

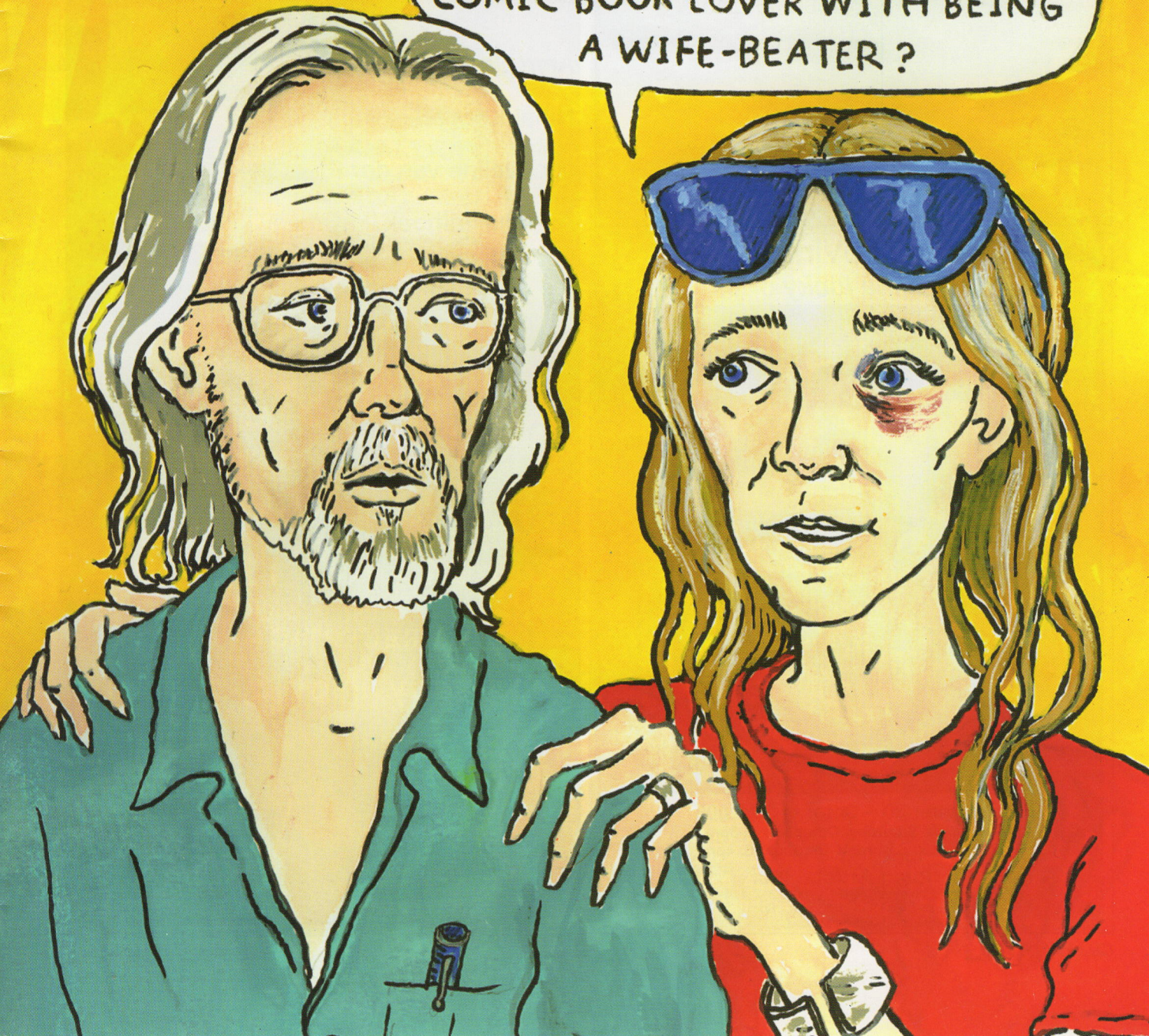
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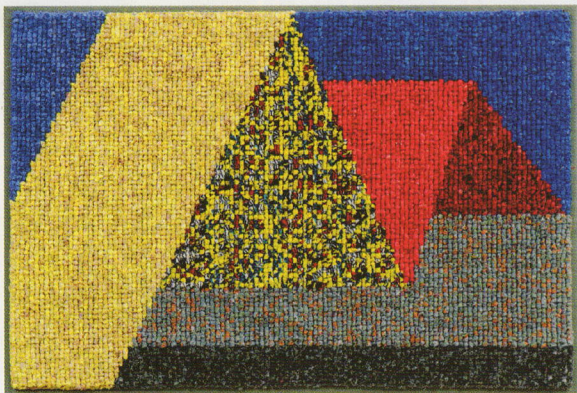
## THE GREAT COMIC BOOK WITCH HUNT

by Ed McCormack  
page 20

COULD IT BE THAT, IN SOME WAY, YOU EQUATE BEING A GROWN-UP COMIC BOOK LOVER WITH BEING A WIFE-BEATER?







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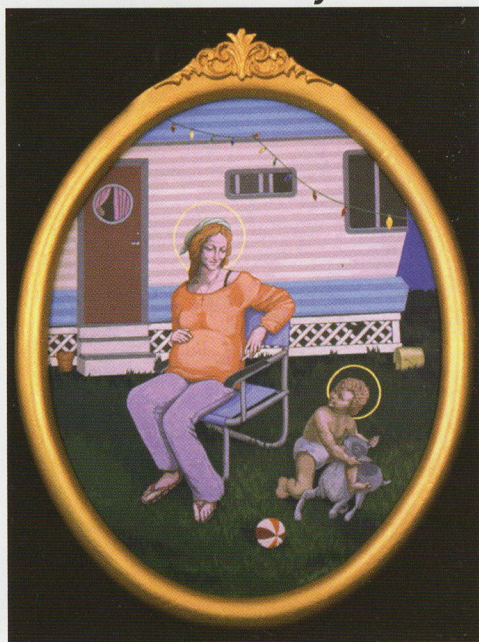
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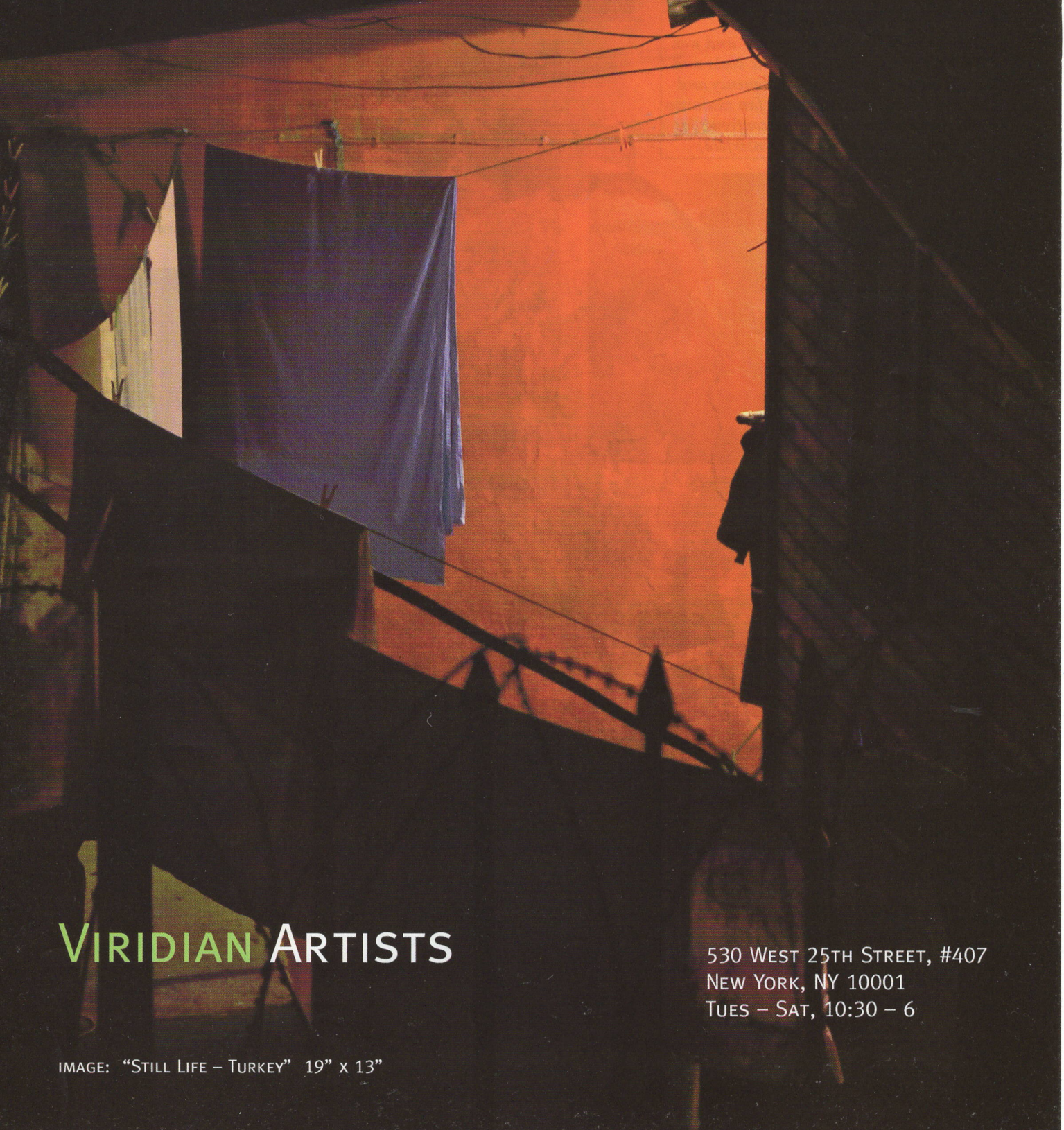


# WALLY GILBERT:

## STILLNESS AND MOTION

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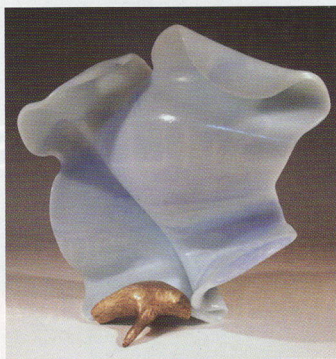


# G&S

## Highlights

### On the Cover:

Before they were "graphic novels" and won Pulitzer Prizes, they were comic books and were blamed for juvenile delinquency and burned in bonfires. A lifelong fan examines their new respectability and confronts his own cultural snobbery. (centerfold)



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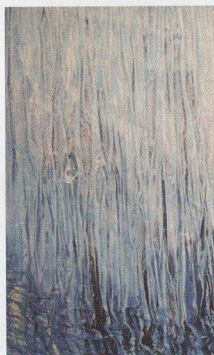
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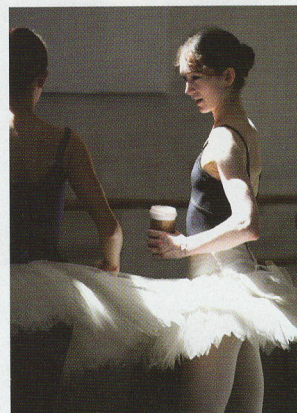
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## GALLERY&STUDIO

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## Simple Pleasures Yield Complex Rewards in West Side Group Show

Although other styles were also in evidence, a certain sophisticated Primitivism permeated "Simple Pleasures," a recent group show co-curated by Robert L. Jones and Robert N. Scott for the West Side Arts Coalition, at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at 96th Street and Broadway.

Carolyn Kaplan, for example, creates bold collage paintings with a deceptively innocent quality. While the use of cotton-balls as apparent "snowball-blossoms" in her landscape "Cherries in the Snow" was an appealing touch, Kaplan's urbane compositional skills were apparent in a bold, Braque-like still life called "Flowers," where boldly cut-out petals resembled fingers on stylized hands.

Similarly, Theresa Rosano projected a folkloric mood in her exuberant oil on canvas "Puerto Rico," wherein white-garbed figures dancing outdoors in a quaint little village were evoked in impasto as thick as cake frosting. However, Rosano's still life "Props for the Opera Carmen" revealed a more classical side to her talent.

Robert L. Jones took another approach to still life in his realist pastels in which the play of light on various surfaces was exquisitely evoked. In Jones's "Purple Peppermint Gift," the piece de resistance was a small candy wrapped in cellophane. By contrast, in "Conga Girl," the image of a sultry young woman, either painted or reflected on a shiny red conga drum formed the focal point of the composition.

Then there was Yee Mee Lee, whose small floral compositions in pastel-medium were notable for their tightly compressed compositions, each focusing on a lush bouquet in a stout vase. Lee's weathered wooden frames seemed artfully chosen to set off her pictures to perfection, actually functioning as integral elements of her compositions.

Another realist, Robert Schultheis, captures urban subjects, in compositions as notable for his skillful delineation of folds in clothing as for his insights into personality. One oil by Schultheis focused on chess players and onlookers in a public park; another, wittily titled "Neighborhood Watch," captured the nosy attitudes of three elderly women sitting on a ledge, watching something outside the picture space with great interest.

Shirley Z. Piniat, an artist who combines a rough-hewn simplicity with compositional savvy to striking effect showed a small mixed media landscape with weathered structures clustered around a marina. Called "Rockport," it featured blunt forms and subdued colors in a manner akin to Marsden Hartley.

A faux naive style served Gertrude V. Fleming splendidly in "The Yellow Rose of Texas," a painting of a languorous woman with flowers in her hair. Equally charming for its wit and formal simplicity was "A Beauty in Repose," in which another glamour girl reclined near a window while a bluebird serenaded her from a tree limb.

Tania Espina's acrylic on canvas "Forgotten Umbrella" was a sweeping vista of brilliant watery expanses further enlivened by a brightly colored beach umbrella, apparently abandoned on a sandy island. But Espina showed a more formal side in smaller paintings of tropical windows that also functioned as strong geometric abstractions.

More overtly nonobjective, the acrylics on linen of Chantel Soustra combined cubist structuring with abstract expressionist brushwork. Soustra's gestural vivacity was nicely tempered by her way with muted color harmonies.

"Alone and Happy" was a spare image of a floral subject evoked with utmost grace by Robert N. Scott, apparently created with a twig dipped in diluted acrylic paint. Scott also demonstrated his ability to impart similar grace to more densely worked landscapes and marinescapes, conjured with energetically overlapping strokes of color.

Finally, there was Yukako, whose calligraphic works in Sumi-ink and water media on handmade rice paper achieved a delicate balance between the abstract and the figurative. Yukako's deftly drawn images of human hands and feet floated gracefully amid splashy linear forms, laid down spontaneously with whiplash strokes of a loaded brush.

—Marie R. Pagano



# Stillness and Motion, Tension and Grace, in the Art of Wally Gilbert

After the advent of the dry-plate and the first hand-held camera over a century ago, and the controversy attending the widespread introduction of color to fine art photography in the 1960s (although the technology had existed since the 1930s, previous to that period, photo purists had deemed color suitable solely for commercial purposes), the advent of the computer has brought about what just may be the third great photographic revolution.

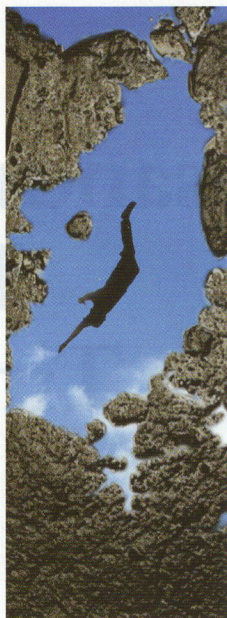
Formerly, Wally Gilbert, a retired Harvard professor and molecular biologist who won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1980 for his groundbreaking work in rapid DNA sequencing, used the computer for scientific research. More recently, since becoming a visual artist, Gilbert has been employing computer technology just as innovatively to create images such as those in his latest solo exhibition "Stillness and Motion," at Viridian Artists, Inc., 530 West 25th Street, from September 2 through 27. (Reception: Thursday, September 4, from 5 to 8pm.)

In an earlier exhibition in 2006 in the same Chelsea venue, Gilbert showed a series of digital still-lives called "The Norblin Project," focusing on machinery in a cavernous former factory in Warsaw, Poland, that had been

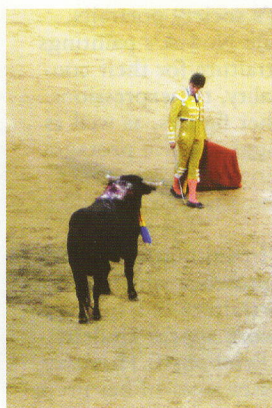
turned into a technical museum. By virtue of his use of microcosmic fragmentation and closeup views, he imbued the long unused mechanisms with new life, lending their forms monumentality, their grease-smeared steel surfaces an eerie, even erotic, suggestiveness by virtue of his sensuous deployment of light and shadow.

In the two new series making up his present solo show, Gilbert works with more contrasting qualities between stillness and action. His inanimate subjects continue to engage us through his selective use of close-up details as a vehicles for abstraction. One of the most dramatic examples is a completely geometric composition in which uninflected areas of brilliant blue, tan, and black converge in a manner that could easily be mistaken for a stark Minimalist color field painting by Larry Zox or Ellsworth Kelly. Only after reading the title, "Corner--Los Angeles," does one realize that this is actually a literal image of an actual location.

Thus here, as in another digital print titled "Arches—Turkey," a study in subtle



"Falling"



"Bull—Madrid"

frame, and a piece of cloth hanging on a nail or hook nearby take on the psychological weight of religious relics or the objects in an assemblage by Joseph Cornell. Just as evocative are prints such as "Still Life — Turkey," where laundry hanging in a courtyard takes on a timeless universality, suggesting theatrical scrims backstage, and "Bird — Turkey," in which the distant shadowy creature and fragments of cloud, are reflected in what appears to be an ornate circular mirror. It is a conundrum worthy of Rene Magritte.

Most contemporary artists who could create juxtapositions of objects as compelling as these, and endow them with such atmospheric subtleties of

beige tones akin to Robert Ryman, Gilbert succeeds splendidly in his stated goal of "intentionally using fragments to represent the whole, forcing the viewer to complete the image and the message," providing us in the process with a fascinating exploration of the juncture where abstraction meets critical reality. But he also does a lot more than confound and entertain us with perceptual puzzles that probe into the nature of things. In "Still Life —

Orkney," for example, the image is less ambiguous, but no less mysterious. The large area of blackness surrounding a deep stone window becomes a kind of shadow-box where potted plants on the inner ledge, a small molted mirror or faded photograph in a simple wood

chiaroscuro, might continue to mine and refine them, to the exclusion of all other subjects, for the length of an entire career. But not Wally Gilbert, who explores the hermetic worlds of ballet (in a rehearsal studio in Boston) and bull fighting (in an arena in Madrid) in two new sequences of prints that give an intimate view of those rarefied realms of endeavor.

One of Gilbert's most casually endearing prints rivals Degas for capturing a petite ballerina in a candid moment in the studio. Obviously, it is a dress rehearsal; for rather than workout leotards, she and two fellow dancers in the background are wearing fluffy white tutus that give them the look of dainty exotic birds. However, the big Styrofoam coffee cup that the central figure clutches in one hand introduces a down-to-earth note that lends the image a vernacular contemporary charm unlike anything Degas ever painted.

Other prints in the sequence capture the dancers either at the practice barre or soaring through the air in full costume, their fluid grace presenting a dramatic contrast to the tense yet similarly action-filled ritual of life and death, enacted by men and animals, that the artist freezes in motion in his bull-fight scenes. In the later series, the matador's swirling evasive grace as he sidesteps the enraged animal's black hurtling bulk and lethal horns, makes for high drama.

But perhaps the highest drama of all can be seen in the relatively still picture which depicts a tense Mexican standoff between man and beast: the bull with his back to the viewer; the matador dragging his cape behind him in the dirt of the arena, as he saunters toward the animal, coyly offering his unprotected torso as though to a lover; his sword at his side, pointed downward; head lowered, hips thrust forward, affecting an almost effeminate seductiveness, as he closes in for the kill...

It is Wally Gilbert's ability to encapsulate so much drama in a single image that makes him a truly extraordinary artist. This exhibition, which also includes two sensational ten-foot long prints, presented on canvas, of airborne human silhouettes reflected in a pool of water, is his most dramatic to date.

—Ed McCormack



"Still Life—Orkney"



# Entering Aleksandra Nowak's Enchanting Time-Capsule

Subtleties of human nature and nuances of emotion are generally assumed to be the province of literature, rather than of painting. While countless art historical examples attest that this was not always the case, there would appear to be a standing rule in contemporary painting that figurative subjects must be divested of all emotional content, either through formal distancing, Warholian irony, or both.

One would almost be driven to the dreary conclusion that the fine distinction between authentic sentiment and the crude burlesque of mawkish sentimentality had been all but lost, if not for an artist such as Aleksandra Nowak, whose exhibition of new paintings at CFM Gallery, 112 Greene Street, can be seen from September 19 through October 13.

Nowak has been favorably compared to Egon Schiele for her sinuous line and manner of employing oils with a translucence akin to watercolor. Yet her vision transcends decadent eroticism to touch upon feelings comparable for their diverse complexity to those in the plays of Schiele's Norwegian near-contemporary Henrik Ibsen. Indeed, the people that Nowak paints are usually clothed in a manner that could very well suggest the 1800s rather than our own time, in off-white dresses, blouses, or other garments with flowing lines and ample folds that afford the artist an opportunity to display her masterful way with drapery.

These archaic garments, along with accessories and hairstyles reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelites, enhance the timeless quality of her paintings. In some compositions, such as the "Dance with Wind," they are so gossamer as to float about the figure like smoke, furthering the sense of a spectral being in flight. In others, like "Any Moment," with its

palpable atmosphere of pregnant anticipation, the old fashioned white dress of the seated woman, rendered in creamy impasto that presents a substantial contrast to the delicately glowing glazes which compose her facial features, calls to mind Sargent's society portraits.

However, while Nowak's paintings touch upon portraiture for their convincing individuality, the expressions and gestures of her figures, as well as their settings, suggest active protagonists in an ongoing narrative, rather than sitters posing passively for a likeness.

Thus Nowak's paintings are endowed with a dramatic presence which goes beyond mere portraiture in a manner that makes her work appear kindred with that of the Symbolists. However, she clearly surpasses most of her predecessors in that movement for her ability to evoke emotion without resorting to the hand-wringing histrionics of nineteenth century theatrical conventions. Rather, the loosely clasped hands, knitted brow, and hooded eyes of the pale yet consumptively rosy-cheeked young woman in her painting "Jealousy" evokes the grip of the "green-eyed demon" with admirable subtlety.

Similarly, the young man reclining in a white Lord Byron blouse in another notable canvas called "Repose" manages to reference Marat's final rest in his bath while ostensibly depicting nothing more drastic than an ordinary afternoon nap. Such thematic ambiguity charges Nowak's paintings with underlying psychological tensions, even as their calm, still surfaces, appear to declare, in the words of Ibsen, "The noise of the crowd dismays me. I do not want to let my coat be spattered with the mud from the roads. I want to await the day of the coming in spotless feast clothes."

