A Year in the Life: Tropic of

A wide-ranging look at the 1993-94 season reveals that, despite rumors of its death, painting is alive and well in New York, where stylistic variations continue to flourish.

BY JERRY SALTZ

Christian Schumann: **Death of a Friend of a Friend,** *1994, acrylic and mixed mediums on canvas, 72 by 48 inches. Courtesy Postmasters Gallery.*

Assume the Position

For a medium supposedly on the wane, painting certainly was in evidence last season, and maybe even impressive, too. Last spring when I told people I was writing this article tracking painting over the course of the 1993-94 season, I got strong reactions. Essentially people divided into two groups—let's call them the left and the right. On the left people said things like, "I hate painting," "Painting is in trouble," or "Painting is out of it"—all, obviously, variations on the old "painting is dead" position. Meanwhile, on the right (roughly equal in number), people bluntly told me, "Right on, man—defend painting," "I hate political art," or "When are people gonna learn to look again?" This camp waits for the triumphant "return of painting." Both sides need to get a grip on the fact that painting can never come back. The reason painting can never come back is that it never left. Both camps are disconnected from reality.

From early September 1993 through early July 1994, I kept track of all the shows in 85 New York galleries: some uptown, some midtown, the majority in SoHo, nearly all of them listed in the *Gallery Guide*, and all regularly exhibiting contemporary art. Charting their monthly shows on a large five-page, color-coded graph, I counted and tracked 610 exhibitions. Of these, 240 (or 39.34 percent) were solo painting shows by living artists. If two-person or group painting shows, museum shows and exhibitions by deceased painters are added, the number grows to nearly 50 percent, with the remaining exhibitions divided between sculpture, photography, video, gallery group shows, theme shows and sundry installations.

So what do these numbers tell us? Like it or not, they say that painting is still the main currency of the art world (which is probably why people get so worked up over it). While the current house style of the art world is late-late Conceptual art, if you go even slightly outside the art world, painting is still art's ambassador. In fact, when there is no dominant painting movement, people at large seem to find it difficult to have an uplifting sense of the art scene.

This doesn't mean that painting is the "going thing," it just tells you that it's not an "already gone" thing. It's true that quantity doesn't equal quality and that proportionately there are as many bad painting shows as there are bad shows of sculpture, photography or whatever. But the fact that so many people in the New York art world are arguing about whether or not painting is dead shows how backwards things can sometimes get in the so-called center.

Look at some of the big galleries: nine out of ten shows at Gagosian's uptown gallery were devoted to painting or drawing. Six of eight shows at Robert Miller, six of seven at Emmerich, three of five at Mary Boone, and five of seven at Pace's downtown gallery were painting shows. Tony Shafrazi showed only painting, while a number of other galleries exhibited almost only painting: Jason McCoy, Frumkin/Adams, Pamela Auchincloss, John Good, David Beitzel and M-13. A very cutting-edge gallery like Feature had paintings up in every one of its shows all year.

Painting In Today's World

Even though people say, "Painting is not equipped to deal with the problems of our time," the reverse may be closer to the truth: our times may not be equipped to deal with painting's problems. Painting can take a long time to get good at. It can be difficult for an artist or an art student to stick with a commitment to painting when most art schools—and the art world in general—discourage gradual development in favor of a "get there now" star system. People may have trouble looking at things that stand still. TV and film are mesmerizing, and painting often takes a long time to look at properly.

But anyone who thinks painting is dead makes the big mistake of thinking that the *medium* is the message. The medium is *not* the message: the medium is the medium and the message is the message. No one says, "The camera is dead." Painting has been declared "dead" by almost every decade of the 20th century; before that the camera was supposed to replace it, and before that the novel. In the modern era, painting has continually been subject to periods of adulation followed by periods of attack. Though painting has recently been through a "down" phase, it was not so many years ago that Barnett Newman came up with his famous dictum, "Sculpture is something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting." And has everyone forgotten that less than 10 years ago, painting was unarguably "it?"

Painting

Amy Sillman: **Hunger**, *1994, oil and gouache on wood, 40 by 46 inches. Courtesy Lipton-Owens Gallery.*

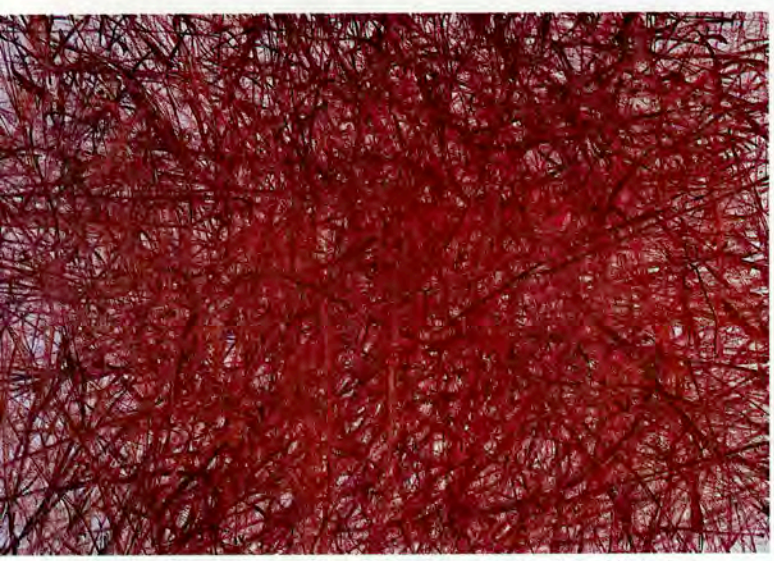
Donald Judd once said, "Painting is like musical theater"—meaning it's made up of a set of conventions. And in a way he was right. But just because painting is based on a set of conventions doesn't mean it's limited. In fact, it's amazing how malleable and resilient it is. It's a "takes a lickin', keeps on tickin'" medium. No matter what people do to it (and they've done some pretty strange things), it comes out as painting. In addition, those "conventions" always seem to be expanding.

Newness is crucial to all the art of our time, not just painting. In his essay "The Painter of Modern Life," Baudelaire defined beauty as having two essential parts: "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent; and the other part which is the eternal and the immutable." He goes on to say that if you neglect "this transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so rapid, you cannot fail to tumble into the abyss." In other words, without a sense of timeliness art gets stale fast. The great struggle for every succeeding generation of 20th-century artists has been to define its own idea of what constitutes "the new." With each generation, that process has accelerated. Art continues to be about breaking rules and breaching boundaries. However, by now, people not only seem addicted to the new, they want the now and the next.

The fact that so many people want to be part of "the next thing" has contributed to a general lack of psychic support for painting. Anything not brand new is thought old. They neglect the "immutable" part of the equation, so painting itself, with its long tradition, gets downgraded. Newness doesn't always have to be shocking. Newness is as newness does. It comes in many shapes and sizes. It can be technical, incremental or personal. It may be easier to find a new medium than it is to find new uses for an old one.

Because painting has had such a long and illustrious history, it's an easy target. Sooner or later every "new gun" in town comes looking for painting—to challenge it, to knock it down. Because so many people take aim at it, something unexpected has happened. Painting has become somewhat radicalized, even renegade or nomadic. It's not clear yet what effects this will have, but something is going on. Of course if painters get smug (the way they can), it'll be over before it starts. For now, painting is seen as "second dog" and this appears to be giving quite a few painters a sense of incredible license. It's okay that no one is rushing to embrace "the new painting," partly because that might snuff out the life in it, and partly because there is no "the new painting." Painting is moving in a series of covert actions, one artist and sometimes one painting at a time. Sometimes it quietly grazes, other times it moves in concerted counter-insurgency. For now, painting is in some sort of gestating Trojan-horse phase. It's huge, it's right out in the open, but no one knows what it's up to.

Instead of asking, "What's new in painting," it might be better to ask, "Are there any approaches, now, that seem particularly promising?" Beck, the musician who wrote and sang last year's anomalous hit song "Loser," said something in a recent radio interview that sounded really right if applied to art (not just painting). Asked about writing music and lyrics, he said, "It's harder to be real than it is to be ironic." Irony, which we've had reams of in all mediums, feels somehow false right now, or at least less useful. That is not to say you can't make "real" art about irony: look at the ways Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke work around painting's supposed impasse. Both artists split the arrow of irony, so that their works exist in the gap between passion and pose. "Realness" doesn't mean sincerity or sanctimoniousness. Awareness or directness might be other words for it, or clarity, or the vaunted Abstract-Expressionist term "authenticity" (minus the posturing or the pride), or that supposedly outdated term originality. What's involved is more than a snicker and less than a declaration. A scent of the marrow. This is a pretty flimsy idea to hang a case on, I know, and it lends itself to misinterpretation easily, but the closer to the core a thing is, the better. If something is open and done freely it contains possibilities, it can grow; if not, it turns rigid, predictable and dull.



Sam Reveles: **Brando Chavez Ring**, *1994, oil on canvas, 79 by 118 inches. Courtesy CRG Art.*

Naming Names

It's interesting to talk generally about painting, but what's really fun is to try to chart the large and unorganized field of last season's solo painting shows: to designate groupings, track ups and downs, or just get a slightly more structured sense of what happened in painting between September of 1993 and July of 1994.

