

N·O·A·R

THE NEW ORLEANS ART REVIEW

A JOURNAL OF ANALYSIS

WINTER 2014-2015



*Douglas Bourgeois - Alan Gerson - Gasperi Collection
Guns in the Hands of Artists - Matisse at MoMA - Paul Ninas*

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Courtesy Arthur Roger Gallery. See essay, page 4.



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Douglas Bourgeois: *St Anthony Appears to Tony*, 1989. Oil on panel. Courtesy Arthur Roger Gallery.

Douglas Bourgeois: Of Reverie & Truth

BY TERRINGTON CALAS

DOUGLAS BOURGEOIS
Contemporary Arts Center
New Orleans, LA

DOUGLAS BOURGEOIS'S ART feels disarmingly intimate. Beyond the rapt technique and startling syntax, what engages your notice ultimately is the circumscribed universe he creates — and further, the abiding spiritual tone of that universe. His paintings suggest some otherworldly realm — usually a lyricized south Louisiana — that exists only in reverie. Or, in a singular Eden. This is a deeply personal realm, and a perplexing one. And it is suffused with an intense religiosity. What you see are Bourgeois's recurring subjects — Pop music luminaries and humbler, ordinary people — all rendered as sacred presences, sometimes as deities. They appear, trance-like, in spaces that seem filtered through a magical lens. Everything is somehow rarefied. Everything — even the

grimmest, debris-strewn interior — has a certain transcendence. These pictures constitute a kind of sanctified dreamscape.

The Pop star images — apparently genuine homages — are easily Bourgeois's most mystical. They have the air of a private Cythera, replete with shadowless idylls and sweet enigmas. In two recent pieces, *Womack and Del Rey* and *Double Holy Spirit Coco*, he transports you to a place of irrational splendor. Lana Del Rey is shown performing on the moon, looking fairy-tale beautiful, as she always does; Womack sings "That's Where It's At" (one would hope); and Coco O is graced with a canopy of fluorescent halos — in a composition that is sheer chromatic bliss.

Bourgeois has worked this sort of pictorial magic for many years. It has become something of a symbolic public service. In the face of snarling reality, we all need paradises, however fictive. These painted reveries fit the bill. Their theatricality alerts the eye, almost overwhelms the eye. But Bourgeois tempers it with a rich and strange poetry. You think of the poetic abstruseness one



Douglas Bourgeois: *Woman from St Gabriel*, 1991. Oil on panel. Courtesy Arthur Roger Gallery.

sees in Giorgione or, more pointedly, in Watteau. These works are theatre, yet nuanced and enhancing.

But Bourgeois's depictions of performers tend to overshadow another, more complex, series of reveries. I mean the somber-mystical paintings, mostly genre scenes, that seem to hover over everything he does. They are, to be sure, equally magical, equally sanctified, but more personal — and tintured with psychic truth. Certain pieces stagger you with their grave undertone. You sense a muted emotional charge — a pensiveness, indeed a yearning.

This impression is notably conveyed in his renderings of the solitary figure. Occasionally, he presents the figure transfixed, almost hypnotic. This image, arguably, signals the keynote of Bourgeois's sustained reverie. In *St Anthony Appears to Tony*,

for example, it becomes clear that his reverie is hardly a mere romantic chimera — hardly the picturesque fantasy one might suspect. It seems, rather, an emotional sanctuary. Or at least, the hope of one. At first glance, the figure evokes the sentinel quality of a Piero fresco — with something of Piero's coolness, too. But the total scene has an exigent temper. Tony stands motionless in his pattern-flung room, gripped by the sacred apparition. His aspect reads like a frozen violence of subjectivity. You see Tony confronting Tony in a "mirror" of disclosure — or perhaps of scrutiny, or of self-inquiry. It is a moment of inward dilemma. This image declares, with shattering concision, the dire reality of solitude.

The evocative intensity in *St Anthony* — as well as in other pieces, such as the exquisite *Dreaming of Home* — is partly due to Bourgeois's etiquette of feeling. He is expressive without



Douglas Bourgeois: *Double Holy Spirit Coco*. Oil on board. Courtesy Arthur Roger Gallery.

resorting to expressionist tactics. There is no question that profound emotion sustains much of what he does. And yet, the pictures are free of rhetoric and free of easy sentiment. His figures, moreover, almost invariably exhibit a vague dispassion. (This is especially true of the musical celebrities whose faces are glibly stage-ready.) Bourgeois's tack is patently reserved — emotion via utter discretion. It amounts to a unique harmony of composition and color. He knows how to manipulate space, and how to wrest implied disquiet from it. Chiefly, he focuses on the dramatic potency of diagonals and negative spaces. His color sense is a question of temperature opposites, but not the obvious ones; only the near-complements. Not orange versus blue, but khaki-tan versus turquoise. Again, the discreet choice. The result of this maneuvering is a calm lyricism countered by the subtlest of visual tensions. You see this in *Dreaming of Home*. It is a serene image, but also it seethes.

As an explicit theme, this notion of emotional anxiety — particularly as linked to solitude — appears sporadically in Bourgeois's oeuvre. But it is key to grasping the core of his meaning. It spreads a melancholy veil over everything he does. This is because there is an unmistakable drift of auto-reflection in his work and, perhaps, he acknowledges an artist's ineluctable apartness. At the same time, he seems aware of his role as consummate watcher of the individual, of other individuals. You felt this solidary view-

er, somehow, as if for the first time, in Bourgeois's abbreviated survey recently at the Contemporary Arts Center.

HIS PAINTINGS ARE meticulous and rich and strange, less artworks than spectacles. Taken together, they suggest some relishable hallucination that Bourgeois fashions wittingly, then induces us to share. In most instances, he transforms images into a singular brand of exotica. And, as such, they feel alien and implausible, yet, at the same time, patently seductive. They pull us out of ourselves and into an enchanted land that is both familiar and not. What we encounter there, chiefly, are Bourgeois' people — some famous personalities, but also a variety of graceless denizens surprisingly exalted. He labors over them, burnishes them to the point of lustrous "sainthood." Dwellings, too, are transformed. In this furbished world, even squalid rooms seem haven-like. The consequence is an environment as elusive, as radiant, and, in its way, as utopian as Matisse's *luxé*. Painting as salvation.

It is no surprise that we should be drawn to these pictures. In part, Bourgeois's technical rigor accounts for that. He uses a painstaking oil technique, almost Netherlandish in its delicacy and precision. The fine detail and highly glazed surfaces are irresistible. Few painters today would, or could, endure the tedium of the process. And that process deepens the exotic tenor of his work. The more he refines a composition, grafting keenly observed ele-



Douglas Bourgeois: *Dreaming of Home*, 1993. Oil on panel. Courtesy Arthur Roger Gallery.

ments to the whole, the stranger and more beguiling the image becomes.

But this technical appeal is only the beginning. We are also drawn, equally I think, to Bourgeois' idiosyncratic vision, his recurring mysticism. It is not very unlike the way we take to Max Ernst (of the early collages), or Rene Magritte, or Joseph Cornell. Cornell especially. The conspicuously different idioms notwithstanding, there is in Bourgeois' art a parallel to Cornell's wistful musing. In both cases, the most memorable pieces can be seen as tone-poems of yearning, as if the artists were detached from their subject, but mesmerized by it. Cornell was certainly detached from his; largely, it was a chimerical perception of the Europe he never saw. Much of Bourgeois' subject is, in fact, close to him — the place where he grew up and where he lives today. Still, a certain remoteness obtains in his work. It suggests a rapt observer living within a distinct and unusual culture while finding himself somehow isolated, cherishing that culture though not exactly fitting in. He elects to see it as the poetical place it might be and, through art, restructures it until it conforms.

The lyrical yearning in his art recalls a significant mo-

ment in the history of modernism — the appearance, over a hundred years ago, of a visionary prose-poem by Charles Baudelaire. It was the poet's Symbolist anthem, and perhaps, the anthem of all quintessentially French art from that point forward — and, indeed, with forebears in Poussin and Claude. Baudelaire spoke of a peculiar “fever that grips us. . . a nostalgia for a unique land, a land superior to others, as art is superior to Nature, where Nature is reshaped by reverie, where it is corrected, beautified, remolded.”

“Reshaped by reverie.” These words obviously constitute a textbook antecedent of a true Symbolist like Redon or a spiritual hedonist like Matisse or a quasi-surrealist Francophile like Cornell. But, it would seem, the idea can also reveal much about the achievement of an artist as resolutely American as Bourgeois.

To be sure, his link to this essentially French symbolist/surrealist ethos is not always apparent; certain paintings fairly refute it. But with each new body of work, there is more evidence that he falls securely within that hybrid tradition. The way he recasts — or, in effect, canonizes — his human subjects is part of it. It situates them in that moody Baudelairean state and separates them from the prosaic, or perhaps joyless, lives they actually live.

At times, he presents the figure as something emblematic, very like a compelling sacred icon. In the CAC show, a good example of this is the now-classic *Woman from St Gabriel* (1991), a compressed and elaborate salute to certain “exotic” hallmarks of southern Louisiana. It features a caramel-colored Medusa crowned with indigenous snakes, gracefully covered in a dress-pattern of birds, frogs, caterpillars, and vines. The background is almost entirely magnolia leaves, impossibly glossy, completing a virtual mosaic of jewel colors. The only relief from this beauty surfeit is a small slip of landscape behind the woman’s shoulders. The sad grey props of industrial exploration sit there, acting as a meager compositional prop in this complex painting and, simultaneously, holding the line as an encroaching force within our state’s natural beauty.

Woman from St Gabriel is one of Bourgeois’ most enduring works. It encompasses his inveterate apotheosis of the human figure, as well as a prudent political note. That apotheosis is widely familiar in his depictions of Pop musicians; their stage-ready grins and luminous costumes are easy correlatives to the magical aura he confers. But in this instance, with a humbler subject, the apotheosis attains a further objective. Bourgeois seems to equate the ennobled woman with the land, both of them exquisitely strange and both of them imperilled.

IN ANOTHER OF Bourgeois’ recurring subjects, the thrust seems profoundly personal. Still, the Baudelairean moodiness abides. At moments, it becomes even more of an issue. As mentioned above, these are the paintings of ordinary young men and women, usually isolated in grungy bedrooms and kitchens. They have far less polish than his musicians and symbolic figures. In fact, they often seem debased — somewhat consistent with their grim environments. But they, too, in a wholly different way, are exalted. Or, at least, their situation is. In these interiors, Bourgeois makes no transformation from real to glamorous. Rather, the transformation is more like the collision of two distinct states — the wretched and the mystical. Despite the clutter of each interior, exacerbated by Bourgeois’ insouciant pictorial structure, the space and the event are utterly still, hushed. He creates a devotional milieu and we catch it in the middle of some urgent ceremony. A lone figure, in suspended reverie, seems to undergo a religious or other experience.

An aura of piety prevails. This, despite some telling, intensely observed details: an overflowing sink, overflowing garbage, a bedroom strewn with used Styrofoam cups and spilled potato chips, cigarettes, a motionless young man with tattooed arms, a girlie magazine. To this, add a divine king — an infant one, and swarthy, too — floating by a kitchen window. The result is something bizarrely ecclesiastical, something like Louisiana Catholicism.

This is where the term tone-poem seems most fitting in discussing Bourgeois’ work. The poetry is the palpable spiritual quality that he accords these rooms. Each space is like a highly unconventional shrine prepared for each figure, where he or she might find redemption. This feeling may come, in part, from the lighting — frontal and static like stage lighting, but without cast shadows. And there is also Bourgeois’ distinctive modelling. His approach is, at once, rigorous and diffident — so diffident, in fact, that deeper tones scarcely exist. There is no conventional

chiaroscuro. This calls to mind the subdued shading in Manet: a system of light tones and half-tones and no more. In Bourgeois, the measured technique imparts a marked clarity of form, and a certain abruptness. Objects seem galvanized. The consequence is a *frisson* that arrests everything, most notably the figure. In these scenes, the figure looks to be in a spell — some religious state that evokes any number of quattrocento Annunciations.

On occasion, as in *St. Anthony Appears to Tony*, there are holy apparitions, miracles. But these are hardly necessary. The eerie spirituality is already there. A saint at the doorway, with piously joined hands, is almost a superfluous intrusion into these wonderful home-shrines.

It must be added hastily that Bourgeois tempers the peculiarity of such interiors. They are not only mystical. They are, as it were, psychologically balanced. He leads us back and forth, from the religious to the secularly mundane. This comes from his unsparing eye. He sees, and he shows us, everything. But in spite of all the endless detail, nothing seems trivial. This is a question of intensity. Every scrap on the floor, every box on a shelf rings with it. He underscores so many unlikely details and does so with such labored scrutiny that you are persuaded to see them as charged elements, not of a conventional genre scene, but of some “real life” episode — perhaps on stage, or in film. In the apparent squalor, you can sense a *cinéma vérité* rawness. And a cinema-like transformation where untidy physical realities seem oddly alluring.

This applies also to the young inhabitants. Bourgeois confers on them a distinct presence beyond the unlovely setting and beyond the religiosity. There is a greasy sexiness about them. These men and women are hardly elegant, but they have dark, cinematic looks. The women, as in *Dreaming of Home* (1993) and *The Traveller* (not in this exhibition), are sometimes reclining nudes, with the bold sensuality of an odalisque. The men actually evoke Bourgeois’ earlier portrayals of teen idols such as Sal Mineo and Elvis.

These are scruffy stars, but stars nonetheless. They enjoin attention. And they amplify one of Bourgeois’ continuing undercurrents: the profound isolation of an artist. These magical figure-in-room compositions are as close as one can get to spiritual autobiography without declining into conspicuous narrative. A great deal is implied here. There is the truth of detachment in an artist’s effort to confront something as powerful as Catholicism. There is the sad truth of an artist’s uneasy fit in everyday society. And further, there are one man’s private obsessions — dazzling music personalities, a lush Louisiana paradise — laid before us because, as an artist, he has no alternative.

The artist, apart from the rest, often must live normal life vicariously. Sometimes, he/she must fabricate the deliciousness of that life. That is what happens in Bourgeois’ seductive paintings of musicians. They are conduits devised for transcending moments of mean reality. But the artist has a weightier task. More than anyone else, he/she is equipped to confront and to assert life’s actual meaning — and to present it. That meaning, at core, is what we see in Bourgeois’ lonely and poignant interiors.

This complex body of work is the utterance of an artist who wields reverie to penetrate that meaning. To penetrate everything from flights of fancy to unavoidable truth. Time and again, his effort is persuasive. □



Lesley Dill: *Dirt*, 2014. Copper, black metal and wire on metal armature, 72" high.

Lesley Dill & Deborah Kass

BY KARL F. VOLKMAR

LESLEY DILL

Beautiful Dirt: Ballgowns of Lightness and Dark
Arthur Roger Gallery
New Orleans, LA

DEBORAH KASS

Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times
Arthur Roger Gallery
New Orleans, LA

AN APPRECIATION OF the semantic conundrums posed by the titles of Lesley Dill's *Beautiful Dirt: Ballgowns of Lightness & Dark* and Deborah Kass' *Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times* can spice up one's experience of the artists' works collectively and individually. The oxymoronic juxtaposition of and syntactical parallels between words and phrases amusingly defy efforts at making sense until encountering the works themselves. Although the works themselves easily stand their own ground, the relationship between an individual work and its name and the collective presents an intriguing puzzle that awaits patient reconciliation on the part of the viewer. The names of the exhibitions themselves and of individual pieces that may appear arbitrary and whimsical at first reading are essential complements of the physical works that contribute to aesthetic appreciation as well as intellectual understanding.

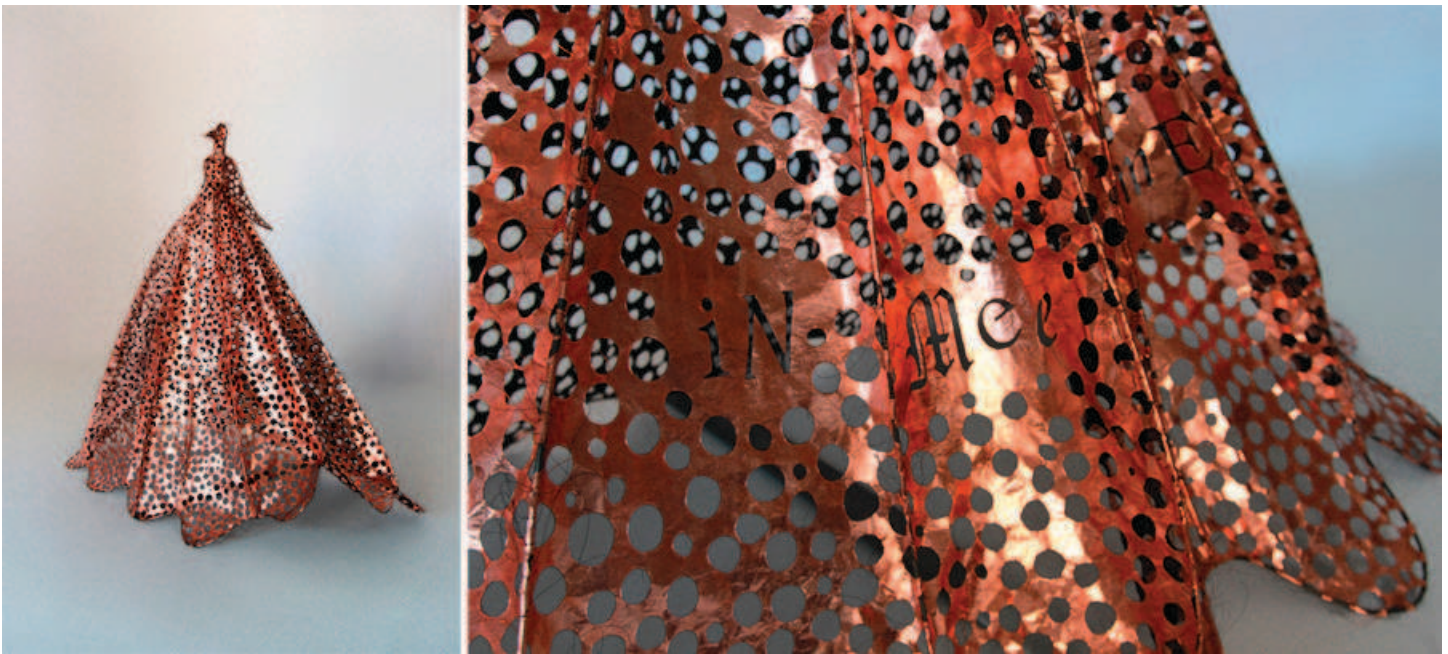
The conflation of terms in Lesley Dill's *Beautiful Dirt: Ballgowns of Lightness & Dark* -- beautiful and dirt, lightness and dark[ness], beautiful and lightness, dirt and dark[ness] -- mirrors the intricate ag-

glomerate of forms and shapes that is *Bird and Leaf Chandelier* (made from metal, silver-leaf, wire, enamel paint, copper, and vinyl, hanging one hundred thirty-two inches long). Suspended from the ceiling, long threads of leaf forms cast evanescent silhouettes on the wall, animating the upper regions of the space amid which the figures pose, figures whose presence is amplified by the spectral mass above.

