstrate the continuing vitality of gestural painting, each taking off from the impetus of Abstract Expressionism to forge a strong personal style: Pud Houstoun, one of our most consistently pleasing painterly virtuosos, employs a host of effects, from glazes to thick impastos, from scored lines to expressive drips, to conjure compositions with a presence that belies their modest size. Elinore Bucholtz creates energetic abstractions especially notable for their chromatic power and sense of reflecting the relationship between matter and space, particularly in a small watercolor called "Sun Circle." Amy Rosenfeld's abstractions employ interlocking forms, bright colors and dark outlines. She juxtaposes intriguing symbols to dynamic and mysterious effect, as seen in her acrylic on canvas "Nightime," with its streaks of deep blue and radiant scarlet.

—Peter Wiley

Noelia Torrubia: A Spanish Painter at Play in Fields of the Surreal

Spain has made a major contribution to Surrealism with a diversity of styles ranging from the meticulous dream representations of Salvador Dali to the more fanciful formal excursions of Joan Miro. And obviously, Noelia Torrubia, a contemporary Spanish painter in the year-round salon exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, has learned a great deal from all of the modern masters who proceeded her.

Being a postmodern painter, however, Torrubia puts her own uniquely playful spin on Surrealism, having assimilated elements of cartooning and popular culture that lend her paintings an inexplicable resonance. Most of her compositions feature biomorphic shapes that morph between the figurative and the abstract. Painted in a palette of brilliant hues laid down in bold, flat areas, her compositions often have a poster-like graphic impact. Sometimes shapes are contained within black outlines, while at other times the colors themselves define the separate forms. Although precise, her paint application cannot be termed "hard-edged," for it allows for subtle tonal modulations within the discrete color areas and certain forms are modeled to create the impression of light and shadow playing along their contours.

Although the early Surrealists were often Freudians, intent on devising specific images to convey psychological states of being or to represent the submerged symbols and meanings that surface in dreams, Torrubia's images appear to be pure products of a fertile imagination, symbolizing metaphysical notions rather than individual emotions.

Torrubia's compelling painting of a black tree floating against an expanse of blue sky with a gold door swung open at its center, for example, presents the viewer with a visual conundrum akin to the "magic realism" of Rene Magritte. For like Magritte, it seems to be Torrubia's intention to subvert the ordinary, rather than to illustrate an idea about the nature of reality. The image is exactly what it appears to be and the viewer is invited to interpret it or to merely accept it at face value at his or her pleasure. That Torrubia provides no title indicates her desire to have the image speak for itself. No explanation is necessary beyond the evidence presented in the painting.

Equally provocative is another composition in which a large, expressively distorted hand is set against a purple cosmic expanse with a window-like opening in its palm in the shape of a bird. One possible interpretation of this image might be that it suggests the elusiveness of dreams, how they slip through our grasp when we attempt to apprehend them. But dreams cannot be explained as patly as some of Torrubia's artistic forbearers would have had us believe, and like other postmodern painters such as Francesco Clemente, Torrubia prefers to present us with puzzles rather than answers. Thus, in other untitled paintings by Torrubia, we may encounter a bizarrely bloated Schmoo-like character apparently walking on thin air; four voluptuously feminine semi-abstract shapes engaged in some mysterious esoteric ritual; or landscape more confounding than any terrain ever conceived by Yves Tanguy, where, among other engaging anomalies, a conga-line of creatures resembling upright ants carries a loaf of French bread under the gaze of a large, all-seeing eye.

Noelia Torrubia appears able to generate such images with an effortless assiduousness suggesting a pipeline to an alternate reality where startling incongruities are an everyday occurrence. In this regard, she is a true Surrealist, albeit one with a playful sense of irony that puts her in perfect harmony with the postmodernist zeitgeist. –Wilson Wong

"Open 2007": Facets of Postmodern Photography

As a curator as well as a photographer, Jennifer Holst has an exquisite sensibility, judging from "Open 2007—A Photography Exhibition," which she oversaw recently for the West Side Arts Coalition, at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street.

Holst's own color photographs were characteristically intimate examples of majesty in miniature. Whether the subject is a breathtaking waterfall in Iceland or a golden sky over Utah, Holst has a way of framing natural phenomenon in pristine, gemlike formal stasis.

Robin Glasser Sacknoff eschews the picturesque tourist-views to capture what happens when the fabled canals flood the streets, leaving all of Venice soggily awash. Yet the picturesque persists in the Sacknoff's shimmering vision of a cathedral reflected in a puddle in a piazza and other telling details captured with a visionary eye.

Don Sichler's singular angle of vision focuses on such contrasts as the cross on a church steeple set against the glass facade of a hi-rise tower, or a row of tools silhouetted in a workshop window with the verdant blur of a landscape dissolving in rain. Sichler has a gift for rooting out memorable everyday epiphanies.

Alberto Riva not only channels the tactile canvases of Antoni Tapies in his digital prints of scrawled city walls but evokes surrealism by shooting through a fish tank in a manner that makes its inhabitants appear to be swimming freely through glossy office corridors. Regan Kelly scavenges successfully for arresting imagery amid city sidewalks and really hits a bull's-eye with an arresting image of a big red cross on a white shed intersecting a serene slice of sand, water, and sky.

Richard Zapata's portrait of a reclining bride with her silky white gown billowing around her like Venus's frothy waves is a tour de force. Zapata's penchant for romance also comes across in his equally engaging image of an elegant couple executing a sharp tango turn. Natural abstract patterns framed by a discerning eye enliven a series of C-prints by Jean Prytyskacz. With the soft blue shadows of trees cast on a pavement saturated in paler blue hues, Prytyskacz evokes a hushed poetry.

Tree limbs also figure prominently in Scott Weingarten's photographic images printed on large sheets of etching paper, in which they merge like a multitude of graceful arteries with the serene face of a beautiful woman. Weingarten takes a potentially tricky subject and transforms it into a convincing personification of the eternal earth goddess.

Among the most abstract images in the show are Harriet G. Green's digital prints of fireworks in a night sky. Green employs points of light like Henri Michaux used ink, to create calligraphic imagery suggestive of a highly personal cosmology. Steve Weintraub employs digital technology to invest the known world with visionary intensity, as seen in his image of railroad cars swirling with colorful psychedelic designs and the Twilight Zone atmosphere in his picture of nocturnal barns and silos glowing phosphorescently. Transcendence of the commonplace is equally evident in fanciful digital C-prints of Fung Yee Alice Ng, where a weird spiral cloud whirls like a flying saucer above a lush landscape or reflected cumuli appear to float like Monet's lilies in a watery pavilion in a botanical garden.

Amid the many colorful permutations in this excellent exhibition, the black and white African portraits of Khuumba Ama present an austere purist vision permeated with human dignity. Particularly powerful is Ama's double portrait of a white bearded elder and a young man who both possess the same soulful eyes.

