

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Art in America
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CRITIC'S DIARY

Suddenly This Summer

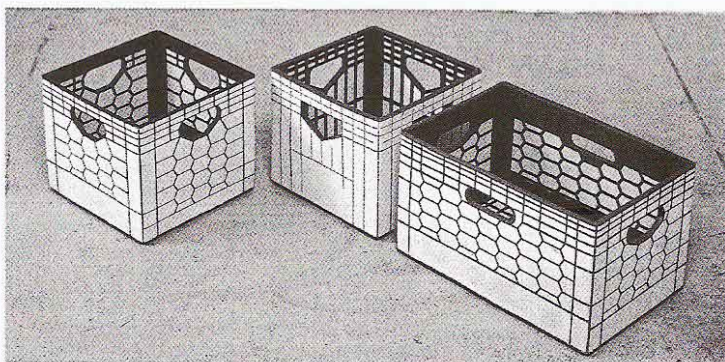
Assessing the work of an unfamiliar artist discovered in a group show is, for the author, the purest form of art criticism.

BY BARRY SCHWABSKY

Why do galleries mount summer group shows? Most people would answer that question with reference to business, but since gallery economics aren't my strong suit, my explanation will probably end up as something closer to an informal disquisition on esthetics.

While these shows take many forms, there are two types that dominate, and they are completely opposed in their motivations. The first type consists of selected works by the artists in the gallery stable. The intention, here, is to sustain and solidify the commitment that already exists between the gallery and its artists. At a time of year when less attention is being paid to the art scene and less money is changing hands, the gallery wants us to know that it continues to stand by the art whose value it has already proclaimed through solo shows during the regular season. For the critic who has already had the opportunity to consider the work of the exhibited artists (usually in greater depth), this kind of show has limited interest.

Other galleries use the summer group show to introduce new artists. Here the intention is not reiterative, but interrogative. And the implicit question is, essentially, What's new? From the critic's standpoint, it is this second type of group show



Anton Vidokle: Untitled sculptures, 1999, plastic containers and plaster, 11 by 13 by 13 inches (left and center) and 11 by 18½ by 13 inches (right). Photo courtesy Audiello Fine Art, Inc., New York.

that can be intriguing, partly because it presents an opportunity to pay attention not just to new things but to our very demand for the new.

Every so often I run into collectors on the street and usually they have the same question on their lips: "Have you seen anything new?" If I say, for instance, "Well, look at the new Alex Katz paintings, he's really taking it somewhere else," or, "Check out Lawrence Weiner's show," let alone citing something like the Jackson Pollock retrospective at MOMA—the newest thing I've seen in years—then I know I'll get the same response: a dismissive wave of the hand, and then, "But I know all that. You mean there's nothing new out there?"

I used to find this attitude terribly irritating. It even drove me to try to avoid all recourse to the new as a value, since it seemed to have become a purely commercial criterion. But I came to realize I couldn't do without the new, though it meant distinguishing between different senses of the word. "Literature," said Ezra Pound, "is news that *stays* news." If an older artist like Katz or a not-quite-as-old one like Weiner reaches deeper into the projects they've been pursuing for decades, really succeeding (perhaps in a quite subtle way) in drawing a different conclusion, then we ought to be able to understand why there's something new there.

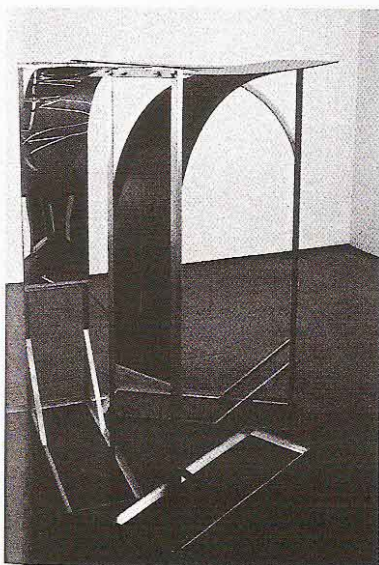
But that's not what my collector friends mean. They're looking for a new name, maybe a chance to get in on the ground floor. Well, thank goodness there are people who are looking to take that risk. For there is risk in investing money (as the collector does) or even just attention and interpretive energy (as the critic does) in the work of a new and unknown artist. With risk, however, comes excitement, at the very

least, and sometimes (for the collector, anyway) more concrete forms of reward as well.

