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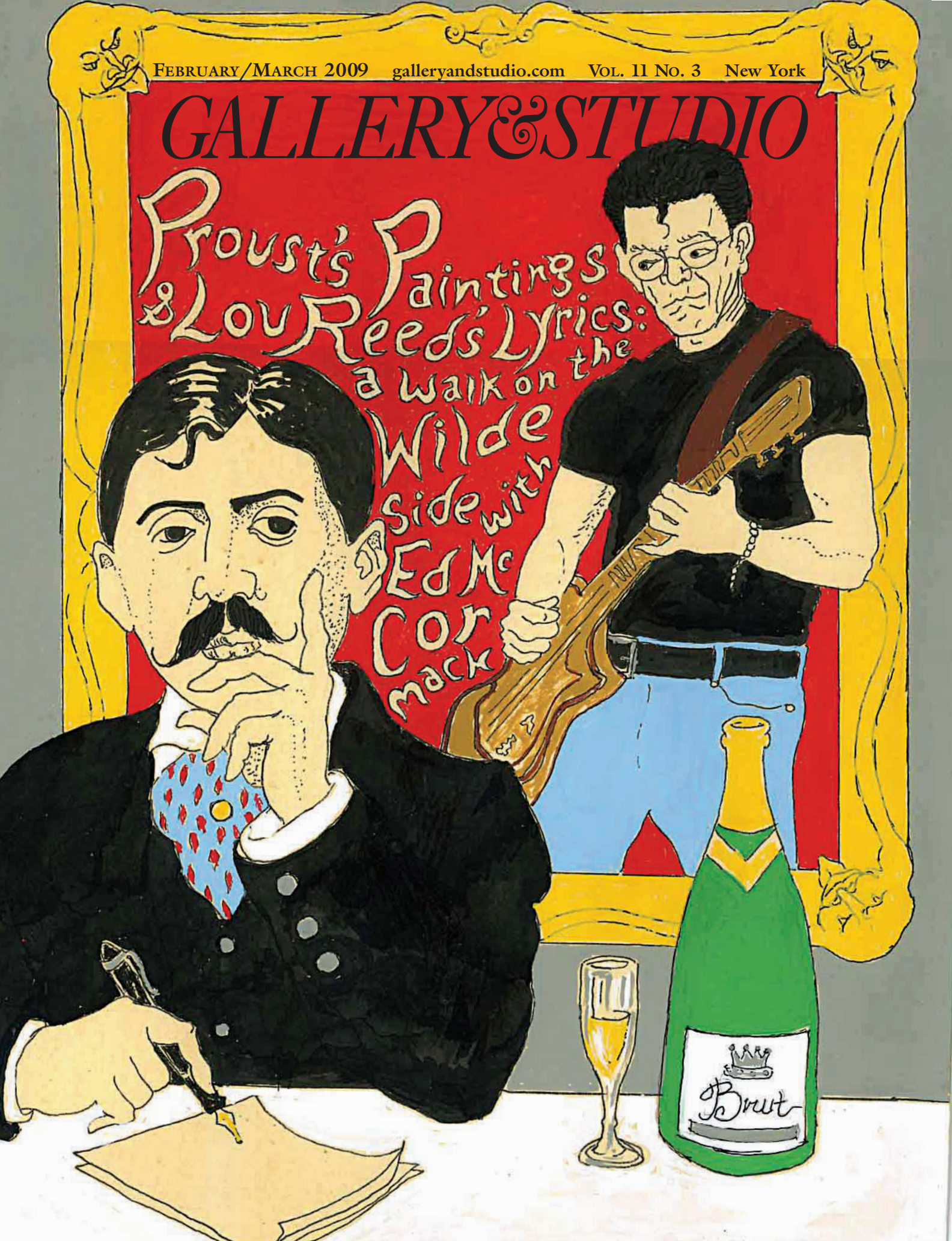
GALLERY&STUDIO



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Empathy and Aesthetics in the Art of Miho Takai

Through all the ongoing "isms" of art history, genre subjects never cease to fascinate; for they show us how we live. Tokyo-born artist Miho Takai, now a resident of Brooklyn, depicts the people of New York City with insight and a rare sense of empathy in her exhibition of paintings at World Fine Art Galleries, 511 West 25th Street from February 3 through 28. (Reception February 12, from 6 to 8 pm.)

Takai employs what could be called a photorealist technique, since her pictures appear derived from photographic sources — at least for their specific details and casual sense of snapshot immediacy. Yet unlike many artists who fit that category in the strictest sense, her paintings do not project a mechanical meticulousness or glossy "coolness." On the contrary, they are as warmly painted and humanistic as the genre scenes popular in Holland in the 17th century.

Take, for example, "Chelsea Cafe," which depicts an elderly woman seated in the foreground of an outdoor cafe in a fashionable art district, while two young beer drinkers scan menus at the table behind her. The clutter of cups and bottles on the table suggests that the woman is not alone (perhaps the person she is with has gone off to use the restroom or pay the check); yet through her telling way with expression and body language, Takai makes clear that her loneliness is profound.

"69th and Woodside"

Takai's sensitivity to the emotional subtleties of her subjects comes across just as clearly in another painting called "69th and Woodside," apparently depicting a line-up of Mexican day laborers hoping to be hired for odd jobs. Each is depicted as a distinctive individual, as they lean either anxiously or listlessly against a low brick fence in front of a wall covered with graffiti. While in the work of another artist this might be just another gritty urban detail, in the context of Takai's painting, the big bright bubble-letters seem to symbolize the contrast between the relatively carefree, creative lives of the young graffiti artists — and perhaps, by extension, of artists in general — and the daily grind of the workers, most of them probably illegal aliens, who gather here early every morning in order to piece together a substandard living.

Equally evocative of the workaday life of ordinary people is "Prince Street Bookseller," in which a man in an Army Surplus store overcoat arranges the books that he peddles from discarded milk crates and a makeshift table on a street in Soho. Here again, such details as a poster for an upscale boutique on the wall behind him underline the contrasts between the hardscrabble existences of the marginally employed and the comfortable lives of more successful city dwellers.

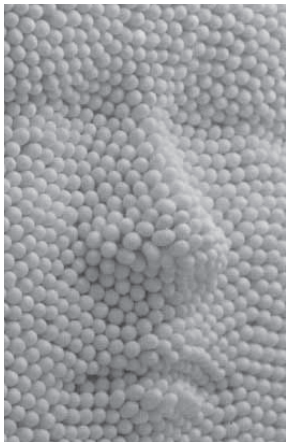
While Takai's work is always thoughtful and socially concerned, it can also be playful, as in "Village Dancer," where street performers sporting black Goth gear, multicolored hair and multiple tattoos entertain a crowd in Washington Square Park. Or it can verge on Hopperesque alienation in a painting of two isolated figures on an otherwise deserted subway platform.

In each instance, what sets her paintings apart is that Miho Takai is an artist with an ability to make simple everyday scenes in the life of a city speak volumes about our common condition.

— Byron Coleman

G&S Highlights

On the Cover:
What do Marcel Proust and Lou Reed have in common, besides new books? Maybe more than you think. See centerfold.



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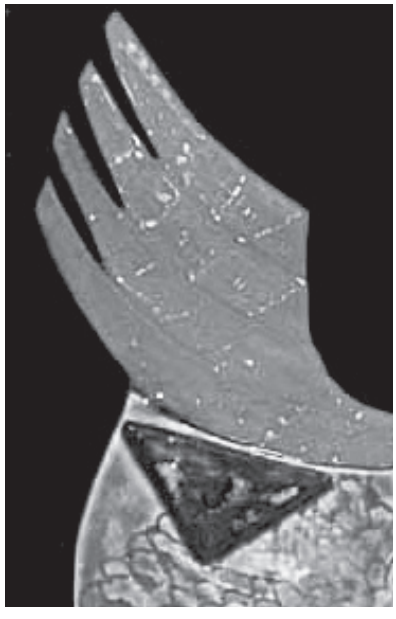

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Ángel Uranga's Recent Urban Vistas Synthesize the Riches of an Entire Oeuvre

In contemporary painting, the relationship of the untrammeled gesture to representational imagery has always been problematic. How does one manage to dynamically heighten the gestural vivacity of the composition and the tactile sensuousness of the paint surface to the point where they take on autonomous aesthetic interest, without sacrificing the pictorial integrity of the image?

Few artists in the course of an entire lifetime achieve as fine a balance in this regard as the Spanish painter Ángel Uranga, now in his youthful prime, whose impressive solo exhibition of landscapes and cityscapes from February 20 to March 13. (Reception Friday, February 20, 6 to 8pm) at Sutton Art Gallery, 407 East 54th Street.

Uranga is particularly well known as a painter of landscapes, a subject for which his energetic strokes and succulent way with impasto — much different in style and purpose but comparable in spirit to that of his esteemed countryman Antoni Tapies — seem particularly well suited. The ruddy Spanish earth, its verdant fields, lush foliage, and sparkling waters, provide plentiful fodder for his loaded brush in one lyrical canvas after another. In each, light radiates from skies that invariably remind one of Rafael Alberti's marvelous poem "Blue," in which he refers so evocatively to "Goya's light blue ribbon" and asks "How many blues did the Mediterranean give?"

Painting by Angel Uranga

Indeed, Uranga's response to nature is so fresh and exuberant, so spontaneous and unimpeded by art historical anxiety, that it takes a practiced eye to discern the formal underpinnings in his landscape paintings, which become explicit only when one examines his extensive body of abstract work from the late 1970s to the early 1990s.

During this period, Uranga's paintings were dominated by darkly powerful, often blocky forms, existing in imaginary metaphysical spaces, wherein nature appeared in the process of being reinvented; where mysterious forces seemed constantly at war with one another, and everything was in a state of flux. Tactile elements already played a prominent part in his compositions, with some textures built up with thick pigment in the manner of bas relief and others apparently created by adding water to oil paints in order to capitalize on the natural incompatibility of the two mediums with unique bubbling or blistering effects that create an unusually active surface.

Judging from a reproduction in a book devoted to Uranga's earlier paintings provided by Enrique Cubillas, his New York art dealer, this technique appears especially effective, in terms of merging the palpable with the metaphoric, a 1987 canvas in which frothy gestural strokes rush like turbulent sea water through squared-off openings in a monolithic structure, its texture resembling aquamarine stone.

The legacy of Surrealism, with which every ambitious young Spanish artist must deal in one way or another, seems properly exorcised in these brooding works, which gained Uranga sufficient recognition to validate them as an important formative part of his oeuvre. And, although he has since become better known for effervescent landscapes, such as the vibrant panoramic vista of white farm houses, fertile fields, and misty distant mountains reproduced with this review, these early works also seem to serve as a stylistic corridor to the recent New York City scenes featured in his recent exhibition at Sutton Art Gallery.

These paintings are a revelation in that they incorporate elements of all the previous series in a successful synthesis of rigorous architectural forms, vivacious brushwork, texture, and atmosphere. Especially exemplary in this regard is Uranga's painting of the Chrysler Building, its distinctive lit-up dome glowing through mists reminiscent of those encircling mountain peaks in ancient Chinese scroll paintings, albeit here richly evoked in milky oil glazes rather than ethereal washes of ink. Here, too, long drips of dark pigment trickle down the two rows of office towers on both sides of the avenue. Splotches of brighter hues, signifying street lights or their reflections, lend the image a gestural vitality that enhances rather than distracts from its urban poetry.

In other paintings in the series, the artist employs an even looser treatment of architectural elements to evoke an overall mood that transcends fussy descriptiveness. Calligraphic strokes send skyscrapers soaring against bold areas of gray that block in their steely sides. All the grit and grime of the urban miasma, from axle grease to sewer steam, seems implicit in the very substance of the pigment. Even the pink sky in one majestic view is thus begrimed. Yet a beam of light shoots upward and slices through it like the proverbial stairway to heaven.

In another canvas, the rectangular shapes of adjoining apartment houses with taller structures rising icily above them hug picture plane in the manner of Cubism. Subdued blue and purple hues are accented with brighter bursts of red and yellow ochre. Vigorous gestural strokes in the manner of Abstract Expressionism are set off by those aforementioned bubbling textures that Uranga achieves by exploiting the incompatibility of oil and water, here suggesting drifting smoke issuing from chimneys just outside the perimeters of the picture space.

The distinguished critic John Russell once called New York City "one of the supreme subjects of our century." That was toward the end of the century before this one, and now, in the tradition of those great Spanish predecessors whose unique vision transformed familiar things and places for us in unexpected ways, Ángel Uranga makes us see familiar elements our city in a new light.

Indeed, in a simple composition centering on one of our ordinary fire hydrants, albeit encrusted with his distinctive textures, he imbues the lowly object with the iconic presence of a portrait in The Prado. Bravo!

— Ed McCormack

Jack Bolen Exhumes the Inner Life of Matter

Selden Rodman once wrote of the Belgian artist Octave Landuyt's paintings that they had surrealist undertones but, unlike much surrealism, seemed less calculated to shock than to "probe the 'experienced' aspect of inanimate nature." The same might be said of the paintings of Jack Bolen, whose new solo exhibition "Dreams in Stone" is on view at Viridian Artists, Inc., 530 West 25th Street, from February 10 to March 7. (Reception: Thursday, February 12, from 6 to 8 pm.)

In Bolen's case, the surreal undertones are attributable to the subtle distortions that he wreaks upon the monumental rock formations he takes as his subject (initially projected from slides of his own photographs), as well as his intense heightening of their original colors, which he transforms into acidic yellows, esoteric purples, and off-shades of red and blue that bear little resemblance to hues found in nature. Indeed, the final image can be as otherworldly as any of Yves Tanguy's existential bone-yards.

In an earlier review of one of Bolen's previous solo shows, three years ago in the same venue, I commented on how his meticulous technique reminded me of the "magic realism" of Ian Albright — albeit unburdened by the excess baggage of anecdotal subject matter relating to mortality and decay that sometimes sank Albright's work down into the bogs of mawkish sentimentality. At that time I was especially struck by the formal qualities in Bolen's work, which he emphasizes by such devices as layering small hard-edged bands, stripes, or squares of color over his realistically delineated rock formations to emphasize the two-dimensionality of the picture plane, as well as by letting the image trail off into the shimmering color field around the edges of the canvas to further distance it from illusion.

Those strong formal qualities still stand, serving as the armature upon which Bolen builds his compositions, making them especially compelling in purely visual terms in the newest paintings in the present exhibition, which serves as something of a mini retrospective, since it contains earlier paintings as well.

Most of the works in the previous show and in this one as well are a continuation of the series Bolen refers to as "The Acadia Paintings, "inspired by rock formations clustered along the coastline of Acadia National Park/ Cranberry Islands, Maine. After prolonged examination of these "unusually contorted, frequently geometrically striated geological formations," as he describes them, Bolen says he was impressed "with their striking visual similarity to the eroded relief paintings and sculptures in the Pharaonic temples and tombs with which I had been concerned in an earlier series, begun during an extended trip to Egypt in 1981-82. "

"I felt a similar psychological presence, a certain shared mystery," he adds.

"Acadia LII"

Intangible as that presence may be, it permeates both series, starting with "Sphinx, 1992," one of the final paintings in the "Pharaonic" cycle. By this time, Bolen had abandoned the architectural elements which characterized earlier examples of his Egyptian-inspired paintings, and the more biomorphic forms, buffeted by the anchoring geometric elements that continue into the next series, do indeed rhyme visually with those of the very earliest work in the "Acadia" series, painted the same year and seen here.

The roughly chronological sequencing of the exhibition, with these two paintings in close proximity, provides the viewer with insight into a crucial turning point in Bolen's creative process. For although the central shapes in the former painting appear ethereal, as though consisting of light or mist rather than solid matter, while those in the latter have clearly ossified (except around the edges where they appear to disperse into thin air), the striking similarity between the two compositions illuminates the evolution through which one inspiration feeds into the next in the work of an artist whose overriding formal concerns endow his entire oeuvre with a high level of coherence and aesthetic consistency.

The "Acadia" series continues to evolve through the 1990s and the early-to- middle years of the present decade, culminating in such recent paintings as "Acadia LVII, 2008," "Acadia LVI, 2008," and "Acadia LV, 2008," where the rock formations appear, once again, to undergo a process of metamorphosis, dematerializing in a manner that, despite the meticulous precision of Bolen's technique, suggests the gestural energy of Abstract Expressionism. These works also come closer in execution to the compositional dispersal of "Sphinx," the painting that immediately preceded the new series, neatly completing the circle of inspiration that animates the exhibition.

The seemingly more fluid forms in the new paintings, along with the evocation of "Dreams" in the title, could tempt some viewers to read all manner of figurative imagery into them in the same way one does with actual elements of nature, such as the whorls in the bark of a tree. But it would be a mistake to approach the suggestive forms in these or any of Bolen's paintings as one would the arterial tree limbs merging with human figures in, say, Pavel Tchelitchew's large canvas "Hide and Seek," once a prominently displayed crowd-pleaser in the permanent collection at MoMA.

For unlike that Russian born Neo-Romantic of the 1950s and '60s, Jack Bolen does not seek to dazzle us with visual effects by emphasizing anything so obvious as how certain patterns replicate themselves in nature. Rather, the real magic in his paintings has more to do with his ability to evoke the inner life of matter, summoning up brilliantly the inexplicable way in which material substances can encompass essences of time and memory.

—Ed McCormack

Andre van der Kerkhoff Enters the "Bath of Multitude"

Certain parallels can be drawn between the German-born photographer Juergen Teller and the Austrian-born artist Andre van der Kerkhoff, who was known as Heinz Krautberger before taking his present pseudonym in 1974. Both choose to live and work outside their own countries, Teller in London, England, van der Kerkhoff in Brisbane, Australia. Both have commercial backgrounds, Teller in fashion photography, van der Kerkhoff in graphic design. Both, like Andy Warhol, who was a successful illustrator before turning to fine art, apply their commercial experience auspiciously to the work that they show in galleries. But, above all, both have garnered attention verging on notoriety for work that can seem transgressive at a time when what art historians refer to as "The Male Gaze" has fallen out of favor with those cultural tastemakers who lobby for political

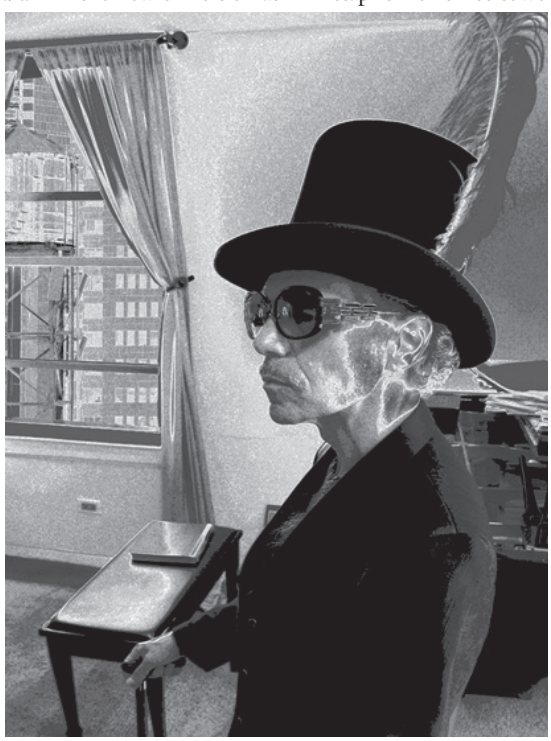
"Marlboro Man "

correctness in the area of sexuality. Claiming that most fashion photography has been shaped by a gay male sensibility, Teller has transgressed by deliberately photographing female models from a heterosexual male perspective (which is to say with a raw, sometimes sloppy sensuality) and carrying that tendency over into his gallery work as well. And Van de der Kerkhoff has transgressed by defiantly perpetuating the Male Gaze with a vengeance in the frankly erotic photo-derived images of pinup-like female nudes printed on brushed aluminum that he first exhibited in New York in 2007. Even mitigated by strategically placed geometric color areas that, as I observed in a review at that time, create a "tantalizing tension between hot and cool, eroticism and formalism," these images have the power to outrage some viewers by virtue of appearing frankly prurient, and even idolatrous, rather than ironic in the manner of Pop art. As Teller said of his own work in a profile in New York magazine, "frankly, it's girls you want to fuck."