—J. B. Walker

Water as Conduit of Passion in the Paintings of Hilda Green Demsky

The great French cultural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss once bemoaned the fact that "painters have come to reject the subject in favor of what is now called, with revealing discretion, their work." Indeed, Levi-Strauss concludes his four volume masterpiece Mythologies with the sobering notion that, as Guy Davenport paraphrased it in an insightful essay, "we have reversed the deference to nature in which civilization began."

One suspects that Levi-Strauss, who consequently found the "work" ("travail," in French) of most modern painters wanting and argued that their art could regain relevance "only if one continued to see painting as a means of knowledge," would have approved of Hilda Green Demsky's statement, "One of my reasons for making art is to understand nature."

For Demsky, waterfalls have long been an important source of knowledge and inspiration; in their presence, as she puts it, "All the many things that water represents come rushing to my mind—their power, purity, meditative capacity, the ions that give you a 'lift,' the way water is constantly recycling from clouds to rain to rivers, how it sustains life, provides recreation and transports us to far-off places."

The notion of "travail," in the double-edged sense that Levi-Strauss employs the term, is nowhere evident in Demsky's statement. Rather, what one hears is an exhilaration that manifests even more forcefully in her paintings, some of the most recent of which can be seen in her new solo show, "Out of the Blue: Rivers of New York," at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from May 15 through June 2. (Reception: Saturday, May 19, from 3 to 6 PM.)

Recently Demsky, a previous recipient of a Fulbright Fellowship and a grant from the National Endowment for the arts, received another grant to create an exhibition centering on the Bronx River as a great community resource, made possible by the Arts Alive Artist Grant Program of the Westchester Arts Council, with funding from the New York State Council on the Arts. In this case, especially, the grant administrators showed admirable venturesomeness in selecting a painter who is certain to create a legitimate artistic statement rather than pretty civic propaganda. Indeed, given her visceral approach to watery subjects, they may be getting more than they bargained for.

The gestural energy of Abstract Expressionism informs every stroke that Hilda Green Demsky applies either to canvas or to the heavy sheets of mylar that have become as frequent a painting surface for her in recent years. At times, starting with her exhibition at Pleiades Gallery in 2003, Demsky has suspended her paintings on mylar from the ceiling or presented them as free-standing cylinders merging painting with aspects of sculpture in installations that evoke a sense of the terrains she traverses with her sketchpad in search of natural inspiration. Such presentations have been especially effective in giving gallery goers a sense of the artist's Thoreau-like immersion in her subject, as well as in successfully creating an all-enveloping environment for aesthetic delectation.

"Lucifer"

Viewed individually, however, Demsky's paintings, whether on canvas or mylar, possess a presence and a power that springs as much from her immersion in art history as in nature. Along with what she has learned from the Abstract Expressionists—particularly de Kooning—about infusing a composition with energy through muscular brushwork, one sees vestiges of Cezanne's protocubist structuring, particularly in her handling of the blocky rocks that often bracket her rushing gushes of water.

This combination of painterly vigor and angular structuring reaches a kind of apex in "A Symphony," one of the recent paintings in which Demsky heightens the chromatic charge of her compositions through the introduction of metallic pigments and employs paint rollers along with brushes to lay down broader, more rectangular color areas than ever before. Here, a seemingly anomalous set of stone steps, leading down to watery depths where waves flow over rocks could appear to be a symbolic, imaginary addition to the composition, suggesting musical scales. In fact, it is an an actual stone staircase leading up from a subterranean gorge whose rushing waters Demsky kept hearing mingled with the symphonic music at an outdoor performance of the New York City Ballet in Saratoga Springs, and later explored.

In a recent artist's statement, Demsky speaks of "the rush of heightened excitement that I feel when I hear the falling water," indicating a sensitivity to the aural as well as visual sensation of her favorite subject that calls to mind Arthur Dove's attempts to paint the sound of foghorns. However, in contrast to that mournful drone, the sound hinted at here is of a more exuberant timbre, for "A Symphony" is one of Demsky's most dynamic paintings to date.

Another recent work "In the Still of the Afternoon," depicting clear water flowing over shallow ridges framed by foliage, is dominated by sumptuous saturations of vibrant blue and green hues akin to those in the nature based abstractions of Joan Mitchell, a painter to whom Demsky seems a kindred spirit in terms of her coloristic and gestural lyricism. Equally evocative is "Live With Serenity," inspired by a horizontal waterfall that Demsky encountered at the top of a mountain, its curvaceous currents filling the composition with sinuous forms and graceful rhythms.

By contrast, "Lucifer" combines the angular shapes of rocks with the steep, frothy flow of a waterfall in a manner familiar to Demsky's admirers, while "Earth Spreading Her Arms" is something of a departure for the artist in its emphasis on parched mountainous masses, enlivened by sensuous crevices and buttered with brilliant yellow sunlight, in which it seems almost possible to discern the subliminal outline of a primal feminine form.

In these and the other recent paintings in her new solo show, Hilda Green Demsky solidifies her position as one of our most deeply committed contemporary nature painters by virtue of her willingness to give herself over to her subject with a passionate sense of engagement that might have given Claude Levi-Strauss heart.

—Ed McCormack

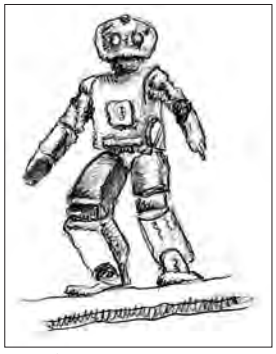
Expressions of "Post-Movement" Diversity at New Century Artists

So far, "post-movement" art, as someone once dubbed it, has yielded few conclusions. One thing we do now know, though (thanks largely to the efforts of The Drawing Center and a few other forward-looking art institutions), is that works on paper have come into their own. The trend continues in the exhibition "Expressions," at New Century Artists, 530 West 25th Street through April 14.

Featured are five artists who often exhibit together; for while their styles are diverse, their shared graphic concerns make for complimentary contrasts:

Linda Ganus

George Olexa, who works with lithography, colographic plate and etched techniques, as well as digital photograph image transfer, makes a radical departure by cutting two or more of his prints into strips and weaving them together to create freestanding sculptures. Olexa calls them "BTree" and "Butterfly-ery" because shredded images of forests cover their exteriors while images of insects swarm within the cylindrical structures. However, they also, inescapably, recall the shredded steel skeletons of the Twin Towers, a fact which could not have been lost on the artist and which lends their bucolic elements a wistful poignancy.

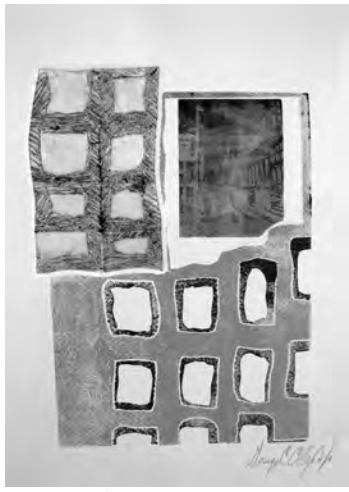


Mark Lerer

Come to think of it, vestiges of ruins and skulls seem to haunt Olexa's recent semiabstract prints of elegantly fragmented city buildings and gaping windows as well.

