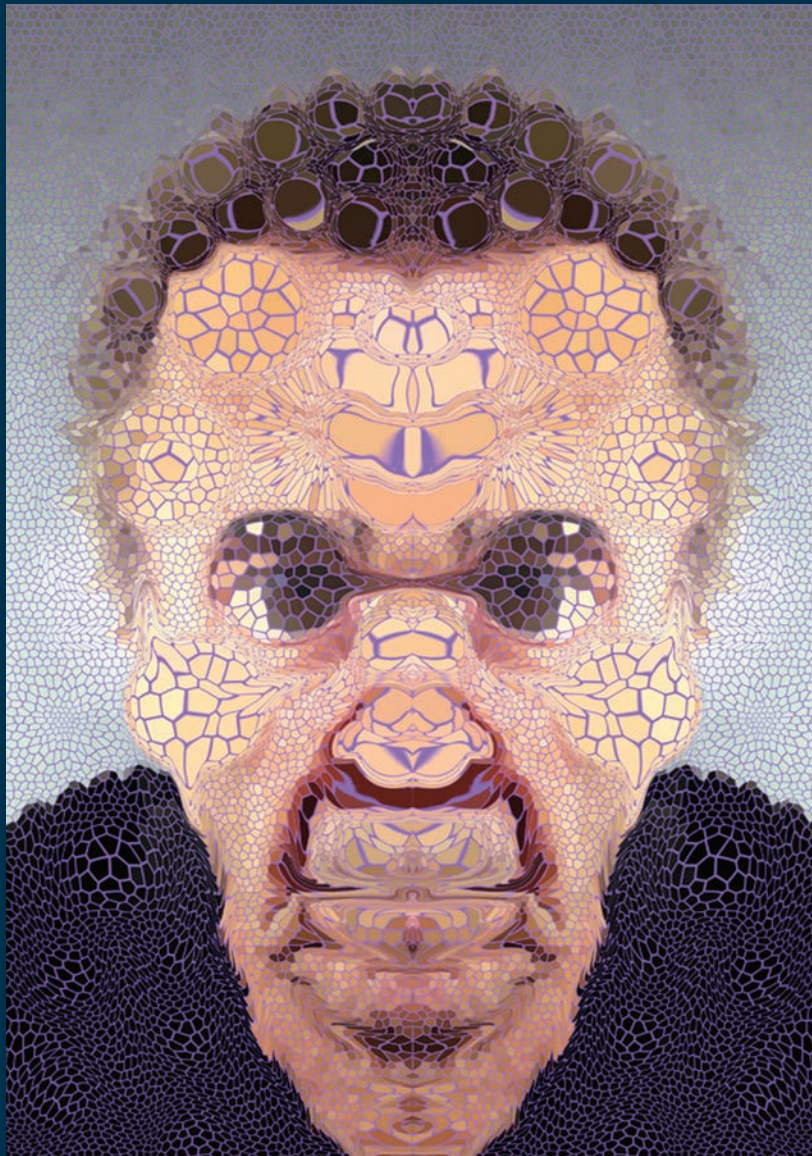


N·O·A·R

THE NEW ORLEANS ART REVIEW

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FEBRUARY / MARCH / APRIL / MAY 2011



Winter/Spring Double Issue

AUDRA KOHOUT



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Herman Mhire: *Ralph 6*, 2008. Giclée print, 80" high.

Herman Mhire: Portraits Now

BY TERRINGTON CALAS

HERMAN MHIRE
Altered States
Martine Chaisson Gallery
New Orleans, LA
—

IT IS HARDLY surprising when we read, at almost regular intervals, that painting – perdurable, history-laden painting – continues to retain its relevance in the contemporary art world. In its various guises, the ancient medium proves again and again that its strange alchemical power is inexhaustible. But the medium of our moment – the medium that fairly defines our conception of modernity – is photography. So wedded to accelerating technology, it seems unstoppable. It seems capable of anything. And, notably, more than ever before, it now occupies the same arena as painting.

In recent years, these two modes, once players in a faintly-remembered aesthetic skirmish, have appeared to overlap. At times, even effacing their distinctions. This is especially true of photography, which can assume a “painterli-

ness” via computer manipulation. A striking example of this is Herman Mhire’s suite of large portraits of Louisiana artists, recently on display at the Martine Chaisson Gallery.

These are photographic prints informed by painting. Works like these certify that photo programs, at last, have become versatile enough to seize some of painting’s expressive prerogative. Mhire’s best portrait heads are charged with the idiosyncratic jolt of a painter’s “touch,” a persuasive singularity. In *Ralph 6*, for instance, we sense a personal, even emotional, intrusion. The face is beyond manipulation. More than a stylized, elegantly automated distortion. It is twisted, mangled – as if bare fingers were pushing color across the surface. And, significantly, the image conjures the paint-tortured faces of artists such as Francis Bacon and Willem de Kooning.

This, and other pieces here, sit on a track of intensely subjective portraiture that goes back through high-modern expressionism, to Munch and van Gogh and, notably, to Géricault – those numbing studies of madness. In fact, Mhire’s heads possess the air of truth of those Géricaults.



Herman Mhire: *Dickie 2*, 2008. Giclée print, 90" high.

His *Dickie 2* and *Francis 4*, imply complex, perhaps secret, perhaps distressed inner lives. They seem no less timeless than the great Romantic's.

What sets them apart, patently, is form – the way Mhire actually makes these pictures. One could say he exploits the painterly extremes of techno-photo possibility. Most of the portraits have the sense of gestural transformation, human subjects recast with a brushwork-like vigor.

Often, the result is hyperbolic. Certain visages are comically animalized; others relentlessly patterned – sometimes to the point of mandala-like symmetry. In every case, moreover, the style is surpassingly fluent. Even the oddest distortions have grace. When human flesh is pulled and distended, as in *Ralph 6*, we sense a slow, reflective effort -- a refining effort. And the final image feels, at once, startling and inevitable.

The consequence of Mhire's approach is a sort of Photoshop mannerism – and distinctly of-today. It's cheek denotes the unique brand of irreverence we now see in a

large swath of contemporary art -- a healthy irreverence regarding everything, even long-standing modernist principles. Not long ago, the level of suavity in these pictures would have ranked them with the pink-and-green confections of *ancien régime* decadence.

The striking thing is this: Mhire's extreme maneuvers never read as preposterous. What they render, to be sure, is not realism. Instead, they declare reality. As I say, today's reality. And this suggests more than the appeal of computer-deft, mannered technique.

OURS IS A CULTURE of audacity and gadgetry. And what follows from it is a rhetorically unsubtle art, an art that discloses, even flaunts, its basis in mechanical contrivance. Mhire's new work does precisely that. In a piece like *Ralph 18*, the artist's techno virtuosity holds sway – that is, his extraordinary control of motif and color and spatial strategy. The photograph presents a mesmerizing spectacle of thick-to-thin loops that create, and almost subsume, an intriguingly demonic face.



Herman Mhire: *Ralph 15*, 2008. Giclée print, 80" high.

Dickie 2, with its rivaling cool/warm fragments and appalling eyes, yields something more counterpoised: its own brand of coherence. It enjoins us to relish a singular pictorial structure, but also to consider the untidy truth of a ravaged human presence. The face clutches your gaze. And it does so by way of distinct and opposing factors. A central T. S. Eliot precept, in paraphrase, underscores this: “the artist must sustain a disjunction of the man that feels and the mind that creates.” *Dickie 2* epitomizes that precarious aesthetic balance. It separates the formal from the emotional, while somehow fusing them. You witness Mhire’s painstaking composition as well as the poignancy of psychological weight. The former pulls you in; the latter keeps you there.

Still, it is important to note that, despite the balance, a certain detachment is foremost in these photographs; the posture here seems as supra-personal as Eliot’s own. Perfectionist technique causes this. Technological conviction

causes it. For me, it is the underlying potency in what Mhire does. He welcomes that prescribed “disjunction of man and mind” — the “mind” being the utterly controlled computer program. And, in true 21st century fashion, the program’s involvement is undisguised. It remains up-front. It confers a sense of the mechanical and, perhaps, a sense of play, even blithe play. It serves as a cool, glib distraction. We envision Mhire’s endless, painstaking keyboard ploys. All of this keeps him, and us, at a manifest remove. And it mitigates our experience. We get to the grave content slowly.

This matters because the ultimate force of a work like *Dickie 2* or *Ralph 15* or *Francis 4* is tantamount to the force of a latter-day expressionist painter — one who depicts an era through portraiture. One who depicts us. And it’s hard to look at ourselves, especially now. Our complex, dishevelled reality warrants a buffer, perhaps a painterly bulwark.

Mhire’s singular style suits well. □



Brian Borrello: *Night Sky with Antennas*. M/M.

Reflections on the Nature of Nature

BY KARL F VOLKMAR

THE MACHINE IN THE GARDEN
Prospect. 1.5 Group Exhibition
Octavia Gallery
New Orleans, LA

WITH OUR ASSIGNMENT from the editor in hand, we set out to visit the exhibition at Octavia Gallery in New Orleans on a bright and sunny Louisiana midwinter day, having decided to follow US 90 through sugar cane fields and across bayous as a pleasant prelude to an art exhibit whose curatorial theme was the interrelationship among man, nature and technology. After stopping at fresh produce stands along the way to purchase new crop strawberries and satsumas and crossing the Mississippi on the I-310 bridge, we glided into the city on banal I-10 and found our way to Magazine Street via Claiborne and Jefferson. Having found a parking space within a few blocks of the address, we got out of the car, locked up, and decided to stroll along the sidewalks this fine and beautiful day, window shopping here and there while searching for the gallery.

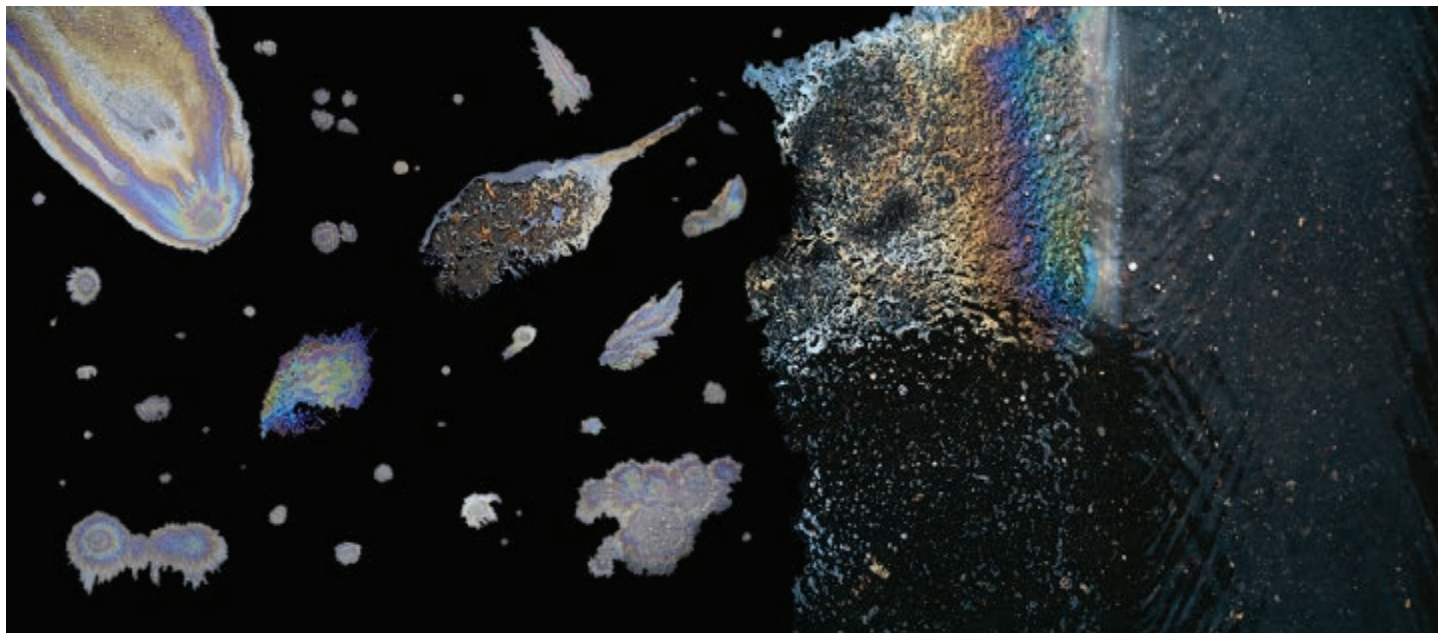
There it was, a small, pretty butter yellow house on the shady side of the street with a double pendant blue sign dangling in front. Crossing the street, we stared at the large black bear with a petite white something at his feet visible through the large front window. What had my editor gotten me involved with, some stuffed animal show?! Climbing the few steps to the entrance, we paused before the old weathered wood door to ring the buzzer.

The door opened and we walked inside, passing by the great bear standing quietly like a Kongo Rikishi guardian figure from some Buddhist temple in Japan.

We found ourselves standing in an intimate exhibition space. Sixteen mostly two dimensional works representing a variety of individual approaches referencing the theme of man, technology, and nature were displayed along the walls: works ranging from the intimate scale of Brian Borrello's indigo nocturnes to Ralph Bourque's emulations of primal consciousness, Christy Speakman's iridescent cosmos, the luminous opalescent atmosphere of Michel Varisco's aerial photographs of the Louisiana coastline, and Daphne Loney's ambiguous sculptural dream. It was an interesting collection of work that invited careful attention to appreciate the nuances of each artist's ideas.

BRIAN BORRELLO'S INTIMATE works, only four and one half by six and one half inches, are quiet meditations on darkness and light, the poetic in the most prosaic of subjects. At first the compositions appear to be little more than dark rectangles bound within even darker frames. As one moves closer and blocks the intruding gallery illumination, shapes appear amidst the darkness of the nighttime sky like the differentiation within an Ad Reinhardt abstraction.

In the broad (relatively speaking) expanse of the dark sky, one begins to discern patterns amid the multitude of pinpricks of starlight, arrived after light years of travel, scattered like the embers of fireflies illuminating a warm summer evening. The geometry of human construction is subsumed within the embrace of darkness,



Christy Speakman: *Cosmic Territory*. Cibachrome print, 40" high.

a place where human presence is only implied. The lower zone, just above the scarcely seen roofs, is enlightened by approaching dawn [or is that the glow of artificial city light?]. The rectilinear silhouettes contrast with the amorphous darkness of the skies. One becomes aware of light and dark as elements in a continuum and the differentiating power of light that makes the world apparent.

In *Night Sky with Powerlines*, the roofline lingers along the lower border. Values gradually shift from lighter to darker as the eye moves from earthly to infinite. External illumination shining across the tooth of the paper creates an irregular texture composed of subtle contrasts of shadows and lights. The eye is drawn into the star-speckled upper region by the soft gray shafts of power line poles rising into the nighttime sky. The paralleling curves of power lines define fluid linear rhythms that gently limn their way through the blue, hinting at the existence of deep space.

In *Night Sky with Comet*, brief apostrophes of light from a meteor storm streak out of the depths of the darkness like the angels in a Giotto fresco. A few vertical poles and the hazy silhouettes of gabled roofs measure the depth of the indigo sky. In an early dawn when the light of the sun only just begins to suggest itself beneath the still darkness of the night like a luminous mist, vertical shafts stretch upwards as their power lines loop their way across the darkness (*Night Sky with Antenna*). In *Night Sky with Full Moon*, a few feeble hints of stars are seen between the roofs as a luminous disc of silver white light and the tentative shape of the Big Dipper brightens the sky.

We are witnesses to a poetic moment, an illusory stasis in an Heraclitean universe where everything changes and everything remains the same, the breath of an experience of the infinite and the eternal as a moment when narcissism dissolves in the inchoate. Like the infinite travel of light emitted by long dead stars that will cease we know not where, so too will the energy of human structures and technologies fade into an entropic darkness.

THERE IS A TWOFOLD irony in the beauty of Christy Speakman's Cibachrome *Cosmic Territory*. In mimicking maps of

galaxies and computer generated graphic simulations of the effects of gravitation on the universe from photographs of the iridescent spectra refracted by earthly surfaces smeared with films of spilled and leaked petroleum distillates derived from deep within the earth, Speakman's process replicates the making of cosmic diagrams like those represented in Mayan mandalas that have survived in their Chiapan descendents' embroidered meditations: the simultaneous representation of the world below, the world of existence, and the world above. [In the context of representations of modern science, one might invoke analogies and homologies, a la Ilya Prigogine, among the subatomic, intracellular, ecological, and astronomical models of the workings of the world, i.e., universe.]

From another perspective one might consider Speakman's image as metaphor for the rational act of extrapolating models from what one can only know through signs gathered in the liminal plane of human sensory experience. There is an ontological irony in the fact that the light refracted from the leaked oil that is made from the petroleum formed deep in the earth that was formed from cosmic material of an expending universe itself is a product of that universe [remember the old saw about the house that Jack built?], and the parallels between universe and art making.

How does one respond to the questions about the problems surrounding pollution of the environment? Finding beauty in ugliness can be dangerous, distracting from attention away from real problems. Goya was successful in using the delicacy of line to underscore the horrors of *The Disasters of War* and the absurdities of *The Caprices*. In the example of *Cosmic Territory*, one's attention is directed towards the infinite cosmos. Yet Speakman's lack of obvious critique of the circumstances from which she created her art should not be considered as a failure to address serious environmental issues, for this can itself lead to important discourse. Or is this a case of an unwitting careerism in the manner in which critic Suzi Gablick questioned the strategies of Jeff Koons at a College Art Association discussion session some years ago?



