

Fanciful to Figurative to Wryly Inscrutable

By HOLLAND COTTER JULY 8, 2005

"SNAP out of it" is the word to the New York art industry after a couple seasons of fanciful, salable, boring painting and drawing. And judging by this summer's crop of gallery group shows, the art world is listening, at least enough to add a dose of conceptual fiber to a high-carb bijoux diet.

Not that the situation has swung in any decisive direction. It's just become more complicated, which is good. Robert Smithson is giving Jack Smith a run for his money as presiding deity. Rock 'n' roll still holds the airwaves, but buzzed with a static of satellite news.

And in the face of the hard-sell campaign for a return to traditional values -- Sincerity, Beauty, the Object -- that has been the art establishment's sole contribution to 21st-century culture so far, some people are asking again: why can't irony be sincere? Why can't ideas be beautiful? Why pile glut onto glut? A few Chelsea galleries are even beginning to consider giving space to artists' ephemeral projects, which will pay off in credibility if not in cash, and may actually make art feel like an adventure rather than an uptight insider game.

Anyway, from a long list of group shows, I've picked a handful that give some sense of where the balance stands. Most are in Chelsea, though there's plenty of activity elsewhere. Young artists are to the fore -- with so many art

schools charging so much money to create careers, how could they not be? -- though history gets a nod. Even when the temperature is high in July, the galleries tend to be cool, the personnel laid-back, the shows adventurous, all reasons why midsummer is my favorite art season.

The summer's big, hot Chelsea show is "Bridge Freezes Before Road" at Barbara Gladstone, organized by the writer Neville Wakefield. If you want an alternative to the mild-mannered artsy-craftsiness of "Greater New York 2005," you'll find it here. You'll also find a complement to the tough, exhilarating Smithsonian retrospective at the Whitney Museum. There is a single small Smithsonian piece at Gladstone: a collage of snapshots of the Nevada desert made in 1968, five years before his death at 35. And certain new work makes direct or indirect reference to him. The layer of salt caking a Banks Violette sculpture brings "Spiral Jetty" to mind. Matthew Day Jackson's "Tomb of the Unknown," with its carved vultures and tattooed surfaces, touches on Smithsonian's pop-cultural obsessions. And Smithsonian's signature concept of the "nonsite" gets a wicked spin in Aaron Young's "Freedom Fries," a video made by kicking a camera across the gardens of Versailles.

In a broader sense, this show is about the 1960's as a state of mind, then and now. This isn't the 60's as a feel-good love feast, but as a manic, heaven-and-hell trip that ended up raising consciousness so high -- it actually afforded a glimpse of how political power worked -- that an entire culture went into a nose dive, still in progress.

The young artists Mr. Wakefield has brought together here seem attuned to a falling-apart dynamic. Kelley Walker sugar-coats variations on Warhol's 60's "Race Riot" paintings with silk-screened images of fecal-brown chocolate. Dan Colen's graffiti-covered plank fort is for little cowboys who won't grow up. What does this Alamo protect? A package of Huggies diapers, fake audio equipment and a sculpture spelling the word "drugs." You have to laugh.

And for a wry, level-headed image of the 60's-style counterculture as a

leftover artifact, there's Slater Bradley's video "The Year of the Doppelgänger." Just a few minutes long, it reduces the stadium rock concert -- that empowering communal event of yesteryear -- to a single skinny drummer banging out Led Zeppelin riffs as quarterbacks-in-training work out behind him.

I'll stop, though there's more to see: a Jasper Johnsian sculpture by Clive Barker from 1967; an impressive painting by the German artist Erik Schmidt; a sleeping-bag piece by Richard Hughes; a Chris Burden video; a crazy (which I like) mix of stuff from Adam McEwen. Each component is on its own track, but together they make a messy, anarchic show very different from what we've been seeing in Chelsea of late.

'Grey Flags'

Even more different is "Grey Flags" at Friedrich Petzel, one of the strangest and best group shows of the year. Its curator is Seth Price, an artist known for his uningratiatingly enigmatic, label-defying work, and the exhibition extends and amplifies his aesthetic.