Linda Ganus puts impressive classical anatomy to the service of a quirky contemporary sensibility. Not only does she employ her skill to imbue her compositions with an eerie psychological impact, as seen in "Bed 2," where a pair of feet emerging from swirling sheets takes on a disconcerting disembodiedness but she also invests deftly delineated draperies with an odd vitality.

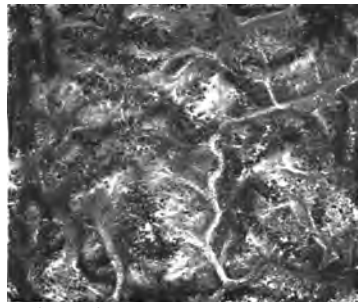
In Ganus's "Bed 1," for example, no figure or part of one can be seen; yet no artist imbues the folds and furrows in fabrics with more anthropomorphic suggestiveness. It helps, too, that the pale, pinkish colorations of Ganus' bedding materials are so immediately evocative of flesh, and that the drama is heightened by a background of densely worked charcoal lines that could suggest either a rumpled black undersheet or waves on a night sea when, to paraphrase the song, there is no moon at all.



George Olexa

Either way, stare long enough at Linda Ganus's new drawings (even her paintings are "drawn" in the best sense of the term) and it is possible to Rorschach everything from bodies in erotic embrace to writhing crucifixions into her rhythmic rendering of abstract shapes within inanimate folds of fabric.

Fritz Erismann continues his practice of testing various ways of drawing from an apparently conceptual angle, in a new series based on the Greek word "Topos." While also in ink on paper, they are not deliberately crude like an earlier series of Art Brut portraits, nor are they refined line drawings like the ones he showed in the same venue a couple of years ago. Rather, they are large, washy works merging elements of Chinese ink painting, Abstract Expressionism, and the obsessive decalmania of the California artist Bruce Connor. Such is their complexity that they simultaneously suggest aerial views of rugged earthy terrains ("topos," as in topography) and elemental energy constructs, amounting to an amalgam of stillness and movement.



Fritz Erisman

Erismann is one of those intrepid artists who eschew a "signature" style in order to keep all avenues of exploration open, gambling on the ideal of style as an expression of one's character rather, than a conscious form of "branding" akin to a corporate logo.

Like Paul Klee and Saul Steinberg (who once said it felt most natural to draw on the scale of his handwriting) Linda Dujack is primarily a visual poet. In an age rife with overblown productions making much ado about nothing, her exquisite little drypoints and collographs constitute a rarefied realm, at once hermetic and expansive, private and universal. Dujack has evolved a swift calligraphic alphabet of fanciful signs and symbols with which she can evoke a host of poetic meanings, simply by juxtaposing one image with another and letting the metaphorical sparks fly, as seen in one magical picture where two cone-like shapes, floating above similarly pointy little houses, keep mentally morphing from sailboats to party hats and back again.

Linda Dujack

In Dujack's drypoint "Cinderella," two rudimentary outlines of dresses, one faux-fancy, the other plain as a feed-sack, are sufficient to tell the whole touching tale; in "The Kite" the buoyant sense of childhood epiphany is evoked with breathtaking economy of means in a few scratchy lines.

With the deceptive ease of an ingenious desk doodler transcribing serial daydreams, Dujack casts out her vivacious line again and again, never failing to capture all manner of imaginative imagery in compositions informed by an unpretentious mastery.

The final artist, Mark Lerer challenges our definition of so-called "serious art" by working exclusively in pencil on small sheets of paper and insisting on drawing decidedly low-rent imagery such his "Robot," which looks for all the world like a sketch for a comicbook panel before it gets "inked."

Although Lerer has also been known to copy figures from Rodin's sculptures and other High Art sources, more often he draws spacemen, superheroes, cowboys and other characters tinged with nostalgia for a simpler time, when heroism still seemed possible. However, he does not come off as an idiot savant, outsider, or new wave hipster deliberately dumbing down for Neo-Pop ironic effect. Nor does there appear to be a sly conceptual method to his madness.

Rather, Mark Lerer invests everything that he draws with an awkward passion that recalls van Gogh's early charcoal studies of shoes, candle holders, and other simple objects, hinting at a highly sophisticated awareness that the earnest effort to "get it right" may be the flip-side of genius.

—Maurice Taplinger

Death of a Poet

by Ed McCormack

In a gallery where I was taking notes on an exhibition, I ran into a former girlfriend of my old friend Ari and thought I should break the news that he had died.

"He never should have been born," she said without missing a beat. "He gave me the worst year of my life. I'm serious: He was a psychopath, your friend."

"All my friends are psychopaths," was all I could think to say in his defense.

* * *

The body lay beneath a blanket like something discarded, half in the hall, half in the bathroom, where his last shit, still unflushed in the bowl, seemed his final brash gesture.While his wife wept, comforted by friends and neighbors, two cops, a young man and a young woman, both Hispanic, waited in the living room like well-behaved children for the coroner to arrive. Politely, they looked away from the mourners, taking in all the degrees and diplomas covering one whole wall and all the books crowding the shelves from floor to ceiling on the other wall behind the computer, the orphaned library continuing all the way down the hall to where the body lay.

The call from his upstairs neighbor had come about an hour earlier, as we finished Sunday dinner, summoning us across town to the stark scene of sudden death.

The last time he had shocked us was some years earlier when his politics changed abruptly. Though nowhere near as wrenching as seeing his body sprawled on the floor, his neo-con conversion was still a mystery —not only to Jeannie and me, but to all of his friends, several of whom had stopped speaking to him.

A self-described "red diaper baby" whose parents had been on pins and needles all through the McCarthy era, he used to regale us when drunk with a rousing, if tuneless, rendition of The Internationale: "Arise ye pris'ners of star-va-a-a-a-a-shun! "— and so on ad absurdum in that froggy croak of his, interrupted sporadically by frightful fits of coughing.

Back then, he was still such a commie that even I got pissed at him for waxing nostalgic about some cockamamie sixties plot of the Weather Underground to blow up a Brink's truck.

"My old man used to moonlight as a Brink's guard because he couldn't make enough to support us shaping the docks. You mean you —a rich kid! a doctor's son!— would blow up my longshoreman father in the name of the working class?"

"Shalom" Portrait of Ari Salant by Jeannie McCormack

Years later, I'd remind him of it, rub it in, when he railed against welfare and rent control. The latter was an especially touchy issue, since our fate hung on the rent hearings in Albany, while he was sitting pretty in a brand new condo on the Upper West Side. Granted, there was a slight taint of sour grapes: Shameful as it seems now to admit, I was jealous of the inheritance his physician father had left him, after blowing his brains out in retirement in Miami Beach. (There's nothing like a friend suddenly coming into money and pulling a Podhoretz to activate one's latent class resentment!)

Still, I felt remorseful about losing my temper one Christmas and calling him a "right wing asshole," after inviting him over for dinner, which he left without eating.

