

# ALEXANDRE

contents / September–October 2009



**Cover:** Melvin Edward Nelson,  
*Untitled* (detail), mineral pigment  
on paper [11 x 13 1/2 in.], not dated.  
Courtesy Cavin-Morris Gallery,  
New York

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Aaron Morse, *Kingdom of Nature*, watercolor and collage on paper, 2007.  
Courtesy ACME Gallery, Los Angeles

entific illustrations of bones, portraits of Abraham Lincoln and Geraldine Ferraro, a Domino's Pizza box, an eagle, and the symbol for dangerous radioactivity—in other words the new and the old, the organic and invented wrested out of their natural contexts and homogenized into disregarded junk. Brenna Youngblood, too, makes a virtue of disjunctive accumulation. Her large panels layer paint, photo-

graphs, and other images on paper into compelling textural fields, dark, damaged specters of domesticity ravaged, it seems, by time, flood, fire.

Too much in the show, however, came across as facile and slight, misconceived efforts to cut-and-paste one's way to consequence. Maeghan Reid's work was typical in its superficial vitality. The meeting of disparate textures (tile, fabric, photographs)

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on spiral sketchpad pages generates a spark, but no compelling imagery or relationships among the parts sustain it. Vague, random disjunctions like these prevail throughout the show: Roshia Yaghmai layers cutouts of vases, wine goblets, and coffee cups atop grainy photo blowups of a Japanese raked sand garden in a graphic example of the opposite of synergy; Jason Meadows melds Paris Hilton's upper half to a painted scorpion tail, a dada- or surrealist-style coupling minus either friction or frisson.

—Leah Ollman

John Walker: Drawings  
1973–75 at Knoedler &  
Company, New York

What might the spirit of controlled inquiry look like in non-narrative images? Should a brave filmmaker ever wish to plumb the imagistic possibilities of the contained experiment, he or she might do worse than to focus on the early, abstract drawings of John Walker. In the nascent 1970s, the British painter—recently arrived in New York on a fellowship—began an avid investigation of materials and mark making on paper. A departure from his large-scale painted collages, with their jutting canvas planes and vivid hues, his black-and-white drawings are more intimate if no less ambitious, for, as this exhibition proved, they



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John Walker, *Untitled*, ink and pencil on handmade Japanese paper (21 1/2 x 18 in.), 1974. Courtesy Knoedler & Company, New York

cover an astonishing breadth of ground.

Made between 1973 and 1975, the studies utilize limited material means for infinitely variable aesthetic ends. In this installation, evocative ink-and-pencil landscapes on feathery handmade Japanese paper led to more gestural works made with oil crayon and lead, which were in turn followed by vaporous bursts of pale dry pigment on dark acrylic grounds that recall a threatening if luminous cosmos. An untitled series from 1974 occupied one room. It charts an

elusive landscape (at once architectural and pastoral) of loosely repeated shapes in changing light, with puddles of near violets, grays, and bluish-blacks gorgeously rendered. A rough and rectangular pencil frame holds each image like a window—outside its frame, the lovely paper offers its uninflected surface like a subtle present.

In comparison, the show's other drawings were more aggressively confrontational. Works made with oil crayon and lead are circumscribed by pencil frames that feel taut to the

breaking point; in others, the frame sags, bursts, the forceful marks within spilling outside the margins. In works employing oil stick and chalk, the white lines are nearly incised into the paper itself. Their pale, reedy hatching suggests fish skeletons or bamboo, but the positive-negative image reversal echos that of a photogram. While these works reflect the larger spirit of conceptual and aesthetic experiment that characterized the New York art world in the 1970s, they also point forward to Walker's later output: the serialization of landscape in his "Seal Point Series" (2006), his increasing focus on light and texture in his '80s-era etchings, and recent works in which the scribbled line seen in previous works finally becomes actual words (cribbed from poets Wilfred Owen and David Jones). To that end, these drawings function like so many windows into Walker's process and provide a reminder that material constraints can lead to invaluable formal breakthroughs.

—Quinn Latimer