

Elemental Sources

Makor Center through December 18

BY JOEL SILVERSTEIN

THERE'S THIS NEAT LITTLE exhibition at the Makor Center on West 67th Street. *Elemental Sources* centers on three emerging abstract painters who all derive their imagery from nature (read landscape). Curated by Lance Esplund, this is a modest yet well considered undertaking. Present are offhanded elements of an artist-run exhibition (as in the "Hey lets put on a show" in the garage variety), but it's also curated as if it were a small commercial gallery where the owner actually cared about painting. Esplund obviously knows that the work looks a little unhip, but is giving these people a try because ultimately the artists' convictions win out. What's refreshing about these painters is that they are so "unpackaged." They have attributes and faults, and none of them are masters, yet that is their charm. Just real people engaged in real painter's problems. You can see how they hash out the paint with their palette knives. Imagine seeing something like this in Chelsea where "surface" has become as vacuous as a Revlon ad?

Josh Dorman, the most figurative of the group, derives his images from the landscapes of Bruegel, Turner, Ryder, Cézanne. They recede to a deep atmospheric plane, only to zoom up in a subtle and attractive modernist conundrum. It's a crazy and wild environment where trees, weeds and flowers are reduced to charcoally squiggles. The air is always damp and the color subdued and glowing.

If one looks askance at these paintings, they flatten out and resemble slabs. When confronting them directly, the painted space reveals a rich palette of plum, yellow-green and

touches of red-orange against deep tones of sienna or gray. Dorman shifts visual languages nicely and is not afraid to throw an organic blob in the middle of a representational gestalt. *THE SHOWER*, 1996 looks variously like rain or a Redonesque eyeball. A Brancusi-y head is half buried in a thicket of wild flowers in *SELF PORTRAIT*, 1999. Dorman wants you in on the journey, but by bringing you back to the surface brings a different kind of analysis, a kind of slow reflection to bear.

Carol Diamond is more heavily indebted to Abstract Expressionism for her inspiration, but in a way parallels similar interests and concerns to Dorman. *YELLOW FLAMES*, 1999 is a smallish picture. At first glance, it is a series of arbitrary strokes, off-whites, oranges, and tans surrounded by the traces of black squiggly lines. At a distance, the work snaps together nicely to reveal the process of a shape forming.

Her large painting, *ROCKLIKE*, 1999, bears some discussion. It has a heritage that stretches from Braque and Picasso to early Pollock and even Anselm Kiefer. Black, green and tan-painted lines skitter across whirlwind cave-like shapes. These lines have a tree-like organicity but also double as hieroglyphs. Diamond implicitly shares the beliefs of the Ab-Ex generation, and for that matter William Rubin's *Primitivism* exhibition at MoMA. Archaic art, an archaic viewpoint equals the language of one's own past. Archeology equals memory and the inscribed line is the demarcation of the present moment, as in the action painting of Harold Rosenberg. It's a rich painting with many levels of interpretation.

The wobbliest painter of the three, although still engaging, is Debra Zichichi. Her small, oval paintings owe a great deal (again) to Braque and

Picasso, this time via Howard Hodgkin. They are like the images of a line splayed by the tension of the paint. Although *COOL OVAL*, 1999 is painted in a strong blue, and *FIERY BOUQUET*, 1999 is held together by a wonderful salmon red, much of this work contains a kind of dead brown and an unfortunately mixed range of tertiary colors which don't hold well on the canvas. I would like to suggest more careful chroma in her mix, more careful priming, or a higher underpainting for those areas of passage.

In *HARDY MUM*, 1999, the artist offers an interesting balance between the muscularity of the stroke and the dribbled emotionalism of the paint itself. Turpentine or medium erodes the gesture of the arm creating a natural vocabulary of inclement weather and vulcanism, frozen in stasis.

It's obvious that Mr. Esplund and the artists have certain strong feelings about the kind of work that should be promulgated today. Whether you think it is old-fashioned is besides the point. They should all be commended. Vulnerability has become a virtue.

