artillery
KILLER TEXT ON ART

REVIEWS

FEATURED REVIEW

Paul McCarthy

L&M Arts, Venice, CA

Paul McCarthy, *Train, Mechanical*, 2003-2009

THE GELATINOUS dreams that inhabit the long career of Paul McCarthy resemble, upon close examination, many of our own collective twice-told tales. The characters are at least the same: Heidi, Santa Claus and Snow White. Playing like a kid's television show on the lids of the subconscious, McCarthy dismembers the meaning of familiar stories in a live vivisection that can be either disturbing or hilarious depending on who's watching and from which angle. Once these commercial fairy tales are exploded, we see that they were filled with nothing but sawdust and stuffing.

To take apart these cherished myths, McCarthy looks clearly at the darkness and repression buried beneath them, the violent sources from which our modern folk tales originated. Disney was totally mind-alteringly present for me growing up, thus McCarthy's mischief really resonates in the 28-year-old me peering down at my tender 8-year-old self, which still wants to believe that there isn't a five-foot-tall one-eyed, heavily tattooed chain-smoking 35-year-old woman inside Mickey Mouse. (It's true, I met her.) I remember discovering how grim Grimm's fairy tales could get, my own simple awakening to the darker origins of sanitized stories.

In McCarthy's latest outing in LA after a 10-year hiatus, the first sculpture I saw up close was an animatronic meisterwerk of mind-boggling technical ability. I understand enough about this stuff (perhaps caught on a late night Discovery show) to understand how impossibly difficult it is to get the head spin, the bulging eyes and the simultaneous multi-directional rutting when the George W. Bush twins thrust their bottle-cocks into the pot-bellied pigs with a certain verisimilar glide, with their beer bellies uncannily rippling. I'm not terribly oohed-and-awed by gear-headed problems (or their mechanical solutions), but that belly rippling still gives me the heebie-jeebies.

Of course animatronics had their first life in the public imagination (placed there by "Imagineers") in the various attractions at Disneyland (Hall of Presidents, Pirates of the Caribbean, etc.). McCarthy is, thankfully, the exact opposite of Uncle Walt. For Walt, everything looked nice but subdermally was really quite fucked-up. McCarthy pointed out in an interview with friend and collaborator Benjamin Weissman, "Disneyland is so clean; hygiene is the religion of fascism." For McCarthy, everything looks really fucked-up on the surface, but there's actually something kind of emotionally generous and generally freeing in what he's trying to do with his comic eruptions of the surreal into the mundane and the personal primal trauma/catharsis.

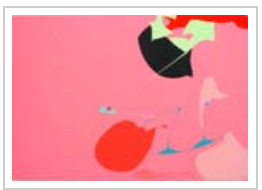
Outside the new L&M building, plopped onto a well-manicured lawn, a vaguely fairy-tale-ish boy and girl (Hummelites) sit in trees with oversized heads atop their real heads, their features sort of soft and smeary with glops of this or that cast in the metal. Though still ridiculously big and heavy-looking, they very quietly become more and more strange and befuddling (in a good way) the longer you look at them. I've no cultural memories of Hummel figurines, but they do look like objet d'art for a maudlin Christian grandmother, but in McCarthy's hands they look as if all that cheap nostalgia and kitschy sentiment has been left in the sun for far too long. I imagine Quinton Massys' The Ugly Duchess (1513) as being the actual owner of such degraded schmaltz. Inside, another heavy metal gaggle of battered Hummelites sailed their ship across the studio-ish platform (leftover buckets of paint, pennies and sundry other debris appear cast along with the main attraction), all black bronze. From where do these crack-faced babies sail? Toward buried treasure or onto their own status as treasure, or as trophy for whomever could afford to carry such enormous weight/costs? These current sculptures, their material, size and obvious expense, are a little off-putting. I sort of like my antiheros a little further outside the system, but I guess that can't be blamed too much on McCarthy. Even if I might prefer the hot air ephemerality of his monumental inflatables, in terms of legacy, I've heard that bronze lasts a whole lot longer.

- Andrew Beraradini

LOS ANGELES

HEATHER GWEN MARTIN

Luis De Jesus



Heather Gwen Martin, *Water Levels*, 2010

SINCE THE EARLY 1990s a particular aesthetic has been associated with abstract painting in the western United States, an aesthetic of over-the-top visual lusciousness that knowingly and aggressively updates ideas of "beauty," acknowledging our habituation to, among other things, synthetic materials and colors, and even the digital re-presentation of mundane reality. Los Angeles, Houston, and, in particular, Las Vegas serve as the loci for this no-longer-new-but-still-pervasive aesthetic, but it should come as no surprise that one of its most persuasive practitioners should now emerge from San Diego, specifically from the University of California campus - where a similar affront to the art world's dominant "ugly-is-serious" trope had coalesced two decades earlier in the Pattern & Decoration movement.

Heather Gwen Martin began her studies at UCSD at the height of the "beautiful abstraction" tendency; according to her mentor, Kim MacConnel, even her earliest works "stood out in their commitment and sophistication." Recognizing a kindred spirit, Pattern & Decoration veteran MacConnel cultivated Martin's innate abilities and leanings, and the result is a body of work that still stands out in its commitment and sophistication - this time in the world, not just in the classroom. The tendrilous lines Martin employs, and the bulbous but brittle shapes she describes with them, appear in other contemporary painting and (especially) drawing, as does her palette, especially its almost painfully vivid chromatic levels. But nobody - nobody - else employing these now-commonplace formalisms makes them work this way, or even achieves quite this level of power, allure, and eloquence.