Having each in his own manner graphically made the point that individual heterosexual male artists should be as free to express their own preferences as, say, David Hockney or Robert Mapplethorpe, without being penalized for the one-sidedness of art historical precedent or persecuted by the forces of political correctness, both Teller and van der Kerkhoff have moved on, the former to a series of autobiographical German scenes and autoportraits, the latter to the gritty urban images featured in his new solo exhibition "Gotham City Blues," at Artbreak Gallery, 195 Grand Street, in Brooklyn, from February 13 to March 14. (Reception: Friday, February 13, 6 to 10pm)

"I had not picked up a camera in thirty years before I began the series," van der Kerkhoff, previously known for the landscape paintings he had exhibited throughout Australia, France, Canada, and the U.S., said in an artist statement issued in connection with his first New York solo show of nudes at Jadite Galleries, his Manhattan art dealer, where he will show in October of this year. And digitally enhanced photography continues to be his medium in the new exhibition at Artbreak Gallery. As with his nudes, the cityscapes are all printed on brushed aluminum plates, which not only gives them the heft and "objectness" of paintings, but imbues his urban imagery with an eerily dreamlike quality, since the areas that would normally be white have a silvery phosphorescence.

"The Power of Hollywood"



"Eccentric Spartan Extravagance "

Van der Kerkhoff's method for creating these pictures is to roam the streets of Manhattan, literally chewing up the scenery, as they say of actors in theater who give a larger-than-life performance and blow everyone else off the stage. (He had some 2500 images to select from for printing after one "three-day photographic rampage.") On first visiting the city in 2006, Kerkhoff found it a place that "symbolically reeked of a nation's decay," and while he subsequently claims to have fallen in love with this Sodom on the Hudson (he had some 2500 images to select from for printing after one three-day photographic orgy), a sense of ambivalence still permeates his pictures. This comes across not only in the title ("Babylon") of his picture of tall buildings in the financial district of Lower Manhattan, but also in the anthropomorphic aspect that he imparts to these structures, which is reminiscent of the Moloch metaphor for office towers in Allen Ginsberg's "Howl." Like the late Beat poet, too, albeit in visual terms, he has an unusual ability to eroticize unlikely things. Indeed, in a catalog essay on some of his earlier urban imagery, I observed that "van der Kerkhoff's eye is clearly an erogenous zone, as capable of imparting sensual qualities to pee-smelling streets, with their kinetic collage of lonely crowds and tattered semiotic wonders, as to the naked bodies of beautiful young women."

Given the innate seductiveness of his vision, that still holds true. But I now also perceive an element of S&M in his love affair with a city where, in his picture, "Gotham City Nocturne," the sinisterly made-up face of the star-crossed young actor Heath Ledger, in his last role as "The Joker" in Batman, decom-

"Gotham City Nocturne"

poses spookily into the clouds above the silhouetted skyline. The Joker's face also appears superimposed at billboard-scale over the facades of the midtown buildings near Macy's in another print called "The Power of Hollywood." Frowning down on the traffic-choked avenue, here the late actor's visage seems to symbolize not only the power of filmic fantasy to blot out pedestrian reality, but also its destructive influence on some of those it briefly exalts.

Then again, only in a city as lawlessly various as New York can reality hold its own so handsomely against fantasy by producing a cast of characters who prove that truth can indeed surpass fiction. Perhaps as evidence of this, van der Kerkhoff submits "Eccentric Spartan Extravagance," an image of a gaunt-faced citizen sporting dark glasses and a long plume in his tophat whose everyday street persona is as striking as that of any of Batman's arch rivals.

Van der Kerkhoff obviously has a gift, rare in a non-native, of focusing in on the incongruous yet telling juxtapositions that make the city a veritable font of found surrealism. One example is his picture of a homeless soul slumbering on a discarded mattress next to an abandoned supermarket delivery cart decorated by the ubiquitous street artist known as De La Vega with his usual Keith Haring-like and the ironically inspirational graffiti slogan for which the image is named: "Become Your Dream."

When the irony is not inherent in the subject itself, van der Kerkhoff pinpoints it conceptually with a title such as "Marlboro Man" for an image of an elderly geezer puffing away on a cigarette as he leans out a tenement window above a smaller structure festooned with floral designs and the phrase "inner Peace..." In fact, found phrases within some of his pictures constitute a kind of concrete poetry that can often seem more apropos than their actual titles. For example, the title "In Search for Sponsorship" is amusing enough for his image of a totally nude flasher pulling a blanket draped over his shoulders away from his body to reveal an erection. But the word "Unisex" on the shop awning above the man's head seems even more apt, given his mincing pose and the almost feminine voluptuousness of his flabby physique, which could suggest a horny hermaphrodite. A woman entering the shop as he exits merely glances slightly askance, as though a naked man in the streets of New York is no big deal, nothing to get alarmed about.

Van der Kerkhoff takes such aberrations in stride as well—even creates them in some cases through digital means by distorting the image or illuminating some areas in an otherwise monochromatic print with areas of glowing color. For he, too, becomes his dream, as though the island of Manhattan sets loose in him some inner demon that is insatiable to devour its every detail, from the teeming thoroughfares of Chinatown — where the graffiti scrawled across the sides of the tenements engages in a funky dialogue with the elegant ideograms on the shop fronts and awnings below — to the almost empty side-streets around The Brooklyn Bridge, where squat landmarks of crumbling brick are linked from above by Hart Crane's "choiring strings" of steel.

That Andre van der Kerkhoff finds lyrical beauty, as well as gaud and grunge, in the urban scene should surprise no one who has been following his work from the beginning. For to appreciate a landscape, or the terrain of a woman's body, or the streets of a city, are all facets of beauty unadorned, are all aspects of a love never wholly sacred or profane. Like Baudelaire with a camera, van der Kerkhoff just as easily enters into "a bath of multitude" as he "populates his solitude," finding in each extreme a microcosm for the whole. Every one of his pictures is a journey into the self for both the artist and the viewer.

—Ed McCormack

"Babylon"

"Become Your Dream"

Robert and Liz Cenedella: A Mixed Bag of Mastery

Robert Cenedella likes to think of himself as an artist of the saloons rather than of the salons. He identifies with Thomas Hart Benton, who used to say that he would rather show his work in bars than galleries or museums.

"I have the same philosophy," Cenedella says. "And in fact I have sold more paintings from bars than galleries."

Cenedella's most recent ginmill project was a mural for Nancy Whiskey, 1 Lispenard Street, at West Broadway. He also did a mural at Le Cirque, but he's even prouder of this one and relates to the people in it more, because as he fondly puts it, Nancy Whiskey is "one of the last great dive bars."

Cenedella's mural was unveiled shortly after the much publicized unveiling of Edward Sorel's mural of famous Greenwich Village bohemians at the Waverly Inn. Since Graydon Carter, the editor Vanity Fair owns that non-dive bar, the magazine ran a big photo spread featuring celebrants like Fran Lebowitz, Chris Walken, and numerous photo-op stars.

Bob Cenedella doesn't own New York magazine, but that publication recently featured a great picture of him sitting at the bar in Nancy Whiskey, looking a bit like Papa Hemingway with his rumpled fedora and grizzly white beard. And while most of the people in Sorel's mural are dead, most the ones in Cenedella's are still very much alive, with the exception of a few ghosts who once again assumed bodily form for the occasion.

"Most of the regulars showed up for the unveiling last night," Melissa, the barmaid, was saying, as she stood behind the bar on the morning after. And all you had to do to be there was look across the empty room to the mural above the shuffleboard. It brought the antic crowd scene alive like a magic mirror. Looking at all those meticulous haunch-to-paunch portraits, more than a hundred of them, painted either from photographs or from life in Cenedella's studio, as well as such faithfully rendered details as the joint's famous "Bless This House" sign, you could almost hear the roar of their voices and the clink of their glasses drowning out the jukebox.

"We get them all in here," Melissa was saying, mirrored in the mural across the bar as she spoke. "Blue collar, white collar, NYU students, telephone company workers, neighborhood people, artists like Bob, and even a few famous people like the former Mets player Ron Darling, who's a good friend of Billy Wall, the owner."

The mural does the varied clientele and boozy ambiance of Nancy Whiskey so proud that you just know Thomas Hart Benton, as well as George Grosz, Bob's old mentor at the Art Student's League (where Bob himself is now one of the most popular instructors), would have approved.

"Guantanamo Man #1" by Liz Cenedella

"The Nancy Whiskey Pub," Robert Cenedella

But don't get the idea that Bob's work doesn't shine in galleries as well. Right after we left Nancy Whiskey that morning, we walked over to Broome Street Gallery, at 498 Broome Street, to see his joint exhibition with his equally gifted spouse Liz Cenedella, "Mixed Bag: Works for Under One Million Dollars," the title a comment on the market-driven art world and indicative of the sharp satirical sensibility that the couple shares.

While Bob's satirical sense is always in your face, this aspect of Liz's creative personality is less known, since she is most highly esteemed as one of our leading fabric artists. However, she combines her exquisite craftspersonship and conceptual power in "No Blood for Oil," a centerpiece of the exhibition. It's an actual flag-draped coffin, only with large cloth logos for Exxon, Gulf, Sunoco, and other big oil companies sewn over the stars and stripes. Could any statement about the tragedy of the Bush presidency be more to the point?

Liz reveals an even less-familar aspect of her oeuvre in her sculptures fashioned from found metal, such as "Guantanamo Man #1," a copper cutout figure clamped with chains and imprisoned behind a rusty barbecue grill; and "Soldier," in which the menacing war machine sports a chimney pot for a head, a shovel for a torso, and brandishes a toy gun.

The raw, funky power of Liz Cenedella's junk sculptures presents a striking contrast to the sumptuous formal elegance of her quilted fabric wall hangings with evocative titles like "Northstar, " Pinwheel," and "Yardbirds Circling" that enhance the allusiveness of their vibrantly colorful geometric and organic forms. Even her utilitarian objects such as decorative pillows and tote bags that send up Capitalism with monetary designs transcend mere craft by virtue of their aesthetic and sometimes satirical qualities.

Other surprises were "Island Landscape," a lyrical mixed media work on found wood and a luminous pastel called "Still Life with Pitcher." One long familiar with the work she is justifiably praised for could only marvel at the heretofore hidden (from this writer anyway) diversity in the art of Liz Cenedella.

For those mainly familiar with Bob Cenedella's large social realist paintings, there were surprises as well: A pair of youthful self portraits and more recent landscapes demonstrated an early manifestation of the painterly finesse that separates his work from the cartoony ham-handedness of Red Grooms, the less biting contemporary with whom he is most likely to be compared. And a group of brush and ink drawings of ramshackle barns, collapsing fences, and bummed up old trucks (some of which have been made into giclee prints) show not only Bob Cenedella's superior draftsmanship but his ability to imbue inanimate objects with affecting social resonance.

Perhaps the biggest surprise of all were mixed media works from Bob's "Easel Series," one incorporating a toilet paper roller, and "Art About Nothing" (composed with empty stretcher bars) that beat the kind of artists they spoofed at their own game. But of course the real crowd pleasers were jam-packed compositions such as "After the Accident," in which various rabid-looking citizens who've stepped out of their vehicles appear about to come to blows, ignoring the elderly lady lying stricken in the gutter; "2001: A Stock Odyssey," depicting the "deja vu all over again" of hair-tearing hysteria on Wall Street; "Rape of the IRT," an antic sex orgy in the subway; and "Impeachment Off the Table," a huge, multi-figure epic, capturing the absurd sweep of recent headline events, from George "Dubya" Bush to Britney Spears, in which Bob Cenedella single-handedly revives the lost art of history painting.

—Ed McCormack

Christopher Green: Making the Ineffable Palpable

To most of us, the word steel suggests something cold and unyielding. As in the phrase "heart of steel," it implies the very antithesis of a sympathetic human emotion. Thus many viewers will be totally unprepared for the emotional impact of "Waiting for News," a piece in stainless steel by Christopher Green, a British sculptor whose American solo exhibition "Qualia" (a philosophical term for qualities of sensory perception more intense than others) can be seen at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, from March 17 through April 11. (Reception: Saturday, March 21, 4 - 7pm.) What will surprise some viewers even more is how Green manages to evoke such a visceral sense of empathy in the viewer in the most enduring of materials and through the most economical of formal means. Perhaps this can be attributed to the desire he expresses in an artist statement "to strip away the superfluous features of subjects and convey the very essence of a subject without disrupting it to the point that it has no connection to the original concept, i.e. abstraction rather than abstract."

"Waiting for News"

In any case, anyone who has ever stood vigil in a hospital waiting for a critically ill loved one will be immediately struck by the power and poignancy of Green's sculpture, "Waiting for News" which is approximately life-size yet possessed of monumental impact. Much of it comes from Green's unique ability to make his assumedly unyielding medium supremely expressive, even while eschewing extraneous details of any kind.

How, then, on encountering these two severely simplified figures seated on a rudimentary oak bench—their faces featureless, their limbs and torsos formed from strips of stainless steel—can one feel so certain that the figure on the left is male and the one on the right is female? It has to do with Green's unerring ability to capture nuances of gesture—here a certain sense of enfolding protectiveness on the part of the figure on the left that can only be compared for its subtlety to an almost involuntary-seeming movement of the hand, signifying helplessness, that I once saw the actor Nick Nolte make in a film scene where he views his mother's dead body.

To do something comparable to that, for its sense of specificity and intimacy, in an ostensibly abstract, somewhat formally generalized, large sculpture in the medium of stainless steel would seem next to impossible. Yet Green accomplishes it in "Waiting for News" by virtue of his ability to make implicit in these two faceless figures, devoid of even the most minimal anatomical gender-signifiers, the sense that the one on the left is attempting to bear up in a "manly" manner, while the one on the right folds "femininely" in upon itself in a perhaps more honest recognition of the anxiety that they both so obviously share.

Somehow Green projects these socially acquired attitudes, which mask our mutual helplessness in certain crucial situations, in a manner that brought to mind a private moment in the life of my wife and myself, when we found ourselves in exactly the sort of situation that the sculpture depicts, while our son was in the intensive care unit at Lenox Hill Hospital. Being transported back to that time was a somewhat painful sensation, but a valuable one in that it attested to the enduring power of art in a way that one does not experience every day—especially in an era like our own, when so much work is merely clever, market driven, and divorced from real stuff of life and death.

Yet to give the impression that Green is a social realist, given to evoking angst, or a so-called "humanist," specializing in manipulating our emotions, would be to do a disservice to his formal innovation, as well as his ability to give a uniquely personal interpretations to a wide variety of moods and subjects.

One example is his highly original treatment of the timeless theme of "The Three Graces," traditionally seen as the handmaidens of Venus, symbolizing grace and beauty. In this piece, consisting of three tall vertical sheets of stainless steel, there are even fewer anatomical referents. However, with images such as Botticelli's "Primavera" and the Neoclassical sculptures of Antonio Canova's in mind, Green has simplified the lines, creating a work which, while minimalist in conception, is romantic in feeling. He accomplishes the considerable feat of evoking the sinuous dance of this sensual subject by virtue of subtle interaction of the three simple forms, as they curve about each other, their reflective surfaces taking on a seductiveness that serves as an incongruous, yet surprisingly effective, surrogate for flesh.

The surface of the stainless steel plays an even more primary role in another work called "Reculver," its title referring to a small village on the Southeast coast of England, where the light is so rarefied that his great fellow countryman Turner sometimes traveled there to paint seascapes. Passing through this village at different times of the day and month, Green would notice how the light hit two towers with an arch between them, preserved amid the ruins of a 12th century church.

Rather than copying the actual configuration of the two towers, Green turned the steel at right angles, creating two adjoining forms that resemble bent knees. The way light reflects off these shapes, softening the brilliance of their steely surfaces, is calculated to replicate the way sunlight and shadow played upon the surface towers, particularly at dawn and at dusk, differentiating one side from the other.

Indeed, his ability to evoke something so ethereal in the most palpable of materials is what makes Christopher Green one of the most ambitious and remarkable talents to wash up on these shores in some time.

—Ed McCormack

The Restless Heart of Steven Krueger

Since he started painting a little over a decade ago Jersey-born Steven Krueger has lived and worked in Austria, Guatemala, Finland and India. Each place has left its mark on his style, (particularly Guatemala, where he found the vibrant culture and constant sense of danger most stimulating).

However, Krueger's recent exhibition at Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, made clear that what his big brash paintings in acrylic or oil are really about is the intimate world of men and women, and all the sensual bliss and emotional violence that comes with it.

Aside from some brief art schooling in Pennsylvania and Virginia, Krueger is mostly self-taught. And the Art Brut rawness of his work, tempered by the time he spent studying the paintings in some of Europe's great museums, serves him well: His rough edges and harsh colors cut right to the heart of human suffering.

Take the tormented red-faced geek in "Head, 2008." With an image of some blue-haired femme fatale stuck in his head like a hatchet, his pain equals the viewers' pleasure. Do those spiky white strokes circling his dome signify an electric Mohawk or a martyr's halo? Decide for yourself, the painter seems to be saying. And look at that gorgeous blue laceration slicing across his cheek and dripping down over his pointy teeth.

With its brilliant scheme of bold primary color areas blazing like neon, "Head, 2008," the largest canvas in the show, is the iconic Krueger monument to the male animal as hapless fool for love.

By contrast, the skull-faced central figure in "Three Women One Man, 2004" has somehow ended up the meat in the sweet girl-sandwich of the impossible and is grinning like an idiot about it. The intricate composition's angular, energetic strokes, informed by early infatuations with Cubism and Abstract Expressionism, suggest a stylistic synthesis of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Picasso's seminal masterpiece "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon." But what it demonstrates most dynamically is a sophisticated art historical awareness which makes clear that, while Krueger may be an autodidact, he is certainly no "outsider."

However, he is no appropriationist, either; for if he appears to be trying on the vestments of Braque for size in the smaller oil on canvas called "Heart, 2005," with its more abstract composition and subdued nocturnal hues, he invariably puts his own zany spin on every picture, here demonstrated in the way the jagged shapes seem to morph from lit-up windows to toothy grins leering at a stylized breast, as the heart of Romantic obsession seems to have turned this poor shlub into some kind of vampire!

"Head, 2008"

the title sinks like a leaking moon-balloon to the bottom of the composition.

Other paintings in the show demonstrate similar imagistic virtuosity: In "Couple, 2005" the two visceral red torsos glare at each other like codependent sides of beef; in "Rejected," one distorted figure sticks its tongue out at the other within a monochromatic composition where line, texture, and spatial tension tell it all; and in "Sixteen Faces, 2006," the multiple toothy visages, set against a deep red field, glow like four rows of votive candles.

A string of international exhibitions has put Steven Krueger on the radar as an intrepid painterly kamikaze well worth keeping an eye on. (Steven Krueger's work is also included in the gallery's year-round salon exhibition.)

—Maurice Taplinger

Dellamarie Parrilli's Exquisitely Honed New Paintings

Precious few artists today seem to be seeking the sublime in the sense that Kandinsky and some of his colleagues were when, under the spell of Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, and other esoteric belief systems enjoying a surge of popularity in the early nineteenth century, they set out to paint what could not be seen. Although it had precedents in the East, particularly in the Buddhist brush painting of China and Japan, this was something entirely new in Western painting, which opened the door to all that was later to be categorized as abstract art. But that door was opened only a crack before the dawning of the scientific age made spiritual seeking unfashionable and formalism became the creed of the day, a tendency which still continues to hold sway where so called nonobjective painting is concerned.

'Real Time Rhapsody'

Dellamarie Parrilli, whose solo exhibition, "Into the Light," was seen recently at Walter Wickiser Gallery, 210 Eleventh Avenue, is one of those rare artists who comes at things from another direction, proceeding intuitively, with nary a glance at the art magazines to see which way the winds of change might be blowing. Her intuitive approach springs directly from her life experience in a way that is not common amid the self-conscious strategizing of the postmodern era, when painting itself can sometimes appear to be undergoing a crisis of belief to which not even the agnostic aesthetic of formalism is immune.

Having taken up her brushes after a severe lung infection curtailed her career as a singer and actress, from the beginning Parrilli approached composition as a form of visual music. Indeed, the first paintings of hers that I encountered in an exhibition at Marymount College in 2004 seemed firmly in the gestural tradition of the branch of Abstract Expressionism for which the critic Harold Rosenberg coined the term "action painting."

More recently, however, Parrilli has honed the densely layered palette knife strokes of those earlier works down to spare calligraphic strokes more reminiscent of the French painter/poet Henri Michaux's spontaneous ecriture. But unlike Michaux, whose best work was as monochromatic as that of the Asian ink painters who inspired him, Parrilli is a transcendent colorist, of whom I once wrote that "it appears as though she has dipped her brush in liquid light rather than physical pigment."

