

The Washington Post

For Art Lovers, a Chelsea Morning: New York Gallery Mecca Finally Makes Good on Its Promise

By Blake Gopnik

Sunday, September 26, 2004

About seven years ago, Manhattan's huge gallery scene, by far the largest in the world, moved almost en masse from booming SoHo to the far western reaches of Chelsea, by the Hudson River north of Greenwich Village. Art began to displace the neighborhood's body shops and taxi depots. For some time after this Great Migration, the district was notable more for the quantity and size of its shows than for their quality. Outside New York, Chelsea was best known for splashy, sellable paintings that didn't seem to have much chance of leaving a historic mark.

This year the scene seems to have grown, if that's possible. It now takes two full days, morning to night, to visit just the best-known Chelsea galleries. But for the first time that I can remember, doing the autumn rounds felt mostly worthwhile. There was real variety on view -- of medium, subject matter, approach, scale. More important, there were a few artists and works that didn't fit into convenient pigeonholes. There were shows that left questions hanging in the air.

Of the 20 or more noteworthy exhibitions in Chelsea's fall season, six get a closer look inside this section, with extra images on view in our photo gallery.

The most interesting show of the Chelsea season also has the strangest premise behind it. Photographer An-My Le, who came to this country as a refugee from Vietnam in 1975, recently managed to get permission to photograph a "virtual Iraq" established for troop training at a Marine base in the California desert. Lugging a huge, tripod-bound view camera, she visited a corner of our Wild West now done up to simulate our wild corner of the Middle East.

Le's show at Murray Guy gallery, an underrated space that's a touch off the beaten track, shows us the result.

A suite of abandoned prefab buildings that were once housing for U.S. officers is now smeared with such slogans as "Good Saddam," "Go Home GI" and "Kill Bush." (Imagine the Pentagon work order for that particular paint job.) Le's preternaturally crisp black-and-white photos show a bunch of troops-in-training taking turns playing good guys, bad guys and guys somewhere in between.

One photograph presents four young Americans costumed in scruffy civvies, wearing the homemade armbands of the Iraqi police. Complete with dangling Kalashnikovs, these amateur actors do a fine job of conveying lassitude and a desultory performance of duty. You have to hope the role's a stretch for them.

Another photo shows a platoon of uniformed Marines as they take down urban "insurgents" wearing track suits. An unarmed bystander -- presumably an officer -- watches the scene. He's in fatigues and is wearing a gas mask, but his hands are in his pockets and he leans against one of the houses with Cary Grant nonchalance.

A third image shows a distant desert landscape, with tiny GIs checking out a street of scattered houses surrounded by sand. Look more closely at the shot, however, and it turns out that the houses are just props; they're the kind of free-standing facades you'd find on the MGM back lot.

That sense of fantasy pervades Le's show. The most painful, important reality of our day comes at us in a "practice version" that's so stagy, it's almost surreal. The pictures are as crisply illusionistic as anyone could want. But the technical perfection of their realism implies a maximum of heavy camera gear, which means there's nothing candid about these shots. They may feel like open windows onto the action they show, but they couldn't have come about without tight planning and cooperation between the static photographer and her moving subjects. The show's news release compares Le's work to posed shots taken by the equipment-laden photographers of the Civil War. But their battlefield images involved manipulating things to show warfare after the fact. Le catches military action before it's even happened.

These pictures imply a nation that's been Hollywoodized from top to bottom. Set in the landscape of our Manifest Destiny, Le's photos suggest a world where the imagined and the real might sometimes be confused. They make me wonder if American self-image might sometimes trump realpolitik.

At Murray Guy gallery through Oct. 16. Call 212-463-7372 or visit www.murrayguy.com.

The new paintings of New Yorker Will Cotton, on show at Mary Boone, are either the dumbest works now on the scene or as smart as anyone could wish.

For some time now, Cotton's trademark photo-realistic pictures have shown landscapes made entirely of sweets -- cotton-candy clouds, almond-bark riverbanks, penny-candy forests -- which he builds as dioramas, then photographs and finally renders in paint on massive canvases. In his latest body of work, Cotton has taken these sugary settings and inserted a luscious naked woman into the middle of each one.

Cotton's new pictures are so immediately offensive to anyone who thinks women are more than just toothsome morsels -- so gross in their political obtuseness -- that there has to be more to them than meets the eye. I can't believe that even the crassest billionaire collector could see a naked black woman lounging in a pool of vanilla ice cream as the normal stuff of art, no matter how deliciously she's painted.

I prefer to read Cotton's latest work as a kind of allegory for painting's current predicament. Many of the canvases typically on view in Chelsea are nothing more than saccharine confections, so Cotton has decided to go with the flow and produce the ultimate in high-calorie, nutrient-free art. By pushing through and well beyond the bounds of good taste, Cotton has

simply extended the logic of Chelsea's more tasteful canvases and shown the empty premises they're built on.

Unfortunately, my reading also risks letting Cotton and his collectors have their cheesecake and eat it, too.

At Mary Boone Gallery through Oct. 23. Call 212-752-2929 or visit www.maryboonegallery.com.