Martin clearly derives her intricate, tensile line from both nature and computer; but at heart it comes from her own hand, and its dogged quirkiness harks back to no less than Arshile Gorky. (The recent retrospective at MOCA provided ready comparison.) In a sense, Martin is an nth-generation abstract expressionist, devolving Gorky's branching gestures much as James Brooks and Conrad Marca-Relli and William Baziotes (and, yes, John Altoon and Jay de Feo) had. At the same time, her intense colors - and, especially, her raucous color combinations, sliding close hues and values almost painfully upon one another - owe a debt to the '60s-era hard-edge painting of such as Ellsworth Kelly, Leon Polk Smith, Jack Youngerman, Nicholas Krushenick and Deborah Remington. I have no idea whose work Martin knew previously (although, knowing MacConnel, he turned her on to at least some of these predecessors), but in this case we're not talking influences, we're talking shoulders of giants. This is the panoply of American painters in which we can already place Martin.

Of course, the 33-year-old Canadian-born artist - who did grad work at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago - is a child of her time as well. In both her palette and her line, and especially in her tumultuous composition, with its eddies, zigzags, abrupt abutments and explosions - all rendered with the poised, crackling hairlines of digital rendering - you see her inherit not just from the aforementioned postwar masters but from more recently prominent painters such as Inka Essenhigh in New York and Los Angeles' Monique Prieto. The level of excitement doubles, then, looking at Martin's paintings: you experience an exhilarating eyeful, gorgeous, smart, risky and vertiginous, and at the same time you witness an American tradition coming to a head in its latest iteration.

- Peter Frank

DEVIN TROY STROTHER

Richard Heller Gallery

DEVIN TROY STROTHER, *DRUNK BITCHES FIGHTING IN THE BATHROOM*, 2009, COURTESY RICHARD HELLER GALLERY, SANTA MONICA.

DEVIN TROY STROTHER IS A YOUNG ARTIST with a lot of talent, a lot of gumption and a lot of attitude. His work explores race in contemporary society with humor and criticality. Exquisitely crafted collages play with foreground and background relationships with narratives that layer sequences in time. The before, during and after of an event is often presented simultaneously in bursts of vibrant color and flying paper shards. These works are executed in a folk art naivete manner with purpose in their exploration of African American culture and stereotypes.

In his ambitious solo debut at Richard Heller Gallery, Strother presents more than 25 works on paper whose figures expand beyond the confines of the rectangle. Figures with no dimensionality and few details, except for clothes, hair and facial expressions. Clothed or nude, isolated or grouped together, none of the figures stand alone, but is rather a character in a narrative. In pieces about dance, dresses are made from glitter; in works about violence they are covered in red blood pigment. They are crude shapes (they often have arms but no hands) and function like props taking part in a tableaux.

Many of the pieces express the grit of urban life. For example, *It's Us Versus Them* (2010) depicts a street scene where a crowd of brightly clad people watch from the sidewalk where there is clearly a battle between two gangs; half are dressed in black (with tall pointy hair) and gold chains, and the other half in white (with big round Afros). Both sides point their fingers out like children pretending to have guns, yet these pretend guns shoot real bullets as blood (red paint) splatters everywhere and the figures are trampled. Strother includes cliche ghetto signage - a video store, a barber shop, a swap meet and a liquor store to set the stage for the action. The work plays on stereotype and urban conflict. Tongue and cheek violence is prevalent throughout the body of work. *Drunk Bitches Fighting in the Bathroom* (2009) features a multiracial crowd of women engaged in a brawl in front of bathroom stalls. The high-heeled figures lurch at each other and fly through the air. The cause of their conflict is unknown but their hair, pointy breasts and a tampon machine distinguish them from his other characters.

The cartoon-like violence in some images is offset by dancing in others. Strother has remarked that his main source of inspiration comes from MTV and Nickelodeon. Hip Hop and Rap showed him "what it meant to be black," and cartoons everything else. Numerous works depict dancing and DJs. In *Please Mr. DJ*, and *Please Don't Stop That Electric Boogaloo*, (both 2010), it is evident that the mass of overlapping dancers are enjoying themselves, oblivious to their surroundings.

The environments Strother creates are made from layers of silkscreen flats and colored paper and share a kinship with the flat style of the cartoon *Southpark*. His exaggerated surfaces are often built from many strips of paper creating a confetti-like texture. Simultaneity - good vs. evil, black vs. white, pain vs. pleasure - is the crux of Strother's endeavor and what makes his work so interesting. The work is direct, yet elusive. The figures are smiling when keeling over. The world is about to explode, so why not party? An ironic wit and an understanding of cultural history is the backstory of this artist whose influences are a product of his generation, as well as folk art and other African American artists who question stereotypes by presenting them unabashedly.

- Jody Zellen

DEBORAH ASCHHEIM

Edward Cella Art + Architecture

WHEN DID WE LAST believe in the Future?

Deborah Aschheim, *Capitol (Only Clear Memory Lonely Year in Hollywood)*, 2009

At least since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the Future has been a reassuring combination of optimism and promised technology, one feeding off the other. In the Future, we believed, everything would be better. Our physical problems would be solved, there would be no more starvation or illness.

Alas, that Future did not come to pass, and the Future is no longer a place we look forward to arriving in. A chunk of the blame falls on the endless prevarications and disastrous policies of the Bush Administration which sent American optimism (and the economy) into a nosedive. And technology? Well, it often seems more trouble than it's worth. One example would be the mobile phone, a miracle of modern communication, which is now accused of everything from traffic accidents (and at least one train wreck) to attention deficit disorder.