It seems more than apt that Parrilli's recent show at Wickiser was called "Into the Light," since she now paints in acrylics on translucent plastic sheeting that enhances the ethereal quality of her luminous hues. This new industrial material comes in various surfaces, which she makes an innate part of her compositions, employing its inner swirls to provide rhythmic counterparts to her vivacious purple and yellow forms in "Real Time Rhapsody"; its more regular raised patterns as a kind of grid to stabilize the graceful strokes of "I to Thee" and "Rendezvous in Heaven," both of which appear laid down with an impulsive theatrical flair akin to the Art Informal of Georges Mathieu.

Without expecting an artist so restlessly experimental to settle into complacency or stop surprising us with each new exhibition, it seems safe to say that the stripping down of Dellamarie Parrilli's visual vocabulary seems indicative of a mature direction. Wherever she goes from here, it is clear that the exquisite simplicity she has achieved signals a profound arrival.

—Ed McCormack

From Out West to Outback, Leon Yost Goes Beyond Documentation to Create Transcendent Art

Leon Yost is an artist who, after some 29 solo gallery exhibitions and others in venues such as the Northern Arizona University Art Museum and the San Diego Museum of Man, still insists on defining himself as "a professional documentary photographer."

Well, it is true that, over the years his pictures have appeared in The New York Times, Time-Life Books, American Photo, and numerous other publications. And there is no doubt that he is every inch the professional, and that no other photographer has documented prehistoric rock carvings so faithfully; nor is there any doubt that those are laurels upon which an impressive legacy could comfortably rest.

But I think the reason that Yost is reluctant to categorize himself as an artist —that glamorous designation so many less qualified contenders are scrambling over each other to claim— has nothing to do with false modesty. (Although he is a low-key guy, raised in the Mennonite faith and possessed of a humility that is rare enough in the circles where we intersect to be noticeable, Yost carries himself with the quiet confidence of a man who knows his true worth.) It is simply that his genuine awe before his subject seems to make aesthetic posturing not only distasteful to him as a man but unnecessary to him as an artist.

"Young Lightnings," Wardaman Tribe, Northern Territory, Australia

The distinguished French semiotician Roland Barthes once said something that is worth noting here, when he observed in his book-length essay "Camera Lucida" that "every photograph is somehow co-natural with its referent." Barthes goes on to make the point that "while painting can feign reality without having seen it," photography depends for its authenticity not on "the optionally real thing to which an image or a sign refers but to the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lense, without which there would be no photograph."

Keep in mind, please, that Barthes is not referring to photography that deliberately imitates painting nor to any of the many perfectly valid postmodern permutations of what was once called "trick photography." Rather, when he puts forth the criterion "what I see has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject," he is talking about the pure form of photography practiced by Leon Yost, who employed the time-honored method of working with an enlarger in a darkroom to create the beautifully crafted large color prints in his exhibition "Out West and Outback: Photographs of prehistoric rock art from America and Australia," at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street from February 17 through March14. (Reception: Saturday, February 21, 4 to 6 pm.)

On the documentary level, what fascinates Yost about the ancient sacred images carved and painted on rocks by shamans on two continents half a world apart "to heal, protect, and bring fertility," is that they have remarkable similarities and differences. In Australia, female figures are typically depicted in a flat graphic manner, but with oversize breasts that protrude out from their sides and (to me, anyway) could be mistaken for wings holding them aloft like angels levitating in a manner that could make the craggy surface of the rock resemble a cloud-laden sky. By contrast, men are depicted in what Yost refers to as an "x-ray style of rendering that simultaneously reveals internal and external features."

Did the same gender stereotypes exist all those centuries ago, the viewer might muse: women as flighty, superficial lightweights, men as complex characters with deeper inner dimensions? In any case, while Yost notes that "Native American males are typically rendered with much enlarged phalluses pointing downwards," the primitive roots of phallocentricity are evident in the Australian Aboriginal sites as well. Just get a gander at "Nabulwinjbulwinj the Woman Eater" (whom Yost describes as "a dangerous male spirit who punishes women who disobey tribal laws") displaying his endowments with splayed legs in a color photograph where the rocks are so filled with vibrantly variegated hues as to suggest a collaboration between Jean Dubuffet and an especially gifted Color Field painter. But it is Yost's artful placement of the single image in a horizontal format, with all four akimbo limbs, suggesting the vast eons that its existence embraces, which makes the image transcend the merely documentary.

In the Northern Territory of Australia, those great distances are bridged by present-day Wardaman tribesmen who believe that the rock paintings lose their power when they fade. Although Aboriginal tribal rules strictly forbid adding new images, they hold ceremonies periodically to repaint the old ones, such as "Young Lightnings." Yost's image shows a ruddy section of a cave wall inhabited by some ninety of these sprightly little spirits. Standing above carved vulva-shapes containing traces of red ochre (perhaps symbolizing menstrual blood), crowned by what appear to be halos spewing bright rays everywhichway, they could resemble a field of wildflowers. At the same time, the few larger, mature lightning spirits hovering above them (some fading in a manner that makes the following analogy even more striking) could also suggest teachers and students at an elementary school outing.

Without belaboring the point (although it is an important one), it should be said that even Yost's straightforward Australian landscapes — such as "Road to Wardaman Land," with the artist's "stranger in a strange land" shadow looming on the broad expanse of red-orange clay peculiar to the region, and "Termite Mounds in Wardaman Land," where the roughly four-foot high natural structures crowd a field of sun-parched yellow grass like insect hi-rises, eery robed figures — give rise to any number of other surreal similies the reader will be mercifully spared. Yet whether Leon Yost wishes to encourage such wildly subjective interpretations or not, the ability to embody in a single image multiple visual metaphors linking different periods in history (and even of prehistory) in the imagination of the viewer would seem to me to be yet another of the eternal mysteries that make for superior works of art.

In any case, Yost generates such imaginative speculation with too much consistency to call it accidental, although, given his great respect for the subject matter he has been exploring so assiduously for three decades, first in the American Southwest and later in the Australian Outback, it is not difficult to understand why he would stress the documentary content of his work over its less tangible aspects. That, of course, is his privilege, and he certainly has the credentials to back it up. Yet he will never convince this viewer that he is not, above all else, an artist of the first rank.

— Ed McCormack

The Paintings of April Bending Evoke a Private Realm of Intriguing Allusions

The Canadian artist April Bending is a painter of many subjects, among them human figures, moonlit vistas, and the flora and marine life of the Cayman Islands, where she spends part of each year— as well as fossils intended to "emphasize mortality and immortality." Yet all are magically transformed and rendered resonantly symbolic by virtue of her distinctive style. Through her frequent use of a single overriding monochromes over a black underpainting, augmented by the spare use of auxiliary hues, she varies the mood and emotional intensity of certain themes that recur in her work.

Blue was the dominant hue in "Bending," her most recent solo exhibition, curated by Basak Malone, at Broadway Gallery, 473 Broadway in Soho, which proved to be one of her most dramatic shows to date. The manner in which she employs this color creates a nocturnal atmosphere that enhances the innate eeriness of her "Heading Home" series. These paintings center on the almost full-length figure of an impassive Everyman whom we encounter shirtless, arms hanging limply at his sides, as though wandering in a trance after escaping from some mental institution or detention center in only his pajama bottoms. The expressively layered blue and purple brushstrokes encircling his entire body could either suggest the glow of reflected neon on a night highway or supernatural auras. With his ideally bald head and his eyes lowered and hidden in their shadowed sockets, he appears so anonymous as to almost resemble an automobile crash dummy. Yet he exudes a human presence as powerful as that in one of the oppositely specific portraits that Giacometti worked and reworked for so long that some of his own creative despair seemed to transfer itself to the canvas. Bending's empathy for her subjects seems to burn through these compelling compositions.

The same sense of a vital presence comes across in a group of heads with titles such as "Resolution," and "The Second Guess." The first two paintings depict Bending's boldly generalized Everyman types, which invariably seem to evoke, for this writer anyway, the existential crisis of identity and morality which has plagued modern man since the advent of the technological age at the beginning of the twentieth century. These men could seem to be contemplating their fate as pawns in the game, to borrow Bob Dylan's apt phrase for those many hapless millions, be they assembly line workers or soldiers, whose lives are predetermined by historical contingencies which grow more sinister with each new manifestation of "progress." Here, as in Bending's larger figures the vibrant blue and purple auras around these men could also be interpreted as secular halos — or perhaps symbols of the indomitableness of the human spirit in the face of even the most daunting depersonalization by the powers that be.

"One For You, One For Me"

In contrast to the shadowed gaze of many of her male figures, Bending's women often confront the viewer frankly with eyes wide open, as seen in two other boldly painted heads: "Who'll Stop the Rain" and "Point of View." In the former painting, a woman with shiny deep blue hair and a greenish cast to her skin confronts us at the center of the canvas, mysteriously untouched by the rivulets of rain pouring down on both sides of her head as though, like a sorceress, she has parted the downpour by sheer force of will. Indeed, her large, dark eyes are hypnotic, suggesting superhuman —or least intuitive powers of the sort for which women were once burnt at the stake.

By contrast, in the latter composition, Bending superimposes a grid of large rectangles over a more conventionally pretty and guileless-looking feminine face with full lips and large moist eyes, filling the entire composition. Here, the suggestion is that this woman is peering out at us through some of sort of small, mesh-covered window in the steel door of a cell. Yet her expression is serene rather than imploring, as though, like many other people of both sexes, she is in a kind of domestic captivity that she has convinced herself she enjoys rather than endures.

Indeed, ensnarement and its avoidance appear to be among Bending's recurring themes, as seen in a painting from her "Fish Series" entitled "One for You, One for Me." This is a staggered triptych texturally depicting blue watery depths, with a large fish on each of the outer panels converging on two actual fish hooks dangling from the top edge of the central one. For all their visual wit, this painting and another from the same series called "Not Biting," both seem potent symbolic expressions of the emotional entrapments —or codependency— to which humans, above all other species, are prey.

In fact, all of April Bending's paintings seem fraught with subtle meanings as layered as the sumptuous impasto she employs to bring them into being. Even a strictly architectural composition, such as "Another Time & Place," in which we see only an intricately tiled floor and a mysterious blue portal, hints at hidden human dramas unfolding just outside the picture space.

But while Bending's intriguing subject matter inevitably invites the sort of subjective interpretation I have indulged in here, the sheer painterly appeal of her work is inarguable. Thus one could conceivably enjoy her work for its many felicities of form, color, texture and composition alone. To do so, however, would be to deprive oneself of the additional pleasure of entering the private world of allusions that her pictures evoke.

—Ed McCormack

Reincarnating the Buddha: von Schmidt at Noho Gallery

Those who like to trivialize complex subjects by assigning them simplistic definitions tend to think of Dada as "anti-art" and Conceptualism as "anti-object." But nothing could be further from the truth in regard to the work of the "conceptual neo-Dadaist" known by the single name von Schmidt.

Best known for his sculpture "The Ideals of Aaron," which was commissioned by The Pave the Way Foundation, and which the artist presented to Pope John Paul II during a private audience at the Vatican in 2005, most of von Schmidt's art is object-based. What makes it conceptual, however, is that the object invariably encompasses an idea with universal implications. And what makes it neo-Dadaist is that, like that of the artists who originated the Dada movement in 1916 in response to the "Great War" that brought European civilization to the brink of destruction, von Schmidt's best work is triggered not by frivolous irreverence but by passionate indignation.

Certainly this is true in the case of his new solo exhibition "Bamiyan Silk Road," at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, through February 14.

Prompted by the Taliban's wanton destruction, in 2001, of the two giant stone statues of the Buddha, which had stood like stately spiritual sentinels high above the Silk Road in the Bamiyan Valley of central Afghanistan for fifteen hundred years, the exhibition presents a powerful rebuttal to intolerance of all kinds.

"The explosion of those ancient Buddhist statues by the Taliban represented a direct assault on civilization itself and presaged the savage attacks of 9/11," the artist says. "First two Buddhas, then, two towers."

Pointing out that since "there was no longer an active Buddhist presence in Bamiyan," the statues "belonged to the world," von Schmidt adds, "I had to respond."

Bamiyan has fascinated von Schmidt since the 1960s, when an exhibit of Afghan archaeological treasures at the Asia Society enlightened him to the significance of the Silk Road as a much traveled thoroughfare and conduit of cross-cultural currents. Displayed were art works from all over the ancient world unearthed in the area. There were even "exact duplicates of art works found in Ancient Greece and other countries of the East," revealing, as he puts it, that 'globalization' preceded the time of Christ." (The discovery this year of what may be the world's oldest extant oil paintings, predating the use of the medium in Europe, inspired him to include two of his own oils in the exhibition at Noho Gallery.)

In regard to the bombed Buddhas, what von Schmidt has done is to give these destroyed spiritual monuments several new incarnations as vital and affecting works of contemporary art. Rather than attempting to imitate their original physical qualities, however, he has invested them with new life through the symbolic significance of the very materials he has chosen.

"Bamiyan Lava Wall"

"Bamiyan Golden Variation"

Some works center on the face of the Buddha reincarnated in square formats as serenely symmetrical as the circles that symbolize emptiness, infinity, perfection, and spiritual attainment in the iconography of the ancient Zen literati ink painters. In "Bamiyan Golden Variation, 2008," as in others, the face, its eyes closed in meditation, fills the entire picture. Here, it is composed of many spherical silk cocoons hand-dyed a shade of golden yellow similar to the saffron hue of monks' robes. Given its radiant glow, to Western eyes (mine in particular), it could also evoke those anthropomorphic images of "Sol" in old prints, showing the sun with a human face, which probably date back to pagan times, predating Christ as "the son of heaven." Thought of in this way, the circular yellow silk cocoons suggest blinding sunspots viewed head-on, as Sol sends forth his eternal rays, reminding one that Carl Jung regarded the fiery orb as a symbol of the source of life and the ultimate wholeness of man.

"Bamiyan Iron, 2008," another version of the Buddha's face in the same size and format is executed in cast iron. While the material is more enduring, the network of lines in the patina could suggest the initial cracks in the precise instant of impact during the bombing, before the statues crumbled into dust. And at least some of these marks could also be interpreted as symbolic of the Buddha's tears streaming down his cheeks, not in self-pity but out of compassionate for the sad karma humankind wreaks upon itself through its violent nature.

By contrast, both the deep, burnished hue of a version of the same image in hand-dyed silk titled "Bamiyan Maroon Variation, 2008," and the infrared phosphorescence of the slightly smaller "Bamiyan Watercolor" could suggest how indelibly the haunting image of the destroyed Buddha's face has burned itself into the artist's consciousness.

Indeed, the image is duplicated again and again in "Bamiyan Lava Wall," a four-foot square grid of smaller Buddha heads that von Schmidt created from molten lava at Vulcan's forge. Both in these heads and in a rough, limbless figure eerily reminiscent of charred bodies of the Buddhist monks who set themselves aflame to protest the Vietnam war, von Schmidt employs the porousness of the earthy substance to impart to the figures a tortured Expressionist sense of distortion that contrasts almost shockingly with the serene expressions and pleasing symmetry of the previous images. Thus the artist reminds us that the Buddha, like Christ, is an all-too-human embodiment of godliness, vulnerable to human suffering.

In these and other works in diverse materials such as paper, glass, oil paint, and aluminum in this deeply affecting exhibition, von Schmidt makes clear how all of us suffer when civilization is attacked at its roots by those who would willfully defile, deface, or destroy such symbols of our higher potential selves.

— Ed McCormack

"Altered States" of Contemporary Photography in Chelsea

Unfathomable as it may seem, not all that long ago (which is to say as recently as the 1950s), color was taboo if one wished to be taken seriously as a fine artist in the still relatively new field of fine art photography. Purists associated color with advertising layouts in glossy magazines, and dismissed it out of hand. But nowadays, to paraphrase the great Cole Porter song, anything goes. From the puritanical stance of those photographic pioneers, we have evolved to the more enlightened belief that art should reflect its times, both in its refusal to adhere to outdated aesthetic formulae and its embrace of whatever state of the art wizardry suits its purposes. Thus the marriage of subjective vision and technology is the promising premise of the multifaceted exhibition "Altered States of Reality," to be seen at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from April 14 through May 5. (Reception: Thursday, April 16, from 6 to 8 pm.)

The digital photographs of David Agee are an auspicious place to start. Employing the camera as a tool to explore the internal structure of things, Agee obscures the original identities of objects to create visual metaphors at once slightly sinister and amusing, as seen in his vibrant color print "The Ninja Pill." By contrast, the familiar takes on a new aspect in the photography of the Mexican artist Apolo Anton Arauz, who often juxtaposes actual objects from the sites he photographs with his images, making an intriguing point regarding reality and its representation. Actual objects are also used by Tokyo artist Hidekazu Ishikawa, whose attitude harks back to Dada by way of Andy Warhol in dotty-brilliant photo-assemblages. Then there is Montserrat Benito Segura, another photographic innovator whose heart also appears to belong to Dada, when she juxtaposes an empty shoe and a footprint side by side as a kind of "evidence" with undertones of forensic aesthetics.

While Sacramento photographer Marisa Atha references a Led Zeppelin song about ascending to heaven in the title of her digital print "Stairway to H," the acidic yellow tone that she superimposes over an image of funky New York City subway steps ironically evokes the stench of urine.

Living and working in France, Mary Mansey does in photography what the Impressionists did in painting, while pushing the image closer to abstraction with shimmering visions of sunlight on water that present a refreshingly direct antidote to much postmodern pretension.

James Spitznagel's use of digital imaging techniques results in austere composition with a sci-fi feeling, particularly in his futuristic city scenes, which hark back to the classic film "Metropolis," even as they forge ahead into new photographic frontiers. Flemming Hoff also employs urban architecture as a starting point, but pushes it more in the direction of minimalism in his digitally altered pictures of austere desert-like cities almost sinisterly devoid of human life.

Equally minimalist but more grounded in organic form, the floral imagery of Cariappa Annaiah, born in India, now living in Boston, combines an exquisite use of negative space and a sinuous grace reminiscent of traditional Asian flower painting with a photographic vision akin to the still lifes of Robert Mapplethorpe. Floral subjects also figure prominently in the photographic oeuvre of the Canadian artist Angelina McCormick, where a single flower set against a nuetral-toned ground takes on a portrait-like presence.

Bulgarian photographer and art therapist Radostina Valchanova creates a sense of metamorphosis in her semiabstract prints, such as one in which an indistinct subject that may be a tree viewed from below morphs into a stylized star that casts its mysterious shadow on a bright red sky. The Swiss artist Shelley Vouga has her own unique way with imagistic transformation, digitally reconfiguring the angular shapes of gems into baroque abstract patterns suggesting cathedral ceilings or steely spider webs.

Conversely, Clint Saunders uses digital photography to liquify solid matter in dramatic prismatic visions of flowing light and translucent color akin to the "poured" paintings of Paul Jenkins and Morris Louis.

Born in Germany, based in Sydney, Australia, Sylvia Schwenk combines photography with performance art in her prints documenting dramatic public events staged in the streets with multiple participants, which become happenings in their own right when presented in the gallery. Tokyo-born Mari Minegishi's happenings are confined to her prints, which focus on out of the way rural sites, where she captures and makes immutable the fleeting effects of light on simple rock formations or other natural things, revealing the magic in the commonplace. Clecio Lira also focuses on nature but transforms it digitally by "tweaking" his black and white photographs of lilies coloristically on the computer to lend them a chromatic animation influenced both by his background in modern dance and the costumes and revelry of Carnival in his native Brazil.

Equally baroque in another manner, the photographs of Camila Manero, who alternates between analog and digital photography as her mood or the subject dictates, are distinguished by forms often that often warp or distort in the manner of Expressionist painting. By contrast, Allen Palmer stresses crystal clarity and meticulous detail in his complex, large scale color prints of New York City's multiethnic neighborhoods, each photographed with sensitivity and respect for its individual culture and character.

Matty Karp's exotic atmospheric color image of shadowy Asian oarsmen in conical hats, navigating their small boats through a blue expanse that suggests a sky as much as a river, is enhanced by his habit of printing his pictures on canvas to blur the boundaries between photography and painting.