Pat Steir

New Paintings

Marlborough Chelsea through January 1

BY JOEL SILVERSTEIN

IN THE EARLY 1870's, JAMES McNeil Whistler painted a series of landscapes derived from his interest in Japanese prints. These paintings were nocturnal scenes of exploding fireworks which employed a new formal language, one bordering on abstraction. *THE FALLING ROCKET*, 1874

was bitterly criticized by the famous critic John Ruskin, who accused Whistler of "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." Whistler took him to court, and the rest, as they say, is art history.

Flinging paint has a different meaning today than it did a hundred and twenty years ago. This is a great place to begin talking about Pat Steir. Steir's work is grounded in her understanding of the traditional ink painting of China and Japan. The techniques of Shui Mo Hua and Sumi employ water-based mediums on silk or paper. They require rigorous planning and years of study, but can incorporate spontaneous and impromptu effects. Pouring, flicking and pooling of the ink are primary techniques for some schools of these disciplines. Steir combines these working methods with the logic of what Whistler would have recognized as *Japonism* or *Western Orientalism* – a western artist's respect and love of Asian material appropriated, misused or misconstrued for a specific reason.

Steir's reason is western abstraction, which has been limping along since Postmodernism reduced it's importance and flattened out it's *a priori* meanings. Add to this a sense of stylistic exhaustion and you have the curious situation where abstract painters sound as defensive as their figurative counterparts of thirty years ago. Steir's goal has been to reinvigorate the genre, by going back to the sources of traditional cultures. Here, abstraction along with a highly developed and conceptual view of nature are the nexus of art making.

Many of Steir's paintings are nine feet square. There is a triptych that's even larger, although several paintings are in the

comfortable twenty-four-inch category. The paintings begin with a ground thinned to the consistency of watercolor: green-umber, midnight blue, black-blue or metallic silver. Paint is then flicked or dribbled, making patterns which evoke waterfalls, oceans, or celestial constellations. The spattered paint, laid on top, consists of powdered whites, tawny off-whites, electric reds, carbon black. Her backgrounds are luminous and show a great deal of formal invention. When a paper-thin umber is used, you can see through it like a filter. When it sets and pools, you can feel its weight. Shiny or mat, her paint is never applied in a mechanical fashion. When it settles sparsely on the canvas, it produces a kind of halo, when denser, a kind of cloud or the mire of striated earth. In *Foss*, 1996/97, her triptych, a blue-black of hair dye intensity is derived from Japanese screens. It offsets a relief of ultramarine chasms and beige calligraphic spume.

There are subtle Asian-like shifts in perception. The backgrounds are dribbled parallel to the picture plane, splaying across our field of vision. This is contrasted against the flicked paint, which is likened to a figurative signifier (the figural protagonist or object in space).

This spray of paint recedes according to western variants of perspective. Big droplets are in the front, implying it's close to your eyes; small droplets in the rear. The shift occurs, because in viewing these droplets, our eyes project a deep recession (read Western Renaissance) space. We are looking for a container, but the background belies and undermines this project as in the folding space of Chinese landscape painting. It is a paradigm shift creating a tightly controlled low-level hum; one that is Steir's gift to the viewer.

RON ERLICH

NEW PAINTINGS

through December 22

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Steir is a master of getting wide expanses of surface, barely covered surface, to absorb and glow. The squares have the bilateral symmetry of the human body and seem more anthropomorphic than they actually are. Perhaps they derive from a trace of Agnes Martin's minimalism and gravity.

Steir's biggest western counterpart is, of course, Jackson Pollock. She can only approach Asian painting through Abstract Expressionism and the ghost of Pollock looms large over the entire installation. The similarities are numerous. These two artists serve up large-scaled spattered works. They employ non-brushed surfaces and techniques that are not related to easel painting. Both derive from non-Western traditions (as is well known, Pollock loved Native American sand painting). Each relies upon a

kind of automatism. Steir even uses metallic paints the way Pollock used aluminum radiator enamel. And perhaps parallels continue.