At least some of the show's historical underpinnings lie in Art Brut, early Modernism's not-nice, dystopian wild style. Its driven, irritated spirit is suggested in two scratchy abstract chalk drawings on slate by Joan Jonas; in Georg Herold's assemblage of bricks punched through a mattress; and in silhouette wall sculptures by Richard Artschwager -- one of a running man, the other of a satyr that appears to be made of singed hair.

Wade Guyton contributes paintings, or something like paintings: two striking, designish inkjet-on-linen pieces composed of a mysterious U-shaped form licked by photographic flames. In an exact reverse of conventional logic, the closer you get, the less like a painting it looks.

The show also introduces the Berlin-based artist David Lieske to New York, with several dissimilar works, the most intriguing a text piece made up

of 50 framed aluminum panels stacked on the gallery floor. Each carries a sentence or phrase from a first-person narrative, which can be read in full only by laboriously going through the stacks. Slowly it becomes clear that the writer is considering how to commit suicide; what you don't know is that the text itself is part of a script appropriated from a snuff film.

Mr. Lieske's way of gradually bringing information to light only to reveal a deeper darkness is also Mr. Price's way. His work in the show consists of a set of clear plastic curtains printed with black and purple forms. The curtains are installed in a way that makes the images hard to decipher. Even when you learn that they, too, are from a snuff film -- a recent tape made of the beheading of a hostage in the Middle East -- you can't actually see them, but they radiate an energy that they didn't have before.

'Walls 'N Things'

The summer show at Nicole Klagsbrun, "Walls 'N Things," organized by Clarissa Dalrymple, shares Mr. Price's interest in the power of ambiguity, but makes something light and bright of it. Everything is both more and less than what it seems, a reality that is in this case enchanting.

The pink wooden wall braces that Cordy Ryman installs in corners of the gallery both imitate structural prototypes and function as decorative, but they do shape how you see the architecture. Mural-size graffiti paintings by Tony Just and Gardar Eide Einarsson look like assertive macho statements, except that one is a pastel-on-paper copy of graffiti, and the other lifts a phrase from Barbie doll packaging.

In a beautiful video installation, Sebastian Bear-McClard and Barney Kulok use natural light to transform a series of ordinary city walls into a kind of aurora borealis. But the show's illusionist theme is most magically demonstrated in a piece by Gedi Sibony. To create it, he covered a gallery wall with several sheets of cardboard that he spray-painted with cheerful colors, then lifted away. All that remains on the wall are faint traces of paint that had

gone over the cardboard edges -- the ghosts of stencils, or, you might say, the mistakes -- and they are the piece: barely there, but once you see it, really, really there.

'This Side Toward Screen'

"This Side Toward Screen" at Murray Guy, a show of 35-millimeter slide projections, is, formally speaking, almost as low-tech as Mr. Sibony's piece and even more elusive. Digital imaging has made slide projection all but obsolete as a teaching aid and source of home entertainment, but it has a significant history as an art medium: Smithsonian, among others, made brilliant use of it.

The artists in this show continue that history. Kota Ezawa exploits the medium's pedagogical association in a lecture on photography made entirely of slides of drawings of photographs. Kevin Arrow animates slides; Madeline Djerejian and Anibal Jorge Pella turn them into fictional narratives. Barbara Probst plays off of the carousel's unyielding linearity of images to make a circling trip through New York City. A piece by Matthew Buckingham, in a nod to Smithsonian's concept of entropy, consists of a single slide -- it's a picture of a Danish political monument -- meant to be projected until it disintegrates.

'Mirage'

The Smithsonian effect also animates "Mirage," an intelligently textured show, organized by the artists Julie Ault and Martin Beck, at Alexander and Bonin. It ranges from an ecological proposal by Peter Fend, to Emily Jacir's video of a Texas road trip, to recent sculpture by Isa Genzken that turns personal and social history into a scrappy nonmonument.

'Early Work'

Ms. Genzken is also in "Early Work" at David Zwirner, a retrospective look at some of the gallery's artists. The attraction, for me, was less in seeing how well-known artists developed than in seeing how certain early work

prefigured what is happening in art now. If I were connecting dots, I would link Ms. Genzken, circa 1989, with Mr. Guyton; Jason Rhoades, circa 1993, with Mr. Colen; and the Chris Ofili of 15 years ago with the many New York painters now working in a realist, figurative style.