Wildlife advertising photographer Alain Lacki reveals his surreal side, digitally manipulating natural imagery to create startling effects in pictures such as one of a young woman pulling the incoming surf over her like a blanket as she sleeps on the sandy shoreline of a beach. Massimiliano Lattanzi, a poet and astronomer as well as a photographer, also creates startling effects, albeit of a more abstract and metaphysical nature, in which images culled from nature or the night skies take on the quality of calligraphy, X-rays, or diagrams, yet remain visionary and finally indefinable.

Immediately recognizable but possessed of a bizarre quality all their own, the sharply focused prints of the artist known only as LEFT present found stones as "natural sculptures" by isolating them in a manner that reveals the mysterious faces carved on their surfaces by the elements over the centuries, thus inviting the viewer to question the nature of art itself. Multimedia artist Marilyn Holland raises other intriguing questions regarding the photographic "editing" of reality in her powerfully abstracted pictures, particularly those in which pieces of sculpture and other objects are radically "recomposed" in close-up.

Another artist who fruitfully explores the abstract possibilities of imagistic alteration is Malka Inbal, whose "Fabric Delusions" imaginatively transform fibrous substances into fiery explosions, exotic flowers, or any number of other phenomena that expand our visual perception of familiar things. Narrative elements come prominently into play in the work of Beth Parin, whose black and white photographs employing a collage technique and imagistic fragmentation transform domestic interiors into surreal psychological terrains that give a new symbolic meaning to the old warning "most accidents occur in the home."

Also working in monochromes, Stefanie Young, a native of New Zealand, creates images of doll-like human faces partially obscured or literally defaced by scratchy lines, which could also suggest tethers and invest her hauntingly beautiful pictures with undertones of sadomasochism.

Purist photography, far from forgotten, makes a strong stowing in the person of Leslie Weil, a successful advertising photographer who, in her fine art Picts combines social consciousness with strong composition and aesthetic qualities.

Then there is Byra Zimmerman, whose love for the classic Dutch still life painters inspires her to create similarly sublime, warmly lit photographic compositions

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Grace Brunsó: Restoring the Pastoral Dream

Sadly, romantic landscape is a species of painting rarely encountered in today's art scene, not because it is no longer relevant, but because few contemporary painters in our highly technological age still seem to possess the proper awe of natural phenomena to carry it off.

Thus this writer was excited and impressed, during a recent visit to Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, in Chelsea, by the paintings of Grace Brunsó, an artist originally from Barcelona, Spain, who relocated in 1998 to Northern California, where she presently lives and paints.

Perhaps before going further one should clarify what is meant by "romantic," as opposed to any other kind of landscape painting. In the present context, it is intended to mean an interpretation of nature which suggests something deeper and more mysterious than that which is simply obvious in the lay of the land; which endeavors to apprehend the hidden essences and energies of nature rather than its outward appearances alone.

Such nineteenth century British painters as John Constable and Samuel Palmer spring most immediately to mind for their ability to invest landscape with spiritual as well as earthly qualities. And it seems to be Grace Brunsó's almost singular ability to make this type of painting new and vital for the postmodern era that makes her an artist worthy of serious attention. For while most of her pictures clearly depict a particular time and place, be it in California or her native Spain, where she still maintains a studio, her scenes invariably present us with a synthesis of natural elements that is at once timeless and universal.

Among the most eye-catching examples in the exhibition at Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery were two adjoining and complementary compositions entitled, respectively, "Lilac Carpet" and "Fuchsia Carpet." In both, the chromatic intensity of the deep pink, red, and purple, fields of flowers carpeting the earth rivaled the chromatic intensity of Color Field painting. Here, as in another idyllic scene by Brunsó depicting a beach, sparkling aquamarine water, cottony cloud formations and distant palm trees waving in the breeze from the opposite shore, one marveled at Brunsó's ability to capture the many moods and nuances of nature, making each immutable in its own manner.

In order to do so, she employs a plethora of different methods and techniques in both oil and watercolor, sometimes working wet-into-wet in the latter medium, as seen in some of her floral studies such as "California Poppies," where the forms of the flowers are made to dissolve deliciously into the paper by virtue of her masterly handling of aquarelle.

Nor does she always adhere to traditional

"Foggy Day at the Park"

methods in either medium, sometimes applying watercolor color opaquely on gray paper to lend it the depth of oils, or, conversely, employing lighter-than-air oil glazes to achieve a luminosity akin to watercolor. In an exquisite little marinescape titled "Small Boats," she even goes so far as to add glitter to her pigments to approximate the shimmer of sunlight on water and sand.

Closely observed, yet filtered through the transformative lense of her exquisitely refined aesthetic sensibility, her landscapes are invariably bathed in radiance, even in a scene such as "Foggy Day at the Park," where the sunlight is somewhat atmospherically diffused. Her skill in achieving such effects enables Grace Brunsó to evoke a world of bucolic beauty that restores the romantic dream of a pastoral paradise to contemporary painting. (Grace Brunsó's work is also included in the gallery's year-round salon.)

—Peter Wiley

Approaches to the Alchemy of Light and Color

West Side Arts Coalition members made creative inquiry into the basic components of the visual world in "Light & Color," recently curated by Anne Rudder and Terry Berkowitz at Broadway Mall Community Center on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street.

Meyer Tannenbaum, showed four lively canvases from his "Expansion Series," in which eloquent abstract calligraphy flowed freely over color fields so luminous as to appear painted with liquid light. Tannenbaum's most compelling recent preoccupations concern line and color as discrete yet harmonious entities.

Color and light literally seemed to take flight in the intimate, buoyant watercolors of Terry Berkowitz, featuring liquescently amorphous abstract shapes suggestive of undersea and landscape themes. In Berkowitz's "Kaleidoscope," translucent washes evoked golden auras dissolving and coalescing, creating a sense of flux.

Then there was the Japanese artist Yukako, all of whose lyrical works in water media on handmade Kozo rice paper are notable for their grace and gestural velocity. Yukako's linear compositions, each with an overriding color scheme, suggest layers of light beams interacting and overlapping in a festive visual event. Beatrice Rubel, another artist possessed of a lyrical gift, showed a single work in color pencil in which delicately interwoven pastel hues formed undulating rainbow waves. Rubel's rhythmically wavering horizontal bands suggest the mysterious process by which light rays give birth to color.

Other artists employed metamorphic imagery that bridged the gap between the figurative and the abstract. Sonia Barnett, for example, showed an intriguing sequence of four vibrantly colorful semiabstract paintings called "New York State to Boot Series," in which a topographical outline gradually changes shape. In the final canvas, it morphs into a towering boot poised against the city's skyline, like the biggest Claes Oldenburg soft sculpture the world has ever seen!

Employing a dazzlingly eclectic melange of neo-cubistic geometric forms and brilliant color areas, Elizabeth K. Hill creates compositions that take on a strongly symbolic quality. In her diamond shaped gem of a small painting "Way Out Yonder," particularly, Hill's synthesis of abstraction and landscape suggested a sense of infinite space.

A marked departure from her visionary Blakean watercolors with handwritten texts, Anne Rudder's expressionistic acrylic paintings were notable for their winning combination of painterly vigor and visual wit. Especially delightful was Rudder's suspenseful domestic drama, wherein a cat clawing at a hovering butterfly appeared on the verge of upending a vase full of flowers, unbeknownst to a woman in a Nabi-patterned blouse gazing out a window with her back turned.

Frequently exhibited African American painter Mikki Powell has a way of getting at the abstract essences of her clearly delineated figurative subjects through her use of clear, flat color areas and dynamic compositional cropping. This could be seen to special advantage in "Soul Flight," Powell's acrylic painting of a kind of symbolic dance between a serenely gesturing woman and a white dove in flight, their complementary forms creating a mesmerizing effect.

Patience Sundaresan's two paintings of brush fires were not only topical, given the recent news from California, but possessed of what Yeats termed "a terrible beauty." For both the beauty and destructiveness of fire filled her canvases with an awesome sense of light and color that exemplified the theme of the exhibition. In his seascapes, Arthur Bitterman takes particular care with the shapes of foamy waves crashing on rocks, evoking their sound and fury with

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PROUST'S PAINTINGS & LOU REED'S LYRICS: a Walk on the Wilde Side

by Ed McCormack

Determined not to be a footnote to anybody else's notoriety, stylin' and profilin' scribe Ed McCormack (center) goes out of his way to upstage Warhol film director Paul Morrissey and camera-shy English major Lou Reed

Photo by Anton Perich

In the early seventies, when I wrote regularly for his brand new magazine "Interview," then little more than a house organ to The Factory, Andy Warhol would sometimes introduce me to people as "the new Tom Wolfe." I knew very well that Andy, the ultimate put-on artist and one of the stingiest people I ever worked for, liked to substitute honorary titles, such as listing me on the masthead as a Contributing Editor, and fulsome flattery for more useful currency. (Indeed, the term "drama queen" could have originated from the tantrums some of his transvestite "Superstars" had to throw to actually get paid for their film roles.)

But as Jules Renard confessed in his journals, "I always believed people when they flattered me." So I also believed Wolfe himself when he sidled up, drink in hand, at a party to launch the issue of Rolling Stone featuring the first installment of his astronaut saga "The Right Stuff," and said, "I told Jann Wenner your piece on the New York Erotic Film Festival was the best thing in the issue."

Of course, this was merely Wolfe's glib way of saying that my wickedly explicit descriptions of sexual acrobats performing on wrestling mats at the champagne reception for the porn-fest were the most outrageous thing in the issue. Still, I chose to take him at his word, even though glibness was my own stock in trade, as I had oafishly demonstrated the first time we'd met, at an earlier Rolling Stone function.

"Did you really introduce yourself to Tom Wolfe as the New Tom Wolfe?" Lou Reed would later ask.

The most well read and literary of rock 'n' rollers (as "Pass Thru Flame: The Collected Lyrics / Lou Reed," published this past December by Da Capo Press, attests), it turned out he had been following my off-the-wall reportage on the downtown demimonde — or the "New York Satyricon," as I was in the habit of referring to it ad absurdom in print. And while he had been a much earlier and more constant habitué of Warhol scene than I ever was, back when The Velvet Underground was The Factory's fabled house band of the damned, I was sure he had drawn upon details of my recent pieces for his hit single, "Walk on the Wild Side" — although, to give credit where due, the title was taken from a novel by Nelson Algren.

"Well, yeah, I did say that to Wolfe. But I was drunk, and anyway, it was Andy's fault..."

"And what did Wolfe say?"

"He said, 'Good luck!' "

Lou grinned, a lizard in sunglasses, and for a time thereafter we became such frequent drinking companions that I would later be annoyingly characterized in more than one cheap celebrity biography as "Reed's friend Ed McCormack" — as if I, who always fancied myself the star of my own life, had suddenly become a footnote to somebody else's notoriety.

True, I was the one Lou called late at night to come over and celebrate the first time he got married. The only guest, I arrived to find him staggering around on the shag carpet in a rumpled white suit with a tumbler of Scotch in his hand, and his bride, Bettye, already out cold, sprawled across the bed in her dress and platforms like a long blond doll.

But while we lived conveniently close to each other in "the airline stewardess ghetto," as he referred to it, I was much too self-centered and standoffish for the kind of easy camaraderie Lou shared with an old college chum he invited to join us for drinks one evening at Jeannie's and my apartment on East 89th Street. When my wife expressed concern that his friend had still not arrived at our door an inordinate number of minutes after she buzzed him into the downstairs vestibule, Lou assured her that he would be knocking momentarily. And when he finally did, after an even longer wait, we realized why it had taken him so long to climb three flights of stairs: he was missing one arm and one leg.

"Meet my friend Lincoln; he's a failed suicide," Lou deadpanned by way of introduction, explaining that in a fit of depression his friend tried to kill himself by jumping in front of a subway train.

"But fortunately he botched even that," he added with a rueful fondness that was obviously mutual, judging from Lincoln's delighted laughter. And they both laughed even harder when Lou added that — existential irony of ironies — his friend now aspired to become a standup comedian.

* * *

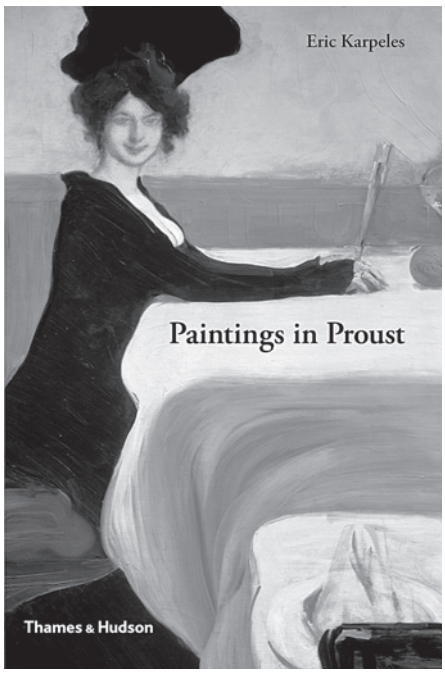
I no longer wanted to be compared to Tom Wolfe by Andy or anybody else after "The Painted Word" came out in 1975, making Wolfe instantly persona non grata in the New York art world. And with good reason, too: that book set a new standard for scurrilousness, giving eloquent voice to cheap-shot philistinism in much the same way that William F. Buckley's erudite rhetoric once lent reactionary ideas worthy of Sara Palin unwonted wit. In fact, what made "The Painted Word" all the more insidious was that it was nowhere near as clueless as Huntington Hartford's "Art or Anarchy?," H.R. Rookmaaker's "Modern Art and the Death of a Culture," or Theodore L. Shaw's

"Precious Rubbish" — books whose very titles announced their witlessness. No, Wolfe was never without wit, even when putting a new spin on the weary old Emperor's New Clothes argument against abstract art.

"I had gotten it all backward all along," he wrote with characteristic disingenuousness. "Not 'seeing is believing,' you ninny, but 'believing is seeing,' for Modern art has become completely literary: the paintings and other works exist only to illustrate the text."

In a nutshell Wolfe's core thesis was that "with nothing going for them except brain power and stupendous rectitude and the peculiar makeup of the art world," two rival New York art critics, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, had projected this style, this unloved brat of theirs,"— Abstract Expressionism — "until it filled up the screen of art history."

Although the book exploded like a stink bomb on publication, nobody in the art world has taken it — or Wolfe — seriously for decades. However, the phrase "painted word" still resonates in the sense that another writer, Donald Newlove, meant when he titled his book about vividly descriptive opening passages in novels "Painted Paragraphs." And the term resounds even more profoundly in relation to a new guidebook, compiled by Eric Karpeles for Thames & Hudson, called "Paintings in Proust: A Visual Companion to In Search of Lost Time."



"The sibling relationship between painting and writing, the 'sister arts,' has been acknowledged as far back as criticism goes in both disciplines," Karpeles, a painter as well as a writer, tells us in the book's introduction. "In a balanced, harmonious similie — ut pictura poesis — Horace referred to a written text that aspires to the condition of a picture. Ekphrasis is the term of classical rhetoric for this pairing of words and pictures, a state of imitation that the poet and critic John Hollander refers to as 'mimesis of mimesis.' "

Proust, who told Jean Cocteau, "My book is a painting,"was without doubt the most prolific practitioner of ekphrasis in modern literature, given the great number of paintings from the 14th to 20th centuries referenced or described in his seven volume epic. Most are works he spent many hours studying in the Louvre, while others are the creations of his fictional artist Elstir. Sometimes they are combined, as when Elstir (whose marinescapes, when Proust describes them, hint at Turner's steamy minglings of sea and sky) endows an ordinary body of water with special mystery for the novel's Narrator "by telling me that it was the gulf of opal painted by Whistler in his 'Harmony in Blue and Silver: Trouville'...."

Although the Thames & Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms defines ekphrasis as "A description of a work of art, which might be imaginary, undertaken as a rhetorical exercise," Proust's relationship to visual art was far deeper and more crucial to his daily existence than that definition implies. Karpeles cites a scene in which the novel's Narrator, who is invariably the author's surrogate, imagines the round tables in a luxurious restaurant as planets in a constellation and immediately pities his fellow diners "because I felt for them the round tables were not planets and that they had not cut through the scheme of things in such a way as to be delivered from the bondage of habitual appearances and enabled to perceive analogies."

Lest readers find themselves among that pitiable group, Karpeles took on the formidable project of gathering all the paintings in the novel together in one volume because, as he puts it, "If you can't conjure up the visual analogy that Proust is making you lose many of the insights in the book." For along with its main theme of how, in certain "privileged moments," we may grasp the hidden meaning of experiences, regain "lost time" (the nuance that makes the present translation of Proust's title more accurate than "Remembrance of Things Past"), and enter a transcendental reality in which past and present are one, so much of the novel is about how art enriches and elevates life, starting in the first volume, "Swann's Way," with the scrupulous cultural education of the young Narrator by his grandmother, who "would have liked me to have in my room photographs of ancient buildings or of beautiful places. But at the moment of buying them, and for all that the subject had an aesthetic value, she would find that vulgarity and utility had too prominent a part in them, through the mechanical nature of their reproduction by photography."

One can't help wondering if Walter Benjamin's famous essay about art losing its "aura" in the age of mechanical reproduction could have been inspired by this passage, just as numerous other texts were germinated by the gemlike insights throughout Proust's 3,000 page text. In any case, rather than succumbing to what she considers to be the vulgar utility of direct photographic representation, the Narrator's grandmother chooses instead to decorate his room with reproductions of paintings such as "Chartres Cathedral" by Corot, "Vesuvius Erupting" by Turner, and "View of a Park with a Water Fountain" by Hubert Robert.

These are among the more than 200 works reproduced in full color in the book, each accompanied by an excerpt from the volume of the novel in which it is mentioned by name or alluded to in some more general manner. But never do these pictures merely illustrate the text or vice versa; rather, each illuminates the other. Thus, toward the end of the chapter on Swann's Way, when the young Narrator, out in the park of the Champs-Elysées in the company of a family servant, sees Swann's daughter Gilberte and is "struck by the first of love's random arrows," the painting reproduced on the facing page is none other than Poussin's sublime "Spring, or The Earthly Paradise."

As Edmund White points out in his biography "Marcel Proust," this was before the advent of permissive modern adolescence, when teenagers of a certain class were still chaperoned by the nannies and other family retainers who had been with them since early childhood. However, while in the passage from the novel excerpted in "Paintings in Proust," the Narrator merely alludes generically to how the clouds in the park that day resembled those "billowing over a Poussin landscape," the specific painting that Karpeles chooses to reproduce, with its comely nude couple at play in a lush Edenic salad, evokes an inner fantasy of awakening sensuality that transcends the young Narrator's restrictive circumstances, illumi-

nating the author's words with a visual metaphor that brings their meaning into even clearer focus.

Indeed, the selections all throughout Karpeles's book cast light on Proust's novel in a manner suggesting a spiritual collaboration with the earlier author, bringing his intimate, personal vision of art vividly alive for the reader. The book functions as a portable museum through which the reader follows the Narrator, noting the works that formed his aesthetic sensibility, alongside the imaginary ones that spring ekphrastically from Proust's meticulously painted paragraphs. Art history and literary imagination merge in a seamless synthesis.

The reproductions range from specific works mentioned in the novel to images that illuminate a more general reference to an artist's work. For a passage in which Proust describes the timeless atmosphere in a hotel corridor as having "that amber haze, unsubstantial and mysterious as twilight, in which Rembrandt picks out here and there a window-sill or a well-head," the Old Master's "Philosopher in Meditation" provides the prerequisite chiaroscuro. With another, in which the Narrator watches Gilberte's mother passing regally in a carriage "borne along by the flight of a pair of fiery horses, slender and shapely as one sees them in the drawings of Constantin Guys," he juxtaposes a drawing by that chronicler of fashionable Paris, praised by Baudelaire as "The Painter of Modern Life," which evokes perfectly Proust's lifelong habit of becoming smitten not only with individuals but with the entire social milieu to which the object of his affections belonged.

"Proust on his deathbed" by Paul Helleu, 1922. Compliments of Thames & Hudson The one picture in "Paintings in Proust" not alluded to in Proust's masterpiece. A Universal Truth: None of us can imagine the world that existed before we were born going on without us.

And mere affections they apparently were, where women were concerned, going no further than harmless flirtations with various upper-class hostesses to advance his social position, while his sexual desires were satisfied in male brothels. His Narrator's female romantic interests were invariably, as Edmund White puts it, "boys in drag."