The kind of newness that attaches to Pollock—newness that looks set to stay new for a long time—can be called, with perhaps a bit of exaggeration, the absolute new. The specific meaning of its newness may be in constant flux (that's what keeps it new), but the fact that it seems new is subject to little, if any, variation. The other kind, the newness that looks new right now—and in which the sensation of newness is indissociable from that vertiginous sense of doubt about whether this sensation will be stable or volatile, genuine or downright counterfeit—might therefore be called the relative new.

The summer group show fulfills a critical function to the extent that it satisfies our requirement for the relative new. (The complementary demand, for the absolute new, is completely alien to it.) And yet, criticism itself has been generally indisposed to take up the opportunities offered by summer shows, and they are rarely reviewed. Admittedly, there are practical reasons for this. It's hard to find a structure for a critical response to a collection of diverse things. Critical notice is a little easier to come by for theme shows or where there is a guest curator of some note. But then what gets reviewed is the theme itself, or the curator's concept or sensibility, and not so much the particular works themselves, which are often, in any case, far from unfamiliar.

It could be, too, that there is a certain fact being manifested by the resistance to reviewing summer group shows. It's as if their testing function, what I called their interrogative dimension, might be impaired by premature scrutiny. But I suspect that



Evan Holloway: 3 Part Sculpture, 1998, Plexiglas and aluminum, 69 by 40 by 40 inches. Photo courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.

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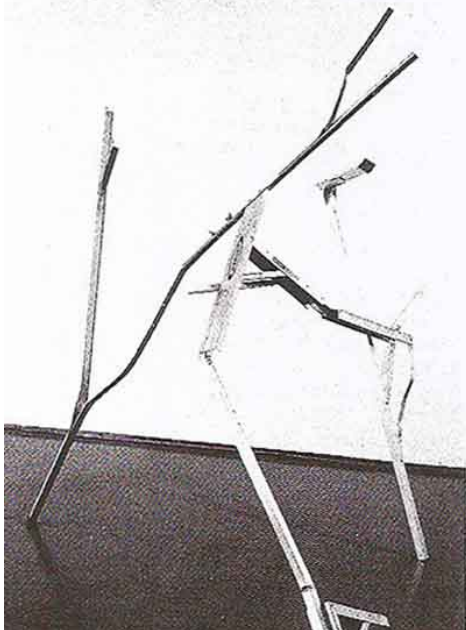
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Every artist's career has to begin somewhere, but how often does a first appearance actually come to your attention? There's something amazing about happening upon such a moment.

the main reason these shows don't get covered is because it's too hard to arrive at a judgment in the case of something truly unfamiliar, and that to publish such judgments leaves the critic uncomfortably out on a limb. All the more so, perhaps, when the judgment is negative. In one of those relatively rare reviews of a group show, an *Artforum* critic nonetheless declined to "name names" of those whose works he felt to be "clunkers" on the grounds that "everyone here is young, who knows what may happen?"¹ But, favorable or otherwise, that self-sufficient judgment is the critical act in its purest form, with the least admixture of criticism's neighboring metiers, art journalism, art history and art theory.

Perhaps the most extreme instance of having to make a completely independent judgment about what you're seeing may be when you're told about an artist, as I was by dealer Massimo Audiello, "I can't show you a bio for Matthew Hoyt; he doesn't have one yet." In other words, his work has not been shown, written about or reproduced, has had no public existence whatsoever. There's something amazing about happening upon such a moment: sure, every artist's career has to begin somewhere,

Jason Meadows: Terra-forma, 1999, aluminum and ladder parts, 7 by 8 by 6 feet. Photo courtesy 303.



