

# GALLERY & STUDIO

## **ART IN THE MIDEAST** A special report by Jacqueline Taylor Basker



Painting by Monif Ajaj

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by Ed McCormack, centerfold

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# G&S Highlights

**On the Cover:**

*Like artists everywhere, artists in the Middle East transcend the rhetoric of politicians and headline writers to arrive at larger truths. Jacqueline Taylor Basker reports from Jordan. -Page 12*



*Ritch Gaiti, pg. 28*



*John Anderson, pg. 27*



*Teona Titvinidze-Kapon, pg. 15*



*Marcia Clark, pg. 29*

*Joseph Bostany, pg. 25*



*GALI Myrzashvili, pg. 4*



*David Kastner, pg. 8*



*Carlota Figueras, pg. 24*

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# GALI Myrzashev: Out of Mutation is Born a Terrible Beauty

When one thinks of Surrealism in historical terms, one tends to think of its more bizarre and irrational aspects. The aim of the movement, as its originator and guiding light, Andre Breton defined it, was “to resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality into an absolute reality, a super-reality.” This tended to make many of Surrealism’s exponents go out of their way to build shock value into their pictures, which were often influenced by the concepts of Freud’s theories concerning the unconscious and its relation to dreams. This essentially literary component in Surrealism—particularly its more hallucinatory aspects—exerts a certain morbid fascination, even for people who are not particularly interested in art.

However, the contemporary painter GALI Myrzashev, whose solo exhibition, funded by a generous patron of the arts named Medgat Kulzhanov, is on view at Chelsea 2/20 Gallery, 220 West 16th Street, from April 22 through May 6, comes to Surrealism from an entirely different, much more personal perspective. (He is also in a group show at Gallery 532, 532 West 25th Street from April 29 through May 3.) GALI, as he signs his paintings and prefers to be known, was born in Kazakhstan, the country so mercilessly maligned in the Borat film, which parodied its people and customs with humorous inaccuracy.

A graduate of the Cinema University of Moscow, GALI was deeply affected by a return visit some years ago to Semipalatinsk, the town where he was born. The horrifying physical deformations that he witnessed among some of



*Syndrome Before Mutation*



*“Childhood”*

the residents there, presumably caused by the region having been the site of nuclear tests by the former Soviet Union, have had a strong and lasting effect on his art.

In his painting, “Syndrome Before Mutation,” for example, the tortuously contorted central form suggests a horse and rider constructed from tumorous bubbles that meld grotesquely. GALI often refers to the realm of his paintings, which appears to be a timeless terrain somewhere between the surreal bone-yards of Yves Tanguy and the desolate netherworld of the contemporary Scandinavian fantasist Odd Nerdrum, as “My small motherland.” His mutated horses and riders may be somberly symbolic of his ancestors’ proud past as nomadic pastoralists, herders of horses and sheep, before they were stabilized in modern times as part of the Soviet collective farm system under the same government whose nuclear experiments would later deform some of their unborn.

The glorious freedom of that pre-Soviet, pre-nuclear nomadic past appears romantically re-imagined in “Great Power,” GALI’s painting of a lone horseman with an infant tethered to his back traversing a vast expanse of desert. The only ominous note in the composition is that the large, luminous orb looming

above the horse and rider appears less lunar than mechanical, more like a wrecking ball poised to shatter a way of life than a full moon. Perhaps this steely satellite, which

casts its elongated oval shadow over the desert sands, is a portent of things to come.

Yet innocence—rather than the ignorance of the old saying—is the true bliss in which we all begin, and that hopeful state is beautifully embodied in the figure of a young boy, perhaps a youthful surrogate for the artist himself, in another major canvas called “Childhood.” Nestled between the front paws of a large, gentle dog who towers over him like a protective sentry, the child regards a small toy figure with the dreamy countenance that makes our early years, when we have at least an illusion of security, a charmed time, never to be retrieved once life has had its way with us and knowledge of the world’s true nature imbues us with rueful wisdom. It is one of GALI’s simplest, most straightforward paintings and one of his most deeply affecting.

Much of the power in GALI’s paintings derives from his meticulously refined style and glowing yet subdued palette, consisting primarily of earth tones only occasionally relieved by small touches of red or other bright hues that burn like beacons through the atmospheric gloom. His flawless technique of layered translucent glazes, in which no trace of a brushstroke can be discerned, endows his semi-abstract figures with a gothic precision suggesting a latter-day Hieronymus Bosch.

Indeed, Bosch is often cited as a forerunner of the Surrealists for his monsters derived from medieval manuscript decorations, figures influenced by the gargoyles that barnacle gothic architecture and other grotesque beings. Yet Bosch’s imagery, like that of GALI, actually reflected in symbolic terms some of the more barbaric social tendencies of his time, rather than being a purely imaginative product of a morbid subjectivity.

In GALI’s case, this social awareness accounts for the grotesquely bloated and wrinkled figures of no readily recognizable species that we see clustered together fearfully in “Epidemic,” a composition expressing the artist’s concern about the proliferation of various killer viruses in the modern age. These creatures, too, spring from that early experience in Semipalatinsk, which apparently opened the artist’s eyes to all the dangers to which humankind is prey in a world of its own making, where technology has outrun our sense of reason in a global village where plagues have the potential to spread with a speed far surpassing the darkest of past ages.

The paradox inherent in much of GALI’s work is the dichotomy between ugliness and beauty, with the latter invariably winning out by virtue of the artist’s ability to endow even his most distorted figures with aesthetic attributes which finally transform them into poignant visual metaphors that provoke emotional empathy rather than freakish physical anomalies that repel the viewer or invite disgust. We find that we can stare unflinchingly at GALI’s wounded human surrogates such as the strange figure who appears to be juggling configurations of the same protoplasmic substance from which his own person is composed in the painting entitled “Self-Conceit.”

Such compositions suggest allegories, that elude easy elucidation; while one can look long and hard at GALI’s paintings without drawing definite conclusions, what comes across quite clearly is the artist’s concern with and sympathy for the human condition, of which he states somewhat bleakly, “an artist is the pain, not the cure.”

Rather than despairing, however, GALI employs his art to assuage the pain in the only way that he can, by creating images that not only call attention to bare truths but also elevate our consciousness by giving birth to what William Butler Yeats once termed “a terrible beauty.” The great Irish poet’s lovely phrase seems the only one that will suffice for describing the paintings that GALI gives us, with their unique combination of sorrow and rejoicing, of elegy and hope, of agony and the ultimate triumph of the human spirit in the face of all but overwhelming adversary. Perhaps the final message in the paintings of GALI is that while art cannot cure our predicament by making the pain visible it can point the way to a more enlightened future.

—Maurice Taplinger



“Great Power”



“Self-Conceit”



“Epidemic”

## CAG at 40: A Refreshing Antidote to All the Hype

What impresses one immediately about “CAG at 40,” the 40th Anniversary exhibition of the Contemporary Artists Guild is not only the sheer variety of styles it embraces but the strong case that it makes for the ongoing vitality of painting and sculpture that displays an awareness of the eternal verities of those mediums without appearing slavishly beholden to them. This seems more than a little meaningful in a season when the Whitney Biennial is overburdened with video, installation, and other so-called new media no longer redeemed by the novelty of the new, much of it specially commissioned by the Whitney for an event that has increasingly become more of a media event than a legitimate survey of what contemporary artists, working alone in their studios, are up to.

On view at Broome Street Gallery, 498 Broome Street, in Soho, from April 15 through 27, “CAG at 40” presents a refreshing contrast to all the hype, with solid work by familiar New York artists such as Trena Banks, Joan Colman, Hedy O’Beil, Geraldine Jeffrey, Mark O’Grady, Marianne Schnell, Alton S. Tobey, Jan Wunderman, and Doris Wyman, as well as other names not as familiar to this reviewer whose work made a memorable impression.

Kwok Kay Choey, for example, works in the ancient medium of Chinese ink on rice paper, yet brings contemporary wit and vitality to “Chase,” in which the drama of a cat advancing on a scurrying mouse is evoked with a few calligraphic strokes as swift as the swish of their tails. Belle Manes’ brushwork is also filled with vigor, but in a more New York School tradition in her painting “Jewish Bride 2,” with its energetic strokes of fleshy pink and pale blue akin to Grace Hartigan and de Kooning’s “Women.”

The celebrated late painter and muralist Alton S. Tobey was another vigorous painter, represented here by a composition that at first glance appears to be abstract but on closer scrutiny is an actually quite literal image of a fish, its bony ribs incised in thick, juicy pigment. By contrast, his son David Tobey, who has been building his own reputation in an impressive series of recent exhibitions, winds a sinuous, continuous line rhythmically around smooth areas of color as luminous as stained glass in his acrylic painting of a musician, “Violin Rhapsody.”

Another fine painter who is no longer with us but whose work appears destined to endure is Elizabeth Delson, whose “Metamorphoses I: Sea Change,” a work in oil, gesso, and shells on paper has a poetic lyricism akin to Loren McIver, with its vibrant colors and flowing forms, set against a generous expanse of white paper, evoking a sense of light and marine movement.

Guest artist David Frank achieves his own kind of lyricism with breezy paint application that produces his own blunt take on Neo-Impressionism, particularly in “Sunday in the Park,” a bold interpretation of the pond in Central Park, with the apartment buildings peeking over the tree tops, the gaily clad crowds strolling by the boat-house, and the white sails of the model sailboats gliding on the water evoked in dappled strokes. Another artist who brings simple subjects alive by virtue of a distinctive painterly manner is Terry Ferrier, whose acrylic composition “String of Pearls,” depicting a woman in a lemon-pink dress, pensively fingering her long necklace on what appears to be a shady summer porch, is notable for its subdued color harmonies and subtly simplified forms.

Considerably more abstract kinships reveal themselves in the dialogue between two artists who employ linear gestures in distinctly different manners: Rose Sigal Ibsen, known for her distinctly Westernized approach to Asian ink and watercolor techniques, even while being accepted as a peer by Chinese masters such as C.C.Wang, displays her virtuosity in “Snake,” with its whiplash black line swirling over an intricately mottled “wet-on-wet” gray ground. By contrast, Joan Colman lays down a multicolored linear network to create a dynamically muscular sense of “push and pull,” in her oil on paper “Road Map,” where the sense of compressed energy pushing against the edges of the composition makes the recent paintings of Brice Marden seem slack by comparison. Linearity of another variety animates the calligraphic abstractions of Geraldine Jeffrey, whose ecriture in her acrylic on paper “White #28” is akin to that of Mark Tobey’s “white writing,” with heavy concentrations of sinuous cursive brushstrokes creating graceful gestural rhythms.

If further proof is needed that “post-modern abstraction” is by no means an oxymoronic term, it is supplied in spades by the paintings of both Hedy O’Beil and Helen Levin: O’Beil, a restless experimenter, synthesizes elements of gesturalism and geometric form in “Shall We Dance,” the frieze-like elongated rectangle at its center a decided departure from the lyrical abstractions that dominated her retrospective at Westbeth Gallery exactly a year ago, its combination of elements demonstrating this accomplished and venturesome painter’s willingness to continually take bold new risks. Levin’s oil on canvas “Jazz Train #3,” on the other hand, emulates in visual terms the spontaneous quality of the music to which its title refers, with slashes and strokes of brilliant color converging like improvised musical notes to create gestural energy-constructs that render figure-to-

ground distinctions moot.

Florence Wint also makes a strong impression with a mixed media painting called “Walking Among Daisies,” which is notable for its upbeat combination of fanciful floating shapes and dense patterning, coming off simultaneously faux primitive and formally savvy. Olive Reich also creates intricate patterns, albeit in a more realist style in “Consider the Lilies,” where dense layerings of yellow flowers and green leaves, delineated in a meticulous watercolor technique, create a composition as compelling for its abstract qualities as for its subject matter. Watercolor is employed in a distinctly different but equally lyrical manner by Johanna Gillman, in “I Dream of Spring,” an irregularly semi-circular cut-out composition on rag paper, in which graceful abstract shapes, painted in delicate green and yellow hues, could suggest dancing nature sprites.

Lisa Feldman’s ambiguously witty mixed media sculpture, “Arm Reliquary,” combining cast glass with decoupage and found objects, consists of a freestanding forearm plastered with religious pictures topped by a big hand making a peace / victory sign while holding a bone with its other three fingers. In Marilyn Weiss’ mixed-media collage “And The Bride Wore Rubber and Red Suede” fragments of newsprint, perforated sheet metal, strips of ribbony forms, and wood fragments come together in a roughly figurative composition that is both elegant and funky. Sondra Gold’s “Pieces of a Globe” is a minimalist bronze suggesting reassembled shards of a shattered world. Isabel Shaw’s bronze “Counterpoise” is a classically economical female nude notable for the slender grace. Guest artist Eva Appelbaum shows a powerful kinship with African tribal sculpture and the portrait heads of the Expressionist painter Alexi von Jawelensky, in her reposeful head in carved wood.

Rachel Maurer displays impressive drawing ability and suggests true reverence for her subject as a contemporary icon, as opposed to post-Pop irony, in her accomplished mixed media work “Legend,” incorporating images of Elvis Presley at different stages of his career in the format of an enlarged postage stamp. Elisa Decker, who began her career as a painter, puts her painterly eye to work in her photography to reveal found visual metaphors, making machine parts appear to merge like lovers and patterns cast on a sidewalk recall a cubistically-stylized classical profile by Braque.

While the work of other worthy CAG members and guests was not available for preview, those mentioned here should provide ample reason to visit Broome Street Gallery in mid-April. —J. Sanders Eaton

# An Italian Group Show Explores Hiding Places of the Muse

The most essential yet elusive component of all art is the subject of “Places of Inspiration,” the newest exhibition by Stefania Carrozzini, curator for IEP International, of Milan, New York and Beijing, on view at Broadway Gallery, 473 Broadway, from April 16 through April 31. (Opening reception: April 17, 6 p.m.)

As with all of Carrozzini’s shows, the participating artists are apparently presented with a theme and encouraged to interpret it as freely as possible. Further questions in response to the initial question may well be even more desirable than answers. In the case of Ezio Balliano’s realist oil painting of a sky replete with soaring gulls and sunlight breaking through the clouds, the answer seems obvious: “From the heavens, silly! Isn’t that where inspiration comes from?”

At the same time, Balliano’s picture seems just a tad too heavenly, illuminated in a manner verging on the saccharine, leading one to suspect a hint of irony beyond the proverbial “silver lining.” Almost a parody of bravura brushwork put to the service of an ostensibly banal subject, it finally redeems itself brilliantly by virtue of Balliano’s sly, not-quite-covert postmodern take on the gestural vitality Abstract Expressionism.

Antonietta Procopio, on the other hand, is able to get away with being so literal as to title her work in this show “Inspiration,” by virtue of a pure and innocent poetic vision. Working in the unusual medium of watercolor on canvas, Procopio produces effects so delicate that she transforms flowers, foliage, and sunlight into a lyrical synthesis far closer in look and spirit to color field painting than traditional landscape. The inspiration, in Procopio’s case, has as much to do with her peculiar aesthetic alchemy as with the initial impetus for the work.

Susanne Weber, a video and performance artist born in Germany, apparently finds her inspiration amid ruins, judging from her work “Which Sustainance Do You Give Your Soul?” which appears to be a still image from one of her performance pieces printed on canvas, in order to imbue a fleeting moment from a relatively new art form that is constantly in flux with the immutability of painting. The image captures a split second in which the artist appears in an ambivalent relationship to her surrounds. Is she seated on the ledge of the pink ruin with the gaping black door (which itself appears precariously suspended on a rocky precipice above a body of water) or suspended mid-leap in thin air? Either way, the image suggests cre-

ative epiphany.

That many of us have our most meditative moments in the bathroom—one of the few places of repose amid all the hecticness of the modern world—would appear to be the message of “The Place of Thinking,” a color photograph by Enza Santoro. In it, a toilet bowl in an outdoor setting serves as a shapely porcelain vase for a multicolored bouquet of flowers, signifying waste as fertilizer for thought, art, and all of its attendant beauty. Santoro’s neat encapsulation of the theme reflects the communication skills of

fessions with an ethereal glow, suggesting a kind of transcendence.

By contrast, an etching by Massimo Lomasto takes a visionary view of ocean waves and swirling cloud formations, evoked in an expressive line augmented by subtly modulated monotoes. That the title of the work refers to “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” reminds us that here, as elsewhere, literature can provide a place of inspiration at the intersection where different art forms converge.

Then there is Giovanna Gammarota who

applies the lessons of brevity that she practiced as a short story writer in the minimalist vein of Raymond Carver to her photographic art, represented here with a picture of a serenely shaded area of a public park where empty benches are surrounded by sheltering trees. If ever there existed a place where inspiration might be expected to strike as stealthily as a mugger, surely it is this cloistered urban oasis.

Another kind of serenity, albeit spiced by certain creaturely tensions, is expressed in Giovanni Compagni’s austere, hard-edged composition, in which the colorful, simplified silhouettes of a green man, a blue cat, and a red bird are seen within a high arched window overlooking a beige city skyline. While the man stands on the windowsill and gazes out over the buildings as though lost in thought, the feline crouches at his feet, its attention riveted on the bird perched on the transom above, presumably so intent on its

singing to be oblivious to danger. Here, the inspired element is the artist’s ability to wittily delineate the relationships between the three figures through their strict formal arrangement.

Two final artists expand the range of methods and materials included in this exhibition: sculptor and video artist Maria Chiara Zarabini employs aluminum screening to create a gracefully flowing three-dimensional configuration called “Another Knot for Milan,” which names its locale yet evokes a sense of something numinous and universal, such as the spark of inspiration itself. Conversely, a mixed media work by Rosaspina Buscarino Canosburi, incorporating glass and acrylic pigments on canvas in a tactile, roughly geometric composition, suggests a weathered wall, perhaps in the very place where inspiration is transformed into palpable substance by an act of artmaking.

—Ed McCormack



Catalog cover collage by Stefania Carrozzini

an artist who, along with a formidable exhibition record, has an impressive list of book cover credits and has steeped herself in research on pictorial and photograph languages.

