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GALLERY&STUDIO



Lil Picard's Counterculture and Mine: A Study in Comparative Realities

by Ed McCormack, pg. 8

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• RETROSPECTIVE •





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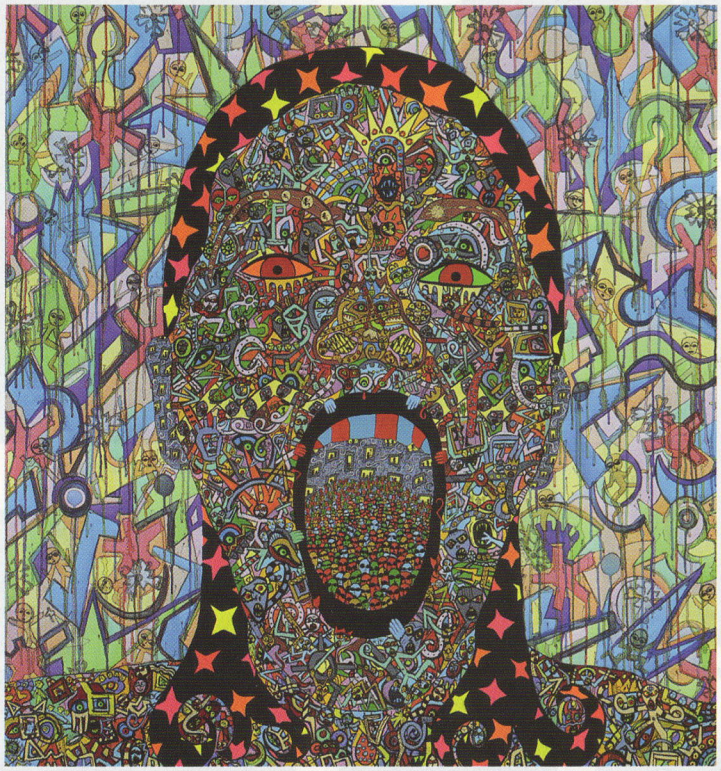
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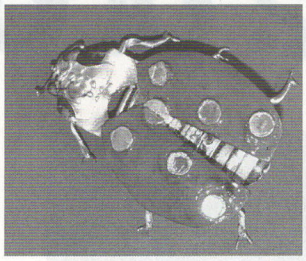
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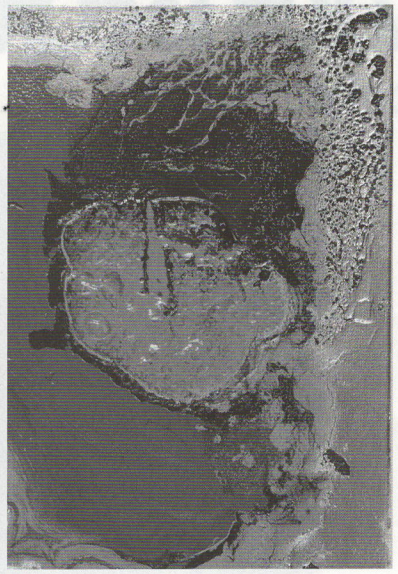
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G&S Highlights



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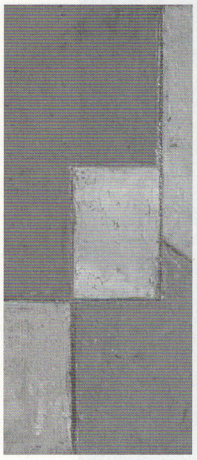


Dorothy A. Culpepper, pg. 20

On the Cover:

Back when he was still an arrogant young visual artist, arrogant older writer Ed McCormack dismissed Lil Picard as "a batty old lady." After viewing the late painter, collagist, and "Happenings" artist's first American museum retrospective, at Grey Art Gallery, New York University, and learning more about Picard's journey from Nazi Berlin to Counterculture New York, he had to revise his opinion.

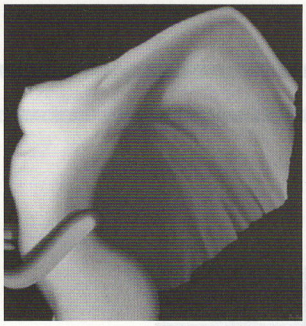
McCormack's highly personal, characteristically meandering mea culpa starts on page 8.



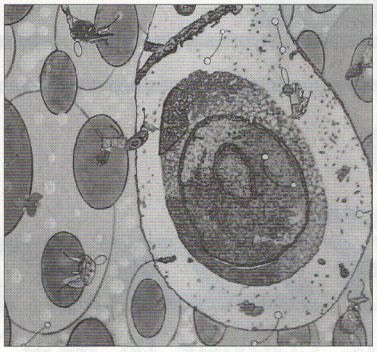
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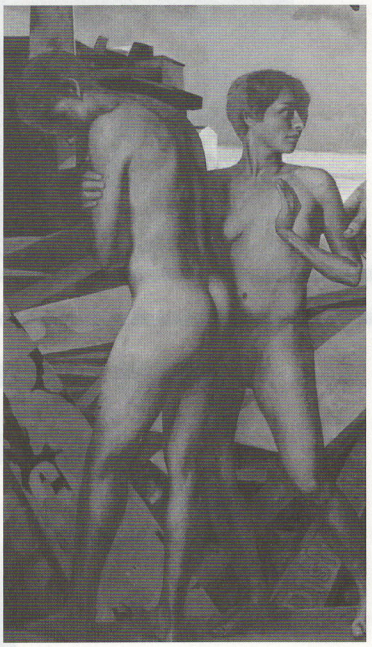
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The *GALLERY&STUDIO* advertising deadline for the September/October issue is August 9 for color, August 16 for black/white.

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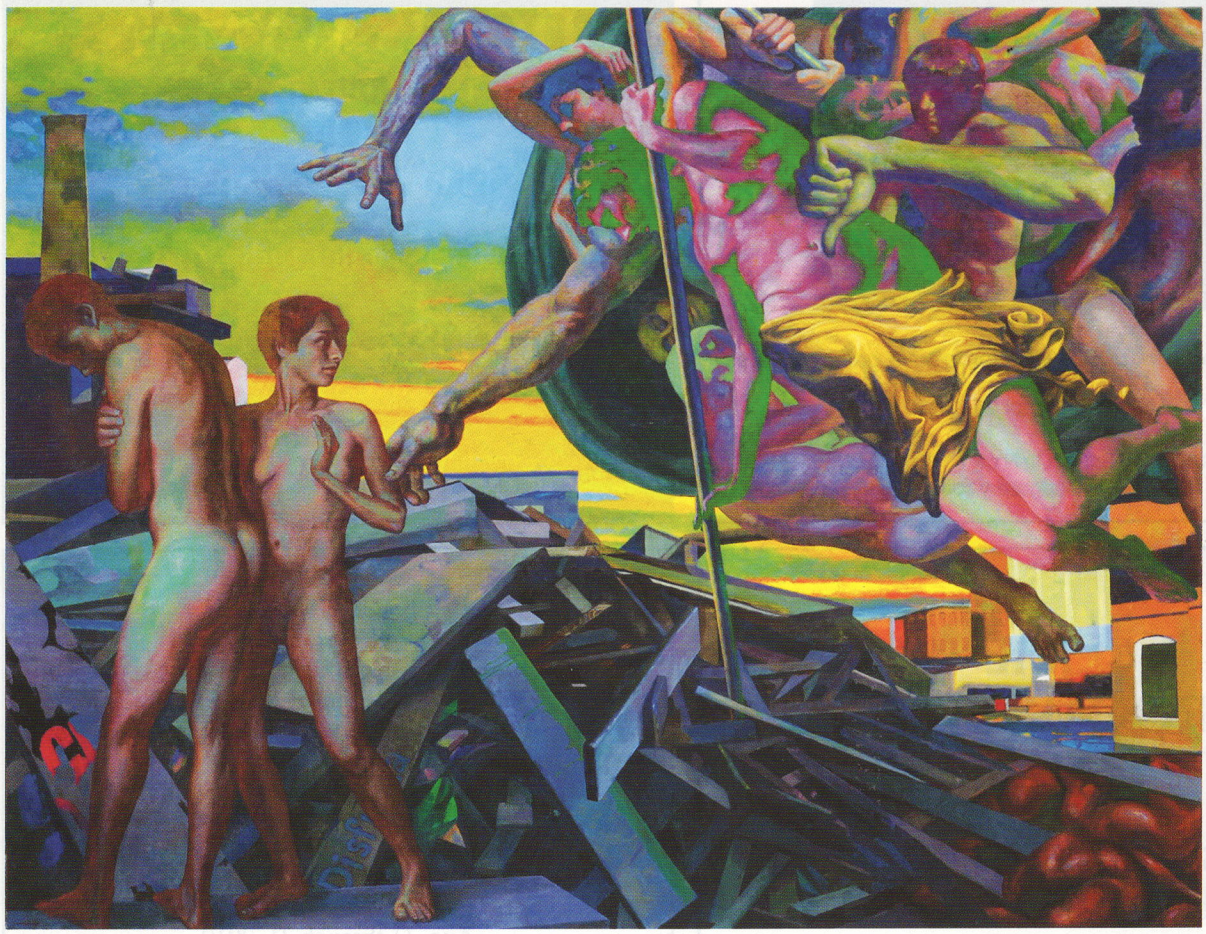
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Rebirth of Wonder: Daniel Ludwig Starts Over



"Disfruta, 2010"

One of the most initially startling images in David Ludwig's breakthrough exhibition "Paradigms Lost," at Allan Stone Gallery, 113 East 90th Street, from April 24 through June 5, is the large oil on linen entitled "Birth of Desire." The single most radical departure from Ludwig's former paintings of realist nudes in interiors, it depicts a small boy who could have stepped out of a print by Maxfield Parrish, seated on the floor gazing up in wonder at a multi-limbed figure composed of puzzlingly clustered male and female body parts.

Here is what shrinks refer to as the "primal scene" played out orgiastically with anatomical anomalies that could suggest a mating of many-limbed Hindu deities. Yet painted with such sensual verisimilitude, it becomes at once freakish and erotic, evoking the confusing impact that an early encounter with adult sexuality can have on a child.

"Birth of Desire," however is hardly Ludwig's most complex composition. Perhaps suggesting that the loss of innocence is an ongoing process, rather than a one-time event like losing one's virginity, the same cherubic child appears again in the same position in "Deer Hunt." Only here he bears witness to an orgy of violence, as monumental male and female nudes pierce the gentle animals with pointed poles under a dramatically clouded sky, while colorful butterflies flutter incongruously around the carnage.

Not in the least abashed about being blatantly theatrical, these are audacious paintings to say the least — none more so than "Raft," the 90 by 70 inch epic that serves as the exhibition's centerpiece. Although inspired by Giricault's "The Raft of the Medusa," the histrionics here do not appear to spring from a life threatening shipwreck but from a reverently choreographed reenactment of art historical references in the manner of George Deem. On one side of the multi-figure composition, an alizarin crimson nude, whose lover clings with an almost fetal codependency reminiscent of John Lennon in Annie Leibovitz's famous photograph of him and Yoko, could remind one of the late Bob Thompson's rainbow-colored people. On the other, the light and shadow on the muscular torso of the standing black man somehow calls to mind the solitary figure menaced by sharks circling his small boat in Winslow Homer's painting "The Gulf Stream." Here, however, he is happily holding hands with a classically proportioned nude whose only incongruous feature is that her head appears overlarge and oddly screwed on in profile, as in some of Paula Rego's figures.

Of course, one could spend all day second-guessing Lugwig's sources and probably be wrong. The only thing that can be stated with certainty is that they are eclectic, as the artist confirms in the exhibition catalog, when he says,"There are so many things I like and love about painting, and I want everything in my work — the discordant, the beautiful, the disturbing. It has taken me to this point in my life to incorporate them in a way that works."

In Ludwig's "Demoiselles," Picasso's angular nudes, influenced by African tribal sculpture, are restored to a classical comeliness that, in a postmodern context, seems almost as unanticipated as that modern master's original distortions. In "Disfruta," which translates as "enjoy" in Spanish, Eden looks like a chemically irradiated junkyard; the expelled couple appears strikingly androgynous; and God descends with an entourage, one of whom gives a big Thumbs Down sign, even as His Michelangeloesque hand reaches out tentatively to fondle the arm of the boyish Eve.

Although Ludwig is also quoted in the catalog alluding to personal disasters that caused him "grief and anger," it would seem a mistake to put too fine a point on the symbolic aspects of his paintings, which in any case elude easy interpretation. Better to imagine what a life-affirming experience it must be for an artist to tear his former aesthetic asunder, then put it back together in such a new and beautiful way.

— Ed McCormack

Kathleen King Goes Gaga in a Bold New Solo Show

Horror vacuii, the compulsion to fill every square inch of the composition with an intricate array of marks or designs, is one of the chief characteristics of so-called "outsider art," a term that usually refers to the work of unschooled and sometimes mentally ill artists. But what happens when a sophisticated mainstream artist who is obviously sound of mind and driven by a deliberate aesthetic strategy, rather than uncontrollable obsessions and harum scarum emotional responses, adopts such swarming intricacy to her own ends?

One answer can be found in the splendiferously opulent mixed media paintings in Kathleen King's "Divas" series, on view at Viridian Artists, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, from June 8 through 26. (Reception: Saturday, June 12, from 3 to 7 PM.)

As one pointed out in a review of her first New York solo exhibition in the same venue in 2005, and feels compelled to repeat here for its relevancy, King's work is very much in the tradition of Chicago's Hairy Who school, a movement of artists who, in the 1960s, offered a refreshingly raucous and deliciously déclassé alternative to the calculated irony of Pop and the sterile austerity of Minimalism. Artists such as James Nutt, Karl Wirsum, and Gladys Nilsson derived inspiration from cartoons and the low-rent ads in the back pages of cheap magazines, as well as from the brash sociopolitical neosurrealism of Peter Saul and their discovery of the local outsider artist Joseph Yoakum. Unfortunately, however, such work fell well outside the pale of chauvinistic New York art circles, on which Pop and Minimalism had a critical stranglehold.

The good news today is that, in the more global climate of postmodernism, Kathleen King, a former adjunct assistant professor at the Art Institute of Chicago, around which the Hairy Who school centered, partakes of the movement's vital energy and swarming intricacy in a manner that transcends its supposed provincialism. For her own innovation has been to replace detailed figuration with an essentially abstract allusiveness that makes her compositions more open-ended and universally appealing.

While her predecessors sometimes had a tendency to become mired in the innate grotesqueness of their low-rent imagery and succumb to a cult of ugliness, King's intricately layered compositions, created with a unique combination of acrylic pigments and mediums, color pencils, xerox transfers and occasional decoupage, are possessed of a byzantine beauty that is highly seductive. Indeed, her formal inventiveness is dazzlingly over-the-top, with boldly delineated biomorphic forms as autonomously sensual as those of Miro set afloat against intricately patterned grounds appropriated from such commonplace sources as botanical patterns and wallpaper designs, and made to shine in a new context. The feminine curvaceousness of the dominant central shapes in King's compositions does indeed evoke the "Divas" theme, if one takes the term, as the artist does according to the gallery press release, to mean "an illustrious woman singer" or "Goddess," "Deity," and "Prima Donna."