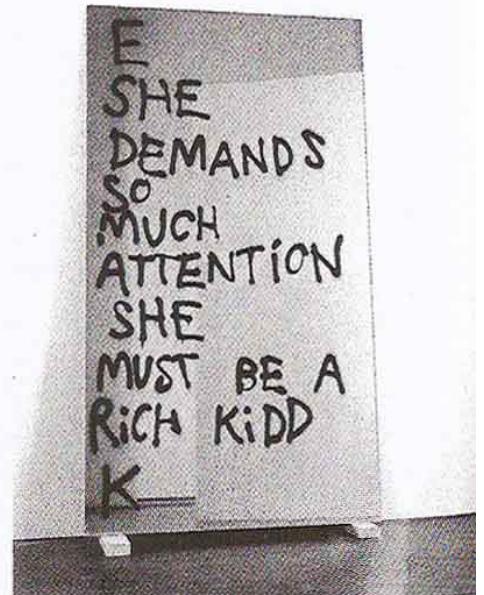
Matthew Hoyt: *Untitled*, 1999, clay, wood, glue, fabric, paint, epoxy resin, 7 inches high.

but how often does a first appearance actually come to your attention? While Los Angeles is constantly generating stories about dealers prowling art school thesis exhibitions like corporate recruiters at business schools swooping down on the hottest prospects, Manhattan has surprisingly few galleries consistently trawling for the absolutely unproven; mostly you have to make your way out to Williamsburg to find such galleries, and then there's often the endearingly sloppy air of friends-and-neighbors-showing-friends-and-neighbors about the experience. Audiello is one of the exceptions. A dealer with a strong track record going back to the mid-'80s, he left the business for a while, then turned up working for Robert Miller uptown before opening his small Chelsea space devoted mainly to young artists, often culled from recent or even current School of Visual Arts classes.

Not surprisingly, his summer show, "Lost & Found," was one of the richest troves of the relative new to be seen this summer, with only one artist I'd ever heard of before (not counting the only A student in a course I'd taught on art criticism at SVA recently, but whose work I didn't know). Here, aside from Hoyt's tiny, toylke rocking figures of clay and cloth, whose peculiar E.T.-like faces made them at once a little too charming and a little too repulsive but certainly memorable, the most striking works were three sculptures by Anton Vidokle, who turns out to be practically an old man by Audiello's standards, having graduated from SVA as long ago as 1989. Or are they sculptures? I've begun to find art annoying when it has nothing better to do than flirt with the border between painting and sculpture, but Vidokle seems less interested in blurred definitions than he is in precisely seen objects. The three works are ordinary plastic milk crates, the open spaces of which have been filled in with white plaster. Vidokle takes up the quite traditional artistic task of making you examine something you've always looked past. The crates are shown, on the floor, open side up, as

though waiting to be filled. Each of the four planes perpendicular to the floor appears as a small geometric painting, simply but beautifully crafted, with a single color in a white field. The peculiar tone of plastic colors—here, red, green and brown—emerges in a different way because of the contrast with the plaster. Likewise, the literal space within the crates emerges more forcefully, indeed more sculpturally, when it is shown as, so to speak, trapped by the plaster. These sculptures show Vidokle as a clear-eyed and rigorous formalist. (A photograph by him, a sort of still life of an Osage orange on a transparent tabletop in a white space, shows a similar formal bent with a less intelligible intention.)