Ambra Morosi has moved over the years from classical realist paintings to hyper-realistic painting to a species of color photography which partakes of a subtle painterly vision. The technique known as “sfumato” (“softened, vaporous”) which painters have used for centuries to produce transformations from light to dark so gradual as to be almost imperceptible, figure prominently in Morosi’s photographic portraits, such as “The Lawyer.” What this particular profile of a bald man in a dark suit has to do with “inspiration” per se is something only the artist could explain. But why should she? Morosi’s strategy of using sfumato to create what she calls “absolute forms” to express an “invisible reality” is sufficient to endow this rather ordinary-looking male representative one of the more down-to-earth pro-

# Surveying the Concrete Conceptual Universe of David Kastner

Much conceptual art charts the artist's thinking through texts, documents, diagrams, and other ephemera—often related to semiotics, linguistic constructs, popular culture, feminism, cultural criticism, and various species of topical commentary—that endeavors to question the validity of, or even replace, the art object itself. While Conceptualism, at its inception, seemed a valid response to the increasing commercial commodification of art in the mid-1960s, and remained for a good part of the 1970s (when it almost appeared, however briefly, to have achieved its goal of jettisoning more traditional forms of art), it constituted a kind of scorched earth solution.

In the case of those artists who pursued it to its inevitable conclusion, showing "works" that consisted solely of index cards displayed on the wall like the labels that normally accompany paintings in museums, Conceptualism ultimately became an ironic illustration of the timeworn cliché about "throwing out the baby with the bath water." Essentially it became a movement of annotation rather than creation; of

potentiality rather than realization; an aesthetic desert waiting to be usurped by the so-called "return of painting" (as if it ever really went away!) in the late 70s. Yet the overblown rehashes of Expressionism perpetrated by Schnabel, Basquiat and others were bound to prove equally vacuous in the end, leading to a more thoughtful postmodern approach that is especially well exemplified in the work of David Kastner, a widely exhib-



*Hard-Edge Abstraction*

ited Florida-based sculptor and painter who practices a form of neo-conceptualism that reinstates the art object as a concrete central presence from which ideas fairly radiate like beams from a solar orb.

Indeed, in his solo show at Ico Gallery, 27 North Moore Street, from April 22

through May 17 (reception: April 25 from 7 to 9 PM), Kastner reveals himself to be visually engaging and intellectually stimulating in equal measure. By preserving what is essential in the conceptual approach without sacrificing the palpable physical attributes and aesthetic values which have distinguished serious art down through the centuries, Kastner gives us the best of two worlds.

In the 1970s, Kastner explored wooden "mass -

space structures." In the '80s he created large hard-edged abstract wall pieces inspired by ancient Egyptian and Greek proportional relationships. Later series included sculptures in bronze, iron, and stone, such as "Homage to the Ancients," merging archetypal forms and monumental metal forms. His new exhibition, focusing primarily but not exclusively on the perceptual effects of dimensional color spaces, appears to be a distillation of an oeuvre that has evolved over nearly four decades, during which the artist's guiding principle has been "to concentrate knowledge into forms." The range of that knowledge is impressive, incorporating influences ranging from the art of Paleolithic cultures to ancient

hieroglyphics and Asian calligraphy; from the avant garde happenings of the pioneering German conceptualist Joseph Beuys to Noam Chomsky's studies of linguistics and the biological foundations of language; from archaeology and anthropology to religion, science, sociology and economics.



*Liquid Abstraction*

"These factors all come into play," Kastner stated in an interview conducted by Lizz Harris. "Art is life!" And in response to a question, posed during the same interview, concerning his interest in making his work a vehicle for communication and social interaction, the artist added, "Man is a social being: visual art and language (written and verbal) are critical elements, instrumental in transferring ideas from one to another. This is related to Beuys' interest in social sculpture, taking the forms to social interaction—people acting upon ideas, the



*String Work (detail)*

fundamental tenet of democracy."

Kastner makes unequivocally clear that he values content over technique; yet, somewhat paradoxically, sculpture has constituted a sizable proportion of his artistic output over the years, necessitating a deep involvement with technique and materials



David Kastner with a fingerprint painting

that is immediately evident in the meticulous finish of pieces such as “Free Art Tomorrow,” where the precisely spray-painted phrase of the title is encased within a wood and plexiglass structure with a mirror behind it reflecting the backs of the words.

Here, the playful exploration of language in a manner akin to concrete poetry harks back to an earlier mixed media piece by Kastner in which the phrases “State Police” and “Police State” were ironically juxtaposed. “Free Art Tomorrow” can be interpreted as a demand for the release of all art that is a prisoner of orthodoxy; a plea for a less mercenary art climate in which monetary value is not the main motor for art collecting; or in innumerable other ways, depending on what associations those loaded words trigger in the psyche of each individual viewer. For like many of Kastner’s pieces “Free Art Tomorrow” appears to be more about the overall idea of communication and the effect of such slogans in a larger sense than about the specific meanings of the actual texts that he presents for our scrutiny.

Although the present exhibition privileges two new bodies of work—a series of new abstract “liquid paintings” and a group of innovative sculptural works created with string—in order to truly understand the full range of Kastner’s invention one should be aware of earlier seminal works such as a series of three painted constructions inspired by his fascination with fingerprints as a unique signifier of individual identity. In these pieces, which delineate the artist’s own fingerprints and took a year and a half to complete, the papillary ridges are painted in thickly pigmented layers, creating a kind of tactile topography of identity from the unique patterns of whorls which distinguish each of us from all others. In one such work, the greatly magnified whorls are defined in linear swirls of ocher and white; the circular print occupies the center of the composition, surrounded by a densely layered field of vigorous gestural strokes and

slashes of vibrant, predominantly pink, orange, and green hues that impart to the painting a lush chromatic sensuality.

Another major work had an interesting genesis, which Kastner delights in telling, although it is the kind of story that invites incredulity and blank stares: One night the artist went into his greenhouse and found to his amazement that all of his plants were swarming with caterpillars, a profusion of them unlike anything he had ever witnessed before. And when he went back outside, the biggest moth he had ever seen—an insect as large as a bird!—was clinging to the side of his house. Curiously, instead of fuzz, it had thick fur, and, telepathically, it seemed to communicate a message: “Please protect my creatures!”

Thus Kastner was inspired to create “Telepath,” a mixed media relief on wood, in which the image of a moth coated with metal leaf is suspended above the title word “Telepath.” This composition has an iconic



“Telepath”

quality, not unlike certain pieces by Jasper Johns; it is similarly formal, albeit with a less deadpan, more visionary quality, in keeping with the mystical experience to which it refers, as well as a luminous surface that heightens its ethereal effect.

The conceptual thrust of Kastner’s concerns enables him to experiment freely, moving between painting, mixed media text pieces, and sculpture—the latter category including a series of rugged, stump-like ceramic forms that hark back to Pre-Columbian art—with little interest in stylistic consistency or contriving an immediately recognizable visual trademark. Since his interest is in exploring a vast terrain of subjects and continually moving on, rather than obsessively perfecting a single method or technique, his work is too constantly in flux and deeply layered with subtle levels of meaning to be easily “branded.” Given the questing restlessness reflected in the broad-ranging diversity of his oeuvre from the seventies to the present, one gets the sense of the artist as explorer, philosopher, and channeler of an expansive world-view with universal ramifications, as opposed to the artist as a mere purveyor of subjective self-expression.

Significantly, like Joseph Beuys, for whom he professes great admiration,

Kastner regards himself as a teacher as much as an artist and he makes it his mission to pose questions that elevate the level of taste rather than cater to current trends or fashions. In contrast to other highly productive artists such as Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, Kastner refuses to pander to the public appetite for post-Pop sensationalism, even when it might mean achieving a higher public profile. While this makes him a difficult artist to sum up critically or to position in the marketplace, it makes his work more richly rewarding in the long run.

And it is the long run with which David Kastner appears most concerned, as he forges ahead in the present exhibition at Ico Gallery, featuring his “liquid abstractions” and “string works,” both of which spring from his present preoccupation with the way the human eye perceives color. While the paintings derive their power from their dynamic fluidity, with brilliant reds, yellows, greens, and blues flowing in molten rivulets, the latter works provoke subtle optical elements with intricate linear arrangements of colored strings in rainbow hues that create chromatic effects akin to the neon sculptures of Dan Flavin. However, that Kastner achieves a similar chromatic shimmer with string rather than colored fluorescent tubes makes his work all the more remarkable for its unique synthesis of ocular sensuality and formal austerity.

While nothing short of a mid-career



museum retrospective could do full justice to the scope and breadth of David Kastner’s oeuvre, the works that Skylor Brummanns, the director of Ico Gallery, has selected for this skillfully curated exhibition provide a valuable and highly engaging introduction to an artist who appears destined to make a considerable contribution to contemporary culture.

—Ed McCormack

# Exploring the Ongoing Evolution of Digital Art

Practically everyone fools around with computers these days, but only the highly talented sidestep facile special effects to create genuine works of art, such as those featured in “Pixel Perfect—The Digital Fine Art Exhibition,” at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from April 18 through May 8 (Reception: April 24, from 6 to 8 PM).

Stewart Michael Bruce integrates his painting and drawing skills into his digital photomontages to create a complex and seamless compositional synthesis of superimposed imagery that takes the innovations of predecessors like Robert Rauschenberg several steps further. In Bruce’s “Baby Doll,” for example, one lingerie form among others in a window filled with an intriguing array of reflections appears to sexily come to life, suggesting a latter-day Pygmalion.

Computer technology also takes a back seat to creative ingenuity and painterly attributes in the compositions of the artist known by the single name Jouanne, whose freehand explorations in Crayola and Dutch oil stick crayons prompt bold abstract compositions. Although they can appear child-like, Jouanne’s compositions are actually highly sophisticated in the tradition of Miro and the biomorphic abstractions of William Baziotes, as seen in “Crimson,” with its sinuous, off-center shapes and blindingly beautiful use of primaries.

By contrast, Didier Deleidi employs frac-

tual mathematics and a computer graphics system geared to fractal mathematics to create luminous C-prints that imaginatively explore endless cosmic, microscopic and undersea vistas. In Deleidi’s “117-Versus,” mysterious purple auras surround a central form suggesting the head and shoulders of a phantom figure, while his “124 — Abyssia” is a more lyrically amorphous composition in which intricate patterns of light emanate from a luminous blue field.

Atypically of computer art, Kaori Michishita’s exquisitely lit digital photography is possessed of a coloristic restraint that imbues her often surreal imagery with a striking sense of drama and gravity. In “Wishing,” Michishita makes a poignant human statement with two graceful hands reaching up yearningly toward a mysterious floating object, while exemplifying the theories on Japanese aesthetics put forth by Jun’ichiro Tanizaki in his eloquent essay “In Praise of Shadows.”

T. Mikey, on the other hand, exemplifies a Neo-Pop-Sci-Fi-Hip Hop sensibility in his antic candy-colored compositions, such as “Picnic on the Moon,” with its plethora of lively human and animal figures romping joyously in a scene that resembles a lunar bacchanal by a contemporary descendent of Hieronymus Bosch. However, the works that T. Mikey creates with a secret technique involving numerous layers of transparent

film, paint, and an assortment of multicolored lights, framed in light-boxes, invariably have a more upbeat charm.

Stiletto-thin slivers of light partially illuminate shadowy green interiors in the mysteriously evocative photographs of the Indian photographer Pankaj Mistry. While capturing what he calls “that magical split second when an ordinary moment decides to share an extraordinary secret,” Mistry also creates geometric compositions as austere beautiful as a stripe painting by Barnett Newman.

Conversely, submerged figurative imagery lurks within the ostensibly abstract *giclée* prints of J. Coleman Miller, providing a surprise bonus for those who scrutinize them carefully. In Miller’s “The Fury,” for example, one who is initially entranced solely by the liquescent fluidity of the forms may suddenly discover stylized heads of racing horses amid the fiery golden hues.

Fanciful architecture, floating flowers, and other cheery wonders enliven the engaging cityscapes, landscapes, and idealized suburban spaces of the Italian artist Maria Trezzi, who starts by creating her scenes in collage. Only after the images are firmly in place does Trezzi subject them to computer manipulation to complete the imaginative metamorphosis.

—Peter Wiley

## International Group Show Redefines Terms and Boundaries in Chelsea

A group of international artists (from 16 countries that include Kazakhstan, Spain, Japan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Estonia, and the United States) put a new spin on the term “New York Realism” by defining it as an attitude rather than a literal genre, in the recent exhibition “People, Energy & Nature,” seen recently at Chelsea 2/20 Gallery, 220 West 16th Street.

For while figurative works predominated, Prachie Narain exhibited abstract compositions comprised of brilliantly colorful vertical, horizontal, gestural strokes; both “Sanitary” and “Phoenix” had a lively wind-blown quality akin to “action painting.” Another gifted abstract artist, Leila Elias showed four mixed media works in which actual leaves were embedded in densely textured surfaces enlivened by glittering elements, their poetic appeal especially resonant in the composition called “Unexpected Snow.”

And although they contained photographic fragments of feminine faces and features as central elements, the main thrust of Nadia Rivest’s acrylic and collage paintings was also abstract, dynamically driven by vigorous slashes of visceral red pigment.

By contrast, Yumiko Nolan’s precise fig-

ure painting of a doll-like female figure with twin pony tails flying out from her head like antlers and her limbs disconnecting as she read a book with a cat lapping its food from a plate on the floor was a surreal flight of fancy incorporating elements of surrealism. Curiously, Ogulqurban Atabalova showed a very similar subject; however, her painting of a curvaceous nude reclining with a black cat nearby, although stylized and simplified, was more in the tradition of a classical *odalisque*.

Then there was Berik Kulmamirov whose oil on canvas “Following the Birds,” depicting a ballerina dancing in the sky amid birds, has a magical buoyancy bolstered by the artist’s skill in imparting verisimilitude to a fanciful scene. Olga Papkovitch employed thick pigment to evoke subjects such as a preening peacock and a fierce lion with a scary red maw in predominately yellow staccato strokes in bold compositions technically reminiscent of Van Gogh.

Masha Samtsova imbues ordinary things with a sense of the fantastic, as seen in her suspenseful paintings of a tornado approaching a small house and tree roots viewed from “Six Feet Under” spreading out like the underbelly of a giant octopus.

Phantasmagoric is the word for the darkly mysterious paintings of Eduard Chernukhin, with their fluid surfaces from which mysterious forms and figures emerge with prolonged viewing, suggesting some postmodern Boschian inferno. Equally compelling in its own way was an oil by GALI (reviewed at length elsewhere in this issue) in which two children, one cradling a pet dog in his arms, appear menaced by a looming shadow of unseen origin.

Exquisite simplicity is seen in two related paintings by Ruth Llanillo Leal, in each of which a single vibrantly colored butterfly hovers within a glossy black ground, exemplifying the term “Magic Realism.” Working in Carrera marble, the sole sculptor in the show, Peter Bulow, displayed a gift for imparting unusual formal grace sometimes grotesque subjects—particularly in the affecting monstrous “Crying Baby” and “Knockout Mutant Looking at the Moon,” an oddly poignant creature resembling a cross between a rat and a griffin.

Rounded out by Olga Radjapova’s folksy floral still life paintings, with each flower and stem delineated in tactile impasto, this was one of the more intriguing group shows of the present season.

—Byron Coleman

## Different Strokes: Lucie Simons & Pamela Loveless at The Pen & Brush

Two talented sisters engage in a dialogue that comes off more like a companionable conversation than a sibling rivalry in the exhibition “Lucie Simons and Pamela Loveless: Recent Watercolors & Serigraphs, at Garden Gallery, The Pen and Brush, 16 East Tenth Street, from April 9 to 13, with a reception on Thursday, April 10, from 5 to 8 PM.

The amiable ambiance of the show seems to spring from the aesthetic sympathies that the two sisters share, although both have distinctive styles and excel in different mediums—at least in the context of this show. Pamela Loveless is the more gesturally inclined of the two, and not only because she is represented with works in watercolor, a naturally more fluid medium, but, rather, because spontaneity appears to be the quality that lends her paintings their vitality.

Lucie Simons, on the other hand, seems more concerned with solid areas of color and formal masses in the serigraphs that make up her part of this exhibition, as well as in the two oils I have seen that are not included in the show. Indeed, her color areas are so clear and precise as to suggest the influence of Japanese woodblock prints (a medium not unlike the serigraph in some of its technical aspects), although it is quite possible that she arrived at her precision independently. In any case, both sisters seem to favor landscape and still life subjects and each brings to them her own distinctive manner.

Pamela Loveless displays her splashy spontaneity at its best in her still life “Summer Spray,” in which a multicolored bouquet of flowers fairly explodes out of a green glass pitcher set up on a table partially covered by a floral-patterned cloth. Nearby are a pear, a copper teapot, and a small green bowl of purple grapes. Loveless’ watercolor technique is simultaneously loose enough to exploit the sparkling freshness innate to the medium and definite enough to delineate the details that lend the picture verisimilitude. For example, while the flowers are crisply rendered, the floral patterns on the cloth beneath the various objects are softly

blurred in a manner subtle enough to make the distinction between them manifest without making their representation unduly “fussy.”

By contrast, the strength in Lucie Simons’ serigraph technique owes much to her ability to make uniform sur-



*Lucie Simons*



*Pamela Loveless*

faces suggest different things, such as the solid substance of tree-trunks and limbs, the intricate textures of their leaves, the surface of water, the softness of clouds, and the foliage and distant hills on the opposite shore. Simons accomplishes all of this in the serigraph she calls “Islands,” by virtue of a

technique of delicate dappling over clear flat areas of color in order to evoke the various textures without disrupting the precise harmony of her compositions with random gestures or mark-making. Indeed, the very opposite qualities of those that succeed so well in her sister’s watercolors are the ones that distinguish her serigraphs. For example, while Pamela Loveless’ snow-scene “White Landscape” gains its vitality from the movement of many spidery winter tree-limbs against bare expanses of paper, Simons’ “White Mountains” projects a sense of stillness and serenity with two massive forms that shimmer like vanilla ice cream. Indeed, the striking differences between their approaches to similar subjects is what makes this show so thoroughly absorbing.

—J. Sanders Eaton

G&S Deadlines for June/July/August 2008 issue:  
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# Artists Reveal the Other Side of the Middle East

by Jacqueline Taylor Basker

I enjoyed watching the break-out of Gaza on Al Jazeera TV. No way the Israeli and Egyptian governments can stop women when they want to shop!

If Gaza is the biggest prison in the world, it seems only fitting that it was women who lead the biggest prison break, a la Delacroix's "Liberty Leading the People." It is women, after all, who have to buy food, clothing, medications and other necessities for their families. The strength of the women, mothers, wives, daughters who have endured generations of suffering and tragedy was revealed in the recent events of Gaza. It was heartening to see that women were the first to push through the fence in this non-violent protest against the blockade of Gaza, an upbeat contrast to the steady diet of violence, hatred, and despair that most media feeds us from the Middle East.