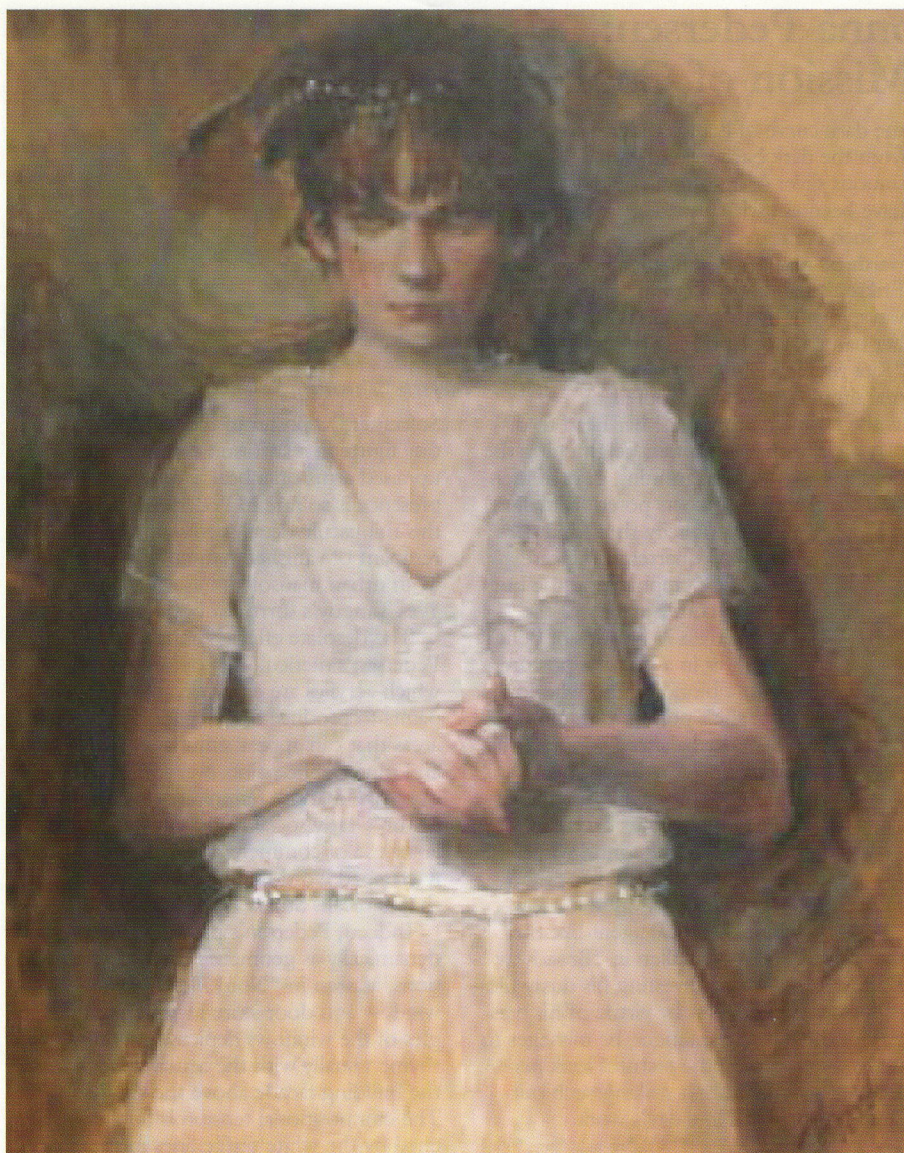
The palette of subdued earth hues

that Nowak relies upon to lend her scenes a mellow patina of time is especially effective in "Cabaret Dancer." For, here, one might be viewing the saucily animated redhead hitching up her skirt to show off her knocking knees, as she frolics naughtily in high-laced black boots, through the amber lens of a drowsy inebriate's mug of beer! By contrast, two portrait heads, titled respectively "Innocence" and "Fortune Teller," reward close scrutiny more gradually: the former for the scrubbed, almost boyishly angular beauty of the girl who meets our gaze with open curiosity from beneath her straight, dark bangs, the latter for the somewhat spooky aspect of the woman whose cat-like eyes stare hypnotically from the shadows of a more imposing awning of hair.

From such mystical suggestiveness it's an effortless step to full-fledged fantasy, as seen in "Mysterious Gardens," where one confronts a shapely female faerie with magnificent insect-wings flaring out behind her. Yet somehow Aleksandra Nowak manages to invest even her floral compositions, such as "Autumn Roses" and the even more conventional still life arrangement "Dry White Roses" with an unusual emotional resonance. In the former work, the sheer organic vitality of the sensuous white roses filling the composition speaks of sentience that is startling in an inanimate subject, while in the latter painting, the pale, bowing flowers interned in a glazed clay pot and the few scattered leaves on the table below project an elegiac mood less labored but no less poignant than Ivan Albright's Magic Realist image of an old funeral wreath moldering blackly on a forbidding steel door.

No contemporary painter exemplifies the Belgian dramatist and poet





*"Jealousy"*

Maurice Maeterlinck's notion of Symbolism as a "theater of silences" more thoroughly than Aleksandra Nowak, who invests even the most commonplace subjects with hidden meanings that hint at underlying spiritual energies. To the earlier Symbolists, who reacted against the purely visual explorations of the Impressionists, after all, the true subject matter of a picture was to be suggested, rather than understood. In an age when science and technology devour mystery daily, Nowak still possesses the secret formula for making mystery manifest in pigment and restoring one's sense of wonder.

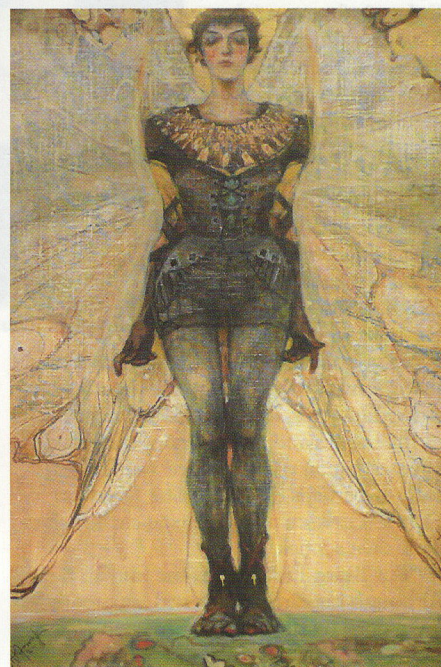
—Ed McCormack



*"Cabaret Dancer"*



*"Dance With Wind"*



*"Mysterious Gardens"*



*"Autumn's Roses"*



# Bjørn Eriksen and Jonna Pedersen: Deadpan Danes on a Mission of Cool

There can be a peculiar seductiveness in uninflected things. Case in point: the Danish painters Bjørn Eriksen and Jonna Pedersen, who excavate the surface of the everyday world to offer a plethora of perverse pleasures for those attuned to the semiotics of the banal. (Both artists are represented in New York by Monkdogz Urban Art, 547 West 27th Street, and their work can be seen on their websites: [www.eriksen.be](http://www.eriksen.be) and [www.jonnapedersen.dk](http://www.jonnapedersen.dk).)

Although they paint separately for the most part, and each has worked in a more or less expressionistic manner in the past, the two artists appear to be on a shared mission of late; so much so that, after I suggested in a previous review that Eriksen's figures might look very much at home in Pedersen's urban settings, they even experimented with painting together on the same canvas, presumably to see if they could merge their different visions of ennui into a definitive synthesis.

Such a collaboration calls to mind when Picasso and Braque were cooking up Cubism and became for a time the Bobbsey Twins of art, almost hard to tell apart. However, in spite of the synchronicity of their styles and symmetry of their names (suggesting an old fashioned vaudeville team—perhaps billed as “The Deadpan Danes”) Eriksen and Pedersen each stick to their own schtick.

For Bjørn Eriksen it is the human figure. Although his earlier work was apparently influenced by the Scandinavian neo-primitivists of the Cobra group and the German neo-expressionists, his present paintings seem more akin to early Alex Katz, when there were still faint traces of New York School “process” in Katz’s figurative style. But being a postmodernist, Eriksen’s hints of the hand may be more beholden to the so-called “Bad Painting” movement of the 1970s, in which deliberately crude paint handling was combined with narrative intimations for ironic effect.

The double irony, though, is that even when he aims for bad, Eriksen is a very good, which comes across particularly well in his portraits, such as “Laila,” depicting a woman with a red rose in her hair whose somewhat frumpy Mona Lisa demeanor he manages to endow with a winsomeness akin to Elizabeth Peyton’s wispy rock and roll androgyness. Capable of aping the clumsiness of folk art by making a tan shadow on Laila’s face as harshly palpable as a caramel wafer, he can turn right around and sever

the dark curve of her shoulder from the dark background with a sinuous sliver of light that could have been cut with a razor.

Such contrasts between awkwardness and grace animate all of Eriksen’s paintings in compelling ways, giving the topless girl with her name tattooed on her pelvis in “Rita Meter Maid” an archaic formal simplicity akin to Modigliani, as she raises an arm above her head to display a clean-shaven armpit; heightening the nerdiness of the four grinning guys in identical checkered sportcoats posed frontally

like a publicity shot for a barbershop quartet, in “Please Return”; emphasizing the burlesque-comic inanity of the bozo in an ill-fitting suit bending over in a kick-me posture with a blond bimbo who looks like she’s posing for a pin-up calendar balanced coolly on his back, in “Anything Goes.”

Bjørn Eriksen based the latter two paintings on old photographs that he found while visiting New York (perhaps they were discarded by some low-rent theatrical agent like the one played by Woody Allen in “Broadway Danny Rose,” while divesting his dusty files of former clients). But by virtue of his mastery of the deadpan manner, he manages to make the people in the pictures look perfectly bored, as though striking such outlandish poses is all in a day’s work.

\* \* \*

The first picture Jonna Pedersen ever painted was a copy of a work by the Danish Cobra artist Asger Jorn that she fell in love with in the Silkeborg Museum. For a while, earlier in her career, she worked in a similarly frenzied gestural manner, before becoming enamored of the bland facades of shops on streets devoid of people, yet somehow seemingly haunted by their absence.

The urban environment that Pedersen evokes suggests the aftermath of one of those “smart bombs” that can supposedly wipe out an entire population without destroying property—a Godsend, some might say, given the relative value of real estate over human life in today’s world. Sans signs of life, everything appears pristinely undisturbed in Pedersen’s paintings. But while Denmark is technically a welfare state, remnants of rampant consumerism are everywhere evident in the variety of signs plastering the storefronts.

Not knowing Danish makes them all the more intriguing, even though Pedersen supplies English titles. In “Tanning Salon,” under the shopfront that says “Consol



Jonna Pedersen “Tanning Salon”

Solcenter,” a poster in the window shows a tiny figure in a swimsuit exulting with upraised arms on a beach. Since the human presence is so rare in Pedersen’s paintings, this minuscule detail seems almost spooky, a remnant of vanished natural joy embalmed in an urban mausoleum as alien as one of Yves Tanguy’s surrealist boneyards.

The desolate effect is enhanced by Pedersen’s meticulously detailed style, in which acrylics are employed like tempera paints to produce flat, dry-looking color areas that can appear simultaneously bright and muted. She paints every brick in an obsessive manner reminiscent of Ben Shahn’s early social realist cityscapes; yet her jazzy use of commercial signage and abruptly cropped word fragments as abstract shapes recalls Stuart Davis.

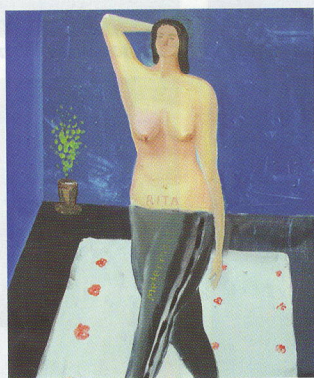
Indeed, Pedersen’s paintings function dynamically as geometric hard-edge abstractions, as seen in “Nord Flex,” a picture of a window and door store in which the rectangles of the windows depicted on the signs rhyme visually with the actual windows in the building facade above the shopfront. The compositional tension is further heightened by the white traffic lines in the gray gutter, which contradict the two dimensional picture plane with implied perspective.

Yet to put too much emphasis on the formal attributes in the paintings of Jonna Pedersen would be to short-change their universal symbolic resonance. Not many artists, after all, can present one with a bland stucco structure called “Gastronomia Italiana,” in what appears to be Danish strip-mall, and make something about its deadpan eeriness evoke the night the notorious renegade Mafioso Crazy Joey Gallo went into a place called Umberto’s Clam House, in New York’s Little Italy, and ended up face-down in his calamari.

Both Bjørn Eriksen and Jonna Pedersen employ the deadpan manner to imbue seemingly simple subjects with a narrative suggestiveness that resonates far beyond the ostensible content of their pictures. Together, they make for an exhibition in which subtle psychological subtexts abound, stimulating a host of imaginative interpretations and ultimately rewarding insights on the part of the viewer.

—Ed McCormack

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2008



Bjørn Eriksen “Rita Metermaid”



# At CFM Gallery: Dali Sans Sliced Eyeballs and Severed Hands

No matter how one looks at it, "Dali: Painting and Film," at the Museum of Modern Art is an acknowledgment, however grudging, of the prolific Surrealist master's inarguable place in an avant garde that has sometimes sought to disown him, even as his place in the larger history of modern art has long been assured. If the exhibition, which examines the relationship between Dali's paintings and his involvement in film with collaborators as diverse as Luis Bunuel, Walt Disney, Alfred Hitchcock, and Andy Warhol, proves anything it is that, of the modernist giants, Dali was the one most ahead of the postmodern curve.

Long before Warhol came along, Dali understood the publicity value of a fine artist connecting to Pop culture, as when he called Disney "one of the great American Surrealists." Indeed, it was his genius as a publicist that drew the most fire from his critics, who branded him a buffoon before it became commonplace for fine artists to gain media attention with contrived stunts and self-aggrandizing sound-bites. Dali simply did it before—and, needless to say—with more flair than the rest, and they never forgave him for it.

All of which takes us full circle back to where his real greatness lies: in the transcendent draftsmanship that served as the foundation for everything that he did—whether it be the crowd-pleasing Surrealist masterpieces such "The Persistence of Memory," in the museum's permanent collection, or the animated film "Destino" that he made with Disney.

It makes sense then that the show at MoMA was overseen by Jodi Hauptman, a curator of drawings, and that, along with paintings and film clips, several drawings and collages are included. For those who would prefer, however, to savor Dali's divine draftsmanship undistracted by gory film clips of an eyeball being sliced by a straight razor or a severed hand being poked with a stick (from the artist's early collaborations with his old school buddy Bunuel, which obviously inspired punk filmmakers such as Nick Zedd and, alas, perhaps even the halved bovines of Damien Hirst!), the exhibition "Salvador Dali: Drawings, Watercolors, Original Etchings," on view at CFM Gallery, 112 Greene Street, from October 17 through November 30 is highly recommended.

Curated by Neil Zukerman, Dali's most

discerning American dealer and collector, this is a small gem of an exhibition of works on paper, comprised of limited edition etchings and original works on paper, fully authenticated and documented by both the artist's longtime friend and publisher Pierre Argillet and Bernard Ewell, reputed to be the only major Dali appraiser who neither

spears!

In contrast to the impromptu gestural vigor of the previous work (a mode of Dali's on which lesser artists such as the French abstractionist Georges Mathieu could base an entire oeuvre). "Sourire du spectre" is a more meticulously detailed image of a female phantom. Standing nude on one of

those existential deserts the artist so favors, she brandishes in one hand a long staff that recedes magically into what one critic referred to as Dali's "flattened yet deep space." Her other hand is raised to the side of her grinning death's-head in the languid manner of a beauty queen, proudly displaying her grotesque conical breasts, ribs that protrude randomly from her torso like errant wishbones, and her hairless pink vaginal wound.

Equestrian figures have always been prominent in Dali's personal mythology and two outstanding examples are seen here: "Chevalier à la lance," depicting a knight poised for battle on horseback, and "Galop," in which horse and rider merge as one rhythmical entity, evoked in a whirlwind welter of circular pen-strokes. Both drawings are boldly centered on large sheets of heavy white handmade paper, the ink-lines of the former augmented with gray washes; those of the latter overlaid with areas of watercolor, the most piquant chromatic accents being the rearing steed's red eyes and the matching orbs of his impressive balls.

Dali's signature use of bold circular forms is especially appealing in "Nu du dos," a rear view of a

Rubensque female nude in ink alone, the pen lines raked over the rough weave of the heavy watercolor paper in a tactile manner that lends the work a surface sensuousness almost equal to its formal sensuality.

Also included are such treasures as "Piano à la langouste," an exquisite image of a red lobster merging with a flowing Rorschach blot of a grand piano, and "Chatelain," a small watercolor of a jowly elderly gentleman, as pompous in deportment as one of Daumier's judicial officials, with a sinewy pen sketch of what appears to be a gondolier on the verso. As a draftsman, Dali's only peer in modern times was Picasso, and this exhibition, lovingly conceived and assembled by Neil Zukerman, long one of his most vocal advocates, shows the Spanish master at his very best.

—Ed McCormack



"Galop"

buys nor sells his work.

One of the more quirkily beautiful works in the CFM show is "Cheval épouventé par l'épouvantail" (Horse Scared by the Scarecrow), a drawing in ink, watercolor, and gold ink, which Dali created in the presence of Pierre Argillet, while the publisher was visiting the artist's home in Port Lligat, Spain.

Standing somewhat aslant in the foreground, the scarecrow has the fanciful appearance of an emaciated harlequin and could very well have been the inspiration for the skeletal figures Tim Burton created for his animated film "The Nightmare Before Christmas." No wonder the horse was spooked and kicks up dust, as it gallops across the yellow plain toward the distant blue mountains, under a spontaneously scrawled sun that hurls inky beams of light down upon the landscape like slender



## Ritch Gaiti Evokes the Equine Spirit with Vigorous Virtuosity

That the New Jersey painter Ritch Gaiti's recent exhibition, "Horses in Motion," at Ward Nasse Gallery, 178 Prince Street, in Soho, happened to coincide auspiciously, if briefly, with "The Horse," the ongoing historical survey at the American Museum of Natural History, made it all the more relevant and enjoyable.

"The Horse" explores "the fascinating bond between horses and humans," a theme that was also prominent in some of Gaiti's paintings depicting cowboys or Native Americans traversing bodies of water on horseback, among other scenes that highlighted their mutual dependence. Particularly affecting was a darkly dramatic oil called "Destiny's River," in which an Indian rider and his mount seemed to meld into a single entity, as they forged through splashy water that offered Gaiti an opportunity to display a gestural flair akin to Abstract Expressionist "action painting" within a figurative context.

While no other contemporary artist captures the human/equine bond more sympathetically than Gaiti, some of the most beautiful canvases in the exhibition at Ward Nasse were those evoking the freedom of wild horses on the open range. One of the most striking for capturing the palpable presence of these magnificent creatures at their ease in a natural setting was called "Horses of a Different Color" — an especial-



"Horses of a Different Color"

ly apt title, since the painting sang chromatically, with a full spectrum of colors and markings in the horses lined up frontally in row against a turquoise blue sky. The pregnant stillness of the moment enabled Gaiti to concentrate on anatomical particulars in a worked-up realist technique, lending each animal a portrait-like individuality, even while achieving a formal balance that lent the composition a striking overall unity.

Another oil on canvas called "The Turning Point," combined a variety of different techniques within a single composition in a manner akin to Larry Rivers, albeit with the sensitivity to the subtle nuances of equine behavior that sets Gaiti apart as the master of his own realm. The three horses on the left side of the composition gazed out alertly, as though just becoming aware

of the intrusion of the viewer's gaze into their space. They were fully fleshed-out in sculptural volumes, while their counterparts on the right side of the canvas had already turned away, their departing rumps rendered linearly in a sketchy blue grisaille. The contrast between the worked-up realism of some of the animals and the spare delineation of the others added to the tension of the moment and endowed the painting with a virtuosic vigor.

By contrast, Gaiti adopts an altogether more impressionistic gestural technique in his paintings of horses in action, which comprised a good percentage of the works on view. A small, lushly textured gem of a canvas called "The River Where Time Stands Still," depicted a herd of horses splashing frontally through a luminous body of water lit by fiery reflections, while in another painting a frieze of spirited steeds raced as through fire across a golden plain, all but dissolving into abstraction. In both, Gaiti achieved a somber radiance that can only be termed "Turneresque."

Along with a mythical dimension redolent of the romance of the Old West, the paintings of Ritch Gaiti provide a plethora of skillfully realized effects, ranging from refined glazes to rugged areas of impasto, that transcend genre to distinguish him as a painter's painter.

—Ed McCormack

## Lee Porter: Australia's Female Answer to "The Male Gaze"

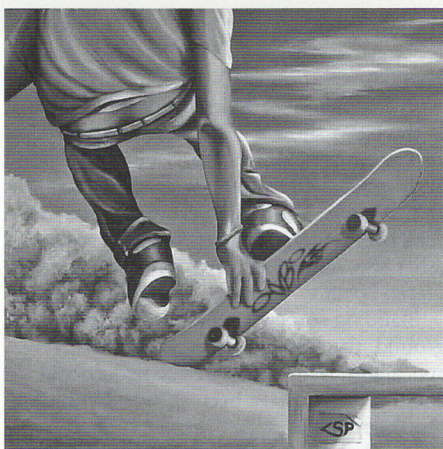
Not counting the well-documented predilections of the ancient Greeks, images of the male derriere are almost as rare in art history as their female counterparts are abundant. The Australian painter Lee Porter makes no extravagant claims for her subject matter, other than to state that she wishes to depict "Aussies from a different perspective."

That said, her lack of pretension notwithstanding, the acrylic paintings that Porter is exhibiting at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street October 24 through November 13 (reception Thursday, November 6, 6 to 8pm) are expeditions into a territory as relatively unexplored (at least by female artists) as the Outback itself, and for that reason alone may possess historical importance. For certain, they possess wit and are skillfully rendered.

"Aussies" as she fondly refers to them, are known to be a vigorous, outdoorsy people, and the men have at least a reputation for being athletic alpha males in the manner of Crocodile Dundee, Mel Gibson, and so on. So it stands to reason that a woman artist with Porter's aesthetic interests would have plenty of suitable models for paintings such as "Country Bum." The term, of course, does not refer to a rustic vagrant, but to what some people on this side of the pond call "buns." The ones in

question are seen in close-up, wrapped tightly in faded denim. That, one supposes, accounts for the "country" part of the title.

What "The Cocky's" means might be more of a mystery to an American but the subject of the painting is clear enough: the lower portions of two men in blue jeans, also seen in



"Skate Boarder, 2007"

close-up from behind, seated on a fence. Here, again, Porter's accomplished realist style endows the picture with a convincing verisimilitude, yet the real point of the picture would seem to be the artist's desire to make a com-

position that is strong in formal terms from a subject that she finds agreeable.

Indeed, her paintings are skillfully conceived and function in abstract as well as figurative terms, and she is especially adept at capturing figures in action, as she does in another acrylic on canvas called "Skate Boarder," depicting the rear lower region of a young man on a red skateboard with his red skivvies showing in the currently fashionable manner, suspended against a brilliant blue sky above a verdant landscape of rolling hills and foliage as dense as broccoli. The vertiginous angle of the composition enables the viewer to share, however vicariously, in his exhilaration as he and his skateboard soar along at breakneck speed, the pastoral landscape taking some of the risk out of a sport that all too often plays out on concrete with unfortunate results.

Seen from the side rather than from behind, five other figures also soar through the air in "Swimmers," as they dive in unison, one above the other, presumably into a pool or natural body water that is not visible in the vertically stacked, abruptly cropped composition. Here again, Lee Porter approaches the male form from yet another angle and proves herself to be a painter of lively wit and considerable formal invention.

—Maureen Flynn



# May DeViney: A Woman Artist's Ongoing Battle Against War, Male Dominance, and Religious Hypocrisy

For some time now, May DeViney has made a specialty of putting a postmodern spin on post-feminist aesthetics with her witty extrapolations of current events, surreal subversions of domestic decorum, and trenchant critiques of historically prescribed female roles.