Ralph Bourque: *Nutria*, Ink on paper, 22.5" high.

RALPH BOURQUE'S *Moon* offers an interesting segue from the previous two artists' into discussion of his works. The orb/disc of the moon lit by the invisible sun is a literal representation of light against darkness. The moon is an object that formed itself into a spherical mass out of cosmic material as the mutual attraction drew the particles together. The eye's awareness of the visible wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum reflected from the surface of the moon, what one calls seeing, and the sun as the source of light is said to illuminate the object. These are the basic facts of physics and the physiology of perception.

Light is only one means by which one apprehends existence. The use of the tactile-referenced word "apprehend" to designate becoming aware of and understanding through vision. To know an object through the haptic sense is literal apprehending. Yet one only experiences the moon through the medium of light, and knows its physical qualities through comparative reasoning and imagining what must be to explain what one sees.

Thus is defined the relationship between subject and object mediated by signs whether on earth or in the celestial realms. The most ordinary experience mirrors the most grand, i.e., the ancient notion of microcosm and macrocosm. The artist, representing light with the substance of pigment, suggests that visual knowing is both tactile and visual. Light as medium and substance lies in the nature of art. Light as making evident at the same time as it covers it up brings to mind the old discourse in re hypnotism as animal magnetism, the use of suggestion to direct behavior, and Freud's characterization of painting qua suggestion as a covering up.

Bourque's intention is to represent this oxymoronic state of revealing and hiding through the interaction of white and black as symbols of light and dark as poetic wonder. In the hands of the artist, the relationship between light and dark serve as analogy for consciousness. By varying the order of application of white pigment, lines, shapes, and illusions of form appear to emerge

from, and disappear into, each other, figures can become ground and ground figures (see "young girl-old woman" perceptual illusion), and patterns appear out of chaos as art and art making simulate the eye/mind's conjuring an object into existence.

In *Nutria*, created by 'floating' [the term used by the artists to describe his technique] white pigment over a black ground, mind's discernment of form through difference is countered by the relative physical closeness of the white pigment as substance, creating a shifting relationship between figure and ground. The perceptual phenomenon is metaphor for the nutria's integral relationship with its habitat as it emerges from the water in which it thrives and water streams off its body.

In his artist's statement, Bourque introduces another dimension to understanding his work because of the artist's experience being raised, living, and working in southern Louisiana and his awareness of the precarious balance between man and nature, the importance of the oil industry to the economic well being of the people, and the destruction wrought by that industry both by its practices, its pollution, and the recent BP spill. *Shore Birds* first appears as chaotic, scattered darks and lights, like congealed petroleum washed onto the Fort Morgan beach. The black oil created by the pressure of the earth laid over it over the millennia has escaped from deep within, emerging into the present, coating and covering with its mantle of primordial darkness. It is ironic that the blackness that was once covered now covers up.

Bourque also suggests that his use of white and black symbolize this dichotomous reality. In this the artist shares common ground with world cultures in the symbolic use of light and dark as, for example, among the Manicheans and Zoroastrians where black and white are/were symbols of dark and light, evil and good. The situation is more problematic, however, for Bourque realizes the good in the evil and the evil in the good that is not adequately represented in simple dualisms. A more satisfying model for this

dilemma is the Chinese notion of Yin-Yang. Another, more subtle model is the Neo-Platonic continuum in which black and white, light and dark, good and evil lie at opposite ends of a spectrum of values with infinite degrees of variation in between. This idea is found in some of the world's spiritual traditions, sometimes expressed in theological language describing a pan-, or panen-, theistic universe. A biblical example appears in the context of understanding the divine character of the universe and the moral responsibilities of humankind.

Thus, in this elaborate way, one can understand Bourque's fascination with seeing expressed in the dialectic of white and black, light and dark, as a fascination with fundamental processes of cognition, allegorized in stories of creation, such as *B'reishit/Genesis* 1:1-5. Indeed, Bourque's description of what inspired the present body of work might be, not inaccurately, characterized as a secular theophany of ongoing revelation. Is it just happenstance that the artist, raised in the heavily Christian Catholic culture of south Louisiana, should include a *Snake* whose serpent's body is massive blackness?

THE LUMINOUS VOLUMES of Michel Varisco's chromogenic photographs are, visually and conceptually are quite different from Bourque's work. Form and texture seem as if condensations of opalescent light, not unlike the process by which tar balls congeal from petroleum plumes drifting through warm gulf waters. While Varisco's photographs present information about wetlands and marshes, as visual experiences, they simulate the vertiginous experience of photographing while flying via aerial perspective, the apparent curvature of the earth's surface and horizon, the vantage point in the air looking out and down, and the intriguing tangent line perspective in which the line of sight swoops in towards and away from, moving closer and closer then further and further, from the center/surface of the earth.

There is an ironic contrast between the beauty that one sees and the exhilaration that one feels and what one knows about the destruction of coastal habitat and pollution, an inherent *double entendre* whenever the theme of man, nature, and technology is the inspiring idea for art making. The means of representation, the media of art, are themselves technologies created within the embrace of the broader question of humankind, nature, and technology of which they are an inalienable component: photography, the machines that enable flight, and off shore platforms. Thus the ironic condition that the means of representation and critique are subject to that same critique.

Nature as a product of mind, an idea, is a configuration of electrical energy, distinct from any presumed objectivity. One can only know through various sign systems which themselves may [seem?] to be mutually exclusive or congruent. One cannot be an objective observer apart from the system that one observes unless one is going to pronounce humankind as supernatural and not subject to natural laws. Yet, if objective is equated with scientific understanding, nature defined and described according to laws, mathematical modeling, and predictability, one must admit the limits of scientific objectivity when encountering by new information, such that new explanations are produced. So it is that ideas of what nature is or is not come may conflict. Classical physics may seem to work just fine for everyday living but, if one wants to understand how the universe really works, one has to embrace new physics and quantum theory. It does not change the cycle of raising

crops to know whether the sun revolves around the earth or the earth revolves around the sun. The season are as they are and there is a time for sowing and a time for reaping and so on and so on.

The union of human and natural is expressed in the esthetic unity of *Ead's Jetties*. The temporary articulation of difference and the resultant desire, the bane of existence, as if mind and body can ever be conceived as distinct, dissolves into a unified atmosphere of light not unlike later impressionist paintings by Pissarro or Monet. The human constructions, and destructions, mirroring the ordering process of reason are subsumed [a word also used when writing about Borrello's work] within an all embracing nature in *Rigs on Horizon*. The despoliation of nature relative to one's idea of what is natural vis-à-vis what is artificial, the hubris that considers itself as apart from as well as of nature and that we are capable of doing or being anything other than what is natural, dissolves into the luminous visions of *Spoiled Gulf* and *Steams of 'Moose' Oil in Gulf*.

DAPHNE LONEY'S *Seemingly Meaningless Moments, Have Their Own Beauty* is unique in the exhibition, not only because it is a three dimensional work, a mixed media sculpture, but also because its inspiration seems to come, not from natural world, but from the world of dreams and nightmares. A poignant chimerical figure, fusing images of a sheared lamb, or perhaps a goat, and a unicorn [unilamb?], lies at the feet of a rearing bear like the unicorn in captivity in the final scene of the *Unicorn Tapestries* at the Cloisters.

Symbol of love, purity, chastity, and sacrifice according to various interpretations, the unicorn/unilamb is emblematic of an edenic innocence, of a world as yet uncorrupted by human vanity. The soft texture of the white one contrasts with the dark coarseness of the bear's hair. The significance of the bear is ambiguous for it seems as much protector as mutilator. The resting unilamb seems oddly at peace, skin slashed through to reveal the red flesh beneath, bared gashes both horrific and oddly sensual, as if a metaphorical allusion to the vaginal labia, a sadomachistic symbiosis of the erotic and the violent.

What does the bear symbolize? He stands with his claws smeared with blood. Perhaps he has unwittingly harmed that which he loves? Bears can only be bears. Perhaps this is an instance of playfulness gone awry, an animal hurting that which he loves, because he is not aware of his own relative strength?

Or is there a reference to an illusion, of that which has been lost a lost innocence, perhaps? In the archetypal myth of the Garden of Eden, life and death are intertwined. Knowledge, sexuality, and suffering are the price of disobedience. Nature may not be so innocent after all. In Bosch's Eden a cat runs away with a mouse in its jaws. This is not the fantasy of Hicks' *Peaceable Kingdom*. The lion lies with the lamb only to devour it.

Seemingly Meaningless Moments, Have Their Own Beauty is coded with ambivalence: the problematic dualism of humanity and nature, that humankind is of nature, needing nature to survive, yet needing to survive the vagaries of nature, the means of survival provided by nature while destroying nature in the process, nature destroying itself. Male and female, pleasure and pain, life and death, horizontal and vertical, light and dark, softness and coarseness are dialectics in a world for which, perhaps, there is no synthesis. The dream of Eden is like fireflies captured by children as evening cedes to the night, dying, their cold light fading, fading, fading □



Gina Phillips: *Heroes and Villains*. Installation, 2011, Courtesy of Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.

Sewn It Up

BY KATHY RODRIGUEZ

MATTHEW COX
Refresh, Reconstitute, Embellish
GINA PHILLIPS
Heroes and Villains
Jonathan Ferrara Gallery
New Orleans, LA

SINCE AT LEAST the 1970s, fiber artists have consciously blurred the distinction between fine art and craft. This deep but debatable line is still tread through the endeavors of the artists who continue to work in the medium. Fabric itself connotes warmth and wrapping, of enclosing the human form within it. Its tactile and sensual qualities evoke vessels, feelings of cocooning, storing,

and protecting. To some, its inherent functionality negates its fine art status. Contrarily, throughout time, fabric has acted much like portraiture or history paintings. Fabrics narrate history, from as many perspectives as are embroidered into the Bayeux tapestry to the intimate and familiar genealogies pieced together in family quilts. It might seem difficult to manage the apparent disparity among these qualities of the fabric medium, but both Matthew Cox and Gina Phillips attempt to do so in their work. These artists explored content of the familiar, intimate, and narrative qualities conveyed by the medium in two simultaneous shows at Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.

Phillips' *Heroes and Villains* is at first glance a history. In previous series, she has explored the mash-up of sometimes incongruous imagery in historical painting. Several works about



Gina Phillips: *Let's Split*, 2011. Fabric, thread, ink, paint, 21" high. Courtesy of Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.

Fats Domino impossibly placed the musician in various historical settings such as the Battle of New Orleans, using the medium of appliquéd thread to create epic fabric “paintings.” But, in *Heroes and Villains* she breaks the figures and landscapes from the traditional rectangular format, allowing her narratives to flow over the walls of the gallery. *Adam and Eve* fills the wall to the left of the gallery entrance with monumental appliqués. A male and female figure each sit on either side of a fire beneath a canopy of tree boughs, which stretch just slightly over the corner of an adjacent wall. The shift is odd – the piece seems site-specific, but it fails to fit within its designated space. The branches are physically crooked, and a vulture with outstretched wings lurks above it, ready to swoop down from its disfigured perch. Differences in the flesh tones of the figures suggest different races, and the woman, rather than the man, tends the fire. All this seems to point to a reinterpretation of roles in the biblical story and leaves the players’ ultimate fate undetermined – the facial expressions of the figures indicate their unawareness of the pending death and consumption that waits, literally around a corner.

Phillips says in her statement that although her “players,” the individual human and bird figures released from the confines of the picture plane, may seem cruel and characterized by folly, hope

is inherent in the narrative. To convey this, Phillips lined figures along the two parallel walls of the main gallery space who brutally chopped weapons into each others’ heads, which spewed bright fountains of blood and chased each other with swords. Eagles carried away their dismembered body parts.

Individually, the figures are silk paintings outlined with black thread, recalling historical prints and paintings that relate to local history and the struggle between American Indian and colonial cultures. Each of these figures also resembles a large-scale patch that might be sewn to some kind of uniform as a marker of achievement – a sign of a historical event. But, the pins that affixed them to the wall evoke the idea of specimens, meticulously arranged to show a moment in life frozen in death. It is the “Convocation of Eagles” that, according to Phillips, represents the cathartic and restorative power of nature. The swooping motion of these birds trumps the static nature of the pinned and immobilized figures. The eagles carried the disembodied parts, severed during their ritualistic violence, off into other areas of the installation. But these limbs and hands reached and linked together, seeming to gravitate toward an undefined ground. Though nature will eventually remove man’s mess, there seems to be a chance for man to renew and restore his presence through the efforts of community,



Matthew Cox: *Foot with Seeded Grass*, 2010. Embroidered X-Ray, 10" high. Courtesy of Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.

much like Phillips' own neighborhood in the Ninth Ward.

Matthew Cox's embroidered x-rays comprised the show *Refresh, Reconstitute, Embellish* in the next room of the gallery. Like Phillips, Cox approaches fabric from a background in painting. Each artist maps color and texture to create representations of the human form. But Cox's use of fabric strays from Phillips' inherently painterly methods and into photography and the sculptural object. By modifying x-ray film with embroidery thread, Cox simultaneously obscures the fine art context of fabric and elevates the medium above one which is inherently scientific. However, both embroideries and x-rays are images subject to analysis and communicate meaning – they are objects meant to be seen to be appreciated. In a way, he may be debasing and elevating both kinds of materials.

The combination of thread and film results in a push and pull between concealing and revealing, inside and outside, warmth and coldness. The representation of toes woven into *Foot with Seeded Grass* gently step onto soft green threads that form a pastoral scene in the right half of the composition, but they are merely one-third of a foot whose bones are revealed in the attached film. The fleshiness of the foot stretches out of the empirical form of the x-ray and into the interpretive form of the embroidery, creating an abrupt division between cold observation and warm interactivity. Taken another way, the x-ray is the more intimate of the two halves. The viewer is privy to the inside of this anonymous subject, the most private view of the physical self, which in turn

could suggest inner thoughts and imaginings. It seems almost like reading the diary of a dead person. Still, its basis is in science and evidence; it has a black-and-whiteness that is emotionless compared to the color and gesture of the embroidery.

Each of the embroidered x-rays was pinned to the wall like a specimen. But, unlike Phillips, the hanging hardware seemed more intentional in the context of Cox's pieces. He stabbed each film with enormous sewing needles like spikes to the wall, allowing for several inches of space between the work and the support. While the work itself suggests a play between gentle nurture in healing and comfort, the needles were violent in contrast, emphasizing the coldness of the x-ray and the brutality that care can sometimes entail. The delicacy of the needle work is betrayed by the repetitive stabbing that is necessary to its process. There is uncomfortable tension between these opposites – how pain can lead to health – perhaps in the same way that Phillips' work suggests reconstitution via violence.

The work of these two artists uses fabric in a painterly way, linked to the history of tapestry and embroidery. They continue in a tradition of painterly fabrics to record and narrate facts, which, of course, are subject to interpretation. They reconsider and interpret information as they are passed along through time, creating fabrics that are metaphors for the aggregation of experiences from preceding generations. It is this new accumulation of the ways the fabric medium can be employed that informs future interpretation. □



David Grunfeld: From *Conscience*. Courtesy Carroll Gallery, Newcomb College, Tulane University.

An Art of Conscience

BY THOMASINE BARTLETT

CONSCIENCE
 Group Exhibition
 Carroll Gallery
 Newcomb College, Tulane University
 New Orleans, LA

LAURA RICHENS, CURATOR of the Carroll Gallery at Tulane University, had been thinking for a while that she wanted to do a show in which artists responded to war. Through conversations with her students, she realized that she was somewhat unique in having grown up in a period in which America was not at war, as she was very young when hostilities ended in Viet Nam and writing her graduate thesis when the first Gulf War took place. While the idea of artists responding to war intrigued her, facing the fifth anniversary of Katrina and the oil spill in the Gulf, she wanted to cast a wider net. Richens began looking at artists whose work responds

to political and/or social events in a socially conscious way. She did not necessarily want artists to make something specifically for this show, but wanted, instead, to find artists whose work generally spoke to the larger issues facing our society. She was also interested in showing artists who had not shown in the Carroll Gallery before.

