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GALLERY&STUDIO

The World of the Working Artist

Weathering the Iffy New Art Market with Bob and Marina

by Ed McCormack, pg. 12

Joy Saville

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Photo: Taylor Photo/Ross

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Reception: Saturday May 16, 4-7 pm

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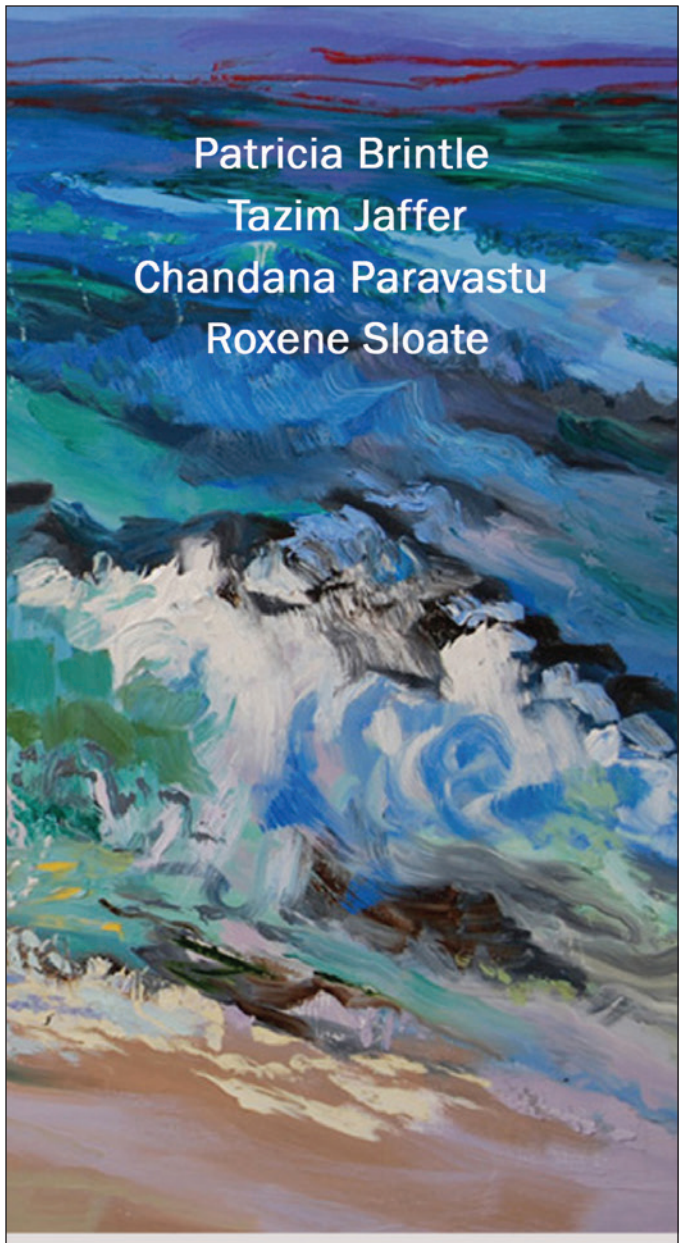

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Curator Carrozzini's Italian "Happy Face" Show

The elusive state to which we all so constantly aspire provides a theme to match the unique imagination of Stefania Carrozzini, curator of International Art Media (I am), Milan, New York City, and Beijing, in the group exhibition "Happiness," sponsored by the Italian Cultural Institute, at Broadway Gallery, 473 Broadway, from April 16 to 30. (Reception: April 17, from 6 to 8 PM).

Carrozzini introduces the exhibition with a quote from one of her intellectual heroes, Pierre Restany: "I have always considered art to be the principal means by which human beings communicate with one another, thus feeling themselves to be a part of history and in harmony with nature, and it is in this relationship that happiness resides."

Adding in her catalog essay, "The nature of happiness is the same as that of art: they are both revolutionary forces which stir from our thoughts and feelings and place such such values as freedom and truth at stake," Carrozzini grants the participants in the exhibition a wide interpretative berth. And they take full advantage of it, as seen in "Heart," a witty mixed media work by Susi Zucchi, who has worked in the fashion field and often employs minerals, gems, and old clothes as materials in the manner of Arte Povera. Here, Zucchi presents us with a discarded bustier. Along with a ragged length of cloth that resembles a claw-like hand, and what appear to be some small, scattered stones, it is submerged in the white pigment that covers the entire composition. The only touch of color is a clotted red form that resembles lump of noxiously red bubble gum, obviously representing the heart of the title. Happiness indeed!

Davide Alborghetti, on the other hand, eploys a set of alabaster wings to symbolize a joy so buoyant that it becomes airborne and floats against a vibrant blue sky, its curvilinearly stylized semiabstract form seeming to blend with the cottony configurations of the pure white clouds. There is invariably a sensuous quality to Alborghetti's work that caused one writer to comment that "the figurative element turns into an abstract image in which lightness and elegance become a secret homage to female beauty." Yet there is also an affecting comic quality to his forms, which make one think of the lovable little creatures called "shmoos" created by the classic American cartoonist Al Capp, "which not only make wonderful friends but, when fried, are more delicious than pork chops." And this also makes sense in the context of this show, since there are those who insist that happiness itself is a comic condition.

However, judging from his contribution to this show, Egidio Castelli might beg to differ, arguing that it is actually a cosmic condition. Although he is apparently known for his mixed media works in which aspects of action painting, such as gestures, explosions, and drips are combined with fantastic imagery, here Castelli is represented by a digital photograph called "Helen." It depicts two images of a woman's face, one hovering above the other like an alter ego. Set against a dark ground, both faces wear a beatific grin that lights them up like a fireworks display in the carnivalesque manner of so-called "aura photography." Indeed, in this case it would appear that the aura has overtaken the physical being almost completely, turning the woman into a kind of phantom of disembodied bliss floating freely in space. Is it possible, as some Buddhists claim, that true happiness resides in emptiness, which is to say: non-being?

Well, there are others who think happiness might be a parade with a big brass band blaring and giddily grinning teenage baton twirlers with their heads thrown

back gleefully against an idyllic blue sky — the only semi-intact image in Eugenio Vignali's lambda print from a digital photo of a wall covered with shredded posters. Although Vignali, a widely exhibited artist and photographer, appears to be paying homage to his fellow Italian artists of a few decades ago who attracted international attention by creating decoupage works with torn film posters appropriated from the streets, happiness for him may mean being able to get a similarly tactile effect with a camera without getting one's hands dirty. Some might call this an advantage of virtual reality.

Then there are those who think that the only happiness resides in power. Certainly the King of the Jungle and his less hirsute mate appear serenely content in the noted Italian wildlife painter Gianluigi Alberio's meticulously realistic acrylic painting of two full-grown lions snuggling like kitty cats, having pooled their savagery and consolidated their sovereignty. And one can only surmise a source of happiness for the painter himself may be that the democratic aesthetic climate of the postmodern era, which sets a place for illustration and other formerly debased modes of art at the copious feast of pluralism, now enables us to appreciate such a painting for its own straightforward merits amid more avant garde offerings, rather than relegating it to some specialized genre ghetto.

The anonymity of big cities can offer a solace for some that can also constitute a kind of happiness. In his oil on canvas, "New York Change," Luigi Christopher Veggetti Kanku seems to celebrate a sense of faceless flux, of the flaneur's safety among strangers, exposing Vance Packard's sociological diatribe "The Lonely Crowd" as the bourgeois fraud that it was. Who can say that the voyeurism of the solitary stroller does not offer its own rich rewards? Obviously, the artist expresses them eloquently, making a busy New York street appear almost pastoral, as shafts of sunlight stream down on the bustling masses, commingling with shadow on the sidewalk to create atmospheric patterns of chiaroscuro.

Preoccupied with numbers and alphabets, Marisa Pezzoli, a book artist also known for her poetry and aphorisms, contributes to this seminar on joy a collage called "Happiness Alphabet," in which bright colors, geometric symbols, printed phrases, and musical notes amount to a kind of visual jingle with echoes of Kurt Schwitters's "Merz" compositions. The modest scale and casual elegance of Pezzoli's piece encapsulates the blithe spirit of this exhibition with winning economy and grace.

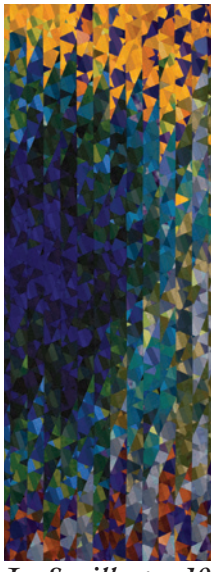
Perhaps it's the particular blue hue that Gabriella Porpora has chosen for her monochromatic painting on plexiglass "Ritmo di danza" that makes one think of Yves Klein, the French avant-gardist who covered nude women in paint and created compositions by rolling and dragging them across huge canvases laid out on the floor. As it turned out, Klein had a tragically short life. But in a short documentary film he looked very happy painting with his naked human brushes — certainly much happier than Jackson Pollock in another film, frowning as he dripped paint from a stick. Popora's veritable gestural dance of wristy rhythmic strokes and splashes also looks quite pleased with itself and with the world. And the pleasure one should add, is contagious for the viewer.

Once again, Stefania Carrozzini exercises considerable curatorial cunning to make her show's theme just as contagious. Once again, the viewer has no choice but to surrender, letting a smile be his or her umbrella.

—Ed McCormack

G&S Highlights

On the Cover:
While some predict even harder times for the art business, Bob and Marina are scrambling for seats on the Titanic. Priced out of one gallery, they're determined to open another in September. Gluttons for punishment or art world visionaries on a spiritual mission? Turn to NEW YORK NOTEBOOK (centerfold).



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Bernice Faegenburg's New Solo Show Pushes Beyond the Sublime

"Garden"

Granted, the era of multiculturalism, globalism, and postmodernism have brought us a long way from the once widely held notion that "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." Yet, even at a time when such essentially racist clichés have been mercifully put to rest, few artists synthesize Eastern and Western aesthetics as successfully or as consistently as Bernice Faegenburg, whose new solo exhibition, "Spring Scene" is on view at Viridian Artists @ Chelsea, 530 West 25th Street, from May 5 through 30. (Reception: Saturday, May 16, from 3 to 6 PM.

Combining Japanese brush painting, Western-style impasto, silk screen painting, and color transfer of drawings and photographs, Faegenburg's painting process amounts to a lively visual stew of diverse influences, inspirations and techniques. In "Peace," the main thrust of the composition and the handling of perspective is decidedly in the Western landscape tradition. With foliage, boulders, and slender saplings in the foreground giving way to a body of water and sloping hills on the opposite shore, it's a setting that might have invited the brush of Cezanne.

However, over this idyllic scene, Faegenburg has superimposed one of her accomplished Japanese brush drawings of a birch tree sinuously delineated on a large, gossamer sheet of Japanese rice paper that covers most of the landscape in the manner of a semitransparent theatrical scrim, dimming the underlying hues like the mists in an ancient scroll painting. Immediately below it, she has also juxtaposed three fragmented photo negative transfer images of birch trees tinted with an almost fluorescent orange hue and lined up in row like multiple Warhol portraits. The large and smaller rectangular divisions within which the various elements of the composition are contained, as well as the borders between them, add yet another layer of art historical reference, to hard-edge geometrical painting, enhancing the eclectic inclusiveness that characterizes Faegenburg's ambitious aesthetic.

Indeed, Faegenburg may be the quintessential postmodernist for the way in which she assimilates diverse stylistic devices that strike sparks in a savvy viewers' synapses: combined painting and screen printing (Rauschenberg!); images layered transparently over one another (Polke! Salle!); shaped canvas (Stella! Kelly! etc., etc.), yet finally makes them all inform her own singular vision.

Perhaps one of the most beautiful examples is "Garden," a 50-inch by 100-inch fan-shaped triptych incorporating acrylic, silk screen, and Japanese brush painting, in which Faegenburg hits her lyrical high note. In each panel, she centers a monochromatic ink painting of bamboo stalks and leaves on rice paper, anchored at the bottom by a broad cream-colored stripe that spans all three, against a verdant overall field of green flecked with piquant touches of yellow, blue, red, and violet. Here, Eastern and Western aesthetics are joined in perhaps the most sublime homeostasis in Faegenburg's entire oeuvre, every stroke and hue perfectly balanced within the graceful arc of the fan-format.

However, Bernice Faegenburg is far too restless and adventurous a talent to settle for mere perfection. So she pushes forward in a considerably more edgy, risk-taking direction in the more recent work "Renewal," which brashly shoulders its way into being the centerpiece of her present exhibition. This 42-inch high, 90-inch wide triptych is composed on a grid that is partially obscured in places by the larger rectangles of collaged or silkscreened images, as well as by the varying thickness of the paint surface. Here, perhaps more than in most of Faegenburg's mixed media paintings, contrasts between thick and thin paint application, between opacity and translucency — those most distinctively obvious opposite characteristics of Eastern and Western painting — provide much of the textural interest.

Being equally conversant in the techniques of Japanese brush painting and Western color saturation, she plays these qualities off each other dynamically in "Renewal," where graceful linear images of bamboo and birds executed in swift, elegant strokes are set off against ruggedly gestural areas of green, yellow, and de Kooning-pink impasto to sumptuous effect. Other contrasts are provided, here in particular, by the confluence of geometric and organic form, as well as by the subtle differences between photographic and drawn floral imagery exquisitely juxtaposed in the third panel.

But the overall power of this impressive triptych derives from the incongruous and yet sparklingly successful manner in which Faegenburg has managed to meld disparate elements of the Eastern and Western painterly traditions, as though Hoyen, the last master of bird and flower subjects in Japan had set some of his ink studies afloat like paper boats in his Western contemporary Monet's radiant lily pond. For in "Renewal," Bernice Faegenburg has given us a work that amounts to a luscious postmodern daydream of transcendently intermingling opposites.

— Ed McCormack

Discovering Jools, Alchemist of Rude Elegance

As in the case of Madonna or Bono, being known professionally by a single name seems to suit the vibrant Pop sensibility of the Australian artist called Jools. Already something of an art star in Melbourne, her mixed media collages are on view at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from May 7 through 27. (Reception Thursday, May 7, from 6 to 8 PM.)