For those who know the world through unassuming eyes, dirt, composed of varying mixtures of composted biomass and minerals, is the fundament of life from which all things are made and, ultimately, evolve (remember the creation myth that first there was darkness and then there was light, first *adamah*/earth from which Adam/humankind was created), an understanding that illuminates the essential nature of dirt freed from enculturated negative baggage, thus casting the artist in the role of the creator.

Chandeliers, the source of light in the darkness of night when ball gowns are worn in seasonal events, signify a turning within and a turning without. Lightness and darkness are a binary opposition or two parts of a whole, of yin and yang and yin in yang and yang in yin, relative degrees in a continuum as in the length of days and nights, of lightness and darkness, of seasons and months and weeks and the days within them in the incarnation of nature's rhythms just as life follows its natural course.

Hanging from the ceiling as a gown hangs from a body, the artist creates an environment in which gowns and chandeliers are the natural habitat celebrated in New Orleans Mardi Gras culture with its balls and parades, the Southern Belle with her cotillions and debutante balls, the



Lesley Dill: *Copper Bird Little*, 2014. Copper, black metal and wire on metal armature, 54" high.

Mardi Gras Indian with his feathers and flowers, and fantastic costumed performances of Nick Cave and Rebecca Horn.

The artist as illuminator is also the artist as metalworker who brings the circa six feet tall and almost as wide *Dirt* (made from copper, black metal and wire) into being from the ores from the earth as a Yoruba metalworker forging an Osanyin staff. Flesh-like coppery letters gleam through *niello* layers like the purity of the soul emanating through an incinerated, decomposed body. Textures, colors, edges and surfaces are expressions of the malleability of the artist's imagination creating one of a kind designs suitable for wearing by Oshun or Maleficent. The narrow torso and slender arms are like the stems of fantastic fungal beings thrusting up through the humus-covered floor of a forest or the muck on the edges of marshland ponds. Brittle erose lace like silhouettes surround the head like roots shredded from being pulled from the earth. Leaves grow out of the end of arms like a Daphne transforming into a laurel tree.

It is easy to imagine the darker beings as if emerging from the embers of campfires glowing among ashes after being crushed in the dirt before bedding down for the night or glistening iron smelted, melted, rolled, and beaten free of slag to the accompaniment of peening incantations from the metalsmith's hammer and tongs. Perforated like dried leaves along a wooded path, *Copper Bird Little* gleams and glistens like a piece of Chimay jewelry awaiting the stage call for a Boschian fantasy.

A sense of presence that emanates from each enigmatic figure, of something invisible manifesting itself in the variegated curving surfaces are the expression of neither fairy-like lightness nor evil darkness but, rather, a power that transcends and reconciles both like the persona of a Kali Durga or Erzulie inhabiting the liminal world of consciousness, a crepuscular realm where lightness and darkness symbiose.

The large hand-painted metal *Big Heart Gown* (measuring eighty-two by sixty-six by seventy-eight inches) stands like an ancient Minoan priestess by virtue of her very existence exuding a primal energy and presiding over all, a primordial earth goddess embodying the forces of both regeneration and decay. One senses the commanding presence through the tensile, textual, and semantic energy expressed in the intricately irregularly textured surface with its super-scribed text and the reflection rather than absorption of the surrounding sounds.

The six feet plus tall figure of *Gown of Blueprint* wearing a multilayered dress with dramatically flaring collar printed with an elaborate text like a magical incantation exudes a regal presence like a diva on an operatic stage. The layers of her gown swirl in the air like an avian angel spreading its wings or the hem of a Sufi dancer's dress as she twirls around and around and around like an Oya. The latent energy expands from within outwards with centrifugal motion, letters and fragments of words momentarily revealed like the murmurings of esoteric incantations heard from the shadows as the closed form opens upwards and outwards into spiraling ailerons.

Dill's *White Bird Homage to Charles Dickens Gown* and *Black-bird for John Donne* are dedicated to the nineteenth century English novelist and the seventeenth century English poet, the descriptive storyteller and social commentator and the metaphysical lyricist. The dynamic visual interplay between serif and sans serif typographies of ancient and contemporary vintages, the evocative and expressive power of font design ornament the full bell of a hooped and petticoat volumes like a Godey's print for the nineteenth century writer and the flounced hem of a royal personage for the poet. The forms of birds emerging from the bodices of these and other gowns perhaps signify the transformative nature of the ball and its participants, of the writer and poet, and of the artist as creator.

The name of Deborah Kass' Levine-esque *Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times* show encourages expectations of lighthearted works appealing to one's sense of irony, humor, and intellectual delight as well as visual pleasure. The individual works will delight the art historical cognoscenti as the artist performs her role as practitioner of an intellectual aesthetic manipulating the art historical as well as popular culture. The artist's subtly playful allusions to historical art of recent vintage by artists like Bourgeois, Johns, Kelly, Nauman and others is a renewal of the appropriation aesthetic of artists like Duchamp, Lichtenstein, and Levine whose own serious playfulness evolved against the background of their own contemporary 'feel bad times' to create an art that appropriates the appropriators.

Seemingly quixotic juxtapositions and colloquial usages contribute to an art that does not follow prescribed syntactical rules as it disrupts semantic expectations. Subversive ironic connotations of iconic me-



Deboarah Kass: *You Made Me Love You*, 2014. Acrylic on Canvas, 27" high.

dia, formal elements, and implied narratives combine with discontinuous historical associations in an art that is the 'feel good' antidote for 'feel bad times'. The artist plays with various fonts (as does Dill) in typological essays relate to Johns' delightfully perverse signifier/signified games and graphic design styles typically used in the advertising programs for products to make one feel good. There is also a darker side.

Like the reflections of the glowing colored lights of an amusement park's rides scattered across a cloudy nighttime sky, *After Louise Bourgeois* conflates Nauman's *Life..Death...* neon sculpture with Bourgeois' use of language in her art. The latter's statement that "A woman has no place in the art world unless she proves over and over again she won't be eliminated" reflects the difficulties Bourgeois had to deal with in her life as a woman and as an artist and the possibility for their amelioration in an axiomatic statement. The spiraling of the nautilus text, the simple but optically distorted geometry of the font, the interference auras, and the shadows cast on the powder-coated aluminum surface suggests an empathy with the interplay among light and form and surface in the work of Judd's and Flavin.

The warm associations with that which neon lights typically promote and the pleasurable experience of line and light and color and design obscure the dark side, the seriousness of the need for perseverance, in a curious way analogous to what Bourgeois was able to achieve in the ongoing creation of work that enabled her to ameliorate her childhood traumas and the challenges of a male dominated art world. Attracted by the bright colors and involved in spiraling pattern that is reinforced in the reading of the sentence, one is both drawn towards and repulsed by the vibrant chromatics of the display. Because the discerning of lines and shapes and letters and words and phrases is constantly being disrupted as they disappear amid luminous auras, one must focus intently on the reading while being continually drawn away as if it were the artist's intention that the viewer must persevere in the struggle to decipher.

One may wonder to what degree Kass as woman and artist identifies with Bourgeois' as woman and artist in a male dominated world and, if so, how this might be reflected in the former's work as it was in the latter's, i.e., if the Kass' work is autobiographical in addition to being intellectually witty. Bourgeois' problematic early childhood because of her father's emotional abuse offers an interesting perspective for reading Kass' *Daddy*, *You Made Me Love You*, and *This is a Man's World* as the expression of an intensely personal sympathy and intellectual empathy with Bourgeois as woman and artist.

The intensely saturated color a la Op Art and Neo-Geo, the back-and-forth push-pull, and circumferential rotation, the left to right and down raster-like dynamic of the letters and words and phrasing, and the intersecting and overlapping pullulation of '*DADDY I WOULD LOVE TO DANCE* [with you]' are oddly confusing for a nominally "feel good" painting as if intended as an experiential metaphor for the psychic conflict experienced by Bourgeois and Kass as women and as artists. The five panel *You Made Me Love You* makes sense as a parody of Kelly's reductive, Spartan, hard edge minimalism, an art that one was 'forced to love' because of contemporary critical acceptance, as Kass overlays a social narrative in the manner of Kruger that includes an allusion to ambiguous physical and/or emotional violence in a feminization of historical machismo minimalism. One might consider the horizontal orientation of *You Made Me Love You* meaningful in relation to 'love' and the vertical orientation of *This is a Man's World* with the stereotypical male. *Small Funk* uses the same font as *Daddy* for *Do you want to funk with me*, perhaps suggesting an intended or unintended but significant relationship between 'I' and an implied 'you', 'you' and 'me', and 'dance' and 'funk'.

Although *OM* and *JOY* evoke the intellectual anonymity of Art & Language's word play, the vibrant interaction between figure and ground may express the energy of *Om* and *Joy*. The two paintings form a symbiotic pair, making whole sense only when together. *Om* is the sound of Tibetan Buddhist meditation. The emotion of *Joy* is the very antithesis of Buddha's first noble truth that "life is suffering." The dynamic interplay among the clear geometry of letter as shape, the vibrancy of the yellow against the blue, and the texture of the blue ground that approximates Klein's mystical messianic monochromes mirrors the feelings expressed by the words.

OY and *YO* represent two components of a palindrome, each the formal and aural mirror image of the other. The small but monumental scale parodies Indiana's iconic Pop *LOVE*. The simplicity of the geometry and pristine character of shape, edge, and form, like a hard edge painting, are belied by the subtle complexity of surfaces and shadows characteristic of Minimalism a la Judd in its most elegant expressions. And, like the preceding works with their roots in the art of the sixties and early seventies, there are also the emotional exotic possibly erotic connotations of the culturally specific vernacular. □



Nina Schwanse: Still from *It's not the Job, It's the Job*. 2014.

It's the Job

BY REBECCA LEE REYNOLDS

NINA SCHWANSE
It's not the Job, It's the Job
Boyd Satellite
New Orleans, Louisiana

SIRENS BLARE IN the background as Nina Schwanse's video, *It's not the Job, It's the Job* (2014), opens with a shot of the construction currently taking place on Tulane Avenue in the Mid-City area of New Orleans for a new hospital complex. A quick cut and a camera pan reveal the passing traffic and, across the street, the Motel Capri. On the blue 1960s-era sign, Capri is lettered awkwardly, as if the sign painter ran out of space and squished the last few letters together. Its dated look and the run down state of the hotel contrast greatly to the new construction. A cement truck passes by and reveals the video's main character, a woman who is busy sweeping next to a barrier that reads "road closed." She is wearing an off-white satin dress with lace detail, belted at the waist with an 80s-period black elastic belt that definitely doesn't go with the upper-class associations of the string of pearls that she wears at the neck. She is really attacking the job of cleaning up

after the construction workers, donning pink crocs and a matching pink sun visor for the occasion. Gesticulations suggest that she is talking to herself.

A cut takes us out of the present day construction site to an undefined mint green space where the character explains to us that she grew up in the area, so it's basically home. The hospital gown that she wears, along with the messed up grey hair and a battered and bruised face, suggest that she is a patient at a psychiatric institution. We start to wonder what happened to her, only to quickly return to the more polished version of the character back on Tulane Avenue. As the camera zooms out to reveal the skyscrapers of downtown behind her, she saunters down the narrow median in her satin dress and mint green stiletto booties, not a care in the world, ignoring the passing traffic. Swells of music begin: the choral intro to Don Ho's 1967 song, "You'll Never Go Home." The lyrics warn young women about falling prey to romance in the islands; if you do, "you'll never go home." But this woman is returning to her home: the Capri Motel, a place she associates with a life of romance in a bygone era.



Nina Schwanse: Still from *It's not the Job, It's the Job*. 2014.

The disconnect between the age of the character's body and her silver grey bob wig immediately suggests a performance, but the context is very real. Most local viewers would recognize the Capri as one of several seedy motels on Tulane Avenue. They would also recognize the construction that has torn down the historic fabric of the area to make way for the new medical center, as well as its connection to Charity Hospital, doubly traumatized by the treatment of patients during Hurricane Katrina and its sudden closing only three weeks after the storm. It is this tension between fiction and reality that drives the 16 min., 36 sec. video which follows a character performed by Schwanse. The video is structured as cuts back and forth between the patient and scenes at the Capri Motel, as if being interviewed by the man behind the camera (a man never seen or heard). From the snippets of her interview, the audience can start to build a narrative for the character as a prostitute who lived and/or worked at the Capri. She explains that she started working at 13 years old and has been in the business for 33 years, making her 46 years old in the video. She discusses her motivations (money to survive) and then describes a turning point when she realized that she would rather work the streets than work for 'the man.' The man, presumably, is the pimp that she rejects in order to go in to business for herself. But the story does not have a happy ending, which is not surprising given that we know the conclusion from the beginning.

Schwanse's video is consistent with her other projects, often structured as the artist taking on the persona of a real person and exploring what it would feel like to be that person. For the *Veronica Compton Archive* (2013), Schwanse became Veronica

Compton, a woman trying to free serial killer Kenneth Bianchi (the 'Hillside Strangler') by performing a copycat killing in 1979. Schwanse tends to choose subjects such as Compton that have been turned into media spectacles, so that her work tries to counter the spectacle and find the reality. The performance is doomed to failure, since it will never be possible to fully understand what that person went through. Yet, the attempt is a remarkable lesson in empathy. Schwanse has explained that this video is part of a larger project of "de-romanticization of the whole industry," referring to research she has done about sex work in New Orleans. The romance dates back to antebellum times, including stories about the red light district Storyville, Bellocq's photographs of women who worked in Storyville, and the association of the area with the birth of jazz. Instead of the romance, Schwanse tries to imagine what a sex worker's reality would be like. The reality of sex work is a high-risk profession with sometimes dire consequences, versus the fiction of the *Pretty Woman* fantasy: Julia Roberts playing a hooker with a heart of gold in the 1990 movie, just waiting to find the right guy who will save her from a life of sin.

The character explains her profession as a sex worker in terms usually reserved for stories of romance: "this is where it happened...that's the corner...our very first date." The pearls were a 10 year anniversary gift, though it's not clear who gave them to her. She recalls game night and moonlight swims and bingo. She dances on the second floor balcony of the hotel as a cheesy big band song plays, and then takes a mop as her partner. She starts ventriloquizing the mop as a suitor: "oh, you are beautiful." But soon thereafter she responds, "well, screw you!" Clearly the inter-



Nina Schwanse: Still from *It's not the Job, It's the Job*. 2014.

action with her 'john' has not followed the romantic script that she desired. Schwanse uses the term as the name of the camera operator, as well. The literal nature of the exchange between sex worker and customer is disavowed by these romantic references. Don Ho's infamous song "Tiny Bubbles" plays as she recalls dancing all night at her prom, even though she admits that she never went to her prom. Caught unawares in her hotel room, she is watching a black-and white romance on the television, and then a jump cut skips over the ending to focus on "The End," as if to signify a successful pairing.

Schwanse has staged the gallery to bring us into the fantasy world of the Capri Motel, circa 1967. The installation surrounding the projected video includes two 70s-era upholstered chairs on either side of a coffee table and an Oriental rug to suggest a desire for class. Opposite the projection is an inkjet print of a 60s-era photograph of the Capri Motel. *CAPRI Motel, 2410 Tulane Avenue* (2014) is appropriated from a vintage postcard. Visitors are invited to take a brochure about the motel from a bin on the table. *Untitled (Brochure for The CAPRI Downtown Motel)* (a numbered edition of 1000) imitates a 60s-era brochure. The front cover entices, "you'll have a terrific vacation." Advertised features include free parking, air conditioning, and heat. As you open the brochure, though, it starts to seem off. A photograph of a hotel room with messed up beds is captioned "evidence of 'a ball of a time,'" while "time to 'unwind'" shows an overhead shot of 7 or 8 nude female bodies. The customer is entreated to "leave your common sense at

home!" and "dress as you please!" The list of "nightly adult activities" includes drag bingo and husband swap. The intimations get more disturbing in the rest of the decoration. On either wall are re-creations of the hotel art that Schwanse observed at the hotel. In one case, she re-created the Sharpie curses that a hotel visitor had added to the watercolor of a lily.

As the interview continues in the video, Schwanse's character becomes more confused, and we are led down the rabbit hole searching for the clue that will explain her loosening grip on reality. Wearing a pink satin robe, she is anxiously rummaging around the hotel room. She searches for a lost coat check ticket to reclaim her mink and talks about receiving trophies and medals for her work. She repeats over and over again, "I was the best! I was the best! I was the best!" Each varying intonation suggests that she is an actress, testing out the sound of the line, as if her identity is a performance that is starting to break down. Cut to the patient plaintively singing, "My doll is as dainty as a sparrow." Lying on the hotel room bed on her stomach, feet kicked up behind her, she explains that she took a young girl under her wing, and this is the clue that we have been waiting for. Something happened, and she was found dead: her torso washed ashore, but her head never found. This is the reveal, the traumatic loss that she blames for her own mental state.

The details of the story are taken from the recent news story about Jaren Lockhart, a Bourbon Street dancer who was staying at the Capri Motel with her boyfriend when she was murdered



Nina Schwanse: Still from *It's not the Job, It's the Job*. 2014.

in 2012. Her body was dismembered and washed up in pieces on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Two years later, the crime was traced to two friends that she knew from the club where she danced. Several computer printouts about the Jaren Lockhart story are supplied on the table. The goriness of the story was a media spectacle. But it doesn't jive with the romantic view of the profession that the character believes, as if she has compartmentalized herself in order to deny the reality of profession. Talking to her image in the mirror, she explains that she could never be as perfect as the girl that she took in. There's a reference to an "incident" and a refusal of the suggestion that she has a daughter. She's wide-eyed for a minute as she harshly exclaims to her mirror reflection, "don't look at me like that!" and then her face transforms to a demure attitude as she feigns thanks for compliments from a fan. Cut back to the patient, who asks, "will you be keeping me here long this time?" The immediate implication is that she doesn't want to be locked up, but no, she explains that this (whatever this is) is the closest thing she has to a home. She wants to stay in the safety and comfort of her delusions.