If cradle-robbing from the art schools is not so developed a practice in New York as it is in Los Angeles, you might expect that a show of mostly L.A.-based artists would stand a good chance of providing glimpses of the relative new. This was



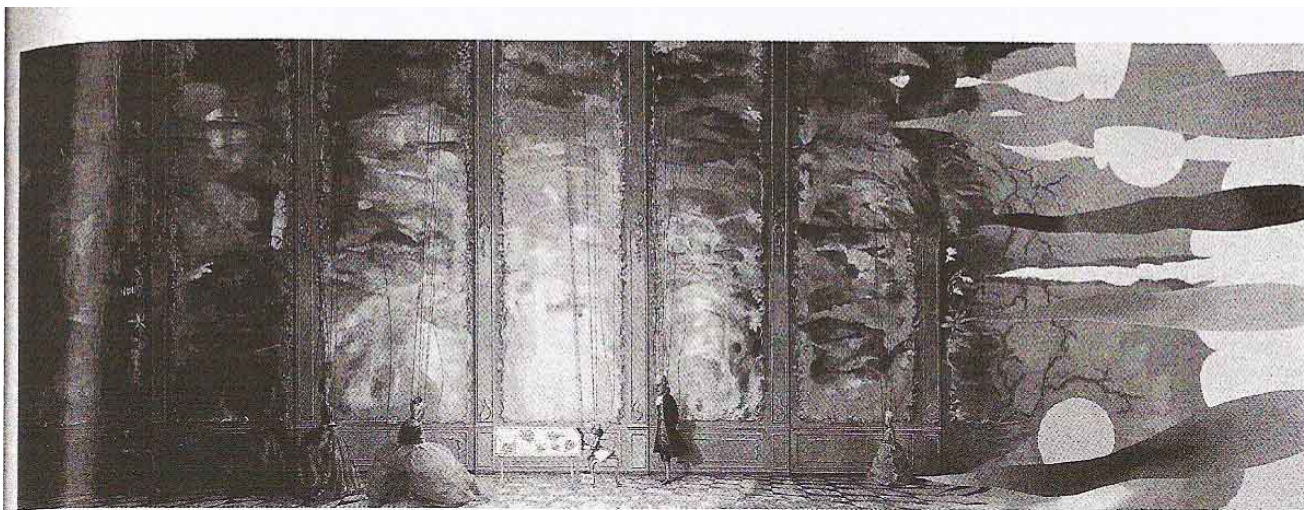
Mark Gonzales: *K*, 1999, spray paint on mirror, 76 1/2 by 44 inches. Photo courtesy Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York.

the case with "Caught" at Chelsea's 303 Gallery, a dependable supplier of the relative new (and also, I'd argue, of the other kind) since Lisa Spellman opened the first space of that name in the wilderness of Park Avenue South, longer ago than I care to admit I can remember. Perhaps I should have known about some of the artists in "Caught," because West Coast critics like Dennis Cooper and Bruce Hainley have already written about them. Luckily for me, names such as Jason Meadows and Evan Holloway (a couple of recent UCLA MFAs, 1998 and 1997, respectively) hadn't sunk in, so I was able to encounter them practically without preconceptions.

I might as well confess straight off that my

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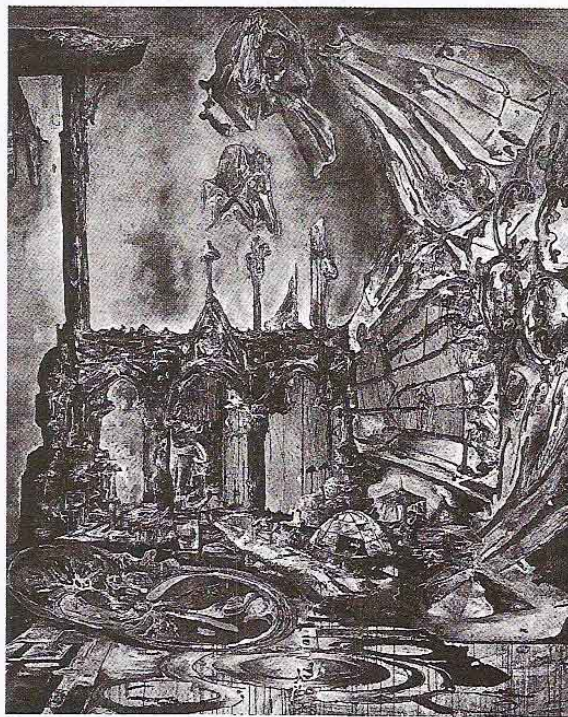
Monika Baer: *Untitled, 1998*, oil on canvas, 75 by 193 inches. Photo courtesy Deitch Projects, New York.