"Space Puppy Diva"

Certainly King's combination of sexy linearity and lushly variegated coloristic overkill could make one think of shimmering sequined gowns catching the glow of pastel-tinted stage-lights in some fantastic production number wherein human bodies morph into living arabesques, while her rich patterning cannot help but reference Persian prints, and by extension, the Nabis and the ornate busyness of early modernist odalisques. Yet, by eschewing specific depiction for a more imaginative abstract allusiveness, King's compositions also give rise to an infinite range of other intriguing possible interpretations.

In "Space Puppy Diva," for example, the cluster of baroque forms set against a multitude of smaller, more or less regularly spaced oval patterns, could just as easily summon up a satellite afloat in the cosmos or cellular activity under a microscope as evoke Lady Gaga flouncing about in one of her more outlandish stage costumes. Then there is "High Note Diva,"a chromatically lush and especially emblematic composition, in which — for this viewer, at least — a mysterious central oval evokes a stylized portal to the womb, surrounded by a plethora of smaller egg-shaped elements, while several much smaller white orbs suggest spermatozoa swarming into its orbit and entering its center, only to suddenly reverse the viewers' perspective and become stars viewed through the porthole of a space ship.

In these works, as well as in others such as "Summer Rain Diva," "Fall Fever Diva," and "Flora Diva," as their evocative titles indicate, Kathleen King's layering of subtle metaphysical meanings within each composition is as rich and various as her richly modulated mixed media technique.

What King shares with her Chicago predecessors is a lively visual wit that is evident in the cartoony bulbousness of her central forms, as well as in the antic fancifulness of the eye-boggling patterns against which she positions them. However what belongs to her alone and sets her work apart from the horde is the sheer inventive plasticity of the shapes that she devises, as well as her impressive skills as a colorist, which combine to lend her paintings an almost contradictory lyricism that escapes all categories, becoming unique unto itself.

— Ed McCormack

Kiki Brodkin, 1926-2010: A Fond Farewell to a Fine Artist



One always thought of Kiki Brodkin and her husband Ed Brodkin as a model artist couple, working together in their home studios in Paramus, New Jersey, far from the hubbub and hype of the New York art scene, but very much a part of it through their frequent exhibitions in Chelsea, where they were both members of Pleiades Gallery.

Like Leon Golub and Nancy Spero, the Brodkins were very different kinds of artists; yet they were kindred spirits and always staunch supporters of each others' work.

"Kiki never settled on one particular technique or look that would become formulaic," Ed told a staff writer for the obituary page of The Record, a New Jersey newspaper. "She wanted to try different things."

Since style, as someone once said, is character and Kiki had plenty of that, there was no need to cultivate something so superficial as a "look." As her husband put it in the same article, "She was without artifice. She didn't tolerate any form of innuendo and was never afraid of saying what she felt. People loved that."

Those are qualities that a thoughtful man like Ed Brodkin, especially, falls in love with. Add that Kiki was still a sophomore at Cooper Union and he a newly worldly veteran just back from overseas with a Purple Heart, and you have all the ingredients for a perfect postwar romance. But Kiki was more than just another 1940s ingenue with grit. The marriage flourished for six decades, as the couple raised three sons and grew together as artists, only ending when Kiki died on April 1 of this year of complications resulting from a 2008 automobile accident.

Fortunately for us all, Kiki Brodkin's spirit, energy, and honesty live on in her rugged abstract sculptures, her contrastingly ethereal encaustic paintings, and the bold digital prints that she took on at a time in life when most artists are reluctant to experiment with the new technology.

"How wonderful it is to reach into the unknown to call up the poetic power of magical visual imagery," the artist stated with characteristic enthusiasm in connection with her solo exhibition "Wax and Wood," at Pleiades Gallery in 2006.

Although she also worked in stone, this show focused on her sculptures in carved wood and her encaustic paintings, both of which are impressive in very different ways. The sculptures are sensuous of surface and sensual of form, projecting a sense of scale much more expansive than their actual dimensions and commanding space with an authoritativeness usually only found in larger works. The encaustic paintings have a luster quite the opposite of Jasper Johns' rather dry handling of the ancient medium, with a chromatic radiance emanating from within their layered surfaces that suggests the term "lightscapes."

Kiki Brodkin, who exhibited in numerous venues in New York City, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Washington D.C., and Germany, as well as in a Biennial in Korea, was an artist whose work warrants serious consideration, now more than ever.

— Ed McCormack

"Kiki: a Celebration Happening" centering on her life and art will take place at 2 PM, featuring speeches, reminiscences, music, dance performance, staring at 2 PM on Saturday August 14, in Studio 1 at S.I.R.., 520 West 25th Street.

"Kiki: A Memorial Art Exhibition" (which can be viewed before and after the above celebration) will be on view at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from August 11 through 21.)

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"Twelve": Introducing Cuban Painter Augusto Bordelois Among 11 of His Peers

Always disarmingly named, Noho Gallery, which opened in 1975 just north of Houston Street, relocated to Soho in 1983, and has occupied its present space at 530 West 25th Street since 2001, has long been one of the city's most vital exhibition venues. So it should surprise no one that the showcase exhibition "Twelve," featuring Cuban artist Augusto Bordelois and 11 gallery artists, on view from July 20 through August 21, promises to be one of the brighter highlights of the normally sleepy summer season.

Bordelois, who graduated from the University of Havana with a major in English language and literature and also studied classical drawing and painting, sculpture, ceramics, and costume design, appears to put all of those areas of interest to use in his technically accomplished and imaginative oils on linen, depicting mysteriously dramatic human interactions. However, in Bordelois' "Obituary on Sunday Morning," a big white dog, bracketed between a nattily dressed man blowing taps on a trumpet and a hefty woman all dolled up in the bodaciously baroque mourning chapeau of a merry widow, steals the show with the unnervingly human gaze of someone in possession of a scandalous secret. Here, as in other paintings in the show, Augusto Bordelois appears much at home in the good company he keeps in this exhibition.

Gearing up for her eagerly anticipated solo exhibition in October, French painter Anne Kolin gives us a glimpse of her new series of collage paintings, inspired by tactile city walls bearing semiotic traces of torn posters and possessed of a Twombleyesque concrete poetry further informed by the melancholy verses of Edmond Jabes.

Another important abstract painter, Jessica Fromm, continues her passionate preoccupation with the expressive potential of gesture and the painted line, her grasp of both growing firmer with each showing. By contrast, although one initially encountered him as a sculptor, everything the multimedia maven known by the mononym of von Schmidt touches turns intriguingly conceptual these days, as seen in his striking photographic double portrait "Father & Son," as well as other images of a mystery man in a wide-brimmed fedora, seen lurking in nocturnal shadows or silhouetted against a spectacular Key West sky, who bears a suspicious resemblance to the artist himself, exploring the mystery of disappearance and loss.

Although the one constant in her work is the innovative use of textiles for which she is justly celebrated, Marilyn Henrion is another artist who can't be pinned down, as seen here, where her brilliantly colorful, stringently formal geometric fabric constructions are handsomely juxtaposed with evocative mixed media works, such as "Matidia," in which images of eroded sculptural faces from antiquity, set against subtly folded, stained and stitched cloth, exert a timeless power.

Another more recent addition to the roster of a gallery which has been instrumental in advancing textile construction into the mainstream of contemporary art, Russian-born Ludmila Aristova brings a particularly "painterly" sensibility to bear in her works such as "Sounds of Music 4 / Stravinsky," where different kinds of fiber are combined in vibrant color interactions and textures that create a radiance and sensuous tactility akin to thick oil impasto.

Then there is Arlene Baker, who combines textiles with painting by literally "veiling" the matte surfaces of her gouaches in gossamer layers of silk, evoking in the series of austere compositions that she calls "Silkspaces," an adamantly abstract yet lyrical sense of natural horizons lit by a serene, silvery glow.

Subtle optical sensations are also at the heart of Tina Rohrer's meticulously executed acrylic paintings, which extend the chromatic explorations of Seurat and Albers into the challenging arena of postmodern abstraction with compositions wherein strategically placed smaller squares or circles of color deconstruct the symmetrical sanctity of an overall grid, setting off chromatic sparks that resonate memorably in the eye and mind of the viewer.

A grid also figures prominently in Bruce Laird's mixed media compositions, albeit as a clearly defined container (akin to the panels in a comic strip) for shapes that shift and vacillate like rorschach blots between the abstract and the allusive, in "Going Green," or as a partially submerged armature for less allusive imagery, in "Adding Up," where paper doll outlines, antique photography and sections of rulers and tape measures converge mysteriously.

Creating installations of life-size figures in handmade cast paper that often hang from the ceiling like tackling dummies and predate Kiki Smith's similarly fragmented anatomical anomalies, Pat Feeney Murrell conveys a sense of the bodily and psychological fragility to which we are all prey, punning visually here with mordant visual wit on the concept of "arm (ed) candy."

The blurring of borders between the seen and the felt also appears to be a concern of the photographic artist Malka Inbal, who employs evocatively shadowy and shimmering semiabstract imagery reminiscent of the forms and tonal contrasts in Edwin Dickinson's paintings to explore her emotional responses to a broad range of human concerns.

And finally there is Sheila Hecht, whose abstract oils have evolved over the past several years through a variety of complex permutations to arrive at their present state of utmost spontaneity and gestural freedom, with brilliant splashes and splotches of primary color and vigorous strokes conveying the pure joy of untrammeled expression.

The diversity of styles, coupled with the generally high level of overall aesthetic quality on view, not only makes for complementary contrasts and an altogether engaging exhibition. It also makes "Twelve" an exemplary microcosm of the pluralistic climate of contemporary art today. And in doing so, it may finally demonstrate the tendency to reflect the zeitgeist that accounts for Noho Gallery's heartening longevity.

— Ed McCormack

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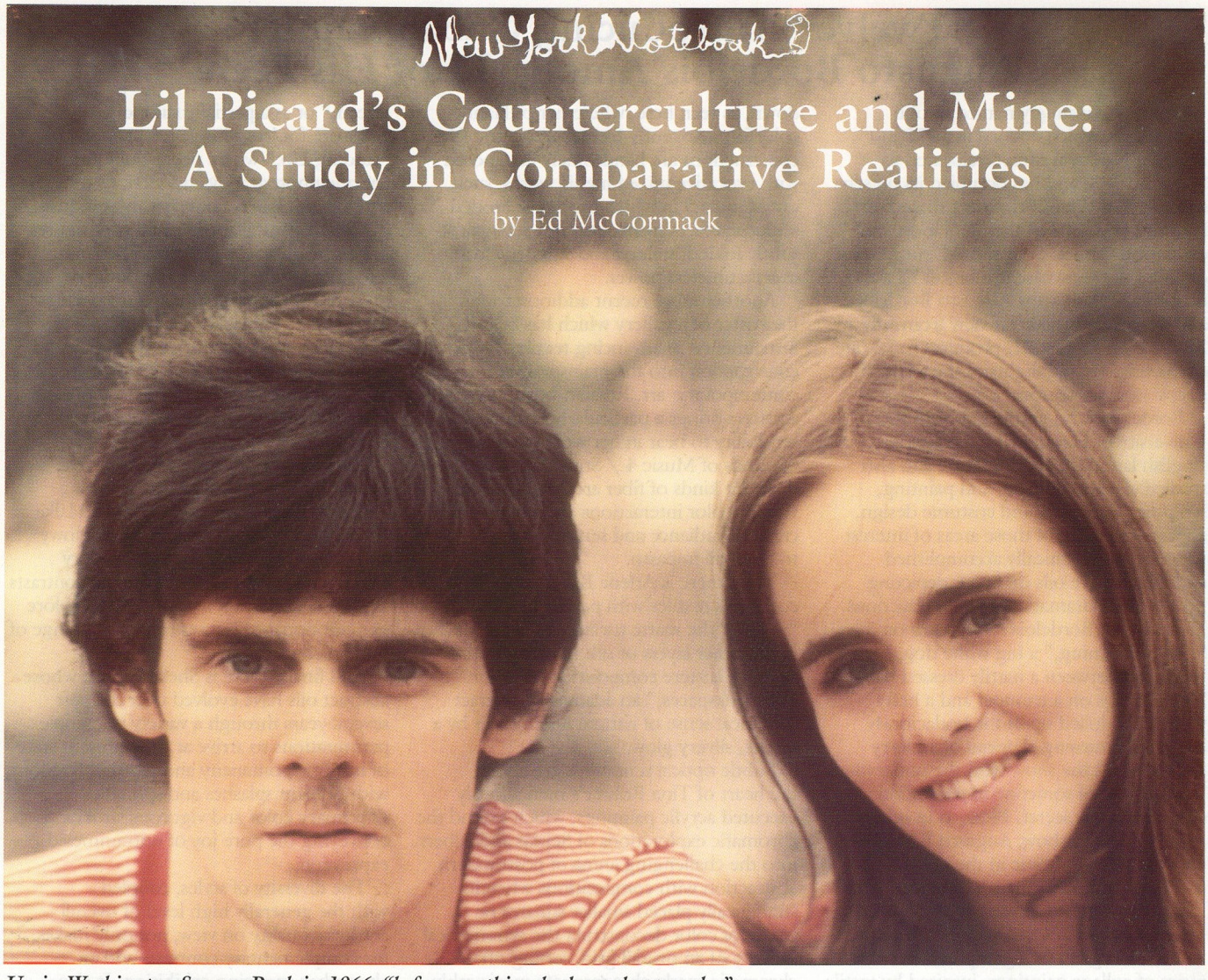
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New York Notebook

Lil Picard's Counterculture and Mine: A Study in Comparative Realities

by Ed McCormack



Us, in Washington Square Park in 1966, "before anything bad ever happened..."

The late artist and critic Lil Picard, presently being celebrated with her first American museum retrospective at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, is the only other person I know of who took the same walk on the wild side as me: from the piss-elegant precincts of high fashion, to the funky 10th Street galleries, to Andy Warhol's Factory. Only her trajectory was obviously more self-determined than mine.

Those places felt like irreconcilable worlds apart in 1966, when I worked as a copy boy at *Women's Wear Daily*, in the Fairchild Publications building at 7 East 12th Street, and would take the short stroll over to The Stryke Gallery, at 86 East 10th Street, where I was having a solo exhibition, to have a liquid lunch with my friend and fellow artist Jim Hans.