It's true there were no predatory painting movements stalking around last season, no big surges, but there were a number of painters—especially women painters—looking for ways to make painting speak to them, or to address political, sexual or ethical issues in nondidactic terms. There were newer artists having their first shows, who added much to the mix, while a seasoned batch of older artists continued a life's work. There were '80s art stars run amok and one or two who looked good. There were '90s wannabees, natural talents, studied practitioners, and artists who don't usually try their hand at the medium, embarking on or returning to painting. Some painters had breakthroughs, others took wrong turns. Realism—on the rise of late—came in many forms: photo-based, surrealistic, expressionistic and cartoony. Abstraction was ironic, decorative, anthropomorphic, optical or "painterly." And each of these subgroups has its own subgroups. Several shows got people talking; others were real duds.

I divided about 135 of last season's 240 solo paint-

Julian Schnabel: **Jane Birkin**, *1990, gesso and oil on sailcloth, 186 by 164 inches. Courtesy Pace Wildenstein.*

ing shows into 10 categories (some of which have subcategories) that roughly locate, for me, the artists' particular place in the nebulous cloud of painting. I had to have seen a show to include it in this overview, so my list is necessarily limited, even lopsided, due to taste, schedule, memory and sometimes chance. In a number of cases I had already reviewed the show for this magazine before the project was conceived, so those artists are cross-referenced and treated here in abbreviated fashion. All in all, the field is enormous. Even at this 10,000 or so words, I realize I am only scratching the surface. [Editor's note: So many of the artists in this article have been covered in these pages during the past season that we have omitted our usual cross references to exhibition reviews in other issues. We have cross-referenced to exhibition reviews in this issue only, and to articles in this and other issues during the past year.]

The categories themselves are nonbinding and a little arbitrary; most of the artists could fit in more than one. There could have been categories for newcomers, sleepers, failures, types of beauty, versions of Minimalism, long-distance information (artists not from the United States), angry women, sexist men, slackers and hackers—but in the end they didn't hold enough interest for me or didn't defend the artists in fair enough terms. So here goes.

Category I. The Big Cats

They're all men and they prowled the '80s like kings of the jungle. Now, more than 10 years later, most of them have either settled down, settled in or settled for just keeping on. The fact that they are all men should come as no surprise because when it came to painting in the '80s, women were not granted this level of notoriety. As one woman remarked, "In the '80s men made the most money, in the '90s they get the tenured teaching jobs." A patriarchal structure persists in the world of painting. It was not so long ago that a woman merely picking up a paintbrush was seen as committing a transgressive act. Things have to open up. If painting does not let in more of the world, eventually the world will let in less of painting.

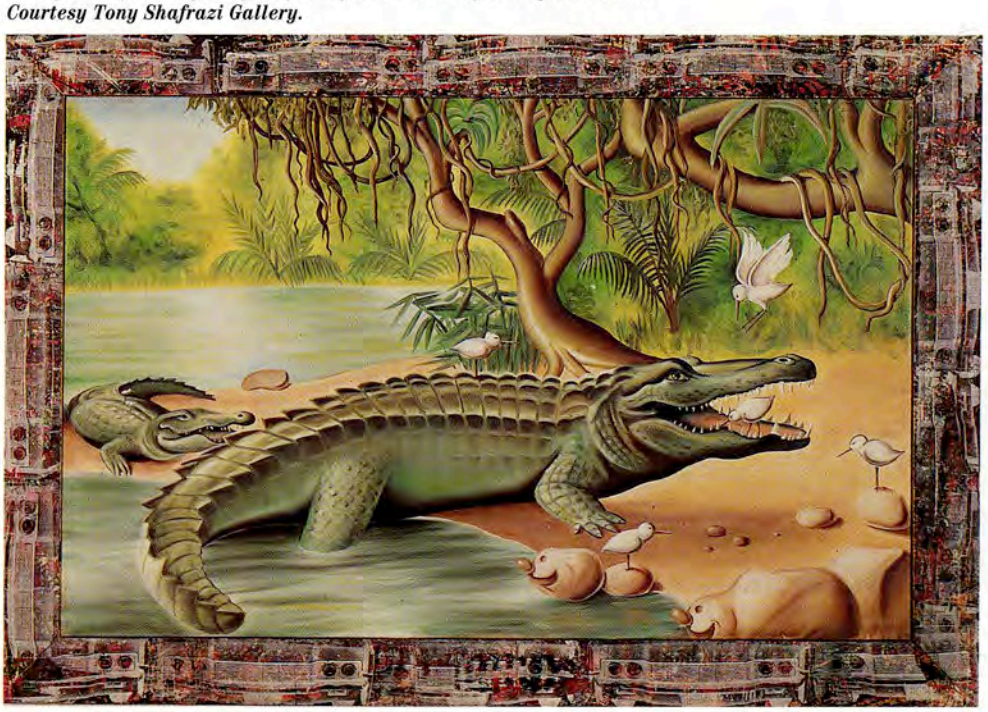
A cast of at least eight '80s art stars had gallery shows last season to varying effect. Often people mistakenly measure a whole season by these shows in a kind of "as the big cats go, so goes the art world" star-oriented illogic. Nevertheless it's important to remember how new the work of these artists once looked and how very little painting today carries that kind of newness.

The great struggle for every succeeding generation of 20th-century artists has been to define its own idea of "the new." With each attempt, the process accelerates. People today want the now and the next.

The best of the Big Cat shows was **Gerhard Richter**'s (Marian Goodman); Richter isn't an '80s artist at all, but that's when he became known to most Americans. Richter continues to make either electrifying, icy, vividly colored abstract paintings that look like photographs once removed, or blurry photographic-looking realist paintings that feel like a mixture of fog and paint. Here he showed giant blue and green abstract paintings; I went expecting a generic experience, but these knocked me out. There was only one realist painting, a small flower still life, but it held the room. Last season you could see Richter's influence coming out in the work of a number of young artists (see Categories V, VI, VII and VIII, subsection 4).

All of "the three Cs" of the Italian "transavanguardia" (remember that?) showed. As usual, **Francesco Clemente** (Gagosian uptown) looked the best; in fact better than he's looked for the last few years when his soggy depictions of life in the immaterial world looked all wet. Last season, in a series of seven tall, X-ray-like panels called "The Black Paintings," which were done as illustrations for Robert Creeley's 1993 poem "Life and Death," Clemente pulled a bit of his special magic out of the hat. The work felt like a visual homecoming without appearing rote. Speaking of rote, **Enzo Cucchi** (BlumHelman) seemed lost in repetition and ersatz paganism. **Sandro Chia** (65 Thompson) meanwhile was shooting blanks. He seems mired in

Kenny Scharf: **Evergladagator**, *1993, oil on canvas, 45¼ by 66¼ inches. Courtesy Tony Shafrazi Gallery.*



a sappy, vaguely neo-hedonistic realism [see page 139].

On the American front, **Julian Schnabel**—true to form—had two shows. The first (Pace uptown) was bad and featured a group of confused, garish paintings with the words "Boni Lux" scrawled across each one (in a manner similar to the artist's "Fox Farm" paintings of 1989). Unfortunately each one was also outfitted in an ornate Baroque-looking frame. But while this first exhibition showed Schnabel at his weakest, the second (Pace downtown) showed off his considerable strengths: his penchant for choosing great surfaces to work on, his big yet intimate sense of scale, and his mythic sense of ego. Because Schnabel clutters the airwaves with so much superfluous stuff it's sometimes hard to keep in mind how good he can be.

In a series of paintings called "early product paintings," which he exhibited last winter at Gagosian downtown, **David Salle**—who was the subject of a *New Yorker* profile by Janet Malcolm in July—seems to have consolidated some gains. These paintings were handsome, almost tasteful, and resembled early Rosenquist—especially in the '50s and '60s nostalgia imagery Salle used: ads for cigarettes, tires, cars and liqueurs featuring wholesome-looking, happy heterosexuals. Salle still has a virtually unbeatable, really original sense of how to put a painting together, even if it has become a bit familiar. His technique of layering images and his deployment of the naked female body has informed and infuriated a generation of younger artists (see categories IV, V and VII) but this show lacked the moody, sordid glamour of the paintings involving tapestries he exhibited in 1991.

With Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat gone, **Kenny Scharf** (Shafrazi) is the last of the prodigious graffiti artists. His new paintings reflected the verdant plant life of Florida (where the artist spends much of his time) as well as his desire to return to his earlier cartoony style, without forsaking the Warholian layering of advertising and newsprint, which were here relegated to the frames. The result was conceptually confused. Although Scharf's pictorial skills and incredibly sweet artistic temperament were in evidence, the main portions of the paintings looked disconcertingly like the work of Alexis Rockman (see category VI).

