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## At the Galleries

LAST FALL'S EXHIBITIONS RANGED FROM THE MESMERIZING to the exasperating, in a wide variety of mediums—video, machine carved stainless steel, acrylic polymer sheets, manipulated wood, and even paint on canvas—and an equally wide variety of approaches—fidelity to perception, rigorous conceptualization, intuitive abstraction, and more. If nothing else, this proliferation confirmed that there is no dominant way of working, no single set of desiderata for present-day artists, a condition that can often seem perplexing, but in the end, I suspect, is healthy, and good for what the endlessly inventive British sculptor Anthony Caro calls “the onward of art.”

In the mesmerizing category, I would list (along with the Metropolitan Museum of Art's extraordinary gathering of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's intimate terracotta studies for monumental sculptures) the Scottish artist Douglas Gordon's video *The End of Civilization*, at Gagosian Gallery, Chelsea. Projected on three very large screens, the piece documented the slow dissolution of a burning piano, in real time, tracking the changing light of the outdoor setting for this unlikely event, over the two hours required for the instrument to be reduced to ash. The immolation was projected on two screens, some distance apart, with a time lag between them; one was visible from both sides, the other only from the front. A third, larger, more horizontal screen, adjacent to the two-sided view of the fire and similarly two sided, showed a rather austere northern English or Scottish landscape, in a slow circular pan, as the sun slowly set. We watched the piano catch fire—and watched the same moment again on the second screen, if we wished. The landscape images seemed coincidental, perhaps arbitrary, until we began to notice wisps of smoke rising from a hidden hollow. So *that's* where the piano was. Our sense of our physical relationship to the recorded event changed, and, just as a little earlier, we had realized that the installation's ambient sound was, in fact, the sound of the fire, we suddenly became aware of a conversation between the disparate images.

As the camera slowly explored the progress of the fire, sometimes moving frighteningly close, we watched as paint blistered, keys were consumed, a fat, turned leg was whittled away by flames, and the body of the instrument collapsed at a strange angle, balanced on one corner. Bits of metal remained intact; dense wooden elements lasted longer than seemed likely. Time passed. The light dimmed. Horses wandered into the landscape but were gone by the time the camera completed its next circle. With darkness, the distant lights of habitations appeared,

suggesting that the hollow from which the smoke rose, palely illuminated by floodlights, was less remote than we thought. For some reason, it was impossible to leave until the piano was reduced to a heap of embers. I can't account for why this leisurely record of the passage of time, destruction, and decay functioned as such a potent metaphor, provoking thoughts about aging, physical change, the fate of the planet, and death, any more than I can explain why Gordon's earlier *Playing Dead—Real Time* was so compelling. The theme there, endlessly repeated, was an elephant trained to lie down, "play dead," and then get up. Shown on multiple screens, at different sizes, from different viewpoints and, if I remember rightly, in dislocated time sequences, it was as difficult to ignore as *The End of Civilization*. A close-up of the elephant's long-lashed eye, apparently checking for a signal to rise, followed by long shots of her effort to haul her vast bulk back onto four feet, was at once charming, deeply moving, and a little disturbing. I've discussed my enthusiasm and my inability to explain the effect of Gordon's work with my colleague Michael Fried, also a great fan of Gordon's, who has written perceptively about him in his recent book *Four Honest Outlaws*. Fried's explanation: "It's because Gordon is a genius." It seems as good as any.

Under "exasperating," I would list (along with the Met's ambitious but strangely unsatisfying and shapeless overview of Andy Warhol's influence) Charles Ray's exhibition of recent sculptures at Matthew Marks Gallery. As the artist has taught us to expect, he presented us with images that initially appeared naturalistic but confounded our expectations because of their size, proportion, forms, and finish. Earlier works used polychromy to enhance our initial sense of accurate reporting on perception while wreaking havoc with our sense of scale. This time, we were confronted by three figures—two nude males and one clothed female—crouching, standing, and half lying. All were slightly over life size. All were machined from solid stainless steel. (The largest, the clothed female, asleep on a schematic bench, weighed 6,000 pounds, the press release boasted.)

