

FEBRUARY/MARCH 2011

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VOL. 13 No. 3 New York

GALLERY & STUDIO

A DAUMIER OF THE ROTOGRAPHURE Denys Wortman at the Museum of the City of New York

IF I HAVE TO COME DOWN TO BUY THEM, YOU'LL HAVE TO COME DOWN ON YOUR PRICES.
August 30, 1948 Grease pencil, graphite and ink Courtesy of The Center For Cartoon Studies and Denys Wortman VIII



*plus **Sleeping with my Uncle:**
Coming of Age on the Lower East Side in the '50s
from Ed McCormack's memoir in progress
HOODLUM HEART page 8*

Beverly A. Smith



Tip Toe Marsh - oil on canvas - 24" wide X 36" high

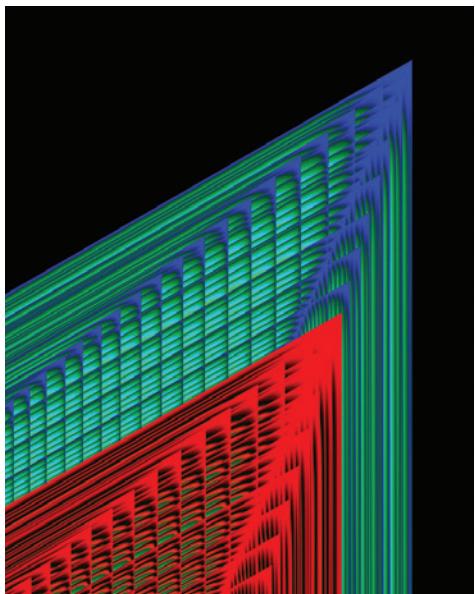
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Wally Gilbert

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"Triangles # 2-10," image is 38" x 40" on 44" x 36" luster paper.

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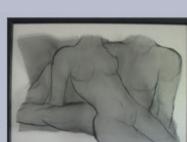
Agnieszka Szyfter



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Natalia Karen Kropf



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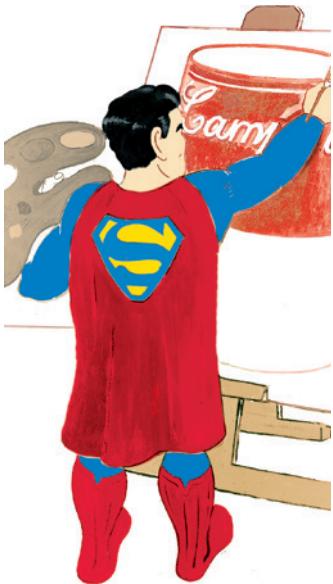
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Highlights

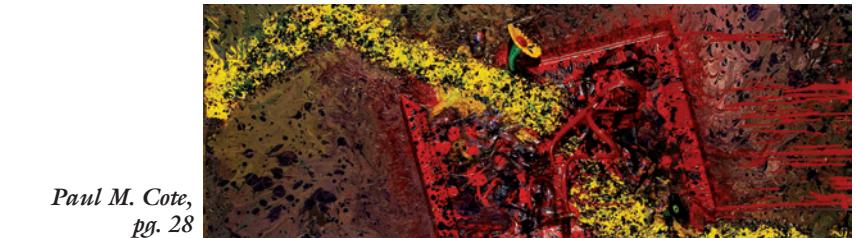
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Denys Wortman, a master draftsman who worked in the popular press, finally gets his museum moment. page 16

Cover your ears: The latest excerpt of Hoodlum Heart takes us back to the pre-gentrified Lower East Side in the 1950s, before anybody ever heard of political correctness. page 8



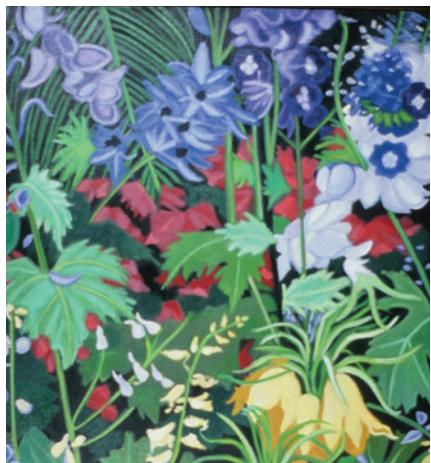
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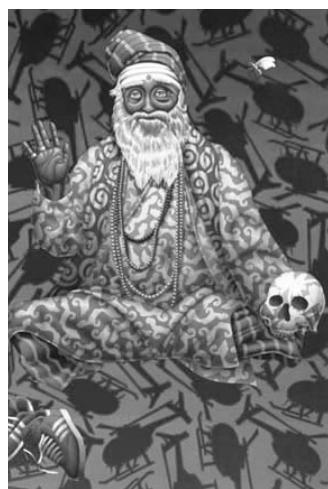
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Chamberlain and Leslie at Allan Stone: Small works by Big Guns

This show of collages by John Chamberlain (whose only possible rival for the heavy metal crown of Greatest Abstract Expressionist Sculptor was David Smith) and Alfred Leslie, one of the boldest second-generation New York School painters, was your proverbial "match made in heaven." Both men usually worked on a large scale, and Leslie, the younger and lesser known of the two, was probably especially impatient with anything small, being ambitious and eager to make his mark. But if the staples he used in his collages in lieu of glue started out in haste, they ended up becoming an expressive element of his compositions, emphasizing the raw vitality of his process-oriented style. They look so great, like the stitches on the Frankenstein monster's scars, holding together the raw materials of works that are at once as sumptuous as a strawberry sundae and funky as a junkyard dog.

Chamberlain also eschewed glue for staples in at least one untitled piece, created with torn fragments of sketchbook pages (some with the spiral holes showing) and bits of colored paper. And he didn't bother with titles either, even in a 1961 mixed media relief as complexly convoluted as one of his famous crushed car sculptures in miniature.

Used to thinking big, neither artist bothered to title any of these smaller pieces, probably little realizing how highly posterity would someday regard things they might have considered chotchkas, that fell from them as casually as leaves from a tree.

Big, after all, was in back then. But in fact nothing in this show actually looked small, even when it was little more than a half foot square, like Leslie's "Untitled, 1960," which actually comes across as huge, given the smack-you-in-the-eye brilliance of its succulent chunks of blue and red set off by a single thick black Zen brushstroke. In fact, although they were not on view here, Leslie made some

collages as tiny as postage stamps which had the impact of billboards, due to his unique apportionment of space, flawless sense of scale, and characteristic bright stripes of color.

Allan Stone put it best in his catalog essay for a solo show of Leslie's work from 1951 to 1965, when he wrote, "Alfred Leslie may have been not so much in touch with as actually embodying the zeitgeist of that time."

Chamberlain's collages and mixed media drawings, on the other hand, have a speedy gestural violence suggesting the demolition derby mood of his sculptures. Even when he restricts himself to the usually light and lyrical medium of watercolor in one untitled drawing from 1958, he chooses a single red hue that gives the visceral effect of blood-soaked gauze. But there is also an innate elegance to Chamberlain's draftsmanship, very much like that of de Kooning, as seen to special advantage in an untitled drawing from the same year, where his graphite line glides over the paper with a figure skater's grace, evoking bulky contours with paradoxical delicacy.

Then again, Chamberlain has always been the poet of fender bending, his work possessed of an exquisite refinement of his own making, despite the banged up scrap metal with which he epitomizes Yeats' lovely phrase "a terrible beauty." And it seemed a stroke of genius on the part of Claudia Stone, Allan's heir, to pair him here with the relative upstart Alfred Leslie, perhaps the only figure of the second generation whose transpositions of scale would not have been dwarfed by the rugged massiveness of his vision.

— Ed McCormack



John Chamberlain, Untitled, 1961



Alfred Leslie, Untitled, 1960

Alfred Leslie and John Chamberlain
seen recently at Allan Stone Gallery,
113 East 90th Street



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Curated by Janice Wood Wetzel and Deena Weintraub

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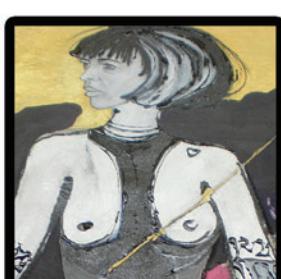
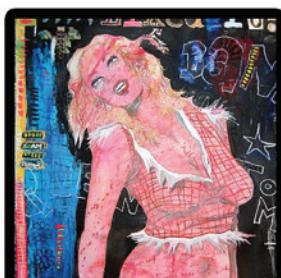
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Norman Perlmutter: Homage to the Box

"With my art I endeavor to create a consciousness of the ordinary," states Norman Perlmutter, a New Jersey artist who has defied the contemporary tendency to put the cart before the horse, showing sporadically, mostly in regional group and juried shows, while perfecting his paintings in relative obscurity for several years. Thus Perlmutter's recent New York City solo debut presented an occasion to contemplate the wisdom of honing one's oeuvre in private, before entering the highly competitive fray of the Manhattan art scene. For here is a painter whose work overall is characterized by an exquisite restraint that has paid off in paintings possessed of impressive integrity and authentic presence.

Perlmutter takes the simple packing crate and gift box as his sole subject. In purely formal terms, one could compare his strategy to Josef Albers' selection of the simple rectangle as the focus of his "Homage to the Square" series. And indeed, like Albers, Perlmutter is a consummate — if more intuitive, less theoretical — colorist. However, Albers began his famous series in 1950, when the sanctity of the two-dimensional picture plane was still at the center of modernist aesthetic doctrine, and along with his chromatic inquiry, was concerned with the question of "how do we see the third dimension when created as an illusion by the artist in terms of lines, flat shapes and colors on a two-dimensional field?"

As a postmodern painter, however, Perlmutter obviously doesn't feel obliged to engage with this well-worn aesthetic issue. Nor, at this late date, must he justify embracing illusory perspective with terms such as "spatial conundrums," as Al Held did in the '60s, when he jeopardized his reputation as a respected hard-edge geometric abstractionist by defying the dictum of flatness. Thus Perlmutter is at liberty not only to employ flat or deep space as he sees fit, but to move freely, from canvas to canvas, between varying degrees of abstraction and representation.

On one end of the spectrum is a painting such as "Red Boxes," an acrylic on canvas in a tall narrow format consisting of three same-size stacked rectangles, separated by three subtly more orange-inflected stripes. The effect of these simple rectangles and

stripes, arranged flatly on the picture plane in a manner that calls one's attention primarily to the chromatic frisson set off by the slight variations in value between the different rectangles, is so innately formal, so abstract that one might almost mistake the painting for a Rothko. On learning the title of the composition, however, the viewer realizes that what he or she is looking at is actually

Perlmutter, who was trained in architecture and graphic arts, also constructs modular wall reliefs, such as "Gift Boxes," in which eight separate panels are irregularly stacked in the manner of a shaped canvas. Here, the different colored stripes of the painted "wrapping paper" not only provoke a *trompe-l'oeil* effect but also create a lively sense of optical disjunction, as in some of

Sean Scully's "bar" paintings on joined panels.

Among Perlmutter's most dynamic paintings, however, are the large acrylics on canvas, "Stack of Boxes" and "Pile of Boxes." Both compositions feature cubic shapes in kandy-kolored hot pinks, pastel purples, baby blues, sherbet greens, and other blatantly artificial hues such as those found in manufactured products rather than in nature. Painted, as their respective titles indicate, either in stately arrangements or ostensibly random (but actually skillfully organized) configurations, they project a simultaneous sense of occupying deep space with an almost

contradictory emblematic presence.

Along with their very formidable formal attributes, Norman Perlmutter's paintings possess a visual wit akin to Pop art. However, while the aesthetic virtues in the paintings of artists such as the late Roy Lichtenstein are often camouflaged by irony, they take center stage even in Perlmutter's more fanciful compositions, such as "Open Box," wherein, like an elephant given wings, an ordinary brown cardboard shipping crate takes surreal flight against a pink and white grid.

— Ed McCormack



a quite literal representation of three gaily colored gift boxes with contrasting lids that read as the "stripes."

Even more adamantly abstract-appearing are paintings such as "Window Boxes" and "Square Boxes," both of which consist of same-size rectangles arranged in overall grids in the manner of certain paintings by Paul Klee during his Bauhaus period, while at the other end of the spectrum are paintings such as "Moving Boxes."

The latter work overtly depicts the interior of an art gallery, with hard-edge abstractions on the walls and stacked boxes on the floor, as if awaiting transport to a different location. The content of the painting is quite detailed, with checkerboard tiles on the floor that add to the illusion of perspective. Yet rendered in Perlmutter's hard-edge geometric style, in flat areas of bright pastel acrylic hues, the composition can be simultaneously abstract, projecting an intriguing sense of spatial ambiguity.

Norman Perlmutter, seen recently at Gallery 2/20, 220 West 16th Street,
www.normanperlmutterart.com

Clive Rowe: Possible Prophet of a “Terrible Beauty”

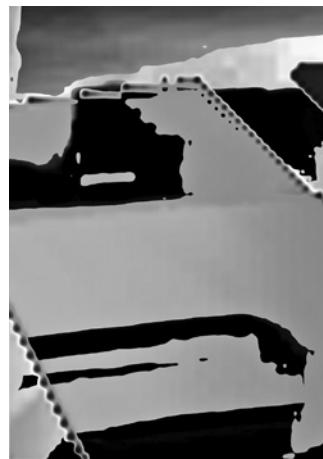
Even an artist engaged with state-of-the-art new media must be beholden to a tradition, in order to sustain a sophisticated and consciously avant garde aesthetic practice. Or so Clive Rowe, a lifelong photographer presently experimenting with manipulating his own images by means of computer technology, seems to imply, in a lengthy artist statement that sheds light on his recent work.

Rowe's artistic heritage includes his great aunt Marjorie Hilda Richardson, a painter and Prix de Rome recipient who married Paul Tietjens, a composer; as well his great uncle Samuel V. Rowe, a textile designer whose work is featured in several prestigious English museum collections. However, the artistic tradition to which Rowe himself proudly belongs is that of Man Ray and other early 20th century photographers who expanded the horizons of their medium beyond the merely representational function to which champions of painting alone might have been happy to relegate it.

For Rowe picks up where “Rayographs” and other twentieth century photographic modernist innovations left off, employing the digital print to, as he puts it, explore “ideas, aesthetics, philosophies that are better expressed not through sharp images but through forms, shapes and colours which are more atmospheric and maybe able to hold the viewers' attention and to communicate with them.”

This is no easy task in the postmodern era, given the glut of pluralistic approaches now extant and the difficulty of any particular mode of expression distinguishing itself in a manner that makes a meaningful connection with the art of past centuries. However, Rowe's prints, all of which are untitled (presumably to avoid burdening his images with preconceptions that may hinder the viewers' imaginative freedom), succeed splendidly in his stated desire: “to challenge the conventional and the obvious” in order to “overtake the banal and to enliven the ordinary.” They do so by virtue of the artist's skill in creating compositions which juxtapose dynamic geometric forms that not only bend, contort, and morph in various fascinating ways, but veer back and forth from the two-dimensional picture plane into deep space, with radiant colors composed of pure light.

Indeed, Rowe's compositions exploit the possibilities of digital manipulation in a manner that not only advances the cause of his medium but reinforces the case for abstract art as an ongoing endeavor in an era when all



“Untitled 2871002004”

too many are all too willing to claim that its potential may have exhausted itself.

One of Rowe's most notable contributions is in projecting a sense of kinetic energy that brings his prints alive in new and exciting ways distinctly different from those of painting. For even as they signal new directions for abstraction, these compositions simultaneously reflect the shifts and flux of contemporary reality in regard to the air conditioned nightmare of the science fiction malls and other artificial environments that

we presently inhabit, and which show every sign of remaining our dominant domain for some time to come.

Perhaps this is the brave new world that the poet and naturalist Gary Snyder dismisses as the realm of “No Nature.” If so, it is a world of our own making, one we must learn to live with. In which case, Clive Rowe may well be in the vanguard of those artists who will ultimately reveal to us its own peculiar beauty.

— Peter Wiley

Clive Rowe, Agora Gallery,
530 West 25th Street, March 25 - April 15
Reception: Thursday, March 31, 6-8 PM

New Approaches to Postmodern Photography

Curated by Jennifer Holst “Open 2010,” a photography exhibition by members of the West Side Arts Coalition included several diverse visions. Jonathan Morrison's images of Central Park, which transformed a familiar locale into a panoramic fairy tale realm, where the spires of the surrounding skyscrapers, rising over the foliage beyond the rowboat lake, suggested a magical kingdom. By contrast, Morrison also gave us a close-up image of gnarled tree trunks as formidable as an elephant's foot which evoked the sense of an enchanted forest.