Proust was hardly the first author for whom such masquerades were necessary in those less enlightened decades before museum board socialites and titled European collectors welcomed Robert Mapplethorpe to the dinner table in full S&M leather fetish gear. However, the prosecution and jailing of his British acquaintance Oscar Wilde caused Proust to despair that homosexuals were "a race upon whom a curse is laid" and made him all the more reticent regarding his own inclinations. Unlike Wilde, he could not counter the quaint Victorian notion of homosexuality as "a crime against nature" by romantically linking criminality and art. While Wilde could say of Thomas Wainwright, the English art critic and painter accused of forgery (and possibly poisoning his sister-in-law), "His crimes seem to have had an important effect on his art; they gave a strong personality to his style," Proust's social ambitions prevented him from acknowledging that respectability could ever be the enemy of creativity. Even if he could concur in his heart with Wilde's quip that "Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others," he was in no position to make amoral aestheticism a creative credo, as numerous other artists, ranging from Jean Genet to Lou Reed, later would. But that Proust evoked amorous yearning more movingly than almost any other author of his time, even while resorting to subterfuge in face of its reigning orthodoxy, only serves to reaffirm in retrospect that the human heart has no gender and the pangs of love are universal.

So, too, are the verities of art, and it was John Ruskin, the preeminent critic of the nineteenth century who not only validated Proust's lush literary style ("Ruskin tells us to describe everything, that we must not brush aside a certain object because everything is poetical") but helped him to refine his aesthetic taste. He honored the great Englishman in an admiring essay and by undertaking the formidable task of translating his work into French. From Ruskin Proust learned the value of close observation, devotion to details, and that "writing is infinitely more important than life." He felt especially confirmed in the latter conviction on leaning of Ruskin's death in 1900, when he wrote to his translation collaborator Marie Nordlinger of "how paltry a thing death is when I see how vigorously this dead man still lives."

Karpeles tells us that the only picture remaining on Proust's bedroom wall as he struggled with his Ruskin translation was a reproduction of Whistler's portrait of the Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle. But he fails to mention that Whistler had won a libel suit against his former champion Ruskin for writing that he had "flung a pot of paint in the public's face" with his painting of a fireworks display over the Thames — a charge Ruskin might have made more credibly about certain steamy effusions by Turner, of whom he was a more enduring champion.

The full title of the picture on Proust's wall, "Arrangement of Grey and Black No. 2: Portrait of Thomas Carlyle," refers to the tones in the handsome subject's hair, beard, and cloak, and indicates the greater concern with arrangements of form and color than with capturing likenesses which made Whistler one of the more advanced artists of his time. However, that title fails to do full justice to the subtler subsidiary hues of pale green and brown that enliven the wall behind Carlyle and the floor beneath his boots.

So closely do these colors resemble those that Jeannie, who invariably views film with a painterly eye, referred to as "moss and rust," as we lay in bed watching a rental copy of the recently released DVD of "Lou Reed: Berlin," that one can't help wondering if Julian Schnabel, who not only directed the performance documentary but designed the set, had based its color scheme on Whistler's painting.

Since "Berlin" was now being hailed by some as a rediscoved masterpiece, I wanted to see if I had missed something in 1973, when I dismissed it as a dreary post-divorce indulgence. (For once I had been in step with the critical consensus, but I tended to view rock 'n' roll as a sociological rather than musical phenomenon, and as a writer felt record reviewing was beneath me.) Not only did the colors on the screen mirror those in Whistler's portrait, one could even make a case for similarities between the agi-

tated, mounting rhythms of Lou's songs and Carlyle's emphatic prose style. But above all, Schnabel was a painter long before he became a filmmaker; and he filmed the concert in blurred, aqueous tones, as though viewed through some murky fishtank of memories and dreams. Presumably, he chose even the pale green gowns of the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, whose angelic voices add a haunting resonance to Lou's gritty tale of a doomed love affair between two speedfreaks scuffling in Berlin before the wall came down. Surely Schnabel must also have calculated how strikingly their fresh, innocent faces, when the camera cut to them, would contrast with Lou's wizened mug, which time has carved more in the wry likeness of a hipster George Burns than a rock 'n' roll ruin like Keith Richards.

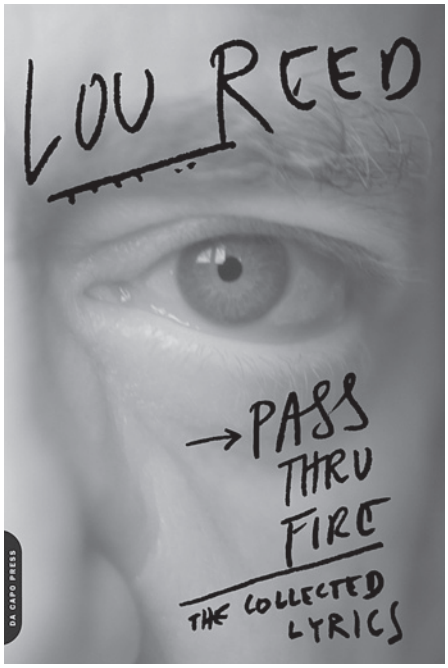
On the musical side, his delivery was more deadpan and tuneless than ever. For the most part, he recited rather than sang the songs, the performance reminding me of the 1950s beatnik coffee house fad for poetry and jazz, the words and musical jams seeming discrete entities that meandered around each other, rarely really meshing.

As a consequence, one was able to better appreciate the raw poetic resonance of lines like, "Caroline says— as she gets up off the floor / You can hit me all you want but I don't love you anymore"; or: "This is the place where she lay her head / when she went to bed at night / And this is the place where our children were conceived / Candles lit the room at night / And this is the place where she cut her wrists / That odd and fateful night / And I said, oh, what a feeling"; or: "They're taking her children away / Because of the things that she did in the streets / In the alleys and the bars, no she couldn't be beat / That miserable rotten slut couldn't turn anyone away..."

Selby or Bukowski couldn't have said any of it better — which I obviously missed the first time around. In fact, for someone like myself, who pretty much lost interest in rock 'n' roll after it stopped being the sexy soundtrack of the mid-'60s to early-'70s, and had never found it profound anyway, the revelation of "Passing Thru Fire: The Collected Lyrics" is how well many of Lou's words hold up on the page. While the book is a bit post-literate in design — which is to say, cluttered with graphics and typographical gimmickry to mollify those more used to listening than reading —- many of the lines are surprisingly lyrical ("The image of the poet's in the breeze / Canadian geese are flying above the trees / A mist is hanging over the lake / My house is very beautiful at night") without being limp, like Bukowski's became, after he got out of the flophouses and into the hot tub.

"I've never been interested in writing pop songs, I don't consider myself part of pop music at all," Lou once told an interviewer. And the lyrics of "Berlin," released as a follow-up to "Walk on the Wild Side," the catchy hit single with "the colored girls" do-wopping back-up, seem perversely calculated to sabotage the commercial success he was suddenly in danger of achieving. But they obviously made an indelible impression on the young Julian Schnabel, who has, as one reviewer put it, "erected a cinematic monument" to an album he has long loved.

Shot over six nights of performances (the only time "Berlin" had been dusted off and



staged in its entirety since being buried stillborn under an avalanche of bad reviews three and a half decades ago) at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn — an avant garde venue very much like Saint Marks Church in the East Village — the film is the very antithesis of Martin Scorcese's glitzy Rolling Stones documentary "Shine a Light" for its low-key artiness. In fact, Lou's lack of animation is surpassed only by that of the wheelchair-bound protagonist of Schnabel's film adaptation of Jean-Dominique Bauby's stroke memoir "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly." Then again, you don't really want an artist who, in his grand old manhood, has been cited as a source of inspiration by the likes of Salmon Rushdie and Vaclav Havel; who has been honored as a Chevalier Commander of Arts and Letters by the French government; and who recently established a writing scholarship at Syracuse University (endowed under both his name and that of Delmore Schwartz, his former professor and mentor), cavorting around the stage like Jumpin' Jack Flash.

As befits a legend most, Lou appears with his t-shirt tucked neatly into his jeans, sporting clear lenses instead of shades, his lingering facial tics (possibly remnants of the shock treatments prescribed to cure his adolescent sexual confusion or vestiges of former amphetamine jitters) offset by his almost military posture (Tai Chi, he stated recently, teaches one "to walk like a king").

Not only does he appear more fit than he did 35 years ago, as the poster boy for the sequined cadaver look then all the rage, but in an era when even fewer distinctions remain between high and low culture, he comports himself throughout the film with the gravity of a man staunchly bearing the burden of a literary eminence that Proust himself might have envied.

* * *

Before we got to know each other, I had been vaguely aware of Lou as an incongruously conservative-looking presence, usually dressed almost professorially in smart sport jackets and turtlenecks, among all the more flamboyant scenemakers and glitter-tots at our communal watering hole, Max's Kansas City and the various record company press parties where we all freeloaded during that period in the early-'70s when he was said to be devoting himself primarily to writing poetry. He had reportedly renounced rock 'n' roll during a reading at The Poetry Project at Saint Mark's Church, saying he would never sing again, lest "Delmore's ghost come back to haunt me."

By the time we became acquainted, however, he had had a change of heart and switched back to denim and leather in keeping with his new role as a solo rock 'n' roller. Subsequently, he would metamorphose with chameleon-like rapidity back and forth from gaunt to almost pudgy, and try on various personae, ranging from painted and tainted androgyne to peroxided skinhead with iron crosses dyed into the sides of his head. One got the feeling that, like Norman Mailer, the one identity he found "indefensible" was that of "the nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn." (Once, when I made a favorable comment about Bob Dylan, he dismissed it with, "You like that phony kike?")

But that secret identity was precisely what sustained him after leaving the Velvet Underground, when he withdrew from the Warhol orbit and actually went back home to live with his parents (who had moved from Brooklyn to Long Island while he was growing up) and worked for two years as a typist for his father's tax accounting firm.

This was something that most hardcore Lou Reed fans would probably find hard to swallow, but it didn't surprise me at all. Lou reminded me of kids I hung out with in the

Village as a teenager, most of whom were from more affluent backgrounds than my own (downward mobility being an infrequent goal of working-class youth). Inspired by Kerouac and Ginsberg, we were all wannabe beatniks. But as Lou himself admits in his song "Men of Good Fortune," some had a "rich daddy to fall back on," and others, well, "You're such a prole, McCormack," he used to chide, "with your leather cop-jacket, your Kerouac, and your beer."

Still, like that of Lester Bangs, the only rock critic I regarded as more than a groupie, and Fran Lebowitz, a throwback to the fabled wits of the Algonquin Round Table, Lou's company was a refreshing relief from the mindless chatter and malicious gossip at Max's (which he parodied so pithily in his song "N.Y. Telephone Conversation"). And I got the impression that, for his part, he was relieved to meet a journalist who was more interested in the poems he had published in The Paris Review and other literary journals than in his songs or the decadent image he had crafted for popular consumption.

Once we had gotten my comic encounter with Tom Wolfe out of the way and I made clear that I didn't share his enthusiasm for the, to me, rather academic poetry of Delmore Schwartz, we moved on to talking about Hubert Selby, the greatly underrated author of "Last Exit to Brooklyn." Selby was important not only to Lou (who, being something of a frustrated journalist, once conducted a magazine interview with his hero in order to meet him) but also to Richard Price, Nick Tosches, and other writers of our generation.

However, it was Lou who had capitalized most profitably on his influence by making similarly sleazy characters and situations to those in Selby's novel accessible to a less bookish audience through the more succinct popular medium of rock and roll songs — particularly some of the early ones he had written for The Velvet Underground, such as "Heroin," "Venus in Furs" and "Waiting For The Man."

In fact, he was once quoted as saying, "I have always wanted to make music that's fun to listen to but also has something to think about. Why couldn't rock and roll be like a great novel, only put to music?"

Of course a cynic or a literary snob might dismiss this idea as a new version of the Reader's Digest Condensed Books, so popular in the 1950s, for a post-literate generation with an even shorter attention span. (I might have myself, had he said it to me during one of our conversations about writers and books.)

Yet for his ability to hone novelistic material down to a few spare, switchblade-sharp lines encompassing a wide range of subcultures and sociopathologies, as well as his eagerness to wallow in the louche and adopt amorality as an aesthetic stance, Lou could almost be called the "anti-Proust." And his literary commitment was such that I believed him when he told me early on that, if his solo recording career didn't work out, he would be perfectly happy to walk away from the music business altogether and spend the rest of his life writing poetry. He clearly had a Plan B and, presumably, a costume change to go with it.

* * *

At risk of disappointing some of his more impressionable fans, I must confess that, overall, I found Lou Reed less debauched than either Glenn Campbell or Andy Williams — unless when I wrote about them those middle-aged, middle-of-the-road recording artists were both going out of their way to demonstrate how hellbent they could be for the youthful readers of Rolling Stone.

In fact, the Lou I came to think of as "an English major with attitude" bore little resemblance to the posturing public junkie who pandered to his audience's depraved expectations by wrapping the microphone cord around his arm and simulating shooting-up on stage. Nor was he anything like the icy ghoul who introduced his song "Afterhours" by saying, "I loved afterhours bars. It's where I first saw someone beaten to death. The woman I was with threw a glass that shattered in a mob guy's face. He thought a man in back of me did it."

While he liked to boast "Nobody does Lou Reed better than me," his honest contempt for the role he had thrust upon himself sometimes seeped into his performances. Once, he wearily quoted Yeats to quell the mindless screams of rowdy fans at the Bottom Line, most of whom were probably too clueless to dig that he was putting them down: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

They both admired the virgin veins in my forearms, tracing them with their black-painted fingernails

Even decades before he cleaned up and settled down with the performance artist Laurie Anderson, the couple becoming twin pillars of the downtown avant garde, often photographed at fashionable parties and events for slick magazines like New York and Vanity Fair; when many of us were still chemically careless and some were still taking bets on who would die sooner, him or Keith; Lou never struck me as being quite as self-destructive as his legend would suggest.

Like many other writers, he seemed more of a voyeur than a participant in much of

the depravity he wrote about in his songs; more a Baudelairian flaneur than an inveterate walker on the wild side. As the well-known publicist and scenemaker Danny Fields, whom I had dubbed "Mother Max's" in one article, put it, "We all had this feeling about Lou— that he would bury us. He was much too smart to get sucked into the whirlpool. Others may have been too fragile, too beautiful to survive. But he knew what he was doing..."

In fact, he was more in control than our mutual acquaintance Lester Bangs, who gave as good as he got in a series of funny interviews that set the hectoring tone for much later Lou Reed coverage. For all his street smarts, Lester fell harder than any of us for the rock 'n' roll ethos of "live fast, die young," never getting to see the fine job Philip Seymour Hoffman did of portraying him in Cameron Crowe's film "Almost Famous."

None of which is to discount Lou's legendary drug excesses (well documented by himself and others) or to deny that he could be diabolical — especially during his "Berlin" period, after his marriage to Bettye broke up, when he was living downtown with another blonde, who seemed more in tune with his dark side. One night as we drank Scotch at their dinette table, they both admired the virgin veins in my forearms, tracing them with their black-painted fingernails, oohing and ahhing at how "beautiful" they were and going on devilishly about what a pity it was, what a waste, that I still shunned needles.

Yet during a particularly dissolute time in my life, when Jeannie and I were briefly separated because of my insufferable behavior and I was drinking so heavily that I feared that I might have destroyed my liver, it was Lou who showed up at my door early one morning, saying,"Let's go, McCormack, I've got a cab waiting downstairs and I'm taking you to my doctor. This guy can cure anything, including cirrhosis."

True, he turned out to be a notorious Doctor Feelgood with a clientele of celebrity speedfreaks who haunted his Park Avenue office like vampires, queuing up before dawn for his magic vitamins. But that morning he went through the motions of being a legitimate physician —even took an X-ray— and disabused me of the notion that I was at death's door. And since I wasn't writing much by then, Lou had the bill sent to him.

And how did I repay his kindness? The last time I saw him, after he had moved out of my neighborhood, was something of a blur. He must have found me drunk at Max's or some afterhours place and brought me home to sleep it off, because I woke up with a pounding hangover that morning on his sofa.

A slender brunette with an angelic face was sitting nearby, leaning forward with her chin in her hand, studying me silently. When she saw that I was awake, she straightened up in her chair, her silken robe slipping slightly away from his flat chest, and I realized this must be Rachel, the beautiful transvestite I had heard was living with Lou.

When I asked after him, Rachel told me he was still sleeping. As I got up to leave, I noticed a vial of methedrine tablets on the coffee table, and being the shamefully dishonorable prick I was back then, stealthily slipped them into my pocket, saying, "Tell Lou I said goodbye."

* * *

Lou once prefaced his wry, somewhat uncharacteristic song "Average Guy" ("I am just your average guy, trying to do what's right") with the disclaimer, "Andy said, 'You don't have to tell them the truth. And so sometimes I don't."

The image of Lou Reed as a caring and charitable friend, even to those who aren't always deserving, may not be the one that his most rabid fans would relish. But it is at least as instructive, in terms of the mistake we make by identifying any writer too closely with his characters, as an anecdote I recently read about an author with a much more decorous reputation.

According to MaryAnn Caws, author of the biography "Marcel Proust," Proust once told Andre Gide that when he visited a favorite brothel in Venice and found himself impotent, he would have two cages, each containing a starving rat, brought to his bedside. Then: "They would be let loose at each other, or, alternately, would be pricked with pins. Proust, said Gide, explained this to him as 'his preoccupation with combining, for the sake of orgasm, the most heterogeneous sensations and emotions.'"

Assuming this remarkable story is not apocryphal, a literary fabrication on Gide's part, I seriously doubt that the Lou Reed I knew before, like Proust retiring to his cork-lined room, I withdrew from the downtown demimonde to live soberly and more or less sanely as a phantom of print, would have been turned on by such a grisly spectacle. But he might have written a song about it.

* * *

An Outstanding Group Show Belies its Name

Although eye-catching, the title "Wayward Pigments" was misleading in relation to a recent exhibition by mostly new members of the West Side Arts Coalition, at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street. For there was much more panache than waywardness evident in the works on view.

Robert N. Scott's abstractions in acrylic on canvas and board are notable for their gestural vigor and vitality. In both "Tidal Surge' and "Cross Currents," Scott demonstrated an ability to project a spontaneous sense of energy, rhythm, and movement in a palette limited mostly to gray monochromes heightened here and there by spare bursts of brighter hues.

Aandra Aabdock's "Signs and Wonders" was a fanciful melange of painting and collage, in which levitating figures and an airplane streaking across the sky above topsy turvy city buildings, limned in a loose, painterly manner, combined with various esoteric symbols and scrawled phrases. Aabdock's metaphysical take on the urban scene was upbeat and refreshing.

Marguerite Borchardt is a realist who, like Fairfield Porter, brings an awareness of underlying abstract qualities to her landscape subjects, as seen in her sweeping pastoral vista in which the piece de resistance was a field of brilliant red poppies. A smaller oil of yellow, green, and red clustered peppers by Borchardt called "Trio" struck a note of piquant coloristic "do re mi."

Theresa Rosano, on the other hand, views nature from a visionary perspective in her neo-romantic oils of light-struck landscapes. Especially transcendent in this regard was Rosano's "Boats at Sunset," in which the sun setting over distant mountains suggested the omnipresent eye of God benevolently overseeing the serene scene.

Carolyn Kaplan showed a lively visual wit in her bold painting of a simplified floral still life, like a fistful of lollipops, with crocheted doilies standing in for two of the flowers. Kaplan's bluntly painted oil of the Chicago skyline was also notable, evoking Carl Sandburg's famous line "City of the big shoulders."

Leonard Gold has his own bold approach to semiabstract imagery, as seen in his oil on canvas "The Enchanted Forest," where stylized trees and vibrant hues created intricate patterns of an almost psychedelic intensity. Equally radiant but more compositionally emblematic, Gold's "Abigail Grown Up" conjured a severely simplified figure swarming with a cosmos of colorful circles.

Alexandra Avlonitis is a consummately sophisticated painter whose evocatively titled oils, such as "From What I Remember," showed a kinship with the abstractions of Richard Diebenkorn. However, Avlonitis has her own unique angle of vision, her compositions suggesting aerial views of landscape, with their muted putty and pale green hues coupled with concise dissections of two-dimensional space.

Working in mixed media, Michelle Melo created an exquisitely subtle sense of pentimento, with elusive imagery partially submerged in a milky ground in two stately vertical panels. In one, the diagrammatic linear foundation of a female torso created a visual pun on Melo's title, "Underneath."