IN THE EARLY stages of curating the show, Tulane Art Department faculty member Michael Plante suggested “Artists of Conscience” as a title. This became the working title during the early stages of organization, but began to seem like a label and was shortened to “Conscience.” Richens initially thought that there would be a large number of artists whose work could be considered for the show, but was surprised at what a limited number there actually were. Some of the invited artists were too busy to participate, and others did not really fit. The eventual selection of four artists, with not too many works each, allowed space for the viewer to contemplate each piece individually, and to think. The included artists were painter Keith



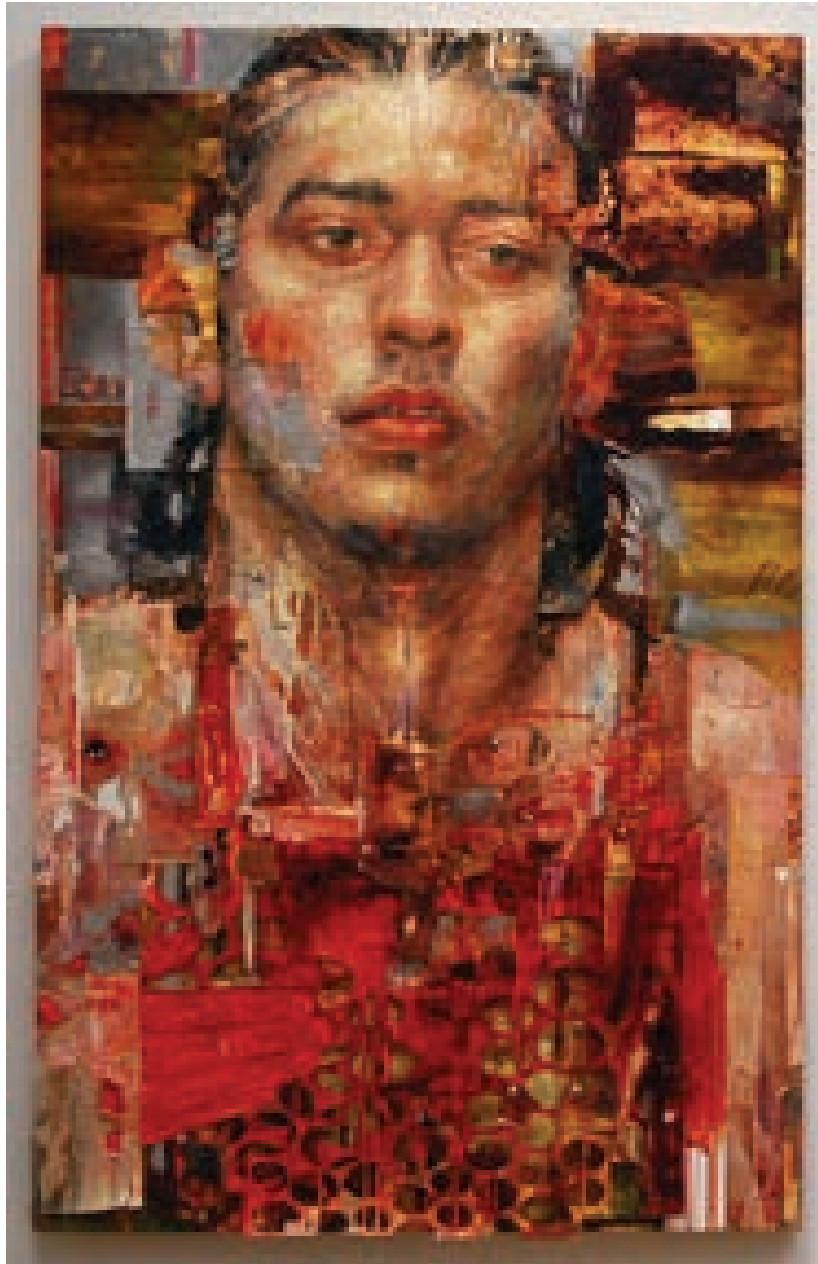
John Barnes. Courtesy of Carroll Gallery, Newcomb College, Tulane University.

Perelli, who Richens had wanted to include in a Carroll Gallery show for a while, mixed media sculptor John Barnes, documentary photographer David Grunfeld, and new-comer to town, installation artist Bob Snead.

Grunfeld's black and white, documentary photographs anchored the show to the socio-political issues that it sought to explore with a sense of "first response to disaster." Richens was pleased to include a documentary photographer as she felt it might provoke consideration of documentation as high art, particularly among the student population. One group of photographs, accompanied by a wall text, was of a family of oyster fishermen from Lafourche Parish, taken immediately after the BP oil spill. Brothers Nick and Levy Collins, their father Wilber Collins, and Port Sulphur oyster fisherman Pete Vujnovich were quoted in the text, voicing concern over the toxic dispersants being sprayed on the oil, the delicate balance of salt and fresh water required for healthy oysters, and the huge footprint of the oil. The Collins family has been harvesting

prime, Caminada Bay, Louisiana oysters for five generations. Other of Grunfeld's photographs, taken post-Katrina, recorded tragedy-stricken victims, together with first-responder graffiti (in one case, extended over the victim with makeup) and destroyed property. The straight-forward, black-and-white format of Grunfeld's pictures, combined with the seriousness of the subjects being depicted, gives the images an immediacy and real-ness that is extremely compelling, particularly in the face of the tragedies being depicted.

JOHN BARNES' WORK in "Conscience" responds to the concept of Eschatology – that "branch of theology ...concerned with ... death and Last Judgment; the ultimate destiny of humankind." Barnes is concerned about the quality of life for himself and his family in the midst of the "aggregate decrepitude" extending beyond the buildings damaged by, and unrepaired since, Katrina, to infuse the actual "pulse and rhythm of life here." Barnes' Altars, fusions of shotgun houses and canoe prows, reinvented in an "A"



Keith Perelli. Courtesy of Carroll Gallery, Newcomb College, Tulane University.

frame structure, are intended to point out the tensions of a fractured, Post-Katrina New Orleans, complete with subcultures of poverty and crime. The sculptures themselves are actually quite colorful, lyric, dancing houses, made of charred wood painted in the bright colors of downtown New Orleans architecture, in various states of decay and of maintenance and neglect. Many sport graffiti, mismatched weatherboards and a variety of iconography reminiscent of the poorer neighborhoods of New Orleans. It is Barnes' hope that the altars will spark a new awareness of the lingering devastation.

BARNES' "SUB-CULTURES of poverty and crime" are made manifest in the portraits by Keith Perelli. Painted from mug shots, Perelli's portraits of incarcerated youths tug at the conscience of the

viewer, insisting upon not only recognition, but also acknowledgment of complicity in the conditions that led to jail. Perelli uses paint and collage to create multi-layered, disparate parts that echo the confused, disoriented choices of his subjects' fractured lives. Combined with the "bling" of silver paper and spray paint, the illusive nature of unmet need and desire inform the straightforward, mug shot views of young, healthy, locked-away men, still slightly dazed by their circumstances. Perelli's painted monotypes further underscore the mug-shot reference with black and white paint.

BOB SNEAD'S INTRODUCTION to his new St. Claude Avenue home was interrupted by the screeching tires and loud crash of a pick-up truck barreling into the light post outside the neighboring



Bob Snead. Courtesy of Carroll Gallery, Newcomb College, Tulane University.

Family Dollar store. Constructing the truck out of packing boxes and placing it in the doorway of the Family Dollar, Snead recreated the event in the Carroll Gallery. The truck, complete with taillights and headlights, and the mangled streetlight, still working in the installation, bask in the red neon glow of the Family Dollar Store sign. Certainly a comment on the drinking culture of New Orleans, the installation is also a metaphor for Snead's family's move to the city. Despite the seriousness of the problem, there is something inherently humorous about a full-scale pick-up truck, constructed entirely of discarded cardboard boxes, complete with lights, stuck in the door of the Family Dollar Store as a gallery installation. In this case, it offers something akin to a moment of hope in the midst of the more dire representations of the problems facing New Orleans.

Overall, "Conscience," the most recent show at Tulane University's Carroll Gallery, curated by Laura Richens, was

a moving reminder of the ability of artists to use their skills to focus attention on both acute and on-going problems, to illuminate those problems in new ways, and to use art to effect change. The fact that Richens could find artists already working this way, without the need of making work specifically for this show, demonstrates the "Conscience" New Orleans' artists are incorporating into their work.

□

Learning the Alphabet

BY KATHY RODRIGUEZ

DAVID WEBBER
New Work
Arthur Roger Gallery
New Orleans, LA

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THE EXPECTATION OF film is narrative, but the quality of the photographic image is also evaluated by the success of its formal composition. This is not a new idea – the Pictorialists and Alfred Steiglitz emphasized the formal quality of photographs while still maintaining their realism, and in the 1920s and 30s Dada and Surrealist artists such as Man Ray and Fernand Léger set these kinds of images in motion in films like *Emak Bakia* (1926) and *Ballet Mécanique* (1924). Though seemingly abstract to the point of being dubiously troubling, these images relied on clear representation of objects in strange contexts. Everything from egg beaters to clouds was viable subject matter, and although the composition of the images formed no apparent narrative, the objects were recognizable. They were abstracted by their context and composition but were still clearly things. David Webber uses the medium of film to create images that are also seemingly abstract. While his films lack a standard or expected cast of characters or narrative, familiar representations of things evince themselves only by looking closely. The viewer constructs that familiarity – the interpretation and meaning - through the viewing itself.

Webber makes films using a process called “direct animation,” in which he physically manipulates the film itself, essentially making moving paintings. For the *Alphabet Series* recently on view at Arthur Roger, he bleached old films, literally “cooking” them (methods can be found in Helen Hill’s *Recipes for Disaster*, available in its entirety online), eliminating most traces of the imagery burned into the emulsion coating. Webber then painted and modified the film with various materials, dying it with beets or painting it with streaky nail polish, in a kind of organic and synthetic alchemy. He gave each “experiment” a taxonomic letter of the alphabet, then projected the film at a screen and recorded it with a separate digital camera. The final construction of the work moved back and forth between these stages, as he changed and re-

recorded areas of film to achieve desired visual effects.

He explains this as “dialoguing with the system,” a process developed by video artists Woody and Steina Vasulka. He also says the process is akin to *musique concrète*, or “concrete music,” a kind of “tape collage” developed by French composers Pierre Henry and Pierre Schaffer in the 1940s. Webber states, “Literally and metaphorically dialoguing with the system, I would respond to the material and the processing structure of the system to inform and or be the work.” He “converses” with the medium through the dialogue between analog and digital systems, and through his automatic collage. The process becomes the product, and the product needs the viewer to finish it. We learn through processes of observation and interpretation of information; perhaps the work is a play on the original subject matter of the educational films.

At Arthur Roger, the digital videos *A*, *E*, and *Y* from the *Alphabet Series* were cloaked within a small room containing only a bench directly before a screen. The light reflected from the screen revealed the confines of the space; otherwise, it seemed vast, like a chasm. The apparent non-objectivity of the images at first might have seemed more disconcerting than the tension of space in which they were shown. The accompanying sound was additionally unnerving; Webber scored each film with a non-objective soundtrack that amalgamated the whirs of a Super8 projector with sporadic snaps and pops and other digital audio. The score for *E* combined these with a high keening or whining much like a prolonged incantation of the sound of the letter.

Webber says his films work best in a gallery setting for two reasons. First, the space can be manipulated so that the work is received without distraction. The context is key to interpreting meaning in the work, and the space successfully prevented disturbances to the viewing experience. Second, it is Webber’s intention that the viewer can come and go as he or she pleases – there is no point at which the experience lacks anything. It is non-cinematic; meaning is prefabricated and presented only in the way the viewer’s experience informs and enables its construction. This is structural film and “expanded cinema,” which relies on the viewer to construct meaning and presents the work as an art object – a sculptural installation with moving paintings. By its initial ambiguity, it entices the viewer to experience viewing in

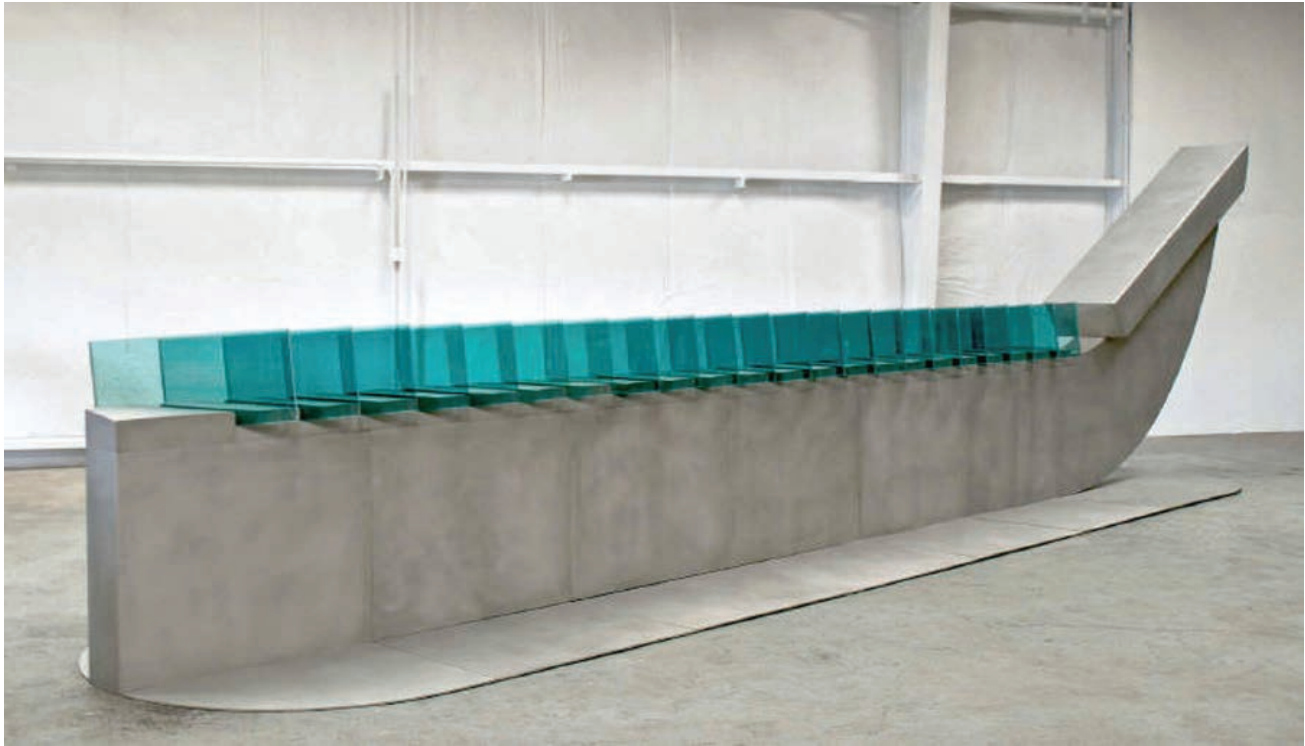


David Webber. *Alphabet Series: The Letter A*, 2006. Single channel CRT video installation film still.

a phenomenological sense. Considering how we see, we can construct what we see.

Webber rendered the initial information meaningless by erasing it from the film. Through further manipulation, he created colors and textures which flowed over the screen, characterized by a smoothness that contrasted with the sound. As he notes in his writing, the resulting images are pareidolic, similar to Rorschach tests. Traces of cracked paint on plastic are suddenly imbued with meaning, appearing as blooming petals or crystallizing water as they move and change in the film, accompanied by the score. This kind of association is the point of the work - to consciously perceive. Webber's series is a visual conundrum solved only by the subjective response. Essentially, it is what art is – a way of

seeing. Webber composes the basic elements of motion, color, texture, and time – parts of the visual alphabet, or building blocks of visual vocabulary – to engage the viewer in a process of learning the language of seeing. By this engagement, the work in turn suggests that without an awareness of our ability to perceive, and therefore an ability to interpret what we see – which is based in our awareness of identity, of the events that shape us and our understanding of the world – we risk true blindness. □



Gene Koss: *Line Fence*, 2010. Glass and stainless steel, 93 x 300 x 60 inches. Courtesy of Arthur Roger Gallery.

The Viability of Glass

BY KARL F. VOLKMAR

GENE KOSS
New Work
Arthur Roger Gallery
New Orleans, LA

LIKEABLE. GENE KOSS'S work is likeable. And I like looking at his work. Seeing how earlier themes continue to evolve, what new variations on the theme of, for example, *Disc Drawings*, have been developed, what new huge piece has taken form, and what new ideas have been added to the artist's repertoire, as some ideas are revisited and renewed, while others are new. This new exhibition at the Arthur Roger Gallery is no exception.

Especially interesting is to see the new large work that the artist has conceived, *Line Fence* in this exhibit. Working with cast glass as his primary medium, which he often combines with various and sundry other materials and found objects, Koss's work challenges whatever reservations one may have, with respect to a medium conventionally associated with utilitarian objects, about the viability of glass as a material for conceptual art. Combine Koss's wit, expressed in titles evoking amusing associations that

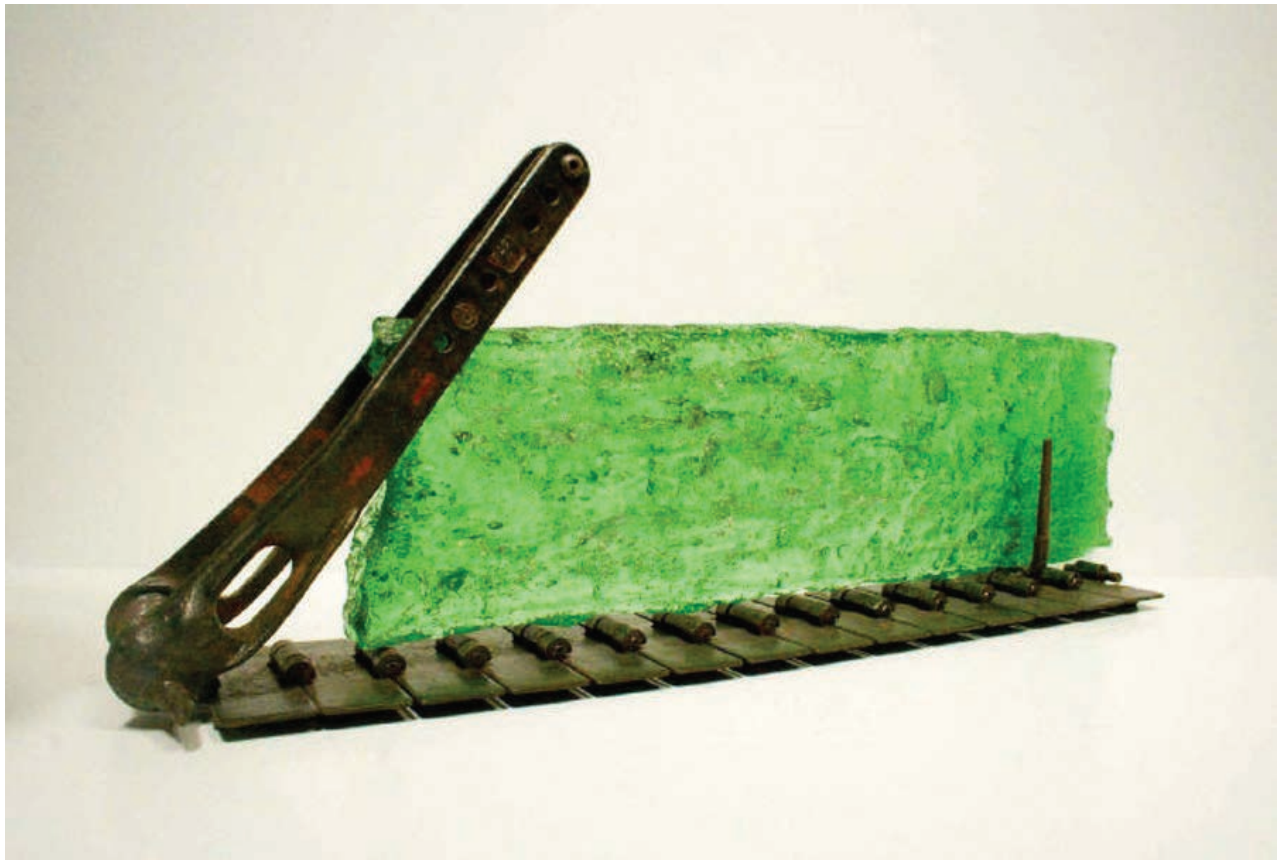
offer multiple paths for approaching the work, with the artist's use of glass in ways unexpected by those unacquainted with its potential, and the confident craftsmanship of the mature artist produces work that represents a confluence of formal strength, humorous associations, and syntheses of multiple historical antecedents.

