Nov/Dec 2010/Jan 2011 www.galleryandstudiomagazine.com Vol. 13 No. 2 New York

GALLERY&STUDIO

"Abstract Expressionist New York" at the Museum of Modern Art

Arshile Gorky (American, born Armenia, 1904–1948) Agony. *1947 Oil on canvas, 40 x 50½" (101.6 x 128.3 cm) The Museum of Modern Art, New York. A. Conger Goodyear Fund* © *2010 The Arshile Gorky Foundation/The Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York*

PLUS *Like a Rolling Stone*

another excerpt from

Ed McCormack's Memoir in progress

HOODLUM HEART

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JOHN WALLACE
60 years of painting

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November 2 - 27, 2010

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November 2 - 27, 2010

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DRAWING

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G&S Highlights

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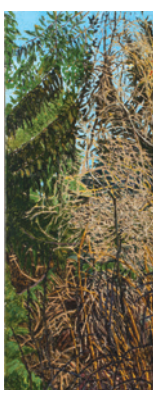

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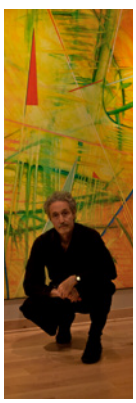

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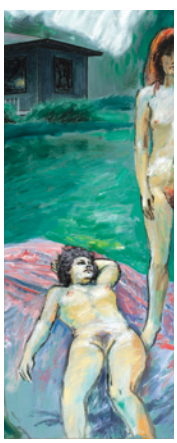

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Imagine: The Watercolor World of Alayne Abrahams

Imagine an oeuvre somewhere between that of the 19th century British visionary William Blake and our greatest contemporary master of the picture book, Maurice Sendak, and you may have some idea of the art of Alayne Abrahams. For like Blake's "Songs of Innocence and Experience" and Sendak's "The Night Kitchen," Abrahams' exquisitely illustrated book "Dreams and Daydreams" holds appeal for all ages, since it can be seen and read on several levels at once.

Cloaked in the cadences of nursery rhymes and enlivened by visual allusions ranging from the Pre-Raphaelites and Arthur Rackham to Maxfield Parrish, Art Nouveau, and psychedelic poster design, Abrahams' synthesis of words and images defies easy classification. One might venture an oxymoronic notion and call her a "wholesome Symbolist," if not for the fact that her skillfully executed watercolors are too complexly layered with meanings, both bright and dark, to be saddled with so simplistic a qualifier.

For surely a winged wisp of post-adolescent girl in a sleeveless top and a thong, kneeling with a brush to paint a garland of violet flowers around a Botticelli-like face, juxtaposed with the lines "Two fairies (did you see) /Dove straight into a tree/ And slept until the morning dew/ Awoke them, wet and gooey" lends itself to a variety of interpretations. And what of the "The Renaissance man," a languorous longhaired youth with only a cloth draped over his loins, who looks like Jim Morrison of The Doors on the nod, as he "leaned on some stars in the sky" and "dreamed a sweet dream/Filled with visions of cream / Piled high on top of his coffee so hot/That the steam curled his lips back in glee"? And then there are kneeling winged nymphets and blissful faces enveloped in psychedelic swirls and illuminated with the poem, "Two women stared into the eyes /Of each other with guile and surprise/ The fairies looked up/ While the angel looked down/And they all dreamt of tea, scones and pies!"

Innocence and experience indeed! For like Sendak, Alayne Abrahams refuses to insult youthful intelligence with the lie that childhood is a garden without serpents, even while including doggerel to delight her very youngest readers, such as: "The monkey he heaved with a big sigh/ As the fairy dripped paint in his eye/Oh my, she exclaimed/ How clumsy and lame/But this paint will no doubt soon dry."

In her independent watercolors and prints, Abraham's pictures speak eloquently for themselves, as seen in two tributes to artistic predecessors: In "Ode to Burne Jones," a Pre-Raphaelite angel piper flutes ornate loops of abstract rainbow hues; in "Musings on Mucha," fragmented faces and full figures, inspired by those of the great Czech-born Paris painter and poster designer, are embellished with flowing Art Nouveau arabesques.

"Ode to Burne Jones"

Other works, including "Goddesses of Light," "Summer," and "Renaissance" encompass a host of mythological and art historical visions, from fairies, angels, and putti to The Three Graces and Botticelli's Venus. Taking as her artistic credo, Albert Einstein's statement that "imagination embraces the entire world and all there will ever be to know and understand," Alayne Abrahams melds them all in her luminous watercolor world of dreams and daydreams.

— Ed McCormack

"Dreams and Daydreams" available through Amazon.com or Trafford.com. Alayne Abrahams' paintings can be viewed on her website: alayneabrahams.com

Jessica Fromm's Drawings: The Power of Not Knowing

For any artist, one of the greatest goals is to surprise oneself. Yet artists, like everyone else, form safe habits. So most surprises are small ones that occur while working in a familiar mode: a slip of the brush that results in a "happy accident" or perhaps two colors one would never have thought of combining before that harmonize — or even clash — in some interesting new way. Precious rare in the life of any artist are those epiphanies that make one feel as though possessed by a demon muse.

For some artists, comfortingly ensconced in a familiar style, such a surprise might be a harrowing experience of Poe-like proportions. But for the once adamantly abstract painter Jessica Fromm, who says "This 'not-knowing is the engine which, as ever, drives my work," it was exhilarating.

"For perhaps the first time in my career I walked into my studio with some images half formed in my mind," says Fromm, whose stately abstract canvases, as recently as last year, evoked comparisons to Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko. "In a very short while I backed away from the easel, convinced that I would not get where I wanted to go in paint. I seized upon charcoal then added graphite, pastel, wax, ink and could not stop."

My phrase "demon muse" was not an exaggeration: Fromm's new drawings possess a near demonic energy and some of her subjects, such as the dark, gape-mouthed head in "Untitled # 23," as well as a sequence of horrifically grimacing faces, could literally suggest demons. Remembering the formal austerity of the oils in her show at Noho Gallery last year one cannot be anything but startled. Other works in the series, however, suggest an underlying narrative and make clear that these dark visions, executed with frenzied expressionist strokes in varying combinations of the mixed graphic mediums the artist mentioned, are concerned with universal themes more humanistic than supernatural.

Who among us, for example, has been so favored by fate that he or she has never had to stand at the sickbed of a gravely ill loved one like the clustered anxious figures in "Untitled # 4" and "Untitled # 17"? Fromm has stated that she has not given these drawings descriptive titles because she wants them to stand alone. And they do, speaking eloquently for themselves.

While the two drawings that I have already cited speak of bearing empathetic witness to another's suffering, there are others, such as "Untitled 7" and Untitled # 12," in which a prone figure dominating the foreground of the composition is gazed down upon by sketchier personages whose interest appears merely morbid or voyeuristic. And these are even more disturbing in their way, for while the former images evoke sympathy on the deepest levels of our humanity, these latter ones implicate us all in the benumbed indifference with which our media saturated

"Untitled # 17"

age obliges us to regard the suffering of others not directly related to us.

Yet other drawings such as "Untitled #5" and "Untitled # 14," strike closer to home, forcing us to identify with writhing or contorted figures whose nudity is devoid of all sensuality by evoking those moments in life that reduce us to our quivering naked meat essence. Indeed, that is what Fromm does to the act of drawing itself in this series: She denudes it of the distancing device of aesthetics, tears away the protective cloak of what Jean Dubuffet referred to as "asphyxiating culture." Yet, for all the raw emotion in these drawings, being a consummately sophisticated artist, Fromm can hardly be defined as an exponent of "art brut," the term that Dubuffet came up with to describe the kind of untrained even at times deranged art he was inspired by and sought in vain to emulate from his own sophisticated and perfectly sane perspective.

Nor can Fromm be labeled with the equally inappropriate designation for very much the same sort of thing that has more recently come into common usage: "outsider art." Quite the contrary, in this series at least, she has joined the ranks of what the humanist critic Seldon Rodman called "Insiders," which is to say: artists who work from their gut, giving visceral impact to images that express our common humanity.

For surely these new images have the look of something unanticipated and authentic which has chosen the artist, rather than being chosen by her. And to try to ignore such a thing, stay the course, and take safer path would be not only unadventurous but self-defeating. For a real artist must seize inspiration in whatever form it arrives, as Fromm has obviously done in the case of these urgent images dredged up from what one can only assume to be fragments of memory long buried deep in the subconscious.

At very least this would appear to be the case; for as broad and blunt as the strokes are with which she has laid them down on paper — often with a violent energy more reminiscent of de Kooning's "Women" than anything by Kathe Kollwitz or other graphic masters of humanist themes — her drawings evoke a sense of specific situations and scenes. This point seems especially well made by the juxtapositioning of two drawings facing each other in the catalog published to accompany the exhibition. One, "Untitled # 8" is of an older female, seated as though on a throne, so formidable of figure that she fills the entire picture space, her eyes staring out imperiously. The other is "Untitled #23," the gape-mouthed image that I described earlier. Only, viewed anew in relation to the figure to its left, it now becomes a small child confronted by the wrath of a judgmental elder.

Neither interpretation seems truer than the other, given the broad range of possible human meanings that these powerful drawings embrace. Whether they indicate a necessary detour or a fertile new direction for her art to explore, one can only be grateful that Jessica Fromm had the courage not to turn her back on them. — Ed McCormack

Jessica Fromm,
Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th Street,
January 18 - February 12.

The Paintings of Marianne Schnell: Nature Transformed

In Marianne Schnell's recent retrospective exhibition, the works included ranged from early student paintings in a realist manner to some superlative examples of the airy, botanically inspired abstractions that crown her mature style. As such, the show enabled us to chart the development of a quintessential New York artist whose varied oeuvre provides an overview of one greatly gifted pilgrim's aesthetic progress over the past half century.

Regarded in the Proustian terms, Schnell's very early realist oils are fascinating not only for their precocious sophistication but also for the hints that they provide of the artist's formative environment. We know that she grew up in Paris and New York and began studying painting at age 11 with the Impressionist Schulein. One gets a sense of this affluent cosmopolitan cultural milieu in Schnell's already accomplished 1939 canvas "Mrs. Schulein in her Drawing Room," showing the subject at her piano in an elegant interior where paintings grace the walls and even lean against them. Already present in this neophyte work is an exquisite, European-inflected refinement that has always been a feature of Schnell's art, even when she later ventured intrepidly into the male-dominated arena of the New York School. And although it is difficult to imagine Schnell bending elbows with the bully boys of Abstract Expressionism at the Cedar Bar, the later works in this show make clear that she more than held her own in sheer painterly terms.

In another early realist painting, "Still Life, 1939," the juxtaposition of fruits, a wine bottle, and a package of cigarettes suggests that the adventurous young artist is already looking beyond the genteel drawing rooms of her childhood to a romantically enticing bohemian world where her work can grow and flourish. Along with other works in the same manner from the same year, "Untitled (Bennington), c. 1950," makes clear that Schnell, now studying with Paul Feeley at Bennington College, was quickly finding her footing in abstraction. For her vigorous compositions of this time are characterized by mostly muted, subtly harmonized color areas, bolstered by an energetic linear ecriture that evokes the supple limbs of saplings. Viewed as a group, these pieces forecast the gift for translating elements of the natural world into the engaging gestural language for which Schnell was eventually to become known.

Indeed, like the visual counterpart to the literary development of Susan Sontag, the exhibition gave one a superb sense of a precocious young woman artist's trajectory from her early promise to the ultimate mastery of her medium. From the early to the late 1960s, Schnell experiments restlessly, trying on a variety of expressive modes, ranging from sweeping, cursive linear configurations, to overall compositions comprised of densely layered and woven strokes, to looser gestural works in generally subdued hues, as seen in a 1960 canvas from her "Black Line Series."

One of the pivotal works from this middle period, as far as this writer is concerned, is an untitled (as most of Schnell's paintings remain to this day) work from 1965, in which she really begins to hit her stride. Now working in acrylics, a relatively new medium that suited the swift buoyancy of her style — and which she would often use either alone or combined with oils from this point on — this largish canvas sets bold, swiftly arching yellow and blue strokes afloat against a pale olive green ground. For, here, Schnell begins to approach the striking détente between elements of Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting that distinguishes her mature work.

It is in the early 1970s, however, that Schnell's unique painterly sensibility emerges in full force. It begins the first year of the decade with a gorgeously sumptuous medium size canvas in which graceful curved strokes enliven a burnished red ground. This banner year also brings us other works in which Schnell introduces a sense of composition more akin to the Asian than the Western tradition. She finally tosses off the shackles of the leftover Cubist structuring that serves as the phantom armature of much ostensibly loose and goosey gestural abstraction. She even outdoes Norman Bluhm in this regard in one especially majestic large canvas where the center, although faintly mottled with pale purple washes is essentially empty, with fiery orange strokes sweeping in from both sides like the branches of two burning pine trees.

From here on in, Marianne Schnell's signature style, which she would continue to refine and open to new possibilities over the next three decades and right to the present, was firmly in place (if one may employ a term that may seem antithetical to the sense of constant flux that continues to animate her best work). Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that at this point the fireworks began, with brilliant, florally suggestive explosions of color everywhere to be seen.

Often her radiant gestural effusions occupy pure white grounds, as in one four-by-six-foot canvas in a horizontal format from the year 2000, where the "air" that she lets into her compositions surrounds a jaggedly configured orange shape that appears to burst like a giant firecracker. Yet that the airy expansiveness of Schnell's mature compositions arises from something far more more complex and mysterious than a simple trick of omission is made clear in an easel scale painting from 2009, where the florally suggestive effusions of color occur against a 24 karat gold ground. For not even the element of metallic opacity that her painterly gestures inhabit so baroquely can anchor the untrammeled vivacity at the heart of Marianne Schnell's creative project. Indeed, it is the energy of nature itself that she taps into and transforms by virtue of her singular artistic vision.

— Ed McCormack

Marianne Schnell,
seen recently at the Broome Street Gallery,
498 Broome Street

The Lyrical Linear Universe of Fred Mou

Line is the essence of form and a delineator of character, according to artists in the Asian countries, where calligraphy is regarded as an art form on a par with painting and its greatest exponents generally surpass the linear mastery of our best Western artists. Fred Mou, a Swiss architect-turned-artist trained at the Institute of Architecture, in Geneva, who began his career at the School of the Beaux Arts, in Paris, is the exception to the rule.

Mou is a painter whose works in acrylic on paper consist primarily of colored lines, rather than areas of color in the usual Western manner. Lines dance and swirl over the white expanse of the paper with a grace that is uncommonly beautiful for their sinuous sense of movement. Among contemporary American artists only Brice Marden's "Cold Mountain" series, influenced by Chinese calligraphy, seems comparable. But while Marden's oils on canvas partake of the aggressive scale of Abstract Expressionism, Mou's relatively modest formats lend his works an intimacy and a poetic delicacy that puts them in a category all their own. Such intimacy is especially refreshing and something to be treasured in an art world where many works are cumbersome and overblown, owing to the idea that size equals significance. By contrast Mou, like the earlier intimist Paul Klee proves the old adage that "less can be more" — especially since the airy openness of his style suggests an expansiveness much greater than the actual size of his paintings.

Mou has evolved a personal vocabulary of linear forms, ranging from cursive swirls and sensual arabesques to geometric forms and biomorphic shapes that appear to be derived from natural, often botanical sources. These sources are spelled out most explicitly in the especially graceful composition entitled "Bamboo." Characteristically, however, this acrylic painting on paper, with its dancing green lines and circular pink forms is hardly naturalistic or formularized in the manner of traditional Eastern painting, in which bamboo is one of the time-honored genre. Rather Mou gives his own imaginative interpretation to the subject in a composition that is essentially abstract.

In another composition called "Connexions" — this one in blue and red — sharper more jagged linear shapes come into play, reminiscent of craggy mountain peaks. And in "Flying Metal," the composition is animated by flamboyantly flowing yet sharp edged forms that project an almost antic sense of movement.

Fred Mou is an unusual artist for his unique ability to create considerable excitement with a severely limited formal vocabulary. However, the austerity of his approach works wonderfully in his favor by imbuing his work with a combination of strength, grace, and precision unlike anything else that immediately springs to mind. Some of his compositions evoke floral forms, while others suggest fantastic landscapes or futuristic cities that exist only in the dreams of a former architect like himself. All are possessed of a peculiar magic, sometimes fanciful, often mysterious. They invite the viewer into a fascinating private world, hermetic and rarefied. Unlike so much art today, they see no need to scream, "Look at me!" (Sometimes whispers can be more seductive than screams anyway.) In any case, the paintings of Fred Mou are a refreshing reprise from the more bombastic aspects of today's art world. And one gets the distinct impression that they will be around long after much of its more showy talents have been forgotten. — Maurice Taplinger

"Bamboo"

Fred Mou, Agora Gallery,
530 West 25th Street,
Show closed October 1

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EDITOR AND PUBLISHER **Jeannie McCormack**
MANAGING EDITOR **Ed McCormack**
SPECIAL EDITORIAL ADVISOR **Margot Palmer-Poroner**
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Marilyn Henrion's "Soft City" Series

The stark iconography of urban architecture — most particularly that of Soho, New York City — takes on palpable sensuality in the distinguished textile artist Marilyn Henrion's new "Soft City" series, which like Jonathan Raban's novel of the same name, presents a magical mystery tour of familiar thoroughfares. Although the contradiction inherent in the series' title may call to mind the "soft sculptures" of Claes Oldenburg, in whose "Happenings" Henrion participated as a young member of the downtown avant garde, the appeal of Henrion's mixed media textile works is considerably more subtle, not to mention lyrical, than Oldenburg's giant, floppy Pop mockups of mundane objects.

Not that there isn't an element of Pop in Henrion's photo-derived images of Soho's historic cast-iron facades, with their gaping portals and windows as black as the eye-sockets of skulls. Indeed, their graphic impact and combination of bright color areas can be likened to Roy Lichtenstein's pared down comic strip renditions of modern art masterpieces. Only, Henrion dares a more virtuoso approach, blithely approximating Impressionist optical razzle dazzle and the effect of chiaroscuro with intricate curlicues of black stitching that could also suggest a metaphor for how the infrastructure of the entire city seems to be cracking under the economic strain of the present recession.

Don't put it past Henrion, whose wit often surfaces in her work in unexpectedly wicked ways, to make such a visual double entendre, even when — or perhaps especially when — she is interpreting a subject so personally beloved. For not only is she a native New Yorker whose more abstract works have always taken inspiration from the city's architecture, but a text issued in conjunction with this exhibition also tells us that her "needlework skills were handed down through her mother from her grandfather, an immigrant tailor living on the Lower East Side of New York early in the twentieth century, just blocks from the Soho neighborhood depicted in this series."

Additionally, it seems relevant here to mention that Henrion lives and works on LaGuardia Place, once the site of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, where 146 young immigrant garment workers perished in a tragic industrial fire in 1911. For the allusions made to gaping portals and windows resembling the eye-sockets in skulls may not be as far-fetched as they seemed: One of the factors that has always enriched even Henrion's most abstract work is a sense of tangential elements that, while not immediately apparent in her compositions seem to resonate like phantom presences from within their painstakingly stitched surfaces. These elements were especially evident in her 2006 "Disturbances" series, in which architecturally allusive abstract forms appeared to implode with organic plasticity, evoking wrenchingly vertiginous associations with the collapsing Twin Towers. And they continue to haunt the more overtly descriptive images in the present series. One even manages to manifest visibly in "Soft City: Blue Wall," an especially rich mixed media, hand quilted composition in which Henrion herself claimed not to be aware of the shadowy full length figure that emerges from a mass of variegated blue forms on the right side of the building.

"Soft City: Blue Wall"

Another major attribute of the "Soft City" series is how successfully Henrion has maintained the formal integrity which has always distinguished her art, while projecting a specific sense of place and evoking strong atmospheric qualities within the self-imposed limitations of her ingenious graphic shorthand. She accomplishes this unique synthesis by virtue of a technique that combines the digital manipulation of her own photographs with ancient needlework techniques, achieving a timeless fusion that she likens to the following lines from T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets: "Time present and time past/ Are both perhaps present in time future/And time future contained in time past."

Henrion further "distances" the image through high contrast photographic "flattening," dramatically emphasizing contrasts between sunlight and shadow, while strengthening the composition's design by binding color and line to the two-dimensional surface of the picture plane. Other contrasts enter into compositions such as "Soft City: Open Door," where the mannequin displaying a bathing suit in a narrow, relatively shallow display window contrasts sharply with the implied depth within the open door, where shadowy shoppers milling around and the bright bursts of color from the clothing racks create compelling spatial tensions. Here, as in most of the compositions in the series, the elaborately hand-quilted elements appear to have a mind of their own. For they serve to add textural interest without necessarily adhering to the contours of the imagery depicted, as though the artist is inviting us to savor them solely for their sensuous tactile qualities.