"If I could save the world by sacrificing my friendship with you, I suppose I'd feel morally obliged to do so," I said when I called to apologize. "But since that's impossible, I'm simply not gonna discuss politics with you anymore." But of course we did, only not half as seriously or bitterly as before. Like Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, we remained friends by learning "to relish disagreement."

That, at least, seemed something to be grateful for, as I sat in the back of a van in the funeral caravan, wearing a yarmulke because I thought it would please or at least amuse him, remembering how we had met in A.A. almost twenty years earlier, and gradually began convincing each other that perhaps our newfound sobriety was somewhat premature: we were meant to be drinking buddies!

We did a lot of our relapsing at gallery openings. At one for Annie Leibovitz, who had taken pictures for some of the articles I wrote for Rolling Stone, I envied him for not recognizing most of the celebrities in her photographs—a bohemian poet's luxury I could ill afford.

Another time, after I conducted a long, uncomfortable interview with the film director Sidney Lumet, a nice man with whom I had little in common, it was a great relief to sit with Ari on his stoop on West 49th Street, drinking beer and talking poetry, which interested me much more than film.

From the start it seemed as though we were picking up a conversation begun long ago, in the late 1950's, when we were both adolescent aspiring beatniks haunting the same coffee shops in Greenwich Village. In fact, it seemed amazing that we'd never-known each other then, since we must have crossed paths many times.

In the early 80's, he reminded me of a younger, a slightly more exaggerated Allen Ginsberg with his dark eyes swimming in round lenses, his nervous gestures, and his brilliant motormouth spritzing nonstop, as he bopped down city streets browsing in

used bookstores and thriftshops, stopping to kibbitz with this one and that one, buying kosher chickens and flowers for his latest ladylove. "A mensch of the boulevards,"I called him, amazed by his openness, his generosity of spirit, his ability to leap right into the human stew (being cagey, increasingly reclusive, and emotionally stingy myself). And for the first time ever, having always scorned the medium as minor compared to painting or poetry, I started thinking about making a film—an antic documentary to be called "Take a Guy Like Me" because that was one of his favorite phrases (as though guys like him were a dime a dozen!) and subtitled "Afternoon of a Poet,"because that, above all else, was what he was.

My plan was to follow him through a typical day, tracking him from his tenement pad (then in Hell's Kitchen) to the unemployment office, where he'd immediately slip into the men's room and stuff several rolls of toilet paper into his backpack, before sitting down for an interview with a large black lady who'd be bowled over by his raving intensity. This scene would be silent, viewed from where I was sitting in the waiting area: We'd see him leaning forward earnestly, waving his arms in the air as if about to take flight, and the sister behind the desk throwing her head back and cracking up until she almost fell out of her chair...

Maybe in the next scene we'd be sitting in McSorley's Olde Ale House in the East Village (having both fallen off the wagon once again) and he'd be telling me about what a terrible doctor his father had been—how the old man himself admitted he'd probably killed as many patients as he cured.

"Somebody could be dying out in the waiting room, but did this bother my father? He couldn't care less! He'd be back there in his inner sanctum, the examining room, practicing his ballroom dancing. He had this stupid practice record, a tango record, that he'd play over and over again.'Doctor Twinkle Toes,' they called him!"

I plotted scene after scene, framed them in my mind as I listened to his stories about his dysfunctional family, his insane friends (to whose company I now proudly belonged), his four former wives, and his past and present loves, who came and went like the wind. (He had not yet met Anne, an artist from Hong Kong who was to be his fifth and final bride.) But it would have taken a modern Max Sennett to keep up with his frenetic slapstick pace: one day teaching English at Touro College, the next quitting to peddle vegetables from a push-cart on Fifth Avenue, because "Academia is no place for a poet... Besides, I can kibbitz more freely with women on the street. They'll accept a kind of directness from a humble street peddler that they would object to from a so-called 'professor'."

My documentary never got beyond day-dream verite, because I finally realized no film could possibly capture unselfconsciously my friend's utter uniqueness, his larger than life human frailty,his comically winning lack of coordination, as he paced his tenement livingroom, bracketed everywhere by books, bumping into and excusing himself to the furniture, gesturing histrionically, smoking incessantly (he had even devised a way to smoke in the shower, he once informed me gleefully) and expounding on everything from the real meaning of existentialism, to where to find the best breakfast special in Hell's Kitchen, with a saintly schlemiel charisma that, if only it could have been transported to the screen, would surely have upstaged Woody Allen.

That crazy charisma was still intact the last time I saw him alive, at one of his wife's gallery receptions, where he was wearing—or maybe it would be more accurate to say flaunting—one of those outrageously gaudy neckties that he delighted in announcing were designed by Rush Limbaugh's wife, as he held forth about the slapstick sex practices of our meshugeneh president, Clinton, for a captive audience of grudgingly bemused liberals.

One woman was standing off to the side, grinning, regarding him as if he were a natural phenomenon like a rainbow or a waterfall, and saying over and over to her husband ,"Look at Ari—what an interesting man! Such an interesting man! Isn't Ari an interesting man?"

It made me think back to that visionary seder in his old apartment in Hell's kitchen several years earlier , when he combusted spontaneously, accidentally anointing his head with the Manischevitz wine, leaning too close to the candelabra, then coming up smiling beatifically, wearing a perfect crown of flame!

"Ari, your hair's on fire!" my wife screamed.

But he hardly seemed to notice, merely patted it out, shrugged, and continued reading from the Haggadah.

The incident apparently made a much stronger impression on Jeannie, who went home and painted a great portrait of him wearing that flaming crown, which she titled "Shalom!" Out of respect for our friend's ego—no likeness was ever flattering enough for him!— we kept it out of sight while he was alive. But today it hangs in tribute high on the wall opposite our bed, and we're confident he can appreciate it, now that he has shed that worn out body of mortal vanity.

The last friend I lost before Ari, I lost not to death but to insanity. A schizophrenic, he suddenly turned against me for no reason I could logically discern. And yet in recent years, pissed at Ari for his conservative politics and his seeming disavowal of even poetry (until just before his death, when he surprised me via e-mail with several new verses), I sometimes found myself thinking that it's sadder still to see a once mad friend go inexplicably sane.

But such misgivings seem petty after friends are snatched from us by the larger mystery of death. Or so I was thinking as we stood in the mud of the cemetery, watching six frail, bearded yeshiva boys struggle manfully to carry that plain pine box from the hearse to the gaping hole in the earth. I was remembering how huge his head had looked on the night of his death when they rolled the gurney into the vestibule outside their apartment and, tearfully, Anne— "Little Wife," as he called her— begged the coroner's men, in that Hong Kong accent Ari had found so endearing, to let her look at "Big Husband" one last time. Reluctantly, they obliged, unzipping the body bag down to his chest, bared by the hasty efforts of the paramedics to revive him. And with his noble beak and flesh as gray as the hair of his beard and breast, he had looked for all the world like a bust of King David.

