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The New Criterion

Gallery Chronicle

By James Panero

On “George Grosz: The Years in America: 1933–1958” at David Nolan Gallery; “Mel Kendrick: Markers” in Madison Square Park; “Conrad Marca-Relli: The New York Years 1945–1967” at Knoedler & Company; “Leon Polk Smith” at Washburn Gallery; “Carole Feuerman: Swimmers, Bathers & Nudes” at Jim Kempner Fine Art & “Color-Time-Space” at Lohin Geduld and Janet Kurnatowski Galleries.

Many people have asked me how the art world is doing in the economic downturn. I am sorry to report that the art world died in early August. This tragic event was not unexpected, nor was it unwelcome. The previous several months had been rough. The end came as a blessing.

After the death of the art world comes its afterlife. The silly season that stretched for nearly a decade will give way to more sober reflection. Galleries will continue to close. But we also know that some galleries will survive, thanks to their intelligence and sensitivity to the emerging mood. Several are off to a good start.

One artist whose antennae were always attuned to changing situations was the German Expressionist George Grosz. The artist is now the subject of a museum-quality exhibition at David Nolan. The business of good gallery-making begins with the education of the eye. With twenty-nine Grosz paintings and drawings and a 280-page catalogue, David Nolan is now running his own class in Grosz anatomy. [1]

In the 1920s Grosz lampooned the excesses of the Weimar Republic, corrupt and blind to Germany’s darker forces. He singled out Adolf Hitler for ridicule when the Führer was little more than a failed artist. A one-time member of the Communist Party, Grosz also repudiated his leftist allegiances after a visit to the Soviet Union. Hitler and Stalin came to appear to him as two sides of the same war machine. Rightly so. Yet perhaps most surprisingly, Grosz developed an unalloyed exuberance for the United States. This romanticism emerged first through his reading of popular American literature and developed in dialectical opposition to his pessimism towards the deteriorating European climate.

When an invitation came in 1932 to teach a summer course at the Art Students League, Grosz booked passage the next month on the ocean liner *New York*. He arrived to the fanfare of the American press. He wrote back to his wife: “I love you, America. I feel like this is my country, I belong here.” He soon decided to emigrate with his family to New York and did so early the next year. Two weeks after his arrival, SA troops stormed his flat and studio in Berlin and declared him an enemy of the regime.

Anti-Hitler, anti-Stalin, pro-America—the trifecta of political astuteness, but a victory that has complicated Grosz’s legacy. Anti-Hitler, good. Anti-Stalin, tolerable. Pro-America, beyond the pale. As Klaus Mann, an exile in Paris, complained in 1936: “He has changed; a very long, very passionate battle has left him tired. He has become apolitical—or is at least trying to be.... He no longer draws: he paints.”

Grosz lived and worked in the United States for twenty-five years. He became one of the earliest high-profile refugees from Hitler. Yet while his audience expected the caustic illustrator to turn his pen against his new homeland, Grosz went about exploring other sides of his artistic vision. The nudes and landscapes that resulted are the revelations of the Nolan show, along with the dense allegorical work he developed in paint.

Grosz could apply his talents for drafting to many styles. The show ranges from black-and-white wartime illustrations to satirical send-ups of Hitler (*So Smells Defeat* [1937]). He worked his way through the Old Masters, Breugel in particular, by creating pressure-cooked paintings like the infernal *Retreat (Rückzug)* (1946) with swirling fires, twisted barbed wire, and a shot-up brick wall that has a three-dimensional texture in oil. In *Cain or Hitler in Hell* (1944), a pile of human skeletons climbs up Hitler’s leg.

That Grosz had a flip side to his dark vision makes him a more complex and interesting artist. His “romantic” American landscapes are as true to their own time and place as are his dystopian images of Europe. Grosz lived on Long Island and vacationed on Cape Cod. He adored the beaches and often painted his wife, Eva, in nude and sometimes erotic scenes in the dunes. The rolling sand and wispy beach grass in Grosz’s landscapes become fecund allegories for a land of milk and honey. As he wrote to his brother-in-law in 1950, “What do you have against the dune paintings and nature studies, they are part of the whole oeuvre—if I hadn’t done them (with passion and love, too), I would not have been able to paint my imaginative pictures, because ‘invention’ is only derived from nature.” He was right. Drawings like *Dunes at Wellfleet* (c.

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1940) and *Dunes Cape Cod* (1939) are among the best works in the show, and to be blind to them is to be blind to Grosz's entire vision.

Several shows this month deserve far more attention than space allows, so here are the best of them, however briefly. When I last reviewed the sculptor Mel Kendrick, another David Nolan artist, I objected to the diminutive scale of the work on view. Kendrick is a constructivist who carves an abstract shape from a wood block, then places the result on top of a base made of the leftover pieces. For an artist who likes to show his hand, sometimes the process gets the better of the product. Not so for a set of monumental sculptures now on view in Madison Square Park.^[2] Derived from many of the same forms at his last Nolan show, these outdoor giants executed in poured black-and-white concrete are playful exceptions to the cloying piles that normally pass for public sculpture. To appreciate their power, just visit the park with children around. By climbing through every hole and jumping off every shape of Kendrick's work, they understand the fun of these structures without the need for further explanation.