Elegantly installed in a pristine, well-proportioned, white space, the trio looked provocative, at first acquaintance. A male nude (a self-portrait, we learned), his back toward us, as we entered, crouched to tie a nonexistent shoe; his pose and chunkily rendered, curling hair triggered associations with the celebrated classical sculpture, *Lo Spinario*—the boy taking a thorn out of his foot. Deeper in the gallery space, a male nude, oddly large headed and spreading through the middle, stood with his toes turned out and arms at his sides, facing us, but seeming to avoid our gaze; his parted lips, beard, and hair evoked Renaissance prototypes. Triangulated between these vaguely classicizing nudes, an overweight woman in tight pants and a baseball jacket slept on a pile of nondescript forms, bent sideways on a couple of ingot-like blocks meant to suggest a bench; her sleek surfaces notwithstanding, she drew us rapidly away from the world of high-minded art historical associations and returned us to the contemporary realities of homelessness, poor nutrition, and all the rest of it. The distances between the

three sculptures, the way each of them seemed to ignore us, and the implied but somehow incomprehensible relationship among them made the ensemble appear portentous, possibly more meaningful as whole than as individual parts—that is, the group promised a typical Ray disruption of assumptions.

I'm not sure what I think about the whole—or that I have any sense of what the connection among the three figures might be—but the main disruption seemed to be of our expectations of the works' formal qualities. With closer inspection and longer acquaintance the figures became steadily less satisfying and less convincing. The capabilities of the machine that produced them resulted in anonymous forms, mechanical and sometimes anatomically bizarre articulation and, despite the vaunted bulk of the three figures, a peculiar weightlessness, exacerbated by the high polish. The sleeping woman's enormous thighs and buttocks seemed sliced by the bench, for example, instead of resting heavily on them, while the back of the crouching male had only a tangential relationship to actual ribs and spine, and the standing male's bulging belly and love handles appeared added to an otherwise fit body. I suppose this is the point. Ray's figures are not intended as expressive equivalents for considered perception and feeling, nor do they result from hard-won sculptural decisions. Rather, they are expedient (albeit labor intensive and very expensively produced) shorthand realizations of ideas about the figure—emblems of “figureness,” as Fried (an admirer of Ray, who also is discussed perceptively in *Four Honest Outlaws*) might have said, “signs” for the figure, in now-outmoded academic jargon. Ray teases his viewers. Despite their essential stylization, his mechanically produced “naturalistic” figures are explicit enough, with their carefully rendered hair, genitals (but no nipples), anecdotal details of clothing, and so on, to raise questions about what was once understood as the relationship of the work of art to actuality. But they are not rewarding enough as sculpture to provide interesting answers to those questions, so they appear to be at once literal and arbitrary. (Maybe it's the shine and the clearly mechanical quality of the “drawing.”) And I'm bewildered by what the trio might imply as a group. I'm going to have to re-read Fried on Ray.

Three strong painting shows by strong women offered welcome alternatives to Ray's troubling, cerebral riffs on figuration: Susannah Phillips' recent paintings and drawings at Lori Bookstein Fine Art, Jill Nathanson's “the air we swim in” at Messineo Art Projects/Wyman Contemporary, both in Chelsea, and Sandi Slone's “Quick Mettle Rich Blood” at Allegra LaViola Gallery, on the Lower East Side. Phillips showed works from three series—still lifes of tightly packed, minimally suggested forms, landscapes of low hills, and interiors with a geometric wood stove—all of them distinguished by their economy and their brooding, subdued palette of “non-colors.” Phillips clearly admires Giorgio Morandi and has learned from him the rewards of revisiting themes and compositions that seem resonant to her. But as her recent show made clear, while she is fascinated by the possibilities of following

unexplored implications, she is not content with repetition. We quickly recognized the “repertory company” of objects in the still lifes but recognized just as quickly the differences among the paintings. Phillips adopted several pictorial languages in the series, now emphasizing abrupt line, now breaking forms into broad zones of different tonalities, now allowing them to retain their integrity, infusing closely related compositions with new individuality. At the same time, she played with the inherent geometry of her nominal subject matter, elongating, broadening, or tipping her forms to suggest different kinds of metaphorical (and literal) relationships.

Phillips’ landscapes, similarly, rang changes on a highly distilled, immediately recognizable motif: a bluff above a slice of lake with blunt hills silhouetted behind. Each new consideration of the theme was visibly, even if only slightly, unlike the others, as Phillips shifted her soft-edged shapes or played with their scales in response to the changing dimensions of the support. Although everything depended upon collisions of clearly defined, almost unmodulated shapes, no two paintings were precisely the same proportion or repeated the same relationship of the parts. Each iteration explored a new range of colors—pale and golden, dark and unnameable—suggesting alterations in the time of day, weather, even seasons. She is fond of a moody palette of tinted greys, sludgy greens, and murky blue-blacks, weighted toward warm brown-mauves at times, and toward cooler regions, at others. Whatever the hue, Phillips seems to worry it on to her canvas, creating dry layers of paint that seem indeterminate at first, but then bloom into deep, subtle, hard-to-grasp chromatic hues. The combination of urgent touch, looming shapes, and eerie color made Phillips’ recent paintings among her most memorable to date.