Toward the end of the video, we return to the construction site to watch our character go back to work. She calls out to Bruno and Donnie, apologizing for being late (the real construction workers simply ignore her), and goes back to her sweeping. These last two or three minutes play out with less dialogue, our ears attuned more to the sounds of traffic and construction. Despite this, they were the most striking part of the film. The earnestness of her work on the street/construction site demonstrates the slippage between the character's psychological space and reality. She is in her own

world, nested inside our world. The feel of the closing scene is different from the feeling of the motel interview scenes, where she is theatrical and melodramatic. She is performing, but we're not sure for whom—the cameraman? Herself? Us? The hotel interviews feel like a psychological mind game. It reminded me of the 1975 documentary film *Grey Gardens*, especially how 'Little Edie' Bouvier Beale acts out to get the attention of the filmmakers, the Maysles Brothers. Schwanse has reported that in addition to *Grey Gardens*, she was thinking about *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Blue Jasmine*—movies that feature female characters on the edge of sanity, trying to relive the glory days of the past.

Choosing to shoot the video at the real Capri Motel raises questions about reality's relationship to fantasy, just as the nearby construction raises questions about how the medical industry works. If millions of dollars are going into this new development, why aren't those dollars helping people who live at the Capri Motel, or helping people like Jaren Lockhart? The contrast of the motel's seedy character and the shiny new construction creates a kind of fissure in reality that reveals the inequity in the system. But ultimately, the documentary research about the sex industry is less important than deconstructing its media archetypes. This fissure erupts from Schwanse's performance, in the slippages between the character and the artist, or between the character's persona and her reality. Layers of identity twist and turn, attempting to win understanding of that old saying about the value of walking a mile in someone else's shoes. □



Artists and Guns: Main gallery view, 2014. Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.

Artists and Guns

BY KARL VOLKMAR

GUNS IN THE HANDS OF ARTISTS
Jonathan Ferrara Gallery
New Orleans, LA

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FROM THE SHOT heard around the world to the recent killing of a twelve-year old boy, guns have been romanticized as the quintessential first line of defense of property rights, idealized as the means for protecting personal liberty and freedom, and fetishized as the preferred medium for revenge and avengement. The success of every effort to cover up the brutal violence that adumbrates the rights of the victims masks how the power of the gun as symbol has obscured reality by representing paranoia as cultural heroism as in the current rage for licensing concealed carry is simply an iteration of the Clark Kent/Superman fantasy.

What would happen if artists, who create rather than destroy, were given the chance to play with guns on their terms? That is what one discovers in a visit to the *Artists and Guns* exhibit at Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.

Ron Bechet confronts viewers with the confounding fundamental question of *Why! (Is it Easier to Get a Gun than an Education, A Gun Instead of Help?)*. Why, indeed, did the hundreds of lives, their names scribbled in scarlet across a map of New Orleans, have to end because government of the people, by the people, and for the people chose not to spend on counselling and education that could have mitigated if not ameliorated the situation that led to each death. For those who might argue that there simply was not enough money, what is the economic cost to the area, the lost productivity of young lives, and of wasted resources needed to investigate and prosecute?

Onegin (Nicholas Varney), made using a decommissioned gun and a bullet composed of 18K yellow gold and various colorless diamonds, alludes to Pushkin's story of *Onegin* who, as "victim of his own pride and selfishness," "lost his love, killed his only friend, and found no satisfaction in his life," and "is doomed to loneliness, and this is his tragedy." (*Wikipedia*). It is ironic, a term that will appear again and again in this essay, that this classical Russian character representing mid-nineteenth century Russian aristocracy is an archetype mirrored in modern urban honor codes that resulted in the murders commemorated in Bechet's work above. *Onegin* with its iambic pentameter structure just might serve as a medium to talk about nature of honor codes, social practices, and murder as an accepted form of personal expression.

Marigny Warning by John Barnes, constructed from decommissioned shotgun barrels, wood, and nails, is literally a shotgun house. Pieced together from scraps that could have been charming as a miniature, the ramshackle building serves as an absurd metaphor for the axiom that one's home is one's castle. Even more disturbing to the point of being perversely humorous is the owner feeling the need to defend his property because of anger at neighbors, paranoia with respect to certain kinds of people passing through the neighborhood or disliking their music. Merely stepping on his property accidentally might be seen as an act of aggression as is government's seemingly ever higher and unfair taxes as spelled out with letters like tiles from a Scrabble game or painted in colors like letters cut out from magazines by a kidnapper. The shotgun barrels, aligned with the clapboard siding and part of the structure, symbolize the lethal nature of these fears and hatreds as do news accounts of the killing of children who step over a property line, walk on the porch, or knock at the door.

In the past, artists have made work revolving around guns, ranging from Chris Burden's shooting himself and Picasso's memorial to his friend Casagemus' suicide, Motherwell's elegies to Garcia Lorca and the Spanish Republic, the mystery around Van Gogh's death and Capa's [staged] photograph of the death of a Spanish revolutionary. But the inspiration for this project and the source of materials are actual guns removed from circulation and made unusable. As the corpses of what had been weapons, these guns are bodies without souls. They also raise the question of when is a gun not a gun in the manner of Kossuth's *One and Three Chairs* or *Art as Idea*, and if it is ever safe to use a gun whether toy or no.

William Villalongo's *Sleeping on Reason* evoking *The Sleep of Reason...* from Goya's *Caprices* combines a gun with a ceramic head, velvet flock, and a pillow in a Plexiglas box. The innocent, naïve, and affective nature of a child's mind, associated with the head of a child in place of the cylinder, parodies the immature, misguided thinking of the killer who acts from feelings rather than reason, the sleep of reason that produces monsters not only in capricious superstition but also in the horrors of murder and war.

If recent disasters from Columbine to Connecticut to ISIS and the political defeat of every attempt at gun control legislation through the fear mongering efforts of national organizations evoke feelings of hopelessness, the dark humor (John Stewart has remarked comedy is tragedy seen through the lens of time) of Robert Tannen's *Specie-Men Gun Parts in a Bottle* stuffs decommissioned handgun parts into a glass jar, evoking bizarre associations with jars of pickles, images from a story by Anne Rice, or specimen bottles in a doctor's office. There is a kinship with Europe's New Realism that challenges one to escape from the iconography of things and appreciate aggregation in terms of color, textures, and design, and the way the tools of brutality are transformed into art.

Luis Cruz Azaceta's *Taperuler Gun* and *Carousel* appeal to a similar sensibility. One chuckles at the implied homology between macho comparisons between gun barrel length and the length of a penis as little boy games are sublimated into the childish fantasies of an adult. Implicit analogies between genitalia and guns, maleness and murderous impulses, shooting and ejaculation of semen, penetration and insemination, thrive on the verge between the playful and the punitive, the serious and the silly as

toys for little boys become the tools for big boys pretending to be adults.

The reality of this drama is clearly illustrated in Neil Alexander's *Growing up in a Gun Culture, My Son* that summarizes what has changed from 1996 to 2014, and what has not. This is where it begins, in seemingly innocent play, the longing for toy guns, the delight in explosive sound, the game of the hunt couched as hide and go seek, as the image of the gun toting, gun slinging hero is systematically programmed into youthful naivete. As one grows older no one should be surprised to discover that adult males see guns as play, that cowboys and Indians and cops and robbers are replaced by violent video games, unaware of the pernicious truth of what one is taught to see as normal and natural and not something to be questioned or cured.

The irony of Tannen's Janus-barreled *Four Barreled Handgun* as a futuristic looking gun capable of [not] shooting in two or more directions simultaneously suggests that perpetrators of gun violence are as much victims as those who are killed. *Double Barreled Shotgun House* is a picturesque pun on a vernacular architectural style. Does anyone find the image of a shotgun and house disconcerting? Appalled at what it implies for the people living in the metaphor, the vision of a gunman firing his weapon into a house? Violence is suppressed in the picturesque association with a home, the beautiful crafting of the building, and the simple elegance of the design. Yet the Remington collection at the Whitney Western Art Museum of in Cody, Wyoming juxtaposed with art exhibits together represent a history and a way of life in which violence was just part of the way it was or so one is told in the carefully manicured history texts used in places like the Texas public schools.

The embedment of guns and violence in American culture is one theme underpinning Ted Riederer's *Of Guns and Drums*. The marching band bass drum and drum mallets made from reclaimed shotgun barrels function as a pun on *Guns and Roses* and its violent disruption of musical traditions and the accompanying head banging punk dancing that dislocated brains. It is not a question of the choice between butter and guns in which even the poor inhabitants of Marigny feel the need for a gun as a measure of identity. Drums are associated with drama, the militarization of musical expression and the marshalling of soldiers in the midst of battle that continues in the martial music of marching bands with their military inspired uniforms, from the fife and drum groups at the Bunker Hill Monument [which is, ironically, on Breed's Hill □!] to Sousa's Fourth of July marches and half time performances in New Year's Day bowl games, and precision performance drill teams presented as entertainment as integral as gladiator combat in the Coliseum.

The inherent danger of the gun as thing, the gun as idea, what its purpose is, what it is used for, what it has come to represent in American culture because of the way human minds work, or do not is elided through the transubstantiation of the gun in the hands of artists in their feats of aesthetic and intellectual legerdemain. Always interested in the dynamic interrelationships among money, power, and politics, Dan Tague's ironic wit (*Pursuit of Happiness, Guns, God and Country, In the Pursuit of Happiness (When The Shit Hits the Fan)*) reveals the messages disguised in [prints of] intricately folded money, hidden texts within the medium of exchange whose value is a matter of faith, economic value, and the



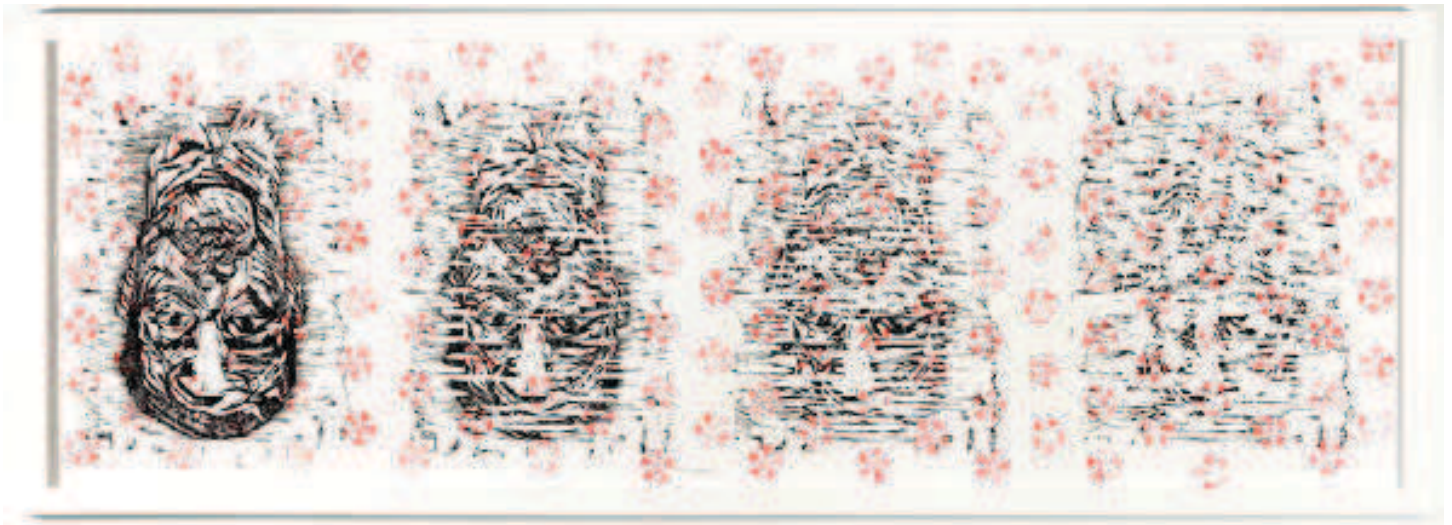
Mel Chin: *Arthur*, 2014. Concrete, two Colt .38 caliber revolvers, 67 x 12 x 12 in. Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.

values of American culture in which god and country and guns are inseparable. Even when riddled with bullet holes, the symbolic value remains, on the most superficial level in the relationship between the radical idea of the “pursuit of happiness” as national ideal and the way gun violence from the hands of enforcers and criminals alike is more like a “pursuit of unhappiness,” and the guns, bullets, action films, and wars that are the peripatetic emanations of national values and significant contributors to a national economy that enables that pursuit of [un-] happiness.

The romantic tale of Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* recast in the idealization of the American West from Ned Buntline’s fictionalization of Wyatt Earp to the Cartwright family brotherhood presented at the height of the Cold War, the herocization of the outlaw as anti-establishment hero relived in inner city gang wars, survivalist fantasies, and Neo-Con illusions, and the current fascination with mythical historical films have created an ambience in which life mirrors artifice that provides a ground for considering the layered references to illusion and representation in Peter Sarkisian, *Recoil*. The list of materials itemizes what is real: table, gun, book, ceramic plate, photographic paper, video projection, and audio. The interplay between abstraction, representation, and things themselves operates as a pun in the manner of *trompe l’oeil* paint-

ing a la Peto and Hartnett and the other Sarkisian. Abstract designs of flowers and a body, each victims of their respective cullings, contrasts with the pistol which is not a pistol, and the text of the narrative to which a reader responds, caught up in the fiction of the writer or the fact of the reporting. The photograph as straight photography, document of a place, or an equivalent, is a starting point for reflecting on the nature of representation through a machine as an illusion of an illusion, questioning one’s visceral response to the conflation of image, text, projected illusion, abstraction, and design, perhaps with an intellectual nod to the corpse. Yet just as no one will ever know what actually happened at Ferguson, perhaps even the cop and the kid might not know after the fact, each incident, each representation, is a detailed notation in a much broader concern.

Personal family tragedy underlies Deborah Luster’s *Forms of Correspondence, I. (Yes, No, Goodbye)*. The artist’s *recuerdamente* is composed of a Ouija board for communication with the spirit of the deceased, reminding one of the ambiguous nature of death, the conflict between physical fact and the desire, the need, perhaps, to communicate that underlies All Saints Day and *El Dia de los Muertos*, the family picnic in Hungarian Settlement and the magical, candle-lit world in Lacombe. One is reminded of



Katrina Andry: *Disappear*, 2014. Monoprint, 22 x 62 in. Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.

the spiritual nature of all correspondences, Baudelairean or otherwise, through signs and symbols, gestures, expressions, pressures, sounds, words, images, actions, whether it be through a kiss (confer Rodin, Klimt and Brancusi) or heart [-shaped] pointer like a babalawo with his divination board. Faces shrouded by darkness, the mark of Cain, the shadowgraphs of guns like those that were used hover in ghostly luminosity over the obscured faces like disappearing memories (Generic Art Solutions, *One Hot Month*).

One might rephrase the trope of they shall beat their swords into plowshares as they shall smelt their [172 pounds of] guns into art to describe Bradley McCallum's *Smelting: A Gun Legacy*. McCallum has fused decommissioned guns from the years 1996 through 2014 (the same period as Neil Alexander's *Growing up in a Gun Culture, My Son!* It would be interesting to consider these as two sides of the same sociological coin) into a commemorative coin, medal, or mandala in which are inscribed the aphorisms "He who suffers conquers" and "He who perseveres is victorious." Metallurgical metamorphosis reverses the making of guns as the trashed is transformed into art. The erose appearance alludes to the alchemical nature of transformation through fire as metaphor for the psychological, the breaking of vessels at the end of the cycle in the Mayan calendar, the broken vessels in Kabbalistic lore, the firing of a gun, the ending of a life, the need for *tikkun*, the beginning of a new era with a spark.

The cryptic title of Adam Mysock's *The Last Six, Under Six, Murdered by a Gun in the Sixth* invites interpretation: the last six shots (all there are in a 'six shooter'), under six feet of earth (the traditional depth for burial), perhaps in the Sixth Ward? The mystery contrasts with the fact that there is no ambiguity in killing, one either kills or does not, one is either killed or is not. What may first seem a purely a formal essay requires close examination to discern whether actual penetration has taken place as in *verissimo* sculptures of crucified hands or feet.

The subtle sensuality of Marcus Kenney's *Girl with Gun*, the picturesque dissolution of natural form that has been so effectively used by artists as diverse as Richter, Inness, and Corot,

evokes a cultural history of romantic associations between woman and nature as it subverts this association. Fingers, hand, wrist, and arm are as if airbrushed like a Playboy centerfold or a Bougereau nude. But one must ask at what is she aiming? The sky with all its spiritual associations and inhabitants -- sun, air, clouds, birds, butterflies?

A quiet elegance elides distinctions between the hardness of metal and the softness of flesh in the sensuality of George Dureau's *Flesh and Guns* in which the extreme realism allows one to discern surfaces and details. The subtle eroticism conveyed through gentle modulations of light evokes images of Delacroix's *Women of Algiers* and the *Massacre at Chios*, juxtaposing the potential for violence with the gentle in a quizzical way. In a similar way the contrast between organic and metallic infuses Bechet's *Swords to Plowshares* with a simple beauty that transmutes difference into unity of form and surface that reflects the nature of plowshares vis-à-vis swords.

Margaret Evangeline's meditation on the ephemeral nature of existence and memory in oil on linen (*Disintegrating Relic*) draws the viewer into a mindfulness of absence and presence, of memories of that which has been lost and the erosion of those memories themselves. One struggles to make out the stains and erasures and writing that elude one's grasp as the veronica and Da Vinci's *sfumato* has fascinated centuries. Yet in this very elusion is a source of fascination and fixation in the cultural memory. Such subtlety also infuses Sidonie Villere's *Residual*. The artist develops her idea from that which remains, the visual, scientific evidence as the shadow of experience, the retracing of which, like understanding the nature of culture, of sociological forces, of how one becomes who one becomes, allows one to approach an imprecise understanding of the details, the circumstances, in an objective, forensic, and aesthetic appreciation.

