



HALLWALLS

Richard Armijo

G. Roger Denson

Carroll Dunham

Catherine Howe

John Miller

Aura Rosenberg

Kiki Smith

Julie Wachtel

Ada Whitney

Introduction and Acknowledgements

HALLWALLS is honored to present this exhibition by nine artists.

My aim is to provide these artists, all of whom are just beginning to command a well-deserved interest, the opportunity to exhibit together in a meaningful context.

I have not been concerned with making an art-historical statement with the exhibition but, rather, with providing a strong intellectual forum for the presentation of a variety of diverse, new talents.

A major part of the work for the exhibition consisted of the lengthy interviews conducted in June of 1983, in Buffalo and New York City. The catalogue contains excerpts from these interviews, and represents only a small part of the documentation available. My guiding principle has been to have the artists speak for themselves as much as possible.

The support of HALLWALLS' staff was essential in organizing the exhibition. I wish to thank William J. Currie, Director, for his interest and general support of the show; Elise Hartenstein, for her help with the publicity and installation and Christine Tebes, whose invaluable fund-raising expertise helped make it possible. I am personally grateful to Bill Smith, who devoted his efforts to the design of the catalogue, and to Robert Evren who unselfishly gave me moral support and edited the catalogue. Finally, none of this would have been possible if it were not for the nine artists in the exhibition, and their desire to make both the show and the catalogue a reality.

Claudia Gould
Curator
HALLWALLS Gallery



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September 23—October 29

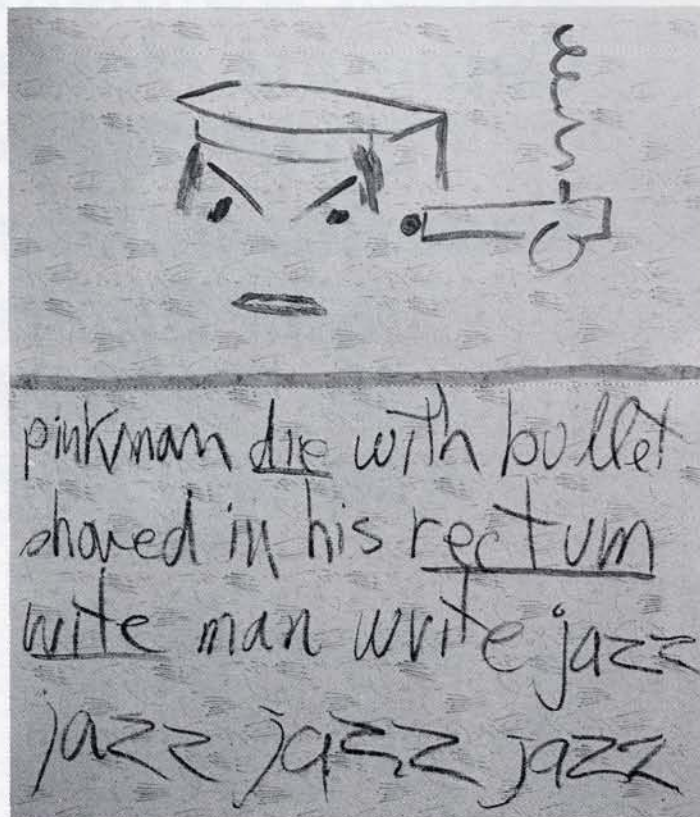
HALLWALLS
Buffalo, New York

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HALLWALLS
700 Main Street
Buffalo, New York 14202

Richard Armijo lives and works in New York City.

Richard Armijo



With Bullet Shoved in his Rectum, 1983, latex and gouache on lead gesso on canvas, 42" x 48", photo by the artist

CG Do you consider yourself primarily a painter?

RA That I am considered a painter comes as a surprise. I do not consider myself as such. I would call myself an artist who also writes. My work has resumed a 2-dimensional format over the last 3 years. However, my orientation is cyclical: I consider small paintings done in my early teens as valid as work done in the present year.

What is your reaction to being included in a show of painters?

I find it a completely open issue: if you were having a show about generic painting, or a generic exhibition, that allows me to self-define. I am interested in whatever allows me the maximum amount of freedom in my expression. Building objects is often laborious; my most successful sculptures were straightforward in format, disassemblable.

My indifference to mechanical structure is evidenced in the recent paintings which are structurally amechanical.

I remember the installation that you did in the New Museum's 14th Street window. You titled it Miguel de la Madrid: He's the guy I like. It was about generic consumerism and generic food and, ironically, it was about advertising.

That installation was alluding to culture becoming generic, homogenous and dehumanizing, especially our own. I wall-papered half the wall space with large scale grocery store food ads, the other half used a color scheme of red, white, and green surmounted by large campaign poster propaganda which I collected in Mexico City, the focal point being, of course, de la Madrid. I did something more basic at Printed Matter entitled *Thin Spaghetti/The Generic Mind*. I simply arranged shelves of generic food.

And I sent 25 lbs. to West Germany; generic food packages are exactly what our government sent to German civilians immediately after the second World War. I sold only one package of macaroni.

How does this figure with your other work?

Certain images, either visual or written, may be proceeding from a generic impulse, culled from extra-subjective source matter. The diptych *When We Worship Mammon*, figures the metamorphic worship of materialism and consumerism. I clipped the image from a flyer handed to me in the subway by a born-again apostate. He wanted me to repent my sins and go to Heaven. I am drawn to imagery suggesting the notion of repentance...of forgiveness...of betrayal. Imagery which suggests a seclusive sensuality. I'm very pulled by a sensuousity of surface. It's a lifelong obsession, sometimes repressed. Repression arises from an academic orientation. I entered school at the decline of the minimal/conceptual hype which was often a repression of psychological issues, observations having to do with passions.

Much of your painting is not so explicit as that statement.

It's more often subtle than not. I am not interested in what's obvious or overt. Maybe if I read this poem this will make sense.

I saw the moon in the calendar today.
The order in my room is the most virulent lie.
My bathtub is filled with floating things
sailboats, duckies, dolls.
I awoke with the right arm dead asleep
Beneath the weight of my head.
My dream:
With a scout's knife I hack away my fingers
and baste them in a skillet.
My fingers are pitched to famished dogs.
I feed them my howls and my rage, and they,
irrational, answer with animal range
and animal sighs.
I arouse in them ecstasy.
And then. Like a Sumerian God
I rip open their jaws and stuff into them
huge maps torn from an atlas
until their bellies are tumescent
and sag with the world inside.

Since you just read one of your own poems, I want to ask to what extent your writing is integral to your work.

Something which has troubled me, even inhibited me, is that counterpoint—what the relationship was—if anything. I dislike holding a pencil. I don't like to draw. Typing for me is a form of drawing. I consider these poems, which I have framed like pictures, to be sketches. They're working plans, intentional sketches, which record imagery which I can later manipulate 3-dimensionally or 2-dimensionally and in certain instances, when the images seem to go into sync eloquently I will consider the statement, at that point, independent, and I will call it a poem. So it can be a picture sketch or it can be a poem—either way...I see them as

being opposite sides of a coin. But you can't really split a coin in half and not consider it a coin.

I've begun to include texts in the pictures themselves and the writing has a marked visual component—elements taken not infrequently from films, cartoons—but also phrases that resemble, even mimic sight. The themes are basic ones: mortality, loneliness, sometimes people caught up in political dramas over which they've no control.

