

# REVIEW

Reviews and previews of current exhibitions in New York  
May 1996 \$3

## Burckhardt, Horvath and Wilson Landscapes at Tibor de Nagy by Hilton Kramer

Many people who greatly admire the photographs of Rudy Burckhardt—exhibited earlier this season at de Nagy—remain unfamiliar with the artist's paintings. Yet painting has been something more than pastime for Burckhardt for decades now, and he is certainly the star of this show devoted to small paintings on canvas and panel. His subjects are drawn from nature—woods, close-up views of tree bark, autumn leaves—and the pictorial style is one of unusual delicacy. Don't look for the kinds of irony that Burckhardt often insinuates into his photographs of the urban scene. If anything, there is a tendency in Burckhardt's paintings of nature to turn his subjects in the direction of abstraction. The little painting of autumn leaves, without in any way forfeiting its representational rigor, is a kind of "all-over" abstraction as well, and the tree-bark pictures might easily pass for outright abstractions if we didn't know better. There is enough here, in any case, to make one wonder what a little retrospective of Rudy Burckhardt's paintings would look like.

Sharon Horvath's paintings are new to me, and I have to confess that I can't quite make them out. They appear to be based on nature, but nature seen from such a distance that it is virtually indistinguishable from contour-maps of topographical terrain. At times one is reminded of Arthur Dove, but the comparison isn't a flattering one for Horvath. The hard surface that is characteristic of these pictures offers, for this observer, still another obstacle to the eye.

I have long been a devoted admirer of Helen Miranda Wilson's landscape paintings, but in the group of pictures assembled for this occasion the artist has taken leave of landscape art in favor of a realm of imaginative fantasy—dreamscapes, as they may be called—in which memories and symbols are mingled for a purpose that remains obscure, at least for me. This looks like a mistaken direction for the artist to take, but one that I shall continue to follow with interest.

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## Second Installment

by April Kingsley

Back again. This time with some friends from the past, and some new people who seem to be doing the right thing for me esthetically. Like **Morgan O'Hara**, whom I'd never heard of, but who was in the inaugural exhibition of the new Gracie Mansion/Fred Dorfman space on Prince Street. (The works went back to the Gracie Mansion/Fred Dorfman Projects Space on St. Marks Place after the opening and can be seen there.) Morgan makes "portraits for the 21st century" of airline captains, shrinks, photographers, accountants, composers and performers, computer whizzes, fellow artists, judges, engineers—you name them—everyperson. The artist claims her portraits—scribbly ink lines ensnarled across the paper surface—"reveal the person's accidents of birth, and give clues to his or her life, work, personality, major preoccupations, sense of curiosity and adventure, and pattern of movement." She should have said "patterns" of movement, for that is what it is she seems to track with her EKG/EEG, seismographic lines. The lines pulse and jump, scatter and spark. They swing, they knot, they loop free and then double back into a snarl. Densities are more prevalent than open spaces. None of the portraits are so telling as those describing Amiri Baraka/Le Roi Jones performing "I am", a poem for Addison Gale in Milan in 1992—in which the lines form a powerful, head-like black shape thrusting forward in space—contrasting with the movement of the hands of the Italian translator, which take up a mincing, will-o-the-wisp, one fifth of the page space Baraka occupies. I happen to be partial to drawing that is about line pulsing with life. Morgan O'Hara's lines do.

I saw two wonderful painting shows in Soho this week (a statement I can't customarily make). When you walk into **Pat Passlof's** show at the Elizabeth Harris Gallery the smell of oil paint is intoxicating. Paintings about paint. Generically classical caryatid figures, horses, and centaurs cavort in pastoral abstractions, each outlined and separated from one another with no overlapping to create spatial illusion. Everything is on the surface. Form and ground are equally activated by brushstrokes, drips, clots, and swaths of pigment. The paint has a surprisingly matte finish, especially where it is really thick. Pat seems to love the pigment and to keep the medium to a minimum. Her colors are rich and startling. A greenish yellow

ground for an "Indian" red centaur, a cadmium yellow deep animal outlined in the same brownish red on a mottled green ground, proliferating pink, bright, hard blue edges on a sullied green ground—none of the color seems old or used overmuch before. A painter madly painting paintings about painting as if no one had ever been a painter before. Like a cave artist, Pat paints as if there's past and no tomorrow. The show closes May 24th.