There are certain dichotomies in Western art: subject/object, figure/ground, representation/abstraction, conscious/unconscious. Pollock's drip paintings are derived from Surrealism and the Mexican muralists. During the period 1946-50, contemporary criticism likened Pollock's painterly space to atomic explosions, lace-making or crushed Cubism. Anything, in short, that would radically reinterpret the Renaissance vortex and decentralize prioritized vision. The cliché of reading Pollock is merely a Formalist one (over-all abstract structure) or a Romantic one (anguished artist that didn't hold back and gave it his all). What both interpretations leave out is that traditional dichotomies of Western picture making surge up in Pollock while being served up as personal trauma. In other words, Pollock's traumas are really our own and pre-date what the Postmodern philosophers would call the crisis of pictorial representation.

Steir in turn favors an Asian attitude, probably derived from Buddhism. Conflict is seen as false, dichotomy an illusion. *Yin* and *Yang* are not dualisms so much as shadings or degrees. No great contrasts or drama. Your ego is actually the thing getting in the way. Steir strives to make the seeing subject cease to be merely ego-centered and become a pure will-less subject of knowledge free of causal relationships, fulfilling itself in fixed contemplation. The presented object of contemplation is in this case, her painting.

Steir's highest goal is to lose herself and for us to do likewise. The conflicts that Pollock could not suppress are elegantly smoothed out. Nature

becomes the body and the viewer becomes an object, all reduced to a permeable boundary; the layer of paint. It's a tall order. Or rather, it's a tall reordering - to give abstraction back its spiritual basis and sense of continuity.

Of course, it could only be partly successful.

To begin with, they are stunning paintings. They are the kind of paintings that you could look at rapturously for a sustained amount of time. They look stunning on the wall, in someone's apartment, beach house or private collection. Every dot is in its proper place. There's a sense of inevitability that is the result of Steir's years of practice or her judicious editing. But it is a ravishing character that is mostly decorative in nature and not in profundity.

In fact, I felt all this Eastern hierarchy a bit over-defined, as if the artist were telling me how to feel. It reduces her to a monk and us to merely acolytes. This is not a reflection on the source of her inspiration. I get the same feeling when I walk into Forum Gallery and Mr. *Joe Blow* American Realist wants me to genuflect before his skill at rendering or his *a priori* emphasis on what is actual.

Of course, you could say that the interpretation of all art is predetermined, but it is a question of degree.

Then again, Ms. Steir does stay very close to her prototypes. Too close. Close enough to mimic the effects of a certain genre, but not enough to maintain the autonomy of her own statement. Brice Marden's *Cold Mountain* paintings, or Louise Fishman's works based on Chinese Scholar's rocks, are I think closer to maintaining an individual freedom for abstraction as a language, as well as employing these very Asian traditions.

Namelessness may be part of the Asian character, but in Steir's hands, all these strategies actually come closer

to revealing an artist in search of a signature style, similar to the late work of Mark Rothko or Adolph Gottlieb. Signature styles are fine, but an artist should also realize that they can act as product identifications (like logos), as well as works of aesthetic and spiritual import and at a \$100,000 a pop.

After a considerable amount of reflection, I thought that these paintings lacked deep structure. The Chinese call it *Ku-Fa* or bone means. But I was wrong. This is to Ms Steir's credit. They are deeply beautiful and maybe even carry some of the spirituality that they purport. However, for paintings that incorporate chance into the creative process, it is ironic that they seem to lack exactly this quality. Chance becomes the attribute of risk, one of the prerequisites for great art.

You can say what you want about de Kooning in his final years (and the recent exhibition of his late works at Museum of Modern Art, 1997) and people practically have said everything about these scraped and emptied works. De Kooning, suffering from Alzheimer's disease, was close to ninety and probably had trouble even remembering his own name, yet he shifted styles one more time. It's like an aged gambler who can't resist the dice; a fearlessness in starting over despite people's expectations or responses. Something else that seems to be lacking in Steir's wonderfully impressive works.