Don Sichler, on the other hand, took a more abstract approach in digital prints where scrawled graffiti, shadowy pedestrians reflected in the sides of glass buildings and other ordinary sights were given poetic new life. One was especially taken with Sichler's picture in which the shadow of the metal scrollwork on a stoop railing suggested a vertiginous visual roller coaster ride.

Cal Eagle captured the hubbub of “Times Square” in a color print of clustered crowds, yellow cabs, and neon signs made especially poignant by the weary expression of one woman lifting a

hand to brush back her hair in the middle of the midtown madness. An opposite mood, more elegiac than hectic, was captured in Eagle's print of a man walking hand in hand with his little boy past the stained, crumbling, and defaced facade of New Utrecht Avenue Station in Brooklyn.

Bob Merritt's most engaging pictures focused on the almost oxymoronic combination of awkwardness and grace possessed by those avian urban scavengers called seagulls. One bird in particular, turning its head in profile as if consciously posing for a portrait, was especially amusing. Then again Merritt managed to give a portrait-like presence to his strikingly colorful images of tulips as well.

By contrast, Archie Hamilton's artfully blurred floral images seemed to speak eloquently of mortality, their petals collapsed like ballet dancers in pink tutus impersonating dying swans. At once lyrical and visceral, Hamilton's pictures also came across as surprisingly sensual in an odd sort of way.

Thom Taylor evoked a dreamlike surrealism akin to de Chirico's desolate plazas, in his picture “Omaha Union Station” looking like an Art Deco mirage

in a desert, not a soul in sight, the lights of its awning eerily blazing at dusk. Just as surreal in another manner was Taylor's tour de force of double-exposure, “Chatham Nature Room,” where an elegant parlor appears in the throes of being overrun by verdant foliage.

Then there was Jean Prytyskacz, whose color photographs were especially notable for their funky, ruggedly beautiful take on urban walls adorned with torn and shredded graffiti that emphasized the tactile quality of their ancient worn brick facades. Here, as in other pictures one has seen by her over the years, Prytyskacz imbued images of urban blight and detritus with a peculiar beauty. All told, this exhibition demonstrated how each individual carries a unique private world within. However, it takes talent and vision to make that inner realm manifest externally, as these seven gifted photo artists did here.

— Joan Spencer Crimmons

“Open 2010,” seen recently at Broadway Mall Community Center, 96th Street and Broadway (center isle)

"Together," Disparate Styles Find Common Ground

The Polish visual artist Agnieszka Szyfter might be classified as a "post-feminist" in a different medium but a similar manner to Madonna and Lady Gaga, in that her art seeks to empower women through glamour as opposed to politics.

"In my work I present a contemporary woman, her emotions and her beauty in order to preserve against the ravages of time," says Szyfter, and like the artist herself, her subjects are flamboyant, as seen in her Post-Pop Neo-Art Noveau paintings such as "Girl with a Pearl Earring," her update of Vermeer's masterpiece, but with Angelina Jolie, rather than Scarlett Johanson, cast in the role. In another ornate mixed media work on canvas called "Elizabeth I," while the title might suggest Elizabeth Taylor, the face afloat amid elegant arabesques bears a suspicious resemblance to Marilyn Monroe.

Szyfter is one among sixteen gifted emerging artists in "Together," an exhibition curated by the artist Basha Maryanska, whose own acrylics on canvas offer sweeping, lyrical views of landscapes and cityscapes in luminous, gemlike hues with a chromatic subtlety one normally only sees in the work of the best Color Field painters. Especially magical among the compositions in the present show is Maryanska's landscape "Broken Cloud," with its purple sky shimmering over what appears to be a golden wheat field, and "Connected," her dazzling vista of a phantom bridge veering through blue mists toward the silvery towers of a distant city skyline.

Lively signs and symbols as brightly colored as the flat shapes in Matisse's famous "Jazz" collages (albeit in softer fleshy pinks, pastel blues, and other non-primary hues) are combined with sinuous linear elements within the squares of a grid in Susan Elias' "Diary of a Romance" series. These semiotic elements, some femininely shapely, others frankly phallic, take on a playfully erotic quality, suggesting a private language of reverie known only to Elias herself.

By contrast, in Virginia Donovan's austere landscapes, primarily in somber earthy hues, hilly land masses suggest slumbering giants, set against pale areas of water. The quiet power of Donovan's compositions emanates from the almost sculptural weight and presence that she imparts to compositions in which the land itself, with its fluent contours, appears to ebb flow, rather than the still bodies of water, as impassive as the seemingly limitless expanses of cloudless sky.

Can wire mesh take on the supple sensuality of naked human flesh?

Three separate sculptors answer in the affirmative, each in her own distinctive style: In Ofra Friedman's relief "Energy," nude figures swirl and whirl in an abandoned pagan dance, while in her mixed media sculpture, "Leaves and Lives," other mesh figures morph into the trunk and limbs of a fruit tree bearing golden disks, and in Friedman's "Spider Woman," a lithe female nude goes gorgeously on the crawl.

Bonnie Shanas imparts to this industrial material a classical quality, with her reliefs featuring exquisitely formed nude male and female bodies melded in intimate embrace. Just as anatomical fragments from antiquity take on eternal life, Shanas makes faceless torsos radiate sensuality, as seen in "For All We Know," where the perfect bodies of the facing couple suggest the romantic urgency of the song for which the piece is named.

Then there is Lea Weinberg, who takes a somewhat more abstract approach, making her wire mesh figures swirl like wisps of smoke, even while projecting a paradoxical sense of palpable physicality. Weinberg is at her most impressive in pieces such as "Tree Tango Sculpture," with its stately figures evoking the distinctive rhythms of that dance, as well as in another piece which suggests clustered bodies and roiling waves like those in Gericault's "The Raft of the Medusa."

By contrast, David Green works in the more traditional medium of marble, but creates nude feminine torsos with severely simplified forms reminiscent of African tribal sculpture — particularly, the brown stone piece entitled "Rapture," where the figure's arms, wrapped around its head, merge as a single mass. Another piece in finely-veined white marble, called "Awakening," is especially sensual, its pearlescent surface suggesting one of Balthus' compact nymphets stretching her nubile form.

Julie Joy Saypoff, on the other hand, creates an exhilarating light-as-air interplay between severely simplified stylized figures in her piece in copper wire mounted on granite, "Close," where the interiors of the two forms contain leaf-like shapes. More baroque is Saypoff's copper piece with an intricately burnished surface, depicting what appears to be an antic encounter between two strange personages standing atop a stack of hefty volumes.

Then there is Helen Zajkowski, whose assemblages ingeniously juxtapose found and finely crafted objects, as in "Friendship," where two cups of what appears to be actual coffee sprout from the opposite ends of a single telephone

receiver wired to itself. In other pieces, such as her "Just Married" series, the artist combines common household utensils, such as a phallic rolling pin and pubic steel wool, with witty Neo-Dada suggestiveness.

While Laianna Ferruggia's realist paintings, such as one of a large man enfolding a petite female nude in his muscular arms, are limned in brownish grisaille reminiscent of the Old Masters, her floral subjects partake of a considerably brighter and varied palette. Both facets of Ferruggia's art, however, show her skill in defining volumes by virtue of an unerring command of chiaroscuro. Another gifted figure painter, Diane Bauer, demonstrated a talent for melding complex elements into satisfying compositions through subtle color harmonies. Bauer's oil on canvas, "Woman with Her Puppy" was especially noteworthy in this regard, approaching Bonnard for uniting figure and interior in a sublime formal synthesis.

More reminiscent of Redon, Mira Satryan is a visionary whose energetic semi abstract floral compositions, with their vibrant yet subdued colors, have a darkly glowing beauty and mystery. Satryan's flowing forms seem to morph and change meaning before one's eyes, suggesting a secret world underlying visible reality.

The multimedia collages, tapestries, and color etchings of Natalia Koren Kropf are possessed of their own energy and mystery, albeit seemingly of an organic rather than visionary kind. Through compositions inspired by the rings within trees, Kropf conveys a sense of the repeated patterns that unify diverse facets of nature. Then there is Lesley Labram, who is inspired by the rugged landscape of Australia to create tactile collagraphs and other works that deal with relationships between the spiritual and the ecological, suggesting effects of nature on the human psyche. Poetic and lyrical, almost dreamlike, Labram's imagery strikes a deep chord in the viewers' ancestral memory, operating just below the level of consciousness.

Also including work by Beverly Smith, another gifted artist reviewed at length elsewhere in this issue, this splendidly curated group show lived up to its title by bringing diverse talents together and revealing their shared concerns.

— Maurice Taplinger,

"Together," New Century Gallery,
530 West 25th Street, March 1-19, Opening
reception: Saturday, March 5, 3-6 PM.

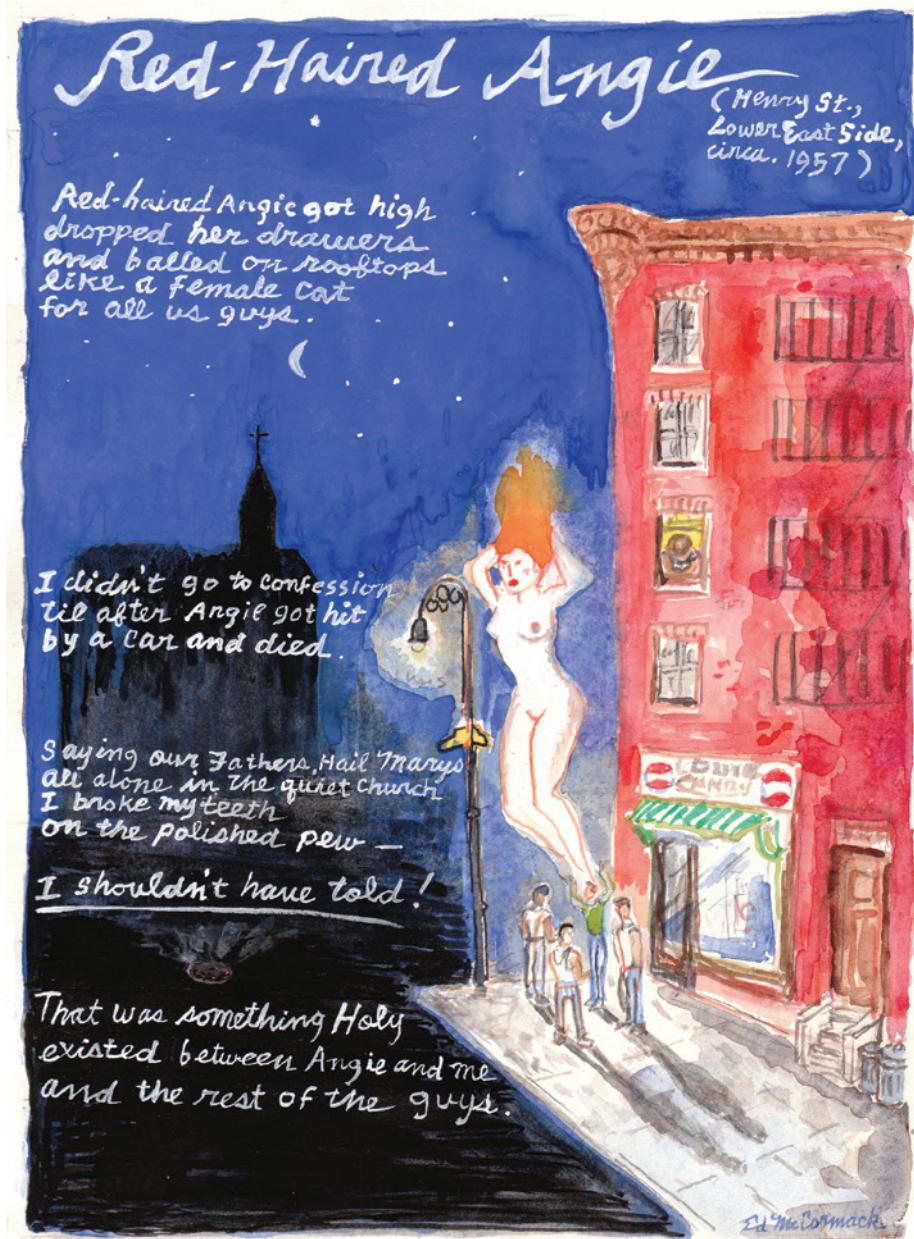
Sleeping with my Uncle:

Coming of age on the Lower East Side in the '50s—an excerpt from

HOODLUM HEART

a memoir in progress by Ed McCormack

illustrated by the author



Almost a lifetime ago (mine), in the 1950s, nobody in their right mind would have called the Lower East Side, the New York neighborhood where I grew up, a fashionable address. Above Houston Street, you had the alphabet avenues — A, B, C, and D — and below it, the best known thoroughfares were Orchard and Delancey streets. Orchard still looked like a teeming newsreel of immigrant life from around the turn of the century, with pushcarts crowding the curb and Hebrew

lettering on most of the signs outside the bargain basements. Delancey was a dimly glittering low-rent Broadway where Ripley Suits, Ratner's Dairy restaurant, and the movie theaters were, and where the big yawning yap of the Williamsburg Bridge simultaneously swallowed and regurgitated traffic to and from another slum across the river in Brooklyn. But even those streets, where tourists rarely ventured, were considered "uptown," if you grew up even further down, around Henry Street, where the older whiteguys hung out, and where

I, all eyes and ears, would hang on their every word.

The whiteguys called themselves the Mayrose — a deceptively sweet name that surely had more to do with the dumb do-wop romanticism of their time than any tendency to comport themselves like Boy Scouts — and every day it was the sameoldshit: hanging around the candy store on the corner of Henry and Scammel, eating pretzels, drinking eggcreams, and listening to the jukebox. At first it was Rosemary Clooney singing "Botcha Me" or the Crewcuts' lame ofay cover version of "Earth Angel" — cornyfuckinshit like that. Then some of the whiteguys discovered rhythm and blues and took to harmonizing in acoustic tenement hallways, attempting to imitate the artful acapellas of the coloredguys: *Didja ever hear them jiggaboos singin up a storm in the courtyard of the Smith Projects, with the bass singin lead and the tenor doin backup in falsetto? It was sofuckinboss you'd swear you was listenin to the record!*

You hadda hand it to them jigs, they dressed sharp too. While the Mayrose were still walking around like cretins with their tailfin collars turned up or wearing t-shirts with a pack of smokes rolled up in the sleeve like some gross cubical tumor, the Sportsmen (whose club insignia was a top hat and cane) were already bopping around like prosperous young stockbrokers in fine ivy league vines shoplifted from Hart Schafner and Marx. Some of the more avant garde dudes were even into the Sherlock Holmes look, complete with tweed deerstalker cap, cape-shouldered raincoat, and little curved pipe. Another popular accessory was bamboo canes from Coney Island that the Sportsmen were only too willing to put upside your head should you be fool enough to mess with them.

The

FEBRUARY/MARCH 2011





whiteguys could tell you all about those bamboo canes from personal experience, having had many bitter territorial disputes with the Sportsmen over the long hot summers of the late-'50s. Yet they had to admit, however reluctantly, that them jiggaboos had class. But the brash newcomers known as the Puerto Ricans were something else again — them freakin' Ricans! The whiteguys (whose version of the Star Spangled Banner went, "Jose can you see / Any bedbugs on me / If you do take a few / They look better on you") could go on for hours about what animals the Puerto Ricans were:

Didja ever go in one a them dumpy little grocery stores they call "bodegas" that smell like kennels and got rotten green bananas hangin from the flypaper? And what about all them stuckup PR broads with their lipstick smeared up to here and boobs on them that could choke a horse? You just know every one a them gotta be whoors! And them freakin Rican guys with their flashy orange shirts and pink pegged pants with two-tone stitching and pistol pockets — the sonsabitches dress like stolen cars! Christ, they don't even have real club jackets — just these cheesy leatherette motorcycle jobs with "Dragons" painted on the back...

The whiteguys would stand on the corner on Henry Street spitting between the toes of their pointy Eyetalian shoes, teasing their greasy pompadours down over their pimply foreheads with Ace pocket combs to get that sharp little Tony Curtis dip in the front, checking their reflections in the candy store window, and badmouthing ad absurdum about how they'd like to send all them spics back on the next banana boat. Mainly it was fear: Nobody had ever heard of "machismo" yet, so neither the whiteguys nor the coloredguys could fathom these fierce new invaders who came charging down Henry Street like cockamamie kamikazes, screaming their bonzai battle cry "Maricon! Maricon!" — which both the whiteguys and the coloredguys took to be some jabbering junglebunny permutation of "American," before learning to their mutual consternation that it actually meant "faggot."