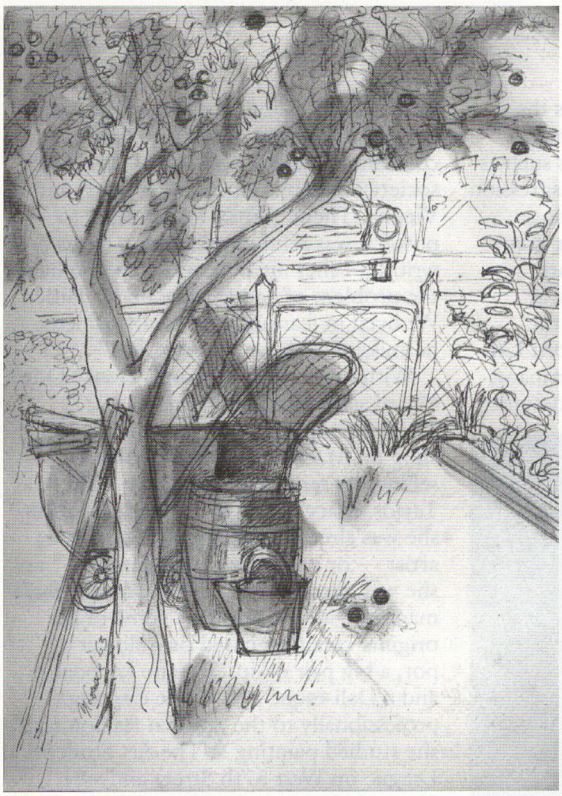
Jim was a few years older than me and the first Pop artist I ever knew. Along with Robert Rauschenberg, he would sometimes mention Andy Warhol as an another artist he admired. This was long before I wrote for the *Andy Warhol's Interview* or got to know Andy personally. Back then I was only vaguely aware of him as a strange-looking media figure I'd occasionally see something about in the *Village Voice*. I remember once seeing a picture that they ran, of him and his assistant Gerard Malanga working on a silkscreen, and not thinking much about it except to find it curious that they were wearing identical striped boatneck beatnik polo shirts. I could only assume it was some kind of fashion statement and feel contempt for two grown men presenting themselves in public dolled up like the Bobbsey Twins.

Still, I made a mental note to find out more about this Warhol character, since Jim was the most interesting artist on 10th Street and I suspected he was more aesthetically sophisticated than me. He was also lucky, because besides showing his paintings inspired by the Buck Rogers comic strip at the Stryke, he was the gallery sitter, a cushy job for which I invariably envied him when our hour of Budweiser and art talk ended and it came time for me to go back and do the bidding of the high strung lady fashion editors in the little black dresses and pearls.

* * *

To quote Dickens in "A Tale of Two Cities," it was the best of times, it was the worst of times. But I still felt that the good outweighed the bad. After eloping on a Trailways bus from Virginia to New York on the cusp of the brief star-crossed era called Camelot, Jeannie and I spent the first year of our marriage living like incestuous siblings in the attic of my parents' rented house on Staten Island, where they had moved a couple of years earlier to get my sister and me off the mean streets of my beloved Lower East Side.

After our son Holden was born, we were able to move out on our own, into a little bungalow hidden away in a leafy cul-de-sac not far from the beach. It was idyllic for awhile. We had a rain barrel and a small grape arbor in the front yard, where I would sit and draw or scribble poetry on my days off, while Jeannie, who was interested in Eastern philosophy long



The yard of our little bungalow

before it became a fad, read Ouspensky, and Holden snoozed in his stroller. Even though there was a beer distributor right across the street and trucks backed in all day to be loaded with boxes of cans and bottles, a mind filled with impressionable literary allusions enabled me to imagine we were like Mr. and Mrs. William Blake in their rustic cottage in the English countryside.

But when winter came, we began to feel cooped up and isolated. Restless for a more cultural milieu, we plotted an escape to Manhattan. We looked first at places downtown but soon discovered that Yorkville, the old German part of the Upper East Side, was a lot cheaper. We finally found something we could afford in a tenement on East 89th Street, between 2nd and 3rd avenues. It was a tiny three-room apartment of the type that is known as a railroad flat, because the narrow rooms ran one after another in a row like train cars — although I thought of them as being more like the panels in a comic strip: simple boxes containing uncomplicated lives.

Holden had his own small room at one end of the apartment, where the water closet (we loved that quaint British euphemism for an enclosure containing only a toilet-bowl!) was; the kitchen was in the middle, with a stall-shower right next to the sink; and the front room, which faced the street and got the best light, was where I painted. It was not much of studio but it wasn't cluttered with a lot of furniture, just a book case and our bed, which functioned as a sofa during the day. In fact, the one time we were burglarized the only loot deemed worthy of taking was an electric fan, an old radio, and some woolen squares Jeannie had crocheted for an afghan, which it amused us to imagine some hapless junkie trying to sew together or peddle on the street as pot-holders.

Being aspiring bohemians, those bare necessities were all we needed. If all this sounds like Hemingway rhapsodizing romantically about his lean early years in Paris with his first wife Hadley and infant son Bumby in "A Moveable Feast," well, that was how romantic it felt after we moved to the city and I first started showing my work on Tenth Street. All the storefront galleries up and down the street would be lit and bustling, with people going from one to another on Friday nights when we held our communal opening receptions. It was a scene so democratic and welcoming to all comers that were a well-behaved bum from the nearby Bowery to wander in, he might think he had died and gone to heaven when nobody stopped him from helping himself to the cheap wine that flowed freely from gallon jugs into paper cups. Given the sartorial tendencies of most of our friends, for all we knew he might be an artist!

Nor was there anything elegant or fashionable about the galleries, either, with their splintered wood floors, hissing radiators, and whitewashed walls. And that was fine with us. Rents were reasonable, art for art's sake was still possible, and fame and fortune did not figure as prominently in our fantasies as they necessarily must for young artists today, in a world ruled by real estate where all the dignity has been taken out of voluntary poverty.

Just a few years later, Jeannie and I would become involved with people and scenes that might have appeared more glamorous to others looking at us from the outside. But I don't think we were ever happier or ever had more than when we had nothing much to speak of, materially, but were rich in hopes and dreams because nothing really bad had ever happened to us yet.

We were so exuberant, in fact, that when we went around to galleries and bars with a gang of our friends, Jeannie, who had grown up on a horse farm in Virginia but could never teach me to ride, would sometimes stop in her tracks, bend over with her hands on her knees, and invite me to climb up on her back. Since I was still as skinny as she was, my wife, the athletic equestrian, had no trouble supporting my weight. So I'd hop on, reach around to slap her on the buttocks, holler, "Giddyap!" — and off we'd gallop down the street our friends cheering us on!

We had a wonderful time together, behaving like Paul and Elisabeth, the rambunctious adolescent brother and sister who share a private world of games and fantasies in Jean Cocteau's novel "Les Enfants Terribles (The Holy Terrors)." The only thing I still needed to do to make life more perfect was find a way to get by without a nine-to-five job. But that would have to wait until the late Sixties, after those four blithe spirits, the Beatles (at least one of whom went to art school), made the question of what was art and what was not seem suddenly moot and I finally got over my self-defeating bohemian hang-ups about "selling out" and went freelance, first as an illustrator and then as a writer. (Without my anticipating it, the latter trade would prove to be a life-changing detour that occasionally still makes me wonder, somewhat wistfully, What if...? But that's a matter for my memoir in progress, and



Fellow artist Marty Greenbaum, Jeannie, and me at my opening at the Stryke Gallery in 1966

not to be belabored here — although I'm so mired in the past these days that fragments of memory seem to spill over into everything else that I write anyway.)

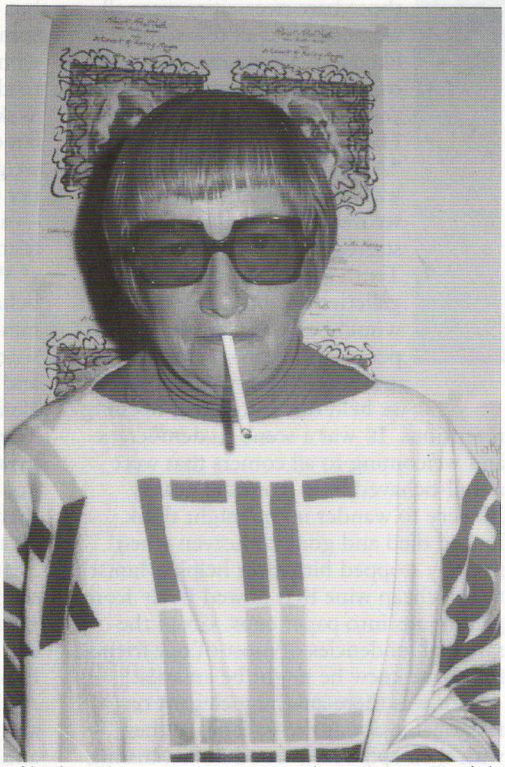
In the meantime, I continued working at *Women's Wear Daily*. At least it was in the Village and, like the Strand Book Store just down the street, attracted a fair number of fellow misfits and unsung geniuses with whom one could grouse about the indignity of having to hold a "day job." Most of these subversives — painters, musicians, aspiring beatnik poets — were on the copy staff, where like underlings everywhere we shared the dubious luxury of mocking those who had us at their beck and call. But Chauncey Howell, WWD's arts columnist, who would later become a cultural commentator on ABC TV News, would sometimes join in as well. Glancing furtively over his shoulder across the cityroom, Chauncey kept us in stitches with his quietly riotous impersonation of the paper's foppish publisher John Fairchild on the day Camelot ended, barking, "Tell that Washington correspondent I don't care who she has to fuck — I want an exclusive on what Jackie will wear to the funeral!"

Chauncey, seemingly the only reporter at WWD who shared our hipster's scorn for the superficial concerns of his editorial colleagues, also came over to 10th Street to see my show and wrote a generous review in his column, praising "a very gifted and gutsy young artist named Ed McCormack" for his "wicked and enthusiastic drawings" of "slum goddesses with dead faces, quivering buttocks and erect breasts, flaunting their weary pudenda in see-through vinyl..."

When a reviewer for *Artnews* followed up by observing that my drawings "convincingly envision the resurgence of a Grosz-Brecht inferno in our hip-huggered, mini-skirted midst," I had to wonder: was it just my natural lasciviousness, or was fashion making serious inroads into my aesthetic consciousness?

* * *

Such was my youthful arrogance during the 10th Street era — not to mention my male chauvinism and ageism — that, whenever I heard anything about Lil Picard's avant garde antics, I tended to dismiss her as "batty old lady." But she was actually way ahead of me, not only in her understanding of how the lascivious Male Gaze had shaped womens' images of themselves down through art history, but also in anticipating by decades the all-inclusive cultural climate that has recently made couture exhibitions such as "Anglomania: Tradition and Transgression in British Fashion" and "Embodying Fashion: The Model as Muse" big draws at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Before becoming known primarily as a visual and performance artist in the United States, Picard, who was born Lili Elizabeth Benedict in Landau, Germany, in 1899, had been an accessories designer,



Lil Picard *photo Anton Perich*

as well a cabaret performer and a journalist in Berlin between the wars.

"You could say it began in the twenties," she told critic Palmer Poroner, in a 1981 interview in *Artspeak* magazine. "I lived. I roared. I really did. In the twenties I wanted to be a dancer and an actress. I left home from a protected, bourgeois place in Strasbourg, and followed Picard, who had been a soldier stationed in Strasbourg at the end of World War I. I was 19. I eloped with him to Berlin."

But when her hasty marriage to the antiquarian bookseller Fritz Picard ended in divorce, she was devastated. "After two years, I became sick and an invalid," she told Poroner. "I was in bed a lot and had to become a writer for a living."

As anyone who writes for a living can ruefully attest, even if he or she is sound of body— if not mind— writing is indeed an invalid's profession. But Picard apparently got out and about enough to become a constant chronicler of Berlin's lively cafe society for publications in Germany and Vienna. Then: "When Hitler came to power I was refused permission to go on writing. I met my husband who also had the problem of being a Jew under Hitler. We lived in fear until we finally gained permission to leave for America."

With her second husband, Henry Odell, Picard settled in Manhattan in 1937, where she opened a custom millinery shop on Madison Avenue, eventually selling her fanciful chapeaux to Lord & Taylor, Macy's, and Bloomingdale's. But she was already thinking of herself as an artist — or a "surrealist hat designer," as she was described in a 1940 *Mademoiselle* magazine layout, showing some of her original creations based on a flower pot, a big pair of lips, a piano keyboard, and a Dali-esque eye. While catering professionally to the uptown fashion set, she studied painting at The Art Students League on West 57th Street and with Hans Hofmann in Provincetown, and felt drawn to the downtown art scene of the New York School. After her close friend, the novelist Patricia Highsmith, introduced her to the Tenth Street galleries, the first works she exhibited there were gestural abstractions. One of the earliest examples in the exhibition at Grey Art Gallery is "Crossing, 1947," an oil on canvas with collaged bits of corrugated cardboard, possibly inspired by crossing the Atlantic from Germany.

Collage continued to be an ingredient in her paintings, as seen in "Collage in Blue, 1957," where a pair of male and female figures are discernible amid an energetic welter of gestural strokes. Around the same time, she began to experiment with small freestanding sculptures and assemblages made with cigar boxes, shards of corrugated cardboard, discarded soft drink and wine bottles, and other found materials. One such piece, "Hide and Seek House, 1960," with its cubistically compartmentalized composition of plaster-slathered cardboard boxes, achieves an especially successful synthesis of the formal and the funky.

However, Picard's biggest breakthrough came in works such as "Lady Woolworth, 1963," an assemblage composed with paint-encrusted beauty products: hair brushes, rollers, lipstick tubes, and costume jewelry. For here she marries the crude figurative force of de Kooning's "Woman" to the then-emerging Pop sensibility to make an engaging feminist statement about the



"Lady Woolworth, 1963" Assemblage on cardboard 28 x 24 in.

objectification of women with the very things they use to beautify themselves. She also commented on violence in her "Destruction Art" pieces such as "Burned Necktie, 1968," consisting of singed silk ties, of which she said, "It is so much better to burn a tie, rip apart clothes, cut up a suit than to slap a dog, mistreat your children, join the Ku Klux Klan, murder your fellow man."

Having always admired the work of her fellow German, Kurt Schwitters, Picard increasingly put her own spin on his idea of incorporating the detritus of daily life in collage. "Andy Warhol and other Presidents of the United States 1975," for example, is a collage comprised primarily of paper napkins, one with sketchy images of Andy's face on it, tiny cut newspaper photos of past presidents, and sugar cubes — the remnants of a quick snack in a coffee shop (perhaps with Andy, since most of her portraits were drawn from life in restaurants). Its playfulness within a geometric composition that comes across like a casual parody of Mondrian is insouciantly appealing.

Since the cultivation of a signature style would have been antithetical to Picard's freewheeling multimedia approach, the exhibition could be mistaken at a glance for a group show. Given the tendency of many of her more-commercially minded contemporaries to freeze free expression into repetitive motifs as instantly recognizable as corporate logos, this could be refreshing. Overall, however, there's a tossed-off feeling to much of Picard's visual output, a sense of almost impatient experiment without ultimate commitment, that could make it seem less like a fully realized oeuvre than artifacts of a particular moment in art history. Hence the phrase "and Counterculture New York" after the artist's name adds historical heft to the exhibition, while absolving her from carrying its full weight on her rather formally frail shoulders. Instead, the viewer is enabled to regard Picard as an especially vivacious exemplar of an era in which art was driven by social rather than marketing factors.