The New York School artist Conrad Marca-Relli brought collage to Abstract Expressionism. Some of his best work is now on view at Knoedler.^[3] In 1967 the critic William Agee noted that Marca-Relli "accepted the potential risks inherent in collage and developed it as a complete pictorial system." Unlike earlier artists who used collage as fragmentary elements in larger paintings, Marca-Relli created entire collage abstractions. An untitled work at Knoedler from 1952 serves as an example of what he could do. With a white surface covering a black background, Marca-Relli cuts a swirling line across the canvas and pulls the gaps open exposing the black beneath, sometimes turning and re-pasting a white chad back onto the surface. "The limitations of the material acted two ways," the artist once said. "It confronted me with a problem of solving the shape and reducing it to the simple form that I was looking for. On the other hand, a collage has always been to me a kind of discipline." It was a discipline that Marca-Relli perfected.

From Malevich to Albers, the square has long been a focus of abstract attention. Sometime in the 1960s, the circle began to receive its due. The simple drawings of Leon Polk Smith from 1968 now on view at Washburn—along with one much larger, shaped canvas—pay homage to the celestial.^[4] On a white background Smith collects a handful of colorful circles together in multiple iterations. These dots act as singular objects, but we can also read them as portholes onto larger circles beneath. Smith leaves these forms to be rounded out in our minds, a dynamic that never loses energy.

It is no secret that twentieth-century modernism had a bad body image, as everyone from Picasso to Giacometti beat a psychological reading into the classical form. Look at the healthy bodies of Augustus Saint-Gaudens and realize the beauty that was lost when art turned away from the idealized nude. The sculptor Carole Feuerman has been confronting this development for decades by reevaluating the classical nude in a contemporary way. Her work is now on view at Jim Kempner.^[5] Unlike other hyper-realist sculptures, Feuerman is not afraid of idealized form. She specializes in female swimmers. According to the modernist playbook she does everything wrong. Her work indulges in sentimentality. Her materials include hair and plastic resin, which she splashes on her figures like drips of pool water. Not to mention the fact that we haven't seen bodies this fit since the Fascist summer-carnival sculpture in Zell am See. On the one hand, for all of her technique, I found some of the polychromy, especially in the faces, a little waxy. On the other, a work like *Tree* (2009), with its swimmer standing on a tree trunk in nothing but a leafy bathing cap, seems like an art nude for the twenty-first century, real and of the moment.

Last June, I mentioned the upcoming exhibition of Tim Bavington's hard-edged abstraction at Jack Shainman Gallery with some enthusiasm. Having now seen the show, I can say it was a disappointment.^[6] Bavington is out to revisit the optical art of the 1960s. Unfortunately, he approaches this task with the gauzy reserve of Gerhard Richter. Bavington's optical effects are referential rather than internal to his painted form. He reinvestigates the synesthetic link between color and music, but the connections he draws are facile. For one painting, *Fell in Love with a Girl* (2009), Bavington informs us the work was "named for a White Stripes song" but "inspired by Missoni fabric." Please, someone send this artist a Scriabin CD.

The abstract painters Joanne Freeman and Kim Uchiyama have organized an excellent group show over two galleries with eye-popping work by Jennifer Riley and Thornton Willis, among others.^[7] Allow me to single out my new favorite painting. It is *My Beautiful Laundrette* (2008) by Stephen Westfall. The colorful work is based on a grid design the artist has been developing for years. What separates Westfall from the old serialists is the way he fits his pieces together, with his square corners coming together slightly out of alignment. One's darting eyes pick up the differences and animate the frames. Color, texture, and form all come together. It is a mesmerizing spectacle and a vision, I hope, of things to come. New Yorkers came out by the thousands for the season's gallery openings, and several galleries mounted strong exhibitions. The death of the art world may be the best thing to happen in years.

NOTES

1 "George Grosz: The Years in America: 1933–1958" opened at David Nolan Gallery, New York, on September 16 and remains on view through October 31, 2009. [Go back to the text.](#)

2 "Mel Kendrick: Markers" opened in Madison Square Park, New York, on September 17 and remains on view through December 31, 2009. [Go back to the text.](#)

3 "Conrad Marca-Relli: The New York Years 1945–1967" opened at Knoedler & Company, New York, on September 12 and remains on view through November 14, 2009. [Go back to the text.](#)

4 "Leon Polk Smith" opened at Washburn Gallery, New York, on September 10 and remains on view through October 31, 2009. [Go back to the text.](#)

5 "Carole Feuerman: Swimmers, Bathers & Nudes" opened at Jim Kempner Fine Art, New York, on September 17 and remains on view through October 31, 2009. [Go back to the text.](#)

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