Your drawings recall a mental image that once had motion.

The 1979 painting *Drame Chez Les Aveugles/Drama At the Home of the Blind* was derived from a cartoon made by Emile Kohl in Paris in 1906. I wanted a primary image, but nothing naive. I later visited the Braille Institute in Los Angeles to see the drawings done by blind people. I experimented with typing, drawing, and painting in total darkness. It was a theatrical experience, but not so convincing as dreams or memories.

Would it be correct to say your work has a literary aspect?

(quickly paging through various paintings) You see an image against a whitish background. A primitive image. It's the image of a woman—a generic negress if you will. The initial source was a cartoon of Harriet Tubman. She is holding a pistol. At the top in script: "Dead men tell no tales, you go on or die" toward the bottom, "...and they all went on. Harriet knew that any slave who went back would be tortured..." The picture source was a *Golden Legacy Illustrated History* magazine, a Black cartoon publication of the mid-sixties. Cartoons, I believe, are a wonderfully perverse mechanism by which to translate ideas or emotions including sincerely felt political tendencies. But it is in no sense—can not be described as being, politically prescriptive since art is not the most expedient method to create social revolution. Art just doesn't do that but it may become—oh, what is the word—seditious, mysterious, and still be politically felt. My aesthetic includes characters like runaway slaves, or women like prostitutes, snowmen.

I notice here a lead swastika surmounting a globe...but I don't believe that you are expressing the idea of fascism.

No, this not a fascist aesthetic. Here is an image which is gender ambiguous, tending toward the masculine, with a script included which reads "Pink man die w/bullet shoved up his rectum... white man write jazz, jazz, jazz". I refer specifically to the murder of a Spanish poet by fascists. But I'm also referring to the conniving, two-faced, imperialism of white men. Jazz equals deception: and I'm saying don't give me that jazz because I'm sick of it. I'm going to commit myself to something. The best artists in New York, at this time are women—not men—and I wonder why that is. I wonder why I have to look at this masturbatory, meaty sort of male "expressionism" which is being hyped in the market place and why the more canny, sensuous image is often bypassed.

G. Roger Denson lives and works alternately in New York City and Buffalo.

G. Roger Denson

CG *Specifically, what I'm interested in is for you to talk about your new paintings and talk about history, or art history, and the dualities and the parallels with which you're dealing.*

GRD I've been presenting parallels on different levels: on a level with language/meaning/expression—on a level with epistemological and phenomenological analysis—on a level with cultural sanctions and mythologies—on a level with history—on a level with formally judging and presenting imagery. Generally speaking, I'm demonstrating the wholistic interrelationships of these various levels within our own culture and time and those of previous civilizations and epochs. From that departure point I'm inferring what future cultures and epochs will have in common with us.

Let's talk specifically about the St. Sebastian and the figure in camouflaged fatigues who's bound and tied and being shot before a firing squad.

The painting is *St. Sebastian*, done by Andrea Mantegna about the year 1455. I've painted this reproduction, enlarging it four-hundred percent (the original is 26 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 11 $\frac{1}{8}$ ") and placed it alongside my own painting of a Latin American political prisoner just executed. It is a critique of the role of ideology in history, whether it be religious or political. Throughout history there had always been an ideological mind-set of one form or another which became very narrow and fanatical. In this light, the critique of the Romantic martyr figure subtly suggests how easy it has been, whether for ideologues or the present-day media, to manipulate the heroic proportions of the martyr icon for use in propaganda.

Where did you find the image of the Latin American figure?

It's not specific. I haven't copied an image—I've staged it. Actually, I hadn't intended it to be Latin American until I was in the process of executing the painting. Its source could just as well have been Israeli, Syrian, American, Iranian, Soviet, Chinese, etc. I chose Latin America as my reference because it is currently an area of violent destabilization relative to the American public. I haven't really intended to focus on any specific region of the world or period of history. I'm more concerned with showing that little has changed in the acquisition and perpetuation of world power other than its style and means: its propagandistic metaphors and its technology.

Tell me about another painting—the Michelangelo—because here is a different kind of correlation.

This one is *Simpatico/Michelangelo* or *The Suicides*. In this work I'm investigating the limitations of an exclusively operational document of behavior used by psychologists to penetrate what is meant by the human "death instinct" or "mechanism".

Of all causes of death, suicide is both the most direct and the most ambiguous. Ironically, the most directly knowable aspect of suicide cannot be observed or illustrated: that of the causality of the human will. The apparatus and power of the raw will can only be intuited directly through its own self-evidence, after having first been stripped of all its cultural identities, a role unique to the phenomenological method. On the other hand, the ambiguity is due in great part to the influence of various religious, philosophical and scientific mythologies entertained by the subject before and during the time of the suicide—as well as by those which the detached observer entertains when approaching it as a subject. Maurice Merleau-Ponty thought that any attempt to identify the external influences of a given action and to distinguish it from that "responsible freedom" of the individual is in actuality a linking of the action and the will with the ambiguity of all human experience. For Merleau-Ponty, the experienced is only in part intelligible and the intelligible is only in part experienced.

It is for this reason—that of ambiguity—that I have painted the sculpture of Michelangelo. Without knowledge of its title, *The Dying Captive*, one might easily interpret the work as either an "ejaculating" or "sleeping/walking" male. It is a deliciously vague illustration of the concept of "pure expression", stripped of meaningful signs or symbols, and indicates how inadequate the surface descriptions of operational behavior are when attempting a more thorough analysis. Only its iconographic power as a well-known sculpture affords any hint that it alludes to death, and this is conveyed only to the initiated. Presented with this uncertainty, the only other alternative to describing the behavior or the suicide is for the viewer to take a phenomenological approach, to name all its implied myths, i.e. the anticipation of transcendence of pain through death; the karmic determination of life cycles; the final narcissistic sublimation of suffering and enslavement; etc. and then to strip the suicide concept of



Simpatico/Bernini, 1983; oil on canvas, 4' x 8', photo by Gary Nickard

them for the purpose of intuiting pure feeling. In this way the painting has become a structurally irreducible archetype, is denied all power as a visually complex metaphor, and in its wake exposes the raw projected mystique from which an elaborate mythology springs.

Could we move on to a third painting?

That would be *Simpatico/Bernini*. This diptych performs a critique on the culturally prevalent attitude toward disease and death, a visual essay on the phenomena that Susan Sontag described in "Illness As Metaphor" when she posited that society projects illness and death beyond its clinical significance until it is elevated to the status of a polemical metaphor. In this work I have depicted the sculpture by Gian Lorenzo Bernini in a Chapel of San Francesco a Ripa, Rome, entitled *The Death of the Blessed Ludovica Albertoni*. It is a High-Baroque marble sculpture of a woman who is wracked by bodily pain but whose exquisite face is aglow with the refined ecstasy of her faith. The ennobled Albertoni was depicted resigning her life and all its sins, and was held up by the Church during the Counter Reformation as a symbol exemplifying divine redemption and sanctification.

What I've correlated with Albertoni is a scene familiar to many of us: the last agonizing moments of a hospitalized woman—alone, with only the glow of a life-monitoring-and support system illuminating her ward. Albertoni, who is positioned above the hospital painting is ascending. Her body is actually lifted up by the force of her convulsion, her hands pointing elegantly inward to the "soul". This is the beatifying interiorization of sublime faith and hope. The contemporary woman, by contrast—perhaps a terminal cancer patient, anticipates the void. There is an impression of dead weight, of sinking back into the earth.

