

the press, with the artist's body weight applying the pressure. Finally, *THE BATTERING RAM* is suspended by ropes and can strike a print by itself, or in this case, employ the painted foot of one of the artists as a printing plate. The sculptor must stay on track by creating forms that are tied to function. If the press can't make a print, it is useless. On the other hand, the print makers who are collaborating must be willing to be flexible, accept all kinds of unforeseen events and be able to access what is going on. It's not an easy process, but so prosaic, that it deserved to be documented and seen as part of the piece in its own right.

The presses all have an early or pre-industrial look, like ancient technologies that you read about in the journals of Marco Polo, or the contraptions that Rube Goldberg used to draw. They are jointed and slivered in ways that suggest an awkward poise. The four artists involved, the sculptor himself: (who also contributed prints) Dan Weldon, Bette Winkler and Jennifer Ale don't share a common style or response to the printmaking process. But they share a level of craft and commitment to seriousness that comes across as consistent.

Dan Weldon is a master printer, and he previously assisted de Kooning and Eric Fischl. Apart from the current collaboration, he makes solar-prints without the use of any acid (environmentally friendly). He has contributed a series of small abstractions based on nature, struck from the press and individually hand-colored. Each work in the series is constructed with lines and forms which are scratched out and redefined like little Hans Hoffmans or Paul Klee's.

Bette Winkler is also an abstract artist. She has been moved by her

encounters with butterflies in Peru. She uses iridescent pigments mixed into conventional colors in order to produce a series of geometric reductions that glow at odd angles. It's a way of referring to nature without illustrating it. In the hallway, Ms Winkler has displayed another abstract series. This time it's of leaves, branches and atmosphere rendered in silver and black that has a haunting quality of a Japanese screen.

Jennifer Ale is an English artist whose work is imbued with the spirit of German Expressionists Kathe Kollwitz, Otto Dix and Emil Nolde. Her lino-cuts are sparsely reduced to strong passages of black and white. Finally, Michael Ince contributed a series of boats and processional images heavily indebted to Indonesian art. While his presses are uniquely individual creations, his prints are far less so.

All the prints demonstrate a high level of craft and are very tasteful, but the nature of the project suggests that more caution should have been thrown to the wind. In viewing the prints away from the videotape, I found myself saying "Let 'er rip!" Perhaps more grain of the wood or stone, more random chance, misprints, misfires, more force and incorporated mayhem would have allowed more of the process to find its way into the imagery in a more fundamental way, so that the video wouldn't be necessary as an explanation of the prints.

What are we left with? A gallery that's a home. Some beautiful spaces and odd clutter. A fantastic concept. A cache of handsome prints, the odd one of which catches fire. First rate sculpture, most of which is not there and a great video documenting it all. Sounds like a reason to stop by from your usual haunts. The gallery is open at unusual hours: Friday-Sunday 12:00-6:00. If you call ahead for an appointment, Ellen Peckham, the

curator, can show you around. She's knowledgeable, friendly and will gladly pull other works out of storage for viewing.

When you visit the gallery, make certain to check out Roberto de Lamonica's fabulous lithographs printed in eighteen colors. De Lamonica, now deceased, was an instructor at the Arts Students League for many years and worked in a lush Latin-Expressionist style. It's a good way to cap off your visit.

Valentina Dubasky

Ancient Futures

New Paintings and Monotypes

Cheryl Pelavin Fine Art through March 4

BY JOEL SILVERSTEIN

"It is difficult to think of a single such natural system that has not, for better or worse, been substantially modified by human culture. It has been happening since the days of ancient Mesopotamia. It is coeval with writing, with the entirety of our social existence. And it is this irreversibly modified world, that is all the nature we have".

~ Simon Schama

Landscape and Memory.

SCHAMA'S VIEW OF landscape is totally sympathetic and informed by contemporary philosophy. It is not a place, or a space that exists in and of itself. It differs from those English Empiricists who trekked through cow pastures with fresh dung on their shoes in order to capture an effect or a formal reality that superseded their own existence. Schama's trees only make a noise if someone is there to hear them.