Bodacious and brilliantly colorful, Jools' collages are inspired by what she calls the visual "noise" of the city, a cacophony she captures in dynamically fractured imagery. Turned on by torn posters, graffiti, advertising logos, neon signs and all the other garish trappings of urban life, she translates them into lively and enduring compositions that unearth the hidden beauty in what some might dismiss as the ugly detritus of a decadent culture.

Although Australia has its own bustling cities (Jools was born in Melbourne), she now lives in rural Victoria with her husband, the arctic explorer Peter Bland, and their three children. But whenever she needs another massive fix of visual noise, she hops a plane to New York City "to absorb the atmosphere, walking the streets day and night taking photographs and filming."

The imagery that she gathers invariably makes its way to her collages, as well as her "Sheila's" (Sheila being Australian slang for "woman"), assemblages created with female mannequins, which she paints and/or covers with a plethora of intriguing collage images wittily conveying the radical and liberating notion that sexy glamour and feminine empowerment can go hand in hand, possibly inspired by her fellow countrywoman, Germaine Greer, to whom she makes passing reference in her artist statement.

"All I Want is Everything"

Like the art critic Robert Hughes, another Australian cultural icon whom she cites as an early influence, Jools has high regard for the work of Robert Rauschenberg. However, she has evolved her own approach to similarly fragmented imagery, which she employs more intricately in her collages, juxtaposing lurid girly illustrations from vintage paperback books, old Western movie posters, various colorful beer bottle labels, comic book characters such as Wonder Woman, and all manner of other funky found symbols, combined with her own photographs of streets, graffiti scrawled walls and set afloat within vigorously painted Abstract Expressionist gestures and color areas in compositions with tiles such as "All I Want is Everything," "Cowboys & Indians," and "I Am Woman Hear Me Roar."

As the latter title, borrowed from a hit song of the 1970s by her fellow Australian Helen Reddy, indicates, Jools has by no means abandoned her roots, even as she acknowledges the influence of American popular culture on her art.

Indeed, her keen interest in the "Dreamtime" story telling traditions of the indigenous Aboriginals also feeds into the narrative aspects of her collages, for, as she puts it, "I love the sense of romance associated with the passing on of stories from generation to generation verbally and with pictures as opposed to the written word."

It is this vernacular quality that makes her work so engaging. An aesthetic alchemist of the first order, Jools transforms the basest elements of our environment into art objects of a rare and peculiar beauty that make us see familiar things as if for the first time.

—Jennifer Howe Lee

Lively Uptown Group Show Offers "Food for Thought"

Food is a loaded subject, which in these times of weight consciousness and fad diets, has come to represent not only that which sustains life but a sensual temptation that some are at pains to resist. In "Eat," a photographic exhibition curated by Deena Weintraub and Jennifer Holst, seen recently at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center aisle at Broadway and 96th Street, several members of the the West Side Arts Coalition, most working in the popular contemporary medium of digital prints, unless otherwise noted, addressed various aspects of this complex issue.

Deena Weintraub captured produce at Toronto Market in close-up: pickles swimming in brine, the richly textured surface of cauliflower, the anatomical allusions in bulbs of garlic. Given Weintraub's focus on form, color, and texture in overall compositions akin to abstract painting, one viewed these familiar foods au naturel and became suddenly aware of their sculptural contours and tactile sensuality.

Janice Wood Wetzel, on the other hand, gave us an image of pure, sinful excess in "Dessert at Dromoland Castle," where an elaborate pastry confection resembling an exotic flower à la Little Shop of Horrors took on an almost sinister seductiveness. Another print by Wood Wetzel made sinuously flowing strands of homemade fettucine pasta look like Abstract Expressionist brushstrokes.

In Cal Eagle's "42nd Street," a young man in a bright red t-shirt sipped one of those Slurpy-type drinks through a straw, while leaning like a Midnight Cowboy on a trash receptacle advertising the play "Altar Boyz." In other prints from his "Coney Island" series as well, Eagle explored conspicuous consumption in a setting where cheap amusements and junk foods reign supreme.

David Ruskin gave portrait-like scrutiny to subjects such as two Savoy cabbages nestled like a sleeping couple, three gravity-defying artichokes evoking acrobats, and a single, shapely pear. While Ruskin's subtle hand-coloring lent all of these subjects a glowing patina, the latter image was especially striking, suggesting a bronze torso of Venus.

Jean Prytyskacz employs the exquisite tonal refinement of the silver gelatin print to lend her black and white images a shadowy drama akin to film noir. Thus Prytyskacz's "Cupcake, Iced Tea, Chocolate Drizzled Whipped Cream" presents a tableau that delightfully evokes something a self-indulgent femme fatale, perhaps played by Veronica Lake, might order in a diner in a private eye mystery of the 1940s.

By contrast, Harriet G. Green's photo collages are highly contemporary in a manner akin to Rauschenberg, employing cutouts of colorful food imagery and figurative fragments such as a pair of disembodied hands holding nuts and berries, starkly set against black backgrounds. Especially witty is Green's image of a fish with a gaping mouth that appears about to consume a miniature human — turning the table, so to speak, on the show's theme!

Irmgard Kuhn takes a formal approach reminiscent of Wayne Thiebaud's iconic rows of pies, in her prints of table settings seen from above, in which plates, silverware and European flatbread packages are invariably set against a muted orange ground. Rather than appearing Pop, however, Kuhn's compositions come off austere and essentiallys abstract.

Inspired by a bustling marketplace in Ecuador, Ellen Zaroff's prints can catch the viewer off guard with incongruous details, such as the colorful clear plastic cups of pineapple and watermelon chunks in an otherwise monochromatic picture. However, Zaroff's most startling image was an oddly collapsed pig's head on a counter, resembling a balloon with the air let out.

Co-curator Jennifer Holst invariably takes a quietly offbeat approach to her themes. Here, her "Tasty Cake" series focused on the gleamingly clean machines in a mechanized food plant, where baked and unbaked pies passed each other on adjoining conveyer belts in a procession recalling The March of the Wooden Soldiers.

— Maureen Flynn

Lorraine Shemesh: The Weight of the Body Poised Against the Dance of Paint

When we speak of "muscularity" in painting, we are talking not only about something tantamount to "push and pull," the apt term Hans Hofmann came up with to describe the underlying pictorial tensions that animate an Abstract Expressionist composition, but also about a certain dynamic viscosity in the paint surface itself, which lends physical traction to the implied tension, making it all the more dramatic.

"Crossing, 2008"

Perhaps the best, and as it turns out, the most literal, example of this quality in recent painting can be seen in "Intersections," a solo show by Lorraine Shemesh, at Allan Stone Gallery, 113 East 90th Street through April 11.

For most of us long familiar with Shemesh's work, this show represents a real departure for an artist best known for her "Water-Works," paintings of swimmers soaring as sleekly as porpoises, their bodies buoyantly afloat or submerged in an aqueous flow lit by luminous reflections. That they were most often of male and female couples added an element of ecstatic eroticism to the mix, as when two bodies are so perfectly in tune that lovemaking attains its most weightlessly transcendent pitch.

Now the figures are still coupled, but they are landlocked, being dancers rather than swimmers. Their lithe bodies are sheathed in skin-tight black and white leotards as boldly striped as old-fashioned prison uniforms. Their faces are hidden behind hoods of the same design — either partially, like those of devout Moslem women, or fully, as though by the stifling hoods and masks used in sadomasochistic play. And their limbs and torsos are locked more as though in struggle than in tender erotic embrace, suggesting the type of sexual union one would tend to refer to as fucking rather than lovemaking.

Yet to put it this way is not to imply something tawdry; it is simply to acknowledge the different levels of desire, difficulty, and mechanical neediness that often must be worked through to tilt the tricky pinball machine of the human libido and sustain the sublime state of romantic love beyond initial infatuation.

In her introduction to the exhibition catalog, gallery director Claudia Stone alludes to "a deep sense of personal loss that many of us encounter as we live through the death of those dear and important to us." And indeed a subtle yet haunting sense of mortality is also present in Shemesh's latest series. One perceived it first in the exquisite preliminary drawing for the large oil on canvas called "Zipper," so named because, here, the dancers merge so closely that the black and white stripes on their bodysuits lock like steel teeth. In Shemesh's swift, elegant sketch in litho crayon on vellum, where the stripes are omitted in the interest of overall fluency, the skeletal aspect of the two figures grinding sinuously up against each other seems to signify more than anatomical expediency in the act of drawing. Rather, these transparent phantoms, entwined like wisps of smoke, suggest how desperately we cling and couple to the end, in denial of our eventual disembodiment.

Just as haunting in another manner is the painting called "Lock," in which the two figures, crouched like rowers with lowered heads, clutch each others' upper arms near the shoulders, as though commiserating in some shared grief.

In a more general sense, however, Lorraine Shemesh's new paintings seem to be all about the push and pull of relationships and of painting itself. In the latter regard (which always trumps subject matter, no matter how compelling, in a painter of her caliber), the bold black and white stripes, as well as the juicily glistening sumptuousness of Shemesh's oil surfaces, seem kindred to the abstractions of Sean Scully. Shemesh, however, eschews the geometric strictures that Scully imposes, making her stripes twist and undulate expressively with the gestures of her figures. And while these dancers may be more static than her swimmers, the spaces around and between them are evoked with such succulent vigor as to suggest that this virtuoso painter has gone beyond apprehending the flow of water to make magically palpable in pigment the swarming energies that activate the very air we breathe.

— Ed McCormack

Anne Bachelier Rescues the Phantom of the Opera from Andrew Lloyd Weber

One reviewer called Andrew Lloyd Webber's staging of The Phantom of the Opera "a victory of pseudo-populist grandiosity over taste — an act of cultural butchery akin to turning an aviary of graceful swans and brilliant peacocks into an order of Chicken McNuggets."

Those of us who grew up on the old black and white film starring Lon Chaney and were not tempted by it to investigate any of the subsequent stage or film versions, much less the book, can only be grateful to Neil Zukerman, publisher and designer of CFM books, for returning Gaston Leroux's 1910 novel to the page in a deluxe format illustrated by the inimitable French painter Anne Bachelier.

In fact, since Zukerman is also the director of CFM Gallery, 112 Greene Street, in Soho, and Bachelier is his star artist, there are several copies priced by degree of deluxeness, the most unique being those that include original illustrations in ink or oil paper illustrations by the artist. However, the standard edition, hard bound in black silk with a pictorial dust jacket, is sufficiently elegant to qualify as an object of art unto itself.

For even if she had never exhibited her somewhat Surrealist, somewhat Symbolist, but ultimately unclassifiable oils on canvas in galleries, Bachelier would have become known as perhaps our greatest living illustrator. And the same must be said of Zukerman: Had he never opened a gallery pugnaciously championing figurative when abstract painting still ruled Soho, he could certainly have attained a reputation as perhaps the last great publisher of not "bookworks" but authentic livres d'artistes.

But what does it mean to be a great illustrator at a time when real illustration has all but been replaced by Photo Shop manipulation, or to be a great publisher in an era of Oprah's Book Club and a bestseller list filled with diet books and celebrity biographies? That Zukerman and Bachelier have been too busy creating beautiful books to consider the full ramifications of this question seems to me a mercy. For the pair has given us superb volumes such as Princess of Wax, and Rose Daughter (A Retelling of Beauty and the Beast), as well as the only edition of Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland really worth looking at since the 1865 edition illustrated by Sir John Tenniel. And their Phantom is arguably their most successful collaboration to date.

For one thing, Zukerman has contributed a synopsis that reads like a well-written libretto. Thus those of us who are still disinclined to slog through more of Leroux's overburdened prose than can be sampled in the skillfully excerpted character introductions Zukerman has also thoughtfully provided, can connect Bachelier's illustrations to the proper points in the text without suffering post-Victorian mind-clog. But even more important, he has designed a book that serves as a plush jewel-box for her peculiar imagistic genius.

Generous areas of white space set off the exquisiteness of Bachelier's spare ink drawings, wherein she combines sinuous strokes of gray wash, laid down boldly with a broad brush in the manner of Asian calligraphy, to arrest the eye and direct it to the meticulous pen-work with which she delineates the main characters. Sumptuous full-page color spreads are devoted to her narrative illustrations in oil on gessoed paper.

The latter are as elaborately wrought as her fine art compositions in oil on canvas. However, what makes Bachelier a superb illustrator, rather than a mere slummer in a

"Christine"

"Unmasking"

"Rafters"

"Phantom-of-the-Opera"

"The Phantom's Masked Ball"

"lesser" area (a too common attitude when painters condescend to trample the life out of a narrative with their overbearing styles and egos) is how thoroughly she gives herself over to the text. Happily, this text reciprocates in kind, giving its atmospheric riches over to the illuminating ministrations of her brush like a lover grateful to have finally found its true mate.

Indeed, not once does Bachelier betray any knowledge of possessing greater mastery of her own art than Leroux had of his. Such is her innate modesty that she revels in his guttering candles, crystal chandeliers, shadowy corridors, relishing the opportunities they afford to indulge her love of chiaroscuro. Every element in the story seems tailored to her talents: The dizzying heights of the Paris Opera House's backstage rafters with their trapeze-like ropes and riggings, so like the theatrical settings of her paintings; the masks and opulent costumes, so like those of the characters born of her own imagination; the novel's beautiful heroine, Christine, with her delicate features and ivory skin so like those of a classic Bachelier ingenue; the Phantom himself, perhaps the most formidable among the many male grotesques that have courted, stalked, and menaced many of the female protagonists of her painted tableaux over the years — all reciprocate the artist's humility by offering her an opportunity to crystalize, rather than subjugate, her singularly imaginative aesthetic vision.

If one had to choose a favorite illustration from among the many magnificent pictures it this book, it would probably be "The Phantom's Masked Ball," the image most like some of Bachelier's most memorable oils on canvas. Such scenes of costumed revelry seem to have grown ever more prominent in Anne Bachelier's oeuvre in the years since Neil Zukerman started coaxing the artist and her husband, Claude, out of their customary domestic seclusion in Grenoble, to join him and his partner, Tom, in an annual jaunt to Venice for Carnivale. Through this annual tradition, it would appear that the enterprising art dealer has provided his favorite artist with yet another avenue of inspiration that bears rich fruit in this their latest collaboration. — Ed McCormack

NOTE: To introduce "The Phantom of the Opera/Le Famtôme de l'Opéra," with illustrations by Anne Bachelier, CFM Gallery will be transformed into the foyer of the Paris Opera House for "The Phantom's Masked Ball" on Saturday, May 16. (For tickets and/or to purchase the book at pre-publication prices, phone the gallery number: 212-966-3864.) A selection of the original illustrations will be on view, along with some small, unrelated oils, through mid-June.