Her arm is outstretched, receiving the fluid of sustenance in her veins (an i.v.). The electrocardiogram is monitoring, then freezing the exact moment of expiration. This is the external hope: the gaze toward medical science and technology; the atheistic death not readily aesthetesized by a culture saturated with Judeo-Christian values. This is the existential resistance and subsequent resignation to the unknown discussed as long as two millenia ago by Epicurus and Lucretius and again recently by Sartre and Camus.

Why are you preoccupied with death?

I'm not at all. It's just that these first three particular images from the *Simpatico* series deal with it. What I'm acually preoccupied with is the fabrication of a cyclical arcana of life-states and events: of death, birth, trauma, insanity, rapture, combat, eros, etc. I want to develop a coherent media-mythology, a system of humanistic symbols with a structural organization for projection in the world. It will be a tarot-like system that could be combined and re-combined with viewing the work because of its deductive, organic structure, used for the purpose of investigating various moral codes applied in the assessment of such life events.

*One last question, why *Simpatico*?*

Simpatico is the association between past, present and future; here and there; animate and inanimate. It is the relationship of the sensory-motor activities of attention, perception and ideation in the physical world of events. Most importantly, it is the identity that arises between the conscious subject and the predicated world with which it partakes; for man is part of a network of relationships, the closest of which are called *Simpatico*.

Carroll Dunham lives and works in New York City.

Carroll Dunham

CG: *You are the only abstract painter in the show.*

CD: Is that right?

Abstract art has been around for a long time, but it's not "in" so to speak, and I guess you've had to deal with this?

You deal with it by continuing to work. I don't know what I think of it in terms of your show. I don't have a moralistic attitude.

I think you are at an advantage in that sense.

I had that attitude, and certainly what was interesting to me when I started thinking about my own painting was painting of a rather programmatic kind. It took me a long time to see ways around that.

Do you find your work becoming more representational or are you consciously avoiding that?

I avoid anything specific. It's only interesting to me to have my paintings look like condensed situations. I never thought of myself as doing anything that had to do with representation. What I'm doing now that may look like aspects of representation, I think is trying to put more complicated emotional situations into painting.

You do make references to certain things.

Well, the knotholes in some of the panels I've used resemble different anatomical parts, but they also could be utterly geometric point locations. They also could be themselves. I'm not interested in any one way to read them.

Do you want to talk about the subject or content in your work? Can it be discussed in concrete terms?

No. Not in terms of "My subject is X or Y or Z." I have a lot of things that are interesting to me and they all get condensed into what my paintings look like. I'm as interested in the idea of a theory of sexuality as I am in the idea of a theory of space. I don't see why concerns about space and attitudes about sexuality can't be condensed into one image and have that image be richer for the confusion of sources. Art is not for the same things that language is for, and it doesn't have to be. If you're receptive to it, it will be working on you.

We'll understand it anyway?

I mean, you should get a kind of knowledge from the art that doesn't equate one to one with language.

What about your use of materials? You used to paint on canvas and paper and now the pieces of wood that you use seem almost as important as the imagery in the paintings. I've actually never seen anyone paint on zebra pattern wood before.

The precedents are in architecture and furniture design.

What made you start using it?

I had the idea for a while, for six months or more before I started. The last group of drawings I did before I started with the plywood were all about trying to find a way into those paintings. I knew about it before I did any of the drawings. I always had a better feeling for dryish kinds of mediums and hardish kinds of surfaces, and I worked for a couple of years on the things on paper, always with the idea in mind that I wanted to make paintings again. There is a way wood looks, and it has to do with the story of wood, and what we know wood is, and the fact that it comes from the natural world and, that figures in the grain of the panels are all, in a sense, a story of the tree that they came from. I felt there had been an issue raised in painting which had not been fully explored: about how the support informs the painter as much as the other way around. I thought I could use the patterns in wood to investigate that.

Creating an object, too?

Creating an object, but really I'm not very interested in "objecthood." I'm much more interested in what has traditionally been called "illusionism." Obviously paintings are physical matter and they sit in the world, but I'm pushing for a disappearance of the physical place where the surface is. This is what people have always called illusionism, but to me it's more a kind of other-dimensional situation that gets set up. You make a new category and you're not looking at a table top or a wall anymore. You're looking at something that is in mental space, or between the eye and the mind.

So you do have specific concerns when you are painting. I mean you want them to be...

Something that talks back to me or something that squirms. I don't know how else to put it.

I was looking at an anatomy book and I thought of your work. Have you seen dolls that push in and out, and the heart goes like this, it moves back and forth?

That's an aspect that I actually cultivate to a point. I don't want to go so far with it that it looks like I'm doing a gory anatomy kind of painting but I am certainly interested in that as one of the associations in the work. Art, to be really worth something, should be the inner life of human beings put outside for their mutual experience. There's a way that, without being literally representational about it, I do think that I probably paint my or somebody else's inside. That can be taken metaphorically, like I have these feelings, or it can be taken quite literally, like I have these organs. In a certain sense my work isn't even abstract, but I defy you to tell me what any of these things are really pictures of.



Big Pine, 1982-1983; casein, dry pigment, charcoal and pencil on pine. Private Collection, photo by Pelka/Noble

No, I can't. I can think about something, but I can't, and I suspect even you don't, know what they represent.

No. But I do know that I don't want to make paintings with a narrative or literary structure. I don't want people to ever feel like once they recognize something that they've solved the problem. You shouldn't let people off the hook that easily. But art is always about making pictures on some level, so...

You can't negate that.

No, but I don't understand what's happened, in a certain way. I'm doing what I'm doing and people are doing what they're doing and everything's wonderful, but I do believe that the twentieth century's primary theme has been this question of abstraction: the relationship of not just art to the visible world, but of physics to phenomena, of

psychology to behavior. The beginnings of abstract art, Einstein and Freud were all happening at the same time. I think of myself as an abstract artist but I don't really want to say that's better. It's just that I still can't believe that those aren't the issues that are, somehow, the most important. I want to make things that are really wild to look at. Art should be challenging and it should be sexy and it should be intelligent and it should be amusing, and none of these things should be mutually exclusive. I'm trying to find a way to deal abstractly with all these things and have them be in the painting, rather than in a literary description of the painting. You should really feel like you're in the presence of a being. If you have a thing sitting there, and it's popping around so much on the wall that it pulsates, or it seems like it inhales and exhales, or it moves; those are things I want my paintings to do.

Catherine Howe lives and works in Buffalo.

Catherine Howe



The Black Hole, 1983; oil on canvas, 48" x 60"

The Gift, 1983; oil on canvas, 60" x 71", photos by Tony Billoni >

CG How conscious are you of the emotionalism in your work? How conscious are you of soliciting the viewer with it?

CH Obviously, I intend the paintings to have an emotive strength. I'm depicting an urgency, that fullest, most emotionally heavy moment. This moment doesn't really explain what has preceeded it and what is to follow. It is a vestigial glimpse. My narratives are implied rather than prescribed. I think mystery can function to entice. The work serves to conjure up memories and emotional connections within the viewer. Perhaps I'm whetting the viewer's appetite for a story, and then leaving him unsatisfied.