A rueful view of the future underlies Deborah Aschheim's first show at Edward Cella, "Nostalgia for the Future." Since moving to Los Angeles a decade ago, Aschheim has made her reputation on technology-themed installations in noncommercial spaces such as the Armory Center for Art and the Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis College of Art and Design. This is her first commercial gallery show in Los Angeles, as well as a switch to drawing and small sculpture. Her subject matter is some of the noted modernist architecture around town - the Theme Building (1961) at LAX, the Century Plaza Hotel (1966) in Century City, the Capitol Records building (1956), a building from the Ambassador College in Pasadena, as well as the Unisphere and Tent of Tomorrow from the New York World's Fair of 1963-64.

These hopeful buildings were made in an era when we believed in the Future - they were iconic, they were what the Future used to look like. Now they seem quaint. Some are in danger of being torn down, while some are being rescued. The Theme Building was just renovated and reopened this past summer - though in limited fashion due to the fears of 9/11. The artist was clearly fascinated by the process of its renovation, as her drawings and one sculpture show the building surrounded by the busy hatchmarks of scaffolding.

Aschheim is a very adept draughtsman, using insistent lines on Dura-lar, a vellum-like plastic, which holds the ink tightly. These are exuberant sketches, and they offer closely observed details, although they are not to scale or exact. Overall views are juxtaposed with zoom-ins - like a close-up of the hexagonal windows of the Ambassador College building or several tiers of the Capitol Records building with their circular awnings.

An aura of nostalgia hovers around these depictions, a nostalgia not necessarily Aschheim's first person own. The New York World's Fair took place when she was born, but she "remembers" it via her parents' photographs, as well as what they've told her about it. For them it was the experience of a lifetime, while hardly anything can inspire that wonder in us now.

There are two sculptures - one of the Theme Building under scaffolding, one of the Century Plaza Hotel - and they are less adept, although their slightly lumpish quality may reflect a deliberate wonkiness. I've noticed that in Aschheim's installation work the wiring and connections are often exposed or obvious - maybe the artist is telling us that while technology is fascinating, it isn't seamless, especially in this DYI mode she revels in.

- Scarlet Cheng

JORDI ALCARAZ

Jack Rutberg Fine Arts

JORDI ALCARAZ, *LLIBRE D'ASTRNOMIA*, 2010

CATALAN ARTIST JORDI ALCARAZ challenges our perceptions with paintings, drawings and sculptures that are both adamantly present and magically elusive. Fluent in the languages of Abstract Expressionism and Art Informel but speaking a uniquely lyrical dialect, Alcaraz addresses our aesthetic expectations only to frustrate and dismantle them. As he does so, he leads us through new phenomenological engagement with art and time, and their infinite possibilities.

Exercicis de Desapararicio III (2010) is a handsome painting of black ovals on a matte grey ground. Its large scale, the inky darkness of its resolute discs, and the expressive verve with which they are limned, are all distantly related to Robert Motherwell's Elegy to the Spanish Republic series. Yet there are significant differences. The ground is cardboard, not canvas, and Alcaraz does as much with charcoal on its malleable surface as he does with paint. Even more unusual is what the younger artist does with the "glass" that hovers over the painting. Actually, it is Plexiglas, not glass per se. And Alcaraz pierces it several times with circular holes that resemble nothing so much as bullet holes. Yet these poetic "bullets" do not rupture the cardboard behind them. Instead, they cast shimmering reflections that function as clear counterpoints to the rounded, dark drops dancing over the rest of the composition. In his *Libre d' Astronomia* (2010), the artist has pierced 11 holes through the Plexiglas and into the blank pages of an old book. Highlights sparkle around the holes in the Plexiglas. Shadowed slivers of text fill the circles pierced in the book. Together they create a dynamic visual dialogue that parallels the way ideas about space and time ricochet among particle physicists debating String Theory.

Alcaraz's drawings similarly challenge the history of that medium and what we expect of it. *Exercicis de Desaparicio II* (2010) begins with four of the artist's black planets, orbiting in the upper left corner. To the right is a small hole, illuminating the grey ground like a tiny sun. Connecting them are what appear to be pale lines, but are in fact arcing erasures that cut through a charcoal cloud. In other works, he draws with lengths of wire, tenuously suspended behind the Plexiglas. Or he pours pigment through the holes in the Plexiglas, so that the blackness pools in thick puddles to create the "drawn" forms. Alcaraz's phenomenological play with materials and perceptions recalls the work of his older compatriot Antoni Tapies (certainly an eminence grise in much of this oeuvre), even as he elegantly transcends it.

The most melancholy piece - and perhaps the most Spanish - is *El Temps* (2010). A distressed wooden saint stands alone in a Plexiglas box. His head is bowed, his eyes cast downward. He reaches forward with one graceful hand to pull back one corner of

the box, creating a curtain-like fold, and opening the corner to allow the air of time to enter. The French term *l'air du temps* has become identified with a perfume name, but the phrase originally meant something like zeitgeist. Allowing air to move in and through the holes he pierces in his astonishing artworks, Alcaraz enchants the spirit of our times. With the base materials of ink, cardboard, wood and Plexiglas, he juxtaposes consciousness with physical phenomena - and conjures experiential alchemy.

Ends December 24, 2010

- Betty Ann Brown

ALBERTO BURRI

Santa Monica Museum of Art

ALBERTO BURRI, *SACCO L.A.*, 1953, *FONDAZIONE PALAZZO ALBIZZINI*, COLLEZIONE BURRI, CITTÀ DI CASTELLO, ITALY, © 2010 ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/SIAE, ROME

ALBERTO BURRI (1915-1995) is considered a seminal modern artist in Italy and is also thought to be a precursor and direct link to many artists and artistic movements (from early Pop art to Art Informel to Arte Povera) both in Europe and the United States. With "Combustione: Alberto Burri and America" at the SMMOA, viewers have a chance to get an overview of the artwork by this prolific and important figure.