Until I saw him in final repose, perfectly still for the first time ever (no longer pacing incessantly, gesticulating, chain-smoking those stinking Gauloises, coughing, wheezing, breathing, however haphazardly), I never realized how much weight he had gained. No wonder those poor yeshiva kids had so much trouble making it up the hill with the coffin. Every time they faltered, I imagined him looking on from wherever he now was, grunting,"Oy! Oy!" I could almost hear him kvetch, "Gavalt, these klutzes are gonna drop me!"

Even the rabbi looked relieved when they finally got the box safely to the grave site, lowered it into the hole, and he could start his eulogy, which wasn't at all bad, because he had known my friend since the early 70's, when Ari had lived in Crown Heights among the Lubavitcher Hassidim.

As my friend had explained it to me one drunken night, he was temporarily driven to get religion by the trauma of finding his fourth wife,who had a history of mental illness, dead on the kitchen floor, a suicide. That was enough to drive him out to Brooklyn, to live among the men in the black hats, where this gray-bearded yet youthful and fairly hip-seeming rabbi officiating at his burial came to know him, and so was able now to dispense with the usual platitudes and pieties and remember him fondly for the mensch that he was, even while allowing that our mutual friend had been "a complex man who always insisted on doing everything his own way, even where religion was concerned."

All the while, as I listened and watched the yeshiva boys shovel dirt on my friend's grave, I was remembering what he told me about how, while the Lubavitchers were supporting him to sit every day studying torah, the new woman with whom he was living wasn't really his wife. In fact, she wasn't even Jewish, and was a drunk to boot!

"Always keep your head covered, and if you pass anyone in the hall, don't even open

your mouth," he would warn this lush of a shiksa. "I tell everybody my wife is very shy, very modest, quiet as a mouse, she never talks to anyone ...Gavalt! If they find out, they'll kill me!"

This business with the shiksa was something I was quite certain the rabbi had not been aware of, as he fondly remembered our mutual friend—quite accurately I thought—as a man who was "very spiritual in his own unique manner." In fact, I was remembering how, whenever we spoke on the phone about seeing each other at some future date, before hanging up, Ari would always add,"God willing."

Perhaps that would have been an appropriate thing to mention. But instead, when it was my turn to say a word or two about my friend, all I could think of was how much I had loved arguing with him and how I would miss showing him my poems. What I didn't say was how I had always expected Ari to help me grow old with style. I had always pictured us sitting in a coffee shop some day, sober but unrepentant, a couple of geriatric hipsters, scorning the young, sneering about how tame, how lame, how utterly clueless and square they were compared to us in our youth.

We were going to help each other, I hoped, to laugh in the face of death...

* * *

G&S NYC GUIDE

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PHOENIX GALLERY 2007 NATIONAL JURIED COMPETITION: JUNE 20-JULY 16, 2007. JUROR: HENRIETTE HULDISCH, ASSISTANT CURATOR, WHITNEY MUSEUM OF ART, NY. ALL MEDIA. AWARD: SOLO/GROUP SHOW. Deadline: APRIL 20, 2007. Prospectus: www.phoenix-gallery.com/info@phoenix-gallery.com or Send SASE, Phoenix Gallery, 210 Eleventh Ave., 902, New York, NY 10001.

MONTSERRAT CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY is reviewing artist portofolios for its new Chelsea Gallery. National and International artists are invited to submit. Sase, slides, photos and brief artist bio. Send to: Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, 547 West 27 street NYC 10001

PLEIADES GALLERY presents its 25th Annual Juried Exhibition. Open to all media. This year's Juror is Rebecca Rabinow, Associate Curator, Dept. of 19th Century, Modern and Contemporary Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. EXHIBITION: June 28 through July 21. SLIDES DEADLINE: Saturday, April 28. Send SASE for PROSPECTUS to Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th St. New York, NY 10001-5516 or download from www.pleiadesgallery.com. Phone: 646 -230 -0056.

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Discovering the Visionary Landscapes of Hung Viet Nguyen

The ostensible subject of the Vietnamese-born painter Hung Viet Nguyen is the landscape of his adopted state, California, which he transforms into a surreal terrain unlike any other, in his "Coastal Sensuality" series, seen on his website: **www.art-hung.com**.

The swelling biomorphic forms with which Nguyen maps out the topography of his unique aesthetic territory could be likened to those of the great autodidact Joseph Yoakum, who strongly influenced Karl Wirsum, Jim Nutt and other artists of Chicago's "Hairy Who" school. However, learning that Nguyen has a degree in biology sheds light on his diagrammatic approach, and his work also relates to Miro's early, surreal, semi-figurative phase—most particularly Miro's "Catalan Landscape" in the collection of MoMA.

Indeed, like Miro's, Nguyen's forms are at once fanciful and sensual, while the linear elements that contain them add considerably to their appeal. For Nguyen conducts the viewers' eye over land masses and bodies of water with a flowing line that he casts out like a lariat to capture contours and establish almost dizzying pictorial rhythms. Tiny, intricately delineated trees, set atop hills and mountains, lend an almost tantric symmetry to his compositions, enhancing their obsessive, somewhat eccentric power. Other details, such as simplified birds soaring through the sky, minuscule fish, or shadowy, rudimentary human swimmers seen below the surface of shimmering blue waters invest the pictures with a whimsical narrative quality.

"Coastal Sensuality No. 9"

There can be no doubt that Nguyen is a "visionary" in the very best sense of that overused and often wrongly attributed term; for as rooted in the specifics of landscape as they may be, his paintings are possessed of a magical unearthliness that is enhanced by his skills as a colorist. He reportedly begins with a layer of pastels and later adds oils in an elaborate process of painting, scraping, repainting, layering, and glazing that results, over a period of weeks, in luminous hues and sensuous textures. .

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of these paintings, however, is how all of the disparate elements in the compositions achieve such unity as to make the landscape appear to be a single anthropomorphic organism, with rubbery, writhing limbs possessed of weird kinetic life.

In "Coastal Sensuality No. 6," for example, two identical mountains near the top of the composition suggest the full cone-breasts of a recumbent female figure, while the curve of the shoreline in the foreground suggests her parted legs, with the river below flowing from the crux of her sex. By contrast, in "Coastal Sensuality No 9," the river flows upward at the center of the composition and the brilliantly colored land masses and tributaries surrounding it, combined with the ornate configuration of stylized trees at its pinnacle, evoke the elaborate brocade robes and crown of a queenly personage.

Whether such allusions are intended or not seems entirely beside the point. For it is his ability to enlist the imaginative collaboration of the viewer that makes Hung Viet Nguyen a compelling and rewarding painter.

—Ed McCormack

The Natural Evolution of Yael Zahavy-Mittelman

"I consider my paintings 'gut creations,' Yael Zahavy-Mittelman states, and the works on her website (**www.yaelsart.com**) bear that definition out with qualities that have a similarly visceral impact on the viewer. Indeed, she is a contemporary exponent of "push and pull," as the German-born American painter and teacher Hans Hofmann referred to the dynamic pictorial tensions espoused in Abstract Expressionism.