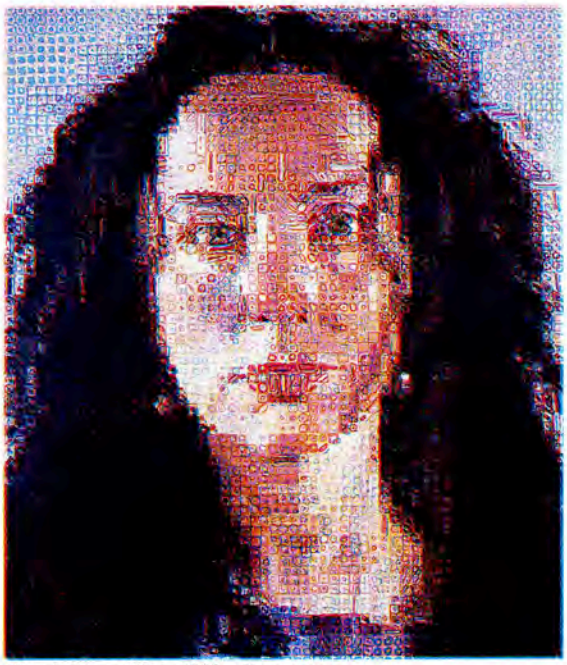
George Condo (Pace downtown) is a latter-day Julian Schnabel who likes to paint big and dumb but with huge dollops of irony. Condo (who is more like a "Kitty Cat" than a "Big Cat") utilized a little Surrealism, a little "Bad painting," a little para-European tastefulness and a whole lot of his previous commedia dell'arte, circus realism in his new work. He recaptured some of his old sense of the bizarre and added a whimsical space (which is irradiated by a wonderful, clean light), but except for the large *Visions of Saint Lucy*, the overall impression was as transitory as that of a street performer.

Elizabeth Murray: **Bounding Dog,** *1993-94, oil on canvas, 91 by 101 inches. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery.*

Condo's predecessor as stylish dandy is, of course, **Markus Lüpertz**, who had one of his best, most centered shows in years, last season at the Michael Werner Gallery. Lüpertz's new paint-ings (a series called "Men Without Women—Parsifal") were big, rather beautifully painted faces somewhat suggestive of his fellow German Neo-Expressionist Georg Baselitz. They also seemed to relate to the mother lode of German Expressionism, especially the work of Nolde and Jawlensky.

Category II. The Museum Cats

The museums did a lot with painting last season and not just in terms of great modern masters like **Joan Miró** [see *A.i.A.*, Sept. '94], who held forth at the Museum of Modern Art last fall. There were four shows by living painters in New York museums: three big names and a sleeper—and if you thought about it they made a great quartet of painting's subjects, techniques, worldviews and possibilities. Briefly (because we want to get back to the trenches, which the museums aren't), there were the paintings of **Lucien Freud** at the Metropolitan and **Robert Ryman** at the Modern [see *A.i.A.*, Jan. '94]. Ryman dismembers painting's structure, while Freud does the same to puckered flesh. Both open cracks into something philosophical. And there were the hygienic, cool surfaces of **Roy Lichtenstein** in his Guggenheim retrospective [see *A.i.A.*, May '94], which harmonized in unexpectedly enticing ways with the prescient, muffled, somewhat photographic surfaces of **Vija Celmins** seen earlier in the season at the Whitney [see *A.i.A.*, Oct. '93]. The four of these artists, in any event, formed a nice backdrop for the season's painting offerings in the galleries.



Chuck Close: **Kiki,** *1993, oil on canvas, 100 by 84 inches. Courtesy Pace Wildenstein.*

Category III. Keeping On With Distinction

Meanwhile, all over town, quite a few artists—mostly over 50—went on with the business of making paintings. Among them were **Frances Barth** [see page 133], **Jennifer Bartlett**, **Lynda Benglis**, **Bill Jensen**, **Ellen Phelan**, **Per Kirkeby**, **Louise Fishman** [see *A.i.A.*, Sept. '93, June '94], **John Moore**, **James Bishop** [see *A.i.A.*, May '94], **Martha Diamond**, **Robert Kushner**, **Sidney Tillim**, **Jack Whitten**, **Robert Zakanitch** [see Cover and page 129], **William T. Wiley** and **Konrad Klapheck**, whose carefully rendered neo-Precisionist paintings (at Edward Thorp) come on like a burst of fresh air. These artists have found remarkable ways to "make it new" again and again. Most have been exhibiting regularly for more than 20 years. Unfortunately they sometimes attract the cheers of a rather conservative segment of the art world who think these painters represent a "return" to "quality" when what they stand for is ingenuity, diligence and skill.

Elizabeth Murray (Paula Cooper) had a good show of smaller-than-her-usual, knotty, shaped

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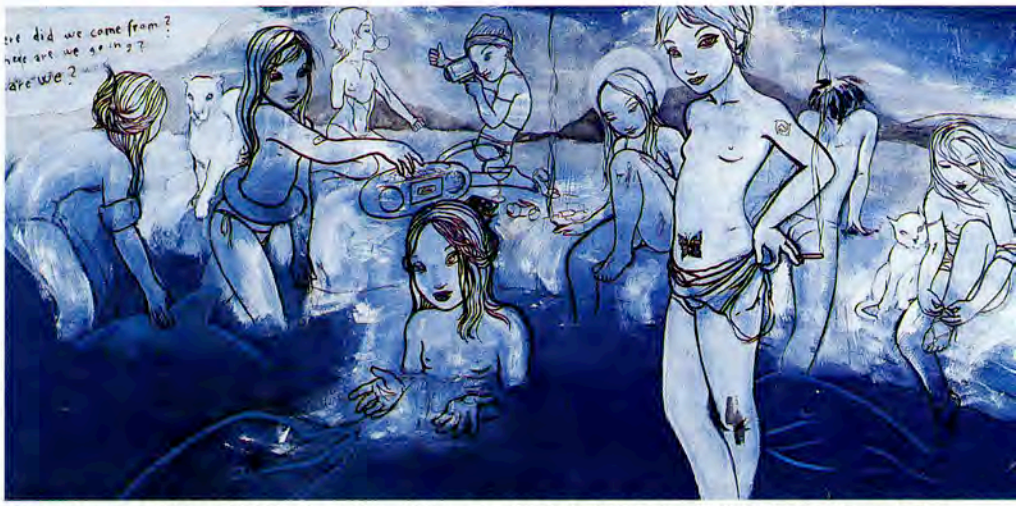


Rita Ackermann: **Where Did We Come From? Where Are We Going? Who Are We?** *1994, acrylic on denim, 50 by 105 inches. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery.*

paintings and one terrific flat canvas titled *Bounding Dog* depicting a big all-over-the-place red canine. Murray's work makes the strongest case I've ever seen for a painting being irregularly shaped, bumpy and full of holes. She makes you wonder why more artists don't break format. Lately Murray's convoluted, personal cubism and crazily colored surfaces have clashed to good effect.

Mary Heilman (Pat Hearn) had a mini-retrospective [see *A.i.A.*, Nov. '93] that tracked her quirky, off-hand abstraction from the plain, gridded one- and two-colored process paintings of the 1970s to the luminous, wonderfully brushy allover abstractions she's now known for. Sometimes Heilman's work sags—especially her shaped paintings—but when she's on, there's a wonderful serendipity to her work.

Patricia Cronin: **Untitled #37,** *watercolor, 12 by 17 inches. Courtesy Trial Balloon.*

In a series of new paintings, all of which were double-paneled and shaped, **Robert Mangold** (Pace downtown) gave his familiar contrasts of drawn line and muted monochrome surface a freshly solemn beauty. Each work had a simply drawn oval or ellipse which rested on, leaned against or overlapped another oval or ellipse. This is a really good example of an artist limiting himself to a handful of elements with terrific results. The things Mangold is doing with incremental—almost intangible—adjustments of weight and placement are stunning.

What Mangold is to nuance and Ryman is to white, **Chuck Close** (Pace downtown) is to the face. In each of his new paintings (all were portraits of artists) Close continued his divide-and-conquer approach of sectioning off the canvas into a regular grid, then filling in every compartment with a tic-tac-toe series of Xs, Os and squares. There's thought in every square inch of these paintings. Every section becomes an abstract painting unto itself before joining with its neighbors to create the whole. The surfaces read like peacock feathers. It looks simple but the results are magical.

Finally, in addition to a show of his early work at Robert Miller that looked very good, **Alex Katz** showed a series of beautifully serene, almost minimalist views of seashores and trees at Marlborough that were a departure from his usual portraits and figurative groups.

Category IV. Our Bodies, Our Selves, You Asshole

While these practiced professionals were pushing their art further, a number of younger artists—mostly women in their 30s—were proving that performance art, photography and sculpture aren't the only mediums capable of making art "about the body" or dealing with corporeal politics. Sexuality, gender, eroticism and developmental psychology have become subjects, as well, for painters who have zeroed in on the body, dissecting it in extreme close-up, deforming it, stylizing it or making it the literal site of confrontation. Many of these artists have an unapologetic in-your-face anger or audacity: a sense of "here we are, deal with it or die." Much of this work is accusatory.

Patricia Cronin's (Trial Balloon) pornographic photographs had been popping up in group shows for a season or so and I always thought them uninteresting as anything other than sexy pictures. Last year, however, Cronin unveiled a group of exquisitely rendered, small watercolor close-ups of two women making love. The bodies were lovingly depicted in gynecological detail, seen with strap-on dildos while hands fondle breasts and tongues lick labia. The point of view of each image was that of one of the participants. In other words, Cronin painted things you could only see if you were doing them. This lesbian viewpoint may seem obvious, but so are most really good ideas.