"Erik (Angel of Music)"

Drawing Takes Center Stage in Chelsea Survey

One would almost automatically assume that the best exhibitions of new drawing would be seen at The Drawing Center, a nonprofit venue exclusively devoted to the medium. But in fact some of the most innovative drawing exhibitions in recent years have been those at New Century Artists Inc., 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea. One is referring specifically to the annual group exhibitions entitled "New Expressions," the newest installment of which, " New Expressions 2009," curated by Linda Dujack, is on view through April 18. (Reception: Saturday April 4, from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.)

Mark Lerer

Mark Lerer's drawings are as conceptual as they are figurative. For some time he exhibited mainly pencil drawings of cartoon super heroes, cowboys, and other action figures. They could have been misconstrued as Pop, but they possessed an earnestness that tipped one off that something else was going on: Lehrer was not being campy or satirical; rather he was celebrating the earnest expressiveness of an often demeaned popular art form. Then, in 2008, he showed ink drawings of infantry soldiers in a blocky Joe Kubert style. But these, too, although possibly nostalgic for a time in which the wars Americans got involved in seemed to make more sense, were no more ironic than Bill Mauldin's affectionate cartoons of W.W.II grunts catching a smoke or reading letters from home. Now, however, Lerer has chosen a more highbrow subject: scenes from poems by Wallace Stevens. Yet while his technique has become slightly more elaborate, with brown and gray washes added to his blunt, boldly outlined ink drawings of "Movers," "Cigar Rollers," and "Cardboard Boxes," Mark Lehrer's drawings remain deadpan, enigmatic, and oddly fascinating.

Fritz Erismann is another artist with a somewhat eccentric vision made manifest in a style that for its florid intricacy could appear to partake equally of 1960s psychedelia and the "mediumistic" outsider art of Madge Gill. But obviously Erismann is no zonked out hippie or naive spiritualist/psychic channeling spirits from the beyond. Rather, he is, like Andre Masson or Henri Michaux, a highly sophisticated practitioner of automatism whose "dreamscapes" call upon "the peculiar logic of a subconscious language made manifest by meditation." Subjects such as "Strange Bird," "Pivot," and "Stairway to Heaven," are evoked in a sinuous line that flows and doubles back upon itself, as if the artist's hand never left the paper. Erismann's continuous line leaves in its wake gracefully dancing configurations in which — presto chango! — a head, a wing, even a violin, suddenly come into focus in ostensibly abstract compositions.

Fritz Erismann

Besides curating this show, printmaker Linda Dujack makes a formidable contribution to it with a group of exquisitely delineated drypoints and collographs that create their own whimsical species of magic. In "Tribute to Giorgio," the bottles and other objects of the Morandi take on a linear animation that belies the term "still life," seeming to scurry about like the fanciful little critters and personages of Paul Klee, Dujack's closest art historical predecessor. Equally fantastic is "Alice and Hookah," in which Lewis Carroll's charming character, hands clasped behind her back, inhabits a mysterious black rectangle somewhere between The Looking Glass and an actual gaping portal, gazing up entranced as the stylized hookah does a mesmerizing snake dance high above her head. Yet even the simplest, everyday subject can be magically transformed by Linda Dujack's singular vision. Take "Tugboat on the Hudson," where a familiar harbor scene, evoked in the sparest black linear dashes and swift splotches of pink on a cream ground becomes a miniature realm of story book enchantment.

In previous years, George Olexa exhibited his works in series related by composition and/or color, size and so on. For the present exhibition, he opts for a radical departure, pairing representational etchings in small frames with nonrepresentational ones in larger frames.

"The Gate - Alaska," an image of a rough wooden fence with colorful wildflowers in the foreground and verdant hills in the distance is juxtaposed with "New Earth," a vigorous gestural abstraction dominated by blues, browns, and various subsidiary hues. "Ivy," an intriguingly off-center composition depicting half of a potted plant rendered in line as precisely as one of Lucian Freud's portrait etchings is paired with "Night Shaol," an abstract landscape as amorphously dispersed as a Jules Olitski color field composition. Yet there is a conceptual harmony to it all that transcends stylistic considerations. Like an exhibition within the exhibition, Olexa's groupings of disparate yet somehow visually sympathetic works present the viewer with a study in complementary contrasts.

Linda Dujack

George Olexa

Inspired by the 200th anniversary of Edgar Allen Poe's poem, "The Raven,"

Linda Ganus

Linda Ganus shows an ink drawing called "crowportrait." The title is appropriate, since while Ganus makes no attempt to anthropomorphize the creature à la Disney, it's a classic head and shoulders composition with a presence like human portraiture. Indeed, not since Leonard Baskin's "The Raptors" series has any contemporary artist captured an avian personality so uncannily. Each feather is finely delineated, and the creature's one visible eye in profile gazes sidelong at the viewer with an unsettling knowingness... Audubon it certainly ain't!

Another accomplished and evocative drawing by Ganus depicts a single graceful feather set dramatically against the white of the paper. Drawn with a fine line suggesting the kind of steel nib known as a "crow-quil," it also evokes the kind of actual quill pen — perhaps made with the feather of a crow or raven! — with which, after pondering weak and weary in his study once upon a midnight dreary, Poe may have written his wonderfully spooky poem.

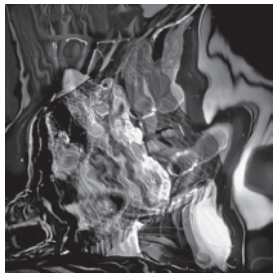
Speaking of spooky, exhibiting in a "New Expressions" exhibition for the first time, Maria Driscoll McMahon creates installations that combine classical realist draftspersonship in the manner of Ingres with paper collage details that project out of the composition in the manner of "pop-up" cards or children's books. In Driscoll's "Girl," for example, a preadolescent in a prim white blouse and plaid jumper, wearing an expression straight out of "The Bad Seed" or "Carrie," sprouts an extra pair of oversize arms that furl out to cast actual shadows behind her. The only spot of color in this otherwise monochromatic graphite drawing is a splotch of bright red at the level of the girl's navel, from which a long thin trickle drips down the front of her skirt like a menstrual stigmata signaling the onset of puberty.

A dialogue of sorts between oddly related images, including one suggesting a faded family album photo of a middle-aged couple with vaporized heads, Driscoll's installation is an unnervingly exciting new addition to this always eagerly anticipated annual drawing survey at New Century Gallery.

— Ed McCormack

Maria Driscoll McMahon

Abstract Forms as Subjective Metaphors in the Photography of Malka Inbal



"Fabric Delusion 13"

No thinking, feeling artist, no matter how much of an abstract purist, can keep the influence of emotional experience out of his or her work, try as he or she may to deny it. Indeed, one characteristic that distinguishes postmodern abstraction in all mediums from its earlier counterparts is the widespread acknowledgment that nonobjective compositions can carry all manner of submerged meanings beyond their immediately perceivable formal content.

This point is made especially well by the photographs of Malka Inbal, on view at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from April 14 through May 5. (Reception Thursday April 16, from 6 to 8m PM.)

"I joined the army at the end of the 1973 war when the corpses were brought from the battles to burial," recalls Inbal, an Israeli citizen born in Romania. "One of the female solders' duties was to go with the soldier's families to the funerals and place bouquets of flowers on the graves. So much sadness and tragedy ... so far from glory..."

Inbal's profound sense of empathy, however, did not turn her into a social realist bent on depicting injustices and human suffering in the manner of figurative artists such Ben Shahn and Leonard Baskin. Rather, much in the subliminal manner of an Abstract Expressionist, she transmutes an entire range of feelings about religious coercion, violence and loss, the crisis of aging, romantic relations, and the problems of parenthood, through the visual vehicle of pure form and color.

In this regard, Inbal belongs to the tradition of adventurous avant garde photographers ranging from Alvin Langdon Coburn, who was influenced by Vorticism in the early twentieth century, to contemporary photographic innovators such as David Stephenson and Adam Fuss, who explore aesthetic areas that were once thought to be the exclusive provinces of painting. Yet what Inbal brings to the medium that is uniquely her own is a sense of kinetic movement in photographic imagery akin to what Marcel Duchamp achieved in his famous painting with "Nude Descending a Staircase."

In fact, both the large scale (40"x40") and the vibrant, light-filled colors in the series that Inbal calls "Fabric Delusion" project an impact more related to many abstract canvases than to most photographs, placing her work firmly within the contemporary category called "painterly photography." And the manner in which she makes luminously colorful shapes swirl suggestively against an all-encompassing black background can be compared to how a choreographer makes the bodies evoke myriad emotions in the viewer by virtue of gestures ranging from the joyful to the elegiac.

"Organza fabrics were chosen, creating forms and by way of lighting, approaching the look of crystals," is how the artist poetically explains the technique employed. "Colors and shapes bubble from behind the esthetics covering the protest."

But just as knowing that a painter employed oils on canvas to create a particular picture does not diminish its power, Inbal so forthrightly disclosing her technical secrets in no way destroys the mystery of her imagery. Rather, one marvels all the more at her ability to convey so much subjective meaning, make so much magic, and evoke such immutable beauty through such ostensibly simple means.

–Byron Coleman

Expressions of the African-American Experience

Co-curated by Sonia Barnett and Elton Tucker, the recent group exhibition "Black Renaissance 2009," seen at Broadway Mall Community Center on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street, reveled in a rich diversity.

Nate Ladson's use of grisaille in his realist oil "The Corner Store" lends the atmosphere of a slightly faded snapshot to a casual gathering of older men. Ladson gives each figure a distinct character; yet the overall sense is of the men's shared histories and sympathies.

Although Mikki Powell takes a more semiabstract approach to the figure, a sense of character also comes across strongly in paintings such as "Inner City" and "Zaideco Family Band," with their flat bright color areas and expressive anatomical distortions. In the former acrylic painting, Powell nails the unflappable élan of a man "chilling" on a stoop with a bottle of beer and a cigarette, his fedora tilted at a rakish angle. In the latter a group of New Orleans musicians onstage is interpreted in the formal vernacular of classic modernism.

Sonia Barnett projects a sense of movement in her restlessly energetic acrylic paintings. Yet while Barnett's compositions are essentially abstract, allusions to the figure are everywhere evident in the her gestural strokes. Some of her compositions suggest a lively procession or the hustle and bustle of shopping, an impression enhanced by titles such as "Market Place" and "Exodus."

Robert Lee Jones combines realism with a sense of the fantastic in his still life "Art Deco,"in which a stylized mask and other unusual objects, such as an emblem bearing the image of a simplified bird, suggest a symbolic tableau rather than a random arrangement of everyday objects. The same sense of an underlying subtext or "back-story" comes across in Jones's "Christa # 2," an insightful portrait of a young woman in shorts and a sleeveless pink top seated on a wooden folding chair, her physical presence and quiet psychological intensity made clearly palpable.

Robert N. Scott reveals a unique ability to impart a fanciful intensity to elements of nature in his intricately delineated acrylic paintings, such as "Arbor Drama," wherein an ancient gnarled tree trunk calls to mind an almost ghostly apparition, an anthropomorphic spirit. And his penchant for fantasy crosses over into full-fledged surrealism in "Infinity,' in which a long, winding road ascends into the endless sky.

William Hunt is a powerful graphic artist in the tradition of the great African American draftsman Charles White. Employing charcoal and pastel as his main mediums, Hunt creates compelling humanistic visual metaphors in symbolic drawings such as "We Both Want Peace," in which the long locks of a black woman and a white woman intertwine to create a peace symbol above their heads.

Kenny Matthewson is a gutsy, funky, uninhibited young artist who, like his late predecessor Jean-Michel Basquiat, merges elements of graffiti and gestural abstraction with intrepid flair. Scrawled energetically amid a colorful welter of slashing strokes and drips, emotionally loaded words such as "Love" and "Mother," as well as spiritual terms such as "Maya," carry earnest messages in Matthewson's vigorous postmodern action paintings.

By contrast, Elton Tucker projects his messages through a style rooted in symbolic realism, in his painting "Have Faith." Tucker's mix media and acrylic composition depicts a handsome young couple in colorful African garb, their faces illuminated by brightly glowing candles. The almost prayerful expressions of the young man and the young woman, as they blow gently into the flames, evoke the sense of spirituality and inner peace implicit in the title.

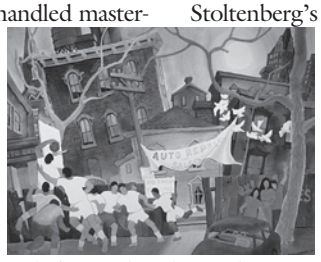
The figure in Carol Maria Weaver's work in stained glass/mosaic "Silent Clown" appears based on the famous French whiteface mime Marcel Marceau, and taken in the context of this show, seems to comment wittily on the old minstrel tradition of blackface. Conversely, "Melanie," another work in mixed media by Weaver is a veritable visual liberation song in which the flowing locks of a beautiful black woman are enlivened by an entire rainbow of hues.

Two final artists bring highly original interpretations to the subject of dance in their respective acrylic paintings: Barbara Eison White's "Dancers in Motion" is notable for the way she makes the close-valued tones and the fluid contours of her figures create undulating rhythms. Nancy Green invests her "Lindy Hoppers" with authentic period feeling by virtue of her attention to detail and expressive use of monochromes. Both artists make unique contributions to a splendidly curated exhibition.

—Marie R. Pagano

Expanding the Horizons of Watercolor

Watercolor is such an innately beautiful medium that we sometimes tend to take its more lyrical attributes for granted. However, it is the unexpected qualities of aquarelle, when it has been handled masterfully, that finally reveal its full breadth and range.



Edwin C Shuttleworth

For as long as anyone can remember, The American Watercolor Watercolor Society has been consistently presenting the medium's many facets in major surveys, such as its 142nd Annual International Exhibit, on view at the Salmagundi Club, 47 Fifth Avenue, through April 26 (1-5 PM daily; Tuesday 1-8 PM; Closed Monday).