Living and teaching here in Annan, Jordan, meeting so many kind, caring, sensitive and compassionate people, I see another side of the Middle East that counteracts those media stereotypes. And while it is seldom acknowledged in the U.S. media, this includes Israel; while there, I realized that there is no one Israeli point of view; there is as much diverse opinion there as here about government policies. In both places, artists are prominent among those who speak out for peace.

Jordan is not the hot, moneyed art scene of Dubai, but the art is every bit as sophisticated, while giving eloquent voice to the plight of ordinary people trying to lead normal lives in the midst of chaos. It is, above all, a humane art that addresses the carnage in Iraq, the abuse of animals, and other topics of universal concern.

One example is "Aquam" (Arabic for numbers) by the Iraqi artist Sina Ata whose mixed media work addresses the impersonality of the statistics about Iraq. Numbers can numb us; deaths, disasters and disease are expressed in statistics. Important strategies for humans are formulated using numbers, although they are abstract and removed. Yet each numerical unit represents a reality. At the Dar al Anda Gallery in Amman, Jordan, Sina takes the statistics of deaths in Iraq and presents conceptual artworks that incorporate the numbers as small individual squares, each marked with an "X". Sina randomly cuts the squares and tosses them in irregular grid rows, some squares falling off the lines, and off the canvas. The mood is somber; the backgrounds are grey, or neutral earth colors with enhanced textures, evoking the surfaces of the land of the Middle East. The subtle shadings, shifts in tones and contrasts of surface, transform these artworks into med-

itations. They decode the meaning of numbers, revealing human suffering and loss.

This art transcends mere statistical records, and confronts the viewer with the repetition of death that demands a deep emotional response. Statistics no longer veil

block holds a single molded "X" form on top, designed as a tombstone.

Born in New York City, but raised in Iraq, he exhibits internationally and creates evocative videos. His film study of 200 candles slowly blown out by an unidentified



*Monif Ajaj*

human experience in Sina's work. Here they disclose mystical meaning. Numbers in history were used to explore profound truths. The Pythagoreans believed the universe could be understood in terms of numbers, that the universe was a number, the cosmic music of the spheres. The Indian text with the decimal place-value system was translated in Baghdad into Arabic in the eighth century, and eventually influenced the ways numbers were written both in the Arab world and in Europe.

It is fitting that an artist from Baghdad continues this ancient tradition of Arabic numerical understanding. Sina creates artworks that are equations of the perfect mathematical shape, the square, and endows them with significance. Sina loved mathematics in school. However, he turned to art after his experience as a soldier, forcibly inducted into the army under Saddam Hussein, into the Kuwait war. He was so traumatized by this experience, that he began painting as a form of therapy, and soon developed into a serious artist. Sina includes in this exhibit his work dedicated to his uncle, assassinated in Iraq, containing his photo encased in glass, with the newspaper clipping of his death, and drips of red paint evoking blood. His sculptures are archetypal monuments commemorating death: one relief block, carved on 4 sides, is entitled "The Widow" and displayed like a Mesopotamian stele. Another large metal

force, against a soundtrack of names of men, women and children, was on display at the exhibit. Recent statistics disclose not only the deaths of Iraqis and Palestinians, but also the large increase of suicides and desertions among American soldiers. Sina's art is a personal statement of grief, of outrage and a plea for humanity to emerge out of indifference, into genuine response and responsibility.

Images of women in the Middle East in the media show them veiled in burkas and silent. However, there are many women whose talent and creativity are recognized both here and internationally. They have powerful messages, and sophisticated means to express them. Jordanian artist Hilda Hiary has broad acclaim for her artworks and videos that combine abstraction with content. Her use of repetitive exploding circular forms, often enclosing collages of newspaper clippings she collects in her travels around the world, reflects the harsh political realities of the Middle East. Floating in a galaxy of intense color, dots and splashes, the banal misinformation and stereotypes create a dichotomy of pain and beauty. Her works create a cosmos where the violence of the news is juxtaposed with abstract realities that assert the ambiguity of the mystery of creation and destruction. Her series on the war in Lebanon is especially provocative—a harsh indictment of the war itself as well as the indifference of

much of the world. The work of artists like Hilda Hiary proves that the image of the passive, powerless women propagated in the media is far from the reality of women's lives and their continual struggle to gain rights, respect and freedom in Middle Eastern society.

Another artist who breaks the stereotypes the Western media has fed us about the Middle East comes from a nation that is supposedly part of the so-called "axis of evil", Syria. Monif Ajaj, exhibited paintings at Zara Gallery in the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Amman, that addressed the abuse of animals, in particular donkeys, and turned them into a symbol for human suffering, a paradigm of pain. Donkeys have functioned not only as beasts of burden, but as an important symbol of humility and loyalty. The donkey is featured in several Hadiths where Muhammad shows special fondness for these humble beasts who serve man, often with little appreciation and much abuse. Ajaj's art is a parable of compassion for these animals, in the tradition of Islam and other world religions. Moses and Abraham rode on the donkey; Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem before his death. Mohammed and Balaam in the Bible spoke with donkeys. Ajaj paints them, with brilliant large semi-abstract shapes, strong brushwork, and stark color, conveying their pain and suffering with a fierce forcefulness of the flayed human figures of Francis Bacon. He documents the practice of disposing of these beasts when they become no longer useful to their owners because they are too old. They are placed in plastic bags and suffocated, or hung from lamp-posts to die. Their owners can then purchase a younger, stronger beast.

Ajaj remembers these scenes from his childhood in Deir Alzor, the rural village where he grew up. He felt sorry for these animals, watching them often beaten, and later killed at the end of their usefulness. Donkey survival is an issue throughout the world, where the combination of obsession for automobiles and contempt for peasant culture has several valuable species of donkeys on the verge of extinction. A donkey rescue center is run in Corfu, Greece, that takes abandoned donkeys and finds homes for them.

Ajaj transforms the donkey into a potent symbol for all victims in his paintings; some images of donkeys with black masks pulled over their heads evoke photos of the torture of prisoners, some look like burchas, some like victims of executions. These beasts come to represent suffering humanity and all endangered life. He depicts a dying donkey, legs splayed over a curve and bleeding into a sewer, below the feet of indifferent passing pedestrians, in expensive shoes covered with glitter. His image of

donkeys struggling to free themselves from plastic bags becomes a parable for all who struggle for freedom. Donkeys piled into large garbage bins evoke memories of past and present genocides. Yet, despite the grim subject matter, Ajaj uses his skill as a gifted abstract expressionist artist, and transforms the pain into a form of sacred beauty. In the tradition of 'Bismillahi ar rahman ar rahim, Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate, Ajaj's paintings take us on a journey of compassion and mercy. Indeed, some of his formats, particularly one large triptych, suggest crucifixions.

The suffering of the poor, the ordinary people, caught in problems of the Middle East is captured in the work of Jordanian artist with family roots in Palestine Shadi Joudeh. His classical academic training in the Russian tradition provides him with the technical skills to dissect the ultimate effects of the tragedy of war, of poverty, of the refugee crisis, on the people at the bottom of the social ladder. Despite the enormous wealth of some, the gap between rich and poor is wide. The battle to survive saps one's strength and etches the struggle on faces. The Palestinian and Iraqi refugees, the people in Gaza, the indentured servants, the impoverished farmers and shepherds, are all the invisible victims of the political and economic disfunctions in the Middle East. Since Joudeh's Palestinian family were refugees from Jerusalem who struggled for years in refugee camps and tents, he has a deep sensitivity for the marginalized and displaced, and creates insightful art depicting their strength and resilience. His portraits are not just of faces, but of souls.

Indeed, behind the media images, the headlines and political rhetoric about the Middle East is the face, as well as the soul, that no one sees, except in art that reveals the complexities and potential of proud people who have been betrayed, invaded, maligned and misunderstood for centuries by the West. These artists work in contradictory situations and struggle to keep cultural institutions relevant and functioning. When artists established a museum in an abandoned jail in the West Bank as a cultural center and a place for Palestinians to make and view art, it was destroyed by the Israelis. The American invasion of Iraq permitted the destruction of the Baghdad Museum and looting of valuable artworks documenting the history of human civilization. Most Iraqi artists are still refugees. Against odds that grow worse daily, the artists of the Middle East struggle to express their own creativity, and preserve the spirit of their people, presenting possibilities and hope for the future.

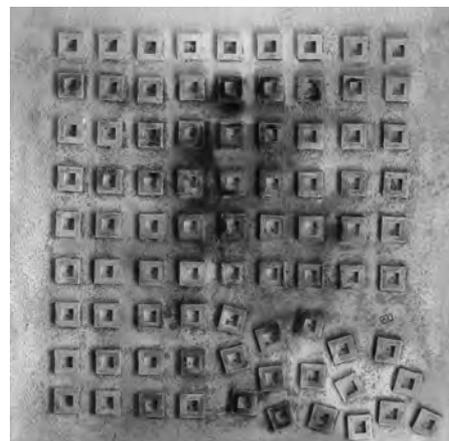
\* \* \*



*Hilda Hiary*



*Shadi Joudeh*



*Sina Ata*

*Jacqueline Taylor Basker is a writer and visual artist based in New York City. Presently she is teaching, doing research, and making art at the New York Institute of Technology in Amman, Jordan, where she has developed an interest in the contemporary art scene in the Middle East.*

## Inna Moshkovich: Nature in the Abstract

It is highly probable that, having been born in Odessa, Ukraine, and having settled in Sydney, Australia, Inna Moshkovich never heard of Jon Schueler. Nonetheless, her paintings show a kinship with that older artist, who would certainly have been known as one of the most gifted of the Abstract Expressionists, had he not moved to Scotland at the crucial moment when America's most significant homegrown art movement was gaining momentum. For like Schueler, who drew inspiration from the Scottish skies, Moshkovich is inspired by nature in a manner much more direct than most other abstract painters.

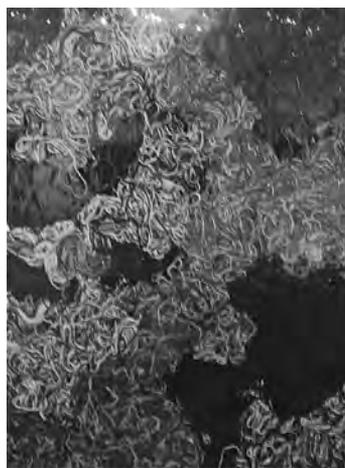
Just how successful Moshkovich is at translating the particulars of landscape into purely painterly terms can be seen in the exhibition "Out From Down Under & Beyond" at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from May 10 to 30 (Reception: May 15 from 6 to 8 PM). In both her acrylic paintings and innovative wool collages, Moshkovich captures a sense of light and movement that brings her compositions alive in a unique manner. More vital to her endeavor than the lay of the land or solid forms are atmospheric elements, which she conjures in a manner that suggests both the lessons of Impressionism and the great British landscape painter Turner's statement about painting with "tinted steam." For Moshkovich has that exceedingly rare ability

to make the most ethereal elements in nature palpable in pigment.

Perhaps the most striking evidence of this can be seen in her "Play of Light Series," focusing on skies in which wispy cloud formations appear shot through with intense sunlight. In these large canvases, delicate dappled strokes of pale yet luminous hues evoke specific qualities of air and natural illumination with an immediacy that eludes most realists. By limiting her composition to an expanse of sky, cut off from land and other referents, Moshkovich captures the vital spirit of her subject without sacrificing the abstract integrity of her compositions.

Moshkovich's approach arises not so much out of a desire to avoid describing the particular details of landscape, but out of a genuine need to celebrate those less obvious qualities of light and air that animate nature as a whole. Thus she achieves not merely the semblance of abstraction that results from arrangements of nonobjective shapes and color areas, but the deeper distillation of essences that true abstraction involves.

Watery expanses also provide Moshkovich



"Ocean Surface I"

an opportunity to conjure up a sense of movement and shifting light, as seen in her "Ocean Surface Series," where the colors are more somber than in the previous series and the forms take on a more gestural thrust akin to Abstract Expressionism, even while retaining the sense of subtlety and restraint that sets her apart from her predecessors of the New York School.

Indeed, if she shares qualities in common with any of those older artists,

perhaps her closest affinity may be for the early abstractions of Philip Guston, with their sensitive, jotted strokes and soft pinkish colorations.

However, Inna Moshkovich has a unique grasp of nature, formed in Ukraine, where she remembers the changes of seasons as "quite drastic" and transplanted to the rugged terrain of Australia. Thus the synthesis of the actual and the abstract that she achieves is a unique accomplishment.

—Maurice Taplinger

## A Visionary Group Exhibition Calculated to Raise the Spirits

According to Anne Rudder, who co-curated the West Side Arts Coalition exhibition "Art and Soul" with Terry Berkowitz, the show, presented recently at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at 96th Street and Broadway, was conceived "to usher out the winter doldrums."

The overwhelming mood was visionary, as seen in Rudder's own work in watercolor and crayon, "The Voice of the Rain (Tribute to Walt Whitman)," which subjected Whitman's work to Blakean illumination, with lines from "Leaves of Grass" written out in the artist's hand and combined with atmospheric semi-abstract landscape imagery.

Co-curator Terry Berkowitz, working in the unorthodox medium of watercolor on canvas, created another kind of purely visual poetry with Turner-esque veils of predominantly yellow hues and forms as amorphous as shadows casting golden auras, as though with a brush dipped in liquid light.

In "Monks of Burma" Rob van Es boldly delineated a faceless procession of ascetics in their saffron robes in vibrant washes of diluted acrylic and ink, while the same artist's "Vanitas, Dead Bird" projected a mood of transcendence, rather than morbidity, by virtue of its breezy brush work and equally brilliant colorations. Frequent WSAC

exhibitor Emily Rich also struck a high note with a group of smallish works in watercolor, acrylic, and collage in which rooftops with their funky chimneys and water towers took on an enchanted quality, as though the fairytale castles and whimsical little kingdoms of Paul Klee had been transported to the gritty city.

Pamela Belen employed soft forms and delicate hues in her exquisitely refined colored pencil drawing "Orchidia," making pale blues and pinks suggest a poignant sense of the precious transience of all life by virtue of her consummate draftspersonship and ability to turn a simple subject into a visual metaphor with much wider implications. By contrast, Jeanette Arnone demonstrated her penchant for over-the-top fantasy in several antic acrylics, gouaches and pastel possessed of an infectious joy and wit which hit its peak in "Toby in Dreamland," a sophisticated primitive picture of an artist beset at his work table by an entire menagerie of imaginary jungle beasts.

Veronica Doljenkova is fully in command of her own abundant inner world, judging from her lively watercolor and ink drawings, which chart anthropomorphic islands and flowing bodies of water with the exacting black line and pale tints of a mad cartographer delineating meandering maps of con-

sciousness. Something of a departure from the interior quality of most of the other works in this show, yet at one with its spirit is a largish oil on canvas by Ronnie Lawrence called "Girls on the Playground," in which four clustered teenagers form a single laughing mass in a perfect evocation of youthful energy mirth suggestive of the lighthearted phrase "a giggle of girls."

Beatrice Rubel, on the other hand, creates colorful abstract works in colored pencil and graphite in which rhythmic ribbons of luminous rainbow hues simultaneously suggest fanciful landscapes and shimmering magical curtains.

The final artist, Yukako, combines the swift fluidity of Asian ink painting, the chromatic saturations of Color Field painting, and the schematic qualities of the Pattern and Decoration movement in works in water media on rice paper with a poetic delicacy akin to the imprints made by leaves after a rainfall. Like the other artists in this refreshing exhibition, Yukako is a true visionary whose work goes beyond mere formal solutions to give expression to the inner voice of an individual sensibility. This is something rare in the increasingly self-conscious climate of today's art scene and therefore to be greatly treasured.

—Ian Palmer

# Teona Titvinidze-Kapon and the Rebirth of Neo-Romanticism

Does anyone remember when Pavel Tchelitchev's "Hide and Seek" was one of the main attractions at the Museum of Modern Art? In the late 1950s and well into the '60s, visiting grammar school classes and groups of tourists would stand in awe before that large meticulously painted canvas, in which the veiny, embryonic heads of children and a claw-like hand, were half-concealed amid the branches of a giant gnarled tree.

Along with Christian Berard and Eugene Berman, Tchelitchev was one of the leading lights of Neo-Romanticism, which was eventually eclipsed by the explosion of Abstract Expressionism.

"Hide and Seek" has remained in storage through subsequent movements, such as Pop, Minimalism, and Conceptualism; yet Neo-Romanticism seems ripe for revival in the present post-modern era, particularly by a younger generation of artists such as Teona Titvinidze-Kapon, whose solo show can be viewed at Gelabert Studios Gallery, 255 West 86th Street, from May 4 through 26. (Reception: May 6, from 5 to 8 PM.)

Born in Tbilisi, the capital of the Republic of Georgia, Titvinidze-Kapon, who moved to the United States to launch her career in 1994, a year after graduating from the Georgia Academy of the Arts, seems the most likely heir to Tchelitchev's mantle. For her paintings are every bit as complex and over the top. In the true Neo-Romantic tradition, they take the basic tenets of Surrealism into a more warmly humanistic direction. One might posit that while Surrealism was Freudian in its coldly analytical approach to the unconscious, Neo-Romanticism was Jungian, with more emphasis on the transformative powers rather than the pathology of dreams.

For this reason Titvinidze-Kapon's paintings seem heirs to the latter tradition, with their radiant colors, complex, multifigure compositions, often set within lushly blooming bucolic landscapes. These sunny pastoral settings contrast refreshingly with the desolate unearthly terrains, nocturnal dreamscapes, and parched deserts so familiar to the former movement, just as the wholesome, generally life-affirming eroticism of Titvinidze-Kapon's compositions presents an upbeat antidote to Surrealism's decadent polymorphous perversity.

Like Tchelitchev, Titvinidze-Kapon

employs trees as a dominant motif. However, she merges them even more organically with her figures, so that their limbs and those of entwined lovers often become one with each other. In one such composition, the tree appears to have become uprooted from the earth, flying high above its verdant curves and flowing blue tributaries like a hot-air balloon, its shapely anthropomorphic limbs suggesting a veritable airborne orgy of embracing couples. The painting suggests an ascent to a heavenly visionary realm such as those depicted by the great British eccentric

a single, bare-limbed tree, in the highest crook of which sits a nude woman gazing down, as an empty man's suit and a pink party dress sway from its lower branches like forlorn remnants of memory, while a naked man below appears to merge with the trunk of the tree and ossify, as he clutches desperately at its base.