Nicola Tyson (Trial Balloon, see my May '94 review), exhibited five somewhat unresolved medium-sized paintings depicting strange surrealist creatures with exactly drawn nipples, hips, vulva and breasts. The surfaces and colors are dull, but the sense of woman fantasizing woman gives the work a quietly "queer" point of view. In a two painting, one-person show, **Lisa Yuskavage** (Luhring Augustine) exhibited kitschy colored portraits of very young girls who have grossly distorted female bodies. She's a good painter but her color—hyper-intense pastel shades—is better than her drawing, which is fairly unremarkable. But there's a subtle "look what you've done to us" undertow to these otherwise still-too-impenetrable works.

Nicole Eisenman [see *A.i.A.*, June '94] (Jack Tilton) takes aim at everyone. She uses a gritty social realist style (she can really draw) and a cartoony line (she could easily be included in Category V, the cartooning category) to depict women in the act of hunting down, castrating, killing or harassing men; or women giving birth, going to the toilet, helping to unzip Daddy's trousers, being subjected to various kinds of humiliation or sexual stimulation. In one work she parodies "The Big Cats," casting herself as a famous artist surrounded by a bevy of scantily clad "Nicole Eisenman assistants." Eisenman is over-the-top and out-of-control in a positive way. She's one of the looser cannons around, right now.

The invitation to **Mira Schor**'s (Horodner Romley) show had one of the artist's paintings of a close-up view of female genitalia stylized as a semi-colon. I don't know the connection between a semi-colon and vaginas but I know I'll never look at a semi-colon the same way. Schor also paints penises, breasts, holes and hair in a too tightly rendered style. Often these images are accompanied by or actually turn into text. As with early modernists like Klee and Kandinsky, Schor is determined to fuse language, representation and abstraction into a single vocabulary. At this point her goal may be more interesting than her actual painting—but there's no one else trying to do quite what she's doing except Suzanne McClelland, whose open, expressionist style is completely different.

Rounding out this category, **Lari Pittman**, who

showed in a group exhibition at P.P.O.W. (and in Los Angeles last November), makes claustrophobically decorative paintings that feature stylized male sexual parts and acts, suggestive symbols ("69"), and a deadly prettiness that sneaks up on you. **Julian Trigo** (Luhring Augustine), born in Argentina, makes scratchy drawings of children at play who, on second look, appear to have cannibalistic impulses. **Rita Ackermann** (Andrea Rosen), who was born in 1968, paints little girls who have tiny budding breasts. Usually they're nude, or wear short-shorts or sometimes blood-stained underpants. Painted in simple black lines and set in weirdly abstract landscapes, these waifs smoke cigarettes, clutch dolphins or hold syringes. Ackermann is an odd combination of a lot of artists—Salle, Eisenman and Sue Williams among them—but her work has a real "look" to it and a complicated emotional temperature that could lift it above its trendiness. **Marlene Dumas**'s (Jack Tilton) paintings of little children [see page 131] also fit in here, though the flat-footed ways they're painted leave me completely cold.

Category V. Toon Time

This may be one of the most vital areas of contemporary painting. It could really be called "The **Peter Saul** Category" after the godfather of wild, cartoony realism. Not only was Saul featured in the Whitney's "Hand-Painted Pop" exhibition last fall, where his early paintings looked surprisingly fresh, he also showed (at Frumkin/Adams) a number of recent Day-Glo distortions of John Wayne Gacy in the electric chair or Jeffrey Dahmer wired up in said chair while being force-fed by a policeman. Saul is the Warhol of Toon Time.

The cartoon continues to be one of the most ubiquitous influences in abstract, figurative and semi-figurative painting. Some of this work is covertly political and also deals with the body. Usually it is highly colored, ferociously wrought, and sometimes a little hard to take. An exception might be **Phillip Smith**'s (Jason McCoy) work. His nearly monochrome surfaces are etched with cartoonlike symbols and figures that seem to tell stories of creation and the fortunes of life. More pictograph than cartoon and more restrained than most of the artists in this category, Smith is off to the side of things but in the thick of an interesting visual problem. And **Carl Ostendarp** (in several group shows last season) brings the cartoon to abstract art in the form of stylized paint blobs and cartoonlike exclamations. **Chuck Agro**'s (White Columns) vividly colored glossy paintings of single bulbous figures have a great physical presence.

Christian Schumann's (Postmasters) first one-person painting show in New York was one of the best of the season. In it he exhibited a series of multi-colored, patchworked paintings with cartoonlike images and words. What makes Schumann so good is not only his inventive ways of making a painting. He's also got something of Salle's sense of a picture (by way of Basquiat). Transferred images, crinkled skeins of paint, found bits of paper and beautiful grounds of opaque color make up the surfaces of his paintings. His subject matter consists of comic-book-like figures which he appears to have plundered, then subjected to his own brand of permutation, many of them engaged in funny, aberrant or horrific acts. There's a raw energy and an undermining sense of humor to Schumann's work. He's a natural; there's nothing forced about his work.

Amy Sillman (Lipton Owens [see page 139]) also has a touch of the facile natural about her, even if she's not as involved with as many different ways of making a painting as Schumann is. Her paintings have colorful, calligraphic, highly rendered images that tell veiled stories of her own life. Like Salle, Sillman layers her images on tasteful, attractive fields that can look like wallpaper, textiles or quasi-modern paintings from the 1950s. Sillman's work has verve and feels authentic, but her influences are keeping her a notch or two away from something new.

Thomas Trosch (Jose Freire, see my June '94 review) paints elegant ladies and gentlemen placed in lush gardens or in sumptuous rooms outfitted with only the "finer things." Trosch paints like a combination of Florine Stettheimer and Milton Resnick, but he thinks like a Disney cartoonist high on old issues of *Vogue* magazine. There is a quaint loveliness to Trosch's work, even if his images aren't that memorable.

Katie Merz's (Jack Tilton) paintings veer closest to actual cartoons. Often she deploys dozens of little drawings of rageful or discombobulated women in a single work. Other times a painting might feature one toonlike character. Merz is less interesting than Sillman because her work breaks down into parts too easily, and her emotional content isn't as palpable as Ackermann's or Eisenman's, but she does have a nice, nervous line and a snazzy sense of visual style.

The purest and the sweetest artist in this category, **Lily van der Stokker** (Feature [see page 132]), applies frothy, happy abstract shapes that resemble thought balloons directly on the wall in what looks like magic-marker or Flair pen pinks, violets and blues. In her own way, van der Stokker skewers that unique brand of joy Americans wear on their sleeve. She shoots that bright yellow smiley face between the eyes with bullets made of sugar.

Category VI. Weird Realism

The photograph and the expressionist figure insinuated realism into the art of the '80s. In the '90s, realism cut itself loose from these constraints and shows signs of becoming a subtly and often disturbingly manipulated genre. People don't expect to see things happen in a realist mode, partly because there is still a quiet prejudice against it, so of course they do. In addition to that, it appears as if numbers of people are about to abandon their allegiance to *theory*. You can almost smell it. More and more, we read critics, once bound by theory, who disparage it, calling for a more comprehensible criticism and art. My guess is that when they

Peter Doig: **Ski Jacket**, *1994, oil on canvas, 72 by 84 inches. Courtesy Gavin Brown's enterprise.*

Toba Khedoori: Untitled, 1994, oil and wax on paper, 11 by 19½ feet. Courtesy David Zwirner Gallery.

John Currin: **Lovers in the Country,** *1993, oil on canvas, 52 by 40 inches. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery.*

turn to painting, one of the first places they will look will be in the realist category. The critic-curator-artist **Douglas Blau**—who had two shows last season of his framed photographs—implored, "Let's get to content any way we can." Obviously all art has content, but the spirit of what Blau said rings true to many in the art world. People want their art to be "about" something. They seem tired of things formal, theoretical and of course ironic.

Toba Khedoori (David Zwirner) lives in Los Angeles; she works in the crucial blind-spot between Ed Ruscha and Gerhard Richter. She paints on huge sheets of white backdrop paper [see p. 137] and pins the finished works to the wall. The bottoms sometimes curl up, the edges are torn or wrinkled. In one work, measuring approximately 10 by 20 feet, she renders a giant yellow construction crane. Her surfaces, which are smudged, gritty and covered with a thin, translucent layer of wax, work to great effect with the exactly rendered crane. Her paintings create a real vacuum, as meaning rushes out and the attempt to "read" them rushes in. She's great with scale, and her intelligence about making a painting borders on the philosophical. You can get lost in her works the way you do in a movie; they're absorbing to look at, yet their material presence is wonderfully indeterminate.

Peter Doig (Gavin Brown's enterprise), who lives in London, is also interested in the no-man's-land between photography and painterly painting. In spite of the fact that Doig combines styles (and is loyal to none) his work lacks any sense of archness or strategy. He acknowledges the photograph without imitating it or critiquing it. One large landscape painting—which looks like a huge out-of-focus postcard of a ski resort—features a group of green trees that melt into an abstract mass, while little colored daubs of paint double as skiers. Doig's paintings are intimate and banal, yet they also have a mesmerizing, cinematic sweep.