One example of a subject not always associated with the medium is Edwin C. Shuttleworth's "Inner City #7." The painting depicts young men scrambling around in a makeshift basketball court on a vacant lot, one kid leaping up to slam-dunking the ball into a net nailed to a gnarled, leafless tree. A big afternoon sun sheds its waning light over ramshackle tenements, a church steeple, and a lopsided telephone pole in the background, bathing the entire scene in a golden glow, as a flock of pigeons, white as doves, swirls skyward. The expressive rhythms of the composition are amplified by Shuttleworth's exquisitely harmonized palette of mostly brown and yellow ochre hues.

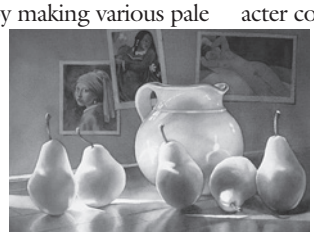
Carol Ann Schrader also shows a lively city scene, albeit in a more photorealist style, in which children in the company of an adult male instructor decorate the pavement with a plethora of lively graffiti and designs in colored chalks. While this painting has the casual quality of a snapshot, Schrader lends it an enduring quality by virtue of her ability to merge a variety of diverse details into a harmonious and aesthetically satisfying whole.

Celia Clark

Indeed, urban scenes seem to truly come into their own in this exhibition, exemplified in the work of artists such as Antonio Masi, whose "Under the Bridge" is notable for the artist's dramatic use of chiaroscuro to capture the gritty atmosphere of an out of the way street where traffic disappears into the yawning darkness of the underpass as shadowy figures take on the appearance of phantoms in the distance.

Steel beams also inspire two other dynamic compositions: In "Gearing Up," Michele Rea delineates each rivet and shadow with detailed verisimilitude; yet the severely cropped composition makes the structure difficult to identify, diverting our attention to its sheer abstract power. Conversely in "Rolling Railroad Bridge," Donald Stoltenberg depicts a distant freight train steaming toward a structure that is clearly identifiable, set against a vibrant blue sky. Yet Stoltenberg's composition still manages to project an abstract thrust akin to Franz Kline's boldly intersecting Abstract Expressionist brush strokes.

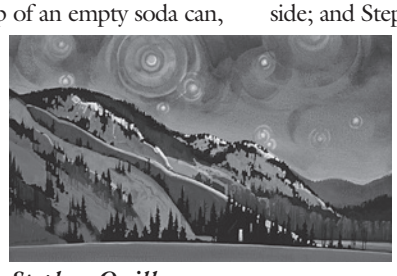
In "Detour," on the other hand, Paul Jackson presents us with a luminous vision of 42nd street with its multitude of neon lights and colorful signs mirrored on the rain-slick pavement and sidewalks. Perhaps distracted by the slightly tawdry glamour of the theater and movie marquees, tourists strolling by under umbrellas fail to notice the big white pelican out in the middle of the street amid the yellow cabs. Or perhaps they fully expect such surreal details to be part of life in the big city and are much more impressed by Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum or the latest sexy billboard for Calvin Klein Jeans. By contrast "The Color Purple," another view of Times Square by Jean Grastorf plays off the title of Alice Walker's play, visible on one of the marquees, by making various pale yet luminous gradations of purple the most prominent hues in the composition. By doing so, Grastorf lends a potentially hectic scene a dreamlike poetry akin to the work of the late Chinese-American watercolor master Dong Kingman.



Barbara Fox

Another playful title, "Surround Sound," is applied to Natalie Smythe's realist painting of a marching band musician in a brilliant red and blue Sgt. Pepper uniform, his torso encircled by the serpentine curves of a tuba. Here, the picture's pièce de resistance is the instrument's dazzlingly rendered shiny brass surface, in which, on close scrutiny, distorted reflections of fellow musicians and spectators may be discerned.

A tour de force of another type is Preecha Promprabtuk's "Speaker # 4," an essentially abstract, wittily inexplicable composition in which minutely detailed yet not quite identifiable imagery suggests a Rube Goldberg contraption made up of an empty soda can, rearranged computer innards, wires, an old phonograph and torn-out printed letters in different typefaces spelling out "Listen Now." Although the Promprabtuk's picture suggests a zany combination of collage and assemblage techniques, it is apparently all accomplished in watercolor trompe-l'oeil.



Stephen Quiller

Natalie Smythe

While the word "portrait" normally makes most people think of oil painting, watercolor has its own unique attributes when it comes to capturing the human personality. In Sandy Mezinis's "Marielle," a close-up of a tan-skinned, browned-eyed young woman with a mane of lustrous black curls, the vibrant freshness of the medium and the artist's swift strokes seem especially well-suited to evoking the vital beauty of the subject. Equally impressive is Celia Clark's "Zipper Trouble," which depicts a woman wearing a black velvet hat as she attempts to fasten a 1930s vintage red and white floral patterned dress at her hip. Although the woman's face is downcast to her task in a manner more casual than one usually associates with a conventional portrait, and her eyes (normally an important clue to personality) cannot be seen, her determined character comes across nonetheless.

Because landscape and still life are more frequently associated with watercolor than the aforementioned subjects, we take special notice when an artist makes them stand out. Keiko Yasuoka certainly sets her work apart in this manner with "Beautiful Morning," where the freshness of early daylight infuses a crisply evoked composition, centered on a crystal vase of flowers and a silver tea service, set out on a white tablecloth in front of a white-framed window.

Another outstanding still life by Barbara Fox makes a row of five shapely peaches and an equally sensuous white porcelain pitcher visually synonymous with feminine beauty, juxtaposed as they are with postcards showing paintings of women by Vermeer, Gauguin, and Modigliani.

Landscape also makes strong showing in several stellar watercolors, such as a boldly brushed, mostly golden, semiabstract composition called "Field Song" by Constantine Kermes; "A Walk in November," a misty vision on rice paper by Frederick Wong of a strolling couple dwarfed by a wintry countryside; and Stephen Quiller's enchanting star-lit snow scene "Winter Evening, View from my Studio."

As always, in the case of these huge yearly surveys by the AWS, the examples cited here offer only the merest hint of the many treasures to be savored at the Salmagundi Club this year.

— Byron Coleman

Weathering the Iffy New Art Market with Bob and Marina

by Ed McCormack

Glamorous art world couple though we are, my wife is still addicted to Jack's 99 Cents Store. She loves running up and down those narrow, crowded aisles, filling her plastic basket with useful items like the legal pads on which I scribble and the calming chamomile tea she urges on me like Methadone to moderate my heavy caffeine jones. She also likes to stock up on canned or packaged foods that often reach their expiration dates in our kitchen cabinets or eventually get given or thrown away to make room for other discounted items we never get around to using, since working at home all day makes us stir-crazy and we usually end up eating out at one of the overpriced yuppie places here on the Upper East Side.

Bargain hunting seems to be a sport for my wife, like those long ago Easter egg hunts on the front lawn of her grandmother's horse farm in Virginia that she remembers so fondly. But as the recession deepens, Jeannie has noticed that certain items which were once 99 cents have been bumped up to $ 1.29 or more, taking some of the fun out of the game.

And the same perverse economics seem to have taken hold in Chelsea, where landlords in some gallery buildings are inexplicably raising rents, even as sales drop near zero, more and more employees are laid off, and real estate experts keep claiming that commercial rentals are among the properties hardest hit by the present slump. How they expect to find new gallery tenants is anybody's guess, in view of art economist David Rusin's declaration: "For the arts sector, I wouldn't call this a recession. It's a full-blown, sustained depression."

In an interview in the neighborhood weekly Chelsea Now, Rusin, the founder of the art market research firm Rusin & Company, goes even further: "In two years, if you walk the streets of Chelsea, two thirds of the businesses that are open now will no longer exist."

Yet at a time when one might think it would be prudent for management companies to continue collecting rents while riding out an uncertain market, some galleries are being forced to close when their leases come up for renewal. It happened to our friends Bob and Marina recently, when their lease expired and their landlord demanded a thirty-nine percent increase to renew. Estimating that between them they've already sunk close to a cool million into the business since opening their gallery in 2006, they decided it was time to pack up and move on.

So one afternoon a few weeks ago, Jeannie and I took them down to the Lower East Side to look at empty storefronts, of which there were now noticeably more than a few months earlier, when we went down there to research an article on "the city's hottest new art district." While this might have seemed superficially encouraging for prospective renters, it could only mean many more gallery ventures had failed in a market where, as an article in The New York Times put it, "sales are vaporizing" and "careers are leaking air."

But Bob, the eternal optimist, had already formulated a pet theory, which he repeated almost verbatim in every still-surviving gallery where we stopped to shmooze and gather intelligence.

The standard pose for some of the more trendy gallery people is that of a human statue sitting in a white cube wearing black and looking snottily aloof. For a visitor to disturb the silence with an earnest question is normally tantamount to breaking wind. It's an attitude imported from uptown which must be maintained even at 3 p.m., on the Lower East Side, when the inner city high school kids swarm the streets and it sounds like an insurrection may be brewing out there. But now foot traffic in the galleries had apparently become so infrequent that most of the sitters seemed almost giddy with gratitude for human company, like forest fire lookouts when the rangers drop by their lonely outposts every few months with supplies.

Still, after the appropriate introductions, commiserations, and small talk had been exchanged, you could see their eyes glaze over as Bob launched into his over-the-top rap about the possible upside of the crisis, his motor-mouthed rhetoric rapidly building up to a full head of steam and concluding as follows:

"Alls I'm saying, bottom line, is that all of us (and it doesn't matter if you're strictly into the missionary position or you like to do it on the trampoline), at the end of the day all of us being on the Titanic together — including Larry Gagosian, Mary Boone, and Pace-Wildenstein — could weed out the mercenaries from the people with integrity and lead to a level playing field where we can all get back to what really matters about art instead of just thinking in terms of its monetary value."

While not exactly contagious, so irrepressible was Bob's gallows optimism that nobody had the heart to suggest sinking with the big movers and shakers of the art scene might not be quite the same as rising with them — or even to wonder aloud if there would be enough life preservers to go around.

Yet Bob's main point is well taken. Wasn't I the guy who, at the height of the boom, went around arguing that art itself had been healthier before artists had so much temptation to sell out? No doubt my mere use of that term dated me as some sort of sour-grapes beatnik, totally out of synch with practical postmodern reality. But I really believed — and still believe — that most artists produce better work when they're not all trying to be the next Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst. In any case, something had to change in a market so overheated that some of the more influential dealers took to haunting prestigious art schools like corporate headhunters, trawling for promising students to turn into instant art stars, with waiting lists of collectors even before they finished their MFAs.

By the same token, nobody who earns a modest living in this business — a precarious enterprise in the best of times — would rush to agree with the writer who recently stated that "a financial scouring can only be good for American art..."

Provided the casualty count does not turn out to be too high, however, a slight scaling down could restore a semblance of sanity. At least the industry website artmarketmoniter.com seemed optimistic when it posted the opinion that "The problem the art market faces today is not the level of sales but the year-over-year comparisons to the market of 2007-2008. No one involved in the business expects — or even wants — those days to return. What they need is to establish a baseline level of buying and selling that allows the market to correct, consolidate and, eventually, thrive."

This almost begins to sound like the "more level playing field" that Bob was always raving about even before the boom went bust. He parroted this favorite catch phrase so incessantly as to make one almost grateful for the slight hearing loss incurred writing about rock and roll bands in one's youth. Yet you had to love him for the obvious purity of his intentions and for how the almost archaic word "integrity" worked

its innocent way into almost every sentence that he uttered.

Indeed, both partners' integrity has always seemed to me beyond question. From the very beginning, it was clear that they had opened the gallery with only the most idealistic intentions, after other business ventures at which they had had considerable success ceased to present them with sufficient challenges and satisfactions. Some might say they went about it naively. Certainly I tried to warn them, when they started idealizing creative people as a class, that not all artists were noble souls, and that their sterling intentions toward them might not always be rewarded, even with simple gratitude. And it didn't help that they began with few collectors or art world contacts to speak of. But from what I could gather, they were both at a point in their lives when the pressing psychological need to start over in a more creative field fully justified any risks involved. One might say that they went into it with their eyes wide open and what they lacked in experience they both more than made up for in enthusiasm. (Marina, who had no previous background in art, was especially gung-ho, her girlish excitement downright endearing as she devoured books on art history from a reading list she had requested of me and boned up on her own on more practical matters relating to the business, concerning which I could be of no help to her at all.)

Left to right: Sebastien Aurillon, Bob Hogge and Marina Hadley of Monkdogz Urban Art

But my purpose in writing this is not to hype my friends; at this point I'm not even sure it would be helpful for them if I did. What I'm more concerned with conveying here is that the way Bob and Marina handled themselves as human beings and conducted business won my respect and caused me to become inordinately fond of them in a relatively short period of time.

From the start, their selection policy had been more direct and democratic than that of most other galleries; in fact, it verged on the anarchic. Nobody had to make an appointment to drop off their slides and then wait weeks or even months for a verdict. Artists were encouraged to walk in off the street. They'd be offered a seat and bottled water or a soft drink; their slides would be given a careful going over, and they'd get an immediate response, pro or con. Provided the work was reasonably portable, they could even shlep the actual paintings or sculptures to the gallery for an impromptu viewing, getting more than a foot in the door right away.

That's how the gallery ended up showing over 170 artists from 48 countries in only 36 months, gaining art world credibility by racking up respectable midlevel sales for many of them in record time. Some were mature talents with impressive exhibition histories, who had fallen victim to the ageism rampant in a field that runs on novelty, and were now given new leases on their careers. Others were young and previously unknown, not because their work was unworthy, but because they couldn't get anyone to even look at it.

Some of the foreign artists were so strapped for cash that they couldn't afford hotel rooms when they arrived for their exhibitions. So Bob and Marina, both of whom live on Long Island, would put them up in one or the other of their homes, probably putting no small strain on the tolerance of their respective spouses: Mary Ellen, a curator at F.I.T., and Mark, a C.P.A. Having met some of the more exotic members of the gallery roster, with their novel piercings and tattoos, one can only imagine what it might have been like to come down to breakfast and find them rooting around in the refrigerator. But it all went along with Bob and Marina's philosophy of running an art gallery more in the manner of a hospitable hippie commune than a pretentious and forbidding aesthetic boutique.

At the same time, with her melodious British accent, vivacious personality, and the voluptuous, full-bodied beauty of an operatic diva, Marina brought a real touch of class to the operation. And her social skills and finesse as an event planner, honed by her background in corporate business development, invariably made the gallery's opening receptions more memorable than most.