Several artists have taken a humorous approach. Jonathan Ferrara's *Excalibur No More*, reminds one that there are no King Arthur's here! How does the world overcome the myth of the Romantic hero, the preference of fantasies in lieu of mental



Michel de Broin: *War of Freedom*, 2014. Decommissioned guns, bronze, Forton, 24 x 32 x 24 in. Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.

health (Iris Murdoch, where are you now?). Medieval legends and classical mythology, hero kings and saviors of humankind, the objectification of good versus evil certainly plays a role in gangs and cops when those myths are embedded in the cultural psyche. One has to laugh at the ridiculousness of Brian Borrello's *Open Carry* with its humongous clip, a supply of bullets that would shame a Sam Browne belt! Imagine the totter blazing away with his semi-automatic weapon, standing in the center of the cosmic circle like a Shiva Nataraja dancing as the world, someone's life, comes to an end. The irony continues in Borrello's *Mississippi Valley, Early 21 Century* in which a decommissioned 12 gauge sawed-off shotgun is re-presented as a tomahawk/war club like a display in an ethnographic museum, a thoughtful pun on indigenous Mississippian culture that points out the ironic parallel between pre-industrial, pre-European civilizations erroneously believed savage and the [advanced?] thinking of civilized, industrial people with their primitive ideas.

Azaceta's *Carry On, Drugs, Gun & Teddy Bear* raises the question about what is the difference in the purposes each of the items serve and the baggage one carries with them all one's life. Teddy bears, drugs, and guns can each serve as surrogates salving insecurities that have arisen because of what had been lost in childhood. Each represents an addictive activity that serves some emotional need: travel to escape from where one is, a gun proving that one is a man, a teddy bear hugged in nostalgic remembrance of childhood comforts, the love one should have but did not get, drugs for escaping anxieties and self doubt consciousness, guns for protecting an insecure, frightened child within.

Allure of glittering bullets enclosed within the sensuous form of an old-fashioned gumball machine is a not so subtle reference to the ease of access abetted by addictive impulse driven behavior, the pleasure in the act of inserting of coins, turning the handle, watching the mass inside shift as objects fall into the pan, bullets on demand, inured to the consequences as sweet delight covers the fact that one is the target as well as the market (Generic Art Solutions, *Target: Audience*).

SMAC (Club S+S) could be a bizarre eukaryotic cell from a Boschian fantasy in the midst of mitosis, the gun dividing itself like strands of chromosomes in an evolving organism, the crystalline cellular membrane reflecting the viewer like a vase in an Oesterwyck still life a *memento mori*, a reminder of the ephemeral nature of life.

What is being mourned? About whom is the epitaph written? Reflection on Paul Villinski's *Epitaph* and *Mourn* seems an appropriate way to consummate this essay. Could it be the death of a shotgun or a handgun, objects produced in the fiery violence of metal processing, things imagined and intended for violent killing, whether in defense, to right a perceived wrong or injustice, avenge a personal affront? Who has been killed, their passage survived by dark delicately winged butterflies hovering and resting in their own ever so brief lives, butterflies whose metamorphic lives echo the Orphic mysteries, the metempsychosis of the lives of those killed and the guns that killed them in the art created in memoriam that the exhibition *Artists and Guns* represents □



Herbert Singleton: *Come Out of Her*. Painted wood bas-relief. 17 1/2 in. x 11 3/4 in. OGden Museum of Southern Art

Outsiders

BY KATHY RODRIGUEZ

THE GASPERI COLLECTION:
Self-taught, Outsider and Visionary Art

HERBERT SINGLETON
Inside Out / Outside In
Prospect. 3
Ogden Museum of Southern Art

ARE ALL ARTISTS outsiders? Rudolph and Margot Wittkower make a strong case for the overall differentiation of the artist's personality as deviant from social norms in their book, *Born Under Saturn*. They clearly posit that the "otherness" of artists is a widely accepted notion among critics, psychologists, the general public, and art historians. Their research cites specific cases of artists who, even within the established canon, departed from the

academic standards of their time to make work that was marked genius in its distinction. Borromini, for instance, was making unusual work during the Baroque (a style in and of itself described as showing "nuances of the bizarre" by the art critic Diderot), though he found patronage and place in his own context. The Wittkowers detail the biographies of individuals now considered great artists, whose works were at times in contrast (or concordance) with their personalities.

Art forms created by self-taught artists have found their own place since the 1970s. As Post-modernism stretched itself out over the last decades of the twentieth-century, artworks by these artists called from the plurality of social, personal, political, historical, and psychological issues that informed critical discourse and understanding of art. The modernists of the preceding decades – from the mid-nineteenth century - had looked to artworks by African, Oceanic, Japanese, and Iberian cultures as exemplars of abstracted form.



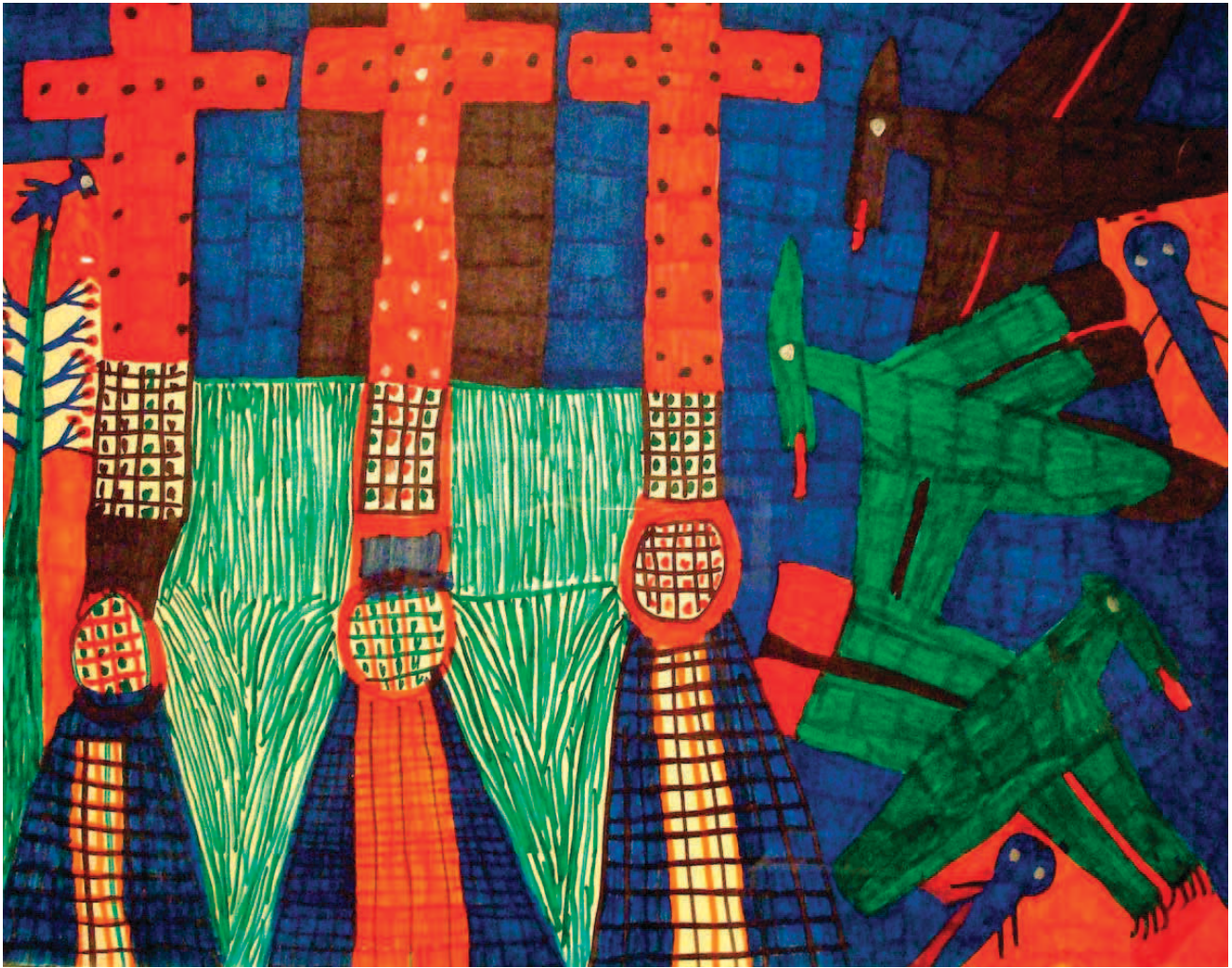
Jack Swirz: *Eleven Fingered Seamstress*. Ogden Museum of Southern Art. Gasperi Collection.

The modernists dangerously reduced the artworks to formalist concerns, ethnographically ignoring the deep cultural roots that grounded and fed the making of the work. In a way, the desire to elevate folk art from its basis in community work and personal exploration verged on taking it too far out of context, too. For instance, Henry Darger – whose work is now an institution within the genre of outsider art – never clearly regarded himself as an artist, and the question arises whether we should regard it as art if the “artist” did not intend it to be labeled as such.

The fascination with the artistic personality of one who makes persists, though, and the heightened recognition of these artworks has led to a broader understanding of our collective human condition. “Outsider,” “visionary,” “naïve,” and “folk” – terms which have been interchangeable – artists make artworks marked by deeply personal and experiential understandings of form, content, and subject matter both within and outside of accepted academic standards. Even Wikipedia differentiates among

the meanings attributed to these labels, though, and study of these art forms deserves precision in labeling and categorizing it. The study of works by “self-taught artists” is spread throughout institutions entirely devoted to this research to classes on the topic taught within a semester, and we continue to admire these art forms for their extremely valuable subjective and complex communication about human experience.

The mission of the Ogden Museum in New Orleans is centered on the art of the American South, and folk art forms a strong tradition within the region. Currently, the Gasperi Collection is on exhibit concurrently with works by the internationally renowned “folk artist” Herbert Singleton. Singleton’s work is more specifically aligned with *Prospect 3: Notes for Now*. The exhibits provide a broad overview of self-taught and folk artworks, in which themes from everyday life, politics, religion, and art itself thread throughout the drawings, paintings, and sculpture (and sculptural paintings) on the walls.



Willie White: *Birds and Crosses*. Ogden Museum of Southern Art. Gasperi Collection.

As of 2011, Richard Gasperi - after decades of collecting - had brought hundreds of artworks of his collection to a refurbished Broadmoor property shared with his partner, Jim Resko. The Times-Picayune article by R. Stephanie Bruno on the new home for their collection, from November of that year, describes the intimate relationship Gasperi maintained with the artists he collected. Mose Tolliver's affectionate portrait of Gasperi and Resko at the entrance to the Gasperi Collection exhibit clearly demonstrates a mutual admiration. Gasperi's relationship with the artworks themselves also evolved. Painstakingly repairing mosaic pieces in objects from his collection led him to try his hand at making them on his own, thus leading to the idea that good art - according to the viewer - is virally inspirational.

Sculptures by nationally exhibited Louisiana folk artist David Butler; also noted in the aforementioned article, span the space of one small gallery at the front of the exhibition. Butler's fantastic creatures creep up one wall in an arch reminiscent of a curving line of reindeer, cutely apropos of the season. But, the celestial bodies, riders on cat-back, frieze-like warriors, and other multi-faceted, multi-limbed figures - painted in flat and saturated colors of red, green, yellow, blue, black, and white - are curiously menacing and sharp at the same time as playful. The obsessiveness of his visionary practice is evident in the sheer number of

objects in this part of the collection - a strong reason to devote a single space entirely to their display. They also seem to form a narrative of their own that reads like a genesis story. Hypnotically, they even appear to reproduce before our eyes.

The careers of self-taught artists are typically quite prolific - Darger's ten thousand-page tome detailing the adventures of the Vivian Girls is a case in point. Pages from Clementine Hunter's sketchbook also speak of her constant practice, capturing images from her life and experience in oil wash on unprimed paper pages. The oils stained successive sheets, so ghost images of trees and figures appear like atmospheric backdrops in one composition, though fully rendered in the preceding painting. Arranging the work in successive, framed, single pages, ordered as they were in the book, emphasizes this magical creation of space and suggests a different kind of narrative, one known only to the artist. It is noted in exhibition text by Gasperi that Hunter communicated intense emotional content in the expressions of some of her figures - particularly a sick woman and a dancing couple - that speak of the unfathomable pain of her life and history. In stark contrast, a bold self-portrait in an iconic beret speaks of strength and comfort in her position as a maker, not unlike a Fontana, or Anguissola, or Leyster image of the same genre.



Herbert Singleton: *Leander Perez*, 1992. Ogden Museum of Southern Art.

Familiarity with European art history is evident in Luster Willis' master-copy of Picasso's Blue Period piece, *La Vie*, featuring a portrait of his friend Carlos Casamegas, the victim of suicide. Titled *Unhappy Love*, Willis replaces the sketches of contorted couples in the middle of Picasso's painting with an alien-like green figure who, with the encroaching insect at the top of the picture plane, creates a far more direct vision of fear of impotence and family that is interpreted from Picasso's piece. The Scarecrow from *The Wizard of Oz* peeks in from a corner, where he is the object of the disdainful gaze of the mother/prostitute from Picasso's work. The new iconography is staggering even within the small scale of the work. Though absurd, it feels extremely, emotionally impactful – not just because of the obvious reference.

“Tramp art” forms in the collection created from carved wood were originally intended as gifts of thanks from the homeless bohemian to his temporary caretaker, or created by workers selling and trading in the wares. These utilitarian objects were crafted with Art Deco designs, meticulously carved from scrap material. Mirror frames, jewelry boxes, and a medicine cabinet comprise some of the objects in this collection. These seem to be the most specific examples of “folk art” in the exhibit, in which a style emerges from a group rather than a specific person, and is based in community education and production. The anonymity of the artisan is a key sign of this distinction, and helps the viewer make separations among art forms within the broad scope of the collection.

Herbert Singleton's relief carvings narrate stories from his biography and experience, like Egyptian and Greek friezes. He taps into archetypes of good and evil, clearly positioning them at odds in the multicolored, multi-figured compositions. One of the clearest examples shows “the heroine man” at work injecting the drug into the tourniquet-laced arm of an obviously fearful figure – dressed in black, Dr. Kilikey looks without feeling on his task. As Eric Bookhardt points out in his review of the work, Andy Antippas' research on the topic of Singleton's work points to his dedication as a representative of the artist at Barrister's Gallery, as well as his deep familiarity with the work itself. The feeling Antippas has for the work is as palpable in his writing as the feeling spewing from the figures in Singleton's carvings.

Emotional attachment to the work is evident from both sides of the exhibits. Both the artists and the collectors have palpable connections to the images and objects. They look cared for and loved, slightly worn with use either through function or simply by being caressed with viewings. The range of emotional content in the work is as wide as the variety of work. It covers the span of human interactions, feelings, relationships, traumas, and much of history, in both personal and wider contexts. “Outsider” seems like far too antagonistic and inappropriate a label, when this work so clearly illuminates much of our collective inside thoughts and external actions. Self-taught artists teach us much about ourselves through the lens of their experiences and practices. □



Sophie T. Lvoff: *Loyola Avenue (New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal I)*, 2014. Archival inkjet print mounted on Dibond.

Lvoff's Repaired City

BY KATHY RODRIGUEZ

SOPHIE T. LVOFF
Transformation
Contemporary Arts Center
New Orleans, LA

CANAL STREET IS dark and almost empty. The last parade, the Krewe of Comus, has long since disappeared down Royal Street with its shuddering floats and its blazing flambeau. Street cleaners sweep confetti and finery into soggy heaps in the gutters. The cold mizzling rain smells of sour paper pulp. Only a few maskers remain abroad, tottering apes clad in Spanish moss, Frankenstein monsters with bolts through their necks, and a neighborhood gang or two making their way arm in arm, wheeling and whip-popping, back to their trucks. Kate is dry-eyed and abstracted. She stands gazing about as if she had landed in a strange city.

This excerpt from the Walker Percy novel, *The Moviegoer*, describes the exodus from the ordinary to fantastic and back that occurs every year, every Mardi Gras season – no matter what preceding catastrophic event might try to cancel it. At this moment in the story, Binx Bolling, the main character in the novel, has tried to cancel Mardi Gras on a personal level, but even he cannot escape the escapism. An impromptu trip to Chicago on the eve of the debauched culmination of Carnival season with his cousin Kate, fresh from a suicide attempt, is cut short when Binx's aunt curtails the pair's travels. They return to New Orleans at the close of Mardi Gras day, when the fantasies fall away and the clean up begins. The thin veil comes back up between fantasy and reality.

It is not the view that immediately comes to mind when people think of New Orleans. This is the Carnival that Andrea Fraser conjures in the monumental pile of "discarded fantasies," which itself seems precariously poised to tumble and dis-

integrate, as fantasies are wont to do. For those who visit New Orleans, it is what is left behind to stay. For those who remain, the trash is a marker of the authenticity of one's citizenship – one wades through the fallout of Carnival to get to work the next day.

Sophie T. Lvoff is after a subjective authenticity in her photographs of New Orleans. She cites the novel as an influence, and it forms a pivotal curatorial point for *Prospect 3: Notes for Now*, in which her work is on exhibit at the Contemporary Arts Center. She searches for the moment of spectacular ordinariness often passed and ignored despite its vibrant now-ness. Lvoff's images are titled with the location of the subject matter, taxonomically setting them in a specific place and time. New Orleans is not only ever-shifting in its appearance, due to the fact of its geographic location, but also because of the historical rise and fall of its iconic neighborhoods: Frenchman Street, St. Claude Avenue, and Magazine Street first come to mind. But, it also somehow always stays the same. Gentilly, Binx's home away from his Uptown home, is still rebuilding itself in the same image. Long stretches of New Orleans along Jefferson Highway have been aesthetically intact since the 1950s. Arguably, the pertinent social and cultural aspects of the entire area are intact as well, though Percy's novel reminds us of a time of intense flux and change. These locations emerge in Lvoff's photographs in the corner of a building, or a cold drink machine curiously blocking a doorway on Simon Bolivar Ave. These moments between shifts form the paradigm of Lvoff's search. Her desire to answer the question, "What Happened Here," leads her to find scenes that are even more enigmatic in their answers. The evidence of iconic New Orleans is in the papier-mâché float decorations mounted on the wall in the Friendly Bar in the Marigny on Chartres St., or eerie neon glowing in the close-spaced interior of the Saturn Bar on St. Claude, where the flat, anamorphic illusion of the planet looms from the ceiling. But, the icons are not the subjects of the images; rather, her search is.