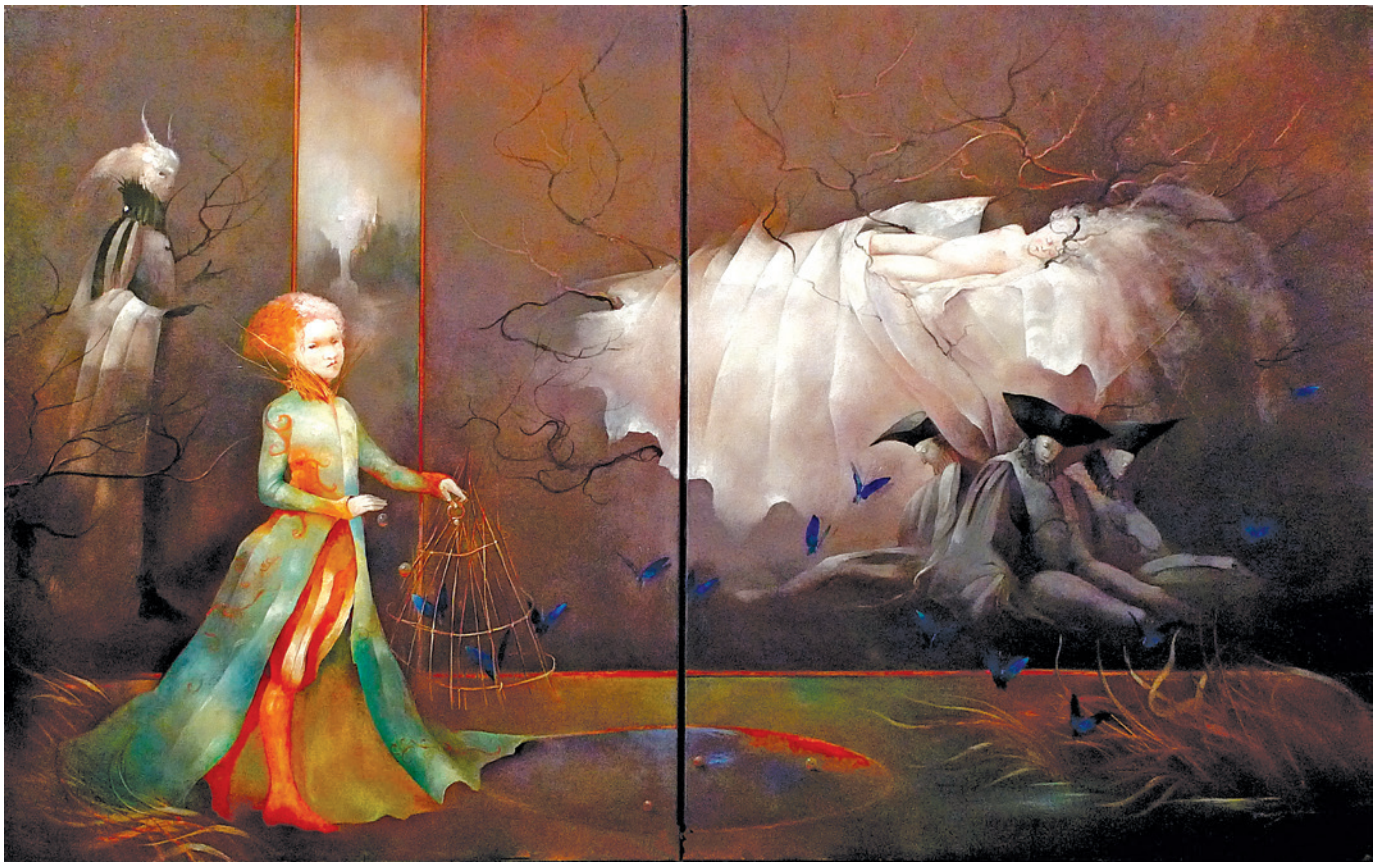
These qualities come to the forefront especially in some of Henrion's more fully frontal compositions such as "Soft City: Angelika," a breathtaking night view, apparently from the artist's studio window, of the well-known Soho cineplex center, with its lights and those of the surrounding buildings and traffic glowing and melting into the all encompassing nocturnal blueness. And they are even more prominent in "Soft City: ell," where the cast-iron columns fronting a boutique doorway and the large pink/red letters of a fragmented logo form a dynamic abstract composition in a mode that, while also referencing the close-up photorealism of artists such as Robert Cottingham, may prove more familiar to many of Marilyn Henrion's longtime viewers.

Most of those, by the way, would undoubtedly agree with me that Henrion is an artist long overdue for serious reconsideration by those myopic critics and tastemakers who, because she has chosen textiles as her primary medium, have relegated her work for far too long to the ghetto of craft. Let us not continue to penalize this major American artist for being one of precious few who have taken that medium far beyond its brief popularity during the feminist era and continued to broaden its possibilities and elevate it to the highest level of contemporary mainstream aesthetics.

— Ed McCormack

Marilyn Henrion
Noho Gallery, 530 West 25th St.
November 2 - 27.

Anne Bachelier: Intrepid Traveler Between the Worlds



"Passe le temps sur la belle au bois dormant (Time Passes for Sleeping Beauty)"

Oddly enough, although I have been following Anne Bachelier's artistic trajectory assiduously since 1993, it never occurred to me until recently, after being privileged with a preview of the new paintings that will be in her fourteenth exhibition at CFM Gallery, that perhaps what this singularly gifted French artist has been depicting all along are her intuitive visions of the afterlife to which we are all destined, sooner or later, to move on. If so, thankfully it is hardly the insipidly sweet hereafter that the chicanery of organized religion would lead us to believe will be our final reward — a place that would surely bore beyond death any soul trained in the trials and intrigues of earthly existence. Rather, it is an alternate reality every bit as complex, challenging, and deliciously, engrossingly ambivalent (at times even corrupt) as the one we presently inhabit.

Whether Bachelier, a retiring woman not given to making or confirming outlandish claims for her work, believes this herself is entirely beside the point. Either way, she has always seemed something of a medium, mediating between our world and a realm that, up to now, one had assumed to be wholly a product of her extraordinary imagination. And until some stately spectral emissary straight out of one of Bachelier's own oils descends from a mountaintop bearing a universally acceptable New Holy Writ validating all of the above, this assumption must stand.

That said, Bachelier's new paintings are among her most uncanny to date, darker, deeper and filled with more unsettling portents than any before. In past reviews I have likened her to Fragonard and Watteau for the ease with which her brush conjured up the foamy fluff of crinolines, the shimmering iridescence of silk, the opulent glimmer of gold, as well as for her orchestration of figure groupings of a rococo elaborateness comparable to Watteau's masterpiece "Pilgrimage to the Island of Cythera." All of those attributes are still present in Bachelier's new paintings; only now she puts them to the service of starker scenes that could suggest Orpheus' descent into the Underworld or an outing on The River Styx.

In "Arrivera le grand navire (The Great Ship Will Arrive)," the figurehead on the turnip-shaped craft floating above the water, trailing disgorged roots like tendrils from its underbelly, with long tattered bandages for flags, resembles a vulture. The navigator at its helm has a skull-like visage and wears a shredded suit of tails. The passengers, all in white lace, appear as ill at ease as the stiffly posed Spanish royalty in Goya's court portraits, as this ship of fools approaches the craggy peaks of an unwelcoming shore. Certainly one cannot envy these tremulous travelers. Yet for all its ominous implications, the painting is possessed of an unutterable atmospheric beauty, owing to Bachelier's exquisite layering of luminous glazes to evoke old masterish effects of sfumato and chiaroscuro rarely encountered in contemporary painting.

A more complex mood is evoked in the larger two-panel oil "Passe le temps sur la belle au bois dormant (Time Passes for Sleeping Beauty)." Here, as in most of her work, apart from her book illustrations (a facet of her talent for which her art dealer, collector and vociferous champion Neil Zukerman provides an outlet in the lavish volumes published by his CFM imprint), Bachelier's interpretation of the theme is hardly literal. In the panel on the left, the artist indulges her love of costumes and silken finery in the figure of a little girl in an ornate costume carrying a birdcage, in and out of which brilliant indigo butterflies flit, catching the eye of a tall feline-faced figure passing in the background. Since Bachelier's compositions observe no physical boundaries between pictures and pictures within the picture, this curious anthropomorphic cat creature appears to inhabit (along with some of the indigo butterflies) a large standing screen, on which the main figure, in the panel on the right, is a pearlescently pale androgynous adolescent nude, covered only from the knees down by plush white billows of bedding floating freely in space, while

sentries in black four-corner hats slump as though drugged down below.

In an oil entitled "La Confidence des papillons (The Confidence of Butterflies)," a single indigo butterfly catches the eye of another androgynous figure in a turban holding a small Asian bowl, into which a woman tenderly cradling its cheek with one hand has dipped a finger of the other and is applying pigment the same color as the butterfly to its lips. Although sexuality is rarely overt in Bachelier's paintings, in these two works, we perceive a subtle undercurrent for which an intellectual mandarin like the late, great French semiotician Roland Barthes may have been tempted to coin a term such as "an erotics of aesthetics." And if it is decadent to summon sensual titillation through obscure fetishes, well, then the two combined panels of "Pass le temps sur la belle au bois dormant" and "La Confidence des papillons" constitute a species of art that gives decadence a good name.

Since for this viewer, anyway, Anne Bachelier's new paintings are decidedly redolent of the afterlife in all manner of aspects, and once we dispense with the moral constraints of Judeo-Christian doctrine, there is really no reason to necessarily assume that the hereafter would be any more devoid of either terrifying tribulations and sensual enjoyments than are our dreams and nightmares — or, for that matter, the constantly shifting realms of heaven and hell that constitute mortal existence.

In "L'Envol (The Abduction)," a skull-faced celestial terrorist spirits a woman who may be morphing into a lobster through moonlit mists. In "Les Mots sortilèges (Magic Words)," a lovely young woman

"La Confidence des papillons (The Confidence of Butterflies)"

in a shoulderless gown made up of long scarlet ribbons and a shapely companion in a feline loup reclining beside her both appear serenely engrossed in an object that one can only hope is not a heavenly device for text messaging.

Who can say for certain that both of these magnificent new paintings by the transcendently gifted Anne Bachelier are not prophetic of a world beyond this one?

— Ed McCormack

Anne Bachelier, CFM Gallery,
36 West 27th St., November 12th - December 31st.

"Arrivera le grand navire (The Great Ship will Arrive)"

This Group Show's Theme Was the Art Itself

The show simply titled "Artworks" made no pretense at an overriding theme, yet its pleasures were many, starting with Marie Robinson's modest scale works in collage and mixed media. Robinson's untitled undersea scene in encaustic stood out, the ancient wax-based medium lending a luminous translucency to the green watery depths.

In Carole Barlowe's complex multileveled acrylic/collage, four paintings were arranged to create a long vertical panorama of urban architecture and pedestrians. Even with such details as the tiny figures of workman on a scaffold, Barlowe imbued her work with an austere formal power by virtue of her pristine hard-edge style and muted color harmonies.

Jutta Filippelli showed works ranging from small vibrant watercolors to abstract landscapes in acrylic with a sense of space reminiscent of Diebenkorn and other Bay Area painters. Especially fine among the later was a small but bold beachscape with a swiftly brushed sailboat as its piece de resistance.

Beatrice Rubel showed one work in colored pencil and graphite called "Bands and Flags," which appeared to be derived from an aerial view of a golf course. In any case, Rubel transformed it into a vibrant topological abstraction, with bold areas of green yellow and pink intersected by rhythmic wavy lines.

Marianne V. McNamara made a witty figurative statement with her large oil on canvas, "Two Chicks," depicting a portly red-haired matron wearing a flower festooned hat and walking a large chicken on a leash. Like Botero's corpulent figures, McNamara's lady had a formidable presence and the artist's lovingly detailed depiction of her striped scarf, speckled wool overcoat, and the proud bearing brought her alive for us.

Along with one of her more familiar Provence scenes, Ava Schonberg showed two floral still life subjects in acrylic. In "Sunflowers in Blue Vase," with its shapely green leaves, clearly defined yellow flowers, the stark geometry of the background was nicely relieved by the pale blue shadows the plant cast on the white tablecloth.

Two oils on canvas and a small pastel on paper called "Sea Grasses" showed Linda Lessner's way with landscape subjects. One canvas called "Patchwork Hills" had puffy white clouds floating in a blue sky over masses of deep green foliage rolling down to lighter green and yellow hills, the idyllic scene evoked with the broadly brushed vigor that lends Lessner's compositions their juicy panache.

Madi Lanier's grasp of nature is invariably structured along neo-cubistic lines, with tree limbs serving as a compositional armature for subtly mottled and tonally modulated areas of watercolor or pastel hues. Here, Lanier's most striking subject was "Wellfleet Woods," where luminous washes of blue and green aquarelle impinged on a line of black tree trunks just enough to deftly dissolve their vertical bias with fluidly poetic atmospheres.

The two final painters both displayed compositional and coloristic intrepidness in distinctly different ways: Amy Rosenfeld's acrylic on canvas "Colors, Shapes, Designs relied upon wildly effective combinations of shrieking pink, blinding orange, neon green, and strident blue hues to wreaking happy chromatic carnage. Broad white stripes zigzagging this way and that and crisscrossed tic tac toe configurations complete Rosenfeld's winningly jazzy statement. Robin Goodstein's forms have a patchy cragginess reminiscent of Clyfford Still at his cranky best. But Goodstein is by far the more appealing colorist than Still, employing combinations of smoky reds, warm ochers, and buoyant blues, and sherbet greens that lend her paintings an almost confectionery lusciousness.

— Byron Coleman

Recently seen at Broadway Mall Community Center, 96th and Broadway, Center Island.

Discovering the Gritty Newcomer Michelle Louise

The story of the painter Michelle Louise is one of triumph over adversity. Three years ago, after leaving an abusive marriage, Louise found herself a single mother raising three children with no job, no bank account, and no car — almost a necessity in a town like Sanford, Maine, where her family has lived for three generations. While doing office work, waiting tables, and giving art lessons, she began to make contacts and sell her paintings, building a reputation beyond her home state. A feature article about her struggle in her hometown paper, the *Sanford News*, provided considerable publicity, and the quality of her paintings took it beyond a mere human interest story.

Louise's first New York exhibition reveals her to be a formidable figurative artist whose work is firmly rooted in her life. In "The Dance," intertwined male and female nudes whose hands reach for each other but don't quite make contact seem to symbolize the shortcomings of many romantic relationships. Here, the strongly generalized figures, both of which are are entirely hairless but hardly androgynous, create a stylized effect that enhances the picture's universality. And while Louise is normally a bold colorist, the dull brown hue of the flowers to the left of the dancing couple, contrasted with the brighter blue background and the pale flesh tones, suggests that they are in the process of dying.

In another acrylic on canvas called "Shhhhh Baby," the loving bond between a mother and an infant provides solace. In this, one of her strongest paintings, the colors are considerably more vibrant and perfectly harmonized. Both the woman and the child that she clutches to her breast have auburn hair, hers flowing down in luxuriant waves against her violet blouse. The brilliant cerulean background sets off the softer baby blue of the infant's pajamas. The clear color areas, as well as the linear grace with which the contours of the figures are defined, suggests something of Toulouse Lautrec's lithographs, had he found inspiration in nurseries rather than bordellos.

"The Dance"

In a painting called "Love," the letters of the word are combined with gesturing hands in a manner that suggests a playful take on Robert Indiana's famous series of paintings on the same theme. By contrast, a more abstractly stylized composition called "Hands of America," in which joined hands of different colors encircle a single eye, is a plea for human harmony in the face of the many partisan conflicts that threaten to divide the country. And in another large acrylic on canvas called "Poppy," the artist not only makes a strong formal statement with the large red flower filling almost the entire picture space, but also seems to suggest the flower's role as the source of the worldwide heroin plague. (At least that is the conclusion this reviewer draws from the woozy, wiggling, pale blue linear forms on the dark ground surrounding the large flower).

It seems to be Michelle Louise's special gift to express such basic sentiments in strong, simple visual symbols that resonate in much the same iconic way as Keith Haring's famous "Radiant Child" and Niki de Saint Phalle's "Nanas." This impressive debut exhibition suggests that we will be seeing more of this talented and resilient artist who has clearly, as the saying goes, snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. — Maureen Flynn

Michelle Louise, Agora Gallery
530 West 25th St., January 11 - February 1, 2010. Reception: Thurs. January 13, 2011, 6 - 8pm.

Chinese Beauty Inspires Artist Zhang Xiuzhu

The renowned Chinese painter Zhang Xiuzhu is an artist totally enamored of the Asian feminine mystique in the series that he calls "As Time Goes By — Theatrical Life." In the West, the phrase "As Time Goes By" immediately evokes the haunting lyrics and melody that accompanied the doomed romance of Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergmann in the classic film "Casablanca." But apparently the phrase had its origins in the Ming Dynasty play "The Peony Pavilion" and was later used in the great 18th century Chinese novel "A Dream of Red Mansions."

Both project the romantic "theatrical" image of Chinese women in ornate garb that inspires Zhang Xiuzhu in the series. At first glance, his large oils on canvas could appear to be Abstract Expressionists, with towering vertical forms splashed and slapped onto the bare white canvas priming in vigorous strokes, much in the manner of the American artist Norman Bluhm, whose paintings are influenced by Chinese ink painting. Zhang began his career working in the traditional medium of ink on paper before taking up oils as a medium. In fact, he still works in his original medium at times and says, "Whether I am working in ink wash, line drawings, sculpture or oil painting, the techniques and expressions I employ are traditional spiritual expressions of Chinese style. For me the only difference is just the materials. I have developed the ability to freely and naturally transform the spirit of Eastern art expression and technique to a form of contemporary expression."

Zhang, who is apparently well versed in Western as well as Eastern art, draws contrasting comparisons in his conception of women to that of de Kooning, which he characterizes as "violent deconstructing, tearing up, squeezing and then hanging up." And indeed, although created in a manner resembling the Western style for which critic Harold Rosenberg coined the term "action painting" in the 1950s (which actually dates to the ancient Zen painters of China and Japan, who splashed ink freely several centuries before), Zhang's own strokes are more lyrical than violent. Centralized discretely against the pure white ground, Zhang's towering figures have the majesty of the mountain peaks in traditional Chinese painting, although the many strokes of vibrant reds, blues, and yellows with which the figures take shape also reminds one of buoyant floral bouquets.

On closer inspection, however individual features can often be discerned in the faces of his figures, although some are more linearly defined than others. In "As Time Goes By — Theatrical Life No. 18," for example, the woman's eyes are clearly defines, as are her breasts and their prominent nipples — as though she (or a lover) has opened the bodice of her ornate costume to reveal them. Indeed, in the initial work in the series, "As Time Goes By — Theatrical Life No.O1," the woman's entire torso is nude, but for a string of colorful beads as though she is in the process of donning or removing her colorful garment, which hangs off her body in all its floral glory, as elaborately embellished in its own way as the robes of Gustav Klimt's Art Nouveau ladies.

"As Time Goes By — Theatrical Life No. 20"

Zhang Xiuzhu's exhibition in Chelsea introduces American art audiences to an artist in the vanguard of the New Chinese Painting.

— Maurice Taplinger

Zhang Xiuzhu, Agora Gallery,
530 West 25th Street. Through November 19

Carrozzini's New Group Show Questions Reality

The Italian artist/curator Stefania Carrozzini's group exhibitions are more engaging than most because they are invariably inspired by philosophical inquiry. Reading David Shields' book "Reality Hunger, a manifesto" inspired her most recent one, "Reality, What Reality?"

The question seems especially relevant in an age of "nonfiction novels," "reality TV," "social media," and any number of other contemporary permutations that tend to blur the line between the literal and the fanciful. So perhaps a good place to start is with Cristina Ruffoni, who appropriates the Chinese restaurant setting of Edward Hopper's 1929 oil on canvas "Chop Suey," renders it in areas of flat acrylic colors (sans the two women having lunch who furnished its central drama), and superimposes big red stencil-style letters that say "American Beauty." In doing so, Ruffoni creates the new reality of an image that looks more like one of Stuart Davis' urban abstractions than a Hopper and refers not too obliquely to a popular film that satirizes aspects of contemporary American reality.

Some of the other artists in the show take more abstract approaches which makes the viewer have to work a bit harder at deciphering their meanings in relation to the theme. Giampiero Reverberi, for example, provides us with a lyrical acrylic painting called "Skies of Painting and Spirit." Perhaps that title, combined with the painting's subtle blue hues and amorphous cloudlike forms, which hover between realistic skyscape and color field abstraction, is a warning not to take either interpretation seriously, since every work of art creates its own reality.