And a vital moment it was; perhaps the last moment when a so-called counterculture actually existed in New York. Not only were there numerous artist-run cooperatives and other venues downtown where one could get first exposure without having to buck the uptown gallery system, but artists supported each other by attending each others' openings and also participating in and creating the initial audience for events called Happenings. A precursor of performance art, happenings were originated by Allan Kaprow, who turned his exhibition at the Rueben Gallery in 1959 into what we would call today an interactive environment.

Kaprow's idea was to break down the boundaries between artist and viewer (something that was admittedly easier to do when most of the viewers were artists themselves), and subsequent happenings took place not only in galleries and artist's lofts, but also in public venues, such as the Staten Island ferry, where Carolee Schneeman staged one in which Picard participated.

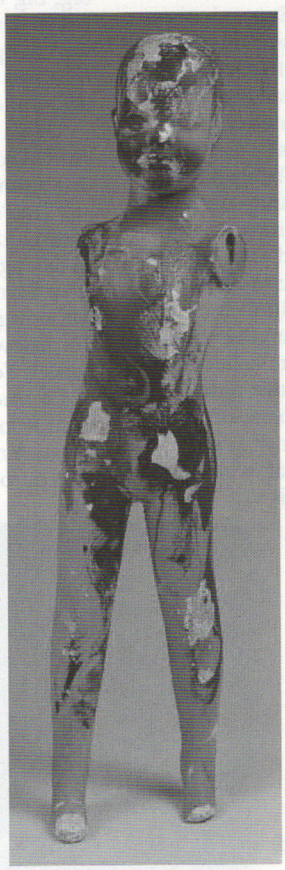
Picard presented her first happening,"The Bed," at a village coffee shop called Cafe au Go Go in 1964. Although she was sixty-five at the time, decades older than most other performance artists, according to the Grey Art Gallery exhibition brochure, "She performed a kind of striptease from an electric bed assisted by the dancer Meredith Monk." The following year, she presented another event at the Smolin Gallery, in which statuesque models preened before a makeup mirror and passed around a tray of falsies while the artist brandished a powder puff at audience members.

"The Beauty Game has taken on tremendous scope," Picard proclaimed to Grace Glueck of the *New York Times*. "It's a modern ritual to replace belief, all overshadowed by a kind of violence and destruction. This is a plastic age and we all wear masks."

For Picard, who described herself as "a frustrated sculptor" and said that she did happenings to "extend sculpture into human beings," this piece was a way of literally bringing to life the theme of her assemblage "Lady Woolworth." Not surprisingly, the Mad Men of one major agency retaliated by headlining the next ad in a famous campaign, "I dreamt I was a happening in my Maidenform bra."

* * *

Picard and Andy Warhol were polar opposites in some ways. For one thing, in both her assemblages made with detritus and her happenings, she was the quintessential anti-commercial artist, more concerned with process than product, while he, from his Campbell's Soup paintings onward, was all about product, both figuratively and literally. For another, Picard was fiercely political, while Andy couldn't have cared less. But they shared a flair for publicity and hit it off right away when Gerard Malanga introduced them at a gallery opening in 1965. Andy invited Lil to perform a happening at the Factory, which he filmed, and later he cast her as his mother in a characteristically tongue-in-cheek autobiographical movie. She also began to write regularly for *Interview*, as well as for the *East Village Other* (an underground paper for which Jim Hans and I collaborated on experimental comic strip around the same time), while reporting on the New York art scene for German magazines such as *Kunstform International* and *Die Welt*.



Relic from "Construction-Destruction-Construction," 1967

Like Sylvia Miles, who acted in Hollywood films as well as in Factory films, and of whom it was famously said "Sylvia would attend the opening of an envelope," Picard, who rarely missed an art reception, must have struck Andy, the ultimate voyeur and gossip, as



"Crossing, 1947" Oil on canvas 32 x 36 in.

one of those campily flamboyant, socially ubiquitous mature women who could keep him up on the latest "dish." Conceivably, she could also be someone to enjoy gossiping about, since she made no secret of her many art world lovers — Ad Rheinhardt and Al Jensen among them — and had once boasted, "I had a whole forest of penises to choose from." To Andy, who was as starstruck concerning figures in art history as he was about contemporary celebrities, Lil may have seemed like a living link to the decadent Berlin of the Weimar Republic — a German flapper right out of a George Grosz drawing and a real-life prototype for the role that his other friend Liza Minelli played in "Cabaret."

After all, Lil had actually hung out in the cafes with Grosz and Brecht back when she was a self-described "coffee house girl," even doing cocaine way back in the twenties, when, as she put it, "everyone did." Yet, in America she had also studied with Hofmann, which linked her as well to the world of the Abstract Expressionists. This, too, may have impressed Andy, who once confided to me, self effacingly, at Brownie's health food restaurant, which served as the Factory Commissary, that they were the "real painters" — especially de Kooning (whom he probably didn't know referred to him as "Andy Asshole").

One gets an amusing glimpse of the relationship between Picard and Warhol in a recording of one of their telephone conversations on the exhibition website. It starts with a telephone ringing off the hook, as Andy the inveterate collector presumably makes his way through the Collier brothers-like clutter of the brownstone, one block east of Jeannie's and my former tenement flat, where he lived for many years with his doting mother, and right across the corner from our local A&P supermarket, where he may have had his primal Campbell's Soup epiphany. When Andy finally picks up, he mostly supplies monosyllabic monotone interjections — "Oh, really," "Oh, okay," "Oh, great" — as Lil launches into a breathless German accented monologue: "Andy, it's Lil. How are you? Listen, I see you tonight? Are you going to this big thing? Listen, there's this marvelous guy from a North German radio station. He's doing since yesterday a big interview on my life with me, for six hours yesterday, and I told him a lot about you too and what role you played. He will come with me. He's this gorgeous guy. He wants to interview you. He's tall and has a beard, and very elegant. And I see you there? I will wear a big, big wig I wore for my performance. I wore a white wig. I did a performance. And the performance will be because I read that you have designed something with apricots..."

"It's a dress you can eat right off the girl," Andy interjects in his blasé way, as if that's something one does every day.

"That's right," Lil acknowledges in passing, obviously impatient to get back to talking about herself. "And you know what I wore for my performance? I wore a white wig with parsley in it. It was parsley. You know what parsley is? Parsley, parsley, parsley. You eat it. It's green. My whole wig is studded with parsley. You can eat right from my wig tonight. So you will see me with my parsley wig. And I eat your apricot, okay? I'll see you, okay? Bye, bye."



"Untitled, c. 1963" Assemblage with open metal cigarette box 5 7/8 x 3 3/8 x 3/4 in

The most telling part of conversation is how Lil seems to be holding out a meeting with "this gorgeous guy" to seduce Andy by proxy into attending the event and seeing her in her wig. It's also interesting to realize that the probable reason the recording exists is because, following the example of Andy, who transcribed an entire "novel" called "A" from random telephone conversations with friends, it was not uncommon for people in his orbit to secretly tape each other, lending a sense of intrigue to the New York counterculture that made its synonym " the underground" seem especially apt.

In fact, Lil's friend Brigid Polk, whose last name was Berlin before Andy changed it to Polk "because she's always 'polking' needles into her arms" — even went so far as to bug her parents' Park Avenue apartment. Brigid later explained that she planted the hidden microphones to eavesdrop on the conversations of her father, Richard Berlin, then the president of the Hearst Corporation, with his buddy Richard Nixon, then the President of the United States, and other high-ranking Republicans.

Coincidentally, I knew Brigid's father before I knew her, at the Hearst Building on West 57th Street, where I worked as William Randolph Hearst Jr.'s office boy as an apolitical high school dropout, and where I first met Jeannie. My boss' wife, Austine "Bootsy" Hearst was from the same county in the Virginia horse country as my future bride and was supposed to look after her when she came to New York over summer vacation from boarding school to model for an agency called Plaza Five. Fortunately for me, Bootsy the busy society matron turned out not to be the best of chaperones. (But that's another story I'm hoarding for my memoir in progress.)

It could be that Picard picked up the habit of taping from Brigid, whom I haven't seen since we ran into each other at a 12-step meeting in midtown several years ago, both of us clean, sober, and considerably saner. For they became friends and occasional artistic collaborators after appearing together in some of Andy's films. Brigid often visited Lil's apartment in the Village, where Lil photographed her posing demurely in a black turtleneck looking, for all her girth, like the former debutante

that she was.

Brigid's "Cock Book" project, a collection of direct prints of many prominent downtown phalluses, may have influenced the older woman's work "Blood Hand," juxtaposing a hand-print in animal blood and a razor blade, created for one of Picard's "Destruction as Construction" events at the Tate Britain. But my favorite collaboration between them is a Warhol-esque Polaroid of the porcine star of "Chelsea Girls" leaning topless over the diminutive Picard, who crouches under her pendulous breasts like a calf gazing up at its mother's udders.

Obviously, like a less ponderous Marina Abramovic, Picard was willing to do almost anything in the name of art. Consider her happening "Tasting and Spitting," staged in 1975 in the performance space at 3 Mercer Street. The audience was greeted by the young punk novelist Kathy Acker, lying nude under a table cluttered with different brands of soda, wine, and a blender, alternately opening and closing her legs, playing peek-a-boo with a swatch of fur. Wearing what a reporter for the *Village Voice* described as "a large white geriatric Afro wig sprinkled with parsley" Picard fed Acker mouth-to-mouth with fluids.

"Like a mother bird to a baby bird," Picard explained to the audience, just before Acker spat the liquids into their midst. ("Some well-dressed uptown people ran out of the room, one politely turning around and saying, 'We won't risk this,'" the un-bylined Voice reporter wrote.) Good riddance to squeamish uptowners! The more stalwart members of the audience were spoon-fed the liquid and invited to spit it out. "It's too pulpy," said one man before doing so.

It could all have appeared inane, even infantile. But, as always with Picard's performances there was a message — sort of — to the madness: The pulpiness of the mixture was caused by newspaper clippings pulverized in the blender with the liquids. One, about a $4000 dinner consumed by the *New York Times* food critic Craig Claiborne, struck the artist as especially decadent and inspired the theme of the performance.

"Everybody loves Lil with her thick German accent," the reporter wrote. "She is grandmother to all, a hausfrau just cooking up some soda pop to spit out, together with other vile though involuntary ingestions like Nixon, Vietnam, and whatever else a 76-year old hausfrau finds repulsive."

Much of the writing on Picard and her work has a similarly patronizing tone. Even her friend John Perreault tipped his hand, concluding a lukewarm review of her 1976 exhibition at Goethe House with the pat-on-the-head phrase "our Lil."



"9 Wigs," c. 1970, nine gelatin silver prints taped together

This had to rankle Picard, who was as aware of the art world's ageism as she was of its sexism, having complained in a 1960 diary entry, "The situation of a woman painter in NY (at my age) is not easy to handle. The Cedar Bar and the Club are run by cliques and only young and pretty girls are wanted around, its a ratrace and a racket of the worst sort."

"She was no sweet little old lady stereotype, but outrageous, scathing," says independent filmmaker Silvianna Goldsmith, who worked closely with Picard on the documentary "Art is a Party and the Party is Art."

"Lil's life in many ways is a role model for aging, of not going gentle into the good night, of living intensely, productively, of rebelling against stereotypes, of celebrating freedom in relationships, claiming one's sexuality, as well as self-realization."

Goldsmith, a small, white-haired woman in a prim pantsuit, was greeted with applause when she made an entrance at the opening reception at the Grey Art Gallery — only to learn that the audio of her film about Lil, which was being screened continuously in the upstairs gallery, was garbled.

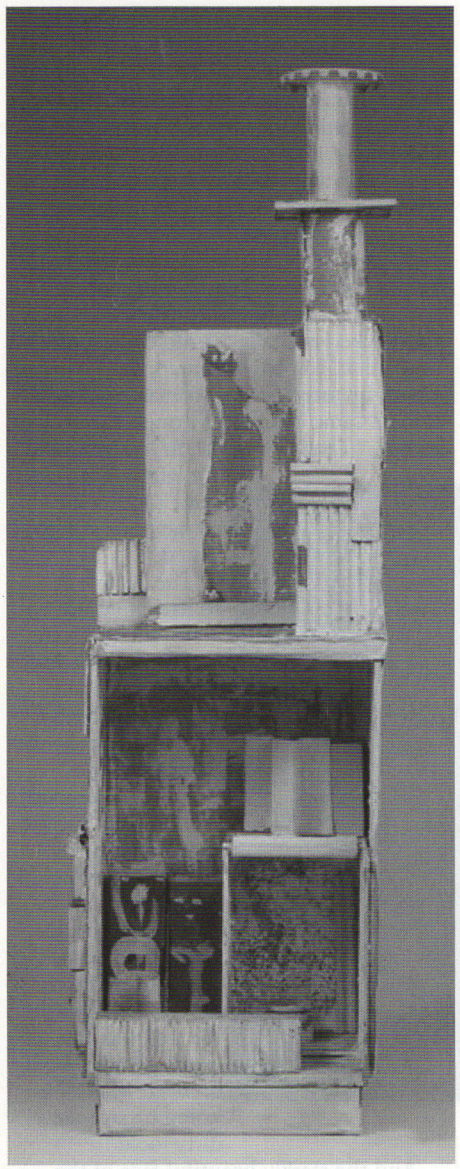
"It doesn't make sense if you can't hear it," she fretted to Jeannie and me, as Picard's 75th birthday celebration in a jam-packed art gallery unfolded silently on the screen. But she brightened up when a bare-breasted young woman holding a camera came bobbing through the crowd, saying, "That's my assistant 'cameraman.' I'm afraid she wasn't much use to me once she got naked!"

The party was so lively that her annoyance with the technical glitch soon dissipated, as we watched as though it were an antic silent comedy by Max Sennett, Goldsmith pointing out the art world luminaries: "There's Carolee Schneeman! There's Claes Oldenburg! I don't remember who that drunken guy sliding down the wall was, but watch what's coming up next: Marisol is going to give me a dirty look!"

And the starkly beautiful face of the famous Venezuelan sculptor, upon which no camera can help but linger intrusively, filled the screen, her huge dark eyes casting a sideways glance askance, doing a sultry slow burn.

Lil Picard, on the other hand, loved the camera as much as the camera loved Marisol. She constantly stole glances at it as she moved among her well-wishers so vivaciously as to give the impression that she was jumping on a pogo stick. A small pixyish presence with an energy that belied her advanced age, she hungrily hugged and kissed her guests, at one point breaking into a joyous a little dance that seemed a cross between a charleston and a jitterbug.