What are the roots of your imagery?

My images are transitory. Manifestations of a certain state of mind rather than any permanent neurosis. At any moment the circumstances could change and the image transform. Pleasure becomes pain, attraction becomes repulsion, arousal becomes anxiety. The boundaries become blurred, emotional, opposites are always in a state of flux. I'm dealing with the middle of the struggle, the erotic strife. Desire becomes suspect.

What is the nature of the struggle that you are referring to?

It is a concern with social objectification. This objectification is evidenced as disconnection in the private sphere. This is a struggle in which lovers turn inward and a woman will defensively wrap her arms around her own body. The personalities are always isolated from each other; they are very much alone with their experience.

How would you describe your working process?

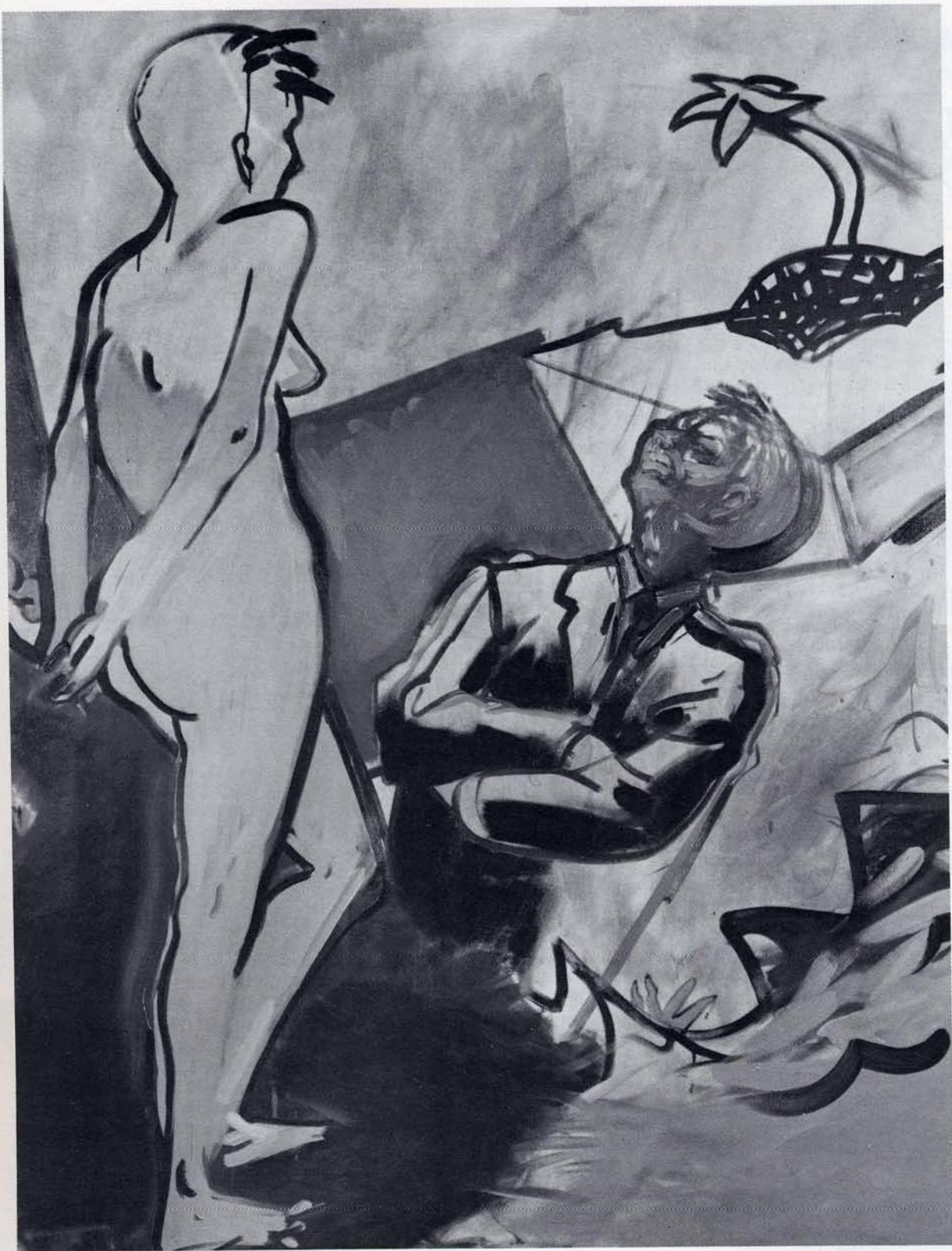
The most accurate description of my process would be invention. Much of the imagery is derived from no specific source. I never paint directly from models, like the photograph. Sometimes vague remembrances of a person I once talked to, or of a certain situation I witnessed, will enter into my work, but more frequently I invent as I paint.

Who has influenced you?

I can't name one particular artist or school that has had a great influence on me. I've been looking at everything from Baroque to Mannerist paintings to Japanese prints. Although the work reflects an awareness of different stylistic tendencies, I don't consciously borrow any of my imagery. I employ a variety of visual techniques, enjoying any inconsistencies that occur. I like to set up tension between that which is a representation of reality and that which is an abbreviation or distortion. A definite style is not something I've worked at. Any consistency in the work is more a reflection of my own affinities, of my intuitive responses.

How much does that have to do with fantasy, or sexual fantasy?

I think the situations I am depicting are a synthesis of both fantasy and reality. You could say I am expressing real emotions in a somewhat dreamlike situation. The sexual nature of the imagery is not intended to titillate. I am creating an image that has the potential to be erotic but filling it with an anxiety that destroys that potential.



John Miller lives and works in New York City.

John Miller

CG *I'm interested in the almost tangible adolescence or innocence in your work.*

JM I guess the work has been described as having a sense of wonder, so that might have to do with the way I depict things, more from a questioning standpoint or an interest taken in otherwise mundane subject matter. In other words, coming to a certain subject without trying to make a particular point and also coming to it without trying to select signature subject matter. What a lot of artists try to do is make certain themes their own. We're all bound to do that. So I try to work with a wide range of subjects. When I do the drawings, I don't work from a sketch or anything, so most of them are drawn spontaneously. I rarely will do the same drawing twice. Usually, I'll get an idea—the hardest thing for me is to think of a subject that I'll want to do—and I'll do it and if it doesn't work out, I just throw the drawing away and try to think of something else. So, anyway, I'm not coming to it with a practised hand and ink's not a medium you can play around with very much. Once you put something down it's there. So it's an improvisational drawing style.

What about the placement of drawings on the wall? Are they dependent on each other, or do you see them as independent?

I conceive of the pictures as autonomous pieces. Now that I've been installing them a while, I know pretty much how they'll look in a show. They do seem to make more sense in a group rather than in isolation. But the intention isn't toward any dematerialization of the art work or that sort of thing. I think it has to do with the themes having a cumulative effect. Also when I am drawing I don't try to dispense with the drawing in a totally detached way—not like the conceptualist paradigm. In fact, in conceptualism it seems like the ultimate point is to repress everything poetic. I see my work as being poetic; the drawings are a lot like haikus. Conceptualism seems to be the apex of a certain aesthetic rationalism and I feel like I'm trying to bring some of the poetic back.