response to Holloway's *3 Part Sculpture* (1998), was about as close to love at first sight as I got this summer. And since a new love is always, somehow, the shadow of an old love, it cannot be irrelevant that this piece echoes much of what I love about the early work of Keith Sonnier: its modesty, its resourcefulness with materials, its elegant fusion of openness and informality with lucidity and structure. A sort of semi-open hut, Holloway's sculpture consists of three similar faces, each made of a simple aluminum framework supporting a bent mirror serving as a wall and a rooflike sheet of Plexiglas. Perhaps more fascinating than the way the bent mirrors distort the perception of oneself and one's environment as one walks around it is how, from a certain distance and with a contemplative stillness, the piece distorts itself: its fundamentally linear structure flattens out, and its three parts fool you into seeing them as two.

Most artists would like to think their work is unmistakably theirs, I guess, but a rather pleasant

confusion about just what belongs to who was one of the charms of "Caught." At first I took Meadows's *Poly distortion unit* (1999) to be another piece of Holloway's, I guess because its use of bent mirrored plastic was materially similar, though not as surprising. On a less obvious level of resemblance, another piece of Meadows's, *Terra-forma* (1999), is also a three-part open construction made of vernacular materials (in this case, rather dramatically, recomposed sections of a cut-up aluminum ladder). To complicate matters, the other Holloway sculpture, the quasi-representational *F-117* (1999), did not resemble *3 Part Sculpture* at all. It's a sort of model airplane made of black-painted shards of wood that looks like something Darth Vader might give his kid to play with.

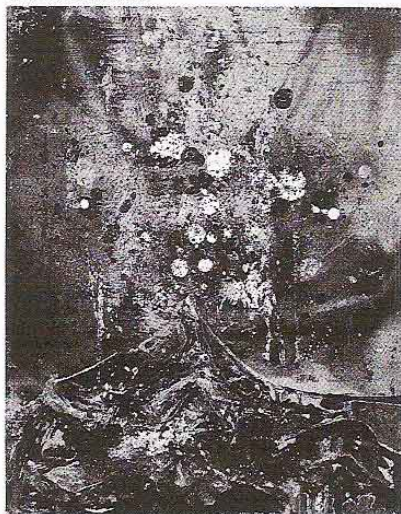
"Caught" was not explicitly billed as an L.A. show, and it wasn't, quite. Showcases of art from a particular place are almost thematic exhibitions, but if they don't claim to characterize what gives that place its current artistic identity, then they are essentially themeless. This was the case with "Mozart on Television: New Painting from Germany" at Deitch Projects, one of a number of galleries that seem to be moving away from the idea of working with a consistent stable of artists, probably in order to be less impeded in their dalliance with the relative new. I think of Germany as one of the few places besides the United States and England where painting remains a going concern, but Deitch's crop was underwhelming, with one big exception, one of three untitled paintings by Monika Baer. And I do mean big: the garishly colored work, dated 1998, was over 16 feet long—the better, I suppose,



Steve Di Benedetto: *Igloo, 1999*, oil on canvas, 106 by 89 inches. Photo courtesy Lawrence Rubin Greenberg Van Doren Fine Art.

to emphasize the puniness of the figures (all shown as puppets rather than as humans) inhabiting its stagey setting, an 18th-century court at whose center sits a child, presumably Mozart, playing at the keyboard. The intention seemed to be satirical, but of what? The artificiality of the 18th century from the viewpoint of the 20th? The refinement of Austrian culture from the earthier outlook of Germany? (It's hard to imagine who'd care.) But the painting's extravagantly Rococo quality was exactly what set it apart from almost everything

Steve Di Benedetto: *Mortis, 1998-99*, oil on canvas, 19 1/2 by 15 1/2 inches. Photo courtesy Luhring Augustine.