The artwork itself is stunning. Large swaths of raw materials not then associated with fine arts were manipulated or treated physically by the artist in such a way as to create a field of action in which the residual traces of the artist's hand vies with a sense of pure materiality. Utilizing elements such as burlap, plastic and cellotex (fiberboard) Burri paints, sews, burns and coats the extended fragments, leaving behind the ineluctable imprint of human activity. Though he began as a traditional painter during his detention at a prisoner-of-war facility in Hereford, Texas, Burri quickly abandoned traditional art-making materials and began integrating discarded materials taken from the world around him. The appearance of his Sacchi series in the early 1950s, which used the burlap material from military supply sacks as a painting support, represented a radical shift in generational art-making. Burri employed the discarded debris of postwar life and industrial byproducts such as tar, sheet metal, plastic and plywood which he transformed through actions: by painting (minimally) scoring, ripping, stitching, burning and collaging. Doing so, he constructed an art world in which the sense and sentiment of existentialist philosophy was given form.

Process and chance are a part of Burri's poetics, as in *Sacco L.A.* (1953), a medium scale, acrylic on canvas work, on which overlapping scraps of burlap, each distressed by time, are laid up in an uneven pattern and then small areas of paint are applied almost as though they were stains, already contained in the fabric. The overall effect is as emotionally poignant as it is technically audacious. Likewise, *Nero Plastica L.A.* (1963) a plastic combustion on canvas; the artist applied a flame to large sheets of plastic, burning through it in some places and leaving the rest with its characteristic sag and char, hanging off the frame.

Whether a viewer connects this overall mode of working to the artist's past as a doctor in wartime or simply understands it as part of the modern artist's tension towards reduction and essentialization, it has created powerful visual works. The artist himself was a private person during an era in which artists were increasing their public profile, so this exhibition provides a long overdue reconciliation with Burri's involvement in the art worlds between Europe and the U.S. Particular attention to his production in America and in California (he spent over 25 years working at his home and studio in the Hollywood Hills during the winter) is an important part of the Combustione exhibition, as is the extremely well-written catalog with essays by Lisa Melandri and Michael Duncan.

Ends December 18, 2010

- John David O'Brien

EINAR AND JAMEX DE LA TORRE

Koplin Del Rio

EINAR AND JAMEX DE LA TORRE, *NAZCAR DAD*, 2009, DE LA TORRE: COURTESY OF KOPLIN DEL RIO GALLERY, CULVER CITY CA

AT FIRST GLANCE this gobsmacking exhibition of brothers Einar and Jamex de la Torre is about surface, surface, surface. Then you look closer and you realize it's about layer, layer, layer. A still closer examination (you do stick around for those, right?) reveals that it's about the contiguous transparency of these surfaces and these layers, and that's when things really begin to take off.

The show is titled "Animexican," and it is comprised of blown glass shapes, iconographic images and dollar store booty. The works (some freestanding, some wall-hung), reflect through a glass, brightly, the melting pot between the two cultures. In turn this melting pot becomes a crucible from which molten glass can be blown. There are references to cult movies (*El Fly Boy* suggests *The Fly*), to anime (*Frijolera Classica*), to car culture (*Nazcar Dad*; *V.W. Series*; *Honk*, *Honk*, *Bling*, *Bling*; and *Tanque You*). The utterly magisterial triptych La Reconquista combines a Rogier Van Der Weyden-esque altarpiece with a collage-feel of the Sgt. Peppers album cover and utilizes some stunning lenticular (convex) 3D imagery so you can place your hand behind an image but in front of the pictorial surface.

To experience the work in all its Technicolor and reflected glory is to embark on a literal and metaphorical odyssey. It's a literal odyssey first because of the various bedazzled configurations of trucks, jalopies, cars, tanks, not to mention the inclusion in *M'ezcalera al Cielo* of an actual tire tread (that in turn references huarache sandals, another mode of loco-motion). It's a literal odyssey because of the way the eye traces the iconographical hop-scotches each piece articulates between Mexican, American and Hybrid Border cultures.

It's metaphorical because of the way the work makes you navigate between the clashing worlds and the objects and rituals that comprise them. It's a brave new world the de la Torre brothers map and we're lucky to have them as our guides. Each piece

represents a map overlaid with spirituality, commerce, culture, politics, regional otherness and global homogeneity. In their hands, layered conduits of superficiality become ravines of significance.

The show's transparency works on several levels as well. Stylistically, the work is shiny, reflective, and, because the shapes are empty, fill-up-able. Formally, the anime-stylized and colorful pieces make the work easy to read. Sometimes figures or other elements are laden with beans, seeds or coins. This gives the viewer a sense of dealing with known entities, known qualities. It gives them a sense of omniscience, being able to see, both literally and metaphorically, into the heart of each piece.

These pieces jump out at you. They are the bull as well as the china shop. Each piece, as well as the exhibition as a whole, buzzes with the visual stimulation of a bazaar or a souk, better yet, of a border crossing. Scores of bright shiny geegaws, perfect for Magpies of Culture and Purveyors of the Ephemeral. They serve as the scrumptious wedge on the teeter-totter of spiritual commercialism and commercial spirituality.

Contextually the work simmers in a cocido of cross-cultural references. It's not so much that we gringos (well, this gringo) have to be versed in the iconography of Aztec and Mayan cultures, not to mention the Mexican Catholicism with which the work abounds. The point is that the work is layered though: transparent, surreal and sultry, with references that, though they abut, though they are ground together as with a mortal and pestle, are not exactly seamless.