Does that relate to your writing? Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

The writing I'm doing currently is a prose poem, like the last one I did.

Yeah, the new one will be called *The True Voice*, but I still have a long way to go. Anyway, my ideas for the writing are associative like the drawings. I don't structure my writing. It isn't structured according to a plot. It's narrational but the narration doesn't really go anywhere in a conventional sense and, again has more to do with the poetry inherent in the manner of telling. That's one of the reasons I have to revise so much. It's curious in that there's a polar difference between the drawing, which is spontaneous, and the writing, which is labored. When I started drawing again after spending so much time writing, it was cathartic to sit down and do something in one sitting. At first, I only spent two or three minutes on a drawing; now they're tending to run up to an hour or so. I've been spending more time on them but it's still the sort of thing you can do without a break in your attention.

What about when you combine written words with the drawings, as you did in your Kitchen show? [Solo Show, The Kitchen, New York. April 1983]

Well, I've combined them two ways. The first was in my artist's books, and there I feel fairly secure because a book being what it is, you can present the reader with more complex ideas, a larger amount of text because a person can pick up and put down a book at will. It doesn't have the feeling of bludgeoning someone with all this verbiage. I'm sensitive to the amount of text you can put up on the wall. With *The Kitchen* show I put the text into laminated plastic signs. In all the signs except one I used quotations rather than my own writing.

I quoted Louis Althusser, Edgar Allen Poe, Maurice Blanchot, Georges Bataille, and an anarchist named William Godwin—Mary Shelley's father (Dan Walworth gave me that quote). I had a Mao sign which I didn't have room to put up. The quotations were elucidating political issues I see as inherent in the work and I was making them more obvious and it was giving the work a more polemical twist. I feel completely at ease with the juxtaposition of word and image in the books while I'm less satisfied with the exhibits. In the books, word and image are more unified. In the exhibits, the signs rupture the visual discourse and they're meant to. But the drawings have this whole aspect of just being presented as pictures without an ostensible avant-garde signifier, although of course they are seen and done as high art rather than true popular art. Having the signs puts it back in again, although it's not within the picture plane.

Are you thinking about putting your own text in with exhibits or your own quotes?

Well, I'm planning to do that at HALLWALLS.

So this will be the first time?

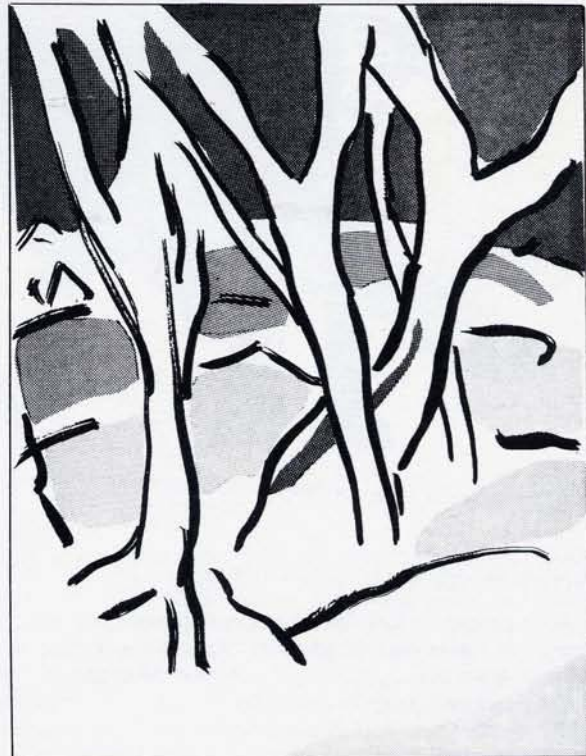
Actually, I made up the sign *To Speak with Passion* for The Kitchen show, but it was more like just putting something on a sign rather than using my own writing. One thing that's funny about the signs is that they're the most expensive objects that I show. They're budget frames from Pearl Paint. They come in wood grain and I paint them flat black. Sometimes I worry that their cheapness will look like kitsch—which I try to avoid—though sometimes I'll attempt a kitsch subject just to offset my own inclinations. Anyway, I was talking about my concern about the frames with a friend from CalArts, Steve Prina. We'd also been talking about how the work looks like popular art—not Pop, but the kind of painting and drawing non-professionals would do, and the possibility of mistaking it for that. He said that no matter what I did the frames are telling you that it's o.k. There's certainly an element of truth in that because frames tell you that it's o.k. to like this work. Usually you only end up talking to people who like your work so it's hard to find out what people who don't like it think. The impression I've gotten third or fourth hand is that some people think it's bad drawing. Most of the people who dislike it don't take issue with certain of my theoretical notions.

It's important to me that people like my work. Hopefully it can provide pleasure the same way middlebrow art can. Some people really do dislike it though.

I think the distinction is that I intend my work to be genuinely attractive and that I consider it sincerely rather than from a knowing in-joke standpoint. It's really my best effort and not supposed to be a demonstration of "aesthetic sophistication" over popular values. It's hard to reconcile a sense of poetry with elaborate technique. Maybe that's the problem I'm struggling with in painting. I tend to favor the poetry over technique. Sometimes I use a cliché, aiming for a feeling for ordinariness. That's why some people see it as kitsch. But I think the difference is that the kitsch attitude believes every situation is completely readable, where I'm trying to respond to the complexity of surface issues. That means rejecting superiority or deep or transcendent meanings.



Untitled, 1983; ink and transfer shading, 9" x 12"



Untitled, 1983; ink and transfer shading, 9" x 12"

Aura Rosenberg lives and works in New York City.

Aura Rosenberg



Back is Barred, 1983, acrylic on canvas, 32" x 78"

CG One characteristic of all of your paintings is your work with clichés. Could you talk about that?

AR I am particularly interested in developing the idea of the truth that is intrinsic to every cliché. By removing the cliché from its context, it becomes heightened and capable of being manipulated. Take for example my work with Avedon's shot of Nastassia Kinski. I can't imagine anything more obvious than a beautiful woman with a

snake coiling up between her legs and around her body. I must say I do find that humorous, but it is of course a very powerful image too. I try to paint along a fine line of corniness and truth to create a sense of ambiguity.

I see a lot of that ambiguity in Galaxy.

Yes, that's true. It started out as a paint splatter, which immediately presented the idea of blood. I then gave that form the shape of a hide by cutting it out. Both of these are flat. I pierced that flatness by representing outer space. And, all of these layers are contradicted by the smiling woman with the gun and the zebra handbag. Everything is happening simultaneously, so it is essentially a study of the coexistence of contradictory elements.

Even when the image remains the same, the situation can change completely. Does this have any connection with your interest in series?

Definitely. A series gives the opportunity to develop some of the ambiguities within an image. In *Reversibles* the relationship of the woman to the leopard isn't a fixed thing. It can be assumed that he's in the cage, but that isn't necessarily so. For example, a painting in this series might have a lush landscape behind the leopard to emphasize that maybe he's in paradise and she, and therefore we, are just looking in.

Artforum commented on the strong political statement contained in your work, which I think is evidenced by what you said about Galaxy, and by several of the other pieces in this exhibition.

Well, survival has always been a major subject in my work and I am very concerned about the way our environment is changing. But politics is only one facet of my larger interest in relationships—all kind of relationships. My painting *Dandy of the Desert* shows one snake devouring another, with the shadow of an eagle hovering over them both. This presents the idea of the food chain, which encapsulates the idea of survival.