But what are we to discern from Clara Scarampella's photographic close-up of chain-link as convoluted as a nest of serpents tinted in delicate pastel hues? Is the artist trying to tell us that we only endure the chains that bind us to false notions of reality because they are candy colored?

Then there is "Electric Tower Meltdown," another apparently digitalized image by Cheryl L. Hrudka evoking fossilized facets of nature such as twigs and leaves woven into perfectly symmetrical and an oddly lovely construct as delicate as a bird's nest and ominous as an illuminated death's head. The only conclusion to be drawn here is that our present technical reality may be driving us in a direction so dire that we will someday only be able to find vestiges of natural beauty in the the byproducts of a toxic environment.

By contrast, Geppo Monzio Compagnoni's images, painted in the manner of a latter-day Magritte, only more satirical than surreal, spare the viewer having to look (or think) beyond the literalness of his subject matter in order to discern the artist's view of reality. In one of Compagnoni's paintings a fellow in a suit and tie poses amiably with hands in pockets, as if for a casual portrait, sporting a garbage can, overflowing with refuse, including a livid brain, instead of a head. In another composition, Uncle Sam's head vanishes into the sky in di sotto in su perspective as he towers over intact towers. But we recognize him from his steeply sloping blue and white striped trousers and the detached eye that dangles down on a long string, lacking foresight.

Gabriella Ceccherini's painting appears totally abstract, until one notices that its form is a ringing cell phone — perhaps the most ubiquitous manifestation of our communal reality. And Stefania Carrozzini contributes one of the artful catalog covers that serve as supplementary contributions to the exhibition, this one suggesting newspaper headlines going up in smoke, as if to bid good riddance to disposable tabloid reality. And Maria Savino's painting of a jagged explosion in the midst of a silhouetted crowd raises the specter of a reality that most of us would prefer not to think about, as does Francesco Pezzuco's stately abstract diptych suggesting stone and smoke.

— Ed McCormack

Onishi Gallery
521 West 26th Street
Nov. 30 - Dec. 15
Reception: Tues, Nov. 30, 6-8pm

Mixed Media, Mixed Messages in Three Artist Show

"Mixed Media," featuring works by Andrea Shapiro, Brigitte Schlachter, and Regina Lerman was enlivened by complementary contrasts, not only of medium but also of style. Although abstract, Andrea Shapiro's compositions are dramatically configured and variously allusive, often with suggestions of the human figure. For this viewer at least, the forms in one of her acrylic paintings, composed with shimmering vertical streaks of subtly modulated green and blue hues, evoked a sense of pedestrians and urban architecture on certain atmospheric rainy days in the city, when everything takes on an unearthly glow and dissolves in puddles and reflections.

Shapiro also conjures up considerable coloristic magic in another acrylic painting featuring more sensually rounded forms and a brighter palette of strident yellows interacting with amorphous areas of blue and purple violet, in which elusive vestiges of facial features seemed discernible. Such fleeting perceptions are entirely subjective, however, and the painting succeeds primarily by virtue of its lyrical abstract grace.

For a painter capable of such chromatic lyricism, a composition which does away with color altogether might seem a risky venture. However, Shapiro succeeds admirably in a white-on-white collage painting where texture picks up the slack, with sweeping forms, apparently configured from twisted mesh, beads, and other materials (possibly augmented with acrylic modeling paste), creating dynamic formal rhythms akin to those in her color paintings.

The paintings of Brigitte Schlachter are contrastingly realistic yet adventurous in their own manner for the artist's refusal to limit herself to repetitious subject matter in order to cultivate a "signature style." Rather, seemingly choosing subjects as the spirit moves her, Schlachter makes the transition from the everyday to the lyrical with engaging smoothness. In one painting, for example, she depicts cars creeping along on a highway under a clear sky into which, in the distance, the city skyline rises. Through tight compositional cropping, Schlachter places us right in the middle of the traffic jam, as though viewing it through a car window, inviting us to consider the possibility that a bit more aesthetic contemplation could lessen tensions when we find ourselves in such everyday situations.

No such transcendence is necessary in order to to be transported by Schlachter's paintings of delicate white and blue flowers in a pale green field or of different shaped loaves of bread, perhaps in a bakery window, painted in a manner that somehow calls to mind Philip Pearlstein's nudes. Oddly enough, however, Schlachter's painting made bread more warmly inviting than Pearlstein's rather clinical approach to the human figure.

Regina Lerman's watercolors take full advantage of the medium's swift freshness to create urban scenes with a nervous energy that recalls early American modernists such as John Marin and Abraham Walkowitz. Even without including the pedestrians and traffic below, Lerman makes skyscrapers or clustered buildings exude a jazzy electric intensity that personifies the urban experience. One picture of the Brooklyn El was tonally muted, while another, where brilliant reflections on the waterfront deconstructed the city skyline to near abstraction, exploded with fiery hues. The energy carries over as well into Lerman's works in oil, such as a painting of vigorously jotted brownstone stoops and pedestrians on New York's Upper East Side. The power of Lerman's work derives from her use of pure gesture as the driving force of her creative impulses. — Marie R. Pagano

Seen Recently at New Century Artists, Inc.
530 West 25th St.

Wayne Wilmoth: Space Creates the Place

Photography has turned the corner in recent decades, taking its rightful place beside painting as a major art form, fetching big prices in galleries and auction houses. Wayne Wilmoth a Texan presently living and working in Naples, Florida, and a professional photographer for two decades, is in the innovative vanguard of the art for his "3-D landscapes." He terms them thus because his use of individually shot images of an entire location mounted on picture panels positioned at different heights creates a sense of depth that duplicates the effect of standing in the actual landscape.

Wilmoth states that his intention is to "freeze a moment in time for others to enjoy," because, "Many go to places I have been but cannot capture it in pictures, as I do. Many want to go to the places and probably never will."

Indeed, the sense of depth in Wilmoth's archival digital prints on panel is truly remarkable, since he carefully calculates the distances and vantage points from which he photographs the various components of his scenes in order to achieve their cumulative effect. Sometimes the pictures that he creates can verge on the playfully surreal, as seen in "Double Window," where the viewer gazes through the opening in one of the huge sandstone formations in Monument Valley, Utah, at an expanse of sky and an identical formation in the distance, its own opening giving way to the same view in microcosm. Here, Wilmoth appears to comment on the notion of infinity with winning visual wit.

Monument Valley, the site of the Navaho Nation, where more Western movies have been filmed than anywhere else in the United States, is obviously an appropriate subject for the artist, with its many natural distance markers. But the quintessential image, from this viewers' perspective, is the one simply titled "Monument Valley." For here is a stunning panoramic view of the monolithic sandstone structures receding in vanishing perspective and making one feel as if he or she has strolled right into this magical place, so rooted in the earth and yet so unearthly.

Another place that Wilmoth brings alive in one of his most impressive 3-D images is Bandon Beach, on the southern Oregon Coast, home of many majestically craggy sea-stacks with names such as Cat and Kitten, Table Rock, and Face Rock — the latter, as local legend has it, the face of an Indian maiden ossified in stone by an evil spirit. In Wilmoth's "Bandon Beach," the huge sea-stacks recede along the shoreline at dawn, the misty early light evoking a visual poetry reminiscent of a watercolor marinescape by the great British painter JMW Turner.

"Bandon Beach"

It would seem, however, that Wilmoth need not go in search of picturesque locations in order to create such effects. Such is his talent for evoking a sense of place and focusing in on its defining characteristics that he can also engage the viewer thoroughly with simpler subjects, as seen in two prints titled, respectively, "Yellowtail" and "Blackbirds." The former captures the swift movement of fish through brilliant blue water; the latter creates the impression that one could walk right out onto the rickety boards of that old pier, footsteps scattering the birds silhouetted on its poles.

— Peter Wiley

Wayne Wilmoth, Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th St., through November 19.
(Reception: November 4, 6-8 PM)

Life in All Its Fullness Reflected in the CLWAC's 114th Open Exhibition

Salon art shows harking back to the "expositions" of the Victorian era, where the works swarmed the walls in lively profusion, creating a dialogue between different styles and genres, can be a refreshing change from the spare, sometimes sterile "white cube" presentation that we have come to expect in today's art world. Certainly this was true in the case of the 114th Annual Open Exhibition of the Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Art Club, a woman's art organization named for a nineteenth century scholar and philanthropist who was the only female among the 106 founding members of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Among the many diverse works on view, Kristin Herzog's pencil drawing "Tulips," the shapely flowers on their slender, graceful stems set austerely against the white of the paper, stood out as a rare gem of a sort not often encountered in an art scene where it can often seem that exquisite draftspersonship has fallen into disfavor. Pencil was also handled with impressive skill by Karen Kaapcke, particularly in regard to shading and modeling, in her detailed study of a man holding his hands of his eyes, "See No Evil."

Beth deLoiselle also captured our attention with "A Branch of Budgies," a solidly painted oil, depicting a lineup of budgerigars perched on a tree limb amid leaves and lush pink flowers, that transcended banality by virtue of the artist's mastery of a refined romantic realist technique.

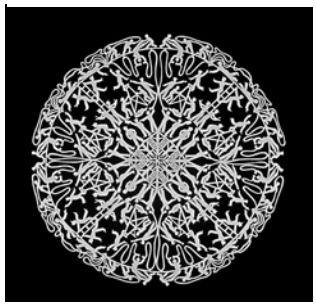
Diana DeSantis

However, lest one get the impression that the show favored traditional styles and media over innovation and experimentation, the work of regular exhibitor Susan Twardus, who creates detailed and expressive figurative sculptures from newspaper should be cited. Twardus was represented here by a veritable tour de force called "The Manipulator," bringing a somewhat sinister puppeteer to animated life. And that even one of the most venerable sculptural mediums can be innovatively transformed without "gilding the lily," so to speak was made clear in Susan Geissler's "Mom, Can I Keep Him?," a winningly weird bronze of a little girl in a blue jumper clutching a big fat pussycat, meticulously painted to resemble a life-size 3-D Norman Rockwell parody. Among other other noteworthy sculptures were, "Lily," a sleek piece in limestone by Freya Gervasi that transformed a floral subject into an abstract Art Noveau arabesque with echoes of an Escher staircase; "The Englishman," a fired clay character study of an elderly chap in a cap by Marlys Boddy; and Priscilla Heep-Coll's "Now, Voyager," a stoneware clay camel with holes in its hump that transform its body into a stylized abstract form in a manner characteristic of this intriguing sculptor of animal subjects. And Virginia Abbott revealed her own innovative approach to assemblage in "The Karl Formula," a multifaceted mixed media semi-cruciform wall-piece juxtaposing several dangling cast paper masks of the same bearded face and various found objects, including a small empty picture frame and clay modeling tools.

Andrea K. Brock

An amusingly surreal comment on the materials that must be marshaled to make art was made by Lucy K.H. Kalian in her oil "Ultra Marines," where an anatomical mannequin salutes three paint tubes standing at attention, each with a palette knife lined up like a rifle and bayonet. How an artist can infuse a portrait with a peculiar personal resonance through the use of light and shadow was demonstrated skillfully in "Derek Garlet," Aubrey O'Meara's pastel of an otherwise nondescript man wearing eyeglasses and a deadpan expression, albeit bathed subtly fluorescent auras that hint at hidden complexities of character. By contrast, the subject herself projects an affecting combination of belligerence and vulnerability through the set of her jaw and the expression in her eyes in "Christa Lost," Diana DeSantis' pastel portrait of a female pugilist in a leotard and trunks wearing one big padded boxing glove and cradling the other in her lap like a stuffed animal. Then there was a more enigmatic oil portrait by Jennifer Fairbanks called "Ascent/Descent," in which a pregnant woman, cradling her big belly and gazing off dreamily leaned against a wall beside a trompe l'oeil rendering of an overturned coffee cup with its spilled contents forming a vertical puddle on the wall. Here, along with the metaphysical coffee cup, other departures from the otherwise meticulous realism of this work are small areas of the composition in which Fairbanks loosens her brushstrokes and lets tiny bits of the canvas show through to reveal a sense of "process."

Linda Gross Brown



Mary Gaynier

Susan Twardus

Process comes to the foreground in "Letters to the Editor," an abstract work in mixed media and collage by Gay Billich in which typographical fragments, graffiti-like scrawls, and splashy painterly effusions converge vigorously. Indeed, the sheer diversity of subjects, styles, and techniques in this show offers something for every taste, ranging from "It's All About Custard," a crystalline culinary still life in oils in the Netherlandish tradition by Andrea K. Brock, to "Footsteps," an evocative winter landscape in pastels by Linda Gross Brown, with bare winter trees casting their shadows over deep snowdrifts through which passing people have trod and traced a winding path. Other pleasures are provided by the wittily titled "How Many Does It Take To Change a Lightbulb?" an amazingly intricate mandala-like figurative tour de force in the delicate and difficult medium of cut paper by Mary Gaynier; a luminous floral watercolor called "Strawberries and Cream" by Doris Davis-Glackin; "Alwyn Court," a technically accomplished photorealist oil of an ornately sculpted building facade with phantasmagoric reflections in its windows by Sharon Florin; and "Reflection," a Diane Rappisi's dramatic oil of a woman of a certain age ruminating in a mirror with an old wedding picture tucked into its frame, at a dressing table amid photographs of children and other mementos of the family life she appears to be looking back upon.

— Maureen Flynn

CLWAC 114th Annual Open Exhibition, National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park South, (Ended October 29th)

At Broome Street Gallery: A Lively Mixed Bag

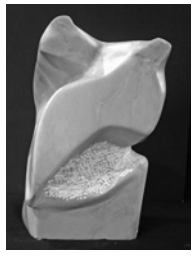
The 93rd Annual Exhibition of the American Society of Contemporary Artists is aptly titled "What's New" For despite its venerable history, the ASCA is one of the more forward-looking of such artist's organizations, less mired in tradition than some others, and its annuals invariably yield a number of surprises. Since the ASCA boasts close to a hundred members and a good many participate in this event, it is naturally impossible to include all of them in even a fairly lengthy review. One can only hope to give a sampling of the show's quality and diversity by selecting a few works to describe and reproducing images of others.

The ancient medium of encaustic is employed in a fresh contemporary manner by Annette DeLucia Lieblein in "Waiting," where a long procession of silhouetted figures is set against a tactile monochromatic ground. The painting has an ominous resonance, evocative of breadlines or other situations akin to Rockwell Kent's mythic figures.

Nature is transformed in Linda Butti's mixed media work on paper, "Autumn Tree," with its radiant rainbow auras. On the evidence of this one piece, Butti appears to be a consummate colorist whose variegated strokes transmit a chromatic intensity that imbues even a simple subject with a visionary quality. By contrast, Sachie Hayashi imparts an almost hallucinatory surrealism to a desolate landscape where the flesh-colored boulders appear to morph into figures, in the oil on canvas, "Ritualistic Dance." In her intricately configured metal sculpture "Poetry of Life," created with copper, brass, and aluminum, Julie Joy Saypoff seems to present our daily existence as a kind of antic merry-go-round. Cutout figures cavort within and around an architectural construct suggesting a fancifully stylized skyscraper conjured up by Alexander Calder, with whom Saypoff seems to share a talent for making metal take flight

Neva Delihas Setlow

Barbara Browner Schiller

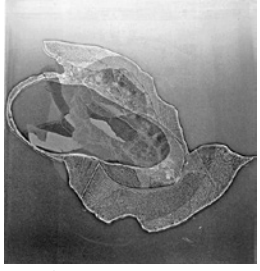


Ray Shanfeld

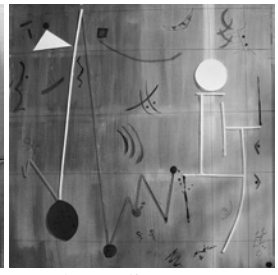
Alan Roland

Jeremy Comins

Rose Marie Cherundolo



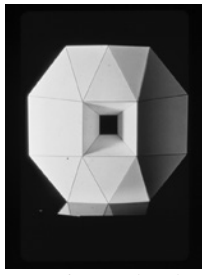
Gerda Rose



Hank Rondina

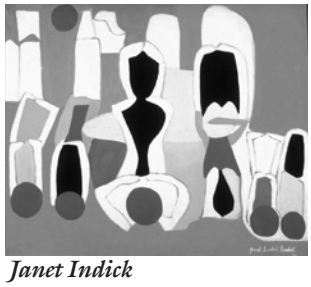
Olga Kitt

Esther Berman



Harriet FeBland

Nikolai Buglaj



Janet Indick

Olivia Koopalethes

Allan Simpson

in which people are stripped of their individuality, and thus their human identity and dignity. Margo Mead, on the other hand, generalizes the human figure to make a more political point in her work in watercolor, ink, and oil crayon on rice paper, "Dropping the Ball on Global Warming." For here, the male and female quasi-deities fumbling with the globe as though it's a hot potato in a celestial setting are symbolically stylized in a manner — even when the piece is stationary rather than mobile.

By contrast, Bonnie Rothchild exploits the weighty quality and innate earthiness of terra cotta to lend gravity to a semiabstract, sensually simplified female figure with a mysterious womb-like opening oddly located in its upper torso, pregnant with an egg-shaped inner form. The title of Rothchild's piece, "Intertwined," only serves to heighten the mystery, leaving the viewer tantalized by a variety of possible interpretations.

Another sculpture — this one by Lea Weinberg — makes a quite different statement with a similar title, "Entangled." The medium is wire mesh and although the shapes it takes are mostly abstract, they strongly suggest a couple struggling against the ties of codependency, yet bound by the stronger force of destiny, as they wind around each other like wisps of smoke.

Still life also makes an appearance in distinctly different guises: In her oil painting "Still Life with Susquehanna," Georgiana Cray Bart presents us with an arrangement of bottles and a bowl of apples, all in subdued green or blue hues set before a window looking out upon a body of water and autumnal trees. The serenity of the scene owes much to Bart's mastery of subtle color harmonies.

By contrast, Dorothy Koppelman incorporates two red tea pots and various cooking utensils within an abstract grid that morphs on closer inspection into a kitchen in her beautifully organized composition, "Cooking on a Brick Wall."

Less covert modes of abstraction also make a strong showing: as seen in Elaine Alibrandi's tactile composition in vibrant yellows and greens, veined by intricately

Continued on page 25

ASCA, Broome Street Gallery,
498 Broome Street,
November 8 - 21

Ann Chernow's "Bad Girls" Cry First But Laugh Last

All the world loves a bad girl. Or such is the impression one would get from the runaway popularity of Madonna, Lady Gaga, Lindsay Lohan, Katy Perry, and company. But they're just beginners compared to the bad girls of 1930s and '40s movies and pulp novels, from which Ann Chernow takes inspiration for her series of etching/aquatints of that name.

While Chernow bases her prints on '30s and '40s film noir imagery, she uses contemporary models, changing their hairstyles and clothing to fit the fashions of those decades. And although the scenes that she draws are her own creations, she employs a complex range of monochromatic techniques to give them the look of classic film stills.

"Once experienced, a movie is never totally forgotten. Memories from films can be channels, metaphor and private reverie through which an artist can address the human condition."

Since the heyday of Pop, many artists have turned to popular culture for inspiration. However, what sets Chernow's work apart from the often slapdash productions of most such Camp followers is her deep emotional commitment to her subject matter, her painstaking research of the periods she depicts, and the highly refined drawing skills she employs to evoke her femme fatales and the film noir atmospheres in which they ply their wiles.

"Where Are You?"

One of the most striking examples is the print Chernow calls "Where Are You?" In it, a brunette with a pert period hairdo, wearing a white blouse that makes her stand out like a moth in a dark room, stands before a window, parting its slats with her delicate fingers. The slats throw shadowy stripes across her pretty profile, dramatically illuminated by the harsh light of the neon night that she gazes out into. Where is he? Flash back from this moment and you can envision an entire scenario, maybe with a gunmetal gray surprise waiting for the heel when he finally arrives.

In "All That Jazz," a big, gorgeous blond band singer in a sequined dress stands with her head thrown back and her chest thrust out, singing her heart out in front of a microphone with the silhouettes of a clarinet player, a sax player, and a trumpet guy wailing away in the background. Oh, her man, she loves him so, he'll never know ... But don't worry, he'll get his, too, before the love affair is over.

Then there's "Clean Beds," in which a Harlow clone strides past a sign advertising that bare amenity with a cute little black hat propped on the back of her bottle-blond head like a slightly slipped halo and her cute little nose in the air. She never thought it would come to this; but, hey, she's a classy broad, and as soon as she hooks up with Mr. Big Spender, she'll be back on Easy Street where she belongs.