"French Soldier"

Zahavy-Mittelman's painterly muscularity extends the tradition of that important modern art movement into the postmodern era, both in her abstract and her figuratively allusive compositions. Her works in the latter category often suggest cataclysmic natural events, with their surging, rhythmic forms. An art therapist as well as a painter, Zahavy-Mittelman appears aware of how nature can impact upon human emotions and is able to invest her landscape-derived compositions with unusual psychological nuances. This is particularly evident in her series in which the movement of water is the primary formal impetus, as seen in the turbulent composition entitled "A Mountain, a Sky, and a River." Here, the visceral/natural synthesis seems especially clear, since the landscape is evoked in mostly red and pink hues that seem more related to the body and the inner organs than to the colors of the earth. Yet while the forms could suggest bodily tissue and sinews, they simultaneously convey the lay of the land and the flow of water by virtue of their curvaceous rhythmic grace.

Perhaps the synthesis is most complete in another painting, tellingly titled "The Birth of Nature," where a fleshy, sensuous, monolithic central form swirls up to dominate the composition like a vast pink embryo. By contrast, other paintings such as "In the Water," "The Black Rose," and "The Yellow Flower" employ more dispersed forms in an equally evocative manner.

In all of these landscape-based abstractions, Zahavy-Mittelman seems akin to pioneering American modernist Arthur Dove for her ability to imbue abstract shapes with a sense of natural essences. Indeed, like Dove, who even endeavored to find visual equivalents for the sound of foghorns, Zahavy-Mittelman evokes metaphysical aspects of nature in paintings such as "Dark Flower" and "The Mystery of The Pink Rose," capturing what Dove himself referred to as "the reality of the sensation," rather than the mere appearance of floral forms.

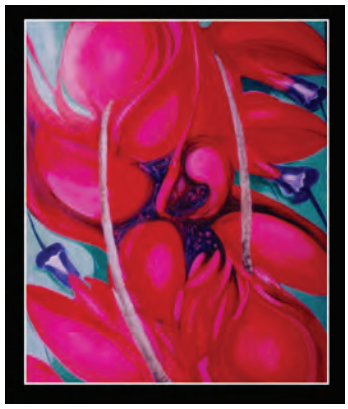
The expressive qualities of Zahavy-Mittelman paintings are tactilely enhanced by her use of the palette knife as a painting instrument, along with her hands, kitchen wipes, cardboard, and sponges, to create a variety of subtle surfaces, textures, and burnished tones that lend depth and mystery to her compositions.

The selection of works on Yael Zahavy-Mittelman's website enables one to follow her steady evolution from the predominantly figurative/symbolic works that begin the decade, with their deep greens and strident yellows, to the brighter-hued abstract flowering of 2003, to the intriguing "Mask" series of 2005, culminating in the majestic nature-based paintings of the present.

—Byron Coleman

Joyce Waddell Bailey's Organic Inspiration

Floral forms seem not only a vehicles for abstraction but symbols of the life force in the oils of Florida artist Joyce Waddell Bailey, whose work can be seen on her website: **www.joycewaddellbailey.com**. Bailey, who has exhibited widely in the United States, as well as in France, Germany, Italy, Argentina, and elsewhere, creates compositions in which light, color, and space are paramount elements.



"Glorioso"

Her paintings based on plant and floral themes share a kinship with those of Georgia O'Keeffe. Like that pioneering modernist, Bailey often severely crops her compositions to bring them to the point of near abstraction. But her floral forms, less sexually allusive than those of her predecessor, are more in line with Gertrude Stein's famous assertion "a rose is a rose is a rose." For Bailey, it would seem, the floral forms the flowers and leaves themselves are sufficiently sensual, both in their shapes and their colors, to compel interest, without having to suggest the organs of human reproduction. Another way in which she differs from O'Keeffe is in the generally large scale of her paintings, which lends them a visual impact akin to that of Abstract Expressionism.

Bailey's methods, however, are more deliberate, involving studies, photographs, scale drawings, and other preparatory stages, before the image is transferred to canvas. The painting is then completed in a meticulous technique that calls to mind Photorealism and the Pop paintings of James Rosenquist. Bailey heightens the chromatic power of her compositions to an almost Fauvist degree by virtue of her vibrant color combinations. Various red hues are particularly prominent in some pictures, taking on a visceral quality in "Glorioso," where a cluster of monumental petals dominates the center of the composition, and smoldering subtly in concert with smoky golden auras in the punningly titled "Avant Garden."

Bailey's use of red is at its most daring in "Star Brite," where, except for two majestic white flowers standing tall on their slender stems, the entire composition is literally awash in the color, creating a saturated atmospheric haze in which other botanical shapes appear as phantom shadows. But Bailey is by no means a one-note colorist, as seen in other compositions where an array of secondary hues are employed with equal effectiveness, such as the violets, and blues in "Moon Glow," and the phosphorescent yellows, starkly juxtaposed with Persian decorative motifs, in "The Bombardment of Baghdad."

While Bailey's floral inspiration is clear in many of her canvases, there are others such as "Eternidad," "Hall of the Mountain King," and the expansive diptych "Barnum and Bailey," in which the emblematic abstract forms, while just as organically fluent, are of less discernible origin. The latter painting is particularly intriguing in this regard, with its rich colors and a baroque array of cursive forms that could suggest the elaborate shapes that decorate circus wagons.

This seems a good guess, given its title, which could be a play on both the name of a famous circus and that of the artist. But when you come right down to it, it is Joyce Waddell Bailey's way with form and color, rather than her subject matter, that makes her a painter to be reckoned with.

—Ed McCormack

Beauty Equals Empowerment in the Paintings of Magali Cadieux

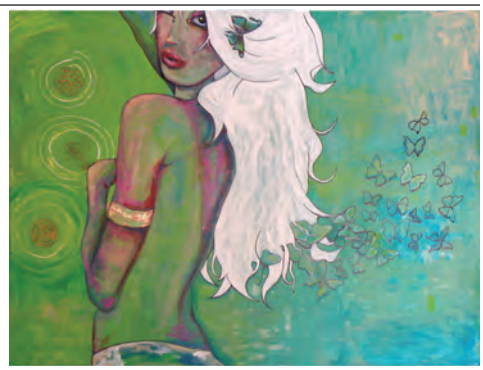
Overwhelmingly, art history filters feminine beauty through the distorting lens of the Male Gaze. However, certain contemporary women artists such as Lisa Yuskavage and, more recently, the Canadian painter Magali Cadieux, provide us with a new perspective on this time-honored subject. But while Yuskavage's takeoffs of centerfold stereotypes are somewhat ironic, Cadieux, whose work is in many private collections and has been exhibited widely throughout Canada as well as in the United States and Europe, paints post-feminist celebrations of unabashed glamour that posit seductiveness as an empowering trait, rather than a symptom of sexual exploitation.

This is just one of the points that becomes clear in the paintings on her website (**www.magalicadieux.com**). Indeed, Cadieux's work is a refreshing anomaly in an art world where the orthodoxies of political correctness often overrule creative vision. For in their stylistic lushness, as well as in their extravagant sensuality and their irrepressible romanticism, her pictures hark back to the spirit of Symbolism.

