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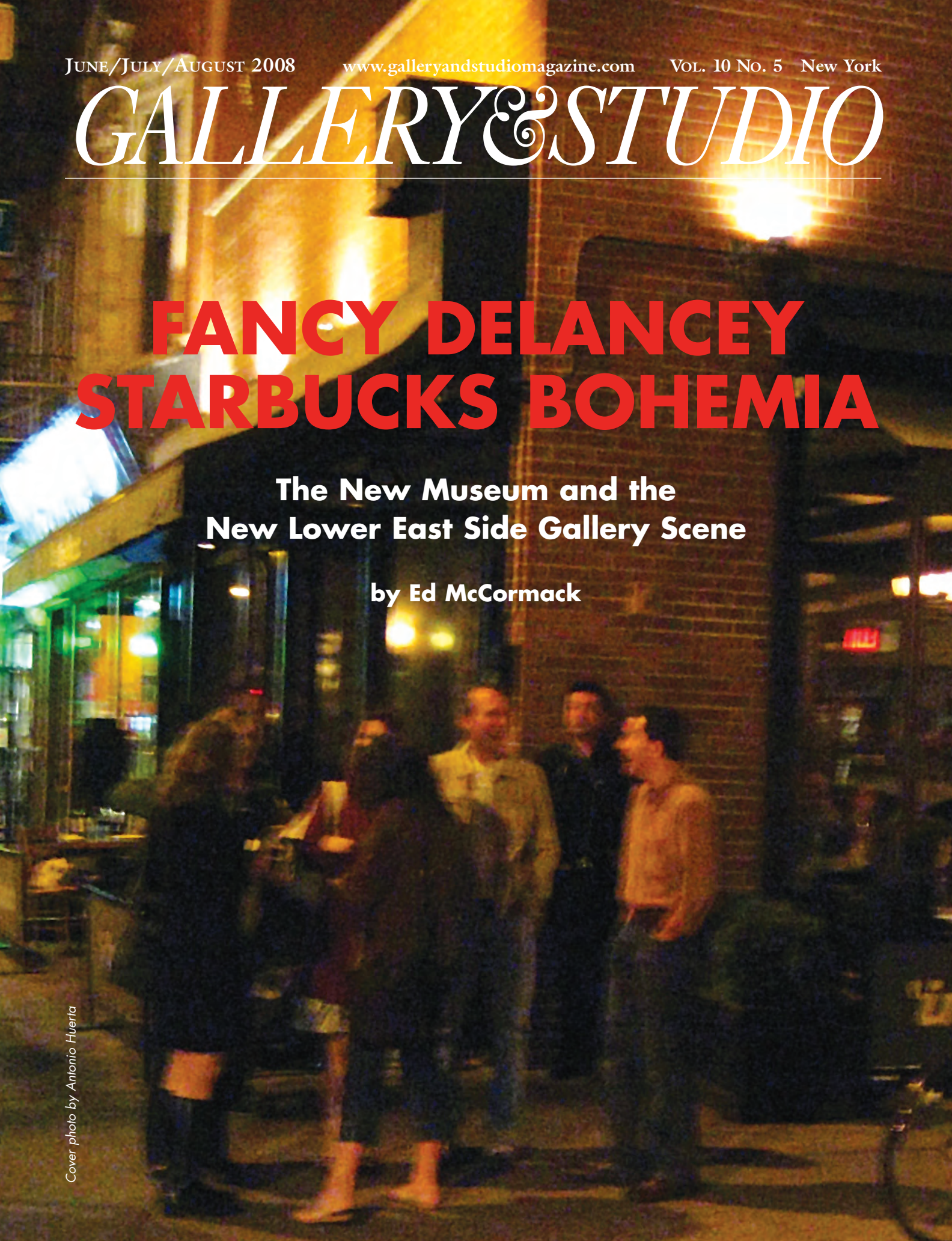
GALLERY&STUDIO



FANCY DELANCEY STARBUCKS BOHEMIA

The New Museum and the New Lower East Side Gallery Scene

by Ed McCormack

Cover photo by Antonio Huerta

On View May 14 - July 11, 2008

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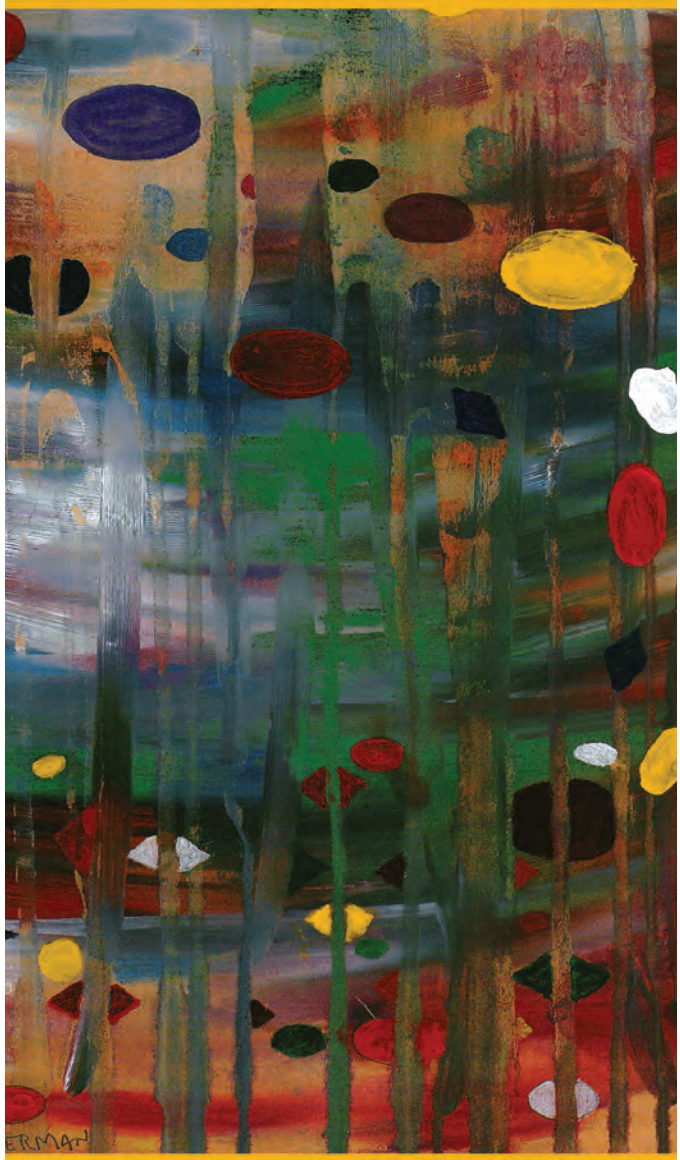

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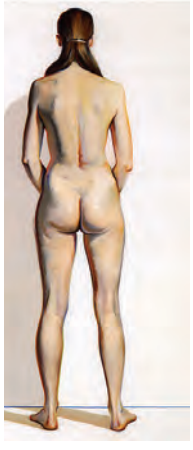

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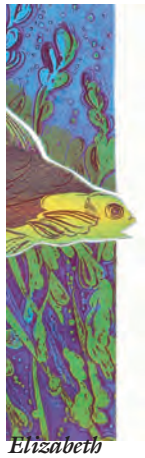

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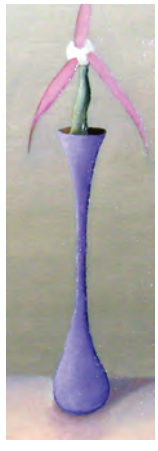

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Stacey Clarfield Newman: Courage and Transformation

Art is not therapy and art can save nobody. This is a hard truth known by all artists who have been faced with devastating life challenges. Yet it is also inarguable that art, in times of suffering, can provide consolation and spiritual succor for those who create it, as well as for those who are receptive to it.

For this reason, over the years, along with gaining critical acclaim for her gallery exhibitions, Stacey Clarfield Newman has devoted considerable time and energy to creating murals for hospitals and AIDS outpatient facilities—places where people come face to face with mortality and the spirit is tested.

Over the past four years, since her last exhibition in Chelsea, Newman herself has been tested by life-threatening illness and a succession of family crises which are reflected, however obliquely, in her new solo show at Viridian Artists, 530 West 25th Street, from June 3 through 28, with an artist's reception on Thursday, June 5th from 6 to 8 pm and a collector's reception on Saturday June 21, from 3 to 6 pm. The title of the exhibition "Naked on the Wall" speaks to the level of candor and vulnerability that makes Newman's latest series of mixed media and collage paintings among the most powerful and compelling of her career.

"Breast Plate, 2008"

"I felt like Rip Van Winkle, waking after a long sleep," Newman said during a recent phone conversation, speaking of how eager she had been to get back to work after recovering from her surgeries. "I remember being in a parking lot in the rain; people all around me were complaining about the weather, and here I was looking up at at the sky, feeling just so grateful to be alive..."

Even before she took seriously ill, Newman's collages were life-affirming in a manner that set them apart from much other contemporary art. Now, the timeless symbol of the butterfly, long ubiquitous in her compositions and continuing as a prominent feature of her new work, is especially resonant in light of her recent experiences.

In "A Dictionary of Symbols," J.E. Cirlot tells us that among the ancients, the butterfly was "an emblem of the soul and of the unconscious attraction towards the light. The purification of the soul by fire, represented in Romanesque art by the burning ember placed by the angel in the prophet's mouth, is visually portrayed on a small Mattei urn by means of an image of Love holding a butterfly close to the flame. The Angel of Death was represented by the Gnostics as a winged foot crushing a butterfly, from which we may deduce that the butterfly was equated with life rather than the soul in the sense of the spirit or transcendent being. This also explains why psychoanalysis regards the butterfly as a symbol of rebirth."

With this in mind, the symbol of the butterfly seems more of a grace-note than ever, as it flutters through recent collages by Newman, such as "Aftermath." In this long horizontal piece, its format suggesting a Chinese hand-scroll, the red floral forms flaring out at the center of the composition take on a visceral quality that the artist confirms. While making clear that they were not deliberately contrived to represent anything so specific, Newman states that these fiery red forms now remind her of how her body "was literally torn open" by the trauma of her medical ordeals.

At the top left of the composition, a radiant bird hovers uncertainly, as though having lost its way, while at the lower right a large butterfly flutters close to the blood-red, flame-like fronds. Nearby, sharper forms, resembling autumn leaves, float somewhat incongruously over an area of bare white paper, perhaps signifying how the ever changing cycles of life mirror those of the seasons.

Indeed Newman maintains that her chosen medium, collage "is like life in its layering of reality and fantasy, trials and successes." And her own process, which she refers to as "painting with paper" (since she begins by hand painting the papers that she cuts or tears, to assemble her compositions) is more layered than most. Often it involves layering tracing paper, tissue, rice paper, and watercolor paper of different weights and densities to create contrasts between opacity and translucency, the complexity further enhanced by photo transfer and drawn imagery that adds an evocative symbolic element to the overall abstract thrust of her compositions.

Newman's use of such imagery is especially affecting in "Breast Plate," which refers directly to her bout with breast cancer and integrates photo transfers of mammeries, a woman with upraised arms, and other significant symbols with bold abstract collage areas akin to Abstract Expressionist brush strokes. Here, too, the irregular shape of the composition and its expansive sense of scale in relation to the body of the viewer (akin to how an X-ray screen conforms to the proportions of the human torso, an effect heightened by the photo-negative quality of the imagery), along with the suggestiveness of the title, provoke an unusual sense of visceral empathy, when one comes into close physical proximity to the collage.

Other collages, such as "Inner Piece" (pun obviously intended to skirt cliché and emphasize formal intention) and "Vagabond Blues," are idyllic abstract landscapes, the former depicting an imaginary realm of private solace, the latter celebrating the restless joy of having a new lease on life.

Like all of Stacey Clarfield Newman's recent works, these are the profoundly inspiring personal testaments of a highly talented artist who has walked through fire and emerged whole to tell the tale.

—Ed McCormack

Dorothy A. Culpepper: Painting in Maximum Overdrive

Context, in contemporary painting, can often appear to be everything. When we understand that a certain mode of expression has been historically validated, those who continue or extend its tradition can be readily absorbed into the critical dialogue. However, the danger in such a simplistic system of aesthetic assimilation was pointed out by Kandinsky, the father of "pure composition," as he referred to it, as early as 1912, when he wrote, "The artist must train not only his eye but his soul, so that it can weigh colors in its own scale and thus become a determinant in artistic creation. If we begin to break the bonds that bind us to nature and to devote ourselves purely to the combination of pure color and independent form we shall produce works that are mere geometric decoration, resembling something like a necktie or a carpet...."

"Discompose"

Commenting on the great abstract pioneer's warning that "Beauty of form and color is no sufficient aim by itself," and his invocation of the soul, the distinguished critic and historian Herbert Read asserts in A Concise History of Modern Painting, "We are nowadays a little shy of using the word 'soul,' or phrases like 'vibrations of the spirit,' but it is not difficult to substitute the terminology of the psychology that has developed since 1912, and then we see that the point Kandinsky was making is obvious enough: the work of art must evoke a response on a deeper level, the level we now call unconscious; and the 'vibrations of the spirit' that then take place are either personal, in that they affect some kind of mental integration, or perhaps supra-personal, in that they assume the archetypal patterns into which mankind projects an explanation of its destiny."

Although abstract painting has been declared dead and been reborn numerous times in the intervening decades, it still provides an avenue for profound revelations for an artist such as Dorothy A. Culpepper, who has kept her faith in "pure composition" through all the recent permutations of postmodernism, and continues to surprise one with the vitality of her discoveries in her new solo exhibition, "Expression on the Edge," at Montserrat Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, from July 8 through August 2. (Reception: Thursday, July 17, from 6 to 8 PM.)

One of the ways that Culpepper keeps her work fresh is by continually employing new techniques for manipulating pigment by pouring and dripping and other means, to keep the surface of the work active and alive. The title of her new show indicates the degree of risk-taking that makes her work a kind of high-wire act, predicated on spontaneous processes of paint handling and split second decision making.

"My work is a never ending challenge in design, color and finding a way to paint that is totally me," she has stated. "I want to feel free as I express myself through paint, found objects and shapes of color and canvas. As my work matures, I realize that the history of art has helped my paintings and monoprints to evolve into maximum overdrive. Painting to the max is what I want to do."

One of the more prevalent techniques that Culpepper appears to be exploring in her new paintings is working "wet-into-wet," with different colors melting into one another and slightly blurring to produce a kind of fuzzily mottled effect that we see especially in a work such as the large acrylic on canvas "La Plata Blizzard." Here, the interaction of deep blue hues swirling in a linear manner and white splotches that spread along their veiny configurations like blossoms on a tree occupying the center of the composition is particularly dynamic. As always in Culpepper's compositions, subsidiary hues

such as green, yellow, and red play along the edges and enliven the interior of the dominant forms, adding structural and chromatic complexity to the highly active surface.

A deliberate sense of drama inevitably imparts grandeur to Culpepper's compositions. She never hesitates to push the envelope, as seen in another major acrylic on canvas called "Orckid"—its title seeming an intriguing, if somewhat obscure, anthropomorphic / floral pun—where rivulets of poured and blurred "wet-into-wet" white, yellow, and fleshy pink hues flow in several directions simultaneously, creating a vertiginous sense of instability—as though the composition is in the process of reorganizing itself before our very eyes.

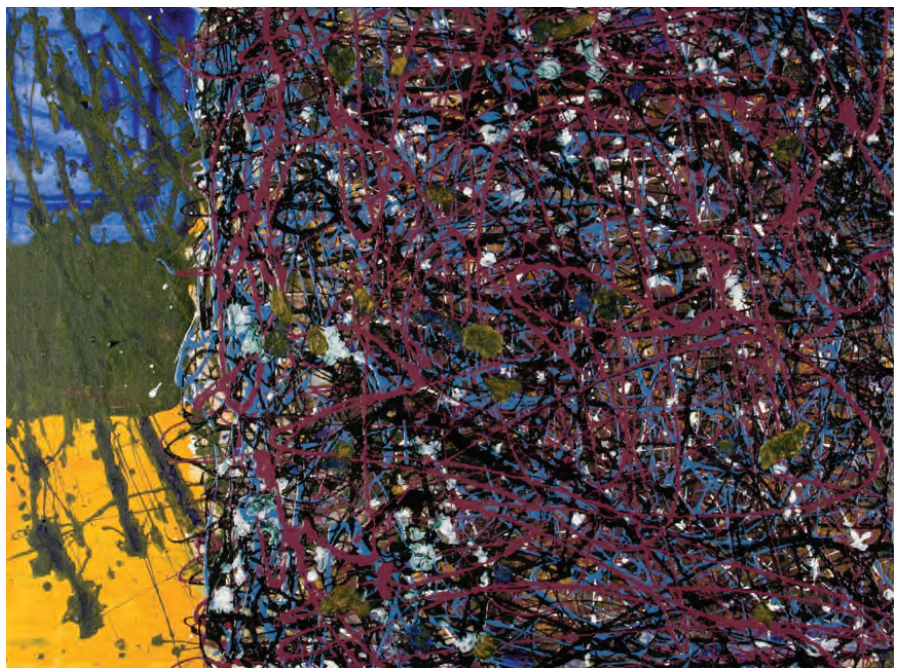
The risk that Culpepper takes in a work such as this is that the painting could almost appear to be running away with her. Yet she miraculously reins in the composition through the roughly symmetrical dispersal of white blotches that counterbalance the underlying lava-like intermingling of pink and yellow hues, as well as stabilizing the dissolving black rivulets that run horizontally across the composition like a blurred photo-image of bare, gnarled, windblown tree-limbs. Such last-minute feats of formal "rescue" in the midst of apparent chaos occur frequently in Culpepper's paintings and are invariably exhilarating for their sheer boldness—as when the hero in old silent film rides up on a galloping horse and plucks a child like a flower from the railroad tracks just in the nick of time!

Although its title might suggest an entire spectrum, "Peacock" is in fact one of Culpepper's most coloristically restrained canvases, composed mainly with a veritable fireworks of white graffiti-like lines scrawled over loosely applied areas of verdant green and sunny yellow, darkened in places by grayish washes like those in Chinese ink paintings. Yet for all its chromatic restraint, this is one of Culpepper's boldest large canvases for the untrammeled vigor of her splashy white ecriture.

Here, as well as in "Discompose" "Verve," "Agitate," and "Zoom," busier —more highly colored and densely worked recent paintings that hark back to an earlier mode— Culpepper displays her remarkable ability to dance perpetually out on "the edge," to use her own term, and by doing so to fulfill her stated aim of "painting to the max" and being "totally me." And if one is not mistaken, that seems close to being what Kandinsky had in mind when he spoke of training not only the eye but the soul.

—Peter Wiley

Orckid"



"Verve"

Rosalyn A. Engelman: "Dry Tears" for Our Floundering Species

Formalist and humanist concerns have long been at odds in American art—at least since the late 1930s, when modernism became fully established as an international movement and challenged the social realism that flourished during the Depression. Clement Greenberg, the most influential critic of the postwar years, argued for a pure plastic art, an art of "absolutes," devoid of literary content, which he termed "kitsch,' while Selden Rodman, a more marginalized but no less vehement voice, championed artists "who feel drawn to values outside themselves enough to examine them in their work."