Jill Nathanson’s new abstractions at Messineo/Wyman were notable, as we have learned to expect from her, both for their use of color to create drama, structure, and meaning, and for the surprising, unpredictable character of the hues themselves. A few years ago, Nathanson was exploring irregularly shaped, wall-mounted works made with sheets of colored acrylic polymer, exploiting the unexpected hues that resulted when she overlapped the transparent planes of color or laid them over painted expanses. Her recent paintings built on what she learned in the process, contrasting a variety of paint applications and paint characters, from relatively rough to extremely refined, from shaggy to fluid, at times emphasizing her touch and, at others, disguising it. The result was a complex but unified polyphony of color and surface inflection, a richly harmonic evocation of an expressive interior landscape. It’s as if Nathanson were the heir of both Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler, fusing and materially reinventing both Louis’ translucent veils of color and Frankenthaler’s pools and fields of radiant hues, in wholly personal and contemporary terms.

Nathanson’s earlier work often pitted her offbeat chromatic sense against warped grids that disciplined and stiffened her zones of seductive, oddball colors. In her recent work, the large color areas

floated free. The grid survived only subliminally, as a memory. Rather than reading Nathanson's recent paintings across the surface, as we did the grids, we tended to see into them. Since they also insistently reminded us of the inherent flatness of the surface of the picture, in the most engaging of the group, a kind of tug of war between fact and fiction created an enlivening tension. Nathanson's color—pale citrusy oranges and yellows, tender greens, transparent blues, and odd mauves—seemed at once evocative of the natural world and synthetic, another opposition that added to the complexity of her pictures. Like the fluctuating, expansive space suggested by her elegantly varied paint handling, surface inflections, and color relationships, this conceptual contradiction kept us a little off balance, suggesting yet another layer of allusion even as the specificity of that allusion escaped us, like an imperfect memory or a rapidly disappearing dream image. The paintings in "the air we swim in" were among Nathanson's most elusive and evocative to date.

Farther downtown, at Allegra LaViola Gallery, the Whitman-derived title of Sandi Slone's exhibition of recent paintings, "Quick Mettle Rich Blood"—a reference attached to the works after the fact, not a generating motivation—signaled the painter's preoccupation with visual metaphors for everything from personal emotion to the state of our troubled planet. Slone is a master of her medium, able to make paint explode, run, spatter, pool, interpenetrate, dissolve into transparency, and more, as if she were able to transmit feeling directly into the physical stuff of painting. Like a choreographer of paint, she seems to charge each of the various gestures required for a particular kind of application with the emotion that generated it, "freezing" conviction onto the surface of the canvas. Waterfalls of pale color against infinite seas of unstable hues competed with upwellings and bursts of fragile rivulets. Combined with what the exhibition's press release accurately called "fierce color," this impressive material vocabulary turned the recent works into a theater of passions of all kinds.

Yet despite the aura of unbridled energy and strong opinions generated by Slone's recent works, the dominant quality of all the pictures in "Quick Mettle Rich Blood" was delicacy. She has long had a predilection for intimate gestures and small incidents. Even though she has often worked with oversized tools—an early series of abstractions made with push brooms established her reputation as a young painter—there has always been a sense of the hand, of cursive gestures that evoke calligraphy as much as they do the full-body sweeps of Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting. The superheated palette of many of the exhibition's paintings seemed to reinforce the allusion to Whitman (which, I hasten to point out, is not the same as illustrating, however apt the reference may seem), further contradicting the filigree of fine-scaled painting events, the exceptionally diverse pours, trickles, and sprays, whose varying intensity and multivalent directions gave the pictures their diverse moods and abundant energy. Yet that sense of delicacy prevailed, Whitman reference or no Whitman reference in the title. "Do I contradict myself? / Very well, then, I contradict myself."

Contradiction of another kind was at the heart of the British sculptor Richard Deacon's exhibition of recent works, both freestanding and wall mounted, at Marian Goodman Gallery, on West 57<sup>th</sup> Street. Deacon, who describes his work as being equally about material and form—structures that are driven by the material and materials that allow him to make particular kinds of structures—here seemed, typically, to explore the most far-flung implications of each of his sculptures, both physical and formal, no matter what direction that might take him in. One of Goodman's two gallery spaces was devoted to geometric metal works that took as their point of departure an open cube, warped, readjusted, compressed, expanded, and stacked. Deacon has spoken of this as "being like folding up the floor of the studio"—that is, taking a simple plane and transforming it, first into an open, almost nonexistent surface described only by drawn "edges," and then manipulating it into a transparent but crisply defined, freestanding, space-grabbing, volumetric object. The resulting construction can be wholly penetrated by the eye—a condition Deacon has investigated in many different ways over the years—but has the authority and presence of a solid, at the same time that its impure geometry makes it seem unstable, potentially mutable.