In his last exhibition at Kim Foster on Crosby Street, classicizing figures dominated **Jean-Marie Haessle's** paintings. Unlike Pat Passlof's bucolic Ovidian classicism, Jean-Marie's imagery spoke of the Renaissance and of indoor erotic activities through alphabets of figural typography (bodies stretched and curved into letter forms). Over the period since then, which is documented in the current exhibition, to May 18, these body/alphabets were reduced to unrecognizable linear fragments and finally submerged beneath a welter of strokes of brilliant pigment. In the ongoing dialogue between drawing and painting that has characterized western art history as a whole, and Jean-Marie's painting in particular, the paint is, at least for the moment, victorious. And victory is sweet. Then too, the rich, one might even say glorious, beauty of the paint in the most recent canvases may reflect the fact that they were painted in the sun drenched art colony of San Miguel in Mexico.

In Kim Foster's smaller gallery for the same time period are **Creighton Michael's** drawings and small sculptures which are intended to illustrate and compliment each other. All executed since his move out of the city to an upstate New York country place with a pond on the property, the work reflects the drawing and sculpting Mother nature does so naturally. The drawings, which are marvelous, make a more comfortable transcription of natureform into art than do the sculptures, which look too much like art, not enough like nature. The scale jumps that work beautifully in lines and smudged planes, are a bit awkward in wire, steel, paper, and wood, in part because the materials are so intrinsically different from one another. The drawings sing, while the sculptures are still clearing their voices.

Gallery Schlesinger is hosting a wonderful, modest show of work from four decades by **Fritz Bultman** (1919-1985). An Abstract Expressionist who worked equally eloquently in four different media—oil painting, painted paper collage, drawing, and sculpture—he was more interested in one than another at different times of his life. Fritz brought something new to each medium. The paint-

ings have a moody turbulence that provides the viewer no rest. A small red and yellow canvas shines sunlight into the room as does a late, sparse collage. Geometry is so organicized in the paintings that is all but disappears; in the collages it is overt, but somehow you think about the beautiful way the color works instead. Fritz drew abstractly in the early years, but his love for the figure came more and more to the fore in the fifties and sixties. His drawing style evolved out of Hans Hofmann's, but nothing in Hofmann's oeuvre remotely approached the languorous voluptuousness and sharp eroticism of Fritz's renderings of the female nude. In sculpture, too, he innovated, tearing and working sheets of black wax into open forms from which unique casts were made. Fully abstract, yet seemingly classical in their gracefulness, the sculptures also feel like fragments of nature, charred in the proverbial primordial fire.

As part of my curatorial duties at the American Craft Museum, I happened to be in fiber artist Lenore Tawney's studio last week and I got a preview of her upcoming show of *Shrines* at the E.M. Donahue Gallery May 18-June 29. Lenore has been making these boxed sculptures since 1964 when a cracked Plexiglas box sitting unused in her studio inspired her to imitate its cracks in lines of linen string crossing though the box's interior and passing out of its sides. The linear forms at first literally wove through the box space in somewhat

the way they did when she was weaving traditionally, but after a stint at the Textile Institute in Philadelphia in 1966 working on the Jacquard loom the linear forms began to follow the drawings she made of the double helical, spiraling geometric structures of her diagrammed Jacquard loom setups. Three of the line drawings she made then will be included in the show, making the graphic link easy to see. The *Shrines* are meant for meditating on the nature of birth, death, and reincarnation. Inside the boxes, and, more recently outside them as well, one finds birds feathered in paper, stones, twigs, birds' eggs, replicas of the Venus of Willendorf, and other fertility figures resting on suspended beds of strings. A sense of lightness prevails, augmented by the Plexiglas bases supporting the boxes, but the physicality of the "plastic" box walls remains somewhat intrusive. What you want is for the boxes to disappear and the strings and their burdens to float miraculously in the air like a Buddhist adept hovering above ground in a trance state.

Finally, a word about the *Kienholz Retrospective* at the Whitney Museum through June 2: Awful. Also, dated, overblown, and much ado about nothing. It is truly a show for people who know nothing about art. You don't have to know how to look at art, because you won't be able to find it there anyway.

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REVIEW