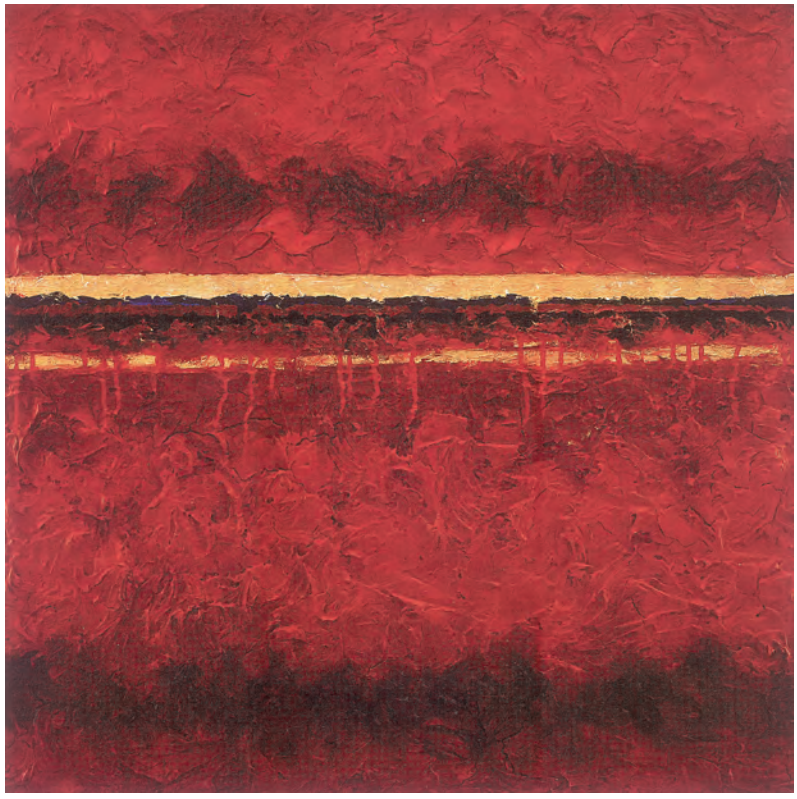
And while the more permissive climate of postmodernism may have muted the controversy, we still tend to make sharp distinctions between "art for art's sake" and art that addresses moral and social issues. Thus one of the season's more unusual, not to mention powerful, exhibitions is Rosalyn A. Engelman: "Dry Tears," on view at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion Museum, Brookdale Center, One West 4th Street, through July 11.

"My aim is to create art, but also to reach hearts and minds by way of individual memory, emotion, and experience," says Engelman, whose work has been exhibited over the years in many prestigious international venues and, most recently, at the Biennale de Firenze, Italy.

For an artist active in an age awash in irony, when honest passion can often appear to be the last taboo, this amounts to a radical position, the genesis of which Engelman explains by saying, "My life and sensibility have been greatly influenced by Jewish concerns. As a child, the atrocities of World War II were deeply ingrained upon my psyche and inner vision. Graphic newsreels and worries about family were part of my earliest consciousness. My father emigrated from Warsaw, Poland, and lost many family members, as did my mother, who left Russia after the Russian Revolution."

Unlike Ben Shahn and Leonard Baskin, earlier Jewish artists of conscience who were similarly moved by their own experience to embody a broad range of universal suffering in symbolic figurative styles, Engelman does not position herself in opposition to mainstream modernist aesthetics. Rather, she puts vibrant color, sensuous tactility, and a gestural immediacy akin to Abstract Expressionism to the service of social activism, in paintings such as "Babi Yar: Korelich, 2007-2008," named for the famous poem by Yevgeny Yevtushenko (from which the exhibition title, "Dry Tears," also derives) memorializing the 33, 771 Jews massacred by the Nazis in Kiev on two days in September of 1941.

Consisting primarily of two horizontal bars set against a monochromatic color field, this painting is as compositionally austere as any Rothko. However, its thickly pigmented surface, encrusted with variegated red hues, has an altogether more visceral impact, like a landscape of clotted blood intersected by clouds of smoke and glimmers of golden twilight. Other new paintings also couch violent themes in strong formal terms. "Gettysburg, 2007-2008" evokes its subject with two diagonal stripes, from which inverted red drips rise like flames, set against a tactile green field, suggesting the verdant landscape on which the biggest battle ever fought on American soil took place.



"Babi Yar: Korelich, 2007-2008"

In "Machines of War, 2007-2008," Engelman employs darker hues and turbulent, muscular strokes, bracketed within an even more severe geometric format, to convey the relentless, pitiless power of evil running on automatic pilot. Even here, however, the paint surface is so seductive that we relish it for its sheer succulence.

Indeed, one of the most paradoxical aspects of Engelman's paintings is that the aesthetic pleasure they provide almost implicates us in the horrors they describe. How dare we take such delectation from the juicy reds and greens of "Sudan, 2007-2008," knowing full well that the government of that troubled land started the first genocide of the 21st century and that the mass murder and taking of slaves still continues? Part of the power of Engelman's paintings is how they almost appear to critique themselves by virtue of a sensuousness that verges on hedonism. Yet she also seems to be telling us that beauty is its own justification, something we can't live without, at risk of putting our souls and the world itself in even greater peril.

Although Engelman's new paintings function independently as autonomous art objects, they are seen here in the context of a dramatic installation that also includes life-size plastic figures. Apparently made from clothing mannequins that the artist has painted and studded like Saint Sebastian with large nails, these figures have a presence as haunting, as mutely eerie, as the cast plaster people of George Segal. Only, they are more horrific for being garishly smeared with read acrylic paint that gives them an appearance suggesting the charred flesh of the Hiroshima bombing victims.

"Collateral Baby H, 2007-2008," occupies its pedestal like a morgue-slab, horizontally, wearing a necklace of barbed wire, swathed in strips of gauze. "Collateral Damage–Soldier, 2007-2008," stands upright, with only a shredded army fatigue jacket covering her nakedness, blood-red tears streaming from blind eyes. In "Three Graces, 2007-2008," the installation's overpowering centerpiece, the paint-smeared, nail-studded female mannequins, draped in black shrouds and shackled to one another by slave-chains, stand amid scattered newspaper and magazine clippings bearing lurid photos and headlines about the rape, torture, and disfigurement of women in Nazi Germany, Afghanistan, Rwanda, and elsewhere worldwide.

As long as such atrocities continue to exist, Rosalyn A. Engelman seems to be telling us, we are all culpable. And we are all victims of our own moral poverty.

—Ed McCormack

Gestural Immediacy and Symbolic Impact in the Art of Anne Kolin

The cross is a complex symbol, usually associated with Christianity; yet it has meanings beyond that of the crucifixion and the concept of "suffering upon the cross." It can also suggest a "cross-roads," or those junctures in our journey through life at which one must decide to choose one direction or another. And, of course the phrase, "We all have our own cross to bear" transcends theological specifics, having come into common usage as a term for the unique challenges that each individual must face.

It is these more "secular" and universal meanings, rather than the obvious religious ones, that the French artist Anne Kolin prefers to explore in paintings such as those in her first New York exhibition "Cross Stitch and Suture," at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from June 10 through July 5. (Reception: Saturday, June 14, from 4 to 6 PM.)

"Yellow Cross"

Influenced by both the gestural energy of the Abstract Expressionists and the palpable material qualities in the work of the Catalan painter Antoni Tapies, Kolin combines vigorous paint handling with sewn fabrics in her recent compositions, the genesis of which was a period from 1998 to 2000 when she conducted art workshops in Strasbourg Prison in her native France.

The experience of working with prisoners had a profound effect on Kolin's work in general, but most particularly on a series of collages created with torn posters in the manner of Arte Povera, in which the motif of prison bars was a prominent element. Faces with a crude power reminiscent of Art Brut and the sophisticated faux primitivism of Karel Appel were also a feature of those earlier works.

However, aside from the cross which appears in various permutations, Kolin's most recent collage paintings are completely abstract, without recognizable referents. Rather, she prefers to employ painterly and textural means alone to evoke a sense of what one poet friend of the artist referred to as "painful wounds buried deep in the memory." These means include collaged fabrics and surgically suggestive stitches that blend with seamless cohesiveness into the palpable pigmentations of her surfaces, lending her canvases an epidermal allusiveness which can often evoke visceral empathy in the viewer.

Yet above and beyond their tactile attractions, it is the gestural sweep of Anne Kolin's compositions which initially arrests our attention by virtue of its rhythmic force. One gets swept up in the sheer velocity of her brush work; the bold scale of her forms, which fill her large canvases like forces of nature; the smoky resonance of her color areas, with brilliant red and yellow hues seeming to burn through gritty gray expanses that appear to splash and crash with oceanic expansiveness.

"Ever since the academicians associated beauty with that which is respectable and unchallenging, artists have hesitated to use the word," the American painter and critic Fairfield Porter once stated in an essay called "Kinds of Beauty." And while it is true that I do not remember Anne Kolin using that word even once over the course of a couple of hours that we spent looking at and discussing her work, her paintings nonetheless possess a kind of beauty.

It is a rough, blunt beauty, unfacile and completely devoid of banality or any of the other negative connotations that have recently attached themselves to that once useful word; a hard-won beauty wholly of her own making, born not of the desire to be decorative or otherwise engaging but out of the struggle that Hans Hofmann once referred to as "push and pull," by which formal tensions are established that energize gestural painting.

Kolin also has natural, almost alchemical ability to imbue unlikely forms and raw materials with unaccustomed grace and harmony. Add to this her remarkable talent for twisting and turning familiar symbols, such as her ubiquitous crosses, into configurations that give them new expressive life, and perhaps you will have some idea of what makes her paintings so compelling.

To put it quite simply, there is a refreshing immediacy to her work which recalls the excitement of one's earliest encounters with so-called "Action Painting," albeit enriched in her case by particular qualities of finesse and tactile delectation that also hark back to Tachisme and L'Art Informel, European counterparts to Abstract Expressionism informed by School of Paris lushness and coloristic refinement that heightened rather than diminished their impact.

The French critic Michel Tapie (not to be confused with the aforementioned Catalan painter Antoni Tapies) who was the main spokesman and theorist for Tachisme once wrote, "Today, art must stupefy to be art...the true creators know that the only way for them to express the inevitability of their message is through the extraordinary—paroxysm, magic, total ecstasy."

Despite the overblown rhetoric, which sounds somewhat dated today, Tapie could be speaking of Anne Kolin's "Cross Stitch and Suture" series. For her gestural immediacy provides an exhilarating antidote to the timid strategizing which has become all too familiar in much contemporary painting.

—Ed McCormack

Encountering Joseph Di Piazza's "Quantum Collection"

The statements that artists issue in connection with their work can often be as telling as the work itself. This can be especially true of those isolated visionaries, commonly referred to as "Outsider artists," who, like Henry Darger, often inhabit imaginary worlds of their own making, or, like Joseph Di Piazza, an artist represented by Monserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, proceed from a theoretical mindset that diverges from the accepted norm.

For the past couple of years, Di Piazza, a former merchant marine who, besides being a visual artist is the author of a self-styled "scientific metaphysics and philosophical religious work in progress called Terminations in Space," has bombarded this writer via mail and email with texts about a series of sculptures that he calls "The Inevitable Quantum Collection," in progress for two decades, gradually winnowed down from 150 to 74 pieces that he considers of "the utmost historical importance."

Forwarded by his managing agent, Charles Kwiatkowski, who appears so convinced of his client's genius as to suggest that Di Piazza is a Don Quixote who has found his Sancho Panza, these missives have all the urgency of breaking news dispatches, as they update one on such historical facts as that the collection was recently moved to a storage facility in New Jersey where "They're kept in a climate controlled self storage unit, each piece standing freely in boxes. The pieces are spaced apart from one another and remain in the dark and I closely inspect the pieces periodically." (In a separate dispatch, the artist assures one, "In the event that the work is more than a couple of years ahead of its time, it will remain securely at rest inside the storage facility until its time.")

But what, exactly, is the Quantum Collection? In fact, it is a series of sculptures created from pieces of driftwood that Di Piazza has collected in Susquehanna, Pennsylvania, and on the beach near his home and studio in Keansburg, New Jersey. If, on learning this, the reader immediately thinks of the kind of kitsch driftwood sculpture that used to decorate beatnik espresso dives in Greenwich Village and Venice West in the late 1950s, he or she can rest assured that Di Piazza transforms the raw and rather declasse natural materials by which his sculptures are inspired and from which they are created through a laborious process of spraying and hand painting, the coatings applied in numerous layers, enabling him to confidently state, "Never before in history has there been an art collection as beautiful and natural as the Quantum collection, mainly because one must consider the longevity of the combined materials used, as well as the degree in which it's possible to blend and feather down colors."

Apparently, the creative process for Di Piazza begins with a kind of intuitive 3-D "Rorschach" approach that the artist describes as follows: "After finding and choosing a suitable piece of old eroded, country driftwood, I orientate it around trying to envision a subject and/or a subject composition that I can work with and is appealing. Then I prep the piece, add or subtract to the piece by breaking it down, cutting it, carving it, or using wood-fill to extend or fill in a particular piece in the appropriate manner..."

"King Fisher"

Along with the Quantum Collection, Di Piazza has recently embarked on a subsidiary series called "Faces," consisting of larger than life charcoal and pastel "pressure portraits," which he begins by transferring greatly enlarged photographs taken by his manager's wife to drawing paper by pushing carbon dust through pin-holes pricked around their contours. The resulting images, such as "Allie," a portrait of Charles Kwiatowski's cute preteen daughter, her face filling the entire picture area, as she flashes a winning gap-toothed grin, have a deadpan frontal presence akin, albeit in a more folksy manner, to the early portraits of Chuck Close.

It is the Quantum Collection, however, for which Di Piazza has the highest hopes, seeing it as the artistic expression of what Charles Kwiatkowski (a former trouble shooter for the phone company who likens the complexity of Di Piazza's thought to that of Albert Einstein and takes it upon himself to translate it into terms a layman can understand) defines as "religion and science coming together when metaphysics meets quantum physics."

The shapes that Di Pizza divines in found fragments of driftwood and proceeds to refine and make figuratively manifest invariably depict fauna and flora, simplified in a semi abstract style and enlivened by vibrant hues that take on a glossy, almost glass-like translucence, due to the many coats of latex primer, spray enamel and transparent paint that he applies to their surfaces. Indeed, works such as "Bottom Fish," where the vibrant red fish glistens like a human heart, set against brilliant green shoots of undersea foliage, and "Bird on a Branch," where the diminutive avian figure and its rugged perch meld in a plethora of rainbow hues all of such a radiance as to suggest Color Field painting in three dimensions. In "Magpie," in particular, Di Piazza's use of color particles applied with a spray gun displays a chromatic intensity, coupled with a tonal subtlety, that compares favorably to the acrylic paintings of Jules Olitski.

Taken in purely formal terms, his pieces also have a streamlined, Brancusi-like simplicity that also bespeaks a highly sophisticated grasp of volumes in space. Di Piazza, however, is driven by concerns that go beyond the formal into the realm of the fantastic, as seen in "Forest Fire Angel," where the flare-winged form appears to rise Phoenix-like from the ashes in a burst of fiery brilliance. This piece seems a visual relative of a prose poem called "The Standing Dead," in which with an eccentric, almost Blakean sense of prophecy, and lines such as "Torches of flame rained down" and "the trees released their seeds before becoming the standing dead," Di Piazza describes the rebirth of a forest thirty years after being devastated by infernal conflagration.

Here, as in sculptures such as "Baby Duck," "Snail" "Sea Horse," and "Eagle," Joseph Di Piazza displays an intuitive talent for employing found natural forms to unearth the underlying patterns in nature, the eternal, repetitive, unifying rhythms that appear to validate the old cliché that there's "nothing new under the sun."

And not even the most hyperbolic metaphysical bluster can obscure the poignant power of Di Piazza's recurring theme: small, defenseless creatures clinging to the shelter of their endangered natural habitats for dear life.

—Ed McCormack

Neil Masterman: A Maestro of Many Styles from the UK

Any exhibition by the British autodidact Neil Masterman could almost be described as a one-man group show, given the broad range of styles and effects this virtuoso artist commands, several of which can be seen at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from June 26 through July 17. (Reception: Thursday, June 26, from 6 to 8pm.)

Two of Masterman's favorite quotes about painting, included in an address book of his paintings that is a popular seller in England, are "Painting is a journey into the unknown" and "Painting is how you feel at the time." Both seem to apply to his own work, which is bright and upbeat in a manner akin to Hockney and Peter Blake, but also shares a sense of playfulness with that other British free spirit Colin Self.

This is especially apparent in Masterman's sunsets, painted on Caribbean holidays, which combine an almost childlike exuberance with an innate visual sophistication. Working in acrylic on paper, Masterman is an uninhibited colorist, applying brilliant reds and yellows with what might appear to be abandon, if not for his marvelous instinct for chromatic harmonies. In "Caribbean Sunset," for example, the central orb explodes like an egg tossed into a table fan, and its overall effect is as dynamic as Orphist abstraction by Frank Kupka. Yet the composition is brought back down to earth by Masterman's somewhat more restrained depiction of the luminous blue water into which the yolk spills its glittering reflections, as well as the sober dark rocks nearby. In "Sunset II" however, the entire composition comes alive with fiery hues that show a kinship to the Fauves.

"Caribbean Sunset"

By contrast, In other paintings such as "My Back Garden" and "Kings Street Mish Mash," Masterman works in a much more subdued palette dominated by earth colors and shard-like shapes that pay homage to Cubism without appearing in the least bit derivative. Which is to say, he puts the geometric vocabulary of the cubists to his own uses to capture his response to his immediate surroundings. The results are unpretentious and intimate, the latter quality enhanced by his tendency to work on easel-scale.

While the relatively modest scale of Masterman's pictures might have marginalized him a few short years ago, when British and American painters alike were under the sway of Abstract Expressionism, the post-modern era has seen a rise in appreciation for the smaller picture that puts him right in the swing of things. Indeed, the unprepossessing size of his pictures makes them all the more remarkable for how they command our attention through the boldness of their forms and their vibrant colors alone.

Paintings such as "Red Houses after Van Gogh" and "Penny's Flowers," a buoyant garden scene that seems especially British, are particularly appealing in this regard. And although they may be somewhat anomalous in an oeuvre given overall to more representational, albeit innovatively handled subjects, abstractions such as "You Guess" and "Troubles Gone" are lively and intriguing explorations of pure form and color. But perhaps the biggest surprise of all is "Lips," an especially small yet striking realist rendering of a moistly glistening feminine mouth making a Monroe-like moue with the look of a Pop icon.

—Maureen Flynn

New York in Black and White: A Modern Romance

As any number film noir enthusiasts will attest, New York City has always been especially gorgeous in black and white. Not to mention those art photography purists who consider all color photography commercial, period. So, you see, there was more than one good reason for "Made in New York: An Exhibition of Black and White Photography," recently curated by Jean Prytyskacz for the West Side Arts Coalition, at Broadway Mall Community Center on the center island at 96th Street and Broadway.

Prejudices aside, however, the show justified itself in its own terms by the inclusion of David Ruskin's romantically misty silver gelatin print "A Walk in the Park," its tiny silhouetted couple walking along a winding path reminding one of those scenes in the Hollywood classic "Portrait of Jenny," when Joseph Cotton's paintings spring magically to life.