In his recent exhibition, Deacon played the sharp edges and assertive drawing of a dark steel piece, made with flat stock, against a related piece made of blunter stainless steel elements that created a very different mood. The largest and simplest of the series, constructed out of only a few generous, "broadly outlined" elements in aluminum checker plate, announced yet another feeling tone and another possibility. The sharpest and most vividly defined of the group, the aluminum sculpture's thin, shining metal seemed dangerous, the edges of the forms, knife like. Wall-mounted, colored variations on the warped cube theme read like flattened diagrams of the obscure geometric underpinnings of the freestanding works.

Related forms with yet another spirit and yet another formal syntax were displayed in the second gallery, down a long corridor from the first, so that no direct comparisons were allowed. The distorted open cubes here haunted the sculptures rather than composing them. Sinuous open structures, made of relatively narrow wooden members, rubbed with metallic powders, seemed to have found their configurations by tracing the perimeters of some of the metal sculptures in a single, erratic passage, sometimes slowing down to twist, like ancient vines, softening the contours by virtue of the properties of wood. The fragility and intimacy of these works seemed in part a function of their waist-high scale and more or less human proportions, in part a reflection of their material. Interspersed among these wooden "drawings" were enigmatic, blunt, bulging stainless steel forms, placed on the floor. Their swellings appeared to echo the suave bends and controlled curves of the wooden "drawings"; it was as if the stainless pieces represented the volumes implied by the trajectories of the wood, made into masses by the sheer weight of the metal. (Deacon's volumetric stainless pieces, however, unlike Ray's, are not solid; their burgeoning forms are

achieved by spinning the recalcitrant metal, not by machine carving, so that there is a double reading of inflation and solidity.) Each of the sculptures in Deacon's exhibition was completely self-sufficient, a self-contained declaration of formal possibilities. Yet the cumulative effect of this group of recent works was the proverbial "whole greater than the sum of its parts." Seeing the artist's connected but evolving responses to the qualities of different materials was like watching Deacon think, as he followed the many permutations of a sculptural idea to their extremes, tracing that process in a series of lucid, intelligent objects.

A ten-year survey of the New York-based painter David Humphrey's work, "Pets, a President, and the Others," at the American University Museum, in Washington, DC, was well worth the journey. Humphrey marries vernacular imagery to a spectacular command of "high art" painting languages to produce startling but utterly convincing visions of a marzipan-colored world in which—to cite only one way this can play out—adorable, solidly rendered stuffed animals coexist with humans reduced to snappy outlines, against distant views of alpine winter landscapes, the whole subsumed by expressive Ab Ex sweeps and Color Field pools. Sometimes the cartoonish, advertising, mass-media imagery dominates, sometimes paint does. Scales shift, as if Humphrey were changing his focus and depth of field in different parts of the picture. The result, against all odds, does not read as a calculated or canny response to today's cynical art world, but rather as an exuberant demonstration of the multifaceted possibilities available to a smart, well-educated, thoughtful painter, such as Humphrey—who is also an astute critic and writer about art.

Yet we're always a little disconcerted, even when the imagery seems clear. In part, it's that abruptly changing scale but, in some pictures, it seemed as if a tsunami of expressive paint could overwhelm the "cool" imagery at any moment, as it seemed to do in a terrific, small narrow painting titled *Landscape and Car* (just what it sounds like). Some of the works at the AU museum were playful, others somewhat threatening. Some teetered on the edge of kitsch but were redeemed—quite deliberately—by Humphrey's virtuosic paint handling and sure hand with disposing elements. In the strongest works, illusionistic space and fragmentation fought for dominance, just as the vernacular and high art elements, allusion and abstractness did. Humphrey's works are utterly of the moment, personal but not wholly unique. Part of what separates them from other contemporary works that similarly demonstrate the permeable borders between disciplines, styles, and approaches is their sheer assurance and inventive structure. But there's also an irresistible sense that Humphrey is having a wonderful time, painting everything that interests him, on any level, and forcing that assortment of potentially conflicting components to get along as best they can. Amazingly, he succeeds.