The abstract compositions of Elisa Van Rhyn effect a dynamic synthesis of mechanistic and organic forms akin to certain works by Leger. Van Rhyn's subtle shadings imbue her interlocking shapes with a sculptural quality.

Robert T. Schultheis takes an opposite approach in compositions where primary colors and free-floating forms achieve an abstract autonomy reminiscent of Kandinsky or Kupka. While Schultheis's "Congenial" was composed of discrete symbols, in his "Blue Movement" rhythmic forms flowed and merged symphonically.

Cecilia André combined an intriguingly quirky abstract style with elements of New Image painting in "Flying & Dripping

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G&S NYC GUIDE

opportunities

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

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

PLEIADES GALLERY 530 West 25th St, New York, NY 10001-5516 presents its 27th Annual Juried Exhibition, July 9 - August 1, 2009. Open to all media. This year's juror is Nat Trotman, Assistant Curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY. Entry deadline: April 18, 2009. Please download the prospectus from www.pleiadesgallery.com <http://www.pleiadesgallery.com> For further information call 1-646-230-0056

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

20TH ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL JURIED COMPETITION Open to U.S. and international artists - 2D and 3D media. Juror: Elisabeth Sussman, Curator, Whitney Museum, NYC. Cash prizes, Power-Point presentation, Group exhibition June 30-July 17, 2009. Deadline: April 10, 2009. $40/3 pieces, $5 each additional. SASE for prospectus: Viridian Artists Inc, 530 West 25th Street, NY, NY 10001, or download at www.viridianartists.com <http://www.viridianartists.com>

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

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POETRY AND WRITING MENTOR. Award winning artist and published poet will work with visual artists who want to write poetry. Learn to paint and collage with words, sculpt with sound and think of negative space equivalent to the silences between words. Enjoy the advantage of being an artist and thinking visually, which is plus to a writer. Your life experiences are your palette, your pen is your brush. Write for yourself, to preserve your history, for publication, or just for the joy of writing. Receive feedback through e mail and telephone conferences. Beginning and experienced writers welcome. Reasonable rates. Call Christine at 212-535-7352.

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 and locate the New York art gallery that is appropriate for you.

correction: In our September/October 2008 issue, photographer Ella Manor was erroneously identified at a former student of the School of Visual Art; in fact, she is a graduate of the Fashion Institute of Technology.

"Yearnings and Reality:" Cuban Exile Artists at Sutton Art Gallery

In an age when culture has taken on global scope, can it still be said that the art of any nationality, ethnic group, or diaspora retains its own unique character? While one would hesitate to venture a definitive answer at a time when so much appears in constant flux, for all its stylistic diversity an atmosphere of unity seemed to permeate "Yearnings and Reality," an exhibition curated by Jay Palacio to benefit the Cuban Cultural Center of New York, seen recently at Sutton Art Gallery, 407 East 54th Street, one of the city's more interesting new art destinations.

This unity undoubtedly has much to do with the fact that, as the title of the exhibition indicates, these artists share the sense of yearning common to all exiles, which is reflected in many of their works. However, another important factor for some is the strain of Surrealism and Magic Realism prominent not only among artists from Cuba but in art all throughout Latin America and the Hispanic diaspora.

Perhaps the most overtly surreal paintings in the exhibition are those of Raúl Villarreal and Gilberto Ruiz. Villarreal's work in ballpoint and oil on canvas "Freedom on My Shoulders" provides the show's most emotionally direct expression of dislocation, presenting the phantom-like image of man with palm trees piercing his bare shoulders like St. Sebastian's arrows and his exposed heart flaming like a torch. In a larger canvas by Villarreal an upside-down palm tree seen amid floating fragments of cloud suggests a spider dangling from its thread in front of three hard-edged orange rectangles. The composition has a stark power that tempts one to liken it to a Francis Bacon triptych of a crucifixion.

Gilberto Ruiz combines painted canvas panels with charcoal drawings on paper to create figurative tableaux in which disparate images such as a saluting military officer with a tornado streaming from the point where his fingers touch his cap is juxtaposed with a sleeping female nude, odd mutant characters, and a roughly scrawled, vaguely figurative form reminiscent of the late Cuban exile conceptualist Ana Mendiata's performance pieces, in which she symbolized returning to her homeland by imprinting a silhouette of her body on moist earth. Ruiz's pointedly fragmented imagery evokes the mysterious realm between public events and private reality that we all inhabit in a media saturated age.

Gladys Triana, a painter, photographer, and installation artist who also exhibited recently at Museo Del Barrio, projects a gentler, more elegiac vision in her large composition in acrylic and collage on linen, "The Collector." What initially appears to be a large minimalist abstraction, comprised of two large rectangles with a smaller rectangle within one of them, yields evocative imagery on further inspection. The subtly modulated color field turns into the yellowed pages of an old, empty album with the smaller divided rectangle of a miniature album within it, containing six postage stamps from Cuba. Floating within the larger one, the small album takes on the poignant aspect of an island growing ever more distant with each year of exile.

In the large still life compositions of Enrique Cubillas, the contours of large floral forms are so sensually carved by light and shadow as to suggest an almost anthropomorphic, anatomically suggestive sensuality. While devoid of the incongruous relationships of objects that one normally sees as surreal, Cubillas's paintings, centering on the petals of sunflowers, peonies or other large blooms bursting abundantly from a stout vase, still project a heightened reality. His mastery of classical chiaroscuro lends his oils, which could suggest domestic reconstructions of a lost bucolic dream, a visual drama reminiscent of the candlelit scenes of Georges de La Tour.

A somewhat more fanciful slant on heightened reality is seen in the acrylic paintings of Guido Betancourt, who encloses flat areas of color within black outlines in the manner of stained glass in his intricately patterned still life paintings, producing an almost psychedelic effect. In one of Betancourt's most dynamic compositions, a large pineapple occupying the center of the composition and surrounded by a riot of patterns and colors gives the impression of a hand grenade about to explode.

Yet another artist who employs the format of still life to project a personal vision is Jay Palacio, whose intimate, meticulously limned paintings of fruits and other objects are often seen on a verandah, set against large expanses of clear blue sky. But in this exhibition the most telling image is a larger canvas which renders the smaller works cinematic in context, as though the "camera" has pulled away to provide us with a wider vista in which the tiny figure of a man stands at the railing, gazing out at the horizon, where the sky meets the sparkling blue water. The title of Palacio's painting is "90 millas," but for this exile it might as well be a million miles.

Drawing as a complete medium, rather than a vehicle for studies or preliminary sketches comes into its own in Geandy Pavón's works in gouache and lead pencil, honoring the powerful graphic tradition in Cuban culture and the art of Latin America in general. An exquisite draftsman like his Mexican counterpart Jose Luis Cuevas, albeit one who obviously values metaphysics over satire, Pavon's exquisitely detailed drawings impart a melancholy poetry to simple subjects such as a dead fish or a loaf of bread. Pavon deliberately lacerates part of the surface of the paper in the latter drawing, suggesting the wounds of martyrdom to those aware that bread is the Christian symbol for Christ's body. By contrast, Ramón Lago, the sole sculptor in the exhibition eroticizes the emotion of yearning with the lithe figure of a standing female nude, simultaneously sensual, sacred, and melancholy. Embodying the life spirit, Lago's expressive sculpture achieves a sense of monumentality that transcends its modest scale.

One of the more remarkable aspects of this exhibition overall is that even its most abstract participants go beyond mere formal experiment. For example, while closing the gap between photography and painting by working in acrylic over digital prints on canvas, Arturo Cuenca creates a luminous metaphysical statement wherein a pocket of light reveals a microcosmic world within softly defused masses of tree limbs and leaves. Then there is Miguel Loredo, whose oils on canvas vitally revive the vocabulary of Abstract Expressionism with smooth gestural velocity, surgically precise linear spatial dissections, and drips that flow as freely as tears.

The final artist, Liliam Cuenca presents us with a mysterious realm of softly brushed shapes that loom pregnantly, like shadows in an interior at twilight. Titles such as "Sleeping Body," "Creatures," and "As an Animal," enhance the slightly ominous mood that makes her work almost disturbingly compelling.

—Ed McCormack

ALTERED STATES

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focusing on bottles and other simple vessels. While Zimmerman employs color, she eschews digital manipulation, bringing this exceptional survey almost full circle back to her medium's classic origins, proving once again that, in postmodern photography, all is permitted. —Maurice Taplinger

WEST SIDE ARTS

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bravura brushstrokes, set against luminous blue skies. In one more pastoral landscape, however, Bitterman showed a calmer sense of nature, with tall trees soaring into shapely clouds above a quaint little wooden footbridge spanning a sparkling brook.

Each of the artists in "Light & Color" demonstrated, in her or his own way, how those two elements combine to convey either the substances or essences of various subjects. —Marie R. Pagano

Discovering the Painterly Photography of Pamela Camhe

The Precisionism of George Sheeler, whose work as a photographer influenced his style as a painter, and Photorealism, a species of contemporary painting based on photo-imagery are both recalled in the photographs that Pamela Camhe is exhibiting at New Century Artists, Inc., 530 West 25th Street, from February 3 to 14. (Reception: Thursday, February 5, from 5 to 8pm.)

"UHAUL"

For nearly thirty years, before showing her new color images in 2006, Camhe worked in her studio on Canal Street in lower Manhattan, photographing friends and other people in black and white. Along with fine art photography, exploring what she calls "non-traditional beauty and glamour," she created images for record jackets, CD covers, posters, and publicity materials for recording and performance artists. She also traveled throughout Europe showing a "slide movie" of her fine art work, had several solo exhibitions in Amsterdam and New York City. After relocating to the East End of Long Island in 2004, she says, "instead of concentrating on photographing the picturesque farms and beaches, I found myself back on the city streets, this time with digital camera in hand. Instead of photographing people, I was drawn to the play of light, color, glass, metal, chrome, architecture and sky, in the city that I love."

However, she is quick to add that the images in her new "Auto Reflective Series" are not digitally constructed. The images that one sees in this series are exactly as she saw them in her camera.

And remarkable images they are, with their vertiginous angles and often near-abstract compositions, in which vibrantly colorful urban details converge at unusual angles or are dramatically distorted by being reflected in the windows or grills of automobiles.

One of Camhe's most abstract images is "Uhaul," in which some of the black block-letters in the familiar logo of the truck rental company occupy the top left portion of the composition in sharp focus. These strong, stable semiotic elements, like fragments of printed text in a collage by Kurt Schwitters, are abruptly abbreviated by the more actively blurred curve of a windshield cutting across the center of the composition, over which reflections of rows of windows in a red brick building appear to careen wildly.

Camhe's ability to animate still images with a dynamic sense of velocity comes across in other pictures as well. In "Rear Window," its title apparently a play on the famous Alfred Hitchcock thriller, the beige and red facades of two adjoining buildings appear to invert to encompass the viewer's field of vision in the opposite direction from the previous picture. By contrast in "NYU Traffic Light," the University's sandy towers soar dizzyingly skyward, intersected diagonally by a the pole of the traffic light of the title in a composition with all the "push and pull" of an Abstract Expressionist canvas. Here, too, luminous pale purple reflections on the glass create lyrical chromatic effects.

Color and texture also come to the forefront in "Navaho Door," which focuses closely on a relatively flat surface, yielding fewer reflections, distortions, and illusions of depth. Its softly brushed areas of blue and pink, pleasingly bracketed by geometric areas created by the vertical crack between the door and the body of the car, reveal Pamela Camhe to be an especially painterly photographer. — J. Sanders Eaton

A Diverse Survey of New Japanese Painting

We've been yearning for an exhibition of contemporary Japanese art that is not exclusively limited to Hello Kitty clones, and here it is: "Matrix of the Mind," at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street from February 24 through March 17 (with a reception on Thursday, March 5, from 6 to 8pm), proves that some artists from the Land of the Rising Sun are thinking about a lot more than cute cartoon characters.

Dan Obana, for example, creates digital scenarios composed from imagination of imaginary urban locales bathed in the golden Turneresque light. Obana's pictures evoke the modern city as human beehive, busy and filled with drama.

Although she now lives in Tribeca, New York, Toshiko Nishikawa retains a quintessentially Japanese sensibility in her elegant abstract works in mixed media on canvas, enclosed within acrylic boxes. Nishikawa's serene compositions, centering on pale vertical streaks, are as soothing as a summer rainfall.

Kae Takashima subjects the demanding medium of watercolor, which she employs with exquisite technical finesse, to a literal trial by fire in works where burns on the paper take on the quality of traditional ink painting. One of Takashima's most intriguing pieces is called "Flower Ring," but it perversely suggests a trompe-l'oeil Zen circle created with partially burnt bacon!

Naoyuki Okada is another present resident of New York who has imported a uniquely Japanese sensibility in his poetic abstractions in watercolor and acrylic, often created on rice paper. In paintings such as "Mind Explosion" and "Golden Pillar," Okada's myriad meticulous strokes of color evoke an almost supernatural radiance.

Delicately delineated images related to his Buddhist fate are employed by Ryumei Murahashi in his intricate copper plate engravings. Murahashi's "Katana" series, comprised of 108 prints (signifying both the number human passions, according to Buddhist doctrine, and the amount of beads on a Buddhist rosary) was created over more than a decade, and the examples seen here reveal the project's profound conceptual complexity.

Although Dominic Lutringer was born in France, he now lives in Japan, and his paintings seem to combine School of Paris tactility and coloristic lushness with Japanese ornateness. Although he admires the work of Gerhard Richter, Lutringer has evolved his own hybrid style, in which floral still life forms are animated by the gestural velocity of Abstract Expressionism.

Yuumi Asatsu is another artist who exemplifies the eclectic energy of postmodern painting, with works that range from photo-realist to abstract, executed in a variety of mediums. Especially exciting are the compositions in her "The Color that There is There" series, in each of which Asatsu explores the particular qualities of a single hue, such as red or blue, with accumulations of subtly modulated strokes.

Kenji Inoue, on the other hand, paints funky fantasias, in which embattled figures, shaded like those of Mark Kostabi but more imaginatively mutated, float freely and sometimes decompose in starry nocturnal expanses. Inoue's compositions are at once explosive and coherently composed, suggesting an overview of global conflict transmogrified by a personal mythology.

Masahiko Saga displays his own dynamic vision, merging elements of ukiyo-e prints and Chinese decorative painting with state of the art computer imaging and digital printing in a vibrant visual synthesis. Saga's images of glowingly colorful roosters and flowers hark back to traditional Asian iconography yet blaze with contemporary immediacy.

Then there is the artist known by the single name of Don, who explores a profound range of feelings in a deceptively simple style. Employing flatly applied pastel hues such as bubblegum pink and baby blue, Don makes simple circles and oblong shapes stand-ins for human heads in paintings with titles such as "Who are You?" and "I Have Been thinking About You" that infuse geometric formal relationships with unexpected emotional resonance. — Maurice Taplinger

Jain Hutzell's "Breastplates" Imaginatively Update the Amazon Myth

"Sunlight reflected off the breastplates of a thousand armored Warriors. Golden insignia of rank glowed bright on the breastplate, powerful symbols of the ancient Bird Goddess. The Warrior felt the power flow through her, making her body invincible, her will indomitable, her victory inevitable."

Thus Jain Hutzell sets the stage for her conceptually fascinating exhibition "Amazon Warriors: From Myth to Reality," at Viridian Artists Inc., 530 West 25th Street, from January 13 through February 7. Invoking Homer, the artist tells us "Troy expected to win against the Greeks once their allies, the Amazons, arrived," and beseeches the viewer to envision "a thousand Amazons gathered at once."

Not since the heyday of feminist art in the 1970s has any artist explored so imaginatively the theme of feminine empowerment. The myths, after all, present Amazons as skilled warriors and protectors of children and the motherland, feared by the Greeks for their fierceness. But they had to be defeated because their woman-centered faith threatened the father-rule.

"Controversy continues about whether the Amazons were historical or mythical," the cultural critic Camille Paglia has written. "Bodies of women in armor have been unearthed in Germany and Russia, but there is still no evidence of autonomous female military units."

The word Amazon derives from the term "a-mazos" (without breasts), since the myth has it that these woman warriors would cut off their right breast so that it not impede drawing the bowstring or throwing the javelin. Curiously, however, ancient Greek art never shows the Amazon with her breast amputated. Paglia argues that the reason for this was that "deformity or mutilation of any kind was contrary to the idealizing classical imagination and the hyperdeveloped Greek sense of form."

That sounds accurate enough, Camille. But while we can probably all agree with the old saw that history has a tendency to repeat itself, the good thing about myths is that, being imaginary, they can be revised to suit the temper of the times.

In the modern world, after all, we admire the everyday heroism of women who undergo mastectomies so that they may continue to live, be productive, and in some cases protect children. (And thankfully, despite how the media constantly bombards us with images of slickness and superficiality, ideals of beauty —among our most enlightened, anyway— are no longer as "skin deep" or as rigidly symmetrical as those of the ancient Greeks.) However, we still do not honor either self-mutilation or willful vulnerability as progressive values, demanding consistency in the myths that we choose to accept — if not as fact, as metaphorical models. Given that "choice" has become a word with near sacred ramifications, not even the most Amazonianly-inclined modern woman would accept, even metaphorically, the notion of having to lob off one healthy breast and go into battle with the other unprotected!

"Matriarch of the West"

Thus the "Amazon Warriors Breastplate Series," featured in Jain Hutzell's exhibition at Viridian Artists, makes for a timely statement auspiciously updated from Antiquity. Certainly Hutzell's life-size breastplates, formed to fit the contours and proportions of the intact female anatomy, would appear to present no greater detriment to the drawing of the bow or the throwing of the javelin than the generally bulkier examples of male armor in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. But even more important, they are truly beautiful in the unexpected way that we demand innovative art objects be today.

An actress, writer, painter, and sculptor who also drew upon upon aspects of Greek culture in an earlier series of works in welded steel called the "Analutikos Series," as well as in an ongoing series in clay titled "Artifact/Artifice," Hutzell has stated that she began the breastplate series in 2006, inspired by "the powerful prehistoric images of women in eastern Europe and an interest in athletics that led to getting a stage fighting certificate while studying acting in London ages ago."

Executed in the ancient medium of clay, which she has explored for the past decade and which she finds "sensuously thrilling," her breastplates are artifacts of an imaginary army that she locates "on the northern shores of the Black Sea around 1500-2000 BCE, when the last vestiges of the ancient goddess religions might have existed." Their colors are loosely based on those found at ancient sites, but their surfaces have been embossed with the identifiably feminine patterns of lace (imprinted on the wet clay before it was fired) and further embellished with numerous layers of vibrantly colorful and metallic glazes that lend them an appearance at once decorative and impregnable. The ingenious golden insignia of rank which Hutzell has devised to differentiate the Amazon leaders (Matriarchs") from the foot soldiers ("Defenders" and "Guardians"), which are based on compass directions (as in "Matriarch of the North," "Northeast Defender," "Southeast Guardian," and so on), also contribute to lending the compositions of these works a formal impact akin to hard-edge geometric paintings on shaped canvases.

However, while such paintings are generally one-dimensional for being tethered to the purely visual precepts of modernism, Jain Hutzell's breastplates, which partake of the eclectic mix of narrative and conceptual elements, are quintessentially postmodern. Both elegantly compelling as pure objects of art and imaginatively driven by a mythical "back-story," they are at once inspiring and empowering.

— Ed McCormack

Pat Kagan: A Power that Defies Stereotypes

Like Marlene Dumas, Pat Kagan once felt considerable guilt about having grown up as a white South African during the apartheid era. However, unlike her well known fellow countrywoman, the experience did not have a perverse effect on her art. Although she immigrated to the United States and settled with her family in Maryland in 1977, Kagan says, "What remains in me of Africa is the vision of bold colors and clear skies saturated with an almost unbelievable blue."

Those colors inform Kagan's lyrical semi-abstract landscapes in watercolor, with their ethereal, almost achingly nostalgic sense of transcendence. But Kagan asserts that her real breakthrough occurred in the bold gestural abstractions in her show, "Quintessential Color" on view at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from March 21 through April 10 (reception Thursday, March 26, from 6 to 8pm).

Where her watercolors are soft and delicate, these abstractions in oil and Rustoleum are bold and energetic in a manner akin to Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. Indeed, while Kagan's forms have a sensual fluidity that can recall those of the former painter, her choice of black as the dominant color recall the latter one. However, she also adds small areas of visceral red to her mostly monochromatic compositions on gessoed paper or canvas, the whiteness of which sets off their gestural qualities most dramatically.