Opposite pleasures were afforded by Eliud Martinez's freaky Coney Island scenes, with the amusement park rides set eerily against turbulent El Greco skies and the cropped faces of the crowds all the way down at the bottom of the composition leering like James Ensor gargoyles.

In other pictures the architecture of the city spoke just as eloquently, as seen in Rudy Collins's images of Harlem brownstones, their facades as stolid and dignified as the faces of old neighborhood churchgoing folks pondering their fate as rampant gentrification changes the character of the area. Deena Weintraub's photographs captured the changing face of the Lower East Side just as graphically, starting with a detail of the stone columns and scrollwork of the Eldridge Street Synagogue and moving on to the graffiti-splashed facade of a former Hebrew school that is now the Angel Orensanz Foundation.

Curator Jean Prytyskacz focused on another facet of the changing Lower East side with her picture of Delancey Street plastered with "Going Out of Business" banners that struck an elegiac note, as they promised the bargains for which the neighborhood was once famous for the very last time.

The surreal incongruities of a city where anything can happen were made manifest in Jane Hoffer's pictures of a peacock preening outside Saint John the Divine. And the faces of a populace that has seen it all were immortalized in Dan Gelb's "City Candid" random portraits—among which one image of a cherubic child watching a parade, his golden ringlets illuminated by sunlight, showed that innocent wonderment was still possible.

Jennifer Holst invariably takes an intimate view in her small, tightly composed prints, here focusing up close on the tartan plaid kilts and socks of Scots marching on Fifth Avenue with wittily abstract results. By contrast, Scott Weingarten's eye for raucous spectacles comes across in his triptych of bodacious celebrants at the Coney Island Mermaid Parade, where scantily clad contestants mug for the camera. Janice Wood Wetzel, on the other hand, puts a lyrical spin on the city in her idyllic image of rowboats on the lake in Central Park with apartment buildings rising like fairytale castles over the lush treetops in the background. Laurens McKenzie also casts a romantic spell with "A Walk Across Time," her picture of pedestrians on the Williamsburg Bridge resembling a still from an old newsreel.

And Carolyn Reus's splendid portrait of a baby snoozing in a stroller as serenely as Winston Churchill after a few stiff whiskies attests to the born New Yorker's ability to adopt to the constant cacophony of one of the world's noisiest cities.

—Maurice Taplinger

Lynda Howitt Forges a New Language For Sea and Sky

Growing up on the beach in Geraldton, Australia, gave the painter Lynda Howitt a lifelong love of the ocean, which is reflected in her solo exhibition of oils on canvas "Wind Beneath My Wings," at Jadite Galleries, 413 West 50th Street, from June 17 through 28. (Reception: June 17, 6 to 8pm.) The show is well named, since Howitt's take on vividly articulated watery expanses also has a stratospheric feeling, a sense of airiness, weightlessness, and light that creates the visual equivalent of a soaring sensation in the viewer. Horizontal streaks shot through with glimmers of light establish the main thrust of her compositions, which project a shimmering tonal radiance, even when she works in a primarily monochromatic palette of softly modulated gray or light blue hues. In some paintings her feathery strokes traverse the canvas at a fairly even keel, while in others they sweep upward, with frosty white highlights evoking the edges of clouds kissed by silvery illumination. But they could just as easily suggest curls of foam on the surface of a wave.

Indeed, sea and sky seem to intermingle freely, becoming barely distinguishable, since Howitt seems less interested in depicting specific aspects of nature than in projecting a sense of the emotions it provokes.

"For me art is about what I feel," she has stated. "Art is transformal in itself. It can change how you feel. It takes us into our inner world, the world of vision and feeling, it's a journey inward."

The title of the present exhibition derives, in fact, from a hit song by Bette Midler, with phrases from its lyrics, such as "Did I Ever Tell You You're My Hero?" and "I Know the Truth" and "Fly, Fly, Fly High Against the Sky," serving as titles for individual canvases. But the ramifications of the paintings go far beyond the banal sentiments of the romantic popular ballad for which they are named. Thus, the title of the show is the only Pop thing about it; for Howitt is an artist much more in the tradition of Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting, judging from the sense of chromatic nuance, subtle gesture, and above all, lyricism that makes her compositions so exhilarating. There is an openness to them that creates an extraordinary resonance, as though the painter were tuned into some celestial symphony no one else can hear; perhaps emanating from that "inner world" of which she speaks.

"Did I ever tell you you're my hero?"

In any case, her paintings radiate a warmth that is quite compelling, even when executed in the cool values to which she seems partial, perhaps in part due to the universal qualities of her subject matter, but also because of her unique vision, in which opposite elements of nature are so successfully merged as to become a single entity melded in the medium of paint.

Howitt's biography tells us, "Born in Uganda, the only white baby in a mission hospital, Lynda fled the Idi Amin massacre with her family to the shores of Western Australia." And although it states in the next sentence that she had "an idyllic childhood" thereafter, such a tumultuous beginning suggests her deep gratitude for the ultimate peace and serenity that her paintings convey so successfully to the viewer.

—Byron Coleman

Learning the Hard Way From Wayne Thiebaud

"Is there an American face?" John Updike asked in a short essay on our national portraiture. Not surprisingly, he couldn't come up with a conclusive answer. But if such a thing exists, no contemporary artist seems more equipped to paint it than Wayne Thiebaud, a Californian who looks himself like a small town parson painted by Norman Rockwell and has always struck me as an artist as American as, well, apple pie.

In fact, the pies and cakes for which Thiebaud is best known have always seemed more like sinful portraits of terrible temptation than mere still-life subjects. And the paintings in the recent exhibition "Wayne Thiebaud: The Figure," at Allan Stone Gallery, 113 East 90th Street, also had the particular presence of portraits, even when their faces were hidden from sight, as in the magnificent lifesize oil on canvas "Nude, Back View, 1969."

As we were looking at it in the gallery, my wife reminded me of a nude portrait I had done of her way back when we were newlyweds, which, although she was too tactful to say so, was frankly imitative of this one. While Thiebaud's model is seen from behind, standing, and I had posed Jeannie frontally, seated on a kitchen chair, it was obvious that I wanted my painting to look as much as possible like his. Of course, I was no more capable of painting anything like Thiebaud than I was of putting my wife's beautiful young face and body on canvas any way at all.

Still, I worked on that painting for several hours, while Jeannie went into a deep state of meditation and stayed so perfectly still that our cat, Lulu, became mesmerized and walked over to where she was sitting and actually stood up on her hind legs—something I had never seen her or any other cat do before. The point, though, is that while my painting captured something of a superficial likeness, it came nowhere near being as much of a portrait of a particular person as this painting of a nude woman with her back turned whom it is highly possible Thiebaud hardly even knew.

Wayne Thiebaud's ability to make personality palpable in pigment, even when the model's facial features cannot be discerned, is equally clear in "Man Reading, 1963," where the bullish body language of the stocky man in the business suit, leaning forward in a chair with a book in his hands and his bald dome catching the light, tells everything one needs to know about him. Ditto for "Standing Man, 1964," whose slight tilt of the head to one side, as he confronts us in his gray Brooks Brothers social armor and shiny black brogans with his hands hanging at his sides, bespeaks the deadpan angst of a shell-shocked soldier in the corporate wars.

Nude, Back View, 1969"

As we walked around Allan Stone Gallery, from one painting to the other, it occurred to me that my attempted portrait of Jeannie could just as easily have been inspired by Thiebaud's "Nude, 1963" or "Girl with Mirror, 1965." Both models even look as though they might be meditating; but that was just Jeannie's way of sitting still for so long and had nothing to do with me. What I was trying for were those luscious rainbow shadows and highlights that play along the edges of Thiebaud's nude figures, lending their bare flesh and even their hair such sensual vitality—especially set against those thickly pigmented, pure white backgrounds that he favors.

I must have figured that the only way I could translate the beauty that I saw before me into a painting would be to shamelessly copy the way that Thiebaud did it. But I learned the hard way that, while that kind of magic can be imitated, it can never be emulated.

—Ed McCormack

Jane Stanfel Evokes the Silent Poetry of Forsaken Places

There's an elegiac quality to the paintings of the Montana artist Jane Stanfel that can sometimes remind one of Andrew Wyeth. This mood is especially prevalent in the series that Stanfel calls "Ghost Ranches of Montana," on view at Jadite Galleries, 413 West 50th Street, from June 3 through 28. (Reception: June 3, 6 to 9pm.)

An important difference between Stanfel and the older artist, however, is that Stanfel's style of realism is not nearly as finicky, and while her oils on canvas and old barn wood are filled with feeling for the abandoned ranches that she often chooses as her subjects, the thrust of her work is never maudlin or merely nostalgic. Which is to say, her paintings have a formal rigor to match their emotional resonance, which should make them as appealing to fanciers of abstract and New Image painting as to those with an affection for the atmospheres and mythology of the western states.

Stanfel has obviously studied the "backstory" of the historic sites and ramshackle structures that she paints, endowing them with all the dignity of ancient Greek ruins. Even a lowly subject such as an old outhouse, prompts intriguing ruminations in the texts that accompany her paintings ("Why would a hermit such as Alfred build a two-seater outhouse? Perhaps it was built before his brother and he had separated, and he thought they might both have the urge at the same time. Perhaps he planned to marry someday.") Yet it is the purely visual attributes of the wittily titled painting "Room for Friend" that finally command our attention: the rugged geometric form of the narrow A-frame structure centrally placed in the composition; its ruddy colorations subtly harmonized with the luminous blue of the sky and the warm umber earth; its formal thrust further enhanced by the detached outhouse door scattered at a diagonal angle in the foreground.

"A Woman's Life"

Other paintings by Stanfel, such as "A Woman's Life" and "The Sunday Car" are equally evocative. "A Woman's Life" depicts a beat-up baby carriage leaning against an old discarded washing machine in front of one of the wooden walls that she always depicts so faithfully, right to the distinctly different grains of each individual plank. As always, Stanfel's treatment of time-worn surfaces, her attention to details such as cracks and stains lends these objects a haunting poignancy.

The subject of "The Sunday Car" is the partly demolished chassis of a vintage 1940s Ford partially submerged in a field of overgrown grass. Here, the piece de resistance is the artist's handling of its rusted surface, with much of the pale blue paint chipped away and even the rust taking on a sun-bleached pinkish cast, the subtly harmonized colors yielding a sweetly forlorn chromatic beauty.

Indeed, it is Jane Stanfel's unique ability to find such beauty in unexpected places and make it speak so eloquently of things much more complex and universal than the simple subjects that she chooses to paint which has won her a following in Europe as well as the United States. She is a singular artist with a gift for revealing the spirit of forsaken places and the souls of discarded objects.

—Maurice Taplinger

Nina Ozbey: Postmodern Abstraction Informed By a Sense of the Past

Aside from such notable exceptions as Joan Mitchell and Grace Hartigan, few woman artists were admitted into the boy's club that was the New York School nucleus of the Abstract Expressionist movement at its inception in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Not that worthy woman artists were not plentiful; it's just that the misogyny was such among male artists in the postwar years that they were pretty much ignored, except as wives and girlfriends —unless, as in the case of Mitchell and Hartigan, their mastery of the supposedly masculine domain of so-called "action painting" made them impossible to dismiss.

There seems no doubt, however, that had the Oklahoma City painter Nina Ozbey, who now lives and works in Earlysville, Virginia, been on the scene in New York City at that time, her work would have passed muster as well. Or at least that's the impression one gets from previewing the work Ozbey will exhibit at Agora Gallery 530 West 25th Street, from July 22 through August 12. (Reception: Thursday, July 24, 6 to 8pm.)

One can only speculate that the authenticity of Ozbey's style has to do with the fact that, rather than merely imitating the mannerisms of those early New York School painters, as many others have done since, Ozbey went the whole route, evolving in a similar manner to the artists whose work she emulates, builds upon and extends into the postmodern era. For she began as painter of still life and landscape in watercolor, before she eventually switched to oils, eliminated subject matter, and took up her present gestural mode. And like many of the best of the Abstract Expressionists, though she gave up subject matter, she retained the allusiveness that lends her forms, laid down with a welter of slashing strokes of color that she layers and brings to vigorous gestural crescendo, a sense of life and movement.

In canvases such as "Royal Flush," "Tracks of Time," and "Over the Ridge," for example, Ozbey invests her compositions with a sense of natural phenomena and what the New York painter and critic Fairfield Porter once termed "the immediacy of experience." Although, as their titles indicate, such paintings do not dwell in specifics, they appear beholden to emotions and events, and seem as if inhabited by phantom presences, in much the same manner as the paintings of such second generation New York School artists as Robert Goodnough and Alfred Leslie.

Like the good abstractionist that she is, Ozbey speaks primarily in terms of form and gesture, saying, "By letting go of subject matter and switching to oil, the process of painting became more enjoyable. I take pleasure in making marks. These marks create spatial relationships by virtue of their color, weight, texture, and value. My work is intuitive; beginning with one stroke of the brush, leading to another and another. I want the opportunity to explore where the painting takes me rather than where I take the painting."

"Tracks of Time"

The raw, romantic energy inherent in her muscular strokes, suggesting vestiges of nature and human anatomy, hinting at a simultaneously reverent and rambunctious relationship with the great art of the past, makes Nina Ozbey seem a legitimate heir to the revolutionary movement that first put American painting on the map.

—Marie R. Pagano

Michael Gemmell: A Painter of the Bogs and the Irish Earth

Encountering the work of the Irish artist Michael Gemmell, one is reminded of a poem by his famous fellow countryman Seamus Heaney called "Exposure" that begins, "It is December in Wicklow: / Alders dripping, birches / Inheriting the last light, / the ash tree cold to look at."
For Gemmell lives and works in Wicklow and his paintings look at the land with a similarly bleak and unforgiving beauty, judging from the ones on view at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from June 3 through 24. (Reception: Thursday, June 5, 6 to 8pm.)

Dark, dark is Gemmell's palette, given to earthy wintry browns, not much green, some blues and whites with the aspect of old snow, frosty and shadowed. And when there are reds they, too, are dark, deep, like the blood of animals on earth or snow. It is as though the landscape itself has been transmogrified by an abstract language all Gemmell's own, just as Heaney makes it his own in his poems. It is a place shaded by memory and moody musings, possessed of a psychological climate perhaps even more prevalent than the weather, as seen in Gemmell's oil on linen "The Wicklow Way," where the big, squareish white and brown form occupies the center of the canvas like a clenched fist.

"Fisherman's Island III"

"My paintings are from above and below which connects with the canvas and paint using mind and memory," Gemmell states. "I have explored the Bogs, the Burren, and the Islands in most of my work which intrigues me as the changes only take place at the moment of one thought at one time, bringing an almost ancient feeling of time and beauty."

Notice that Gemmell never stops thinking about the landscape as something interiorized—"from above and below"—rather than as something diagrammatically delineating the lay of the land. His process seems to be one of delving and digging into earthy essences, as when Heaney likens working with his pen to the way his father sinks a spade "into gravelly ground."

Thus one looks at his paintings from a different angle than most landscapes, inhabits them, actually, like a place where reality amounts to muted colors and strong forms. Sean Scully's stripe paintings have a similarly weathered look, a kind of slightly sullied visual atmosphere hinting at a kinship between the two painters. But Gemmell is also taken by the raw variety of form, as well as the cold climate of color. The shapes in his paintings bear many submerged allusions, "slippery glimpses" to use de Koonings famous term of things that never come into specific focus but brood blockily with the enormous dark weight of imminence in compositions such as "Winter Island," "Rebirth of a Field" and "Dreamer of Dreams."

Again one thinks of Heaney; now of his poem "Bogland," with its "waterlogged trunks of great firs" and "the skeleton of the Great Irish Elk" taken out of the peat and set up like "An astounding crate full of air." Encountering the paintings of Michael Gemmell, their forms pregnant with similar mysteries, their colors tinged by the timeless grime of excavated things, it is clear what the artist means when he says, "My work speaks for itself and I feel it stands on its own, as I have put a lot of years and thought into each painting."

—Peter Wiley

"Anything Goes" in an Antic, Frantic West Side Group Show

Curated by participating artists Elton Tucker and Khuumba Ama for the West Side Arts Coalition and seen recently at Broadway Mall Community Center on the center island at 96th Street and Broadway, "Anything Goes" billed itself as "A Craft Art / Mixed Media Exhibit" and indeed demonstrated that the boundaries we draw between those different categories are often arbitrary.

Georgianna Grantham, for example, showed fabric placemat designs that functioned superbly as geometric abstractions when artfully arranged in frames and hung on the gallery wall. Indeed, Grantham's designs were now indistinguishable from fabric collages, demonstrating that in art context is often everything and can determine our perceptions of what is and what is not a work of art.

The same was true of Udeaku Chikezie's handcrafted jewelry, several pieces of which, exhibited dangling within an empty frame, comprised an intriguing example of the art of assemblage. Again, context, content, and intent conspired to confound our notions of what constitutes serious aesthetic expression.

Barbara Eison White, on the other hand, left no doubt that she was creating fine art, even when working in the folksy medium of colorful ceramic plaques. White's still life "Fruit" and "African Dream," a detailed depiction of an African village in the manner of Red Grooms, were as compelling as her 3-D cut-out collage "Jazz," with musicians and sassy showgirls clad in strategically placed real feathers evoking the heyday of Harlem's famous The Cotton Club.

Madi Lanier also jumped the boundaries between art and craft with a monoprint called "Acrobats at the Beach" in a manner akin to a more anatomically accurate Paul Klee, as well as a copper cutout of a willowy mermaid that was at once decorative and whimsical in the manner of Alexander Calder. And what could be more audaciously apt in the context of a show like this than Khuumba Ama's hand crocheted designer shawl suspended from the wall draped over a crossbar like a Chinese scroll? Khuumba's piece would succeed as a brash conceptual gesture alone, yet the beauty of the brown and pink fringed shawl gave it considerable visual appeal as minimalist soft sculpture as well.

Other exhibitors without craft connections took the relaxed spirit of this show as an opportunity to show some of their more playful experiments: Emily Rich played with layered panels in mixed media pieces that lent her impressive gestural energy a new spatial dimension. Ivan Sherman revealed another, quite unexpected side of his of creative personality. Along with some of his technically wizardly semi-abstract corrugated wall-sculptures of faces and semi-abstract architectural subjects combining the playful and the formal, Sherman showed digital prints on watercolor paper of expressively exaggerated jazz musicians.

Collage virtuoso Harriet Green, who invariably surprises one with her willingness to let each piece dictate its own terms, showed three different approaches to her medium, ranging from the austere to the antic. However, Green's most compelling work this time out was a collage painting with photographic images of dancers emerging from a brightly painted house in a manner akin to Romare Bearden.

Elton Tucker, a veritable maestro of excess known for his love of sparkles, seemed to take the title of the show he co-curated as a goad to outdo himself with a truly over-the- top composition called "Music of Color." Combining novelty store plastic mirrors with Jackson Pollock dayglo spaghetti, this delightfully demented piece demonstrated Tucker's rare talent for creating beauty from dime-store detritus.

Another less familiar funkmeister named Kenny Mathewson also dazzled us with a mixed piece called "Free the Angels" in which his manipulation of photographic fragments and raw painterly elements suggested a talent as raw, freewheeling, and monstrous as that of the young Ornette Coleman or the late Jean-Michel Basquiat.