In the current show at the Arthur Roger Gallery, Koss continues to build on ideas and materials referenced to the artist's early upbringing on a Wisconsin farm. Building on the America's nostalgic love of roaming through flea markets and old stuff stores and delight in unusual tools from a bygone age when inventiveness manifested itself in machines, gives his work its special tactile, and visual, appeal.

The artist's fine feeling for the evocative power of transposition and re-contextualization, resituating objects from the everyday to the art, is empowered by conceptual precedents: the ready-mades of Duchamp, Picasso's assemblages, the *Nouveau Realisme* of Tinguely, and Rauschenburg's anything goes. Koss's playfulness is even more delightful because of the slightly askew character of his creations. Viewers are invited to guess for what function some of the found objects were designed. Unusual juxtapositions challenge one to imagine just how these new objects might function. It's good fun.



Gene Koss: *Totem Series (13436)*. 2010. Timber and cast glass, 93" high. Courtesy of Arthur Roger Gallery.



Gene Koss: *Levee Sculpture (13393)*, 2010. Glass, steel. Courtesy of Arthur Roger Gallery.

Fascination with Koss' work, indeed Koss' own motivations, may be attributed, at least to some degree, to an American love of gadgets which continues unabated in this digital era. Contrast the fads for *iThis* and *iThat* that celebrate coolness over content (what content?) with bucolic nostalgia for a pre-industrial, pre-digital age with its chimerical fantasy of an idealized existence when life was easy, nature was abundant, and families worked close together tending the soil day in and day out, year after year, manual labor adding value, toiling under the sun, welcoming the rains, husbanding the growth and harvesting of other living things to provide for human needs. Curiously, a similar fascination with materials qua materials characterized Minimalism as it appeared in the sixties as antidote to the subjectivities of expressionism and Modernism messianic ideals.

Line Fence is a large, more than seven feet high and twenty-five feet in length, construction of cast glass and stainless steel, on the scale of public art that must command attention when installed in an open air setting. Displayed in the enclosed space of the gallery, it may seem as if the walls have been built around the artwork rather than the sculpture being inserted into the confines of the gallery. The experience of walking around the work is rather like visiting a factory production facility with its immense machinery. Yet there is also an approachable character to

Line Fence that may be due to its rural roots as one watches other visitors on the further side and feels the urge to chat with them. Certainly the gallery situation with its huge quantities of daylight coming in through the windows has a way of surrounding Koss's with a field of light, giving rise to an impression of fusion with surrounding space not unlike Donald Judd's one hundred untitled works installation at the Chinati Foundation near Marfa, Texas.

One can appreciate *Line Fence* from several perspectives: historical, formal, and poetic. From the historical perspective, the use of stainless steel and ground moiré surfaces evokes David Smith's *Cubi* series. The long shape dividing space in such a way that one must walk around to experience it fully is like Richard Serra's somber COR-TEN steel *Tilted Arch* reconceived on a more human, and humane, scale. The artist's use of elemental, clearly articulated forms hints at an empathetic identification with Modernist abstraction. The simple industrial materials mirror those of Minimalism.

Conflations of simple color and texture in the arrangement of a series of bluish green glass slabs along the top may evoke memories of glass insulators on old-fashioned, creosote-soaked utility poles, or birds perching along a telephone wire [remember them?]. One might even imagine a connection to Oldenberg's Pop Art if one reads the form as a highly abstract toothbrush or swivel-headed Trac II razor.

The two large works from the *Totem Series* are each over seven feet in height. *Totem Series (13436)* with its strong contrasts of large dark timber and light cast glass might be a Dogon-like mask worn by a race of giants from Easter Island or a relative of a Cajun tree spirit. Closer inspection, however, reveals that the shape of the large glass cotter pin matches the intaglio shapes cut into the timbers, suggesting that the whole was [also?] conceived as mold and casting.

The word *totem* comes from an Ojibwee word meaning “his kinship group.” From this perspective, Koss’s totem works seem to have a closer kinship bond to the totem concept as interpreted in the work of numerous twentieth century artists rather than to the totems of the indigenous people of North America’s Pacific Northwest Coast. While the sensitive, delicate crafting of Louisiana sculptor Clyde Connell’s work reflects the indigenous spirituality, Koss’s totems are more akin to the interpretations of Archipenko, the totemic character of Smith’s sculpture, Nam June Paik’s *Internet Dweller*, and the carefully crafted constructions of Monster Roster artist H. C. Westermann

Totem Series: High Honor-William Koss suggests affinities with the rough cut lumber of Minimalist Carl Andre and Robert Arneson’s tongue-in-cheek humor. The concentric arcs made by the saw shaping the timber have a textural kinship with the moiré surfaces of *Line Fence*. A workman on a construction site might put his lunch pail or toolbox on top, except for the extreme height (eighty-seven inches). Perhaps a punning play on the pedestal displays in galleries and museums, but, oops!, someone forgot their toolbox! Or is that the art?

The three *Levee Sculptures* are assembled from rescued material, various scrap parts, and found objects that are transformed into art like a folk artist creating little whimsical critters and nonfunctional machines. Inspired by the ingenious devices designed to control water flow or irrigate rice fields, one may not be able to figure out just how Koss’s *Levee Sculptures*, and the *Bridge Series* piece would work, and that can be part of the fun. But they certainly look like they have been used, and hard, perhaps recovered from a pile of used machinery dumped alongside the irrigation levees beside the road. The appearance of questionable efficacy does not exclude the possibility that they just might work, like Klee’s *Twittering Machine*, Calder’s toys, or Nancy Graves’ critters. Although Koss sometimes refers to these smaller pieces as maquettes, meaning that they might serve as models for one of his larger works, they serve well as independent pieces.

The *Ridge Road Climb* and *Disc Drawing* series are made using slabs of glass with lines of colored glass threaded through the mass of glass. The uneven surfaces, edges, and contours of these amoebic slabs of transparent glass are memories of the tools used to shape and have a character similar to the gestural strokes of abstract expressionist paintings. The molten streams of color winding through the translucent volumes, casting shadows within the masses through which they twine, are fascinating, like cream undulating through a glass of iced coffee, like strands of DNA rapt in an evolutionary dance.

The interplay between transparency and translucency, reflection and refraction reminds me of one of my favorite paintings, often found in art history survey and appreciation texts, the *Peaches and Jar* fresco from Pompeii with its careful observation of reflected, refracted, and absorbed light as it makes contact with the glass of the jar, the liquid inside, and the stair steps. Moving around *Ridge Road Climb*, viewing it from various angles,

provides additional opportunities to enjoy the complexities of the irregular helices of the threads of colored glass and the shadows they cast. It is fun to imagine a miniature self at the wheel of a tiny sports car following the routes delineated by the undulating serpentine lines. Maybe even with accompanying vrrmmvrrmmmming sounds to make it even more fun!

Childlike, perhaps, but another way of becoming fully engaged with the work, a virtual, literal way of putting oneself into the works. Calder, I suspect, would agree. Anything to subvert tendencies to merely stand in front of each piece as if it were a relief sculpture whose whole truth was revealed from the front. This one dimensional fixation can be expanded to involve every dimensions as one moves around the work, perhaps moving the light source, adding additional sources, illuminating the work from multiple perspectives, perhaps even placing the sculpture on a rotating base like Moholy Nagy’s *Light Space Modulator*. The *Disc Drawing* pieces are similar to *Ridge Road Climb*. Numbers 13419 and 13421 rest on large bases rather than pedestals producing the effect that the shadows of the threads and points are cast on the surrounding surfaces like the variegated shadows in Renoir’s *Le Moulin de la Galette*.

Completing our tour of Koss’s work is a brief look at a subspecies in the *Totem* theme. Made of dark brown glass like *golems* made of clay, one subgroup includes lumpy fetish-like forms like Paleolithic fertility figures or genetic anomalies distantly related to Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds. Another subgroup includes several slender plantlike forms, each just beginning to differentiate itself according to its unique genetic coding, like polyps or hydrozoa of the imagination. Their biomorphic character identifies them as belonging to an order in which one also finds work by another artist who works primarily with glass, Dale Chihuly. It is an important order within the domain of art with only a few extant examples and practitioners.

□



Carolyn Evans: *Water Under the Bridge*, 2010. Courtesy Cole Pratt Gallery.

Home Turf

BY JUDITH BONNER

BARBARA BRAINARD
Walk About
CAROLYN EVANS
Spring Buzz
Cole Pratt Gallery
New Orleans, LA

CAROLYN EVANS AND BARBARA BRAINARD emphasize awareness of environment, both natural and man-made, through their collective works at Cole Pratt Gallery -- Evans' exhibition is titled "Spring Buzz" and Brainard's "Walk About." Evans' large colorful oil paintings portray non-descript houses against a warm background and Brainard's small-scale black-and-white monotypes focus on specific residential street scenes in New Orleans. While Evan's structures seem to float in mid-air, Brainard's residences are well-grounded despite the considerable proportion of the canvas that is given over to open skies. Both artists have developed an individual style in representing their home turf, though Evans has relocated to New England. Although they are different in approach, medium, and treatment, the two exhibitions are compatible in subject.

Evans' near-abstract compositions focus on simplified geo-

metric shapes, primarily camp-like houses or similar structures built on pilings. A number of her works have facial features superimposed on the architectural structures or in the skies. A work titled *Celebrating the Kumquat Tree*, features childlike wavy blue lines that resemble hair emerging from the roof-line of a house, yet upon closer examination the blue lines are the topmost branches of a tree that grows either in front of or inside the house. In this painting, as her other works in this exhibition, space is ambiguous. The house is set against a vivid orange background; the kumquat tree is largely hidden from view. Like a number of contemporary artists, she includes symbols that obviously have personal meanings or are merely recollections from memory. She also incorporates shapes that resemble birds and animals, some of which seem to be carried by the winds of a storm.

A number of Evans' works make a subtle reference to the devastation by Hurricane Katrina, during which Evans, like so many others, lost her home and possessions. Evans does not, however, dwell on the horror. Frequently, houses appear to glide across the picture plane. In *Daddy Throw Me a Line* objects float through the pale blue sky, including fish. A red line extending across the composition and behind a cabana-like structure infers not only the tow rope for water skiing, but a life line during flooding. Here as in her other canvases, layers of thinly-applied over-glazes create a



Carolyn Evans: *Celebrating the Kumquat Tree*, 2010. O/C, 52"high.

luminous effect. Again, Evans creates a sense of spatial ambiguity. The brown mid-ground suggests that the house is constructed upon land, but the light ochre and green area, which occupied the lower half of the composition, also appears like algae floating on muddy waters. If the canvas was rotated 180 degrees, it would appear as if the house was turned upside-down and fish were swimming in blue water.

This work recalls the paintings of Will Henry Stevens (1881-1949), whose paintings frequently featured horizontal or vertical bands, which could be hung in different directions and create a pleasing composition from all four sides. Stevens' compositions were similarly populated with small designs, symbols, geometric shapes, fish, birds, and biomorphic forms that were changeable depending upon the viewpoint.

Several of Evan's works focus on the incongruities of life. *Water Under the Bridge* depicts three obelisk-like structures built upon docks; a small rectangular aperture below the docks creates a narrow place under which water can flow. The three peaked structures have faces that seem to look upward toward a fish and duck, both of which swim in the blue sky. Likewise, *Fire in the Kitchen* presents a confusing scene in which a single flame, which could represent either a pilot light or a fire that is upside down. *Visiting Empire* features two houses on pilings; a sun with a face shown profile seems to blow gently on the two structures. This work obviously refers to the camp-like homes that dot the Louisiana landscape, much of which is surrounded by water.

A tongue-in-cheek *Mansion on the Levee* presents a structure

that more closely resembles a shack that appears to float on green water, a perception which is magnified by a small rowboat in central foreground. A small painting titled *Other Side of the Tracks* depicts a small red-roofed yellow structure that sits directly on a segment of black-and-white vertical lines. While this small painting has the feel of vernacular paintings, its arrangement makes a strong comment on social strata and racial barriers, with the tracks creating a social barrier.

In Evan's title work, *Spring Buzz*, confetti like green leaves float above the roofline of a structure whose supports merge with the trunks of trees. There appear to be birds or a butterfly flitting through the leaves. Evans alternately uses a palette knife and brush to create textural variations in her compositions.

Brainard works from black-and-white photographs she takes on her walks and drives through the city's neighborhoods, but her monotypes are not typical of the photographic views seen in most gallery exhibitions. Hers are not super-realistic views with highly detailed images and smoothly finished surfaces; instead these are impressions of New Orleans houses and neighborhoods. These views, most of which feature buildings that hug the lower foreground, capture the weathered imprint of time that is typical of the city's neighborhoods. Some structures seem to curve slightly inward, but without exaggeration or distortion. Brainard's works are thoughtfully composed and carefully constructed. Brainard's skill in this difficult medium is particularly evident in a number of dense floral still lifes with strong dark and light patterns.

Like Evans' paintings, Brainard's prints retain the effects



Barbara Brainard: *From the Old Mermaid*, 2010. Monotype.

of artist's tools, although hers is a subtle application. This is true especially in the vast areas of skies in her street scenes, which are shaded with mottled gray following the path of her handiwork as she applies and manipulates ink on her matrix. Uneven specks add additional textural interest to these scenes.

Buildings in Brainard's compositions are generalized, with select details and rhythmic patterns of architectural features like

roof tiles and awnings. She focuses on areas of the city not ordinarily seen, including Faubourg Marigny, Palm Terrace, and the Napoleon Avenue corridor. In *Palm Terrace II*, she portrays stucco residences in the lower composition, which are punctuated by a single palm tree. This street scene also has a universal appeal, for it also resembles views in California and some tropical islands. Brainard takes advantage of the lines created by telephone wires that mar



Barbara Brainard: *Along St Claude*, 2010. Monotype, 24" high.

most photographic street scenes. Instead, her rendering of the wires creates the appearance of the cracks in vintage lantern slides.

This technique is especially effective in *From the Old Mermaid*. Brainard calls attention to a declining neighborhood in *Across Freret*, a wide street scene wherein houses are situated at the extreme sides of the composition. A prominently placed telephone pole in center foreground and the paraphernalia of technology define contemporary life. Additionally, she introduces other elements of debris and a vintage vehicle to bridge the chasm that would otherwise develop in this view. A work called *Beach Front* differs in its focus on the flooded area in West End where a highway barrier in foreground demarcates the area where the street should be. Instead, any division between the flooded street and the lake are nonexis-

tent. Telephone poles and wires present a tangled web across the upper composition. These latter two works are somber comments on the enormity of difficulties affecting the city's recovery.

Clearly, both artists make thoughtful reference to the magnitude of the horrendous disasters that were visited upon the Louisiana and Mississippi regions. And while both approach the greater majority of their works with seeming cheerfulness, their resolve to overcome the difficulties remains an underlying motivation in their choice of artistic subject.

□



Kathryn Hunter: *Knotted*, 2010. Steel with mixed-media, 46" high.

Concerning the Natural

BY THOMASINE BARTLETT

KATHRYN HUNTER
Recent Work
LeMieux Galleries
MICHAEL MARLOWE
Paintings
Soren Christensen Gallery
New Orleans, LA

PELICANS, REDFISH, WHALES, rays, bears and even rats, are currently competing for space on the walls of LeMieux Galleries. Made of powder-coated laser cut steel, the creatures boast industrially perfect, shiny surfaces in shades of blue, red and yellow, sometimes in shade-on-shade patterns. The steel animals combine with the fragility of paper, thread, silk, letterpress and relief printing, in Kathryn Hunter's show "confluence." *Rays* casts fire-engine red rays (we are talking fish – like stingrays) with styl-

ized waves, reminiscent of textile design, cut from delicate, almost translucent, mottled aqua-blue paper expanded into matching paint lines applied directly on the wall. This bright, whimsical, yet somehow poignant image greets visitors upon entering LeMieux Galleries, while said visitor is observed by a pair of large, patterned, somehow doleful blue pelicans holding either end of an intricately knotted rope suspended between their beaks in *Knotted*, on the right wall of the gallery. Other works combine letterpress printing, relief printing, flocking, a running stitch in red thread, typing and various other materials, with the animal images. Some of the animals are cut from paper, some of them are printed, but all are somewhat anthropomorphic. *Your Life. Made Simpler* is a series of die cut bears, cut from a variety of differently patterned security envelopes. These cut outs are embellished with drawing, cut paper and mixed media. Although identical in form, each takes on a unique individuality and personality.