Wolfgang Staehle is the German-born Internet artist, long based in New York, whose video installation famously captured live footage of the World Trade Center as it burned and then collapsed.

During his latest show at Postmasters gallery, Staehle will be presenting more peaceable live action -- or so we have to hope.

One wall-filling, high-resolution video projection shows a series of still photos of a rustic vista in the Hudson River valley, snapped every 10 seconds by a live Web camera set on automatic. Rather than presenting the world in video, as it passes us by, Staehle's piece gives it to us as a sequence of tableaux. He becomes a kind of high-speed Frederic Church. It's amazing what pleasure there can be in watching nature change -- or rather, in watching one man-made picture give way to an oh-so-slightly different view. A visit just at closing time showed crisply rendered Old Master vegetation fading to impressionistic black -- a Sanford Gifford sunset becoming a Whistler nocturne. Flattened out and turned into a glowing rectangle on the wall of a Chelsea gallery, even the most transparent, high-tech view of nature smacks more of old-time art than of the great outdoors.

In another video projection, Staehle has taken a single classic landscape view and animated it. By shooting an hour's worth of Niagara Falls -- shades of Church again -- and then editing it into an infinite, seamless loop with roaring sound, Staehle gives us both a chance to contemplate a single scene at leisure and to absorb that scene's dynamic flow.

It's the next best thing to being there -- no raincoat required. After all, who needs reality when mediation does the trick so well?

At Postmasters gallery through Oct. 16. Call 212-727-3323 or visit www.postmastersart.com. For a look at the installation, visit [this video clip](#).

In a show called "Replacement" at Sean Kelly Gallery, prominent Brazilian artist Iran do Espirito Santo dances on the edge between representation and minimal abstraction.

The gallery's main space contains a massive work made out of six wall-size panels, cut from honeycomb aluminum and painted white. They are the six sides of an unfolded box, and they are being shown in different configurations over the five weeks of the show. One week all six sides might sit on the ground, while the next week two sides might be standing up, with the four others splayed out flat. Espirito Santo's panels evoke the steel plates of heavy industry but

also a delicate parcel folded from cardboard. There are hints of Richard Serra brutishness in them but also of the whimsical enlargements of Claes Oldenburg.

Another piece, installed in the gallery's front room, presents six plinths, each bearing a "light bulb" machined from a solid block of stainless steel and screwed into a white socket, standard-looking but in fact cut from solid Teflon. Espirito Santo's six faux fixtures exactly echo six working bulbs and sockets fixed on the ceiling overhead and lighting up the room. Each of Espirito Santo's objects reads as a strange alter ego to one of the room's real lighting fixtures: His turned steel gleams, but it is as massy and opaque as the real bulbs are light and incandescent. Lighthearted trompe l'oeil meets the taciturn, what-you-see-is-what-you-get ethos of minimal art.

At Sean Kelly Gallery through Oct. 16. Call 212-239-1181 or visit www.skny.com.

Video art has a reputation for being sober, even heavy-handed. The looped projections of Euan Macdonald -- born in Scotland, raised and trained in Canada and now based in Los Angeles -- take another tack. They are whimsical and resonant. They are more like lyric poetry than tracts. (A number were screened in Washington this August at Cheryl Numark's E Street space. The projections ran 24/7, so passing night owls could view them through the gallery's plate glass.) One video now showing at Cohan and Leslie gallery, called "Weltmeister" ("World Beater"), is titled after the logo emblazoned on the front of an accordion played by its lone hero. Over the course of the video's few minutes, the husky, gemütlich musician begins to play "The Star-Spangled Banner" at a normal pace, speeds up until the tune begins to fall apart, then veers into an unrecognizable vaudevillian fantasia whose notes barely cohere. This Weltmeister manages to have his way with the patriotic song of history's most powerful World Beater.

Another Macdonald classic shows the cracked pavement of a back street in a run-down Los Angeles neighborhood. A creaky ice cream truck pulls into view, with "It's a Small World" tinkling out over its loudspeaker. Within a minute or so, another truck appears, playing the same tune. Then a third one. A song that's about planetary harmony becomes cacophonous polyphony, all out of sync in a world all out of whack.

At Cohan and Leslie gallery through Oct. 9. Call 212-206-8710 or visit www.cohanandleslie.com.

For some reason only Freud could figure out, I have a fondness for knitted and crocheted art. This art world micro-trend is represented this season at Elizabeth Dee Gallery, in the first solo exhibition of New Yorker Orly Genger.

Genger makes peculiar abstract objects -- hard to say if they're sculptures, pictures or, well, sweaters -- that she's crocheted by hand out of yarn, elastic cord, metallic ribbons, even heavy rope. They have all the qualities of good abstraction: powerful forms and colors, interesting textures and compositions, an intense involvement with their materials and with the space they take up. But there's also an element of girlish play in Genger -- even of nose-thumbing -- that I can't resist. If a Jackson Pollock is all about the trace of the heroic artist's hand and psyche, an

artist's handiwork is present in a Genger, too -- but it's the trace of a heroine, and of the kind of modest sensibility we've always labeled feminine.

At Elizabeth Dee Gallery through Oct. 9. Call 212-924-7545 or visit www.elizabethdeegallery.com.