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Suejin Jo Wins New York Artists Equity's Solo Show Competition

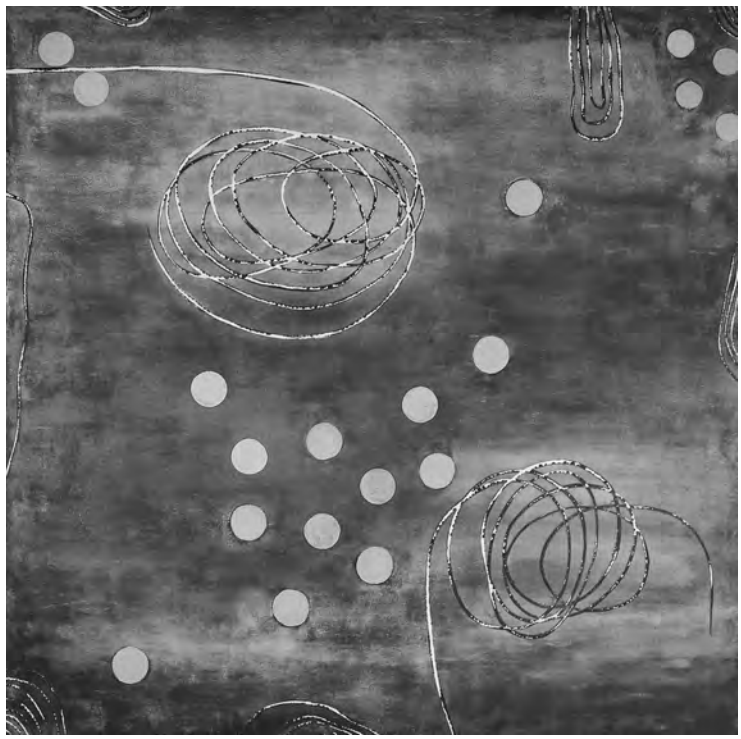
The huge turnout for the recent dinner at the National Arts Club celebrating the 60th Anniversary of New York Artists Equity Association, as well as the 97th birthday of Will Barnet, one of its founding members, demonstrated the high esteem in which NYAEA is held in the art world.

Thus it would be a visibility-enhancing boon to the career of any artist to win the prizes awarded in the organization's recent juried exhibition. Suejin Jo, a widely exhibited painter born in Seoul, Korea, now living in New York City, who won The NYAEA 2008 Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Solo Exhibition Award, proves to be a worthy honoree, as do Merrill Steiger, who won the Jack T. Stewart Memorial Award, and Margery Small, winner of the James Gorden Schnell Memorial Award.

Margery Small

Merrill Steiger

Suejin Jo, who studied at the Art Students League and Columbia University, says of her work (which will be on view at Broome Street Gallery, 498 Broome Street from June 10 through 22, with a reception on June 12 from 6 to 8pm), "My paintings show marks of synthesis of two opposite elements such as 'sharp and soft,' 'fragile and solid,' 'here and there,' 'in and out.' I try to achieve this duality by using defined lines and color fields with solid forms. The ultimate composition floats lightly in space as if it was a musical score played by a master musician. This is the story of my life as a displaced person."



Suejin Jo

Perhaps that last sentence about displacement hints at the sense of melancholy pervading some of Jo's paintings in oil and dried pigment on canvas. However, it is a lyrical, almost lilting melancholy, suggesting the ultimately uplifting musical score that Jo refers to in her artist's statement, rather than a sense of bitterness or alienation. In this regard, her work calls to mind Loren MacIver, an earlier artist active in the 1940s and '50s, for its poetic effect.

For while Jo's paintings appear to be more consciously concerned with formal issues than MacIver's, the two painters arrive at a similar synthesis of the abstract and the allusive, although they come at it from opposite directions. In her most famous painting, "Hopscotch, 1940," in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, for example, MacIver makes an abstract composition from the detailed depiction of a city pavement covered with children's chalk marks. But the title of Jo's "Water Lily" seems an afterthought, perhaps arrived at after the artist realized that her abstract composition of yellow circles floating over a luminous color field further activated by gracefully swirling linear forms projected a lyricism reminiscent of Monet's most famous masterpiece.

One can only imagine that the title for "Blowing in the Wind," another composition by Jo recalling a song by Bob Dylan and juxtaposing larger orange orbs and tighter linear scrawls, set against a delicately mottled color field of primarily pale green and cloudy tan hues, came about similarly, when the finished painting spoke to the artist, revealing its ostensible theme. And while a canvas called "Somewhere Nowhere," in which precise orange and black circles interact with loosely flowing white linear forms, appears to allude to nothing more tangible or specific than the artist's fascination with opposites, "Way Out," where the colored dots connect with the lines like stops on a subway map, wittily delineates what could appear to be an escape route from a brewing aesthetic dilemma.

Although Suejin Jo happens to be one of those artists whose titles are intriguing enough to add an element of entertaining guesswork to her compositions, the main thrust of her paintings is obviously the formal interplay between her linear ecriture, which can resemble Cy Twombly's elegant graffiti, and her delicately modulated color fields. At the same time, one can't discount literal content when the circular shapes quantified in the titles of paintings such as "Double Play" and "Triple Play," doodled like loose cartoon spirals, suggest unraveling baseballs.

Similarly, when Jo calls another painting "Thousand Kisses Deep," how can the viewer not project a sense of emotionally fervent romantic longing onto its composition of impetuous linear gestures juxtaposed with an artful scattering of slightly blurred red blotches, suggesting lipstick traces dissolving in rain or in tears?

The intriguing tension between abstract purity and the hints of specific things and feelings that appear to intrude here and there on her compositions makes Suejin Jo seem a quintessentially postmodern painter. Indeed, these contradictions in her work, which provide her with fodder for working out complex solutions to the issues of opposition and duality that she cites as inspiration, leave much room for the expansion and growth of her aesthetic direction, making her seem a most auspicious choice for the honor that has been bestowed upon her by New York Artists Equity.

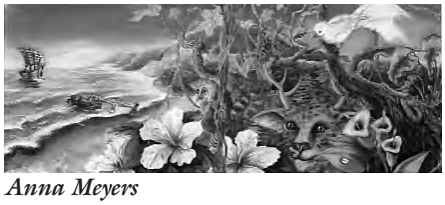
—Ed McCormack

Ripe for Discovery: Recent MFAs From Western Connecticut State Showcased in Chelsea

Given the mercenary and fiscal-minded climate of the current art scene, one can't help finding significance in the fact that some of the city's most extensive art coverage is to be found in the conservative daily The New York Sun. Just as germane is the fact that when the paper chose recently to do a "think" piece on MFA thesis shows they chose to headline it "Columbia's MFA Thesis Show Sets a High Bar," without really explaining why they thought so or even describing any of the work on view. Moreover, the only other schools they mentioned in connection with the article were equally fashionable ones, such as the Yale University School of Art and the School of Art at the California School of the Arts (which, as it happens, does not even present an MFA exhibition).

Michel Belknap

J. D. Richey



Anna Meyers

That said, one of the most rewarding MFA exhibitions to be seen this season is that of Western Connecticut State University, a smaller school you may never have heard of, which, under the direction of its co-coordinators Margaret Grimes and John Wallace, both working painters, consistently graduates some of the most interesting young artists to be seen anywhere in the country. The WCSU Spring 2008 Thesis Exhibition, which will open on June 17 and run through July 5, with a reception June 19 from 5 to 8 PM at Blue Mountain Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, is one of the best to date.

Since the WCSU is nestled in the bucolic setting that inspired the Hudson River School and the Connecticut Impressionists, it stands to reason that landscape would exert a strong presence. More than one or two of these young artists, however, manages to invest a scene that might have exuded pastoral serenity in an earlier age with hints of a peculiarly contemporary anxiety.

Carla Lindsey's oil on canvas "One Day He Will Reunite Us" depicts slender bare-limbed trees at the entrance to a wood casting their ghostly shadows on a blanket of snow. Lindsay's painting projects a cool clarity of statement, subtly shaded by the elegiac mood implied in the title.

Deann J. Matheny, on the other hand, treats tree-limbs and leaves as an occasion for detailed yet succulent paint handling in a manner akin to Neil Welliver's wilderness compositions, in an oil on panel "Untitled." Matheny, however, zooms in closer for a tightly cropped composition with more compressed spatial tensions.

Then there is Michel Belknap, whose acrylic painting on paper, "Relevee," is notable for its combination of muted tonal harmonies in a range of subdued greens, as well as for its tactile surface. Belknap turns a simple image of a clump of foliage into an essentially abstract exercise in painterly vigor.

Another artist with a strongly subjective sense of nature, Kevin Dwyer, makes bleakness an aesthetic attribute in an acrylic on board called "Winter Landscape— Facing East." In a palette limited to gray tones laid down with splintery, agitated strokes, Dwyer endows angst with a grim grace akin to the Neo-Expressionism of Anselm Kiefer.

Kevin Dwyer

By contrast, Sarah Mahan employs strident color effectively in "Spectacled Langur," her oil of a purple primate crouching anxiously on a tree limb, set against red-violet sky with large green leaves in the foreground. Mahan double-majored in Studio Art and Zoology for her B.A. at Suny, Oswego, but it seems clear here that the art part won out.

Carla Lindsey

Fragments of somewhat jumbled, disparate imagery merge intriguingly with elements of geometric abstraction in Philip Lique's intriguing mixed media work "Deer Population 2007." Through somewhat oblique visual strategies, Lique seems to critique the very fabric of reality.

Philip Lique

J.D. Richey casts four figures within an irregularly shaped format to create a strong contemporary allegory in an urban setting: A sensitive-looking young man with a sparse beard and crossed arms, possibly a portrait of the artist, stands his ground defiantly against three jeering Philistine tormentors.

Deann J. Matheny

Anna Myers, an illustration major, offers lyrical relief with a delightful oil on paper entitled "Rainbow Isle," which combines the imaginative innocence of a Henri Rousseau with the sophisticated technique of a Maurice Sendak. But even in this idyllic fantasy of a gentle leopard with antlers peering out from a flowery lair where a white bird perches on a branch, a schooner in the distance and its crew rowing ashore strike a slightly ominous note of coming change.

Robert Storr, the director of the Yale University School of Arts, is quoted in the aforementioned article on MFA thesis shows as saying that that one of the prospects that worries him is artists being plucked out of such shows prematurely by art dealers. One could think of worse fates, however, for the artists in the WSCU exhibition, most of whom appear ready for their close-up.

Sarah Mahan

—Ed McCormack

A Language of the Sublime: The Paintings of J. Dule

Subtlety and sensitivity to nuance are qualities hardly as highly prized as they should be in an art world that all too often honors only the gaudy, the showy, and the overblown. Yet on those relatively rare occasions when one encounters these qualities in a contemporary work of art they are immediately recognizable and refresh one's faith in painting, particularly, as a contemplative activity which can touch upon the divine in the simple pursuit of a formal ideal.

The "Seaside Series" of the Connecticut painter J. Dule, seen recently in his first New York solo show at New Art Center, 580 Eighth Avenue, is an excellent case in point. One happens upon such an exhibition with a sense of having discovered something at once unassuming and wondrous.

Apparently, earlier in his career, Dule was influenced by Frank Auerbach and Karel Appel, artists given to the use of strident color and thick impasto stressing the palpable physicality of pigment. His present work, however, is almost ethereal for his use of translucent washes of luminous color that call to mind Constable's remark about J.M.W. Turner: "He seems to paint with tinted steam, so effervescent and so airy."

The vaporousness of Dule's surfaces and the amorphousness of his forms suggest a purity of vision verging on the magical. It can be compared to the grace and economy of Asian painting and can also suggest an improbable yet successful synthesis of the elegant shorthand of John Marine's marinescapes and the spiritual resonance of Mark Rothko's abstractions.

While Dule's compositions evoke a convincing sense of natural spaces, often consisting of stretches of land or sandy beach and vast expanses of sky, they are by means restricted to conventional color choices. Thus while the rhythmic dunes in one of his compositions may be depicted in tones of ocher that approximate the color of sand, the sky above may be laid down in a shade of violet unlike anything actually occurring in nature. Or it is just as likely for the sky to be a more or less naturalistic blue hue, while the land below emits a radiant tangerine glow.

Dule's delicate glazes of luminous color need conform to no known models because he has evolved a style that conjures up an emotional sense of place rather than its mere physical representation. His paintings reinvent the visible world from the inside out with such lyrical completeness as to imbue them with a verisimilitude that transcends literal appearances.

"In the age of photography and computer images," Dule has stated, "I have found painting to be either one of two endeavors. The first is an exploration of materials, colors and textures and the rich tapestry of creation when they are brought together in unique ways. The second is the appearance of abstract images out of the subconscious mind expressing deep emotions and sensibilities."

In his "Seaside Series," what Dule finally gives us is not the logic of things as we know them but a hint of the sublime.

—Byron Coleman

Martina O'Brien Melds Elements of Landscape and Abstraction

Although she is inspired by the example of Mondrian to regard her compositions as geometric constructs, the painterly process of the Irish artist Martina O'Brien quickly dissolves overt geometry in atmospherics akin to those of Turner and Constable, in her canvases on view at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from June 3 through 24. (Reception Thursday, June 5, from 6 to 8 PM.)

A strong sense of landscape and seascape provide a phantom armature for O'Brien's ostensibly abstract compositions, which invariably evoke intermingling clouds, mists, and watery expanses in a manner reminiscent of the ethereally floating vistas of classical Chinese scrolls, albeit very much in the tradition of Western painting and fortified by the rich heft and depth of oils on canvas.

Trained at Dun Laoighaire College of Art and Design and The National College of Art and Design, O'Brien is "a painter's painter," possessed of remarkable technical finesse, which puts at her disposal an arsenal of dazzling effects. A consummate colorist, she employs a seemingly infinite range of blues, grays, and browns to conjure up shimmering panoramas of air, light, and liquescent reflections, in which craggy rock formations and land masses rise here and there out of the primordial mist like humpbacked whales or shadowy sea monsters.

To endow her paintings with physical presence, O'Brien applies thick layers oil impasto with a brush, then scrapes the canvas with a palette knife, creating tactile ridges of pigment that impart to their surfaces distinct vertical and horizontal structures, which stabilize her freely flowing forms in the manner of a grid, reminding us that her paintings are autonomous aesthetic entities rather than mere illusions of reality.

"Tide Upon Tide, Late Afternoon, Brittas Bay"

On one level, then, O'Brien's paintings are the most materially palpable of art objects, with their encrusted pile-up of pigmentation evoking the very substance of the of Irish earth more in the manner of surrogates than representations. On another level, however, her compositions are the most ethereal of things, evoking elusive nuances of light and air that can transport the viewer as readily as any romantic landscape of the past by virtue of their atmospheric qualities and sensitivity to the salient particulars of natural phenomena.

Like Constable, who declared, "No two days are alike, not even two hours," O'Brien evokes, from painting to painting, a sense of fleeting facets of weather occurring in time, even as her primary focus appears to be on creating a formal statement in contemporary aesthetics, expressing the postmodern duality that manifests in the tantalizing tension between abstract form and subject matter.

While O'Brien's landscapes appear quintessentially Irish, invested with all the poetry, myth, and romance that we associate with that fabled country, they are, in fact, almost equally informed by impressions culled from her travels in China, Vietnam, India and the Middle East. Thus they are actually universal composites filled with a timeless allusiveness, finally transcending the particulars of any one locale yet possessed of a striking unity of surface.

Although some titles, such as "Where Connamera Meets the Atlantic" and "Kenmare Bay," allude to specific places, others such as "Soft Waters Ebb and Flow," and "Cradle of Illumination" express the overall poetic magnitude of the artistic vision of Martina O'Brien, whose paintings grace several important collections in Ireland and seem a sure bet to achieve an enthusiastic following in the United States as well.

—Marilyn Schleifer

New York Notebook

FANCY DELANCEY STARBUCKS BOHEMIA:
The New Museum and the New Lower East Side Gallery Scene

by Ed McCormack

To someone who actually grew up around here and can remember when people built pigeon coops rather than penthouses on tenement rooftops, the very idea of a Starbucks on Delancey Street still seems almost surreal. But there it is, right on the corner of Allen and Delancey, not far from that other glaring incongruity: Bernard Tschumi's glass-fronted "Blue Building," one of several residential towers and designer hotels newly risen amid all manner of recent renovations, extensions, and architectural anomalies hastily grafted onto the downtown skyline—aesthetics be damned!

At least Sol Moscot Opticians ("Since 1915") and Jimmy Jazz homeboy wear are still standing on the corner of Orchard and Delancey. But another condo monstrosity is going up on the old site of Dunkin Donuts and the 99¢ Store, within spitting distance of where the big yawning yap of the Williamsburg Bridge swallows and regurgitates traffic to and from another former slum in Brooklyn that has likewise morphed into high-end haven for creative hipsterism.

"What's missing from the American underground?" the novelist Bruce Benderson asked rhetorically in an essay called "Toward the New Degeneracy." "Not publicity or funding, but vital links to the culture of poverty." Yet any of the aspiring performance artists ensconced in Starbucks, tapping away at their laptops or conferring with their agents on their cells between sips of skinny latte, would be conversant with at least the historical fact of poverty on the Lower East Side. You can't avoid it, the way the local color has been exploited since the clubs, boutiques, and art galleries started opening and the condos started going up down here.

As soon as it became clear that the Lower East Side was going to be The Next Big Thing, pictures of teeming tenement streets, crowded with pushcarts back in the day, became prominent in the local decor, and the real estate sharks started brainstorming for a marketable acronym. First they floated "LoHo" (as in SoHo and NoHo) to the media, and it turned up in an article here and there but somehow didn't stick. The Lower East Side Business Improvement District (BID) got in on the act with "LES," just the initials, which look great on a T-shirt. Then some genius came up with the slogan "LES is More. Explore." And suddenly my funky old neighborhood had a spanking new corporate logo.

Lately, style pieces about LES and shoppers' guides to its goodies—from the bialys at Kossar's to the pickles at Guss's to the designer dresses and shoes at Narnia—have been appearing everywhere, always with a nostalgic angle, as in the AM New York headline, "Echoes of Old Clash With Hip." A far cry from Stewart Meyer's 1984 novel "The Lotus Crew," with lines like "Delancey Street crackled shameless like a neon leper colony," Richard Price's new book "Lush Life" nails the neighborhood's newfound mix of historical self-consciousness and artsy attitude. Hawking Jacob Riis prints from the 1880s to a club owner, one character spritzs, "The man was light years ahead of his time, total multimedia."

Even the pilot issue of Page Six, the *New York Post*'s slick new life-style supplement for the clueless, featured an article called "Prima Gallerinas," all about how in the "exciting new gallery scene on the Lower East Side, an emerging group of women is taking the spotlight."

If the East Village scene of the 1980s was driven by a desire to create an alternative to the art establishment, the stampede to the Lower East Side started with the news that the establishment was building a branch downtown.

Deborah Claxton, "Governor of Day" 2007, Woodward Gallery

"When I heard the New Museum was opening on the Bowery, I knew we had to be close to that action," says one of the "Prima Gallerinas," Fabienne Stephan, director of Salon 94, at 1 Freeman Alley, off Rivington Street, a satellite of a the Upper East Side gallery of the same name. Curiously yet predictably, other established venues have not been above following the action, including Woodward Gallery, formerly of Soho, which recently featured an exhibition of Deborah Claxton's exquisitely intricate collages in its large, almost incongruously elegant space at 133 Eldridge Street. Perhaps to lend it an edginess in keeping with the new locale, they called the show, "Extreme Paper."