Survival is certainly a comprehensive subject, but I don't feel that your work is entirely concerned with subject matter. Dandy of the Desert is as strong an object as it is an image of survival.

I think I've always been struck by the objectness of paintings and have wanted to emphasize that quality in my own work. This comes from the experience of growing up with Modernism. Any object is capable of being contemplated, but a painting is an object made specifically for that purpose. That's the main reason for its existence...its very existence becomes heightened. This is an advantage, kind of a running start, that all paintings share. But given this heightened state, I think it's easy for painting to fall flat on its face! As an object it should present us with something strong, unknown and questioning. No painting should exist without considering itself as an object.

I made a major breakthrough in 1980 when I started making skins. They presented to me a seamless union of



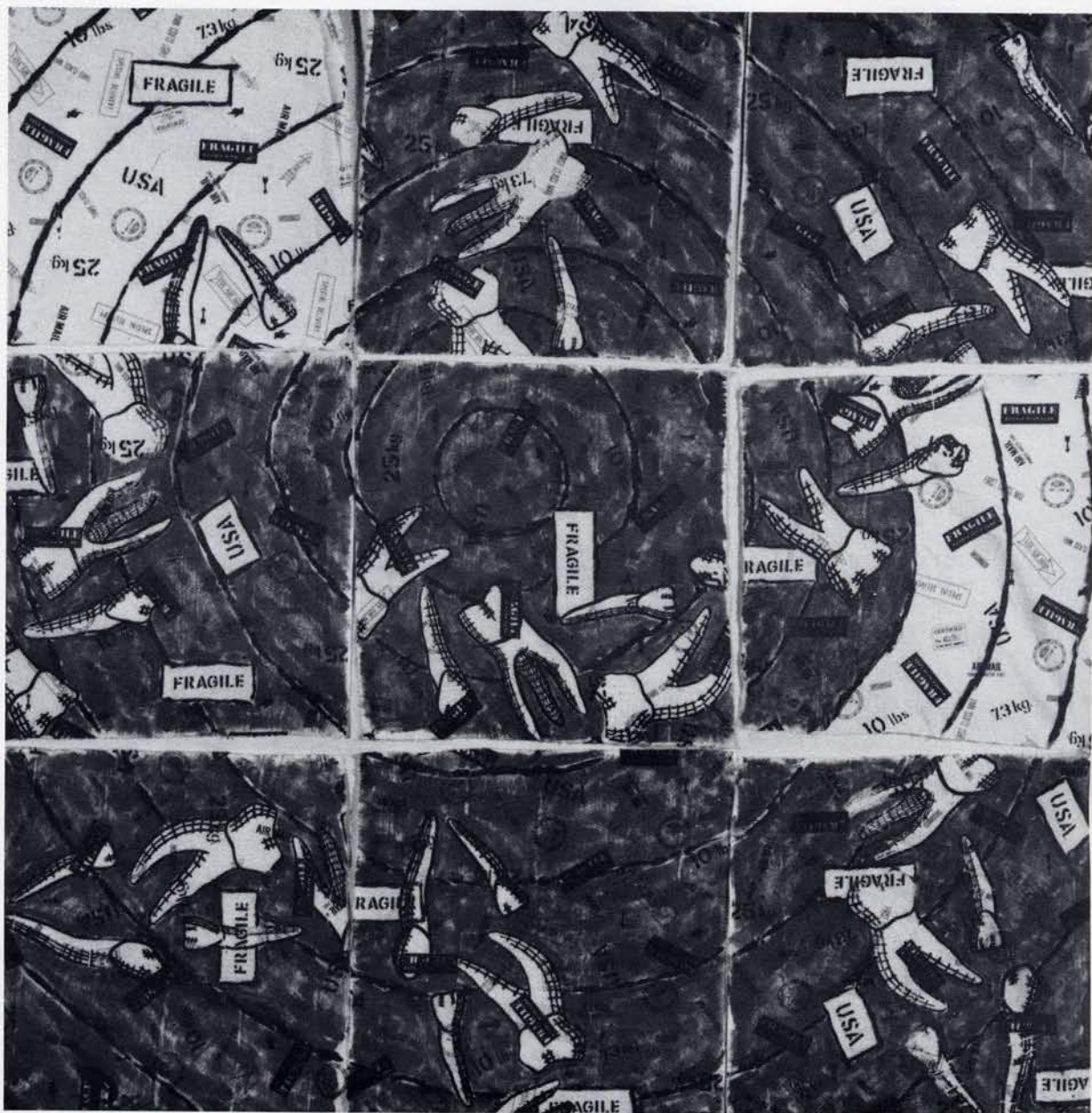
Galaxy, 1983, acrylic on canvas, 41" x 45", photos by Steve Satterwhite

image and object. Prior to the skins, I was always trying to undermine the illusionism inherent in images because that made it easier to see the painting as an object. That's why I used real sand in *Dandy of the Desert* rather than just painting sand; it's also why I incorporate the solid imprint of my own body in so many paintings. The skins really give me the opportunity to play with illusion. I try as much as possible to make them appear authentic, and I

think one's first impression is that they're real since they share so many of the same properties as a real skin. They're flat, they have the same shape and markings, they're hung on walls. Our tactile perception is what distinguishes the two, and that for me is one of the main purposes of painting: to maximize the use of our senses, to interpret what is being presented. And I think the perfect metaphor for touch is skin.

Kiki Smith lives and works in New York City.

Kiki Smith



CG *Can you tell me the focus your work has taken over the last few years?*

KS For the last few years I've been painting parts of the body, fragments, exterior systems (cut off arms and legs) or microscopic views of cells.

Why do you use tie-dye to represent this?

The tie-dyes are a continuation; their shape and repetition allude to these views of cells and crystal formations. These images are representative of basic life forms in the paintings. I have always tended to make a kind of pattern painting, although I do not consider myself a pattern painter per se.

What about the visual impact of the single image at the top of each painting?

That image gives the work a central focus, whereas before the images were floating or equally distributed. The long and narrow proportions physically distance the viewer, creating a sense of inaccessibility to the image. I like this idea, I also want the images to be confined and claustrophobic.

What kind of images do you use?

I tend to use images of the body or nature that don't relate specifically to individual personalities. I am interested in using images as symbols in a generic context.

What kind of symbols are you talking about?

Symbols such as a hand, or teeth, or a bone. Symbols that stand for themselves, that everyone can relate to. By making images that are too specific the viewer cannot disassociate the image from him or herself, or from specific experience.

Do you use these images to tell a story?