Although Kagan made the first of these paintings days before her pregnant daughter hemorrhaged and was threatened with a miscarriage, she would later see it as prophetic, since at the time the red paint, as she applied it, reminded her of blood. The crisis caused her to continue the series, which she now began to think of as being "related to abnormalities of the uterus."

"Because I see the uterus as a utilitarian container, the vessel in which the fetus is carried," the artist elaborates, "it was natural to employ Rustoleum, a utilitarian, oil-based paint that is commonly used to paint metal outdoor furniture in order to protect it from rust. This paint also lends itself to the gestural, spontaneous strokes that are a direct manifestation of my gut-level, emotional response to my daughter's pregnancy, and to the intense, primitive bond that exists between all women who experience the wonder of creating new life."

What makes Kagan's perception on this score doubly profound is that, although some very talented women were among the Abstract Expressionists who initially popularized this manner of gestural painting, most of them never really got due recognition because it was thought of as a male movement. Alternately called "action painting,"

"Initial Crisis"

with all the machismo the term implies, its very athleticism seemed to contradict feminine stereotypes so prevalent in 40s and 50s, when Abstract Expressionism emerged as the first truly original American art movement. Some of those stereotypes still linger to this day. However, Kagan's "Uterus Paintings," as she refers to them, make the important point that childbirth can often be one of the bloodiest adventures of all.

But even more relevant is the fact that Pat Kagan's new paintings, with their sensual, muscularly swerving and swirling shapes, are powerful works that ultimately transcend gender considerations and will surely endure for their purely aesthetic qualities.

— Maureen Flynn

Stephan Stiehler: A New Approach to "Mail Art"

Much abstract painting, even at this late date, still concerns itself primarily with surfaces, denying the intangible. This may have been a necessary stance during the early modernist period, when artists were still at pains to prove that there could be intrinsic value in pure forms and colors that did not refer to actual things. And the attitude continued well into the Abstract Expressionist era, when American artists of a certain stripe became almost belligerent in their insistence that "what you see is what it is" and one avant garde art magazine was actually called "It Is."

"Art Mailbag Documenta No 32"

The advent of postmodernism, however, created a more permissive, less dogmatic climate in which it became possible for serious artists to explore new levels of meaning, even while putting primary emphasis on the formal aspects of their work. One of the more interesting recent manifestations of this newer tendency was the conceptual element that the German painter Stephan Stiehler introduced to his evocative color field paintings in a recent exhibition at Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, in Chelsea.

The title of Stiehler's show was "Blue Messages," because the paintings were all executed on historical German mailbags and, as the artist explained in a catalog statement, "In their former life mailbags covered thousands of personal messages. In this case a life of a mailbag is similar to a human life. Over the whole life we are collecting thousands of messages and impressions."

Stiehler's ideas are in line to a certain degree with Antoni Tapies' notions of the "noumenal," as it relates to the essential spirit of materials. However, his approach is more subtle, subliminal, concerned with, as he puts it, "expressing the feelings from the bottom of all experiences in life with different layers."

One does not need to know this to appreciate Stiehler's paintings, which are sufficiently compelling for their purely visual attributes to hold our interest, with their pregnant forms and amorphous clouds of softly modulated tonalities floating serenely over vibrant blue acrylic fields. However, the knowledge deepens one's understanding of the artist's intentions and provides a subtext for the coloristic and textural qualities of his lyrical abstract compositions.

Like Ad Reinhardt's "black paintings," Stiehler's mailbag paintings are largely monochromatic, although some compositions are enlivened here and there with bright bursts of red and, to a lesser degree, touches of glowing green. Only in two compositions, "Art-Mailbag Documenta no. 32" and "Art-Mailbag Documenta no. 33," are the printed phrases "Deutsche Bundespost" and the black red and yellow vertical stripes on the mailbags left partially visible, with areas of the overall blue hue clouding over and obscuring the rest of the letters.

In all of the other paintings, the particular character of each individual bag, its "life history," so speak, is revealed in the various textures under the blue paint. These take the form of stitches, rectangular patches and other repairs that, like wrinkles or scars in human flesh, serve as poignant tactile reminders of the ravages of time, even as they simultaneously function as autonomous aesthetic components of the composition. Thus an element of chance, however modified by the artist's eye and hand, enters into the paintings of Stephan Stiehler, who, like fellow countrymen Joseph Beuys and Anselm Keifer, unearths the mysterious inner life of materials.

— Marie R. Pagano

George Deem: Schooled in Mastery

At first glance, a solo exhibition by George Deem could almost appear to be a group show. Deem, who died this past August, was a virtuoso painter with an ability to paint in a variety of styles. He was also a visual scholar of past masterpieces who, over a career that spanned more than forty years, often integrated meticulously painted passages from Courbet, Vermeer and other artists he admired into his own compositions. However, he did not "appropriate," in the manner of Mike Bidlo, in order to flout the modernist reverence for originality or make some postmodernist point about the death of authorship. Deem's copying —or perhaps it would be more accurate to refer to it as "repainting"—was a labor of love. But in this seemingly self-effacing act of surrender his own originality is paradoxically revealed.

Elsewhere in this issue I refer to a book about beautifully written passages in literature called "Painted Paragraphs." But Deem is the only painter I know of who actually did paint paragraphs.

In fact, two large oils on canvas, circa the early 1960s, called "Paragraph" and "Paragraph (Black)," as well as another from the same period called "Double Paragraph," can be seen in a memorial exhibition of Deem's early work at Allan Stone Gallery, 113 East 90th Street, through February 21.

Running not quite concurrently with a show of Deem's more recent work at Pavel Zoubok Gallery, which ends on February 7, the exhibition at Allan Stone is called "Quotations: The Early Work," an apt title on two counts: (1) because of the passages from the masters quoted in his Deem's paintings, and (2) because the stately blocks of ecriture in his "Paragraph" paintings suggest elegantly penned but not quite legible manuscript pages by writers like Emerson or Thoreau. Complete with subtle palimpsests, Deem's symmetrically delineated lines of pseudo-text are polar opposites of Cy Twombly's free-floating, loosely scrawled phrases.

Getting back to that first glance, the contrast between Deem's lettrist works and his figurative paintings is so stark that one would almost think they had to be done by different artists. Yet the two modes converge coherently in major oils on linen, such as "Landscape with Border," where Deem combines painted handwriting with geometric abstraction and thirteen old masterish paintings-within-the-painting, and "Courbet with Details," in which elements of lettrisme are juxtaposed with the figurative imagery like field notes in a sketch book.

One of the more frequently thumbed treasures in my library is Deem's "Art School," originally published by Thames & Hudson in 1993 and recently reissued. The book puns visually on 38 "schools of art" with witty art historical "revisions" set in actual classrooms. (In "School of Balthus," for example, Lolita-like "nymphets" sprawl seductively over the desks.)

"Landscape with Border"

"It was in this classroom," Deem said in the introduction, referring to his own school days in Indiana, "that poetry, magic, sex —everything— developed in this quiet and inexpressible way."

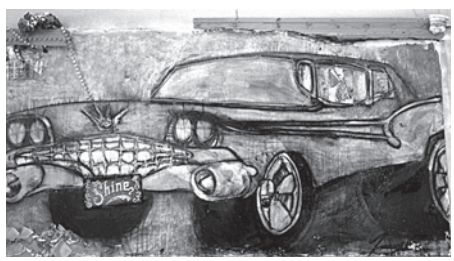
By never losing that sense of wonder, while developing, over the course of a diligent and productive career, the means to make it expressible, George Deem went from being an honor student to being a peer of the illustrious predecessors who had been his lifelong teachers.

— Ed McCormack

Feeling and Innovation in the Art of Neil Bernstein

Neil Bernstein, whose solo show of mixed media works, "9/11 Debris Works from Ground Zero 2001," will be on view at New Century Artists, Inc., 530 West 25th Street, from February 1 through 14, is an artist with an unflinching vision. He is deeply affected by historical tragedies such as the Holocaust, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, and the devastation wreaked upon New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina, as well as the Bush administration's failure to respond adequately to the distress of a population it apparently considered expendable. At the same time, unlike a lot of artists who can be loosely defined as "new humanists" or "social realists," he is also an innovator in the use of mixed media who aims for what he calls "a representation of the unrepresentational."

In this regard, perhaps his most kindred predecessors are socially conscious assemblage artists like Marisol Escobar, Bruce Connor, and Edward Kienholz. Bernstein, however, has his own unique way with materials. God knows for example, where he got the "broker's blood" that he combines with a vintage children's rocking horse, hospital bandage, plaster, resin and World Trade Center ash in "Anubis 9/14/01." In any case, this 3-D wall work of an equine figure suggests a unicorn with a long drooping horn (as though melted by a savage force),



"Galaxy 500"

completely swathed in partially burnt bandages, is a moving memorial to a terrible event. For while the unicorn has in recent years been transformed into an upbeat New Age symbol of gentle beauty (so much so that the film director Peter Bogdanovich titled his grief-filled memoir of the murdered actress Dorothy Stratten, who had been his lover, "Death of the Unicorn"), in Antiquity this mythical beast was believed to have certain evil characteristics. The Physiologus Graecus, for example, defines it as "an animal fleet of foot, one-horned and harboring ill-will toward men." With this ambiguous image in mind, Bernstein's assemblage seems doubly poignant as a potent symbol of the harm that man, as a species, inflicts upon himself.

New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina debris figure prominently in another major mixed media piece by Bernstein called "Galaxy 500," in which the dominant form is an expressively exaggerated pink automobile. Adorned with an ornate license plate that says "Shine" and decorated with real strings of beads, the vehicle may once have been a prized symbol of upward mobility. Now sadly submerged in the floodwaters, its grill grimaces at its sad fate.

Other mixed media works — such as "Arrancarr (The Flying Javelina)," recalling the wistful saying "If pigs could fly" and incorporating the figure of a wild boar stuck with arrows along with "Latino blood and 1,000 year old Hohokam spiral-painted pottery shard," and "Zero 2, The Children Return to Battery Park," which includes a children's play ball and World Trade Center ash— also demonstrate this artist's ability to imbue his assemblages with an almost amulet-like spiritual significance through his use of unusual materials.

It seems no wonder that, along with numerous gallery and museum exhibitions in the U.S. and abroad, Neil Bernstein has been invited to show site specific works at Ground Zero, New York, and at the gates of both Dachau and Auschwitz concentration camps, in Germany. Work this eloquent, socially relevant, and powerful deserves the widest possible exposure.

— Ed McCormack

The Creative Spirit Itself as Subject of West Side Group Show

In "The Evolving Spirit," a recent exhibition curated by Margo Mead at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street, several members of the West Side Arts Coalition interpreted an elusive theme.

A mood of solitude permeated three figurative oils by Larry Frank, who combines a mastery of anatomy with subdued colors and fluent brush work. All three of Frank's paintings —a woman brandishing a fan; another of a thoughtful man; the third, a woman in a tutu —gave off a sense of self-absorption on the part of the sitters.

A more abstract approach to the figure was taken by Elizabeth K. Hill, whose subjects played hide-and-seek with abstract forms, with the exception of "The Letter Carriers." Here, a pair of postal workers with their wheeled carts were rendered in such a formal manner as to take on the exotic quality of actors in a Japanese Noh drama.

Another artist who merged the abstract and the figurative was Matthew Cervenka, whose intricate compositions, composed with brilliant color areas enclosed by black lines, depicted stylized stick figures with an angularity akin to Aztec motifs.

Best known for her abstract compositions, Meg Boe Birns' revealed another side of her artistic personality in mixed media compositions centered on serene faces in bas relief. Titles such as Goddess of Rose" and "The Snow Queen" enhanced their fanciful quality, particularly in the latter work, with its pale, frosty hues and embedded fragments of mirror.

Elisa Van Rhyn's works in oil and oil pastel on canvas are comprised of forms with the organic quality of interlocking limbs or anatomically suggestive machine parts. But for all their palpable physical allusiveness, enhanced by shading and modeled contours, titles such as "Streams of Consciousness" suggest an inner rather than outer reality.

Frequent exhibitor Ava Schonberg was represented by a beach scene in which a row of cabanas was painted with a smooth tactility reminiscent of Wayne Thiebaud, as well as a still life in creamy hues as appealing as those of sorbet. But perhaps her most striking acrylic on canvas was "Lulu," a larger composition featuring a stylized human figure.

Leonard Gold combined oddly complementary colors to create a chromatically pulsing effect. In Gold's intricately configured forest scene, interwoven tree and leaf-shapes in a style akin to the Pattern and Decoration School were given an Op-Art spin to create an almost psychedelic visual impact.

Carson Ferri-Grant, a relatively new addition to the WSAC roster, showed a series of nine framed watercolors of meticulously rendered botanical subjects called "The Tree of Giving." Celebrating the rich variety of plant life with their sensitive and lyrical delineation of flowers and stems, these paintings served as the basis for signed laser prints offered for sale through secret ballots to benefit several worthy charities.

Curator Margo Mead has evolved a unique visual vocabulary, merging elements of Cubist structuring with traditional Asian landscape painting in her vivacious yet solidly grounded works in watercolor and black ink on rice paper. Contrasting the chiseled forms of craggy mountain peaks with the flowing energy of waterfalls, enlivening the normally monochromatic palette of Chinese scrolls with luminous purples and oranges, Mead's work exemplifies the title she conceived for this exhilarating exhibition.

— Byron Coleman

Tension Meets Harmony in Cheryl Telford's Abstractions

Gesture and texture serve the paintings of Cheryl Telford exceptionally well, both separately and together, in her exhibition at Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, which continues through February 14.

Gesture alone is the principle force behind some works, in which black strokes dance gingerly against generous expanses of white ground, accented here and there with just the faintest touches of red or blue applied in the technique known as "dry brush." These works have an exuberant grace akin to Asian calligraphy, although, wisely, Telford makes no attempt to imitate the forms of that venerable traditional art, as some Western "Orientalists" are wont to out of misguided enthusiasm for its superficial characteristics. Rather, like Franz Kline, Mark Tobey, and other savvy American predecessors, she adopts some of its techniques to her own purposes without perverting its cultural origins.

The resulting paintings have something in common, as well, with the monochromatic ink paintings of the French poet / artist Henri Michaux. Only, Telford apparently arrives at her private alphabet of symbols more in the playful, freewheeling manner of Miro, and without benefit of the the mind altering substances that Michaux resorted to for his surrealist-influenced experiments. Indeed, Telford realizing in the bare essentials of these buoyant, economical works her stated ambition of "Creating a

"Triptych" (center panel)

mark that exhibits life — ambiguous, gestural, startling and confounding."

In some of her other compositions texture and color combine with gesture to create more layered and complex aesthetic expressions. One of the more richly worked up examples is "Untitled," a painting in a long, scroll-like horizontal format, its gemlike hues and rugged forms suggesting a mythic landscape. However, "Untitled" could also evoke all manner of other associations by virtue of pictorial tensions exemplifying the great Abstract Expressionist painter and teacher Hans Hofmann's famous credo of "push and pull" as the activating force of successful abstract composition. But what we see in this painting primarily is energy unleashed to a dynamic degree, yet ultimately controlled by the artist's authoritative command of form and color. Here, too, the gestural vigor displayed by Telford recalls Jackson Pollock's ability to create what his friend the poet Frank O'Hara once described as "an infinitely extensible field of force."

By contrast a stately stillness often characterizes the works that Cheryl Telford conceives as triptychs, in which each of the three panels could stand handsomely as separate compositions, although they gain even more power in relation to one another. In "Triptych 1,' subdued earthy tones are combined with gold and silver metallic pigments applied in thick impasto to all three panels to create bold shapes that could either suggest primitive symbols or ancient armor lined up frontally in a row. The impression, in any case, is of impregnable strength, elegantly arrayed.

In "Triptych 2," much brighter hues and freer, lighter gestures lend the compositions of all three panels a lively sense of movement that intriguingly contradicts the crusty thickness of the paint surface. While the shapes delineated in luminous yellows, blues, and purples flow cursively within the compositions side panels, a bold grid dominating center panel could suggest a "cabinet of wonders," given the mysterious forms arranged like small objects within its roughly geometric confines. All three panels, however, project the palpable, pulsing sense of energy that invariably makes Cheryl Telford's paintings so exciting to encounter. (Cheryl Telford's work is also included in the gallery's year-round salon exhibition.)

— Peter Wiley

Judy Clifford Revives the Bucolic Vision

Delighted by The Metropolitan Museum of Art's small gemlike exhibition of works by the British artist Samuel Palmer 1805-1881) some time back, one couldn't help wondering if it would be possible for a living artist to paint in a similarly bucolic manner and remain relevant to the contemporary age? Well, the answer has arrived in the person of Judy Clifford, who lives in a rural area outside New York City and whose solo exhibition "Trees: Branches, Flowers & Leaves" can be seen at New Century Artists, Inc., 530 West 25th Street, from March 17 through 28. (Reception: Thursday, March 19, from 5 to 8 pm.)

Like Elizabeth Peyton's idealized portraits of pretty, androgynous young people, Clifford's intimate pastoral visions hark back to a more romantic era. However, it is in the very refusal of such painters to succumb to the gratuitous cult of ugliness that dominates much postmodern art that lends their work a rebellious "edge" and energizes it with contemporary immediacy.

Even apart from Clifford's mixed media works, such as "Leaves in a Box," where painted leaves are juxtaposed with real ones in a format akin to one of Joseph Cornell's assemblages, one could make a good case for the abstract attributes of her work. Paintings such as Clifford's "Chartreuse Tree" and "Sienna Trees" boast what is termed "overall" compositions," when one speaks of artists such as Jackson Pollock and the early Milton Resnick. And in both Clifford employs hues as subtle and unexpected as those in the work of certain Color Field painters.

"Jack's Gaze"

Willem de Kooning once stated that almost all abstract painting "is based on landscape." But to tout Clifford's paintings as "abstraction in disguise," simply to make them seem more "advanced" to those who judge art solely in formal terms, would be to do a serious disservice to the complexity of her work. For while her compositions certainly do possess all of the virtues we normally associate with abstract art at its best, they also appear driven by subjective and even emotional components which are every bit as germane to their appeal.

Perhaps the painting in Clifford's present exhibition at New Century Artists that makes this point best of all is "Jack's Gaze." This is also the specific work that occasioned the reference to Samuel Palmer with which I began this review, being a visionary glimpse into a hidden garden reminiscent of Palmer's 1829 painting "In a Shoreham Garden."

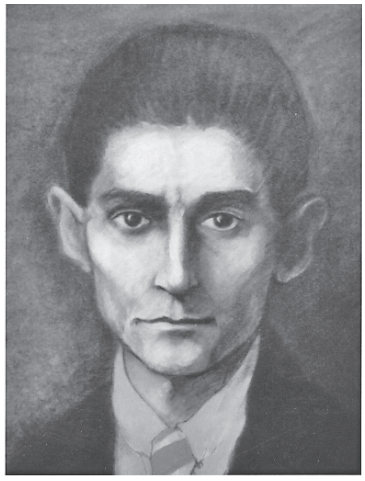
In, as in Palmer's earlier work the focal point of Clifford's composition is the solitary figure of a man, serving as its meditative center. Here, however, he is even more distantly located, standing in a gazebo deep within the garden at the end of a path bordered by high hedges. And while Palmer's figure stood in a nocturnal garden, gazing up at the stars, Clifford's man must seek shelter from the full blaze of the sunlight that bathes the surrounding foliage in its radiance in order to enjoy his moment of solitary contemplation.

Yet the painting is no less mysterious for being so brilliantly lit. And one can only imagine that "Jack" must be giving thanks for all the natural richness his gaze embraces in this serene place that Judy Clifford has created for him to inhabit for time immemorial.

— J. Sanders Eaton

Miguel Herrera and Nicholas Bergman: Small Packages, Big Themes

Born in Santiago de Chile, a resident of New York City since 1968, Miguel Herrera is a painter, poet, and graphic artist. But none of those qualifications alone prepared one for the excellence of his exhibition "Portraits of Poets," at the Jefferson Market Library, at 425 Avenue of the Americas.