Hence landscape is tied to the creation of language, writing and historical or personal memories. It's very validation is dependent upon avenues which cannot be scientifically proven; ultimately veils of loss and the presence of the viewer is an integral part of the visual, intellectual and aesthetic equation. Human beings don't exist within nature; they create it's very concept as part of a running dialogue with culture.

Valentina Dubasky's current exhibition strongly reflects this sensibility. Like Rothko and Gottlieb who mimicked the language of progress during the 1940's by racing to the Stone Age, Dubasky's paintings want to tie a contemporary view of the future to a distant, archaic past. The paintings are mostly large and evoke the physicality of walls. They are complex structures, taking their formal cues from the symbolic landscape paintings of Anselm Kiefer and the heavily textured narrative abstractions of Joan Snyder. Layers of plaster are applied, much like fresco or secco painting, on stretched canvas. Oil paint with wax medium is added in layers, balancing bright, turgid areas with overpainting in lighter atmospheric pastels.

Squares of canvas are collaged into the image, at which point the artist reevaluates the process in order to incorporate the new material. The cycle continues, balancing painted imagery with sheer physical materiality. There is a running battle, an evolution of painting, repainting, gluing, gouging, so that finish is determined by a host of factors buried archeologically within the artwork. Sometimes the finished paintings are clotted and overproduced, but more often than not, Dubasky strikes a balance which is wholly attractive.

The artist has voiced her interest in the idea of nature contraposed against

the grittiness of the urban environment. The squares of collage are here likened to the grid of the city. To my eye, what is more relevant is Dubasky's metaphor of the urban garden, a patch of overgrown land where the hardy weeds and dandelions push through the cracks of the pavement. It's relevant to her work and to her feisty artistic consciousness as well.

The artist has traveled widely, and this is important to each painting. She conjures up western perspective in some areas, anchoring a tree or a plant to a solid piece of ground, but then the horizon fades into a mass of dribbled, scumbled or splotched palette-knife painting. The actual phenotypes of flora probably span the globe. I casually noticed the lollipop trees of Sieneese and Florentine paintings, the palms and lotuses of Egyptian and Rajput art. Spacial and figurative systems converge as the artist frames that which is both internal and external. There are spores that float, atmospherically, as well as those that are codified as ciphers, sitting on a plaster wall. Ancient Egyptian art, especially the way Egyptian artists reduced natural form into conceptual abstraction, figures heavily here. Their genius was a graphic integrity that takes a wall, demarcates a series of symbols, paints them and locks them into place within the hierarchy of the rectangle. This conception of space is tied to the solidity of the stone itself.

Dubasky softens the concept by studying ancient cave paintings, of China, India and Paleolithic times. In the "sky" portion of her paintings, even the lightest areas are clotted with paint and plaster and pressed into service as atmosphere. They recede with light strokes. Yet, the trees, plants and organic form proceed in elliptical movements that break against the surface, detaching and even patterning

into sharply incised calligraphy that function much as tomb hieroglyphics. It is a triumvirate of meaning that the artist has described: Projecting forms have a three-dimensionality of their own, brushstrokes carry the implied history of objects depicted by gesture and illusion and the scratches within the surface recall archaism, archeology and personal trauma.

The literal forms of nature are broken and used abstractly. These so-called landscapes, have a high vantage point and low perspective line. In *RIVERBANK WITH REEDS*, 1999, Dubasky has created a tendril of bulrushes that are as spunky and proactive as *The Day of the Triffids* or an *Outer Limits* episode. As the tinted-blue sky bisects the horizon line, we are thrust into a mythological world of archetypes - Moses cast adrift upon the waters, his staff metamorphosed into a giant snake. It's a kind of primitive animism brought into the service of contemporary art.

Dubasky's paintings are not without their faults. The viewer is sometimes cast adrift into a sea of paint, which is heavily laid on with a trowel. The smaller paintings on paper offer less room to breathe and present a more repetitive drawing line than her more spacious work on canvas. Her draughtmanship, especially in her organic shapes, tends towards a literal, schematic handling, yet, I can honestly say that when I walked into a room of them, their faults drop away. (In preparation of this review, I saw Dubasky's works in her studio as her exhibition at Cheryl Pelavin was not yet opened.) They create their own world, in the same wonderfully uncomfortable experience that a viewer feels when s/he is caught between two sarcophagus lids at The Met. Perhaps this is all a round-about way of saying that Dubasky's work is both funeral and life affirming at the same time.