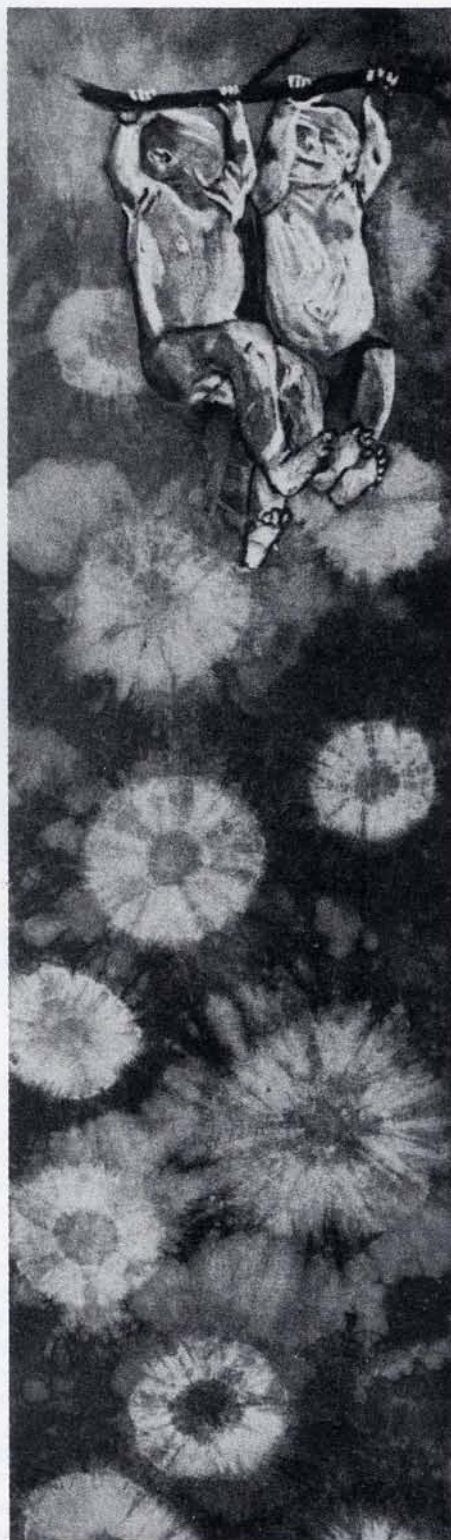
I don't like allegories. I use the images as metaphors. I want people to make up their own stories. I like to leave issues open.

Can we get back to the issue of nature in your work? Do you feel that women are dealing and working with this issue more than men?

It's funny you asked that question. At a friend's house the other day I was looking at a book on the Spanish painter Francisco De Zurbaran. I was particularly struck by *The Temptation of Friar Diego Orgaz*, 1639. Friar Diego stood holding a stick above his head trying to drive his temptor away. On the right is his temptation, consisting of a large bear and a woman with her tongue sticking out at Diego. Her hands and fingernails are extended toward him. Below her is a lion. I had been explaining to a friend a week before, that many of the women artists I knew used images of women; that they aligned themselves with nature and biology, e.g. Cara Perlman, Rebecca Howland, Christy Rupp, myself, etc. I suppose it is accepted, but it always surprises me that, given the choices possible, we all in a different way keep using nature and the biological system. When I saw this painting from a male perspective, exposing his fear of women and nature, it really made me laugh.

< *Fragile*, 1982; paint and silkscreen on fabric, 6' x 6'

For *Nicaragua*, 1983; paint on dyed fabric, 28" x 68" >



Julie Wachtel lives and works in Brooklyn.

Julie Wachtel

CG I know you are not a graffiti artist, nor have I ever thought of you as one, but you seem to have arrived at that kind of imagery and I'm interested in knowing how you feel about this.

JW I've been interested in graffiti work from the beginning, and have appreciated it on a number of different levels although, I agree, I think my work distinguishes itself in substantial ways. Actually, I've always seen my work as having a somewhat close relationship to that kind of directness of form. Three years ago I started working with posters I bought in the stores, the kind of stuff that decorates bedrooms or people's homes more generally. First the posters were arranged in strips, then in grid tableaux. All the poster pieces were wheat-pasted to the wall the way they are on the street, and they had life-size magic marker figures drawn over them. They dealt with the personal aspect of one's home as well as the public nature of the images and the way the images were presented.

Did you ever put them on the street?

I never did put them on the street although I considered doing that. They were always meant for a gallery situation,

although a place like Fashion Moda is closer to the street than, say, Artists Space, especially since it's a storefront. But the work never participated in the style of graffiti. I think there was a relationship in terms of the form of the work on certain levels.

Graffiti artists use spray paint and you use a brush.

I used magic marker and I did use spray paint a little, but what distinguishes my work from the graffiti work that is going on now is that all that work is involved with style. Each artist develops a single style, a signature, and the meaning of the work has a lot to do with that. My work has never been about style on the level of presenting a specific style that's my own. I am more concerned with the function of style, the way it communicates than developing a particular style. So I see that as a very large distinction.

I am thinking about Kenny Scharf's work. His imagery is so compounded. There's no room for anything. There's so much going on that I'm not sure anything is going on. Your work is very different from that, more problematic.

I like to set up a situation in which the viewer has more of an ability to participate in a type of dialogue or conflict in the work. There's a lot of conflict in the paintings. Before, you mentioned Pop imagery. Although I certainly see my work as part of that tradition, I'm not interested in the status of Pop, nor am I interested in the nostalgia of the 50's, our childhood imagery. Most of the images I select are extremely sentimental, the type of thing we would rather disown than celebrate. I'm concerned with the way our unconscious and emotive experiences become shorthanded and catalogued into forms which then produce specific responses. Like when you watch something on t.v. and its very corny and ridiculous and you know it, but you still smile at the appropriate moments almost against your will. So my paintings have a lot to do with forms of participation.

Why greeting card images?

In a simple and direct way they are about expression. I mean this in two ways. First their function is to express something; congratulations, I miss you, I love you and so on. Second their visual form is highly expressive. The cartoon characters that I've been using, the sort of hapless souls with distorted bodies are a good example. It fascinates me how easily form conveys expression through such simple means. A twisted line for a mouth means grief. Traditionally we view painting's expressive powers as communicating through much more refined and rarified channels. But on another level, the fact that I'm using greeting cards as a source for imagery is insignificant. I used to use posters, now I use cards. It's just a limitation that makes it easier on me, a limited set of choices. Also I like the humor in the images and the lack of pretension.

Humor really hasn't been the main element in your earlier work although there was always some humorous aspect. Before, it was just much more serious, graver, although I always ended up laughing when I walked out of the room



Acceleration of Similarity, 1983, oil on canvas, 72" x 64", photos by the artist

because of the relationship of the images. There'd be a Mao, and there'd be a porno star, and next that would be...

John Travolta.

Right. So there was a really funny dichotomy.

Right. I don't know that I feel that myself, but I understand. I always saw that work as having humor just because of the unexpectedness of the images. Someone like Mussolini or John Travolta is more serious than say, Miss Piggy.

In your poster pieces you used images that were basically different but which were drawn from the same source. You could open the newspaper and probably find them all on the same page.

I'm interested in putting the viewer in a position of modulating between two things in an attempt to reconcile it and having it already reconciled in some almost unconscious way within the viewer. Unconsciously, there is a kind of rationality, but consciously the relationship between the images are, I think, very irrational. Some people like to construct a super-narrative to connect the two things. But that is not at all important to me. I never think in terms of a narrative.

So the relationship is important, but the story-telling, which could go on between the two, is really insignificant?

Well, I think it's a fabrication of the viewer. It's not in the work itself.

So how are you trying to manipulate us?