Watching this tiny dynamo of a woman, who died at age 94 in 1994, cavort on the screen, her absence now bore a hole in the center of this posthumous exhibition, causing a writer who had once mean-spiritedly dismissed most performance art as "show business for people without talent" to lament to his wife that Lil



"Hide and Seek House, 1960"
Assemblage 35 1/16 x 10 5/16 x 8 3/4 in.

Picard's most vital work of art was missing: herself.

As Jeannie and I toured the Grey Art Gallery on opening night, it turned out that for the most personal of reasons, we were both most deeply affected by perhaps the artist's least characteristic series of works: 11 ink drawings on typing paper labeled "Untitled (Henry F. Odell's Death series)." Exhibited along with a typed copy of her husband's living will, they provide an unflinching record of his last days at St. Vincent's hospital. Picard spared herself no pain in images such as one, dated May 22, 1976, of Henry grimacing horribly behind an oxygen mask, that she imprinted on another piece of paper while the ink was still wet, leaving a faint ghostly impression. This was framed beneath the first drawing and scrawled with the words "The print / of suffering / a dot a line / a streak / once a face / May 22 1976."

I have written elsewhere about how, while Jeannie and I kept a vigil for our son Holden when he was fatally ill with AIDs in the intensive care unit of Lenox Hill Hospital, I succumbed to "magical thinking," a condition that one medical dictionary defines as "the erroneous belief that one's thoughts, words, or actions will cause or prevent a specific outcome in some way that defies commonly held laws of cause and effect."



Documentary photograph by Julie Abeles of Lil Picard performing "Construction-Destruction-Construction," October 20, 1967, Judson Memorial Church, New York
Gelatin silver photograph 8 x 10 in. © Julie Abeles

Compulsively, while we sat at Holden's bedside, I inscribed scores of tiny t's in a small bound sketchbook in the hope of transferring some of my own t-cells to our son. My wife and I were ecstatic, imagining that my magical thinking was working when his t-cell count shot up temporarily. But the first time I wrote about that period I refrained from mentioning a drawing that I did in the deepest possible despair when Holden's t-count dropped sharply again. I couldn't even bring myself to look at that drawing until very recently, after first seeing Lil Picard's drawings of her dying husband.

Dated 5. 2. 93, Holden's 30th birthday, my drawing shows Jeannie sitting in a chair beside his hospital bed, gaunt and hollow-eyed, wringing her hands while he sleeps in his oxygen mask. It is a picture of unbearable pain and utter hopelessness, and as soon as soon as I finished it, I regretted having drawn it. Yet superstition prevented me from scribbling over it or tearing the page out of my sketchbook. Instead, mere wishful thinking having replaced magical thinking, I wrote banal, hopeful words on the picture that the stark, awful truth of the picture belied: "The road to recovery is not always smooth ... But love will see us through! This too shall pass ! / And joy return !"

For the next twelve days, I clutched that bound sketchbook as desperately as some people with more formal faith than I could ever muster clutch bibles and others finger rosary beads. Now, however, the drawings that I made were hopeful lies, by which, in my state of near psychotic distress, I may have imagined I could take the curse off that more truthful drawing: buoyant abstract forms suggesting some blessed mystical metamorphosis; Holden looking radiantly healthy and handsome again, sunny beams of light streaming from his face as it merges with Jeannie's serene profile and graceful floral forms dance in the air; the three of us strolling with linked arms along a path that flows like water in a metaphysical landscape where smiles and bright eyes adorn the mountain peaks; my wife gently messaging our son's feet, as she did every day in the I.C.U.), with intricate lines of "healing energy" swirling all about them...

The last drawing, a loose, confused doodle of our three forlorn faces intertwined and Holden's hands holding and writing on a pad, as he had to do when he was unable to speak, was dated 5.13.93. After May 14, any drawings that I made of our son would have to be from memory, rather than from life.

It took Lil Picard — a real realist, who, when an art historian told her that because she worked with impermanent materials her work would disintegrate, answered, "So will you" — to make me open that sketchbook again.

* * *

Lil Picard and Counterculture New York continues at Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, through July 10, 2010. ***All works by Lil Pircard are from the Lil Picard Collection, University of Iowa Museum of Art © University of Iowa Museum of Art***

Sumi-E: Western Approaches to an Asian Art Form

Sumi-E painting, or painting with brush and ink in the Japanese manner, which derives from ancient Chinese ink painting, is a world unto itself. Once, in the Pax coffee shop near the Art Students League that he had made his regular hangout, I tried to explain its appeal to a third or fourth generation American Abstract Expressionist of my acquaintance, who just kept shaking his head and saying, "I know it's very beautiful and very difficult to do but it's just a whole other aesthetic than what I know and do." This despite the fact that the gestural thrust of Abstract Expressionism —the very type of painting that he knew and did! — derived directly from Asian brush painting, particularly the spontaneous Zen literati branch of it, which inspired so-called "action painting."

Fortunately, there are some American artists who not only understand the "very different aesthetic" of brush and ink painting but have become passionate devotees and accomplished exponents of it. Several of the best of them are seen in "Enchanted Worlds of Our Dreams," an exhibition the Sumi-E Society of America, Metro NY Chapter, at 9th Street Salon, 502 9th Street (between 7th & 8th Avenues), in Park Slope, Brooklyn through June 5. (Viewing by appointment Call 646-457-0014.)

One member of the Sumi-E Society with whose work many of us have long been familiar is Rose Sigal Ibsen, a Romanian-born artist and long time resident of New York City who has perhaps done more to popularize Asian ink painting than any other occidental person one can name. Ibsen, who has been widely praised by some of the Asian masters of Sumi-E and Chinese ink painting, including C.C. Wang, and has exhibited in both Japan and China, is well represented in this show. Her and watercolor painting "Grapes" and her monochromatic ink painting "Bamboo" both show her mastery of the more traditional modes and subjects of Sumi-E.

By contrast, John Dilgen's ink and watercolor painting "Little Bang," with its bold gray and spattered spots of color demonstrates how he has applied brush painting to a contemporary style of gesture painting akin to that of the Abstract Expressionist Norman Bluhm. While the circle in "Little Bang" alludes to an ages old Zen theme, his "Branch" could as easily be a product of the New York School as a traditional Asian subject.

Marla Kleinman, who works in a relatively large format, employs a whole range of watercolor hues and techniques, combining them with fantastic figures reminiscent of the Belgian painter James Ensor in an excitingly eclectic composition called "Who, What, Where." And then, as if to reaffirm her faith in more traditional subjects as well, she also exhibits another vibrant watercolor called "Early Dawn Red Lotus."

Kate Mulhauser's "Heron in Rice Fields" is a spare linear avian figure that harks back to the aforementioned Zen literati painter/poets. Mulhauser's line, which varies from a faint grey to denser tones, illustrates the subtle gradations of monochrome that characterize Sumi-E painting at its very best, backing up the belief, held by many, that a true painter needs only the black of the ink and the white of the paper to suggest all the colors in the rainbow.

Linda Mulhauser, on the other hand, avails herself of bright blue, green and yellow water color washes in abstract compositions with the swift spare dynamics of western "action painting."

The work of Roslyn Gamiel is distinguished by an exhilarating fluidity of line, which animates her work "Dancing Brush" with its calligraphic black ink strokes accented by lyrical pink accents. Gamiel evokes landscape in a somewhat more restrained and lyrical manner in another composition called "Quiet Cove."

Still-life is the subject of two works by Isabel Marcus who excels in making delicate and luminous watercolor washes evoke floral studies such as "Lotus for Sara" and "Imperfection is Perfection" with poetic freshness.

Then there is Sophie Maynard, who chooses a traditional Asian subject in her monochromatic ink painting "Bamboo," imbues it with individuality by virtue of her strong use of shadow, which give the stalks a solidity akin to Grecian columns, and also lends character to the drooping leaves.

–J. Sanders Eaton

A Forward Looking West Side Group Show

Several diverse talents were featured in the group exhibition "Spring Forward," curated by participating artists Leonard Gold and Robert Schultheis for the West Side Arts Coalition, at Broadway Mall Community Center, on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street.

One new discovery was Lola Pineyrua who showed a large painting in acrylic and Chinese ink on canvas called "Para Viri." A tribute to her deceased mother, Pineyrua's composition, mainly in luminous greens and yellows, combined rhythmic patterns of abstract shapes resembling graceful palm fronds with splashy linear elements, hinting with impressive lyrical beauty at the hidden mysteries underlying nature and the life force.

Gloria Pearl has a unique way with gesture, which came across dynamically in three untitled works in oil and mixed media. Together, they revealed Pearl's command of a vigorous Abstract Expressionist "push and pull," with slashing strokes of vibrant color conveying a sense of converging forces and taut spatial tensions.

Elaine Adelstein's "Bridge" series of mostly small acrylic paintings compares favorably to the city subjects of early American modernists such as John Marin and Abraham Walkowitz. For like them, Adelstein imbues architectural structures with a visually charged sense of urban urgency within a strong formal context.

Charlotte Jackson's oils are at once geometric and possessed of a restrained painterly sensuality that comes across most boldly in her "Maltese Crosses." Making flat areas of black, bright red, and brilliant blue sing a lively "do re mi" within the context of tic tack toe simplicity, Jackson revamps the formalist vocabulary in paintings that ring out with a rare emblematic power.

Robert Scott's monotypes are intimate in scale yet majestic in sweep, with swirling lines, subdued blues, and reds like streaks of dried blood interwoven in a manner akin to the great British printmaker and teacher Stanley Hayter. Titles such as "Metamorphosis" and "Spring Moon Dance" encourage imaginative interpretation of Scott's monoprints without compromising their abstract integrity.

Anthony Kirov, on the other hand, is a figure painter whose oils combine elements of the Byzantine with synthetic cubism and comic book realism. Employing brilliant stained glasslike color in a kaleidoscopic manner, Kirov makes the subject of romantic love simultaneously quaint and iconic in paintings such as "Umbrella for Two" and "Bench for Two."

Robert Schultheis is an altogether different species of romantic, smitten with urban atmospheres and vignettes. Schultheis' considerable mastery of straightforward realism comes across winningly in subjects such as "59th Street Bridge," where purple twilight clouds float in the sky above and lights glitter on the water below; as well as in "Cafe Charbon," where the telling detail is a bike chained to a pole in front of a crowded sidewalk cafe.

Co-curator Leonard Gold is a contemporary Expressionist with a penchant for piling on thick impasto to lend his vigorously worked oils on canvas an almost sculptural presence that makes him seem a kindred spirit of Jay Milder and the Rhino Horn group. Gold, however, has his own unique way with muscularly encrusted neoprimitive symbols — masks, fish, birds, hands — flowing freely from his brush in skillfully orchestrated pictorial rhythms.

Continued on page 18

The Hybrid Visions of Surrealist Anis Dargaa

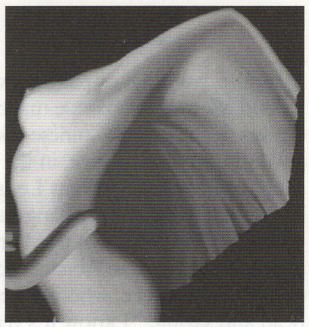
Like his fellow countryman René Magritte, the doubly gifted painter and sculptor Anis Dargaa, born in Liège, Belgium, in 1972, is a Surrealist fascinated with intriguing incongruities. However, Dargaa's imagistic anomalies, rather than being centered on objects of the ordinary world skewed slightly out of synch, are of a wholly phantasmagorical nature. And for this reason, his true mentor is the Spanish Surrealist master Salvador Dali, whom he claims inspired him to begin painting in oils on the very day of Dali's death. (Such a histrionic pronunciamento seems very much in tune with the spirit of the artist whom Dargaa refers to as "a spiritual father.")

What Dargaa has learned from Dali, as well as what he has innovated on his own and hopes will serve as a benchmark for future artists, is on view in "Eternity," the series of paintings on view at Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from June 29 through July 20. (Reception: Thursday, July 1, from 6 to 8 PM.)

Dargaa created "Elephantus Woman," the first painting in the ongoing series fully twenty years ago. Concerned, according to the artist, with "durability, longevity, fertility, and Woman," the series combines images of sensual female nudes with elephants in a manner much more graceful, beautiful, and logical than it can possibly sound when described in words. Perhaps the two paintings that pinpoint the hybrid metamorphosis most clearly, when viewed together, are "Elephantus Woman Base," and "Elephantus Woman Eternity." The first painting appears initially to be a realistic frontal view of an elephant's head with descending trunk and protruding tusks, until one studies it more closely and a suggestion of female breasts, belly, and legs begins to emerge, almost subliminally, from its general outline. In the second painting the metamorphosis appears reversed, with the image of the naked woman most immediately discernible, albeit headless and with what seem to be wings shaped like elephant ears rearing outward from her back and curved tusks entwining her slender waist.

Dargaa's sculptures explore the same theme in a somewhat more abstract manner, with golden tusks reclining like serpents on pedestals or encircling egg-like shapes. That both seem to defy description is what brings them so alive in a manner to elude ekphrasis, and make one realize how completely they belong to the realm of the visual.

Perhaps more immediately comprehensible yet no less mysterious, are oils such as "Elephantus Woman's Eggs," in which the full length figure of another classically formed female nude with wings like elephant wings outstretched appears within a surreal terrain where egg-like shapes float like blue balloons; as well as "L'Envoi de la Femme Elephant," in which another full length nude levitates in profile against a deep, dark ground, her breasts and legs again alluding to the animal's forehead and trunk.



"Elephantus Woman Eternity"

What makes it possible for Anis Dargaa to create such essentially contradictory imagistic hybrids, which in the hands of a lesser painter would be discordant, is his unique way of bringing about tonal and chromatic harmonies by virtue of a carefully controlled palette based on the colors and light of the Mediterranean, with the blues of the sea and sky and the ochers of the land predominant. These hues, combined with a flawlessly smooth classical realist oil technique enable him to blend the most improbable elements in a visually harmonious synthesis. Thus this gifted artist imbues his most fantastic dreams and visions with startling verisimilitude.

— Maurice Taplinger

WSAC Exhibition Proves Art Needs No "Excuse"

As its title suggested, the recent group show, "Visions and Inspirations," curated by Robin Goodstein and Ava Schonberg for the West Side Arts Coalition, at Broadway Mall Community Center, located on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street, was an eclectic venture, adhering to no specific theme.

Each artist supplied his or her own theme, as seen in Marianne V. McNamara's lively satirical figurative oils, such as "He'll Get Over It," depicting in detail a runaway bride standing with her suitcase, smoking a cigarette in the woods, and "What Ever Happened to Sex, Drugs & Rock 'n' Roll," showing a bunch of decrepit old geezers gobbling junk food in a diner with a swordfish hanging over their heads.

By contrast, Marie Robison's loose splashy style captured the spontaneity of the music in her study of jazz musicians, "Just Jiving," and managed to project a sense of spiritual mystery just as well in "Seeking," an apparent pilgrimage of shadowy, clustered figures.