John Currin's show (Andrea Rosen) got a lot of people worked up. Currin, who has been painting oddish realistic portraits of middle-aged women, girls, old women and sometimes men, turned more narrative and menacing in this show. Some thought it was disgusting and sexist, others thought it was among the better shows of the year. One work depicted a blond, bearded, gaunt-looking older man with a much younger, buxom Hopperesque woman. Currin is not a latter-day Fischl. His style is exact but not photographic, illustrative but not commercial. He keeps his distance—more than he intends to. You make up the narratives. Obviously the ones that some people imagined were pretty sordid. These were Currin's best paintings and his most peculiar to date. In his next show, I'd like to learn more of what these images mean to him.

Alexis Rockman (Jay Gorney) continued to hone a verisimilitudinous surreal/sci-fi illustrative style in a series of glistening paintings of his by-now-trademark mutant animals. This time they're set not in some prehistoric bog but in a sort of biosphere that seems adrift in space. I miss Rockman's former, looser style and long for him to reintroduce it somehow. Also these paintings felt very "male"—very "frogs and snails and puppy dog tails." Their intentionally creepy, horror-show subject matter might therefore limit his audience. Nevertheless he's very good in his big paintings, which seem more expansive and open.

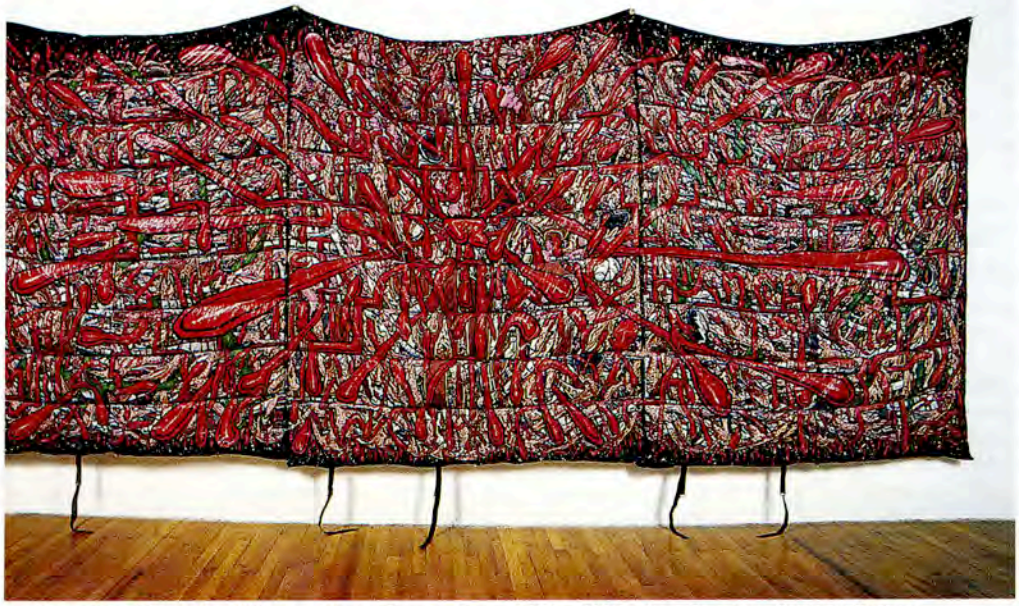
Another offshoot of Weird Realism might be called Rogue Realism. Right now **Peter Cain** (whose genetic resplicings of cars appeared in two group shows last season) and **Robin Lowe** (seen in several group shows) stand out. Lowe's particular brand of realism is dense, compact and dead-on. He's no fantasist. His portraits of little children have the intensity of Alice Neel but none of her brushy, drawn unfinishedness. At first Lowe's work doesn't even look like it's new. It looks almost like academic realism. He has a sure, equalized touch and a psychological depth that make his work hum with possibility.

Martin Kippenberger: **Untitled (Self-Portrait),** *1992, oil on canvas, 70¼ by 59 inches. Courtesy Metro Pictures.*

Robin Lowe: **Extremeño/Layla,** *1993, oil on wood, 48 by 38 inches. Courtesy A.C. Project.*

I'm still on the fence about **Manuel Ocampo**'s (Annina Nosei) paintings, which look like circus posters for the Stations of the Cross by way of Wes Craven (the director of the "Nightmare on Elm Street" movies). Ocampo depicts cockroaches, skulls and humans who seem to function on the cockroach level in politically tinged paintings. **Hugh Steers** (Richard Anderson) makes hazily colored, loosely brushed images of a man with AIDS [see *A.i.A.*, June '94]. There is a haunted serenity to Steers's work, even if he does have a somewhat underdeveloped sense of technique.

Under the Weird and the Rogue runs a river that might be called "A Fragile Beauty"—ephemeral depictions of fairly traditional subjects. One artist to be found here is **Taboo**, who is something of a natural himself; he makes washy New York cityscapes that look glamorous, poignant and a lot like the kind of painting you see at sidewalk art shows. **Maureen Gallace** (Nicole Klagsbrun, see my Nov. '93 review), a sleeper, makes muffled serene landscapes that try to do with barns, boats, trees and sky what Morandi did with bottles. **Jim Hodges** (CRG) covered the walls of



Jason Fox: **Drenisis**, *1993, acrylic on sleeping bags, 101 by 199 inches. Courtesy Feature Gallery.*

the gallery with little white paper napkins, each of which presented a drawing of a different flower. The whole conjured a vision of coffee shops, lost time, aloneness and daydreaming. **April Gornik**'s nonspecific, atmospheric landscapes (Edward Thorp), which have shown little sign of growth over the past decade, try to be visionary and descriptive at the same time, succeeding only occasionally. **Elizabeth Peyton** (at the Chelsea Hotel, see my May '94 review) mounted a show of her delicate yet provocative drawings of historical figures based on her reading. Peyton's work has a wonderful lightness-of-being as do the incisive paintings and drawings of **Billy Sullivan** chronicling "our world" (Stux and Tom Cugliani). **Jane Kaplowitz**'s vast "Gone With the Wind" mural covered a whole wall at Cugliani. **Jeremy Dickinson**'s (Cohen Gallery) small, pristine paintings of buses are like illuminated manuscripts. As I don't connect to them, I don't know how to write about the fantastic figurative worlds of **Robert Yarber** (Sonnabend) except to say they're both Weird and Rogue.

Many of the artists mentioned just above build on a long tradition of painterly realism in postwar American painting. Two exemplars of that tradition showed last season: most impressively, **Lois Dodd** (Fischbach), who exhibited small landscapes (often snow scenes) from the past two decades, and **Jane Wilson** (Fischbach), whose stripped-down, Luminist scenes of land and sky bore a telling relationship to the work of Mark Rothko.

Category VII. Conceptual Painting and Appropriation

Some people make paintings to make paintings, other people make paintings to make a point. A motley crew of conceptually inclined painters has sprung up over the past few years, a few of whom have gotten rather good at making their points as visually as possible. Artists in this category confront certain dangerous obstacles: the pit of political didacticism and the pendulum of theoretical dogma. If any of these artists ventures too far from the Path of Visual Thinking, their work can collapse into the ashes of irony.

Martin Kippenberger's paintings (Metro Pictures) are garishly colored and crudely painted. Usually he employs an accumulation of photographically derived images thrown together with the detritus of everyday life. Kippenberger changes styles from work to work (which must be fun). One of the paintings he exhibited in this mini-overview was actually a Jeff Koons liqueur ad painting that Kippenberger liked so much that he bought it, then exhibited it with his own name on the wall label. It's not exactly Rauschenberg's famous "erased de Kooning," nor is it Sherrie Levine doing Walker Evans, it's more like clowning around than picking a fight, a good-hearted slap on the back. Kippenberger is more interested in chaos than either destruction or anything egalitarian. That's what lifts him above all the other pan-stylists.

Deborah Kass (Jose Freire) doesn't want painting to die, she wants to introduce it to subversive subject matter [see *A.i.A.*, June '94]. Kass exhibited a series of smallish, silk-screened takeoffs on Warhol's Chairman Mao paintings. Kass replaced Mao with Gertrude Stein and renames the series "Chairman Ma," after the ur-lesbian of modernism. Kass has no pretense to be formally original. Her achievement lies in the way she freshens up another artist's style with new meaning.

Guillermo Kuitca's "Tablada Suite" paintings (Sperone Westwater), which are based on a cemetery plan, are laid out as floor plans for huge structures: theaters, prisons, stadiums, etc. These intricate, nominally geometric grids of everyday modern life imply thousands upon thousands of human beings, centuries of time and volumes of thought without depicting a single figure. Their overwhelming immensity as ideas is equaled only by the infinite hypnotic delicacy of their execution. Finding the grid—that staple of modernist abstraction—in real life, Kuitca returns it to paintings, infused with the sense of loss and hierarchy that are a part of that life.

Nicholas Rule's show was a disappointment (Paul Kasmin). I really like what Rule does. I'm not against change, but his new pieces—slight, washy abstract paintings based on the paths taken by hurricanes (not a bad idea)—were not up to the visual or intellectual level of his previous work. Worse still, if you didn't know what the paintings were about they didn't come across. Anytime you have to hang a show on an idea, you're in trouble. I still believe in this guy, though.