I wouldn't say I am—well, I am trying to manipulate you, and in a way I'm not. In a certain sense all art manipulates you; it's a matter of the way it does it. Advertising, t.v. and most products of popular culture are highly manipulative and function within certain conventions. There's an object to the manipulation. There is no object or conclusion to be drawn from my paintings. It is manipulative to the degree that it puts you in the dilemma of having no object for the meaning to attach itself to, so the viewer is put in a place where there's almost a saturation of meaning and over-determination of it but there's no object for that—for the meaning to close itself—or to complete itself. So when the viewer attempts to construct this single, monolithic narrative, to connect the two things, I think that's just the desire on the viewer's part for a resolution. I don't necessarily think that there should be a resolution.

Ada Whitney lives and works in New York City.

Ada Whitney

CG *What are your concerns when you begin a painting?*

AW I want to create a mysterious mood that is contemplative and emotional—very emotional. I concern myself with primal feelings that I believe everyone experiences when contemplating death, the future, the past—where each ends, where each begins. Each person has a different response to these. The images I use are meant to confront the viewer with those ideas and questions.

I think many people never concern themselves with the idea that you have described.

Thoughtful people reflect on their own lives.

The figures in your paintings aren't human. They're not only androgynous, they're ghost-like.

They do have an unworldly, spiritual quality which isn't meant to be frightening. The fact that they are androgynous is very important. The painted figure becomes less specific this way—it's not a temporal, human being, but a timeless universal symbol. The emotion and energy the figure evokes is meant to be more important than an individual story. The viewer doesn't wonder 'who is this?' and 'where is this?'

Before we further discuss the images you use, I'd like to ask you about your painting style. It's very tight and modeled. It has nothing to do with expressionism, though you confront emotional issues.

That's true. I paint an intense subject in a very tight, controlled style to create a quiet emotion. It's not a gut, human emotion, but a controlled, quiet emotion.

Well, I think that's what you get. Tell me more about the imagery you use.

It's a personal symbolism I use to create different moods. In the early paintings there's a sense of desolation because I place a solitary figure in a completely empty landscape bathed in unearthly light. You wonder: what happened to everyone, or is this even the earth? In many paintings the figures are standing in, or emerging from, holes. Are they leaving or are they coming to life? It's puzzling, somewhat disturbing, and intriguing.

Yes, that's what I was speaking of earlier. That kind of existence, what is it?

That's just it. The paintings are a question in themselves. I set up these questions through the use of peculiar images—such as holes filled with water or light, odd root-like objects, and unnatural landscapes that are filled with sourceless light, and solitary human-like figures. The images have definite symbolic references to our own lives, but together they create an otherworldly atmosphere.

Yes, the lighting is so strange, the figures seem to be translucent; they glow by themselves.

I think the lighting creates an energizing mood. In my less recent sculptural work I used actual neon set into arch and tomb-like shapes to achieve a similar effect. Light is such a spiritual symbol.

I would like to discuss this new rock-like painting; it seems you are moving to a more sculptural format again.

Yes, I am starting to combine the abstract, sculptural format with the newer, narrative painting, though I am not using the specific religious references, I'd say Catholic, that my sculpture had. I moved away from this when I started painting in a narrative, figurative format so that I could create a more universal, illusionistic imagery and symbolism.

The paintings seem dream-like. Do they come from your dreams?

No, not specifically. I use archetypal imagery, which I think might give them that quality.

Back to my original question about the rock painting, why a return to the sculptural?

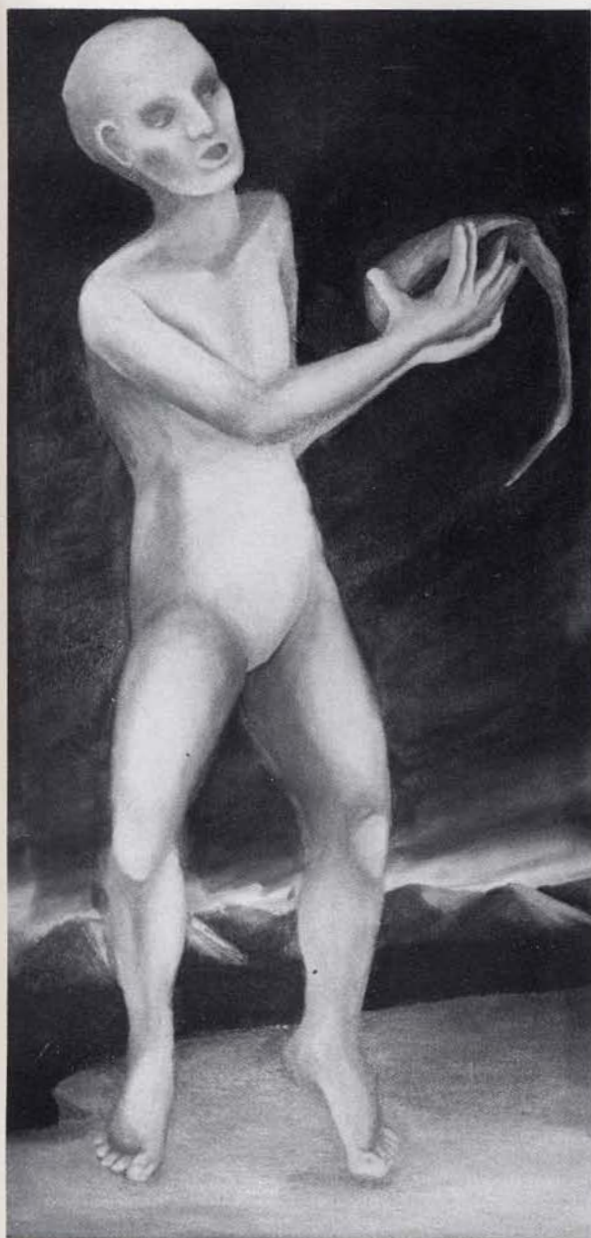
I felt that the paintings might be too specific in a narrative sense. Though the landscapes are unknown, the figures and lighting unreal, the image of a specific being in a specific space, limits the temporal quality I am striving for. Since I am dealing with the question of existence in time, where it ends and begins, I thought that by combining an illusionary figure with an actual object (the sculpture) this question would be emphasized. The fact that the sculpture exists in space and is not an illusion denotes time itself, that is, in the sense that it has its own history, that it does in fact exist. This object combined with a painted image sets up the question of what's real. Where does the space end and begin? The choice of rock-like object was a formal answer. I wanted to create a mood of ritual; the rock seems so totem-like, so primitive.

These works remind me of Stonehenge, in a sense.

Yes, that and the idea of a cave painting. They have that primitive quality, though the figures obviously remove them from our inherited history. The work is very mysterious without being specifically religious, unlike my previous sculpture.

Well, they're still religious in that they come down to the mystery of the spirit.

Yes, I think they have definite references to religion. I refer to Renaissance paintings, which were concerned with



The Message, 1983 (work in progress); oil on canvas, 48" x 54", photo by the artist

Catholicism and The Bible. The paintings are not religious in the sense that they ask questions but they don't profess to answer them.

The last question I have is, do you see doing large interior installations sometime in the future?

Yes, as you know a few years ago I did a sculpture installation of tomb-like arches inset with neon, that had a very chapel-like feeling to it. I would like to do something similar in the future using these rock-like slab paintings

and possibly some free-standing work, but with a less formal format.

It seems to me that you have taken your basic themes and come almost full circle with them, creating new ideas and ways to express them. The transitions seem very clear. I wonder what will happen when this circle is complete?

I don't think the circle is ever complete. The questions are always there—there'll be other ways and reasons to express them.