For the artist, the works reflect the patterns of life, and the relationships between animals and humans, with an emphasis on the narrative that relationship creates. For me, the work speaks of



Michael Marlowe: *Pillar*, 2010. Acrylic on birch panel, 46" high.

the beauty of the wild, and of a joy found in nature, that directly relates to the recent ecological disasters, such as the Gulf oil spill, and the on-going problem of reconciling the ways in which we, as humans, live, with the lives of other creatures.

THE WORK OF Michael Marlowe in "Grandeur," a few doors away at Soren Christensen Gallery, also addresses nature. Marlowe's landscapes, primarily featuring trees, are ethereal, misty havens, inviting the viewer to enter, and to rest. Painted in acrylic paint on birch panel, a trace of the wood grain of the panel can be detected beneath the surface of the paint, interestingly reiterating the subject matter. The paintings seem almost primeval, giving no indications of man's hand or presence. The trees, standing boldly at the water's edge, or fronting hazy blue-green mountains, stand sentinel over pristine dreamscapes conjured from memory or from the remote, primal past.

Cropped evergreens foreground gently rolling mountain peaks in the *Blue Mountain Series*, a triptych boasting a continuous image, although each perfectly square panel holds its own individu-

ally. *Camelot*, a depiction of tall, narrow cedars on the banks of a stream, is touched with an overall golden glow, while *Halo* allows a glimpse of sunrise through majestic, leafy treetops with a warm hint of light reflecting from the highest branches. While *Pillar* arranges tall, spindly, relatively evenly spaced trunks supporting leafy crowns against the edge of the water, in a row reminiscent of ancient temple architecture, *Panorama* reverses the direction, with a long, narrow view of water and hills, fronted by cropped branches, encroaching from either side of the foreground.

Overall, the works of Michael Marlowe offer a wonderful respite from the hustle and bustle of everyday activity in the uncompromisingly un-natural, man-made environment. Whether real landscapes or romantic dreamscapes, these paintings hearken to an earlier time of peace and plenty, and untouched nature. In doing this, they speak to some deeper part of our psyches, drawing us in to share the artist's vision. □



Emily Sartor: *Careless Love*. Oil on canvas. Courtesy Le Mieux Galleries.

Projections

BY KATHY RODRIGUEZ

Prospect 1.5 Group Exhibitions
Jonathan Ferrara Gallery
LeMieux Galleries
New Orleans, LA

DAN CAMERON, FOUNDER of U.S. Biennale Inc., which produces the Prospect Biennale in New Orleans, organized showings of local and foreign talent in various gallery spaces for an interim installment of the exhibition dubbed “1.5.” It is meant as a preview of things to come in a greater, more expansive Prospect 2, which would, according to gallerist Jonathan Ferrara, again bring New Orleans national and international attention as a site for collectors who tour the world circuit of cultural exhibitions, thus generating commerce, revenue, and reputation in our city. Simultaneously, it is an opportunity for New Orleans to burnish and add to the surface of its palimpsest, a means to bring acclaim and attention not only to our city but its artists as well. Curated shows by Cameron at two galleries aim to achieve this goal. Three of these in succession fill the center gallery at LeMieux, each featuring artists who have lived in Louisiana, and now work elsewhere. Jonathan Ferrara Gallery gives up the entirety of its space to Cameron and Prospect in *Resounding*, an exhibit of the work of five artists dealing with the sense and absence of sound, a key aspect of the city’s history.

Paintings by New York-based artist Emily Sartor,

originally from Monroe, Louisiana, are the third in the series of Prospect 1.5 exhibitions at LeMieux. Described by the artist as “free-wheeling and sentimental,” they are narratives in various formats. The composition of graphic novels is evident in the fractured picture planes, gutters, and panels familiar to comics that structure two pieces, *Rank Stranger* and *Nocturama*. But, in their “free-wheeling” nature, the subject matter of these paintings explores a range of interests from dada-istic poetry to the films of Antonioni to the prints of John James Audubon. However disparate, isolated moments of painting and drawing visually cohere into a plausible narrative, much like single images caught in time on a comics page express themselves together as a story.

This is especially the case in *Rank Stranger*. A *horror vacui* encompasses the space, text and image filling and flattening toward the edges of the picture plane. But, color and undulating line create a surface that simmers and pulses outward from the edges, like a bubble before exploding. The paper itself has a sense of depth in the eye of the artist; Sartor feels the white of paper is a kind of dimension in illusionistic space.

Banners of text in a decorative and western font proclaim the title of the piece and other phrases, recalling the lyrics and phrasing of the eponymous song. The text stretches across the composition, linking strangely juxtaposed egrets, anatomical studies, and a drawing inspired by a still from an Antonioni film, *The Passenger*. The repetition of the word “unknown” across the middle of the composition formally links the imagery, and threads the narrative



Ted Riederer: *St. Antipode*. M/M. Courtesy Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.

as well. In the film, a journalist becomes a stranger; in the song, a man finds himself in an unfamiliar community – the unknown is the constant, and it is personal. This seems appropriate for the flowing nature of Sartor’s narrative; the story could go anywhere into the unfamiliar.

While tactility of the paint and the richness of the visual imagery in Sartor’s pieces cue the senses, they do not immediately appeal to the one sense explored in the exhibit at Ferrara. All of this gallery space is devoted to the artwork in *Resounding*, which explores the absence of sound. In an interview with Diane Mack, Cameron asks whether it is possible to talk about music without hearing it. The artists in this exhibition produce work that provides an answer.

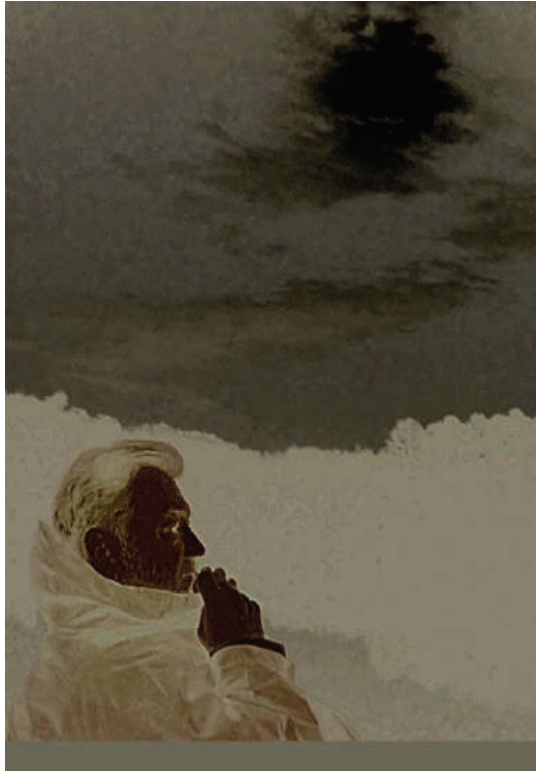
Ted Riederer’s piece *St. Antipode* uses the iconography of music to evoke the idea of opposing forces. A pile of skulls cast in vinyl records faces its conqueror, a tall figure armored in the same material. Described as both Darth Vader and St. George by the artist and his critics, this figure is created using records that hold songs dear to the artist, with which he armed himself during 1986. In a video from Robert Goff Gallery in New York, Riederer describes this personally difficult year, and says that music was a kind of armor for him during that time. The skulls are vinyl recordings of the top 200 hits from the same time; these less personal songs are vanquished, irrelevant, and dead. Vinyl itself might be considered similarly obsolete, a pile of detritus that serves only to remind of the finished past. The vinyl is silent and unplayable, but the music, physically immaterial, persists.

The viewer cannot become fully involved in the extremely personal context of Riederer’s piece, and it is the same with *Theorists*,

a video installation by Turkey-born artist Fikret Atay. In what seems typical of Atay’s work, the video features intimately filmed moments familiar to the artist, but enigmatic to the viewer. Sound becomes non-specific and incoherent; it seems deliberately left without translation, and it is up to the viewer to create and decipher meaning in isolation, in a small room at the back of the gallery, somewhat encapsulated but also lost. Still, these are moments of prayer and traditional dance, and the specialness associated with the ritual translates through Atay’s film style if the language does not. The video is a sign of a disconnect that still exists in a world supposedly linked by constant news and information.

Photographs by Rhona Bitner and sculpture by Tim Lee and Sean Duffy are more easily approached. Bitner’s visual records of the emptied spaces where great sounds occurred reverberate with the hollow echoes of their memory. The celebrity of sound also forms the basis of works by Lee and Duffy. Lee creates memorials to easily recognized and famous individuals with printed lyrics, liner notes, and vinyl, a full-fledged “record” of great things. Duffy plays with a pop-art aesthetic that also recalls teenage-bedroom fantasies of celebrity and shrines to musical heroes in meticulously handled album covers marked-up with Sharpies. In each of these works, sound is absent, and memory is the key to seeing and listening.

Prospect 1.5 might be described as a meditation on the nature of the biennale in New Orleans. Aspects of the city, like its music and the far-reaching talents of the natives of its state, are dissected and examined in these few exhibitions. It might be this kind of inquiry that deepens and broadens the projects that comprise the next installment in the Prospect series. □



Dawn DeDeaux: *Man Unseen*. Digital print on steel. Arthur Roger Gallery.

The Ambiguity of the Unseen

BY KARL F. VOLKMAR

DAWN DEDEAUX
Unseen
Arthur Roger Gallery
New Orleans, LA

THE CURRENT EXHIBITION of Dawn DeDeaux's art at Arthur Roger Gallery is an eclectic assortment of work -- lengths of industrial steel chain, ladders leaning against light-smearred walls, elongated acrylic rectangles leaning against another light-smearred wall, dense cubic (apparent) masses of oyster shells on the floor, dark prints on steel, a pair of welded steel boots isolated on a low pedestal, a passageway gallery leading to a small cave of an exhibition space with a curious assortment of works et cetera -- a conflation of work with a distant kinship relationship with artists' works ranging from the intimate boxes of Cornell to Borofsky's cerebral *mr. is*.

Although the careful positioning and lighting of each piece signals a conscious intentionality, the sense of deliberateness does not extend beyond individual, or small clusters of, works. Disjunction and irrational juxtaposition are essential components in the theoretical underpinnings of the confections of Cornell and Borofsky but, despite the thin veil of associations with water and marine phenomena mentioned in the artist's rambling walkthrough, the aggregation of work that is the exhibition seems to defy an

attempt to uncover an underlying theoretical unity. There are many interesting pieces in the show, but not for the reasons presented in the artist's walkthrough.

The four *...over x feet of water* 2008 digital transparencies on acrylic rectangles leaning against the wall in the corner opposite the entrance can be the medium for a fascinating visual experience...when one overlooks the literal intentions motivating the pieces. There exists a tension between the work as information and the work as medium for aesthetic experience. The length of each rectangle corresponds to the different values for x where x represents the depth of water --three feet, six feet, and so forth -- as measured during the Katrina flooding of New Orleans. If the artist's intention is to provide a medium that enables one to physically relate to the depth of flooding on a one-to-one scale, that purpose might be more effectively realized in a richly descriptive verbal narrative or the virtual reality environment of a digital cave. It may be demanding too much from the observer to make the leap from information to emotive empathy with no more assistance than a human scale bar graph that leaves it to the observer's imagination rather than the artist's imaging to effect the desired response. This is always problematic when working with art as illustration, information, and ideas.

As an art of aesthetic experience, however, the reflections of light from the surfaces, the effects of light refracted through



Dawn DeDeaux: *Unseen*. Installation, 2011. Arthur Roger Gallery.

the clear medium, the interplay between projected reflections and refractions, and the angles and half shadows and shadows on the walls and the polished floors are engaged in a slow dance expressing an evanescent and ephemeral poetry that exists apart from, and in spite of, the literal, narrative associations and the empathies these associations may evoke in the observer. It is in the manipulation of light and shadow that the artist builds on her strong suit, and a fascination with rhythmic repetition can be found in DeDeaux's work over the years.

From another perspective, DeDeaux's sympathy for, and careful handling of, materials shares some common ground with the motivations of minimalism and the expressive presence of pure matter in the hands of Beuys and Kiefer. Although social critique is an essential component in Beuys' and Kiefer's works, the effectiveness of their work is not dependent on that social element. In the work of DeDeaux, literal and narrative referencing has, not always, but can have, a tendency to interfere with the aesthetic enjoyment of the artist's work because of the strong suggestive influence of the illustrational and the melodramatic. The result can be a tension that manifests itself as an either/or subversion of whole experience in which the literal nature of narrative interferes with, perhaps even misdirects the viewer's attention away from, the sensual and sensuous aesthetic, rather than facilitating a mutually reinforcing experience.

The artist seems to be aware of the problem posed when literal and narrative elements are inserted into the formal when

describing the rows of *illuminaria* displayed on the shelves on either side of the passageway gallery. The images of heads enclosed within the clear volumes can interfere with one's appreciation of the elegant rhythms defined by the *illuminaria*. Indeed, the artist's oral text can sound like an *apologia* excusing her deeply intuitive feeling for materials and effects and the possibilities of different technologies by inviting the viewer to identify with the social narrative.

While a historical situation is apparently the context out of which the artist's art was developed, and, indeed, an understanding of which may enhance one's enjoyment of her work, it does not necessarily allow for a full response to the subtly refined expressive and formal qualities of the work. The effectiveness of the artist's work lies not in the referential but in the dynamic relationships among shapes and shadows, transparency and opacity, angles and overlap, luminous masses and dark shadows, and in some cases the materials themselves.

The artist's formal and material sensitivities find rich expression in a perhaps unintended arrangement shaped by the physical gallery space. When viewed from a vantage point in the large front exhibition space and looking through the passageway gallery into the small chapel-like cell at the end, one's gaze passes between rows of *luminaria* on either side. The luminous volumes, glowingly reflected on the walls, and concentric shadows of conic sections created from the intersection of acrylic and light lead one's eye through a space perfectly framed by the perspective of

the architectural lines of the passage gallery in the manner of a Renaissance perspective scheme, or Sol Lewitt drawing, towards a simple array of twelve rectangles that glows like a Byzantine icon in the small cave of an exhibition space beyond.

This work, *Same Place, Different Time* from 2005, is a talisman for defining some of the major themes informing DeDeaux's work. The simple geometric arrangement of colors and shapes is heir to the memes of the minimalist grid (Reinhardt, Krauss) and the experimental use of newly developed industrial materials and technologies (Bell, Flavin) as a work digitally printed on reflective foil. Is this small chapel of a gallery an *homage* to the artistic roots from which the artist is descended? The figurative presence of the cast statue of a saint splashed with gold paint, *Regarding Culture (St. Francis and Friends)*, with its explicit with religious tradition, seems so out of place unless referenced to the Situationists' painting of the statues in the Tuileries in 1968. The nacreous incorporeality of biomorphic forms illumined by flitting blue light might be the mutant progeny of an alchemical wedding of Arp, Andre, and Spielberg.

If *Same Place, Different Time* offers a conceptual framework for understanding DeDeaux's work as it has evolved since 2005, *Shadows of My Former Self* from 2011 may be a means to understanding the artist's work from advantage point of the present looking back. The series of four rectangles as a single tier grid and the printing on steel are echoes of the artist's minimalist tendencies in the continuing interest in materials, organization, and ongoing experimentation with the creative and expressive possibilities of technologies. The figure of a long projected shadow of the artist (presumably), varied in color and orientation from print to print by the use of digital imaging software, is a further example of the artist's explorations.

In *Shadows...*, the artist uses language in a subtle and poetic way. The title suggests that 'shadow' represents both phenomenon and symbol. The phrase "shadows of my former self" implies that shadows represent what was and is no more or what has changed. Understanding that shadows, as the absence of light, are seen by virtue of being unseen, shadows as what is 'unseen' are metaphor for that which is hidden or historical. Might this, perhaps, be the meaning of the title, *Unseen*, given to the exhibition, referring to the works themselves as artifacts that are by definition history? That perhaps art, as product of the past, is absence, what has been lost?

This notion may offer insight into another 'shadow' work, the digital image on steel *Man Unseen* which appears to have been printed from a negative. That which is light is rendered as dark. That which is dark, without light, is rendered as light. Negative implies positive, that which is not that which is, shadow light, thus signifying that which is not and that which is, that which was and that which is, absence and presence, former self and self. When seen through the lens of this series of analogies, the welded steel *New World Explorer (Tony)* with its pair of boots and walking staff stands as testament to the powerful presence of absence and that which is not seen, positioned by the entrance to the passageway gallery like a kongorikishi guardian figure at a Japanese shrine or Augustus Saint-Gaudens' *Adams Memorial* in Washington, D.C.

DeDeaux has designed an interesting installation leaning ladders made of transparent, and thus translucent, material, and ladders made of dark, light absorbing, material, against the

wall. At first one sees the dark ladders, vaguely apprehending the existence of those made of transparent material by means of interference patterns of light and shadows iterated in overlapping layers on the wall and reflected on the polished wood floor. Lines, edges, shapes, surfaces, forms, intervals, and interstices appear as disruptions in a continuum of light. Cast shadows entwine in complex intersecting patterns, invisible substance appears to glow as light is reflected, passes through, and is partially absorbed, creating effects that channel the peaches and crystal vase painting from Herculaneum. Associations with ladders arise from the cultural memory as if evoked by the tones of a fakir's flute as object and symbol, medium and metaphor for communication and transition connecting one level with another at construction sites, linking natural and supernatural, or leaning against a nighttime sky while a dog howls at the moon.