At times, Teona Titvinidze-Kapon conjures up such a complex and mysterious array of images within a single painting that one finally despairs of trying to interpret them too literally and simply surrenders to the pleasure of bearing witness to her imaginative fecundity. One especially auspicious example is a major picture centering on a woman in a blue tutu riding a blue elephant. Both the vibrant color of the pachyderm, offset by its rosy pink cheeks and benign demeanor, as well as the intricacy of the composition, suggest the elephant god Ganeesh, depicted in an Indian religious miniature.

However, everything else in the painting is decidedly secular and highly subjective, such as the painting-within-the-painting on the elephant's decorative blanket, a characteristic gathering of nudes in an



"Untitled"

pastoral setting framed by a multicolored riot of decorative floral patterns. Further enlivened by actual flowers and floating feathers of a type that resemble human eyes set against the fiery red and orange sky of the landscape through which the elephant and its rider move, the painting has a baroque, over-the-top, almost psychedelic quality that sets this gifted Georgian-born painter as one of the most intrepid figurative talents to emerge since the late Peter Dean achieved prominence with his "Rhino Horn" paintings in the mid-to-late 1980s.

Indeed, on the strength of her energetic and entertaining exhibition at Gelabert Studios Gallery, Teona Titvinidze-Kapon proves herself to be a most worthy heir to the legacy of Pavel Tchelitchev, and surely if a new Neo-Romantic movement is in the offing, she should be among those who spearhead it.

Indeed, in another such painting, while the tree remains rooted among a rich array of flowers, it apparently draws an electrifying energy from the earth that illuminates it in a manner recalling the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas' immortal line about "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower." Indeed, its trunk lights up like a green neon sign outlining two entwined bodies, while each separate limb bears other coupling lovers like ripe fruit among its lush leaves, and rather than emanating from without, sunbeams appear to flow from within the tree itself, forming a brilliant yellow aura around its entire circumference.

In yet other paintings by Titvinidze-Kapon, however, trees play a variety of roles, some less transcendent, as in a composition where a woman in an elegant evening gown stands pensively with her bare back to us, dwarfed by a forest of white birches, the contrasting patterns on their bark creating an intricate camouflage in which she appears in danger of losing herself; or in a picture of

—J. Sanders Eaton

# High Art, Low-Life, Lerman's Non-Novel, Mailer's Madness, and My Friend the Philanthropist

by Ed McCormack



"Wouldn't it be just too trite if I came down with pneumonia and died because I wore the wrong shoes and my feet got soaked to the bone?" I groused to my wife, as we climbed the stairs to our apartment, after venturing out into a torrential rain and hail storm to attend a dinner at The National Arts Club that I couldn't talk my way out of.

"Trite?" Jeannie said, stopping and turning at the landing to regard me bemusedly. "Did you really say trite?"

And of course she was right; it's more than absurd to think one can "critique" the very forces that determine our destiny—as if fate gives two shits about our opinion of its capricious artistry.

Surely I was not being nearly as lucid as the elderly black lady, struggling to negotiate the slippery street with the aid of a cane while being pelted furiously by hail stones, who had come up alongside us earlier in the evening and said, "I don't know where these mother-fuckers is coming from—it must be from Hell!"

But that's the danger of making a living as I do: one can begin to labor under the delusion that life is obliged to follow the logic we demand of art; that it should make some kind of sense, however abstract. In fact, sometimes it's unreasonable to expect even art to make sense. At best one can only hope for the kind of synthesis of sense and sensibility that Clare Pettit suggests, in a recent issue of the *London Times Literary Supplement*, when she writes that Leonard Barkan's memoir "Satyr Square" "reminds us of how much joy and pleasure there can be in work when it is properly braided into the rest of the stuff of life, and that the art of living matters just as much—if not more—than any other art."

Not having read Barkan's book, the quote makes me think instead of *The Grand Surprise: The Journals of Leo Lerman*, which I have been savoring slowly for some time now. At six hundred plus pages, it is the heftiest volume on my bedside table, and I have made a

point of alternating it with other books to prolong my reading of it because I find its author eminently companionable, despite his sometimes annoying tendency to repeatedly bemoan his lack of literary industry.

The problem, as Lerman, who died in 1994, saw it, was that he had frittered away his potentially most productive years working as an editor, writing occasional trendy trivia for publications like *Mademoiselle*, *Vogue*, *Glamour*, and *Harper's Bazaar*, and hanging out with friends like Marlene Dietrich, Truman Capote, Maria Callas and Noel Coward, instead of writing epic novels of manners like those of his literary hero Marcel Proust. What Lerman failed to realize is that his secret journals, discovered after his death by his longtime partner, the artist Gray Foy, and published posthumously, constitute his own nonfictional "Remembrance of Things Past."

Unlike so many other writers who bemoan the hours of solitude and drudgery that their craft requires, Lerman loved writing. He rhapsodizes more than once about what "bliss" it is to have hours alone at his desk. So it was not a distaste for the work that hampered him but a social life that ultimately proved even more seductive than those hours of bliss at his desk—or, better yet, in bed, where he often preferred to write, since it apparently made the process of putting words on paper all the more sensual.

The book begins with the memory of a childhood epiphany from which its title derives: On "a hot delicious day in early summer in Jackson Heights," while exploring the empty rooms of a huge Victorian house that his father had been hired to paint, ten year-old lepidopterist Leo spotted, clinging to the faded wallpaper, a Camberwell Beauty, "the butterfly that I most coveted and had never seen before, save in butterfly books in the library."

Poised to pounce, the boy approached the rare specimen stealthily, only to realize that he could not bring himself to capture something so beautiful.

"Then I tried to shoo the Camberwell Beauty to the window but it remained obdurate, clinging tenaciously, somnolently to its wall. Suddenly, as I stood, hand outstretched, supplicating, it raised its wings languorously (as later I was to see Margot Fonteyn raise her arms numerous times), fluttered onto my right hand. I can feel the kiss, the almost imperceptible kiss of its feet, and the sweet tingle of the little stirrings it made as it raised and lowered its mysterious purple-brown wings several times. Then I flung it from the window, worrying whether it would be hurt, alarmed because my hand was all dusty, purple-brown, the powder from the Camberwell Beauty's wings."

As an adult, leafing through a magazine, Lerman's attention was captured by a color photograph of the same rare species: "So sitting there, thirty-five or so years later, I read about this butterfly and discovered that it has another name. Sometimes it is called the Grand Surprise."

In artfully giving form to the book from the many notebooks that Leo Lerman left behind, its editor, Stephen Pascal, positioned the butterfly incident early on in the published text as the diarist's version of Proust's madeleine. It flutters back to haunt Lerman some 200 pages later when he writes, "The full realization of my grave misstep in writing even a word for

New York Magazine

fashion magazines years ago has come upon me recently. I accept this—no anguish—but must do something about it...Perhaps the Grand Surprise isn't finding oneself in the 'great world' of society, fashion, arts, and entertainment, but discovering that one has made an almost comical mistake, which for years has deflected one from his true purpose."

\* \* \*

Lerman's lament has particular resonance for me, since for many years my own writing was a mere accessory to my social life—especially in the early 1970s, when I wrote regular feature articles and a column called "New York Confidential" for *Rolling Stone* and it was still possible to convince myself that spending most of my nights at Max's Kansas City, the notorious downtown bar that served as the epicenter of the "New York Satyricon" (title of a book I owed Viking Press but was too deep into the dissipations of my subject to complete) was essential research.

Knowing full well what it is like to suspect that one is wasting one's talent, even while being irresistibly caught up in a celebrity-laden lifestyle that others consider enviably glamorous, I can empathize in retrospect with Lerman. However, Lerman reminds me less of myself than of Danny Fields, the inveterate scenemaker who first introduced me to Andy Warhol, Lou Reed, Lisa Robinson, and just about everyone else who mattered in the downtown demi-monde.

Although generally unknown to the public at large, people like Danny are famous among the famous for their ability to spot talent, predict trends, and put people together who should know one another. Known mainly for their social mobility, such people's own professional accomplishments need not be particularly impressive. Danny, for example, had worked as an editor for various teenybopper publications, ghost-written celebrity biographers, and was a "company freak" (someone retained by The Suits to keep them attuned to happenings in the underground) for Atlantic Records.

Perhaps he will be best remembered as the first manager of The Ramones—although in tabloid terms, Linda Stein, his more obnoxious partner in that enterprise, will be better remembered for goading her personal assistant into beating her to death with a "yoga stick." While Stein had the real estate bucks to back the band, Danny had the inspired vision of a funkier Monkees dressed like teenage street hustlers in leather jackets, torn jeans, and sneakers.

Maybe he hoped to emulate the success of good friend Brian Epstein, who turned four raw kids from Liverpool into an enormously influential cultural phenomenon called The



*Fashionista and tastemaker Leo Lerman, not writing*

Beatles. But The Ramones merely became icons of "punk rock," the low rent movement I named in a *Rolling Stone* article on a Bowery dive called CBGB, never imagining that an entire generation of downed-out headbangers would take up my dismissive epithet as a rallying cry. In matters less subjective than popularizing his own personal kinks, however, Danny Fields wielded considerable power as a tastemaker and arbiter of hip who could launch a career with a knowing nod followed by a blase "fabulous."

Apparently Leo Lerman, another gay man with a penchant for effortless networking, was also such a tastemaker, albeit one with classier contacts, a more distinguished professional life (his final position was editorial advisor to all the Conde Nast publications), and needless to say, far greater literary gifts. Even early in his career in postwar Manhattan, when he lived in a fifth floor walk-up with his first partner Richard Hunter and the refreshments were limited to "jug wine and rat cheese," his parties attracted a spectrum of revelers ranging from the distinguished literary critic Lionel Trilling to the stripper Gypsy Rose Lee.

"What friends often remembered most fondly about Leo," Stephen Pascal writes in the book's introduction, "is how he changed their lives by a casual introduction or an offhand suggestion." But while Pascal allows as to how "Through decades of reporting on art and entertainment and, perhaps more important, years of counseling, introducing, and prodding talent, Leo Lerman helped steer American culture," he adds, "His lasting significance, however, may lie in his role as an observer of the lives

and art swirling around him."

One could compare Lerman's descriptions of the social milieu in which he moved to the elegant, skillfully choreographed interior scenes of his contemporary, the realist painter John Koch, in one of which, "Cocktail Party," the bearded, black-suited figure of Lerman himself appears prominently in the foreground. But not quite. Unlike Koch, whose chic genre scenes were never less than genteel, Lerman peels back the civilized social veneer to reveal a decadence that is nowhere more devastating than in his word portrait of the painter and his wife Dora: "Their feasts were first in a brownstone walk-up, one-plate gumbo dinner on laps, and later elaborate 'banquets' in a huge, Central Park double co-op, very Art Deco, where Dora would scream: "This is just like old St. Petersburg!" She shouted affluence—at her sit-down dinners for seventy-five, at her collection of Guardis and Bouchers and El Grecos ('Aren't they a dream!' she would shriek. 'All real!'). When she ran out of self-praise for her possessions, for her enormous person, she would glare wildly about—her eyes those of a carousel horse—and howl, 'And this is my table!' as John's pink tongue darted avidly between his full lips and his hands surreptitiously felt the limbs of any young male seated deliberately nearby at the table."

In another diary entry, dated 1953, Lerman turns even a visit to a clinic into a surreal scatological episode worthy of a William Burroughs novel: "The doctor appeared in red-rimmed heavy goggles, and as he massaged my stomach (very pleasant on a workday to lie in the dark with a man massaging my stomach) and inserted the tube up my bottom, he said, 'You know, we've met before. About a year or so ago at the Ballet Ball. I was at Nancy Norman's table. You were at Mrs. Bouverie's.' He went on in this high-fashion, social tone all the time he gave me the enema."

Lerman's comic gift is also apparent in an account of weathering a lightning storm in his New York City townhouse: "I am trying to be brave—not successfully. What torrents. What bombardments aerial and shattering violet light. It's funny—even I can see that. Every time I try to creep up the stair to shut the windows, the flash-and-crash comes, and I run back into this room and crouch, a fat creature in the exquisite, sleeveless creation I favor when the heat's on, which it indeed is. I try to think of happy things—like the beaded-flower store in Paris opposite Marie Antoinette and Louis's graveyard or Sainte-Chapelle....Ah me...I'll think VENICE. If I were a genuine writer, I would utilize this time for minutely describing the storm...but this is a baroque storm."

Even here his self-doubts cloud his vision; for he is nothing if not a genuine writer, giving us much more than “a minute description of the storm” in this antic passage, which reads like Lewis Carroll set to the staccato rhythms of Louis Ferdinand Celine.

In terms of his ability to evoke what he calls “the seamy side of a certain kind of high life,” perhaps one of Lerman’s best vignettes describes a visit to the palatial Beverly Hills home of the actress Marian Davies in 1951, shortly after the death of her long-time sugar daddy, William Randolph Hearst: “We went back through the servants rooms into a small room filled with the kind of people you see when Hollywood does Raymond Chandler (all of L.A. and Hollywood seems written by Chandler). On the bed, another big dyed blond with her skirts above her navel, and a tall dress-extra kind of run down sexy man (later he would be a bum; now he was a drifter) stroking between her thighs. She singing: ‘Nothing wrong. We’re married. He’s my husband. He’s good. That’s why I married him.’ And thick smoke and nasty laughing and smell of rye and vomit. It was evident that a fight was in the making—and all sorts of nastiness.”

In his 1959 collection of potshots and personal musings, “Advertisements for Myself,” Norman Mailer goads Truman Capote to take an existential gamble, saying, “I would suspect he hesitates between the attractions of Society which he enjoys and which repays him for his unique gifts, and the novel he could write of the gossip column’s real life, a major work, but it would banish him forever from his favorite world.” Capote didn’t take the bait until 1975, when he published a scandalous roman a clef of a short story called “La Cote Basque” in *Esquire*. It was supposed to be the first chapter of Capote’s self-billed “Proustian masterpiece,” called “Answered Prayers,” which never appeared and which many believe never existed except as a publicity stunt that sent all of his Society pals scurrying as if from a bomb scare.

If Capote bit the bejeweled hand that had wined and dined him with that one published teaser, surely Leo Lerman could have chewed off the whole arm, had he been able to fulfill the “blissful dream” he was already confiding to Richard Hunter in a 1956 letter: to “get out of this fashion-magazine world....and write my book.”

Unfortunately, Lerman’s inability to value himself as a writer above all else, and forego the glittering company to which he had become so accustomed, kept his best writing buried in his journals, only to emerge

posthumously as a flawed but no less fascinating monument to the triumph of life over art.

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In my own case, it was less a matter of literary aspiration than for self-preservation, as well as for the sake of others, that I opted, some time back, to withdraw as a social entity and exist primarily as a phantom of print. When I remember my more outgoing self, I am reminded of my favorite *New Yorker* cartoon: two thugs in a bar, one saying to the other, “I never went in for victimless crime. I’m more of a people person.”

Back then my favorite catch-phrase was “the existential edge,” repeated so often that future best-selling author and talk show wit Fran Lebowitz, with whom I used to freeload at record company press parties when we were both equally poor, dubbed me “The Existential Ed.” Not yet having read much of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, or Sartre, my notion of Existentialism came second-hand from Norman Mailer, my idea of a philosopher now that I felt I had outgrown the goofball Zen of Jack Kerouac. Basically to be an existentialist, to me, meant to behave recklessly when drunk. I was being an existentialist in print when Mailer’s book on Marilyn Monroe came out and I published an audacious review called “McCormack on Mailer on Marilyn: A Manage a Trois in the Spirit of the New Vulgarity.” And I was being an existentialist in the flesh when I was one of the most obnoxious drunks among many obnoxious drunks at Mailer’s infamous 50th birthday party at the Four Seasons.

Although I no longer drink or act out impulsively in public, I remembered that ancient evening with a certain rueful nostalgia, when Jeannie and I had a chance encounter with Mailer’s former wife on Second Avenue a few weeks after his death. I first met Adele Morales Mailer twenty or so years ago on the 57th Street crosstown bus when she mistook the friend I was with for Allen Ginsberg. It turned out Adele, a painter, was headed for the same gallery opening we were en route to. Back then she still retained traces of her former dark-eyed Spanish beatnik beauty. Now, she was 82 and looked shrunken and haggard, her woolen coat hanging off her shoulders, schlepping two shopping bags. But she still had eyes that burned like black coals, as she kvetched about how since Norman’s death reporters from all around the world have been swooping down on her, stirring up maddening memories.

“Of all the vivid characters who came and went in the tumultuous 84-year life of Norman Mailer, perhaps none played such a sensational role, and then vanished so com-



*Adele Morales Mailer still carrying grudges*

pletely from the public eye, as the author’s second wife, Adele,” wrote one reporter for *The Sydney Morning Herald*. At least that one mentioned her by name; to others she was just the wife that Mailer had stabbed.

“I was an idiot for not pressing charges,” she said of her stabbing with a pen-knife, the climax to one of the couples’ wild, brawling parties, which made tabloid headlines and put her in intensive care, near death, in 1960. “Maybe if Norman had gone to prison he would have finally written his great American novel. His novels aren’t very good, you know, although he was a great journalist.”

She launched into a distraught, disjointed tirade, one minute declaring that her marriage to Norman had been an amazing learning experience, the next that it had been a living hell; in one breath saying that he had been enormously generous after their split, in the next that he had left her in poverty. Her morbid obsession with a relationship long in the past, which had given her a public identity while making her a footnote to someone else’s biography, reminded me of Ruth Kligman, another woman I once knew who seemed to use her former status as Jackson Pollock’s mistress to lure subsequent younger lovers— as if genius could rub off by dipping one’s brush in the same old pot. Ruth’s book “Love Affair” had been the basis for the film “Pollock,” and now that Norman was dead Adele claimed there was some interest from Hollywood in her own story as well.

“Have you read my book?” she asked, referring to her lurid memoir “The Last

Party: Scenes from My Life With Norman Mailer,” which also chronicles her encounters with Jack Kerouac, Ed Fancher (co-founder with her former husband of The Village Voice), and other male admirers in 1950s Greenwich Village. “When it came out, about twelve years ago, Norman was furious. He wouldn’t even speak to me. But I wrote it to let people know that I was an artist in my own right; that I had done other things in my life besides being stabbed by Norman Mailer.”