DeViney goes even further in her new solo exhibition, "We are the lucky ones," at Viridian Artists, Inc., 530 West 25th Street, from September 30 through October 25. (There will be a reception on Saturday, October 4, from 5 to 8pm and an artist's talk on Saturday, October 18, at 4pm.)

For a series of ink drawings on board with gold leaf, titled "East Meets West," DeViney once again adopts a quaint, homespun style based on the designs that a mid-20th century matriarchal collective known as the Folly Cove Artists printed with wood-blocks on cloth. Its pristine simplicity of line and strong spotting of blacks, reminiscent of Wonder Woman comics, makes it the perfect vehicle for the confrontations between women in burkas and nun's habits.

In the first drawing "East Meets West: Discovery," the woman in the burka and the woman in the habit, noticing the striking similarity of their garb, point accusing fingers at one another, like high school girls who've arrived at the Prom in the same dress. In the second, "East Meets West: Lecturing," they square off with a Koran and a Bible, respectively, each waving an index finger heavenward as they angrily expound. In the third drawing, "East Meets West: Warring," they point rifles at each other. By now the "enemy" combatants on both sides are probably aware that they are equally lorded over by male commanders in chief who have designed their uniforms for equally oppressive reasons. But it is already too late: the conflict has escalated beyond all reasoning.

Like the early American primitive style of Amy Cutler's surreal gouaches or that of Edward Gorey's macabre Victorian allegories, the cartoon-like simplicity of DeViney's Neo-Folly Cove drawings is the perfect vehicle for her wry statements on the divisions between East and West. But DeViney's drawings are all the more powerful for daring to deal in such an ironically innocent manner with a much grimmer, more deadly reality.

DeViney employs a more refined and detailed watercolor technique just as effectively in two pieces called "Liberty Burka" and "War Birds." Although the former piece is a design drawing for an installation of the same name, it is a finished work of art in its own right. Stating that the piece "treats the Statue of Liberty as a concept besieged and withered by current American ideas of what Liberty requires to live," DeViney has draped her in an American flag burka, extinguished her torch, and wilted the spikes of

Sunny Pines," based on Leonardo de Vinci's "The Virgin and Child with St. Anne." Here, Mary and the infant Jesus are residents of a trailer camp, as they well might be were their Biblical poverty transferred to "George Bush's America," where, as the artist puts it, "poverty reads as shiftlessness...with poor people taking total blame for their predicaments."

Thus Mary, her belly big with a second Savior and bulging against her K-Mart maternity shift, lounges lazily, cigarette in hand, in an aluminum lawn chair watching, Jesus, who wears a diaper he should have outgrown had he been properly toilet-trained, play with a lamb-like puppy nearby. However, both their halos remain intact, even as a furtive hand, parting the window-curtain from inside the mobile home behind them (as though on the lookout for the Welfare investigator?), suggests that the coming birth will be anything but virgin.

Then there is "Madonna of the Steam," in which a more traditionally saintly-looking Mary is seen slumped over an ironing board, the cross of womanhood, wielding a prop frequently included in

DeViney's paintings, as "symbol of drudgery and oppression," of which she says, "There are few household implements of more obvious physical burden than the iron." Surrounded by a gold oval frame suspended on a metallic braided cord decorated with tiny, dangling crystal irons, the painting makes a poignant statement regarding martyrdom by steam. Here, too, as in the previously described work, Mary wears around her neck a tiny pendant that DeViney has created to "exemplify the spirit of western fundamentalist Christianity": a "spermafex," combining a sperm and a crucifix, it appears in all of her recent images of female saints.

Another powerful symbol are the dismembered doll parts half-buried in the sandbox on ornate wooden legs that forms the main body of DeViney's assemblage, "Treasure Chest," from which one could almost be distracted by the bejeweled elegance of the piece, which comments on the ever-increasing price of oil. On noticing them, however, one is abruptly reminded that the cost in human life is even higher.

—Ed McCormack



"East Meets West: Lecturing"

her crown to make them resemble the limp, floppy points of a jester's cap. Like the installation itself, the picture presents a powerful indictment of the mockery the present administration has made of the values Americans hold most dear.

In keeping with the avian symbology of "War Birds," DeViney has adopted the meticulous naturalistic watercolor technique of the painter-naturalist John James Audubon, along with an iconography that harks back to both WWII and the Cold War. The two American birds guarding their perch from an enemy bird, decorated with a hammer and sickle, flying high above, bear red white and blue airplane insignia. That one of the macho guardians of pre-Bush Homeland Security even flaunts one of those shapely pin-up girl decals that used to adorn vintage WWII fighter planes reminds us once again that, whether covered head to toe in burkas or bared to near nakedness in bikinis, women have perennially been objects of male fantasy and dominance.

Such is DeViney's versatility that she can also adopt the manner of the Renaissance for ironic icons such as "Madonna of the



## The Unpredictably Flowering Forms of Margo Spellman

Paradoxically, it is often more difficult to hide drawing skill in abstract painting than the lack of it. Not that one would necessarily want to hide it; for that would be to play into the foolish Philistine cliché that you don't have to know how to draw to be an abstract painter



*"Tools of the Reinvention Trade"*  
(detail: second panel of a three-panel triptych)

anyway. Still, an obviously accomplished draftsman like the Seattle artist Margo Spellman must have occasion to struggle against her skill, in order to avoid becoming facile. And one suspects the struggle itself lends Spellman's work some of its formal tension.

Like the Abstract Expressionist painter Arshile Gorky, who also possessed great skill in drawing (as is obvious in his abstractions as in his childhood self-portrait with his mother), Spellman seems to find great inspiration in organic forms in general and botanical ones in particular, in her exhibition at Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, from September 23 through October 11. (Reception: Thursday, September 25th, 6 to 8pm.)

That Spellman's paintings are filled with allusions to the natural world lends them a quality refreshingly unlike the "airlessness" (the only word that will do) of much postmodern abstraction. The connection with nature is a vital one for Spellman, whose forms actually appear to bloom on the canvas like flowers in a garden. Often her compositions are quite baroque as a result of the flowing contours that her natural shapes assume. And the garden-like effect is furthered by her intrepidity as a colorist, which complements the sensuality of her shapes with a kindred chromatic sensuousness.

For all this, Spellman is too savvy a painter to become overly intoxicated with her subject matter. As Frank O'Hara once said of Helen Frankenthaler, her lyricism is as speculative as it is authoritative; if she is willing to risk everything on a momentary inspiration, later on in the process of completing any individual painting, the impulse will be judged by a sophisticated self-critical intelligence. Scrutinizing the juicily worked and reworked surface of Spellman's triptych "Tools of the Reinvention Trade," its thickly impastoed forms so pregnant with what came before, one is reminded that the term *pentimento* means "to repent."

It would appear, too, that things tend to metamorphose into other things, as Spellman works her surfaces, laying on thick pigment, scraping it away, scumbling one color over another, until what once resembled a soft floral form now takes on a mineral scabrousness; or a shape that may have begun as something else morphs into the semiabstract Pre-Columbian earth mother in Spellman's "Menopausal Midwife II," which has a powerful, neo-primitive presence akin to the best works of Rufino Tamayo.

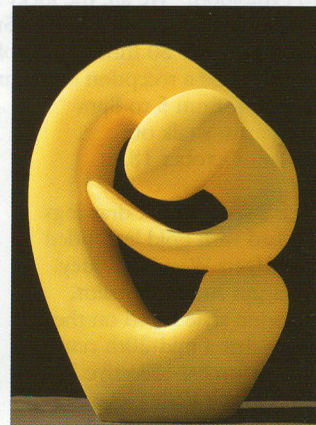
Indeed, while Spellman is primarily an abstract painter in the biomorphic tradition of Gorky and William Baziotes, and most of her compositions capture and hold our attention for her fluent command of form and color alone, certain paintings seem to determine their direction of their own accord. One fine example is "Higher Ground II," a mysterious verdant landscape with shadowy trees and a seemingly supernatural glow emanating from the sky that calls to mind not only Turner but that odd American visionary Albert Pinkham Ryder. Such anomalies suggest that, like all truly adventurous artists, Margo Spellman likes to keep all of her options open.

—Byron Coleman

## Malta Sculptor Joe Xuereb Makes Formal Contours Speak Volumes

Although growing up in Malta, where stylized female fertility figures, dating back to the Prehistoric Temple period, have played a long, significant role in the native psyche, has undoubtedly influenced the sculptures of Joe Xuereb, to place undue emphasis on their inspiration (or the fact that Xuereb is self-taught, for that matter) would be to do a disservice to his sophisticated originality and possibly relegate his work to the ghetto of neo-primitivism.

At the same time, one cannot deny that Xuereb's severely simplified pieces in soft globigerina limestone suggest what Joe Scicluna, in writing about his work, referred to as "a Jungian interpretation of a common primordial basis of artistic creation." Indeed, what thinking artist would not want to own this astute observation of what makes Xuereb's stone sculptures resonate so vibrantly across diverse cultures from ancient times to the present?



*"Introspection"*

However, Xuereb, who has been a constant in the ongoing Salon exhibition at Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, from 2006 to the present, also has an ability, unshared by ancient artists, to evoke a wide range of complex and subtle psychological and emotional states in stone, as indicated by the titles he has given to some of his pieces, such as "Empathy," "Introspection," "Despair," and "Defiance," to name just a few. And in each case, the specific feeling is made manifest with an expressiveness that seems all the more remarkable, given Xuereb's severe anatomical abbreviations and the fact that all of his figures are faceless.

Indeed, how he manages to invest such formally stylized figures with so much emotional impact is one of the great mysteries of his work. It is as though he is initiating us in a special plastic language, in which the smoothly flowing contours of the stone and the fluent permutations they assume can articulate a host of harmonious relationships, or just as easily convey a sense of loss or isolation.

In this regard, the negative spaces in some of Xuereb's sculptures play as important a role as their solid forms, as in "Amor Mater." Here, although the bodies of the embracing couple make up a single harmonious mass, only the empty area just below where their featureless faces meet to become one emphasizes the ardency of their kiss.

While it was not on view at the time this reviewer visited the gallery, another work viewed in a catalog of Xuereb's sculptures, containing an insightful essay by the aforementioned Joe Scicluna, sheds further light on the sculptor's subtle deployment of empty space, here to express the less erotic but no less meaningful human quality of "Empathy." And in yet another work viewed at the gallery, the figures merged even more fully to make up a single form in a work called "Divine Love," which seemed to express the kind of connection that transcends all limitations of the flesh.

For all their inventive formal convolutions, which are often more akin to the organic fluidity of modernists like of Hans Arp and Henry Moore than to the ritual rigidity of neolithic sculpture, one cannot help stressing the humanistic qualities of Joe Xuereb's pieces. For these have obviously contributed just as much to winning Joe Xuereb a place in numerous important international collections.

—Byron Coleman



# Marilyn Henrion: A New Music of the Rectangles and Spheres

Only an extraordinary sense of conviction could make an established artist at mid-career willfully adopt a technique that all but the most savvy viewers will almost automatically associate with industrial design rather than fine art, as Marilyn Henrion does in her “Noise” series, and then proceed to invest it with an artistic authority that subverts all expectations. The series can be seen in Henrion’s new solo show at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from September 30 through October 25.

Henrion has been persistently surprising us since 1975, when she switched mediums from painting to textiles and immediately demonstrated that what many still regarded as women’s busywork could be a vehicle for sophisticated artistic expression. Since she had been associated with the Beat Generation poets and an active participant of the avant garde Happenings scene in the 1960s, Henrion’s change of mediums, which coincided with the rise of the feminist movement, could have seemed incongruous. However, while there was never any question as to her own feminist consciousness, it was her emphasis on formal rather than political issues that made her work endure over subsequent decades. More than a mere gesture of solidarity with the unsung woman quiltmakers who created one of America’s great folk art forms, her choice of medium proceeded from an abiding belief that fiber art was a frontier whose serious artistic possibilities had yet to be fully explored.

Unlike the artists of the Pattern and Decoration movement who would follow her lead in 1980s, Henrion never appeared especially beholden to Islamic, Celtic, or other non-Western modes of ornamentation, even while acknowledging the influence of Indian miniatures and Japanese kesa robes on her work. Nor did she seem unduly concerned with challenging the longstanding taboo against decoration in fine art. Rather, she employed quilting and other fiber art techniques to create works that, by virtue of her command of pure form and color, demanded to be considered within the context of mainstream geometric abstraction.

The question of context was settled all the more vehemently by Henrion’s careful designation of her works as “hand pieced and stitched constructions,” instead of “art-quilts” or any of the other terms all too often employed to relegate certain types of work by woman artists to the ghetto of the artsy crafts. None of which is to imply that she did not exploit the tactile and coloristic opulence peculiar to her medium to the fullest. Indeed, few painters could match the synthesis of formal austerity and surface sensuality that she achieved by combining variously textured fabrics, from matte to silken, with reflective metallic brocades and hand-stitching that produced puckers and pulls as

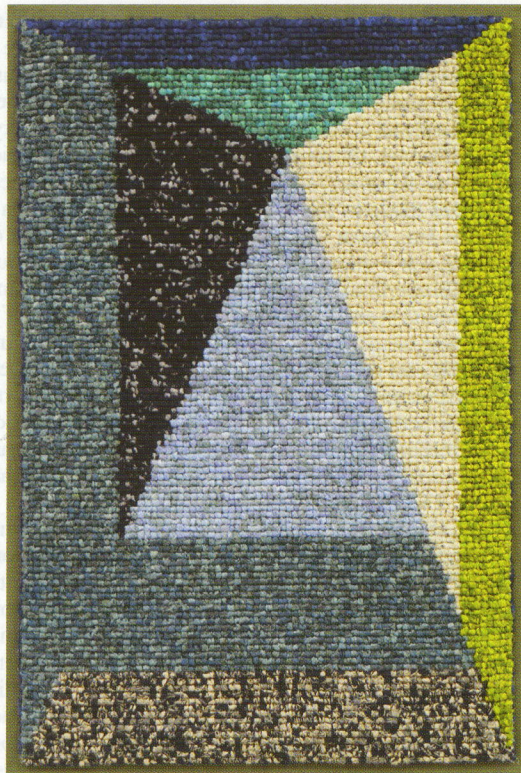
subtly individualistic as brushstrokes.

Henrion proved that fiber art could not only compete with painting in terms of formal power and aesthetic delectation, but that it could also carry as much emotional impact—particularly in her 2005

“Disturbances” series, in which architec-  
tonic abstract forms swerved from their geometric moorings in a manner that viscerally evoked the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers. But while, as I noted in a previous review, she tapped into a particularly powerful communal trauma in that series, she is better known for works whose primary appeal is the pure visual pleasure that they provide. (No wonder she loves Matisse, who was influenced by growing up in Bohain, a province of France renowned for its weavers of elegant, colorful fabrics not unlike those that have served so successfully as her own working palette.)

Perhaps the most radical aspect of Henrion’s newest pieces, then, is her deliberate eschewal of the immediately ingratiating qualities that have always made her compositions so seductive. In contrast to the Byzantine complexity, baroque swirls, and bright primaries enhanced by gold and silver brocades in her earlier works, these sparer geometric compositions call upon a different tradition of textile based art, derived from rug-making, which she refers to as “cotton and linen textile construction.” The tactile yet uniform surface, achieved by a process of hooking strips of fabric into a mesh canvas foundation to produce an overall texture of more or less even nubs, provides Henrion with the perfect context for forms which are considerably more pared down and minimalist than her previous ones. And that these forms are actually woven directly into the fabric to create the composition, rather than stitched together in the manner of collage, lends them a different kind of depth and sensuousness.

Despite its name, Henrion’s “Noise” series is paradoxically “quieter” than her hand pieced and stitched constructions. In contrast to the fanfare of rioting patterns, textures, and colors in those earlier pieces, these new ones, with their softer secondary colors subtly modulated by particles of variegated hues, suggest a more muted chromatic cacophony, prompted by Henrion’s reading of the lines in Shakespeare’s “The Tempest” that go: “The isle is full of noises, / Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not. / Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments / Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices, / That, if I then had waked after long sleep, / Will make me sleep again.”



*“Vanishing Point 6”*

Indeed, while Henrion employs color with greater restraint and subtlety than ever before, in a manner as “painterly” and harmonically complex in its own way as a Jules Olitski or a Darby Bannard, her new works suggest a commingling of sounds akin to the steady hum of “white noise,” evoking, as the artist herself puts it, everything “from the presence of vast interstellar matter that fills the universe to the activity of billions of quantum particles contained in every cell of our bodies.”

Never one to shy away from ambitious subjects—and what could be more ambitious than echoing visually what amounts to the very Music of the Spheres?—Henrion finds new challenges in encapsulating profound complexity in a more concentrated geometric context. Her “Meditation #2,” for example, with its central circle dissected into four rectangular areas containing smaller misaligned circles of various colors, seems akin to the work of Hilda AF Klint, a Swedish contemporary of Kandinsky, who, like him, saw abstract painting as a path to spiritual exploration, but was never properly acknowledged as one of the true pioneers of modern art.

Whether Henrion is even familiar with Klint, given the earlier artist’s relative obscurity, seems a moot point, since such kinships transcend time and logic, perhaps proving that mysterious spiritual connections play a larger part than we know in the evolution of aesthetic tendencies and ideas. Conscious or not, in another cotton and linen textile con-

*Continued on page 38*



# Landscape as Landfill: The Art of Robert Baribeau

One of the more memorable things that Willem de Kooning said to me, during an altogether memorable visit to his studio in East Hampton in the early eighties, was that virtually all abstract painting springs from landscape. Of course, as in all such conjecture about art, an argument could have been made to the contrary (especially since the late, linear compositions de Kooning was working on at the time were less landscape-like than any of his earlier abstractions)—although I was not about to be the one to make it.

Besides, no one demonstrates the master's statement to be at least ninety-nine percent true better than Robert Baribeau, whose recent work was seen over the summer in a solo exhibition at Allan Stone Gallery, 113 East 90th Street, a venue that has also shown many de Koonings over the years and continues to do so, along with the work of other towering figures of Abstract Expressionism.

Baribeau grew up on a farm in Oregon and while attending college worked for a landscape architect. These experiences by his own admission, left an indelible impression on his work. Nowhere is this more evident than in the large mixed media works and smaller flower paintings on paper that Baribeau has been exploring since his 2004

exhibition at Allan Stone, where he has exhibited regularly since 1979.

Energy, velocity, and tactility are the salient qualities that make Baribeau's recent paintings such a sumptuous treat for those of us who have never lost our taste for the dynamic scale and immediacy of the movement that put American painting on the map. Since Baribeau tends to favor working in horizontal formats (the exception being his smaller floral compositions on paper: single upthrusting phallic blooms recalling Dylan Thomas's great line about "the force that drives the green fuse through the flower") the sense of an actual terrain is even more pronounced than in the work of others who mine the same tradition.

However, it is a festive, almost antic, terrain in which great, juicy swathes of pigment converge and collide in broad, flat planes, shedding splatters on impact that drip down like melted cake-frosting from the upper portion of the painting that the eye wants to read as "sky." This deliciously gooey precipitation descends in rivulets onto the ruggedly tactile horizon that generally divides the



Untitled 2008

composition—its the terra firma, so to speak. On close inspection, portions of this impasto-plastered surface, pocked and scored and shot through with vibrant paint-ball explosions, are densely encrusted with collaged flora of the type that decorates fabric and wallpaper patterns, along with

stripes, polka dots, snippets of cafe tablecloth-plaid, and even, in one instance, stylized cocktail glasses, apparently ripped from a sheet of gaudy gift-wrap and stuck into the wet paint in an instant of inspired impulsiveness.

Such bits and pieces of this and that, while retaining the autonomy of their banal origins, are nonetheless utterly transformed, becoming conduits of pure energy, like scat-phrases in a jazz vocal or made-up words in one of Jack Kerouac's breathlessly improvised paragraphs of "spontaneous bop prosody."

Every random, lowly bit of detritus in Robert Baribeau's compositions ends up getting swept along and ultimately elevated on the surging tides of his perfect painterly storms.

—Ed McCormack

## Egalitarian Gallantry Ennobles the Art of Ricardo Lowenberg

Women are objectified, and even demeaned, by male artists in so many ways in so much contemporary art that one is hardly prepared for the mellow romanticism and aesthetic gallantry that distinguishes the paintings of the Mexican artist Ricardo Lowenberg, on view at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, from September 9 through 30 (Reception September 11, 6 to 8 pm).

If Lowenberg's work shares certain qualities with that of Frida Kahlo—only, a much less tormented Frida, without the blood and tears—it could possibly be attributed to the fact that, when he was a boy, growing up in an artistic family in Mexico City, his mother would often take him to the house of Frida Kahlo, where his older sisters often went to play as children.

In any case, looking closely at Kahlo's work may have taught Lowenberg something about how the lessons of Mexican folk art, its clarity, brilliant colors, and straight-

forward frontal figuration, can be deliberately emulated and integrated into the work of a sophisticated painter to striking effect. He also studied the great Mexican muralists

who obviously evolved his own way of merging their strong forms and coloristic boldness with the very different kind of delicacy that one sees in the French Impressionists to create the uniquely original personal synthesis that informs his work.

The soulful sensitivity that has made Lowenberg one of Mexico's most celebrated contemporary painters in recent years has much to do with a sensibility which seems to stand somewhat apart from the dominant trends of our era. Especially refreshing is his apparent freedom from the desperate search for novelty that has given rise to what can only be termed a worldwide cult of ugliness.

Although they are clearly individuals with their own specific qualities, the women in his paintings all possess in common an almost sacred beauty that is especially apparent in the oil on canvas titled "Inocencia." The picture depicts a slender girl in a frilly white dress, standing on a verandah with the appealing awkwardness of early adolescence, cradling a simple doll in her arms, as though reluctant to let go of an object that may

represent her last connection to childhood. Although she has the wholesomeness of one of Renoir's rosy cheeked milkmaids, her lovely complexion and features are clearly Mexican, as is the earthy landscape ranging out behind her.

Here, as in his other feminine portraits, one of the most satisfying attributes of Ricardo Lowenberg's paintings is the harmonious manner in which he integrates the figures with their surroundings. This is particularly clear in "Monica," wherein the configurations possess an almost cubistic angularity. However, it is more than a mere formal device; it is the artist's way of revealing the affection of these women for their familiar environment, which comes across most dramatically, in "Alicia," in which the model, who resembles a Mexican version of the elegant French actress Juliette Binoche, regards the viewer from behind a row of large, brilliantly colorful fronds.

Although paintings of women make up one of the most prolific areas of his oeuvre, Ricardo Lowenberg reveals his versatility in masterfully organized still life subjects such as "Limones Y Bromelia," as well as in the somewhat surreal composition "Esperanza," in which an unborn baby appears in the fetal position in a womb-like form centered in what appears to be a metaphysical landscape.

—Marie R. Pagano



"Esperanza"



# Children of War: Steven Dono's Most Unambiguously Harrowing Theme

Steven Dono has always been a hard artist to place. Is he a sculptor, a conceptualist, an installation artist—or a unique amalgam of all three? And can one really employ the formal vernacular of Minimalism and mix in a wry element of Duchamp gamesmanship to make the kind of moral or humanistic statement one is more used to encountering in Social Realist painting? Aren't these kinds of preoccupations altogether antithetical and wouldn't combining them alienate both those who think art for art's sake is the only way to go—"If you have a message send a telegram!"—and their opposites who believe that all art is meaningless decoration unless it illuminates the human condition and elevates the moral discourse?

In any case, the sheer complexity and all-encompassing ambition of Dono's work has always struck me as laudably Quixotic to say the least: the making of subtle metaphors out of massive, unyielding materials with little regard for the critical categories, financial contingencies of the art world, or the almost always specialized tastes of collectors.