This was well before anybody had ever heard of Third World solidarity, or even the Third World, period. So if there was one

thing the whiteguys and the coloredguys agreed upon it was that the Puerto Ricans were undesirable aliens and had to go.

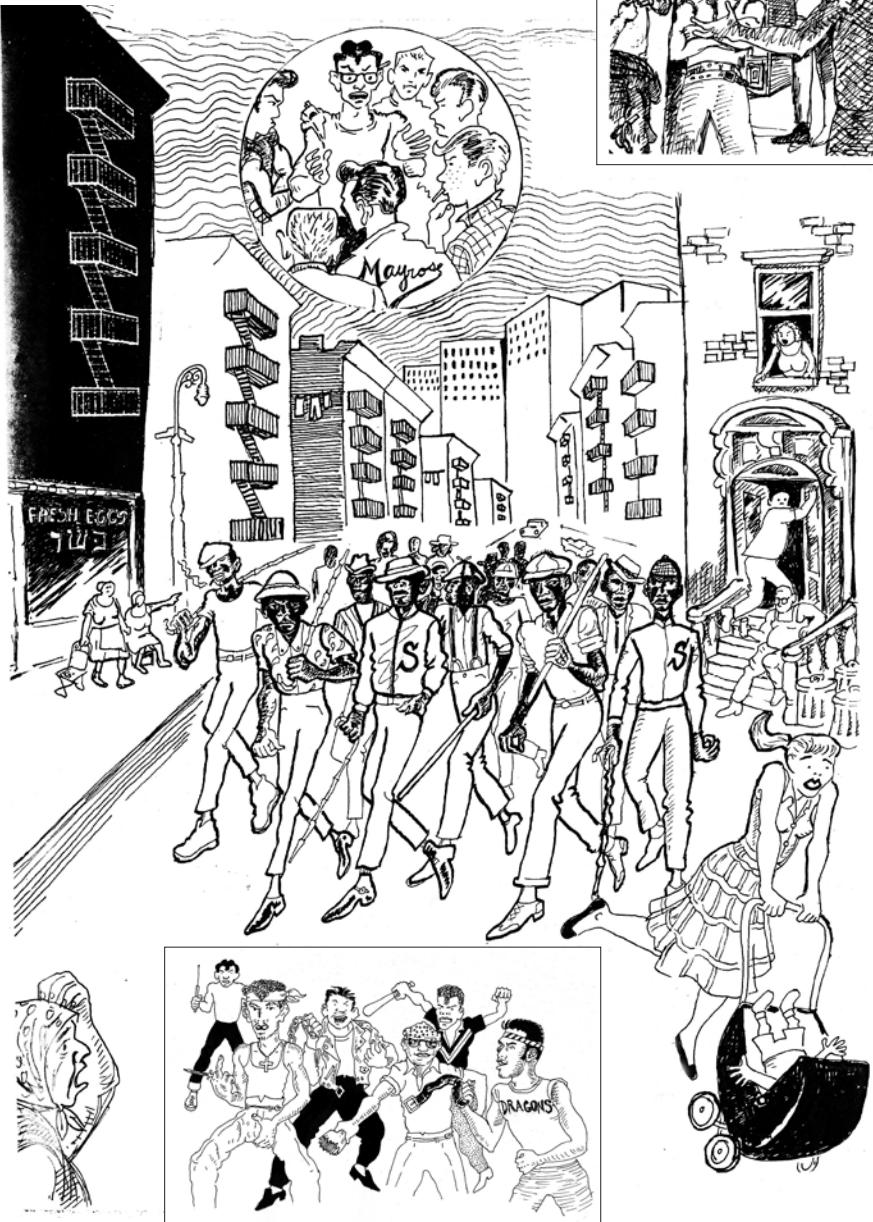
"It's just like in World War II when we needed the jigs to help us cream the Krauts and the Japs — or even them other fuckin' gooks over in Korea," explained the war counselor for the Mayrose, who everybody called Izzy the Goy because he was the only Jewish guy dumb enough to hang out with the mostly mick, wop, and polack street gang, when it finally became necessary to form an uneasy alliance with their former enemies the Sportsmen. The way Izzy put it to his troops, this was one of those rare moments in history when patriotic Americans of all stripes and colors had to put aside their past differences to defend their mutually contested turf against a commonly detested foe.

"Look at it this way," reasoned Izzy, whose favorite sport was lurking outside the Hebrew school on East Broadway

to torment his more Orthodox brethren by snatching their skullcaps and yanking their sidecurls. "At least the jiggaboos are Americans ... But them freakin' Ricans, they're foreigners, man!"

Naturally everybody on Henry Street started scattering prematurely when that impressive diddybop army of Sportsmen in stingy-brim crash helmets, turned down sailor hats, and Sherlock Holmes bebop caps, brandishing bamboo canes and stickball bats like swagger sticks, came bopping up from the Alfred E. Smith projects all the way down on Madison Street

in tight military formation. The little old Jewish ladies who sat kibitzing on



the streets all day, seemingly holding the sagging tenements up with their bent backs, started scurrying like roaches, scraping their folding chairs and milk crates on the sidewalk, fluttering hands over their hearts, murmuring, "Oy vey, not again!" Swift young mothers sprinted with their baby strollers, and even the jaded stoop sitters with their cheap cigars and racing forms took grumbling cover in hallways from the rumble about to erupt.

As it turned out, their alarm was not all that premature; for no sooner had the Mayrose and their new allies the Sportsmen palm-slappingly convened as though the corner outside the candy store was Geneva, than the Dragons — them fearless freakin Ricans! — came charging up Henry Street from the opposite direction, screaming. "Maricon! Maricon!"

The rumble itself was anticlimactic: Just a bunch of showboating kids skirmishing up and down the block with lots of yelling and a somewhat comical minimum of hand-to-hand combat, as bamboo canes and ripped-off car aerials flailed without finding flesh and wildly flung bricks smashed into stoops and parked cars. And while participants on both sides would later embellish their heroics to sound like something out of the Iliad, the casualty count amounted to no more than a few minor bruises and contusions, before the far-off wail of cop-sirens signaled the hasty retreat of the Dragons back to their own turf on Forsyth Street and the comradely adjournment of the Mayrose and Sportsmen to the candy store.

Five squad cars came screeching around the corner and stopped in front of the candy store. Ten of New York's Finest piled out like Keystone Kops and started climbing over each other in their haste to get in the door. Some neighborhood yenta had probably panicked at the sight of all those Sportsmen bopping up Henry Street and called the 7th Precinct to report that the whiteguys and the coloredguys were getting ready to kill each other again. But inside the candy store all the cops found was Mayrose and Sportsmen toasting each other with eggcreams and slapping each other on the back all buddy-buddy, while on the thumping jukebox Louie Lymon and the Teen Chords insisted, "NO, NO, NO, I'M NOT A JU-VEN-ILE DE-LIN-QUENT!"

It was sofuckinboss the whiteguys and the coloredguys cracked up, remembering the befuddled look on the faces of them dumb bulls, before they got back in their prowler cars and drove back to the precinct to jerk each other off. But their euphoric gloating was soon cut short by some deflating news from three members of the Mayrose Debs, the gang's female auxiliary, who had been cowering by the jukebox near the back of the store, well out of the

way of the plateglass window, which had been shattered by a tossed garbage can during a previous rumble.

The girls told them that at the height of the pitched battle Chinito, the flamboyant leader of the Dragons — he of the flashy Apache head-scarves and swishy walk that made some of the Mayrose swear he must be queer — had sauntered casually into the candy store — their very own hangout! — and ordered an egg cream. Chinito (so named because he almost looked Chinese, with his slanted eyes and shiny blueblack hair) had even flirted casually with the girls. Clearly charmed, the girls added that the gallant Puerto Rican warrior had behaved like a perfect gentlemen, bowing and blowing them a farewell kiss before running back out to rejoin his troops like Errol Flynn as Robin Hood dashing off to rally his Merry Men in Sherwood Forest.



"You gotta hand it to that goddamn Chinito," Izzy the Goy had to admit with a rueful smile. "That spic got heart." "Yeah, man," admitted a Sportsman they called Coal for the most obvious reason. "That mela mela be one b-a-a-a-d motherjumper!"

In an era when "bad" meant good; when no automatic lip service was paid to the facile pieties of political correctness; when real respect had to be either learned or earned the hard way, this was the highest possible praise.

* * *

Like the good Americans they prided themselves on being, the kids who hung out on Henry Street booed B-movie Nazis whenever they appeared on-screen at the Leows Delancey. But those posturing villains, with their monocles and swastika armbands, were no more real to them than the Evil Dr. Fu Manchu. And the numbers tattooed on the forearms of Mr. and Mrs. Klebinoff only made them seem more foreign, as they made change for

secondhand comic books, egg creams, and loose cigarettes, two cents each, three for a nickel.

The dour refugee couple who ran the candy store got scant sympathy for their stretch in one of Hitler's camps compared to local heroes like Georgie Flores, who died in the ring, Tutti Boy Martino, who came back from Korea in a box, or Buster Kelly, who was built like a jukebox and got shot in the ass by a jealous husband in Little Italy. Snotnose kids, younger brothers and sisters of the Mayrose, were constantly appearing in the candystore doorway to serenade them with a ditty that went: "Klebinoff had a candy store, / business, it was bad. / He asked his wife what to do, / and this was what she said: / 'Take a little gasoline, / pour it on the floor, / take a match, / Give a scratch, / no more candy store!'"

The Klebinoffs had no choice but to put up with these petty pogroms from junior juvenile delinquents — at least a couple of whom were clearly Jewish themselves! — until they could sell the business and leave this meshugalah place.

Who knows what finally became of those poor refugees? The candystore never burned down; it was doubtful that they would even have had fire insurance if it had. Instead, it was taken over by an old Italian guy that the kids renamed "Botchagaloop" and called a "dumb mountain guinea" to his face, even though half of the Mayrose were greaseballs themselves. Botchagaloop had tattoos, too, but not numbers: hula hula girls. And while its lyrics are lost to memory, soon some gutter genius (call him Kilroy or Anonymous) dreamt up a new ditty with which to bust his balls. It was only fair in a neighborhood where everybody was always ranking on everybody else's race or religion, and poetry was born more often out of malice than love.

* * *

The Beat writers William Burroughs and Herbert Huncke may have been among the first junkies on Henry Street when they shared a pad in a tenement there in 1945. But while the Beat Generation would later exert a powerful influence on my life — perhaps saving it and ruining it at the same time — like most of the kids I grew up with, I was a baby back then. As far as I know from my own experience, smack didn't hit the neighborhood hard until the late fifties. It happened so suddenly it was as if that spooky white horse of heroin came galloping down Henry Street while everyone was sleeping.

One morning the neighborhood woke up and found itself haunted by zombies. A dubious peace descended like a pall. The sporadic gangbusting and diddybopping came to an abrupt halt. Those energetic territorial disputes between white, black, and Puerto Rican youths of just a summer



or two ago were remembered almost nostalgically, as wholesome vestiges of a more vital time, now that the former combatants were as gentled ghosts, united in their mutual passivity. For the first time, you saw former Mayrose, Sportsmen, and Dragons haunting the streets together, as though posing for a slightly more drowsy version of the Brotherhood Week poster I was once recruited to paint in the art room at The Henry Street Settlement.

"The white guy will be over here, the colored guy will be over there, and I figure I'll put the Puerto Rican kid and the Chinaman over here on the right side of the picture," I said, showing off my preliminary sketch, in which the figures were roughly blocked in but their individual ethnicity was not yet distinguishable.

"You shouldn't say that word, Eddie," Jim Lee, the art instructor, said in a more severe tone than I had ever heard him use with me before. "Chinaman" is a word that Chinese people find very offensive."

Having thought of myself as relatively enlightened compared to some of my relatives, since I didn't routinely refer to Chinese food as "chinks" (as in, "How about we go over to Mott Street tonight for some chinks?"), I was taken aback. Certainly I never meant to offend Mr. Lee, of all people. A professional portrait painter and amateur chef who would eventually publish a culinary bestseller called "Jim Lee's Chinese Cook Book," he was as close as I had to a mentor. He encouraged my artistic tendencies, and I respected him so much that I never joined in when some of the kids would tease him by bursting into the art room singing the Bobbettes song that went: "One, two, three / Look at Mr. Lee / Three, four, five / Look at him jive..."

Sometimes after school I would work with Mr. Lee at the partly gutted former matzo factory, right opposite the public swimming pool on Pitt Street, that he was renovating as a townhouse. I would hand him hammers, sweep up sawdust, run

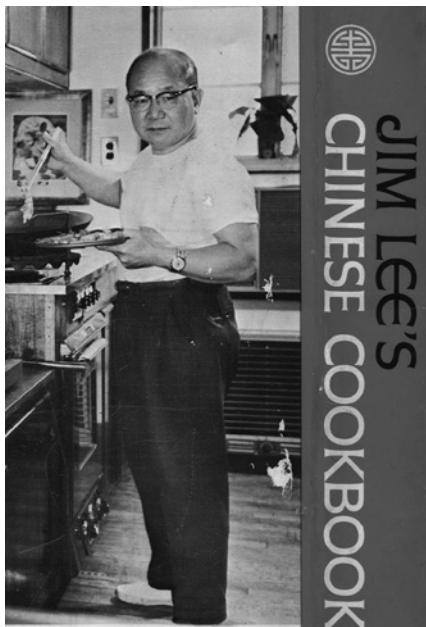
errands to the hardware store, anything he wanted me to do. I did it because I loved spending time with him and his wife Isabella, an artsy-looking caucasian woman who stood about two heads taller than her sturdy but tiny husband and would later create the graceful ink illustrations for his cook book. Their marriage seemed so harmonious and the atmosphere of their home, even in its unfinished state, so tranquil, genteel, and cultural compared to the nonstop craziness of my family that it became a model of how I wanted my grownup life to be someday.

In the meantime, I suppose I wanted to feel in some way adopted by the couple and was worried that now they might not want me around anymore.

"Jesus, Mr. Lee, I'm really sorry," I said. "I really didn't mean to knock Chinese people or anything."

"It's all right, Eddie," he told me. "Now that you know it's insulting, I'm sure you won't use that word again. Racial prejudice is just ignorance anyway."

A couple of years after I painted that



Brotherhood Week Poster, it would strike me as ironic how the white guys, the colored guys, and the Puerto Rican guys were finally united in the Brotherhood of the Needle. Neutered by the newfound lethargy that heroin produced, you'd see them slapping palms (sometimes, but not always, passing bags of H as they did), nodding out on stoops together, lounging languidly in tenement doorways. They appeared to have turned prematurely autumnal like those scrawny sad-ass trees in the Vladeck Houses courtyard that bloomed only sparsely, even in the fierce heat of undershirt summer. And every other week, it seemed, somebody would go down to check the mailbox and find one of them sprawled, white-lipped, in the vestibule

or under the stairwell, sometimes with the spike still stuck in his arm and a burnt spoon lying nearby...

Now they were far beyond the reach of the social workers at the Henry Street Settlement — those selfless souls dedicated to civilizing as many of us as possible, or at least imparting a few of the social graces, before unleashing us on the city at large. (Sadly, though, for all their good intentions and lofty degrees in the social sciences and humanities, most of the social workers never had a clue; educated fools, lacking in even the most elemental street smarts, they were easy marks for our constant put-ons, put-downs, and cons.)

All at once antic Katzenjammer streets that had throbbed with life; streets where everybody's unabashed underwear flapped like flags from fire-escapes and clotheslines; where kids had fought and played stickball and been heroes in the fevered stadiums of their imaginations, had turned empty, spooky, still. And all those stories you heard about guys ripping off their own families to get junk really were true.

One kid I knew who lived in the projects with his grandmother ransacked their whole apartment piece by piece. First he pawned the radio and the twelve-inch Motorola TV console that the old lady was still paying for on time; then he sold the dinette set, chair by chair, and finally took the table right out from under them. The last straw was when he came back for the toaster. The old lady loved her toast, so she picked up a carving knife and told him to leave the goddamn toaster right where it was. And when he tried to shove her aside and reach for it anyway, she stuck the blade right through her no good grandson's already stigmatized arm...

More than anything else, it was heroin that put an end to the tradition of honor among thieves which had once been a matter of pride on the Lower East Side.

Not everybody I grew up with got strung out or ended up dead or in jail. Some settled down, got married, "copped a slave," as we used to say. Maybe they shaped the docks or, through a father or uncle, got a union card in the Teamsters, good steady work. Others went to night school, got their high school equivalency diplomas, then took the Civil Service exams for the fireman, the cops, or the sanitation department. A few even made it to City College and ended up getting desk jobs. In the best tradition of most humanity, they came and went quietly, without making a vulgar spectacle of themselves in posterity.