Lvoff says she feels somewhat like the character of Binx, who searches for "something to wake himself up from the everydayness of his life," according to a statement by the artist. Binx is the moviegoer of the title of the book, and finds those fantastic moments in the films he obsessively views. Lvoff finds these moments in the spectrum of Louisiana spectacle, from a sublime, Turner-like sky, to an abandoned car in a lush green field. Lvoff says she seeks images that seem specific to the city, "without beating the viewer over the head saying HEY IT'S NEW ORLEANS HERE," looking instead for atmosphere, light, and color that reveal the "depth of its beauty."

Lvoff's approach is more akin to *flâneuring* than Binx's method of seeking fantasy in film. She takes to local sites and roads to find the moment of the everyday that is outside of mundane experience. The *flâneur* delights in the spectacle of the street, at the same time brushing off its grime from his fine clothes. He observes from the crowd, within it but not in it – intentionally separated from the pace of the world, himself slowed like the pace of New Orleans in the context of the rest of the nation. That *flâneuring* pace seems apparent in Lvoff's aforementioned image from the Friendly Bar – titled *Chartres Street (Friendly Bar I)*. Here, Lvoff's self-portrait is reflected from the mirrored face of a cigarette machine, beckoning the viewer to "Come to Kool." That is exactly what the *flâneur* wants to do.

She pictures "cool" New Orleans, the one that easily

calls, siren-like, to a tourist population that forms the basis of the economy. The images are fantasies, departing from the spectacle of the everyday to create a new fiction about the city. The bars are empty and bright, the smell of ashtrays and booze replaced by disinfectant. In *Loyola Avenue (New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal I)*, the image's geometry belies the clustered chaos of the environs just outside, which itself is stacked like finger sandwiches into alternating areas of picturesque and run-down parts of town. The red behind the counter recalls Eggleston's red ceiling, but the grittiness of that photograph is absent in the clean line and overall design of Lvoff's image. The cleanliness of design throughout the photographs gently idealizes away from the rough, splintered reality that is part of the city's overt texture. The noise of the city may be intentionally "sucked out of the photograph's frame." But, this is the literal pulse of the place – the rhythm that separates and distinguishes our wavelength from all else. Without this texture, this beat, the images of the city feel like golems, or otherwise simulacra – airbrushed visions of verifiable truth.

Lvoff cites Eggleston's photographs as an influence on her work. Color and light are key forms in his images, and Lvoff's eye for the design of color in her photographs is strong. Scale also relates to Eggleston's work among Lvoff's images, but the painterly way that Lvoff captures the shot begs for more space on both sides of the picture plane. The reflective aspects of cinema, and art making, want to be more prevalent in the photographs. Though the great importance of simply finding the image in the artist's process is evident, the large-scale cinematic constructions of Jeff Wall, or Gregory Crewdson, come to mind as examples of calling to those qualities. The painterly approach, and the depiction of moments between moments, are crowded by their placement, but also need room that is absent in the scale of the photographs.

The trip to Chicago is the climax of *The Moviegoer*, and the impetus for change in the book. It is within this journey that Binx himself states that change will occur, just before the story's resolution. In Chicago, he and Kate go to see *The Young Philadelphians*, and Binx summarizes the movie as such: "Paul Newman is an idealistic young fellow who is disillusioned and becomes cynical and calculating. But in the end he recovers his ideals." All that happens in the city during their trip points to this revelation. Little does Binx know that he too shall recover his ideals, which involve his own succumbing to the Uptown lifestyle that he tries, with little success, to avoid throughout the story. The "treasures" that feed his imagination and existence in the movies fall away, and Binx finds himself perfectly within the situation he once despised.

The ending is tragic. Binx's search for something outside of ordinary experience landed him squarely back at the beginning, in the framework he wanted to escape. He finds himself in the "strange city" that Kate sees, the one recovering from fantasy, brutally truthful about its return from escapism. A colleague described it as like the end of a Shakespearean comedy – or a Lifetime movie – when a marriage at the end magically repairs all the ills permeating the narrative. Some might revel in the joy of the cure, but the troubles that preceded it extend into the untold part of the epilogue. Binx is "recovered" from the fantasy that he used as an escapist tactic, married back into his broken family. The brokenness will still be there, beyond the last page. Lvoff presents a view of a strange city, one that is removed from reality. It is a view of the repaired city that does not exist. The pho-



Sophie T. Lvoff: *Chartres Street (Friendly Bar I)*, 2014. Archival inkjet print mounted on Dibond.

tographs are not self-aware as constructions – they are full-fledged visions of being in love, allowing the true problems and imperfections to disappear as in Binx’s marriage to his damaged cousin, without further extension or explanation. True love involves acknowledging and owning the problems of the relationship, until and unless they become so damaging to self that the relationship can no longer be pursued. But, there is nothing wrong with indulging in fiction, and to use it as a vehicle for searching is an intriguing

method of finding images. In actuality, that is part of the authentic New Orleans experience – looking to escape, to ignore for a moment all that really plagues us. It would be a more authentic experience, though, to show the wounds, the imperfections, which are truly on the body of this place. □



Katie Rafferty: *Crossing*. Oil and mixed media on canvas, 36 x 48 in. Cole Pratt Gallery.

Gallery Walk

BY MARIAN S. MCLELLAN

WAYNE AMEDEE
Octavia Art Gallery

ALAN GERSON
Le Mieux Gallery

SHAWNE MAJOR
Callan Contemporary

KATIE RAFFERTY
Cole Pratt Gallery

IN THIS SELF-CONSCIOUS world we live in, where nearly every move is documented, it's no wonder that art supplies are increasingly the stuff of the streets, publicly awaiting immortality. Certainly, many artists have used found rather than purchased materials. But Joseph Cornell, for instance, housed his beautiful garbage in pristine and intimate boxes, like specimens for future revelry, where even in a museum setting the onlooker would truly have to look to see.

Among the four exhibits included in this walk, a commonality lies in the Louisiana artists' not-so-subtle approach to image making, and in their oftentimes, to varying degrees, use of found objects.

The least obtrusive of the four is perhaps Katie Rafferty's "Drawn Into Light" grouping of mixed media works at Cole Pratt Gallery on Magazine Street. In her artist's statement, Rafferty's *modus operandi* recalls Cornell's pensive approach to collecting potential art materials, stating that she incorporates "drawings, found papers, scraps of material...old book pages, old music posters... torn from telephone posts" that she finds on her many walks. The predominantly green mixed media "*Crossing*" displays a glimpse of a photograph of a little boy casually crossing a street into a vast space of white contained by loosely painted and torn borders. In the warmer hued "*Turning*," Rafferty again includes a photograph of a child, this time a little girl, and orchestrates the surface with faint rectangles of paint and torn paper, possibly to imply the layers of the young girl's journey.



Wayne Amedee: Gallery view, 2014. Octavia Art Gallery.

Downtown on Julia Street at Octavia Art Gallery, more rectilinear forms are found in the two and three-dimensional works of artist Wayne Amedee, 2014 recipient of the Artist of the Year Award given by the Louisiana Office of Cultural Development and creator of the red and green sculpture in City Park, “*Grateful Labors*.”

Though the multi-media works are divided into three series, “*Consolation*,” “*Selvedge/Microcosm*,” and “*Chrysalis*,” it becomes immediately apparent to even the casual gallery goer that Amedee’s focus is on the in-between spaces that hold us up and keep us steady on unsteady ground. What is not so apparent is Amedee’s underlying support system and impetus behind the series, his beloved wife, Barbara, who died late last year, and who was a dominant presence in the New Orleans art world. Octavia’s Press portion of their website directs us to an interview in “*The Advocate*” for this personal revelation.

Hence, the wedge formations found in the largest of the

series, “*Consolation*,” are visible in two and three-dimensional offerings. The freestanding “*Consolation Series XX*” presents us with a vertebral column of soothing hues of greens and blues, apparently a favored color scheme of Amedee’s. Fashioned of solidly painted wedges of wood, the shadows cast between each wedge seem equally supportive. We find these wedge-shaped shadows playing a dominant role in the more organic, mixed media/collage “*Consolation Collage*,” where a grouping of three stacks vertically fan-out before a forest of pale greens and blues.

The “*Chrysalis*” mixed media/collage series, while being Amedee’s most delicate series and accounting for only five pieces in the exhibit, is also his most playful and talismanic. In all five, Amedee applies rectangular bits of gold foil and scraps of writing taken from Barbara’s belongings and revived in such works as the jewel-like “*Chrysalis IX*.” Still emphasizing a vertical format, but with less rigidity, the overall effect of the “*Chrysalis*” series is that of renewal.



Shawne Major: *Tarantella*. Mixed media, 26 x 18 in. Callan Contemporary.

Just up the street at Callan Contemporary is Shawne Major's elaborate exhibition "*Collective Memory*." A cursory viewing of Major's hand sewn tapestries will surely evoke the time-consuming, though beautiful, garments of local Mardi Gras Indians. But prolonged inspection informs us that these wall adornments are not for wearing, at least not on the human form. Stepping back, we realize that the plethora of found and accumulated objects sewn onto bolts of mesh have been given revamped life to strongly recall Aboriginal Dreamtime, albeit using a wild variety of mainstream resources, especially plastic, the contemporary material of choice when it comes to just about everything.

Major refers to her work as mixed media tapestries, and her artist's statement informs us that her sewing notions come from "the material detritus of the everyday human experience." It is true, not a day goes by that a human has not experienced plastic,

and has most likely even anguished over just what to do with that plastic baby, horse, ring, fish. Major knows what to do, using each small piece as a marker to connote each finger's crossing.

"*Hundredth Monkey*," measuring 84"x48," is densely encrusted with red and blue rings, black lace, golden horses, cats, bells and sweet pink flowers. Together, these disparate objects serve as landmarks, passages, of circular paths for connecting and reconnecting an intricate, innermost travel. The outline of "*Vestige*," nearly as large as "*Hundredth Monkey*," unabashedly evokes a geographical formation, going so far as to map out a large area with garish, turquoise fur. Looking more like a dress for a paper doll and slightly larger than "*Hundredth Monkey*," is "*Parthenope*." The title is the name of a Greek siren, and for sure, the quilt-like piece is quite appealing, embedded as it is with hearts, water guns, and reflectors, amid patches of furry white.



Alan Gerson: *Excavation VI*. Plaster and acrylic paint., 9 1/2 x 20 x 2 1/2. LeMieux Galleries.

Closer to the river on Julia Street at Le Mieux Galleries is Alan Gerson's *"Excavations and Monuments: Works in Plaster."* As one would expect from Gerson, rather than the monuments being large and out of reach, and the excavations deep and inaccessible, the free standing and bas relief sculptures, painted in acrylic, are intimate in scale and therefore akin to time capsules of a bygone era. Except for a few earlier plaster pieces included in the show (unpainted, and relating to mythological and biblical tales) the feeling of the compartmentalized buildings is that we are looking at samples from the past that have been preserved with hopes of being reclaimed. Since many of the plaster pieces are unrealistically colored to the point of being ready for a Wallace and Gromit film, one cannot help but be reminded of Gerson's love for brightly painted brick in paintings where his *"Goofy Guy"* and other characters inhabited. But now, the brick is the main character. The wall-mounted *"Green Barrier"* and red *"Vault II"* are both compact representations of multi-level brick exteriors, with sealed entry spaces, while the pedestal pieces *"Tower Section III," "Tower*

Section V," and *"Tower Section VIII"* are of varying heights, each depicting bits of exposed brick. One thinks of charming old buildings that while in use provided a vital haven and then, perhaps due to urban renewal, abruptly succumbed to an abandoned state, forever impacting the lives they held. Buildings do not stand-alone.

In contrast to the colorful pieces, Gerson includes a somber pair of found, weathered boards. *"Window"* is merely an uneven piece of wood with peeling yellow paint and a small inset of plaster brick. *"World Without Entry III"* is even more austere, with the darkness of the wood relieved only slightly with slivers of plaster brick. Though the first title toys with the idea that the brick is the window, the latter acknowledges that a world once familiar is now impenetrable. Lighter in mood is Gerson's jaunty pair of dilapidated buildings, *"Maquette for Urban Monument."* Bringing to mind two old men who used to be quite the bon vivants, the building on the left could be wearing a brown tie, and the one on the right, a bright red hat, just waiting for gentrification. Alas, it's gentrification that got them to the point of being merely a monument. □



Henri Matisse: Installation view, Museum of Modern Art, 2014.

Matisse at MoMA

BY STEPHEN BACHMANN

HENRI MATISSE
Museum of Modern Art
New York, NY

AN EXHIBITION OF Matisse's Cut-Outs opened at the New York Museum of Modern Art October 12, 2014.

One question is what if anything new one can say about such things. In one sense one should simply recall Nietzsche and feast:

In regard to [contemporary] painters ...they are full and overfull of general ideas. They like a form, not for the sake of what it is, but for the sake of what it expresses. They are sons of a scholarly, tormented, and reflective generation – a thousand miles removed from the old masters, who did not read and only thought of feasting their eyes. (Will to Power, §828)

Matisse is one of the greatest artists of the 20th century, of course. Matisse's Cut-Outs constitute one of the achievements that contribute to his greatness. Of course.

So what else might be said?

First, the good news is that this exhibition took place on MOMA's top floor, which means that Matisse's works almost

had enough lighting for their extraordinary colors. In general, the lighting in the present MOMA facility sucks. I am old enough to remember going to the earlier MOMA building, and with all the sunlight pouring in from so many quarters it provided a consistent festival of color. The MOMA collection thrived in that environment. Unfortunately, in the new MOMA, sunlight is at a premium, and artificial light prevails. The quality of many MOMA masterworks suffer accordingly. It is as if I owned the Mona Lisa and showed her under a bare 60 watt electric light in my bed room closet; or, if I had a number of Monet's *Haystacks*, and placed them for show in my reconstructed basement which now serves as a booze bar and man cave. Fortunately MOMA's 6th floor has some of the best of MOMA's light; it could be better, but it could be worse.

Second, the varying sizes of these Cut-Outs is educational. One may not be surprised that "The Tomato" is relatively small, the size of a "normal" still life. Or that "Christmas Eve," a design for a church window, is large, like a church window. But the MOMA exhibition provides other educational surprises. For example, I first became aware of "The Snail" from reproductions which suggested that it was an intimate sort of thing, say 10 inches by 10 inches. Actually, the original, as demonstrated in this show, is more like 10 feet by 10 feet. How one appreciates these works is affected by such encounters.



Henri Matisse: *Swimming Pool*. Installation view, Museum of Modern Art. 2014.

Third, a direct encounter with these originals suggests the degree to which they might be appreciated as sculptures, as opposed to collages. My notion of collage here is that one takes the thing that one has cut or appropriated, one pastes it onto the flat surface, and one moves on to produce another form to paste into the composition. By contrast, a “sculpture” will involve sculpting the form. The first thing clipped and pasted does not end the creation of the final form. It only constitutes its beginning, the first step. A number of other forms will be clipped and pasted until some final version of the form is achieved. Matisse adopted this second approach in a surprising number of instances. Thus, where one would have assumed that he simply clipped a pomegranate, a thigh curve, or a star, one will find that a number of the pomegranates, body curves, or stars, consist of clipped squares, triangles, rhomboids, or whatever. The fact that each part of the ultimate pomegranate, body curve, or star, involves patches of different color or brushwork adds another level of subtle fascination to these works.

Fourth, the Cut-Outs can be considered as sculpture from another perspective, viz., that of time. These pieces are subject to decay. Sculptures change through rust and rot, some for better and

some for worse, and sometimes the artist might anticipate how the “degeneration” of her materials over time would contribute to or detract from the work. The fact of this Matisse show is that the works consist of paper, colored with paint, and then pasted into particular arrangements. The paper underneath is deteriorating. The paint on top of (partially in?) the paper has also been subjected to the depredations of light. Which of these works are better, and which of these works are worse, than when they were first created and presented over half a century ago?

The fourth point leads to the fifth and possibly most interesting point about these works, and it relates to Benjamin’s point about the status of a work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Let us recall Matisse’s work entitled “The Tomato.” Let us say I encountered and experienced “The Tomato” on January 6. Let us say I would like to enjoy a similar experience later, say in February 2015, or February 2020. If I take a picture of “The Tomato” in Year 2015, how exactly will that photo reproduce my experience of “The Tomato” when I encountered it in MOMA on January 6? It may depend somewhat on the quality of the equipment I used to take the photo (cell phone, “real camera”?) or the quality of the equipment I use to recall the image (e.g., a computer

screen, a high or low quality printer with or low quality resolution and inks...) Clearly, depending upon how many pictures I take and how many machines I use in reproduction activity, it is quite possible that a number of different versions of "The Tomato" will eventually result. Some may prove more satisfying than others, and different versions may arouse similar or different appreciations.

In the meantime, we recall that "The Tomato" was originally created in Year 1947. Will the photo of "The Tomato" taken in Year 2015 properly reproduce the experience generated by "The Tomato" in Year 1947? Probably not, given that the experience generated by "The Tomato" of 2015 will not be the same as the experience generated by "The Tomato" of 1947, given the effects that time will have wrought upon "The Tomato" between 1947 and 2015. However, with enough diddling in 2015, or 2020, the mechanical reproducer might actually be able to produce something that is closer to the original 1947 experience than the actual but "degraded" experience of 2015.

And after one acknowledges the legitimacy of diddling, where should one stop? Perhaps the "The Tomato" more resembles a musical score, and serves as a beginning more than an end, once the mechanical reproducer intervenes as a "conductor" between the score and the audience? What if I want the background in "The Tomato" colored blue instead of green? What if, when I recall the shock of the "real" "The Snail," I insist on printing "The Tomato" in a format that makes it four by five meters instead of 16 by 20 inches? And so on.

Whether Matisse likes it or not, these issues of reproduction inhere in the creation, re-generation, and appreciation of this work. Yet Matisse seems to have been aware of the issues, and he may in fact have embraced them. The MOMA exhibition tells us that in his earlier Cut-Outs, Matisse was concerned to use the same gouache colors for each reproducing run of each picture. By the time he pursues his adventures in stained glass, though, Matisse observes that the maquette for his window might best be considered a "score," while the ultimate window might be considered the "orchestra." (This point grows all the more tantalizing when one considers that many of Matisse's later and larger pieces seem to be generated in response to commissions for ceramic productions: for better or worse, we see the maquettes, but not the ultimate ceramics – some of which were never executed.)

After these considerations, can Matisse be viewed from any other perspective/? Ironically, for me, such thoughts began with an anthology published by Cambridge University Press, concerning one of Matisse's contemporaries, Joseph Stalin. (The book is *Stalin, a New History*, and Matisse was born in 1869 and died in 1954, while Stalin's years were 1878 -1953.)