Brandon Herman, from "My Vacation with a Kidnapper," Envoy Gallery

More what one might expect in these hot yet still raw environs is Envoy, at 131 Chrystie Street, where we saw Brandon Herman's five foot high cast-fiberglass cartoon cat-head and Michael Yinger's floor sculpture of an American flag composed of shell-casings, shot glasses, animal bones, and sundry other objects de kitsch. Both were highlights of the two artists' adjoining the first solo shows at the gallery.

"I moved here in 2006, before I even knew the New Museum was coming," Jimi Dams, the gallery director told us. "It had nothing to do with the museum. I just felt that Chelsea was turning into a horrible art mall and had to get out of there."

Another outlet for emerging talents, Never Work Gallery, occupying a tiny storefront at 191 Henry Street, seemingly specializes in intimate-scaled painterly abstraction akin to the Neo-Naturism of Gregory Amenoff and Bill Jensen. Gallery director Siobhan Lowe told a reporter she has to work seven days a week, sometimes moonlighting as an accountant, to make the rent—which may be why we had to view the show through the window when we stopped by one day during business hours.

"Must be a great show," said a bearded dude in a derby and black frock-coat, as he passed by and noticed us with our noses pressed against the glass. Above the waist he looked much as his great grandfather must have when he landed on Ellis Island; but his shredded jeans and western boots were strictly hipster.

Like the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, a former tenement now divested of tenants, where actors in period costumes give walking tours of the past, his get-up made perfect sense in a neighborhood that increasingly seems like an ironic living diorama.

Photo: Antonio Heurto

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For an institution sporting an audacious facade of six precariously staggered silver boxes, one emblazoned with the slogan "Hell, yes!" in rainbow-colored bubble-letters, the New Museum of Contemporary Art can be awfully unfrivolous. Granted, the museum's inaugural survey of collage and assemblage, "Unmonumental," was predictably raucous. But that its first two solo shows, concurrent exhibitions by Tomma Abts and Paul Chan, could hardly be called crowd-pleasers seems to bode well for its potential to rise above the obvious.

Born in Germany, now based in London, where she was awarded the prestigious Turner Prize in 2006, Tomma Abts is a painter of small, precise geometric abstractions. Unlike the large-scale narrative Neo-Expressionism practiced by Neo Rauch's' followers in the Leipzig School, her work has no novelty value whatsoever. Yet its intimate rewards are many for those who find pleasure in precise interplays of form and color, tactile pentimento (resulting from a process that involves numerous smooth layers of acrylic and oil pigments), and subtle illusions of space, light, and shadow.

Shadows, real rather than illusory, are an even a more prominent element in the Hong Kong-born American artist Paul Chan's digital wall and floor projections, first exhibited in the 2006 Whitney Biennial. Chan's pieces are quaintly kinetic, as though cast by an antique "magic lantern," lending them a seance-like sense of mystery, as phantom birds soar over silhouetted telephone poles and fruits float up from a bowl until it is empty. As far as digital projections go, his playfully occult pieces are a lot more lyrical than Tony Oursler's rubbery lips that sneer at the viewer, "What are you looking at? I'll fuck you up!"

The very location of the New Museum seems to call out for an ironic detachment to match its Pop facade— if only to avoid descending into unfashionable humanist bathos or bitter social satire. Either that or settle for the steady diet of sensationalism on which so many other museums are forced by the short attention span of an over-entertained populace to subsist. The Abts and Chan exhibitions, however, suggest a commendable sense of formal focus amid the distractions of a thoroughfare where one can still pass from the fashionable to the flea-bitten within a single block; from crowds of strolling fashion victims wearing their affluence on their backs to a lone soul in putrid tatters, sitting on a box outside the Salvation Army Christian Corps, studiously picking at running sores on his grossly swollen legs.

* * *

My classic "there goes the neighborhood" moment came about four of five years ago, while subjecting my wife to one of the periodic walking tours that she wryly refers to as my "sentimental journeys." We had already swung by the settlement house on Henry Street, where there used to be afternoon art classes to keep us off the streets and Friday night dances that often ended in gang fights. I had pointed out where our building had been; where my grandfather kept a pigeon coop on the roof and would stand out on the ledge, wiry and fearless, swinging a long bamboo pole to conduct his swirling flock high above the tenement tops. We had walked through the courtyard of the Vladeck Houses, where my friends and I would harmonize acappella to rhythm and blues tunes in the acoustical project hallways and stairwells. And I had shown her the rubbled lot on Clinton Street, where the 7th Precinct used to be, and where my friend Ronnie and I had spent several hairy hours in a holding pen, being interrogated and terrorized by a pair of drunken detectives over a stupid misunderstanding, until our parents were called out of bed to come and collect us.

Next, I intended to have Jeannie help me pick out a leather jacket in the same place where I once bought one that I wore in high school. But when we got to Orchard Street, we suddenly found ourselves engulfed by an outdoor fashion show put on by one of the East Village-style boutiques that were just then beginning to replace a few of the old bargain stores— robotic "house" muzak blasting; bodaciously sashaying punkette models trailed by a video crew— and I knew right away that this was the beginning of some kind of end.

* * *

The forces of civic promotion were working overtime one recent Tuesday afternoon. The eager BID PR kids were busy handing out the "Go East LES Shopping & Dining Guide" in their storefront visitor's center on Broome Street. And on Orchard Street, the gift shop of the Tenement Museum was as crowded as the D-train at rush hour, doing a brisk business in LES t-shirts, nostalgic picture books, and historical chotchkas like the authentic replica of an 1800s "NO IRISH NEED APPLY" sign that we couldn't resist picking up as a birthday gift for our design and production ace Karen Mullen.

"How long do you think it will take for this place to turn into Whole Foods?" Jeannie asked later, as we strolled through the cavernous Essex Market, another throwback to my childhood, where there's now an art gallery, cleverly named Cuchifritos, among the stalls selling everything from Goya canned beans to Calvin Klein jeans.

Looking around at some of the more trendy vendors, including a fancy chocolatier, that have cropped up among the older ethnic fruit stands, fish stalls, and botanicas, I knew what she meant: How long before that Hispanic couple huddled with their little daughter among hanging sport coats and party dresses, eating arroz con pollo out of aluminum takeout-trays behind a proud display of their wedding pictures, will no longer be able to afford the rent on their tiny clothing stall?

Cuchifritos, on the other hand, will probably be around for awhile—at least until the upscale bars, clubs and boutiques are such a draw that the neighborhood doesn't need the cultural panache of art galleries anymore. In the meantime, Cuchifritos was staking its claim on avant gardeness with "If There Ever Was: an exhibition of extinct and impossible smells."

It consisted of seven "olfactory images" contained in objects that resembled deodorant sticks and were lined up on a table for visitors to pick up and sniff. Accompanying texts told us that their scents had been created by "some of the most renowned 'trained noses' in fragrance design." These

scents were meant to evoke subjects ranging from the aftermath of the atomic blast at Hiroshima to wild plants rendered extinct by deforestation to a convicted murderer's last meal to a bottle of perfume discovered in a leather satchel on the ocean floor after the Titanic sank. To one viewer whose olfactory perceptions were perhaps not as subtle as they should have been, however, they suggested nothing so much as seven different brands of glue stick.

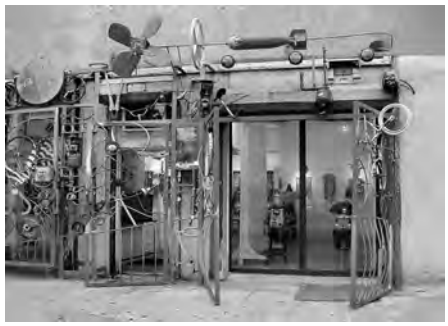
Sol Moscot, "Grandma Sylvia Coming Home from a Cruise in 1949."

More evocative in terms of its site-specific historical relevance was the exhibition on the ground floor of Sol Moscot Opticians, which has recently been turned into a gallery featuring blown-up family snapshots and vintage photographs of the Lower East Side from the '30s, '40s, and '50s by Sol himself. Starting with a patriarchal white-bearded portrait of his father, Hyman Moscot, who started selling ready-made eyeglasses from a pushcart on Orchard Street shortly after arriving from Eastern Europe in 1899, the pictures chronicle four generations of the family, which has been in business on the Lower East Side for 90 years.

Especially fascinating is a black and white print called "Grandma Sylvia Coming Home from a Cruise in 1949," showing a woman in a mink coat with bleached blond hair and shoulders like a linebacker coming through a door like gangbusters, the noir silhouette of a man's fedora visible behind her. She is wearing dangling earrings and ornate sunglasses. Her painted lips form a big "O" as two small children rush to embrace her. It is an image worthy of Diane Arbus.

Along with the photographs, several pair of vintage eyeglasses, encased in plexiglass and labeled "Moscot Originals," hang like sculptures on the walls, and a suitably scruffy young man named Jacob Morris has been installed as a gallery receptionist.

"I get paid to sit on my butt all day and do nothing," he says with a shrug and a sly hipster smile. "Hey, I'm not complaining, man!"



FusionArts Museum

* * *

"Maybe they don't like our facade," Shalom Neuman was musing, referring to the funky spray-painted metalwork swarming the front of the FusionArts Museum, at 57 Stanton Street, as he stood inside, surrounded by his eerie "Toxic Paradise" landscapes, neon-lit oil slicks and swampy landfills limned with a perverse finesse reminiscent of the Hudson River School masters, albeit updated with flashing lights and barnacled with super hero plastic figurines.

Hugely talented, a true pioneer of hyperkinetic multimedia, Shalom shrugged off the slight like the old school bohemian that he is: what do you expect from The System?

Meanwhile, his more volatile manager Deborah Fries was fuming about taking a costly ad with Art in America, only to have Shalom's show ignored and their venue left out of the magazine's guide to "Selected LES Galleries." After all, FusionArts was already here in the early '80s, showing multimedia, multidisciplinary work that Deborah refers to as "assemblage on steroids" decades before the LES gallery scene exploded. Besides the legendary ABC Rio, it's the only surviving pioneer of the East Village era, even though Stanton Street was so deep in the belly of the beast that it frequently got left out of the Alphabet City roll call as well.

Even the Abrons Arts Center of The Henry Street Settlement and the Art Gallery of The Educational Alliance, neighborhood social organizations that date all the way back to the first waves of immigrants before the turn of the century, have been included in the gallery guides and benefitted from all the recent LES publicity, while FusionArts has once again been overlooked. So you have to wonder: Could Shalom be right?

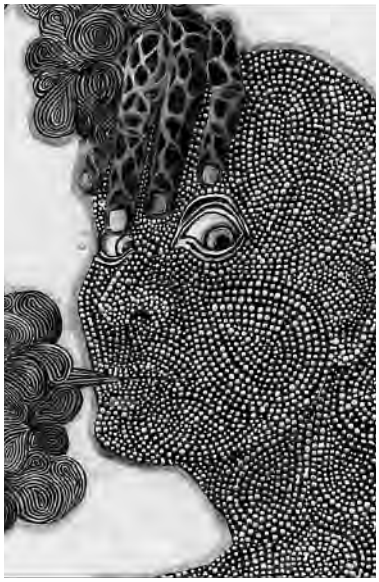
Shalom Neuman, from "Toxic Paradise" FusionArts Museum

Could it be that funky facade, so proudly redolent of anti-establishment chic, looks radically out of sync with the pristine, white-walled "professionalism" of its neighbors?

Four doors down, former 57th Street resident Luxe Gallery's neat white cube at 53 Stanton Street was featuring Amelie Chabannes's reptilian neo-pointillist self-portraits on wood and weird little waxen heads. Next door at the same address, Smith-Stewart Gallery, run by a former curator for P.S. 1, Los Angeles artist Georganne Deen was showing whimsical oils depicting romantic entanglements between nubile nymphs and furry animals suggesting the doodled looseleaf fantasies of especially wicked adolescent girls.

No one is even trying to pretend that the LES scene constitutes any kind of indigenous upstart movement — not when a big, established gallery like Janos Gat deliberately moves down from the Upper East Side in order to be close to the New Museum, and therefore convenient to visiting curators. In its generous space at 195 Bowery, Gat recently mounted a show of Israeli-born realist Ra'anan Levy's large oils of chillingly anthropomorphic stainless steel sinks, their drain-holes suggesting gaping mouths and eye sockets, their faucets leaking rusty water, evoking bloody noses or diseased penises.

On street-level in the same building, DCKT Contemporary, another established venue relocated from Chelsea, showed photographs and videos by Josh Azzarella, in which significant details of familiar news images and film footage were altered to provoke unexpected emotional responses. Particularly affecting was Azzarella's catch-your-breath-then-sigh-with-relief video sequence in which the members of a road



Amelie Chabannes, "Intimate Biometrics #3" 2007, Luxe Gallery

Georganne Deen, "The Inner Cry" 2008, oil on linen, 55" x 40", Courtesy of Smith-Stewart, New York

Ra'anan Levy, "Cloaca Maxima, 2007," Courtesy Janos Gat Gallery

crew working on a downtown street suddenly look up in unison to watch a plane fly harmlessly past the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center.

At Lehmann Maupin, 201 Chrystie Street (which also maintains a branch in Chelsea) a large abstract mixed media work called "A Midsummer Night's Dream (after Shakespeare and Mendelssohn)" had personal meaning for me, since it was credited to "Tim Rollins & K.O.S. with the Henry Street Settlement kids." How cool to see big time gallery representation for kids from the same inner city social agency where I learned, almost a lifetime ago, to take fine art almost as seriously as E.C. Comics!

The long-term vitality of the LES scene, however, will depend not on the major dealers who establish outposts downtown to be in profitable proximity to the "action," but with smaller grass-roots venues like Gallery 128, 128 Rivington Street, where Namiyo Kubo, who was trained in traditional painting in her native Japan but became an abstract artist after moving to New York in 1982, recently showed her "Water Series," vibrant gestural compositions on wall-size sheets of handmade paper. Gallery 128 also periodically presents events by innovative figures such as vivacious downtown performance diva Vernita Nemec and avant garde dancer Yoshiko Chuma, drawing crowds that often spill out onto the sidewalk from its small storefront space.

Among other new and promising galleries is Number 35, confusingly located at 39 Essex Street, a tiny storefront a few doors down from G&S Sporting Goods, where I once bought a pair of flashy satin trunks for a career as an amateur boxer in the Police Athletic League (soon to be abruptly aborted by a single bout with a scrappy colored kid who looked like he had rickets). At Number 35, we saw further evidence of the tendency of even the more modest LES venues to import international talent as well as recruiting artists locally. An art duo from Berlin called Kreissel & Kerber had filled the entire space with a site-specific installation called "First Thing Tomorrow Morning." Comprised of plywood planks, shards of foamcore, snapshots of demolition sites, and computer-generated vector-drawings suggesting scaffolding, the installation recreated what the artists call the "supporting constructions and temporary structures" one encounters in "fragile architectural landscapes."

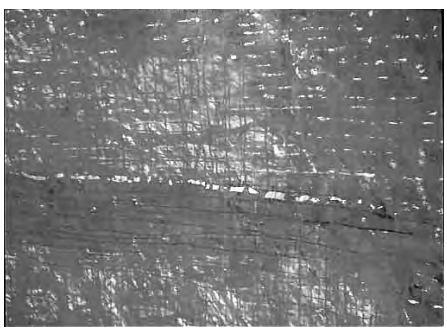
The poignant sense of urban flux that the installation evoked reminded me of walking over to Essex Street just a few minutes earlier from Orchard Gallery, 47 Orchard Street, where we had just seen an exhibition of portrait drawings by Amy Sillman. As we stepped out of the gallery, a young boy nearby yelled several times up to a tenement across the street. Finally, a woman appeared in one of the windows and dropped down to him something wrapped in paper that made a smacking sound when it landed in the gutter.

"That was a common thing when I was growing up down here," I told my wife. "If you wanted to buy something from the candy store, you'd call up to your mother and she'd ball some change up in a piece of newspaper and drop it down to you. We called it 'air mail.' It's the same term people used when they tossed garbage out the window into the air-shaft."

Then Jeannie pointed out to me how the tenement was hemmed in on both sides by other structures surrounded by scaffolding and shrouded like Christos in that yellow Tyvek material that makes buildings under renovation look gift-wrapped. And once again the vanished world of my childhood felt as atmospherically dreamy, distant, and imaginary as Herbert Asbury's classic tome of tabloid sociology, "The Gangs of New York."

For a kid growing up in this then still-provincial neighborhood in the 1950s, after all, the rickety Rube Goldberg contraption at the Streit Matzo factory, on Rivington street, that ran the matzos along a conveyor belt after they came out of the ovens and cut them into uniform sheets to be boxed, seemed like one of the mechanical wonders of the world. On warm summer nights, they'd roll the big corrugated steel door up to let the heat from the ovens out and the mouthwatering fragrance of fresh-baked unleavened bread would permeate the surrounding blocks, luring us in to sample the broken matzos that the bakers tossed into big barrels for the taking.

Josh Azzarella, "Untitled #39 (265) [detail], 2007," Courtesy Simon Preston Gallery



Namiyo Kubo, "Red Stratum," Courtesy Gallery 128

Daniel Joseph Martinez, "It's just a little headache, it's just a little bruise redemption of the flesh. The politics of the future as urgent as the blue sky, 2008" prosthetics, taxidermy, metal, plastic, corn syrup, food coloring, mechanical apparatus, dimensions variable, Courtesy the artist, Simon Preston and The Project, New York

Those pleasant memories were evoked momentarily when we walked into the inaugural exhibition of the Simon Preston Gallery, in its impressive new space at 301 Broome Street, where an installation by Daniel Joseph Martinez occupied the entire front room. It consisted of a machine that appeared to be of similar dimensions to the one at the old matzo factory, with similarly complex configurations of pulleys and belts in constant motion. Only, the function of this mechanical marvel was to position and aim a dead rabbit with the pointing finger of a prosthetic hand sticking out of its snout, spewing buckets of fake blood all over the walls and floor, implicating the viewer, according to the gallery press release, in "a spectacle of violence" that "fuses the body horror of Cronenberg sci-fi with a mutating Nietzchean uber-man."

* * *

Since real estate now determines so much of the reality of the New York art world, Rental Gallery, in a loft on the sixth floor of a tenement at 120 East Broadway that used to be an illegal Chinese gambling casino, may be one of the most relevant venues—at least conceptually.

"So let me make sure I understand this," I said. "You rent the gallery to other galleries from out of town who want to put on shows in New York?"

"Most of them are from Europe, a couple from L.A.," the gallery director, Joel Mesler, said from behind his high white reception desk, where he sat with a silent, enigmatically smiling young female assistant. Like a lot of the other more marginal entrepreneurs in the Lower East Side art scene, they looked like they were waiting for their ship to come in. He seemed to be growing a beard to pass the time.

"It's cool that you're so up-front about it," I said. "A lot of galleries don't like to admit that they rent their space."

"I suppose we're sort of transparent," he said with a little laugh.