Among my dead-end peers, only two brothers named Falco distinguished themselves from the rest of us by taking in their separate turns first infamy then honest fame. Nobody who knew him was surprised when the older brother, Frankie, went out in a blaze of MAD DOG COP-

LOUIS FALCO



DANCE COMPANY

ALICE TULLY HALL AT LINCOLN CENTER
JUNE 5-10 8:00 PM RES: 362-1911

Image courtesy: PeriodPaper.com

KILLER headlines on the front page of the *New York Daily News*, gunned down in a shoot-out with a vengeful police posse in a sleazy Times Square hotel, after he and an accomplice named Tommy Trantino coldly executed two plainclothesmen in a bar out in Jersey called the Angel Lounge.

Trantino, unlike Falco, punked out and turned himself in after seeing his WANTED picture on the TV news, strolling into the precinct house with a lawyer and a crowd of reporters in tow to make sure the cops didn't kill him on the spot. Years later, he started writing in prison. Unlike Jack Henry Abbott, Tommy didn't have a literary champion with real clout like Norman Mailer to get him sprung — only an obscure East Village poet named Irving Stettner. But Irving, whom I'd get to know in the early '70s, after I started writing in lieu of making an honest living ("Some of us don't write, we work," said my uncle Georgie, calling my bluff at my father's wake), published some of Trantino's prison writings in his little magazine *Stroker*.

Tommy became something of a cause celebre among the downtown literati, word got around, and in 1973, Knopf brought out his book "Lock the Lock." Writing in unpunctuated beatnik lower-case, run-on prose that veers crazily between naturalistic description and surrealism, in one story called "The Angel," Trantino gives a graphic account of the cop-killing. Falco comes off as the perfect Joe Pesci character: a maniacal hood who starts out jovial and

expansive, buying drinks for the band — even getting up on the stand to serenade the patrons in the Angel Lounge with a not-bad rendition of "Sorrento" — before the two plainclothes cops come in and he suddenly turns demonic: "frank leaps onto the bar and goes into a squat with a gun in each hand and the cops are saying dont hurt us please and razor screams like wild horses are slashing kicking in my head exploding crazy twitching flares and cannon rattling all around me frank is ticking on the bar two rumbling tanks in his claws and his hair is on fire and his horns are whistling twisting out and his fangs are blistered and bubbled with phlegm screaming out of a dark tunnel GET UNDRESSED GET UNDRESSED..."

Apparently to humiliate them, Two-Gun Frankie made the cops get naked, a characteristically perverse touch, before shooting them dead.

* * *

A lot of neighborhood people would have laid odds that Frankie's kid brother, Louie,

who was born in 1943, the same year as me, and was to die of AIDS in 1993, the same year as my son Holden, would have followed in his footsteps. Instead, Louie enrolled in the same class as my first serious girlfriend, Helen Aronson, at the Henry Street Settlement, a social agency that endeavored to keep us off the streets, turning the same ferocious energy to the art of modern dance.

I don't know what eventually became of Helen, a baby beatnik sexual prodigy with a black-leotarded crotch full of free love, after we broke up. But by the time he was 17, Louie was dancing with the Jose Limon Company. Later, he choreographed the film version of "Fame," created ballets for Alvin Ailey, and was one of the featured performers in "Nureyev and Friends" on Broadway. By the late '60s, when we all became hippies, he had already made the Louis Falco Dance Company famous in the U.S. and Europe for raucous performances that the *New York Times* called "the ultimate in disheveled chic."

* * *

A decade later, when I was still somewhat shakily trying to moderate my habits and make things right again with my wife Jeannie after a years-long lost weekend of alcohol and drugs, I pitched the story of the Falco brothers as "a real-life John Garfield movie" to an editor at *The Daily News*. I started freelancing for the News because I had burned a lot of bridges in hipper

circles, stopped writing for *Rolling Stone*, and could do what I thought of as "daytime pieces" — stories that didn't involve a lot of the nocturnal hanging out and dissipation that had contributed to my more serious substance abuse problems.

I liked this particular editor, Andy Port, because she reminded me of those streetsmart big-haired brunette chicks in girl singing groups like the Shangri-Las, and pretty much gave me free reign to write whatever I wished. Andy apparently had that freedom because she presided over the News' now-defunct Sunday Magazine supplement, which the editors on the daily paper probably didn't take seriously enough to monitor closely. It was possible that they didn't even bother to look at it, since I had gotten away with sympathetic cover features on junkie squatters living in a shantytown on Avenue B; on former yippies Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin; on Allen Ginsberg (the latter illustrated with a big color photo of him and William Burroughs holding hands — dig that with your bagel and cream cheese, baby!), among other subjects that were pretty radical for that publication. Andy and I liked to joke that we had a little hippie pothead conspiracy going to subvert that right wing rag. So when I proposed the Falco brothers piece, she said, "It sounds fabulous — do it!"

The first thing I learned when I walked into the loft in Chelsea where Louie, now sporting a mane of ringlets to put Roger Daltrey, lead singer of The Who, to shame, was rehearsing his company, was that no matter how pretty they may look, a studio full of hard working dancers stinks like a huge hamper full of dirty laundry. The second thing was that the New York Times critic Clive Barnes had been right on the money when he called Falco "a choreographer of energy rather than grace." While a rock and roll score blared, the longhaired girl and boy dancers, all decked out in ragamuffin deshabille, flung themselves around like hoody kids jiving and shucking back in the day on the basketball court down at the end of Henry Street.

After the rehearsal, Louie and I sat over beers in a booth in a nearby Blarney Stone bar, reminiscing about the old neighborhood and some of the characters we had known in common. The more we talked, the more sure I was that he would be amenable to the kind of story I wanted to write.

"I'm still influenced by the streets where we grew up ... Like if anybody in here started something," he said, casting a hard glance over his shoulder at the handful of harmless old rummies hugging the bar, before letting the thought trail off...

Although he had never talked specifically about Frankie in print, Louie had been quoted saying, "Everything I am,

everything I create comes from what my family was and where I was born. I don't think there's any getting away from your heritage." He had also said, "I think my works are gutsy. It comes from growing up on the Lower East Side. I don't have the same taboos as other people. I don't censor. I have a certain freedom that others don't."

Since I came from the same place and felt the same way (I even had a couple of younger cousins who were constantly going in and out of Rikers, Rahway, and Attica for armed robbery and other serious shit), I was sure Louie would see me as the right guy to tell his story with compassion and sensitivity. So I was taken aback when he went silent and his cherubic face tightened at the first mention of his brother's name. All he would say about Frankie was that one day, when they were kids and he almost drowned at Pitt Street Pool, his big brother had reached down into the water and pulled him out like a whelp by the hair.

When I persisted, arguing like the con-man that every journalist becomes in pursuit of a juicy story that I thought it was important to shed light on how his background had influenced his creative direction, he cut me off with, "Look, Ed, I'll talk about anything else you want me to, but I definitely don't want to talk about Frankie in print. There's just no way I'm gonna exploit my brother's memory for publicity."

What could I say? I had to respect him for upholding the code of silence we had both grown up with, even though he, like me, had come a long way from Henry Street. Because, to be perfectly honest, more than once over the years, I have reverted to acts of random criminality. But only, I always told myself at the time, for the sake of art or in the name of love.

In fact, the first and harshest critics of my writing turned out to be a couple of drunken plainclothes cops who once detained me and a friend I was with on suspicion of burglary back in my teenage beatnik phase. Among the boxes of admittedly pilfered but not technically burgled stationery supplies (since we had borrowed a key from a friend whose father worked in the office, rather than breaking in) with which we bumbled right into the arms of the two bulls when they stepped out of a bookie bar across the street from the precinct house, was a limited edition pamphlet of my poems that we had mimeographed that very day.

Being Jewish, the friend who got picked up with me had to answer to the epithet "Cut-Cock." But I, as the perpetrator of the poems, bore the brunt of the abuse for "disgracing a good Irish name with this perverted crap." While I cringed in a holding cage in the squad room, the two law enforcement louts guzzled Ballantine Ale from coffee mugs and took turns

reciting my poem "Red-Haired Angie," eulogizing a neighborhood girl who took on all comers on rooftops before being killed by a hit and run driver.

For their lisping, mincing imitation of Percy Dovetails, a grotesque poet parody on the Ernie Kovacs TV show, made me aware that art can be an offense of which one remains guilty even after being cleared of all other charges.

* * *

*They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.*

— Philip Larkin

My uncle Charlie was my best buddy and my bed-mate. Psychology being as foreign as dentistry to Irish drinkingclass families like ours — tough titty if you lost all your teeth, went crazy! — nobody thought twice about assigning a grown man to bunk with his nine-year-old nephew after Charlie's wife, Dolly, kicked him out and he moved into our cramped tenement walkup on Henry Street. Fortunately for me, Charlie was no child molester, although he might have had transvestite tendencies, judging from a snapshot I remember seeing of him at one of the weekend beer parties in our family kitchen.

My uncle Georgie, Charlie's older brother, and my aunt Delores, who lived upstairs like Ed Norton and his wife Trixie in "The Honeymooners," are also in the picture, probably taken by my mother with her Kodak Brownie box camera. Charlie (whose resemblance to the toughguy actor Mickey Rouarke I would become aware of many years later, after his real-life counterpart was long gone) is wearing lipstick, one of my mother's pillbox hats, and a bra and panties — presumably belonging to Mama as well. One of his balls is hanging out of a leg-hole in the panties, as he rests one foot on the edge of my fathers' chair and leans over to playfully muss his hair.

My father has lipstick smears on one cheek and is holding the other and rolling his eyes heavenward, like the comedian Red Buttons singing his TV theme song "Strange Things Are Happening." His elbow resting on the table, he looks annoyed, as he often did with my mother's brothers, whom he referred to behind their backs as "crude deze, doze, and dems characters, real Lower East Side goons." (Apparently, even Hell's Kitchen, where my father grew up, was considered classier.)

As for my uncles, they were always amused by the hoity-toity airs my father put on, and would crack up when, at the end of a night's drinking, their brother-in-law would announce, "Well, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I'm going into the arms of morpheus."

"The arms of who, Eddie?" they'd chorus, pounding the table so hard they'd almost spill their beers.

I must have been present when the puzzling picture was taken because my younger sister Maureen and I were usually allowed to stay up late when the grownups partied, since we would have been kept up by the noise anyway. But I would have been too young to wonder if cross-dressing had had anything to do with the breakup of my uncle's marriage, or if this antic drag act was just another wacky whim amid the usual family madness.

* * *

To me Charlie, who had blown his big toe off in a foxhole to get sent home early from Korea and marry the girl of his dreams, was just an overgrown kid whose idea of wit was to let out a big blasting beer-fart in bed, then pull the covers over my head to almost asphyxiate me with the stink as he laughed his way to the grave. Still, I loved him unconditionally. For it was Charlie — not my distant, bedeviled father, hounded by the bookies and shylocks down on the docks, who were always threatening to break his kneecaps over gambling debts that my mother finally had to cover with high interest loans from Household Finance Company — who was always there for me. When my bullying elementary school gym teacher humiliated me in front of the class by sarcastically cracking that my chronic cough sounded like TB, it was Charlie who stormed up to P.S. 147 and threatened to throw him out of a window if he ever got smart with his nephew again. It was Charlie who took me to John Wayne and Audie Murphy movies at the Leow's Canal on Saturday nights, and afterward to the cavernous Garden Cafeteria for rice pudding. (Neither of us would have known or cared back then that the Garden was a hub of intellectual life on the Lower East Side and that one of the shabby-looking old Jewish guys among whom we huddled like a couple of goyische hoods planning a heist could have been Isaac Bashevis Singer, who wrote for the Yiddish language newspaper *The Daily Forward*, right down the block on East Broadway.)

It was Charlie, too, who taught me that Vaseline Hair Tonic was better than Brylcream for holding a pompadour, and when I got a little older, showed me the Sheik prophylactic he carried in his wallet and advised me that it was time for me to start doing the same, just in case. And most likely it was Charlie — who I never called "uncle," unless he made me say it when we play-wrestled and he got me in a headlock, because he was not at all avuncular, more like a needling older brother — who gave me a complex about my skinny arms and legs. I didn't mind the nickname "Eddie Spaghetti," which could have sounded like a wiry Mafia guy, as much as when he called



me "Mahatma Gandhi," which in our backward neighborhood evoked not a great Indian leader but a bandy-legged comic strip snake charmer.

But even though he teased me mercilessly, I always knew that Charlie, like his big sister Mabel, my doting mother, was always in my corner. And unlike my father, he never sneered at my ambition to become a syndicated comic strip artist when I grew up.

"You'll be lucky to get hired on the docks like everybody else," said my old man, the son of Irish immigrants from County Cork, drinking beer at the kitchen table with my uncle Georgie.

"Don't listen to Mr. Sour Grapes there," my mother said from the sink, alluding to my father's eternal bitterness about drinking his way out of a great job as a trainer for the Brooklyn Dodgers and ending up an ordinary longshoreman. "With your talent, you can become anything you want."

We've probably all heard those psychological theories about offspring who subconsciously stop themselves from succeeding, so as not to surpass their parents. But I doubt that they ever applied to me, since I never remember wishing to emulate my father in any way — least of all in the defeatism he seemed all too willing to make my legacy. In fact, I think it was partly to make him eat his discouraging words that, one Saturday a couple of years later, encumbered with two folding chairs, a thick drawing pad, some felt-tip pens, and a portfolio full of sample sketches, I took the subway to West 4th Street to sell caricatures to the tourists who flocked to the Village for the Washington Square Outdoor Art Exhibition. I was too young to register officially, but whenever the monitors chased me, I'd move to another spot. My grim determination comes across in a picture someone took of me surrounded by some fellow East Side kids who had stopped by to visit with the neighborhood artiste. Glowering darkly among gladly grinning normal boys, I already look cursed by the

malady of art. "How'd you make out?" my mother asked, wiping her hands on a dishtowel, when I got home that evening.

My father and my uncle Georgie, who were drinking and bitching about a dock strike that seemed like it was never

going to end, didn't bother to look at me until I started fishing crumpled bills out of my pockets and dropping them onto the table. A year later, when I looked a little older and the prodigy novelty had worn off, I wouldn't do nearly as well, would get discouraged, and would call it quits. But that first year I averaged about fifty bucks a day on weekends, not bad money for a twelve year old kid.

My mother beamed, but my father and uncle just gave me the fisheye, then resumed their conversation.

"I'm telling you Georgie, if the union doesn't make a deal soon and put an end this goddamn thing," my father said, "we'll have to get guns and go stick up a bank."

"I've got a better idea, Eddie," said my uncle. "You know that big crack in the ceiling out in the hall? Why don't we take a broomstick, knock some chunks of plaster down, and put the plaster dust all over you? Then you lay down on the floor, start yellin' your fuckin' head off, and get everybody in the building out there for witnesses. Maybe that hebe landlord will settle out of court."

Before we knew it, my father was rolling around on our kitchen floor, barechested and grimacing, with a pile of wooden clothes hangers under his back, while my uncle Georgie cheered him on: "That's it, Eddie, just keep it up. As soon as your back looks banged up enough, you can put your shirt on and we'll go out in the hall and put our plan into action. It just has to look bad on the outside. They say a lot of back injuries don't even show up on an x-ray anyway."

My mother looked at me and shook her head. "Thank God you won't end up like them."

* * *

Whether out of spite or misplaced nostalgia for what might have been, my mother kept the archives of my father's failure in an album filled with photos and press clippings from his time with the Brooklyn Dodgers. There was one picture

of him going over the training schedule with three unidentified ball players, labeled in his own florid handwriting, "Havana, Cuba, Spring 1941." Others showed him leading the entire team through calisthenics out in the practice field, where he claimed that a young law student named Fidel Castro had once tried out as a pitcher. In my mother's favorite picture, he looked like a movie star in a white linen suit that set off his deep tan, as he posed, cigarette in hand, at a table outside the Hotel Nationale, the team's Cuban headquarters during Spring Training.

Among the yellowed newspaper clippings that my mother also saved was one from Hearst's New York tabloid, the *Daily Mirror*, dated April 3, 1939, which began, "When trainer Doc Knowles, of the Giants, attempted to make the players step through conditioning maneuvers in their 1928 Hot Springs, Ark., training camp, he had tough sledding making them cooperate. But when Eddie McCormack put the Dodgers through the strangest calisthenic gyrations ever seen in a training camp this Spring, they were so taken by his personality that even the most skeptical veterans did every trick he ordered and would have jumped through hoops if he had requested."