Like all of Ann Chernow's bad girls, this brave little bottle-blond fervently believes that every cloud has a silver lining. Just don't show her the print that the artist modeled after an old-fashioned poster for an imaginary film called "Guilty as Hell," in which a beautiful stiff is laid out like Sleeping Beauty under the legend, "Hidden Hands Ended Her Life!"

— Ed McCormack

Recently seen:
Ann Chernow, 2/20 Gallery,
220 West 16th Street

The Neo-Pointillism of Santina "Semadar" Panetta

At a heretofore little explored juncture where pointillism meets optical art and color field painting the oils of Santina "Semadar" Panetta, an artist who was exposed to the classical arts in both her native Italy and Greece before migrating to Montreal, has staked out her own unique territory.

Ostensibly, Panetta's paintings are landscapes. Yet her own distinctive manner of juxtaposing discrete dots of color that blend together optically, rather than on the artist's palette, goes beyond the effects of nature to spark a dazzling chromatic shimmer perhaps more akin to early Larry Poons and Brigid Riley than to those of Seurat.

At the same time, Panetta has obviously studied and absorbed the pointillist master's formula for optical painting based on the systematic repetition of elements that he referred to as "divisionism," through which he hoped to arrive at a more rational approach to light and color than the fleeting effects of the Impressionists. Panetta, however, ups the chromatic ante by employing fiery colors in some works that her predecessor might not have necessarily have chosen and combining them with contemporary intrepidness. And, ultimately, much as Seurat did in his own time and manner, her paintings transcend the technique that she employs to create them, becoming entities illuminated by a unique life of their own.

Although at face value the comparison could seem far-fetched given the disparity of their subject matter, Panetta's work can also be likened to that of Chuck Close for the manner in which the separate units that make up her compositions, while abstract at close range, cohere from a distance to create the image. However, it is primarily Panetta's unique color combinations that set her work apart, as well as the manner in which she animates the surfaces of her paintings through the arrangement of her daubs of color and the juxtapositioning of different hues to capture subtly changing qualities of light unlike those of either earlier Pointillists or their peers in the Impressionist movement.

Neither quasi-scientific in the way that Arthur Danto meant when he referred to Seurat as "a chilly geometrist, a chromatic engineer," or beholden to the random whims of nature in the manner of plein air painters such as Monet, Panetta's paintings appear to partake of both systematic and the spontaneous elements in order to arrive at the radiant effects that they project. Yet light is invariably the pièce de resistance in her compositions.

In order to savor the subtle variations that she achieves from one composition to another, one need only compare her oil on canvas "Spring River" to another oil on canvas entitled "Day Break." In the former work, for all the chromatic razzle dazzle of the shimmering surface, the forms of the flowing blue river and the yellow and green foliage along its shore are clearly defined. In the latter painting, however, the landscape is all but deconstructed by the blindingly brilliant sense of light that fills the entire composition, illuminating it to the point of near oblivion. Here, as its title implies, the dawn light virtually "breaks" the composition into a glittering array of golden hues, exemplifying the synthesis of landscape and abstraction at which Santina "Semadar" Panetta excels.

"Spring River"

— Byron Coleman

Santina "Semadar" Panetta,
Agora Gallery, 530 West 25 Street,
November 23-December 14;
Reception: December 2, 6-8 PM.

WSAC
West Side Arts Coalition 1979

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Reception: Sat., Nov. 13th 2 - 5 pm

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Eleanor Comins **Jeremy Comins** Maria De Echevarria **Judith de Zanger**
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William Jefferson **Ilse Kahane** Richard Karp **Florence Keveson** Olga Kitt
Olivia Koopalethes **Dorothy Koppelman** Helen Levin **Estelle Levy**
Annette Lieblein Frank Mann **Leanne Martinson** Basha Maryanska
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Gilbert Passarella **Lisa Robbins** Alan Roland **Hank Rondina**
Bonnie Rothchild **Gerda Roze** Joanne Beaule Ruggles **Julie Joy Saypoff**
Barbara Browner Schiller **Neva Setlow** Ray Shanfeld **Isabel Shaw**
Uri Shulevitz **Allan Simpson** Sonia Stark **Kelley Ryan Stengele**
Lubomir Tomaszewski **Lea Weinberg** Raymond Weinstein **Marilyn Weiss**
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Wisdom in Line: The Human Empathy of AK Corbin

AK Corbin, who can arrest our attention with an elegant pencil drawing of a Greek statue lounging casually, as though waiting for a bus, in a museum sculpture court, while an old guy reads a newspaper on a bench nearby bench is one of the least pretentious yet more relevant artists around. For her subject is the eternal one of everyday existence and human foibles, caught on the run and depicted with a knowing humor precious rare and highly welcome in today's clamorous art scene.

"On the A Train"

Although Corbin formerly exhibited in Chelsea, the launching of her own exhibition space, closer to home in Red Hook, Brooklyn, also seems in keeping with her populist aesthetic. Just as apropos is her decision to give pride of place to city related works, mainly her own, but with at least one show a year reserved for other worthy artists (one of whom will be her 88 year old mother Madeleine Kraeler Corbin, whose upcoming debut exhibition is previewed elsewhere in this issue).

Small Gallery, as the new space is called, will also include Petit Paris, a sort of annex featuring what Corbin describes as "all things small and intimate rendered in and about Paris with a very clear mandate to show established and emerging artists from across the pond."

Last year, Corbin created soulful atmospheric views of Red Hook's desolate industrial streets. More such views, included in her first show in her new space, demonstrate once again her uncanny ability to permeate even unpeopled scenes with a haunting sense of a hidden human presence. These small mixed media works, some with collage elements, are striking in formal terms as well, with their clear color areas reminiscent of Toulouse Lautrec lithographs.

Also featured are small images sketched elsewhere in Red Hook, in and around Central Park, at Jones Beach, and on the subway, the majority of which were completed in the artist's studio. One exception, completed on the spot, is "On the A Train" a strong black and white drawing of a weary passenger in rolled up shirtsleeves who rolls his eyes heavenward and appears punch-drunk from the summer heat and the bombardment of swarming graffiti and advertising messages, he sits on a train under a big poster of a woman wearing a sun-visor and coolly sipping iced tea.

As with the aforementioned Red Hook scenes, Corbin shows her ability to imbue inanimate objects with an almost anthropomorphic quality in another drawing of an old tree in Central Park, its gnarled branches and thick, lumpy trunk exquisitely delineated. Stare at this ancient sentry long enough and its craggy surface begins to suggest grimacing faces and tormented limbs crucified against an overcast sky above starved, sloping lawns delicately tinted with pale yellow washes.

Nearly as gnarled and wizened as the tree is the body of an elderly male bather resting on his elbows on a blanket on Jones Beach. Since his leathery back is turned up to the sun, his face is hidden as he gazes off into the distance — perhaps wistfully, at youthful beauty that we, the viewers, cannot see. But Corbin's line, while incisive and unflinching, is never anything but sympathetic: If this man's slack musculature reminds us what bags of bones we yet may become, well, that's just the price one pays for longevity. And who is to say that the simple will to continue is not another form of beauty? — Ed McCormack

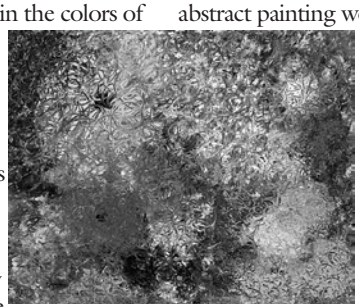
AK Corbin, Gallery Small New York, 416 Van Brunt Street, Red Hook, Brooklyn. October 31st - November 28th.

Lyricism and Freedom in the Art of Dominique Boutaud

Although Dominique Boutaud, who was born in Nice, France, became an American citizen in 2008, she remains a French painter in the very best sense of the term. Which is to say: her work has a sense of finesse and a love of beauty that harks back to the glory days of the School of Paris. And while she is primarily an abstract painter who says "The U.S. freedom allowed me to direct my oil painting toward abstract freedom," her work is invariably based in nature. And, in fact, it would appear, conversely, that her occasional overtly floral compositions, such as "Symphonie de Fleurs" are essentially abstract anyway, given her bold coloristic and compositional sense.

Indeed, looking at Boutaud's work overall, one is reminded of something that the American painter and critic Fairfield Porter (who was close to most of the important members of the Abstract Expressionist movement, and applied their compositional and gestural dynamics to realism) once said in praise of the floral painter Leon Hartl: "he goes against the grain of the existentialist cult of sincerity that values violence, ill-adjustment and awkwardness." For it is clear that Boutaud as well values none of those dubious qualities in either her totally abstract or abstractly informed floral paintings.

Indeed all of Boutaud's paintings in either of her modes, like Hartl's, are obviously (to quote Porter once more) "supremely about spaces and volumes expressed in the colors of textures and paint." And this is clearly part of what lends Boutaud's work its subtle intensity, as well as its absolute painterly integrity.



"Symphonie de Fleurs"

On encountering Boutaud's oil on canvas, "The Reality," for example, one perceives immediately that this striking composition of numerous tiny white strokes on a vibrant blue ground is for the painter, first and foremost, an occasion for exploring the qualities of color and texture as elements in themselves. And one can only assume that this is the meaning of its title: that the reality exists primarily in the visual and physical qualities of the materials themselves; the things, in other words, that make the painting a palpable, independent, and autonomous entity in the real world. Yet the title also seems double-edged owing to the cosmic suggestiveness of the composition, which evokes another, even larger reality: that of the stars in all their mystery. Boutaud's work seems to tell us that we can have it both ways. Or as Mark Rothko once put it: "There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing." Since Rothko made that statement in 1943, when the principles of abstract painting were still being debated, one can only assume he may have said it in reply to one of his more dogmatic colleagues claiming that abstract painting in order to be "pure" must be concerned with formal values alone.

Fortunately, in the more catholic cultural climate of our present postmodern era Boutaud can not only draw inspiration from the bounty of nature but also evoke an emotional state in the darkly evocative composition "The Pain Received," where jewel-like bursts of color emerge from a deep blue field, or create more elusive yet equally compelling statements such as in her minimalist composition "Meli Melo," where graceful cursive forms converge on a deep yellow ground. The possibilities are limitless, and Dominique Boutaud appears eager to explore them all. — Maureen Flynn

Dominique Boutaud, Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, November 23 - December 14, Reception: Thurs. December 2, 6 - 8pm

Like a Rolling Stone – an excerpt from HOODLUM HEART: Confessions of a Test Dummy for the Crash and Burn Generation, a memoir by Ed McCormack

After my wife walked out on me, the pictures in her modeling portfolio, which she left behind temporarily in her haste to escape my madness, and which I took to poring over masochistically, suddenly objectified the person with whom I had lived intimately since we were both barely out of adolescence, stamping her indelibly on my psyche as an icon of beauty unsurpassable by any other woman with whom I might ever hope to be.

Although other photographs, in which she was posed provocatively in a miniskirt with a sultry expression framed by the long straight hair of the hippie-chick femme fatale, may have been more overtly sexy, there was one image in particular that I carried in my mind as a haunting reminder of all I had lost. Wearing a white lace dress with a high collar and ruffled sleeves, she poses as primly as a bride, her hands clasped in front of her lower body. Her tawny hair is brushed back a bit further than usual from her high cheekbones, which form a parenthesis for her wide-set eyes. Her lips are slightly parted in the most fetching way, and a very large white flower on a tall stem rises like a balloon behind her, giving the initial impression that she is standing in some fantastic garden. But on closer inspection it becomes clear that the flower is fake, a prop probably attached by the photographer to the windshield of a pale-colored parked car, and that there is a barely perceptible blur of moving traffic in the background.

The picture always reminded me of the first day I laid eyes on her, on the cusp of a romantic era called Camelot. A recent high school dropout and aspiring beatnik from the Lower East Side pressured by his parents to get a job, I had lied on an employment application about having a diploma and landed on my feet in the Hearst editorial offices on West 57th Street, the personal copy boy of William Randolph Hearst Jr.

As for my future bride, her parents had allowed her to come to New York over summer vacation from a boarding school in the Virginia horse country called Fairfax Hall to model junior fashions for an agency called Plaza Five on the condition that she be chaperoned by my boss' wife, Austine "Bootsy" Hearst, a former model herself and an alumnae of the same ritzy Southern belle hatchery.

The picture of my wife Jeannie that I was haunted by after she left me.

To an apolitical dead-end kid from a neighborhood where the Miss Rheingold Contest, a beauty pageant sponsored by a beer company with ballots in every bar, was taken more seriously (at least by the drinkingclass Irish) than the presidential election, working for Hearst was a glamorous job. Long before JFK's penchant for presidential cocksmanship became a matter, posthumously, of public record, I was suddenly privy to the inside information that the Democratic candidate was known to his Washington cronies as "Jack the Zipper." Jackie Gleason would often burst into the office in full "And Away We Go" mode, to spirit the boss out for a liquid lunch at Toots Shor's or The Stork Club (where my longshoreman father, incidentally, sometimes moonlighted as a waiter during dock strikes). The diamond-dripping blonde movie actress Zsa Zsa Gabor — with whom the Frank Sinatra Jr. of Yellow Journalism appeared to be having an affair judging from the amount of time they spent behind the closed door of his inner sanctum — would regularly dispatch me down to the Riker's coffee shop in the lobby, instructing in her famous Hungarian accent, "Tell dem I vant it in a real cup dollink. Tell dem Zsa Zsa does not drink from paper!"

But even Zsa Zsa's glitzy glamour faded beside the fresh beauty of Jeannie Sanders Eaton, who showed up in the office that day like a vision. Forever after, whenever I remembered my first glimpse of her, I would think of the unforgettably evocative title of a short story by Irwin Shaw: "The Girls in Their Summer Dresses."

Less than a year later Jeannie and I would elope, choosing the church for expediency rather than denomination. But we had already married our destinies in an unused office in the Hearst Building where I helped her rehearse "Romeo & Juliet" for her acting class.

"If I profane with my unworthiest hand this holy shrine," I read, reaching out to cup her breast, the improvised move provoking a coy giggle from my beloved, "the gentle fine is this: my lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand to smooth that rough touch with a gentle kiss."

"What're you trying to do," she replied, putting the script aside, throwing both arms around my shoulders, and drawing me close, "get me all uppity buppity?"

Now, alone in the haunted tenement apartment where we had lived together with our young son Holden, surrounded by overflowing ashtrays and empty beer bottles, what I found so heartbreakingly poignant about that particular picture was its combination of purity and pulchritude, embodying in one lovely package the madonna and mistress dichotomy so dear to the heart of every sentimental Italian mafioso and Irish Catholic fuck-up like me.

Me, writer Fran Lebowitz, and Jeannie, in her angry Jane Fonda phase, fed up with the endless press parties, giving the paparazzi the fish-eye.

* * *

In the early '70s, just before my world came undone, I was still disingenuous enough to convince myself that I was merely faking making a career out of losing my social virginity in my own native city, as I churned out regular feature articles and a column called "New York Confidential" for Rolling Stone. But even though I still liked to think I possessed that sixth sense that slick city kids call street smarts, I sometimes reminded myself of a very young young woman I once knew who claimed that deep, deep down (presumably where not even penises could reach) she would always remain a "psychological virgin." Since her assertion was made somewhat after the fact, I considered it slightly wistful, until I found myself sacrificing some phantom cherry of my own almost nightly at Max's Kansas City, the Hotel Chelsea, Andy Warhol's Factory, and almost every other gathering place of the hip, the chic, and the fashionably depraved.

A not untypical article published under my byline around that time began with the line, "I am witnessing the first public blowjob ever administered by a lady in the gentleman's health club of the Henry Hudson Hotel, a New York landmark since 1929." The piece, about the opening night festivities for something called the New York Erotic Film Festival, went on to describe the whole catered orgy, as sexual acrobats performed on wrestling mats (and one especially agile couple made out on adjoining excercycles) for a crowd of fully clothed spectators milling around the fluorescent auditorium with champagne glasses in their hands. And it climaxed (if that's the proper word) with my good friend and fellow writer Fran Lebowitz flagging down a flack for the festival after it was announced that there would be "free blowjobs for the press."

"Are you aware," Fran asked, just on principle, "that there are female members of the press?"

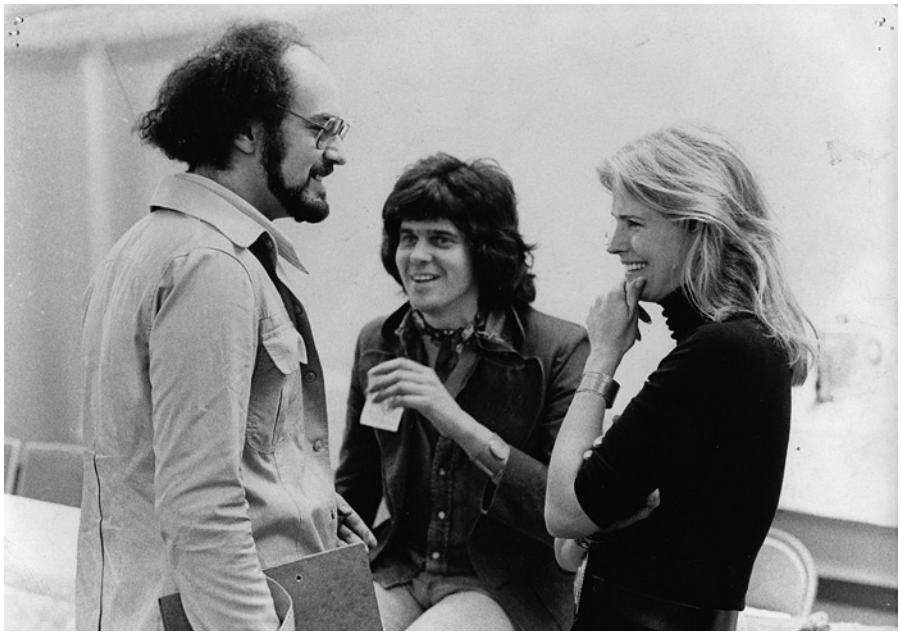
The backtracking flack looked perplexed. "Well, I don't know if we have anyone available to eat pussy..."

* * *

Naturally I was flattered when Jann Wenner, the Editor and Publisher of *Rolling Stone* told me, "Tom Wolfe loved your piece on the porn fest. He said it was the best thing in the issue."

Since Wolfe had the first installment of his book on the astronauts, "The Right Stuff," in the same issue, I knew that what he really meant was not that mine was the best, but the most outrageous piece. But that was still generous praise, considering that the first time I'd met Wolfe, some weeks earlier I had tactlessly taken my awe of him by the horns and parroted something that the great put-on artist Andy Warhol (always more generous with fulsome flattery than proper payment to those of us who contributed to his magazine Interview) had called me. And apparently, my chutzpah had gained me a certain notoriety, since when I showed up, supposedly to write about him, the first thing Lou Reed asked me was, "Did you really introduce yourself to Tom Wolfe as 'the New Tom Wolfe'?"

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



"Don Gordeone," "Fast Eddie," and actress/ photographer Candace Bergen on tour with Alice Cooper.

"And what did Wolfe say?"

"He said, 'Good luck!'"

Lou grinned as if pleased to finally meet someone as abrasive as himself. And for a time thereafter we became frequent drinking companions, since my reputation for debauchery and self destructiveness rivaled his own in certain downtown circles. Normally, on journalistic assignment, however, I was able to operate on automatic pilot. Propped up by just the right recipe of speed or coke, Quaaludes or Valium, and (always) cannabis and alcohol, I seemed to have total recall. (I hardly ever took notes because that would have been uncool and might make my subjects self-conscious, not to mention self-censorious. The trick was to blend in with the entourage and hang out until all was revealed.)

But everything finally caught up with me on Alice Cooper's "Billion Dollar Babies" tour in 1973. Since *Rolling Stone*'s deadline this time was especially tight, and I was supposed to be writing a cover story on the run, a typewriter had been ordered ahead for me in every hotel room along the tour route. But I never went near any of them. Instead I spent all day every day drinking can after can of Budweiser with my fellow alkie, Alice, who always performed pissed to the gills back then. Alice's hulking ex-marine bodyguard gave some of us Mafia nicknames: Alice (whose real name is Vincent Furnier) was "Vinnie, The Boss," his manager, Shep Gordon, was "Don Gordeone," and I, for some reason, was "Fast Eddie."

The tour party barnstormed through the midwest in an F-27 with a big dollar-sign on its tail fin. The poker area was plastered with *Playboy* and *Penthouse* centerfolds and some of the seats had been torn out to make room for beanbag chairs and cushions. Whenever there was turbulence, some passengers would roll around on the floor, yelling about how that fucking kamikaze at the stick was trying to kill us all. (When one of the more sober musicians started chewing the glitter off his fingernails, a roadie consoled, "Don't worry, it's a short flight — just a hop, skip, and a plunge.")