“Didn’t he claim that he stabbed you to prevent himself from getting cancer?” I asked disingenuously. “Didn’t it have to do with one of his theories about how the cells rebel if you don’t have the courage to follow your impulses and take crucial actions at certain moments?”

“He was a sociopath,” Adele said by way of explanation.

“Maybe that’s why my favorite Mailer book is ‘Advertisements for Myself,’” I said. “It seems to be his most sociopathic.”

“I’m not kidding,” she insisted. “He was seriously deranged.”

“I don’t read Mailer for sense,” I explained. “I read him for sentences.”

“You can’t even imagine what I went through with that man,” she said, clearly unimpressed by my flippancy. “He may have been a genius, but he was a monster.”

Adele admits to having been something of a monster herself, before getting sober in Alcoholics Anonymous some fifteen years ago. In an early chapter of “The Last Party,” she tells about seeing a production of “Carmen” with her mother when she was thirteen and deciding, “I was going to be that beautiful temptress who ate men alive, flossed her teeth, and spit out the bones, wearing an endless supply of costumes from Frederick’s of Hollywood.”

Naturally, Adele no longer looked anything like that innocent aspiring femme fatale or the worldly bohemian hot tamale who first caught Norman’s eye; nor did she even resemble the embittered divorcee who, at the end of her book, watches her former husband being interviewed on TV and fantasizes about “happily scooping out those baby blues of his like spoonfuls of cantaloupe, slowly slitting his fat, bourbon-soaked liver,” and “chopping off his hands, dooming him to write the great American novel with his feet.”

The small woman in the oversized overcoat that we left standing beside her shopping bags on the corner of 82nd Street and Second Avenue, after getting a word in edgewise to say our goodbyes, evoked nothing so much as the British gentlewoman poet Stevie Smith’s poignant phrase “not waving but drowning.”

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*Macho existentialist Norman Mailer demonstrating that the pen-knife is mightier than the pen*

“Most of us novelists who are any good are invariably half-educated; inaccurate, albeit brilliant upon occasion, insufferably vain of course; and—the indispensable requirement for a good newspaperman—as eager to tell a lie as the truth. (Saying the truth makes us burn with the desire to convince our audience, whereas telling a lie affords ample leisure to study the result.)”

This is Norman Mailer at his most provocative—one might even say at his most sociopathic—for he makes this characteristically pugnacious assertion with which any “good newspaperman” would be honor-bound to disagree, at the very onset of his own journalistic career, in 1956, in his first column for *The Village Voice*, later reprinted in “Advertisements for Myself.”

Yet Mailer’s perverse logic is rarely without merit; for while I was not lying, I must admit that it was to study their reactions that I repeatedly introduced one guest to the others, at a large gathering in our small apartment, as “David Ludlow, the philanthropist.”

It’s a word that can really resonate among artists, people who often feel that the world owes them a living, given how poorly compensated most of them are for their cultural contribution. And it’s the word that my friend David, who used to answer to “social activist and freelance photographer,” before a cruel twist of fate made him a multimillionaire, now applies to himself with the same lack of irony that has always been one of his more endearing

traits.

In the 1960s, when just about everyone else was paying lip service to peace, love, and social justice, David was the only true idealist I knew. He and the young Swedish woman he was living with back then were our neighbors in a row of tenements on East 89th Street, and we’d often visit back and forth. A New England WASP with a social mission, David was deeply committed to “organizing indigenous people in the inner city,” as he used to put it. Having grown up workingclass on the Lower East Side when it was still a community rife with enough crime and poverty to make any social worker salivate, such phrases always sounded like patronizing clinical terms for people like me. But since I could no longer qualify as a juvenile delinquent by the time I knew David, the chip that I still carried around on my shoulder toward those who would presume to save people like me from our underprivileged outlaw selves now seems every bit as naive as my friend’s good intentions once struck me.

Still, I never doubted David’s sincerity, liked him immensely, and the contrast between his earnest altruism and my hipper-than-thou cynicism made for lively conversation. I have many fond memories of those pleasant evenings that we spent in one or the other of our tiny apartments, Dylan droning softly on the turned-down stereo and our two beautiful girls nestled nearby in the cozy lamplight, regarding our verbal jousting with the wry wisdom of the superior sex, back when passionate argument was as catnip to our arrogant young manhood.

\* \* \*

After David and his girlfriend split up and went their separate ways in the late sixties, we didn’t hear from him again until very recently, when he Googled us on a whim and then surprised us with a blast-from-the-past phone call from his home in Boston.

“It turns out I’m much wealthier than I ever expected to be,” he confided in the course of our long, catching-up conversation, as though still befuddled and almost a bit embarrassed by it. For he had not come into his wealth in an enviable way, inheriting his first wife’s share of a huge family fortune after she fell to her death while they were mountain climbing in Siberia in 1996, exactly a year after their wedding.

“I’ve always been very left-wing politically and all of a sudden I was living with incredible inequality,” David told a reporter for the *Boston Globe* who interviewed him about his philanthropy last year. “Suddenly I was in the upper one-percent of the population in terms of wealth, and I felt terrible about that for a long time.”

He finally felt better after deciding to contribute half of his wealth to funding an after school program in Boston’s inner city,

among several other worthy projects in an effort to “sow seeds of justice for new generations to overcome racism and oppression.”

He also decided to live so frugally by most people’s standards—let alone those of multimillionaire!—that, since he would be arriving in the city the day before our party, he actually asked if he, his second wife, Joann, and their two large dogs could sleep overnight on our floor, saying, “I’d rather give my money away than waste it on hotels and other luxuries.”

But being less nostalgic than my old friend for the crash-pad lifestyle of our youth, I recommended The Gracie Inn, a reasonable bed and breakfast nearby.

At our party, David handled the bald inquiries and barely disguised entreaties of some of the pushier geniuses with the guarded good humor of a man quite used to coping graciously with all manner of hustles, while Joann, a professor of sociology, seemed amused to encounter a class of people possessed of formidable egos unrestrained by superegos.

I should state here that David had already put me to the test. After viewing our website previous to our reunion, he had mailed us an unsolicited check for \$500 to cover “a lifetime subscription to *Gallery&Studio*,” the art journal we publish. My first impulse was to send him a \$478.00 refund with a note saying that I would prefer he renew his subscription on a year-by-year basis. But Jeannie, who is more tactful, practical, and naturally generous than I am, argued that such gestures can be a gratifying form of self-expression for some people, and to deny them that pleasure can seem a rude rebuff. And while foolish pride still compelled me to make a gesture in return, sending David and Joann a drawing comparable to one I had recently sold for \$500, I was happy that I had at least nominally followed my wife’s advice when David and I finally met face-to-face at our party and I was touched by how warmly he greeted me.

“David has told me so much about you and Jeannie, it’s so nice to meet you, finally,” Joann said when they first arrived. “He’s always said you were the coolest guy he ever knew.”

“Then I must be a great disappointment,” I said coyly, when I actually should have said, “Your husband’s a lot cooler, using his money to spread so much sunshine.”

Over the next couple of hours, it became clear that my old friend had lost none of his youthful idealism. Nor had great wealth added sufficient gravity to diminish his goofy, gung-ho charm, I realized, as he went on enthusiastically about all the radio, TV, and print interviews he was doing in an exhaustive effort to convince other multi-



*Philanthropist David Ludlow spreading sunshine*

millionaires to give away half their money. An even bigger cynic than myself might cite the “warm glow theory”—a term coined by an economist named James Andeoni. “In the warm-glow view of philanthropy,” David Leonhardt wrote in a recent issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, “people aren’t giving money merely to save the whales; they’re also giving money to feel the glow that comes with being the kind of person who’s helping to save the whales.”

But the type of person who would buy that theory unequivocally would probably also agree with those psychologists who say that making art is simply a symptom of social maladjustment and what most of us call love is actually a disorder called “codependency.”

After David and Joann left for the long drive back to Boston—God forbid my friend the philanthropist should squander more of his disposable fortune on another night at The Gracie Inn!—I found myself casually polling our remaining guests about David’s philanthropy. Only now I realized that I was no longer doing so for my own perverse amusement, but because I felt genuinely proud of him, which surprised me, never having been one to sentimentalize my friends.

There are some lines by Philip Larkin that have always reminded me of one of the qualities that I prize most highly in my wife: “In times when nothing stood / but worsened or grew strange, / there was one constant good: / she did not change.” And it occurred to me now that, unlike another friend of mine, who had been just as left wing in the Sixties but underwent a metamorphosis from radical to neo-con almost immediately on inheriting a much smaller

fortune, David had shown his own consistency of character by remaining true to the ideals that I had once dismissed so cynically. His genuine concern for people less well off than himself was finally being given its fullest expression now that he was better off than most of us will ever be. And while I still wasn’t sure if I fully agreed with Clare Pettit that “the art of living matters just as much—if not more—than any other art,” *that*, it seemed to me, was the art of living elevated to its highest level.

But this was a private thought; not one I wished to put up for debate among the people who sat in our kitchen discussing the departed guest, whose ears must have been, ringing all the way back to Boston.

“He seemed like a nice guy, but when I asked him what he was a philanthropist of, he said he didn’t want to talk about money,” said a visual artist who had been done out of his own rightful inheritance by a woman his famous father had married toward the end of his life. “What else is there to talk about to a philanthropist?”

“When I start giving away money, all I ask is that they put me in a nice room with a picture window that I can sit in front of, heavily sedated, gazing out at a nice green lawn,” said a gallerist, who had already sunk a good part of his own self-made fortune into promoting the careers of emerging artists he knew would probably defect ungratefully the moment more prestigious venues beckoned.

“Now you tell me!” said a brilliant but woefully unrecognized poet who had somehow missed the word “philanthropist” when I introduced him to David.

\* \* \*

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## From Post-Pop to Neo-Surreal: “Expressions 2008”

Mark Lerer is a minimalist in means, if not in style. A versatile recycler of louche graphic manners, culled from old comics and other vintage commercial sources, who seems to work exclusively in pencil or pen on a small scale, his most recent ink drawings appear to be channeling Bill Mauldin, the 1940s war cartoonist, in the group show

“Expressions,” at New Century Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, through April 12.

To Mauldin’s witty delineation of infantrymen in action and in repose, however, Lerer adds a gritty dash of the contemporary comic book artist Joe Kubert’s blunt, angular line-work to perhaps convey the grimmer mood of a less gung-ho army in a more ambiguous era, when there would appear to be no more just wars.

Whereas some of Lerer’s earlier drawings of cowboys or comic book super heroes, executed in an unadorned yet earnest style deliberately reminiscent of the macho daydreams with which listless high school boys decorate their notebooks, suggested nostalgia for mythic American heroism past, his present pictures have a pointed, anti-heroic pathos, as though the clustered G.I. Joe figure manning the machine guns are no longer sure what they are shooting at or why.

Linda Ganus, on the other hand, continues to court the uncanny in her installation “See Life,” its punning title referring to the surreal mollusks, snails, eels and other creatures that populate it. Some of them are anthropomorphic monsters that she fashions from various sculptural materials; others appear in etchings and woodcuts. Often they inhabit incongruous settings, as in one woodcut where a large octopus sails in through a bathroom window and attaches itself to the shower-rod jutting up out of the old fashioned claw-footed tub. Her sculptures, as well, have an anomalous quality, as though exotic undersea creatures were frozen midway through a process of anthropomorphic metamorphosis. The effect is enhanced by their ghostly whiteness and the artist’s ability to merge elements of classical anatomy with a sense of lumpy freeform biomorphic mutation in a seamless three-dimensional synthesis reflecting her consummate skill in drawing, which she employs in all of her work to imbue the utterly weird with a striking verisimilitude.

APRIL/MAY 2008

Such weirdnesses, the artist states are “about living, adapting, and trying to survive in modern times.” And, indeed, by virtue of her imaginative flights, Ganus makes clear how disconcertingly bizarre these times truly are.

In the little linear universe of her intimate drypoints and collographs, printmaker Linda Dujack, continues to make moons turn into balloons that tow little fishing boats along blue lagoons, or polka dot clouds wiggle like spermatozoa as they sail past the “Church on Pond Road.”

One of Dujack’s most delightful recent images is “Tulip,” in which a blithely abstracted flower, drawn in one continuous line overlaid with delicate tints of pale blue, green, and yellow, is set against a subtly modulated gray ground. It reminded me of the wonderfully off-the-wall reasoning of the clothing designer Isabel Toledo, who recently quoted as musing, “If you had never seen an umbrella and

flowing veils of color. In fact, Erismann states that he thinks of these forms “among other things, as ‘Veils.’”

And if indeed one looks at them that way, they appear windblown, flowing in swirling, rhythmical patterns as though dancing on a clothesline, in compositions so kinetic they can appear to change before one’s eyes. Indeed, they seem to move like monochromatic kaleidoscopes, often converging from the corners of the page, with empty white paper at the center to let air into the composition. Fritz Erismann’s new drawings are bravura draftsmanly performances that leave one eager to see how he will sustain the same level of kinetic energy in the oils he plans to base upon them.

By contrast, stasis and structure are the ostensible strengths of George C. Olexa’s technically innovative works in lithography, collographic plate, and etched techniques along with digital photograph image transfer. In his more busy compositions, such as “Circus,” Olexa takes similar risks to those dared by Frank Stella, juggling and layering

a baroque array of superimposed shapes in compositions with a colorful and tactile richness that could court chaos in the hands of a less formidable artist, but which he is able to orchestrate successfully, bringing a plethora of disparate elements into pleasing harmony.

Olexa’s real forte, however, is the stately sparseness that we see most particularly in his

“Window” series, where mainly rectangular shapes are combined with subdued hues in compositions that call to mind those paintings by Braque which the artist intended to be “like re-

imagined encyclopedias in which one object swaps identities with another.” In Olexa’s “Overview —Window Series,” for example, the subject is ostensibly a half-demolished tenement with rows of windows suddenly terminated

by serrated edges at the top of the structure where the upper floors have presumably been knocked by the wrecking ball. However, the formal simplification that Olexa achieves with flat, stencil-like overlaid shapes in golden ochre and subdued earth hues endows the mundane scene with an almost regal elegance, as though the ruined building were a royal crown.

—Maurice Taplinger



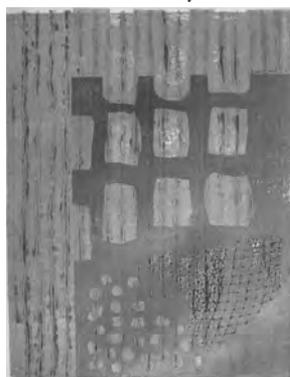
Mark Lerer



Linda Ganus



Fritz Erismann



George C. Olexa

you had no idea what it was for—if it just looked like a dying lily—could you imagine its shape open?”

Linda Dujack has a way of not only opening umbrellas but setting windmills whirling in the viewer’s imagination every time her line meanders across a small sheet of paper. She draws with that child-like freedom that it takes an adult artist a lifetime to learn.

Fritz Erismann explores drawing as a conceptual medium, and is seen here with a selection of mostly charcoal drawings. Although conceived as preparatory sketches for future oils on canvas, these drawings also function as finished works, complete unto themselves, with the charcoal employed in a manner that could be considered quite “painterly” in its own right. By this one means that Erismann exploits the particular qualities of his medium with great versatility, achieving effects simultaneously as grainy as the drawings of Georges Seurat and translucent as Paul Jenkins’ gracefully



Linda Dujack

## Universal Connections in the Art of Anicée

Aesthetic relationships can often cross cultural barriers and manifest in unexpected ways. One such example can be seen in the possibly unintended yet striking Asian feeling in the compositions of the gifted young contemporary painter who exhibits under the single name of Anicée.

Born in the French Alps of a French father and a Tunisian mother, Anicée presently lives and works in Montreal, Canada, where she creates canvases exploring the diversity of nature in



*“The Strength of Vacuum”*

terms that reflect her mixed heritage, of which she says, “I try to merge the richness of both cultures.” Although Anicée also asserts that she strives to achieve “universality” in her art, as far as one knows, she has special interest in the art of China and Japan, having more than enough in her own background to inspire her. Yet a kinship with Asian art manifests nonetheless, not only stylistically but in Anicée’s approach to nature, judging from the work on view in the exhibition “Abstract Concepts,” on view at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from May 10 to 30, with a reception on May 15 from 6 to 8 PM.

To begin with, Anicée tends to prefer working monochromatically in her mixed media paintings on canvas, as well as in her silkscreen prints. Thus both invite comparison to traditional Chinese painting, in which black ink on white paper suffices to suggest every color in the spectrum. Aside from obvious exceptions such as the black and white compositions of Franz Kline and a few others, monochromatic painting, otherwise known as *grisaille*, is relatively rare in modern Western painting. Abstract and emphatically nontraditional as her paintings are, however, Anicée takes to *grisaille* as naturally as any traditional Asian painter—although in her recent work, like the French painter Yves Klein, she chooses to work primarily in blue rather than black.

Even more germane to the relationships we are noting here is the linear thrust of her work, which reminds us that along with painting and poetry, calligraphy is one of “the three perfections” merged in Asian art. Anicée’s line is possessed of a sinuous grace rarely encountered in contemporary Western painting and her use of white space in her compositions lends them a similar sense of spaciousness to that which we see in Asian landscape scrolls, with their vistas of “mountains and rivers without end,” to borrow the Zen-influenced American poet Gary Snyder’s felicitous phrase.

That said, there are no readily discernible mountains or rivers in Anicée’s paintings, nor any other obvious attempts to delineate recognizable aspects of landscape. Her compositions are completely abstract, capturing the inner spirit of nature rather than its outward appearance with graceful, rhythmic networks of lines and marks that flow and merge with a freedom akin to Henri Michaux’s mescaline drawings; yet that Anicée’s compositions are obviously informed by a more sober and refined sensibility is indicated by her frequent use of a grid as a formal armature for her linear explorations. And while her paintings, which often have enigmatic titles such as “The Strength of Vacuum” and “Etude 6: Far From Near,” suggest at least a passing awareness of Zen philosophy, that Anicée has apparently arrived at such relationships on her own makes her work all the more remarkable. —Peter Wiley

## “Black Renaissance”: Surveying a Vital Diaspora

The recent West Side Arts Coalition exhibition “Black Renaissance,” seen at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at 96th Street and Broadway provided a sharply focused survey of the art of the African American Diaspora. Styles ranging from the figurative to the abstract revealed the range of diversity among artists who have translated their cultural experience into paintings that compel us as much for their formal qualities as their content.