Like everything else in the show, the title works on many levels. It suggests the stylized, colorful, sometimes violent, sometimes sexual nature of anime cartoons created with a Mexican template. It suggests the cross-hatching of Mexican culture and politics with Catholicism, television and popular culture. It describes a frenetic cross-pollination of eras, genres and tropes, all of which make you appreciate that, as precious and clever the surfaces may be, the best thing about the work is that at heart the shapes contain within them the breath of fresh air that made each piece possible in the first place.

- James Scarborough

PRELUDE TO AN APOCALYPSE

Pedersen Projects

Lisa Adams, *Ineluctable*, 2010

IT'S HARD TO ESCAPE the tone of apocalyptic doom that inflects contemporary discourse in the political, economic and environmental spheres. Kirk Pedersen's group show, "Prelude to An Apocalypse," pushes away the doom and gloom rhetoric for a look at the way artists register and address very real environmental changes through their work - specifically in landscape - though that generic term is merely a reference point for a much broader range of concerns, ideas and expressions.

In *An Altar for your life, for your death* (2008), Amir Fallah presents an apparatus rising in short perpendicular thrusts against a blue sky descending into inferno - a phantasmagoric tree house or habitat; each shelf or coffer crowded with domestic/fantastic detail - otherworldly flora and fauna, urns, vessels, masks, artifacts - interspersed with collaged photo representations of historical personalities both ancient and contemporary, the whole framed by an element - branch, pipe or duct - connecting with the foreground structure. Fallah here commingles a number of contradictory ideas, strategies and sensibilities: *Altar* functions as both image for contemplation and a pastiche of such an image; an ecological metaphor and an archaeological send-up.

Contradiction and complication are at the heart of Lisa Adams' work. The paralleled tensions between the natural and built environments, the representational and the conceptual or abstract are explicit in Ineluctable. Here landscape registers as entirely abstract in horizontal, explicitly "denatured" zones of gray-blue (sea), green (land) and pale acid-yellow/green (sky). On the right side of the canvas, a brown stalk rises through the "zones" to a pale yellow-white cloud or blossom. To the left, what might be glass blocks in pale ice-blue and verdigris step up to a chartreuse planter holding succulents, stepping down to a still icier planter trailing off filigree vines (an Adams signature), which end in fuschia-colored "fruit," with a cluster of cherry-tomato roundels bleeding into the deep green foreground.

Greg Rose has a tangentially related approach to the symbolical power of abstract shape and mass that fuses irony with dazzle, gloom with exuberance. For all I know *Arcadia* (*Arboretum*) (2006) might be modeled directly on the Los Angeles Arboretum, but here smog-dusted San Gabriel skies have given way to a hallucinogenic otherworldly atmosphere in pale modulated amethyst, mauve, turquoise and sea-green washes. Against this backdrop, shrubs, flowers and other plants are laid out with deliberate paint-by-numbers stiff articulation in neon-vivid, saturated colors - blood-reds, carnation pinks, blue, purple and grass, emerald and forest greens. At the center, rising amid the cresting red and green foliage at a hillock's edge, a purple tree, entirely bare of foliage - as if severely pruned or simply dead - is pitched forward in an almost muscular arabesque, both exuding and exemplifying an irrepressible vitality that charges the entire painting.

Wendell Gladstone's 2008 canvas, *Sanguine* seems most tenuously related to Pedersen's theme. The land, sea and sky here seem to be referenced as elements of a dreamscape - an inebriated one, albeit mediated by symbols. A vivid pointillistically-rendered figure floats in the foreground, borne aloft by a collaged crew of ghostly Russian sailors and the demonic mask of his dream. Perhaps this is a fitting pendant to the troubled yet still magical "landscape" presented by the show as a whole. But these dreams - or their implications - will not easily be slept through, much less slept off.

- Ezrha Jean Black

LINO MARTINEZ

118 WINSTON

THE WORK OF LINO MARTINEZ represents a flawless and luminous merging of aesthetics, a combination of Old World virtuosity and New World philosophy. Taking his cue from Old Master technicians like Rembrandt and da Vinci, Martinez expands on this traditional vernacular with grace, elegance and an unquantifiable mystery uniquely his own.

Martinez, originally from Mexico City, works in a variety of media including monotype and traditional line drawing, which he then combines. The United States Bicentennial was a series of celebrations

LINO MARTINEZ, *NATIVE AMERICAN SERIES* 05, 2010, COURTESY OF 118 WINSTON

and observances during the mid-1970s that paid tribute to the historical events leading up to the creation of the United States as an independent republic. Martinez posits that the U.S. as we know it today owes a debt of gratitude to the Native Americans who originally forged this country from their blood. Many of his subjects include chiefs like Sitting Bull and Geronimo, who have become complicated iconic figures in American History and are usually depicted as larger than life, almost mythic.

Martinez' images of these men function less as "portraits" but operate instead within the realm of memory where each strategically placed colored box, monotyped onto the drawings, become its own strangely compelling disjunction between the literal space of the drawing itself and of the history and time it references. Martinez' depictions of these men are both delicate and powerful, and he uses color as a point of mediation between memory and literal time. In *Native American Series 05*, for example, the floating blue/green square in the right hand corner of the picture plane serves almost as a point of rest or contemplation within the image. The colored area intersects with the drawing of Sitting Bull as though the figure had transcended either out of the colored frame or was in the process of staging a return to another dimension.

Other images are more obviously alluring and less politically activated which is the case with Martinez' monotype prints of women, mostly shades of green and blue. In *Untitled 08*, a woman is prostrate, head turned away. We can't see her eyes, only the base of her neck and a single breast. The bedspread she rests under seemingly transforms into the surrounding landscape of sprawling hills.