Bob has a brasher persona, a more checkered history, and the kind of street smarts that made me immediately recognize him as a kindred spirit, as though we might have been pirates or pulled some heist together in a previous life. (Of course, I mean this in the very best way, as in Dylan's famous line, "to live outside the law you gotta be honest.") An artist and former trader in gold and God only knows what else, Bob comes on like a carnival barker in Armani and alligator cowboy boots. An inveterate showman, he is so enamored of hoopla that he had to be talked out of featuring live body painters at the gallery's inaugural reception, relenting only after I convinced him that bare flesh covered in Day-Glo swirls might smack too much of the Coney Island Mermaid Parade — perhaps not quite the tone one wants to set from the gitgo! However, for the press-kit photo, he could not be deterred from sporting the trademark wraparound shades that make him look like the old comic book super hero Submariner, style being an area in which Bob defers to no man.

But beneath the lounge lizard exterior lurks a serious painter of tactile abstract canvases, somewhat akin to those of Richard Pousette-Dart, which he rarely exhibits these days, having made pushing the work of other artists his main priority. When Bob did hang one of his own paintings, it was

invariably placed somewhat out of the way, on a wall between the gallery proper and the office area. For it was there less to impress visitors than to make the point to his artists that they weren't, as he put it, "dealing with just another schmuck in a suit."

As we continued to make the rounds on the Lower East Side that afternoon, Bob and Marina's prospects began to seem ever more discouraging. The director of one of the older galleries even complained that not only was nobody coming in, but some of the newer venues which had opened to give established Chelsea spaces satellites near The New Museum were beginning to snub those who had actually pioneered the Lower East Side scene. Wanting in on this vital new market during the boom, they seemed eager to distance themselves from their more endangered neighbors now that there was blood in the streets.

Shaking our heads at the irony of this, we all opted for suicide by cholesterol. As we strolled over to Katz's Delicatessen, famous since W.W.II for its slogan "Send a Salami to Your Boy in the Army" and for a lethal species of pastrami that does not travel above Houston Street, Bob said, "Listen, man, I know you're antisocial and hate to go anywhere and all that, but we're gonna have a closing party at the gallery the Saturday after next and Marina and I would love if you guys could stop by."

"Jeannie already guessed that you'd probably be having something and informed me that we'd have to show up to pay our respects," I replied drily.

Bob grinned. "You know us, man: any excuse for a party."

Since Bob's Irish and Marina's half English and half Japanese, they struck a compromise and held an Irish wake. Usually when I see those two and their puckish little French assistant Sebastian, I get something rare for me: a warm feeling like when you're an infant and you pee down your own leg. But that night, walking into the gallery was like stepping under a cold shower. When I went over to the bountifully heaped buffet table that Marina invariably provides, it reminded me of a body laid out in a funeral parlor. So I turned away and asked the bartender for a Diet Coke.

Since I resolved some years ago to go through life without anesthesia and stopped drinking, most social occasions call to mind Sartre's famous line, "Hell is other people." Surrounded by them now, trapped like a laboratory rat in this glaringly bright cage of chattering humanity, I pined for my usual Saturday night ritual of staying at home and listening to Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" on National Public Radio.

"Well, the sooner we pay our condolences the sooner we can leave," I said, steering my wife in the direction of our host and hostess.

Bob seemed even more pumped up than usual, albeit in slightly a morose laughing-to-keep from crying manner, as he greeted us warmly then launched right into yet another variation on his Titanic rap. Like me, he resolved to quit drinking at a certain age, seemingly the only alternative to dying for people of our shared ethnic background. So when I asked him in the most casual possible way what that yellow stuff in his glass was, it was a relief when he inserted the phrase "orange juice" right into the mounting rhythms of his monologue without missing a beat.

I bore with him through all the manic reiterations and non sequiturs until his mind caught up with what his mouth had been saying and he fell abruptly silent, that familiar little grin of sheepish self-bemusement slowly making its way across his face.

"But exactly!" I said, patting him on the shoulder, then turned to hear what Marina was saying to Jeannie. Marina sounded so appealingly star struck as she trilled on about what a genuine, unaffected person a well known "fusion" guitarist who had just left with his wife seemed to be that, instead of grousing about music that can't make up its mind whether it wants to rock or swing, I asked her how the search for a new gallery was going.

"Oh, it's going fabulously," she said. "We already have a couple of different realtors looking into locations for us. It will either be in Chelsea or on the Lower East Side, this time on the ground floor, and we will definitely be up and running when the new art season begins in September."

I recently read a first-person account of autism by a woman who said her way of coping with social situations was to observe what "normal" people do and mimic it. Although I've never been officially diagnosed, that seemed like sound advice anyway. So, after Marina was called away by hostess duties and Jeannie went off to the ladies room, I decided to circulate.

"I can get laid anytime I want to, but he's the one I'm worried about," some geriatric rake in a toupee was saying to Sebastian and a huddle of his trendy young friends. But I didn't stick around to hear the rest.

"So you're supposed to be an EMS guy?" a woman with a ring through her nose challenged, thrusting her bosom at a man whose nose and mustache looked like they came with his glasses. "What's the worst thing you ever saw?"

"I don't know, maybe a severed head on the West Side Highway," came the reply. "But, then again, it evens out: Last night I delivered a baby. That was messy but nowhere near as nasty."

"You know what show I can't wait to see?" another man was saying, as I worked my way across the room. "The one at MoMA by that Chinese artist whose name I can't remember. The guy who ate fried rice until he vomited, then jumped out a window and broke both his ankles, then locked himself in a cage for a whole year?"

"His name is Tehching Hsieh, actually," someone informed him. "They say he's a real genius, the most profound conceptualist since Marcel Duchamp."

It would have seemed like just another gallery opening if one didn't keep overhearing, here and there, people mouthing platitudes like "One door closes, another opens" and "Every ending marks a new beginning." If those were not the exact sentiments often heard at funerals, they seemed close enough to make one wonder if Bob and Marina really would be able to reopen somewhere in September. Not for a minute, mind you, did I doubt their determination, both being thoroughly committed to their mission and among the biggest gluttons for punishment I've ever known. But with so many practical factors mitigating against a comeback, could anyone blame them if they took a long, hard look at the bottom line and decided to cut their losses?

At the same time, Bob and Marina are somewhat unique in that this gallery venture seems to be more than a business to them. From what I can gather, it's more like a search for meaning, a quasi-spiritual mission, or whatever one chooses to call those outlandishly corny-sounding yet very real crises which can visit thoughtful individuals who have sampled more than a fair portion of monetary success and finally found it wanting. At this point, while both of them would obviously be capable of earning a good living in any number of other ways, I suspect that remaining in the art business has come to represent something altogether transcendent of practical considerations for Bob and Marina. And I also feel certain that their respective spouses must be well aware of this — or why else would they have stood by watching good money being thrown after bad and not pulled the plug long ago?

Still, even the deepest wellsprings of marital sympathy must have their limits. So all I can do is hold my breath until September and hope that nobody talks sense into my good friends before they sign a new lease. It's less a matter of misery loving company than of some of us needing to know that there are still people around who are just as crazy as we are.

* * *

While suspense builds as to whether or not Bob and Marina will return to the art scene as physical entities next season, check out their informative and amusing blog (also featuring the wry gallicisms of their colleague Sebastien) artblahblah.com.

opportunities

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The CLWAC's 2009 Members' Exhibition: Plethora of Pleasures

A wide variety of styles, ranging from Photorealism to Abstract Expressionism graced the 2009 edition of the Annual Members Exhibition of The Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Art Club, named for a 19th century philanthropist who was the only woman on the founding board of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Seen recently at Broome Street Gallery, 498 Broome Street, the show included frequently exhibited artists as well as some newcomers — at least to this reviewer.

Terry Ferrier

One of the more familiar names was Harriet Regina Marion, represented by a strong mixed media work titled "Softshell Bluepoint," in which cursive, clawlike collage shards, tactile lumps of pigment and pastel hues combine to create a dynamic vortex of an abstract composition. Another member who invariably offers surprises is Elvira Dimitrij, here showing a witty Neo-Dadaist statement in oil called "Art Imitates Art," featuring a copy of the Mona Lisa with a sticker saying "Disguise" taped onto it.

One of the more lyrical paintings in the show was an acrylic composition called "Birds in Flight" by Terry Ferrier, capturing a flurrying sense of movement and light in soft strokes of color, with some of the graceful avian figures blending ethereally into the surrounding sky, as though soaring between two worlds. By contrast, a down-to-earth subject presented an occasion for a striking formal statement in Lynn Reardon's still life in oil "Take Out," with the strongly simplified rectangle of the Chinese food container sprouting a pair of chopsticks and set against a brilliant red background.

Joyce Zeller

As always, landscape was a popular subject: Delores Brink gave us one of the more gorgeously effusive visions in her pastel of trees exploding with pink blossoms, "Spring in Bloom." Flo Kemp employs more subdued hues in the ocher range in her etching, "Lake Serene," with its meditative image of softly modulated hills presented in a diptych format that creates a sequential sense of viewing the same landscape in two distinct moments of time. In another manner, akin to the aesthetic of Asian painting, albeit made more materially palpable in her mixed media technique, Cary Thorp Brown captures a sense of the sublime in the luminous sky intersected by the linear traceries of delicate tree limbs that she evokes in her composition "Blue Morning." And Lynne Kroll summons up her own fanciful blend of contemporary chinoiserie and semiabstract surrealism, with silhouetted birds and suggestions of metaphysical landscape, in her work in watermedia "Love is in the Air."

A more realistic yet highly expressive interpretation of a landscape subject can be seen in Jacquelyn Kammerer Cattaneo's vibrantly brisk pastel of a rugged tree so melded with its craggy terrain that it is titled " Root or Rock?" Then there is "Into the Mist," an oil by Bethanne Kinsella Cople which could almost be classified as a "skyscape," given the manner in which the magnificently evoked, light-filled expanse of sky above the low-lying strip of verdant land dominates its meticulous realist composition.

Images more akin to portraiture than to generalized figuration were another area of interest in this exhibition. One of the most detailed was Randy Globus's photorealist composition "Brass Ring," a watercolor as solidly configured as an oil, depicting a somewhat tremulous-looking little girl clutching tightly to the pole as she rides a fanciful feline figure on an ornately colorful carousel. Reality once-removed was the subject of Florence Kaplan's oil in grisaille, "Waiting," its monochromic treatment of several people lined up outside a frame house under a cloudy sky giving the impression of a family album photo shadowed by eerie portents. A contrastingly lighthearted mood comes across in Joyce Zeller's pastel on black paper "Washboard Blues," where the object of the title transcends its mundane role in the laundry room to be employed as a musical instrument by a young woman with long blond tresses flowing out from under a big straw hat, dressed in dishabille blouse harking back to the hippie era. And despite the somewhat misleading title, another sprightly youthful subject is featured in Chong sun Oh's skillful full length oil portrait "Lady in Red Shoes," her long dark hair spilling over the shoulders of her Navy style pea coat, the rolled-up cuffs of her grundgy jeans insouciantly setting off her incongruously dainty red "mary janes."

Priscilla Heep

Also a portrait of sorts, "Duke's Turf," an acrylic painting by Carol Cosh-Harrison, captures the cocky personality of a colorful rooster strutting his stuff in a sunny barnyard domain of which he is obviously lord of the manor. And even an inanimate subject that actually belonged to the genre of still life took on the presence of portraiture in Elaine Gaskell"s "Red Stature," an oil of an ivory figurine of a bearded Chinese mandarin standing with proprietary pride beside a china plate piled high with lemons and limes.

With an exhibition as chock full of first rate work as this, one must finally resort to random impressions relayed with telegraphic brevity to suggest its diversity and scope; so, here goes:

Susan Winter's work in watercolor and pastel, "A Touch of Spring" imparted to floral still life an Abstract Expressionist vivacity, replete with gestures and drips, in bright primary hues. Priscilla Heep's stoneware clay sculptures of skeletal little critters were at once comic and poignant. Jean Kroeber has her own unique gift for imparting emotional resonance to lissome, statuesque female figures in her wood sculptures such as "Resignation." Nina Maguire conjured up a magically atmospheric sense of an urban snowstorm through the most minimal of means, with the merest suggestion of scattered shadowy figures and blurry auto and street lights, in her acrylic painting "NYC Winter 1991." Jinx Lindenauer's "Mother and Child" is another tour de force of economy, strongly evoking the deep emotions of maternal devotion in the merged contours of simple circular forms roughly worked in plaster. Conversely, in Louise Peterson's considerably more detailed canine sculpture Bella & the Bug II," the creature's consternation at an invisible adversary is made manifest in the furrows on its brow. And then there is "Waliing in the Woods of Robert Frost," a mixed media abstraction by Joyce Hill, in which Autumnal hues, photographic images of trees, and gestural vivacity convey a lyrical sense of the poet's rural milieu.

Different strokes for different folks, as the saying goes, provided the many diverse pleasures in this richly inclusive exhibition by members of the Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Art Club. –J Sanders Eaton

Marc Cavello: Drawn to the Line Itself

Paul Klee spoke of "taking a line for a walk"; Joseph Campbell told us "Follow your bliss." Marc Cavello appears to take fruitful heed of both. With refreshingly unpretentious candor, Cavello also cites the actor/artist Peter Falk, who said in an interview "My idea of heaven is to spend the day drawing," as an inspiration for his solo exhibition "This is the Free Underground," at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, through April 11.

"A new trend is developing," Cavello declares in an artist statement that reads like a personal manifesto, " leaving the time tested image of the drug rattled manic depressive artist in the past. The new artist is sober, honest and free as expressed in the title of my show. THIS IS THE FREE UNDERGROUND."

Although Cavello is referring to the inner freedom he feels when he creates art, which he likens to meditation and his practice of Bikram Yoga, he would appear to belong to another, more palpable underground as well: that new breed of young artists who challenge the traditional dominance of painting by making drawing a primary medium. They first surfaced in force in a manner suggesting a nascent movement in the 2004 Whitney Biennial, which featured work by Ernesto Caivano, Robyn O'Neil, Raymond Pettibon, and Zak Smith — all of whom present drawings as a finished works of art, rather than sketches or preliminary studies.