In a small group of assisted ready-mades, the artist plays with the material massiveness of steel chain struggling to make its presence felt through the medium of light, a light that reveals the chain sculptures' existence as it defies the steel's effort to absorb the wavelengths that make visible. Lengths of links rise from steel plates, defying physical weight, evoking deeply hidden memories of the enigmatic presence of Connell's surreal sentinels and totemic objects that occupied this same space some ten years ago. Distant echoes rise from Brancusi's early twentieth century expressionist abstraction, the *Endless Column*. But something other than the symbolist expressionism of Brancusi and the surreal presences of Connell, something other than the plain spoken, theoretically rich minimalist realism of Andre's and Morris' industrial materials, informs DeDeaux's chains.

A length of iron chain, privileged with its own slender pool of light, the rhythmic pulse of its links interrupted by a fractured link, lies along the floor as if in mimicry of the dry landscape rock garden at Ryoanji. Did the artist have this garden in mind as *Unseen* was installed? The positioning of the installation, in part or *in toto*, and the naming of *Unseen*, might be an allegory of that famous garden. At Ryoanji the position of the observer, the angle of view, and the alignment of the individual objects are all coordinated in such a way that all objects can never be seen from any single vantage point. One object is always hidden. One will only be able to see that which is unseen when one has attained enlightenment. Perhaps there is a single idea underlying *Unseen*?

In a series of prints on acid-free paper filleted from *Oyster Cube Pearl I* and *Oyster Cube Grey I*, the simple geometries of maritime signal flags contrast with the irregular, auricular shapes of shucked oyster shells. The meaning of each is written in the respective title: *Flag Foxtrot 10* ("I am **disabled**. Communicate with me."); *Flag Delta 10* ("**Keep clear** of me. I am maneuvering with difficulty."); and *Flag Xray 10* ("**Stop** carrying out **your intentions** and watch for my signals."). To what circumstances do these warnings refer? New Orleans during Katrina? The silting of oyster beds? A more primal, sublimated expression from within the artist, as Artemesia Gentileschi has done so eloquently? Ambiguity is the infinitely malleable antithesis of reason. □



Justin Forbes: *I'll Show You Mine If You Show Me Yours*. O/C, 36" high.

Structure & Chaos

BY KATHY RODRIGUEZ

JUSTIN FORBES
KRISTA JURISICH
Jonathan Ferrara Gallery

PAUL CAMPBELL
Heriard-Cimino Gallery
New Orleans, LA

THREE EXHIBITIONS AT two galleries, Jonathan Ferrara and Heriard-Cimino, explore similar content and media. The paintings and collages of Justin Forbes, Krista Jurisich, and Paul Campbell range from high degrees of representation to non-objectivity, showing a slice of the spectrum of formal possibility. But form does not entirely comprise their meaning – their subjects seem to be linked by ideas of disorder, uncontrollable events, and the relationship between structure and chaos.

In "Halcyon Days" at Jonathan Ferrara, Forbes shows a series of texturally flat, figurative oil paintings created in the past year – according to the gallery, his first major

body of work since his removal from the city during Katrina. The subject matter – street scenes, dimly lit bars, varied characters caught mid-gesture - narrates a personal mythology steeped in youthful anarchy. Images of current culture were originally against an academic norm, butted against authority and structure. Forbes' use of this subject matter places his paintings in the genre of social realism, particularly the Ashcan School, which emphasized the underbelly of urban life. The scale is approachable and forthright; the sub-narratives of Forbes' overall story fit neatly into the window of the picture plane.

Stylized color and line struggle against these confines. Though there is evidence of the influence of Alice Neel in the sensuous curves and contours, and seemingly arbitrary but expressive color, that Forbes uses to paint his characters, his palette is more intense. Forbes' saturated color joins with a skewed perspective that lingers somewhere above and right in front of the primary (and authoritative) figure in *McQueen's Blvd*. The formal qualities evoke dreamscapes or acid trips, places and drugs that are outside the realm of conventional rules, but also means for finding sense in the waking world. Burlesque figures interrupt the order



Krista Jurisich: *Out of Pocket - Pass the Buck*. Mixed media on board, 31.5" high.

and geometry intrinsic to a pool game – even a beer-soaked one - at Mimi’s bar in *Social Networking*. Both paintings depict a spontaneous energetic disorder that is youth at play.

Balthus might appreciate the eroticism suggested by a peculiarly posed pool cue and the curious gazes of two children in *I’ll Show You Mine if You Show Me Yours*. Sexual discovery is part of the adolescent journey on which Forbes’ characters find their way. But, the iconography of this piece symbolizes the process of creation and destruction, life and death – it is almost a contemporary vanitas. From the middle ground near a trailer, a pregnant woman watches over two boys and their pool cue in the foreground. Behind her, a father-figure cooks meat over a charcoal grill. To her right, a little girl opens her underpants to the rapt gaze of a little boy. Each character is so isolated and privately engaged that the looming presence of an approaching tornado goes unnoticed. It is a narrative of the process of procreation: revelation, sexual encounter, conception, and birth. But, food and entertainment, the indulgent pleasures of human life, eventually meet an insurmountable end, the ultimate order of things.

Out of Pocket – Pass the Buck, a collage-drawing by Jurisich in “The Theatre of Culture Strata” at Ferrara, uses more traditional vanitas iconography. A huge skull looms at the center;

a globe suspends from a human hand to its left. There, tradition stops. Eyeballs watch from all angles, and authority figures peer at the viewer from behind grass at the bottom of the picture plane. A squid and whale struggle in a battle for survival to the right. This is an image of the diorama at the American Museum of Natural History, suggesting that the piece is didactic. The viewer should learn, from the money bills layered in the background, that finances structure this world – and this world is fleeting. However, the juxtaposition of Caravaggio and candy in the upper left of the composition suggests meaninglessness. Though Caravaggio was a rebel and a revolutionary, he is part of the canon of art history – his work is currently part of the textbook survey. Put in the same composition as a big sweet jelly mold, the order and authority is cancelled out.

By its nature, collage challenges order. It is rooted in the belief that content is created from chaos. It is automatic, a deposit of the sediments of culture pieced and glued together from clippings. Jurisich literally translates this in *Needle in a Haystack*, a giant relief of objects culled from local overflow sites and former barrier islands cemented together on a support. This is the only control Jurisich has over the work, and it is one of the most activist of her pieces. The amalgamation of pictures, glass, trinkets, and money, probably priceless to those who once owned them, are meaning-



Paul Campbell: String Series 7, 2011. O/C, 48" high.



Paul Campbell: *Koosh 6*, 2011. O/C, 60" high.

less now. Jurisich categorized other objects in apothecary jars that evoke specimens – the original identity of the pieces are lost; they are simply dead evidence. But, maybe the title implies a tiny grain of life – a solution to cultural conundrums by searching deeply through all this chaotic detritus.

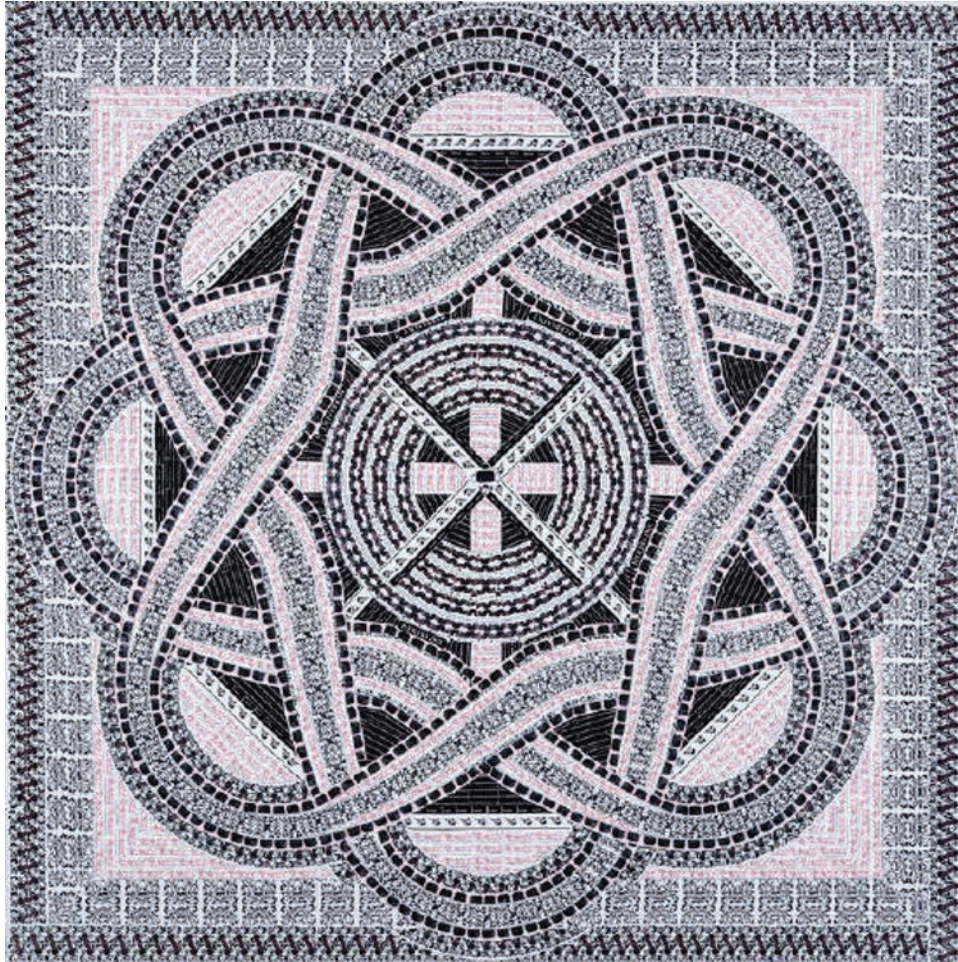
CAMPBELL'S *KOOSH* AT HERIARD-CIMINO is controlled chaos. It isn't difficult to guess how Clement Greenberg would feel about the artist's use of the kitschy koosh ball as a painting tool. But the resulting work is essentially Abstract Expressionist, an image of the indexical signs of the artist's gesture. Campbell admits that he parodies the style; in these works, he threw the paint-soaked ball, which resembles an anemone, at an atmospherically colored canvas. He is irreverent, literally throwing paint in the face of painting. It begs whether a koosh is any different than a brush, or a stick, or string – another painting tool favored by Campbell.

The result is decorative – something of a blow to the authority oil painting conveys. The scars left by the koosh

resemble chrysanthemums (symbols of death, interestingly) and interlace with dramatic, chandelier-like drips. The paint itself has a low relief, more like a print; the finished form resembles handmade wallpaper. Campbell paraphrases Duchamp, embracing the element of chance. The work is controlled from beginning to end. The layers of paint show the history of his process, the manipulation of color and line to a desired effect.

Each artist subjects the process of painting, a medium with great historical gravity, to humor and play. The subjects of their paintings – grand themes of order and chaos – are weightier than the connotations of the medium. Nothing is humorous in the end; it might be an imbalance between the severity and the silliness, or the inherent difficulty of refreshing traditional themes. But, the pleasure of looking is enough to encourage deeper consideration – and that, within the fast pace that characterizes our lives, is an achievement in itself.

□



Troy Dugas: *Herbsaint*. Courtesy Arthur Roger Gallery.

Patterns of Perspective

BY KARL F. VOLKMAR

TROY DUGAS
Arthur Roger Gallery
New Orleans, LA

THE ART OF Troy Dugas is purposeful and deliberate. The design is the idea, an idea so insistent that it can imprint its intentionality into one's consciousness like a mystical vision. One's gaze is mesmerized into contemplation of multiple, radially symmetrical, mandala-like concentric patterns or fascinated by images that seem to glow with a spiritual energy found elsewhere in the apocalyptic visions of a Beatus manuscript or the mystical diagrams of kabalistic Sefirot. The effect allows multiple responses depending on the nature of the observer.

A fundamentalist reading of the patterns as literal text results in translations expressed in simple declarative sentences using descriptive language. The observer who inhabits

such a world that is no more than what it seems to be, after pausing for a comma of a moment, will declare that a work like *Grand Fine Green* can be comprehended at a glance, describe it as mere decorative patterning, and move quickly on to whatever is next, thus avoiding becoming drawn into [s/he might say 'ensnared in'] the intricacies of the design and a deeper, more subjective response. Others may experience the dynamic, rhythmic interrelationships among the lines, colors, and shapes as a poetic cantillation, eliding the literal as in the ritual chanting of a Masoretic text.

An experiential respondent discovers subtexts that are described in metaphysical narratives related using affective language, descriptive metaphors, and historical allusions. For the observer who believes in a multi-dimensional universe, the comma of a pause allows eye and mind to be drawn into and engaged with the minutiae of the design like honeybees to a field of flowers. This is only the beginning of a richly experienced secular theophany as s/he becomes in-



Troy Dugas: *St Jerome*. Courtesy Arthur Roger Gallery.

creasingly absorbed in ongoing exploration, discovery, and psychic appreciation like a Tibetan monk who slowly approaches the ein-sof through progressive meditative practice.

Although they appear superficially to be expressions of entirely different, irreconcilable realms of consciousness, the works of Dugas and of Mark Rothko are like two different paths to the nascence of consciousness just as any two biological beings can trace their individual histories back to the beginnings of life in the telling of their 'ancestors tale' (Richard Dawkins, *The Ancestor's Tale*). Patient concentration before a Rothko stained canvas, whether in a museum or the quiet confines of the chapel in Houston, allows the diffuse colors of the paintings to saturate one's retina and induce a sensation of serene transcendence. Patient attention before Schnapps 70 allows the mind's eye to alternate between passive absorption in the gestalt of the whole and active zooming into the centripetal design.

In *Sunflower*, the eye, following the lead of the artist, circumbulates a series of concentric shapes set within a square ground, moving at will and by impulse inwards toward the center and outwards towards the periphery along radial paths and sections as if caught in a slowly moving

vortex. More and more details are discovered in the intricate patterns of each zone. The dexterously rendered details are appreciated as one does the stitches used by appliqué, embroidery, or bricolage artists. One is awed by the sheer effort, inventiveness, and meticulous craft of the artists much as one is impressed by the one million five hundred thousand color shifts in a Huari huipile and the twenty five million knots that make up the Ardabil carpet. The magnitude of the technical virtuosity is more like an act of devotion than a display of technical skill.

Mindfulness. Being in the eternal present. Focus. Concentration. Each represents the world according her or his vocation. The scientist discovers patterns in nature, represents them in algorithms, and tests them in experiments. The artist invents patterns and represents them in the making of art. The sensitive observer becomes involved in exploring these patterns, sympathetically iterating the experience of the creator, as they are indexed to the map of her or his past experiences.

The associations evoked by an artist's work can provide interesting insights into [a viewer's response to the work if not] the work itself. The perception of a sympathy with the paintings of Georges Seurat with their meticulous, deliberate

technique and ordered compositions once described as being like an Egyptian fresco is easily understood. The clearly described forms and carefully structured compositions of Nicholas Poussin's classicism require a bit more effort. So, too, the structure of Piet Mondrian, sans the latter's theosophical neoplatonism. Perhaps. Surprising was a perceived affinity with the work of Victor Vasarely and Bridgett Riley with their iterations and subtle variations within a narrow range of visual elements in and the resulting illusions effected. How different they each seem on the surface yet the work of each of these artists seem to share some common trait or characteristic with the artist's mandalas.

This raises an important question. On what basis does one compare one work of art to another: appearances, media, formal qualities, historical contexts, social constructions of meaning et cetera? In the natural sciences, systems of classification have changed from analogous appearances signifying similar functioning or effects to counter intuitive statistical modeling in evolutionary biology that reveals the plotlines and character development in *The Ancestor's Tale*. How does one account for differences? Can they be explained by differences in time, place, personality, or worldview, or the result of chance variation, and natural selection? Or is there a memetic root in the case of art and culture, as there is a genetic explanation in the case of living organisms, for similar characteristics or phenomena, at any and every level? A cautious thought experiment, a cross-fertilization between evolutionary biology and Ellen Dissanayake's anthropological theory of art, suggests that this is possible.

Appearances are the least reliable sign of relatedness. The unique materiality and absolute realism of Robert Rymann's Zen-based minimalist white on white paintings might seem unrelated to Dugas' intricately iterated and reiterated designs. So, too, Cy Twombly's infinitely varied primal graffiti scrawled across the surfaces of vast canvases like an abstract notation for improvisations on a didgeridoo. Individually, however, their works are like the different modalities of medieval plainchant sung in adoration of a supernatural whole, or the alternative paths to enlightenment of different Buddhist sects, developed from a shared memetic template whose epiphenomenal manifestations are influenced by environmental circumstances.

In *Herbsaint* and *St. Jerome*, the mind discovers patterns as the eye follows bits of color cues, hints of implied lines and contour lines, tracing shapes lying beneath other shapes, experiencing shapes as continuous planes, as transparent planes, and shapes as opaque planes. The seemingly finer and finer detail pulls one into the rhythms of a maze as intricate as the carpet page of the Lindesfarne Gospels or the Chi Rho Iota initials in the Book of Kells. One's perception of the whole is composed of intertwined lines that, in the serpentine and lacertine interlace of the medieval manuscript, embody the invisible forces animating the world. American Vermouth could easily pass as the ground plan of an early Mayan temple at Cerros or an as yet undiscovered Lafayette Wat.