The neo-primitivistic carved wood and bark assemblages of Berney Harris are unique for suggesting the totems and fetish objects of some lost tribe of urban scavengers. Harris is a highly original talent with the ability to improvise with all manner of materials, making magic out of detritus.

Then there was Tania Espina, whose oils and acrylic paintings of still life subjects, such as peppers and halved watermelons, verge dynamically on abstraction by virtue of their large scale, close-up compositions, and brilliant colors. Coming from the opposite direction, the energetic abstract painter Robin Goodstein employed dark, moody hues and a vigorous gesturalism, in an oil entitled, "In the Night," to evoke an atmospheric nocturnal mood without resorting to specific imagery. Goodstein's co-curator Ava Schonberg, on the other hand, evoked the sun splashed stone facades of the Middle East, in her accomplished architectural oils, which have a warm nostalgic quality akin to the Paris street scenes of Utrillo, albeit bolstered by a stronger formal underpinning.

Madi Lanier's mixed media paintings are invariably refreshing for the sense of untrammeled freedom that they project, as seen in her "Composition I" and Composition II," in which sharply defined shapes and bright colors combine with collage elements in a fanciful manner that can only be compared to Miro. Another frequent exhibitor with her own sense of freedom and fantasy, Deborah Yaffe was represented here by lively works in watercolor, oil pastel, and ink, in which underwater imagery, the human figure, and abstract forms were harmonically synthesized with characteristic ease.

Cezanne would appear to be an inspiration to Jutta Filippelli, whose landscapes show a similar "touch" and sense of structuring, yet possess their own unique charm, coloristic sensibility, and sensitivity to the nuances of nature. Another gifted painter who demonstrates that nature is an enduring subject, Marguerite Borchardt showed realist floral compositions and landscapes with a winningly breezy precision and coloristic clarity suggesting the artist's determination to capture an epiphany with utter verisimilitude and impressive immediacy.

Annabelle Leigh, a former burlesque queen turned painter and collage artist, merges clusters of glamourous female faces clipped from magazines with flowers or morphs them into abstract shapes in effusive candy-colored compositions that project a fanciful view of the feminine mystique.

Like the other artists in this enjoyably eclectic and freewheeling exhibition, Leigh supplied her own unique "visions and inspirations" in lieu of an overriding theme.

— Byron Coleman

Painter Maria de Echevarria's Musical Leap Forward

It is incumbent upon any ambitious artist to evolve, whether in cautious steps or great leaps forward, in order to make progress and remain relevant. For the widely exhibited Argentinean artist Maria de Echevarria, who divides her time between studios in New York and New Mexico, the most recent breakthrough came with a decision to consciously surrender to the classical music that constantly plays in her studio. Vivaldi, Dubussy, Mahler — and at least in one work, Bossa Nova! — became conduits to the Sublime in her recent exhibition "The Colors of Music" at the gallery of the Consulate General of Argentina, 12 West 56th Street.

Anyone who has followed de Echevarria's career over the past decade or so knows that her paintings have always possessed a strong spiritual component. As recently as 2003, at Gallery 2/20, 220 West 16th Street, and in 2004 in the same venue as the present show, she exhibited paintings in which ethereal figures were seen within atmospheric metaphysical landscapes. In a previous review, the writer made clear that these "beings of light" appeared in some, but not all, of de Echevarria's canvases. Now these spectral figures have vanished altogether from the latest series and, perhaps somewhat surprisingly (since they were certainly mysterious), their absence proves to be no deficit.

For it would appear that de Echevarria no longer requires such figurative props, neither to serve as spiritual symbols or spatial markers to enhance the sense of a vast environment that invariably comes across in her canvases, nor to increase the drama therein. And although they once seemed integral to her overall artistic project (particularly in "Encounter," one of this writer's personal favorites among her earlier paintings), she has actually broadened her horizons by doing away with them, much as the British master J.M.W. Turner did when he eliminated the little wave-tossed ships that could seem like small, finicky decals stuck onto his tumultuous seascapes, thus advancing his paintings at least a century forward to become precursors of Abstract Expressionism.

Similarly, de Echevarria's elimination of such specific figurative references now propels her compositions headlong into a realm of pure abstraction, bringing them closer to the condition of music — inarguably the most abstract art form as well as the theme of her present exhibition. This is just as clear in a painting such as her acrylic on canvas "Vivaldi, The Four Seasons — Summer," where organic traces of floral forms and swirling foliage can be still discerned within the vigorous painterly pyrotechnics, as it is in "Sunset # 8 ," with its much more Minimalist composition and burnished golden hues. For, as in the case of Turner, nature — whether it takes the form of the roiling energies that underlie all that grows or the impassive stoicism of a horizon line — invariably informs de Echevarria's compositions, much as it informed those of the great musical composers from whom she takes inspiration in the present exhibition.



"Vivaldi, The Four Seasons-Summer"

Indeed, this sense of the natural world as a constant presence and inspiration, however codified by gesture or geometry, is what distinguishes de Echevarria's paintings from those of her worthy predecessor Mark Rothko, to whom she is certain to be likened by some for both the stateliness of her most stringently geometrical compositions and the rarefied sense of color-as-light that her canvases unfailingly emit.

Indeed it is the pure chromatic intensity radiating from her paintings, above all else, that imbues them with a spiritual resonance which transcends the anecdotal to achieve abstract autonomy, even in a composition such as "Debussy, La Mer # 2," with its muscularly cursive strokes of ultramarine blue and white evoking rhythmic nocturnal waves and curling sea foam illuminated by moonlight. For while this painting is clearly derived from nature its primary impact is abstract.

The opposite might be said of "Mahler, Resurrection # 1," in which it could initially appear that there is no ostensible subject, until one considers the allusions to a cruciform in the stark rectangular frontality of its composition. Yet the smoky ochre hues with light streaming through in the top portion of this evocative work in acrylic and oil on canvas simultaneously suggest the ultimate release from the suffering of earthly existence and the hope for renewal in the afterlife that inspired Mahler's most transcendent symphony.

Perhaps the most magnificent evidence of the giant step that Maria de Echevarria has taken in her present exhibition can be seen in the three major canvases, each measuring 60 x 48 inches, that share one large wall in the gallery. Although they were obviously not conceived as a triptych, given that "Winter" is composed in a palette of cool, grayed-down monochromes contained within horizontal stripes, while "Source" and "Beach" both present much more vibrant hues within similarly austere formats, all three paintings work wonderfully in concert. At the same time, their themes are diverse, encompassing, respectively, a season, a mystical state of origin, and an element of marinescape. Indeed, Maria de Echevarria's ability to build such subtle diversity upon such a solid formal armature represents a giant step in the ongoing adventure of her artistic trajectory.

—J. Sanders Eaton

Photo Show Gives the Lowdown on the High Line

What is the High Line Park anyway? A little touch of Eden transposed to the long derelict elevated railroad system adjoining the West Side Highway — or a municipal folly, intended to beautify the already gentrified but still drab streets of Chelsea, no more pastoral than a windowbox on a tenement fire-escape?

For the present, until final construction is completed and the verdict is in, it's still a work in progress to which West Side Arts Coalition curator and participating artist Jean Prytyskacz dispatched a platoon of her fellow photographers for "The High Line Park Photography Exhibit," seen recently at Broadway Mall Community Center on the center island at Broadway and 96th Street.

David Ruskin, who could make a garbage can appear romantic with his lyrical technique of hand tinting his pictures to lend them a time-mellowed mistiness, gives us a characteristically rosy-lensed take on the theme, transforming Chelsea into some European dream city, where even Calvin Klein hotties grappling hornily on a huge billboard take on a Sistine Ceiling grandeur.

By contrast, in his large, crystal clear digital print "Jumpin' at the High Line," Dr. Barry Pinchefsky, a newcomer to the WSAC with a quick eye, captures the youthful exuberance of a neighborhood kid in a colorful parka and hoody leaping over the benches next to a green lawn, as adults stroll like sedate zombies nearby.

Although a winter day can almost transform a swerving High Line walkway into a snow-patched country road, Carolyn Reus focuses wryly on a sign saying "Keep it Wild, Keep on the Path" — and once again we are rudely awakened from a fanciful daydream by a reminder that nature in the city must invariably be kept within circumscribed boundaries. Janice Wood Wetzel sees delicate pink flowers set against steel beams, prompting one to muse from yet another angle on the convergence of opposing forces; yet, in another print, called "Crimson & Gold," the same photographer zeroes in on vibrantly colorful flowers, empowering our imagination to transport us momentarily to a far away meadow.

While most of the artists in the show chose to photograph the High Line itself, at least three used it as a vantage point from which to view the street below: Deena Weintraub shoots down like a sniper at the fashionable boutiques gracing certain streets of the now chic gallery area, capturing eery mannequins in trendy suits, dresses, and sun glasses, looking like specters of gentrification itself behind reflectively distorting plate glass windows.

Brunie Feliciano, on the other hand, gives us high contrast black and white bird's-eye-views of passing pedestrians with saturated shadows creating a noirish effect that takes her darkly-matted prints back in time, as though we were gazing down not on contemporary people but on ghosts from the 1930s, when the trains were still running on the elevated line.

Then Jennifer Holst reminds just as emphatically that those days are long gone, with her intimate views of delicate violet flowers and green grass growing over the High Line's long unused train tracks like the proverbial rose breaking through the pavement in the myth of nature redeemed!

Patricia Gilman, too, seems to foresee a radiant bucolic recovery brightening the urban landscape in the pink efflorescence of her digital print "Cherry Blossom." But, as of now, the tug of war is far from over, as Jane Hoffer makes clear in her series of sleek surrounding geometric facades that reduce the High Line to a small, shadowy reflection on steep mountains of glass.

The Irony Prize, however, must finally be awarded to curator Jean Prytyskacz, for her terrific black and white print of people sitting in bleacher seats set before a huge picture window in this "park in the sky" that affords them a scenic view of the grimy gray street below!

— J. Sanders Eaton

WEST SIDE GROUP SHOW

Continued from page 15

By contrast Anita Seay combines a sinuous
black India ink line with abstract color areas set against the pristine white ground of the primed canvas. Meandering gracefully, Seay's line evokes allusions to the figure that evade specifics, ultimately seducing the viewer via the sheer exuberance of her voluptuous configurations.

An exquisite subtlety is apparently the forte of the final artist, Michelle Melo. Like an aesthetic magician performing sleight of hand, Melo mesmerizes us with the most of the most minimal of means: a length of string and twisting and turning like an elusive melody over faint gray forms suggesting a city skyline engulfed in fog.

— Byron Coleman

G&S NYC GUIDE

opportunities

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

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

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

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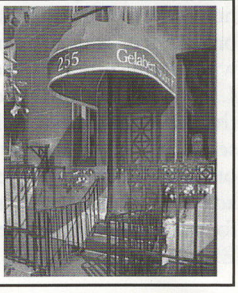
ATTENTION ARTISTS – A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY–IN CHELSEA–THE ART CENTER OF NEW YORK CITY VIRIDIAN Artists, Inc., established in 1970, is accepting applications for membership. For information please visit www.viridianartists.com or call 212-414-4040.

NOHO GALLERY is viewing portfolios in all media for our Chelsea location. Visit nohogallery.com <http://nohogallery.com> for application form, or send SASE to Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, NY, NY 10001.

NEW YORK, NY: CATHERINE LORILLARD WOLFE ART CLUB, INC. 114th Annual Open Juried Exhibition at the National Arts Club, NY. October 5-29, 2010. Open to women artists. Media: Oil, Acrylic, Watercolor, Pastel, Graphics, and Sculpture. Over $9000 in awards. Entry Fee: $30/Members and Associates, $35/Non-Members. Juried by CD's or Slides. Deadline for entry is July 1, 2010. For prospectus, send SASE to Okki Wang, 431 Woodbury Road, Cold Spring Harbor, NY 11724 or download prospectus at www.clwac.org.

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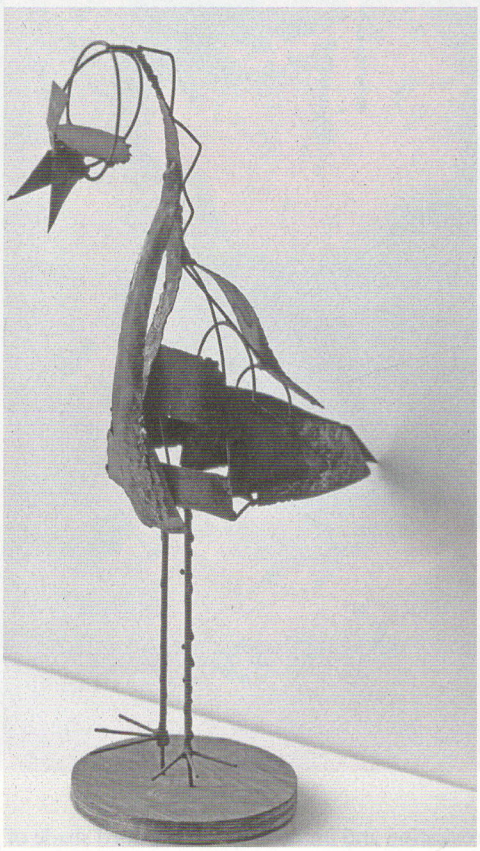


Revelation and Reverence in the Art of Judy Pestronk

In the catalog for "Barcelona and Modernity," an exhibition last year at the Cleveland Museum focusing on ceramics, fashion, fiber/textiles, jewelry and mixed media by Picasso, Gaudi, Miro, and Dali, Daniel Girald-Miracle wrote, "Gaudi approached every project from a small piece of furniture to a major building the same way. He aimed for a total work of art whose unity resulted from the harmony of its various elements ....In his mind, there were no higher or lesser arts, nor did he differentiate between architecture, sculpture, painting or crafts."

Judy Pestronk, a former professor of art at Nassau Community College, who has had a long and productive career as both an artist and a teacher, appears to hold to a similar philosophy, judging from a preview of the work to be exhibited in her upcoming solo show of sculpture, jewelry, drawing, and painting at the Salmagundi Club, 47 Fifth Avenue, from June 28 through July 11. (Reception: July 9 from 6 to 8 PM.)

Pestronk began making jewelry after sustaining a severe case of carpal tunnel syndrome while working on a sculpture: "I was using a compressor to block out some very hard stone, and the vibrations did some damage to the nerves of my wrist," she explains. "I had to have surgery. So I needed to work with something light, especially now that I'm getting on ... I think people consider sculpture as being more important than jewelry. I'm not sure I do. I bring all my artistic background to my jewelry making. Music, sculpture, jewelry, drama — they're all art forms. I believe all the arts are related."