'Living for the City'

The very presence of work by Mr. Ofili is also a reminder of how unglobal the New York art world has become. Multiculturalism went out of style, and cosmopolitanism plummeted. For that reason alone, "Living for the City" at Jack Shainman is welcome, though, strictly speaking, it's not a Chelsea show. It has been organized by Isolde Brielmaier and Trevor Schoonmaker, co-founders of the Brooklyn Institute of Contemporary Art, an international art center still on the drawing board, but that hopes to open in 2007.

Intended as a preview of coming attractions, their show has work by 16 artists who have had little or no exposure in New York, among them Taiyo Kimura from Tokyo; Jean-Ulrick Désert, who moves between Europe, Jamaica and the United States; and the Japanese-Canadian artist Kevin Ei-ichi deForest. Over all, the work varies in style and interest, but what's instantly striking is how completely unlike anything else in Chelsea the show itself looks.

'Atomica'

When the Brooklyn Institute does finally open, it is bound to present a fair amount of topical art. For many artists in Africa, Asia and Latin America, being politically alert is simply part of being a world citizen. And some of this summer's group shows project a similar consciousness. It comes across obliquely -- as existential disturbance, you might say -- at Gladstone and Petzel, and concretely in "Atomica: Making the Invisible Visible," a two-part exhibition split between adjoining galleries, Esso and Lombard-Freid Fine Arts.

Conceived by Ombretta Agrò Andruff, Esso's director, the show coincides with the 60th anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan on Aug. 6, 1945, though it also has obvious pertinence to the war in Iraq. The infamous image of a mushroom-shape cloud recurs through the galleries like the toll of a bell; yet the show as a whole is notable for its modulated handling of its loaded theme.

The juxtaposition of Davide Cantoni's whisper-soft burned-paper drawings with Nobuho Nagasawa's neo-Pop "Nuclear Cuisine" defines a broad, sophisticated formal ground. And pieces like Lisi Raskin's fantastic candy-colored painting of a missile control room and Marc Handelman's "Flag Dispersion," an explosive abstract painting in red, white, blue and gold, carry it away from didacticism to some other place.

'Post No Bills'

That other place is also where "Post No Bills," a floor-to-ceiling roundup of artist-made posters at White Columns, stands. Since the 60's, innovative poster design has been closely associated with politics and rock, and the association continues here in an all-text, all-opinion piece titled "The Advantages of Another Bush Presidency," by the GuerrillaGirlsBroadband, and in Scott King's Valentine pink Cher-as-Che homage.

But much of the rest of the work in the show -- organized by White Columns's new director, Matthew Higgs -- doesn't adhere to those categories. The artist Steven Shearer fills a whole wall with posters devoted to 1970's fanzines, retro-psychedelia and death-metal bands, subjects that he has explored and archived in other forms for years. In this case, the poster turns from a public to a private medium, an independent work of art tinged with the strain of obsessiveness found in so much current work.

'Bebe le Strange'

It is, for example, the subtext of a tense little show called "Bebe le

Strange," put together at D'Amelio Terras by Rachel Uffner, the gallery's director, and the artist Barb Choit. The show centers on depictions of the figure, which in the 1990's was "the body," though the two are not conceptually the same. The body was sexual, biological, vulnerable. The figure, as often as not, is absurd, bizarre, clownish, artificial, and we see a lot of that here.

The Houston-based photographer Demetrius Oliver, for example, turns an unspecified part of his own anatomy into goofy abstract sculpture. Walead Beshty depicts himself as if in a sitcom, literally absorbed in a department-store shopping experience: his head is stuck in a pillowcase. Corin Hewitt creates emblematic self-portraits from elements found in old photographs of his parents, while a Brooklyn-based artist who calls himself just Carter draws his own head in profile, then reworks it, often elaborately, through collage.

And in some cases, the figure is present through absence. Matt Keegan cuts the heads out from large-format photographic portraits and displays them with what are essentially the empty spaces that remain. In Ms. Choit's ink drawings of crowds of obscure amateur bands, the figures are so tiny, numerous and densely packed that they threaten to dissolve into a solid black blot.

