

Art in Review

■ Large but intimate landscapes ■ New work for paint ■ A direct approach to a fine distinction ■ Technical bravura as style ■ Beyond Minimalism.

Alex Katz

Marlborough Gallery
40 West 57th Street
Through Nov. 2

Alex Katz is best known for billboard-scaled portraits and figure paintings in which strong light, flat colors and robust yet unruffled paint surfaces have much to say. Several of the new paintings at Marlborough continue this line of endeavor, most notably "Muna," a portrait of a woman who confronts the viewer, Sphinx-like, at several times life size, and "Chance," in which four women act out a beach scene with an air of artifice that is matched by a bright yellow background.

Nonetheless, the best paintings in this exhibition are intimate yet large-scale landscapes that zero in on nature's details — the edge of a forest stream, for example — while leaving the paint in a decidedly ruffled state. In "Black Brook," from 1989, the paint refuses to cohere absolutely to the image at hand — a pair of rocky banks and their reflections in the water that divides them. Big fluffy brushstrokes fill the air, asserting the primacy of painted space over real space, but also giving a credible translation to the play of light on the water that attracted and challenged the artist in the first place. In effect, Mr. Katz is trying to revise the plein-air studies of the Impressionists upward toward an Abstract Expressionist scale, and the process is bringing new openness and life to his paintings. **ROBERTA SMITH**

Suzanne McClelland

Stephanie Theodore Gallery
580 Broadway (near Houston Street)
SoHo
Through Oct. 26

Suzanne McClelland's first solo exhibition introduces an artist who is trying to make paint do things it hasn't done before. She specializes in a kind of hallucinatory surge in which language, material and emotion join together for results that are random

and primitive and that avoid the traditional niceties of paint. Ms. McClelland's fluid surfaces are more spilled than painted, and some of their scattered marks gradually reveal themselves to be fragmented letters of the works' titles, but only after a good bit of looking. As words like "Now," "Forever" and "Till" emerge from these unaccommodating surfaces, the paintings convey a sensibility that is both feminine and feminist, that obliquely recounts suffering and patience while adamantly refusing to suffer or be patient any longer. **ROBERTA SMITH**

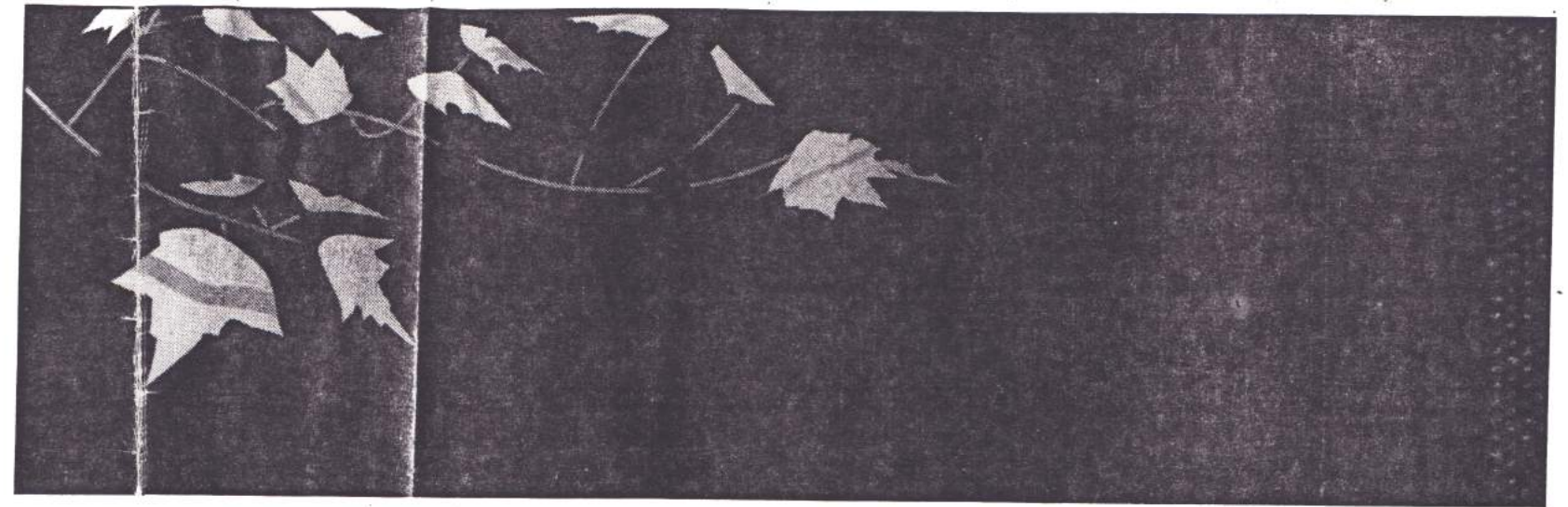
Rebecca Purdum

Jack Tilton Gallery
24 West 57th Street
Manhattan
Through Nov. 16

Rebecca Purdum has in recent years established herself as a painter to watch. This show demonstrates her continued progress along the fine line between figuration and abstraction. As before she pays great attention to qualities of light diffused through mists of color that recall the atmospheric scenes of Joseph Turner or the hovering forms of Mark Rothko. Vague shapes appear beneath the rippling clouds of paint, recalling Monet's late images of the ponds at his home in Giverny.