In the '90s, realism cut itself loose from the constraints of photography and the expressionist figure; it now shows signs of becoming a subtly and often disturbingly manipulative genre.

Matthew Weinstein: **The Lantern's Idiot Eyes**, *1994, oil and mixed mediums on canvas, 90 by 40 inches. Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery.*

Rudolph Stingel: Untitled, 1993, oil and enamel on canvas, 99⅛ by 66⅛ by 1½ inches. Courtesy Paula Cooper.

Gary Simmons, **Ida Applebroog**, **Annette Lemieux**, **Komar & Melamid** [see page 116], **Dottie Attie**, **Byron Kim**, **Catherine Howe** and **Kay Rosen** belong here as well. So does **Glen Ligon** (at Protetch), whose black-and-white text paintings address racial issues and are at once sobering and visually crisp. But before we leave this category we might do well to glance at the remains of those artists who steered too close to this area's obstacles: **Adam Rolston** (Fawbush), whose takeoffs on Warhol were vapid, and **Lawrence Gipe** (BlumHelman), whose attempt at shedding some light on 20th-century megalomania fell well short of its pretentious target. **Sarah Morris**'s (Nicole Klagsbrun) paintings of words looked hopelessly caught in the spring of 1989. Their irony and archness is so empty and dogmatic that you can't help but think about all the other artists who have passed this way in the last five years. Finally, **Lutz Bacher**'s (Pat Hearn) didactic appropriations of Vargas-girl pinups made no sense whatsoever.

Category VIII. Abstract Painting: Underdog or Uber Alles?

After two decades of story-telling, point-making or sermon-delivering art and pictures full of words, people may have lost some of the skills necessary for looking at abstract painting—for simply *seeing what they see*. (Indeed, not long ago I was at a dinner with a group of well-known artists and art dealers, all of whom professed to be "tired of abstract painting.") But formalism—or whatever you want to call it—is not dead. There are many ways you could divide the unusually crowded category of abstract painting: these are only four of them, and the second is the most problematic.

Sub-Section 1. Mutant Greenbergian Abstraction

Color Field painting, dormant and disparaged since the late 1970s, has been showing unexpected signs of influence, if not life, lately. A number of artists continue the reduction of painting to the essences that Clement Greenberg and the Color Field painters advocated. But some of those "essences" have gotten, well . . . pretty strange: in fact, you could say they're popping out all over. This kind of painting has become physical and surface-oriented in ways Greenberg never imagined. Considering the thick Styrofoam waterfall paintings he exhibited last season—some of the bumpy projections must have extended almost a foot off the painting—**Larry Poons** (Salander-O'Reilly [see page 130]), an arch Greenbergian himself, might be called a Mutant Greenbergian Abstractionist. This unlikely revival reminds us that as it is with artists, so it is with art movements: Never Count Anything Out.

A potpourri of different brushstrokes, spaces, colors and textures define the work of the English artist **Fiona Rae**. Rae is one of the most loquacious examples of Mutant Greenbergian Abstraction (hereafter referred to as M.G.A.). Her first show in the United States (John Good [see p. 131]) didn't live up to advance notices. Her work is a little stiffer and more self-conscious than you'd expect, given the elaborate conceptual framework it is supposedly built around (she might just as easily have gone into Category VII), but the most recent paintings, simplified with big Hans Hofmann-like blocks of color, show signs of a promising new direction.

The other extreme was taken by **Elliott Puckette** (Paul Kasmin, see my Feb. '94 review), who had one of the sweetest yet most austere shows of last season. In her first solo appearance, Puckette streamlined Pollock's alloverness into calligraphic lines and arabesques incised into painted wood. Lyrical, erudite and brimming with restrained emotion, Puckette's paintings read like abstract love letters.

Another first show, quasi-minimalist and not all that "Mutant," actually, was that of **Sam Reveles** (at CRG). In its severity his work flirts with classic Greenbergianism by way of Brice Marden (whom he once worked for) and Mel Bochner. Reveles's version of alloverness is a visceral accumulation of chaotic arching lines, usually on unprimed canvas or blood-red chromatic grounds. His work is packed with a pungent sense of full body contact. These marks manifest themselves as a series of whiplashes or sword flicks that are both controlled and violent, often given order by a faint pencil grid. Reveles's work has a smoldering erotic "thereness." (Interestingly, **Julian Lethbridge**—who appeared only in group shows this past season—uses a similar approach of letting marks accumulate, but Lethbridge's work has an elegantly reasoned, restrained power, as opposed to Reveles's steamy punch.)

Body contact of a different sort infuses **Karin Davie**'s (Fawbush [see page 129]) curvaceous paintings, whose wavy, candy-colored stripes—derived from Op and Color Field—can have fun-house-mirror distortions as well as a surprisingly erotic twist. Writhing stripes of pink evoke form-fitting dresses, soft ice cream and Christmas wrapping paper. It's really quite an associative package. Davie's first show was sexy to look at even if it did fade quickly from memory after you left the gallery.

Ross Bleckner [see *A.i.A.*, June '94](Mary Boone) could just as easily be placed in the Realism category because of his romantic figuration, but his roots are in abstraction—or at least a '70s-based semi-abstraction—and his moody alloverness makes it possible to locate him here. Bleckner, who at a certain point in the mid-1980s was said to have influenced a number of younger abstract painters who were then exhibiting in New York's East Village, has been making mostly dark abstract-symbolist paintings for more than five years. Marked with the artist's by-now-trademark flashes of white light, glossy surfaces and vague images of loving cups, birds or written names, Bleckner's paintings really are pretty. He doesn't seem interested in new ideas about beauty or different ways to make a painting; he relies on Gustave Moreau-like effects to produce certain calculated results. He achieves those results: the paintings are filled with sentiment and are elegiac; but at a certain expense. The work ends up feeling more melodramatic than dramatic.

Peter Schuyff (Paul Kasmin) is my "Just Call Me Angel of the Morning" artist: I like his work, but I don't usually talk about it. Schuyff has an

Sean Landers: **Patches** *(detail), 1993, oil on canvas, 84 by 198 inches. Collection Suedwest-LB, Stuttgart. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery.*

individual sense of quirkiness that I admire, and his paintings are often fun to look at—if only to figure out how he gets his special optical effects to work. In his show this spring, however, he seemed to be going through the motions.

Other artists who rounded out this section of M.G.A. last season were **David Dupuis**, **Rachel Finn**, **Mary Jones**, **Craig Fisher**, **Andrew Masullo** (another sleeper), **Cora Cohen**, **Richard Kalina**, **Shirley Kaneda**, **Greg Kwiatek**, **Andrea Belag**, **Jacqueline Humphries**, **Gary Lang** (whose brightly colored dense grids of space, at Michael Klein, looked good), **Eva Lundsager** (who more people should look at), and **Lawrence Carroll** (whose particularly shy versions of M.G.A. are evocative).

Installation view of Sol LeWitt's **Wall Drawing #725**, *1993 (left) and* **Wall Drawing #691 B**, *1994 (right); at Pace Wildenstein. Photo Eilen Page Wilson.*

Sub-Section 2. Abstractionism

This may be the kind of work that is helping to give painting a bad name. When people say, "Abstract art is boring," they might be referring to this type of abstraction. New York is quick to label other areas of the country regional, even provincial. But New York has its own regionalism and style. It's never talked about in mixed company, but there are panels about it, lectures, papers and whole issues of magazines devoted to it. Let's call it "Abstractionism." The only way I can think of to differentiate it from the rest of M.G.A. is to say that Abstractionism is "straighter" than M.G.A. and it has an unfortunate recessive "Save Painting" gene. Usually the Abstractionist comes up with a witty recipe or a particular formula: a brushstroke, a flourish of seductive pours and drips, a "signature" way of laying down paint—and repeats it over and over again, in a kind of mindless turf-protecting dance.

These artists make rules rather than break rules. It's amazing that something that started out as bold and open as abstract painting should in their hands end up so obvious and lifeless. Usually the work feels self-satisfied and more interested in gaining admittance to the Country Club of Art than in taking risks. Where artists in the other sub-sections of abstract painting want to throw Greenberg's pie in Greenberg's face, the Abstractionists just want a piece of the pie. The work is usually serious and has no sense of humor. These artists infiltrate the system easily. Collectors seem to find this work "understandable" because it purports to have "answers." Somebody ought to tell these artists that art doesn't answer questions, it asks them. The only thing that can be done about this type of painting is for the rest of M.G.A. to maintain a safe distance from it, in case its attitudes are catching. Generally the rest of M.G.A. seems to be outpacing these "straighter" Greenbergians. Exceptions to the above dim view might be **Juan Uslé** and **John Zinsser**, both of whose paintings are "straight" but feel authentic; while painters like **David Row**, **Cary Smith** and **Andrew Spence** are in trouble, and are coming to look like Abstractionists through and through.