For a truly fetishistic image, one in which "body" and figure meet, there is Johannes Vanderbeek's remarkable "Burning at the Stake," a wax cast of a woman's head covered with long red human hair that has been intricately braided to form the image suggested by the title.

'Sticks & Stones'

And, finally, to round out the figurative picture, pop into "Sticks & Stones" at Perry Rubenstein, which includes an ambitious multipart self-portrait by Jay Heikes and scrupulously detailed drawings of militiamen with monstrous heads by Adam Helms, who has to be one of the summer's most visible artists, with additional work at Gladstone, at Oliver Kamm/5BE in "Delicate Demons and Heavenly Delights" and at P.S.1.

Inexplicably low in visibility this summer, however, are female artists. The Petzel and Klagsbrun exhibitions each have one; Gladstone, only three; Rubenstein, none.

'Idols of Perversity'

As a potential corrective, there's an exhibition at Bellwether that takes images of women as its theme, but does curious things with it. The curators -- the artist Thomas Woodruff and the gallery's owner, Becky Smith -- were inspired by a 1980's book by Bram Dijkstra titled "Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin de Siècle Culture." And in the show they've built around it, Surrealism is the prevailing mode; academic painting, the preferred style; the contemporary art star John Currin, the patron saint.

Mr. Currin's painting titled "Chewy," of a bald, vacantly smiling woman, is enshrined at the beginning of the show, and much of the rest of the work draws on its cunning blend of old master style and up-to-date snarky humor to produce an effect that might be termed the shock of the retrograde. Some artists -- Everest Hall, Graham Little, Christopher Pugliese and Christoph Steinmeyer -- go for goony glamour. Others, like Marion Peck and Pieter Schoolwerth, settle for grotesque. Almost everyone else, including Sas Christian, Tim Mensching and Mr. Woodruff himself, stake out some slippery middle ground.

The exhibition is clearly calculated to push buttons; it invites you to be amused or appalled. And at this level, the show works, because it is so thoroughly of a piece. Ms. Smith and Mr. Woodruff have pushed an idea to the max, as if they had a personal stake in it, and maybe they do, whether it is a shared interest in problems of depicting gender, or their identification as painters who work in a still suspect academic-realist style.

'Something Is Somewhere'

For a less intense and way less manipulative art viewing, however, let me

recommend a visit to "Something Is Somewhere," at Monya Rowe, a show that makes an unambiguous feminist statement simply by being made up of 20 female artists. Organized by Anat Ebgi and Ms. Rowe, it's a solid, low-key show that to some degree exemplifies the personalized, miniaturist, often whimsical approach to painting and drawing that has attracted attention in the past few years.

Narrative fantasy is a common thread in this art. Larissa Bates's painting of a single-sex Arcadia is one example. Erika Somogyi's image of adolescent girls wandering through a cemetery amid hallucinogenically colored leaves is another. My eye was caught and held by other work: a photograph of Stone Age feminism titled "Bigfoot and Nioka I" by Ellen Lesperance and Jeanine Oleson -- it's major -- and Angela Dufresne's paintings of fictional architecture. Ms. Dufresne's career is taking off, for understandable reasons. Her two small pieces at Rowe are very good, and two larger ones in a five-artist show called "Fresh Paint" at Lehman-Maupin even better.

'Put It in Your Mouth ... '

Ms. Rowe's gallery is an ideal size for intimately scaled work, and so are a handful of galleries on the Lower East Side, two with group shows. Rivington Arms is only a narrow storefront, but it has plenty of room for the 30 works the artist-curator Darren Bader has installed there in "Put It in Your Mouth/I'll See You on the Dark Side of the Prune." Most are of a modest scale and funkiness that Chelsea, as a whole, wouldn't know what to do with (though Mr. Wakefield at Gladstone might).

They include a painting done with honey and eye shadow by Kathryn Garcia, and a sculpture made of ice cream and paint by Chris Kasper. From Mateo Tannatt comes an assemblage of a vintage Humpty Dumpty sweater and egg shells; and from Urs Fischer, half an apple and half a pear joined by a bolt.