Standing with her bare back to us, crowned by a flowing platinum mane, Cadieux's "Aphrodite" casts a come-hither glance over her shoulder as a garland of butterflies flutters around her lower body. Classical in comeliness yet contemporary in demeanor, this "Aphrodite" is as formidable a presence as the figures of the Bavarian Symbolist Franz von Stuck, particularly the knowing nymph who confronts us with her locks covering her nakedness, Godiva-like, in his famous canvas "Spring."

Yet at the same time, Cadieux's Female Gaze bestows a wry quality to her creations, as though she and the young women that she summons up with her brush are sly conspirators, putting a cool Pop spin on the whole idea of the "femme fatale" that has bedeviled the fevered male imagination for so many centuries. Which is to say: there is no "sinister siren" notion at work in the paintings of Magali Cadieux. Quite the contrary, the young women that she paints have a wholesome appeal which reflects the attitude of the artist herself, who lived for a time in Sarasota, Florida, where she studied at the John Ringling School of Arts, and vowed never to become one of those people who "didn't really live or fulfill the dreams they had."

Wearing the skimpy halter of a hippy flower child Cadieux's "Venus" whirls like Abba's dancing queen. Her "Chloris," seen in dynamically cropped facial close-up, sports the green hair of a punky East Village



"Aphrodite"

slum goddess; yet her rosy cheeks glow with health, like those of the proverbial milkmaid. And the willowy beauty in "L'ouverture" appears in the midst of a mystical metamorphosis as she rises from a graceful botanical form like a psychedelic nature sprite.

In a style that combines a sinuous linearity with a coloristic sumptuousness and ornamental quality akin to Gustav Klimt and other members of the Viennese "Secession," Cadieux portrays the free-wheeling female figure in mythic terms, placing her at the center of her compositions as the dominant element, rather than merely a decorative living arabesque. Her women are not only physically beautiful but also imposing, even monumental, projecting a sense of power and prowess that is both engaging and inspiring. —Marie R. Pagano

Donal Murray: Dublin Through a Painter's Eyes

Although all manner of mainstream art styles and movements exist in modern Ireland, as in just about every other country of the world today, the work of the Dublin- based artist Donal Murray belongs to a particularly genteel and venerable Irish pictorial tradition. Like a latter-day colleague of Jack Yeats, the painter brother of Ireland's greatest poet, William Butler Yeats, Murray has painted racetrack scenes and other genre subjects, although his most constant inspiration is the city of Dublin. Three such paintings by Murray are on view in the year-round salon exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, in Chelsea.

"A New Beginning"

"Capel Street Bridge" is an atmospheric early evening view in which the charms of the city are evoked with impressive skill. Although Murray was known earlier in his career for an impressionistic style, two years spent at the New York Academy of Figurative Art in New York City reportedly gave him new insights into traditional painting techniques. These are very much in evidence in his solid handling of the bridge and the surrounding architecture in this serene scene. At the same time, Murray's color choices and evocation of the lights on the bridge and their reflections on the water harks back to his impressionistic phrase by virtue of his ability to capture the precise quality of the moment at dusk when the street lights come on to augment the waning natural light at dusk.

Two other oils apparently give us different angles on the same location. In "The Boat Trip," a team of five men, perhaps practicing for a race, rows along the river during the daylight hours. Here, too, Murray's considerable skills as a colorist put him in good stead, bringing the scene alive by virtue of the chromatic subtlety with which he evokes the shimmering play of sunlight on the water and the very different way it affects the stone surfaces of the buildings. Here, as in other paintings, the old stone buildings of Dublin provide Murray much opportunity to indulge his penchant for the warm, earthy hues which impart to his paintings their mood of misty romanticism.

This mood is particularly poignant in "The New Beginning," the largest of the three oils on view at Montserrat, which depicts a young blond woman in a sweater and jeans, with a wheeled suitcase beside her, leaning on the railing of a bridge and gazing out at the river and the buildings receding in vanishing perspective along the shoreline, as though wondering what the future has in store. Perhaps she has left home and is embarking on a new life, like one of those spunky yet vulnerable young women in the stories of the Irish writer William Trevor.

In any case, it attests to Donal Murray's skills as a visual storyteller that he makes one feel a sense of trepidation and concern for this mere slip of a girl setting out into the world on her own. Indeed, Murray seems almost alone among the new crop of Irish painters in his ability to assimilate the human resonance of his country's great literary tradition so successfully, without sacrificing any of those purely plastic attributes on which all visual art must ultimately stand or fall.

—Deborah Follett

Luzerne Odell Revives the Heroic Figure for a New Age

The knowledge that we are all born alone and must ultimately die alone makes the human figure in isolation a powerful subject —one which resonates deep within the communal psyche. This seems especially true when the artist who depicts this subject appears as innately empathetic as Luzerne Odell, a native of Phoenix, Arizona, who studied at the California Institute of the Arts, earned a graduate degree from Hunter College, and has exhibited in galleries in Southern California, Paris, Belgrade and New York.

On view at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from April 10 through May 1, with a reception on April 12 from 6 to 8 PM, Odell's oils on canvas possess a haunting presence. Seen in desolate, desert-like dreamscapes bathed in surreal chemical light, they loom amid sparse, stunted vegetation, under overcast skies.

One could speculate endlessly on the environment in which Odell's figures find themselves: Is this a post-apocalyptic terrain —as indicated by one figure with shredded arms standing before a bare window, gazing out at emptiness— or symbolic of some more ironic miasma, as the title "Window of Opportunity" seems to suggest? The sense of irony is even more clearly defined in another large canvas called "Mission Accomplished," where the figure slumps forlornly under a deep purple sky, seeming to embody a world of weariness and disillusionment.

"Window of Opportunity"

One would be in error, however, to interpret the paintings of Luzerne Odell as political or moral statements, for their ramifications are far more universal, seeming to encompass the thwarted aspirations of all humankind. Surely, the monumental quality of Odell's figures is closer in spirit to Leon Golub's early paintings of ravaged warriors derived from classical sculpture than to Golub's later, more specific images of mercenary soldiers torturing prisoners and brutalizing other hapless victims.

For while one would never wish to suggest that only suffering can ennoble us, there is a great, melancholic grace to Odell's figures, a dignity that prevails in the face of their apparent existential angst. Ideally nude and well formed, they cannot be said to belong to any recognizable period of history, just as the spaces they inhabit give no hint of geographical location. And although some of these figures evince a palpable solidity, others appear as ethereal as phantoms, even transparent, with portions of their anatomy fading into their surroundings. Yet others are cast in deep shadow, appearing silhouetted against the acidic, iridescent red, green, or violet atmospheres of the environs to which they have been exiled, forever strangers in a strange land.