It is this fluidity, conflating the natural world with the human body that makes these works rich and powerful. The artist's colors unify and connect the two worlds. Yet there are also strange dissections that divide these images; these are experienced more as deliberate disruptions into the space. These dissections appear almost as land markers, derivations, the parceling out of space, time, color and form.

Martinez' overall approach combines a love of formalism with the sensitivity of the artist's own hand. Whether working with monotypes or drawings, Martinez conveys a passion for the human form, not as an objective viewer "objectifying" his subject, but as an involved and fiercely committed practitioner of line, shape, color and composition.

- Eve Wood

NEW YORK

DON CHRISTENSEN

Sideshow Gallery

Don Christensen, Santa Santa, 2010

A STUDENT RECENTLY asked me, "So what makes a painting good, anyway?" My reply: confidence in your decisions and allowing no distractions. Great examples are found in Don Christensen's new paintings in acrylic on canvas, which are committed to clear, clean (but not necessarily spectral) color and playful, buoyant shapes with no evidence of hesitation or second-guessing in sight.

Graphically, the droll *Santa Santa* (all images 2009-10) is merely one horizontal band of triangles over another, the upper triangles being a bit larger. But owing to the title, two eccentric hexagons striped in red, white and blue-black suggest twin St. Nicks joined at the hip. The ground to these figures is a half-dozen triangles subdivided into bands of yellows and greens - Christmas trees à la Ellsworth Kelly? At nearly 5 x 10 foot, the largest work in the show is *South of the Park*, in which vividly tinted expanses of violet and pink act as foils for looming diamonds and triangles in analogous hues: yellow-orange and yellow, or yellow-green and green-blue. The palette is ripe, and the boundary between colors is often electric.

The space in *Tiptop* is far more illusionistic, if cartoonily so. Against an infinitely deep, pale blue sky, five pitched planes in an accordion-like fold zigzag their way up the canvas, becoming smaller and thus more distant toward the top and suggesting a fantastic, towering edifice. Keyed to a brawny yellow alternately striped with deep green and red, its downward-facing planes are significantly darker and bluer (they are ochre, really) than those tilted upward, so the structure appears to be washed in hazy sunshine.

According to a statement in the exhibition catalog, the artist works out a painting's compositional and chromatic relationships in Photoshop and "squares up" the printout to canvas, the old-fashioned way. He may make adjustments in color as he mixes paint, but you'd never know; his surfaces are flat and matte, and the edges between shapes unequivocal, if a little wavy.

Christensen has a wide-ranging approach to his work, and makes rather smaller, more sculptural paintings and painterly, wall-based sculpture. In *Game* and *Stapleton*, he uses oil-based enamel in deep earth tones and neutralized secondaries on wood slats and slabs, assembling them into visually syncopated panels recalling the geometry of game boards. *Untitled Step* is a rustic, child-sized wooden bench of which the flat, rectangular seat is painted a turquoise blue-green with loopy tracery in pale peach and yellow: think a kindergarten Brice Marden. Wired to the wall, it is one of four works in which small pieces of furniture provide the support.

While there is a convincing give-and-take among these modes of working, the canvases rock the hardest. Years ago, Christensen played drums in the Contortions, the Raybeats and other great bands. No surprise, then, that he strips his painting down to the

few elements essential to its pulse, its drive, its swing. He doesn't add a fill, and he doesn't miss a beat.

- Stephen Maine

KARL WIRSUM

Derek Eller Gallery

Karl Wirsum, *Untitled* (Study for a Playboy illustration), 1969

ONE OF THE FOUNDING MEMBERS of "The Hairy Who?", Karl Wirsum, built his career, partly, on a certain indifference to the New York art world. Unfortunately, the feeling turned out to be sort of mutual as Wirsum hasn't had a New York solo show in over 20 years. It's nice to know, though, that an oversight has finally been corrected and ironic to find out that we obviously need Wirsum more than he needs us.

The drawings in this show, all made between 1967 and 1970, show him in fine form with a collection of oddball characters including pinup girls, muscle men, Island Natives, a blob-faced mutants and an odd-looking character with a giant bulbous phallus. The men all seem a little pathetic, tortured and somewhat indistinct, while the women seem totemic, whole and self-possessed.

Wirsum draws them all in a simplified and abstract, almost faux-naif, psychedelic cartoon style. It's like comic book illustration ironed almost entirely flat and then used as a springboard for virtuosic doodles (if that isn't an oxymoron.) His touch is almost perfect: loose but confident, decorative but never repetitive, psychedelic but not self-indulgent, and figurative without ever losing his sense of improvisatory freedom. Not only is this quite a feat, it still feels brand new. Wirsum's drawings demonstrate what Richard Serra meant when he said "drawing as a verb" and show also how "thinking" is something that artists do with their eyes and hands, as well as their minds.

The characters here are all familiar but rendered with a heightened sense of specificity: a redhead pinup's hair is drawn as a flat, jagged, fiery red shape interspersed with lightning-bolt shaped white lights. It's more like a mane than hair - appropriate enough for a pinup girl that looks ready to stare you down, and then, maybe, eat you alive. The angular prickly rendering of her face suggests razor-wire more readily than lipstick or eyeliner. Another piece - of a black helmet-shaped skirt over sexy legs, with the caption, "Nazi helmet skirt," makes the psychological confusion of sex and power a little more overt. Yikes!

Those works suggest the weird mix of loaded sexuality and formal distance that Wirsum's women have. It's also interesting that, of all the male figures in these drawings, the only two that look remotely happy are the two cavorting about with women - in the only two drawings, also that happen to have two figures in them. The male gaze here has been deflected, sublimated into the abstract possibilities of drawing, and turned back upon itself. Not unlike de Kooning's women (whose composition is most similar) Wirsum's reveal to us the primitive power (for men), of all images of women - and how our simultaneous awe, contempt and deference (the folly, perhaps, that we might "possess" them) tends to turn us (male humans) into ridiculous cartoons.