For an exhibition called "Bare Ruined Puppets" Dono created work named after the Italian master Paolo Uccello's painting "The Battle of Romano," a room-size grid that the viewer could walk through, discovering at its center an eerie skeletal doll, dangling from strings and dressed not in fifteenth century armor, like Uccello's soldiers, but in shredded modern army fatigues—a literal "puppet of war."

For his version of the "Annunciation," he bolted together a labyrinth of wooden beams, ten feet tall by ten feet wide, culminating in a brick and granite enclosure wherein the visitor, thrust into the role of the angel Gabriel coming to deliver the news of the Virgin Birth to Mary, was struck dumb by encountering a bizarre female S&M puppet dangling from a string, naked but for a black vinyl corset, a garter belt, black stockings, and spike-heeled shoes.

Of course, nothing is ever so stark or simple as it appears at first glance in Dono's work, which is invariably layered with multiple meanings and dares to traverse that juncture at which religion, politics, violence, and kinky sex converge to make clear how power and perversity often go hand in hand. So on learning that Dono's new exhibition would be called "Ruin of Innocence," who could blame one for imagining it might have to do with the semiotics of politicians who keep their high black socks on when they have relations with high-priced call girls, or some such esoteric theme like that?

It turns out, however, that "Ruin of Innocence," which can be seen in the Project Room of The Phoenix Gallery, 210 Eleventh Avenue @ 25th Street from September 3 through 27, with a reception



*RUIN OF INNOCENCE (Detail)*

on September 4 from 6 to 8pm, has a subtitle: "Children: Victims of War," and deals with a much more horrific and heartbreaking subject.

In a statement issued for the exhibition, Dono tells us, "For the past 100 years there has been a war waged somewhere in the world. It seems that this will continue well into the twenty-first century. Wars for profit, religious ideology, control of dwindling resources, and in the near future, food and water, are on the increase. Children will always be caught in the midst of the din and chaos of violent conflicts. At this moment in time there are twenty-five countries actively engaged in armed conflict in which children are at risk."

The sculpture consists of six discarded GAP Kids mannequins that Dono employs as effigies for those children. They are headless (anonymous) and made out of some soft, stuffed material that is normally covered by the colorful clothing sold in GAP Kids stores. But because they were naked when the artist found them in a dumpster, they looked bloated, as dead bodies become when they are left unburied for too long. So after bringing them back to his studio, he applied shellac to them, to lend them the sheen that bloated corpses get when the skin stretches almost to the bursting point. He dressed them in white t-shirts with miniature flags sewn onto them of the thirty or so countries where children currently suffer the effects of war. (The bright colors of the flags look eerily like those of

the cute clothes that we purchase at GAP Kids for their more fortunate counterparts, our own little pamperlings.) Then he bound them together with plastic rope and suspended them from the ceiling "like slaughtered/discarded carcasses in a meat processing plant," as he puts it.

In the Projects Room at The Phoenix Gallery, the sculpture will be the centerpiece of an installation that will also include maps of all the countries involved, so the viewer can get a sense of the terrains in which children are not only caught in the middle of such conflicts, but in some African countries, forced to participate in them as child soldiers.

"For the girls this means that they are in double jeopardy of not only being killed but also of being raped by enemy soldiers," Dono told us when we visited him in his studio in an apartment on the upper West Side to view the sculpture prior to the exhibition.

In the course of creating the piece, Dono did a lot of research on the subject of children, and it has obviously left its mark on him. He seemed barely able to contain his emotions as he spoke about how many countries are subjecting children to such wartime atrocities—not only the African nations, where it has been highly publicized, but in places such as Albania, where, rather than military conflicts, kids get caught in the middle of family feuds that have been going on for many centuries.

"Real the Hatfields and the McCoys sort of things," he added with rueful irony. Up until recently, Dono was artist in residence at The Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, where he worked in a cavernous studio down in the cathedral's medieval-looking crypt. But for some reason that he does not know (probably not his "Annunciation," which was created there some seven or eight years ago), he was recently given his walking papers.

Now one of his past sculptures, a huge ship on railroad tracks with a miniature Statue of Liberty lashed to its mast, takes up an entire room of this apartment in which he lives and works, like a conceptual albatross. That piece is called "Ruin of Belief" and it represents the rudderless ship of state on which the present administration in Washington D.C. first rode into infamy.

But as huge as it looms physically, prophetic as it turned out to be, and powerful as it still is, it is upstaged considerably by the naked truth that Steven Dono faces us with in "Ruin of Innocence," his most powerful and affecting statement to date.

—Ed McCormack



# Amy Cohen Banker's Abundant Fount of Painterly Possibilities

Although Amy Cohen Banker has been a ubiquitous presence on the New York art scene in recent years, garnering considerable acclaim for her exhibitions in Chelsea, in the vital Lower East Side art scene that has sprung up around the New Museum, and in a variety of alternative spaces and uptown venues, it is perhaps only on her website ([www.amycohenbanker.com](http://www.amycohenbanker.com)) that one can get a sufficient overview of this immensely gifted painter's prolific output.

A true postmodern heir to the gestural aesthetic of the New York School, Banker emerged as something of a fullblown prodigy. While most painters of her generation were still struggling to find their way, Knox Martin, one of her instructors at the Art Students League, was already predicting, "She will be a leading force in the 21st Century art world. She has earned admiration and respect as a distinguished American artist." (Richard Barr of the Museum of Modern Art seconded the motion, enthusing, "Her education and art background is extraordinary in range. I'd rate her 24-karat gold!")

For Banker, who says, "I have been an artist all my life," such accolades were hardly unusual and could no longer come as a surprise; the honors started arriving early, when her first art work was selected for an exhibition at Lever House at age six.

Raised in New York City, she considers herself fortunate to have been exposed to a abundant cultural environment in childhood.

"My grandparents and parents encouraged my interests by taking me and my brothers to museums and concert halls," she tells us in one of the texts on her website. "I remember Leonard Bernstein's young people's concert series. Nureyev dancing, Rembrandt's Aristotle contemplating Homer and Da Vinci's Mona Lisa the first time they were exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art."

After graduating from Cornell University in 1975, Banker's horizons appeared unlimited. She married and gave birth to two daughters; juggled child-rearing with studio classes at the Art Students League; did photography at the New School; worked as a docent and a development assistant at the Museum of Modern Art; spent two and a half years in Tokyo, mastering the fluid linear grace of Japanese brush, which would eventually become an essential technical attribute in the development of her paintings in oils, acrylics, and mixed media...

Wasn't it John Lennon who said that life is what happens when you're making other plans? In 2001, life struck the artist a devastating blow, of which she says, "One of the most life changing events for me was really my daughter Allison's illness and eventual death from Hodgkins Disease at nineteen

years old." (A poet as well as a painter, she includes a moving audio eulogy for her daughter on her website.)

"It's taken me the last few years to get back on my feet; now I can concentrate on accelerated progress," Banker adds, and the degree to which she has succeeded was strikingly evident in a recent exhibition at Common Ground Gallery on East 27th Street, where she showed a large selection of



"Persephone (Hecate), 2008"

recent oils on canvas. Although the majority of them were abstract, there were also some excursions into Neo-Expressionist figuration that shared a gestural verve and coloristic vivacity with that of her abstractions, making them seem not so much departures as organic extensions of the same aesthetic.

While this diversity within her oeuvre may be sanctioned by the catholic, even permissive, climate of the postmodern era, where the boundaries between abstraction and figuration are no longer so firmly drawn and many artists feel freer than previous generations did to indulge momentary impulses, in Banker's case it seems more attributable to the kind of absolute confidence in one's own subjective vision that enabled de Kooning to move so effortlessly between the two modes of expression at a time when such boundary jumping was still verboten. For like de Kooning's, boldly Art Brutish yet sophisticatedly sinuous figures in Banker's paintings, rather than seeming preconceived, appear to materialize as apparitions of pigment, attaining substance in the act of painting, acquiring palpable presence through the sheer insistence of her strokes.

At the same time, every mark that Banker lays down on canvas or paper, be it toward abstract or figurative ends, is obviously informed by an inner life that encompasses

many intellectual interests. Yet, given her spontaneous process, one suspects that she probably tags compositions with titles such as "Persephone (Hecate), 2008," or "Orpheus and Eurydice, 2008," after the fact rather than beforehand. In any case, while nothing about her paintings appears contrived, or even premeditated, there is the sense that her extensive reading of mythology, philosophy, and literature functions as a kind of mental background music, stimulating her imagination and directing her brushstrokes subconsciously as she works.

Similarly, one would assume that the shapes of objects in her immediate line of vision—or at very least in the general environment of her studio—must frequently insinuate themselves into her compositions as well, just as in some of her earlier paintings images of actual objects were often more overtly juxtaposed and superimposed to function primarily as abstract shapes. For even in her most adamantly abstract works, the nonobjective forms remain so evocative that one can Rorschach all manner of associations onto them; there is still a sense of palimpsests, of pentimenti, of the ghostly essences of actual things that have been subsumed and submerged under the skin of the pigment, so to speak.

Indeed, part of what makes Banker's paintings so visually exhilarating is the feeling one gets from them of an entire cosmos of organic and inorganic object—and perhaps even things not of this world—being caught up in the symphonically emotional flow of her gestures: things of which we can only get "slippery glimpses," to borrow her predecessor and apparent kindred spirit de Kooning's felicitous phrase.

One is also put in mind of the New York School poet Frank O'Hara's lovely title "In Memory of My Feelings" by the elegiac tone of some of Banker's recent compositions, particularly those saturated with rich blue hues, such as "Reverie, 2007," where one gets the sense of painting as a redemptive force through which one may come to terms with a deep and abiding grief, and even apprehend the sense of grace and transcendence that animates the much more buoyantly sunny composition Banker calls "Dance."

Amy Cohen Banker's singularly generous sensibility is such a fertile fount of aesthetic possibilities that several lesser artists could seemingly base "signature styles" and entire careers on any single aspect of her concurrent modes. "Let them," seems to be her attitude, since she is too busy moving toward the next empty canvas, the next spontaneous discovery, to cautiously hoard her abundant natural resources.

—Ed McCormack



# Charting the Impossible: The Intrepid Mission of Slobodan Miljevic

Such is the influence of postmodern inclusiveness that some of the most interesting abstract painters today employ a much broader vocabulary of forms and manners within an individual work than their predecessors in previous decades, when sharper distinctions were insisted upon between hardedge abstraction, lyrical abstraction, and other subdivisions of nonobjective painting.

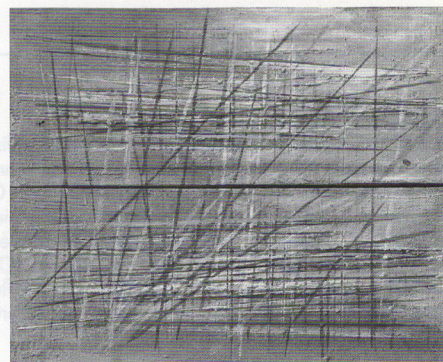
A fine case in point is Slobodan Miljevic, at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from October 24 through November 13, reception, Thursday, November 6, 6 to 8 pm. A widely exhibited artist from Serbia, he states, "I am trying to create balance between diversities and dimensions." Although an autodidact, Miljevic is a consummately sophisticated painter, conversant with a broad range of techniques, which he combines in a manner that gives his compositions a multidimensional quality. Mediums are mixed liberally in order to lend his paintings a plethora of textural and coloristic contrasts. Often, he combines oils, acrylics, sand, and even digital prints to striking effect.

Color often functions as light in compositions such as "Flash," a digital print and acrylic on canvas in which glowing auras radiate from areas of deep red and nocturnal blue. In many of Miljevic's paintings, as titles such as "Star Landscape," and "From the Earth" may indicate, one gets the sense

of being projected into outer space. Light and movement are evoked to suggest the unsettling velocity of a highly technological sci-fi age in which virtual reality holds as much sway as the world one walks around in every day. Yet while his colors often suggest the unearthly glow that emanates from computer screens and video monitors, and the precise linear elements in his paintings smack of technical diagrams, there is also a lyrical element in his work that harks back to the gestural traditions of tachisme, the European counterpart of Abstract Expressionism.

One thinks particularly of predecessors such as Hans Hartung, the German painter who settled in France and fused the colors of the Fauves with the improvisational spirit of Klee and Kandinsky. Similarly, Miljevic's intense layerings of line, coupled with radiant auras, charge his paintings with great chromatic and tactile vibrancy, pushing their contrasts a step further. It stands to reason that Miljevic cites both the Constructivists and the Abstract Expressionists as influences, given the eclectic nature of his paintings, in which elements of those diverse schools converge in a harmony that would almost not seem possible.

Perhaps the complementary contrasts in this regard are most immediately evident in "Net" and "So High," two related works in



"So High"

acrylic, oil, and sand on canvas, in which the synthesis of line and color is most dynamic. In both paintings, respectively, intricate concentrations of lines are layered over areas of blue and yellow in a multitude of interwoven or adjacent brushstrokes. Here, the tensions that animate the compositions seem to result from an almost compulsive need to chart the unknowable, to impose a systemic armature upon a fictive expanse suggesting the vastness of the sky.

The Quixotic effort hints at nothing less than the frustration of our ineffectual position vis a vis the solving the mystery of existence. Indeed, it is Slobodan Miljevic's willingness to bite off more than any artist can reasonably chew, combined with his ability to delight our senses and capture our imaginations in the process, that makes his work vastly ambitious and ultimately valuable.

—Martin Freund

## Fumio Noma: Listening to the Whisperings of Nature

Looking at the work of Fumio Noma, on view at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from September 9 through 30 (reception September 11, 6 to 8 pm), one is reminded of the great Japanese writer Junichiro Tanizaki, who fell under the influence of Western writers such as Baudelaire, Poe, and Wilde, yet remained faithful to his national heritage and wrote the ultimate essay on the Japanese sense of beauty, "In Praise of Shadows."

For while Noma has traveled widely throughout the United States and Europe, absorbing many influences in most of the major museums and feels a particular kinship with Miro, rather than working in Western oils, he employs the quintessentially Japanese medium of sumi-e ink painting on fibrous, absorbent washi paper. Thus his paintings, which are for the most part monochromatic compositions of black ink and gray washes accented with spare areas of red pigment, while fresh and contemporary in form and content, are immediately identifiable as being



"Zen Sitting Meditation"

within the great tradition of Asian painting and calligraphy. Although admitting that he "became interested in sumi art when I saw an exhibition for a specific calligrapher," he is quick to add that he was "not interested in calligraphy itself." He was more interested in adapting the traditional medium to a highly personal mode of expression.

"Free from limitations, I paint what can only be painted at that very moment," he explains, "accepting what materializes as myself during that time."

So if someone asks about my identity, I would say it is my artwork."

Indeed, it is this subjective approach that enables Noma to dare a theme such as that in his painting "Wave" and not suffer by comparison to Hokusai's famous masterpiece. For Noma gives his own interpretation to the subject, capturing the rhythmic movement of the great wave in what appears to be a single uninterrupted stroke of a broad brush loaded with black ink. The muscular form gathers momentum as it moves across

the white paper from left to right, curling upward at its tail-end in a gesture that spits spatters of ink like bits of foam.

If the previous image harks back to the spare, splashy spontaneity of the Zen literati painters of several centuries ago, in another painting on the theme titled, "A Wave in the Moonlight," much of the paper is saturated with moody black and gray tones, in the manner of a semi-abstract composition by an early American modernist such as Arthur Dove or a visionary canvas by Albert Pinkham Ryder. Only the whiteness of the wave's foamy curve and the full moon, half-veiled in wisps of cloud, relieve the nocturnal darkness.

"When I paint," Noma states, "nature's whispers such as rivers flowing, the sound of the wind and birds singing flow inside my mind like background music; no external sounds ever reach me."

From within this intensely hermetic contemplative state, cut off from the outside world, Fumio Noma transcribes an inner world composed of flowing, floating forms, laid down with a rare gestural flair. Sensual shapes flare upward in "Flaming Desire," gather like black smoke in "Hot Wind," or vibrate like the energy of consciousness itself in "Zen Sitting Meditation," each stroke becoming a unique living entity.

—Byron Coleman



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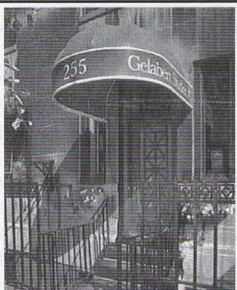
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## websites

**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](http://www.New-York-Art-Galleries.com) and locate the New York art gallery that is appropriate for you.

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# Janet Gurian Lippmann's Pastoral Vision at the National Arts Club

Viewing the transcendent Turner exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art recently reminded one once again that for all the “new media” that many artists employ quite interestingly today, one can never discount the time-honored beauty and power of oil on canvas. One artist who upholds that tradition splendidly is Janet Gurian Lippmann, a longtime artist in residence at the National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park South, where her new solo exhibition, “Beauty, Near and Far,” can be seen in the Gregg Gallery, from September 3 through 20. (The gallery hours are Monday through Friday, from 11 to 5pm, and there will be a reception and a book signing by the artist on Tuesday, September 9 from 5 to 8pm.)

Lippmann cites influences as diverse as Degas, Dutch still life, Persian miniature paintings, and Japanese Ukiyo-e prints. But by her own account her biggest influence came in the Spring of 1954, when “I traveled alone to Monet’s gardens at Giverny, an experience that had a profound effect on the subsequent course of my life and work,” and about which she wrote an article for “American Artist” magazine. But even more germane to her intrepid spirit as an artist is that she subsequently created her own series of “Giverny” paintings, in which she declared her artistic independence, even while paying



*“Gramercy Park”*

homage to the Impressionist master.

Among the Giverny images in the present exhibition, “Wisteria Reflections,” dated 1986-2006 demonstrates not only how Lippmann frequently continues to rework and refine paintings over the course of several years, but how she reinterprets one of Monet’s familiar subjects in her own manner. Indeed, Lippmann’s bold approach to the lush green foliage and pink-violet blooms, intersected by the bold forms of the little foot-bridge across the lily pond, is more akin for its gestural fluency to Fairfield Porter’s landscapes influenced by Abstract Expressionism, than to the sun-dappled strokes of Impressionism.

In fact, closer in actual location to the old stamping grounds of Porter and his more abstract peers, Lippmann’s breezy pastel

“Apple Trees, The Hamptons,” is an especially exhilarating excursion into gestural boldness by an artist who can approach the pure plastic freedom of abstraction without ever sacrificing the verisimilitude and the specific sense of place that invariably brings her compositions to vibrant life.

And that Lippmann finds natural vitality and pockets of beauty everywhere can be seen in another pastel (for her a full-fledged painting medium on a par with oils rather than a vehicle for preliminary studies) called “Morning Glories, 19th Street,” where the brilliant blue blooms and green leaves burst abundantly over a wrought iron fence in front of a building, proving that natural can not be restrained, even by an urban setting.

The same point is made more expansively in “Gramercy Park,” where the figures of two children embracing on a softly shaded path near a brilliant red flower bed adds one of the most beautiful aspects of human nature to the equation. Then there is “Pondside, Giverny,” 1986-2006, where the sense of submerged Cubist planes serving as an armature for the composition (closer to Cezanne than Monet) demonstrates how Janet Lippmann has assimilated yet another aspect of art history into her highly original personal vision, making it thoroughly her own.

—Ed McCormack

## Aranka Israni's Ever-Evolving Quest for Homeostasis

An Indian raised as a Muslim in Dubai, Aranka Israni brings a strong sense of her cultural heritage to bear in her paintings on view at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from September 9 through 30 (Reception: Thursday, September 11, 6 to 8pm).

Yet, in order to gain enough distance and freedom to explore the spiritual aspects of her upbringing in her work, while avoiding the stereotypes associated with traditional Indian art, Israni had to break away from the culturally conservative capitol of the United Arab Emirates, and come to United States, where she developed a flowing abstract style that, at first glance, could appear beholden to the “poured” paintings of artists such as Paul Jenkins and Morris Louis. On closer perusal, however, it becomes clear that Israni’s translucent veils of color are achieved more deliberately with a brush, enabling her to inflect them with a more subtly-shaded lyricism that can only be achieved with the wrist.

Employing thinly diluted washes of color on pale, uninflected grounds, Israni creates sinuous shapes that float like wisps of smoke or gossamer, windblown scarves wiggling through thin air. But while her paintings appear to be as free as the wind itself, give their lyrical sense of flotation, they are actually about the struggle to achieve balance and

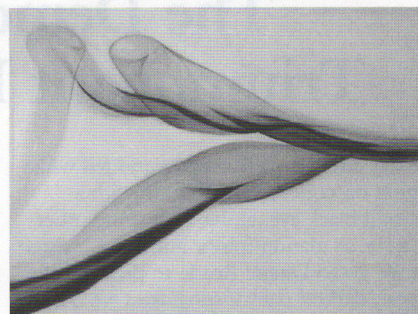
homeostasis in the chaotic yet often restrictive modern world. These inherent conflicts become especially clear in a painting such as “Entwine,” where the the upwardly furling purple form centered on the vertical canvas takes on the force of a twister or tornado, in contrast to the more gentle pale blue swirls in another oil on canvas called “Ascendance.” In the latter work, there is the suggestion that the struggle can only be ended through spiritual transcendence.

However, the title “Like Water for Ice” suggests how that which flows fluidly can also become stagnant, as applied to one of Israni’s most graceful compositions, featuring intermingled ribbons of translucent blue and pale crimson swelling as rhythmically as ocean waves. Here, as in many of her recent compositions, Israni addresses the notion of opposites, and perhaps the high price that the quest for harmony may exact.

The forms in Israni’s paintings constitute a kind of fleshed-out calligraphy; they appear at once spontaneous and studied, ethereal and substantial, suggesting an ideal synthesis of Eastern and Western aesthetics. While her multicultural interests would suggest that she remains open to a host of influences, she has pared her painterly vocabulary down to an exquisite sparseness of means.

The absolute clarity and grace of these

compositions reveals a maturity of vision that belies the artist’s relative youth: the wisdom of an old soul inhabiting a new incar-



*“Reactor”*

nation. Which is to say, while the sophistication of her work indicates a lively awareness of the prevailing aesthetic climate, Aranka Israni seems to possess an instinctive sense of the eternal verities that imbues her paintings with a rather remarkable self-containment, recalling the cosmic irony of Wallace Stevens’s great lines: “Where was it that one first heard of the truth? The the.”

Aranka Israni’s paintings ask all the right questions without expecting answers, trusting in the truism that the point is the journey rather than the destination.

—Maurice Taplinger



# New York Notebook



Comic strip: concept, Jeannie McCormack; drawings: Ed McCormack

## THE GREAT COMIC BOOK WITCH HUNT: The Demonization, Near-Death, and Triumphant Revival of a Popular Art Form

By Ed McCormack

The day after my wife tripped and fell while jogging on concrete, ending up with a beautiful black eye, along with some other not quite as glaring minor injuries, I insisted that we go to Duane Reade to pick out the biggest, darkest pair of sunglasses we could find. (Aptly enough, the style we selected was called "Paparazzi.")

After all, we wouldn't want to give those nice ladies at the Post Office and those fawning checkout girls at Gristedes who were forever cooing about what a great couple we were, "always together and all," something to start whispering behind our backs about, would we?

"I really wouldn't blame them, because even though I know it can't always be true, that's what I automatically think when I see a woman with an eye like this," Jeannie said, slipping on her new Holly Golightly goggles. "Anyway, I could learn to like this incognito look!"