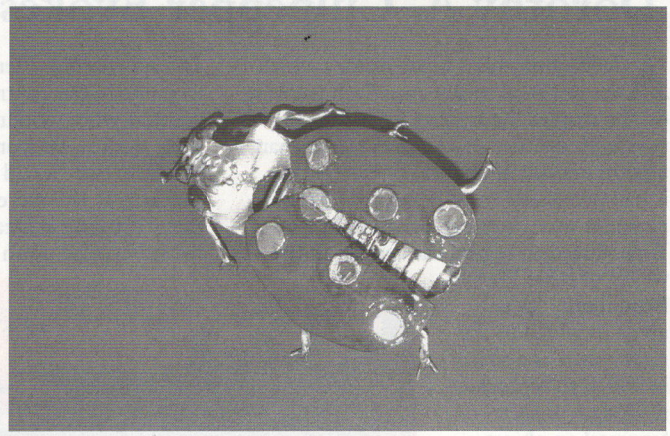


Untitled

A sculptor first and foremost, Pestronk's oeuvre reveals a wide diversity of subject matter and a mastery of mediums ranging from wood and stone to clay, stained fused glass, steel, and precious metals such as gold and silver.

"I don't have a political agenda for my work," she says, "What I do is about emotions and history. I believe that today is an extension of the past. I believe in making beautiful things that last."

Expressive heads, modeled with boldly simplified forms and tactile surfaces that make one think of Rodin's more intimate pieces are but one facet of Pestronk's sculpture. An unpretentious sense of intimacy is a strain that runs throughout her human figures, which are always solidly wrought and sympathetic. Some of her stone carvings also combine this pervasive humanism with a formal simplification reminiscent of her former teacher William Zorach's blocky figuration, with details subordinated to the whole in a manner that harks back to the raw power of primitive rather than classical sources.



Untitled

Yet other pieces in welded metal project a more fanciful, even whimsical mood. One example is her semiabstract avian figure, its beak, wings, and legs so finely fashioned as to make it appear poised to rise up in weightless flight. Then there's a fantastic winged dragon possessed of an almost skeletal delicacy. Pestronk has created other excellent non-human figures over the years, such as one of a grasshopper in sterling silver that shares with the previous works a detailed exquisiteness that makes clear why it has been possible for her to transpose her aesthetic so gracefully to jewelry making.

In any case, the divide between art and craft is often arbitrary, based on nothing more than a false perception of art that adorns the human body as being somehow less exalted than that which hangs a wall or rests on a pedestal in a gallery or museum. Indeed, jewelry created by fine artists such as Picasso, Dali, Miro, and Calder invariably far surpasses in aesthetic value the cost of its materials, however precious.

What makes Pestronk's example especially relevant, however, is that unlike her worthy predecessors, she was detoured by her disability into making jewelry her main medium for a period of time. Thus there was far more at stake for her than for those artists who make jewelry a creative sideline. In order to continue her lifelong dedication to "making beautiful things that last" — be they in oil paint, marble, silver or gold — she has had to focus her creative energies all the more intensely on wearable art that transcends its merely decorative function.

Consequently, the visitor to Judy Pestronk's exhibition at the Salmagundi Club is advised to take just as careful notice of her most miniature works — jewelry inspired by flies, bees, and an especially striking little ladybug — as of the sculptures, paintings, watercolors and drawings which, over the years, have won her places of honor in the Brooklyn Museum, The National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institute, in Washington D.C., and in important public and private collections abroad.

For in ancient Chinese painting, insects conveyed special meanings and blessings. Crickets, for example were thought to sound like a spinning wheel, and their image served as a reminder to prepare warm clothing for the coming winter. And while no similar tradition exists in the West, Pestronk reveals a rare and altogether engaging reverence for nature's humblest creations that we all would do well to share. — Maureen Flynn

In Her New Exhibition at Montserrat Gallery, Dorothy A. Culpepper Evokes Grandeur on an Intimate Scale

A decisive moment in art history which was destined to put American painting on the map as the leading force in mid-twentieth century modernism rather than a poor, provincial relation of Europe, as it had previously been perceived, was the moment when a group of artists in New York started to regard the canvas, in the words of critic Harold Rosenberg, "as an arena in which to act — rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze, or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go onto the canvas was not a picture but an event."

Ever since, there has been no question that the advent of Abstract Expressionism signaled the turning point for American painting, although, predictably, the philistine-pandering popular press initially greeted the movement as a mere novelty and a comic spectacle in fatuous magazine articles depicting Jackson Pollock as "Jack the Dripper" and cartoons characterizing abstract artists as beatnik charlatans perpetrating a hoax that anyone's kindergarten child could duplicate. Once the major works of Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, Rothko and others were wholeheartedly embraced by the cultural establishment and safely enshrined in major museums, however, and it became no longer fashionable for all but the least sophisticated to flaunt their ignorance, the march of movements moved on, with a steady procession of bandwagons for publicity hungry artists to jump onto, ranging from Pop to Minimalism, to the various postmodern permutations of today.

Perhaps the healthiest aspect of the present pluralistic art climate is that all is permitted and no particular movement dominates (although many have tried), therefore creating an attitude of receptiveness to a wide range of styles and approaches. Hence it is now possible to evaluate the contribution of certain painters who, working in the solitude of their studios, far from the drum rolls of publicity that herald each new flash-in-the-pan artistic fad and each new proclamation that "Painting is Dead," have continued to and expand upon the possibilities for spontaneity, improvisation and immediacy that the Abstract Expressionists pioneered. And a handful of the most serious and committed contemporary gestural artists, Dorothy A. Culpepper prominent among them, continue to demonstrate that the possibilities for what Clement Greenberg called "American-type painting" remain infinite.



"Killer Pain"

Consistently, in her frequent exhibitions at Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, Culpepper has found ways to, as Ezra Pound once exhorted artists in all mediums to do,"make it new." This year in her exhibition "Abstract Expressions" in the same venue, from July 6 to August 8. (reception: Thursday, July 8 from 6 to 8 pm) Culpepper fills this tall order once again by demonstrating that the expansive sense of scale that has always been a chief characteristic of large Abstract Expressionist canvases can still be achieved even when the actual dimensions of the painting are considerably reduced. For while the paintings in the present exhibition are of easel size (the largest being 24 by 24 inches), considerably smaller than some Culpepper has created in the past, they have a visual impact comparable to her much larger works.

One can partially attribute this to Culpepper's dynamic method of working, with skeins and successive layers of dripped and flung pigment that often appear to swirl from the center of the painting and flow out toward its edges of the composition, creating an overall color field with the feeling of a self-contained cosmos. This type of work is especially well exemplified in Culpepper's recent work "Color Walks With You," where the brightest hues — luscious reds, violets, and blues, along with a somewhat more subdued shade of green and bits of strident yellow flashing through here and there — emerge from beneath a "net" of black linear tangles and grow more prominent along the edges of the composition.

Here, given the title of the painting, the dark linear network forming the nucleus of the composition calls to mind Paul Klee's famous saying, "Taking a line for a walk," seeming to symbolize the viewers' visual trajectory within the picture space, with the areas of intense color perhaps signifying the sights and highlights along the way,

as in bright flashes of neon enlivening an evening stroll. However, this is admittedly a strictly subjective reading of the painting's effect on a particular spectator. Such, in fact, is the infinite allusiveness inherent in Culpepper's paintings that everyone will invariably discover different meanings and emotional associations in their energetically layered and overlapping configurations of form, color, and line.

A similar pictorial and plastic strategy is employed by the artist in "Color Talks to You," with its horizontal format and even denser areas of darkness. Only here, the black linear network (which exudes so many subtle shades and nuances of darkness that one can only assume it to be made up of an amalgam of many other colors) is considerably more concentrated, almost to the point of becoming clotted, so that the intense areas of red, blue, purple, yellow, orange, and green below glow through ever more brightly by contrast.

Here, too, one could read all manner of literary meanings into the painting, the most obvious being the ultimate triumph of color and light over darkness. But in the final analysis, Culpepper's work needs no further justification than its innate visual qualities, which are invariably sufficient to engage our attention and warrant serious thought.

Along with her densely configured compositions of intricately layered linear skeins — one of the most compelling of which in this exhibition is "Missing You," with its graceful white and gray calligraphy advancing the picture plane and creating a tantalizing spatial tension to contradict the implied depth of the predominately alizarin crimson ground over which it dances — Culpepper also creates compositions featuring larger, simpler, more centralized forms. One of these is the intriguingly titled "Killer Pain," with its bold, deep purplish swath of impasto swooping diagonally down across a rugged expanse of thickly encrusted dirt-brown ground to merge with a bubbly, strawberry-shaped, gleaming blood-red blob resembling a disembodied human heart trailing black smoke like a burnt-out comet plummeting to earth for a crash landing! Here, as the previous sentence so aptly demonstrates, Culpepper makes a powerful statement that registers in one's subconscious with a visceral force that defies coherent translation into the language of any form of expression other than that of painting itself.



"Color Walks With You"



"Missing You"

Culpepper employs a similar visual motif in a another composition of the same size called "The Cobalt Nugget." Only, here, a sunnier chromatic disposition, centering on a bright blue orb surrounded by verdant green forms suggesting a joyous explosion of foliage and set against a beige ground enlivened by luminous yellow splashes, creates a contrastingly buoyant mood. Indeed, it attests to her surpassing skills as a colorist that this artist can employ roughly the same basic formal components to achieve such opposite emotional responses in the viewer.

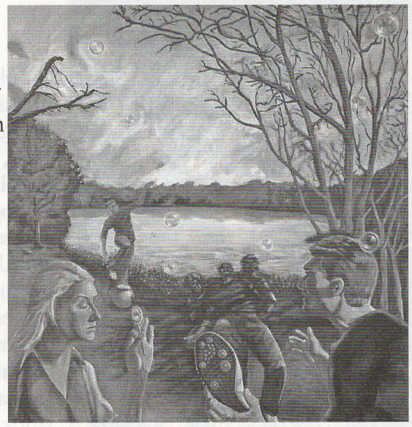
But one has already learned from past experience to expect such versatility from Dorothy A. Culpepper, even as she continues to spring a plethora of surprises, drawn from an apparently inexhaustible fund of creative resources, with each subsequent exhibition.

— Peter Wiley

Work by Culpepper is also featured in Montserrat Gallery's year-round salon.

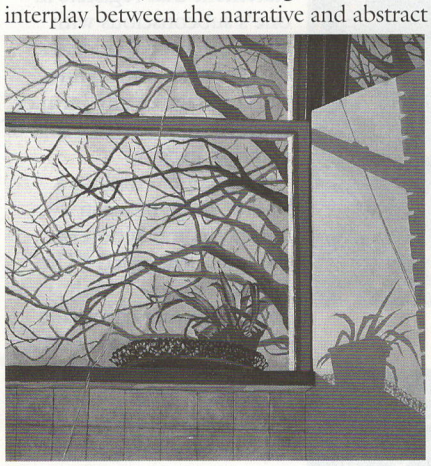
Looking to the Future at Blue Mountain Gallery

One of the chief values of MFA exhibitions is that they can give us a fair idea of how the next generation of artists is thinking. And this holds true in the case of "Thirteen Emerging Artists," an exhibition of recent MFA graduates of Western Connecticut State University, at Blue Mountain Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, from June 22 through July 10. On the basis of the works available for preview, there is much reason for rejoicing.

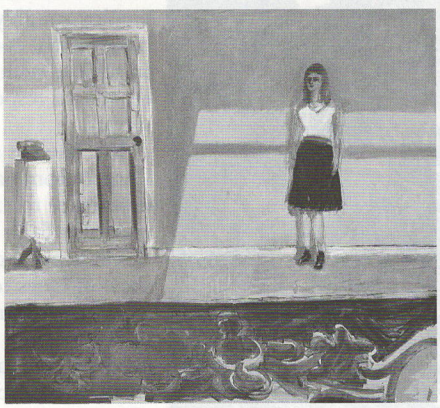


David Brownell

Since WCSU offers MFAs in Illustration as well as Painting, and both are included in the exhibition, it is interesting to notice the interplay between the narrative and abstract elements in both. The most overt storyteller among the painters is David Brownell, whose large oil on canvas is a contemporary allegory centering on several figures around a lakeside. One woman blows bubbles while her companion grips the shoe of a man being restrained by two other people on the grass, as another man balances obliviously on a ball nearby. Not even the soap bubbles floating in the air lighten the ominous mood that the spidery shadows of bare tree limbs, falling across the chest of the restrained man, amplify. Indeed, it is Brownell's mastery of chiaroscuro that invests his enigmatic painting with high drama.



Renee Rossi



Thomas Reilly

Bare tree limbs and shadows play a different role in another large oil, this one a still life by Renee Rossi. Here, the limbs are seen through a window and the shadows — silhouettes of a flowerpot on the windowsill and of the ridged edges of the exterior bricks around the window — enliven an interior wall like images cast on a movie screen. Rossi lends still life an impressive sense of animation by bending space inside out.



Jill Sarver

Another figurative Painter, Thomas Reilly, creates a sense of tension and expectancy with his exquisite use of the spaces between a standing woman, a closed door, and a red telephone in a yellow room, as well with as the innate nervousness of his brush strokes. Reilly's severe flattening of the dark area along the bottom of the composition, which could suggest either a rug or that the woman is actually on a stage adds an intriguing ambiguity to the picture.

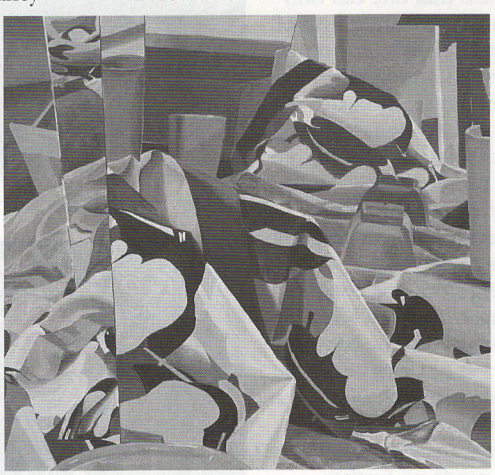
Then there is "Ancient Face," a much smaller portrait head by Jill Sarver, its softly blurred features defined primarily by vigorously brushed areas of shadow, set against a ground of deep, burnished ochre highlighted with boldly smudged areas of gold leaf. Sarver successfully synthesizes the haunting presence of tomb paintings from antiquity with a blunt figuration reminiscent of the late California expressionist David Parks.

The sense of narrative carries over, albeit in a more submerged manner, in Brie McDonald's abstract oil "Geisha." For while McDonald's clearly defined lines and vibrant colors could suggest the patterns on a Japanese kimono, her combination of meticulously limned organic shapes and geometric forms evokes the hustle and bustle of figures rushing through the gleaming environs of a modern mall or terminal.

Betsy Davidson, on the other hand, employs succulent oil impasto, muscularly interlocking shapes, and splintered lines that zigzag, meander and flicker like neon tubing. Davidson's maze-like composition "Clump" reconfigures the vocabulary of gestural abstraction convincingly enough to attest to its ongoing vitality.

Just as the painters in this show, abstract as well as figurative, freely partake of a wide-ranging allusiveness, the illustrators incorporate abstract attributes that come across strongly in Hiroshi Mizuno's expressive caricature of James Brown. Employing a supple line and the clear, brilliant colors of digital technology, Mizuno makes "The Godfather of Soul" as dynamic as a dragon in a ukiyo-e print.