Judging from the earlier works on his website (www.MarcCavello.com), unlike some of his fellow draftsmen, who came out of the zine, comix, and punk graphics scenes, Marc Cavello seems to have been a fine artist all along. However he has been involved in photography, cinematography, video, and music (as both producer and performer), and shares with other artists a free-wheeling generational attraction to multimedia. He also shares their bare-bones economy of means, saying, "I believe that drawing is simple, accessible, and beautiful. The medium has limitless potential. The drawer can get to work right now, for the price of loose change, and create in total freedom."

As a draftsman, Cavello employs line with more fluid proficiency than most, moving easily between abstract and figuratively allusive forms with the flick of a wrist. He seems closest for the pure profusion of his graphic output to Zak Smith, who made a different drawing for every page in Thomas Pynchon's huge novel "Gravity's Rainbow."

Cavello, however, seems to generate imagery even more effortlessly, as though the line, at times, takes him for a walk, rather than vice versa — and all he has to do is hang on as the scenery goes flying by at breakneck speed! Stark, inky black against the white of the paper, his line thickens and

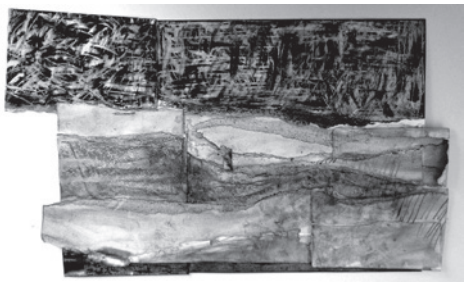
thins, twists and turns, giving suggestions of actual things that just as quickly morph back into abstraction. In a drawing called "Freeraw," for example, a strong central form that initially appears nonobjective suggests, on closer perusal, a demonic head akin to those of the fantasy writer and draftsman Clive Barker, with one intense black eye peering out of its oddly-jumbled countenance and a maze of possible brain matter at its see-thru crown. Other drawings can be as lyrically rhythmical as the Japanese manga master Hokusai's famous print "The Wave."

However, "Rorschaching" specific subject matter into the individual compositions of Marc Cavello is hardly the point. Best seen in overall wall-covering grids, as he often exhibits them, they are a purely cumulative phenomenon: exhilarating expressions of pure, untrammeled, blissful energy.

— Ed McCormack

Lily David's "Fragments" Come to Chelsea

At once lyrical and formidable, the mixed media works of Lily David present the viewer with a host of intriguing contradictions that the artist resolves with consummate grace, in her exhibition at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from April 14 through May 5. (Reception: Thursday, April 16, from 6 to 8 PM.)



"5 Fragments 2006"

David, who was born in Mexico but immigrated with her family to Israel as a child, has innovated a technique that auspiciously complements her aesthetic approach. Inspired in part by her former career as a theatrical set designer, she employs torn and folded paper to create compositions that close the gap between painting and sculpture with 3-D forms protruding from a two dimension surface. The resulting pieces strike an exquisite balance between the ethereal and the physically palpable. However it is the manner in which she combines her solidly constructed surfaces with a loose, painterly lyricism that makes her work truly unique.

Although David was influenced in her early work by having spent part of her childhood in rural Mexico and being exposed to the brilliant colors of that country's folkloric art, the more austere pale blue and tan hues most prominent in the recent series she calls "Fragments" grew out of doing her military service in the Israeli Air Force and being stationed for two years in the desert. Indeed, these pieces, redolent of vast expanses of sky and sand, suggest an almost archaic grandeur. For while created with paper, the lightest of art materials, they suggest a weightiness and heft akin to ancient tablets.

Another paradox is that while these works, according to the artist, were occasioned by "living in Israel under a tense reality with almost daily pain, sadness and sorrow," they also project a transcendent sense of serenity. Their forms unfurl majestically, the combination of jutting, craggy surfaces evoking an arid landscape interrupted abruptly by the often uneven edges of the compositions, which incorporate elements of bas-relief and "shaped canvas" in the more malleable medium of paper.

At the same time, David's manner of painting is akin to the Lyrical Abstraction of the New York School painter Helen Frankenthaler, and for all the poetic personal resonance of her subject matter, her compositions finally succeed by virtue of their formidable formal qualities. Indeed, an insightful statement that the painter and critic Fairfield Porter once made about ancient Greek sculpture can be applied to David's work as well: "As sculpture got superficially to look more like nature, it grew more abstract."

For while her pieces evoke the sense of a stark and unforgiving desert landscape, it is finally through their pure plastic values — their incongruous yet highly effective confluence of sculptural and painterly qualities, the chromatic frisson of their pale yet luminous color harmonies, and the bold spaciousness of their forms — that they ultimately distinguish themselves.

Few artists in recent memory have combined such disparate qualities as a rugged tactility and a lyrical delicacy as impressively as Lily David does in this series of works. At once intimate and monumental, her "Fragments," although apparently hard-won by experience, possess a deceptively effortless-seeming beauty that remains vivid in memory long after one has viewed them.

— Peter Wiley

Discovering Rania Emmanouel's Fertile Vocabulary of Fantastic Imagery

Entering Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, for the recent solo exhibition of the Greek painter Rania Emmanouel, one immediately found oneself in a rarefied realm. Although born in Athens, Greece, where she has lived and worked since 1986, after studying architecture in Rome and Art in Athens and Chicago, Emmanouel actually inhabits an inner world of imagination which can be found on no map but exists vividly in her paintings. It is a world of silences and exquisite metaphysical landscapes as peculiarly evocative as the desolate plazas of Giorgio de Chirico or the unearthly mindscapes of his admirer Yves Tanguy. Unlike the terrains of those earlier surrealists, however, Emmanouel's fantastic realm is not a forbidding place. Rather, it is an enchanted dreamspace, apparently inhabited primarily by birds. Granted there is a suggestion that humans may be present somewhere offstage, since bicycles play a prominent part in Emmanouel's compositions, often with plump apples balanced oddly on their seats. For apples are also among Emmanouel's favorite symbols, along with the trees upon which they grow. Apples of either a rosy or greenish cast are also scattered about in patterns that appear casual but never quite random on the expanses of grass or earth below. These Edenic fruits are obviously potent symbols the elusiveness of whose meanings within the overall context of Emmanouel's paintings imbue them with great mystery. But mystery, after all, is everywhere evident in these works, which operate like conundrums, spurring all manner of imaginative interpretations on the part of the viewer.

"Waiting"

While one ponders the possible meanings of the objects that Emmanouel juxtaposes (for the guessing itself is a delectably tantalizing activity!), the artist's technique provides more palpable pleasures. Yet, even here one hesitates to put too much emphasize on anything as mundane as material substance. For, in truth, her colors seem composed of tinted air, so limpid are the hues she apparently applies in the translucent of glazes. Her skies are especially exquisite, seemingly composed of the palest blues, with hints of yellow seeping through, as though the brush had been dipped in liquid light rather than physical pigment.

For while Emmanouel works in the modern medium of acrylics she employs them so delicately, with such luminous finesse, as to invite comparison with ancient frescoes or the exacting oil technique of Surrealism's great Netherlandish forerunner Hieronymus Bosch. And although her vision is nowhere near as grim as that of the latter artist, it is infused with an affecting atmospheric poetry, a lovely sense of melancholy which lends psychological impact to such visual anomalies as the tree-roots that metamorphose into a bird's claw in the composition entitled "Waiting." Here, too, one sees a beautiful bird whose posture and the serene gaze suggests infinite patience, as it waits on a t-shaped perch near a lush tree with a profusion of green leaves and what appear, in this case, to be oranges rather than apples. Indeed, one such fruit balances magically on the crossbar of the bird's perch, while three blank, pale-colored flags blow as though in a gentle breeze on the opposite side of the composition.

Another three such flags, this time enlivened with contrasting checkerboard squares, appear in the painting called "Cycling," where the bike with the plumb apple balanced on its seat is suspended on the periphery of a large circle inscribed on the ground. Within the circle, some apples are scattered like balls in a game while others lay outside it, as though having fallen from the nearby tree. Here, as in the previous painting, while Emmanouel's paint quality is characteristically meticulous and fine, subtle texture is provided via the judicious addition of several tiny, delicate stones affixed to the surface of the canvas. However, rather than as concession to the modern conventions of mixed media or collage, Emmanouel seems to employ such materials to enhance the innate mysteriousness of her timeless vision. For instead of calling attention to themselves, these natural elements blend seamlessly into her pictures. For example, while the minute mineral fragments in "Waiting" could be seen as literal stones on the painted ground, given their placement at the bottom of the composition, in "Cycling," where they are affixed to the upper left edge of the painting, they suggest a flock of birds growing ever more distant as they ascend to vanish into the sky.

The bicycle with the apple on its seat is also seen in the composition that Emmanouel calls "Penalty," and appears again in "First Place," atop a pedestal carved with the Roman numeral "I" ("II" and "III" mark its other levels), clearly the winner in some metaphysical race of the artist's imagination. Yet another fanciful product of that fertile creative resource is the old-fashioned choo-choo that chugs along in the distance as a snail makes its way up the trunk of a tree and an apple descends on a parachute in the painting entitled "The Train."

Indeed, in much the same way that poets employ words to compose their verses, Rania Emmanouel combines her unique imagistic vocabulary to create visions calculated to provoke what she refers to as "the unexpected smile of life that is always there."

It seems no wonder, then, that her many group and solo exhibitions have attracted collectors in Greece, Holland, Belgium, and England. One feels fairly certain that, as she becomes better known in the United States through her exhibitions at Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, Rania Emmanouel will gain just as many delighted followers on these shores as well.

— Maurice Taplinger

Rania Emmanouel's work is also included in the gallery's year-roumd salon exhibition.

Nature's Underlying Numinousness Informs the Art of Joy Saville

Joy Saville is the kind of textile artist who more readily invites comparison with painters than with artists working in her own medium. This is not to disparage art quilts, which gained status as a major art form on a par with painting during the feminist era of the 1960s, when homespun materials traditionally associated with women's crafts were first taken up by fine artists. For in the decades since, fabric art has transcended sexual politics to be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities alone.

Yet on encountering work as formally animated and coloristically subtle as Saville's, one is still sorely tempted to tout it as "painterly," since the manner in which Saville employs myriad small, discrete shapes cut from colorful cotton, linen, and silk could be likened to how the Impressionists employed strokes of oil pigments placed next to each other, rather than blended, to evoke an optical sensation of light.

Nor would it seem entirely inaccurate to compare Saville's sharp, cascading shards of color to those of the second-generation Abstract Expressionist painter Robert Goodnough, since both artists, in their different ways, update the structural vocabulary of Cubism, albeit unbound by that movement's literal references and muddy austerity.

But all such comparisons are finally wanting, since they fail to take into account the peculiar coloristic and textural characteristics of fiber art, with which an artist of Saville's caliber can achieve effects beyond the reach of painting. Initially, Saville's choice of her medium was a simple matter of having grown up in Nebraska, where sewing and quilt-making were very much a part of daily life. Yet, in the 1970s, when she was living in Princeton, New Jersey, and contemporary fine art quilts had already made significant inroads into galleries and major museum collections, while the work that she saw encouraged her, it did not inspire her. She was still searching for the personal vision that makes her art unique today.

The specific qualities of that uniqueness come across full-blown in "(Re)generation – Transformation," Saville's first New York solo exhibition at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from May 12 through June 6. (Reception: Saturday, May 16, from 4 to 7 PM.)

Saville seems auspiciously at home in this Chelsea venue which, while not exclusively devoted to textile art, boasts on its roster other major innovators in the medium such as Marilyn Henrion and Erma Yost. And while Saville made a favorable first impression in a group show there in 2005, this more extensive selection of work created in the past sixteen months more than confirms one's initial suspicion that she is a significant presence in the New York art scene.

As the title of the exhibition suggests, the cycles of change — birth, death, and regeneration in nature seem to play an important role in Saville's work, an impression backed up by an artist's statement in which she says, "Have you ever had your breath taken away by the color of dogwood trees, autumn leaves, a sunset, or the view of the landscape as you drive over a hill? These are the frozen moments that inform my work."

"Quickening"

Yet, just as Saville does not aspire to approximate the characteristics of painting in her medium, there is no attempt in her compositions to imitate the lay of the land, as in traditional depictions of landscape, nor its exact colorations. Rather, Saville strives for something much more elusive and ambitious: to recreate the immediate, indefinable emotional reactions that provoke natural epiphanies, something as subtle and barely expressible as the mystery of nature itself.

Given her working process, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she strives to "rebuild" such personal epiphanies through the meticulous layering of myriad triangular shapes — parallelograms, as she calls them — cut from whole cloth. Laying out on her studio floor as many as a hundred different shades of these shapes, she arranges, studies, and shifts them into countless combinations. The process goes on for days, weeks, months, until a particular coloristic configuration somehow recaptures the ever elusive original reaction that set the composition in motion. Only then does she begin to stitch the pieces in place to create the final work.

Thus Saville attains the sense of the numinous forces behind the face of nature that one perceives in major compositions such as "Quickening," "Waters of Grace," and "Event Horizon" with their vibrantly variegated clusters of blue, violet, green, brown and deep yellow and orange hues confirming the artist's conviction that "light is color and color is light." As the poetic titles of such works reflect, her aim is not to superficially apprehend the outer appearance of the aforementioned dogwood trees, autumn leaves, or sunset. Rather, it is to revive and make immutable the sensory experience of viewing them and the emotion of wonderment it evoked.

And, as with all truly vital art, this in turn provokes a diverse array of subjective reactions in the individual viewer. Of the jagged white areas in Saville's "Sacred Spaces," which are among the largest and boldest forms in her recent compositions, my wife observed,"Those shapes remind me exactly of those blinding white lights that I saw when I had that flu and was running that very high fever."

Is it possible that she was experiencing what Joy Saville refers to as "the very thin line between life and death ... or, the vastness of being that encompasses both life and death?"

In any case, in her work of the past sixteen months, Saville realizes her stated intention to express "the depth of these extremes."

— Ed McCormack

Cultural Scope in the Paintings of James Moncada

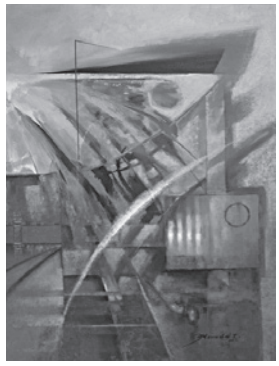
Few contemporary painters embody the ideal of multiculturalism as successfully as James Moncada, who combined the confluent strains of the Indian, Spanish, and African traditions of his native Columbia with sophisticated Western aesthetics in his recent solo exhibition at Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, in Chelsea.