It pleased me that my wife, too, was concerned with preserving my gentlemanly honor. But Jeannie was less indulgent a few days later, when I acted almost as self-conscious about asking a guard at The Metropolitan Museum of Art directions to "Superheroes," the exhibition of costumes from films based on comic books and the funky punk couture some of them have inspired.

"Could it be that in some way you equate being an adult comic book lover with being a wife beater?" she teased.

"Absolutely not," I insisted humorlessly. "How could you possibly think anything would be as embarrassing to me as being mistaken for the kind of lowlife scumbag who would beat up on a woman? I'm afraid I couldn't possibly be as blasé about it as Charles Bukowski, who belted one of his girlfriends, and when she called him a bastard and told him he wouldn't have the guts

to do that to a man, said, 'What's that got to do with it?' But I still wouldn't want anyone thinking I was the kind of person who only sets foot in an art museum for some show that has nothing to do with art. Or, even worse, the kind of pretentious phony who wouldn't be caught dead looking at anything having to do with comic books, unless it was validated by being in a museum. See what I mean? It's a double-edged self-consciousness! But let's face it: this show hardly even has to do with comic books. It's just a cynical, dumbed down attempt on the Met's part to compete with other summer blockbusters like "Sex in the City" and that new Indiana Jones movie, in order to attract the hoi polloi."

The hoi polloi? Just hearing myself say it out loud made me aware that, for all comics meant to me as a kid, I had become something of a cultural snob.

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"If artists are snobs," Tennessee Williams once wrote, "it is much in the same humble way that lunatics are: not because they wish to be different, and hope and believe that they are, but because they are painfully struck in the face with the inescapable fact of their difference, which makes them hurt and lonely enough to want to undertake the vocation of artists."

I don't deny that it wasn't always easy, being a kid with artistic leanings growing up on the Lower East Side back in the bad old diddibop days of the 1950s. But I wouldn't go so far as to endorse Williams's sentimental assessment by claiming to have been any more bothered by being different than any other person of sensibility who happens to have been born into a world ruled by banality. What's so painful, after all, about realizing at an early age that one's taste happens to be better than run of the mill?

If anything, I took pride in preferring primitively-drawn Captain Marvel to slick, invincible Superman; in knowing that blocky bicep'd Captain America, in his red, white and blue long Johns, was nowhere near as interesting as *The Spirit*, who fought crime in a rumpled blue business suit (and whose "curious moral neutrality," I would learn many years later, "made an alarming and indelible impression" on the young John Updike); that sideshow-supple Plastic Man, who could stretch his neck like a giraffe and periscope around corners or disguise himself as a table for the crooks to sit down at and plan their heist, was the coolest superhero of all...

Although a Gallup poll conducted in the mid '50s found that 70 percent of American adults believed comic books caused juvenile delinquency, none of the delinquents that I knew (and I knew plenty) were half as obsessed with them as I was. Most of them had already lost their sense of wonder; were too jaded for "kid stuff," as one hood actually referred to a copy of *Weird Fantasy* I was skimming in our junior high school cafeteria.

It was mainly thoughtful introverts like myself—nerds as we call them today—who went in for such escapism. Umberto Eco, the well known novelist and professor of semiotics, was an Italian version. In his novel "The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana," Eco makes a point that could have applied to many of us when, speaking through his character but really for himself, he writes, "I had been reading schoolbooks and comic books and it was through comic books that I had laboriously constructed a social conscience."

In the same book—which is so peppered with comic pages and panels from the author's own collection that its fly leaf inaccurately touts it as a "graphic novel"—Eco

tells us how he was captivated by American comics ("brought over perhaps by soldiers") of a type Italian editors would not have dared to publish, "as their attitude was too outrageously modern and suggested what the Nazis called degenerate art."

And referring to the American cartoonist Chester Gould's genius for distortion, he adds, "Later, having grown older and wiser, was I drawn to Picasso thanks to a nudge from Dick Tracy?"

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One of the points that David Hajdu makes in his recent history "The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How it Changed America," all about how comic books were all but wiped out during the McCarthy era, when witch hunts were all the rage, is that comics were an overwhelmingly workingclass phenomenon. The very first newspaper strip, "The Yellow Kid," which made its debut in 1896 in Hearst's New York Journal "was set in the gutters of Manhattan's Lower East Side and depicted the rowdy antics of a gang of young scruffs."

Not only were many of the characters in comic strips workingclass but many of their creators were as well. Like me, they were people who did not grow up among aesthetes; who probably got their first exposure to art of any kind in the "funny papers"; who were naturally susceptible to what Hajdu refers to as "the workingclass ideal of skilled craftsmanship."

But as early as 1909, when the Ladies Home Journal ran an article headlined "A Crime Against American Children," comic strips were already being condemned for bringing "crude immigrant humor" into American homes on Sunday, "the Christian sabbath." Much more vulnerable than the newspaper strips, which were backed by the financial and legal clout of Hearst, Pulitzer, and powerful syndicates such as King Features, were their poor relation, comic books.

Born in the 1930s, when popular newspaper strips were reprinted in pulp pamphlets and offered as promotional premiums, comic books eventually became the province of smalltime publishers who bought up strips rejected by the syndicates or commissioned new ones from struggling artists and writers. Hajdu's book gives vivid glimpses of these often eccentric entrepreneurs and their employees, toiling in seedy downtown studios that often resembled sweatshops—only, with drawing tables lined up instead of sewing machines. On payday, one cigar-chomping, derby-sporting comic book packager named Harry A. Chesler "would sit behind the desk in his office,

summon the artists, one by one, and ask 'How much do you need this week to get by?'"

Still, it was more than slave labor to eager neophytes like Jerry Robinson, who apprenticed to Batman creator Bob Kane while still an undergraduate at Columbia University, and recalled in an interview, "Basically we were kids ourselves, so we wrote about what excited us, which our audience then related to. We were inventing the language as we went along and some of us had an awareness of that."

Their creative enterprise did nothing to endear these young innovators to the anti-comic book crusaders, who eventually came on like the tommygun-wielding thugs in one of the comic books they found most objectionable: "Crime Does Not Pay." That title, emblazoned in big block letters across some of the most gloriously garish, blood-spattered covers in all of comicdom, had always struck me as a cautious concession to potential censors, since crime was the only thing that did pay in my neighborhood, where nobody but the loansharks and the bookies rode around in Cadillacs.

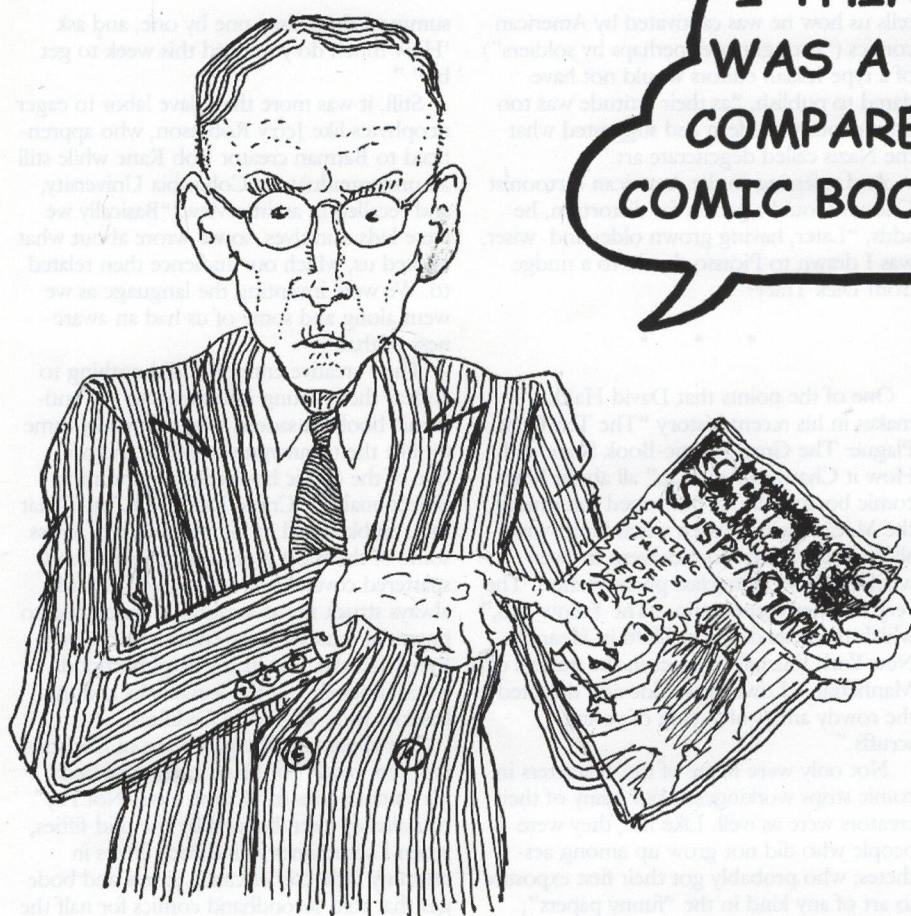
But apparently the guardians of Christian morality could not be so easily appeased: Newsstand sales of "Crime Does Not Pay" had already been banned by the mid-fifties, when I sometimes found back issues in crummy little corner candy stores and bodegas that sold secondhand comics for half the cover price (it would still be some time before old comics were treasured as collectibles).

Interestingly enough, by the early '40s, Hajdu tells us, "more than a third of comic books were being read by people over eighteen... since the armed forces were buying comics in bulk and making them available to men and women in the service... and also because the first generation raised on comics was growing older." Yet the case against comics was better served by emphasizing the younger reader, as Sterling North a columnist for *The Chicago Daily News*, did in a 1940 article headlined "A National Disgrace (And a Challenge to American Parents)." Citing "mayhem, murder, torture, abduction, voluptuous females in scanty attire, blazing machine guns, hooded 'justice,' and cheap political propaganda," North warned that "Unless we want a coming generation even more ferocious than the present one, parents and teachers throughout America must band together to break the 'comic' magazines."

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By 1963, the year my son Holden was born, that goal had, for all intents and purposes, already been achieved by something





called the Comics Code Authority. Characterized by Hajdu as “an unprecedented (and never surpassed) monument to self-imposed repression,” the Code stipulated, among other things, that “policeman, judges, government officials and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority; no magazine shall use the word horror or terror in its title; all lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated; passion or romantic interest shall never be treated in such a way as to stimulate the lower and baser emotions; females shall be drawn realistically without exaggerations of any physical qualities; respect for parents, the moral code, and for honorable behavior shall be fostered; the treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage.”

While it seems inconceivable today that any industry intent on entertaining the hot-blooded young would abide by such restrictions, in 1954 there was very little choice. The Code came about largely as a defense against devastating attacks by Dr. Fredric Wertham, a publicity-hungry psychologist and author of a best-selling tract called

“Seduction of the Innocent,” whose core thesis was that “comic books are an important contributing factor in many cases of juvenile delinquency.”

A thin-lipped German transplant with a pronounced accent who lacked only a monocle to be the very picture of a B-movie SS officer, Wertham actually said, “I think Hitler was a beginner compared to the comic book industry.”

Not only did Wertham blame comic books for the “the tidal wave of gore and bloodshed flooding through good old Blackboard Jungle America,” as Bob

Callahan puts it in the introduction to the “Smithsonian Book of Comic Book Stories,” he also started those rumors we’ve all heard about Batman and Robin, observing that the latter was “buoyant with energy and devo-

tion to nothing on earth or in interplanetary space as much as to Bruce Wayne” (Batman’s secret identity) and that “He often stands with his legs spread, his genital region discreetly evident.”

As for Wonder Woman, she was obviously a lesbian with S&M tendencies who liked to tie-up male criminals with her “golden lassos.” And Superman was redolent of Hitler’s “Master Race,” even though he was the creation of Joe Schuster and Jerry Siegel, two young Jewish guys from Cleveland who regularly pitted the “man of steel” against Nazi villains in their wartime comics.

To an NYU professor named Frederick M. Thrasher, Wertham’s claims must have seemed as farfetched as those of Louis Proal, a turn of the century French magistrate and lecturer who, Hajdu informs us, studied the reading habits of convicts, decided they had been influenced to commit violent crimes by the novels of Dostoevsky, George Sand, and Zola, and recommended that “all such literature should be banned.” Thrasher pointed out that none of Wertham’s theories were supported by research data and that he “cites a series of sensational child crimes headlined in the press (not his own cases) which he imputes to the comics without any evidence that the juveniles involved ever read or were interested in comic books.”

Unfortunately, Thrasher’s article appeared in the “Journal of Educational Sociology,” not exactly a household name to the hordes of ordinary citizens around the

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country who, mesmerized by Wertham's articles and newspaper, radio, and TV interviews, enlisted their kids for mass comic book burnings organized by church groups, American Legion posts, and PTA's all around the country.

More surprising than how many young people tossed their beloved comics into bonfires to win the approval of adults was how few newspapers around the country thought to remind their readers how much these events resembled the book burnings that had taken place in Nazi Germany just a few years earlier.

Even some public intellectuals succumbed to the anti-comics hysteria with uncharacteristic witlessness. Reviewing Wertham's book for *The New Yorker*, Wolcott Gibbs frothed, "The concrete evidence it offers of a real crime against the children seems to be practically unanswerable. I like to think that Superman and his pals are up against the battle of their perverse, fantastic, and foolish lives."

If an urbane chap like Gibbs could get so worked up about a squeaky clean all-American icon like Superman, imagine how less sophisticated souls reacted to some of the characters and stories reprinted in "The EC Horror Library of the 1950's" a big, gorgeous coffee table volume, published by Nostalgia Press, that my son Holden presented me with in 1978. Since the date of the "To Daddy" inscription opposite the title page, "5/29/78," doesn't coincide with my birthday, Father's Day, or any other occasion for which I might have expected to receive such a gift, it amuses me to suspect that my son, who was born in May, may have purchased it—at least in part, since my book shelves were always open to him—as a belated 15th birthday present for himself. Who could blame the kid for being curious about this extinct species of great horror comics that I had been extolling to him for years?

But wait a minute, some of you may be thinking, weren't EC comics the very ones that Wertham had warned parents most sternly about, singling them out for their gory content, their sexual suggestiveness—and perhaps worst of all to the good doctor—their reckless disrespect for authority? So wasn't I even a little bit worried that some of the graphically explicit imagery in these comics—pools of blood, severed heads, grave-robbing ghouls, an entire panoply of terrors—might warp my son's young mind and possibly turn him into a blood-thirsty criminal?

Not in the least; or at least no more than I would worry about exposing him to a

Gruenewald crucifixion, Goya's "Disasters of War," or, for that matter, the naked necrophilia of Edgar Allan Poe's "Anabel Lee." What would have been really criminal, as far as I was concerned, would be to deprive a brilliant kid like Holden, who looked upon comic books as a serious art form, of seeing the work of consummate draftsmen like Reed Crandell, Jack Davis, Bill Elder, George Evans, Graham Ingels, and Wallace Wood, who had influenced just about every good comics artist who came later. For not only did my son follow in my childhood footsteps by writing and drawing his own homemade comics (even devising an ingenious "MC Comics" logo for the cover), but he did me one better by writing long brilliantly analytical letters of appreciation, criticism, and advice to the editors of D.C., his favorite company, some of which, much to his delight and mine, were published.

Here I should confess that I could not share my son's enthusiasm for DC Comics, which introduced Superman in 1938 and which Bob Callahan credits with more recently introducing "new noir decade realism into the old worlds of costumed characters of the early forties" (a trend especially evident in their other leading character Batman's "Dark Knight" phase).

By the time Holden became an aficionado, mainstream commercial comics such as

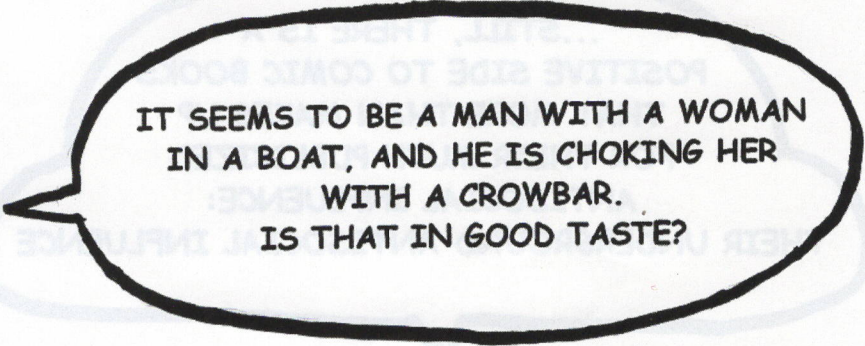
For all this, my son was never as fanatical a fan as Larry Stark, a member of my own generation, who says, "Since that sad day in 1955, when EC gasped their last breath, I've felt a sincere loss."

No doubt Dr. Wertham would have reserved his most dire prognosis for young Larry, who wrote so many critical letters to Bill Gaines, the editor of EC, that Gaines finally hung a sign over his desk that said, "God help us to write stories that will please Larry Stark."

But instead of becoming an axe-murderer, Stark grew up to be the theater critic for *Boston After Dark*, a role only a panned playwright might consider one and the same.

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Originally, EC stood for Educational Comics, although it was eventually changed to *Entertaining Comics* when that name began to seem more descriptive of its goals. The company had specialized in titles such as "Picture Stories from the Bible," "Picture Stories from 'American History,'" and "Picture Stories from Science," until its founder, M.C. Gaines died in a boating accident in 1948, and his son Bill took his place at the helm. Over the next few years, with the help of comic book legends Harvey Kurtzman and Al Feldstein, Bill Gaines



IT SEEMS TO BE A MAN WITH A WOMAN  
IN A BOAT, AND HE IS CHOKING HER  
WITH A CROWBAR.  
IS THAT IN GOOD TASTE?



I THINK SO

those of DC or its rival, Marvel Comics, no longer held any interest for me, apart from the vicarious pleasure I took in my son's astute analysis of them. Nor was I about to debate the relative merits of pre and post Code comics with him, not only because no halfway sensitive parent wants to risk dampening a bright kid's enthusiasm with his own heavyhanded opinions from on high, but also because I was sure that, within his own frames of reference, Holden's taste was in every way equal to my own. Nor, for that matter, was there any doubt in my mind that he had thought his opinions through more thoroughly and was more passionate about them than I had ever been.

transformed a barely-profitable purveyor of innocuous educational and religious pamphlets into the publisher of a line of crime and horror stories so popular and controversial that, at the height of the anti-comics pogroms, its offices were raided by the NYPD.

In 1953, frantic S.O.S. editorials signed



by "The Whole EC Gang" started to appear regularly in the pages of "Tales from the Crypt," "Vault of Horror," "ShockSuspenseStories," and "Haunt of Fear." Warning that comics were "under fire" from "assorted headline hunters," including "a psychiatrist who has made a lucrative career of attacking comic magazines" and "groups of adults who would like to blame their lack of ability as responsible parents on comic magazines," they urged readers to write letters of protest to The Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency "now investigating the comics industry."

Convinced that the senators would listen to reason, even as everyone warned him that he was walking into an ambush, Gaines volunteered to appear at the hearings, which were to be televised, as a friendly witness. But he popped large quantities of benzedrine pills to stay up several nights in a row preparing for his appearance, and by the time he was called to testify, following a characteristically self-assured appearance by his nemesis, Dr. Wertham, he was so sleep-deprived as to be barely coherent.

Overweight, perspiring profusely, Gaines presented the perfect stuck-pig image for the blood-sport that such hearings had become in Joe McCarthy's America, as

Feiffer, who began his cartooning career as an assistant to Will Eisner, creator of *The Spirit*, asserts in his book *The Great Comic Book Heroes*, published in 1965. "The attack was strident and spotty; the defense smug and spotty—proving, perhaps, that even when grownups correctly verbalize a point about children, they manage to miss it: so that a child expert can talk about how important fantasies of aggression are for children, thereby destroying forever the value of fantasies of aggression. Once a child is told: 'Go on, darling. I'm watching. Fantasize,' he no longer has a reason. Still, there is a positive side to comic books that more than makes up for their much publicized antisocial influence: their underground antisocial influence."

Feiffer's words were to be more prophetic than he could possibly have imagined. Just a couple of years later, a geeky young refugee from suburban Delaware named Robert Crumb came pushing a creaky old baby carriage, laden with the first issue of his self-published "Zap Comics," along Haight Street, in the hippie quarter of San Francisco, hawking copies to the flaky foot traffic of zonked-out runaways and freaks who greeted each new aberration with a spacey "Oh, wow!" or "Far out!"

Whether by design or by practical neces-

they relished confronting the Establishment.

Crumb revives the rebellious spirit of the period vividly in a strip called "I Remember the Sixties," reprinted in *The Smithsonian Book of Comic-Book Stories*. One panel shows a crowd of fist-pumping young freaks gleefully cheering on a hairy rock guitarist, singing, "Mom! Dad! I want to kill you!" under a caption that says, "Back then, we wanted to break down all 'law'n' order.' We hated all symbols of authority. Anything associated with our parents and their values was poison to us, and we expressed ourselves."

This meant even going so far as to send up suburban sitcom family values in a manner that would have been much too daring for "Mad," as Crumb did in a strip where a Betty Crocker matron in black garter belt and bondage bra embraces a crewcut Beaver Cleaver teenager who exclaims, "Gee...you must be the greatest mom a guy ever had!"

Crumb and some of his colleagues in the underground movement, such as Kim Deitch, Gilbert Shelton, and Spain Rodriguez, never hesitated to be outrageous, even deliberately offensive, in their parodies of "square" society's moral hypocrisy. Which is probably why Crumb still seems a little leery of being belatedly embraced by the fine art establishment, which has honored him with numerous international gallery and museum exhibitions over the past several years.

His ambivalence comes across in the poster he designed for the exhibition "R. Crumb: Drawings and Comics" at Museum Ludwig, in Cologne, Germany, in 2004. Granted, in his underground days, he probably would have drawn himself sitting on a toilet bowl, with a joint (or possibly even his erect penis) in his hand, rather than in an overstuffed Major Hoople easy-chair, daintily hoisting a tea cup, as if in a tentative toast to his newfound respectability. Yet his satirical edge is still evident in the question he poses in a headline-size Gothic Germanic typeface: "Yeah, but is it Art?"

And in a smaller balloon below, the cartoon Crumb answers,

"You tell me, I don't know..."

\* \* \*

In her preface to the first annual "Best American Comics" anthology, published by Houghton Mifflin in 2006, series editor Anne Elizabeth Moore explains, "the collection is a new addition to the esteemed line of distinguished titles in the Best American series that's been helping to define literature since 1915. "Then she adds, "That such an honor would be bestowed upon the traditionally lowbrow medium of comics is a direct violation of the laws of both comics

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ANTISOCIAL INFLUENCE:  
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Estes 9, the same ambitious senate hitman who had grilled Mafia boss Joe Columbo so mercilessly during earlier hearings on organized crime, held up a blown-up cover of *ShockSuspenseStories*, saying, "It seems to be a man with a woman in a boat, and he is choking her with a crowbar. Is that in good taste?"

When the best Gaines could come up with for a reply was, "I think so," The Whole EC Gang, following the hearings with morose fascination on TV, knew the gig was up.

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"The entire debate on comic books was, in my opinion, poorly handled," Jules

sity, the perambulator was the ideal prop for a movement, then in its infancy, which would prove to be Dr. Wertham's worst nightmare come to garish psychedelic life. For Crumb was the frontrunner for a fearless new breed of graphic subversives profoundly influenced by "Mad," the only EC title to survive the purge by switching to a magazine format and getting around the Code on a technicality. What set apart these underground cartoonists, as they would later come to be known, was that, like the San Francisco rock bands for whom some of them designed concert posters and album covers (most notably Crumb's classically funky cover for Janis Joplin's first album),



history and literature. I just hope we can get it done before Houghton Mifflin figures this out."