The show was by Mirjam Thomann and Jan Timme. Called "In and Out of Context," it was presented by Galerie Christian Nagel, based in Cologne and Berlin. The gallery space, just to the right of the reception area, was empty except for a couple of tall mirrors leaning against a couple of the walls, as though waiting to be installed. If you looked into the mirrors from certain angles you could see, outside one of the windows, a sign affixed to the face of the building: five illuminated white plastic squares held together by a vertical metal bar, each containing a single red letter, spelling out the word "ANGEL." (It would only dawn on me later that it was a play on the name of the visiting gallery "Nagel.")

Beyond the sign was a bird's eye-view of East Broadway, looking south to where the Twin Towers used to dominate the skyline. This is an especially bustling intersection, popular with the Fukianese, the most recent immigrants from China, people of whose irrepressible vitality the long-resident Cantonese and the ABC's (American born Chinese) often seem somewhat wary.

On Tuesday, the big day for gathering on East Broadway, droves of Fukianese come all the way from Philadelphia, Washington D.C., and godknows where else on the take-your-life-in-your-hands economy express buses. Young women who work for the bus companies stand out on the sidewalk, chanting, "Going to D.C.? Going to Philly?" Some of them practically push you onto the buses, even if you're a "lo fan" (foreign devil). They're determined that you should go to Washington or Philadelphia whether you have business there or not!

The Fukianese come in to fraternize with other Fukianese who live in Chinatown; to hang out in the crowded mall under the Manhattan Bridge; to shop for clothes and food items to take home with them; to get 1970s-style shag haircuts in the unisex salons; to eat dumplings in the bakeries along East Broadway. Some of them even come to get married. The storefront wedding salons like Just Pretty Bridal offer a package deal: For a set fee you can rent the gowns and tuxes for the entire wedding party. They do everybody's hair right there in the store and take them uptown in ribbon-festooned stretch limousines for a photo session in Central Park.

Afterward, they all return to Chinatown for a banquet in one of the more moderate-priced restaurants, a big photo blow-up of the bride and groom displayed on an easel in the entryway. Then the gowns and tuxes

Mirjam Thomann and Jan Timme, "In and Out of Context," Rental Gallery

are returned to the store and everybody gets back on the bus, much in the manner of Cinderella's coach turning into a pumpkin.

I once saw a beautiful little bride daintily lift the hem of her gown to step over a puddle, as she alighted like a butterfly from the limo. Under her rented wedding finery, she wore big, clumsy work boots.

"Interesting show," I told Joel Mesler. "Very evocative."

"Glad you enjoyed it."

"I think I'll take the catalog," I said, handing him two dollars.

"Great," he said. "Make sure that one has the postcard in it."

After we left, I imagined him saying to his silent, smiling assistant, "Now we can buy some dumplings."

* * *

Robert Cenedella: The Rebel Teacher and His Legions

For his recent Class Show at The Art Students League, Robert Cenedella, one of our best satirical artists and one of the most popular instructors at the League, produced a hefty catalog called "art® Morning, Noon and Night," that doubles as a valuable historical document.

The iconoclastic Cenedella made Liz Smith's column awhile back with his limited edition red lacquer wastepaper basket emblazoned with a portrait of George W. Bush and the words "White Trash," an exact replica of his Giant Waste Basket Sculpture. He also raised eyebrows on West 57th Street and ruffled a lot of feathers in the art world when he exhibited a painting in the front windows of The League depicting phony aesthetes in a museum genuflecting before a pedestal supporting a huge, steaming pile of excrement.

Cenedella's Class Show catalog, however, is a contrastingly tender tribute to an institution of learning whose strength, he says, " comes from within, in that "The League does not sell degrees."

Scott Higgins, the editor of the catalog, elaborates on this point in his introductory notes: "The school was started in rebellion and remains somewhat obdurate and maddeningly contradictory. Calling it a school isn't really correct; sure there are instructors and students, but there are no grades, no exams and no graduation ceremonies. There isn't even a lecture hall. The League is about one thing and one thing only: art."

Much to his credit, the works reproduced in the catalog demonstrate that, unlike a lot of other instructors one could name, rather than turning out platoons of "mini-me" acolytes, Cenedella inspires his students to discover their own artistic attributes and develop their own unique styles. But of even greater interest to the general reader are the archival articles by past instructors from ASL publications dating back to the 1920s, '30s, and '40s.

"The Death of George Grosz"

Among them are two essays, one on watercolor technique, the other decrying commercialism in art, by the great German painter and draftsman George Grosz, who emigrated to the U.S. during the Nazi era and was Cenedella's teacher and the subject of one of his most powerful paintings, "The Death of George Grosz."

There are also fine essays by other League instructors such as Yasuo Kuniyoshi, the Japanese expatriate who founded Artists Equity Association and Harry Sternberg, who developed silkscreen printing as a fine art medium, among others who share Cenedella's belief in the social responsibility of the artist. What I've always valued and enjoyed most about Robert Cenedella, in particular, is how he fulfills that responsibility with such high energy and irreverent good humor.

—Ed McCormack

Katrin Alvarez: Confronting and Banishing the Demons Within

Like Marlene Dumas, an older artist with whom she shares certain qualities in common, the German painter Katrin Alvarez depicts aspects of human and societal relationships through figures that often take on a doll-like quality, in her exhibition at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from June 3 through 24. (Reception: Thursday, June 5, 6 to 8pm.)

Many of the people that Alvarez paints seem to be somnambulists cut off somewhat self-protectively from their own benumbed emotions, as they traverse desolate landscapes or appear locked into compartmentalized spaces that they cohabit but do not share with others whose sense of isolation is apparently every bit as severe as their own.

In an oil and mixed media work on canvas called "The Painful Reality of Human Relations," for example, one nude figure inhabits a kind of bunker cut into the earth in a posture of despondency, while another, wearing black stockings, bares her buttocks in a gesture more derisive than seductive and yet others wander about disinterestedly in a scene as evocatively conceived as one of Neo Rauch's Leipzig tableaux and as bleakly existential as a stage drama by Samuel Beckett .

Even more stark is "Slums of the Mind," in which the bust-level image of a young woman, her head surrounded by a strange, skeletal rectangular structure of no known utility, partially covers her breasts with her hands as she wanders through a scorched earth landscape suggesting a post-nuclear world. The young woman wears a dazed

"Serenity of Being"

expression such one sees only on the faces of the homeless; the sky above her appears incandescent with toxicity. As in the case of other great contemporary humanists such as Gregory Gillespie and Odd Nerdrum, the severity of Alvarez's vision is redeemed by her ability to transform potentially unpalatable subjects into objects of aesthetic delectation.

In another oil and mixed media painting on canvas entitled "Easy Prey," for example, two ominous male figures appear to stalk a living doll with hinged arms resembling a pubescent girl in scanty underwear, suggesting an allegory of pedophilia. Indeed, the traumas of youth appear to be a recurring theme for Alvarez, as seen in two other works called "Chain of Childhood" and "I Survived My Childhood."

In both, luminous, clear-eyed portraits of women inhabit the foreground. But behind them, phantom-like memories lurk. In "I Survived My Childhood," a masterfully drafted crayon on board, the background figure resembles a ghostly relative of the protagonist of Edvard Much's famous picture, "The Scream."

Perhaps Alvarez's most disturbing image, however, is another crayon drawing on board entitled "Departure from Normal Conditions," where a woman with weird protrusions sprouting for her limbs appears to inhabit a surreal junk shop of mismatched human body parts. Even here, however, despite the grotesque subject matter, the artist's refined draftspersonship saves the day, turning something potentially ugly into a thing of real beauty.

It could very well be that Katrin Alvarez' s artistic mission is to teach us to look unflinchingly at the demons that we all harbor, in the hope that by doing so we may transcend the dangers that threaten us from within. Surely this is one valid reason to make art, and if indeed this is the area that she has staked out for herself, well, no one does it better.

—Maureen Flynn

opportunities

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

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notable exhibitions and events

ACA GALLERIES 529 W 20th St., Charles W. Hawthorne (1872-1930) A Life in Color; James Chapin (1887-1975) The Dark Side of Light through June 27. 212 206 8080 www.acagalleries.com

NEW YORK STUDIO SCHOOL 8 W 8th St., Jilaine Jones Sculpture, June 5-19, 2008 212 673 6466 www.nyss.org/jones

QCC ART GALLERY The City University of New York 222-05 56h Ave., Bayside NY, Rudy Ernst, Multimedia Expressions thru June 28. 718 631 63 96 www.qccartgallery.org

THE 183RD ANNUAL: AN INVITATIONAL EXHIBITION OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ART The National Academy of Museum & School of Fine Arts 1083 Fifth Ave, NY, NY, through September 7, 2008. 212 369 4880 www.nationalacademy.org

LIC ART CENTER OPEN STUDIOS 44-02 23rd St. Long Island City, NY For information contact: Edgar Perez LIC4402@aol.com For Directions:www.hopstop.com

NOHRA HAIME GALLERY 41 East 57th Street. Leopoldo Maler, A multimedia Installation through July 3. 212-888-3550

KATHARINA RICH PERLOW Gallery 41 East 57th Street, Raymond Hendler and Artists from his 'avant garde' Circle June 3-July 16. 212 644 7171 www.artnet.com

THE ART STUDENTS LEAGUE OF NEW YORK, Elizabeth V. Sullivan Gallery, 241 Kings Highway, Sparkill NY, Galina Manikova, Connecting Wall New York June 4-June 29. 845-359-1263 www.theartstudentsleague.org

2/20 Gallery 220 West 16th St., NY, NY, Pato Diaz, "Valparaiso" Digital Painting through June 10. 212-807-8348 www.patriciodiaz.com

FREE & GREEN: "The Complete Guide to New York Art Galleries: The Most Comprehensive Resource of its Kind" by Renée Phillips, is now published on the Manhattan Arts International website for visitors to read Free. This Online Directory has detailed profiles of hundreds of New York City Art Galleries, Private Dealers, Non-profit Exhibition Organizations, Museums, and Alternative Exhibition Spaces with links to their websites. Contact names, style of art shown, artists shown, mission statement, year established, how artists should approach them, and much more is provided! Go to www.New-York-Art-Galleries.com and locate the New York art gallery that is appropriate for you.

WEST SIDE GROUP
Continued from page 12
Definitely a cat to watch.

Then there was Rina Hunter, whose big Expressionist mixed media painting of a wild-eyed, toothy face, "Bandung Guy," could be seen from bustling Broadway through the open gallery door, silently shouting out to passersby, as if to say, "Hey, c'mon in—there's all kindsa great stuff in here!"

—Byron Coleman

Tradition and Originality in the Art of George J.D. Bruce

What makes an artist original, if not a striving after new forms of expression? Those who truly know would argue that it is actually the artist's ability to imbue even the most traditional subjects and genres with the stamp of an individual sensibility. The paintings of George J.D. Bruce are a fine case in point, on the strength of the work he is showing at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from June 3 through 24. (Reception: Thursday, June 5, 6 to 8 PM.)

By all indications, Bruce, who was born in Great Britain in 1930, trained at the Byam Shaw School of Drawing and Painting, and is a member of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters in London is a traditional English gentleman. And the work that he produces in his studios in London and in the countryside of London invariably reflects such a strong identification with the great art of the past that when he was asked by an interviewer to name his most gratifying experience as an artist, he immediately answered, "Experiencing the Old Masters."

Yet for all his reverence for tradition, what makes Bruce's own art relevant today is the freshness and immediacy that he brings to his interpretation of landscape and still life subjects. Indeed, it is obvious that his vision is unmediated by academic considerations and that he is responding directly to the subject at hand when he paints a picture such as "Black Cuillins," one of his smallest yet most exquisitely atmospheric oils on paper.

For there is no formula for capturing as vividly as Bruce does here the particular quality of light streaming through darkly massed clouds and mist, illuminating the tips of foliage in a manner that makes it

"Tiree Headland"

almost appear as though they are being ignited by the sun and sending up smoke. The achievement of such effects requires a gift of natural grace that cannot be learned even from the closest study of the Old Masters.

Indeed, although Bruce attributes his mastery of technique to being classically trained as an art student in the 1950s, it is individual vision of a type that ultimately transcends technique, even while applying technique admirably, that brings alive paintings such as another small oil on paper called "Tiree Headland," in which the artist's interpretation of yet another dramatically overcast sky, rough breeze-blown grasses, and frigid surf along the shoreline of a deserted beach actually evokes a visceral sensation of the climate of the scene in the viewer—at very least, this viewer.

Somewhat more decorous, yet no less vividly limned, Bruce's still life compositions, such as "Blue Flowers with Redcurrants," and "Roses in Fish Bowl," demonstrate his ability to capture subtle nuances of color and reflections of light on various surfaces. But even more significant is the vibrant life that he brings to carefully arranged floral subjects, which do not have the unpredictability, the sense of flux, and the spontaneity of natural settings. What George J.D. Bruce does with these static subjects, however, besides capturing the individual vitality of each petal and leaf with impressive verisimilitude, is to emphasize their formal qualities every bit as emphatically as any abstract artist might. And it is this ability to highlight the abstract attributes underlying the visible world that makes him a painter of rare and original gifts.

—Wilson Wong

Artists Honor the Earth in Chelsea Group Show

Despite a stylistic diversity that belies their self-designation "New York Realism," the artists in the recent group show "Life and Planet," were united in honoring Earth Day and the environment, at 532 Gallery, 532 West 25th Street in Chelsea.

Gali, a well known painter from Kazakhstan who has long been concerned with the effects of nuclear fall-out on humanity showed two large oils on canvas in which the refined beauty of his fantastic realist style, with its softly modeled forms and muted colors, contrasted sharply with grotesquely distorted human and animal figures showing the effects of mutation. These were counterbalanced by two smaller paintings of children interacting tenderly with their pets, presenting the worst and best of all possible worlds.

Berik Kulmamirov, another accomplished painter from Kazakhstan offered a large canvas called "Cold Summer of Caspian Sea," in which, in contrast to the ubiquitous Warhol portraits, the figure of Marilyn Monroe (or a least a dead-ringer for her) was employed for decidedly non-Pop purposes. As she crouched near a small hut, a camel sauntered by behind her; meanwhile, in the foreground, an eagle hovered over a gnarled tree. Loaded with symbolism that was not readily decipherable, Kulmamirov's composition exuded mystery and drama.

Nadia Rivest also used the symbol of a glamorous woman effectively in two oils entitled "Darina 1" and simply "Darina." Striking sultry poses with her long, wheat-straw hair blowing over one eye, Darina gave the impression of being a muse or a femme fatale. Yet a certain defensiveness in her demeanor, made explicit by the artist's ability to evoke subtle facial expressions, made her appear more vulnerable than formidable.

Oil paint piled up in thick impasto and scored linearly gave Olga Papkovithc's painting of an insect on sunflowers "Bee of Octagonia" an almost relief-like effect. Papkovithc has obviously learned much from van Gogh's brushwork, but employs it in a less frenetic manner, in this strong canvas, where gestural intensity conveys vital energy rather than angst.

Aydar Khusainov, on the other hand, employs radiant ribbon-like forms swirling around small, brightly colored silhouetted figures in intricate compositions of a Byzantine complexity. In Khusainov's oil on canvas "Alchemist of Love," especially, the effect is as visually dazzling as the similarly linear paintings of Friedensreich Hundertwasser, but even more fluid.

Ogulkurban Atabalova, on the other hand, practices a style of realism with subtle angular qualities akin to the British painter Wyndham Lewis, which lend Atabalova's oil of a mother and child "Madonna of the 21st Century" a formal appeal to match its emotional resonance. Indeed, Atabalova's formal qualities come to the forefront in the smaller still life "Eggs," where a frypan and other utensils are the central motif.

Leila Elias is a collageist of the first order, creating evocative and meticulous compositions from photographic fragments and other colorful elements that meld with a unique poetic grace. Here, Elias's lyricism is particularly noteworthy in "Butterfly Dream," where a graceful silhouetted feminine profile is the piece de resistance in a lyrically surreal composition that also includes smaller figures, clocks, and the butterfly of the title.

By contrast, Sofya Mirvis creates a lively synthesis of the surreal and the painterly in "Walking From Fate," where disembodied legs and other figurative fragments merge in a gestural blur with swiftly sketched buildings to create a sense of urban action and flux. Then there is Olga Radjapova, whose richly detailed still life "Red Flowers," with its stylized vase offering a brilliant profusion of blooms and juxtaposed by juicily painted fruits makes a modest yet elegant argument for preserving all that is essential in our environment.

—Marie R. Pagano

Camaraderie, Competition, and Joy in CLWAC's 2008 Survey

The true value of a show like the Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Art Club's 2008 Members' Exhibition, seen recently at the Broome Street Gallery, 498 Broome Street, is the opportunity it affords to view a wide variety of diverse works. Here is "art for art's sake" in the most literal sense of the term, a veritable bazaar of diverse works in many mediums, as familiar and new artists vie for one's attention in a spirit of combined camaraderie and competition, amounting to a veritable aesthetic bazaar not unlike that provided by a good art fair.

As always, the show was juried, but while that is most certainly a significant draw for the artists, the judges' choices should have no undue influence on the discerning viewer with aesthetic preferences of his or her own. For while prizes are generally merited, artistic taste is invariably subjective and the wide membership of this venerable women's art organization, named for an American scholar and philanthropist who was the lone woman among the 106 founding members of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, provides something for everyone.

One frequent exhibitor, the sculptor Gloria Spevacek makes this point splendidly with "Fatherhood Penguin," a bronze of a male avian protecting an egg that should resonate with anyone who saw the hit nature film "March of the Penguins," narrated by Morgan Freeman. But beyond its popular appeal, Spevacek's treatment of simplified animal anatomy should also provide another kind of pleasure to viewers with a sophisticated appreciation for abstract form.

The latter category of viewer should also appreciate Jinx Lindenauer's "Cathedral Rock," an abstract marble sculpture that, while relatively intimate in scale, projects an authoritative presence, while fanciers of more figurative tendencies will most probably be impressed by Marsha Tosk's bronze of a lissome female nude, "The Reflecting Pool," its title referring to the figure's self smitten downward glance, as though admiring her own image ala Narcissus from her perch on a rock.

The democratic nature of visual expression in this show also came across in the complementary contrasts between the styles of several other artists as well. As always in an organization so steeped in tradition, various forms of representation made a strong showing. Lucille Berill Paulsen's "Saint Karin," a small, meticulously painted oil in an elaborate arched frame of a young woman with a pretty, clean-cut countenance and a halo encircling her shiny, shampooed-looking hair simultaneously suggested a religious icon and a contemporary parent's idealization of a justifiably beloved offspring. Two very different approaches to a similar subject were seen in Jeanette Dick's intimate rear-view of seated female nude in an accomplished pastel technique and Okki Whang's considerably larger oil of a dreadlocked young male seated with his back to the viewer, a skateboard resting against his legs.

In a somewhat less realistic figurative style akin to the cartoon-influenced 3-D assemblages of Red Grooms, a brightly painted bas relief by Cary Boone Nelson depicted seven mature women seated on a long bench, as though waiting at a bus stop or in a train station, each figure possessed of a strong individual character. Equally evocative in a more boldly generalized manner is "Stormy Evening," a largish oil in a palette dominated by luminous purple hues by Elaine Lavalle, in a which several shadowy figures traverse a hazy city street amid glowing traffic lights, the entire composition conjuring up an almost Turner-esque atmospheric mystery.

