

## Elemental Sources

Makor Center through December 18

BY JOEL SILVERSTEIN

**T**HERE'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

**I**N 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