- Elwyn Palmerton

JULIE MEHRETU

Guggenheim

JULIE MEHRETU, *MIDDLE GREY*, 2007-09, SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM FOUNDATION FOR THE DEUTSCHE GUGGENHEIM, BERLIN, © JULIE MEHRETU

FOR SOMEONE WHO works on such an ambitious scale, Julie Mehretu is charmingly self-effacing, but then any number of people could hide behind work like this. Since January, her 80-foot mural for Goldman Sachs has spanned the lobby, not to mention a former parking lot covering Hudson River landfill. She calls one painting at the Guggenheim *Atlantic Wall*, as if to say one had better stand back.

Of course, there is more to scale than size, starting with time scale. Bank buildings and the like float across the Goldman Sachs lobby wall, alluding to the origins of modern finance. Its design is rash, impulsive, all-encompassing, joyous and sinister. One can see the buildings flying apart or about to crash, like the economy today.

Just as important, Mehretu's working methods give a canvas its own history. She begins with something very much like line drawing. After working over it freely, she may add laminated cutouts for irregular geometries. She abhors symmetry or even strong diagonals, lest the work stand still. Every step in the process is visible and in motion.

All this speaks of both pleasure and ambition, not a bad formula for success. Jeffrey Deitch himself advised Goldman Sachs on its purchase. Deutsche Bank sponsors "Grey Area," her five paintings at the Guggenheim. Come to think of it, Mehretu seems to have found a career in finance.

For all her energy, Mehretu does not insist on the triumph of abstraction or history painting. As the title says, it is about gray areas, although she manages to explore them in splashes of black. Each canvas makes its own choices - between representation and abstraction, painting and drawing, and color.

They do not fit easily into anyone's history. If anyone deserves the label African American, she does, but again with shades of gray. Born in Ethiopia, she grew up in Minnesota, studied at RISD, and took junior year abroad in Senegal.

Mehretu can pay a price for her honesty, in being everywhere and nowhere. I had to see "Grey Area" several times up close to cherish the variations. I also had trouble remembering a single image. The room works best as a series, just as the process separates the layers and then throws on more of what lay below. Memories dissolve and reappear, like that of 9/11, and she uses a photograph of the fallen towers as another source.

She calls one painting Believer's Palace, after Saddam Hussein's palace - alluding to at least two more shattered illusions, his and the Iraq war. At her best, the explosion is still taking place, like the splashes of white in Middle Grey, on top of a wash that flows

downward without touching bottom. This is neither the nightmare of global capitalism nor its triumph.

- John Haber

SAN FRANCISCO

RUDOLF SCHWARZKOGLER

Steven Wolf Fine Arts

RUDOLF SCHWARZKOGLER, *AKTION II*, 1965, PRINTED 1982 BY GALERIE KRINZINGER, STAMPED EN VERSO WITH AUTHORIZATION BY THE ARTIST'S PARTNER EDITH ADAMS; PHOTO BY JASON MANDELLA

HAVING RELOCATED from relatively plush digs in downtown San Francisco to a refurbished industrial space in the Mission District, Steven Wolf Fine Arts has reopened with not exactly a scandalous show, but a show about scandal, myth, body and performance art that also happens to resurrect some amazing photographs from the 1960s, precursors to Mapplethorpe, Samaras and Witkin. The Viennese artist Rudolf Schwarzkogler gained his notoriety posthumously, according to Steven Wolf, due to a mistake made by the normally credible art critic Robert Hughes, who wrote, memorably, that Schwarzkogler "proceeded inch by inch to amputate his own penis while a photographer recorded the act as an art event." (Gentlemen, take a moment to compose yourselves.) "Hughes," Wolf continues, "had been looking at photos of "Aktion 2," in which Schwarzkogler posed his friend [the photographer Hans Cibulka] with a filleted fish in his crotch. He also shot the model's penis bandaged and leaking fluid. It was all artifice. Yet the myth spread, and Schwarzkogler, who had leapt to his death from a second-floor window in 1969 [possibly emulating Yves Klein's *Leap into the Void*], was mistakenly ushered into the art world as 'the Vincent Van Gogh of body art.'" Daredevil body artist Chris Burden pointed out the mistake in 1970, but to no avail.

Myths about psycho artists are as fun and entertaining as those of masochistic saints, of course, and equally marketable, yet the dramatically posed and constructed photographs that inaugurated this bit of freak mythology have remained curiously unknown, despite Schwarzkogler's renowned participation in the cathartic rituals involving blood/violence/nudity rituals of the Viennese Actionism group. Schwarzkogler's elegant, staged photos depict such Absurdist paraphernalia as "a dead fish, a dead chicken, bare light bulbs, colored liquids, bound objects, and a man wrapped in gauze." The enduring themes of Schwarzkogler's works involved experience of pain and mutilation, often in an incongruous clinical context, such as "3rd Aktion" (1965) in which a patient's head swathed in bandages is being pierced by what appears to be a corkscrew, producing a bloodstain under the bandages (Wikipedia)." The blogger Supervert (!) praised the cool logic beneath the heated dramaturgy: "Instructions that Schwarzkogler wrote for his later performances, the ones that seem to depict a nightmare clinic where gauze-wrapped men are poked and prodded with razor blades and electrical wires, convey the elegant, sadomasochistic precision that infused his actions: 'Head leaning on a lump of suet. Black liquid drips from the bandage above the eye onto the suet. A hand with black painted fingernails is lying on the head.'"