I should have taken it as an omen when that self-elected "stewardess" in the Alice Cooper t-shirt came stumbling out of the pilot's cabin with a plastic bag full of rattling Bud cans, ordered me to stick out my tongue, and placed a Mandrax on it.

Five days later, it was deadline day in the Sheraton Motor Lodge in downtown Detroit — with that dreaded D-Day sky looming like an empty sheet of typing paper in the picture window, as I lay barfing my guts into a wastepaper basket down at the end of the bed. Much of what had transpired since the first gig in Pittsburgh was a blank. I barely managed to pull myself together by the time Shep Gordon knocked on my door to take me to the airport in his chauffeured limo. A former grass dealer gone sensationally legit, Shep didn't lose his customary cool (a definite asset for the manager of the rock and roll equivalent of a drunken circus geek) when I discovered while rummaging through my pockets for a joint that I had somehow managed to misplace my wallet, containing my ID, my return ticket, and what was left of the expense money that *Rolling Stone* had advanced me.

"Don't worry, my man," he said. "I'll take care of everything."

At the airport, he whipped out an accordion fold of credit cards, frequent flyer cards, police badges, and god knows what other kinds of cards as long as Alice's pet snake, dangled it in front of the ticket clerk's face, and announced that the distinguished journalist with him had been pickpocketed of his credentials but needed a ticket to New York, where he had an urgent deadline to meet. And when the clerk explained that he couldn't put me on the plane without ID, Don Gordeone pointed to the F-27 with the big dollar sign on it sitting out on the tarmac, said it was his, and the matter was settled.

"Just spell the name right, baby," he said, stuffing a C-note in the pocket of my denim jacket for spending money, and I was on my way.

Jann had agreed to extend the deadline until the following morning, as long as my cover piece got wired to him at the magazine's main headquarters in San Francisco from the New York office via the "mojo" — the *Rolling Stone* term for the first primitive fax machine. When I got back to our little apartment on 89th Street early that evening, the beautiful young woman and the beautiful little boy eating dinner at the kitchen table looked like members of some sane, wholesome tribe to which I no longer belonged. The thought filled me with remorse. But I barely had time to greet them, refuse food, crack a beer to wash down a couple of amphetamine pills, and put "Whipping Post" by the Allman Brothers (the cut I usually used to crank up my prose rhythms) on the stereo, before sitting down at my typewriter table in the next room to write nonstop for the next twelve hours.

I didn't hear from Jann until two days later, when he called to tell me that he and a couple of other editors had had to work all day, taping telephone interviews with Alice and Shep Gordon and sorting through and deciphering my typed and scrawled pages, then stay up all night rewriting to salvage something publishable out of the pile of incoherent stream of consciousness ravings I had sent him.

"Well, do me a favor Jann, and take my name off of it," I said.

"I already have," he answered. But apparently he didn't want to take credit for it either. The piece was published under the byline of a newcomer called "Harry Swift," whose future in journalism appeared no more promising than my own at that moment in time.

The only thing that hadn't been tampered with was my ending, which described a drunken late night encounter that Alice had on that last surreal night in Detroit with two teenage girls who'd been lurking in the hotel corridors all day and their mother, who had just got off work in the downstairs coffee shop. They spotted and called out to Vinnie the Boss when he tiptoed out into the hallway barefoot to prankishly slip a fish head from his dinner plate under the door of another musician's room as a Mafia omen

of coming doom, and: "Suddenly, he faces them, spinning towards them on his heels like a gunslinger, and in one flashing instant pulls down his pants and his jockey shorts, swings it right out and wiggles it at them: the flaccid little beetlenut pecker of the superstar."

* * *

Jann could be an unreasonable bastard. Once I wrote a cover feature about Aerosmith, and he had to junk an entire press run after discovering that a picture Annie Lebowitz had taken of a groupie going down on a banana sticking out of lead singer Steven Tyler's fly in a limousine had somehow slipped into the issue. I don't know how he penalized Annie or the editor responsible; all I know is that he reduced my already paltry freelance fee to help pay for the second press run, even though I had not even been present when the picture was taken. But he also gave writers whose talent he respected a lot of leeway for personal quirks, eccentricities, and freakouts, as he alluded in the wry tag-line he attached to my cover story on the reggae star Bob Marley: "Ed McCormack suffered a breakdown after writing his last feature for us on 'Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman.' We sent him to Jamaica to take the cure from the Rastafarians but we're not sure it took."

Apparently, stories had got back to him about how, against all good advice, I had insisted on doing business with the disreputable street rasta dope dealers prowling the parking lot of the Kingston Sheraton (some of whom were rumored to moonlight as hired gunmen in the civil war that was raging in the streets between the city's opposing political parties) because I couldn't wait one extra day, until the Island Records press flacks scored through safer channels, to turn on. He had also heard how mercilessly I harassed Peter Simon, singer Carly's photographer brother, for politely asking if I might refrain from smoking in the car in which he was chauffeuring me around. And, worst of all, he had heard how the rock critic Lester Bangs had had to pull Chris Blackwell, the president of Marley's record company (who had reportedly financed our junket to Jamaica) aside and assure him that I was not altogether insane, after Blackwell asked me at the hotel's poolside bar what I thought of the reggae king's music, and I shrugged him off with, "Actually, man, I don't really listen to a lot of music. I'm more interested in all the weird shit that happens around the music scene."

Lester, whose ironic but kindly spirit Philip Seymour Hoffman channeled so uncannily several years after his fatal overdose in the film "Almost Famous," was not only one of the few so-called rock critics I respected as a writer but a prince of a guy who acted as my "minder" during that trip (and later referred to me with undo discretion as "Gonzo" all throughout the wryly affectionate account of that ordeal that he wrote for Creem magazine). It was Lester who made sure I stashed my herb at the hotel before we traveled around Kingston, where police roadblocks were set up all over city; who watched my back at a hallucinatory Rastafarian revival meeting called a "grounation" in the notorious tropical slum called Trenchtown, as huge quantities of speed, the local ganja, and the trancelike rhythms of a troupe of dreadlocked drummers called "The Sons of Negus" sent me into a dangerously manic state; who smoothed things over between Peter Simon and myself with his unrelenting good humor; and generally went out of his way to prevent my suffering serious consequences for my reckless behavior. So in the long run, I was pleased that I had not let Lester down — especially after how he had vouched for me with Chris Blackwell — when my article came out in Rolling Stone with that now-classic cover photo by Annie Leibovitz of Marley with his arms outstretched, as if for a crucifixion.

Addled memories of the Grounation in Trenchtown from my sketchbook

* * *

My stock was way up at *Rolling Stone* after that piece — the first major feature to introduce Marley and reggae as a coming phenomenon to the United States — appeared. Jann forwarded letters to me praising my writing that he had received from Nat Hentoff, one of his early journalistic heroes, and Peter Rudge, tour manager for both the Rolling Stones and The Who. My "New York Confidential" column was also proving useful to him as a liaison to the cooler-than-thou downtown crowd, as he contemplated moving the magazine's main headquarters East and replacing its laid-back San Francisco hippie vibe with a more cosmopolitan image. So he may have been trying to shmooze me, when I went to Los Angeles to cover what I thought was to be a feature on a *Playboy* photo shoot and he had his secretary book me into a suite at the trendy Chateau Marmont.

A stucco castle nestled like something in

one of Nathaniel West's Hollywood novels in a lush tropical salad high above the Sunset Strip, the Chateau, once a favorite hideout of Greta Garbo, had a slightly dowdy chic like that of the Hotel Chelsea and over the years had attracted a clientele of Hollywood hipsters ranging from James Dean to Jim Morrisson and John Belushi (who would eventually further enhance its mystique by being found face-down in its swimming pool after his final OD).

So I felt properly favored after checking in , as I smoked a joint on my balcony and watched the Mexican gardeners toil like worker ants down below. But what I didn't know, until I strolled down to the lobby and inquired of that molelike Peter Lorre desk clerk as to its whereabouts was that at that time the hotel had no cocktail lounge. Sure that this had to be one of Jann's perverse jokes — either that or an attempt to thwart my tendency to run up hefty bar bills — I called Rolling Stone's Los Angeles office in a panic, demanding to be transferred to the nearest Holiday Inn. I only calmed down after an editor named Delores Ziebarth got the OK from Jann to advance me extra expense money to stock the suite's fridge and pantry with beer and booze. (My freelance expense account was strictly cash and carry up front, since I had no credit cards back then and so little ID that it's a wonder I was never arrested for vagrancy.)

Crisis over, Delores said, "Everything is all set with the people at Playgirl, by the way. Their photo stylist Annie Lomax — remember the English pop star, Jackie Lomax? she's his wife — will be picking you up at the Chateau in the morning to drive you to the set."

"You mean the people at Playboy, don't you?" I asked.

Then Delores broke the news that I had apparently misconstrued the assignment when I accepted it back in New York, and would not have the voyeuristic pleasure of studying the Playmate of the Month before she was airbrushed. This particular deprivation, however, turned out to be a blessing in disguise journalistically, since the relatively new phenomenon of a male nude centerfold shoot yielded better quotes and weirder scenes: The small but prodigiously hung male model dropping his drawers for the first time and Annie Lomax exclaiming, "My god, we should paint eyes on it!"; Playgirl's newly hired hetero-hippie staff photographer complaining that his very job title was a bad pun, and confessing that he still couldn't figure "which angle of the dangle turns women, men, or whoever the hell looks at these hideous pictures, on"; the bottle-blond head of the model's bikini-bunny girlfriend, whom he'd brought along as a "fluffer," bobbing between his legs like a beach ball while he floated on his back on an inflatable pool raft, until he had achieved the barely legal *Playgirl* ideal, for which I came up with the felicitous phrase that served as the article's title: "Maximum Tumescence in Repose."

(Counting the banana that torpedoed an entire print run, it occurs to me now, as I write, that there've already been three blowjob references in these few scant pages. Be assured that this is neither by design nor due to any particular obsession of mine. It would seem that feminine genuflection to the god of Phallos was one of the recurring themes of that time, even before "Deep Throat" came out in 1972. After all, giving good head, like rolling a tight joint, was a skill mastered by every hip chick in the unofficial finishing schools of the Sixties. Let a pecker go limp anywhere in the republic and any respectable teenybopper or debutante could administer oral resuscitation with the efficiency of a Red Cross nurse. But that the still unimproved ratio of half decent cunnilingus to excellent fellatio remained perhaps the last vestige of the old double standard for some woman warriors to tilt their dildos at well into the final battles of the so-called sexual revolution is an issue that may warrant further comment as this memoir of a not altogether misspent youth continues.)

* * *

By the mid-seventies, I suppose I felt about writing for *Rolling Stone*, the publication that, according to the Columbia Journalism Review, "spoke to an entire generation," much the same way that Brendan Gill felt about writing for *The New Yorker* back in the thirties and forties, when that grand old monolith addressed itself to the best and brightest of an earlier generation.

"With The New Yorker serving as my passport and letter of credit," Gill enthused in his memoir Here at the New Yorker, "how easy I have found it for almost forty years to rush pell-mell through the world, playing the clown when the spirit of darkness has moved me and colliding with good times at every turn!"

Those could have been my sentiments exactly. Only, it didn't dawn on me how much playing the clown was beginning to impinge on my professionalism, even when Howard Bloom, the East Coast promotion chief for ABC/Dunhill records, insisted that I drop into his office for a little diplomatic briefing before I traveled to Hungary to write a feature about Locomotiv GT, the Soviet Bloc supergroup known as "the Beatles of Budapest." Essentially, what he told me was that he and his colleagues had high hopes for this band, the first Iron Curtain rockers to ever be signed by an American record company, the first to be granted permission by their Ministry of Culture to tour the U.S., and the first — as the lousiest luck would have it — to have a member, their guitarist Tomas Barta, defect. Since rock and roll, unlike "Preferred" art forms such as the ballet and classical music, belonged to a category called "Tolerated" (and that only to keep a lid on the kids) everybody expected the Ministry of Culture to disband Locomotive GT. Probably the only reason they didn't was because they were so popular among the rambunctious youth and the government didn't need another Hungarian Revolution on its hands.

"So please, comrade," Bloom said, draping a fatherly arm over my shoulders as he walked me out to the elevator, "do us all a favor and try not to bring any more heat on the band than they already have. Try to steer clear of the underage Hungarian groupies, the money changers, the black marketeers, and the secret police. And whatever you do, don't be crazy enough to even think about carrying anything through customs; let the natives turn you on — if, indeed, the natives turn on at all. But then again, should you choose not to heed my advice, just think what a great Rolling Stone feature article 'Inside a Hungarian Prison Camp' would make!"

* * *

No sooner had my plane touched down than I found myself embroiled in a rapidly escalating imbroglio in that drab little welfare state air terminal outside Budapest. All I wanted was a pack of cigarettes, but the hysterical crone behind the concession counter kept shrieking incomprehensibly and waving my money away like a vampire confronted with a cross. A crowd was beginning to gather by the time Joszef ("Call me Joe") Laux, the drummer for Locomotiv GT, came running over, his long, stringy hair flying out of a floppy denim pimp cap. He fished the necessary forints out of his jeans to buy me a pack of stale Hungarian smokes, and, glancing nervously this way and that, hurried me out of there and into his silver-gray Mercedes.

Shouting over the stereo din of Frank Zappa's "Give Me Your Dirty Love," Joe explained that the woman had freaked out because she could have been busted for black market money changing had she so much as touched my U.S. currency. But when I asked him how I could exchange my dollars for forints, he said, "No need for money: You are my guest!" Then he told me that as soon as he learned what day I was coming, he had called the radio station and announced that tonight Locomotiv GT would be giving a free concert in my honor at the Agriculture University right here in Budapest.

Me (left) backstage on my first night in Hungary with songwriter Anna Adamis and "the boys" of Locomotiv GT. With the KGB tailing them constantly, the last thing "the Beatles of Budapest" needed was this loose cannon from the U.S.

"Next couple of nights you vill travel vith us to gigs out in the sticks. But me and the boys thought it vould be nice for you to see us play vunce in The Big Buda, vhere ve started out."

All along the road from the airport grim factories spewed smoke into the darkening December sky, reminding me of grainy charcoal strokes in a Cold War political cartoon. But as soon as we rolled into the city proper, Budapest unfurled sufficient scenic splendors to justify Joe's civic pride, as he shouted above the stereo, "Sometimes it is called 'The Paris of the East!' "

Even as he pointed out the lights starting to blink on and twinkle on the eight little bridges spanning the Danube River as night came down, and called my attention to the picturesque ruins of Hapsburg Citadel spilling down Gellert Hill like so much beautifully broken crockery, all I could think about was how best to formulate the urgent question I blurted out as soon as he ended his tour guide spiel: "Tell me, Joe, how do people get high here?"

Acting as though he hadn't heard me, he popped a tape into the deck and said,"Listen to this, Ed, I recorded it from Radio Luxembourg to remind me of how great everything vas going for us until that bastard Barta defected and ve had to come back home vith our heads hanging down."

The last several bars of one of his band's songs blasted out, followed by an announcer's voice: "And that was 'Jenny's Got a New Thing,' the American single by Locomotiv GT. They're from Budapest, you know, first Hungarian group to tour the States and they say the kids in the Motor City and this Hungarian band really came to an International agreement about what rock and roll is about. And now let's listen to 'Hot Tramps by the New York Dolls..."

I agreed that the spot from the station that broadcasts in English all over the world like a rock and roll Radio Free Europe was way cool and boasted about having written the article that got the Dolls signed to Mercury Records when they were still a struggling cult band known only to a small following of indigenous downtown glitter-tots. Then I tried again: "I figured surely you guys must have some kind of wacky paprika dust or some shit like that to get off on here in the Big Buda."

But my host assured me that nobody took drugs in Hungary (a blanket statement I found impossible to believe), and added, somewhat disingenuously, I thought, "Here, ve have only good strong coffee for energy and powerful plum brandy called slivovitz to mellow out vith." To mess with anything else, he assured me, would be certain suicide for any high profile band in Hungary — and especially for Locomotive GT, "since the Ministry of Culture is alvays vatching for us to make one wrong move, and KGB agents are following us around all the time. Anyvay, Hungarians don't need drugs. You'll see at the gig tonight how us and the kids get from the music alone a Natural High!"

As we pulled up to the Olimpia Hotel, where I would be staying, Joe mentioned that just a few days earlier a member of Bergendy, another well known band who were in Budapest for a gig, tried to commit suicide by taking a plugged-in radio into the bathtub with him. I had the feeling that he was telling me this not only to hint at the stress Soviet Bloc rockers were under, but also to suggest, not without a certain pride,

that it was just as possible to freak out here in the land of the Natural High as anywhere else.

Since I knew that he and his wife Anna Adamis, the band's lyricist, lived in Budapest, I was more than a little puzzled when Joe checked into the room right next to mine, claiming that he liked the hotel's heated swimming pool. It was my first brush with hospitality behind the Iron Curtain, where if a foreign visitor excused himself to go to the bathroom in a cafe, his host might say, "Good idea," and tag along, as though pissing together, like drinking with someone, was a congenial social activity.

* * *

"So this is you! How handsome, like Danny Hutton from Three Dog Night! I'm so happy you came all the vay across the ocean to write about Joe and the boys! Come, give me a big hug and a kiss!"

Anna Adamis could have given Zsa Zsa a run for her money. A vivacious blond in a leopard-patterned outfit who didn't perform with the band but was known to their fans as "the fifth member of Locomotive GT," she rushed across the couples' living room with outstretched arms to greet me warmly when we stopped to pick her up for the gig. Their "flat," as they referred to it, was hardly your standard socialist housing. It had an antique grand piano in the middle of the floor and French doors leading out to a balcony overlooking the Danube and its twinkling lights. The only incongruous part of the decor was an entire wall plastered, as in a teenager's room, with a floor-to-ceiling collage of pop posters and magazine photos of mostly American and British bands.

Although I didn't know it yet, Anna was to become my other "minder," sticking to me like glue whenever her husband had business to attend to, which turned out to be during much of my stay in Budapest. It started that very night at the Agriculture University, when she took me by the hand as the band got ready to go onstage and led me out into the crowd to watch from the front row. Then, spotting two dour looking-men in dark suits among all the denim and leather-clad kids, she whispered, "Our friends from the KGB," and led me up a steep flight of stairs to a lighting platform above the stage. As soon as the band walked out, the thunderous cheering and stomping started as hordes of adoring young Huns chanted in unison: "Locomotiv Gee-ya-tee! Locomotive Gee-ya-tee! Locomotive Gee-ya-tee!"

But instead of getting behind his drum-set, Joe stepped forward, glowing like a firefly in his silver stage-jacket ("Same vun Rick Derringer vore on the cover of 'All-American boy,' he'd told me proudly backstage, insisting that I try it on), and waved his arms to call coitus interruptus to the adulatory racket.

"I hope he's not about to lead them in a singalong of the Internationale," I whispered to Anna, perhaps imprudently. But she got the joke and giggled before translating for me: "He is telling dem him and the boys are happy to be back again, playing in their hometown, Budapest. He apologizes for being so long avay, but the boys have been so busy touring... And now they cheer because he mentions touring in the States, saying, 'Some of you vere vorried, you varned us not to go... But as you see, ve only suffered vun casualty... And now they laugh because he made a little joke to introduce James, the new guitarist..."

Speech over, Joe got behind his drums and became the churning motor that drove Locomotive GT into their signature song "Rock Yourself." As the bearish, bearded conservatory-trained keyboard player Gabor Pressor made Beethoven roll over and over, the new lead guitarist James Karocsonyi revealed his Jimmy Page-like virtuosity, and Tomas Somlo's wailing banshee vocals reverberated through the auditorium, the crowd's ecstatic reaction almost made it possible for even a cynic like myself to believe that there actually might be such a thing as the Natural High.

* * *

The mood was considerably more somber the following night, when our caravan of cars and trucks pulled into a darkened parking lot in Miskolc, Hungary's second largest city. Crowds of disappointed kids were hunkering around in the dark parking lot outside the circular concert hall, which was locked up as tight as the giant drum that it resembled. Clearly, for whatever mysterious reason, there would be no gig this evening. As the other musicians signed autographs and Anna clung to my arm as if I were about to dash off into the night, Joe addressed the forlorn fans in Hungarian. The only English words I recognized were "Three Dog Night," before he gestured grandly toward me and announced,"Danny Hutton!"

"Because they are so sad, he told them you are him, visiting us from the States," Anna whispered as the kids began swarming around us. Fishing a pen out of her bag and handing it to me, she said, "Please sign autographs, 'Danny,' to make them a little more happy."