In a material reading of Dugas' thinking, the artist's work can be mined for the social text encoded in the physical substrate of the medium following McLuhan's epiphany that 'the medium is the message'. Just as more conventional media

– bronze, film, junk, marble, pastels, oils, photographs, print-making media, tempera, watercolors, et cetera -- each have their own histories and associated values as media within the social production of art and meaning, so do graphic design media exist within a socio-economic matrix. Two paths of interpretation approached from this perspective suggest themselves. One is the artist's reuse of outdated commercial labels. The second is the consideration of the labels as socio-economic constructs.

The use of labels is an extension of the incorporation of non-traditional materials in art-making sanctioned by early twentieth century synthetic cubism. In the recycling of objects no longer having value and having been discarded -- Schwitters' merzbild, Rauschenberg neo-Dada, *nouveau réalisme*, and *arte povera* – materials could be used as irony, metaphor, social critique of a consumer society, or ecological model.

Although graphic designs are created by artists, their aesthetic value is typically subordinate to the economic. The role of these ultimately disposable items is to define brand identity, attract a potential buyer's attention, and communicate information. Having no intrinsic material value, when that role has been fulfilled, or the economic play in which they played a role is rewritten, these commercial labels are shredded, ground into small bits, and returned to the ashes and dust from which they were made. Rescued from this fate by the curiosity of the artist, in hands of Dugas the remains became like the colored sands passing through the fingertips of a Tibetan monk as he created his intricate designed mandalas.

Although the shredding destroyed works of art, their value as aesthetic objects had been compromised by their infinite reproduction, which reduced the value of a single unit to virtually nil like a dollar bill. This phenomenon was appropriated and exploited in the art of ex-graphic designer Andrew Warhola, Jr. The aura of uniqueness had been destroyed not through mechanical reproduction, as Benjamin theorized, but by the process of multiple reproduction in and of itself (as is the case with Federal Reserve notes). Graphic design is subject to the inexorable and ineluctable laws of the market as is every other commodity.

Dugas was curious enough to collect defunct labels (at first without knowing why except that he wanted them, itself a fine example of impulsive spending!) until he came up with the idea of recycling them as materials for making art, thus giving them a new life as fine art. Collecting them as one rakes up leaves in the fall, and storing them in the compost heap of his mind, the labels became the humus in which seeds of inspiration found nourishment, sprouted, and grew into art. In an amusing way, this ecological description might be considered as an allegorical metempsychosis in which the aesthetic and socio-economic spirits of the commercial labels have been reincarnated in the higher state of suitable-for-gallery art. □



Vinko Brešan's *Witnesses*. Barbir.

Hope and Trauma in the Balkans

BY JOHN MOSIER

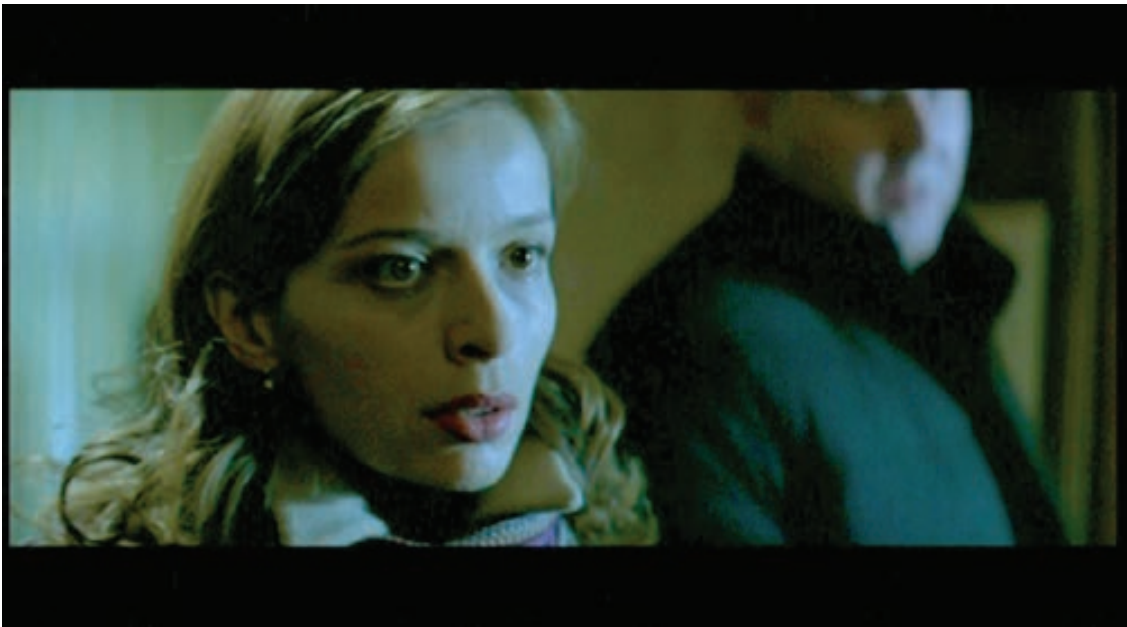
WITNESSES
Director: Vinko Brešan

A DIMLY LIT town square, bathed in a ghastly green light. We're watching a convoy drive around it, exit left. A ragtag collection of military and civilian vehicles, nondescript and devoid of insignia. They pass by a battered sedan. A few second later, the sedan comes to life, lurches off. It's hard to tell what the importance of this is, and the next sequence of events hardly helps: an older woman in a room, a man laid out in a coffin on the table. A man is there paying his respects, gets into a car, drives off. Then we see the battered sedan lurch to a halt. Everything is wet and dim, interiors dark and dingy.

Three men get out. They appear to be soldiers, but it's difficult to tell in what army—or even if they're in an army,

although they're well armed. They go to a house. The door opens. There's a burst of gunfire, one from the soldier at the door, another from one standing back. We still have no idea what's happening, and thus begins a chilling and torturous tale, *Svedici (Witnesses)* by the Croatian director Vinko Brešan, based on an untranslated novel by Jurica Pavičić, *Alabaster Sheep*.

The context of the film is so totally obscure it's maddening. There's never any explanation of anything, none of the cues audiences need to decipher what's going on. And this in a film where the majority of viewers desperately need enlightenment. Not many Westerners know what Croatian even sounds like, what the distinctive national shield looks like, or what conflict we've been plunged into. The bloody disintegration of the Balkan state of Yugoslavia is a chapter of contemporary history that no one outside of the wreckage wants to remember. But then Westerners have short memories, so perhaps Brešan is wise not to bother filling



Vinko Brešan's *Witnesses*. Majka.

in the gaps.

Now make no mistake. *Witnesses* is a brilliantly conceived and executed work, an extended meditation on the theme of violence and moral regeneration that reveals a mastery of cinematic storytelling, that's remarkable even by the standards of Balkan directors. It's worth noting in that regard, by the way, that these folks were the outstanding students of FAMU, the famous Prague film school, mainly because in Belgrade and Zagreb (and elsewhere) they were able to make movies largely free of the dead hand of the communist state that stifled the Czech and Slovak alumni.

Which is not to say that this is an easy film. Basically, it's the poster child for representational obscurity. Viewers accustomed to being spoon fed their narratives, given simplistic plots with lots of props and over acting, will be completely befuddled. So were a good many critics.

The various blurbs for the film suggest that, like Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, it gives multiple and conflicting points of view about one event. But the narrative point of view here has nothing to do with Kurosawa. There's no ambiguity about the central event, no ambiguity about who did what or why, and none whatsoever about the reactions of the five main characters. It's a false and wildly misleading comparison borne of critical desperation.

Now it's true that Brešan does keep looping back to the

same scene. But he does so not to show events as being different (a la Kurosawa), but to develop the story in some new direction, to meter out pieces of crucial information.

He does this in two entirely different ways. One of them is conventional. Twice he jumps back to a wartime scene that helps to explain the present. The only thing that's disconcerting is there's no signal of the shift: we're simply catapulted back to that moment, slammed into it violently. Its disorienting, but psychologically it typifies trauma: the unexpected catastrophe that seizes us unawares, remains frozen in our minds, precisely because we haven't had the time to prepare for it. Make no mistake: although the title is an imperfect derivation from the Croatian word for witness (svjedok), it could just as accurately be called *Trauma* (interestingly enough, the Croatians use the same word we do to describe the syndrome).

The other device is considerably more complex. Brešan will take an otherwise innocuous scene: a shot of the police investigation of the murder, for instance, then follow one or two characters who are present. Then, unexpectedly, he'll go back to that same scene (literally), only this time he'll follow a different character, give us an additional glimpse of his life, pick up at a later point in the original conversation. The anchor scene remains the same. But what we see flowing out of that scene is not.

So, for instance, on the first pass, we see Barbir, the local detective (played by Drazen Kuhn) who's investigating the murder, being accosted by a female reporter, Majka (Mirjana Karanovic).

It's clear she's not there just to file a story, that she has personal business. That business isn't revealed until another looping, which makes the transition to a flashback. Barbir came to her office to investigate a petty theft. Majka reveals her distress: her fiancé has been wounded, she can't see him, she doesn't even know if he's alive. There's an air raid, she refuses to take cover, and the next thing you know, she's clutching at him desperately.

When we see this. We don't know what the result is, and we definitely don't know what this has to do with the story, other than that Majka's determination to cover the story parallels Barbir's determination to find the killers.

The idea that in the middle of a war two people are determined not to let the fact that the dead man was a member of an enemy race interfere with the pursuit of justice is admirable, but hardly novel. An enemy race? Alas, yes, this was a racial war as well as a territorial and nationalistic one—something else everyone wants to forget. But *Witnesses* isn't about a stubborn detective and an intrepid reporter united by their quest for justice, although as the story unfolds, her role is considerably more important than his. The ostensible story is not exactly a distraction; it's simply one part of the narrative. It's a conventional trope that raises expectations (will Barbir succeed in bringing the murderers to justice?) and generates some romantic tension (he's married, she's engaged).

Brešan raises those questions, whose existence suggests a formulaic plot, only to deflate them. Barbir figures out who the killers are, but his investigations are thwarted at every turn: eye witnesses lie or clam up, the mayor and the prosecutor don't want him to investigate the local army unit (it's returning to the front), and ultimately, nothing happens. In one of the last shots of the film we see him standing on the street watching as Josko (Kresimir Mikic), the youngest of the killers, climbs into a truck and heads off to the war.

Similarly, when we're introduced to Majka, the "personal" business she wants to discuss is what happened during the air raid. She doesn't want a repetition. She's not being indecisive, she's serious. So is Barbir. One reason his investigation never goes anywhere is that he spends too much time at the hospital. His wife is lying there in a coma, may survive only if she can get an operation. But there are so many desperate cases . . .

At some point, we can grasp the unifying thread: the mortally wounded wife (shrapnel in the brain), the air raid, the missing fiancé, the killing of the Serb, the dead man laid out on the table. The Montenegrin intellectual and partisan, Milovan Djilas, called his book about the Second World War, *Wartime*. None of the people in this film are intellectuals; their experiences are fragmented and personal, but Brešan's film is the counterpart, stands to the collapse of Tito's Yugoslavia what Djilas' account does to the formation of it. However noble the intentions were, this artificial state was borne in blood, and it collapsed in blood, leaving the survivors wandering around in a state of shock, their personal lives in ruins.

The aftermath of the collapse has generated some impressive films, notably Milos Radivojevic's *Awakening From the Dead* and Jasmila Zbanic's *Grbavica*. But these films are about exclusively personal responses to the debacle: they focus on one individual. Brešan's film shows us how everyone has been affected. No one is immune.

He also shows how, on a practical level, the struggle played

out, since in *Witnesses* the war is still going on. It's far enough along for the Croats to feel confident of being able to establish their country. As Dr. Matic (Ljubomir Kerekes), the mayor, the mayor, tells Barbir, there will be a time for murder investigations after the war.

Barbir has no choice but to play along, because Dr. Matic is the only person who may be able to save his wife by operating on her. So he prevails on Majka to see if she can persuade him. Matic is the uncle of the man she's going to marry, Kreso Leon Lucev). It's his younger brother, Josko, who's killed the Serb, along with friends Vojo (Mariko Prga) and Baric (Bojan Navojec). Matic knows who did it, because his sister-in-law, Novinarka, had him come to her house—the same house where husband is laid out on the table.

So Matic has an interest in the investigation not going anywhere, and he tells the three men how to solve their problem. That dilemma is the crux of the story. The Serb wasn't alone. There's a witness, locked up in the garage. Matic's advice is a page out of Stalin's book: "no body, no problem." He's the epitome of the Communist apparatchik, oily and unctuous, whose bland words mask a total indifference to human suffering.

But to be fair, it's not clear that when he gives them his advice, he understands the problem—certainly the audience doesn't. The witness is a little girl, the Serb's daughter. Like all the other keys to the situation, this one emerges casually, almost accidentally, even though the information has always been there for us to see. When, early on, Majka goes in the house with Barbir, she notices a stuffed animal; at the morgue, the examiner remarks on how curious it is that the dead was eating a child's breakfast cereal.

But only the three killers know the identify of the witness from, the beginning. That accounts for their somewhat mysterious behavior. We see that, we just don't know the cause. No one cares about the Serb, who by all accounts was a thoroughly rotten human being, and no one's sorry that he's dead. But killing a little girl in cold blood . . . Everyone has a line he doesn't want to cross, and there it is. The three of them are paralyzed, torn.

Traumatized in different ways: Josko is a sullen boy, Vojo simply withdrawn, and Baric, surprisingly, is brooding. As he tells Majka, right before he kills himself, he's seen too much, we've all witnessed too much. So the title doesn't refer just to witness in the narrowest sense (the girl is a witness to a crime), it refers to what they've all witnessed, been forced to confront.

Now the unraveling of this story is just as elegant and well plotted as the story is complex. Kreso suspects something's amiss, and Majka figures out who the witness was. Eventually, they conspire to save the little girl, helped by the soul searching of Vojo and Ljubo. Josko's a different story. In a flashback we see how it was his childish irresponsibility that cost his brother his leg. It's that scene, incidentally, that generated the title for the novel.

At some point the traumas begin to pile up. Novinarka's in deep mourning because her husband, and their father, was killed in a stupid and pointless firefight, which the sons witnessed (and which we see). Barbir's wife was fatally injured by shrapnel (when Majka goes to the hospital to tell him what she knows, he's sitting there, mourning a corpse). The air raid sent Majka over the edge: she didn't want to have sex, she just wanted to be held, to be comforted. They're two lost souls, drowning, hanging on to each



Vinko Brešan's *Witnesses*. Josko and Mother.

other for life itself.

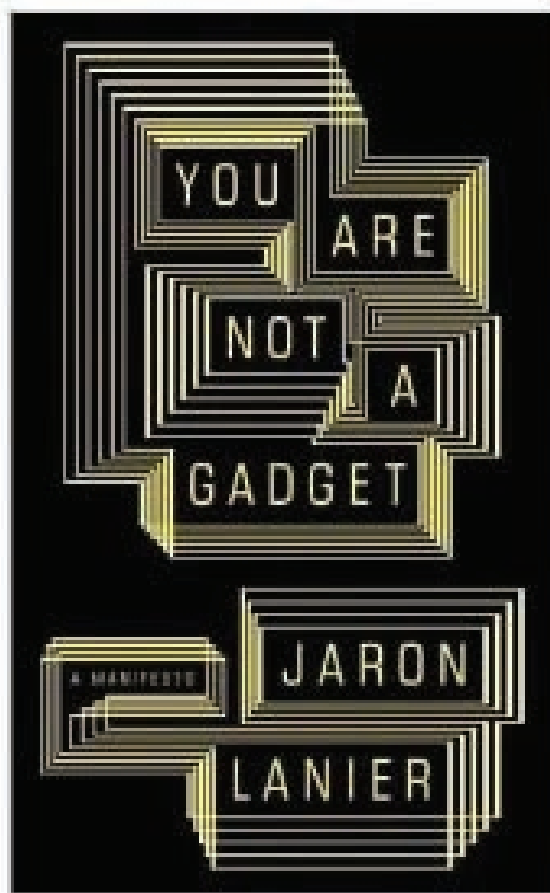
One critic commented on how enervated and drained the characters were—as though this was a criticism. On the contrary, it's the point of the film. Everyone's been affected. Not simply traumatized, but polarized. Brešan doesn't bother to point out what his original audience knew perfectly well. This was a war in which atrocities were the order of the day. How does the boy's father die? They're on patrol, a woman comes running out of a house, screaming hysterically that she's a Croat. But behind her is a Serb, using her as a shield. He's shooting at them, they shoot back, killing them both—just as he managed to kill Kreso's father. It's the sort of casual violence that makes the point without belaboring it. But Brešan's hardly fomenting the notion that the Serbs are uniformly wicked. When Josko starts to fiddle with the little figures at a roadside shrine, a captive Serb calls out to him not to do that—it's booby trapped. And that even though Josko has been urinating on the man (he's stopped by his brother).

The reality is thus as fiendishly complicated as the story

itself. This is a war in which people do horrible things routinely and without much thought. But that doesn't mean that they've become savages. On the contrary, trapped in the middle of a struggle that rings out the worst in humanity, they're desperately trying to do something that will allow them to define themselves as human beings.

Brešan films everything except the war scenes (three of those) in a drizzling, soggy, landscape: at the funeral (of Kreso and Josko's father) it's actually raining steadily. The interiors are dim, bathed in a garish green. Only at the very end is there a hint of the sun—a nice touch: Kreso and Majka have taken the little girl, driven her across the frontier to relative safety.