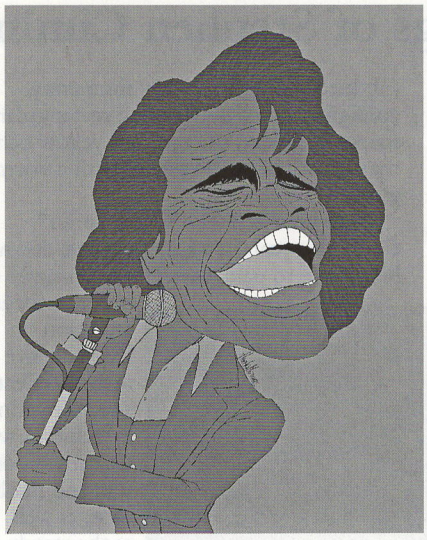
Barbara Mansilla creates an emblematic image, combining visual wit with technical virtuosity in her whimsical paper sculpture of a wolf talking on the telephone while noticing out of the corner of its eye a nice plump duckling strolling by. Jamison Odone employs meticulous pen and ink crosshatching in the manner of Edward Gorey, along with bubblegum pink and



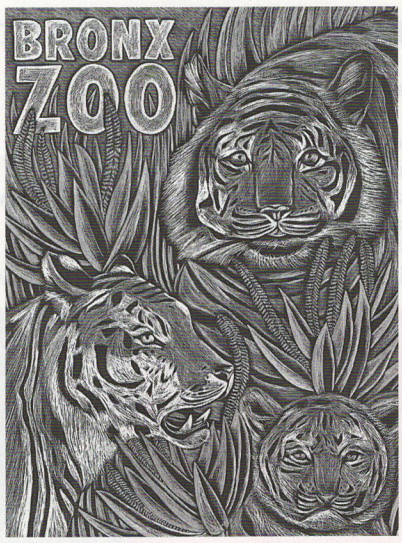
Brie McDonald



Betsy Davidson



Hiroshi Mizuno



Annie Lane



Thomasina L. Beasley

baby blue watercolor washes, to evoke charmingly simplified cartoon characters traversing metaphysical stairways in tribute to M.C. Escher.

Annie Lane skillfully combines aquarelle with scratchboard to design a poster for the Bronx Zoo in which realistically rendered tigers roam among tall weeds like plump pussycats. And in "Rime in Spirit Form," Thomasina L. Beasley uses scratchboard alone to create an image of a demonic fox-like creature with the stark power of a black and white German Expressionist woodcut.

Working in oil on masonite, Danielle Alpert adopts a faux-primitive but actually highly sophisticated style to a create an intriguing picture of frogs languishing in a murky pond that combines qualities of "New Image" painting with illustration.



Barbara Mansilla

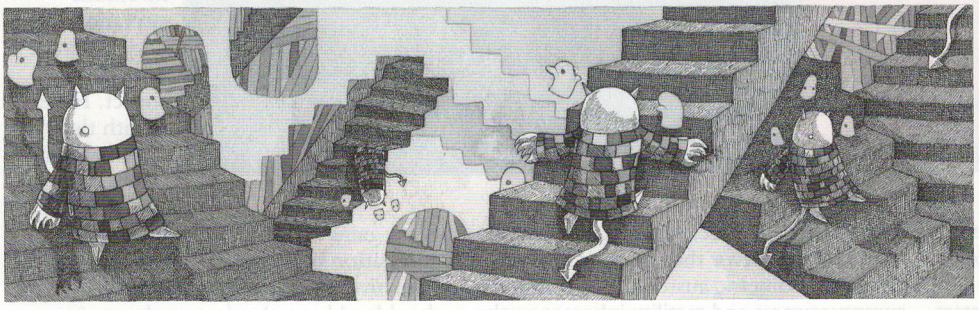
Then there is David Ferreira, who employs an accomplished fantastic realist acrylic technique akin to that of the noted British illustrator Alan Aldrich to capture a surreal encounter between a tiny bird perched on a craggy rock and a huge "octopus king" rising out of intricately wrought waves sporting a purple crown.



Danielle Alpert

Indeed, in a multimedia, postmodern art climate, when many critics and curators propose that "contemporary practice" should become an umbrella term to replace all the old categories, exhibitions such as "Thirteen Emerging Artists" make arbitrary distinctions between fine and applied arts seem woefully out of date.

— Peter Wiley



Jamison Odone



David Ferreira

Less Becomes More in the Small Paintings of Stephen Cimini

After decades of huge canvases in the wake of the Abstract Expressionist era, in many cases size came to lose all relation to scale and seem meaningless — except, perhaps, as an indicator of overblown ambition — and contemporary artists began to rediscover the joys of intimacy.

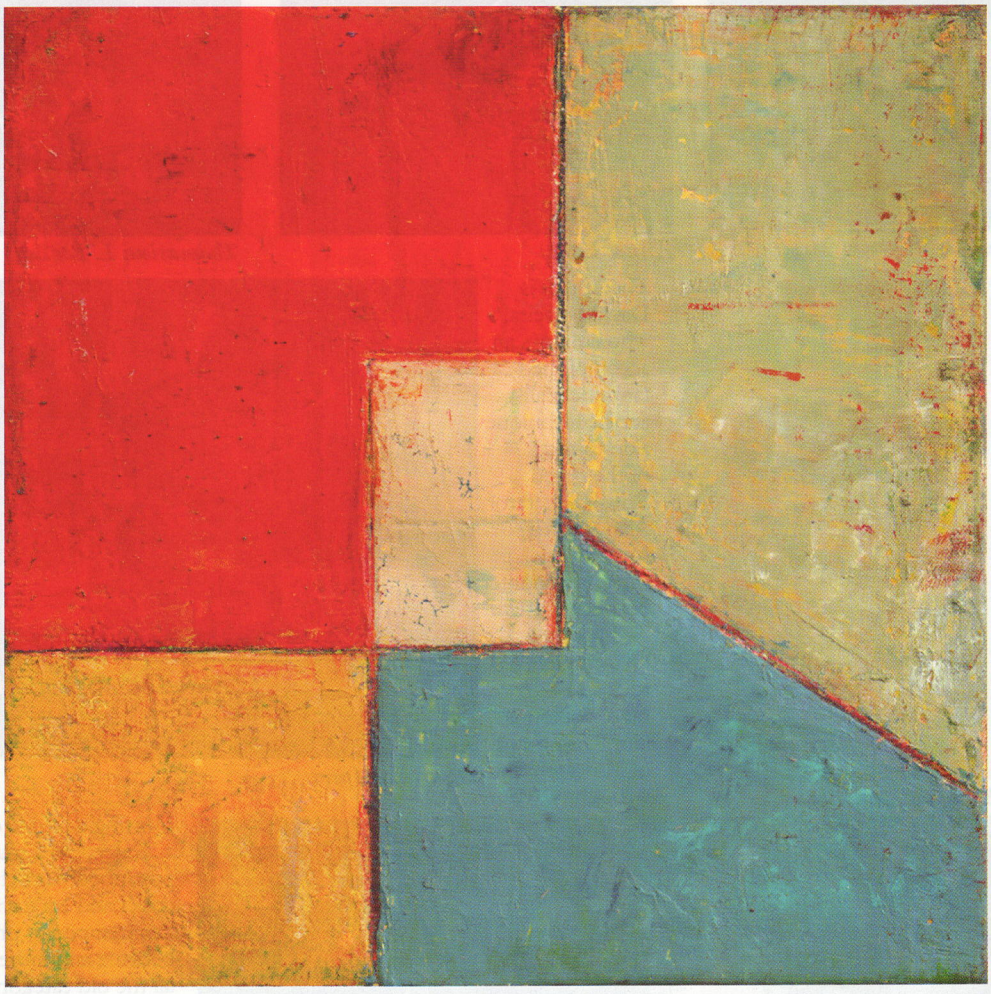
Although Stephen Cimini, who was recently awarded a grant from the Pollock-Krassner Foundation, can still work fairly large and invariably make size truly matter as an integral element of the composition, his recent decision to paint a series of 6 X 6 X 1.5 inch canvases to accommodate the relatively modest space of Jadite Galleries' new exhibition annex, at 528 West 47th Street, has produced especially auspicious results.

Entitled "Secrets in Nature: a small study installation," the show opens with a reception from 6 to 8 PM on Thursday, June 3, and will run through the 19th.

Since the 40 paintings in oil, wax medium, and marble dust on canvas that comprise the show are geometric abstractions, containing no natural imagery, the title resulted instead from the artist having wondered,"How many of these do I have to do before I start repeating myself?"

Like individual snowflakes or leaves on a tree, the number turned out to be infinite in its variety. But from this viewers' perspective, even more impressive is the sense of spaciousness and scale that Cimini is able to project into a format that measures half a square foot. For unlike artists who in the manner of Indian miniaturists conceive of small formats as little "theaters" for narrative imagery, these works address the same issues relating to form, color, texture, the sanctity of the modernist picture plane, and the inherent "objectness" of the artwork as Cimini's larger canvases.

And although it seems entirely conceivable that Cimini may yet employ similar motifs in some of his larger canvases, one would have to quibble with calling these small paintings "studies." For each is a full realized work in its own right, to which compression contributes its own special attributes, drawing the viewer even closer to savor the exquisite tensions between geometric austerity and coloristic sumptuousness and tactility inherent to the artist's entire oeuvre.



"Secret 1"

In "secret # 1," for example, roughly rectangular areas of muted red, burnished orange, vibrant blue, and pale, milky yellow scumbled and flecked with other, subtly variegated hues, converge around a fleshy pink square at the center of the composition. The cumulative effect is startlingly sensuous in a way that one might never have imagined geometric painting could be.

By contrast, "secret # 18" is all cool blue and emerald green hues that shimmer like the icy surface of a peculiar flavor of sorbet, while "secret # 28" presents a tonally subdued yet chromatically simmering configuration of overlapping rectangular shapes in golden oranges and yellow ochres that infuse the entire canvas with a warm glow.

After unveiling his "Ghost Series" earlier this year, in which he pared down his palette to pale, pastel monochromes in order to focus attention on the seductive textural effects and soft patina he achieves with his mixture of wax and marble dust, as well as the stately linearity, derived from urban architecture, that serves as a formal armature for all of his compositions, Stephen Cimini has returned to color with a vengeance.

If anything, the modest scale of the works in this exhibition at the Jadite annex intensifies, rather than diminishing, the sense of chromatic saturation that lends his work such sensory impact. Here, as with the aforementioned "Ghost Series," Cimini once again gains our attention and wins our admiration by virtue of various types of reductiveness, decisively demonstrating the durable old saw that less can be more.

Don't imagine for a minute, however, that Cimini has finally settled on a predictable métier; for it is his restless spirit of experimentation that makes him capable of surprising us (and most likely himself as well) again and again. Indeed, at a juncture in art history when some advocates of newer media are all too willing to dismiss abstract painting — and painting in general for that matter — as anachronistic, it is his unpredictability which sets Stephen Cimini apart as an artist with whom even the most adamant nay sayers must reckon.

— Ed McCormack

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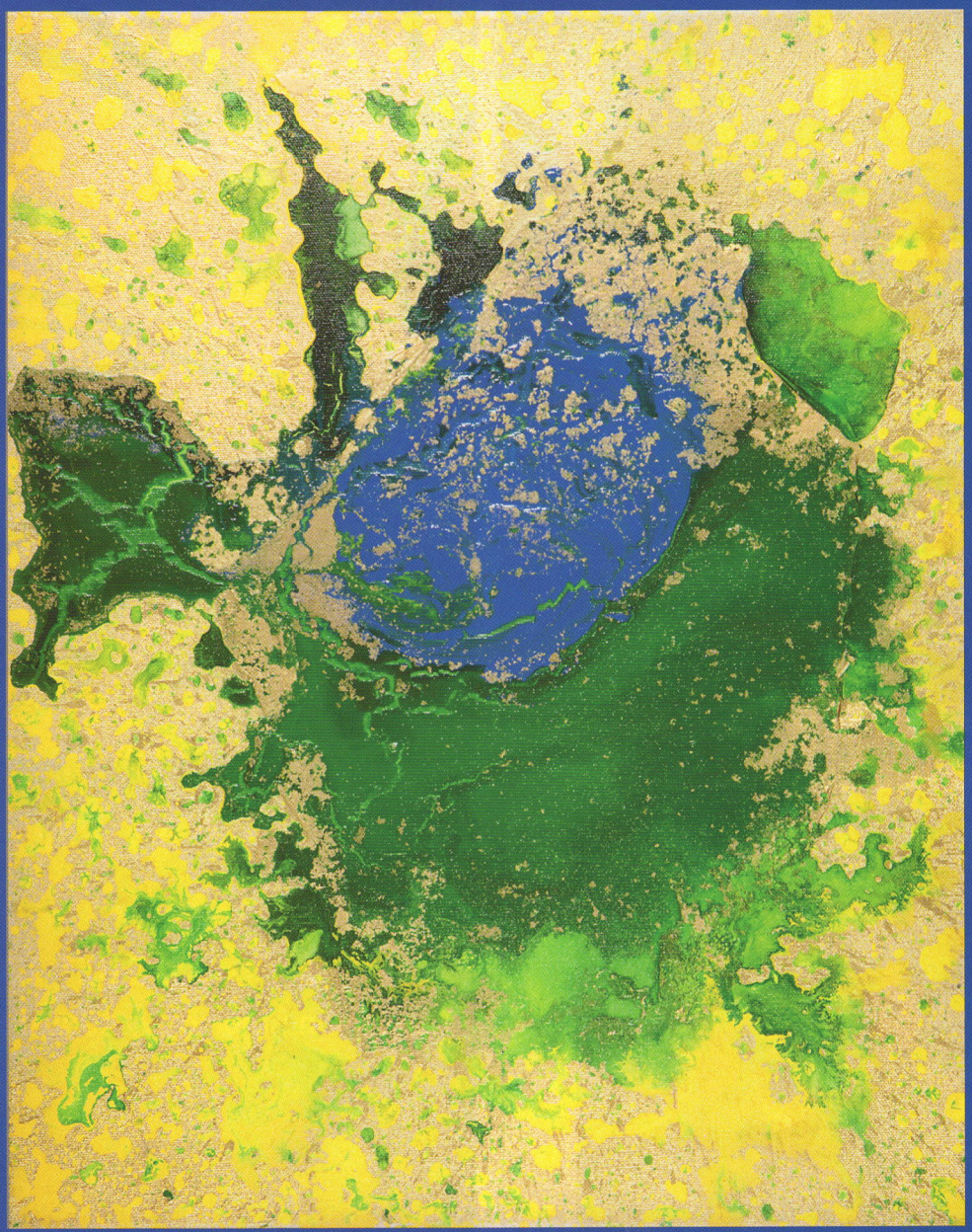
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Dorothy A. Culpepper

Abstract Expressions



"The Cobalt Nugget," mixed media, 16" x 20"

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