That our father possessed a personality would have been news to my younger sister Maureen and me. He certainly never wasted it on his family. To us he seemed the silent, solitary rebuttal to the belief that no man was an island, as he sat on a bench in the Vladeck projects courtyard, right down the block from our tenement on Henry Street, casting his long shadow on the pavement and nursing a quart bottle of Rheingold cloaked in the brown paper bag of Propriety. Exiled from the idyllic Irish beer gardens of his beloved Woodside, Queens, when my clannish mother moved us back to Manhattan to keep her recently widowed father company when I was six and Maureen was three, he referred to the Lower East Side forever after as "this Godforsaken neighborhood," and remained aloof from the lively society of the surrounding sidewalks and stoops.

It would have amazed us to hear our tightlipped old man wax so loquacious as he does in an interview in another of my mother's clippings, telling an Associated Press sportswriter named Frank Eck, "Physical conditioning helped the Brooklyn Dodgers win the National League pennant in 1941, when I had 40 players under me at Havana. There'll be a lot of young players in the training camps this spring and everyone knows that the youth of today is tense and needs loosening up."

That our father, whose standard answer to any request for permission was a distracted "ask your mother," noticed anything at all about "the youth of today" would also have come as a surprise to



Maureen and me. But there was a lot we didn't know about the veritable stranger who, when asked about his glory days, would invariably wave a dismissive hand and say, "Ah, that's all water under the bridge, kid."

His steady downward trajectory is charted, however spottily, in subsequent clippings: "It's a boy (Edward Bruce) for the Eddie McCormacks of Woodside," reads one from 1943. "McCormack, a guard at the Sperry plant in Brooklyn, was a trainer for the Brooklyn Dodgers for three years."

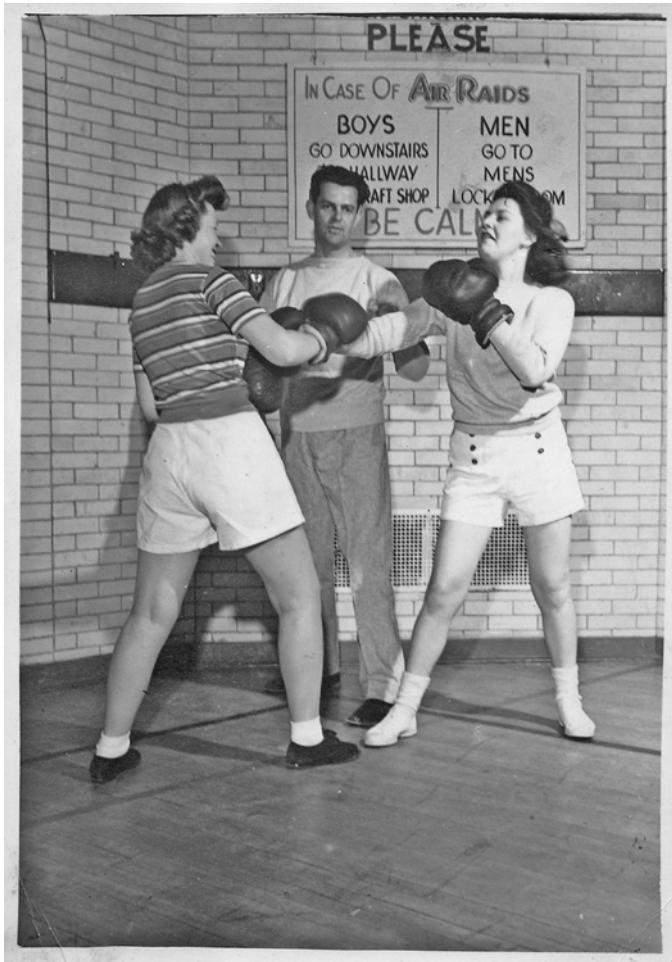
Somewhere in between training the Dodgers and working as a guard in a defense plant, my father ran an exercise program for female employees of a company where my mother worked as an elevator operator. My mother also saved snapshots of him giving boxing lessons to some of the switchboard girls and secretaries and leading them through calisthenics that looked like chorus line moves. Mama claimed that several of them were madly in love with him, and when she told how her head almost got stuck in the elevator doors the first time he asked her out on a date, it sounded like a scene out of some 1940s romantic comedy.

He had to have bowled her over, since it would not have been common for an

unsophisticated Lower East Side girl like my mother to marry a worldly man thirteen years her senior, rather than a young guy from the neighborhood. But there was more trouble than romance ahead: In the October 13, 1945 edition of *The New York Daily News*, Danton Walker reported in his "Broadway" column "Eddie McCormack, who trained the Brooklyn baseball Dodgers in their Havana and Florida camps, is bedded with a stomach ailment at French Hospital."

Actually, it was an attack of bleeding ulcers so severe that a surgeon had to remove half my father's stomach and to tell him that he'd be a dead man if he ever touched alcohol again. To my father (who had apparently reacted the same way when Dodgers manager Leo Durocher warned him that he would be canned if he kept hitting the bottle so hard that he failed to show up for training sessions), this called for a stiff drink.

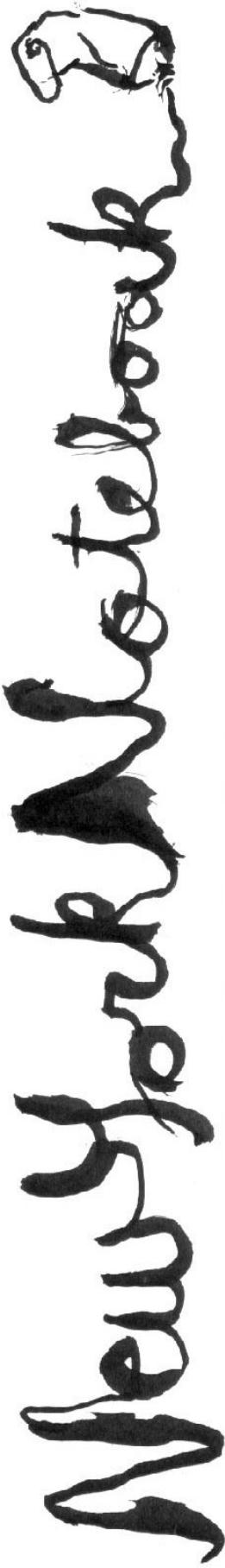
For a time, to pay off the loan sharks down on the docks, he moonlighted as a waiter at the Stork Club. I can almost imagine him passing items to the columnists along with their checks. By that time, however, his chances of a comeback were as slim as winning the Irish Sweepstakes, his other futile strategy for being rescued from the practical circumstances of his life.



By 1953 — after apparently driving a cab for a while, judging from a hack license one of my cousins recently gave me with a mugshot of him, a little cabbie cap propped on his head, looking bloated and befuddled, like Jackie Gleason's character, "The Poor Soul" — my father had been working as a longshoreman for almost a decade. Yet his apparent determination to keep the family name in boldface was such that, when I had surgery for appendicitis, schmaltzy Daily Mirror columnist Nick Kenny urged his readers, "Dip your pen in sunshine and write to shut-in Eddie McCormack, 10, Medical Arts Hospital, New York, N.Y."

My poor mother had high hopes for me. She "kvelled" just like the Jewish ladies in our neighborhood did when their children made them proud, after I won a scholarship to the High School of Music & Art. But just the other day, buying a Lotto ticket, as I do every week, religiously, I thought of what she said after I turned my back on it, only to drop out of my Blackboard Jungle neighborhood school, Seward Park High, when I turned sixteen: "The apple don't fall far from the tree."

* * *



Denys Wortman: A Daumier of the

The concurrence of the Edward Hopper exhibition at the Whitney and the retrospective of drawings by Denys Wortman at The Museum of the City of New York seems serendipitous. For while the two artists were in no way aesthetic or personal adversaries, Wortman strikes me as the anti-Hopper, in that he favored the raucous visual cacophony of the city over its solitary moments and scenes of melancholy.

Not that I had ever heard of Hopper as a very young aspiring cartoonist in the early 1950s, when I first discovered Wortman's single-panel feature "Metropolitan Movies," in the *World-Telegram and Sun*. Nor did I have any idea that Wortman (who had actually studied alongside Hopper in Robert Henri's class at New York School of Fine and Applied Art) had started chronicling the life of the city way back in 1924 for the Telegram's predecessor, *The New York World*.

All I knew was that I often recognized my own neighborhood, the Lower East Side, evoked lovingly, brick by brick, in Wortman's drawings, as well as in the captions below them, which were decidedly more down-to-earth proletarian than wittily urbane in the manner of New Yorker gag cartoons.

Since I would have been only five when it originally appeared in the paper in 1948, I must have seen one of my favorites reproduced somewhere at a later date for it to have impressed itself so vividly on my memory. It's a pigeon's eye-view, masterly in its detail, of a woman leaning over a fire-escape and shouting down to a street where pushcarts crowd the curb: "If I have to come down to buy them, you'll have to come down on your prices."

True to life — and, particularly, to the survival humor of my old neighborhood — as they were, however, it wasn't so much the captions that captured my attention as what must have been the most supple pencil line I had ever seen up to that time. And while the literary content of Wortman's cartoons (some of which he credited to his wife, who would tell him things she had overheard while out shopping) was not to be discounted, it was for his unerring draftsmanship that he was most highly praised by fine artists who looked

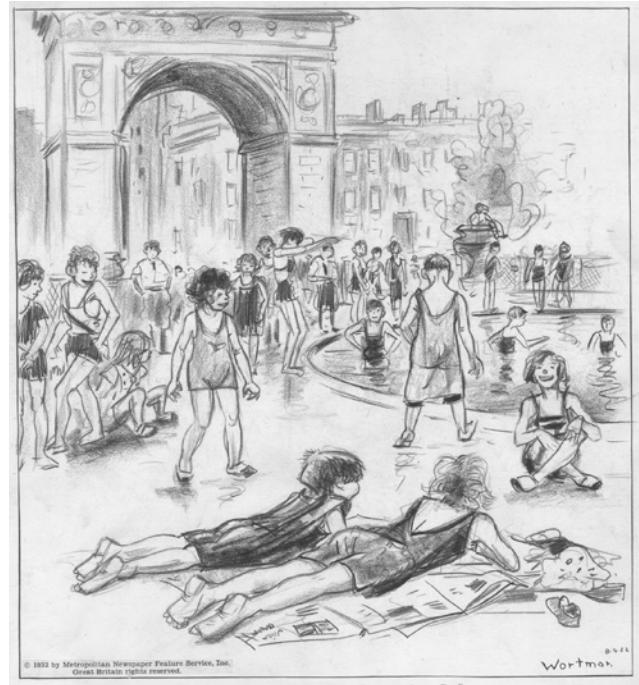


I'M STILL WONDERING WHETHER CUPID'S GONNA SMILE AT ME HERE AT HOME, AT THE BEACH, IN THE OFFICE OR AT THE WORLD'S FAIR.
August 31, 1939 Grease pencil, graphite and ink
Courtesy of The Center For Cartoon Studies and Denys Wortman VIII

upon this newspaper cartoonist as a peer.

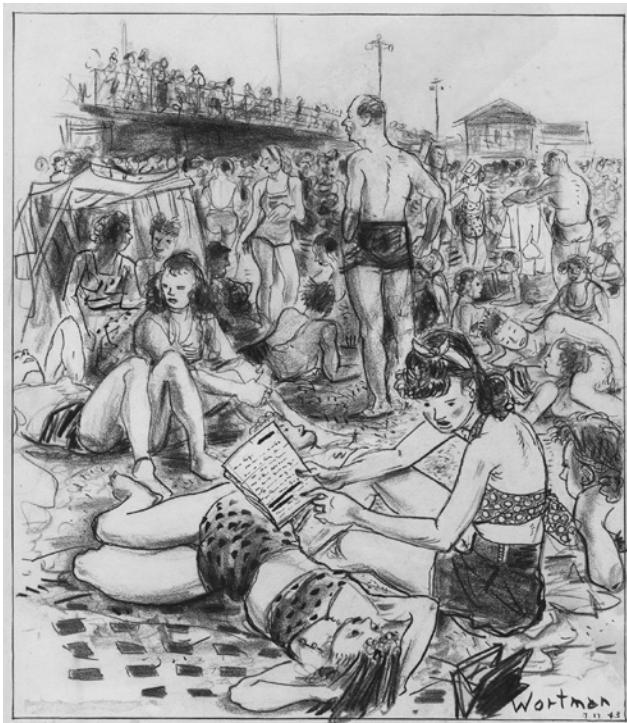
Reginald Marsh, who was similarly smitten with bustling street scenes, said, "Denys Wortman has long been a special admiration of mine. His drawings are brilliant, and what is equally important, they have great humor." But Guy Pène du Bois paid him the highest tribute of all when he said, "Denys Wortman's work should be treated as seriously in America as that of men like Daumier and Forain in France, and Hogarth and Rowlandson in England."

While the social realism of both his admirers was pretty much relegated to museum storage rooms after Abstract Expressionism



YO HO MARY! DID YOU BRING YOUR SUNTAN OIL?
August 9, 1932 Grease pencil, graphite and ink Courtesy of The Center For Cartoon Studies and Denys Wortman VIII

Rotogravure Finally Gets His Museum Moment



LOOK WHAT THE CENSORS DID TO THIS LETTER I GOT FROM JOE. I'M SURE HE SAID HE LOVED ME A COUPLA TIMES IN THERE WHERE THEY'VE BLACKED IT OUT.

July 17, 1943 Grease pencil, graphite and ink Courtesy of The Center For Cartoon Studies and Denys Wortman VIII

came into vogue, Wortman continued to find a ready audience in the popular press. Yet as a young artist he had the heady experience of exhibiting in the landmark Armory Show of 1913, and that he still harbored fine art aspirations is evident in two canvases, "Street Scene" and "Street Scene-Market," both painted in 1948.

But while these paintings are characteristically detailed in their depiction of his familiar fire escapes, pushcarts, gaping tenement doorways, store awnings, and laundry strung between buildings, they lack the vitality that Wortman evoked with a simple pencil line in his cartoons. Of course, it really wouldn't be fair to expect someone who turned out a magnificent drawing on deadline six days a week to produce even a handful of great paintings in the same year. But it still seems clear that Wortman was a born draftsman rather than painter; that line was his true forte, the rotogravure his natural métier.

Well, the same might be said of Daumier himself, whose paintings were plodding compared to the sublime linear depictions of the human form and visage that inspired W.H. Auden to declare (even while pairing him with a greater Spanish humanist whose paintings and etchings breathed the same rare air), "To me art's subject is the human

"the beautiful and respectable little village of Saugerties-on-the-Hudson where my father was for many years the pastor."

Although Wortman knew from an early age that his only wish was to become an artist, to please his parents he studied engineering before becoming a student of Robert Henri and Kenneth Hayes Miller. If it was also as a concession to his conventional upbringing that he finally chose family life and commercial outlets for his work, rather than taking a more bohemian route, one can only consider it fortuitous. For a talent that

clay / And landscape
but a background
to a torso; / All of
Cezanne's apples I
would give away / For
one small Goya or a
Daumier."

Perhaps more relevant than quibbling over the qualitative disparities between Wortman's drawings and paintings is how sympathetic a subject the human clay of tenement dwellers and other low-rent urban types became in the hands of this descendent of early Dutch Huguenot settlers, born in 1887 in the parsonage of what he himself described as

might have been given short shrift in galleries flourished in the popular press. The tenants of "Mrs. Rumpel's Rooming House," two amiable vagrants called "Mopey Dick and the Duke," and a varied cast of other colorful characters peopling "Metropolitan Movies" struck an empathetic chord with struggling city dwellers during the Depression and World War II.

By 1952, when Wortman depicted one of his hard-luck partners reading a newspaper with a headline touting relative prosperity, while the other says, "But Duke, if I could borrow 250 billion dollars and live on it for 20 years without paying any of it back, I'd have prosperity too," the rueful humor surely would have been lost on a naive nine-year-old like me. But I was already able to relish the artist's way with the shabby drapery of wry resignation and all the other telling details that speak much more eloquently than words to our common humanity. — Ed McCormack



I'M DYING TO GET DOWN TO 150. THAT'S WHEN I CAN CROSS MY LEGS.

September 1, 1936 Grease pencil, graphite and ink Courtesy of The Center For Cartoon Studies and Denys Wortman VIII

Denys Wortman Rediscovered:
Drawings for the
World Telegram and Sun, 1930-1953
Museum of the City of New York,
1220 Fifth Avenue, through March 20

In “HeartShare” Show, Some Clients Transcend Therapy to Create Real Art

Artists with developmental disabilities enrolled in HeartShare Human Services, “a 96-year-old non-profit organization providing care and support to many of New York City’s most vulnerable individuals,” were featured in the second annual “ArtShare for HeartShare Exhibition.” It might have been sufficient to merely acknowledge the show’s curator, Barbara Nowak-Cuthel, for her humanitarian effort in donating time and funds to organize and underwrite the show, if not for the genuine artistic pleasures it afforded the viewer.