In one chapter, James Harris points out the political problems facing the revolutionary Bolsheviks: "On the eve of the February Revolution [1917], there were approximately 24,000 members in the Bolshevik underground. By the end of the Civil War,[1921] over 700,00 new members had joined the now ruling party." (p.66) The Russian population during this period seems to have been at least 125,000,000 people, which suggests that the Bolsheviks had their work cut out for them.

One approach to the problem was noted by David Brandenberger:

...Personality cults promoting charismatic leadership are typically found in developing societies where ruling cliques aspire to cultivate a sense of popular legitimacy. Scholars since Max Weber have observed that charismatic leadership plays a particularly crucial role in societies that are either poorly integrated or lack regularized administrative institutions. (p.249)

In other words, the personality cult was pursued to supplement the limited effect that a limited number of Party members could perpetrate on society.

The preceding, of course, is not an apology for Stalin and Stalinism, rather, it is an attempt to understand. And at issue in this essay is less the question of the problems of cult and genius and legitimacy as they pertain to Stalin, as it is the question of cult and genius and legitimacy as they pertain to Matisse. Western societies celebrate their own cults of genius, whether it be Steve Jobs, Henry Ford, Henri Matisse, Albert Einstein....

The ideology of genius in Western society has the same function as the ideology of genius (or cult of personality) in the developing society (whether it claims to be socialist or not). It legitimates the social order. It legitimates inequality of power and wealth. In developing societies, the magic aura of the Great Leader holds people in their working places. In more advanced societies, it is a kinder and gentler magic, because magic can be spread throughout various corners of society, and not just by the Leader. If every citizen cannot be a rich and powerful genius, at least every person has the hope of becoming a rich and powerful genius. And if one is not a rich and powerful genius, the other rich and powerful geniuses make the lives of the rest of us non-geniuses so much better. In the meantime the rich and powerful can claim they enjoy riches and powers because of their magic genius traits; and they should not have to share the proceeds of their genius with the hoi polloi because they are geniuses.

Indeed, the existence of geniuses in various sectors of the society allow the rich and powerful to perpetuate their situations of rich and power (and claims of genius). To recall Matisse, let's say he is a genius, so much so that his output is a gazillion times more valuable than the output of my 10 year old daughter. With these radical differences in valuation, the significance of owning a Matisse (as opposed to my daughters crayon portrait) does much to perpetuate inequality. Only the rich can own a Matisse; perhaps only the rich can appreciate a Matisse. In the meantime, we all sit happy and enchanted because our society produces geniuses and preserves their work – even though it would seem that an acceptance and embrace of hierarchy seems needed as a precondition and predicate for such a wonder-full order.

One may argue that the argument of genius speaks for itself, but the question is whether only a genius can speak like a genius. In other words, while experiencing the work of Matisse can be and often is elevating, what does that mean? If Matisse understands that his Cut-Outs are more "scores" than the ultimate experience, perhaps Matisse knows that he is best appreciated through the efforts of other people who play with mechanical reproduction techniques. Perhaps the best experience of "The Tomato" is NOT



Henri Matisse: *Danseuse Creole*, ca. 1950. Goache on paper, cut and pasted, on paper, mounted on canvas. 80 11/16 × 47 1/4 in.

to be found in the object which Matisse created and which now hangs in MOMA, but rather in reproduced version of that object in some book MOMA produces, or in some print shop in Brooklyn where there exists a talented printer who knows how to mess with his inks.

Is the “Matisse” experience better, then, when “he” is an individual, or when “he” is the result of collective endeavor?

And then, what about collective endeavors that rely even less on the score, and even more on the intermediaries who bring the score into concrete being? Here let us wonder about the works called “European cathedrals” (from the “cathedral” age, say, 1100-1400). The experience of one European cathedral generally surpasses the experience of the entire Matisse Cut-Out exhibition (even when it includes some samples from Matisse’s work for the Vence Chapel). Yet the cathedral is the product of a lot of people with differing amounts of talent. If the cathedral provides an experience of “genius,” it is the genius of the collective which many and varied elements of the social body provide to create a great sum greater than the sum of the parts.

Genius would seem to show up in a number of societies. Yet it appears in a number of guises; and those guises would seem to be functions of the social order being sustained by those in power. Desperate party bureaucrats in the USSR celebrate Stalin so they can enjoy their privileges and keep society under their rule. Less desperate oligarchs in the USA celebrate “individual” “success” so they can enjoy their privileges and keep society from pursuing wealth redistribution projects. What sort of order is being celebrated in medieval Europe?

One short summary is provided by French historian Georges Duby: “...it was the art of the Gothic cathedrals throughout Christendom which, at that point, became the instrument – possibly the most effective of all – of repression by the Catholic Church.” (p.135, *The Age of the Cathedrals*) In the *The Gothic Enterprise*, Robert Scott qualifies and elaborates:

...cathedrals became powerful instruments of propaganda in aid of the Church’s great struggle against heresy. As we shall see, each new cathedral was a concrete display and representation of orthodox Catholic theology. This theology portrayed God as light and the universe as a luminous sphere that radiated outward from God, infusing the body of Christ, who as both God and man linked ordinary humans and the divine. Cathedrals were the vectors through which this process worked, and bishops, whose seats were housed in these great buildings, were the spiritual masters of orthodoxy.

Duby has even suggested that the Gothic church became an instrument of repression... I would say instead that the Gothic cathedral stood for a great many things and reflected a variety of interests. Cathedrals were products of the episcopate’s efforts to reassert control over religious matters; of the Church’s crusade against heresy; of the bishops’ desire to express, assert, and celebrate their place in Christendom; of the king’s efforts to regain supremacy over feudal lords; of the pride of local merchants, tradesmen, craftsmen and vendors in the cities they helped to found and run. All these forces interacted to produce the great enterprise of Gothic cathedral building. (loc.1140)

Scott’s evaluation is perhaps more fair, but one must recall some of the methods that the “faithful” employed to enforce orthodoxy when the inspiration of cathedrals were lacking (or failed):

Another grotesque incident occurred in April, 1210, in the town of Cabaret ... a famous place of Cathar pilgrimage. The citizens of Cabaret awoke one morning to the spectacle of a procession of nearly a hundred men stumbling toward the city. The men were defeated defenders of the nearby town of Bram. All had had their eyes gouged out and their noses and upper lips sliced off. They were led by one hapless soldier who was spared one eye so that he could lead the procession. The men were sent to Cabaret to remind those who harbored Cathars of the terrible fate that awaited them. (ibid.)

It might surprise no one to learn that the Inquisition was instituted as cathedrals were being built. In 1215 the Lateran Council held that all Christians should do confession (and penance) on an annual basis. The cathedrals constitute a more pleasing side of a coin that wanted to form European minds along certain patterns.

Where does this all leave us? Aside from discussing the situation of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, Walter Benjamin also observed that “Every document of civilization is as the same time a document of barbarism.” The gift of the European cathedrals can be appreciated; and abused. So can the gifts from Henri Matisse. Perhaps the abuse Henri Matisse can be ameliorated as one considers the degree to which the impact of his individualized genius can be ameliorated. This means allowing more and more people to use him as a score, which then allows more and more people to become not only creators, but also owners. □



Paul Ninas: *Untitled* (reclining nude on beach), ca. 1939. Oil on canvas.

An Early Modernist

BY JUDITH H. BONNER

PAUL NINAS

Paul Ninas: Unseen Works by the Dean of New Orleans Modernism
LeMieux Galleries
New Orleans, LA

PAUL NINAS (1903-1964), who has been referred to as the “Dean of New Orleans Artists,” knew his own mind from an early age. Born in Missouri in 1903, Ninas set out on his own direction when, according to family lore, he tried to run away to sea at the age of 14—undoubtedly to see the world. His father had studied engineering in Turkey, and taught at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. Young Ninas followed in his father’s footsteps and studied engineering at the university. Ninas’s effort to continue studying engineering in Istanbul was abandoned in favor of studying art, an endeavor that occupied him for four decades. A selection of works from his lengthy art career is on view in an exhibition titled *Paul Ninas: Unseen Works by the Dean of New Orleans Modernism* at LeMieux Galleries.

Ninas traveled extensively across the United States, as well as through Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Arabia, North Africa, and Germany. In the early 1920s Ninas studied art at the Vienna Royal Academy in Austria, in Florence, and at the Académie des Beaux-

Arts in Paris. It was at the latter academy that Ninas studied with Cubist theorist André Lhote, with whom Josephine Crawford would later study; Lhote would have a lasting effect upon both artists. In 1925 Ninas received his Master of Fine Arts degree from the Vienna Royal Academy. A year later he became one of the first American artists honored with a solo exhibition at a Paris gallery, a show that was a sell-out. He would also have his work included in the Contemporary Arts Exhibition at the 1939 New York World’s Fair. Ninas had the good fortune to have one of his works cited in the *New Yorker* magazine—one of only three paintings to be recognized.

In 1930 Ninas purchased a coconut and lime plantation on the Island of Dominica in the West Indies. There he created a colorful series of landscapes from his surroundings and became a noted local celebrity. While living on the island, like Paul Gauguin, he executed numerous colorful paintings depicting the natives—especially the women. Upon receiving word that his father died, Ninas returned to the United States to settle his father’s affairs. On his return to Dominica, he traveled through New Orleans, where he succumbed to the charms of the city. Returning to settle permanently in New Orleans in 1932, he became integral with the art scene. He served as director of the Arts and Crafts Club of New Orleans and its School of Art during a critical time in the development of the modernist art during the 1930s, not only in the French Quarter, but in the city’s other art circles. Ninas also taught at Dillard University and at Kingsley House in the Irish Channel, and later at the University of Texas at Austin from 1949 to 1952.



Paul Ninas: *Untitled* (horse, woman and mirror), ca. 1955. Oil on canvas.

Ninas's works generally focus on subjects that are associated with the location in which he lives. His 1939 series of four murals in the Sazerac Bar in the Roosevelt Hotel depict scenes of local life, including one scene showing a number of personalities among the city officials and art crowd of his time in the city. The figures are set against St Louis Cathedral, and are therefore clearly set in New Orleans. Although Ninas's murals have been the target of recent criticism for a so-called racist view of an African American man sitting backwards on a mule drinking from a jug, through the years other figures have been depicted similarly in different art forms. In the background field hands are bent over in their labor.

The light-colored body of the jug serves as a device that points to and merges with the similarly colored shirt of a mounted overseer at the top of the pyramid, a subtle but clear reference to the success of the cotton industry that rested on the backs of a large body of laborers. Similarly, in mural of a levee scene on the opposite wall of the Sazerac Bar, dock hands hoist cargo on their shoulders. These scenes present the same straightforward type of laborious scene in works by self-taught African American artist William Tolliver, particularly an oil painting of cotton pickers laboring in the field, a painting that is currently on view at The Historic New Orleans Collection.

This exhibition at LeMieux Galleries provides an overview of Ninas's career, from his 1930s island paintings to his stop in New Orleans and his fascination for a different kind of exoticism, through his late abstract paintings of the 1950s. Ninas's awareness of modernist art trends and his response to them is evident; his exploration of themes and different forms of representa-

tion—from figural to abstract and nearly non-objective art—is visible in these galleries. Those unfamiliar with Ninas's work may be confused by the different types of art produced by a single artist.

The earlier works are straightforward, particularly his bust-length portraits. A portrait of a young dark-haired woman shown frontally is surely that of Jane Smith Ninas, his wife at that time. Although the portrait is ostensibly a quick sketch, the oval form of her face is echoed with the curves of the neck and the placket of her open cardigan. The entirety is balanced with the horizontal bands across the background.

Ninas's gaunt and thin-faced bust-length self-portrait at an early age resembles a cross between television actors Ron Perlman and Wayne Rogers. The portrait, which suggests Paul Cézanne in its direct application of paint, also reveals the artist's intensity and search for something undefinable. A large 1930s canvas showing a blonde-haired nude woman lying on a beach is curious for its unclear narrative. Although the scene obviously offered the opportunity for a figure study, the woman's position with her left hand raised to her forehead appears as though she is in dismay. Three red sinister stick-like figures running down the beach—and away from the woman—have painted ears like cats or devils.

Another 1930s canvas featuring a female nude shows the figure lying on a straw mat and curled up in reverie. In this painting, too, the woman's left hand is held to her forehead. The figure's position is more complicated in arrangement, providing Ninas the opportunity to employ the formal principles of design, specifically repetitious, rhythmic patterns of the mat and her limbs, which are balanced with variations in anatomical features. Through the lines,



Paul Ninas: *Self Portrait*, ca. 1940. Oil on canvas.

shapes, and edges of the mat and limbs, the viewer's eye travels easily through the work, resting at specific focal areas. Ninas's typical use of primary colors in this canvas is subtle: the yellow mat is neutralized near the body, the darker blue edges of the mat are relieved by the light blue shadows in the crumpled white sheet, and the round red pillow near her feet re-directs the visitor's gaze back into the composition and echoes the curves of her hips and thighs.

Throughout his career Ninas emphasized his subjects with linear contours, which have the effect of flattening the subject. His Cubist works do not follow the usual rules of Cubism which have triangular facets dissolving throughout the composition. A wharf scene is typical of Ninas's artistic style during the 1940s, which focuses on the flat forms of simply depicted ships, masts, and docks, each defined by heavy dark lines. This scene in particular demonstrates Ninas's influence on Jane Smith Ninas, whose marine scenes are markedly similar.

The boats in Ninas's marine scenes from the 1950s and early 60s often dissolve into a mass of small geometric shapes representing the hulls of the boats and ships and vertical linear marks representing masts and smokestacks. These are usually interspersed with areas of primary colors. While the subject is still clear in a large circa-1959 untitled scene of two women seated on a beach, the figures are abstracted and their faces are indistinguishable. Two white arcs painted along the women's thighs on either side of the composition, as well as strategically placed linear marks around their heads and shoulders, suggest movement. The painting has the effect of being a work in process, rather than a finished work.

Some works in this exhibition have brief passages that recall works by Wassily Kandinsky or Paul Klee. An abstract composition is reminiscent of works by Pablo Picasso, especially the animal-like shapes that recall the bull and horse in *Guernica*, painted in 1937. Overlapping amoeba-like shapes are emphasized with



Paul Ninas: *Untitled* (dock scene), ca. 1940. Oil on canvas.

dark contours, while a meandering white line draws the viewer's eye forward and creates a sense of depth. In another oil painting that makes reference to Picasso, the faceted subject is more easily identified than the previous work. A woman standing by a mirror at left is clearly influenced by Picasso's Cubist paintings. The woman standing by the mirror appears to wear a harlequin's costume, while at right one or two figures—or a single figure in motion—merge with a horse. The painting, which is dated to the mid-1950s, is notable for its late date when the Cubist movement had passed its peak.

At this time Ninas was not associated closely with The Arts and Crafts Club, which no longer ran its art school. By then the name had changed to the Arts and Crafts Gallery. The organization had lost its financial support and its clout, and closed its doors on March 24, 1951. Ninas and Josephine Crawford are credited with being the artists who introduced Cubism to the city under the aegis

of the Arts and Crafts Club. Crawford's death occurred on March 25, 1952, a year after the closing of the Arts and Crafts Gallery. Both artists would continue to explore Cubism throughout their careers, but Ninas experimented with other artistic concepts during his career.

A stroll through LeMieux Galleries allows viewers to contemplate Ninas's awareness of art trends throughout the 1930s to the late 1950s. His training abroad and his extensive travels had a lasting effect on him, for Ninas maintained an awareness of international ideas and openness to new ideas. This is evident in the exhibition as he visits and re-visits earlier stages of his artistic development. Ninas's body of works has many paintings of pronounced achievement. While this exhibition shows many of his strengths, it also reveals some of his less successful efforts during his artistic explorations. □



Still from Sfar's *The Rabbi's Cat*. Zbalya, Father and cat.

Graphic Novels & Film

BY JOHN MOSIER

THE RABBI'S CAT
GAINSBORG, A HEROIC LIFE
Director: Joan Sfar

THE CURRENT HOLLYWOOD fashion is to turn graphic novels—what back in the late pleistocene were called comic books—into movies. The results to date have been pathetic. When *Aeon Flux*, *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*, and *Ultraviolet* first came out, they were widely panned, even though technically only the first of the three was based on a comic—an animated serial done for Music Television's Liquid Television series.

Today they don't look nearly so bad. Not because of their intrinsic aesthetic merit, but simply because the current crop is so horrible.

Basically the reason for this is that, regardless of the amount of money thrown into the project, everyone involved has missed the two key ingredients that propelled the first graphic novels—and still do.

Although by no means the first, Jean-Claude Forrest's *Barbarella* series, conceived back in the dark ages of the late 1950s, is the perfect illustration both of those ingredients and what a film version should do.

The adventures of his heroine, whose appearance evoked Brigitte Bardot, were as much concerned with sexual relations as with saving the galaxy. Not to be coy about it, a great deal of the success was because Forrest could be sexually explicit at a time when commercial films were still handling the subject gingerly. And this was so even in France.

Forrest took advantage of a curious state of affairs, in which graphic novels—to give them their current name—were allowed *carte blanche* on subjects that filmmakers were not. The same thing holds true even today, as anyone who has watched *South Park* can attest.

One reason, probably the main reason, that this freedom was allowed is owing to the distinctive visual style, the look and feel of the artwork. Forrest turned his back on both the photo realism and comic realism styles of his predecessors. His drawings were sketchy and whimsical, so that even though the sexuality was definitely there, it lacked the explicit, quasi erotic or even porno-graphic of subsequent French artists. Objectively speaking, however, the more talented of those folks definitely had their own visual style, and they took advantage of the fact that since they were drawing imaginary characters, they could show as much sex—and violence—as they pleased.



Still from Sfar's *Gainsbourg, A Heroic Life*. Serge in Jamiaca.

Now from a filmmaker's perspective, those two features posed unique challenges if the object was to make a film using real people on an actual set, and it's fair to say that very few of them were able to come anywhere close.

In that regard Roger Vadim's adaptation of *Barbarella* is the basic text of how to transform one visual form into another. Vadim realized that it was impossible to recreate Forrest's visuals, so instead he created an entirely different look. The set, with its fur lined space ship, killer dolls, and bizarre gadgets, evoked the drawings, but placed them in a world that was Vadim's own.

The result was a critically panned work of enormous significance, because it demonstrated what could be done if the director had enough imagination and enough skill.