But obviously the publisher, like numerous others large and small, has already figured out that something revolutionary is going on in this once scorned hybrid medium that straddles art and literature and requires those who both write and draw their own stories to be doubly gifted. Call them graphic novels if you like, but those are still comic books taking up all that prime shelf space at Barnes & Noble nowadays. And much of the credit should go to Art Spiegelman, who elevated their status immediately in 1992, when he won the Pulitzer Prize for his epic "Maus," proving that cartoon cats and mice could be used to tell a Holocaust story as harrowing and moving as anything ever written by Elie Wiesel.

Spiegelman was already working to get comics taken seriously in the early 80s, when he and his wife, Francoise Mouly, published "Raw," an innovative graphic magazine that gave early exposure to some of the best young artists in the field and helped to create an audience for others. Although many among this younger generation had been influenced by the underground cartoonists of the Sixties, their work was rarely as outrageous. In keeping with the less revolutionary temper of their era, they tended to be more introspective and in some ways more subtle, taking in a range of human experience beyond their underground predecessors' sometimes sophomoric preoccupation with those hippie staples "sex, drugs, and rock and roll."

Chris Ware and Lynda Barry, for example, both deal in very different ways with the helplessness and heartbreak of childhood; Ware in an exquisitely pristine Neo-Art Deco style that tempers the innate emotionalism of his subject matter; Barry with a scribbly urgency that suggests a brilliant but disturbed preadolescent's stressed-out notebook doodlings. Sometimes adding "who never forgets anything" after her signature, Phoebe Gloeckner, who started drawing her strip "Diary of a Teenage Girl" while still in high school, combines vulnerability with tough survivor's wit, making emotional abuse at the hands of a sadistic stepfather and dubiously consensual sex with her mother's boyfriend seem like everyday events in darkest suburbia.

Influenced by "Indy" film, Daniel Clowes's deadpan parables illuminate the foibles of dysfunctional Gen-X slackers and wannabe hipsters adrift in a existential mall land, hooked on consumer culture and looking for love in all the wrong places. Long before "The L Word," Alison Bechdel gave us wryly affectionate, if not quite as glamorous, takes on hip, contemporary les-

bian life. And Bechdel's "Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic," about growing up with a closeted gay mortician father in the family funeral parlor, strangely parallels "Six Feet Under." Marjane Satrapi, yet another gifted young woman cartoonist who brings a unique personal vision to a once almost exclusively male field, has lifted the veil on what it was like to come of age in post-revolutionary Iran in the vivid dialogue and elegantly stark black and white drawings of her graphic memoir "Persepolis."

So far, only the big commercial publishers like DC and Marvel have parlayed comic books into Hollywood blockbusters with standard issue costumed characters like Superman, Batman, and Spiderman (although the recent news that artist / writer Frank Miller, who has worked for both companies, is now about to bring The Spirit to the big screen, indicates that some of the more subtle mainstream characters may soon find a new audience). But strips by Clowes, Satrapi, and Harvey Pekar have also been adapted fairly successfully as films. And while it's hard to imagine how Ben Katchor's "Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer" might translate cinematically, it has already been the subject of a show at The Jewish Museum and attracted literary fans like the novelist Michael Chabon, who waxed rhapsodic over Katchor's "city of men who live alone in small apartments, tormented by memories, impracticable plans, stains on the ceiling."

That at least one of the new comics creators may have influenced the underground cartoonist who once inspired so many of them is suggested by the collaborations between Harvey Pekar and Robert Crumb. A writer not sufficiently masochistic, apparently, to take up screenwriting, Pekar had to cajole Crumb, among other artists, to turn his scripts and crude stick-figure storyboards into fully realized comic strips. And it seems obvious that illustrating Pekar's surprisingly compelling stories about his day to day life as a workingclass bohemian hospital clerk in Cleveland inspired Crumb himself to work more autobiographically in strips such as a story about an older brother who committed suicide that was reprinted in "The Best American Comics" anthology.

In general Crumb's recent stories, including a series of collaborations with his wife Aline Crumb, also a cartoonist, which run

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AN AXE MURDERER  
HE BECAME A THEATER CRITIC  
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ONE AND THE SAME**

periodically in The New Yorker (a once unimaginable venue for him!), depart from his earlier satirical shock tactics, taking a mellow, more ruminative tone. Still, the Old Master has not lost his edge. Although the last panel of "I Remember the Sixties" again finds him slumped in an easy chair, thoughtfully hoping he has been "part of the solution an' not part of the problem," he decides, "Maybe I should get more involved—rob a bank or something!"

\* \* \*

"The terrain of sensibility can be seen as a boundless tissue of small instinctive perceptions, vagrant sympathies," the cultural critic Donald Phelps wrote in a recent essay titled "Poetry of Erosion: "Ben Katchor's Julius Knipl," sounding more like he was expounding on the Poststructuralist theories of Jacques Derrida or Roland Barthes than a comic strip. But that's the kind of discourse one encounters frequently in fan publications such as "Comics Journal," where Phelps's essay appeared, prompting the fear that this vital popular art form might wilt under the weight of so much scholarship.

It reminds me of the kind of "artiness" a good friend and I once succumbed to, when we decided to collaborate on a comic strip back in the heady heyday of the underground comics movement.

It could be that we came at it from the wrong direction from the start, since we were both fine artists, showing in the same gallery in the Tenth Street scene, and back then when a painter employed the vernacular of cartooning it could only be construed as slumming in the manner of Roy Lichtenstein's Pop parodies of 50's Romance comics. ("No comics publisher would have hired Lichtenstein—he wasn't good enough," says Raymond Everett Kinstler, who once drew romance comics for D.C. and is now a portrait painter, specializing in stylish society figures such as author Tom Wolfe and O. Alden James, President of the National Arts Club.)

Not that Jim Hans or I would ever have thought of ourselves as slummers, since he



was the only artist I knew of working in the Pop idiom who genuinely loved and respected comic art, rather than looking down on it, and I had learned literally everything I knew about drawing from studying the work of great newspaper strip and comic book draftsmen, such as Hal Foster, Milton Caniff and Will Eisner, as a kid.

Still, the collaborative process that we settled on to create our strip, "The Adventures of Tom in the Aquarian Age," was closer to conceptual art practices than traditional cartooning methods, since it involved an element of randomness and chance of which John Cage or Yoko Ono might well have approved: On a predetermined grid of photocopied empty panels, Jim would paste down an image or two from his extensive archive of old line-engravings and hand-print a few phrases of text, then send it to me. I would add a drawing that incorporated or expanded upon his collage fragment, letter in a few more words, then send it back to him.

The process, which would be repeated until all the panels were filled and the page was completed, was influenced in equal parts by the "Mail Art" of Ray Johnson (from whom we both received regular mis-sives) and the earlier "Exquisite Corpse" experiments of the Surrealists, in which several artists passed a folded piece of paper around a cafe table, each drawing on it without seeing what the others had done, until it was unfolded and the entire image could be viewed.

Our method produced some interesting results and occasionally enabled us to do what all venturesome artists strive to do: surprise ourselves. And naturally we were elated when, in a downtown storefront office permeated by the homey odor of marijuana, Kim Deitch, already an underground cartoonist of some note, and editor of the Gothic Blimp Works, accepted our strip for publication.

Since The Gothic Blimp Works was the comics supplement of the East Village Other, the leading counterculture newspaper in New York, and, along with just about every other hip cartoonist around, Crumb himself often contributed strips and cover

drawings to it, we knew that we were starting at the very top of the underground, oxymoronic as that may sound.

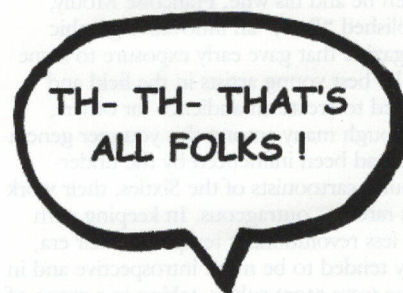
So, given how arbitrary most of the events that have determined what I've done and become in the interim have been, I can't help wondering what I might be doing now had the Gothic Blimp Works not gone the way of the Hindenburg soon after the third or fourth episode of our epic appeared in print. Would "Tom's Adventures" have continued indefinitely, perhaps turning into the first truly avant garde graphic novel? And would I have fulfilled my childhood fantasy of becoming a successful cartoonist, after the underground had gone mainstream and there was actual money involved?

Somehow I doubt it, and the very approach that we ended up taking to the project seems to bear me out. I won't try to speak for Jim Hans, but I had already spent an inordinate amount of my adult life looking at the art in galleries and museums, rather than in newspaper strips and comic books, and thus had been corrupted, if that's the word, by the even grander fantasy of Genius with a capital "G."

Never mind that I never even got close, and that my life and whatever I chose to call my art ended up taking an entirely different turn. And never mind that, witnessing the inspiring work being done in comics and graphic novels in recent years, I've had occasion to wonder where I might be now, if, like Lyonel Feininger, a terrific comic strip

artist who apparently talked himself into becoming a mediocre modernist painter, I had not let my cultural snobbery lure me away from a possibly more rewarding vocation.

But comics have their own unique aesthetic, to which one must commit wholeheartedly or not at all. And while it is true enough that every creator of superheroes, specifically, does well to build upon the anatomical fundament of Leonardo and Michelangelo, by and large those who wish to achieve mastery in the medium must look for inspiration not to the Old Masters entombed in museums, nor to the avant garde gamesmanship of the contemporary hotshots raising hell in galleries, but to all the other lowercase geniuses who, down through the decades in both newspaper strips and comic books, have practiced "the workingclass ideal of skilled craftsmanship" to such immortal perfection.



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# A Lively Stylistic Mix Made "Salon 2008" a Memorable Melange by Any Measure

Salon exhibitions are casual affairs, intended to showcase a varied group of artists rather than adhere to a particular theme. West Side Arts Coalition co-curators Leila Elias and Berik Kulmamirov put together an unusually handsome and coherent exhibition from a diverse sampling of their artistic colleagues in "Salon 2008," seen recently at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street.

Don Sichler showed digital prints of glass-fronted high-rise buildings exploring the abstract possibilities of their reflective surfaces with dazzling colors and shapes within grids of windows, creating a kind of "found cubism" and suggesting a new way of looking at these modern structures that so many of us love to hate.

Eva Sochorova's abstract acrylic painting featured beautifully melded colors and geometric forms in the manner of the Russian Constructivists, albeit with softer, more lyrical paint handling. Frequent exhibitor Yukako invariably finds new avenues for expanding the perimeters of traditional Asian painting, here with a fusion of graceful ink calligraphy and light, loose, lyrical watercolor washes that evoked lilting natural rhythms.

Azmeer Hossain says more with monochromatic tones than many painters do with a full palette, judging from an untitled mixed media abstraction in which strong forms on a tactile surface, scored with deep lines, suggested earthy substances and ancient tablets.

In two paintings from her "Cosmos" series, Leanne Martinson employed collaged fragments of painted canvas to create compositions in which visual "jumps" and disjunctions created dynamic formal enjambements. A sense of spiritual fervor invariably lends the flowing watercolor and mixed media paintings on paper of Anne Rudder a visionary quality reminiscent of Blake, as seen in her "Christ's Suffering and Love," where the poetic phrase "Take oh take has now become my cry to shatter all" winds among lyrical images of birds, human figures, and sacred symbols.

Emily Rich, one of our most vigorous present-day practitioners of the gestural mode, was represented by a characteristically graceful composition inspired by Christo's "Gates" project in Central Park, as well as by another acrylic on canvas in which a figure played hide and seek amid luscious abstract forms, reminding one of de Kooning's memorable phrase "slippery glimpes."

By contrast, Joseph Boss makes mixed media assemblages that pay tribute to tribal art through means of a sophisticated contemporary sensibility, with mask-like faces, set in relief against precisely patterned back-

grounds, projecting an unnerving presence.

In a manner reminiscent of Leger, Meyer Tannenbaum appeared to be exploring what happens when line and color interact as discrete yet harmonious entities. However, Tannenbaum's cloud-like linear configurations slide even more elusively around (as well as in and out of) his soft pastel color areas.

In Leila Elias's mixed media collage "Red, Black & Yellow," which had a power that far exceeded its modest scale, the piece de resistance was a central shape suggesting an abstract rose, its petals angularly squared off in a manner that revealed Elias's ability to transform a familiar shape into an independent aesthetic entity. Berik Kulmamirov employed a flawless realist technique to set a beautiful ballerina in motion against a background of fiery red clouds, as she soared above phallically suggestive flowers that added erotic resonance to a transcendent image, in his oil on canvas "Above Lilies."

Pud Houstoun combined linear elements with colors that range from confectionery pinks to "dirtier" hues suggesting the gritty, grimy aspects of the urban environment. Like Cy Twombly, Houstoun takes the vernacular of graffiti to new heights of elegance.

"A Single Yellow Rose" is an intricate composition in oil by Lori Lata that turns a still life in an interior into an intricate, maze-like composition in which one must search for the object in the title, while succumbing to Lata's skillful way with semi-abstract form and subtly harmonized earth colors.

Olga Papkovitch moves easily from a small portrait of Archangel Gabriel in the manner of a Byzantine icon to a larger, thickly encrusted floral composition with an energy akin to van Gogh. Papkovitch obviously agrees with the adage that "style is character" and demonstrates it by virtue of her impressive versatility. Then there is the photographer Paul Margolis, whose C-prints of abandoned institutions such as an old quarantine hospital or the ferry terminal on Ellis Island have a haunted atmosphere, making peeling walls and broken windowpanes speak volumes about human dislocation and isolation.

Meg Boe Birns employed luscious color, fanciful patterning, and lush texture in her fanciful acrylic painting of a purple cat face and showed a more minimalist side in her 3-D abstract mixed media assemblage of a monolithic form resembling an hourglass. Archie Hamilton's black and white silver gelatin selenium toned print "Big Wheel" presented the viewer with a fascinating visual conundrum; for while the wheel in the foreground was sharply focused, its counterpart in the background suggested a mysteriously distorted phantom shadow with added

spokes.

Margo Mead's landscape "The Wonder Of It All" lived up to its title with a breathtaking mountain view bathed in golden auras. Combining Chinese ink techniques with vibrant Western watercolor washes on rice paper, Mead's painting was a veritable ode to nature. Harriet G. Green's small, exquisitely detailed photomontages employ mirror images to create surreal effects, especially in one work where two bursting-at-the-seams trash receptacles were conjoined like Siamese twins pregnant with detritus. Madi Lanier continued to fruitfully explore her recent mode of watercolor and monoprint compositions in which pale areas of color are combined with precise lines to create semi-abstract spatial statements in two works in which her austere visual vocabulary did surprising justice to the extravagant subject of sunsets. In three separate paintings in oil, watercolor, and acrylic, Jutta Filippelli showed three different approaches to still life, ranging from painterly representation to expressionism to detailed realism, the installation seeming to function as an eloquent visual essay on the subject at hand.

Shirley Piniat once again demonstrated her special gift for lending everyday subjects a raw beauty. Potted plants on a round table and weather-beaten shacks on the water were both rendered by Piniat with sublimely rugged simplicity. Set against a field of blue and purple, continuous white lines that appear squeezed from the tube like toothpaste evoked a procession of figures, even while suggesting an indecipherable script, in Udeaku Chikezie's work in acrylic and oil on canvas. Like Yves Tanguy, Chikezie creates a private world, albeit in a more abstract manner. Avdar Khusainov, on the other hand, presented a pictographic vision in which faces, houses, and other images inhabit an overall abstract design in his oil on canvas "Streets of New York." In one of MD. Mahmudul Hassan's abstract compositions, rich, somber colors and mysteriously allusive forms, suggesting ornate portals and other exotica, were scratched into the surface of the paint; while in another, buoyant splashes of color created a lyrical effect. Samir Anastasius showed three unassuming works in watercolor and crayon on paper, in which a spirit of playfulness prevailed, with engagingly upbeat forms floating freely amid written phrase in the manner of an artful diary.

Also including Marlene Zimmerman's vibrant Neo-Pop figure paintings and one equally colorful still life that was simultaneously a witty contemporary take on chinoiserie and a graceful formal statement, "Salon 2008" was one of the better exhibitions of its type to be seen this season.

—Maurice Taplinger



# Biho Asai's Graceful Shaman Dance of Splashing Ink

To most Western viewers, Japanese calligraphy presents a beautiful mystery, possessed of obvious attributes, yet, owing to the language barrier, ultimately unknowable. However, Biho Asai, one of Japan's most innovative contemporary calligraphers, does much to make this esoteric art form, regarded throughout Asia as one of the "three perfections," on a par with painting and poetry, universally accessible by putting an imaginative emphasis on its pictorial qualities, even while retaining the essential integrity of the written characters.

Asai's unorthodox approach was not immediately accepted in her homeland the petite calligrapher told me through an American interpreter, just before the opening reception of her recent exhibition at Caelum Gallery, at 508-526 West 26th Street, in Chelsea.

Apparently, some traditionalists in the calligraphic community objected to the liberties she took with the written characters. But in Japan, as in the United States, controversy often begets publicity, and all the newspaper, magazine, and TV articles and interviews that ensued ended up being beneficial to Asai's career. One of the biggest satisfactions, she explained, was that many of those who objected most strenuously to her style later came to emulate it. The modest, almost self-effacing smile she maintained while her interpreter translated this for me made clear that she regarded their conversion not so much as a victory, but as a vindication of her vision.

Caelum Gallery, which has a well-earned reputation for exhibiting innovative contemporary work by both Japanese and American artists, seemed an especially apt venue for showcasing Asai's talent, which came across most immediately in a striking calligraphic composition in a long, horizontal format called "Four Seasons."

As a Western viewer, I could not help drawing comparisons to the watercolors of Charles Burchfield, the visionary American artist who evolved a personal alphabet of symbols for various elements in nature. While Burchfield, who also took the four seasons as a theme in one of his best known series, had to invent his symbols, Asai adopts hers from existing characters, emphasizing their pictorial qualities expressively to invest them with meanings that can be "read" to some extent even by those who are not versed in the Japanese language.

In "Four Seasons," for example, the allusions to landscape are unmistakable. Certain characters are evoked in small, cursive

strokes that suggest butterflies or insects swirling in midair; others are elongated in a manner that calls to mind tall blades of grass swaying in a gentle breeze. Executed in various colors of Sumi ink, along with the carbon black Sumi ink that is the basic medium of calligraphy, the piece was a lyrical evocation that soared beyond the specific meanings of the individual characters to create a complex panorama of the stages and states of nature and the seasons in flux.



Equally evocative was "Full Moon," in which the characters again took on a vivid pictorialism, with the central circular form intersected by linear strokes suggesting wisps of cloud floating over a lunar orb and the sinuous vertical strokes below again evoking flowers on tall, breeze-bent stems.

The Japanese principle of aesthetically exquisite packaging plays an important part in the presentation of Asai's calligraphy.

Whether employing the traditional scroll format or framing a piece in the western manner, she works closely with artisans. For "Setsubun," a piece celebrating the "Bean Throwing Festival" that takes place at temples in Japan at the beginning of February, in which the legumes are tossed to drive away the evil spirit and bring good fortune, she ordered the scroll surrounding the calligraphic characters to be embellished with bean-like designs. For another piece called "Earth," she chose a frame with colorations and textures resembling those on the earthen walls of rustic Japanese houses.

At the reception for her exhibition at Caelum Gallery, Asai presented three calligraphy performances that went far beyond

what one is used to seeing in most contemporary art events classified under the category of "performance art" for the high level of discipline and planning they involved. In preparation for each of them, several young assistants scurried about, industriously setting up ink stones, pots of Sumi ink, and brushes with long bamboo handles on upright stands, at precise intervals around a large expanse of absorbent Japanese paper spread out on a black felt backing on the gallery floor.

This was all done with a quiet concentration and care that made one think of time-honored Japanese rituals such as the tea ceremony, and repeated during the intermissions between performances. After the guests in the gallery had been treated to wine and sushi, the calligrapher appeared and greeted them with a gra-

cious bow. Her three pieces, performed to music that varied from a lively Japanese vocal recording called "A Song is Born" to a lovely melody by Chopin, were titled, respectively, "The Creation," "Rose," and "Cherry Blossom."

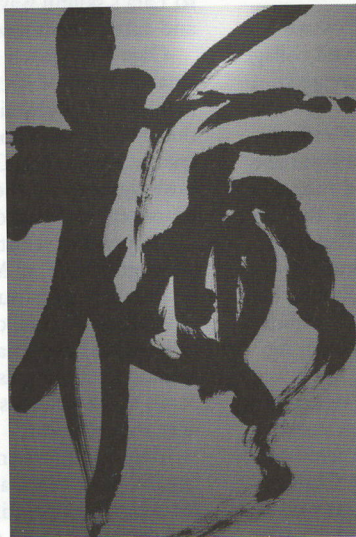
Each involved a costume change, most notably a beautiful red dress for the second

piece and an ornate red and gold kimono, which Asai wielded like a veil, for the latter. Whipping her long, shiny hair about as she wielded her long-handled brushes, Asai alternately took on the look of a shaman and a nature sprite, and applying the ink in perfect synch with the music, moving her slender, waif-like body rhythmically, varying her strokes in time to its tempo, from smoothly swirling lines when it slowed to thrusts, jabs, and vigorous splatters and splashes when it quickened. Her energetic gestural variations reminded one that Japanese literati painter-poet-calligraphers were stroking and splashing ink in

their mountain retreats for many centuries before Jackson Pollock laid his first canvas down on the floor and started to drip oil paint.

Throughout all three of the performances, each precisely timed so that the last brushstroke was laid down just as the last

*Continued on page 38*



"Sakura"



# The Japanese Painter Nobuko Tanabe Makes a Major Breakthrough in Her Most Recent Exhibition in Chelsea

It is always gratifying for a writer familiar with an artist's work to see a giant step in his or her aesthetic evolution. Such is the case with Nobuko Tanabe, a Japanese artist whose exhibition I reviewed at Montserrat Gallery when it was still located in Soho, in February of 2002.

At that time Tanabe was working in a more Minimalist mode than today and her paintings also encompassed elements of Color Field and Abstract Expressionism. A fascinatingly eclectic range of influences had been successfully assimilated by the artist, and some of her paintings took on a sculptural dimension, with the Japanese paper that she often glues to canvas crumpled to create rippling waves.

In her more recent solo show at Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, as it is now known, at 547 West 27th Street, in Chelsea, Tanabe still employs Japanese paper, along with glue, gesso, and canvas, but in a somewhat more subtle manner. Her paintings have become less sculptural—actually, considerably less so—and her unique collage paintings had now had taken on a more subjective, less formal, quality of intimacy. And while her early work had impressed me mightily, for bringing what I referred to as “an unprecedented degree of expressiveness to a basically reductive style,” I now felt even more favorably disposed toward her for having the courage to make her paintings less reductive and more personal, thereby enhancing their expressive qualities in unforeseen new ways.

It always takes courage, after all, for an artist to sacrifice one aspect of her or his work for another, especially when it involves the diminishment of a certain amount of formal impact. However, what Tanabe has gained is immeasurably greater: a firmer grasp on her own true voice and a purchase on the limitless range of possibilities that present themselves when one breaks free of formalist orthodoxy and can explore uncharted regions of self.