With so many contributions from among the program’s intellectually and developmentally disabled clients on view, it would be impossible to do justice to them all. One can only focus on a few whose work best exemplified the spirit and diversity of the event as a whole.

The colored marker drawings of Walter Gregory have reportedly evolved over the past seven years from villains representing his personal hardships to superheroes suggesting his newfound sense of creative empowerment. Gregory’s colorful cartoon characters, such as “Swat Cat,” are possessed of impressive visual wit.

Tammy Price displays an aesthetic sophistication one cannot help comparing to that of the British abstract painter Howard Hodgkin, in her acrylic on canvas, “Dancing,” with its colorful dots floating like confetti over bold, blocky areas of red, blue, yellow and green. Several others as well showed a formal mastery that transcended the “outsider” category: Vincent Kim’s “Color Squares I & II” revealed a skillful way with color areas that create a subtle chromatic dialogue. Although its dominant deep blue, brown, and white color scheme may seem incongruous in relation to its title, Donald Graham’s acrylic painting on canvas board, “Rainbow,” displays a gestural vigor that would do any abstract expressionist proud. Christopher Defray, on the other hand, showed a work in watercolor and pen called “Camel Cigarettes” that combined elements of Pop and abstraction. Defray employed considerable command of the difficult watercolor medium to make the partly camouflaged silhouette of a camel emerge from within an intricately configured maze of abstract shapes.

Then there is Lamar Jones, whose “X Marks the Spot” is especially notable for his use of pentimento, particularly in the luminous deep pink and ochre colors

(apparently left over from a variegated underpainting now covered by strokes of vibrant blue) enlivening the central form.

Other artists in the show worked in styles more reminiscent of folk art, as seen in John Wojciechowski’s painting “Nells Glow Guernsey Cow,” with its simplified bovine figure set flatly against a blue background and bordered top and bottom by areas of white, creating the effect of a long, rectangular sign on a quaint country store.

Just as bold in its own way is “Tulips,” by Jonathan Young, a work in acrylic on paper in which two flowers with red crowns and thick green stems take on the blunt quality of adjoining fire-hydrants. Presented on the two-dimensional picture plane with three almost identical clouds lined up overhead, this unique floral vision has a decorative directness that sets Young’s work apart. And equally charming in another manner is “I Got a Boo-Boo,” an acrylic face mask by Jennifer Enny, which has a linear economy almost like some of the faces that Picasso painted on ceramic plates, particularly its stylized with decorative lashes. Also quite inventive is Enny’s use of what appears to be black pipe-cleaners to create the mask’s curlicues of hair. Only the red “boo-boo” on the forehead adds a slightly disquieting note to the otherwise cheery face.

Brandon Collins is a highly imaginative and versatile artist who creates complex scenarios in a variety of media ranging from watercolors and pastels to colored pencils and markers. His subjects range from snow scenes and still lifes to detailed images of city streets in a style reminiscent of the art brut Paris scenes of Jean Dubuffet. Especially engaging is his mixed media work on paper depicting the hectic activity in a busy neighborhood pizza store. Much simpler in conception, yet filled with their own blithe energy, the calligraphic acrylic paintings of Jose Colon feature mostly vertical strokes of luminous primary hues, set against the pure white-primed ground of the canvas, that appear to literally jump for joy. Another kind of joy, the freedom of flight, comes across in “Red Birds,” an acrylic painting by Valerie Dolvin, in which the avians of the title sail against a field of pale blue strokes that make the sky as palpable an entity as their feathery forms. Dolvin’s lyrical style appears auspiciously suited to her subject.

Khalid Akeem Washington creates semiabstract landscapes with poetic atmospheres, as seen in his composition in



Jennifer Enny



Tammy Price

acrylic on paper, “Blue Moon.” Here, acrylic is employed in the manner of watercolor, lending translucent vibrancy to a palette dominated by blues and greens to evoke what appears to be a nocturnal seascape with shadowy gray hills bordering a dark body of water. Washington also employs palette knives and mixes sand into his pigments in some works where he builds up more textural areas that he later dilutes with water to give his work subtle tactile qualities that augment his intuitive sense of color.

Collage is also explored with interesting results by some participants in this show. Lucinda Caponi combines a magazine photo of a woman in a bathing suit, a full moon, and other imagery in her mixed media collage, “A Day at the Beach,” while Richard Quilter juxtaposes couture models with more scattered found objects in his wittily named piece, “Fashion Disaster.” Very much in tune with the contemporary trend of including fragments of text in visual works, Anthony Rodriguez creates a kind of concrete poetry in acrylic paintings such as his “Batman Begins,” where mysterious yet evocative words and phrases such as “Street Grindin” and “The Shreredder” suggest a personal semiotics. Here, set within irregular areas of white on a strident yellow ground, Rodriguez’s boldly printed capital letters take on a dynamic impact all their own.

What the work of at least some of the artists in this exhibition seemed to suggest is that it may eventually become necessary to do away altogether with terms such as “primitive,” “unschooled,” and “outsider” art. After all, artists have always been unique individuals and more than a few who have achieved great works have had to overcome handicaps or disabilities — not to mention glaring eccentricities — of their own. And a surprising number of those featured here could hold their own handsomely in any so-called mainstream exhibition.

— Maureen Flynn

HeartShare, recently seen at
New Century Gallery
530 West 25th Street

Maria José Royuela: The Art of Reflection

"Patience" is a word one rarely hears in the hectic, ambitious art world of today, where everyone appears to be in a hurry to succeed, and where the work is often hurried in execution, serving as a mere accessory to that quest for success. For this reason it is refreshing to hear the Spanish painter Maria José Royuela say, "My work is the fruit of patience. Mine, my patience, which leads me to paint from quiet observation of my surroundings and from listening to my interior."

Indeed, the quietude and stillness of Royuela's paintings in the venerable, patient medium of oils on canvas is what strikes one immediately upon encountering them. From a distance one could easily mistake her canvases for the subtlest of color field abstractions, given the delicacy of her forms, the subtlety of her tonalities. Up close, however, one discovers in the intimacy of Royuela's "Sin Titulo" series tangible visual evidence of the truth of John Calvin's belief that "There is not one blade of grass, there is no color in this world that is not intended to make us rejoice."

The lush, verdant colors of summer are not what attract Royuela's eye, mind, heart. Rather, she is drawn to the bone-dry whiteness of winter rocks, with their

timeworn cracks and crevices, as fine as graphite lines; to the sere shades of dehydrated vegetation; the mortal hues of sun-starved flowers and grasses; the substance of common soil; to colors that she calls "not



"Sin Titulo"

frivolous but honest."

And yet there is a sensuality to her treatment of landscape subjects that makes one think, oddly enough, of Andrew Wyeth — not only his wintry country scenes, but also of the pale flesh tones of the nudes in the "Helga" series. Perhaps this can be attributed to the almost sentient feeling that Royuela brings out in nature, the sense of it being like a feeling entity, that she captures through her

use of earth tones, of pale ochers and muted reds, colors that, as Wyeth himself said of his own palette, have "almost a lonely feeling."

In an interview, when asked what was the hardest part of her artistic journey,

Royuela answered, "I feel like I'm going upstream." This, of course, is a natural feeling for an artist who eschews the kind of sensationalism that is likely to get instant attention in today's art scene in favor of what she refers to as "authenticity" and "reflection."

Rooted in the soil of her childhood in La Rioja, Spain, the paintings of Maria José Royuela, with their muted colors and simple forms, transport us to a timeless place of stillness and serenity. Here, the receptive viewer may escape what Royuela refers to as the "materialistic and superficial" concerns of urban culture, and find a space for reflection. For even in nature, her work seems to tell us, one must beware of the showy and superficial, and dig deeper to discover the greater mysteries hidden within the firmament. Such work has become a rarity in recent art and is something to be treasured.

— Maurice Taplinger

Maria José Royuela, Agora Gallery,
530 West 25th Street, March 1-22, 2011
Reception: Thursday, March 3, 6-8 PM

Resolution: A Resounding Group Survey

In "Resolution," curated by Sonia Barnett for the West Side Arts Coalition, the Afro-American artist William Hunt once again displayed the prodigious draftsmanship talents that make him the natural heir to the late social realist Charles White. Hunt showed his unique graphic inventiveness particularly in his large charcoal drawing on paper "Cherish, Them" where the luxuriant dreadlocks of two proudly smiling, loving parents on both sides of the composition join to form a hammock for a sleeping child.

Good drawing is also the armature of Anne Rudder's visionary poem-paintings in watercolor. Rudder's "Poem/Prayer" centers on a benevolent amazon with outstretched arms and the outline of a dove within a sunburst symbol on her flowing garment looming over a lively cityscape. Another hybrid work by Rudder titled "Forever," combines a Christlike figure with a poem beginning with the lines "There is no dead land, / but a crystal sea / moving through the / eternal soul..." In an age of irony, Rudder's spiritual directness is brave and inspiring.

Richard Carlson employs the grid as a format for both austere abstract compositions and figurative forays such as "Diva Down Under," where a large female face with catlike green eyes hovers at the top of a vertically stacked diptych, amid rectangular

forms that zoom dynamically between the two-dimensional picture plane and deep illusionistic perspective. Carlson's playful eclectic sensibility partakes of postmodern freedom from overriding aesthetic dogma in refreshing new ways.

By contrast, the artist known as Yukako showed two paintings, entitled "Winter Brightness" and "Winter Garden," both vibrant overall compositions created with thick, feathery strokes of red, yellow, blue, green and pink acrylic pigment. The addition of bits of gold metallic pigment added to the effect of shimmering rainbow-hued energy fields.

Nancy Johnson also made an impression with her intimate watercolor "I Will Remember Dad," an affectionate portrait of an elderly man in a short sleeved shirt and blue slacks seated in an easy chair reading a newspaper in a domestic interior. Johnson captures a sense of her father's mild personality with an economy and grace characteristic of her medium at its best.

Sonia Barnett's painterly vigor came across most dynamically in "Crossing Thresholds," a flowing Abstract Expressionist work in the unusual medium of watercolor on canvas. In contrast to its bold and flowing strokes of stark primaries, Barnett displayed her versatility in two smaller, more lyrical mixed media works featuring intricately interlocking

forms awash in soft yet luminous hues.

Winged skeletons flitting like dragonflies over streaked and dripping areas of brilliant yellow, purple, and blue came across as theatrical rather than macabre in Elizabeth K. Hill's acrylic painting "Aire and Angels." A pleasing fantasia hovering between the abstract and the representational, Hill's painting possessed a benign yet otherworldly appeal.

By contrast, the paintings of Nate Ladson are subtle and elusive, as in a luminous untitled oil and acrylic abstraction of fiery red and moody blue hues. Especially intriguing here, however, was Ladson's mixed media piece "Images," in which a phantom figure moved through a shower of light like a phantom shadow, reminding one of the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's great novel "Invisible Man," hiding in plain sight in his cellar amid 1369 blazing bulbs.

The two final artists both work on an intimate scale and share a refreshingly light touch: Madi Lanier seems to be a kindred spirit of both Paul Klee and Joan Miró, in her abstract mixed media compositions of gaily colored floating forms enlivened by

Continued on page 26

"Resolution," recently seen at Broadway Mall Community Center, 96th Street and Broadway, center island.

A Powerful Female Spirit Haunts the Art of Susannah Virginia Griffin

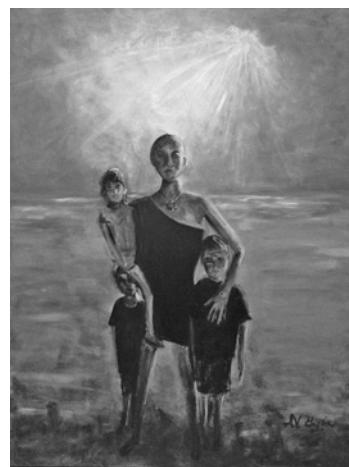
One of the Texas artist Susannah Virginia Griffin's most affecting paintings is the acrylic on canvas entitled "All that Glitters." In a vigorous flurry of gestural strokes, it depicts a faceless doll with long yellow hair, its bent, bow legs hardly suggesting those of a ballerina, even as they issue from a tattered cerulean blue tutu ruffled like the feathers of a dying swan. It is a poignantly affecting painting that at a single glance renders its title ironic. A diva unable to stand, one can't help seeing this tatty Raggedy Ann figure as a symbol of dreams deferred. As with all of Griffin's best paintings, the impact of "All That Glitters" arises out of the remarkable emotional content that the artist is able to impart to a simple image by virtue of the feeling conveyed in her brush strokes, as well as the vibrancy of her colors and the eloquence of her forms.

Another painting by Griffin called "Cycle of Life," is especially notable for the former two attributes. For here Griffin's brushwork is somewhat more subdued. What makes this image of a simplified bird, presumably in the process of making the transition from this life to the next one, so affecting is the skill with which the artist employs an expressive line, along with a combination of somber blues and more luminous yellows and blues. With these expressive elements, she depicts

the avian form at final rest, as its soul rises up from it like a fiery red kite into the light. It is an image that appears to express simultaneously both the brevity of life and the eternalness of our essence. Primarily through form and color, Griffin embodies the notion that while flesh and feather may be mortal, energy never dies.

This is a concept that seems wholly in keeping with her personal philosophy and statements that she has issued concerning her artistic intentions, such as, "Anything and everything I see has life in it, and I draw what I see."

Thus even the casual gesture of a woman in a backless dress, seen from behind, apparently raising a hand to shield her eyes, as she stands in a crowd watching a fireworks display erupt in the night sky, takes on an eternal quality in her painting "Venus."



"The Warrior"

Susannah Virginia Griffin is also a strong abstract painter, as seen in compositions such as "The Marriage," where two powerful forms interlock like links in a chain, yet also evoke a sense of struggle, and "Resistance," where roiling gestural shapes suggest stormy surf. One is also impressed by the vibrant colors, succulent impasto, and muscular paint handling that enliven other abstract acrylics on canvas such as "Void" and "Drenched."

However, it is Griffin's images of the female figure that seem to haunt one's memory long after seeing them. Among these, one of the most powerful is her painting of a woman in a simple garment, almost suggesting a primitive animal skin, standing in a desert protectively enfolding three small children. She is slender, appearing almost physically frail, yet she seems possessed of great strength. In this case, there is nothing ironic about the title: "The Warrior."

— Maureen Flynn,

Susannah Virginia Griffin, Agora Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, March 1 - 22, 2011. Reception: Thurs. March 3, 6 - 8pm.

"Abstract Plus," in which Less Becomes More

Although the West Side Arts Coalition has a reputation for presenting group exhibitions which give large numbers of emerging artists maximum exposure, the year-end show, "Abstract Plus/2010, focused on five talents in slightly more depth.

Anne Rudder's "Transition" series was occasioned by a recent health crisis. Although Rudder has often been compared to William Blake for her manner of combining figurative imagery with hand written poetry, this series of mixed media works seemed more in the spirit of Buddhist painter / poets and haiku artists for its merger of concise phrases with simpler abstract forms. In "Transition: Expression," the big, boldly written phrase "Sorrow Tears" appeared to literally dissolve in a torrent of tears. In "Transition: Feeling," the words "Anger" and "Grief" bled into visceral areas of red. In "Transition: Rest," however, a more spiritual mood was evoked with the text "Turn away from pain / Turn away from pain / and come to my / Healing Love," written out in a manner that made the calligraphy, now more elegantly shaped, and the luminous yellow and blue hues project an actual sense of healing light and energy.

The acrylic paintings of Yukako Ishida are buoyant, driven by an irrepressible gestural energy. In Yukako's "Cosmos" cursive red swirls, intermingled with one yellow area, rose up like soap bubbles against a variegated

black, blue, and ochre ground. By contrast, in Yukako's Aurora, an overall composition of smaller, more tightly knit yellow, red, blue, green, yellow, and pink strokes created a chromatically shimmering surface, at once tactile and ethereal. Yukako possesses a furiously upbeat energy that can recall Pollock in his "Blue Poles" period.

Joseph Boss' compositions in acrylic and mixed media can only be termed baroque for the vitality of his forms and scrumptiousness of his colors. The wittily named and playful "Motley Exteriors" consists of variously colored orbs with spiral strokes within, suggesting spinning wheels, set against a patchy color field. By contrast, in "Untitled" intricate, closely-packed shapes and daubs of vibrant color float like windblown confetti and fill the canvas to bursting with a lively sense of kinetic movement. Then there is the delightful surprise of "Oh Life," in which Boss merges Fauvist painted figures with areas of photographic collage imagery, such as a cat's head, the pretty face of a magazine model, and a pair of female legs culminating in patent leather maryjane pumps with straps across the instep, creating a particularly lively visual melange.