Judged by that standard, hardly anything done since measures up, whether it's an adaptation, or simply an attempt to capture the spirit of the form. Most attempts fail in both categories. Surprisingly, given the amount of money lavished on the production, hardly any of them manage to convey any consistent visual style.

The two faux-Greek films based on Frank Miller's work come surprisingly close in this regard. No one who takes even a cursory glance at either one is likely to get it mixed up with anything else. In *The 300: Rise of an Empire*, Noam Murro's semi-nude Greeks, his fantastic apparition of the Persian emperor, are imaginative and memorable.

The difficulty is that while there are some visually striking images—the arrival of the Spartans led by their sword-wielding queen—all too often the images deteriorate into a sort of costume drama, in which his half-naked Greeks look just as silly as the fully clothed ones of dozens of Italian exploitation films about

Jason or Hercules.

The other, more serious objection, I think, is that nothing much is done with the story. After half a century of seeing scenes of graphic violence, it's not as though any of these films are particularly daring, and the sexuality is adolescent. One comes away with the impression of opportunities missed, that the filmmakers didn't grasp fully what might have been done. The sex—or rather the lack of it—is particularly telling.

If one of the points of the static form was to shatter conventions, push the boundaries of what could be shown and said, the films are just more of the same stunted imagination that generated *Aeon Flux* and dozens of other adaptations. Although for some time artists have been endlessly proclaiming their daring, their transgressive behavior, they ain't exactly producing *la maja desnuda*, or even Canova's Pauline (Bonaparte) Borghese's *Venus Victrix*.

That being the case, it's no surprise that somewhere out there is a graphic novelist who decided he could do better at filming his work than any conventional director. The somewhere in this case is France, and the novelist is Joan Sfar, who, despite the first name, professes the male gender.

The French origins are hardly surprising, since France was where the idea of comic strips for adults first appeared. What is surprising is that Sfar has given us two wildly different cinematic adaptations of his own work, both as remarkable as they are impressive.

The most recent of the two is a straightforward work of animation, whose strengths are likely to be missed, since it's not only animation, but superficially, it appears to be closer to Disney than Forrest.

The film is called, *The Rabbi's Cat*. More accurately it should be called "The Cat Who Loved the Rabbi's Daughter," since as all felinophiles will tell you, dogs have masters, cats have servants.

Now in order to understand what's really clever about this work, one has to consider how animators handled animals. The first and greatest generation generally modeled their animals on people. Daffy Duck, for example, was a rather snarky and deserved portrait of a studio executive that the animators all hated. Aside from beeping and quacking, the animals were all anthropomorphic, that is, they moved, talked, and thought, like people.

In fact, Chuck Jones could give tellingly apt descriptions of how each character was drawn to mimic either a specific person or a general type. The idea was clever, but it relied on an ancient tradition, which in the west was first enshrined by Aesop.

That's a necessary observation needed to appreciate Sfar's film. His cat behaves like a cat. He's not a human being in cat form.

His behavior with the rabbi's daughter, Zbalya—drawn by Sfar as a luscious and voluptuous young woman—exemplifies what attracts some people to felines and repels others: the sensation of a sexualized relationship between two different species.

Obviously he can't have sex with her, but he's openly and unabashedly in love with her, and like any lover, he pines away for her, thrusts himself into her presence. But he does it like a cat, not a human in a cat suit.

He's sexual, amoral, and obnoxious. A real cat.

The first chance he gets, he eats the rabbi's parrot, and is suddenly able to talk. But when he rabbi, conquering his astonishment, demands to know if he ate the parrot, he lies, thus acting out of a cynical comment most cat lovers would agree with: if a cat could talk, he'd lie.

He's loyal, devoted to the people he lives with, but he's also argumentative, gets into an hilarious debate with the rabbi about converting to Judaism.

Like most talented creators of this form, Sfar has a distinctive visual style that's difficult to categorize. The film is set in French Algeria of the 1930s, and the humans are mostly Jews or Arabs or Black Africans.

That allows Sfar to create his own particular world, which, although his visuals have nothing in common with Hayao Miyazaki's, share with the great Japanese animator the quality of being synthesized. Sfar's Algeria is pretty much like Yamazaki's Italy of the 1920s (*Porco Rosso*) or his turn of the century Austria-Hungary (*Howl's Moving Castle*).

For want of a better word, his style could be called sketch-realism. Although the film could easily appeal to children, it's sophisticated enough to draw adults, or cat loving adults, in.

It should be noted that this film is basically a compilation of various episodes, so about half of it involves an expedition to find one of the Lost Tribes, which gives the film a curiously episodic quality. It's entertaining, but structurally the film is defective. Still, well worth watching, which is more than can be said for most works in this sub-genre.

On the other hand, Sfar's other major film, a biography of Serge Gainsbourg, reveals a man who's probably an even better live action director than he is a graphic novelist, which is saying a good deal.

Gainsbourg is one of those talents that only France seems to produce. The son of the Russian Jewish emigrants Joseph and Olga Ginsbourg, he was born in Paris.

The Ginsburgs survived the Holocaust, and after the war, their son, a talented pianist and a painter, taught at a school set up for Jewish children whose parents had been murdered. Sfar's filming of a scene in which the young Gainsbourg tries to rouse these traumatized children by encouraging them to join in a musical performance is one of those scenes that makes you realize what the cinema can do. That it rarely does only make the scene all the more impressive.

Gainsbourg (he changed both his last name and his first, from Lucien to Serge) had a problem common to a good many talented people. He couldn't decide what to make of his life, whether to pursue a career in painting or in music. And if the latter, whether as a pianist, a guitarist, or a song writer.

But by the early sixties, his career started to come into focus as the latter. He wrote lyrics for Juliette Greco, became well known, and then his career took off. In 1965 he wrote a song for the teenage sensation France Gall, which won the 1965 Eurovision song contest.

Sfar's portrayal of how that happened is one of the more memorable parts of the film. France Gall, played by Sara Forestier, comes across as a tone deaf dunce who doesn't have a clue as to the meaning of the sexually suggestive lyrics. Given her age, the song is outrageous, made all the more so by the fact that she can't sing, and clearly has no idea what she's singing.

But the scene really sums up why Gainsbourg's songs had such a dramatic impact. They're verbally clever, they're outrageous, and the sexuality is over the top—especially for 1965.

Sfar sees Gainsbourg as the poster child for the sixties. Although hardly known outside of France, where he was notorious, most Americans have probably heard his 1969 song, *Je t'aime*, which was basically the explicit sounds of female arousal, set to a dreamy, hypnotic beat. The song, which offended the sensibilities of just about everyone who heard it, was an instant success.

It had originally been intended as a duet with Brigitte Bardot (they recorded it), but the most widely heard version featured Jane Birkin.

For a physically unimpressive and stereotypically Jewish intellectual, Gainsbourg was remarkably successful with women. In addition to two wives (he and Birkin never married), he had a famous (or notorious) affair with Bardot.

Now the difficulty for American audiences is that although in France all these details are well known, most foreigners lack that knowledge. Sfar doesn't exactly help, although the casting is remarkable. Eric Elmosnino, who plays the adult Gainsbourg, is remarkably like the original, while Forestier is a dead ringer for France Gall.

Even people who didn't know about Gainsbourg and Bardot will probably recognize her when she appears in the movie. Laetitia Casta isn't a lookalike, but she has all of Bardot's gestures, her 1960s flamboyance and pouting sexuality, down perfectly.

The casting, generally the weak point in contemporary French cinema (and in American as well) really makes the movie. Since this is basically a biopic, the ability of the actors to render the real people is important. Given Gainsbourg's wildly heteronormative sex life, the actresses play a major part in the film. Lucy



Still from Sfar's *Gainsbourg, A Heroic Life*. Birkin and Gainsbourg.

Gordon, who plays Jane Birkin, although she lacks the original's physical persona, genuinely captures the anguish of a woman who loves a man but realizes he's impossible to live with.

In an improbable twist, Gainsbourg finally ended up with a young woman known simply as Bambou (Mylene Jampanoi), who in real life—the twist—was the grand niece of Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus of Stalingrad fame

Gainsbourg basically turned the musical scene upside down and inside out, pushed the limits of what could be said (and sung) way past what the society of the 1950s—and beyond—was prepared for. He moved effortlessly from the French nightclub and jazz scene to the pop music of the sixties and then, in the late seventies, to Reggae (he basically introduced the Europeans to the form). It's difficult to think of someone who reinvented himself so frequently and successfully.

As a result, he's basically a legend in France, and not just for his outrageous public appearances and not so private life.

Sfar titled his film *Gainsbourg, A Heroic Life*, and what gives it real depth—and links it to the graphic novel—is his portrayal of a man driven by an inner demon.

That's often a truism about great artists, but what Sfar does is to create that demon, a cartoon figure known as *La Gueule* (the honker?), the amoral inner voice that drives Gainsbourg on, while also reminding him of his Jewishness. We often are told about artists who are grappling with that inner personality or alternate self, but Sfar's real stroke is to bring him to life, to use his

graphic novel skills to inject an semi-animated figure into a live action film (there are also animated sequences).

The *gueule* is both muse and demon, temper and enabler. His essential ambiguity gives the film a complexity as a study of the artist that takes us far beyond the usual cinematic accounts.

Trying to account for why some artists succeed and others fail is a frustrating and ultimately unsuccessful enterprise. When Somerset Maugham attempted it in *The Moon and Sixpence*, his basic conclusion was that you can't. Given that Maugham was no mean talent himself, and that his novel remains one of the best discussions of the difficulties of biography, his conclusion cannot be easily dismissed. But Sfar makes an excellent case. He's also produced two fascinating films, a reminder that as far as visual imagination goes, increasingly the real talent is in a despised and hardly respectable form. □



Marcel Proust photographed circa 1900.

History of the Madeleine

BY STEPHEN BACHMANN

ONE OF THE most famous literary incidents from the 20th century involves Marcel Proust's encounter with his madeleine, a shaped cupcake, in his masterwork, *In Search of Lost Time* ("SEARCH"). The paragraph describing the incident runs as follows:

Many years had elapsed during which nothing of Combray, save what was comprised in the theatre and the drama of my going to bed there, had any existence for me, when one day in winter, as I came home, my mother, seeing that I was cold, offered me some tea, a thing I did not ordinarily take. I declined at first, and then, for no particular reason, changed my mind. She sent out for one of those short, plump little cakes called 'petites madeleines,' which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted scallop of a pilgrim's shell. And soon, mechanically, weary after a dull day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—this new sensation having

had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was myself. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, accidental, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I was conscious that it was connected with the taste of tea and cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature as theirs. Whence did it come? What did it signify? How could I seize upon and define it? (i, 60)

For some the charm of the madeleine involves its role as a trigger to childhood memories, because Proust initially (and in three sentences) explains it as such:

...But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, still, alone, more fragile, but with more vitality, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.

And once I had recognized the taste of the crumb of madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-flowers which my aunt used to give me (although I did not yet know and must long postpone the discovery of why

this memory made me so happy) immediately the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like the scenery of a theatre to attach itself to the little pavilion, opening on to the garden, which had been built out behind it for my parents (the isolated panel which until that moment had been all that I could see); and with the house the town, from morning to night and in all weathers, the Square where I was sent before luncheon, the streets along which I used to run errands, the country roads we took when it was fine. And just as the Japanese amuse themselves by filling a porcelain bowl with water and steeping in it little crumbs of paper which until then are without character or form, but, the moment they become wet, stretch themselves and bend, take on colour and distinctive shape, become flowers or houses or people, permanent and recognisable, so in that moment all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann's park, and the water-lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and of its surroundings, taking their proper shapes and growing solid, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea. (i, 63-64)

However, those who will persist in reading in SEARCH will learn that the point of the madeleine is its role as a trigger of "an exquisite pleasure," "an all-powerful joy," where "the vicissitudes of life [became] indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory," having "the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence," and where I "ceased now to feel mediocre, accidental, mortal." The rapture intimated by the encounter with the madeleine actually constitutes a signal that a Paradise of Lost Time exists, it is out there, but that it must be accessed through a sensitive attentiveness to the fortuitous. Proust encounters his madeleine in Volume One of SEARCH, and he experiences similar moments as the pages of his long novel progress. However, it is not until he trips on some paving stone in Volume Six that he begins to appreciate and articulate what is going on:

... but as I moved sharply backwards I tripped against the uneven paving-stones in front of the coach-house. And at the moment when, recovering my balance, I put my foot on a stone which was slightly lower than its neighbour, all my discouragement vanished and in its place was that same happiness which at various epochs of my life had been given to me by the sight of trees which I had thought that I recognized in the course of a drive near Balbec, by the sight of the twin steeples of Martinville, by the flavour of a madeleine dipped in tea, and by all those other sensations of which I have spoken and of which the last works of Vinteuil had seemed to me to combine the quintessential character. Just as, at that moment when I tasted the madeleine, all anxiety about the future, all intellectual doubts had disappeared. . . . The happiness which I had just felt was unquestionably the same as that which I had felt when I tasted the madeleine soaked in tea. (vi, 255-256)

... I had not gone in search of the two uneven paving-stones of the courtyard upon which I had stumbled. But it was precisely the fortuitous and inevitable fashion in which this and the other sensations had been encountered that proved the trueness of the past which they brought back to life, of the images which they released, since we feel, with these sensations, the effort that they make to climb back towards the light, feel in ourselves the joy of rediscovering what is real. (vi, 272)

The madeleine, then, is not only a cupcake; it is not only a trigger for the precipitation of charming childhood members; it also constitutes the key to an entire philosophy of being. Its fame, therefore, is certainly well deserved.

Yet questions arise concerning the madeleine's role when one compares it to the original version of Proust's epiphanic narrative. It may be found in the first three paragraphs of the opening pages of *Against Sainte-Beuve* ("ASB"), a work which not published until 1954, yet which pre-dated SEARCH. (ASB was written around 1908-1909; Proust began writing SEARCH around 1909; SEARCH's first volume was published in 1912; Proust died in 1922; last volumes of SEARCH were published in 1923, 1925, and 1927). In the following translation, I take the blame

or the credit for trying to bring Proust's serpentine sentences under some control:

Each day I attach less value to the intellect. Each day I realize more clearly that if the writer is going to recover something of our impressions--that is to say, secure something from himself which constitutes the only material of art--then he will not get it from the outside. What the intellect gives to us under the name of the Past is not the Past. In reality--just as happens to the souls of the dead in some popular legends--at the moment when any hour of our lives dies, it becomes embodied in a material object and hides there. In that object the hour remains captive forever; unless we encounter that object. Through that object we recognize the hour in it: we identify it; and we release it. We may very well never encounter the object wherein the hour has hidden itself (or; let us call it "the sensation," because all objects relate to us through sensation). Thus some hours of our lives we will never revive. There is little chance that the object will even cross our path, because it is so slight, so lost in the world! There is a house in the country where I have spent several summers of my life. Sometimes I reflected on those summers, but they were not the summers. There was a good chance those summers would remain dead to me forever. Resurrecting them would, like all resurrections, depend upon stupid chance. The other night, I returned to my room frozen from the snow. I was unable to warm myself. I had begun to read under the lamp in my room, when my old cook proposed to make me a cup of tea, something I never do. By chance she brought some slices of toast. I dipped the toast in the cup of tea: and just at the moment when I put the toast in my mouth and my palate felt the sensation of its softness soaked with tea taste, I experienced a turmoil: smells of geraniums, oranges, a sensation of extraordinary light--happiness! I sat totally still, dreading that one mere movement might stop all that passing through me which I still didn't understand. I focused on that scrap of wet bread, the apparent source of all those marvels. Then suddenly, the shaking walls of my memory fell. The summers I spent in that country house flooded into my consciousness, their mornings pulling a parade with an unlimited cargo of happy hours. Then I remembered: each of those days, after I had dressed, I would go down to the room of my grandfather where he was just waking up and taking his tea. He would dip a zwieback and give it to me to eat. The summer passed. Those dead hours--dead to the intellect, at least--fled and huddled in the refuge of the tea soaked toast. Doubtless I would never have found them again--except that that winter evening, returning frozen from the snow, my cook proposed that potion, linked to that resurrection by a magic compact unknown to me.

But as soon as I had tasted the zwieback, a whole garden appeared: Up till then vague and dull, it revealed its forgotten walks, flowered by flowerbed, everything in bloom in that small cup of tea, just like those Japanese flowers which open themselves up when dropped in water. I had a similar experience with days from Venice which had become dead to me which my intellect could not recover: last year, while crossing a courtyard I stopped short in the middle of uneven, shiny paving stones. My friends worried that I had slipped, but I waved them to go on, I would catch up with them. Something more important had seized me; I didn't know what it was yet, but from the base of my being I felt a tremor from the Past. I did not recognize it, but it had been when I set my foot on the paving stone that I sensed the turmoil. I felt an invading happiness which wanted to enrich me with this pure substance of Self which is an impression from the Past. It consists of pure life preserved in its purity--but we cannot know that we lived it, because all the other sensations of the moment smother it. This thing asked only to be set free, that it might add to my treasures of poetry and life. But I did not feel I had the power to free it. God, the intellect is worthless in such instances! I backed up a few steps to the uneven shiny paving stones to try recover that state of being. The touch proved identical to paving stones from the Baptistry of Saint Mark, also smooth and lightly uneven. The shadow on the canal that day where a gondola waited for me, all the happiness, all the wealth of those hours, rushed into me as a result of this recovered sensation. The day relived

itself in me.

Not only can the intellect do nothing for us concerning such resurrections. Worse, these hours of the Past will nestle into objects where the intellect cannot recover them. These hours will not hide in the objects where you have consciously looked to connect with them. Even worse, should anything else resurrect these hours, they will be stripped of their poetry when revived.

One may mark how almost the whole of SEARCH is sketched out in these three paragraphs. However, for the purpose of this discussion, the point is that the madeleine never appears. Rather, its role is replaced by a mundane piece of dry toast. The key to unlocking the secret of the universe has degenerated from an exquisite little cupcake to a shard of dead bread.

Why?