"Kafka" by Miguel Herrera

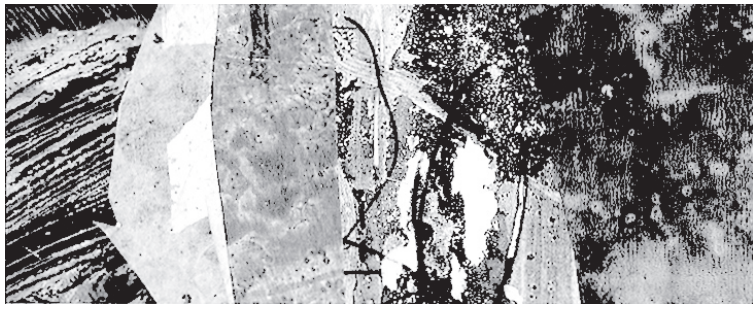
That historic former courthouse and Village landmark, with its prominent tower and winding stone staircase, the traversal of which feels like ascending to a medieval turret, seemed an auspiciously literary venue for Herrera's beautiful drawings, if not exactly the one they deserved for the widest possible exposure. These are quiet works, modest in scale but large in ambition.

With his dark, intense eyes and thick black forelock, Lorca looked like a matinee idol of the silent screen, a veritable Valentino. Rimbaud looked more like one of that new breed of scruffy hipster movie actors and rock musicians, someone Elizabeth Peyton might paint. Beckett looked like an alert hawk with that intense stare, feathers rising on his crown. Shadowy-browed Kafka looked haunted, of course; how else could he look? Colette looked younger and more seductive than we normally see her, big liquid eyes and cupid's bow lips, surrounded by a wild nest of black hair, ready for the romantic adventures she would recount as a cantankerous old invalid in the imaginary harem of her lonely Paris bedroom. There were also insightful close-up portraits of Borges and Neruda, all evoked in those brisk stokes of charcoal and velvety ink washes that Herrera handles so masterfully.

Obviously these fellow poets live for him as vividly as Poussin lives for the contemporary neoclassical realist painter Vincent Arcilesi, who, when Jeannie and I encountered him rushing along a side street near the Metropolitan Museum on one of the nights that it stays open late, announced breathlessly, "I'm going to see Poussin," as though late for a date with a dear old friend.

* * *

Although people are almost always more complex than immediately meets the eye, it's still always a revelation to discover that someone familiar in one context has a whole other dimension heretofore unknown. As far as we were aware, along with his wife Misuzu Takemoto, Nicholas Bergman was one of the proprietors of Caelum Gallery, at 526 West 26th Street, which shows artists of several nationalities but is particularly well known for Japanese contemporaries. So when we happened to walk into that Chelsea venue one afternoon and immediately had our attention arrested by a fascinating exhibition of many small, exquisitely realized collages, we went halfway through the show before one of us glanced at the announcement card and read "Homage to Humanity: Collage in tribute to each of the world's 245 countries and territories by Nicholas Bergman."



"South Ossetia" by Nicholas Bergman

Even more of a revelation, however, was how superbly (like the drawings of Miguel Herrera, albeit in a different way), Bergman's collages proved the old saying that "good things often come in small packages." For the intimate scale of these works operated in much the same way as in the paintings of Paul Klee and the collages of Kurt Schwitters (who would appear to be a kindred spirit of Bergman), drawing the viewer near rather than pushing him or her away, confiding their secrets in a whisper rather than the boisterous shout that has come to be more expected today.

Perhaps the reason we were not aware that Bergman is an artist as well as a gallerist is that he has always struck us as a quiet, gentlemanly presence behind the desk in the small office just off the exhibition space (an impression enhanced by one or two amiable but brief conversations with him at opening receptions) and would probably be the last to inform one of it.

However, his work certainly gets the point across, with its graceful forms, often created with pieces of precisely cut rice paper and other gossamer materials, either already colored or overlaid with semitranslucent washes of ink or paint and richly layered in a manner that imparts to his compositions impressive richness and depth.

Color is applied not in a finicky manner, as one might expect of compositions so small that, in some, thin bits of string suffice as calligraphic linear elements, but with a relaxed boldness that lends Bergman's collages an implied sense of scale much more expansive than their actual size.

Indeed, someone familiar with only the reproduction of the work titled "South Ossetia," on the announcement card for the exhibition, might easily imagine the collage to be as huge as a regulation-size Color Field painting by Helen Frankenthaler, Jules Olitski, or Lawrence Poons. But in a time when much art has become so overblown as to do a disservice to its content by stretching it disastrously thin, it is much to Bergman's credit (and indicates a deep respect for the already glutted aesthetic ecology as well!) that he can evoke such expansiveness in a mere few inches — especially given the global scope of his subject matter.

Indeed, with Lewis Hyde's acclaimed book length essay "The Gift" in mind, Nicholas Bergman's exhibition seemed not only an homage to humanity but an offering to it as well. —Ed McCormack

WEST SIDE ARTS

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Pigments," where orange strokes flowed like a shower of sparks between two shapely vertical vessels. And in another lively oil called "Bottle & Wayward Pigments," André finally tipped us off to the origins of the exhibition's odd title. —Maureen Flynn

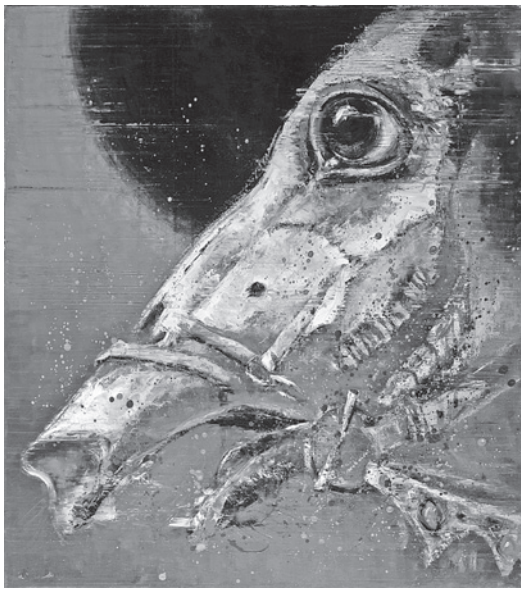
Anna Ravliuc Lends Redeeming Beauty to Harsh Truths

Inspired by pagan traditions and prehistoric legends, Anna Ravliuc, an artist born in the Ukraine, now living in Romania, emerges as a contemporary heir to Gustave Moreau in the paintings viewed at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from February 24 through March 17. (Reception: Thursday, March 5, 6 to 8pm.)

For like that great Symbolist, Ravliuc possesses the skill to render her most fantastic visions convincing. Along with her mastery of anatomy, she also lends her compositions considerable tactile and chromatic appeal by virtue of a special technique, involving the application of multiple oil glazes and layers of varnish that she then scrapes away in some areas, revealing the underpainting in a manner that imbues them with great depth and drama.

Such self-dramatizing touches as revealing that she was born on "Walpurgis Night" (the Witches' Sabbath) also reflect the theatrical mood of Ravliuc's paintings, with their macabre figures and a palette poised between dark and fiery hues. One of her recurring figures, seen in various poses and guises in several of her canvases, is a figure with the face of a skeleton and the body of a living person.

In the painting titled with the phrase "There is no truth on earth, but there is no truth above either," the macabre personage is seen seated on a dark throne, perhaps pondering this bleak concept. A glowing globe beside him on the black and white checkerboard-tiled floor illuminates his bare legs, X-raying the bones below the flesh. This powerful painting could be said to present a symbolic counterpoint to another provocative statement by the artist: "You can easily learn to wear a clown's or a king's mask. Yet the most difficult is to learn how to wear the mask of your own face, and do it proudly. I want to be Angel and Demon, Lie and Truth, Heart and Blood, but whatever self I take, more than ever I want to be myself."



"In My End is My Beginning"

Indeed, when Anna Ravliuc speaks of her artistic intentions she does so in a kind of prose poetry that throws considerable light on her dark vision. Horses, for example, are another recurring motif, as seen in the shadowy steed that dominates the complex and striking nocturnal scene, "Kidnapping the Moon," as well as the heroic profile of the wild-eyed white horse set against an area of visceral red in another painting titled, "In My End is My Beginning."

Relating an incident from her childhood, when she was so absorbed in play that she did not realize that a carriage with runaway horses was bearing down on her until she heard their breathing, she concludes "The horses stopped right before me, by themselves — there was nobody in the carriage...Since then I have a special relationship with horses. I love them and I trust them..."

Yet another painting of an eerie equine skull, poignantly reflects the French term for still life, "nature morte," and seems to make the point that we must all be brave in the face of the knowledge that time will rob us all of all that we love. But Anna Ravliuc must be forgiven for this harsh reminder, since her paintings are possessed of what William Butler Yeats once termed "a terrible beauty."

— Peter Wiley

Open 2009: New Facets of Photography

"How Green Was My Valley," a vibrant pastoral vision of farmlands and verdant fields viewed from an aerial perspective by Janice Wood Wetzel was one of the images in "Open 2009," a photographic exhibition by members of the West Side Arts Coalition, curated by Jennifer Holst, at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at 96th Street and Broadway. Among Wetzel's other digital prints another standout was an idyllic view through violet foreground flowers to horses grazing behind a rustic fence with hills and foliage in the distance.

David Ruskin's rugged Alaskan scenes presented a cool contrast, with their snowy peaks juxtaposed with clouds and mists, as in ancient Chinese scroll paintings. Ruskin's subtle hand coloring invariably lends a lyrical sense of fantasy to his pictures, here as well as in his more familiar urban vistas.

Don Sichler finds beauty in unlikely places, such as a rusty red pickup truck with a smashed window or a funky junkyard reflected in a rear window. Sichler's most striking digital print was "Bikes," in which a lineup of motorcycles had a kinetic effect like Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase." By contrast, Bob Merritt's digital prints on canvas heighten the already beautiful colors of his floral subjects in a manner verging on the visual pizzaz of classic Pop. But for all his chromatic tweaking, Merritt still retains the natural beauty of his subjects, be they close-ups of flowers as deliberately abstracted as an oil by Georgia O'Keeffe or a picture perfect lakeside scene such as his "Bear Mountain Foliage."

Calvin Eagle captured one's attention with his surreal digital print of a gigantic yuppie in a business suit towering over lilliputian pedestrians passing below. But his most affecting image was of an elderly couple in gaudy sport clothes who look less real people than like life-size Duane Hanson sculptures as they sit glumly on a bench in front of a billboard for "Dreamland Circus Sideshow."

Archie Hamilton's large, monochromatic white silver gelatin prints of a single flower are akin in some ways to the floral portraits of the late Robert Mapplethorpe. However, Hamilton's tones are more darkly dramatic and the fact that the large sensual petals are starting to wilt lends his pictures a sense of mortality and decadence akin to the poem's in Baudelaire's "Flowers of Evil."

By contrast, Rudy Collins chooses an exhilarating subject in his series of digital prints "The Gulls," capturing the flight of a single seagull in a manner akin to Muybridge's pioneering motion photography. Only Collins brings his birds more alive through the use of color as they soar against clear blue sky, particularly in one priceless print in which the gull turns its head to gaze directly at the photographer like a celebrity annoyed by an intrusive paparazzo.

Jean Prytyskacz seems to get a similar look from a group of bulky men in identical Fiesta de Giglio t-shirts at an Italian street festival in Brooklyn. But that does not deter her from getting other engaging color photographs of the event, including one of a wizened neighborhood dignitary surrounded by a brass band as he sits on a float sporting a leisure suit and a porkpie hat.

Curator Jennifer Holst rounds out the exhibition with characteristically compelling pictures in which land masses mirrored in bodies of water possess a symmetry that enhances their austere aesthetic appeal. Always thoughtfully conceived, Holst's pictures invariably have an understated power that remains in ones memory long after one has encountered them.

— Marie R. Pagano

Chaos and Containment in the Paintings of Mary Jane Rivers

"Over the past eight years, my work has evolved into an exploration of pathways between the conscious and the unconscious," Mary Jane Rivers says in a recent artist statement, "between woundedness and longing to belong, between how one is expected to behave and how one actually feels, between making 'a pretty picture' and accepting what is actually made, and an acceptance of the humor in all of it."

"The Containment Series: Blue Bayou"

Given the vulnerability at its core, this is a remarkably candid confession for any painter to make — at least so nakedly, in words. But then again, Mary Jane Rivers is no ordinary painter, as her exhibition at Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, which continues through February 14, makes clear.

For Rivers eschews self-protective strategies, putting her soul on the line every time she picks up her brush. She even goes so far as to blow the whistle on herself, when she admits that the suite of paintings she calls "The Containment Series" expresses "the scrambling and confusion underneath the polished veneer when one is faced with a situation that requires more competency than has been attained."

The saving grace of the series, however, is that it reveals just how much has been obtained. And, even more important, the paintings justify the price that the artist has had to pay in order to achieve them.

The motif of "The Containment Series" suggests, quite literally, the tension between the public pose of self composure and the inner turmoil just below the surface. The dominant form in these paintings is a large, roughly rectangular shape laid down with a bold black line that seems to stand for the border of demarcation between one's inner and outer world. In each painting, the rectangle is set against a vibrant color field — pink in one painting, blue in another, yellow in a third. This tablet-like form seems to represent the page upon which the self is "writ." It is the more or less stolid container — fairly neat, even though its edges may be lightly serrated. like those on a decomposing manuscript page — that keeps our private emotions in check.

But here's the good news for the viewer: savvy artist that she is, Rivers' "turmoil" is gorgeously organized, rhapsodically orchestrated, amounting to a perfect painting-within-the painting, with its combination of exquisitely balanced organic, and geometric shapes, vigorous gestures, and exuberant bursts of bright, mainly primary, colors.

For while Rivers is unusually frank in her willingness to express the anxiety that de Kooning was alluding to more guardedly when he stated "for me, art is not a situation of comfort," she is above all a consummate if largely intuitive painter, and the series seems to be sharing with us what she apparently already knows: that the inner self is not as chaotic as we may lead ourselves to believe, and indeed constitutes the most vital part of who we are.

The show also includes other abstractions, in which Rivers' colorful forms float buoyantly "outside the box," so to speak. One of the most striking of these works, reflecting on "the joy of experiencing the self unconditionally," is "Still Point," which displays the effortless authority of a latter-day Kandinsky. (Mary Jane Rivers' work is also included in the gallery's year-round salon exhibition.)

— J. Sanders Eaton

Chungja Moon: New Age Buddhist Art

"The process of my work is not bound to traditional forms," states Chungja Moon, some of whose paintings are permanently on view at Ward-Nasse Gallery, 178 Prince Street, in Soho. "It is rooted in an impromptu and instinctual inspiration, pure feeling and emotion which are flowing deeply in my mind."

Ever since encountering her work in the early 1990s, I have considered Moon an artist whose natural exuberance sets her apart. Born in Korea, now a resident of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, she has evolved a blend of fantastic semi-abstraction which could appear influenced in equal parts by Surrealism and the Fauves, although given the directness of her approach and the apparently limitless scope of her imagination, it is entirely possible that she arrived at her style independently.

In any case Moon's work, which has been profoundly influenced by her Buddhist practice, is distinguished by an extraordinary freedom and imagistic range. Her brilliantly colorful acrylic paintings possess an almost childlike freshness of vision paradoxically coupled with an innate aesthetic sophistication, which makes it possible for her to sally forth into the realm of her own consciousness with an intrepidness quite rare in contemporary art.

Indeed, her compositions seem subconsciously channeled from that mysterious intersection where figures and symbols become interchangeable, where nature wears a different face than anything familiar from this earth. There is the sense of a higher dimension, unbeholden to the rules of gravity or earthly logic.

One particularly poignant symbol is that of the lone sojourner in her "Peace" series, a faceless, severely simplified soul with no visible arms and long feet that resemble the claws of an anthropomorphic bird. This symbol seems to stand for the solitary seeker of truth traversing a universe abundant with ineffable wonders. Possibly, it evolved from an earlier series called "Bodhidharma," centering on meditating, supplicating, and levitating Buddhist monks, delineated with a swift simplicity reminiscent of ancient literati ink painting, albeit in vibrant Fauvist hues rather than the traditional monochromes.

Avian creatures, butterflies and angelic beings are frequent symbols in Moon's new paintings, inhabiting an ethereal realm where solar and lunar orbs and arching beams of white light, shot through with streaks of luminous rainbow hues, form a kind of cosmic landscape.

In Chungja Moon's personal universe, botanical forms also metamorphose magically, taking on animate life. For example, in the composition she calls "Sunflower # 1" the yellow petals of the majestic monolith issue forth like rays from the sun above a row of smaller flowers. Their buds pupiled like eyeballs, the latter appear to bow on their long, slender stems, as though before some plant god.

From Chungja Moon's "Peace" series

In "Lotus # 2," Moon takes her own unique approach to one of the eight precious symbols of Buddhism, the flower for which one of the most important sutras is named, and upon the open calyx of whose blossoms, in ancient art, Buddhas or bodhisattvas often stand enthroned.

Forgoing such hackneyed traditional symbolism, she simply juxtaposes the shapely purity of the flower with the forms of wild white geese amid shimmering blue waters and other vibrant hues that light up the entire composition like a shower of multicolored sparks.

Thus Chungja Moon evokes a more immediate sense of the flower's vital energy, in keeping with her statement, "I wish to make my painting alive and breathing."

— Ed McCormack

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NEW EXPRESSIONS 09

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Attendees are welcome to meet the artists at the opening reception in the gallery on **Saturday April 4, from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.**

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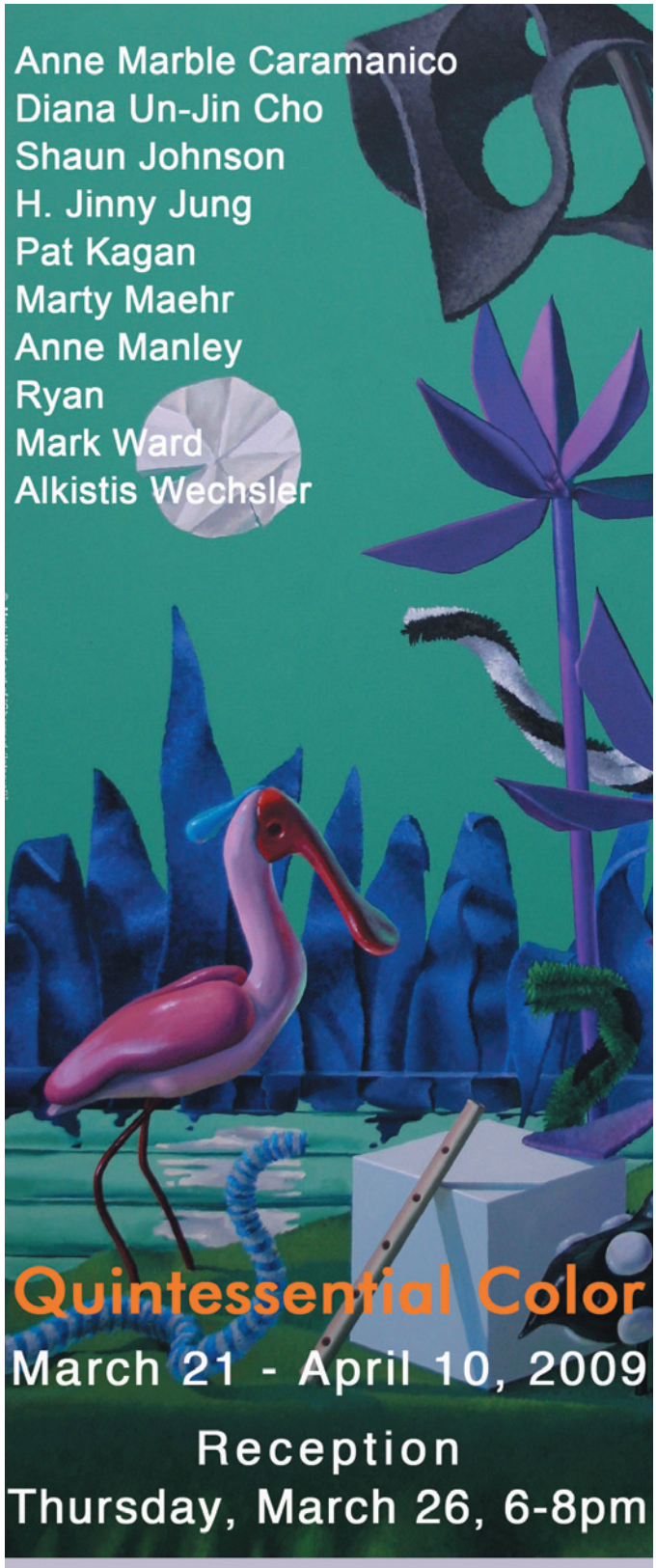

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