Sub-Section 3. Garage Artists

Like Garage Bands, Garage Artists make their paintings with whatever's around: nails, string, chewing gum, Vaseline, yarn, rags or old underpants. They are more raw than their M.G.A. siblings and tend to flirt with a kind of ungainliness. But their work generally carries a gritty edginess. **Joe Zucker**, who was in a group show at Nolan Eckman, has to be counted a charter member: Zucker has found more ways to make a painting

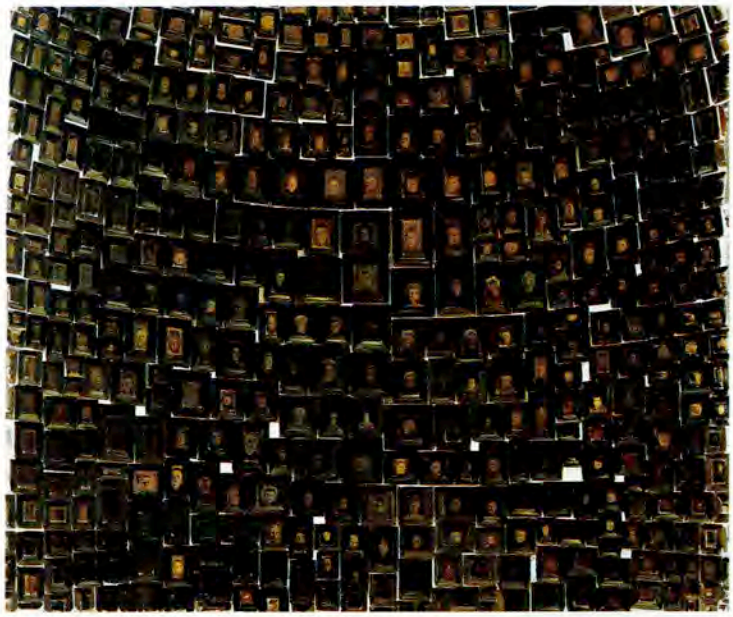
After two decades of story-telling, point-making art and of pictures full of words, viewers may have lost some of the skills necessary for looking at abstract painting—for simply *seeing what they see.*

(cotton balls, pegboard, Rhoplex, string, netting, webbing . . .) than just about anybody. **Matthew Weinstein**'s recent paintings (at Sonnabend) were his best yet. He cut holes in the surface, painted the stretcher bars, tied things to the painting, and cut up and pasted little letters together to spell out lines from Rimbaud's "The Drunken Boat" (in this last regard Weinstein is like Clemente, only played in reverse at the wrong speed). Thus Weinstein attains a kind of subject matter without being overly narrative. In addition to which the funny "ransom letter" style gave the work a nice folkish quality. Weinstein is pushing toward a personal vernacular abstraction. He needs one more push in order to fully escape the gravitational pull of the planets **Terry Winters** (Category X), **Lari Pittman** (Category IV) and **Carroll Dunham** (who was in a number of group shows and exhibited impressive drawings at Nolan Eckman). Dunham's work influences a host of younger artists, among them Amy Sillman and Christian Schumann.

More artists in this category: **Fabian Marcaccio** (whose paintings [see p. 102] sometimes spill over onto the wall from stretchers that can erupt into cancerous gnarls), **Jim Isermann** (who has used stained glass in his "paintings" and this year turned to sewing [see page 142]), **Dona Nelson** and **Donald Baechler** (both of whom have used old underpants and other bumpy items in their work), **Jody Lomberg** (a good artist who knits her paintings), **Charles Spurrier** (who sticks little brightly colored wads of chewing gum on his garish surfaces), **Randy Wray** (whose gooey surfaces could have been applied with a cake decorating tool), **Jason Fox** (whose paintings on sleeping bags look like prison tattoos by way of street graffiti), and **Joe Leticia** (who paints trompe-l'oeil patterns of plywood on plywood).

Sub-Section 4. Mad Max Variations

There is a kind of abstraction that if it were human might be considered anti-social. It seeks automony and shuns "connection" or transcendence. A painter's version of "specificity," it is cold without being coy, distant without being unapproachable, difficult without being problematic. In a way it builds on some of the precepts of '80s appropriation and "simulation," but it's not so theory laden. It feels unbound, slightly outlaw. Here we find one of the more vexing artists around: **Rudolf Stingel** (who was in a couple of group shows), whose silver-orange monochrome abstract paintings look like Mutant Greenbergian Abstractionism on steroids or 'ludes. Stingel uses a simple step-by-



David Deutsch: **Hotel Planet,** *1994, oil on canvas, 76 by 84 inches. Courtesy Jay Gorney Modern Art.*

step formula, which he's published, to make these "things." There's a tremendous coolness to the work that makes you think of Richter's abstract paintings. Stingel has also covered whole walls with bright orange carpeting, making the eye buzz.

Christopher Wool, who did not show last year, may have founded this category in the mid-1980s with his stark black-and-white abstract stencil paintings, and later with his paintings of words (one of which, *Rat*, was attacked in Morley Safer's "60 Minutes" segment bashing the art world). Another artist who belongs here is **Dan Walsh**. **Edouard Prulhière**'s work has a beautiful but tough sense of artificiality and forthrightness. I suspect he almost never uses a brush. His work looks mechanical but in very contradictory handmade ways. Perhaps because the gallery where he showed (Kubinski) closed not long afterwards, his exhibition went overlooked and under-talked-about. **Damien Hirst**'s multicolored dot paintings, which have been seen at the Cohen Gallery, are as pretty as they are opaque, as dainty as they are deadpan and are purely "Mad Max." **Mike Scott** (Shafrazi) needlessly complicated his once austere art. Finally, **Steve di Benedetto** (Shafrazi), who once seemed very promising, combined a murky painterliness with hard-edged optical effects. Like Scott, di Benedetto tried to do too many contradictory things. Both lacked a sense of resolution or clarity.

Category IX. Crossover Dreams

Out on the margins of painting there's always a lot going on: artists coming in from the cold of sculpture, conceptualism or whatever, and artists departing from the canvas for points or surfaces unknown. There was quite a bit of crossing over and crossing back last year as painting, references to painting, and yearning for painting cropped up in places you'd least expect it.

Who would have thought it? **Sean Landers** (Andrea Rosen), the master of "I Gotta Be Me," correspondence-school art, letter-writing, self-flagellation and self-promotion, took an unexpected leap from yellow legal pads to Abstract Expressionist-scale expanses of canvas. Reading became less of an issue, although the megalomaniacal doubt was still there to be read. But the looking got a lot more fun. Landers should also probably be given last season's "Howard Stern" award for upsetting the most people. The paintings are made up of running commentaries on the artist's problems with premature ejaculation, his breakup with his girlfriend, his encounter with a Greek woman whom he falls in love with outside a bar in Venice, and his craven desires for critical attention (he eventually made the cover of *Artforum* last spring). When I ventured that I really liked the whiteness and the open-wound feel of this show—how he lays bare certain hidden sides of the creative process and how "new" his work looks—two very p.c. critics (one man, one woman, both white) jumped all over me, saying, "Who cares about the ravings of a straight white guy?" For them Landers is a latter-day "slacker" Julian Schnabel: they hate him, not just his work.

Another artist operating with "intent to paint" was **Jack Pierson** (Luhring Augustine [see page 135]), who previously excelled at beautiful, blurry, colored photographs, as-is installations and touchingly charged drawings, as well as word pieces made from the letters of old signs. But dominating his first show in this gallery was a group of all-blue oil stick paintings on paper that brought the "bluesy" aspect of Pierson's work to full chroma. Because the show itself was so stylized, people may have failed to appreciate what an accomplished sense of style the paintings had on their own.

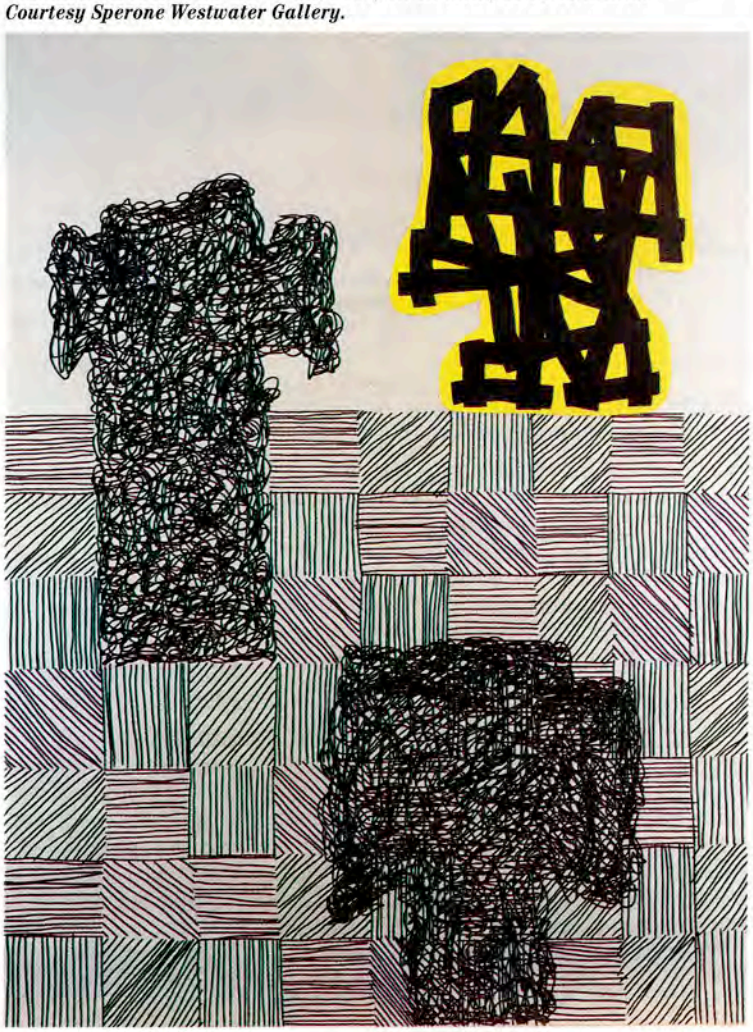
Although **Sol LeWitt**'s exhibition at Pace Downtown contained only 10 wall drawings (dating from 1970 to the present), it had a summarizing scope and encompassed the elaborate span of the artist's exploration of what is possible with a wall, a pencil, maybe some color, and an idea. The show was a real wow. This was one of the best shows of the year.