One of Moncada's great strengths is that, unlike many of his contemporaries, he has not abandoned the principles of high modernism. Rather, he has retained what he finds useful in the art of the past, putting his own painterly spin on the vestiges of Cubism, Futurism, and other movements that he "quotes" in his compositions in the eclectic manner that characterizes postmodernism at its most fruitful.

This results in a complex mixture of elements in almost every one of Moncada's oils on canvas, where geometric and organic forms reach a harmonious plastic synthesis. Circles recur as an especially prominent motif; they are potent symbols in many of his paintings, representing, as one previous critic accurately observed, "the sun, the moon, and eternity." Indeed, one of the paintings in his exhibition at Montserrat took the form of a tondo, evoking — at least to the eye of this beholder — not only these universal elements but also an ancient shield adorned with all manner of esoteric symbols, including what appeared to be veiled or half submerged anatomical references which could seem related to female fertility.

However, this interpretation is admittedly subjective, since the fecund forms in question were nowhere near as overt as the actual musical notes boldly interjected into "Music," the largest canvas in the exhibition. The painting lived up to its title auspiciously by virtue of its rhapsodic mood and array of evocative forms and colors, set within ambiguously arranged planes, which simultaneously suggested shallow and deep space, giving rise to exhilarating pictorial tensions rhythmically interwoven, in one area of the composition, with metallic gold swirls as strident and vigorous as a melody by Vivaldi.

Although Moncada's forms are precisely delineated, his colors, rather than being flat and unmodulated in the manner of most "hard-edge" painting, are subtly shaded and have a richly burnished quality, tending toward deep red and blue hues, offset by ochers and other earth colors. He also employs metallic gold pigments liberally, lending his compositions a chromatic richness akin to icons. Indeed, in his color choices alone, Moncada encompasses not only diverse cultural influences but an implied span of time stretching from the Incas to the Renaissance. Yet he has also obviously been greatly inspired by later movements such as Cubism, as seen in the diamond-shaped canvas called "Composition I," with its elegantly overlapping planes. And he pays particular homage to Abstract Expressionism in the gestural vigor of the major canvas entitled "Interrelation."



"Escape"

Among the larger paintings in the show, this is one of Moncada's most complex compositions, in both formal and coloristic terms, with rectangles of red and ocher set within a variegated color field where a vibrant cerulean blue is the dominant hue. Here, too, dynamic, decisive strokes evoke all manner of sensual allusions to metaphysical landscape spaces and elements of prehistory — particularly the yellow and red forms on the right side of the composition, which could suggest feathers and other facets of tribalism. It is a painting of great imaginative scope and ambition, revealing Moncada's ability to combine diverse elements and orchestrate them into a coherent formal statement possessed of a unique majesty.

Indeed, here as in "Lunar," "Escape," and other canvases in his recent exhibition, James Moncada firmly established himself as a painter of surpassing gifts.

—Peter Wiley

James Moncada's work is also included in the gallery's year-roumd salon exhibition.

Painting With a Camera: The Prints of Matty Karp

Although he is a photographer, Matty Karp operates at the juncture at which photography and painting meets. Karp makes this point implicit by printing his Giclee images on canvas rather than paper, as seen at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from April 14 through May 5. (Reception April 16, from 6 to 8 PM.)

However, the relationship of Karp's photographs to painting goes beyond the means of presentation to the imagery itself. Landscape is a frequent subject and Karp's handling of light is especially painterly in pictures such as "Foliage," where the plant life around a shoreline frames a body of water so golden it appears to have absorbed the entire energy of the sun.

Equally vibrant are the fiery autumnal colors enlivening the leaves in "The Wood," while the dark poles emerging from another body of water in an image entitled "Zen" display the spare, monochromatic grace of swift black brushstrokes in an Asian ink painting. And be they natural foam or achieved via digital means (something one need not know to appreciate the picture on its own aesthetic merits), the frothy white formations swirling around several more such poles in a print called "Water Clouds" create a somewhat surrealistic effect, calling to mind the misty atmospheric lyricism of Gary Snyder's epic Zen poem "Mountains and Rivers Without End."

Although he lives and works in Haifa, Israel, Karp travels widely throughout the world, and Asia appears to be one of his more fertile locales for inspiration, judging from "Mist," yet another striking print of shadowy fishermen in conical hats navigating their small skiffs through an overall blue haze like phantoms of the deep. Here, especially, Karp transcends mere exoticism to create an image of great formal beauty, even while one writer accurately observed that the "emotional resonance of his work is primary."

At the same time, one of the great strengths of Karp's prints is how well he applies the formal lessons of art history to his own unique angle of vision, integrating diverse qualities of several different schools of painting into compositions, while retaining his own stylistic signature. As one might imagine, given his sensitivity to light and color, Impressionism appears to be an important inspiration. "Stroll in the Wood" employs imagistic blurring most effectively in this regard, resulting in such shimmering beauty as to almost seem an homage to Monet.

By contrast, in a work called "Abstract," a rippling rainbow of vibrant hues (particularly luminous pinks and yellows), reflected in a river or pond, suggest an affinity for the Color Field aesthetics of Jules Olitski or even the chromatic phosphorescence of Donald Flavin's neon tube sculptures.

"Zen"

And while Karp appears particularly attuned to the colors and moods of nature, he can also do justice to funkier urban subjects when they happen to catch his eye. One striking example is the print entitled "Graffiti," in which an apparent wall painting of a face resembling that of the murderous hippie-era Svengali Charles Manson (or some similarly sinister figure) looms ominously. Although somewhat anomalous, in terms of imagery, this print, like his nature scenes, reveals the coloristic and compositional dynamism that invariably sets the art of Matty Karp apart.

— Maurice Taplinger

Austrian Sculptor F.J. Rittmannsberger and the Hidden Language of Stone

A sense of the monumental is something that all too often seems sadly lacking in much contemporary sculpture. This can be in some part owed to the decline in the use of natural materials, particularly stone, which carries within its substance the weight and the history of centuries. But it also has to do with the inability of many artists today, so distracted by the trappings of the mass media among other mutable matters, to grasp and apprehend the mythic qualities underlying the superficial incidentals of our daily existence and embody them in their work. Thus they also fail to imbue their work with a sense of our common destiny.

The Austrian sculptor F.J. Rittmannsberger, however, is something of a fortunate anomaly in this regard. His work fairly breathes history and myth. Seen in a recent solo show at Montserrat Contemporary Art, 547 West 27th Street and also featured in the venue's year-round salon exhibition, Rittmannsberger's sculptures reveal a stylistic diversity that is all the more impressive for their overriding unity — perhaps proving conclusively that style is a function of character, rather than a matter of superficial likenesses. For not only does Rittmannsberger transcend the line between abstraction and figuration with an ease that would be the envy of many another artist, he also shows a great deal of variation within each mode of expression. Yet all of his work bears the stamp of his unique sculptural sensibility.

"Human Landscapes"

This unusual formal holism may very well be owed to a special sensitivity to his materials Rittmannsberger expresses eloquently in an artist's statement: "Stones and their formations have always attracted me, particularly stones which are formed by nature and so become sculptures with an archaic touch."

One is reminded of Michelangelo's statement to the effect that he did not so much carve the figure into the stone but find the figure trapped within the stone and release it. Rittmannsberger's approach appears to be equally organic, when he speaks of "the seeing and recognizing of already existing organic structures, which I can bring to life."

Indeed, Rittmannsberger invariably invests the forms that he brings to life with a warmth resonant of flesh, which comes across even in a nickel-plated piece such as "Torso." This curvaceous feminine form, with its ample hips and full breasts, possesses a voluptuousness that seemingly transcends the steely sheen of its surface. Indeed the tantalizing tension between surface and the form only tends to enhance the erotic quality of the sculpture. And the archaic quality of which Rittmannsberger speaks is especially evident here as well, particularly in relation to a stunning formal simplicity which simultaneously harks back to the fragmented figures of Grecian antiquity and primitive Yoruba sculptures, even while it also suggests a kindship with the early 20th century modernist carvings of Ossip Zadkine and others.

However, that Rittmannsberger's humanism invariably goes hand in hand with his formalism can also be seen to special advantage in a second, quite different sculpture that shares the title "Torso." This partial figure in soft marble is formed in the manner of Modigliani's painted nudes rather than the Italian artist's sculptures, which lacked the sensuality Rittmannsberger evokes here, incising the exquisitely elongated torso with subtle, fleshy folds, as well as with the prominent cleft of its sex.

Even when cast in bronze, Rittmannsberger's pieces project a similar sensuality, as seen in "Courting Couple," in which a male and a female are locked in carnal embrace, their rounded contours rhyming harmoniously, merging to become one strong yet graceful formal entity. Here, particularly, one senses a relationship to Rodin. Indeed, Rittmannsberger's approach to this erotic subject, which is bold but by no means offensively explicit, calls to mind Rodin's famous statement, "The vulgar readily imagine that what they consider ugly in existence is not fit subject for the artist. They would like to forbid us to represent what displeases and offends them in nature.

"Norway's Landscape"

It is a great error on their part. What is commonly called ugly in nature can in art become full of great beauty."

Like that great master, yet in his own contemporary manner, Rittmannsberger finds beauty everywhere, as seen in a piece in white Thassos marble called "Human Landscapes," in which four graceful forms flow upward like huge elephant tusks joined together at the top; as well as in an even more abstract sculpture in Morud serpentine marble called "Norway's Landscape," where an angularly semi-geometric shape with a circular hole at its center could suggest a stylized, severely simplified leaf. However, while this could at first seem the latter piece's only natural referent, one perceives within the horizontal striations of the green patina of the stone itself an even more prominent and poetic sense of a verdant landscape. It is such subtleties within the larger context of his sculptures, only yielding their richness with prolonged contemplation, that one discovers the complexity of Rittmannsberger's inimitable aesthetic.

Even in those works where the human figure is absent — and there are many, given this artist's fascination with pure form and the projected qualities of stone itself, as well as his ability to create an endless variety of abstract permutations of compelling universality — human emotion and a sense of the human presence are forever present in the person of the artist himself. One feels the force of his personality behind every shape that he carves. It permeates the substance of his creations, imbuing them with a mythic significance and a monumentality that seem destined to endure. — Maurice Taplinger

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" was recently seen at New Century Artists, 530 West 25th Street.

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 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.

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 Palmer's earlier work the focal point of the composition is the solitary figure of a man, which serves as its meditative center. Here, however, the garden alone, devoid of the human presence, and the gazebo deep within it, at the end of a path bordered by high hedges, provides sufficient drama. Also while Palmer's painting was a nocturnal scene, Clifford's composition is all the more remarkable for the cloistered sense of mystery that she achieves in broad daylight.

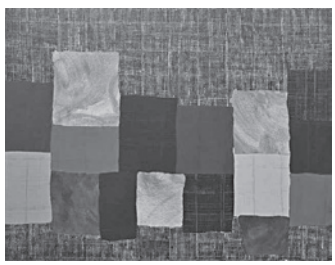
"Pedestal with Three Pieces"

Equally intriguing in another manner is Clifford's 3-D mixed media assemblage, "Pedestal with three pieces," in which a woman's dress appears to hover in midair between two ritualistic-looking primitive structures, suggesting some poetic evocation of the feminine mystique. Here, as in her paintings Judy Clifford evokes a visionary sense of nature in all its many guises.

— J. Sanders Eaton

Steven Foy: Expanding the Range of Painterly Possibilities

The work of the English painter Steven Foy, whose solo exhibition, "Arrangements," was seen recently at Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, 547 West 25th Street, presents an excellent example of how some of our most imaginative contemporary artists are finding ways to make abstract painting new for the postmodern era.



"Arrangement #21"

In an artist's statement issued in connection with the show, Foy said, "The works are concerned with man-made order and organic growth, and the tension between the construction of the painting, like an industrial process and the growing of something in nature from seed." And indeed, it is the deliberate, conceptual component in Foy's work which distinguishes it in new and significant ways from the improvisational approach of the Abstract Expressionists, even while Foy's paintings have similar scale and impact and tactile surfaces that show signs of the painterly process.

While de Kooning, Pollock, and others acknowledged the inspiration of nature in the sense of movement and flux they generated in their compositions, they generally saw industrial processes as antithetical to the lyrical/romantic thrust of their aesthetic. Conversely, many of the Pop artists and Minimalists who succeeded them strove with Oedipal zeal for an impersonal, "manufactured" look. Working from the position that he terms "the point where more is possible," Foy combines elements of the natural and the manufactured in a quintessential postmodern synthesis.

Thus, his iconography ranges from roughly circular forms as organically evocative as Terry Winters' pods to rectangles and elongated shapes that could suggest clusters of multicolored tongue depressors — particularly in a composition such as "Arrangement # 59," where they are set against a background of the shade of "institutional green" that one associates with hospital walls or welfare offices. Often Foy's colors tend toward the artificial: odd shades of green-blue and mauve like nothing in nature; cake-frosting pinks bumping up against mud-pie browns. Yet they are combined in a manner that creates peculiarly delicious chromatic harmonies. In this regard, one of Foy's most majestic large canvases is the one titled "Arrangement # 21," wherein a frieze of colored squares is set against a textured gray ground, the overall effect like a monstrously mutated descendent of Paul Klee's dainty little checkerboards.

The grid has a long history in art, from when it was used by the Old Masters to scale up drawings for painting to when it came out from under the paint to become a staple of Modernism. Foy employs the grid to anchor his forms to the picture plane by scoring myriad small squares that follow the weave of the heavy cotton duck canvas on which he works into his sumptuous paint surfaces. These are particularly prominent in "Arrangement # 56," a veritable fugue of oval shapes in muted-to-strident gray and blue hues bouncing like slightly lopsided balloons off of a milky greenish ground emphatically scored to reveal the layer of blue beneath. Thus Foy weds color to texture in yet another manifestation of his quirky originality.

Indeed, while he is decidedly a player in the larger global area of today, Foy impresses this writer as one of those classic British painterly eccentrics like Hodgkin and Victor Pasmore, who seem to take wicked delight in standing abstract painting on its head. Such cheek is refreshing and much needed amid the presently reigning postmodern orthodoxies. —Peter Wiley

Steven Foy's work is also included in the gallery's year-roumd salon exhibition.