Along with these curious objects are photographs of other curious objects,

by Peter Johansen, Nancy de Holl and Anca Munteanu Rimnic. Brian Bellott has cooked up a poetic pocket-size book for the occasion. It is photocopied, as opposed to desktop-published, and photocopying is a big-deal medium here, also accounting for work by Aaron Brewer and Michael Queenland. Where all of this is coming from, or going, I have no idea. But as an antidote to the "return to craft" party line that has had such a stultifying effect on recent art, this exercise in the slapdash and the throwaway comes as a breath of fresh air.

'I Throw Herring to the Dog'

Not that a balance between artlessness and craft can't be struck. It can be, and is in "I Throw Herring to the Dog" at Canada. The show has been assembled by Lillian Ludlow and Marcella Mullins, who are both fashion designers and artists. And I suspect that those multitasking activities help explain a curatorial aesthetic that combines improvisation and precision.

Some artists here -- Aurelio Valle, Emily Sundblad, Agathe Snow and Benjamin Sturgill -- take advantage of the flexibility offered by collaging and assemblage. Others hone rigorous formal skills: Joshua Leffel in crosshatched ink drawings, Stephen Ellwood in a superbly edited film of Rorschach-like woodland images that flow like the Easter music from "Parsifal."

Daniel Subkoff, represented by two tiny, stitchlike drawings and a wall hanging, falls somewhere in between. His big piece is a suspended sheet of raw canvas, from which he has cut several long, thin vertical strips, left attached to the sheet at their top or bottom edge. He lets some of the strips flop down to the floor, where they stretch out like tentacles; others he raised up in swags toward the ceiling. They resemble antennae, but also look regal.

The resulting object, almost too slight to be called an object, is attractive but not beautiful, handmade but not handcrafted, funny but not cute. It suggests many things -- a blanket, a canopy, a banner -- without, of course, being any of them. But maybe that's wrong. Maybe in the context of Mr. Price's show, where it would look fine, it would be an inscrutable flag for new New

York art to follow.

Stars of the Crowd The group shows in New York City galleries reviewed by Holland Cotter:

Chelsea

'SOMETHING IS SOMEWHERE,' Monya Rowe, 526 West 26th Street, Suite 504, (646)234-8645. Through July 29.

'LIVING FOR THE CITY,' Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street, (212)645-1701. Through Aug. 5.

'MIRAGE,' Alexander and Bonin, 132 10th Avenue, near 18th Street, (212)367-7474. Through July 29.

'ATOMICA: MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE,' Esso Gallery and Lombard-Freid Fine Arts, 531 West 26th Street, second floor, (212)967-8040. Through July 29.

'BRIDGE FREEZES BEFORE ROAD,' Barbara Gladstone Gallery, 515 West 24th Street, (212)206-9300. Through Aug. 19.

'WALLS 'N THINGS,' Nicole Klagsbrun, 526 West 26th Street, Suite 213, (212)243-3335. Through Aug. 5.

'THIS SIDE TOWARD SCREEN,' Murray Guy, 453 West 17th Street, (212)463-7372. Through July 29.

'GREY FLAGS,' Friedrich Petzel Gallery, 535 West 22nd Street, (212)680-9467. Through Aug. 12.

'STICKS & STONES,' Perry Rubenstein Gallery, 527 West 23rd Street, (212)627-8000. Through Aug. 12.

'EARLY WORK,' David Zwirner, 525 West 19th Street, (212)727-2070.

Through Aug. 5.

'BEBE LE STRANGE,' D'Amelio Terras, 525 West 22nd Street, (212)352-9460. Through Aug. 12.

'IDOLS OF PERVERSITY,' Bellwether, 134 10th Avenue, near 18th Street, (212)929-5959. Through Aug. 6.

Greenwich Village

'POST NO BILLS,' White Columns, 320 West 13th Street, (212)924-4212. Through July 23.

Lower East Side

'I THROW HERRING TO THE DOG,' Canada, 55-59 Chrystie Street, (212)925-4631. Through July 31.

'PUT IT IN YOUR MOUTH/I'LL SEE YOU ON THE DARK SIDE OF THE PRUNE,' Rivington Arms, 102 Rivington Street, (646)654-3213. Through July 24.