Dorothea Rockburne (Emmerich) also left canvas behind in her show of wall paintings [see page 110]. Like LeWitt, Rockburne covered gallery surfaces with images of curving lines arcing across rich expanses of powdery color. The works had a cosmological feel about them, like diagrams of the way forces interact.

Category XI. Upping the Ante

Sometimes the most memorable shows of a season are not the best shows. They occur when artists move their work a little or a lot. It's great to see steps taken. It doesn't always mean the results are great, but the sense of effort and diligence makes us look a little harder and a little longer. In addition to the artists I will discuss below, a number of those I already have mentioned could have found their way into this category.

Jonathan Lasker: **Terms of Reality,** *1994, oil on linen, 80 by 60 inches. Courtesy Sperone Westwater Gallery.*



Even though people say, "Painting is not equipped to deal with the problems of our time," the reverse may be closer to the truth: our times may not be equipped to deal with painting's problems.

I've never really connected with **Jonathan Lasker**'s work. A shape, some stripes, a thicket of tangled lines, slightly jarring color and a thick, casually applied surface: these are the ingredients that Lasker has manipulated for more than 10 years. He makes paintings of paintings that bear a striking resemblance to the "real thing." Although he obviously has a place in the M.G.A. category (not least because he helped form it), Lasker has progressively amplified the components of his art. His changeless but continually evolving style might make him a better artist than I thought he was. It wasn't so much that Lasker made a big move in his show last season at Sperone Westwater as it is that his work has become more convincing. I still don't connect with it much, but I respect it a lot more.

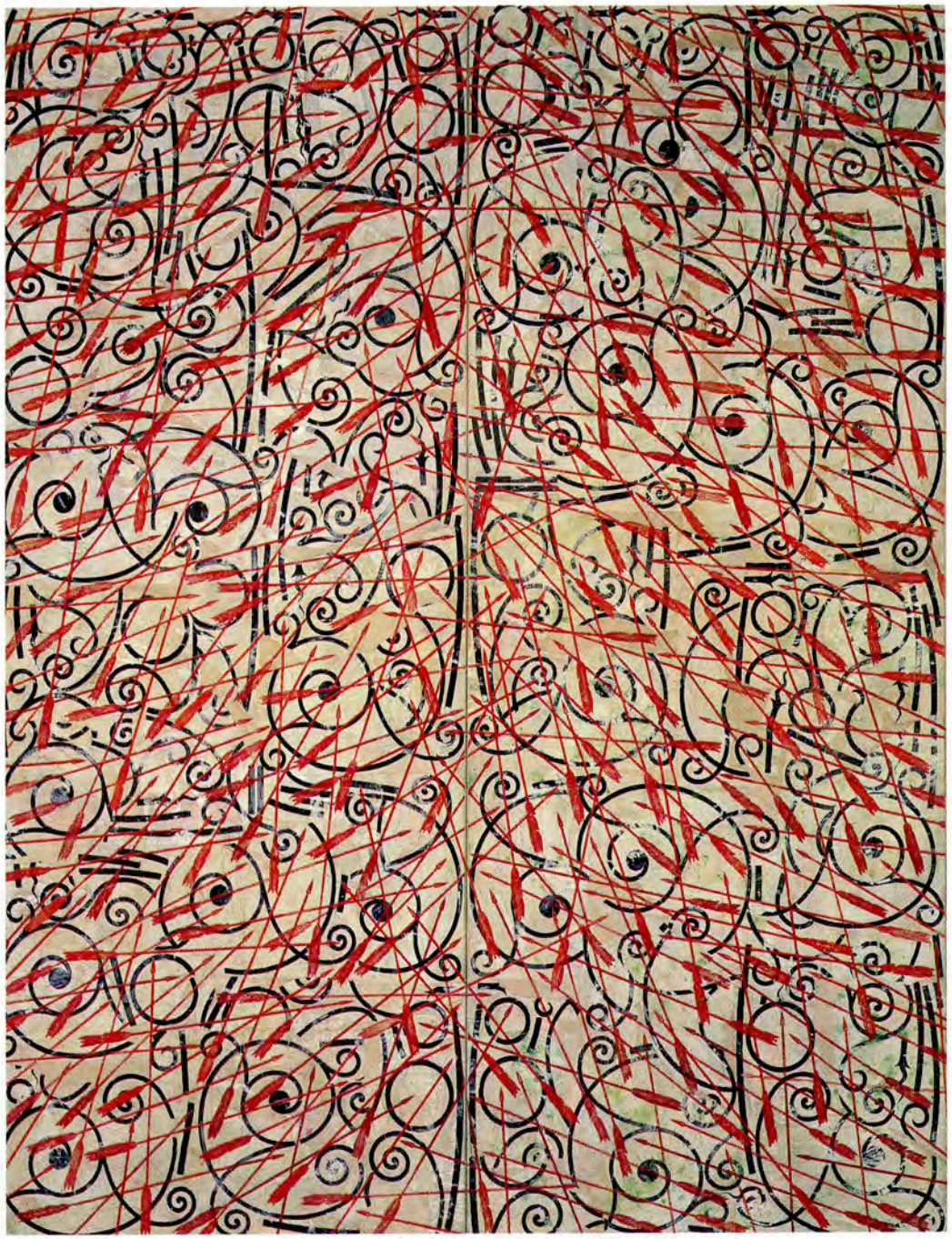
Terry Winters's new gunky, gaudy-colored, dense paintings, his most abstract works to date (at Sonnabend [see p. 130]), show him on the verge of what feels like a real breakthrough. It's as if Winters had gone inside the clustered pod shapes that drifted through many of his earlier paintings in order to reveal their coagulated structure. With a new Gothic sense of composition, never has his work looked so simultaneously beautiful and ugly, finished and unfinished.

David Deutsch was in only one group show all year (at Jay Gorney) but the three paintings he exhibited in it made a good impression. Deutsch is an artist whose work I always liked, especially his early paintings of landscapes dotted with strange surveillance tools. Then he became engaged in a protracted series of smaller, more conventional landscapes that I didn't like. The new paintings are better. One featured an allover grid of framed portraits of men who look like they once ran things. The painting had the feel of an observatory by way of a salon. It made it feel like Deutsch is "coming home."

Lisa Ruyter (Petzel/Borgmann) wallpapered the gallery with her line drawings and then hung her paintings, Warhol-style, on top of them. Ruyter surprised me and spiced up her hyper-exact, analytic work, making it even colder—which is good in her case. **Richmond Burton**'s paintings, seen at Matthew Marks [see p. 102], were better than the last group he showed in this gallery. Burton has a quirky personal sense of geometry which worked in one or two of these new paintings. **Stephen Mueller** (Annina Nosei) tightened his aqueous, visionary abstractions. The work had more resonance and more clarity.

Finally, **Philip Taaffe** took the decorative, as both concept and experience, to a new place. The new paintings in his spring show at Gagosian downtown showed the artist using motifs that evoke early modernist abstractions, Islamic tiles and grillwork, and European wrought iron, while also using natural forms like beetles and butterflies that have long been the staples of decorative design. Accumulating in small, delicate units, often consisting of cutout linoprints affixed to canvas, these large (sometimes too large) paintings have an understated, antiheroic grandeur. Perhaps signaling a new psychological complexity, the most recent painting in the show, *Eros and Psyche*, features a dense, irregular pattern of overlapping arrows, brushily painted in blood red. All the arrows point at the middle seam of the painting, as if it were under assault. This is an enormously evocative painting. An image of the beautiful naked, young body of the martyred St. Sebastian forms in the mind. Taaffe's work suits Baudelaire's criteria for beauty to a tee: something "immutable" (Taaffe's shapes and motifs) and something "transitory" (his original and sometimes exquisite ways of actually making a painting). He's uneven, but there probably isn't a better abstract painter of his generation.

Painting, as de Gaulle said of France, will never die, but like any other medium it passes through periods of dormancy and growth. At this point we may be moving out of the former and into the latter—entering a phase of vitality whose character is markedly different. Many painters, including Taaffe, are finding ways to expand painting's scope by directing it away from its overdetermined, overly masculine past to a bright future. It's about time. □



Philip Taaffe:* Eros and Psyche, *1993-94, mixed mediums on canvas, 132 by 100½ inches. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

Author: *Jerry Saltz's last marathon overview of the New York art world for this magazine appeared in September '93.*