Jeanne Lyons Butler Strikes a New Balance Between Abstraction and Allusion

The best definition of Minimalism I ever heard was when John Pawson called it "the perfection that an artifact achieves when it is no longer possible to improve it by subtraction." Yet when I think of how Minimalism had played itself out as a movement by the late 1970s, it seems a classic case of "throwing the baby out with the bath water." For only so much can be subtracted before too little remains to sustain interest. At a certain point, one grew so starved for visual incident as to end up savoring the light fixtures and fire extinguishers in museums.

Enter the postmodern era and the "white works" of Jeanne Lyons Butler, whose solo exhibition "White: Sigma" is on view at Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from April 13 through May 9. (Reception: Saturday, April 18, from 4 to 7 pm.)

Certainly Butler's aesthetic is reductive enough to qualify as some new, improved species of Minimalism. Still, one hesitates to affix a "neo" to so pure and unburdened a thing. Better by far to let Butler's work stand on its own independent, unaffiliated merits as a singularly austere answer to some of the more glaring sins of so-called "postmodern pluralism." Besides, Butler's mixed media compositions, incorporating quilting, appliqué and bits of paper with stitched lines and spare touches of graphite and oil paint, appear altogether antithetical to the tenets of the "old" minimalism, their brevity closer to the infinite spirit of haiku than the blank-wall vacancy of the corporate box.

"White 10:136"

Indeed, the elongated vertical format of some of Butler's pieces, as well as their overall whiteness, relieved here and there by linear stokes laid down with spare calligraphic grace, enhances their resemblance to the Japanese scrolls upon which haiku often appear. Only, this calligraphy, like that of Cy Twombly, constitutes a private language, an elegant graffiti whose meanings remain elusive. And in Butler's case, as I've commented more than once in past reviews but must repeat, since it is so unique to her visual vocabulary, her use of stitching as a linear entity in her compositions plays off in an intriguingly trompe-l'oeil manner against her variety of purely graphic mark-making techniques.

Butler maintains that fiber is the foundation of her art, yet she can not really be classified as a fabric artist in any strict sense of that term either, since she employs textiles more in the manner of sewn collage than elements of craft, much in the same way she now uses paper in her compositions. And while the subtle sublimity and formal integrity of her work has always struck me as being akin to that of Agnes Martin, Butler has never been as locked as the older artist within the self-limiting cage of the grid, which now seems to function even less than in her earlier compositions as the phantom armature upon which her exquisitely austere aesthetic rests.

Even while continuing for the most part to exclude color, aside from the "strokes," as she calls them, of torn tan paper that play off her white fields, her recent compositions have gained measurably in freedom and expressiveness. So much so, in fact, that their poetic resonance now seems fully equal to their formal grace, their allusiveness a match for their rigor.

This is nowhere more evident than in the piece titled "White 10: 136," where the viewer can't help associating the sense of flotation in the cluster of small squares of tan paper slightly to the left in the middle of the scroll-like composition with the flight of Autumn leaves. Granted, this lyrical touch is formally grounded on the right by the eight rows of six vertical "strokes of paper" spanning the entire length of the composition. But even these elements, which might have suggested primitive units of counting in one of Butler's earlier compositions, now evoke a formal shorthand for the trees stripped bare of the floating leaves.

Along with the uncompromising rigor of her exquisitely balanced compositions, Butler's non-referential titles, which are as austere as the works themselves, bear out the overriding impression that, while she admits to being influenced "by landscape and personal spiritual reflection," formal considerations are still the artist's primary concern. Yet what seems most new about her recent work is the manner in which it has opened itself up to a wider range of subjective interpretation on the part the viewer.

Now, encountering the two roughly rectangular pale brown paper forms, set against the pure white ground in the more square-shaped work "White 10:98," one may get a sense of presences hovering in space and wonder if the faint vertical line between them represents a barrier or that which draws them together. In any case, a sublime balance is achieved, and the space that the forms occupy comes alive with a pregnant energy. Similarly, the spare grace of the curved brown line dominating the composition of "White 10: 106" could simultaneously suggest the slope of a hill or a slender twig in a field of snow, without in any way interfering with one's appreciation of the subtle spatial qualities and other non-objective attributes that imbue these compositions with such serene beauty. For the new balance between abstraction and allusiveness that Jeanne Lyons Butler achieves in her recent work serves only to enrich its quiet power.

— Ed McCormack

Karl Stengel's Gestural Metaphors for Art's Angst

In an essay about Cy Twombly, Roland Barthes asserted that the artist's brash painted gestures are "fragments of an indolence, and that is what makes them extremely elegant." On the face of it, someone who did not know better might assume the same about Karl Stengel, who, like the American expatriate Twombly, was born elsewhere and settled in Italy. But Stengel's gestural elegance actually appears more driven by passion and engagement than by indolence or ennui.

Born in Hungary in 1925, Stengel attended the Academy of Arts and Crafts in Budapest, then continued his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich after the Soviet intervention in 1956 forced him to leave his native country. Over the years, he spent time in Germany and Spain, before moving to Italy, where he has lived and worked for the past twenty years, building a formidable reputation with exhibitions in Florence, Milan, Bologna, Piacenza, Parma, Lucca and Rome, as well as in the United States, Norway and Romania.

Like that of Twombly, the rough elegance of Stengel's mature work may have been influenced by the spirit of Italian graffito and Art Povera. But it's innate emotional energy is what comes across most forcefully in the exhibition of Karl Stengel's work that the hotshot Italian curator Stefania Carrozzini has imported to Broadway Gallery, 473 Broadway (continuing through April 15).

Collage by Karl Stengel

Stengel's abstract paintings, drawings, monotypes and collages are all infused with the same inimitable energy, be it an oil crayon composition of indecipherable red and blue "handwriting" overlaid by black lines; a monochromatic painting of large, irregularly-shaped black forms swooping down on a white ground with a stark power akin to Motherwell's "Elegy to the Spanish Republic; or other works in which the translucent fluidity of water-media is explored with bold rectangular shapes or stacked bars of hues that appear lit from within.

However some of Stengel's most affecting compositions are those in which his gestures evoke the human figure with an almost Art Brut immediacy. Particularly expressive in this regard are a series of mixed media collages depicting an artist in relation to his paintings. Although reminiscent of a series of etchings and paintings in which Picasso explored similar themes, the studio does not resemble a bordello in Stengel's pictures. There are no languorous nude models lying about seductively; just a weary haunted-looking older man with soulful eyes and deep furrows worried into his features with a sharp graphite line.

While a second figure also appears in these compositions, it is so identical to the artist as to seem a phantom aspect of himself. He is actually alone with his angst, arguing internally not with his muse but with his own creative conscience.

But what is most striking about these compositions is that while the figures are drawn monochromatically in a black or blue line, the paintings against which they are set (in one such work, a sort of paper sculpture, it is positioned behind the figure on a separate sheet, like a theatrical backdrop) explode with a riot of forms and colors.

What Karl Stengel gives us in such compositions is something rare and wonderful: the perfect visual metaphor for how an artist finally only comes fully alive in his or her work.

— Ed McCormack

Order Meets Spontaneity in the Paintings of Marvin Hines

Marvin Hines, an artist born in Richmond Virginia, now living and working in Carrollton Texas, explains his total commitment to abstract painting as follows: "The development of my purely non-objective work reflects my strong belief in the ability of color and abstract shapes as a provocation of emotion and an adventure into self-interpretation that reaches beyond a reality based image."

Jane's Spotted Pony"

In this regard, Hines recalls the adamant attitudes of certain Abstract Expressionists in a more embattled era than our own, when art that did refer overtly to recognizable things had to defend itself against unsympathetic criticism. Indeed, this may account in part for the absolute freshness of the paintings Hines is exhibiting at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from May 7 through 27. (Reception: Thursday, May 7, from 6 to 8 PM.)

For Hines seemingly approaches the act of painting as though he were the first abstract artist on earth, with a joyful gusto that proves contagious for the viewer. Part of the appeal of his work may also be that, while, in fact, Hines acknowledges having been inspired by former teachers such as the 20th century abstractionist John Walker, he seems less influenced by art history than by his travels in Cuba, South and Central America, French Polynesia, Asia, and Italy. Which is to say, there is an ambient energy to his compositions that brings them truly alive, a raw visionary power akin to that of the cantankerous California artist Clyfford Still who, while linked to the Abstract Expressionists in purpose, remained aloof from art world cliquishness and politics.

In Hines's work, this independence comes across in paintings such as the oil on canvas "Newport Jazz," with its intricately interwoven yellow and red skeins suggesting the complexity of a Count Basie orchestration or a Thelonius Monk piano solo. While eschewing even the most abstract references to musicians, instruments, etc., Hines makes a connection that results in what can only be termed a form of visual music. Certainly Hines manages to convey a similar sense of spontaneity and improvisation to that of the jazz artists he apparently celebrates wholly in color, line, and form.

Another painting, entitled "Abacus," suggests counting and mathematics by virtue of red, roughly circular forms interspersed with staccato black linear dashes and set against a white gestural ground. Here, too, Hines's use of a combination of enamel and oil paints results in an especially tactile surface contrasts that lend the painting further interest, apart from its formal vitality.

Then there is the oil "Remains of the Fire," in which vertical flashes of red dance against an energetically worked ground, comprised of vibrant blues shot through with streaks of white pigment. And in another dynamic composition in oil and enamel on canvas, intriguingly titled "Jane's Spotted Pony," Hines plays vigorously with figure/ground relationships by setting a swirling central cluster of blue, red and yellow gestures against a texturally variegated white ground inflected with patches of gray underpainting.

Here, as in his other compositions, he demonstrates an intrepid attack upon the canvas that lends his compositions a kinetic liveliness coupled with an intuitive formal control, often achieved with an underlying grid that serves as an armature for his brilliant chromatic saturations.

By virtue of these seemingly opposite yet ultimately harmonious painterly attributes, Marvin Hines achieves a stylistic synthesis that makes his work both notable and memorable.

— Maureen Flynn

Sheila Finnigan

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MARIA DRISCOLL McMAHON • GEORGE OLEXA

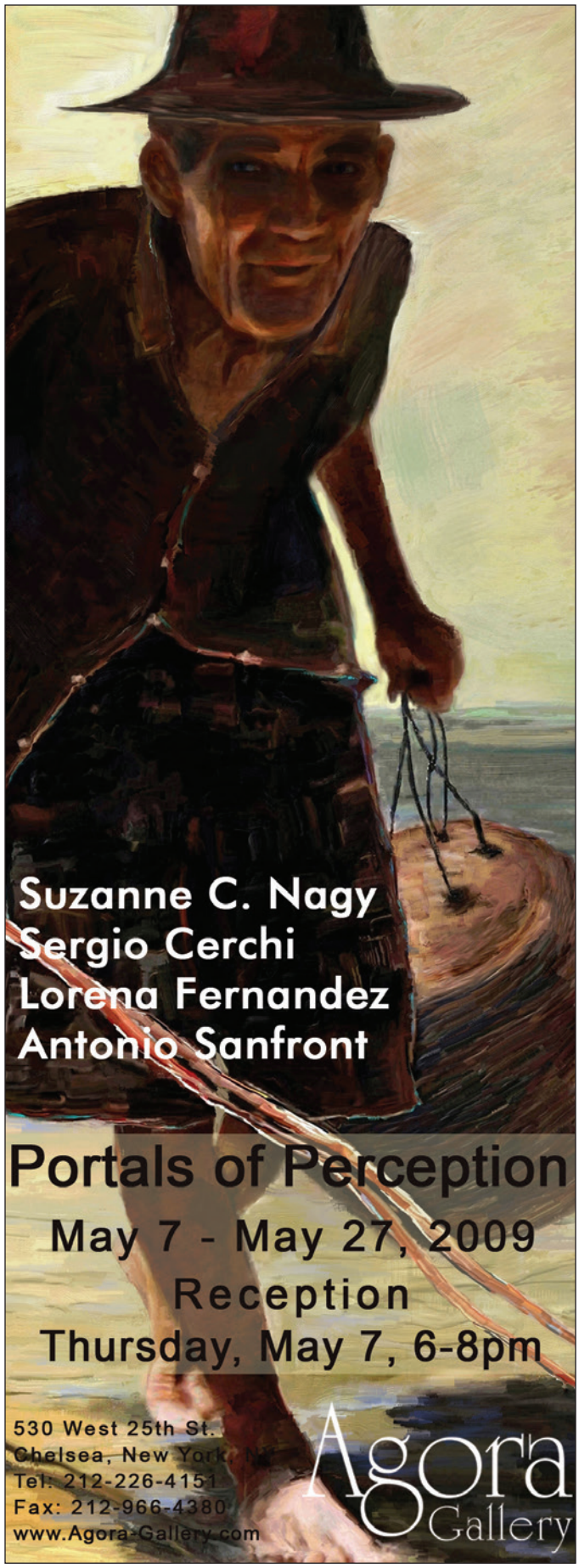
NEW CENTURY ARTISTS is pleased to announce the exhibit "NEW EXPRESSIONS 09" which will be open for viewing from **March 31 to April 18, 2009**.

Linda Dujack is a printmaker. Her art has been inspired by the events in her life. • **Fritz Erismann** is inspired by formative and transforming processes. His works on paper and canvas reflect arts capacity to reinvent itself. • **Linda Ganus** works from the figure and associated objects. Her work explores symbiotic relationships found in nature as well as those that exist between individuals. • **Mark Lerer**'s drawings distill his observations of the human figure into a pictorial style that is unique and compelling. • **Maria Driscoll McMahon's** figurative and conceptual drawings and paintings are often a confrontation with the abject, and a brush with the sublime. • **George C. Olexa** works with color and empirical memory to inspire seeing, examination of ones self, and our environment.

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.**

NEW CENTURY ARTISTS
530 West 25th Street – Suite 406 – between 10th & 11th Ave.
New York City 10001 (212) 367-7072

Email: newcenturyartists@msn.com – url: newcenturyartists.org
Gallery Hours: Tuesday – Saturday 11:00 am to 6:00 pm




Gaston Leroux's
THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA
Le FANTOME DE L'OPERA
Illustrations by
Anne Bachelier
May / June 2009 at
CFM Gallery
112 Greene Street, SoHo, New York City, NY 10012
Tel: (212) 966-3864 info@cfmgallery.com Fax: (212) 2261041
Sunday Noon to 6pm Monday thru Saturday 11am to 6pm
www.cfmgallery.com