Sometime later, back in the States, I would learn from Zoltan Gombos, a Hungarian language newspaper publisher who served as the band's New York representative, that the Ministry of Culture suddenly had second thoughts about an American journalist seeing some of the "crude workers' halls and unruly audiences" in some of the more industrial cities outside Budapest. But apparently Joe and Anna were not at liberty to level with me about this. When I asked the day after our trip to Miscolc why the gig had been canceled, Joe gave me some lame excuse about having learned from the officials at the Ministry that there was some problem with the promoter.

With no gig scheduled for that night, the couple took me to dinner and then for a tour of some of their favorite nightspots and cafes, where the mellow amber Old World atmosphere could not be owed entirely to the fact I was often viewing them through a tilted beer glass. We finally ended up in a hectic strobe-lit "disko-bar" with a muc more Western ambiance. Tired of having them pay for everything, I had asked Joe before dinner to take me to exchange some of my U.S. currency for forints. When he insisted once again that I was their guest and didn't need my own money, I became suspicious that he was trying to keep me from having any contact at all with his fellow Hungarians. And this seemed borne out not only when he once again insisted on escorting me for a social piss but also whenever I exchanged a few words with any of the people in the disko bar who spoke a little English. Invariably, either he or Anna would intervene and redirect the conversation, as though they feared that I might be about to ask one of these local hipsters where I might find some of that "wacky paprika dust" I had mentioned on the way into Budapest from the airport. And although I was initially annoyed to be monitored so closely, I began to appreciate why they were so cautious when we noticed a young longhair, who had heard us talking earlier and decided to test his English on me, being escorted out the door by two tall men in dark suits. The flashing strobes made the ominous scene seem to play out in slow-motion, as in an old black and white horror movie when streaks of lightning make everything jerk and flicker.

I didn't even bother to put up much of a fight the next day, when Joe got off the phone after a terse conversation with an official at the Ministry and suggested that, instead of traveling with the band to the gig in a city called Ozd that night, I let Anna show me more of Budapest and treat me to "a nice dinner relaxing dinner." He claimed that while the band was contractually obligated to show up, the problems with the promoter had not been successfully resolved, and there was a very good chance that tonight's gig would be canceled as well. Anyway, I knew I was beat when Anna took up her husband's argument, chiming in with mock coyness,"Am I really so unattractive that you don't even vant to be seen vith me, Ed?"

After the band left for Ozd, I insisted that Anna take me to change some of my dollars into forints and told her there was no point in arguing: I would be paying for everything tonight. First I had her take me shopping for a souvenir for my son and a peace offering for my estranged wife. Then we went to a little cafe, where I kept refilling Anna's wine glass until her tongue loosened and she offered the opinion that while she admired Bob Dylan, it would be not only dangerous but redundant to write protest songs in a country where to write at all was an act of protest. She was just beginning to tell me about how she had been coerced by the Ministry into writing the songs for a propagandistic rock opera that was hailed as "the Hair of Hungary" before interrupting herself to call my attention to two dark-suited men whom she said had been tailing us since we left the flat.

We decided it was a good time to go back to my room at the Olimpia to drop off the presents before going to dinner. We were only there for a short time when someone knocked on the door. When I opened it, there stood our two dark-suited shadows, as though having hoped to catch us in flagrante delicto. They stepped into the room without being asked. As soon as she saw them through the open door of the bathroom, where she had been brushing her hair, Anna came storming out, waving her brush like a weapon, dressing them down with a haughty tirade in the native tongue.

Later, over dinner, we shared a good laugh at the memory of how those two black-suited goons had retreated from a woman's wrath, one of them even seeming to execute an apologetic little bow as he backed out the door and retreated down the hall. But I could tell that Anna was worried. And I was sure that she and her husband would both be greatly relieved to put me on the plane the following morning.

Unfortunately, my article was never published, since the band's second American album, which was to have been titled "Ve Have an Accent," was never released, making them pretty much irrelevant to the music press here. Later I would learn that Joe had fled the country while Anna stayed behind to compose innocuous pop songs with Gabor Pressor, and Locomotiv GT reformed as a less edgy musical entity with the replacement guitarist James Karocsony as its only remaining earlier member. I can only hope in retrospect that none of these developments had anything to do with my visit to Hungary. But I didn't have time to think about it immediately. As soon as I got back, Chet Flippo, my favorite editor, called to ask if I could stop up at *Rolling Stone*'s New York bureau to discuss another assignment.

A tall, rangy Texan whose homeboy Willy Nelson regularly sent him cases of Lone Star Beer that he kept stacked up in his office, Chet got us a couple of cold ones from the fridge and asked his lissome miniskirted secretary, Iris, to organize some shelves high above his desk so we could enjoy the view like a couple of sly frat boys as we talked business:

"Alice Cooper called Jann personally to request that you be the one to cover his new tour, 'Welcome to My Nightmare.' Are you interested?"

"You're kidding! After what I wrote about his little beetlenut pecker?"

Chet chuckled. "Apparently, he told Jann, 'Fast Eddie is the only guy who will drink beer with me in the morning.' But hey, man, how'd you get that name anyway? Around here we call you Easy Ed."

"I guess I'm both fast and easy."

* * *

Broome Street Gallery

Continued from page 14

interwoven dark lines, suggesting an arboreal inspiration. And Leslie Shaw Zadoian's , hovering forms project an inexplicable sense of tension in "Situation," a darkly brooding mixed media work on canvas.

Then there is Rose Sigal-Ibsen, well known for her personal approach to Asian ink painting, and represented by one of her more abstract excursions, with wet-into-wet washes that flow and spread out in shadowy waves, evoking myriad associations in the manner of a Rorschach blot. By contrast, Miriam Wills, another artist familiar to many New York gallery goers, weighed in with "Coloring Me," a ynamic composition in acrylic and collage on canvas featuring her characteristically fractured and packed neo-cubist planes and vibrant primaries.

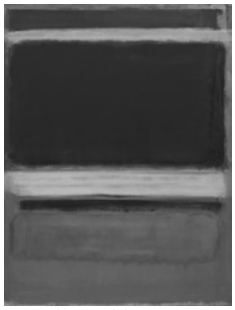
As the works briefly noted above and the ones reproduced with this review indicate, the ASCA's 93rd Annual Exhibition is a varied and rewarding free-for-all and well worth adding to one's gallery hopping itinerary.

— Marie R. Pagano

The Last Romantic Art Movement at the Museum of Modern Art

Andrew Wyeth's "Christina's World" and Ben Shahn's "Handball Court" were hanging side by side on the dimly lit wall in the corridor opposite the escalator, and the hair-raising primal screams of museum visitors invited by Yoko Ono's "Voice Piece for Soprano" to stand at a microphone and yell their lungs out, were shrieking up from the atrium, as we headed for the fourth floor at MoMA to see the huge survey "Abstract Expressionist New York."

To one who makes an almost paranoid habit of making such connections, that the two realist paintings had been relegated to the hall seemed symbolic of how all other schools of art were marginalized almost from the minute the New York School came on the scene. And Yoko's shriekfest seemed just as exemplary of much that came after the Last Romantic Art Movement peaked in the 1960s, making the fourth floor galleries seem an oasis amid the madness.



Mark Rothko (American, born Latvia. 1903-1970)* No. 3/No. 13.** ***1949 Oil on canvas 7' 1 3/8" x 65" (216.5 x 164.8 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Bequest of Mrs. Mark Rothko through The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc. © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

If not for everyone: Many of the fresh-faced fashion victims swarming the galleries in their expensive hipster finery seemed less than overwhelmed by the massive canvases filling the walls with effusions of pure form, gesture, and color. They'd seen much more sensational stuff by later generations of trendy art stars who suspended crucifixes in containers of piss, cast sculpture from their own frozen blood, photographed themselves with bullwhips shoved up their ass, or sliced whole cows right down the middle and displayed them in Plexiglas vitrines. Yet they appeared eager to understand what all the fuss was about and properly respectful of what it must have been like when artists didn't hang out with movie stars or get mentioned on Page Six and lived in cold-water lofts without cell phones, ipods, or even cool clothes.

Oh, babies, could I tell you stories!

But this is not the place. What I'm more excited about conveying right now is what I learned after spotting a small oil, its composition consisting mainly of white rhythmically woven skeins and swirls of off-white liquified pigment, hanging unobtrusively in a corner near the exit door of the first gallery, which I immediately recognized as a typical Jackson Pollock drip painting. In fact, I would have sworn to it, until I got up close and read the wall label: "Hans Hofmann (American, born Germany, 1880-1966), Spring, 1944-45 (dated on reverse 1940), Oil on wood, 11 1/14 x 14 (28 x 35.7 cm), The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Peter A. Rubel."

As far as anyone seems to know, Pollock didn't create his first drip paintings until 1947, two years later than the last date on that rather confusing wall label. So while it's not unheard of for two artists to arrive at the same idea independently, it's interesting to wonder if Pollock saw that modest little work, maybe lying around on the floor in Hofmann's studio, and was inspired to run with the technique that ultimately defined his career. Still, it would be ridiculous to deny that Pollock did infinitely more with the drip, as major canvases such as "Number 1A, 1948" and "One: Number 31," demonstrate, and was a far more important painter, while Hofmann is mainly remembered as a great teacher and theorist who coined the defining phrase of Abstract Expressionist practice: "push and pull."

More relevant to the theme of the exhibition, however, are how sequences of paintings chart the evolution of individual artists' signature styles: Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko both began with quasi-primitive symbols, often enclosed within grids. Gottlieb's symbols grew larger, to float freely in space. Rothko finally dispensed with the symbols altogether, and the containing rectangles grew into his characteristic squares of blurred color, which grew more somber and faded to gray in the period preceding his suicide.

Philip Guston's trajectory is traced, from his early stylized social realist figure paintings to the lyrical abstract canvases with which he established his reputation, to the final cartoon-influenced oils that, in the 1960s, made him persona non gratis to some of his former colleagues who accused him of betraying their movement to join the insurgent Pop camp. (Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist and others give them all the boot, as they did in the late '60s, in the final gallery on the fourth floor labeled "On to Pop.")

We see Willem de Kooning gradually unshackle himself from the Picassoid and Surrealist influences of his early friend and mentor Arshile Gorky (also well represented with five major canvases), as he works his way from biomorphic enamels to "Woman One" to sweeping late abstractions, becoming Pollock's main rival, once his Dutch Boy former Hoboken house painter's brushes gain real ballast. There are also some bold black and white calligraphic canvases by de Kooning's Cedar Bar drinking buddy Franz Kline, terrific paintings by Lee Krasner, Grace Hartigan, and Joan Mitchell (the only women artists to buck the macho buddy system and make the cut), culled from MoMA's vast holdings.

Indeed, one of the most remarkable things to realize about this huge survey is that the 250 works in a variety of mediums, including painting, drawing, prints, and film, all come from the museum's own collection. Then again, MoMA and Abstract Expressionism grew up together. Since the museum's mandate was to promote both European and American modernist art, its founding director Alfred H. Barr Jr. had the good sense to realize that this was the perfect bandwagon to jump on as soon as the movement first emerged in the late 1940s. When popular magazines like *Life*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* got hip to the novelty value of these brash homegrown painters putting American art on the world map (particularly Pollock, the mediagenic art cowboy from Cody, Wyoming, whom they dubbed "Jack the Dripper") MoMA benefited from the publicity bonanza as well. This great show is payback, reviving the euphoria of a moment when downtown Manhattan felt like bohemian Paris in the 1920s. A kindred literary movement called the Beat Generation was also brewing as the painterly pioneers proliferated in the lofts and cooperative galleries of the 10th Street scene.

Adolph Gottlieb (American, 1903-1974)* Blast, I** ***1957 Oil on canvas 7' 6" x 45 1/8" (228.7 x 114.4 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Philip Johnson Fund © Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

Twenty years later, in the mid '60s, when we had only been around for a little over two decades ourselves, my pregnant wife and I schlepped two of my huge canvases over on the ferry from our little bungalow on Staten Island to the Brata Gallery, on 10th Street and Third Avenue, where my first literary hero Jack Kerouac had once participated in a poetry reading. The movement had long ago moved to posher venues uptown, but the mystique still held as Jeannie and I waited nervously in the Brata's dank cellar, where the last vagabond Beat street poet, Jack Micheline, still kept his army cot, tattered manuscripts, and books, while a jury of my peers voted upstairs on my bid for membership. And ghosts still surrounded us one memorable Friday night several months later at the Cedar Bar, where Pollock, de Kooning and Kline once drank and brawled, as we fueled up with our rowdy droogies before walking over to the opening reception of my first solo show at the Brata.

I can barely believe almost another forty years went by before it all came back, strolling through "Abstract Expressionist New York" at MoMa. Those were the days, my friend.

— Ed McCormack

Museum of Modern Art,
11 West 53rd St.,
through April 25, 2011.

Madeleine Kraeler Corbin: Everyday Dreams

For an artist to have her first exhibition at the age of 88 seems more remarkable than ever in an era when agism rules the art world and dealers sometimes trawl the more prestigious schools for promising young talents that they can mold into so-called Art Stars, some of whom actually end up graduating with waiting lists of collectors when the gallerist who discovers them has a great deal of clout.

This kind of too-much-too-soon shortsightedness, which can not only ossify a young artist's work in the long run but gives a callow tone to so much contemporary art, is something that one can only assume Madeleine Kraeler Corbin, the octogenarian artist in question, would probably find astounding. For when her middle daughter, the New York artist AK Corbin, opened an art gallery in Red Hook, Brooklyn, to show her own work and that of other worthy artists, her mother's advice to her was, "Just make sure you set a standard. Don't give in."

Well, it's highly doubtful that AK Corbin, the inheritor of such integrity, will ever give in to the ill-advised trend of choosing malleable neophytes with lots of presumed shelf life over seasoned artists with abundant life experience that gives them something to say. And she is certainly setting a standard by giving Madeleine Kraeler Corbin her exhibition debut in her venue Gallery Small, dedicated to presenting city related works on an intimate scale.

"Dancing at the Senior Center"

Born in 1922, the daughter of a woman's clothing manufacturer and a mother described as "a right hand man to Fiorello La Guardia," the elder Corbin is said to have possessed remarkable drawing ability from an early age. And although her favored medium is sculpture, it is clear from the mature drawings and small paintings she has chosen for her first exhibition, she is a draftsperson of formidable gifts.

So why, one might wonder, has she waited so long to have an exhibition? There seems to be no more mystery to it than why Virginia Hamilton Adair, who was born in 1913 didn't publish her first book of poems, the critically acclaimed "Ants on a Melon," until 1996. Corbin married, had children, and has had a full life and a busy career as an architect, interior decorator, and author books on the architectural styles of New England. She also created a unique house out of a couple of old bull pens and was also one of the first collectors of Pre-Columbian and African Art. Obviously, she is no reclusive shrinking violet out of the Emily Dickinson mold, timidly hiding her work away. She seems simply to be one of those artists for whom creating the work has provided sufficient satisfaction in itself and whose success in other endeavors has eliminated any pressing need to think of art in careerist terms.

As with poets who support themselves outside of academia (The family physician Williams Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens, the insurance executive, are two of the most famous examples), certain visual artists can actually benefit from being involved with the workaday world, rather than the somewhat cloistered community of artists. In Madeleine Kraeler Corbin's case, it appears to imbue her drawings and small paintings with an empathy for the struggles of ordinary people that is precious rare in art today.

One gets the feeling that she is an artist who might concur with W.H. Auden's famous line, "All Cezanne's apples I would give away for one small Goya or a Daumier." But while the workingclass atmosphere and period feeling of some of her pictures can be compared to the better-known sculptor Jacob Epstein's drawings for Hutchins Hapgood's classic book "The Spirit of the Ghetto," others deal with the more secular cultural aspirations of the middle class from which she herself evolved. One of her more poignant pictures in the latter regard is "Museum Visit," in which a woman of a certain age confronts an aggressive abstraction dominating an entire wall and threatening to bowl her over, as she dutifully tours the galleries. Although the composition is relatively detailed, with other visitors perusing other paintings in the background and so on, Corbin's monochromatic washes are applied in broad strokes with a vigor to match that of the gestural forms in the painting that appear to set the main figure reeling back in incomprehension.

The forms are more solidly locked in place to reflect the sad stagnation of the elderly man seated on a beige sofa in Corbin's Hopperesque watercolor "Lonely Hotel." The institutional green walls and the tall windows, blank with white daylight, looming over the man as he slumps with his hands held together like the gloves of a weary boxer reluctant to rise from his corner stool for the next round, contribute to the pathos of the scene. Here, too, the converging angles of the other furniture in the cramped room enhance the sense of oppression and isolation, demonstrating the artist's sophisticated use of abstract geometry to heighten an emotional effect.

Indeed, although ostensibly a social realist, Madeleine Kraeler Corbin's compositions are invariably supported by a strong formal armature of abstract and classical allusions. In her pastel, "At the Beach," an older woman in a blue robe standing in the shadows of a summer bungalow, glancing wistfully at a couple drying off on a bench could be one of Canaletto's Venice burghers. In the ironically titled "Not Bocce Ball," the huddled men have the downtrodden demeanor of inmates in a gulag. And in "Dancing — Senior Center," the dapper gent leading with his profile appears oblivious to his partner, who looks lost in a reverie of years long past.

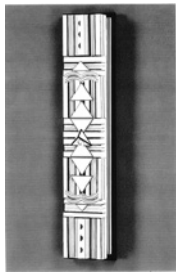
Madeleine Kraeler Corbin is said to be an ardent admirer of her late former schoolmate Diane Arbus' photographs of dwarfs, giants, transvestites, and other marginalized Americans. Her own pictures, however, are just as affecting for what they reveal of the hopes, dreams, and heartbreak of so-called ordinary people.

— Ed McCormack

Madeleine Kraeler Corbin, Gallery Small New York, 416 Van Brunt, Red Hook, Brooklyn, November 28th — December 26th.

Geometry as Constant: The Achievement of Harriet FeBland

Few contemporary artists whom one can name have shown such stylistic consistency as Harriet FeBland whose allegiance to geometry has been constant running through each phase of her work and period of her career. Yet the variety and expressive range of the work that she has achieved over the years within this self-imposed constraint is truly remarkable.



"Top-Down 5770"

Although born in New York, FeBland lived abroad in England and France for 11 years. Having started studying at age nine at Pratt Institute's Saturday children's art classes and continued her art education during her teen years and later at the American Artists School, the New School for Social Research, and New York University, with distinguished instructors ranging as the Soyer brothers and Chaim Gross to Stuart Davis and Yashua Kuniyoshi to Will Barnet and Harry Sternberg, she was presumably already an accomplished artist by the time she traveled abroad. For she worked with Stanley Hayter at the prestigious graphics studio Atelier 17, in Paris, and exhibited constructions and paintings at the Musée d'Art Moderne, as well as in galleries in London and elsewhere in Europe.

By the time she returned to the United States in the late 1950s, FeBland had a formidable reputation as an innovative constructionist sculptor/painter and was featured in museum and gallery exhibitions with Joseph Cornell, Hans Van de Bovendkamp, Marisol, Louise Nevelson, and other artists of comparable stature. A major solo exhibition "Plastics in Art" at Galerie International, in New York City, in 1961, gained her further recognition as a pioneer in new media, and she continued to mine and refine her geometric aesthetic to widespread critical acclaim with subsequent exhibitions and commissions for her unique reliefs, boxes, totems, graphics, paintings, and monumental outdoor sculptures.

While many artists at a similar point in their careers tend to play it safe, the new pieces in FeBland's fifty-second exhibition, at the Interchurch Center, are among her most adventurous. Featuring several large totems, small boxes, and medium-size wall constructions, the show reaffirms the innovative richness, as well as the unprecedented lyricism in her chosen mode of expression, that once caused Paul Mocsanyi, the former director of the New School Art Center, to say of FeBland, "She is the Poet of Geometry."

Among the new works, one was particularly taken with "Zen" a wall-relief construction-painting in which three layered gray panels play host to alternating red and white horizontal strips. As minimalist as it is, this piece projects a meditative grace that is near-hypnotic. Also outstanding was a tall narrow wall-relief construction, titled Top Down 5770, with a stately quality akin to some of FeBland's more totemic floor sculptures. Here, without resorting to specific figuration, but through the arrangement of geometric shapes, particularly triangles, stacked one above the other and outlined in a precise linear fashion on an austere white ground in blue and red, the artist creates the impression of stacked tribal masks.

Frank DeGregorie, the curator of the show, says, "Harriet FeBland's work never fails to have a dramatic effect on me due to the fact that whenever I see it I am drawn into it and can take my leave only when I promise myself a return visit."