As always, the postmodern abstract expressionist Emily Rich conjures up a vigorous, muscular mixture of elements in acrylics on canvas ranging from "Bold City,"

where angular architectural shapes put a vital new spin on cubistic structuring; to "Black & White Series with Gold," in which the restricted palette enables one to focus all the more intensely on the juicy, de Kooningesque grace of Rich's sensual, serpentine twisting strokes. Her unerring sense of space, shape, and — above all — gesture invariably makes for an exhilarating viewing experience.

Richard Carlson, on the other hand, is an abstract classicist. His precise (but not exactly hard-edge) compositions are notable for their stately formal austerity, combined with an exquisitely restrained expressiveness. Here he was represented by three mixed media paintings from his "White Tunnel" series. Close-valued geometric color areas are enlivened by faint palimpsests and bits of pentimento that suggest phantom forms beneath Carlson's main ones. Although the clarity of his compositions captures one's attention from all the way across the room, these underlying elements, as well as the piquant variations of tone and touch at the edges where the colors meet, provide subtle sensual pleasures at close range.

Patience Prescott Sundaresan, the show's
Continued on page 26

"Abstract Plus" recently seen at
Broadway Mall Community Center,
Broadway and 96th Street (center isle)

Deborah Sudran is That Rare Postmodern Painter Brave Enough to Embrace Beauty

Norman Mailer once said that the one identity he found "absolutely insupportable" for himself was that of the "nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn." The visual artist Deborah Sudran admittedly feels much the same way about the possibility of being regarded as a "flower painter." But neither Mailer nor Sudran could ever be in danger of being misconstrued so simplistically by any person sophisticated enough to understand their work or be worthy of its concerns.

In Sudran's case, to trivialize her paintings in such a manner would be as ludicrous as calling Cezanne a "landscape painter," Modigliani a "people painter" or Morandi a "bottle painter." For while flowers and plants may be their ostensible subjects, what Sudran's paintings are primarily about are formal relationships and color juxtapositions. That she chooses botanical forms as her creative vehicle merely enables her to add yet another layer of complexity to her essentially abstract project. Paradoxically, grounding her pictures in a specific, particularly vibrant aspect of nature enables her to transcend the sterility of a strict formalism and engage with the ineffable mystery of what Dylan Thomas so eloquently termed "the force that through green fuse drives the flower."

Indeed, to discount the importance of these less tangible aspects of Sudran's work would be to trivialize it in yet another way, since along with their formal attributes, her paintings possess a visionary vividness which is very much a part of their power. For while she works from her own photographs, culled from in her travels to places as far away as Guatemala and as close to home as Central Park and the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, she is by no means a Photo-Realist painter. Rather, she often alters her photographic sources and adjusts colors to intensify the effect of nature.

Thus in Sudran's oil on canvas "Cacti and Succulents 10," for example, the yellow thorns thrust forward from the dark green barrel cactus like spiky stars, and in another composition called "Ornamental Cabbage," the crinkly pink leaves, with areas of blue green encircling

them like baby-blue bonnets, combine the labial sensuality of spiraling rose petals with the boingy presence of sunflowers.

These dynamic juxtapositions come about in no small part because Sudran

allusiveness of the thick stemmed, pink bulbed plant at the center composition, as well as the mask-like qualities of the small botanical form to its left and the resemblance of the two red flowers speckled with yellow dots on its right to stylized strawberries.

The emblematic quality of Sudran's gouaches helps make even more clear to the viewer that the subject matter of her paintings in both mediums is not only an occasion for abstraction but is also open to imaginative interpretation. By contrast, in her oils, it is the almost hallucinatory intricacy of her compositions, which are often as overall in organization as Pollock's drips and swirls, that warns one against taking anything in them too literally.

In the especially intricate oil, "Fieldflowers 2," in particular, where the dark areas between the plants and stems suggest a nocturnal background, the round centers of some of the flowers appear uncannily like the eyes of creatures staring out at one through dense jungle foliage. In this regard, even without as much deliberate distortion on the part of the artist, some of Sudran's paintings can seem as visionary as those of Charles Burchfield. For what Sudran does best is to somehow bring out the inherent ambiguity of reality by virtue of a subtle imageistic juxtapositioning and coloristic heightening, rather than by means of obvious distortions of form.

Returning to the New York art scene after a long hiatus from exhibiting, during which she continued to paint in self-willed isolation, Deborah Sudran's new solo exhibition will surely gain her many new admirers. For here is an artist of mature gifts with work that should come as a welcome relief for many from the superficial novelty all too prevalent in many galleries today. No mere "flower painter" by any means, Sudran's paintings are hardly pretty. Rather, they are tough and brave for being truly beautiful in an era when it can almost seem that beauty has become the last taboo.

— Ed McCormack

Deborah Sudran, Viridian Artists, Inc.,
530 West 25th Street, February 8 - 26.
Reception: Saturday, February 12, 4 - 6 pm



Fieldflowers 1

happens to be a consummate colorist, something that comes across just as strongly in her gouaches as in her oils. Indeed, the matte quality of opaque watercolor in no way dims her chromatic dynamism. This can be seen to special advantage in "Cacti and Succulents 10," a work in that medium with an identical name but a much different composition than its aforementioned counterpart in oil on canvas. Here, her use of unlikely hues, such as greens, pinks, and purples, set against a peculiar orange / ochre ground not only reveals her almost Fauvist coloristic intrepidity, but the relative flatness of the medium, which emphasizes her use of line and clearly defined color areas (as in a Japanese print), also highlights the abstract characteristics of her compositions. By further divorcing her imagery from naturalism, it opens up associative possibilities such as the phallic

Did Dontzoff Paints the Human Image in the Raw

Born in Paris of Russian, Jewish, and Gypsy origins, Did Dontzoff is a painter with his own unique vernacular, which can only be described as a sophisticated variant on Dubuffet's "art brut," seasoned by the streets in much the same manner as the poetry of Jacques Prévert and the songs of Charles Aznavour.

For while also influenced by Russian native crafts, Dontzoff's blunt, expressive figures, with their thick outlines and totemic presences, suggest eternal flaneurs and boulevardiers, Apache Everymen trapped in the net of life.

"My paintings are inescapable because they are made of life, which instills deep expression in the work," the artist declares, sounding like one of the men that he paints, pondering his own predicament. "There is constant movement, but no answers."

There is also something of Leonard Baskin's stark, streaked graphic humanism in Dontzoff's bold personages, with the surfaces within their bold black contours veined with lines like those in a crude woodcut. One could also cite African tribal

sculpture as a possible source for their rugged angularity and almost unnerving presence.

Like Dubuffet himself, or the over-the-top drawings that Andy Masson created

to illustrate Georges Bataille's novel "The Dead Man" (sans the gratuitous obscenity) Dontzoff's paintings in black India ink and acrylic are raw and vigorous, partaking of the directness of so-called outsider art from a more sophisticated perspective informed by art historical awareness. Yet they are free of the constraints of what Dubuffet referred to as "asphyxiating culture."

For even as their compositions display an undeniable cohesiveness of design, they make no concessions to the conventions of polite taste.

Indeed, there is something of the trickster in Dontzoff, of the magician who dazzles his audience with sleight of hand and picks one's pocket at the same time — at least figuratively speaking. Just listen to his voice, as he pulls the wool over one's eyes in a statement issued in connection with his present exhibition: "Man, woman, dialogue



"On ne Passe pas"

of deaf and dumb, first images, before the sound, separate for ever, man, woman, painting, painting of a fit of laughter, vida, senora, por favor, after I beg you, do as you may, Madame, sit down, how may I help you? Love, you are certain of it, so ok, I give you blue and black, with a zest of red all that mixed with our 'sauce du moment,' and preferably to consume every day."

One could also see Dontzoff as an artistic shaman, creating starkly simplified human effigies that take on a monumental, monolithic presence, like towering constructions made from slabs of slate, yet seem somehow possessed of a poignantly affecting soulfulness. Indeed, one could go on ad absurdum, puzzling over the strange power of Did Dontzoff's work. But let's simply give the last word to his kindred spirit and fellow Parisian, the late cafe poet and mensch of the boulevards, Jacques Prévert, as to what these are paintings of: "Of a world sober and drunk / Of a world sad and gay / Tender and cruel / Real and surreal / Terrifying and funny / Nocturnal and diurnal / Usual and unusual / Handsome as hell."

— Byron Coleman

Did Dontzoff, Agora Gallery,
530 West 25th St, March 25 - April 15, 2011.
Reception: March 31, 6 - 8pm.

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Beverly A. Smith's Happy Marriage of Nature and Transcendence

It stands to reason that the art of Beverly A. Smith is so brilliantly saturated with sunlight, since she lives and works in Sarasota Florida. In fact, the painting that she calls "Sarasota" could be seen as her signature work, given its exuberant chromatic explosions of yellow and verdant green strokes, which fill the canvas with a sun-drenched sense of energy.

Like other female abstract painters before her — most particularly Helen Frankenthaler and Joan Mitchell — Smith presents a lush, positive, and life-affirming answer to the miasma of male angst that hangs heavily over so much contemporary art. A delightful effusiveness is what animates Smith's work in particular, with its veritable showers of luminous color. Indeed, even though she is still too young for her career to have begun at the time that the critic and Abstract Expressionist advocate Harold Rosenberg coined the phrase "action painting," that designation seems tailor-made for her.

For what Smith conveys in her compositions, most of which are done in thick impastos of oil paint applied to the canvas with a palette knife rather than brushes, is the spirit and emotional energy of nature, rather than its outward manifestations.

And while the sunlight that saturates her present paintings is most immediately that which warms her days in Sarasota, she actually grew up in Boston, Massachusetts, and only moved to Florida about three years ago. Learning that she has been inspired by the marshes in Falmouth or Edgartown, Cape Cod, also goes a long way toward explaining the total effect of a painting such as "Tip Toe Marsh," one of her most exhilarating oils on canvas. For in this, one of her most representational canvases in its own unique way as well, one can clearly discern the brilliant blue waters and high grasses that make up such wetlands, with their porous limestone bedrock and dense, moist vegetation. In Smith's paintings, the tall grasses appear as though scraped into the surface of the pigment with the tip of the palette knife or the handle of the brush, giving an extra tactile dimension, as well as greater chromatic subtlety, to the picture by

revealing the layers of yellow hues beneath the green, lending yet another luminous coloristic element to the picture. The entire painting — but especially the cerulean blue water of the marsh — shimmers with a kind of succulence and reflectiveness that makes one think of Monet's water lilies,



"Acceptance"

albeit laid down on canvas with looser strokes that are more expressionistic than impressionistic. The vigorous manner of execution of the scored and scratched grasses provides a lively contrast to the pure yellow splash of sunlight that illuminates the entire upper right portion of the composition so brilliantly. Indeed, that Smith adheres more to the spontaneous energy of Expressionism, rather than the quasi-scientific calculation of Impressionism is what imbues her paintings with their emotional content.

Perhaps this emotional component of her work comes across most clearly in "Acceptance," a composition that appears to mingle elements of both joy and melancholy in its palette of pinks, blues, and greens, laid down in vigorous strokes in a mostly vertical direction. This canvas could be said to be less representational than "Tip Toe Marsh," in that there is not as much sense of the lay of the land or the flow of the water as in the previous painting. Rather, we are presented with a juicy configuration of forms pressing forward on the two-dimensional space of the picture plane that convey a feeling more clearly than they suggest an image, an experiential — and therefore emotional — impression that resonates and hints as to the possible meaning of the title.

By contrast, somewhat more tumultuous emotions appear to be evoked in the painting that Smith calls "Restraint," where a whirlwind of strokes in somewhat uncharacteristically darker tonalities swirls over the entire surface of the composition with a stormy energy. Indeed, here, Smith demonstrates that, unlike many abstract painters who settle on a trademark style in order to make their work more uniformly marketable, she is not willing to restrict her palette or to endlessly repeat the same motifs for the sake of achieving stylistic consistency. Rather, apparently subscribing to the belief that "style is character," she trusts in the authenticity of her emotions and the strength of her own character to carry the work forward, trusting that the perceptive viewer will be able to discern for him or herself the deeper consistency that she strives for in all the varied facets of her creative oeuvre.

That Smith, while working primarily from nature, also gives free reign to imagination as well, can only be surmised from another somewhat anomalous composition that she calls "Bedouins II." For although one always risks being misled (not to mention misleading the reader) when one takes the title of any abstract painting too literally, in this work the small forms, partially obscured here and there within an expansive vortex of pinkish pigment, could indeed suggest the slow progress of desert nomads making their way through a sand storm.

At the same time, however, to search for too many specific meanings in the work of a painter such as Beverly A. Smith is to miss the larger point of her ambitious artistic project. For it is the autonomous aesthetic attributes of paintings such as these that provide the viewer with deeper and more relevant riches of enjoyment. And it is the manner in which the artist activates her materials to recreate the experience of the visual world, rather than merely copying its superficial aspects, that finally lends Smith's paintings their truly transcendent appeal.

— Byron Coleman

Beverly A. Smith,
New Century Artists Gallery,
530 West 25th Street, March 1 - 19.

Robert Cenedella: The Art World's Last Angry Man



"The Gallery Opening"

Whenever I look at "Gallery Opening," a large color serigraph by Robert Cenedella that dominates its own wall in my wife's home office, where I see it every day, I am reminded once again why I rarely attend art receptions and have as little to do with art world politics as possible. Cenedella, who is fond of saying that, like the great Ashcan School master Robert Henry, he would rather show his work in saloons than salons, obviously shares my distaste for the schmoozy social aspects of the business in which we both find ourselves for different reasons.

It happens that Cenedella and I both attended the High School of Music and Art, however briefly, back in the fifties. I spent only a few days there before transferring back to my neighborhood high school, where I didn't have so much competition from other talented kids and could continue being the proverbial big fish in the small pond. But Cenedella, who already had political principles and a desire to stick it to the system, got expelled for writing an article satirizing the school's air raid drills as pointless precautions against atomic armageddon.

Obviously, Cenedella's penchant for heckling all that he perceives as being patently absurd started long before Victor Navasky, Editor-in-Chief of that great liberal journal *The Nation*, praised him in print as a "cagey outsider" and "an original," who employs "a fiendishly comic sensibility" to "capture the brutality of spectators at a boxing match and the

degradation of city politics."

Cenedella applies those same satirical attributes to the art scene in "Gallery Opening," skewering some of the more obvious freeloaders and phonies who flock to such events with caricatures that hark back to Thomas Rowlandson and William Hogarth. The latter artist, who was a painter as well as a draftsman comes particularly to mind, for besides being a satirist, Cenedella is a fine painter. Although his wit sometimes upstages his painterly finesse, his skill as a straightforward realist comes across perhaps most clearly in the relatively simple still life "Owl and Truck," where the bird's downy feathers and the chipped paint on the surface of the old toy truck provide subtle coloristic and tactile contrasts.

This somewhat atypical painting, particularly, reveals the formal command that lends cohesion to even Cenedella's most dazzlingly complex and riotous figurative compositions.

"Gallery Opening" certainly ranks high among the latter, with its array of figures tautly organized and gracefully

choreographed after the manner of Bruegel's rollicking peasant festivals. Only, these characters (one of whom is a dead ringer for the late critical blowhard Clement Greenberg) are hardly as earthy or endearing as Bruegel's, as they bloat with pretentious gestures, preen narcissistically, and hover vulturic around the drink cart, causing the poor, besieged, red-coated waiter to roll his eyes away wearily. Naturally, nobody is even bothering to look at the art, which in this case consists of what appears to be living people suspended, as if in a torture chamber, from the walls. Could they be less trendy artists "strapped" for cash?