Tanabe's breakthrough is perhaps most clearly evident in the poetic work in gesso, acrylic, and glue on canvas that she calls “Water Fall.” Certainly this handsome hori-

zontal composition, with its undulating inner textures and limited palette of deep ultramarine and pure white is one of her most literal images, evoking the thundering beauty and foamy rush of the natural phenomenon it is named for with a power quite

gest a reference to Hokusai, one is actually put more in mind of van Gogh's “Starry Night” by its cosmic-seeming yellow and blue swirls. By contrast, Tanabe's “White” is a purist composition in which the only coloristic contrast comes from the subtle shad-

ows between the intricately swirling folds of the pure white Japanese paper glued meticulously to the surface.

Here, again, one sees the deepening subjectivity in Tanabe's new works, which, for all her multicultural awareness, seem more innately Japanese for their subtlety of sensibility than some of her earlier pieces. It is a quality that American artists such as Mark Tobey and Morris Graves, situated in Seattle and open to Pacific inspiration, strove for, but which Tanabe appears to achieve effortlessly. Certainly her fluent brush work comes out of the Eastern calli-



“Water Fall”

the equal to Pat Steir's much discussed and celebrated paintings of the same subject, despite being nowhere near as overblown.

Indeed, although it is one of the larger works in her recent show, Tanabe's “Water Fall” (the title comprised of two words rather than one, suggesting not only the standard name for a specific natural phenomenon but the generic effect of falling water quite apart from it) is executed on relatively modest easel scale. It is also executed in a considerably more controlled mode of abstraction than Steir's paintings, which strive to capture movement with poured skeins of paint flowing downward from the top of the canvas.

By contrast, Tanabe's painting consists of bold blue areas at the top and bottom of the composition, separated by a single broad band of white at the center. Yet its simplicity, which can be roughly compared to that of certain land and marinescapes by Milton Avery, is the source of its strength, evoking a very specific and personal perception of a very specific thing, even while being as solidly grounded in formal stasis as a Dutch still life.

With an artist as obviously sophisticated as Nobuko Tanabe there are bound to be echoes of art history—as often as not unexpected ones, at that. Although the title of her smaller painting “Wave #2” might sug-

graphic tradition, although she is prone to jogging its rhythms expressively with the contradictory patterns of ripples and ridges that she creates with Japanese paper glued to a canvas support. At the same time, she has also assimilated Western influences wholeheartedly, particularly in her use of color, which can take on an almost Fauvist chromatic stridency in paintings such as “Poison-Flower” and “Roll-Red,” with its green, orange, yellow, and red swirls encircling a glowing central orb.

In 2004 another reviewer for this publication wrote, not inaccurately, that one of the significant facets of Tanabe's work was the connection that she made between Color Field painting and Abstract Expressionism, which I also commented upon in my earlier review. However, Nobuko Tanabe has recently approached the point where it will soon no longer be necessary to cite such connections. For the paintings in her recent exhibition at Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery indicate that her influences have now been thoroughly integrated into a singularly seamless stylistic synthesis entirely her own. (Nobuko Tanabe's work can also be seen in Monserrat's year-round salon exhibition.)

—Maurice Taplinger



# An Informative Survey of New Canadian Painting Comes to Chelsea

We live in such relatively close proximity to our “neighbor to the north,” as it is often called; yet far too many of us remain unaware of the vital contemporary art scene that it harbors. For this reason, and simply for the overall excellence of the work on view, “Beyond Borders: an Exhibition of Fine Art from Canada” is well worth a visit to Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, where it will be on view from October 1 through 21 (Reception: October 2, 6 to 8pm).

In one of Adelle Bernadette’s most dynamic paintings, a glamorous woman in a shoulderless evening dress with a Medusa-like mane of black braids flying about her flung back head appears to have been captured in some terpsichorean trance or reverie. Here, as in other paintings by Bernadette, the artist’s tight compositional cropping, which appears to be influenced by cinematography, enhances the drama.

Also influenced by popular culture, albeit in a much different way is Emma Coyle’s paintings of willowy young woman which combine the facile line of fashion illustration by way of Matisse with the coloristic stridency of the Fauves and the German expressionists. Like the comic strip paintings of Roy Lichtenstein, Coyle’s compositions emphasize the hidden beauty in banal subject matter, making us look at familiar imagery in a new way.

Myrna Brooks Bercovich, on the other hand, employs muted color and tactile elements to create paintings with a dynamic abstract thrust. In “Pollock, Riopelle, and Moi,” Bercovich pays homage to the most publicized of the American action painters and Jean-Paul Riopelle, his lesser-known Canadian counterpart, whose “automatisme” was equally influential to homegrown artists of his generation, while displaying the unique qualities of her own vigorous gestural style.

Pauline Horricks straddles the abstract and the representational in her use of light and shadow to imbue her nature paintings with a personal poetry that comes across particularly in the hushed beauty of “Moon Shadow.” Along with compelling contrasts between delicate traces of shadow and rock formations that suggest human anatomy, Horricks employs chiaroscuro not only to evoke atmosphere but also as an effective formal device.

Jacques Philippe Hébert also works with organic shapes appropriated directly from nature, but he transforms them through heat application in a kiln in works in the medium of Venetian glass, creating compositions that combine a high level of craftsmanship with a sophisticated artistic vision. Especially striking in this regard is Hébert’s “Cascade,” with its intricate linear patterns simultaneously suggesting sinuous tree limbs and networks of human veins.

Another artist employing unusual materials

is Aaron W. Lacey, who combines molding pastes, patterned cloth, and acrylic paints in mixed media works with seductive surfaces as tempting to touch as to view. Floral patterns are a dominant motif in the compositions of Lacey, who endeavors to “fuse science, art and fashion” and succeeds splendidly in creating compelling formal juxtapositions.

The variety of representational tendencies with which Canadian artists interpret their native landscape, as well as the human figure, is exemplified in the work of several artists: John Mackintosh creates acrylic paintings with a strong mystical/spiritual component, in which soaring birds, beams of light and other upbeat natural imagery exert a surreal power. Mackintosh’s meticulously rendered compositions indicate a sensibility akin to that of the visionary American nature painter Charles Burchfield.

Michele Kambolis evokes the physicality of the firmament itself in thick impasto to which she adds sand and silver dust and modeling materials to build up bold forms that serve as surrogates for nature rather than mere representations of landscape. Her ruggedly textured canvases are tactile tours de force.

Evan King’s winning neo-primitive paintings transport us back to a picturesque Canadian past, in which early Indian lake-front settlements, populated with tiny figures, tepees, and canoes, appear dwarfed by the raw magnificence of the land. For all his affection for history, however, King’s paintings have a graphic boldness as contemporary as a new wave comic strip.

The paintings of Pascal Lareau have all to do with subtle qualities of “touch.” Like Larry Rivers, Lareau is an excellent draftsman who often leaves areas of white “breathing” space in his portrait compositions, which combine fluent brushwork with vibrant color areas, applying the vital energy of Abstract Expressionism to figurative art.

Another fresh take on figuration can be seen in the paintings of Nicholas Palmer, who seems akin to Francis Bacon for the painterly pyrotechnics with which he works out his own internal conflicts in sometimes violent streaks of visceral color. More like an aesthetic exorcist than a traditional painter, Palmer brings an elegant fury to bear in his searing portrait head “See All Evil, Hear All Evil, Speak All Evil.”

By contrast, Linda McKenny takes a straightforward realist approach to the scenic beauty of Canada’s mountains and forests. Yet her tendency to amplify certain elements with heightened color and texture imparts a sense of the sublime to her vistas that compares favorably to our own Hudson River School.

Lynda Pogue’s painterly subjectivity reduces sand dunes and watery expanses to their visual essentials in her freewheeling forays into abstraction. While retaining the spirit

of her subjects, Pogue transforms them through her ability to concentrate on form and movement in compositions animated by gestural velocity and possessed of glowing simplicity.

Making metaphysical symbols from elements of nature, Jane Richardson employs copper, embedded canvases, and metallic pigments in mixed media works that sometimes verge on the surreal. Yet, far from being literary in the manner of, say, Magritte, Richardson’s visual metaphors are bolstered by geometric elements that lend them a strong abstract presence.

Cathy Boyd employs an accomplished realist technique to create serene landscapes that are refreshingly devoid of aesthetic hyperbole. Her style is luminously transparent, in that her oils and pastels serve as windows on sparkling scenes of rivers and streams, depicted in loving, reverent, ego-transcending detail.

An Argentinean transplanted to Canada, Debora Dacci approaches every landscape as though encountering nature for the first time, capturing a sense of immediacy in breezy strokes. Her sumptuous use of color and lively way with gesture is especially exhilarating in “#12,” with its graceful daubs of pigment evoking an autumnal forest dappled with light.

Monica Deac also creates a sense of light, albeit through more abstract means in her subtly shaded, softly shimmering color field paintings. As chromatically nuanced in their own manner as the stately canvases of Mark Rothko, Deac’s majestic compositions apprehend the eternal spirit and deep essences of nature, as opposed to its superficial aspects.

Employing pen and colored inks in a self-taught neo-pointillist technique, Lawrie Dignan conjures up the landscape of British Columbia in stylized compositions that project a synthesis of sensuality and precision. Dignan’s work merges the decorativeness of Art Nouveau with a delightfully quirky visionary quality.

By contrast, Jacqueline Staikos paints oils on canvas invested with a rugged, starkly simplified quality reminiscent of Marsden Hartley. Clouds and trees are strongly outlined and codified in Staikos’s compositions, wherein every element possess a similar aesthetic weight and solidity, lending her work a singular presence.

Then there is Valery Vinokurov, who relocated to Canada from Latvia and proves that the fractured planes of Cubism still offer a vital avenue for exploration by contemporary painters. Vinokurov’s semi-abstract paintings are notable for their chromatically restrained elegance and the tightly knit yet fluid rhythms of their compositions.

All told, “Beyond Borders” gives our neighbor to the north its rightful due as a formidable player in the contemporary art scene.

—Maurice Taplinger



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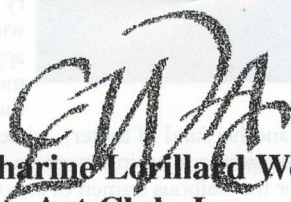
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## Ella Manor: Of Fashion Victims and Beautiful Monsters

Fortunate, in an era when high art and popular culture continue to draw closer, are those artists whose personal and professional concerns not only coincide harmoniously but nourish one another. The young Israeli-born photographer Ella Manor, who studied at the School of Visual Arts and is now a denizen of the New York fashion world, is a case in point.

Those who log onto Manor's website ([www.ellamanor.com](http://www.ellamanor.com)) can click on categories that specify "personal work" and "fashion." However, the singular aesthetic sensibility that unites them transcends categories. Like Man Ray, Dianne Arbus, and Richard Avedon, all of whom honed their unmistakably fine art visions at "Vogue," Manor marries form and content with an élan that makes a mockery of distinctions between high and low. Her pictures



"Untitled"

intrigue one by investing what is sometimes considered superficial, even trivial, with a suggestiveness that speaks of fate, mortality, and other issues more profound than one is accustomed to encountering in the precincts of the fabulously trendy.

For example, one of the most striking images on Manor's website shows a woman perched on the ledge of a rooftop in a bridal gown and veil as though contemplating a leap. Since much of Manor's personal work takes the form of self-portraits, often with the artist enacting a role in a manner akin to Cindy Sherman or Kimiko Yoshida, the picture seems to make an ambivalent statement about the sacrificial symbology of being "given away" in marriage. ("I'm kind of exploring the idea of being a bride," the artist, who took the picture of herself on the weekend before her own wedding, told a reporter.)

At the same time, lest one misinterpret her pictures, it is important to be aware that Manor is creating metaphors rather than being literal. Thus masks are a favorite motif, mingled in one personal picture with ghostly overlapping self portraits that seem to speculate wryly on how the artist's penchant for role playing could possibly precipitate a genuine identity crisis.

Gender is also up for grabs—or at least fluid—in some of Manor's photographs, as seen in one image in her digital fashion portfolio of a model with her luxuriant mane pinned back out of view on one side and a stubble drawn onto her face, suggesting a more beautiful tongue-in-chic update on those "half-man half-woman" hoaxes in sleazy carnival sideshows.

But Manor also demonstrates that she need not always resort to subterfuge or fantasy to create compelling imagery, in a magazine spread in yet another section of her website called "tearsheets." Here, employing the verite technique of a rapid-fire documentary collage, she juxtaposes images of thin young things on the runway and backstage, to evoke both the glamour and wide-eyed anxiety

*Continued on page 38*

## Joyce Waddell Bailey Helps Digital Prints Come into Their Own

The forms and forces of nature have long infused the lyrical oil paintings of the Florida artist Joyce Waddell Bailey, whose work was cited in a previous review in this publication for "a meticulous technique that calls to mind Photorealism and the Pop paintings of James Rosenquist."

In a more recent body of work, the artist explores similar themes in the distinctly different medium of original Giclée (digital) prints based on macro-photography. These can be seen on her website ([www.joycewaddellbailey.com](http://www.joycewaddellbailey.com)) and are also featured in her handsome new hardcover book "Original Giclée prints: Intimate Whispers."

Rather than using the inkjet printing process to merely reproduce her paintings, as some artists have, Bailey, who, as a faculty member at Mt. Holyoke College helped set up the Rodney L. White Print Room for the study of prints and printmaking, employs the new technology for its own unique aesthetic attributes. Thus her prints possess qualities distinctly different from her oil paintings, being informed by a technical finesse obviously gained from her extensive experience with lithography, woodcut, etching, and various photographic processes.

While Bailey's oils are generally executed on a large scale, lending them a presence and a visual impact that has been likened to Abstract Expressionism, her Giclée prints, while by no means small, are considerably more intimate, as the title of the new book suggests. Their softly glowing colors draw the viewer closer, to contemplate their velvety surfaces, which are more akin to pastel than oil, as well as their sensual forms.

Although Bailey apparently derives inspiration primarily from floral sources, her prints, like her paintings, allude to a wide range of subjects. These are hinted at in the brief poetic texts that she includes opposite the prints reproduced in "Intimate Whispers." For "Royal Collection: Ovation," for example she complements the compelling image of what appears to be a candle flame aglow between luxuriant red petals with a reference to a theatrical experience in which "memorable moments flood back to us after the curtain falls."



"Howling Dog"

Even more complex associations are set off by the work called "Royal Collection: Encore," where the anticipatory "flutter from the wings" in a theater appears to merge metaphorically with the stripes on the

wing of a butterfly (another kind of flutter), while the central image of the composition suggests something more on the order of a blurred strawberry or the bulbous stamen of an exotic blood-red flower.

Although another print by Bailey titled "Purple Passion Collection: Howling Dog" has been compared for its title to a painting by Rufino Tamayo, to this reviewer's eye it is closer in spirit to the Arthur Dove's "Foghorns" for the way Bailey makes its rhythmically reverberating pink, purple and magenta shapes evoke an equally haunting aural experience through purely visual means.

Indeed, even without the evocative captions that complement the images in her book, lending it a poetic resonance reminiscent of William Blake's "Songs of Innocence and Experience," the recent Giclée prints of Joyce Waddell Bailey's website stand splendidly on their own, as luminous examples of how a truly gifted artist can extend the frontiers of a promising new print medium.

—J. Sanders Eaton



## James Armstrong: Sculptures as Vessels of Light

The career trajectory of the sculptor and painter James Armstrong, who exhibits his work regularly at Monkdogz Urban Art, in Chelsea, New York City, demonstrates perhaps better than any other story we have heard recently the role that chance events can play in artistic destiny.

Although his medium of choice, after earning his B.A. degree in Fine Arts from the University of Missouri and remaining there to begin his career, had been stone sculpture, in 2000 it became necessary for Armstrong to move back to Illinois to run his family's glass factory.

"It was definitely trial by fire...with an average temperature ranging from between 2000 and 2400 degrees fahrenheit," Armstrong relates on his website: [www.armstrong-art.com](http://www.armstrong-art.com), where a wide range of his work is available for viewing. "My only creative outlet at the time was my guitar...and let me tell you, I was playin' the blues."

Well, as the old saying goes, "When you get a lemon, make lemonade" —or in this case, when you get stuck in a glass factory, make art out of glass. Armstrong went on line in search of a book on casting glass and *pate de verre*. He found one that sounded interesting by a man named Boyce Lundstrom, the author of several books on glass fusing and casting, but running the glass factory was keeping him too busy to follow through. A year later, however, through a series of fortuitous events, Lundstrom contacted Armstrong to inquire about buying the factory and eventually became a teacher and a mentor to him.

That's a short version (the longer, more detailed one can be read on the website) because what we are concerned with here is the work in both sculpture and painting that Armstrong has been creating ever since. One of the more striking pieces, recently on view at Monkdogz Urban Art (which also included work by Armstrong in a group exhibition that the gallery curated at elegant Concorde Room VIP lounge at Kennedy Airport) is titled "Quetzalcoatl." Like all of Armstrong's kiln formed glass sculptures, it is essentially abstract, yet it commands space in a manner that evokes the spirit of the legendary Toltec ruler and Aztec deity for whom it is named. Quetzalcoatl (which

means "the feathered serpent") was credited with discovering maize, the arts, and science; was associated with the wind and the planet Venus; and believed to represent the forces of good and light.

spring from Mount Helicron with a single blow of his hoof, that the artist captures with such striking formal economy. However, it is not only the sense of flight to which the artist appears to allude in the

shimmering translucence of the material and the streamlined sidewise movement of the piece but something even more ethereal: the role of the winged horse as a symbol of poetic inspiration.

Another work called "Centaur" comes closer in its rugged thrust to an Expressionistic suggestion of the randy half-human half-equine creature; however, not so close as to compromise the raw formal power that lends Armstrong's glass sculptures their main appeal. Indeed, their uniqueness lies in his ability to create shapes that appear to unfurl weightlessly in space, yet project a palpable presence that verges on the monumental. In pieces such as "Flight of Time," "Blue Bull," and "Flower Power" particularly, he achieves a sense of significant form without resorting to the overblown scale that has become something of a cliché in much of today's art.

Painters "saved the honor of sculpture in the nineteenth century," according to the art historian Michel Seuphor, who cites Daumier, Degas, Renoir and Gauguin as having left us "sculptured works that

are sometimes rough but always have a startling truth." Seuphor attributes this to the regenerative qualities of a change of mediums, adding "one sterilizes and kills what one hugs too tightly." This could possibly apply to the forays into painting that spell James Armstrong from his main preoccupation with abstract glass sculpture, which run a lively gamut from organically flowing abstract compositions akin to Georgia O'Keeffe's bone-like forms to nudes, probing self-portraits, and even a charming painting of a sleeping feline that transcends banality by virtue of its innate formal grace. While the abstract paintings on his website may be the most compelling for their close relationship to his sculptural mode of expression, all of the pieces on view —and there are many more than could be described adequately in this space— attest to the singular vision that makes James Armstrong an artist well worth your attention.

—Byron Coleman



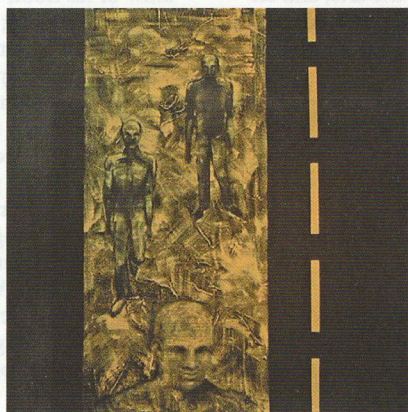
Armstrong's sculpture, with its crystalline, light-catching surface and four graceful shapes flaring out of a central base in a manner that makes them appear to twirl like the spokes of a windmill in the air, captures a sense of all of these qualities symbolically, yet simultaneously retains its abstract integrity. In fact, all of Armstrong's pieces combine strong formal attributes with mythic and heroic aspects, largely missing in much contemporary sculpture, that hark back to modernists such as Henry Moore and Jacques Lipchitz, who sought to embody mythic themes while marrying pure form to content.

Like those early masters, Armstrong transforms and submerges figural references while projecting qualities such as the sense of flight in another powerful glass sculpture called "Pegasus," where it is again the spirit, rather than the actual appearance, of the famous winged horse that, according to the myth, causes the stream of Hippocrene to



## April Bending: Of Arduous Journeys and Serene Arrivals

While many artists use their websites as virtual galleries, the particular advantage of such a site, in the case of the immensely productive and widely exhibited Canadian painter April Bending, is that it ([www.aprilbending.com](http://www.aprilbending.com)) enables viewers to take in much more of her work than could reasonably be presented in even the most comprehensive exhibition.



"The Long Way Home"

Some of Bending's strongest paintings are seen in her "On the Road Series," darkly evocative acrylics on canvas in a palette restricted to monochromatic earth tones. Their compositions center on human figures, seen singly or in groups, that take on monumental qualities by virtue of Bending's mastery of anatomy and ability to evoke emotional resonance through facial expressions—or in the case of the painting she calls "The Long Way Home," through the lack of them.

For in this particular canvas, the figures take on a somnambulant quality, as they traverse what appears to be a dirt road, bracketed between rectangular divisions, suggesting a stretch of blacktop embellished on one side by highway markings. Here, Bending's use of stark geometric abstraction, rather than distancing the figures, serves to emphasize their weary humanity, as they trudge homeward along the narrow, seemingly endless path.

All of the paintings in the "On the Road Series" appear to deal in one way or another with the arduousness of life's journey, either literally or symbolically. In "This Too Shall Pass," for example, the couple in the painting, like Picasso's "Absinthe Drinkers," are seen imbibing, rather than engaged in an actual journey. But, as the title suggests, they are hardly at their ease: The female figure clutches a glass as though for dear life, resting her head on the shoulder of her companion, who strokes her brow in an effort to provide momentary comfort, as they inhabit a melancholy miasma of "wine and roses."

Something of an anomaly for being the only work in the series sans the human figure, "The Eddy" is a lyrical composition depicting a circular current in a clear body of water, fish swimming beneath its crystalline surface. Executed with a swirling sinuousness akin to the linear motifs of Art Nouveau, "The Eddy" holds out the hope of a cool oasis at the end of the dusty road.

Other serene subjects come into play in Bending's "Sails Series" and "Sea and Palms Series," presumably inspired by spending part of the year in the Cayman Islands. Here, vibrant color is employed more liberally in landscapes and marinescapes that serve as the impetus for semi-abstract explorations which reach their exquisite apex with "In Midnight Waves," an image of frothy aquatic majesty to rival in its own way Hokusai's most masterly color woodblock print, "The Great Wave."

Bending reveals further versatility in her "Fish Series," where the various species take on iconic qualities in compositions where they are juxtaposed gracefully with underwater flora, and in her "Moon Series," where lunar orbs inspire some of her more austere yet poetic acrylics on canvas. Also of considerable interest are a number of insightful portraits, as well as a "Free Standing Series" of towering works comprised of stacked canvases that breach the gap between painting and sculpture.

All attest to the power and originality of April Bending's varied oeuvre.

—Maurice Taplinger

## Noelia Torrubia Puts a New Spin on Surrealism

One of the charges most frequently leveled at surrealism by its critics is that it tends to make plastic values secondary to symbolic content. While this charge does not hold in every case, it is true that the contemporary artist pursuing a surrealist mode of expression must take care not to descend to the mere illustration of incongruous relationships and dreamlike states of being.

One artist who has avoided such pitfalls admirably is Noelia Torrubia, a painter from Barcelona, Spain, whose solo exhibition "El retorno del Surrealismo" (The Return of Surrealism) was seen recently at Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, in Chelsea.

The secret of Torrubia's success is her ability to create boldly simplified compositions that are as intriguing in formal terms as they are engaging for their subject matter. Although some of Torrubia's paintings are titled, others are not. One of the latter was especially intriguing. On a brilliant, smoothly painted orange field, it depicted several stylized figures, interconnected by a flowing black line, as though engaged in a dance. The figures, filled in with earth colors and deep red hues, were so sinuously shapely as to suggest living arabesques. Although this painting showed an abstract fluidity akin to some of the best works of Miro, it also suggested something quite profound about the intricacy of human relationships.