No doubt this important solo show by one of our most gifted geometric artists in one of the city's most handsome exhibition venues will have a similar effect on many other visitors as well. — J. Sanders Eaton

Harriet FeBland, The Interchurch Center, 475 Riverside Drive, through December 2nd

Chantal Westby's Paintings Project an Epic Grandeur

The Italian phrase di sotto in su, which means "looking up from below," is a device for creating spatial allusions via severe foreshortening often seen in the ceiling frescos of Andrea Mantegna and other Renaissance masters but rarely encountered in the work of contemporary artists. Chantal Westby, a French painter who moved to the United States in 1980s, is one of the rare exceptions. Westby often employs di sotto in su effectively to add a dynamic sense of depth to her large mixed media compositions, while sometimes producing an almost vertiginous sensation in the viewer.

This dizzying feeling is especially strong in Westby's large canvas "Ship Wreck Survivor," with its tumultuous waves reminiscent of Turner's stormy marine scenes. In Westby's painting, however,a huge hand — presumably that of God — appears in the starry nocturnal sky, guiding the tiny figure toward the shore. The artist's thick paint application enhances the drama of the scene, with tactile impastos that pile up on the surface of the canvas, making the white foam on the crashing waves and the craggy textures of the brown rocks physically palpable. Indeed, the figure of the wave-tossed survivor strugglingly swimming toward the shore, as the mast of his wrecked ship bobs in the distance, is so thickly pigmented that it casts an actual shadow on the surface of the rushing sea, also evoked in juicy strokes. The picture has a mythic quality that makes one think of epics such as "Moby Dick" or "Jonah and the Whale," albeit translated into visceral visual terms by Westby's bold way with composition and materials.

"Ship Wreck Survivor"

The sense of vertigo again invests an even larger mixed media and acrylic painting on canvas called "La Source" with an unusual impact. Here, while the composition is essentially abstract, one gets a sense, not only from the title, but also from the yellow forms streaming down like blinding rays in dynamic perspective from a central hub, of staring up at the sun. This picture, in particular, possesses a power akin to that of the Beat Generation female artist Jay De Feo's famous painting, "The Rose," legendary for its unprecedentedly thick paint application. While Westby's impasto may not be quite as thick in "La Source," its effect of the work on the viewer is equally mesmerizing by virtue of her spatial approach.

An opposite mood is evoked in "Blue Moon," a work invested with a serene atmospheric mystery, in which the lunar orb floats through the night sky trailing long wisps of cloud resembling a woman's hair blowing in the wind. Below, rectangular geometric shapes appear, like refuse floating in a river, suggesting contrasts between the ethereal and earthly realms.

In other paintings by Westby, such as "Delivering the Light" and "Fortune's Wheel," abstraction is employed allusively to evoke a sense of the spiritual with imagery that suggests various states of being without resorting to literal descriptiveness. In a composition called "Horizon," however, the forms of white birds fly low over a rugged terrain like aircraft approaching a runway and recede in vanishing perspective toward a streaked blue sky, sweeping the viewer along on the wings of Chantal Westby's sheer painterly velocity. — Peter Wiley

Chantal Westby, Agora Gallery 530 West 25th St., November 23rd - December 14th. Reception: Thurs. Dec. 2, 6 - 8pm.

Ludmila Aristova's "Illuminations" Series Signals an Important Turning Point in a Distinguished Career

Looking at "Illuminations," the new fiber art works by the Russian-born artist Ludmila Aristova, one is put in mind of the fairy tale "Rumpelstiltskin" by The Brothers Grimm. For the unique alchemy that Aristova creates with simple cloth and thread appears as magically transformative as that of the miller's daughter who spins gold from straw.

This has never been so evident as in her new series of fiber art works, where the combination of brightly colored and metallic threads in almost every piece catch the light and create shimmering effects that can only be compared to the brush strokes of the Impressionists. Aristova attributes the luminosity of her recent abstract compositions to the fact that she has recently been awarded U.S. citizenship, something that she describes as affecting her as though a great cloud over her life has been lifted. The fall of the Soviet Union, she makes clear, did nothing to erase the traumatic childhood memory of her grandfather's unexplained arrest during the Stalinist era, never to be seen again by his family. And while she has been a resident of New York City for several years, becoming a citizen, she exults, has opened the floodgates of her creativity in new and exciting ways. She says that the new sense of freedom has caused it to blossom and become more bold in both color and design.

Works such as "Illuminations # 2" and "Golden Autumn" seem to back up this claim with particular radiance and power. The former piece presents the viewer with a veritable sunburst of golden yellow hues that create an affect akin to the most brilliant compositions of the Color Field painter Jules Olitski. Indeed the textures that Aristova achieves with needle and thread can be accurately compared to Olitski's use of painterly impasto to lend his canvases tactile weight and depth. For not only does she combine fabrics such as silk and cotton but also combines hand-painting with dyed materials to create complex chromatic contrasts that are considerably enhanced by painstaking hand-stitching with different colored threads. Indeed, no painter has at his or her disposal a more richly varied arsenal of subtle textural and coloristic effects.

Another recent innovation is Aristova's use of more patchwork elements, as seen to particular advantage in "Golden Autumn," where an intricate array of angular shards of different colored fabrics in the deep yellow and rusty red range create neo-cubistic fractured planes that evoke a windswept swirl of leaves. Driven by an energy which also recalls the dynamic vortexes of Futurism, this is a composition in which the artist appears to harness the force of nature in an especially accomplished manner. By contrast, in another autumnal composition called "Leaf-Fall," Aristova employs painted passages in a particularly bold manner, brushing broad streaks of white and fleshy pink pigment over tightly stitched diagonal seams further enhanced texturally by myriad small triangular extensions. Here, in fact, the sewn elements become a kind of backdrop, while the painterly passages move to the foreground, playing a magic role in animating and emphasizing the overall diagonal thrust of the composition. Painting also becomes a prominent, if more subtly integrated, element of the work simply titled "Autumn," where more coloristically variegated strokes of yellow ochre, alizarin crimson, orange, green and blue, dance and swirl amid variously dyed fabrics and those same tiny, multitudinous triangular shapes of a regularity which suggests that they may have been created with pinking shears.

"Golden Autumn"

Yet another technique that Aristova has been exploring successfully in her recent compositions is layered pleats, often used with darker, more subdued hues (particularly browns, purples, and blues), as seen in the piece that she calls "Twister." Here, given the evocative title, the raised fabric folds that form the bulk of the composition actually appear as not one but two "eyes of the storm" in a roughly simplified mask-like Expressionist face that also suggests the presence of a gaping mouth. Of course this is a subjective interpretation on the part of one viewer of a work which, like most of Aristova's compositions, is essentially abstract. However, it serves to drive home the point that this innovative fiber artist has achieved a freedom in her latest work which places her on an expressive par with painting. Indeed this point is also well made in some of her more recent pieces where this pleating technique also comes into play. This is especially evident in some of her "Illuminations" on a considerably smaller scale, wherein she appears to be testing the possibilities of creating more Minimalist compositions. Although most, but not all, of these pieces are under ten inches square, she employs folds of fabric configured in various directions to create rhythmic and sensual compositions evoking the sense of a much larger scale.

It will certainly be interesting to those of us avidly following Ludmila Aristova's career to see where she goes with these intriguing new departures. For whatever direction this immensely gifted artist, who has come a long way since she completed her studies at the Moscow Textile Institute and started out as a fashion designer, ultimately takes them in will be well worth our serious attention.

— Ed McCormack

Ludmila Aristova, Noho Gallery,
530 West 25th Street,
November 30 - December 24.
(Reception: December 2, 6-8 PM)

Viewing the West Side from Diverse Personal Perspectives

The urban scene, one of the great subjects of modern times, has rarely been depicted so affectionately as in a recent group show curated by Carson Ferri-Grant and Anne Rudder under the auspices of the West Side Arts Coalition. Both curators set the tone with their own contributions to the exhibition:

Carson Ferri-Grant's "Lilies in Waiting — Right Outside My Window" gives a close-up glimpse in watercolor of the sort of natural miracle that brightens the concrete jungle. That his three graceful botanical studies form a triptych in an actual wooden window frame makes them all the more apropos. Anne Rudder evokes selfless love in a large watercolor dedicated to Ida Strauss, a New Yorker who chose to stay behind and perish with her husband Isador, a U.S. Congressman, on the Titanic, rather than escape in a lifeboat. A down to earth park on 106th Street is named for the couple; but, characteristically, Rudder aims for the stars in a beautiful Blakean poem/painting, "In the Garden (Strauss Park)," memorializing Ida's romantic sacrifice, particularly with the poignant line, "If love for me was quick and fleeting for her it was the eternal heart." Three smaller figure studies by the artist chart the development of both poem and picture.

New exhibitor Richard Carlson's two stately collage paintings, "Transit Stories" and "The Post Office," incorporate evocative imagery into abstract compositions in which subtle semi-translucent painterly effects float over an underlying grid. In the former a superimposed subway map and female faces appropriated from Roy Lichtenstein comicstrip paintings hint at a complex urban narrative. In the latter, fragments of newsprint and a faded photographic image add depth to formal beauty.

Helen Stutz expresses her love of the Big Apple with winning directness in small watercolors of the New York skyline, the George Washington Bridge, and Rockefeller Center, where tiny skaters glide in the rink below Paul Manship's majestic gilded statue of Prometheus. Stutz's breezy realism breathes new life into familiar scenes. Anthony Kirov, on the other hand, takes a fanciful view of the city's ubiquitous cultural riches in his neocubistic oils combining brilliant colors, stylized figures, fractured planes, and Chagall-like whimsy. Here, Kirov showed two paintings depicting musical performances as though Lincoln Center were located in the Land of Oz.

In abstract acrylics such as "Standing Tall in the Changing Faces of Harlem" and "Crowded Sidewalk," Sonia Barnett appeared to protest the insidious erosion of a community with vigorous gestural strokes of thick pigment on a bare white ground. By contrast, Barnett's Harlem river view evoked a gentler, more elegiac mood suggestive of the blues.

Like the great Paul Klee, Elizabeth K. Hill conjured miniature worlds in a few square inches. Hill's gift for making microcosmic magic was especially apparent in her nocturnal cityscape "Night Thoughts," with its big full moon glowing through smoky atmospherics, as well as in her brighter architectural composition "Toytown." In his accomplished oil "A Moment to Reflect," Nathaniel Ladson depicted an elegant, Garbo-like matron in a straw hat and sunglasses stopping to ruminate near a brick wall in an accomplished realist style. By contrast, Ladson's mixed media/Giclee print "Birds" offered a more lighthearted monochromatic image of pigeons lined up on the ledge of a roof like gray-coated commuters waiting on a railroad platform.

Then there was Patience Sundaresan, another insightful realist who sees the city from a profoundly personal perspective, suggesting a subtle poetry akin to that of Loren McIver. In "NYC Intimacy: West 73rd Street," Sundaresan imbues a close-up of an urban curb and cracked, stained sidewalk with intense mystery. And in "NYC Intimacy: West 72nd Street Tunnel," she goes even further, making the silhouetted figure traversing the eerie tunnel amid puddles and reflections seem symbolic of a soul in transit between this life and the next.

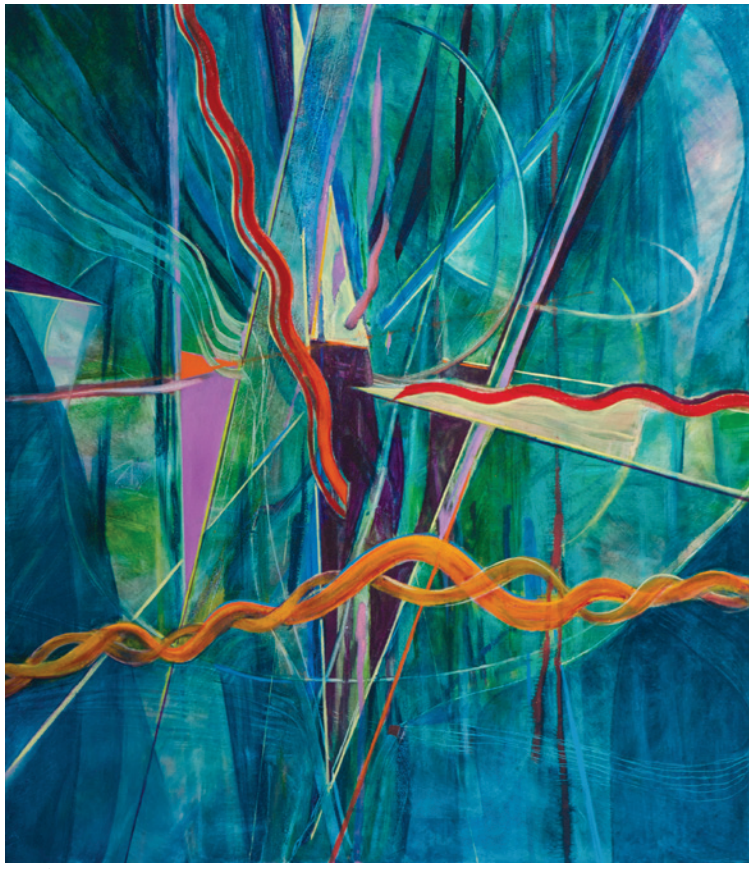
—Maurice Taplinger

"Capturing Our Neighborhood – The West Side," seen recently at Broadway Mall Community Center, central island, Broadway at 96th St.

Arthur Dworin's Imaginative Postmodern Take on the Ethos of Abstract Expressionism

Surely the major survey, "Abstract Expressionist New York," now at the Museum of Modern Art, vividly chronicles the movement that, some sixty years ago, initially put this city on the map as the art capital of the world. It would be a mistake, however, to relegate the movement to the annals of art history as a done deal. For the tradition that it spawned continues to inspire scores of contemporary painters.

One of the most impressive among them for the postmodern spin that he puts on that tradition is Arthur Dworin, who was born in Detroit, Michigan, but has lived and worked in New York City since 1967, where he has also worked as a scenic artist for TV, movies, ballet, opera and theater. For Dworin's considerable accomplishment as a painter has been to unite the two distinctly different stylistic strains that divided The New York School into two critically opposing camps: the formalists, championed by Clement Greenberg, and the "action painters,"espoused by Harold Rosenberg, who coined that term. Dworin bridges the gap by combining hard-edged, primarily triangular forms with freely flowing shapes and gestures that often verge on the baroque, with radiant coloristic pyrotechnics that apparently derive from his long-term practice of Agni Yoga or "fire yoga," described as "a meditation focused on color frequencies associated with areas of consciousness."



"Ode to NB"

Indeed, along with luminous blues, yellows, and reds, fiery orange hues are a frequent component of Dworin's large canvases, which also partake of the expansive scale and sense of space cited by Clement Greenberg as a distinguishing characteristic of the new "American-Type Painting" that bulldozed European easel painting out of the limelight during the postwar period. At the same time, displaying the pluralistic independence of a true postmodernist, Dworin refuses to adhere to Greenberg's insistence on the absolute flatness of the picture plane as a prerequisite for such painting, along with the blanket rejection of any vestiges of natural allusiveness. For the space in his paintings is often ambiguous, with a combination of mostly triangular geometric forms and baroque abstract shapes giving way to an atmospheric sense of depth that jibes with Dworin's stated hope that "the spirit in these works will act as a key to awaken what is already deep within the observer and anew with each viewing, bring a greater awareness of our inner and outer universes."

Harking back to the influence of Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, and other esoteric disciplines of turn of the century modernist pioneers such as Kandinsky and Mondrian, even as it suggests the mix and match attitudes of our present pluralistic era, this statement bespeaks a radical departure from the most adamantly abstract diehards of the postwar era. Peter Selz, former Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture for the Museum of Modern Art, and an ardent collector of his work has observed of Dworin's paintings, "Abstract as they are, they bring a new sense of visual order to organic forms of nature."

Indeed, for his stated willingness to let suggestions of our inner and outer worlds enter into his abstract cosmos, rather than insisting on formal purity, Dworin puts himself in the good company of two of the least-doctrinaire giants of The New York School: Mark Rothko, who freely acknowledged the spiritual content in his canvases and Willem de Kooning, who once remarked during a conversation that I had with him in his studio in East Hampton that even his most ostensibly abstract paintings were filled with "slippery glimpses" of the known world.

In some of Dworin's paintings — particularly "Gordian Cypher l," "Ode to NB," and "Transliteration" wavy linear elements that braid around each other can suggest slippery glimpses of everything from mating serpents to entwined jungle vines. In other works, such as the monumental composition "Breaking Through I" and its smaller companion piece, "Breaking Through II," the landscape references are most clearly discernible in the rhythmic blue curves, emphasized with bits of green and white shading that could alternately evoke mountains with areas of verdant vegetation or majestic ocean waves. While the completely circular forms in both compositions could suggest either solar or lunar orbs, the colorful straight and cursive linear and triangular forms in both compositions are especially evocative of a fanciful sailboat's masts, sails, and flags. Of course, such readings will invariably vary in the eye of every beholder, since the visual vocabulary and possible symbolism in Dworin's compositions is hardly obvious and therefore open to a variety of imaginative interpretations.

From this writer's angle of vision, the work that prompted the most specific interpretation was the complex canvas called "Objectifying." Dominated by greens, yellows, and blues, its central area suggested a vertiginous nocturnal view of an artificially lit landscape bracketed between and truncated between darker geometric areas suggesting the wings or open hatch of an aircraft. One is well aware, however, that such a reading might surprise or even amuse the artist himself, since paintings are by no means Rorschach tests and these works are more than sufficiently compelling for their abstract attributes alone. Yet to stir the imagination is also an important function of significant art, and Arthur Dworin succeeds sensationally on both scores. — Ed McCormack

Arthur Dworin, Viridian Artists, 530 West 25th Street, October 26 - November 13, Reception October 30, 4 - 6 pm.

John Wallace, Stargazing Sensualist

On the strength of his retrospective spanning six decades, it would appear that John Wallace was postmodern decades before anyone ever dreamt up that term. Whether this made him avant garde before his time or the opposite may be debatable. But what is undeniable is that Wallace has always been one hell of a venturesome artist.

Judging from an early oil called "The Red Bike," he still worked in a semiabstract style reminiscent of Braque in 1950. But by 1956, when he painted "Self Portrait on Stairway," he had already beat Diebenkorn to a brushy figuration redolent of Abstract Expressionism. The brushstrokes become more frenzied and the colors more fiery, however in "Self Portrait Wild Horse Creek Road, 1960," in which the painter depicts himself as a tall, streaky specter, walking straight into a huge red fireball of a sun hanging pregnantly in a pink sky that a gnarled tree claws at with its bare branches. Here, the young artist seems still in the process of absorbing influences such as the Fauves, Munch, and, particularly, van Gogh's self portraits in landscapes — or perhaps Francis Bacon's strident appropriation of them in his "Study for a Portrait of Van Gogh VI."

Wallace truly comes into his stylistically own three years later with a subject closer to home: "Margaret with Pearls," a youthful profile of his beautiful wife and frequent model, the painter Margaret Grimes, her fiery red mane framing her delicate features and cascading over her bare shoulders. Although he would still indulge in frenzied painterly pyrotechnics as late as 1968, in paintings such as "Death of the Monk," where a shadowy phantom, presumably representing the soul, escapes from a meditating figure within a Zen circle, this exquisite little portrait of his wife points the way to the firmer graphic grasp of his mature style.

Apparently, Margaret is not only his mate and model but his muse. With her high cheekbones, and slender yet voluptuous form, she haunts his oeuvre and inspires some of his strongest works, appearing in one painting as "Nyx, Goddess of Night." Here, her nude torso is armless, as in an ancient Greek statue eroded by time, and her eyes are devoid of irises or pupils; yet her youthful body, replete with bristling pubis, is vibrantly alive, the marble smoothness of her flesh contrasting with the looser pink and yellow gestural effusiveness of the surrounding ground.

By the mid 1970's Wallace is hitting his stride, having arrived at the restrained painterliness that distinguishes his mature style. Although his brushstrokes still retain an agitated vigor in the skies and foliage of his landscape settings, all extraneous vestiges of gestural extravagance have vanished or been subordinated to the solid descriptiveness seen in the major 1976 canvas "In a Dark Garden." In this, one of Wallace's most hauntingly evocative paintings, two nude women, one standing, the other reclining on a rumpled blanket at her feet, are depicted on an isolated lawn with a small gray bungalow in the background and the high trees of a forest looming against the overcast sky beyond. While the reclining woman gazes off dreamily, her head resting on a forearm tucked behind her head, the standing woman, her hands resting on her thighs, the light catching her thick red hair, gazes directly out at the viewer.