J.W. Ford’s mixed media work “Early Cotton Club,” for example, celebrates the heyday of the famous Harlem night spot with the smiling face of a vivacious showgirl sporting real feather in her jeweled crown; while the same artist’s “Early American Baby” is a period piece with the nostalgic quality of an old tintype.

In Farhana Akhter’s “Side By Side” two indistinct figures almost merge into one within a dark, tactile mass of thick, shiny pigment. Although their features are nonexistent and all detail is subordinated to texture, the painting nonetheless projects a powerful sense of the human presence.

By contrast, Robert Lee Jones dwells in meticulous detail in African scenes such as his oil and acrylic painting “The Water Bearers.” However, like Larry Rivers, he also combines sketchier elements (as in a travel diary) with fully fleshed-realism, calling attention to “process” in a manner that enhances his composition’s vitality.

Sonia Barnett works in a folksy style akin to that of the well known African-American painter Benny Andrews to lend her paintings of jazz musicians a down-to-earth charm. In Barnett’s acrylic painting “Still Playing,” an elderly horn man shows no signs of slowing down.

Robert Scott combines photographic elements with gestural painting in symbolic portraits such as “Celia Cruz: Azucar,” depicting the famous Latin salsa diva with the funky vigor of a graffiti-scrawled poster on an inner city wall. However, Scott shows a more tender side in the muted brown hues of his oil, “Mother and Children.”

A visionary quality enlivens the oils of Nathaniel Ladson, particularly in compositions such as “Man and The Horns” and “Sisters,” where a single image, repeated within rainbow streaks of color creates a shimmering chromatic intensity. Yet Ladson can also make an ordinary moment memorable, as seen in his affectionate image of a lazy old dog snoozing under a blanket.

The contrast between inner and outer reality appears to be the subject of William Hunt’s large bold charcoal drawings, in which large heads in bold outline are filled with various smaller images of full-length figures. Layers of thought and memory are suggested in monochromatic compositions made remarkable by Hunt’s ability to endow his drawing medium with the depth and complexity of painting.

Elton Tucker is a stylish draftsman whose works in mixed media combine the sensual flair of the very best fashion drawing with fine art intention to create a fascinating synthesis of beauty and meaning. In works such as “I Am Beautiful,” Tucker creates positive statements as affecting as a soulful love song.

The final artist, Yukako, shows a solidarity with the others in Sumi ink and water media in abstract compositions with the spontaneous quality of jazz improvisation. In context, Yukako’s works are at one with the spirit of the exhibition, which is wide open and gregarious. One left this exhibition with a renewed appreciation for the great cultural appreciation of African American artists and was still contemplating that subject hours later, while enjoying a sumptuous dinner at Sylvia’s, the famous restaurant in Harlem frequented by numerous celebrities from Muhammad Ali to Bill Clinton. It seemed fitting to follow a feast of art with a feast of soul food.

—Peter Wiley

# The American Watercolor Society's 141st Annual Exhibit

If one had to cite a dominant trend among the many styles displayed by the more than one hundred artists in the 141st Annual International Exhibit of the American Watercolor Society, on view at the Salmagundi Club, 47 Fifth Avenue, from April 1 through 27, it would probably be the hybrid tendency for which a writer for this publication once coined the term "Abstract Realism."

Although it does appear to amount to a movement in the usual sense of that term, this tendency is very much in evidence in works such as a still life by Karen Kluglein, in which a severely cropped close-up view of the randomly piled and crumpled pages of *The New York Times*, set against what



*Karen Kluglein*

appears to be a pale blue bed sheet, billow out in flowing waves. For while Kluglein's painting is meticulously realistic, with light and shadow depicted with striking verisimilitude, the



*Marilyn Scutzky*



*Elizabeth Imrie*

overall effect of the composition is decidedly abstract. Abstract realism can take more impressionistic or expressionistic forms as well. In Barbara Maiser's painting of a frond-laden vase on a table, porous washes, particularly in the long dangling fringe of the China-white tablecloth, have a similar effect as the drips in an Abstract Expressionist composition, while Doug Finrock's boldly brushed watercolor of foamy surf rushing over rocks has the spontaneous visual velocity of "action painting." Or else abstract realism can mimic certain aspects of hard-edged abstraction, as in Marilyn Schutzky's more precise painting in which a bird's eye-view of a stout pot forms a central orb in the composition, with long stems flowing out of its opening in all directions, like bent spokes from a disassembling wheel. Another example can be seen in a composition by David Coolidge focusing in such severe closeup on steel machine parts, their weathered surfaces delineated with all the care and individual character of a portrait, even while the com-

position initially compels one's attention for the formal quality of its flat geometric shapes.

None of which is to say that numerous other tendencies are not amply represented as well. As always in the AWS's annual surveys, straightforward realism makes a strong showing. One example is M.E. "Mike" Bailey's still life of tools in a shed, notable for the artist's Wyeth-like handling of light and shadow. Another is Elizabeth Imrie's

bust-level painting of a young woman with a refined profile and dark, thick ponytail, wearing a white silk slip and gazing off regally. Another is Myrna Wacknov's multiple images of the same portly matron in a grid, her hands visible in each and as indicative of her fluctuating moods as expressively delineated as her facial features. And especially intriguing in another manner is Kiff Holland's portrait of a cherubic child with ringlets as gold as the antique frame around

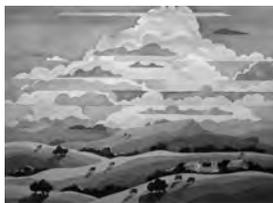


*David Coolidge*

the mirror in the background, which reflects a rather stern-looking woman, behind whom is another mirror in which an older man is reflected, the effect eerily suggestive of time passing and the generations succeeding one another as the reflections grow more distant and ghostly.

Also somewhat spooky is Lindsey Stauffer's accomplished crowd scene of what appears to be a political or patriotic rally, with a flag jutting up and the sun streaming through the trees, back-lighting the figures and casting their faces ominously in shadow. Then there is Paul Jackson's photorealist nocturnal Times Square scene with clusters of yellow cabs, buses, trucks, cars and pedestrians streaming past a plethora of neon lights, show posters, and the golden arches of McDonald's while a big white crane flies by like a surreal emissary from some alternate reality.

Landscape, always another strong category, is also subjected to a variety of interpretations, one of the most pastoral being Wilmer Anderson's pristinely rendered



*Wilmer Anderson*

panoramic vista of rolling hills somewhere in the heartland dotted with farmhouses, clumps of trees, and grazing livestock, the verdant mounds rhyming rhythmically with the formal striations of the cloud strata in the vast expanse of sky above to create a stylized vision of vanishing Americana as



*Lindsey Stauffer*

nostalgic as vintage Thomas Hart Benton.

By contrast, Stephen Quiller's landscape with brilliant blue mountains and boldly blocked-in forms extends the chromatic stridency of the Fauves into the postmodern era, while George Ronsholdt

employs intricately carnivalesque color areas to evoke an enchanted semi-abstract realm as fanciful



*Paul Jackson*

as the little worlds of Paul Klee. Then there is Jim Camann's painting of two men padding a canoe past an overgrown island on a lumi-



*Marilyn Hughey Phillis*

nous body of water, which displays a down-to-earth vigorousness of execution auspiciously suited to its subject.

The versatility of the medium that this exhibition celebrates is especially evident in Diana Kan's

painting combining a misty mountainous theme and technique reminiscent of traditional Asian ink painting



*George Ronsholdt*

with the coloristic intensity of Western watercolor, as well as in a swirling composition by Marilyn Hughey Phillis, whose flowing, florally suggestive shapes and splashy color areas are akin to the "poured" abstractions of Paul Jenkins. Like others in this



*Diana Kan*

exhibition too numerous to mention without turning this review into a mere list of diverse excellences, both demonstrate the qualities that make watercolor a unique medium and make the AWS's annual international surveys events not to be missed.—J. Sanders Eaton

## Carlota Figueras: Only Women Bleed

The picture is the show-stopper in “Ay Que Martirio,” an exhibition of color photographs by Carlota Figueras, a Spanish artist from Barcelona, on view at Jadite Gallery, 662 Tenth Avenue (between 46th and 47th Streets) from April 8 through 21. (Reception: Tuesday, April 8 from 6 to 8pm.)

Everything about Figueras’ “Cristo En La Cruz” recalls Diego Velasquez’s masterpiece of the same name, in the collection of The Prado, in Madrid: the position of the figure with its arms stretched somewhat higher above its head than in many other crucifixions; the face lowered, seemingly more in exhaustion than agony, and turned slightly to one side; the long damp ringlets dangling onto the shoulders; the rich colorations of the flesh, the subtle play of light and shadow on the naked torso; the rich, dark void of the background.

Everything, that is, except for the following significant differences: rather than being an emaciated male figure, this is a voluptuously beautiful female, and no loincloth is draped loosely about her hips to preserve her modesty. Surprisingly for an era in which full frontal nudity has become so prevalent in film and other media as to almost seem commonplace, a pair of full breasts and a dark pubic patch have suddenly, in context, regained the power to shock.

Context, after all, is crucial in contemporary art, and Figueras’ exquisitely sensual photograph juggles contexts, arouses contradictory responses, and suggests all manner of possible meanings related to religion, eroticism, and the position of women in society—as well as in the hierarchy of martyrdom.

On closer scrutiny of “Cristo En La Cruz”—which, like all the pictures in the show, it may interest the reader to know, is a staged self-portrait—one realizes that no attempt has been made to fake the appearance of nails penetrating flesh. The artist’s upraised arms are clearly supported by her hands clasping straps tethered to the cross-bar. Does this mean that one can forego adding sadomasochism to the list of associations above? Perhaps here, but decidedly not in a related picture simply entitled “Cristo”—a closer view of the same pose, only with Figueras’ head encircled by a crown of sea-shells (a wry reference Botticelli’s Venus?) and rivulets of red streaming down over her naked breasts.

Then there is “San Sebastian,” in which she is seen tied to a pole, wearing only a white cloth about her hips with arrows jutting from it and red stains suggesting not so much wounds as virginal blood on a bed-sheet. Here, too, the very feminine woman with the full breasts manages to affect a convincingly masculine aspect, as she impersonates the male saint and martyr who survived execution by bow and arrow.

Blood flows freely from other martyred saints depicted by the photographer / mime as well. It streaks the arms and shoulders of “Saint Barbara,” as she is pulled along at the end of a rope encircling her wrists. It trickles from the forehead of “Saint Rita,” as she casts her doleful gaze heavenward from under a nun’s habit. A thin line of it encircles the throat of “Saint Cecilia,” who lies prone on her back with wide-open eyes.

Surely, a critic better versed in catechism could explicate more minutely; but for this lapsed Catholic, in Carlota Figueras’ extraordinary pictures, stigmata invariably stand for menstrual blood as symbol for the tests, trials, and miracles peculiar to women’s lives.

—Ed McCormack



“Cristo En La Cruz”

## New Directions in Photography Seen in Chelsea

That no other art form has progressed as rapidly as photography in the past half century should come as no surprise to viewers of “Tripping the Light Fantastic— The Fine Art Photography Exhibition,” at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from April 18 through May 8. (Reception: Thursday, April 24, 2008, from 6 to 8 PM.)

“The relentless press of nature,” to employ her own felicitous phrase, inspires the landscape photography of Eleanor Owen Kerr, a native of Louisiana, whose images of majestic rocks and waterways have a sculptural purity and a monumentality that can be seen to particular advantage in a picture such as “Ocean Point Levitation,” her view of a river flowing crookedly through a corridor of boulders. Uncovering many precious mysteries of nature hidden right out of sight, Kerr’s pictures provide hiding mental places for the viewer, where he or she can experience, however vicariously, a sense of serenity that all too often eludes one amid the hectic contingencies of modern life.

Conversely, London-based photographer and painter Nathan Pendlebury finds his primary stimulation in city streets and subways, savoring their variety and energy on the run. When he is not creating abstract paintings inspired by tactile walls scrawled with graffiti, Pendlebury is capturing telling urban vignettes with his camera, such as “Station,” his candid image of a bearded Hasidic man sporting the traditional black garb and side curls as he hurries past a stalled train with his head held high, as though determined to ignore all the distractions of the secular world.

Bronx born photographer Allen Palmer creates his own world in miniature by focusing on toys and figurines that come startlingly to life in his color pictures, such as “The Great Garloo,” in which we look over the shoulders of a mechanical character strolling across the polished wood floor of what appears to be a typical suburban living room. With his Mohawk haircut, broad shoulders, leopard skin loincloth and huge feet sporting Spartan sandals, this green cousin to The Hulk is obviously a warrior, a lord of all he surveys, as he gazes toward an overstuffed indigo sofa, alert to any possible danger. It is comforting to know that this conscientious sentry is on the job, protecting the American home against all manner of alien forces.

Beth Parin is another photographer who deals with human narratives, albeit of an enigmatic nature, as seen in “Catholic Girl,” her haunting image of a young woman wearing a loose shift that barely covers her buttocks, standing alone in an empty, light-flooded room, gazing out like a startled deer through the surrounding picture windows at a disjointed landscape, where ominous storm clouds are gathering. Although the setting is familiar, this image projects an atmosphere of anxiety as exotic as any of the foreign cultures Parin captures in her travel photographs of places like Egypt and Belize.

Then there is Yasmin Shirali, who creates her own compelling Twilight Zone with photographs such as “How to Get Your Mind Back,” in which a lone figure wanders dreamily, knee-deep in weeds in a desolate landscape where what appears to be an escaped umbrella floats like a kite overhead. Here as in another picture where a morose young female carnival performer adjusts her oversize bowtie while a similarly clad woman behind her appears to have misplaced her facial features, Shirali creates the photographic equivalent of surrealist painting.

Like the other photographers in this sharply focused survey, Shirali extends the possibilities of her medium by virtue of her singular, subjective vision.

—Marie R. Pagano

# Joseph Bostany Gives “Action Painting” a New Lease on Life

There was a time, not too long ago in terms of art history, when both Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg felt it necessary to hide the fact that they had once earned a living as window dressers, lest the first-generation macho bully boys of The New York School refuse to take their art seriously. It was okay to work as a house painter, as de Kooning had for awhile, or to teach in order to pay the rent on one's cold water loft. But to have anything to do with commercial art was verboten for a serious painter, until a former shoe illustrator named Andy Warhol came along and changed all that for good.

Andy made blatant commercialism not only a frequent subject of his work but an artistic credo, removed the stigma from commercial art, and made the notion of “selling out” seem like an old bohemian superstition for subsequent generations of painters. This has its bad and good points, one of the latter being that a fine painter like Joseph Bostany no longer has to disown his distinguished past as an award winning textile design stylist for Betsy Johnson, Donna Karan, Norma Kamali, Ralph Lauren, and numerous other high fashion figures.

That said, the paintings that Bostany will be exhibiting in his solo show “Emotions,” at Ezair Gallery, 905 Madison Avenue, from May 1 through 31 (with a reception on Wednesday, May 7, from 6 to 8pm), are in no way beholden to Pattern and Decoration, the 1980s movement spearheaded by artists such as Robert Kushner and Kim MacConnel, who took inspiration from commercial fabric, wallpaper, and carpet design, as well as from Islamic, Byzantine, and Celtic motifs.

Rather, Bostany is a latter-day exponent of Abstract Expressionism at its purest and most passionate. Indeed, he paints as if that movement were in its edgy, uncertain inception, rather than safely ensconced in art history as America's first significant home-grown contribution to modern painting. Which is to say, he proceeds as though abstract painting itself had not been declared dead and resurrected numerous times during the past half dozen decades, and he manages to make the obvious excitement that he feels about the possibilities of pushing pigment around on a canvas conta-

rious for the viewer. What he demonstrates most dynamically is that these possibilities have never been fully exhausted, even by the greatest of his predecessors, and that an artist who persists in regarding them in the spirit of adventure can still find much to explore in the realm of pure form, color, and gesture.

For evidence of this one need look no

rhythmic flow of Bostany's “Fantasia” is closer to the spare linear manner of de Kooning's late-period works.

Indeed, it is clear that Bostany has absorbed the entire vocabulary of Abstract Expressionism as only a consummately sophisticated painter, aware that his art form progresses in a historical continuum can.

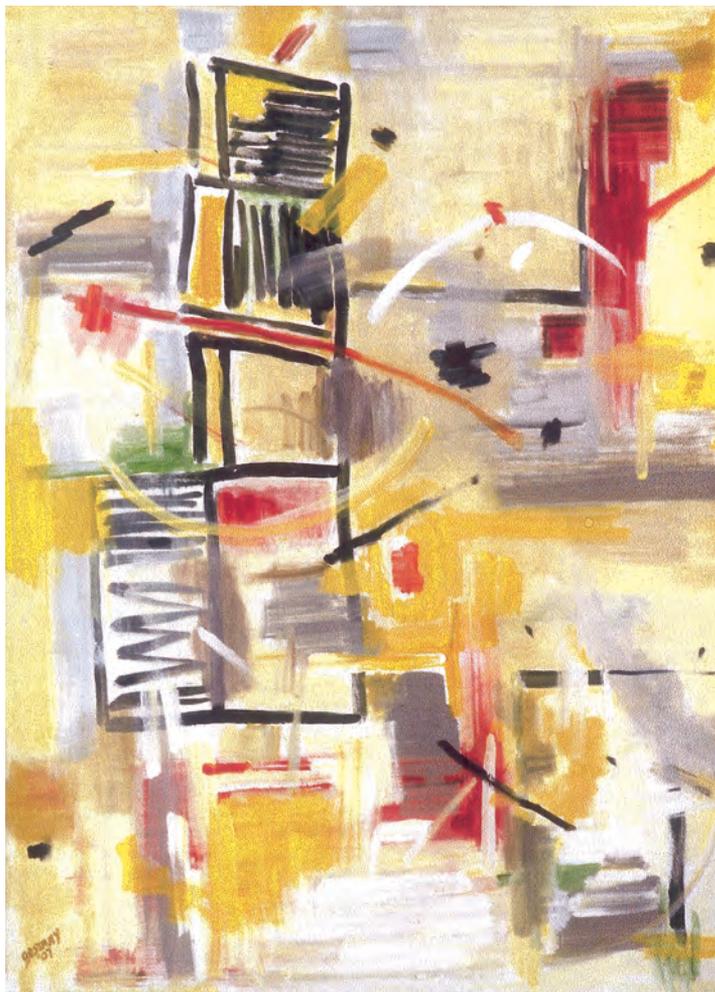
Aspects of Hans Hofmann can be discerned, for example, in the blocky, angular forms and chromatic intensity of Bostany's oil on linen “Casino Royale.” However, Bostany has infused them with a gestural energy that is uniquely his own, with broad areas of semi-translucent white scumbled boldly over brilliant yellows and subdued dried-blood reds, and succulent drips splashing from one particularly vigorous slash of gray on the right side of the composition, indicating the sheer velocity of his brushwork.