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else I saw this summer, including the more recent paintings by Baer, dated 1998, in the same show.

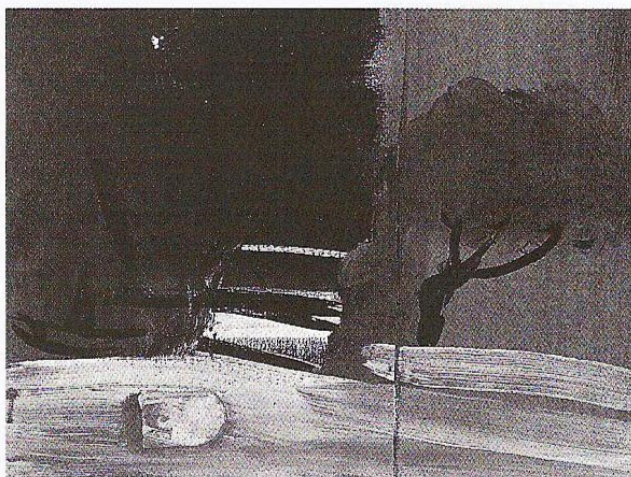
Of course, the newness of the new can be very relative indeed. One jam-packed little show I saw might just as well have been called "Ecole de Killimnik"—I felt I'd seen it all somewhere before, but with different names on the labels. But at this point, it probably sounds like the quality I called the relative new is really indistinguishable from the unfamiliarity of work by unknown young artists. Often enough that's true, but sometimes the work of an artist with a considerable track record can have that quality—if it seems sufficiently out of character to make you see his or her work as if it were completely unfamiliar. This is a much rarer event, though a particularly satisfying one. It happened to me at a show called "Kill All Lies," curated by Michele Maccarone at Luhring Augustine (like 303, long a reliable haunt of the relative new). The title refers to then-artist Tony Shafrazi's notorious spray-painted scrawl across Picasso's *Guernica* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1974. The work by the one artist I'd never heard of seemed familiar—foolish me, when I saw the words Mark Gonzalez had spray-painted onto mirrors I somehow thought that Luhring Augustine stalwart Christopher Wool (who wasn't in the show at all) had finally given up his stencils—while what looked wildly unfamiliar was actually by an artist whose work I'd been seeing regularly, without paying much attention to it, for at least a decade.

I'm still not even sure how to go about describing the five small paintings I saw by Steve Di Benedetto. Titles like *Absu* or *Idjarn* don't help much—I don't even know if they're nonsense or real words from any of the innumerable languages I don't speak, although the fact that one has a title that's clearly Latin (*Mortuus*) suggests that the latter is a strong possibility. I'm almost afraid to even describe these paintings as abstract, though that seems the one obvious thing about them. Just as I suspect there's actually meaning secreted in those nonsignifying titles, I've got to wonder whether there isn't some imagery cunningly buried among the weirdly scrambled paint surfaces Di Benedetto has served up. I can certainly mention a Richter-esque high-keyed palette without much risk, especially as that's about the only thing these paintings have in common with the hard-edged, optically aggressive stripe paintings I'd previously associated with Di Benedetto. Anyway, they're amazing paintings, with the nerve-jangling effect of the most intense Op art but married to a swarming, cancerously biomorphic quality—and yet somehow, in the immense care that seems to have gone

into these complicated surfaces, there is something quite tenderly lyrical about it all.