Once again, a similar subject is treated in a different manner in "My New York," a watercolor by Ann Chaddock of a rainy night in the Times Square theater district, in which pedestrians with umbrellas weaving among among city traffic under billboards and neon signs are depicted in a style at once spontaneous and filled with loving detail. By contrast, the sleepier atmosphere of nocturnal suburbia is evoked in "Night Walkers," an oil by Joan Hoffman Coll of someone walking two dogs down a quiet street where the cozy yellow windows of shadowy houses glow from behind tall, sheltering hedges, the scene lent a pleasing verisimilitude by the artist's way with chiaroscuro. Then there is Dora Atwater Millikin, who transforms an obscure country road with telephone poles and small nondescript houses here and there into a creamy semi-abstract composition reminiscent of Nicholas de Stael, its subtle color harmonies and smooth yet palpable textures offering much opportunity for visual/tactile delectation.

In "Amanda" Gaile Snow Gibbs gives us a radiant and insightful oil of a wholesome young woman wearing a modest maternity frock and cradling her pregnant stomach. Elizabeth Torak's "Sunday Morning" is a warmly affectionate double-portrait of two portly African American church ladies enjoying a hearty breakfast of pancakes, painted in a robust, bouncy manner that owes something to Rubens. And while they are not exactly portraits in any traditional sense, Janet Indick's "Eve & Adam," companion assemblages of masks, artificial fruits, fake flowers, a rubber snake, a necktie, and other found objects arranged on totemic cardboard tubes create characters as fanciful as some of Saul Steinberg's witty graphic permutations.

One could go on indefinitely describing highlights of this show, among them: Jean Kroeber's gracefully wraithlike wood manzanite sculpture "Curvatura," its fluid form suggesting a nature sprite; a tiny, exquisite pastel called "Peering into the Past" by Margaret Williams McGowan in which a tattered gray sweatshirt hanging on a hook conjures up an almost ghostly presence; a large watercolor by Randy Globus of two scarecrow-like figures with bird houses for heads, the empty sleeves of one clutching a bouquet of dried flowers, standing together in a field, in a deadpan composition as surreal as anything by Rene Magritte.

An embarrassment of riches for a critic, this most recent CLWAC Members' Exhibition offered a plethora of pleasures for the viewer.

—Byron Coleman

Hendrik Smit Possibly the Last All-Out, Balls-Out "Action Painter"

Having put aside his brushes some time back, the Dutch painter Hendrik Smit paints directly with his hands. Unlike so many other things in today's novelty-driven, publicity-hungry art world, this is not a gimmick or a bid for attention on Smit's part, but a serious attempt to involve himself in a more intimate and visceral manner with the act of painting. And it succeeds admirably on evidence of the paintings Smit exhibits regularly at Montserrat Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, in Chelsea, and the even larger number of his paintings available for viewing on his website: **www.hendriksmit.nl**.

Indeed, Smit's use of his hands rather than brushes gives his abstract canvases a unique gestural thrust, a signature style unlike that of any other artist at work today. On first acquaintance with Smit's dynamically rhythmical compositions, with their dramatically splashy, surging, rhythmic forms and brilliant primaries often juxtaposed with fleshy pinks and other complementary hues, one is initially tempted to make comparisons to de Kooning for the most obvious reasons: both are Dutchmen through and through (anyone who ever spent time with de Kooning, as this writer had the good fortune to do once, a few years before his death, can attest that he never lost his accent); both work on a heroic scale putting the full force of the body behind their strokes; both are brilliant colorists and employ bold forms that vacillate between the lyrical and the brutal; both show an acute awareness of and reverence for the great European tradition from which they sprang, even while challenging its orthodoxies.

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Where Smit differs significantly from de Kooning, however, is in his absolutely extemporaneous way of working. According to his longtime friend and art dealer, Allan Stone, who was an executor for his estate, de Kooning "would try out a 'spontaneous' passage on vellum many times until he achieved the desired effect, and then he would meticulously reproduce that passage on canvas." The same was true of Franz Kline, another Abstract Expressionist often mistaken for an "action painter," who made small ink sketches on the pages of a telephone book and actually traced them onto his large canvases with an opaque projector.

Smit, however, improvises his paintings from scratch in the manner of a jazz musician. In this regard, even though they show no stylistic similarities, Smit's working process can be more readily compared to Jackson Pollock's drip technique, for its directness and the manner in which his literally "hands-on" technique (as Christine van Stralen, of the Art Projects Bureau, Almere, the Netherlands, called it in a text reproduced on Smit's website) puts him "right inside the painting," where Pollock always claimed he wanted to be, as well as for its radical departure from traditional practice.

It helps, of course, that Smit is more skillful with his hands than most other painters are with their brushes, articulating heroic forms, smeared and manipulated with his fingers, that veer across his large canvases with breathtaking velocity and force, thrashing like drunken cobras, like the splayed entrails of eviscerated mastodons, or (while it is impossible to imagine Smit ever stooping to such cheap theatrics) like the paint-splashed nude models that Eves Klein used to roll across unstretched lengths of canvas laid out on the floor.

One can only apologize for the luridness of the imagery that Hendrik Smit's expansively energetic compositions inspire in the writer straining to come up with similes to match the visual impact of his paintings—especially since the artist himself takes great pains to avoid recognizable imagery or even the slightest allusion to anything outside the sphere of his adamantly abstract canvases.

Speaking of spheres, some of Smit's most spectacular recent paintings are a series of tondos, the round shape of which makes their dimensions appear limitless and emphasizes the swirling expansiveness of their forms, that—if the artist will once again forgive the writer for "Rorschaching" actual images onto his determinedly nonobjective compositions—suggest brilliantly colorful land-masses and bodies of water on the surface of a global orb (at least the most ambitious of subjects, if a subject must be suggested to help the reader visualize some of the superficial characteristics of these paintings).

Taking the body of Smit's work as a whole, rectangular and in the round alike, what the vitality and immediacy of his oeuvre projects most insistently is the ongoing struggle and ultimate triumph of the creative act, as the artist attacks the canvas with paint-smeared hands (only occasionally does he resort to the palette knife to further articulate certain areas), creating cataclysmic shapes that appear almost as though wrested from within it rather than imposed upon it—so inevitable and organic do their sinuous permutations appear.

To again quote Smit's fellow countryman and spiritual ancestor de Kooning, "There's no way of looking at a work of art by itself; it's not self-evident—it needs a history, it needs a lot of talking about; it's part of a whole man's life." And surely this is true of Smit, whose work can only be understood as a continuum of gestures that, from one canvas to another, give us if not the literal content of the man's life, the imprint of his character conveyed with emphatic energy.

After viewing Smit's website, this writer was put in mind of something he once heard a well known British rock and roll singer exclaim to his fellow musicians as they came offstage, dripping sweat and grinning after a particularly rollicking performance: "That gig was really balls-out, mates!"

"Balls out" seems a most appropriate accolade for the paintings of Hendrik Smit.

—Ed McCormack

Alphonse Lane Brings "Nature Morte" to Strange New Life

In his book "Objects on a Table," Guy Davenport states, "That the kinship of still life with still life down through history is greater than that of landscape with landscape, or portrait with portrait, lies at the center of its mystery," and adds, "Reiteration is a privilege of still life denied many other modes."

Although Davenport's theory is interesting, he's obviously unfamiliar with the highly original still life compositions of Alphonse Lane, an artist who holds an M.F.A. in Painting from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and exhibits at Monkdogz Urban Art, in Chelsea, whose work can be seen on his website: **alphonselane.net**.

"Olive Mist"

For Lane, who works in a meticulous and pristine style in oil on panel, objects on a table invariably take a turn for the surreal. Aside from occasional departures from his usual format—an intriguing composition of floating figurative fragments and symbols called "Sage of Crystals"; a moody stylized landscape called "Fallen Sun Flower"—most of his compositions center on one or more floral arrangements lined up frontally against a background of a single, pale hue. However, the petals and fronds of the flowers often resemble tendrils; their leaves possess a serpentine sinuousness; their colors appear to parody rather than imitate nature: odd pastel hues, tending toward soft, smoky yellows, olive greens, mauves, and baby blues.

The vases and pots that Lane paints are often in similarly offbeat colors and their shapes can be just as fanciful, as seen in "Exotic Vases," where pink and pale violet vessels with curved handles rival for their baroque contours the bizarre plant forms that they hold. Lane's apparently imaginary plant species sometimes suggest alien life forms of an almost sinister sensuality, as flora take on the qualities of fauna, assuming postures that can seem tortured, wounded, even malign.

Two of his most overtly anthropomorphic paintings are "Windmill Flower," and "Dying Limbs," where the plants and their vessels merge visually to suggest single figures gesturing dramatically. Giving the lie to Davenport's theory of sameness, Lane differs significantly from earlier still life painters, such as the Dutch masters or Morandi, in that he seems less concerned with the play of light on surfaces or formal juxtapositions than with the emotional resonance of inanimate objects.

This is not to imply that Lane is neglectful of formal values; quite the contrary: it is his exquisite sensitivity to form, spatial relationships, and subtleties of tone and color that lends his compositions their underlying tension. On one level, his paintings can appear as austerely arranged and uninflected in style as those of William Bailey, another contemporary painter who invests still life with peculiarly suggestive qualities. But while Bailey's tabletop line-ups of China cups, canisters, clayware, and the occasional egg, smoothly painted in subdued hues, have reminded some critics of metaphorical cityscapes, Lane's paintings are all the more remarkable for his ability to imbue an equally restrained technique with a deeper psychological suggestiveness by virtue of his fanciful subject matter.

In Lane's painting "Olive Mist," for example, there is the suggestion of a familial relationship between the three objects that make up the composition. The two taller plants inhabit blue and purple vases, respectively. Waving their fronds like arms, they appear to fawn over the smaller plant in a squat yellow pot between them. While the latter sits self-contained, like a baby Buddha, its odd blue and red petals and symmetrical leaves flourishing, the other two seem to shrivel and wane, as though drained by their doting concern.

While such interpretations are admittedly subjective and probably touch upon meanings never intended by the artist, it seems safe to surmise that each viewer who scrutinizes Lane's work will come up with equally farfetched conclusions of his or her own. So subtly evocative are these paintings that one can't help reading all manner of things into them. And Lane obviously does nothing to discourage such imaginative forays on the part of the viewer when he names a composition comprised of three objects, the central one tall and red with pink petals sprouting out of it like tongues of flame, "Fire Vase," or titles another composition, "These Flowers Never Die."

Something of a mysterious departure for its outdoor setting is a painting called "Blue Light," in which hearty nocturnal blooms in a stout vase are seen against a starry sky, seemingly trumpeting their vespertine glories from their shapely horns. By contrast, in "Red Ocher Vase," small, colorful flowers on a tall vine, rising out of a vessel shaped like a human heart, appear to sizzle like sparks on the fuse of a bomb.

Indeed, it is this sense of imminence, of something strange about to happen, and in happening, to create a metaphor for something else, that imbues the ostensibly simple paintings of Alphonse Lane with a vital complexity which transcends the connotations of passivity and morbidity inherent in the French term for still life, "nature morte."

—Ed McCormack

Elizabeth Delson (1932-2005): The Rich Legacy of a Working Artist

"They are landscapes in my mind, perhaps not immediately evident to all; the colors are vibrant, almost gaudy," the painter and printmaker Elizabeth Delson wrote about a series of paintings she was working on in the Spring of 2002, three years before her death. "I wonder how they will fare; it is like sending children out into the world, not knowing if they will be seen as ugly ducklings or elegant swans."

Excerpted from a longer journal entry at the beginning of the comprehensive website (**www.atalierliz.com**) that is maintained to keep her artistic legacy alive, this brief quote speaks volumes about Elizabeth Delson's devotion to her artistic vocation.

Over a fifty-one year career, which began in earnest after her first child was born in 1960 and she gave up her work as a textile designer for fine art, while coping with all the newfound joys and chores of motherhood, Delson sent scores of paintings and prints out into the world. Some of them won prizes in juried exhibitions or found their way into important private and public collections, including those of The Brooklyn Museum and Hunter College.

"Metamorphoses V: All That Jazz"

As a young woman from Plainfield, New Jersey, recently graduated from Smith College, Delson enrolled in Pratt Institute, in Brooklyn, where she studied drawing with Philip Guston and Richard Lindner. Both were strong personalities and most likely confirmed her belief in her artistic calling; but neither left a lasting influence on her mature style, which, in her abstract paintings, has an organic energy and a gestural strength akin to Abstract Expressionism, and in her more figurative prints often reveals an almost Matisse-like linear fluidity.

Much to her credit, from the beginning Delson seemed to recognize the distinctly different characteristics of her two mediums, never attempting to merge or synthesize them for the sake of achieving a superficial stylistic consistency. Someone once said, "Style is character," and that alone seems sufficient to unite the two aspects of Delson's creativity under the auspices of her singular aesthetic sensibility.

Among her paintings, of which there are 83 in the virtual gallery on her website (the remaining 28 paintings listed in the Painting Catalog are in private collections unavailable for photographing), the works that Delson refers to in the aforementioned journal entry are characteristically vigorous. Their colors are indeed "vibrant," but far from being " almost gaudy," as she described them. Painted in oil on paper primed with white gesso that serves as an integral element in the composition, they employ gestural strokes that intertwine like multicolored flames. Generous areas of white ground around the clustered strokes at the center let air into the composition and emphasize the calligraphic grace and muscular plasticity of the energetically flaring forms.

Although Delson described of them as "landscapes in my mind," these paintings appear more concerned with the underlying energies and essences of nature than with the lay of the land. And, indeed, some works in the series, such as "Metamorphosis V: All That Jazz" appears decidedly figurative, with dancing forms suggesting the angularly stylized nudes in Picasso's "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon," albeit in juicier gestural strokes and brighter hues more akin to de Kooning.

These works are a departure from Delson's earlier Abstract Expressionist oils, in which tightly enjambed areas of strong but muted color appear to allude to landscape, still life and figures, their sensually swelling contours creating dynamic spatial tensions. As she continued to paint, Delson's forms opened up, unlocked, became less convoluted, acquiring the ease, velocity and grace of a mature style. Even while remaining true to the innate characteristics of their medium, retaining its palpable physicality and abstract autonomy, her paintings grew closer in spirit to her prints for the fluidity of their forms.

"The Deep"

Conversely, it would appear that some of her prints simultaneously became more painterly, in terms of being fully fleshed out, as seen in her color viscosity etching "The Deep," an undersea marine scene featuring a large, realistically rendered fish that appears to float outside the rectangle containing its undersea environment, one of her most accomplished and popular images. As a printmaker Delson, who had an etching studio and press in the family's house in Park Slope, Brooklyn, was especially prolific and adventurous. The Print Gallery on her site boasts some 306 examples, mostly etchings, along with lithographs and serigraphs. She employed a variety of techniques, including aquatint and inkless intaglio to lend her prints tactile qualities that are especially appealing in small yet technically dazzling prints such as "An Apple a Day," a witty play on the theme of Adam and Eve, and "Exotic Little Jungle," both with raised, inkless areas that create ornate frames within the picture space for her deftly drawn human and animal figures.

Again, but in a different manner, Delson's use of color relief and intaglio techniques in her "Twelve Tribes of Israel Suite," combining monochromatic figures and elements of landscape with red Hebrew lettering, results in a tactile richness that enhances the series' symbolic significance, putting it on a par with the best Judaica prints of Ben Shahn and Leonard Baskin.

Along with her ability to invest enduring biblical, mythological, and symbolic scenes with contemporary freshness, as seen in her "Metamorphoses Suite" and "Signs of the Zodiac" series, Delson was able to impart monumental qualities to fleeting moments of daily life in a series of modest yet superb miniature prints endowing romping felines, avuncular owls, children at play, reclining nudes, a slice of pie on a plate, and other humble subjects with a presence recalling the ancient Asian masters.

One especially outstanding example of Elizabeth Delson's ability to ennoble an everyday subject is a medium-size color etching in a long, narrow horizontal format called "By the Blue, Blue Sea," which has all the grace and beauty of a classical frieze. Here, several linear nude male and female figures printed in sepia ink cavort gracefully on a stretch of intricately stippled sand, while the tide rolls in behind them in sinuous blue swirls, orchestrated by Delson in as memorably watery a manner as Hokusai's masterpiece "The Great Wave."

One feels quite comfortable placing Elizabeth Delson in such exhalted company.

—Ed McCormack

Passions, Moral and Otherwise, Abound in A.B. Bradshaw's Virtual Galleries

"The Kiss"

While Pop and Minimalism were the major art movements of the 1960s, there was a vital countercurrent—appropriately rooted in the counterculture, and most particularly in the psychedelic poster movement—bent on reviving more visionary and romantic styles. The artists who adhered to this alternative movement revered Aubrey Beardsley, William Blake, Gustave Dore, Albrecht Durer, and other great draftsmen who had fallen out of favor with the advent of the avant garde. And while many vanished with the drug culture, others have stood their ground long enough to see the species of figuration that they championed vindicated in the more permissive aesthetic climate of Postmodernism.

By far one of the more gifted of these contemporary draftsmanly stalwarts is A.B. Bradshaw, whose work can viewed on two websites: **www.originalgalleryart.com** and **www.bradshawgunengraver.com**. The first site features Bradshaw's fine art; the second centers on what he considers to be his commercial work as a professional gun engraver and engraver of jewelry in precious metals.

However, like his fellow engraver (and commercial printer) William Blake—as well as the refreshingly down-to-earth (even when sky-high!) hippie graphic aces of the San Francisco poster movement—Bradshaw apparently makes little distinction between the calling of the artist and craftsman / artisan. That he brings an almost equal degree of craft and creative imagination to the task of engraving an ornate image of a mastodon onto the bore of a gun as to creating a fine art copperplate print, wood engraving, or oil painting of a neo-surreal fantasy scene, makes both sites equally worth savoring.

Like Blake, the forbearer with whom he has the most in common (although the settings in which he situates some of his figures recall the bucolic British landscapes of Samuel Palmer and shades of Hieronymus Bosch haunt some of his more hellish visions), Bradshaw favors visionary battles between demons and angels, symbolizing the conflicts in human nature between the forces of light and darkness.

The self-protective irony so fashionable in much contemporary art seems to have no place in Bradshaw's hierarchy of concerns, even if his eschewal of it may cause some to see him as naive, or even a bit batty in the manner of the aforementioned Blake. Passion is paramount in all of his work, whether it be the morally indignant passion of the cartoon-like drawing "Progress of Man"; the romantic passion depicted in "The Kiss"; or the unabashed eroticism of watercolors like "Long Shot," a luminous watercolor of a lissome female pool player in a flimsy see-through negligee and tall black fetish boots baring a rear-view of buttocks and a flash of pudendum as she leans determinedly over a pool table. Other prints such as "Fellatio" are even more explicit depictions of sexual couplings executed with a healthy robustness and impressive technical finesse, which should offend no adult person—except perhaps those who have religious objections to such subjects or harbor lamentable hangups concerning sexual expression.

Divided into several virtual galleries devoted to a plethora of subjects, ranging from the sensual to the spiritual, the sacred to the profane, A.B. Bradshaw's main website opens with a prominently posted WARNING to the "easily offended," advising "parental guidance and viewer discretion." Those with no qualms about proceeding further will encounter much beauty and many mature pleasures. —Byron Coleman

"100 New York Painters": Candidates for the Canon

That Cynthia Maris Dantzic, longtime Professor of Art Long Island University and award-winning author of numerous art textbooks, is also a visual artist makes her handsome new coffee table volume "100 New York Painters" all the more worthy of one's attention.