Bostany is in the truest sense of the term an “action painter,” and the impetuosity of his ecriture—painterly handwriting—is especially appealing in the aptly named large canvas “Exuberance.” Here, after establishing a neo-cubist grid of intricately woven vertical and horizontal yellow and gray strokes, the artist overlays them on the left side of the composition with a freely floating configuration of stacked black rectangles as audaciously spontaneous as an enlarged telephone doodle. These are further enhanced by equally unrestrained red, white, and yellow dots and dashes that lend the composition a playful, off-the-cuff festiveness.

In the hands of a less competent painter such as an area, laid down over a such a carefully prepared and refined painterly groundwork, would amount to a desecration. Bostany, however, not only manages to pull it off by virtue of sheer intrepidity andchutzpah but makes it the piece de resistance of “Exuberance,” the very element in the composition that justifies its name.

Such risk-taking is a given in the art Joe Bostany, and it ultimately pays big dividends in terms of the vitality that makes this immensely engaging painter's present exhibition such an invigorating experience for the viewer.

—Ed McCormack



“Exuberance”

further than Bostany's vivacious large oil on canvas “Stratosphere,” where swift, feathery strokes of blue, red, and brown are streaked across a spattered ochre ground, or “Fantasia,” a slightly smaller composition in which fluffier forms and a combination of fleshy pink and lipstick red hues, augmented by sparse touches of lingerie black, suggest the feminine aspect. Although it is invariably hazardous to take the titles of abstract paintings too literally, in the former work the space is clearly stratospheric, with its spaciousness and spatterings of atmosphere, while the latter, both in color and form, projects a sense cursive sensuality without alluding to anatomical specifics in the manner of de Kooning's “Women.” In fact, the

## By Any Name, An Illuminating Group Show

While one might quibble with the title, “Creative Outburst” (why not “Artistic Tantrum?”) a group exhibition, through April 6, curated by Margo Mead for the West Side Arts Coalition, brought a lively array of talents to Broadway Mall Community Center, 96th Street and Broadway.

Linda Lessner’s triptych reduced a seascape to a striking minimalist composition without sacrificing verisimilitude, while her work in pastel and collage on canvas, “Beachwood,” depicted its subject with a tactile evocativeness akin to the homespun abstractions of Arthur Dove. By contrast, Madi Lanier’s two abstract marine subjects, “Ocean 1” and “Turbulent Ocean 2,” combined luminous ground hues with precise linear elements. In both, color and line functioned as discrete formal entities.

To one more familiar with Ivan Sherman’s exquisitely crafted geometric abstractions in corrugated cardboard and acrylic (two of which were included in the show), his stylized feminine “Paper Doll #1,” with its shredded corrugated spirals for hair and 3-D lips came as a delightful surprise. Who would have thought Sherman also possessed a visual wit to rival that of Saul Steinberg?

The anguished male figure in Anne Rudder’s work in watercolor and crayon “Shelter” had a raw power suggesting the

visual embodiment of W.B. Yeats’ “rude beast” slouching toward Bethlehem. However, combined with a scrawled text (“I listen to the man’s voice / sobbing in the bath / adjacent to my room”) in a bold hand that harmonized with the drawn image, Rudder’s composition put a harrowing new face on Social Realism.

David Saphier displayed graphic commitment of another kind in obsessively intricate ink drawings from his “Topography” series, their entire surfaces darkened by myriad minuscule marks, except for narrow paths of bare paper simultaneously suggesting tributaries and fault lines. Like Bruce Connor, Saphier puts a sophisticated spin on the Outsider sensibility. Yukako, on the other hand, employs spare yet expressive brush strokes to maximum effect in her works in sumi ink on Japanese rice paper, contributing her own unique vigor to the cross-cultural confluence of Asian calligraphy and Abstract Expressionism.

And the exhibition’s curator Margo Mead contributes her own singular sensibility to the eternal dialogue between East and West. Mead’s works in watermedia on rice paper subject vast Grand Canyon vistas to Neo-Cubist planar dissections and bathe them in vibrant chromatic auras that imbue a familiar subject with shimmering new life. Meyer Tannenbaum also shines as a colorist here, with paintings from his “Expansion

Series,” where a sinuous linearity interacts with hues of an almost confectionery beauty in compositions especially notable for their bouncy buoyancy. In fact, Tannenbaum is one of only a handful of contemporary painters who can employ such a lush spectrum and still maintain the formal rigor that invariably distinguishes his best work.

Carol Carpentieri is an aesthetic free spirit whose penchant for experiment enables her to move from two incisive watercolor portraits of women in a more or less straightforward style to a larger collage on canvas called “Woven Faces.” In the latter work, many tiny faces and fragmented facial features, arranged in a checkerboard grid, created a mosaic of humanity within a striking abstract context. Ava Schonberg also combined the literal with strong abstract design, albeit in a much different manner in her “Provence” series. Schonberg’s unerring orchestration of sunlight and shadow, lent her compositions an appeal beyond their picturesque Mediterranean locales.

Then there is Ruth Llanillo Leal, whose recent acrylic paintings featuring butterflies are lyrical hybrids of brilliant hard-edge aesthetics and poetic subject matter. Leal’s “Red Moon,” with two pale blue butterflies fluttering around the edges of the central orb was especially exhilarating.

—Maureen Flynn

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## G&S NYC GUIDE

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### opportunities

**WEST SIDE ARTS COALITION** (WSAC) established 1979, welcomes new members from all geographic areas. There are approximately 14 exhibits per year for Fine Arts, Photography, and Craft Arts. Music, Poetry, Theater and Dance programs available. Contact information: Tel. 212-316-6024, email- wsacny@wsacny.org or website- www.wsacny.org. Or send SASE to the West Side Arts Coalition, PO Box 527, Cathedral Station, New York, NY 10025. Visit our ground floor gallery at 96th Street & Broadway (on the center island) New York City. Open: Wed. 6-8pm, Sat. & Sun., 12 - 6pm.

**PLEIADES GALLERY** Join our community of fine artists at this esteemed artist-run gallery with its many Winners of Awards, Grants, Fellowships and Juried Shows. Exhibit your work and advance your career. www.pleiadesgallery.com or SASE to Pleiades Gallery, 530 W. 25 St., 4th fl. NY, NY 10001-5516, Tel. 646-230-0056.

**MONTERRAT CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY** is reviewing artist portfolios 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

**CUSTOM PICTURE FRAMING** for artists and galleries. Museum quality, selected frames & mats. Float & dry mounting, canvas stretching. Jadite Galleries, 662 10th Ave. (betw. 46/47St.) Hours: 12 - 6 pm, Free delivery in Manhattan. 212-977-6190 jaditeart@aol.com

**PHOENIX GALLERY 2008 NATIONAL JURIED COMPETITION:** June 18-July 12, 2008. JUROR: ESTHER ADLER, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Drawings, The Museum of Modern Art, NY. ALL MEDIA. AWARD: SOLO/GROUP SHOW. Deadline: APRIL 26, 2008. Prospectus: www.phoenix-gallery.com info@phoenix-gallery.com or Send SASE, Phoenix Gallery, 210 Eleventh Ave., 902, New York, NY 10001.

**ESTABLISHED CHELSEA GALLERY** reviews artist portfolios monthly. Send sase or visit www.noho.gallery.com for application form. Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, New York, NY 10001. 212 367-7063

**barebrush.com. N\*DES-OF-THE-MONTH.** Membership is free. Listings: \$1/artwork. Prizes. Dedicated to the art of the n\*de. No porn.

### notable exhibitions and events

**GRANT GALLERY UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS:** “Live Music Drawing,” paintings and Installations by Kay H. Lin from April 3 - 21. “China: A Nation in Anticipation,” Real Life Photography and Landscapes by Jesse Nash, April 24 - May 7. 7 Mercer St., NYC 10013, Tel. 212 343 2919 www.grantgallery.com

**BOND STREET GALLERY:** New gallery focuses on a fresh approach to photography. “Coney Island of the Heart,” Inaugural exhibition centering on the work of Harold Feinstein and other photographers, thru May 8. 297 Bond Street, Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn 11231, Tel. 718 858 2297 bondstreetgallery.com

**JEWISH AMERICAN WRITERS** @ The Cornelia Street Cafe Presents: SALLY DAWIDOFF (poetry), ROCHELLE ALMEIDA (prose), MARC SCHNEIDER and ALEX SIMUNEK (music). Sunday April 13, 6 - 8 pm. Admission: \$7 (includes one free drink). The Cornelia Street Cafe, 29 Cornelia Street (betw W. 4th/Bleecker, west of 6th Ave.) NYC 10014, Tel. 212-989-9319

**ROBIN RICE GALLERY:** Photography by Bill Phelps through April 20. 325 West 11 St. NYC 10014 Tel. 212 366 6660 robinricegallery.com

**FORUM GALLERY:** Paintings by Robert Bauer through April 26. 745 Fifth Ave. NYC 10151 forumgallery.com.

# Encountering John Anderson's "Bunyan-esque" Grandeur

Entering a gallery filled with the massive wood sculptures of John Anderson, whose work is in the collections of MoMA, The Whitney, and numerous other museums, one immediately thinks of Paul Bunyan, the giant lumberjack of the North Woods who, the tall tale tells us, created the ten thousand lakes of Minnesota when his footprints filled with rain water. Such analogies suggest themselves not only because Anderson, who was born in Seattle, Washington, in 1928, once worked as a logger, but also because his ambition is truly Bunyan-esque.

In fact, Anderson's recent exhibition at Allan Stone Gallery, 113 East 90th Street, gave the impression that the legendary lumberjack had skinned an entire grove of trees and reassembled it to create an enchanted forest of playful yet vaguely threatening forms. For while each of Anderson's sculptures, consisting of thousands of smoothly finished sections of kindling strung like beads on steel wires and dangled from the ceiling, is a discrete entity, possessed of its own spooky majesty, together they create an entire environment with its own unique species and natural laws.

One curtain-like configuration of wooden forms may evoke a cascading, clanking waterfall. Others suggest bizarre topiary shapes or totemic artifacts of ancient tribes. Yet others assume anthropomorphic quali-

ties, calling to mind mythic forest deities with thorny crowns. One can almost imagine these spectral beings coming alive after the gallery lights go out at night, and intoning in voices as deep as a digiridoo the lines from a poem by Gregory Corso that go: "The apple-cart like a / broomstick-angel / snaps & splinters / old Dutch shoes."

However, the evocative, aspects of Anderson's art (his elaborate configurations of tubular branches and logs can seem gigantic distant relatives of Yves Tanguy's surrealist bone-yards) are obviously secondary to his formal concerns. In the latter regard, while Anderson's fractured forms have been accurately compared to Cubism, his work is very much in the gestural tradition of its American descendant Abstract Expressionism, the movement with which the Allan Stone Gallery has been inextricably linked since the early 1960s.

Indeed, his wooden shapes can be likened to densely-layered strokes drawn in space,

while the monumental scale of his pieces explodes and extends the picture plane in three dimensions. Like those of John

Chamberlain and Cesar, two other major artists who have been exhibited at Allan Stone, the commanding presence of Anderson's pieces grandly gives the lie to Harold Greenberg's facetiously dismissive statement, "Sculpture is something you back into when you look at painting."

Indeed, John Anderson's work does what only sculpture can, aggressively invading the viewers' space, engaging and finally overwhelming him or her from all directions with its ruggedly tactile, towering physicality. Yet at the same

time, it's thrust appears uniquely painterly, given the loose, flexible fluidity of its strung-together segments and the great variety of shapes the sculptor sets into motion in space. Coupled with the ghostly blondness of the wood, the combination of massiveness and grace in Anderson's sculptures summons visions of ancient Viking ships gliding upon water, bringing tidings of beauty and danger. —Ed McCormack



Untitled, 2004

## New Art from Australia and New Zealand in Chelsea

Australian art critic and inveterate curmudgeon Robert Hughes once stated somewhat patronizingly that Australian art—and by implication, that of New Zealand as well—was "purely a product of isolation." But that opinion no longer appears to hold true, given the level of high purpose and sophistication on view in "Out From Down Under & Beyond: The Australian & New Zealand Art Exhibition," at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from May 10 through 30 (Reception Thursday, May 15, 6 to 8 PM).

From German-born Eve Arnold's majestic minimalist forms created with large sheets of aluminum or copper that she etches, distresses and finishes with 24-carat gold leaf to create sensuous surface effects; to Russian-trained painter Alex Nemirovsky's complex figurative compositions combining classical European draftsmanship and painterly skill with a tumultuous neo-surrealism; to the flowing rhythmic abstractions of Indonesian-born painter Sonya Veronica, with their deep, luminous hues, the show plays host to a broad range of international influences. In this regard, the art of Australia and New Zealand, like that of the United States, seems to benefit from a great deal of aesthetic cross-fertilization, which enriches its native culture and makes the boundaries between

homegrown and imported tendencies difficult to define.

Indeed, even when indigenous influences assert themselves, they are invariably informed by a variety of sophisticated elements, as seen in the work of Sally Smith, who lives on a small New Zealand island and whose ink and watercolor drawings with the mixture of symbolic and natural elements partake in equal measure of her experience as an architect and her husband's Maori culture.

Then there is Freya Jobbins, a former member of the Australian Federal Police Force, whose iconic black and white woodcuts capture the everyday heroism of emergency rescue workers in action in forceful compositions enlivened by powerful linear rhythms. Jobbins' compositions have an immediacy akin to the Social Realism of Kathe Kollwitz coupled with a technical finesse reminiscent of Leonard Baskin. Sally West draws not only from the rugged landscape of the Australian Outback but also from the Aboriginal art of the same area. Like those indigenous "Dreamtime" artists, she often creates her compositions with many densely layered dabs of color, resulting in an intricate, teeming, chromatically complex surface shimmer. However, West is a savvy, sophisticated painter, obviously also influenced to equal degree by Cubism and other

European modernist art movements, even as she evokes a vivid sense of the Australian landscape and culture by virtue of her abiding affection for its rugged particulars.

Fiona Craig, on the other hand, employs a full palette of vibrant hues in her landscapes reflecting her upbringing in the Blue Mountains, near Sydney, and her still life compositions are equally flooded with intensely heightened color, lending them an impact akin to abstraction, despite the exacting verisimilitude with which she imbues her scenes and objects.

Aaron J. March appears to combine primitive and sophisticated influences in a lively synthesis in paintings where simplified figurative forms often play hide and seek with less recognizable shapes and gestures, creating compositions in which the immediacy of Art Brut is successfully married to the vocabulary of Abstract Expressionism.

Like the other artists in this exhibition, March reveals a sophistication that belies the implication of provincialism in the statement by Robert Hughes cited at the beginning of this review. It seems certain that even Hughes would have to agree that Australian art, along with that of New Zealand, is now a force to be reckoned with in the global arena of postmodernism.

—Marie R. Pagano

## Ritch Gaiti's Virtual Wild West Show

Unlike Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell, who went west in the 1880s and rode with the cowpokes they painted, Ritch Gaiti, a contemporary artist residing in New Jersey, creates what he calls "paintings of another time, another place," which can be viewed on his website: [www.gaiti.com](http://www.gaiti.com).

Gaiti's Wild West is closer in its mythic spirit to Marlboro Country than Deadwood, taking off from the romantic legend that Remington, Russell, and the writer Bret Hart wove from the raw fabric of reality, later to be further embroidered by Hollywood movies and ingrained indelibly in the American imagination. His great, refreshing gift is to tell the story straight, without irony, and make it seem vividly real once more.

This is quite a trick in an era as cynical as the present one, when so many of the heroic old values seem hollow and easy to scorn. Yet Gaiti imbues his paintings with a striking authenticity by virtue of his genuine affection for his subject matter and particularly his sympathy for the native peoples who played such a prominent role in the dream that was ultimately to vanquish them.

Although the series of oils on his website called "The Cowboys" capture the lonely, weary hardships of the men who ride the range with affecting sensitivity and

insight—particularly in the compositions called "Somebody's Gotta Do It," "Long Cold Ride," and "Uphill in Winter"—in terms of spiritual commiseration, Gaiti rides with the Indians, so to speak. Unlike Remington and Russell, who would have been considered mavericks had they treated Native Americans as anything but exotic stereotypes, Gaiti clearly shows on which side his strongest sympathies lie in the humanistic intimacy of the series he calls "The People," particularly in paintings such as the tender maternal scene "Indian Madonna" and the heroic portrait, "Geronimo."

Not only does Gaiti document the daily lives of his Indian subjects, he delves deeply into their religious rituals and supernatural beliefs in the series entitled "The Spirits," where certain figures appear enveloped in ethereal, ghostly auras. It is in these paintings particularly, that he ventures where his predecessors among the nineteenth century Wild West artists dared not go, being a postmodern painter possessed of the freedom to his imagination, as well as the art historical hindsight to heighten his palette and enhance his vision with a less literal expressiveness.



*"Just Hanging"*

Indeed, Gaiti's chromatic intensity often approaches that of the German Expressionists, especially in "Los Caballos," a series focusing on equine subjects as they either graze and take their ease in fields or gallop wildly across the plains.

In "Just Hanging," three grown horses and a colt are evoked in flickering strokes of fiery hues that suggest the optical effect of strong sunlight; while the procession of steeds kicking up dust in paintings such as "Gray Thunder" and "Racin' the Sun" call to mind mystical cowboy ballads such as "Ghost Riders in the Sky."

All reveal Ritch Gaiti's special gift for lending old myths new life.