Di Benedetto also turned up in "Another Country: The Constructed Landscape," curated by Augusto Arbito at (let me pause for a deep breath) Lawrence Rubin Greenberg Van Doren Fine Art, the spiffy new uptown gallery whose intended niche is still unclear to me, though I'm sure that whatever it is they'll conquer it. Similar technique, different scale: this was a huge, incredibly ugly canvas called *Igloo* (1999), in which the weird textures of the small abstract works seemed to have unpleasantly coagulated into semiarchitectural forms. Far from making me question my enthusiasm for the paintings I'd seen at Luhring Augustine, the apparent failure of *Igloo* only confirmed for me the conviction that Di Benedetto is actually up to something quite risky, and therefore all the more impressive when it's brought off. (Similarly, Holloway's *F-117*, different as it was from *3 Part Sculpture*, which had made so much more of an impression on me, at least proved that Holloway is bent on making particular works, and not just on inventing a Hollowayesque type of object that can be reiterated indefinitely.)

Aside from *Igloo*, and a couple of spectacularly Technicolor landscape abstractions by Eva Lundsager—a painter whose work I know well but can't help mentioning here precisely because I suspect it harbors something of that absolute newness that is beyond the scope of this essay—"Another Country" was notable mainly for some small paintings by the Englishman Merlin James. In another context, you might take them for somebody's uncle's souvenirs of a rural vacation. I had seen some similar things a while back in a three-person show at what was then Wooster Gardens (now Brent Sikkema Gallery), but I'm still just as puzzled as I was the first time. A lot of artists these days seem attracted to the look of banal Sunday painting, but James gets closer than anybody else, I think, without actually allowing his work to become insipid enough to be quite dismissable. And yet it has that strangely subjectless quality that amateur art has, the one thing that painters like Maureen Gallace or Karen Kilimnik, who've taken other cues from the output of hobbyists, have never been interested in. Is James approaching a new frontier for art, where the one convention that turned out to be essential, that art was never supposed to have been able to jettison and still maintain its identity—namely, the concept of art itself—becomes questionable? It's a scary thought, and I'll be watching to see what happens with his work, hoping it stays as troubling as it is now.



Merlin James: *Tree & Steps*, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 12 by 18 inches.
Photo courtesy Lawrence Rubin Greenberg Van Doren Fine Art, New York.

As readers may have noticed, I seem to have allowed the very phenomenon I began discussing to vanish—I've been talking about specific works, not shows. Convention might have required a roll call of artists in every show mentioned with at least a brief remark on each of them. Instead, I've tried to maintain the undisciplined subjectivity that obtains when a critic doesn't have to write about everything he or she has seen, when it's not a tour of duty but of pleasure. While I can hardly deny that what caught my eye this summer reflects my own bias toward a kind of perverse formalism, I hope that the edge I find in these works has some basis beyond that bias.

The summer group show in its pure form, having no theme and no connecting thread among the works presented, is not really a show at all, but simply the simultaneous presentation of a number of singular works. All that's asked of them in relation to one another is that they stay out of each other's way. This means that to talk about my experiences sampling New York's summer group shows is not at all to talk about the shows as such, but simply to discuss the individual works or artists that caught my eye. In each case, without a history, a biography or a career's worth of work to refer back to, I was left face to face with the object. It's not a bad place to spend the summer. □

1. Bruce Hainley, "Malibu Sex Party," *Artforum*, February 1998, p. 98.

Exhibitions discussed in this article:

"Lost & Found," Audiello Fine Art [June 4-July 30]
"Caught," 303 Gallery [July 1-30]
"Mozart on Television: New Painting From Germany," Deitch Projects [July 1-Aug. 6]
"Kill All Lies," Luhring Augustine [June 4-July 30]
"Another Country: The Constructed Landscape," Lawrence Rubin Greenberg Van Doren Fine Art [June 9-July 9]

Author: Barry Schwabsky is the author of *The Widening Circle: Consequences of Modernism in Contemporary Art* (Cambridge University Press).

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