In making her work, Ms. Purdum first stains the canvas, then applies layers of paint directly with her gloved hands. As a result, her pictures frequently display a characteristic sweeping line that marks the span of her arm. Ms. Purdum also builds up differing textures in the works, from thick, shiny surfaces to thinned out areas where the canvas has barely been touched by paint.

Like the large, exuberant paintings of Joan Mitchell, these works hint at subjects without specifying their references. They point toward the world while retaining their integrity as formally complex, emotionally suggestive objects. Several of the works suggest landscapes; one seems to allude to the dark jagged canyon of a city street at dusk. But overall the



"Black Brook VIII," 1990, an oil on canvas by Alex Katz at the Marlborough Gallery.

Marlborough Gallery

tone of these works is brighter and more open than ever before.

Much of the attraction of these works comes from their sense of imminence, the feeling that the clouds of color about to reveal a scene blind them. This quality of anticipation creates a tension that recalls the interwoven textures of Minimalist music, where spiraling figures seem always on the verge of breaking into melody but never do. In one painting here, though, the black outline of a human figure can be discerned behind the mists of color. Whether it will come forward or remain ambiguous — whether Ms. Purdum will be able to incorporate referential elements into her works while retaining their allusive richness — is a crucial question for this young and ambitious artist. **CHARLES HAGEN**

Jim Dine

Pace Gallery
142 Greene Street
SoHo
Through Oct. 26

The exhibition of Jim Dine's newest paintings and sculptures displays, as usual, an impressive technical bravura. Few artists proceed with the confidence of Mr. Dine when it comes to laying paint on canvas or casting things in bronze, or when combining these two media, as when he painted on cast metal heads or busts. Dine's technique is so de-

veloped that it amounts to the style that almost but not quite ties his disparate efforts together and obscures the basic hollowness of his art.

The most bizarre thing about this crowded and superficially energetic exhibition is that it frequently reads like a small survey of Neo-Expressionism. At one juncture in a large elaborately patinated bronze urn raised high on a pedestal, we seem to be looking at one of Julian Schnabel's recent sculptures. When Mr. Dine festoons two big carved-wood figures with tools — implements he has used in his art since the mid-1960's — it is nonetheless Georg Baselitz who comes to mind. Similarly the dreamy, high-cheeked faces in many of Mr. Dine's paintings seem borrowed from Francesco Clemente's cast of characters.

Adding to the confusion is the question of whether these efforts are unintended affinities or direct parodies. Elsewhere Mr. Dine ambushes art head on, as in a series of disastrous sculptures that reprise the armless Venus de Milo but also render her headless. **ROBERTA SMITH**

Mel Bochner

SteinGladstone
99 Wooster Street
SoHo
Through tomorrow

This elegantly ephemeral exhibition recalls a moment in the late 1960's when younger artists, stopped

in their tracks by the absolute simplicity of Minimal sculpture, attempted to go it one better. One solution, evident in this installation piece that Mel Bochner created in Munich in 1969, was to dispense with Minimalism's high-cost metal forms and deal directly with the "real space" that was at the heart of the Minimalist enterprise.

In "Measurement Series: 36-Inch Latitudinal Projection," which is being exhibited in New York for the first time, Mr. Bochner runs a black tape line around an entire room, notching it at 36-inch intervals. A square of butcher paper taped to the wall at the first interval lets us know that the tape is also 36 inches off the ground (at least in the beginning: the slightly slanting floor at SteinGladstone creates an added perceptual fillip). This paper also invites the viewer to fill in the other 36-inch blanks in the mind's eye, ringing the room with paper, and in turn conjuring the possibility of an even more tangible sculpture. In the end, Mr. Bochner's space becomes more mental than physical, as the pleasure of considering it is, and this must have been his point. **ROBERTA SMITH**

Jonathan Lasker

Sperone Westwater
142 Greene Street
SoHo
Through Oct. 26

Jonathan Lasker's growing use of

painterly effects is beginning to contradict the conceptual premise behind his work, which is to quote those same effects ironically. Typically Mr. Lasker paints tangled squiggles of black lines on pastel backgrounds. These squiggles recall the grand gestural marks of the Abstract Expressionists, but Mr. Lasker paints them flat, producing smooth surfaces that, along with the pinks and pale blues he tends to use for his backgrounds, suggest high-tone décor. Onto these inexpressive surfaces he superimposes gigantic knotlike marks of the same sort, impossibly thick, as if he'd squeezed a trail of paint straight from the tube.

Mr. Lasker plays a game of surfaces, referring to the commonplace of using texture to signify emotion. In these stylized works, authenticity is only a nostalgic memory — or so it would seem. Mr. Lasker has begun to use a broader palette, and his figures have become more complicated as well. In one piece here he adds yet another layer of texture, in the form of a black shadowlike figure, on top of an already intricate composition. The struggle between irony and expression is common in art these days, and Mr. Lasker seems to be working toward an edgy and interesting balance of the two. **CHARLES HAGEN**

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