Is it Steir's fault that a segment of the population might like her work for the wrong reasons? (The *Richard Gere-Dahli Lama-Hamptons* crowd, for example). Of course not. She's too good an artist to pander, but I do think she's being a little self-conscious.

The Japanese have an expression.

When someone dies, they compliment the deceased by saying "S/He played at life." Playing has the implication of the kind of risk I am talking about. If I could say one thing to Ms. Steir, it would be respectfully this: Play more.

Leslie Lerner

My Life in France - The Lost Boy - Psychedelic Pastorales

Littlejohn Contemporary
through December 11

BY JOEL SILVERSTEIN

ON THE EXHIBITION'S opening night, the artist told me a story. He wanted to come up with an analogy for our culture and hit upon Holland in the seventeenth century. Not the style of Dutch Baroque art, but the genesis of the bourgeoisie art market during the first global mercantile economy. He imagined a factory in Delft, the center of both art and the porcelain trade, rocked by an explosion. Ersatz blue-and-white Chinese shards are everywhere. An adolescent is caught in the catastrophe and loses an arm. Therein began his journeys.

This "Lost Boy" (Lerner's epithet) travels to Venice and then to India, where he loses his mind. Upon his return home, although mad, the lost youth tells his stories to the people, only to find out that there is no context for them to understand or believe him. His is a language of the lost.

If I have gone into great detail about the narrative that fuels this work, it is to cue you into a master fantasist whose paintings sustain multiple levels of interpretation. The lost boy, like Voltaire's *Candide* or the protagonist

in the French comic strip *Tintin*, stumbles from one landscape into another. These paintings, whether large or small, are stringently controlled and lush. They are composed with a broad, receding horizon - a wide band of technicolor blues, violets and oranges. They frame scenes made up of small movements, surefire flicks of the brush that break against the surface in serpentine strokes. James Ensor comes to mind, but Lerner's vocabulary is much richer.

There are the court paintings of Fragonard and Watteau with their declarative posing, airy lightness and short hand brush work. There are painters of the imagination, like Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon with their weirdly glowing vegetable matter and shifts of perception within the details. Finally we are plunked down directly into Philip Guston territory, where detritus bites back with a vengeance and an attic or a field is filled not just with the waste products of your own mind, but of history's as well.

Lerner does not use reference materials, although he is well schooled in both art history and popular culture. The images emerge from the workings of the paint itself. These subtle juxtapositions mimicking nineteenth-century Symbolism are really products of our own Postmodern culture, where everything mixes with everything else.

In *MY LIFE IN FRANCE; THE LOST BOY TREASURE POOL*, 1999, the ghostly faced youth is surrounded by objects that can't be easily identified. Flowers, weeds, boots, pieces of clothing, packaging, jellyfish eyes. The list goes on. In *THE FLOOD PLANE*, 1999, it includes pieces of machinery, milagros from Mexico, tools and more. Each stroke both clearly describes and undoes. Each figure is fixed within a different century and is dictated by our own. Lerner's work is like the

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imaginary histories of Jorge Luis Borges or E. L. Doctorow. Believable fiction mixes with equal parts of fact and disruptive nihilism. It's unstable but seductive. A blasted allegory for our Postmodern age, one couched in the language of painting as if it had a past. On to be more specific, mutually exclusive pasts which exist by contradiction. One thinks of the golden age of the movies and their constructed sets. Facsimiles of reality which served their purpose and when no longer needed, struck down, or left in remnants. Better still, left in fragmentary states of completion for future generations to contemplate, like in the set of the silent film *The Ten Commandments* (1923) recently found in the sands of California.

Narrative and painterly structure reinvigorate and replenish in a process of mutual stimulation. If that's not enough to pique your interest, Lerner