"In a Dark Garden," 1976

Although there's a formal perfection to the composition, which is filled with all manner of little painterly felicities and draftsmanly touches, such as the delicate green shadows and cool twilight auras enlivening the flesh tones and the firm outlines that Wallace often employs to define the contours of his figures, the scene has a snapshot immediacy. It suggests an exquisitely tantalizing moment lodged in a man's memory, rather than a situation set up by the artist to create a painting.

A single female nude appears a year later, standing with the casual grace of a ballerina at the practice barre in a toasty domestic interior in front of a picture window with a view of a frigid winter landscape in the large oil, "First Snowfall — Crete." By contrast the nude decapitated by the top edge of the canvas in the playfully surreal 1977 painting "Cosmic Furnace" descends a staircase, like a more realistic version of Duchamp's famous mannequin made up of shattered shingles, into what appears to be metaphysical suburban cellar littered with guns, golf clubs, and scientific instruments, which magically morphs into a lunar landscape complete with hovering astronaut. Perhaps this picture forecasts things to come, as Wallace increasingly introduces elements reflecting his long-term interest in science, particularly astronomy, into his compositions.

The constellations figure prominently in an intimate 1988 work in watercolor and egg tempera named for Philip Glass' opera "Einstein on the Beach," depicting the father of Relativity riding a bicycle along the dunes. A year later, stellar elements also dominate an acrylic on canvas called "Supernova 1987A with Accelerator & Stephen Hawking," showing the great cosmologist and theoretical physicist dwarfed in his wheelchair by towering stargazing devices.

In "Alignment of Jupiter Moon, Mars, and Saturn over Tauton Lake, 1990," a red-haired woman in blue shorts sits in a rowboat under a full moon. In "Conjunction of Venus Mars & Jupiter with Crescent Moon, 1992," the lighted windows of a country house surrounded by shadowy trees project as much mystery as the moon and stars above. Figurative subjects continue into the present decade, among them a superb large 2003 double portrait called "Max Beckmann and Quappi — St. Louis on June 6 1950," Showing the German émigré artist who inspired Wallace to take up painting wearing an academic gown, holding a cigarette in one hand and a rolled certificate in the other, while his wife Quappi stands nearby clutching a bouquet of red flowers. Apparently, Beckmann is being honored at Washington University, where he taught for the last three years of his life. And one can't help wondering if Beckmann's ambivalent expression reflects something of Wallace's own feelings about the position of artists in academia, since he himself is a tenured professor at Western Connecticut State University. But if teaching has hampered his artistic productivity, there is no evidence of it in this abundant and varied exhibition. Since in 2004, John Wallace has increasingly trained his gaze heavenward, creating an unprecedented series of epic metaphysical canvases with titles such as "Solar Eclipse" and "Solstice Sunrise Flash Spectrum," in which the solid forms of the monolithic ruins at Stonehenge are combined with ethereal chromatic auras to stunningly transcendent effect.

— Ed McCormack

John Wallace, Blue Mountain Gallery,
530 West 25th Street, November 2 - 27

Outrage and a Grace-Note of Hope Animate Anowar Hossain's "Katrina" Series

Encountering Anowar Hossain's new series of paintings prompted by the artist's emotional reaction to the devastation unleashed on the city of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina, the first thing one thought of was William Carlos Williams' famous statement, "It is difficult to get the news from poetry, yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there."

For in an age when the mass media constantly bombards us with images at lightning speed, one might validly wonder what the venerable art of painting has to contribute to our understanding of such events. The answer, of course, is: nothing. The whims of nature, like the acts of man, are finally capricious and inexplicable. But what painting and its sister art, poetry, can do perhaps better than any other medium in the hands of an accomplished artist is to view public events through the filter of an empathetic individual sensibility and make something coherent and of enduring value from the chaos that surrounds us.

"I really felt bad about Katrina happening in America because I grew up experiencing this type of disaster in the country I was born in (Bangladesh)," the artist told us in a recent e-mail. "I can recall many tornados, hurricanes, and tidal waves wiping out village after village, eradicating homes and lives in the flash of a moment. There is a sense of helplessness and hopelessness when this type of thing occurs. It's always the poor that are the greatest victims. Coming from a Third World country made me connect to the tragedy . . . The event, like the ones experienced in my childhood, had the same emotional impact. However, as an adult in America, I was able to turn those events into images."

"From the Katrina Series"

The images that Hossain created out of this tragedy, like all of his work, are informed not only by memories and emotions that Katrina provoked but also by his early admiration for the writer Ravindrath Tagore, the film maker Satyajit Ray, the musician Ravi Shanker. Perhaps more obvious is the influence of Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning, both of whom, like himself, came from other countries to make their mark in the New York art world.

But while both of those earlier painters had figurative as well as abstract periods, during their era, when civil (and sometimes uncivil) war raged in the New York art world between the factions of art-for-art's-sake and humanism, it would have been unthinkable for an artist to combine Abstract Expressionist paint handling and Social Realist subject matter, as Hossain does in his Katrina series. Perhaps the most radical thing about our pluralistic, postmodern, postmovement era is the freedom it allows artists to pursue what Jack Kerouac referred to as "the unspeakable visions of the individual" wherever they might lead. And Anowar Hossain, the eclectic themes of whose exhibitions over the past few years have ranged from the predominantly abstract to a recent show memorializing Michael Jackson, has been a prominent exponent of this trend.

Hossain's present series on Katrina is not only his most deeply moving to date but also his most successful in terms of the synthesis of figurative and abstract form that he has been exploring most recently. Indeed, given the magnitude of his subject, the series transcends social realism to approach a new species of history painting. Two new works in particular, where partially submerged, straining figures struggle against the forces of devastation in a sea of rubble, call to mind Goya's "The Disasters of War" and Gericault's "Raft of the Medusa." However, rather than from the pathos of particulars, as was common in an age when visual art was actually called upon to give the news to some extent, the raw power and human drama in Hossain's paintings derives from his use of Abstract Expressionist gestural energy to convey both action and emotional urgency.

Hossain's ability to make us feel empathy through the vehicle of gesture invests other works in the series with harrowing impact as well. At times the paint itself appears to flood the canvas with torrential force, threatening to submerge the imagery. In one especially hectic collage painting, a ghostly female figure with upraised arms simultaneously suggests a woman fleeing the storm and a defaced angel, suggesting spooky church statuary in a city where Christianity and Voo Doo often go hand-in-hand. Dripping rivulets of whitewash like mossy mummy rags, canceled as though by a big red X, its mouth gagged with what looks like a red adhesive strip, the figure appears amid cryptic scrawled graffiti phrases such as "Beware Poker Player," fragments of the stars and bars, and storm-tossed ribbons of dollar bills. Here, the artist gives dynamic visual form to his "anger and disappointment that the government didn't respond quickly in bringing assistance to the people who needed it most," as well as his conviction that "if this impacted on people of greater means, the government would have been more prompt in bringing assistance."

Religious and spiritual imagery is prominent throughout the series. One painting focuses on a faceless figure positioned as in a crucifixion and eroded, as if in a bath of acid, by a field of vibrant blue pigment. In another work, a head of the Virgin Mary, flanked by two floating angels, materializes above a group of gospel singers. And in yet other compositions, only eyes and gaping mouths remain visible in all-consuming expanses of vigorously brushed pigment.

But even while giving visual voice to our communal grief and outrage, Anowar Hossain strikes a resonant note of hope and pays final tribute to the resilience of a vital people with a painting of a large smiling face, resembling the great New Orleans-born trumpet player and singer Louis Armstrong, emerging triumphantly from a welter of vibrant blue strokes. Above his head, like a halo, the single word "Jazz" appears, roughly fashioned from fragments of the American flag.

— Ed McCormack

Anowar Hossain, LIC Art Center,
44-02 23rd Street, Long Island City, NY
November 6 - December 6

Clara Gràcia: The Emotive Power of Nature

"Hidden Village"

It has been noted elsewhere that while the Catalan artist Clara Gràcia often works on large canvases, her style is more lyrical than aggressive and does not tend to intimidate the viewer, as big paintings sometimes can. Indeed, standing before one of her paintings the viewer is enveloped in effusions of color and light that have the warming effect of Mediterranean sunlight. In this regard, as well as for their lush beauty, Gràcia's paintings share qualities in common with those of Joan Mitchell, that most gentle of Abstract Expressionists.

However, one of the ways in which they differ is that Gràcia's work is less abstract and firmly rooted in landscape, combining the plein air freshness of the Impressionists with the heightened palette of the Fauves. Working with a palette knife rather than brushes, Gràcia piles on pigment in luscious abundance, like a confectioner applying frosting to a cake. Indeed, the texture of her paintings is reminiscent of Nicholas de Stael and the Canadian painter Jean Riopelle for its sensual tactile appeal.

"Sumptuous" is the only word that can accurately describe her surfaces, particularly in an acrylic on canvas such as "Hidden Village," where small rustic dwellings play hide-and-seek with the viewer behind the colorful, confetti-like leaves that dominate the foreground of the composition. Here, too, the sky is a breathtaking blue hue, hovering above earthy mountain ranges.

Even while partaking of the naturalistic light of the Impressionists, Gràcia veers closer to the Fauves for the chromatic liberties that she takes in many of her compositions. For rather than simply transcribing the colors of the landscape to create a realistic impression, what she seems to strive for and succeeds admirably in evoking is the emotional impression that the landscape makes upon us.

Thus she achieves an even deeper kind of reality which makes her pictures more affecting than if they simply duplicated the factual appearance of the visual data on hand. She will put pinks and yellows together in a way that nature might not dare in a particular scene, to create a sense of the interplay of sunlight and foliage or flowers in a manner that cannot be conveyed naturalistically.

Looking at the perfect purity of her greens, the earthiness of a deep shade of red, one can almost smell the freshness of mint, the odor of clay. Through her strong instinct for color, Gràcia magically transmits to us the "extra-visual" qualities of nature, its mysteriously elusive components, even as she clearly delineates the contours of the mountains, the lay of the land.

She is even capable of conveying a shimmering sense of heat by enveloping an entire landscape in a single fiery hue (albeit subtly accented, here and there, with touches of other, cooler colors, such as pale blue), as in the composition "Tramonto." She brings this vibrant painting alive not only through her skillful blending of the luminous orange, red, pink and yellow hues that saturate the canvas, but also through the vigor of her staccato palette knife strokes, which enliven the surface and complete the sense of pulsing heat radiating from the solar orb sinking low above the hilly land masses silhouetted on the horizon line. Indeed in both her landscape and her floral still life compositions (the vitality of which give the lie to the term "nature morte"), Clara Gràcia proves herself to be a painter to contend with.

— Byron Coleman

Clara Gràcia, Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, November 23 - December 14. Reception: Thurs. December 2, 6 - 8pm.

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Margaret Grimes: Reframing the American Sublime

"In art school, we were told to look at nature as if we were seeing it for the first time," says the widely exhibited painter Margaret Grimes, who coordinates the MFA program at Western Connecticut State University. "Now we look at it as if we were seeing it for the last time; hence the need to meticulously observe."

However, while acknowledging that her paintings contain an elegiac element, "an urgency, a nostalgia for the present which speaks to the fragility of nature and our own mortality," Grimes also desires "to find the abstract in the natural and by close observation of the intensity of individual moments approach the transcendent."

The transcendence that Grimes not only approaches but apprehends in her paintings harks back to that of the Hudson River School — Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, Frederick Edwin Church, and others — who, from about 1820 well into the 1880s, celebrated an American landscape that was still young and wild enough to inspire awe rather than eulogies. But the very significant difference is one of erased distance: while those earlier painters depicted vast vistas that existed wherever one looked, Grimes' woods and thickets have by now been bracketed between cities and strip malls. And while she spares us depiction of the tacky facades of their K-Marts, Costcos, and Target stores (a subject best left to Pop and post-Pop dealers in deadpan irony), Grimes flattens and fastens her woods and thickets to the two-dimensional picture in a manner that bespeaks much, much more than mere adherence to its established sanctity as the foundation for modernist painterly aesthetics.

To envision the sublime in a landscape painting without the illusion of great distances that the vanishing points of traditional Western perspective imply is not only a formidable task but raises the larger question of whether magic can be invoked without mirrors and smoke. Margaret Grimes provides a resoundingly affirmative reply in her large triptych "Dawn, Wykham, Road," where the verdant sun-kissed treetops of a lush forest flare out splendiferously across three large panels, set against a luminous sky in ascending flux from deep orange and pink to brilliant yellow to delicate robin's-egg blue.

Standing before Grimes' work — even at this late date, when what is dubiously defined as "progress" obliges us to take the sublime in smaller, more compartmentalized increments — one is put in mind of Thomas Cole's statement, "We are still in Eden; the wall that shuts us out of the garden is ignorance and folly."

"Baldwin Hill Road, February 2010"

Grimes shows her Abstract Expressionist roots most overtly in "Baldwin Hill Road, February 2010" another oil on canvas consisting solely of tall grasses, tree limbs, tangled foliage, and bits of blue sky depicted with a gestural vigor and calligraphic grace akin to Pollock, albeit without aping his drip technique. The juicy tactility with which Grimes handles thick oil impasto is especially evident here, as well as in a series of gemlike small landscape studies such as the "Morning Star, Washington" which combines an atmospheric mystery reminiscent of the reclusive American visionary Albert Pinkham Ryder with the solemn, darkly glistening tachisme of the French abstractionist Pierre Soulages. In another such work in a small format, "Late Light, Beech Forest V" the pink tree-trunks are as palpably fleshy as the limbs of de Kooning's women, and plump pileups of green pigment indicating the thick leaves, weave between them.

Even an ethereal element such as sunlight takes on painterly weight in Grimes' compositions, as seen in the much larger painting called "Dawn Elegy," where it slathers bark of trees like butter on breadsticks. Here, too, Grimes revels in her coloristic skills, employing pastel and candy-colored hues such as sherbet greens and bubblegum pinks to tweak the palette of nature and pump up the chromatic intensity of her paintings, achieving the transcendence for which she aims.

In a century where precious little wilderness remains to compare to the Edenic panoramas that drove the dreams of the Hudson River School and their less painterly peers in the Luminist movement (who were chiefly concerned with capturing the crystalline qualities of water and sky), one can only be thankful that sufficient natural grandeur survives to inspire a painter such as Margaret Grimes. For along with Wayne Thiebaud, Neil Welliver and very few others, Grimes is one of a mere handful of artists who can still muster an authentic sense of wonder at what was once known as The New World. That its virgin land has been raped and its riches so sadly diminished over the relatively few centuries since its discovery makes her work all the more relevant and important today, when greater vision is required to evoke that which is slowly vanishing than that which lies in abundance before one's eyes.

Viewing Grime's new paintings, one is reminded that the best of the earliest nineteenth century landscape painters — which is to say, the first sophisticated artists to take on this great subject in the wake of the primitive limners — were often, like her, in philosophical sympathy with the transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson. And wasn't it Emerson who said, "The feat of imagination is in showing the convertibility of every thing into every other thing?"

In making that which is vanishing immutable in pigment, Margaret Grimes perpetuates and updates one of the truly great traditions in American painting.

— Ed McCormack

Margaret Grimes,
Blue Mountain Gallery, 530 West 25th St.,
Show ended October 30th

Derrick Guild's Visual "Fictions" Trump Trompe l'oeil

The Scottish painter Derrick Guild is an artist who seems to go way out of his way to make certain that nothing that he does appears trendy or avant garde or looks anything like modernist — or even postmodernist — painting as we commonly think of it. This gives his work a sly conceptual edge unlike anything else around today and makes it avant garde despite itself.

Although widely exhibited in Scotland and England, Guild first made a major impression on the The New York art scene in 2000 with his solo exhibition of "Bread Paintings" at Allan Stone Gallery, where his fourth solo show was recently on view. In that first show, the strange intensity of Guild's exquisite little oils derived from a detailed warts and all descriptiveness that made them even more like Renaissance portraits of baked goods than the Dutch still tradition to which one might normally compare them for their luminous technique.

Indeed, in his new series,"After Eden," created during a 22 month stay on Ascension Island, a British overseas dependency in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, Guild comes even closer to the Dutch still life tradition in other regards. For not only does he deliberately take inspiration from the 17th and 18th century botanical illustrations of which the Dutch were the world's leading exponents, but he also merges realism with elements of artifice in a manner similar to how their painterly counterparts would combine in a single composition actual blooms from different seasons and secondhand sources, such as scientific books and those botanical illustrations themselves.

"Ascension Plant I, 2007"

Enamored of how these botanical illustrations "helped reinforce a kind of Edenic view of the newly colonized world," Guild takes it all further by creating what he sees "not merely as paintings of flowers but trompe l'oeil illusions of paintings of impossibly hybridized plants." However, he goes even further, for even while creating the perfect illusion that these paintings are painted on modest-sized sheets vellum that have been stained by the tropical climate and distressed, folded, and torn over time, he trumps trompe l'oeil by executing them in oils on canvas on a relatively large scale.

In "Ascension Plant I, 2007," several flowers, a big, thorny cactus with delicate buds growing out of it, and droopy green fronds all sprout from a single thick stem resembling an oversize leek. Here, as in other paintings of what he calls "fictional hybrids," Guild succeeds quite sensationally in his creating "an analogy to the botanists from the past who brought back paintings of plants to be marveled at and created an illusion of the new world." (Indeed, in this regard the series seems an organic visual counterpart of the fantastic literary genre known as "steam punk," in which contemporary writers, in the thrall of early science fiction masters such as H.G. Wells, fabricate worlds where antiquated spaceships zoom into an imaginary future.)

Along with ten paintings, Guild also exhibited three sculptures which seemed to comment wryly on the fact that the island has only three small indigenous plants and all of the others in its rainforest have been humanly engineered over the past 250 years. In the small oil on resin sculpture with jewelry called "Charm," for example, two pearl pendants drip off the outer leaves of a clover-shaped plant like dewdrops.

— Ed McCormack

Derrick Guild, Allan Stone Gallery,
113 East 90th Street (ended October 20)

That Magic Moment: The Fantastic Realism of Rania Mesiskli

Often having months to kill between sporadic recording and touring schedules, many popular entertainers — among them, Tony Bennett (who paints the views from his many hotel rooms) and Ron Wood of the Rolling Stones (who paints endless images of his band in performance) — take up painting as a pastime. Few, however, can be said to have equally serious duel careers in both fields, like Rania Mesiskli, a singer popular in the Greek community, who lives and works in New York City and is also an accomplished painter.

"The Costume Party"

Although self-taught, Mesiskli is no primitive. Rather, she is a sophisticated visual artist whose work stands entirely on its own merits, justly celebrated for her fantastic evocations of theatrical subjects encompassing the worlds of ballet, circus, theater, and even rock and roll in a painting called "Rock Star." However, what sets her work apart from others who paint such subjects is her imaginative approach, inspired by Toulouse Lautrec, Degas, Chagall and other past masters — with perhaps a special place in her heart for Suzanne Valadon, the first woman artist admitted to the Societé Nationale des Beaux Arts, and also a circus aerialist before a fall from a trapeze ended her performing career.

One of Mesiskli's most sensational paintings in regard to her imaginative gifts, as well as for demonstrating her meticulous realist technique, is "Costume Party," a multifigure composition with a carnivalesque quality that calls to mind a kinder more gentle contemporary James Ensor. For here, gathered on a big stage before a backdrop of fanciful graphic symbols is a group of performers in elaborate costumes, making up a veritable menagerie of fanciful animal figures.

Most prominent among them are four towering "giraffes," their long necks tottering high above the stage, as a pair of ostrich-like exotic birds, one with a human rider on its back, and other fanciful creatures cavort in unison. But the central figure of the gathering is a dwarfish, possibly transvestite ringmaster or "barker" character in what appears to be a bare-shouldered, spangled flapper's gown, who gestures histrionically toward the others. Like a character played by Joel Grey in the hit Broadway play (and later film) "Cabaret," this strange personage seems at once seductive and strangely sinister: an emissary from a realm of fantasy that might well subsume one's reality.

For Rania Mesiskli, who has also painted a splendid portrait of Marilyn Monroe and has flickering images of her own glamorous visage and Marilyn's transposed on her website, is obviously well aware of the pitfalls that glittering fantasy worlds can entail. However, for the most part, it is the bright and positive side of theatrical life that she seems to celebrate in her paintings, of which she states, "I am seeking to stimulate and uplift the human spirit with an exciting sense of artful energy and joy de vivre. Ballets, circus images, theatrical plays and glamour fashion captured at the height of their performances. At the heart of show business lies the moment, that instant in which dream and discipline meet."

Indeed, it is that fleeting moment that Rania Mesiskli captures consistently and renders immutable by virtue of her imaginative vision and meticulous technique.

— Maurice Taplinger

Rania Mesiskli, seen recently at
the New Art Center, 580 8th Avenue.
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