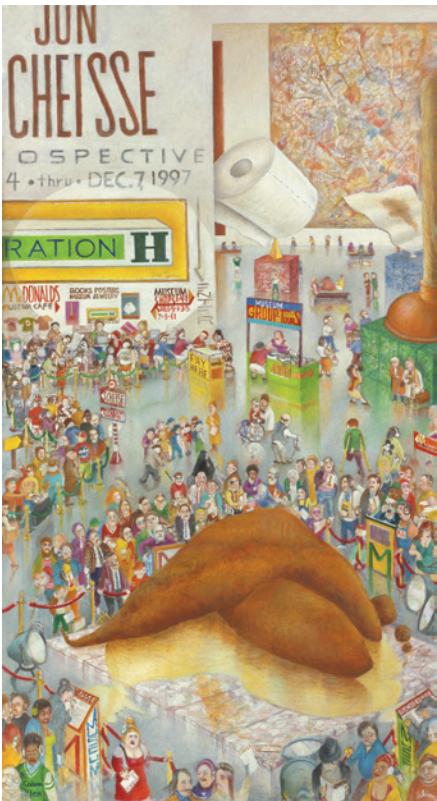
Scathing as it is, however, "Gallery Opening" is hardly Cenedella's most damning indictment of the contemporary art scene. That distinction belongs to "The Museum," by far his most controversial work. Indeed, it speaks well for the integrity of The Art Students League, where Cenedella once studied with George Grosz, and where he now continues teaching in that great German expatriate's social realist tradition, that the administration didn't give in to pressure from some quarters and withdraw the painting from its front windows. Nor did that



"Owl and Truck"

enlightened institution bend when some passersby on 57th Street came in frothing at the mouth over his right on the money antimaterialist statement featuring a crucified Santa.

In "The Museum," we see mobs of



"The Museum"

clueless cultural sycophants swarming like hungry flies around a huge pedestal heaped high with a super-sized pile of steaming, viscerally glistening excrement. Yet, here, as in all of Cenedella's best work, the peripheral details are every bit as important as the main event, depicting a gigantic art mall where Pop paintings of Preparation H, a giant roll of toilet paper ala Oldenburg, and a gargantuan plunger on its own pedestal can also be seen in the background.

For arguably even more repulsive than the monstrous pile of fecal matter that serves as the exhibition's putrid piece de resistance, Cenedella seems to be telling us, is a cultural institution that would stoop to scatology in order to compete with the mass media by pandering to the insatiable public appetite for vulgarity. And Cenedella's point is certainly well taken, for he makes it with the good humor of a man who takes such wicked delight in human stupidity that his anger is invariably more bemused than ill-tempered.

Yet, admittedly, as heartfelt an expression of disgust with cultural corruption as it is, "The Museum" is not a picture that I could live with as easily as I do with "Gallery Opening." In fact, I'm sure that having it around would adversely affect my appetite, since, like those of a lot of other New Yorkers, ours is a relatively small apartment, where we truly must

live intimately with the art on the walls. Surely Cenedella had to know that most viewers — even those who appreciate his mission to "kick against the pricks," in Pound's memorable phrase — would probably feel much the same way about this particular work.

Then again, few of us would want Goya's "Saturn Eating his Son" hanging over the dining room table either. And it is much to Cenedella's credit that he does not inhibit his creative impulses in order to avoid giving offense, especially when one considers that some of his most publicized and presumably most lucrative commissions have been for murals in upscale restaurants.

One thinks particularly of his six-by-ten-foot mural for "Le Cirque," containing more than 150 portraits of



"The Vision"

that elegant eatery's celebrity patrons and staff, which got written up in *The New Yorker*. Such a write-up is something that, as an editor once told me when I got mentioned in Liz Smith's column, "many people would kill for." But Cenedella is hardly a man to be chastened by favorable publicity, even when it comes from a liberal icon like columnist Murray Kempton, who once began a piece about one of his shows with the characteristically Zen-like lead sentence: "Yes Art, which will burst upon us all at the Fitzgerald Gallery tomorrow, is one of the most serious expressions possible to the aesthetic impulse, that is, a joke."

"I guess I invented Conceptual Art without knowing it," Cenedella says of that 1965 solo show. "So much of what I did as a joke has been done seriously since

that time..."

"Yes Art" was one of his more rueful jokes, a parting shot at Pop, when, as he put it in a recent e-mail, he "said my farewell to 'Art' by joining an ad agency to escape the commerciality of the art world." By this time, Cenedella had every reason to despair of the art world, having endured the hardships depicted symbolically in his 1962 oil canvas, "The Vision," where a lone, mutilated artist, his entire head swathed in bandages, staggers blindly through a landscape of infinite rubble under a dramatic post-nuclear sky. A surreal take on the lot of the artist in modern society, this early work still holds up as a powerful, gorgeously painted statement, akin to his mentor George Grosz's great canvas "The Wanderer" or Peter Blume's "The Eternal City."

In much the same way that a musician realizes immediately in the recording studio that he or she has a hit song, Cenedella must have known that he had made an important breakthrough with this painting, since it is alternately known as "The Victor." But he was obviously not feeling very victorious just three years later, when the kind of passionate figurative painting that Abstract Expressionism had all but eclipsed was dealt yet another blow by this shiny new product of commercial irony called Pop.

Along with "Souperman" in his blue union suit and red cape painting a Campbell's can — a double parody of Lichtenstein and Warhol — Cenedella's intended swan song, the Yes Art exhibition, offered another Andy takeoff called "Brillo Descending the Staircase," as well as actual S&H Green Stamps to those who purchased real Brillo boxes



"Souperman"



"Veteran"

(\$6.75 if folded by the artist, \$5.75, if self-folded). His disgust with the whole scene is made manifest in another work of the same year, a silkscreen of Robert Indiana's famous print with the word "Love" replaced by "Shit."

While some of his detractors might disagree, Cenedella was not cut out to be a Mad Man in the Don Draper mold. Unlike Warhol, who easily made the transition in the opposite direction, since his paintings were just as commercial as the shoe illustrations he had done for Bonwit Teller, Cenedella's take on advertising was too unslick and wildly original to fly on Mad. Ave. After awhile, he quit the ad game, and returned to his first love, painting, with a vengeance.

Over the next four decades, along

with a steady stream of satirical graphics — "We All Live in Harrisburg," in which Wyeth's "Christina" crouches in the grass gazing at the leaking nuclear reactors; "Read Their Lips," in which a prissy, purse-lipped George Bush Senior in drag stands in for one of Grant Wood's "Daughters of the Revolution," among others — Cenedella painted many of his best known oils on canvas:

"59th Street Station" is one of the great American Subway scenes, a raucous rush hour answer to George Tooker's spooky vision of a subterranean hall of mirrors. "Broome Street Bar" transforms one of Cenedella's favorite Soho watering holes into an Ensor carnival of grotesque faces grimacing brilliantly amid checkerboard tablecloths, stained glass decorations, and hanging ferns. (Far from being offended, the establishment's owner, Kenn Reisdorf says of the artist,

"He always puts his thoughts and feelings out for others to respond to. I love the guy. He knows how to hate well. He knows how to love. He is alive.")

With an antic passion reminiscent of Ucello, "Battlefield of Energy" is a contemporary history painting in which Cenedella depicts the oil crisis as "the oil companies going to war against the people while our government stands by and lets them." And history painting takes on an almost Boschian hellishness in "2001—A Stock Odyssey," another intricate multifigure composition commemorating a day that the dow topped 2,000.

When the artist announced that he was selling stock in the latter painting, the novel notion rated a full page write-up in *The New York Times*. But even more amusing, Leo Castelli, one of the then key players in the avant garde

art establishment that Bob Cenedella relentless attacks was quoted in it, having to admit, "It's a conceptual work of art in a way. And for that particular painter, it is an interesting idea."

That particular painter should soon surprise some movers and shakers in an even larger arena, when he unveils his group portrait in progress of the United States Senate. — Ed McCormack

Robert Cenedella
Studio 57 Fine Arts
212-956-9395

RESOLUTION

Continued from page 19

a dancing line. The three compositions in her "Trio" series make for a charmingly musical do re mi of a sequence.

Marie Robison's small works have a winning combination of innocence and sophistication, ranging from an airy architectural study, to a painterly bouquet of bubblegum pink flowers, to windblown instruments for a rock combo. All have a breezy grace increasingly rare in today's angst-ridden gallery scene.

— Marie R. Pagano

WEST SIDE ARTS

Continued from page 20

curator, provides the "Plus" part of the exhibition with her evocative photos mounted on board. Despite her different medium, Sundaresan's atmospheric landscapes seem at home among paintings, given their own "painterly" attributes. For her vibrant pink, blue, and yellow skies and shadowy trees, trestles, bridges, and land masses give the viewer a sense of velocity akin to speeding along in an automobile at dusk or dawn.

— Byron Coleman



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Stephen Hall Evokes a Tattooed Sideshow Reality

A Scottish born painter who moved to New York in 1978 and gravitated quite naturally by dint of simpatico temperament to the vital, funky East Village art scene of the early '80s, Stephen Hall puts classical figurative skills to the service of subject matter that can only be called bizarre in the very best sense of the term.

Like that of Ed Paschke, the most gifted and visionary artist to emerge from Chicago's "Hairy Who" school in the 1960s, Hall's work immediately captures one's attention with its sideshow strangeness, its obsessively patterned surfaces, its fetishistically meticulous finish.

Indeed, such is the intensity of his vision that one might be tempted to see him as an extraordinarily gifted outsider artist along the lines of Joe Coleman, if not for the sophisticated subtlety of his personal iconography and the consummate mastery of his realist technique.

Lit as though by garish neon that flashes a fluorescent blue, red, or violet cast over their skin, the exotic subjects of Hall's "Diverse Cultural Portraits" series are living embodiments of a surreal culture shock: In "Beauty and the Ugly Truth," a geisha tattooed like an Aborigine with swirling decorative arabesques and floral patterns poses primly before a backdrop swarming with the shadows of pliers. In "Rolex Revolutionary," a Mexican guerilla in a huge sombrero clutches his carbine, as he stands beside a puny purple chihuahua, proudly sporting the deluxe timepiece of the title. In "Whodo Guru," a dubious white-whiskered, cross-legged mystic with a pair of red Adidas raises a benevolent palm while clutching a human skull with the other, while shadowy helicopters swarm like insects around him.

In another series simply titled "Fish," Hall's "Swordfish" casts the big blue meanie adrift in a blood-red sea amid multiple silhouettes of sexy spike-heeled shoes, as though quite literally navigating undercurrents of S&M eroticism. And in other paintings from the same series, the undersea creatures appear somehow as pregnant with potential chaos as torpedoes unleashed from a submarine, as they stream alone or in schools through the ocean depths, driven by blind instincts not unlike our own.

Stephen Hall is an artist with a unique aesthetic sensibility which, as one of his aforementioned titles indicates, embraces beauty and "the ugly truth" as equal partners in the murky existential miasma that is life. His paintings confront us with complex conundrums for which each of many possible solutions may very well tell us as much about ourselves as about the subject at hand.

In the hands of a lesser painter such themes would seem impossible to bring off convincingly; however, Hall's flawless technique enables him to imbue unlikely juxtapositions of imagery with startling verisimilitude. Such classical mastery of a venerable medium seems all the more remarkable in an artist who has also thrived creatively in the field of music videos, where he has worked with Lenny Kravitz, the B52's, and numerous other popular recording personalities. One can only surmise that his forays into newer media contribute to the striking contemporary immediacy that makes Stephen Hall one of our more exciting Pop Surrealists.

-Ed McCormack



"Whodo Guru"

Paul M. Cote Journeys from Rage to Raw Beauty

Paul M. Cote is a postmodern artist inspired by the great modernists — particularly Jackson Pollock. It could be a coincidence that Cote signs his paintings with the nom de brush “Cody,” and Pollock grew up in Cody, Wyoming. But like his great predecessor, Cote comes across as an artistic cowboy, lassoing his forms with skeins of flung pigment like Buffalo Bill Cody on mammoth canvases that suggest the expansive scale of the Old West.

At the same time — since Cote often embeds rocks, sea shells, crystals, screws, nails, masks, broken glass, old gold picture frames, and even whimsical 3-D figures of butterflies festooned with white feathers into his thick impasto surfaces — there’s also a hint of the funky 1980s East Village found-object funk assemblage ala Julian Schnabel and Jean-Michel Basquiat in his explosive compositions. Add the Post-Pop-Cosmic sensibility of an artist who cites “science fiction and the universe” as two of his major enthusiasms; the natural physicality of a kid who grew up playing hockey, baseball, and football; the aggressive spirit of an adult who has earned his living playing and teaching tennis and has trained as competitive bodybuilding — and you may get some idea of what we are dealing with here.

Cote calls painting “The Gift,” since it came to him on an impulse, mercifully ending a period of his life that he now refers to as “the uncentered years.” Thus he seems to regard art as something akin to spiritual salvation and to embrace it with the

conviction of the newly converted. So don’t look for traditional technical finesse in his big, bold solo show at Caelum Gallery, but

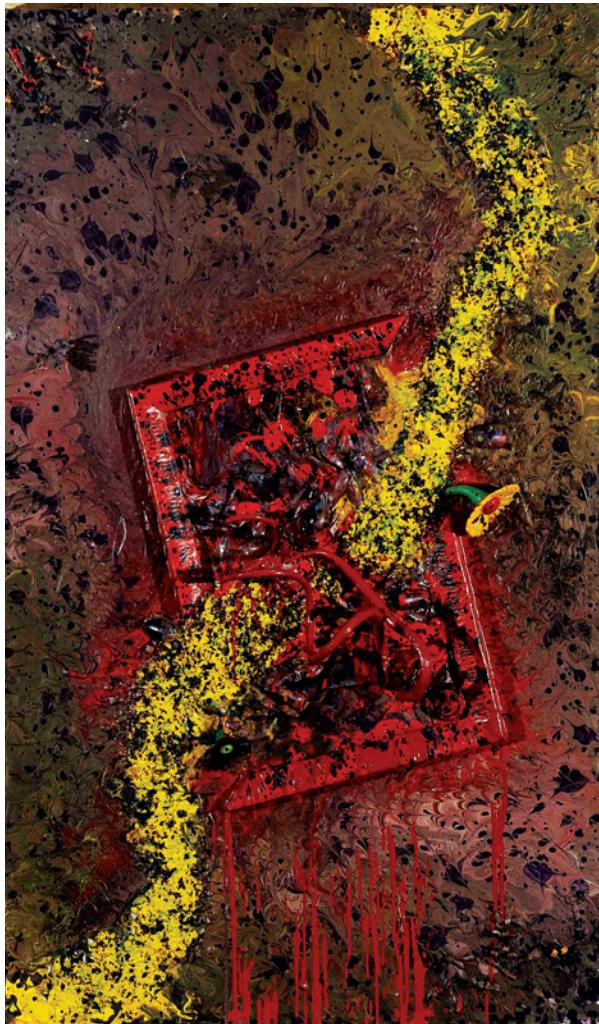
in his studio shows him spreading paint on a canvas laid out on the floor with what appears to be a mop! The results are thickly layered monoliths that often take on the heft of bas reliefs, given the combination of thick pigment and embedded objects that lend Cote’s work unique heft and depth.

Characteristically tactile is the canvas called “Lonely Road,” where a winding configuration of piled-up pebbles, splashed with strident yellow drips, swerves through and shatters a large red picture frame. One could read obvious meanings into this work: As in “The Wizard of Oz,” following the yellow brick road of art can lead to a magical place. But to get there one must be willing to spend many hours working in isolation in the studio. And it will only be worthwhile if, at the end of the day, the frame of conventional constraints is shattered and new ground is gained...

But to second-guess such an open-ended abstraction so specifically, rather than engaging with it primarily for its autonomous aesthetic attributes, can be a risky venture. Unless, of course, it is a painting such as the powerfully indignant “Universal Screwing by BP,” in which Cote vents his rage at the Deepwater Horizon oil spill by engulfing small figures of birds, symbolic scatterings of screws, and other objects in swirling layers of mucky black pigment.

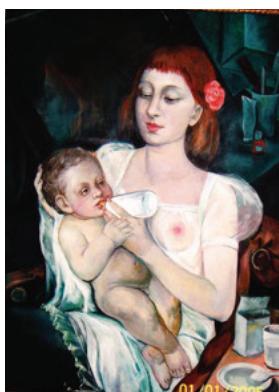
By contrast, another large canvas, hung quadrilaterally, and simply titled “Serenity,” draws the viewer into a luminous space where crystalline blue and white ripples create the sense of a lyrical aquatic realm in a more perfect world than our own.

— Ed McCormack



“Lonely Road”

for the untrammeled passion of a natural born outsider who appears to wrestle each new composition into submission by sheer force of will. (One picture of him at work



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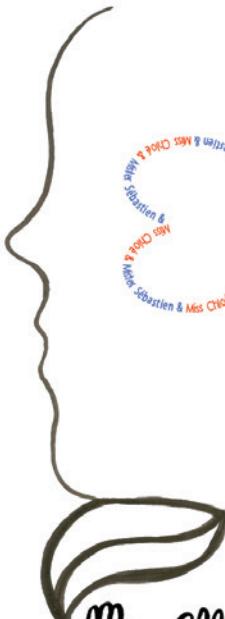
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