The mood of Odell's paintings is overwhelming. One is drawn into them as if into a dream. But while their subject matter is haunting, it is never grotesque or nihilistic, as in the paintings of Francis Bacon or others who traffic in a kind of generic ugliness. On the contrary, there is a heroic beauty to these monumental male figures that harks back to Greek antiquity. For all the adversity that they face, there is the sense that they will prevail by sheer dint of the indomitable human spirit. And it is this, abetted by their considerable formal attributes, that makes the paintings of Luzerne Odell ultimately uplifting.

—Peter Wiley

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"New Naturism" and Spirituality in the Paintings of Margaret Grimes

Once, when I interviewed him in East Hampton, Willem de Kooning insisted that all abstract painting springs from landscape. Like his statement that "flesh is why oil paint was invented," it was a characteristically provocative assertion, but only half true. In fact, earlier abstract pioneers like Kandinsky were more intent on inventing a visual language for unseen spiritual phenomena than codifying concrete aspects of nature.

What makes the work of Margaret Grimes, a widely exhibited painter who coordinates the M.F.A. Program at Western Connecticut State University, so interesting is that she not only merges realism and abstraction but has evolved a way of framing nature in a spiritual context.

Indeed, Grimes does this quite literally in "Altarpiece," the magnificent centerpiece of her recent exhibition at Blue Mountain Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea. Consisting of five large canvases (two joined to form a central diptych, two others adjoining, and one above), "Altarpiece" was inspired by a verdant view through a window and French doors and tall, narrow side panels. And while Grimes is a frequenter of cathedrals on her annual visits to Italy, it was only after she assembled this modular configuration of canvases, that she was struck by how much it resembled the way nature is framed by the sacred trappings of traditional church windows —a notion that could not help but please her, given her conviction that we face an environmental crisis which makes questioning the relationship of humankind and nature an urgent priority.

That Grimes's colors are so light-filled as to often suggest stained glass (albeit executed in oil on linen, without in any obvious way straining for such an effect) further enhances the resemblance —especially in a majestic single canvas called "Paesaggio Francescano." In this horizontal painting, spanning 72 by 120 inches, the luminous landscape is actually contained within a silhouetted window that forms an integral part of the composition, a device which highlights the sacred connection even more dramatically.

At the same time, to make too much of such devices would be to trivialize the overall sense of the sacredness of nature that comes across in all of Margaret Grimes's paintings, from her largest, most elaborately wrought canvases to small oils such as "6:00 AM, "Harrington River" or "Low Tide Sunrise, Provincetown," which capture their subjects with haiku-like brevity in a few square inches. The latter painting, an almost abstract little gem of a beachscape, consisting of just a few candy-colored stripes as lusciously tactile one of Wayne Thiebaud's pie pictures, is especially breathtaking in this regard. Indeed, what Grimes's near-miniature oils demonstrate most impressively is her unique ability, as a colorist, to evoke a convincing sense of nature with an unlikely palette of pastel hues —particularly scrumptious pinks and purple violets, applied in thick impasto, with a gestural vigor akin to Abstract Expressionism.

"Crying in the Wilderness 1"

In her larger oils, however, Grimes achieves an even more radical synthesis of the abstract and the natural. For in these major canvases she depicts the lay of the land —or, to put it more accurately, the vertical face of the woodsy subjects that she favors— as convincingly as conventional modern landscape painters like Fairfield Porter or Neil Welliver, even while evoking a metaphysical sense of natural essences akin more to essentially abstract artists like Bill Jensen and Gregory Amenoff, for whom I once coined the term "New Naturists."

Perhaps the painting that demonstrates Grimes's unique synthesis of realism and abstraction most clearly and curiously is "Crying in the Wilderness II," where the bare limbs of a tall tree set against blue mountains take on an autonomous abstract linearity, wiggling like serpentine streaks of neon reflected in a rain-puddle or Chinese ink calligraphy set free from its monochromatic constraints in a blaze of vibrant color. While such an effect might come off unsettlingly hallucinatory in the work of a lesser painter, Grimes lends these incongruously writhing limbs an expressive logic not unlike some of the intriguing anomalies in the landscapes of that prototypical New Naturist, Charles Burchfield.

Margaret Grimes appears to realize that it is only through such departures from convention that postmodern landscape painting can maintain its transgressive edge and qualify as an avant garde endeavor. Only by going out on a limb, to employ a cliche too apropos to avoid in the context of her work, can a contemporary nature painter subvert tradition sufficiently to make a fresh statement. However, it also seems important to note that Grimes adheres to tradition insofar as she paints directly from nature, rather than from photographic sources. Eschewing the sense of "remove" —that visual hallmark of fashionable irony!— for which so many of her peers strive, she imbues her paintings with vital immediacy by capturing the nuances of transitional light (specifically, that of sunrise in several of her smaller canvases and late afternoon in large paintings such as the aforementioned "Altarpiece" and "Paesaggio Francescano").

While woodlands and thickets, frequent subjects of her large canvases, enable Grimes to more or less adhere to the two dimensions of the modernist picture plane as the ostensible arena for her vigorous brushwork and succulent surfaces, they simultaneously suggest infinite depth and inner mystery as well. Such is the complexity that Grimes courts, which is thoroughly in keeping with the epic ambition the physical scale of some of her paintings suggests. Coupled with a rugged gestural energy, this scale itself harks back to her Abstract Expressionist roots, even while indicating her desire to return that expansiveness to its own dual roots in landscape and in the less knowable realm of spiritual aspiration.

This is, by any measure, a heroic endeavor. And Margaret Grimes's latest exhibition suggests that she may well be worthy of it.

—Ed McCormack

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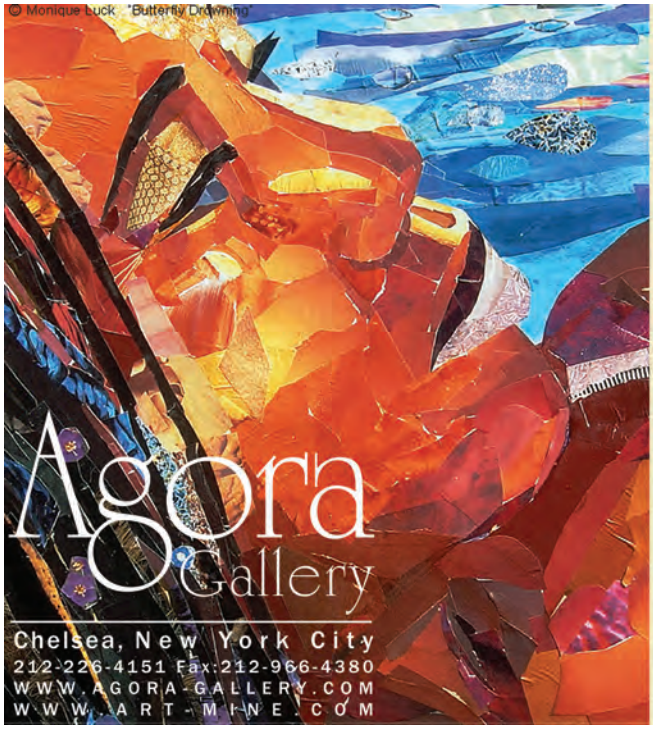

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