Like other doubly gifted painter / writers such as Elaine de Kooning and Fairfield Porter, Dantzic understands her subject from a more intimate perspective than most other critics. Even more important, she does not fall back on jargon or mistake obscurity for profundity. Writing in clear, well-constructed sentences, she offers succinct biographical sketches of the artists, as well as insightful comments on their work that illuminate, rather than obfuscate, the book's profusion of beautiful color reproductions.

"You will encounter a number of household names and iconic museum-owned works known far beyond the confines of New York," Dantzic tells us in her introduction. "These will be supplemented by less familiar, even relatively unknown names, yet not, to my mind, of lesser merit."

The book, which is arranged alphabetically, rather by order of prominence or stylistic sympathy, places artists at different career levels in a random proximity that would be unlikely in a gallery setting. The overall parity attests to the author's taste and makes her point splendidly.

Although Alex Katz is represented by the familiar large canvases for which critic Irving Sandler coined the term "hard edge realism," early in his career Katz exhibited freestanding cut-outs of friends in the art world. More recently, Susan Sills has made lifesize cut-outs of figures from famous paintings the mainstay of her career, expanding the possibilities of the form in unexpected ways, ultimately making it her own.

Wolf Kahn and Richard Mayhew both came of age among the Abstract Expressionists, but applied their gestural vigor and coloristic independence to landscape painting. Marcia Clark's majestic Arctic landscapes achieve their own dynamic synthesis of the gestural and the actual, and Stephanie Rauschenbusch employs the grid to "push" her European and domestic landscapes "toward abstraction."

Among the more familiar names are: Richard Anuszkiewicz, Lennart Anderson, Benny Andrews, Donald Baechler, Will Barnet, Jack Beal, Siri Berg, Bernard Chaet, Charles Cajori, Chuck Close, Harvey Dinnerstein, Lois Dodd, Richard Estes, Janet Fish, Eric Fischl, Audrey Flack, Jane Freilicher, Bob Goodnough, Yvonne Jacquette, Jack Levine, Robert Mangold, Philip Pearlstein, and Paul Resika, Faith Ringgold, Dorothea Rockburne, William Scharf, Pat Steir, and George Tooker.

Some of the up-and comers are: Kelynn Zatarain Alder, Emma Amos, Jane Bolmeier, Richmond Burton, Ellen Cibula, Lisa Collado, Judy Cuttler, Lisa Corinne Davis, Catherine Redmond, Marie Roberts, Shunji Sakuyama, Johan Sellenraad, Laura Schiavina, Posoon Park Sung, Barbara Takenaga, Vivian Tsao, Bob Tomlinson, Audrey Ushenko,Gian Berto Vanni, Ella Yang, and Darryl Zudeck.

"Admittedly, many, even many of the best, will not be found in these pages," Dantzic writes. "I must (and do) acknowledge the large number of those who might as well have been included."

Nonetheless, '100 New York Artists" offers a lively, if arguable, overview of what makes this city, in Dantzic's words, the "Art Capital of the contemporary world."

—J. Sanders Eaton

Kenneth Dinkel's Abstract Paintings Make Their New York Debut at Berkeley Gallery

Like the German artist Gerhard Richter, the upstate New York painter Kenneth Dinkel works in two distinctly different modes. But while Richter's fuzzy photorealism and streaked gestural abstractions are both conceptual conceits —pictures of pictures, so to speak— Dinkel's lyrical landscapes and rhythmic abstractions are faithful representations of what he considers to be outer and inner reality.

Dinkel's gift for boiling landscape subjects —such as a sunset over a beach, a stretch of marshlands at the foot of Bass River, or cloud formations over snow-shrouded mountains— down to a few essential shapes, depicted with solid clarity and vibrant color, could remind one of Marsden Harley's rugged distillations of the Maine coast. (In fact, it was on a visit to Maine, about ten years ago, that Dinkel, then a contractor by trade, first got the urge to paint.) However, his style is less blunt, more earnestly realistic than that of the earlier painter, and his approach is probably more methodical as well, since he claims to be able to visualize each picture from start to finish.

"Rush Hour"

Dinkel's abstractions, however, are more intuitive affairs, involving a great deal of improvisation and discovery, and it is these that the curator Bob Keiber has chosen to showcase in the artist's first New York City solo exhibition at Berkeley Gallery, Berkeley College, 3 East 43rd Street, from July 1 through 31. (Reception: July 9, from 5:30 to 7:30 PM.)

What Dinkel's abstractions share with his landscapes is a sense of straightforward specificity, as though he endeavors to endow less tangible qualities with the same structural solidity as things one can see. At the same time, each composition seems to be based on internalized structures that emerge from, or out of, universal rhythms such as those of autumn leaves blowing in a breeze or distant stars winking in a nocturnal sky.

Indeed, two of his paintings actually verge on a peculiarly postmodern tendency for which I once coined the oxymoronic yet arguably apt term "abstract realism": "Magnolia," where pink buds and pale green vines are set schematically against a pale blue sky, and "Infinite Dream," where tiny points of light enliven a velvety, deeper blue expanse. Only their overall compositions set them apart as more consciously formal explorations than his landscapes.

Other oils on canvas, such as "Mardi Gras" and "Rush Hour," are more purely abstract, with their even more codified overall compositions of intricately meshed cursive strokes swirling like feathers in a storm. Yet Dinkel's penchant for the literal still comes across in the way the buoyant shapes and festive red, orange, and neon green hues in "Mardi Gras" reflect its title, as well as in how the more convoluted forms and dominant blue hues of "Rush Hour" suggest hectic urban rhythms.

Besides reminding one that the aforementioned Marsden Hartley also vacillated between landscape and abstract compositions, the thematic literalness of Dinkel's abstractions calls to mind other pioneering American modernists like Joseph Stella, who based a nonobjective painting on the gaudy lights of Coney Island, and Arthur Dove, who, in one of his most famous paintings, sought a visual equivalent for the sound of foghorns.

Although Dinkel's abstractions often focus on specifics, he captures the essences of his subjects, probes their underlying principles, via the rhythms that emanate from them, rather than their external forms. Yet very definite parallels can be drawn between "Reflections,' one of his larger abstract canvases in the exhibition and "Pantanemo," a marinescape only available for viewing on his website (Kennethdinkel.com). For while the former work consists of radiant rainbow bands of color running horizontally across the canvas, the latter is a similarly spare depiction of sky, sea, and sand with an almost identical composition.

Because most of Dinkel's abstract paintings are overall compositions (the one just discussed being a rare exception), it would be far too superficial to liken certain individual works such as "The Dress" and "Fireworks," despite their densely layered and somewhat atypical splashes and drips, to Jackson Pollock. However, a far more accurate comparison might be made to the art of Mark Tobey, a contemporary of Pollock's whose intimate and contemplative "white writing," informed by Asian calligraphy, is more akin to the graceful rhythms of Dinkel's generally more deliberate mark-making technique.

Like Tobey before him, Dinkel lives somewhat apart from the clamorous cultural capitol that is Manhattan—although the upstate hamlet of Armonk, New York, is admittedly nowhere near as remote as Tobey's Pacific Northwest. As in his predecessors case, this could account to some degree for Dinkel's independence from the trendy influences that were rampant in the heyday of Abstract Expressionism and continue to hold sway in an even more amplified way today. In rural Armonk, where he lives quietly with his wife Nancy, an aspiring portrait painter, and his two young sons, he finds inspiration for his landscapes and, apparently, a serenity that nurtures the inwardness of his abstractions as well.

That neither of his two modes of expression seems at all beholden to fashion strikes one as being much to his credit and makes Kenneth Dinkel's New York solo debut of abstractions at Berkeley Gallery an exhibition well worth seeing.

—Ed McCormack

The "Art Fantastique" of Michèle Vincent at Montserrat Gallery

The skeletons of ruined cathedrals overgrown with fantastic foliage sometimes shelter lovers in a state of metamorphosis from human to plant form in the meticulously detailed oils of the French painter Michèle Vincent, whose work is on view in the year around salon exhibition and also featured in a solo exhibition entitled "The Fantastic Universe," at Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, from May 27 through June 14. (Champagne reception Thursday, May 29th, from 6 to 8 PM.)

Although self-taught, Vincent cites Salvador Dali and Leonor Fini as influences. But whether she is aware of his work or not, one can just as readily discern a strong, perhaps intuitive, kinship with the American fantastic realist Ivan Albright, who painted "The Picture of Dorian Gray" for the Hollywood film based on Wilde's novel, in her penchant for decaying surfaces, rendered in loving detail.

Indeed, Vincent's painting, "The Old Fabric on the Wall" is every bit as striking for its detailed depiction of decrepitness as Albright's famous canvas "That which I Should Have Done, I Did Not Do." However, while the American painter's composition centered on a moldering funeral wreath on an old, battered door, the piece de resistance of Vincent's painting is a shredding piece of cloth pinned to a plaster wall that is crumbling in places, with the bricks showing through and plants growing through the cracks with insects swarming around them. This tattered cloth opens like a window on a nocturnal realm where a beautiful nude woman, waist-deep in a body of water, appears to be embraced by a phantom lover who half-vanishes into the dark blue background.

Other works in the exhibition, all painted between 2000 and 2008, are equally evocative. In one, a handsome man with long blond hair who looks like the warrior hero of a Harlequin women's romance novel stands under the arches of a cathedral that soars skyward in rhythmic reverberations reminiscent of M.C. Escher, as he holds aloft a beautiful woman whose nudity is only half hidden by lush explosions of flowers and feathers far more extravagant than the plumage of any Las Vegas showgirl. Indeed, on closer inspection, these floral elements and avian adornments actually appear to be consuming her flesh, as her handler holds her up like a giant bouquet, and slender vines of flora take on a life of their own, snake-dancing sinuously up toward the light streaming from the crown of the cathedral.

The two lovers are revisited in other paintings, where they are engulfed by baroque configurations among ruins whose erosions and fissures reveal glimpses of clear blue sky, as swarms of birds swoop off into the distance in visionary compositions whose complex symbology, known only to the artist herself, provokes a veritable riot of imaginative speculation in the mind of the viewer.

Painting by Michèle Vincent

Besides the painters she admires, Vincent, who has been widely exhibited and honored in France, Italy and the U.S., also cites an eclectic list of literary influences that includes Baudelaire, Verlaine Lautreamont, Poe, and The Lord of the Rings trilogy, along with other enthusiasms ranging from the classical music to the rock group Dire Straits. All apparently feed into and inform the unique brand of gothic surrealism that she refers to as "Art Fantastique."

—Maurice Taplinger

Akihiko Iwanami's Commitment to Eternal Virtues and Verities

All the publicity surrounding the Takashi Murakami retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum can only serve to further obscure the fact that some Japanese artists are inspired by things deeper and more subtle than anime, manga, science fiction characters, and video games.

Long after art that is beholden to cute cartoon characters and other aspects of popular culture has run its inevitable course, however, it seems certain that the work of Akihiko Iwanami will endure, judging from the paintings seen in his most recent exhibition, which ran through May 31 at Caelum Gallery, 508-526 West 26th Street, in Chelsea.

Having followed Iwanami's work for more than a decade and having had the pleasure of meeting with him on more than one occasion to discuss his aesthetic ideas, it was heartening but not unexpected to see that he has remained steadfast in his commitment to combining the spontaneous velocity of ancient Zen literati ink painting with the aggressive scale and untrammeled energy of mainstream abstraction. And the synthesis that he forges strikes me as much more innately authentic than that of the Abstract Expressionists, who adopted techniques of dripping, splashing, and spattering that originated in Asia many centuries earlier.

Indeed, Iwanami's big, bold gestural abstractions appear to extend the tradition of modernism exemplified by the painters associated with the Gutai group, whose work awakened many Americans to the power of postwar Japanese art—not only as a foreign branch of "action painting" and predecessor of performance art, but as an autonomous movement with its own indigenous origins—when they showed at the then influential Martha Jackson Gallery, in New York City in 1958. Being an artist of the postmodern period, however, and even more adamant about cleaving to his roots in a climate auspiciously hospitable to multiculturalism, Iwanami works not in oils or acrylics, but in traditional mineral pigments on paper.

"Untitled Red"

These pure, natural materials imbue his paint surfaces with an almost contradictory sense of solidity and translucency, making them appear at once marble-like and as mutable as molten lava. He employs the chromatic clarity of mineral colors most glowingly in the recent paintings such "Untitled, Blue" and "Untitled, Red," where the apportionment of space is consummately Japanese, with the dominant hue set against expansive areas of "emptiness." In Iwanami's case, however, the ostensibly bare spaces in the composition are invariably underpinned by a submerged grid, often primed with metallic leaf, that serves as an organizing armature for the freedom of his brush work, which can vary with the mere twist of a wrist from sinuous calligraphic grace to a painterly muscularity reminiscent of de Kooning.

Although they never resort to overt descriptiveness, Akihiko Iwanami's compositions often appear to allude, if not directly to landscape, to the eternal forces and essences that underlie all of nature, as well as to the infinite spaces and mysterious misty atmospheres in traditional Asian scroll paintings. With their luminous colors and surging forms, partaking of a wide variety of exuberant and vigorous mark-making techniques, they are expansive, ambitious, and magnificent in a manner that makes much other art that is currently being touted for its fashionable attributes seem transient and trivial by comparison.

—Ed McCormack

Joe Chierchio's Atmospheric City of Dreams

John Russell once called New York City "one of the supreme subjects of our century." And certainly the great and ever-increasing number of painters, photographers, poets, novelists, and filmmakers who have fallen under the city's spell attests to its fascination. Few, however, have given us as delightfully skewed a view of the Gotham as Joe Chierchio, a romantic who grew up in Brooklyn.

Fresh from a successful exhibition at The Gallery, in Sag Harbor, Chierchio again brings his unique style of nostalgic art noir to the Gallery of Graphic Arts, Ltd., at 1601 York Avenue, from September 9 through October 4.

Like Edward Hopper's famous painting of a nocturnal dinner, "Nighthawks," Chierchio's images have a way of lodging themselves into your memory, where they linger like the melodies of old jukebox tunes. Even more peculiarly, each new picture appears to take on the aura of an instant classic. Indeed, Chierchio is the visual poet of "Deja vu all over again," to borrow Leo Durocher's witty redundancy; the nostalgia factor is so strong in his work that you could swear you've seen these scenes before—either in an old movie or a small out of the way museum somewhere in some alternate reality like the one that Chierchio depicts.

And indeed it is another reality, one in which the guys and dolls of film noir meet Pulp Fiction and New York landmarks can be wheeled around and rearranged like stage sets to create locations that ultimately seem realer than real for duplicating the vividness of dreams. In "Pershing Square," for example, Chierchio has restored the row of elevated shoeshine chairs outside Grand Central Station.

After all, grown men don't wear sneakers in Chierchio's virtual realm and most of them wouldn't dream of venturing out without a natty fedora or at very least a floppy cap like one of the bootblacks wears as he buffs one of the customer's brogans —possibly in time to a tune like the one being blown on a trumpet by a hepcat in a t-shirt and stingy-brim bebop hat high up in a tenement window with a pigeon perched on its upper ledge as purple dusk descends over this city of dreams, in yet another atmospheric scene by Chierchio that reminds you of Chet Baker's cool jazz or one of those great old movies like "Young Man With a Horn."

Make no mistake about it: every picture tells a story in the art of Joe Chierchio, and technique has a lot to do with it: that mellow, grainy, well-worn quality that he gets with colored pencils touched up with watercolor could remind you of the rusty patina on your old man's work clothes hanging on a hook when you were a kid. The firm black outlines in his drawings could also remind you of old-fashioned comic book illustration, albeit with more subtle shadows and highlights enhancing the atmosphere, as seen to particular advantage in "The Last Train," which could recall that great last scene in a romantic movie where the girl who's been having her doubts finally makes up her mind and comes racing along the platform as the guy hangs halfway out of the train, their hands reaching out to each other just as the door is about to close, plumes of smoke flowing from chimneys in the background and the bridge, that beautiful Brooklyn Bridge that the artist knows so well, poised majestically against the deep blue night sky.

Romance is everywhere in this city of dreams, where in another picture called "Date Night," a couple gets out of a Art Deco-looking coupe of a cab on a street where a Horn & Hardart Automat is right next door to a glittering movie marquee advertising "HUMPHREY BOGART in 'KEY LARGO' with LAUREN BACALL."

Not only the romance of young couples in love but of the city itself, as in yet another work called "Milkman," in which, having parked his immaculate white truck at the curb, the character of the title, carrying a rack of bottles, ascends the stoop outside a genteel Henry James brownstone just as dawn breaks over Washington Square Park, the familiar arch rising toward the gilt-edged clouds like the Arc d' Triumph, transforming familiar Greenwich Village into an imaginary Paris.

But there's a simultaneously grittier side to Chierchio's private world as well that comes across in "The Shape Up," where a longshoreman in a floppy cap, a lumpy overcoat thrown over his shoulders like a cape, sits shivering on a chilly waterfront pier with a tugboat behind him at approximately the same time as the milkman makes his delivery. This guy clutches a rolled-up copy of the Daily News like a club, and casts a wary, shifty-eyed glance over his shoulder. Maybe he's simply watching for the stevedore, hoping to catch his eye and be hired for a day's work; or maybe he owes money to the loan sharks on the gangster-infested docks and is ready to make a run for it if he sees their thugs approaching to work him over like they did to Marlon Brando in "On the Waterfront." Either way, it's clear that, as my old man used to say, "life is no picnic on the docks."

The last time I spoke to Chierchio, when he called to fill me in on the dates of his exhibition, he was excited about a new piece he was working on.

"I'm gonna call it 'The Phone Call,'" he said. "It's a guy standing up at a pay phone, looking over his shoulder, watching a girl go into a hotel. It's down by the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and you can see the Brooklyn Bridge in the background. The guy has this little satchel beside him. I don't know whether they're going to get together, or if he's on the lam, or what..."

Like I said, there's a story behind every picture. But it's obviously as mysterious to the artist as to the viewer, because Joe Chierchio's pictures have a life of their own.

—Byron Coleman

Robert Baribeau:

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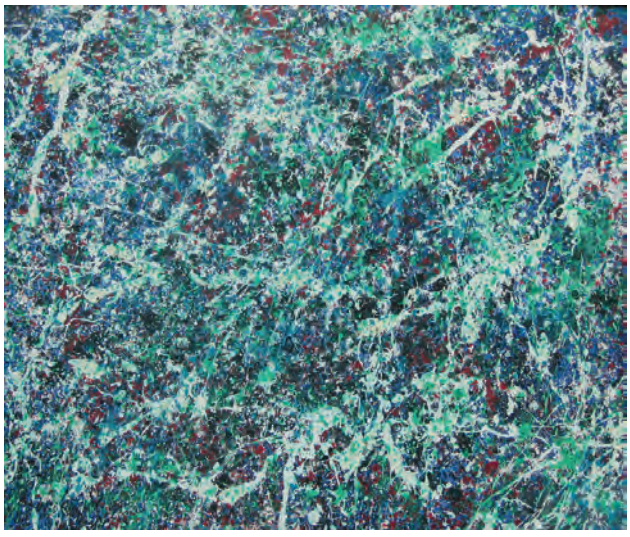

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