—Maurice Taplinger

## New York Artists Equity Association, Inc. Turns 60 With a Gala 97th Birthday Celebration for Will Barnet

In a world where the general public's perception of the living conditions of artists has been grossly distorted by a handful of highly hyped, fabulously wealthy Page-Six "Art Stars," it's heartening to know that two elegant women are still down there in that Broome Street basement—dungeon, really—that they call an office, fighting the good fight for the many thousands of equally worthy working artists in this city who still can't afford to get the whole neighborhood in an uproar by planting a shocking pink Italian villa right in the middle of Greenwich Village.

Although Burt Hasen is honorary president and other artists that I know and admire, including Vincent Arcilesi, Violet Baxter, Marianne Schnell and Doris Wyman, serve selflessly in various capacities, executive director Regina Stewart and her able assistant Jane Martin are the faces of New York Artist Equity for me. They are the two who labor below ground like coal miners day after day, lobbying Washington for artists' rights and arts funding, preparing grant proposals, providing members with group health insurance plans, protecting them from fraudulent business practices and attending to the myriad other tasks that have made the organization a major asset of

the art community for six decades.

And lately they have had another task added to their workload: planning NYAEA's 60th Anniversary Dinner in celebration of Will Barnet's 97th Birthday. A benefit for New York Artists Equity, Inc., and the Artists Welfare Fund, the event will take place at the National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park South on May 2.

Speakers will include Regina Stewart, O. Aldon James Jr., president of the National Arts Club, Gail Stavitsky, Chief Curator of the Montclair Art Museum, Dr. John Driscoll, owner of Babcock Galleries, and Charles C. Bergman, Chairman of the Board and CEO of the Pollock-Krasner Foundation. (For information call NYAEA at 212-941-0130.)

The informative and highly entertaining journal that Regina Stewart has compiled for the event serves as both a history of Artists Equity (as it is generally known among artists and shall henceforth be referred to here) and a capsule biography of Will Barnet's career as one of America's most distinguished artists. Among its numerous revelations is one bound to amuse those given to stereotyping artists as a species: Artist's Equity had literally no archives until 1990, when it moved from

Union Square to 498 Broome Street, and a "treasure trove" of old newspaper clippings, brochures, letters, flyers and other materials (now cataloged, computerized, and safely stored for the ages in the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian) was discovered crammed haphazardly into several shoe boxes and milk crates!

Yet the list of founding members reads like a who's who of American modern art in the 1940s: John Sloan, George Bellows, Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, Thomas Hart Benton, Edward Hopper, Louise Nevelson, John Marin, Jacob Lawrence, Paul Cadmus, Stuart Davis, Will Barnet, Yasuo Kuniyoshi—it goes on and on. They may not have all been cut out to be bureaucrats but they knew that, as sculptor David Smith understated it, "the wage per hour for art work is usually below that of organized labor."

At the same conference in Woodstock in 1947, the organization's newly elected first president, the painter Yasuo Kuniyoshi, said, "Both writers and musicians several years ago reached a level of recognition sufficient to organize for their respective economic protection. The artist is just reaching that stage now and hopes to establish some

*continued on page 31*

## Marcia Clark: The Artist as Arctic Adventurer

That Marcia Clark is challenged aesthetically by a beauty too vast and desolate to be embraced or conquered lends her paintings a tremendous sense of tension. While Willem de Kooning was speaking figuratively when he declared “Art is not a situation of comfort for me,” Clark seems to seek out places that, for all their awesome visual beauty, are literally uncomfortable—and sometimes dangerous as well. Her art seems to thrive in uninviting climates that less venturesome souls might find far too daunting for prolonged habitation.

Once, in Alaska, Clark stayed in a small cabin built on a bit of rock jutting up out of a glacier for several days, making drawings and oil sketches of the surrounding mountains and ice formations. On a trip to the outhouse, a few yards away from the cabin, she sank to her hips in snow and ice, her right foot locking into a hole below. The more she struggled to release herself, the faster the ice seemed to melt and refreeze, locking her even more firmly in place.

“I was getting very cold and frightened,” Clark recalls. “So far as I knew no one was around for miles. I imagined being discovered frozen solid in place, just feet from the outhouse and just a little further from the cabin. Somehow I thought of Lot’s wife turned into a pillar of salt, because she looked back as they were escaping the sulphurous conflagration of Sodom. Realizing that yelling was futile and there was only myself to rely on, I became seriously calm, and a little more incisive in my thinking. It then occurred to me then that I was going about this the wrong way: instead of digging forward, in front of the foot, I needed to dig behind it. And viola, I was able to slide the foot back and out of the hole.”

Still, Clark was not yet out of danger. Snow continued to fall relentlessly day after day. The small planes couldn’t land, and she was stranded up there on the glacier four days longer than planned. When the planes

finally arrived she was down to her last crumbs of food.

Clark, whose latest solo show “In Search of Ice: Recent Paintings from Travels in the Arctic,” was seen at Blue Mountain Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, may be the last serious descendent of the artist-as-explorer tradition that Andrew Wilcox and Tim Barringer extol in their landmark volume “American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States 1820-1880.” Although she now has to travel further and search harder to find vistas of wilderness comparable to those painted by Thomas Cole and Frederick Edwin Church, she feels a deep and abiding affinity with the landscape painters of the Hudson River School. Thus, awhile back, she retraced Cole’s travels in an article for the *Smithsonian*

website of Polar Artists Group, an organization with which she is associated. “My paintings are not political statements, but they do come out of my personal experience. They are from my own vantage point and express my values and feelings for places, and I bear witness as an artist.”

The witness that she bears is eloquent indeed, and differs significantly from the work of distinguished predecessors such as Church and Rockwell Kent (one of the most sublime and constant observers of the Arctic scene) for her innovative extension of the pictorial space beyond the traditional rectangular canvas, in order to capture the panoramic vastness of the vistas that she encounters in her travels to places she refers to as being at “the ends of the earth.” She accomplishes this by splicing together several of the the large sheets of frosted Mylar that she often substitutes for canvas



“Briksdalsbreen, 2008”

[www.marciaclarkpaintings.com](http://www.marciaclarkpaintings.com)

*Magazine* and was guest curator for an exhibition of contemporary panoramas at the Hudson River Museum.

Reading the journals of the naturalist John Muir and seeing Frederick Church’s sketches of icebergs at the Smithsonian eventually led Clark to begin her ongoing polar journey with an initial visit to Glacier Bay, Alaska, discovered by Muir in the 1800s. On one of the subsequent trips to polar regions that she has made over the past few years, she joined an expedition cruise to Norway’s Svalbard Archipelago and visited Iceland and Greenland, sponsored by an artist residency at the Upernavik Museum. During a visit to Newfoundland, one of Church’s destinations, she was appalled to discover that “the almost continuous parade of icebergs” that had once collected in its harbor was sadly diminished.

“I’m concerned about the changes I see, evidence of global warming, and I’m concerned about man’s part in this,” Clark states on the

in her oil paintings to form sprawling, irregularly shaped formats, such as the elongated scroll of the exhibition’s approximately seven-by-eleven-foot centerpiece “Briksdalsbreen, 2008.”

Here, luminous aquamarine ice formations, suggesting a frozen waterfall, spill down over earth-colored rocks that peter out toward the bottom of the composition, becoming faint calligraphic ecriture with an abstract expressionist gestural vitality. Since the Arctic itself is a work in progress, never completed, and Clark’s stated focus in the series is on “the forever fluctuating, mutating, and transforming nature of the polar ice,” it seems only appropriate that the paintings should show traces of process.

Clark’s painterly vigor is no less apparent in “Drifts, Island, Distant Iceberg, 2007,” a plein air oil sketch on aluminum, small enough to hold in one’s hands yet possessed of a similar sense of spatial expansiveness,

*continued on page 30*



*"Upernavik Panorama #2"*

with bold, swift strokes breezily evoking mounds of snow and ice gliding over water like mountains taking flight. And a dynamic vertiginousness, akin to some of Wayne Thiebaud's odd twists on landscape perspective, enlivens other compositions, such as "Upernavik Panorama #2," an oil on canvas depicting an overcast day in northwest Greenland. In this work, the "ends of the earth" feeling is enhanced by the way the horizon-line slants, suggesting the actual curve of the globe.

By contrast, in other paintings such as the oil on Mylar "Glacier, Svalbard, 2007" monolithic walls of ice lie flat on the two-dimensional picture plane, the light and shadow on their chunky reflective surfaces creating natural cubist planes.

Relatively new to Clark's oeuvre are a series of collages and photo collages, such as "Pouch Cove #2, 2005," in which an oil sketch on Denril (a material similar to Mylar, but lighter) of a landscape dotted with small white houses is superimposed over a map of Newfoundland, with the Gulf of St. Lawrence serving as the pale blue sky and the cream-colored islands morphing into clouds rising up from behind the verdant painted hills. In contrast to the wild



*"Svalbard Glacier #2"*

magnificence of her vast vistas of ice and snow, this relatively domesticated depiction of a hamlet by the shoreline suggested a much welcome respite for the intrepid painter / adventurer.

I was mightily impressed by the rugged power and panoramic sweep of Marcia Clark's paintings the first time I encountered them in a 2003 exhibition at The Painting Center, featuring women artists who had been awarded residencies at Cape Cornwell, a remote area of the Scottish Highlands known for its untamed landscape, unearthly light, and severe weather conditions. The locales that inspired the works in her recent show at Blue Mountain Gallery present Clark with even less forgiving landscapes, against which to pit her gritty skills all the more impressively.

—Ed McCormack

## Lucie Simons & Pamela Loveless

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Friday, April 11, 4-7pm

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## Rebecca Cooperman and Basha Ruth Nelson: Two Ways of Seeing and Feeling

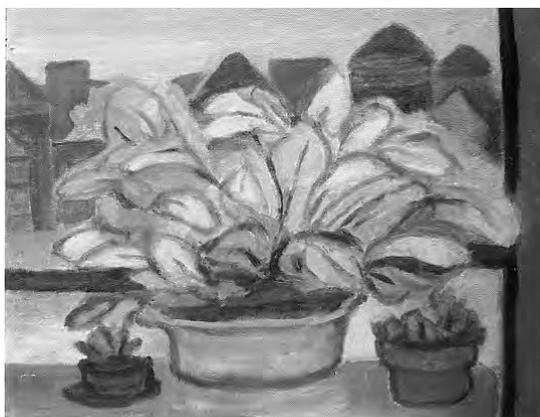
The painter Rebecca Cooperman and the sculptor Basha Ruth Nelson have little in common stylistically, yet a shared spirit of exploration made for mutually complementary contrasts in their adjoining solo shows, seen recently at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street.

Rebecca Cooperman is one of those artists like Morandi who explores essentially the same subject year after year, yet invariably makes it new. Potted plants in the studio or on a windowsill, partially blocking a severely cropped view of city buildings, serve as an intimate microcosm for all of nature in Cooperman's oeuvre. That nature is all but consumed by the urban environment only makes her intimate relationship to it more poignant.

To see several of Cooperman's recent and earlier paintings intermingled makes clear how much variety she wrings from self-imposed restriction, ranging from the bold, clearly defined fronds and stems of "Large Green," to the succulent, saturated gestures and textures of "Green Studio Ensemble," to the precise delineation of many small, overlapping leaves in the almost abstract overall composition "Andante."

While adhering to a pretty much predetermined format with a single-mindedness reminiscent of Chardin, Cooperman makes each new canvas an opportunity to explore color, form, pattern, and the relationship between the real and the abstract in a subtly different manner. Fairfield Porter once commented that Jane Freilicher was "traditional and radical," and it would be no more contradictory to say the same of Cooperman, whose approach to the time-honored genre of still life is invariably adventurous, continually challenging its conventions.

While the spatial tensions in Cooperman's earlier paintings were more geometric, informed by the principles of cubism, they have mellowed and melded over time, becoming less overt but no less present as a formal armature for her real-

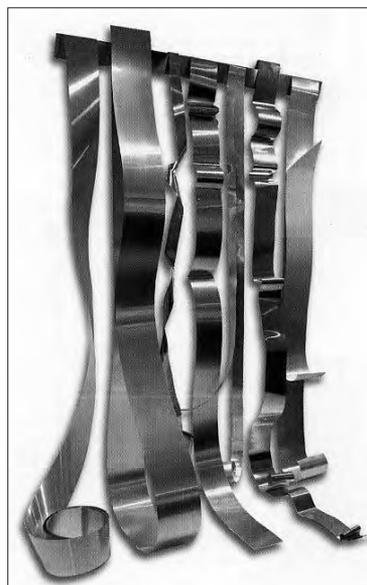


Rebecca Cooperman

ism. As a colorist, she is unsurpassed in her use of green, a virtual virtuoso of verdant hues, often combining several shades of piquant pale greens with deep emerald greens and even green-blues within a single canvas to create harmonies and counterpoints that make the composition sing chromatically.

Rebecca Cooperman's paintings speak eloquently of the small pockets of beauty and brief moments of clarity that sustain us amid the rush and roar of modern life. In the clamorous context of today's art world, her quiet insistence seems all the more admirable, like Emily Dickinson replying succinctly to the garulousness of Walt Whitman.

Working in a variety of materials from sheet aluminum and copper to plexiglass to pencil and ink on rice paper, Basha Ruth Nelson creates sculptures and wall assemblages that she sees, since the death of her husband in 2007, as vehicles for "turning



Basha Ruth Nelson

of Artists Equity attests to the necessity for its continuing existence.

One of the most stalwart and respected of those supporters is Will Barnet, whose work is in the collections of most major museum and whose former students include Mark Rothko, Tom Wesselman, Donald Judd, and Cy Twombly, among many others. Barnet was invited by Josef Albers to teach at Yale in the 1950s and continues to critique the work of advanced students at the National Academy, where he has been

grief back to love and emerging from darkness into light and the future."

In a series of wall pieces rice paper is folded in a manner akin to abstract origami, to create shapes that resemble phantom figures or warped cruciforms, set against black backgrounds. Some gain their power from the contrast between the precise angularity of the folded paper shapes and the fluidity of the calligraphic lines drawn on them in black ink. In one of the most nakedly emotional, a single phrase is scrawled several times over with varying degrees of legibility: "Where are you?"

Other pieces, set flat on pedestals, consist of shapes created with copper mesh and other materials arranged on mirrored plexiglass sheets that cast shadows and reflections on the gallery wall. Here, the contrast between the solid objects and the shadows and reflections that they cast on the gallery

wall suggests the chasm of yearning between the physical world and phantom presences in the spirit realm.

As its title indicates, the large sculpture "Emerging" seems to symbolize a brilliant new rebirth of wonder after a long dark winter of soul-searching. A majestic curtain of shimmering aluminum and copper ribbons suspended from the gallery ceiling and curling down onto the floor like a cascading waterfall, the piece suggests the beginning of an acceptance of natural cycles and mysteries.

Although this is a mode in which those familiar with the sculpture of Basha Ruth Nelson, with its concentration on stately vertical forms, are long familiar with their concentration on flowing, undulating vertical forms, in the context of her recent loss "Emergence" seems to signal a bright new beginning.

—Ed McCormack

**New York Artists Equity Association**  
*continued from page 28*  
economic equilibrium through Artists Equity Association."

This kind of talk may not be part of the public discourse on art today, which tends all too often to center on fashion and fantasies of fame. But that established artists such as Jane Wilson, James Rosenquist, and Red Grooms—who may no longer need the protections it offers but can remember when they did—are still strong supporters

named honorary Vice President. He characterizes himself as "possibly the last living artist to be trained in the classic French Academy tradition." Then, as if to succinctly sum up his eventual evolution as a modernist master of both abstract and figurative modes, he adds, "In my early years as an artist and as a teacher I rebelled against my background."

—Ed McCormack

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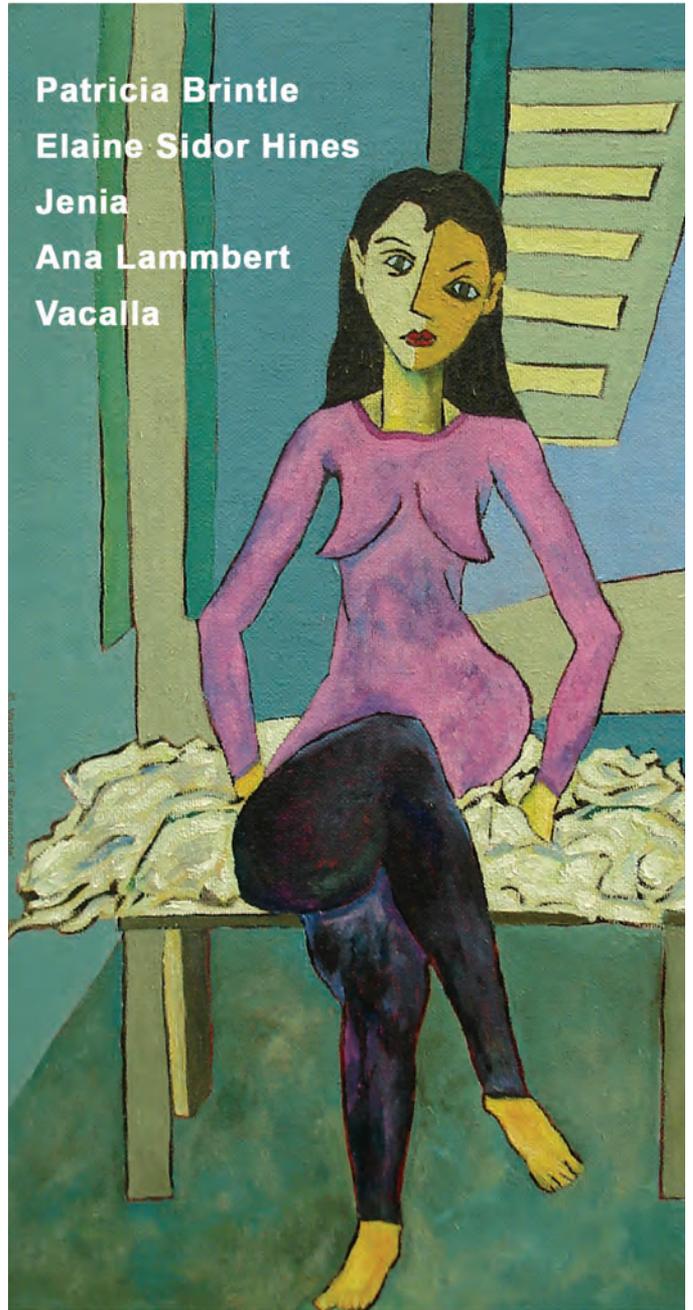
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