The artist worked as a photographer in Cambodia. She was photographing women who had suffered atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge. While she was there, she saw two boys that lived on the street. They lived in abject poverty, but kept themselves entertained by telling jokes. The first and second time that the joke was told, they merely laughed. The third time the joke was told, they literally fell onto the street with hilarity. The incongruities of the situation, the abject poverty, the humor in the face of hopelessness, the pratfall and self-generating entertainment were not lost on Dubasky. She constantly keeps a sharp eye on the broken piece of ground that might give us a moment's solace. If her landscape pretensions, (like Kiefer's for that matter) at times reach too high or lack differentiation, she can pride herself on the fact that her paintings work smoothly, the way good self-generating entertainments should.

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Yvonne Thomas

Early Works, 1955 - 1962

Denise Bibro Fine Art through January 30

BY ROBERT C. MORGAN

YVONNE THOMAS IS A truly dedicated artist, and this exhibition of paintings from her awakening into abstract expressionism are evidence of her dedication. Thomas has a facility for paint and color that represents what used to be called "formalist" painting. She can make the surface undulate and press in upon itself like few others.

When asked about these magical manipulations of paint, Thomas credited her teacher Hans Hofmann. According to Thomas, it was the exuberant energy and infectious enthusiasm of Hofmann that made abstract painters in New York want to learn. He offered a method that could liberate one's painterly consciousness. Thomas discovered that she was no longer pulled down by the weight of a method but lifted up by the possibilities and potentialities of her sense of intuition.

It is this sense of intuition that comes across in these marvelous paintings from 1955 - 1962. It was an exciting period to be painting in this style and there were many artists doing it. Keep in mind that this era was on the cusp between the first and second generations of abstract expressionists. We hear a lot about Joan Mitchell, Grace Hartigan, Helen Frankenthaler and Lee Krasner as connected with the second generation. Yvonne Thomas should be included there as well.

It is curious to note that by 1955, Willem de Kooning was the painter who everyone wanted to emulate - not Jackson Pollock. Pollock's drip-and-pour style of painting was too difficult to follow. If you dripped and poured, you would look too much like Pollock. Somehow de Kooning's tactile approach to the gesture was more open; he gave a certain edge to Abstract Expressionism. It was more than style.

Looking at *THE SIREN*, 1955 by Yvonne Thomas, one gets the sense that she took a little from de Kooning and something else from Hofmann, but ultimately she made it all her own. This was going to be her style, and no one else's. A dogmatic approach to painting was necessary in those days, and Thomas knew it. She clearly understood what was required in order to become the artist that everyone

wanted to be.

This exhibition is an exhilarating one. It is without pretense. The paintings don't try to be anything more than what there are, namely, damn good painting (to appropriate a phrase from the Cedar Bar). Even smaller paintings like *ELIGIA*, 1962 and *RED DICE*, 1959 show Thomas as an artist who understood what the philosopher Wittgenstein meant when he wrote - "Form is the possibility of structure." It is not so easy to discover form through gesture. Color is not an effect in these paintings, but a necessary, incalculable ingredient - a quality that must sing and offer the proper tension in order for the painting to pull together.

Making her paintings pull together (again a Hofmannesque concept) is something that Thomas mastered in those early years. There is a quality of focus and concentration - a quality of light - that is difficult to articulate beyond the act of seeing how it functions as part of the compositional whole. *BLUE ECHO*, 1961 - another small painting - is resonant, full of vitality and life. Thomas understands that balance in a composition is not something that emerges out of the void. To get balance in one's work, it is necessary to seek out the conflict, to discover the tension that exists within the inchoate pictorial space, and then to wrestle it down, to take command of it, but the trick is to command it with grace, intelligence, and a nearly hedonistic abandonment.

When I view these paintings, I don't have to chase after referents. Referents and meanings are not the issue. These paintings contain their own life, their own cause and effect, their own ineffable necessity. *FABLE*, 1958/9 - a museum piece - is like that. If you want to understand what the legacy of Abstract Expressionism is all about from the position of those who