A similar theme appeared to be explored by Torrubia in another large oil on canvas called "Pareja," in which two grossly distorted figures were so thoroughly connected as to form a single mass. Painted an odd gray hue, the figures were set against an ochre sky in a mountainous blue-gray terrain.

While "Pareja seemed to comment on a codependency that shuts out the rest of the world, another oil on canvas entitled "Amor Libre" suggested its opposite, with a composition in which two severely simplified sensual female bodies sans heads (!) occupied the center of the canvas, forming a circular configuration that created the effect of a freeform mandala. Both paintings were notable for Torrubia's ability to evoke complex meanings with pared down shapes and a bright but restricted palette, lending the emotional and psychological content that we expect of surrealism an unusual formal impact.

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of this could be seen in another canvas called "La Mirilla," in which the central element was a giant keyhole suspended in midair in a dark blue nocturnal space, its opening revealing an area of daylight and clear blue sky. Here, the metaphysical motif could suggest a kinship with Rene Magritte. But unlike the older painter, who often verges on the illustrative, Torrubia's formal reductiveness endows the composition with a purely visual power that enhances its formal appeal without in any way diminishing its poetic suggestiveness.

In other paintings as well, Noelia Torrubia manages to achieve an impressive balance between form and content, as in one especially bizarre composition featuring an emaciated pachyderm with octopoid legs presented in an egg-shaped space at the center of the canvas. But perhaps one of her most affecting works was an oil called "Cadaques," in which the little white houses of a picturesque Spanish village appeared surrounded on all sides by sky and wispy clouds, suggesting a magical childhood realm enshrined affectionately in memory.

(Noelia Torrubia's work can also be seen in Montserrat's year-round salon exhibition.)

—Byron Coleman



"Untitled"



# Sheila Finnigan Brings New Evidence of “Missing” Muses to Light

In her previous New York exhibitions, the Chicago artist Sheila Finnigan proved to be the visual peer of her fellow Midwesterner Garrison Keillor, National Public Radio’s inveterate tall-tale spinner, for her ability to weave elaborate conceptual conceits. Finnigan has taken on icons ranging from Andy Warhol to Marilyn Monroe to JFK to George W. Bush, casting them within reprises of familiar masterpieces to create a funky contemporary answer to history painting.

In her most recent solo show at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, however, Finnigan surpassed herself for her ability to tickle the imagination with outrageous conjecture, while making serious statements regarding artistic inspiration and contemporary art’s sometimes uneasy relationship with its audience and the marketplace.

Entitled “The Last of the Muses,” the exhibition took off from a characteristically Finniganesque premise: Since “painting has been declared dead and literature is dying,” is it possible that all the muses have vanished “just when we need them most? Or do fragments of the self / rush back to them / like lightning in reverse / wet and dark / and wailing out of death?”

In any case, in a wall-text serving as a preamble to the exhibition Finnigan imagined “the muses inspiring one last epic poem before bidding farewell to a weary world.” And working in a unique mixed media technique, consisting for the most part of charcoal, gesso and various collage elements on often wall-size expanses of unstretched cotton canvas, as well as with installations and assemblages of found objects, she conjured up all nine muses for a farewell appearance: Cleo, muse of history; Calliope, muse of epic poetry; Melpomene, muse of tragedy; Polymnia, muse of sacred song; Terpsichore, muse of choral song and dance; Thalia, muse of bucolic poetry; Arania, muse of Astronomy; and Erato, muse of erotic poetry.

One of Finnigan’s most spectacular evocations, in terms of sheer scale and complexity, was “Cleo, Muse of History (after David’s ‘Death of Marat’),” in which, following the format of the famous Neoclassical painting praised by Baudelaire as “a secular pieta for the modern age,” the nude figure of the dead muse is seen slumped in her bath (just as Finnigan once pictured Warhol, whom some would accuse of being the muse’s modern murderer!). In one hand she clutches a manuscript, and in the other, dangling out of the tub, she holds a plumed pen. A magnified version of the manuscript appears in the lower portion of the composition, where a scattering of leaves splashed with wintry gesso litters the gallery floor. Amid scrawled and faded charcoal palimpsests, the only legible words are,



“Cleo, Muse of History (after David’s ‘A Marat’)”

“Here’s a kiss for the whole world—Sheila.” And indeed that same spirit of generosity tempered by wry irony permeates the entire exhibition, in which Finnigan positions herself as an informal (thus “Sheila”) yet authoritative tour guide to the muses, with whom she is obviously on fond, familiar terms.

Finnigan’s intrepid willingness to take unsuperstitious liberties with the great art of the past comes across most spectacularly in “String Theory (after Michelangelo’s ‘Creation.’)” Here, Eve replaces Adam as the favored one with whom God, also transformed into feminine form, touches forefingers as though in a cosmic version of the high five. Both voluptuous figures become metaphors for the artist and her Main Muse in a huge composition whose formal impact is enhanced by strips of canvas forming a bold pyramid that further unites creator and Creator; just as the work’s textural interest is enhanced by tactile clouds of gesso and the shredded edges of the unstretched cotton, to which the title “String Theory” alludes with characteristic wit.

This reference to a dubious hypothesis held by a small minority of scientists who posit all phenomena and matter in the universe as caused by the vibrations of invisible strings is thoroughly in keeping with Finnigan’s penchant for conceptual conceits. One of her most amusing is “The Last Recording,” an installation consisting of an antique record player and what purports to be a long lost recording of the actual voices

of the muses, supposedly interred in metal urns in the Palais Garnier in Paris in 1920. A wall text, simulating a text from the Smithsonian magazine dated March 2008 and by-lined “B.A. Dreemer,” weaves an elaborate narrative about how “Gaston Leroux, obsessed by rumors of how nine Muses may have lived or may still be living on the island of Kimmuna in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea led an expedition to the island” where he overheard “two muses conversing in a language heretofore unknown. Breathlessly he managed to record their voices before they sensed his presence and fled. His diary of the chance encounter mysteriously disappeared but his recordings were recently rediscovered in a veritable time capsule in 2008. One of these recordings is on exhibit here...”

Going on in her inimitable manner in yet another wall-text, Finnigan tells of “the possible sighting” on the same island in the year 2000, of “the Tenth Muse... the true speaker for whom the author she inspires is but a mouthpiece,”

and supplies us with her image and artifacts related to her—“traces of her long golden hair; leaves of the rare flower, Morene, indigenous to the island etched with lines from a recent and as yet unpublished epic prose poem, ‘Dripping Jewels’”—as components of an installation called “The Cabinet.” In a large French jar on a lower shelf her flaxen tresses are entombed, while



“The Cabinet”

one of the drawers contains “the muses’ fossilized eggs, hard proof that the Muses lived on Kimmuna since the beginning.” Although Finnigan long ago distinguished herself as a painter, installation artist, and conceptualist of original gifts, with “The Cabinet,” as well as with other assemblages incorporating glass heads, an old WWI US Army helmet, and other objects, she proves herself a kindred spirit of Joseph Cornell for her ability to imbue found objects with the mystique of personal myths. This was by far the best exhibition to date by an artist whose unpredictable transmutation of materials invariably amounts to aesthetic alchemy of the first rank.

—Ed McCormack



## For Colorado Painter Peggy Zehring, Spiritual Art is Supported By a Strong Formal Armature

Although their styles are in no way similar, it was not surprising to learn that Peggy Zehring had once been a post-graduate student of Elaine de Kooning. Both are strong-willed, independent artists. If Elaine could resist her hugely famous husband's influence and go her way own artistically, it makes sense that Peggy could resist Elaine's stylistic influence (even while absorbing some of her indomitable character) and do the same.

And she certainly has, evolving a distinctive abstract style over the years that suggests a kind of "Zen heraldry." For

"funk assemblage" practiced by Bruce Connor and William T. Wiley, there is nothing random or arbitrary about Zehring's process. Rather, she employs found materials and objects within precise geometric formats to explore what she refers to as "universal, visual Truths from which to formulate a global unity of forms and symbols."

Zehring is best known in the Northwest and the Southwest, where she has exhibited most widely, lectured extensively, taught in numerous colleges and co-founded The La Veta School of the

square format, something that conventional art teachers traditionally warn students never to do because perfectly symmetrical canvases or panels are thought to be monotonous. When Zehring employs them, however, they become infinite spaces that play off splendidly against the circular shapes that are often the dominant motifs of her compositions.

Here, a semi-circular gestural shape, superimposed over rectangular fragments of some ruggedly textured found material that the artist has tinted indigo, is centered within a more fully rounded and



*"Circling the 9 Squares Series 1"*



*"Harnessing Chi"*

while Zehring's use of universal symbols—particularly the circle—harks back to the Zen literati painters of ancient China and Japan, those artists worked in ink monochromes, and Zehring is a dynamic colorist. Her heightened hues radiate with a vibrant clarity and her compositions possess an emblematic quality akin to the California artist Deborah Remington.

However, while Remington's paint surfaces are meticulously flat and hard-edged, Zehring's combine brilliant color fields with gestural elements built up to bas-relief thickness with vinyl spackle paint and acrylic mediums to which she adds wood, leather straps, buttons, aged, weathered tent canvas, and other found materials salvaged from her "favorite Colorado junkyard." While the use of such detritus could suggest the kind of

Arts. But she has also become a prominent presence in the New York art scene in recent years through her exhibitions at Montserrat Gallery of Contemporary Art, 547 West 27th Street, in Chelsea, where her new solo show is on view from September 23 through October 11. (Reception: Thursday, September 25, from 6 to 8pm.)

Employing ratios of irrational numbers such as the Golden Mean Proportion as an underlying architecture to her compositions, Zehring layers this formal armature with tactile and chromatic contrasts that could appear contradictory in the hands of a less accomplished painter. She achieves a harmonious balance between these opposing elements by virtue of her instinctive painterly panache.

In the work titled "Harnessing Chi," for example, she chooses a perfectly

smoothly painted red orb that touches all four edges of the square support. This semi-circular form has the splashy, spontaneous appearance of the circles that Zen masters lay down on rice paper in a single swift stroke of a broad brush laden with black Sumi ink. However, Zehring's semi-circle, built up in thick impasto with green pigment and acrylic modeling materials, actually has the weighty 3-D physicality of a sculptural form suspended within a composition as coloristically intense as an Indian miniature blown up to Abstract Expressionist scale. In keeping with its title, which refers to the universal life force on which all things are said to depend for health and life, the entire composition radiates a sense of pulsing vital energy that is held in check—"harnessed"—by Zehring's casual mastery of geometric form.



The title of a larger composition by Zehring, "Harnessing the Kundalini," refers to the psycho-spiritual energy consciousness which is said to reside sleeping within the body, only to be awakened by either spiritual discipline or spontaneous mystical illumination. In Sanskrit, "kundalini" means snake or "serpent power" because it is believed to lie coiled like a serpent in the root chakra at the base of the spine in the body like a serpent, and Zehring conveys this concept with a sinuous serpentine shape. Delineated in thick electric blue impasto, it swells and swirls like a good-sized cobra against a roughly hourglass-shaped area of red that could seem to symbolize the female form, since in Tantra Yoga kundalini is also believed to be an aspect of Shakti, the divine feminine energy and consort of the Lord Shiva.

Although Kundalini is depicted in various ways in tantric illuminated manuscripts (some of the most striking from 18th century Rajasthan and Kashmir), these are largely diagrammatic. Only this contemporary interpretation by Zehring conveys the experience of the transcendental bliss and superlucidity that supposedly results from freeing the kundalini with a forcefulness that verges on the psychedelic.

While the esoteric ideas that Peggy Zehring embodies in her compositions are of considerable interest and certainly enhance the enjoyment of her work, she demonstrates that the formal element in her paintings alone can sustain the viewer's interest in her "Circling the 9 Squares Series I." In this grid of nine foot-square panels, she explores an interplay of superimposed circles and squares, their geometries variously deconstructed by thick gestural strokes and swirls slathered on like pastel-colored cake frosting. The overall effect is at once sumptuous and rigorous, a visual/tactile feast as abundant and over-the-top as Frank Stella's maximalist painted steel assemblages, bridging the gap between painting and sculpture.

In a review of one of her previous exhibitions in the same venue in this publication in 2003, Peter Wiley noted that Peggy Zehring's paintings possess "the power and presence of unique contemporary mandalas." In the short time since that astute observation, it would appear that the Eastern element in Zehring's work has

become even more pronounced, reminding us that abstract art has its roots in the esoteric interests of Wassily Kandinsky and his circle, who, a little over a hundred years ago, sought to create new avenues through which art might apprehend the unknown.

After Kandinsky became associated with the Bauhaus (the curriculum of which initially offered non-Western philosophies and mystical religions), his abiding spiritual aspirations, spurred by Theosophy and Rosicrucianism, were downplayed by critics and art historians more concerned with formalist values. Both as a teacher and an artist,

however, Peggy Zehring refuses to sever formal values from their spiritual source. For her, the Bauhaus tradition, passed on to her by her own teachers at the University of Illinois, will always represent "truth, purity, and integrity." And that in no way contradicts her core belief that, "When we come from our souls rather than from our eyes, and when we regain our childhood innocence, we're the best we can be as artists and as people." (Peggy Zehring's work can also be seen in Monserrat's year-round salon exhibition.)

—J. Sanders Eaton



*"Harnessing The Kundalini"*



# Karen Frances: Illuminating the Pervasive Darkness

“Ultimately, I think of my pieces as contemporary cave drawings, representations of universal archetypes reflecting stories of personal battles, struggles of the spirit, and the joys of living in the paradox,” states Karen Frances, whose “Still Point” series can be seen at Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, from September 23 through October 11.

Frances’s use of the word “pieces” to describe her work may reflect the fact that they defy description as being solely paintings or sculptures, since they embody qualities of both. Pressed to decide, one would have to define them as paintings, since despite their relief-like tactility, they are primarily works of art in which color plays a major part, along with texture, and they are displayed on the wall. But their physical characteristics are indeed impressive enough to suggest a merger of both mediums.

In this regard one would have to compare Frances to the great contemporary Spanish artist Antoni Tàpies for her ability to embody the “noumenal”—which is to say, the metaphysical—through the most material of means. Indeed, it is in transcending the inherent contradiction between the material and the ethereal that Frances’s work takes on the weight of spiritual meaning. And while, yes, the deep earthy tones and rugged textures of her personal take on “tachisme” actually do suggest cave paint-

ings, the tools and found objects that she either drags across her thickly encrusted surfaces in the act of painting, to create deep furrows and crevices and leave evocative traces and shapes, or embeds in them as permanent elements of the composition, also suggest fossils excavated from an archeological site.

These found objects are especially prominent in “Still Point: Unhinging,” where, embedded in the roughly roundish central form that is the focal point of most of her compositions, they resemble prehistoric bones. They also play an important role in “Still Point: Descending,” where sharp shards of broken shell or stone occupy a womb-like deep purple and brown orb. Both compositions remind us that Frances’s earthy pigmentations, combined with deep, glistening, visceral reds, violets and other such hues, present a welcome refuge from what her kindred spirit Tàpies referred to as “the excess of bustle, garish colors, and noise by which we are always surrounded” in the modern world.

In order to resist such gaudy, attention-getting devices and pursue a deeper direction that runs counter to the carnivalesque hubbub of the marketplace, however, a contemporary painter must possess a supreme confidence in the value of her subjective vision. And it is obvious that this is what gives Frances the strength to burrow into the all-pervasive darkness that one encoun-



“Still Point: Crowning”

ters in a painting such as “Still Point: Crowning,” where her colors rival the stained-glass richness of a Rouault religious scene, sans the specific subject matter; although here the glowing flamelike form within the red-violet central shape could suggest an Angelic Being enveloped in phosphorescent white auras.

Frequently, Karen Frances adds metallic and light-refracting pigments to, as she puts it, “push the light effects further.” However, the darkness out of which Karen Frances excavates her forms is illuminated not so much by technical means as by the brilliance of her personal vision.

—Marie R. Pagano

## MARILYN HENRION

*Continued from page 13*

struction by Henrion called “Quartet,” one can likewise discern a stylistic empathy with the paintings of Irene Rice Pereira, who had the double misfortune of being a woman and being a geometric painter when the art scene was dominated by the macho bully boys of “Action Painting.” Not only does “Quartet’s” composition of interlocking rectangles and a mostly monochrome palette of subtle gray tones, relieved here and there by spare areas of red, remind one of Pereira, but the particulate textures of the wool in Henrion’s work appear to channel her distinctive stippling technique.

Such tributes to earlier women artists whose significance has been overlooked by phallogocentric art historians seem auspiciously in keeping with the ethos of an artist who, for all her insistence on aesthetic autonomy, made her feminist sympathies manifest the minute she switched from painting to fiber art. As always in Henrion’s case, however, formal concerns come even more prominently into play, such as the eternal tension between implied perspective and the sanctity of the two-dimensional picture plane seen in the “Noise” series. In works such as “Rift,” where a vertical red band unevenly divides variegated areas of gray that suggest visual

static on a video screen, and “Strata,” which is as rectangularly-based and flatly matter-of-fact as a Mondrian, two-dimensional space clearly triumphs. However, the triangular bias of the numbered compositions that share the title “Vanishing Point” plays with spatial ambiguity, and another grouping of works called “Unfolding” revels more overtly in illusion through Henrion’s handling of angularly unfurling, undulating shapes.

Among the latter works, “Unfolding 2” is especially noteworthy for the artist’s reintroduction of brilliant primary hues which restore a familiar chromatic lushness to her new compositional austerity, creating a dynamic synthesis that makes one eager to discover where the ever-evolving art of Marilyn Henrion will go next.

—Ed McCormack

## ELLA MANOR

*Continued from page 32*

of the annual cattle call known as Fashion Week. By contrast, her ability to take fashion photography to the edge comes across sensorially in set-up shots of black-lipped Goth girls in dark brick alleys and one image, in particular, as carefully plotted as a film noir still: While the model lies sprawled like a lovely, gape-eyed murder victim, the viewer’s attention bounces helplessly back

and forth between her blood-red lipstick and the elegant matching handbag, dropped half-open on the pavement nearby.

But perhaps the real show-stopper of the site is a picture in which Manor, her lips dripping fake blood, hovers sinisterly over a nude model with fang-marks on her neck. At first glance, it could look like a spoof of Charles Busch’s off-Broadway camp classic “Vampire Lesbians of Sodom.” Then it dawns on one that Ella Manor may be alluding to something deeper and more universal: how all artists draw their life’s blood from their models or muses.

—Ed McCormack

## BIHO ASAI

*Continued from page 28*

note of music sounded, Biho Asai moved with the grace of a dancer, evoking in the first piece the creation of nature, of the elements, of human beings, and, finally, of love; in the second, the unsurpassed beauty of the rose; in the third, the ever renewing vitality of flowering cherry blossoms.

All of these things were made manifest in a manner that required no translation and left no doubt among the appreciative audience gathered in the gallery that we were in the presence of a very rare and significant artist.

—Ed McCormack



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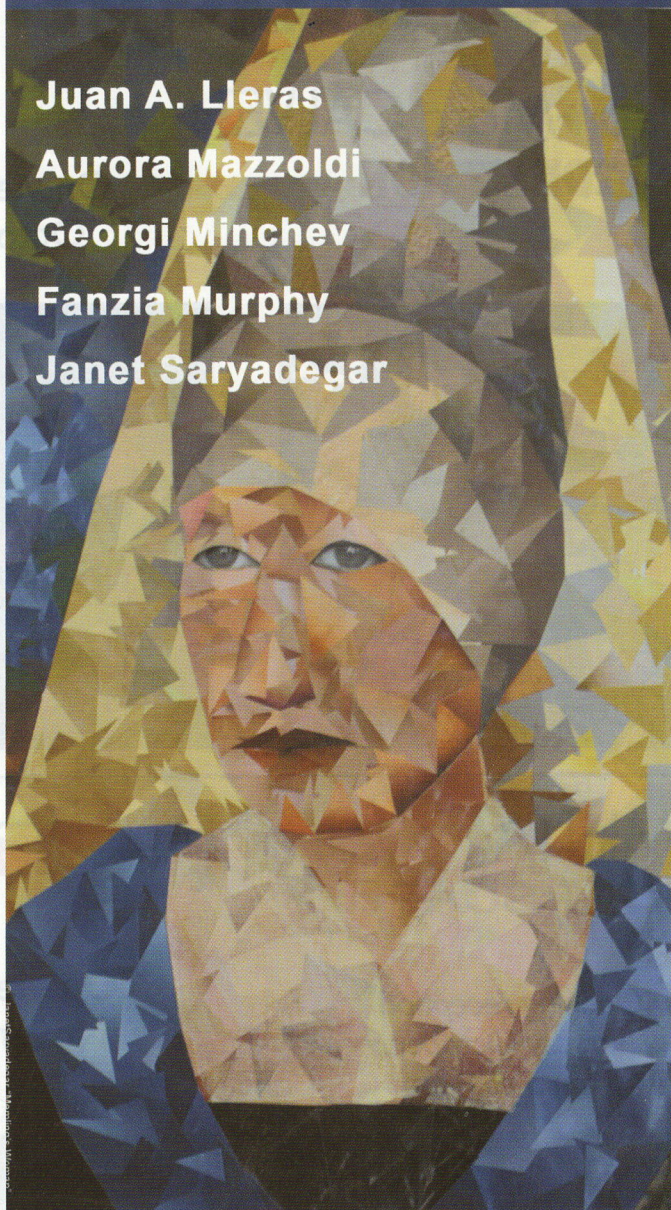
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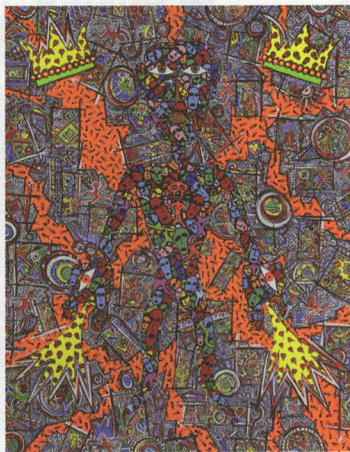
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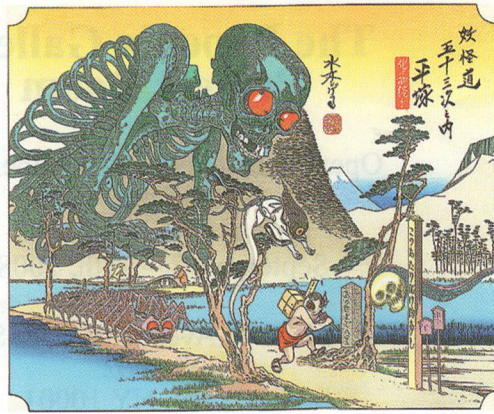


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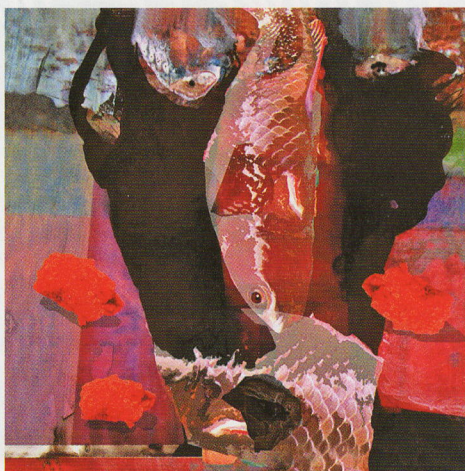


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