The quickest explanation for the madeleine's accession might involve the rhetoric I just used. A madeleine, a shaped product of the baker's art, seems to involve much more charm and poetry than a piece of bread half on its way to the wastebasket. However, one must wonder whether the explanation of surface charm can be used to understand the appearance of a madeleine in this context; for over the course of his writing life, Proust explored the role of a number of items that could serve as triggers to the doors of paradise. An initial list of potential sources for similar illumination might include the following:

- Level ray of the setting sun (vi, 276)
- Book binding (vi, 289)
- Breakfast coffee (vi, 289)
- Noon in the sound of bells (vi, 290)
- Mornings with the hiccups of central heating (vi, 290)
- Distant sound of an aeroplane (vi, 298)
- Outline of a church steeple (vi, 298)
- Warbling of a thrush (vi, 334)
- Smell in a deplorable wooden villa at the seaside (Santeuil, 408)
- Eating light-coloured grapes (Santeuil, 409)
- Taste of dark, spiced messes of stewed fruit, in hotel rooms with dusty furniture (ibid.)
 - Bathroom of wet soap, eau-de-Cologne, mouth-wash, and sunlight (ibid.)
 - Smell of railway carriages (ibid.)
 - The sound of limping, echoing bells (ibid.)
 - The fragrance of roses (ibid.)
 - Washrooms and roads from which we can look at the sea (ibid.)

Certainly a number of the above items could be said to resemble mundane pieces of toast rather than exalted pieces of cake.

The reason for the madeleine's replacement of the toast is suggested in one of the earlier English biographies of Proust:

The scallop-shaped madeleine cake has been traditional in Illiers from time immemorial. Illiers was one of the halting places on the medieval pilgrimage route from Paris to the shrine of St. James the Apostle at Compostella in Spain. The church of St.-Jacques took its name from Saint James, and the madeleine cake its shape from the shell worn by pilgrims in their hats. Proust alludes to this in the madeleine incident. (George Painter, Proust: The Early Years, 22n3.)

"Illiers" is the "real" name of Proust's fictional town of Combray where, where the narrator has his madeleine moment. Allusion to the madeleine might thus be considered to be an introduction of some local color or verisimilitude into Proust's story. However, it would seem most productive to focus on the matter of pilgrimage: As Painter points out, this is how Proust adverts to the madeleine:

"She sent out for one of those short, plump little cakes called 'petites madeleines,' which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted scallop of a pilgrim's shell."

At this juncture, some historical context might prove helpful.

After Jesus' death, St. James – one of Jesus' original follow-

ers – went to Spain, presumably to pave the way for St. Paul's intended missionary work. (Romans 15:20f) However, on January 2, 40, the Virgin Mary appeared to James and told him to return to Judea, which he did, and died at the hand of King Herod. James' body was sent by ship to Spain, where the boat sank, near Compostella, in the most northwest region area of Spain known as Galicia.

When American revolutionary and future president John Adams visited Europe to beg money from France, his boat leaked and he had to make his way to Paris from northwestern Spain (Galicia). He wrote

I have always regretted that We could not find time to make a Pilgrimage to Sainiagio de Compostella. We were informed... that the Original of this Shrine and Temple of St. Iago [James] was this. A certain Shepherd saw a bright Light there in the night. Afterwards it was revealed to an Archbishop that St. James was buried there. This laid the Foundation of a Church, and they have built an Altar on the Spot where the Shepherd saw the Light. ...Upon the Supposition that this is the place of the Sepulchre of Saint James, there are great numbers of Pilgrims, who visit it, every Year, from France, Spain, Italy and other parts of Europe, many of them on foot.

The discovery of the tomb seems to have occurred around 800 AD; and on May 23, 844, St. James made a miraculous appearance to assist the Christians of Spain in a defeat of the Muslim Moors at the Battle of Clavijo.

Sainiagio de Compostella became a major destination for pilgrims, ranking with Rome, Jerusalem, Canterbury, and Cologne. Starting point for pilgrimages began in Paris, Vezelay, Le Fut and Arles, in France; Valencia, Granada, Seville and Lisbon in Iberia; and as far away as Amsterdam, Gdansk, Krakow, Budapest and Naples, in other parts of Europe. (In 1987 the route(s) became the first European Cultural Route as declared by the Council of Europe.) If one draws lines from all these places of origin which ultimately converge on Sainiagio de Compostella, one gets the impression of a scallop shell set on its side, with the base to the left and the arc on the right.

But the scallop shell's connection to all this derives not only from a diagram of the pilgrim routes. Scallop shells abound in Galicia, and it seems that when James' body was washed ashore after the shipwreck of 50 AD, it arrived in a protective layer of scallop shells. The scallop shell became a symbol for St. James: his pilgrims wore them, they carried them, and they often secured a scallop shell from Galicia either as a souvenir, or as proof that they had truly completed the pilgrimage. Scallop shells served as markers on many of the St. James routes and hostels. Eventually Shell Oil seized the scallop shell as a corporate logo.

Nevertheless, the scallop shell maintained its role as an imprimatur on the cupcakes sold by bakeries at Illiers/Combray. They come into Proust's novel as a sign of pilgrimage. As such they signal not only the pilgrimage of people walking to northwestern Spain, they also suggest the pilgrimage about to be pursued by the reader who has chosen to journey with Proust. Proust was clear that his novel was to be experienced as some sort of extended journey sojourn by the reader:

... for me the novel is not only plane psychology but psychology in space and time...Then, like a city which, while the train pursues its winding course, seems to be first on our right, then on our left, the varying aspects the same character will have assumed to such a degree that they will have made him seem like successive and different characters ... (L, 225-8; November 1912, to Antoine Bibesco.)

My method of composition is veiled, and all the less immediately apparent for taking shape on a wide scale. (SL4, 98; November 10, 1919, to Souday]

It is indeed too little understood that my books form a structure, but the compasses being opened wide, the composition, which is rigorous, and to which all else is sacrificed, takes some time to discern. Although nobody

will be able to deny it, once the last page of *Le Temps retrouvé* (written before the rest of the book) comes full circle to meet the first page of Swann. [SL4, 291-2; January 18/19, 1922, to Crémieux]

Thus, Proust found a symbol of pilgrimage to be more useful for his literary purposes than he did a piece of dry toast.

Yet one more feature of Proust's singular cupcake might be noted, and it relates to the end goal of the pilgrimage, which in this case is epiphanic.

Sometimes the goal of a pilgrimage can be just to get to the final spot. It is something like touching home plate in baseball; indeed, at the cathedral at Santiago de Compostella, one of the stone pillars has had part of itself worn away by the happy caresses of arriving pilgrims.

Yet implicit in a pilgrimage is also notion of achieving some insight, some revelation, some transcendent experience. If one's goal is the skull of Thomas Beckett at Canterbury, presumably one hopes to experience something more than looking at an ordinary dead head bone. Maybe the head bone will glow. Maybe one will feel a warm glow within one self. Maybe one will achieve some insight as to divinity's manifestations on this terrestrial ball.

It is at this point that the word epiphany becomes helpful, in that *epi* is a Greek preposition meaning upon, on or near, and *phanos* refers to things like light, bright, joyous, lamp, lantern or torch (*phanos* is also used in the context of garments washed clean, kind of like what certain laundry products promise to the homemaker). When Greek melds these two concepts, the translation leads to words like appearance, illumination, manifestation, visibility, shine forth, come to light, show oneself, open, conspicuous. The Christian Feast of the Epiphany refers to the arrival of the three wise man at Jesus' manger, and signals Jesus' manifestation as Christ to the Gentiles. Epiphany is preceded by the twelve days of Christmas from December 25 through January 5, and celebrated in Spain with gift giving, and in New Orleans with king cakes.

While it is not required for a pilgrimage to end in an epiphany, it remains an option. It seems to constitute an appropriate if not essential option for Proust. His pilgrimage, as we have seen, begins with an intimation of epiphany when he encounters the madeleine. Similar experiences punctuate his long narrative until finally he reaches the courtyard where he trips on the paving stones and his rapture combines with understanding,

Just as, at that moment when I tasted the madeleine, all anxiety about the future, all intellectual doubts had disappeared . . . The happiness which I had just felt was unquestionably the same as that which I had felt when I tasted the madeleine soaked in tea. (vi, 255-256)

... I had not gone in search of the two uneven paving-stones of the courtyard upon which I had stumbled. But it was precisely the fortuitous and inevitable fashion in which this and the other sensations had been encountered that proved the trueness of the past which they brought back to life, of the images which they released, since we feel, with these sensations, the effort that they make to climb back towards the light, feel in ourselves the joy of rediscovering what is real. (vi, 272)

Here, finally, illumination strikes not only his being, but also his intellect. Proust may or may not have known that a shepherd discovered St. James' body through an emanation of light. But he would have found the correlation appropriate. He refers to "those moments of perception which had made me think that life was worth living" as *brefs éclairs*, i.e., "brief lightning-flashes." (vi, 507)

Guy Deleuze identifies Proust's epistemology with that of Nietzsche. Truth arrives through shock, if not violence. This is an epistemology which the Saxon pastor's son may or may not have derived from the Bible. Certainly it was available to Proust, for both the Old and New Testaments are filled with epiphanic encounters that lead to the truth. Jolts with God work on many of the Old Testament's major characters, e.g., Moses, Elijah, Isaiah. Exodus 31-22; I Kings 19:12; Isaiah 6:1-3. And of course the New Testament provides similar experiences: e.g., Jesus in

the wilderness, the Transformation, Luke's report of Paul's conversion, and Paul's report concerning some person (probably himself) who visited the third heaven. Mark 1:12; Mark 9:1-8; Acts 9; II Corinthians 12: 2-5. Proust's Catholic side can cite ecstasies reported by the likes of Saints Joan of Arc, Theresa of Avila, Hildegard of Bingen, etc.

The religious aspect of this epistemology lead to one last critical feature of Proust's cupcake, and that is its name, the madeleine. In one sense, the name madeleine is a misleading red herring, because it seems that the madeleine was named for Madeleine Paulmier, a chef who may have created the item in the 18th or 19th century. However, one should focus more on the fact that "madeleine" is a name that derives from Mary Magdalene.

In the New Testament, Mary Magdalene plays a premier role. Jesus freed her from seven demons, she followed him, and she was the first to discover his resurrection. This has led recent scholars to speculate that Mary might have served as a major leader of the original Jesus movement. Alas, before the last few decades of feminism, Mary had been subjected to a misogynist press. The many male clerics concluded that her demons represented her participation in every sin, and that Mary had been quite a slut, if not a whore, before encountering Jesus. It was this version of Mary that Proust would have known; but from his perspective, all those sins – and experience – might have qualified her all the more as the inaugurator and foreshadower of his novel. The course of SEARCH travels through its own litany of sins, including the selfishness of snobbery and love - not to mention the lusts Sodom and Gomorrah. If Mary was the first to see the resurrection, it might have been because she had earned it. (In the postscript, I will also discuss whether these sorts of things can really be earned.)

Given that she was the first to see the risen Christ, Mary Magdalene may lay claim to having experienced the supreme epiphany. In that sense, Marcel's cupcake thus intimates not only pilgrimage, but also the radical epiphanies which are to be ultimately revealed at the end of the pilgrimage. Proust's radical epiphanies can in fact be characterized as encounters with the phenomenon of resurrection. Samuel Beckett uses the word "fetish" to describe them, and Roger Shattuck has use the term *moments bienheureux*. Yet Proust uses the term *resurrection* at least three times in SEARCH (vi, 267, 272, 505), and seven times in SEARCH's sketch, the preface to ASB (although two of the seven instances use the verb (*ressusciter*; *ressuscite-nous*) instead of the noun). When Marcel tastes the madeleine, he is, all but literally, following the course of its namesake Mary. Like Mary, his path leads to an encounter with resurrection, and an ultimate appreciation of its significance.

Perhaps it is appropriate that when Marcel begins the last series of epiphanies that lead him to his ultimate insights – and to writing about them – he does so with an experience of tripping on uneven paving stones which remind him of the uneven paving stones he had tripped over in St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice. Mark, of course, wrote the first gospel. It was Mark who found the way to turn the lived experience of Jesus into experience of Jesus into written Word (although it required John to formulate it in those terms). A central theme of SEARCH is Marcel's hope to become a writer. By understanding the meaning of his epiphanies, he learns that he actually has something important to say; and the book ends with him determining to sit down and write a book about his experiences with epiphany. Of course it begins with a began with a cupcake, a sign of pilgrimage, epiphany, and resurrection; which could not be conveyed through a piece of dried toast. □



Lin Emery at Arthur Roger Gallery.

Calendar

COMPILED BY MERIDIAN GILL

A GALLERY FOR FINE PHOTOGRAPHY – 241 Chartres St. 568-1313. www.agallery.com - Sir Analog and Lady Digital: **Jerry Uelsmann** (photography), **Maggie Taylor** (photography), March 14 - July 30.

ACADEMY GALLERY– 5256 Magazine Street. 899-8111. www.noafa.com - New Work: **Susan Hotard** (painting), **Louis Morales** (painting), March 7 – March 31.

ARIODANTE GALLERY– 535 Julia St., 524-3233. www.ariodantegallery.com - **Kim Zabbia** (painting), **Chester Allen** (jewelry), and **Hernan Caro** (sculpture), March 7 – 31; **Julie Breaux** (paintings) and **Jivita** (jewelry), April 4 – 30.

ARTHUR ROGER GALLERY – 432 Julia St. 522-1999. www.arthurrogergallery.com - **Frederick J. Brown** (painting), March 7 – 28; **Lin Emery** (sculpture), March 7 – April 25; **Amer Kobaslija** (painting), March 28 – May 30.

BARRISTER’S GALLERY – 2331 St. Claude Ave. 525-2767. www.barristersgallery.com - Here’s Where the Story Ends The International Rose Sélavy Rothko Made Me Cry: **Dan Tague** (mixed media), PopUp Exhibit: **James Steg**, March 14 – April 4.

BOYD SATELLITE – 440 Julia St. 899-4218. www.boydsatellite-gallery.com - **Mason Saltarrelli** (paint), March 4 - April 7; **Errol Barron** (watercolor), April 7 - May 2; **Valerie Corradetti** (various media), April 7 - May 2.

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

CALLAN CONTEMPORARY – 518 Julia St., New Orleans, 525-0518. www.callancontemporary.com - SUB-STRUCTURES: **James Kennedy** (painting), February 5 – March 28.

CAROL ROBINSON GALLERY – 840 Napoleon Ave. at Magazine. 895-6130. www.carolrobinsongallery.com - Artists of Faith: **Group Exhibition** (various media), through April 4; Virtual Exhibition, ongoing.

COLE PRATT GALLERY – 3800 Magazine St. 891-6789. www.coleprattgallery.com - **Phil Sandusky** (painting), February 24, - March 28.



Radcliffe Bailey at the Contemporary Arts Center.

COLLINS DIBOLL ART GALLERY – Loyola University. 861-5456. <http://www.loyno.edu/dibollgallery/> - Mark Grote Visiting Artist Lecture Series: **Keith Sonnier** (sculpture), March 3 - March 23; Bachelor of Arts Senior Exhibition, March 23 - April 16; Graphic Design Senior Exhibition, April 16 - April 27; Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Exhibition, April 27.

CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER – 900 Camp St. 210-0224. www.cacno.org - EN MAS?: Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean: Curated by **Claire Tancons, Krista Thompson**, March 7 - June 7. Recent Works: **Radcliffe Bailey** (sculpture), March 7–June 7.

d.o.c.s. gallery – 709 Camp St. 524-3936. www.docsgallery.com

HISTORIC NEW ORLEANS COLLECTION – 533 Royal St. 523-4662. www.hnoc.org - Andrew Jackson: Hero of New Orleans: through March 29.

ISAAC DELGADO FINE ARTS GALLERY – 615 City Park Ave. 361-6620. www.dcc.edu/departments/art-gallery - Visual Communications Student Show: March 5 – March 19; Interior Design

Student Show: March 26 - April 9; Fine Arts Student Exhibition: April 16 - April 30.

JEAN BRAGG GALLERY OF SOUTHERN ART – 600 Julia Street. 895-7375. www.jeanbragg.com - Storyville: **Linda Lesperance** (paint), March 7 - April 4; An Eye for “Patios, Stairways and Iron Lace Balconies: Etchings, Various Artists, March 7 - April 4; Shoreline and Wetlands, Two Perspectives: **Rhea Gary** (paint), **Melissa Smith** (painting), April 4 - May 2.

JONATHAN FERRARA GALLERY – 400a Julia St. 522-5471. www.jonathanferraragallery.com - Palimpsest: **Michael Pajon** (collage), February 6 – March 28.

LeMIEUX GALLERIES – 332 Julia St. 522-5988. www.lemieux-galleries.com - From Our Shallow Waters: Still-Lives from the Coast of New Orleans: **Billy Solitario** (painting), March 7-April 11.

NEWCOMB ART GALLERY – Tulane University. 865-5328. www.newcombartgallery.tulane.edu - The Private Impressionist: Works on Paper by the Artist and His Circle: **Edgar Degas** (various media), through May 24.



Tina Freeman at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art

NEW ORLEANS MUSEUM OF ART – City Park. 606-4712. www.noma.org - Salutations: **Josephine Sacabo** (photography), through April 5; Forever Mural: **Odili Donald Odita**, through April 30. ORIENTALISM: TAKING AND MAKING: through December 31st, 2016; Kongo Across the River: organized by the Harn Museum of Art at the University of Florida and the Royal Museum for Central Africa, various media, through March 25; Recently acquisitioned works: **Robert Rauschenberg** (painting), through March 29.

OGDEN MUSEUM OF SOUTHERN ART – 925 Camp St. 539-9600. www.ogdenmuseum.org - Artist Spaces: **Tina Freeman** (photography), March 7 - September 6; Cultural Mechanic: **Jim Roche** (various media), through July 12. Tennessee Williams: The Playwright and the Painter: Organized by **David Wolkowsky and the Key West Art & Historical Society**, February 7 – May 31; South: **Mark Steinmetz** (photography), through May 10.

SOREN CHRISTENSEN GALLERY – 400 Julia St. 569-9501. www.sorenchristensen.com -Group Work: Selections from the Roster, March; Group Work: Selections from the Roster, April; Shelter: **Gretchen Weller Howard** (various media), May.

STELLA JONES GALLERY – Place St. Charles, 201 St. Charles Ave. 568-9050. www.stellajonesgallery.com -

STEVE MARTIN GALLERY– 624 Julia St. 566-1390. <http://www.stevemartinfineart.com> - Steve Martin and Emerging Artists, ongoing

UNO-ST. CLAUDE GALLERY - 2429 St. Claude Ave. 280-6410. <http://finearts.uno.edu/gallery.html>. **Rylan Steele** (photography), **Southerly Gold** (photography), March 14 - April 5. □

KONGO *across the* WATERS

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