Shown here are 15 of the approximately 60 images that Schwarzkogler staged and photographed in Aktions1 through 6 in 1965; they were reprinted in gelatin silver in small editions in 1982. Schwarzkogler's pain-soaked visions remain affecting and enigmatic today (to those able to enter imaginatively into them) because of their grim emotional authenticity - object lessons for our culture of comfortably neutered genteel irony.

- DeWitt Cheng

LYNN KOBLE

Swarm Gallery

LYNN KOBLE, *PUNDIT*, 2009 ; PHOTO BY JASON MANDELLA

NAVIGATING THE COURSE of one's path through the world can be a tricky proposition. For some, the path is clearly marked, their transportation paid in advance and eager companions awaiting. Others wander aimlessly, like Hansel and Gretel searching for a bird-ravaged trail of breadcrumbs. Increasingly, our society seems divided into those on the steady path, and those helplessly lost.

Issues of comfort and discomfort, ease, confidence and our unsettled relationship to an increasingly artificial environment inform the work of Lynn Koble, recently on view at Oakland's Swarm Gallery. Koble's work is infused with a strong sense of the absurd, of a fantasy world, somewhat nightmarish, where inanimate objects take on human persona, or act as surrogates for the natural environment.

Koble's installation is comprised of three sculptural works, with wall-mounted elements. Most intriguing, Pundit was slumped on the floor, a large shaggy green mass of felt, constructed from small, leaf-like shapes in different hues of green, ranging from muted to vivid, light to dark. Conical speakers, also green, with black "faces," project Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony. Mounted on wheels, the piece seems on the verge of motion, as though it might spring to life at any moment. Could someone be crouching inside? Its playful, yet ominous presence suggests sci-fi or children's stories - perhaps Alice in Wonderland, or the more serious conundrums of existentialists such as Franz Kafka. Its assumption of the character of an authority figure catches us off guard, at a loss to compute.

A red "brick" wall, also constructed of felt, stands about seven feet high and a foot and a half wide. *Porta-wall* proclaims "I don't belong here, I belong over there." We may experience the distress of the wall as merely amusing, or transfer it to a variety of situations in which we ourselves experience a similar unease. A woman's voice lends a female persona to the wall, its stress giving new poignancy to the term "anxious object."

Koble's *Chorus* provided the most engaging audio component of these sound installations. Seven floor-mounted constructions, along with four wall-mounted, resembled children's toys or animated fauna. Part leaf, part Tinkertoy, they entertain us with soothing bird calls and chirping. The balance between organic and geometric creates an odd tension. Hollow ovals whose faces, at waist to head height, bear a grid of nine holes, are designed to emit sound when the viewer approaches; these perch on slender dowels, a palette of vibrant green carried through in the supporting stands. Green power cords traverse the floor, a bit like vines.

- Barbara Morris

TEMPLE, AZ

DINH Q. LÊ

Nelson Fine Art Center

DINH Q LÊ, *BICYCLE REPAIR SIGNALS* (DETAIL), 2009, COURTESY OF ELIZABETH LEACH GALLERY, PORTLAND

VIETNAMESE-BORN and based Dinh Q. Lê dusts up Duchamp's well-worn notion of the "readymade" in his latest installation, "Signs and Signals from the Periphery." Resonating with layers of thoughtful ethnographic observation, he playfully reflects the inadvertent modernist beauty found in the symbolic signage of Vietnamese street vendors.

In the 1980s and '90s, Lê was recognized for his tapestry-like murals in which photographs mounted on linen strips were visually - and physically - woven together in the manner of traditional grass mats. In these works, the artist enacted reconciliation between gruesome, journalistic images of the Vietnam War with stills taken from Hollywood films like The Deer Hunter. The pieces were, as critic Colin Gardner put it in an essay from 2001: a rhythm of mutual revelation and concealment, a post-colonial hybrid in which the glossy "beauty" of Hollywood fiction [became] the conceptual framework for understanding "the other."

In this current exhibition at the Nelson Fine Art Center at Arizona State University, Lê (who permanently returned to Vietnam in 2000 after a 20-year stretch in the U.S.) has eschewed the dialectical approach of these earlier works by widening his practice and positing himself in a complicated stance as wizened outsider and sympathetic observer. In *Bicycle Repair Signals* (2009), a large grid of photographs documenting the quirky street-side formations that announce the patching of bike tires, Lê prompts wry associations with minimalism. One "signal" (a designation that Lê seems to use to cover the zone between literal "sign" and "sculpture") consists simply of a bike tire propped up by a steel rod. It's a reference to Serra that is as obvious to U.S. art aficionados as it would be completely obscure to the actual tire merchant. Lê uses these photographs as a background for his own sculptural riffs on the theme. In one piece, Lê intersects a tire with a single strand of neon; it reads like an "assisted" readymade with a dash of Keith Sonnier.

Flag vendors who exploit the temporary nationalistic fervor that flares up during soccer season inspired *The Infrastructure of Nationalism*, a bike festooned with Vietnamese flags (bold yellow stars on bright red fields) that fan out like peacock feathers on poles attached to the rear seat. Another piece, called *Porn Here*, reveals the urban signal for the highly transient enterprise of selling pirated Triple-X CDs. The photographs depict scratched-up compact discs subjected to all manner of abject humiliation in the service of porn salesmanship; in the funniest image, Lê frames a CD "signal" propped up on the sidewalk between two chunks of cement amidst an arrangement of fallen orchid flowers that have gracefully fallen around it from an overhanging tree.

In the end, every element of the installation casts a knowing modernist wink towards the museum's audience. More significantly, Lê also has a non-ironic, benevolent engagement with his subject that communicates the desperation of late-capitalist chaos with a refreshing lack of preaching or pandering.

- Lawrence Gipe