It's a somber ending, but curiously uplifting. It works. So does this film. If Dostoevsky were around today, making movies, this would be the sort of film he'd make—or anyway understand. □



Facebook v. Proust

BY STEPHEN R. BACHMANN

YOU ARE NOT A GADGET

By Jaron Lanier
Knopf, 2010

“..information under-represents reality ...”
--Jaron Lanier: *You Are Not a Gadget*, p.69

JARON LANIER HAS written a book called *You Are Not a Gadget*. His face peers out from the inside book jacket and he resembles a veteran Hell’s Angel rider. He is white, well fed, and has dreadlocks of light brown hair extending down to his nipples (covered by a plain black tee shirt). The book jacket informs us that he is “known as the father of virtual reality technology” and lives in Berkeley, California.

Lanier’s portrait in itself might suffice to induce one to read his book, for he seems to be no ordinary geek. He is not. Music is one

of his passions, and he is in love with an instrument called the oud. Lanier’s obsession with music leads him to the thesis of his book. The bad news about digitalizing music, he observes, is that it breaks down the music into units and ultimately impoverishes it.

MIDI [which became the standard scheme to represent music in software] was made of digital patterns that represented keyboard events like “key-down” and “key-up.” ... That meant it could not describe the curvy, transient expressions a singer or a saxophone player can produce. It could only describe the tile mosaic world of the keyboardist, not the watercolor world of the violin. [7] ... The whole of the human auditory experience has become filled with discrete notes that fit in a grid. [9]

For those of us infatuated with visual art he makes the same point:

A digital image of an oil painting is forever a representation, not a real thing. A real painting is a bottomless mystery, like any other

real thing. An oil painting changes with time; cracks appears on its face. It has texture, odor, and a sense of presence and history. ... Digital representations can be very good, but you can never foresee all the ways a representation might need to be used ... it will always turn out that you forgot something, like the weight or the tautness of the canvass [133-134]

This line of logic ["the digital flattening of expression into a global mush" 47]) leads Lanier to note that digital technology threatens to do the same thing to humans and their relationships:

Throughout this book I'll explore whether people are becoming like MIDI notes--overly defined, and restricted in practice to what can be represented in a computer. [10] ... missionary reductionism has happened to the internet ... The strangeness is being leached away by the mush-making process. Individual web pages as they first appeared in the early 1990s had the flavor of personhood. MySpace preserved some of that flavor, though a process of regularized formatting had begun. Facebook went further, organizing people into multiple-choice entities, while Wikipedia seeks to erase point of view entirely. ... using computers to reduce individual expression is a primitive, retrograde activity, no matter how sophisticated your tools are [48] ... Your real life is represented by a silly, phony set of database entries ... What computerized analysis of all the country's school tests has done to education is exactly what Facebook has done to friendships. In both cases, life is turned into a database. Both degradations are based on the same philosophical mistake, which is the belief that computers can presently represent human thought or human relationships. These are things computers cannot currently do.[69] What happened to musical notes with the arrival of MIDI is happening to people. [70] people have often respected bits too much, resulting in a creeping degradation of their own qualities as human beings. [119]

So far I have absolutely no disagreement with Lanier's observations. They are important, and their implications are profound. If I have any reservations concerning Lanier's book, they might involve the degree to which he fails to put them into larger contexts.

The first reservation, perhaps, may be too easy, in that it observes that sometimes the insufficient is better than nothing. As Lanier might argue, an image on a computer screen cannot replace a direct encounter with a painting by van Gogh. Picasso's *Guernica* cannot be fully appreciated unless you are standing there in front of it confronted by its huge size. Nevertheless, it would be a shame if one could never enjoy a sense of van Gogh or Picasso unless and until one had the real thing. Seeing a van Gogh in a book might inspire one to search out an original in a museum; ditto, if one first saw *Guernica* on a computer screen. (The final point to be made here is that sometimes reproductions can prove superior to the original, which is what I believe is the case in Mondrian's severest classical works: cracking paint undermines their impacts.) The second reservation would observe that humanity's definition might originate in the degradation of experience. In *Will to Power*, Nietzsche has observed that "We set up a word at the point at which our ignorance begins." He elaborates in *Twilight of the Idols* that

Our true experiences are not at all garrulous. They could not communicate themselves even if they tried. That is because

they lack the right word. Whatever we have words for, that we have already got beyond... Language, it seems was invented only for what is average, medium, communicable...

Our species may distinguish itself from others with its recourse to sophisticated sign systems. But the systems which helped our ancestors come down from the trees reduce the richness of reality along the lines accomplished by Lanier's computers. A third reservation would observe that the degradation of reality's richness is simply something that human beings continue to do over time. It did not start with language, and it will probably not stop with computers. If one contemplates the rise of mass production, one might conclude that it is better for a person to make her own music--as opposed to buying it from a musician, or buying a replica of it from some huckster. Or growing her own food, as opposed to buying it from a farmer, or buying a replica of food from some "food" manufacturer. And so on. At this juncture one must wonder whether a degraded experience is better than no experience at all. Sometimes it is not, and here Lanier loses. But Lanier's point is not only that sometimes degraded experience is worse than no experience at all; sometimes too much degraded experience ruins one's capacity for worthwhile experience. At this point Lanier joins Proust:

... we have to rediscover, to reapprehend, to make ourselves fully aware of that reality, remote from our daily preoccupations, from which we separate ourselves by an even greater gulf as the conventional knowledge which we substitute for it grows thicker and more impermeable, that reality which it is very easy for us to die without ever having known and which is, quite simply, our life. [298] ... Our vanity, our passions, our spirit of imitation, our abstract intelligence, our habits have long been at work, and it is the task of art to undo this work of theirs... [299-300]
TIME REGAINED

Convention, habit, and reduction have their uses. But their dangers are profound. How much art can we expect or need to make convention, habit, and reduction enduring?

A final set of reservations concerning Lanier's analysis may be derived from the notion of "political economy." Lanier does spend a few sentences on Marx (see, e.g., p.78), but they are so inadequate--if not stupid--that they are more trouble discussing and refuting than they are worth.

What does merit discussion, though, is the context that Lanier ignores, which might be called the degradation of consumption.

A person who really knew the Marxist tradition would laugh at Lanier's assertion that "new technologies have in general created new jobs--and those jobs have generally been better than the old ones." [78] Lanier might benefit from a reading of Harry Braverman's seminal *Labor and Monopoly Capital*; and if he cannot endure that, he might start with some readings from Max Weber. The point of Weber was how the "rationalization" of capitalist production was leading its participants into an "iron cage" of boredom and alienation. Blue collar and white collar work in the 20th century is not known for its scintillating features. That's why they've been called "jobs." But as Braverman might say to Weber, it is not just a question of the job being routine and boring. Braverman points out the degree to which labor under capitalism has been designed to take power from the worker and give it to the boss. Labor in the 20th century has been made stupid not merely because of technology. Labor has been made stupid because the owners use technology to ensure that the workers have as little

power over the production process as possible.

The preceding paragraph discusses the degradation of work under capitalism, but for the purposes of this review the more critical point relates to the degradation of consumption under capitalism. A great deal of pish posh has been written about the sort of freedom that people “enjoy” under capitalism. Certainly, unless you own capital, you enjoy no freedom of work under capitalism. You do what you are told, and most of what you do is boring at best, distasteful at worst. But the capitalist rejoinder to this objection is that you get plenty of freedom when you walk out of your factory or office door: your freedom consists in the freedom to choose from a myriad of consumer goods.

Yet whether “freedom” really consists in the ability to choose between frosted flakes and sugared shredded wheat biscuits--or between an iPod and an iPad--is a question of its own. The point to note here is that freedom of the marketplace is just as false and non-existent as freedom in the workplace. Writers as “radical” as John Galbraith and Alfred D. Chandler Jr. have observed that what capitalists have tried to do in the workplace they have tried to do in the marketplace. They have tried to control it. In other words, capitalists are not content to respond to demand. They want to engineer demand, they want to control demand. They want to control everything as much as possible in order to ensure a high rate of profit. Advertising does more than inform, it tries to sway and control consumer demand:

Advertising at its best is making people feel that without their product, you're a loser. Kids are very sensitive to that... You open up emotional vulnerabilities, and it's very easy to do with kids because they're the most emotionally vulnerable.-- Nancy Shalek, pres of Shalek agency [Kasser, *THE HIGH PRICE OF MATERIALISM*, 91]

All of these people understand something that is very basic and logical, that if you own this child at any early age, you can own this child for years to come. Companies are saying “Hey, I want to own the kid younger and younger and younger.”-- Mike Searles, president of Kids R Us [91]

When it comes to targeting kid consumer, we at General Mills follow the Procter & Gamble model of “cradle to grave.” We believe in getting them early and having them for life. --Wayne Chilicki, executive at General Mills [91]

Americans are on the receiving end of twice as much advertising as the citizens of virtually every other advanced democracy, subjecting them to a constant barrage of seductive pleas to consume more and more. Only in America would a cash-strapped public school display paid advertisements on the pages of its examination booklets.--Derek Bok [*THE POLITICS OF HAPPINESS*, 115]

And when the cajoling of advertising does not work, capitalist are not adverse to resorting to more coercive measures. And so it is that at mid-century, GM took the choice for public transportation away from the people of Los Angeles by the political and economic means of pushing L.A.'s nascent streetcar system to turn to buses. Apple and Microsoft try to force people to hew to their product lines by making them incompatible with other product lines.

While Lanier may appropriately deplore the degradation that recent technologies have brought to human experience, he might have spent more time appreciating how it is a result of political economy, not just technology. Technology just does not happen, it involves political choice by economic actors. Breaking experience into exhausted bits, reducing people to multiple choice

entities, this not only degrades experience; it also ensures that the consumer becomes dependent upon this degraded experience. It resembles heroin. If you want to enjoy music, food, or a painting you don't make these items yourself. You don't even go to another human being for it. You go through the intermediary of a corporation which wants to make a profit on the transaction; and the transaction affords second and third rate goods to boot.

The person reading this piece finds herself in a similar fix. Perhaps it would be better if she conceived my witty thoughts on her own, or heard them directly from my mouth. However, at least at this juncture, once she has gotten these printed words in her hands, she is “home free” to enjoy or deplore my prose and ideas. She does NOT depend upon a technologically complicated electronic mediator like her PC, or a Kindle, for further engagement. This is one reason that intellectual property issues are going to grow more and more acute in the 21st century: the mediators want monopoly power over intellectual property. The one thing scarier than the notion of a child born in 2020 believing that computer screens provide the best way of experiencing experience will be the actuality that the only way to experience experience will be through a complicated and costly computer with a price attached to every scrap of consumption.

Thus, what Lanier is deploring in the 21st century is simply a recapitulation of the devil's bargain that has been going on since the invention of industrial capitalism. Consumers get goods; but not only are the goods degraded, they are addictive. And the purveyor of goods does his best to ensure that only he (the purveyor) will be in a position to provide the addict with his heroin.

For better and for worse, Lanier's *You Are Not a Gadget* called to mind Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*. Klein's book relates how capitalism forces its “freedoms” onto participants through shock and disaster, e.g., Pinochet's Chile and Katrina's New Orleans. The thesis may be true, but it is not new: Marx' *Capital* traces the founding of capitalism to medieval England's foreclosure movement, i.e., the forced removal of peasants from common land so that the land could be parcelled into privately held units, and so that peasants would have no land, and thus be forced to sell their labor. In other words, people don't pick capitalism unless they are forced into it. Such background and context might have enriched Klein's presentation. The same can be said for Lanier and *You Are Not a Gadget* ; but given the context of his society and Klein's, perhaps the miracle is that they can even make ahistorical observations that hold some percipience.

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Jill Moser at Heriard-Cimino Gallery..

Calendar

COMPILED BY KATHY RODRIGUEZ

A GALLERY FOR FINE PHOTOGRAPHY – 241 Chartres St. 568-1313. www.agallery.com - Counterfeit: Louviere + Vanessa, May 14 - June 30; Jazz Fest Exhibition: Henry Butler, Herman Leonard, April 28

ACADEMY GALLERY – 5256 Magazine Street. 899-8111. Annual Student Exhibition, May-July

ARIODANTE GALLERY – 535 Julia St., 524-3233. www.ariodantegallery.com - Taft McWhorter (paintings), Belle Bijoux (jewelry), Stephen T Fuller/Drake (glass photography), Abe Geasland (found object sculpture), April 2 - 30; Cheryl Finrock (painting), Shea Yetta (jewelry), Anne Ashley (neon sculpture), Laura Cox (photography), May 7-31; Group Show, June 4 - July 31.

ARTHUR ROGER GALLERY – 432 Julia St. 522-1999. www.arthurrogergallery.com - Dave Greber (video), April 2-30; Simon Gunning (painting), May 1 - 31

BARRISTER'S GALLERY – 2331 St. Claude Ave. 525-2767. www.barristersgallery.com - Lost Little Girl's Art Show: Lillian Butter (painting), April 9 - May 7

BRUNNER GALLERY – 215 N. Columbia St. Covington, 985-893-0444. www.brunnergallery.com - Group Show, ongoing.

CAROL ROBINSON GALLERY – 840 Napoleon Ave. at Magazine. 895-6130. www.carolrobinsongallery.com - Timeline: Karen Jacobs (mixed media); Artists of Faith: An Invitational Exhibition, April; Virtual Exhibition, ongoing

COLE PRATT GALLERY – 3800 Magazine St. 891-6789. www.coleprattgallery.com - Carolyn Evans (paintings), April 11 - May 1; Robert Landsen (drawings), May 1 - May 29; Karen Statsny (paintings), May 29-June 26

COLLINS DIBOLL ART GALLERY – Loyola University. 861-5456. <http://www.loyno.edu/dibollgallery/> - Graphic Design Senior Exhibit, March 31-April 11; Bachelor of Arts Senior Exhibit, April 14-27; Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Exhibit, May 2 - 15; TypeCon, Summer

CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER – 900 Camp St. 210-0224. www.cacno.org - Electro-Sonic Painting: Marcus Brown (performance), May 19-21; Then and Now: Group Show, March 17-June 12; Yesterday, Today,



Massey Craddock at Taylor-Bercier..

and Tomorrow: Teen Artists' Perceptions of Time, March 19-May 1

d.o.c.s. gallery – 709 Camp St. 524-3936. www.docsgallery.com - Adam Farrington (mixed media), April 2 - May 5; Eileen O'Donnell (sculpture), May 7 - June 2; Group Show, June 4-August 4

GALLERY BIENVENU – 518 Julia St. 525-0518. www.gallerybienvenu.com - Raine Bedsole (sculpture), April 2 - May 22

HERIARD CIMINO GALLERY – 440 Julia St. 525-7300. www.heriardcimino.com - Paul Campbell (painting), April 2 - 30; Jill Moser, May 7 - June 2

HISTORIC NEW ORLEANS COLLECTION – 533 Royal St. 523-4662. www.hnoc.org - In Search of Julien Hudson: Free Artist of Color in Pre-Civil War New Orleans (paintings), January 20-May 15

JONATHAN FERRARA GALLERY – 400a Julia St. 522-5471. www.jonathanferraragallery.com - Halcyon Days: Justin Forbes (paintings), March 30 - May 8; May I Have a Revolution Please: Dan Tague (prints/drawings), April 22 - June 1; Incidence: Rieko Fujinami (drawings) and Wrong Sounding Stories: Adam Mysock (paintings), June 2 - 30

LeMIEUX GALLERIES – 332 Julia St. 522-5988. www.lemieuxgalleries.com - I CAN FLY: Songbirds and Singers, On a Wing and a Prayer: John Langford (prints/paintings), April 23-May 28; Breaking Muse: Shannon Landis Hansen (sculpture), June 4 - July 30

NEWCOMB ART GALLERY – Tulane University. 865-5328. <http://www.tulane.edu/~newcomb/artindex.html> - The History of the Future: Michael Berman and Julian Cardona (photography), May 11 - June 29

NEW ORLEANS MUSEUM OF ART – City Park. 606-4712. www.noma.org - Residents and Visitors: Twentieth Century Photographs of Louisiana (organized with HNOG; photography), through May 1; Different Strokes

for Different Folks: Glass from the Harter, Jastremski, and Sawyer Gifts, through May 15; Zen Painting from the Permanent Collection, through July 10; Ancestors of Congo Square: African Art at the New Orleans Museum of Art, May 13-July 17; Read My Pins: The Madeleine Albright Collection, May 24-August 14; Serenissima: Venetian Glass 1500 to the Present, June 3 - October 2

OGDEN MUSEUM OF SOUTHERN ART – 925 Camp St. 539-9600. www.ogdenmuseum.org - One World, Two Artists: John Alexander and Walter Anderson (paintings), Haiti After the Earthquake: Julie Dermansky (photography), Juke Joints: Birney Imes (photography), Art and Jazz: Preservation Hall at 50 (photography, painting, prints), through mid-July

SOREN CHRISTENSEN GALLERY – 400 Julia St. 569-9501. www.sorenchristensen.com - Grandeur: Michael Marlowe (paintings), April; Gretchen Weller Howard (mixed media), May; Campbell Hutchinson (painting), June; Group Show, July

TAYLOR BERCIER FINE ARTS – 233 Chartres St. 527-0072. www.taylorbercier.com - Massey Craddock (painting), April 21 - May 31

STELLA JONES GALLERY – Place St. Charles, 201 St. Charles Ave. 568-9050 . <http://www.stellajones.com> -

3 RING CIRCUS GALLERY – 1638 Clio St. 569-2700. www.3ringcircusproductions.com - Growth Patterns: Morgana King (installation/paintings), through May 7

UNO ST. CLAUDE GALLERY - 2429 St. Claude Ave. 280-6493. MFA Thesis Exhibitions: Holis Hannan and Regina Scully, through May 6; Matthew Grant and Peter Barnitz, May 14-June 8

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