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ART REVIEW; Making An Entrance At Any Age

By ROBERTA SMITH

THE New York art world isn't everyone's cup of tea, but few would deny that it is constantly aswirl. Its tea leaves rarely drift to the bottom for perusal and are further agitated by a constant influx of new ones, usually through the ritual of the first solo show.

This tradition persists as the main form of introduction for new art, even as dealers and collectors prowl graduate school exhibitions looking for the next hot thing. Hence the condition that art in Chelsea sometimes looks like student work, because it is. It's for sale but was made in a studio provided by an institution of higher learning, toward an M.F.A. or even a B.F.A.

There is perhaps much to deplore about the world's current youth craze, the corrupting effects of the market and so on. (If art and money had sex in the 1980's, these days they must be making a pornographic film.) But to some degree, it was ever thus. Frank Stella was shown at the Museum of Modern Art the year after he earned his undergraduate degree.

Perhaps the exceptions have become the norm, and the norms have multiplied exponentially. But I doubt that instant success thwarts or furthers an artist's development much more than grinding failure. The number of people who still make art five years after earning their M.F.A.'s may rise a bit. More likely, there will eventually be more former artists with one or two New York solo shows on their inactive résumés.

A sampling of the many solo debuts on view in New York at any given moment, but especially in spring, demonstrates that the ages of "new" artists can vary as much as their styles, mediums or points of origin. These shows can introduce mature talents, announce unfocused raw potential or reveal promise that will need to cut loose to be fulfilled. First shows are just the first step.

One thing is certain: it is never too late to have a New York debut, or to learn new tricks. At 83, the legendary and reclusive French filmmaker Chris Marker, whose work is precedent for artists like Chantal Akerman and Isaac Julien, is taking the plunge as an installation artist. Mr. Marker's "Owls at Noon Prelude: The Hollow Men," at the Museum of Modern Art, is the first segment of a meditation on what he calls "the erratic liner of Century XX." He made it entirely on a computer using a program written with assistance from Nikolai Zinoviev.

Multiplying two video channels across eight screens, the work alternates found images of the trenches, body-strewn battlefields and ruined cities of World War I with excerpts from and additions to "The Hollow Men," T.S. Eliot's bitter, dirgelike poem about the war written in 1925, four years after Mr. Marker's birth. Though some of the images are familiar, Mr. Marker, characteristically, makes mesmerizing use of his medium and its black-and-white palette.

The images are shrouded in manipulated textures and (somewhat cornily) layered with faces. The words, gliding across alternate screens in both directions, complicate space and perception, revealing their meanings bit by bit, culminating in the poem's famous last lines: "This is the way the world ends/ Not with a bang but a whimper." Replicating memory's retention of traumatic events in scraps of images and language, and recalling a world tragedy whose effects are still felt, this piece reverberates painfully with the present.

At Nolan/Eckman in SoHo, an artist just this side of 80 is making his debut. Miroslav Tichy, born in 1925, is a self-taught Czech photographer who makes his own cameras. His preferred subject, women in bathing suits, might wear a bit thin, but the images, taken between the 1950's and the 70's, have a distinctive combination of dreamlike fuzziness and everyday unidealized reality. They're Pictorialist snapshots. Unfortunately, the cameras are not in the show; the one on the show's announcement might be a sculpture by Dieter Roth.

Aurie Ramirez

The venerable alternative space White Columns has been energized by its new director and chief curator, Matthew Higgs, who is making telling adjustments both small and large. For example, White Columns is deviating from its usual habit, in place at least since 1998, of nonstop group shows in its main space. The deviation is the first show anywhere of the captivating watercolors of Aurie Ramirez, a Filipino-American woman, now 44, who worked for 20 years with Creative Growth, an art center for disabled adult artists

in Oakland, Calif.

Ms. Ramirez, who has a thing for pinstripes, makes extraordinary watercolors that delineate a stage-set universe populated by sometimes androgynous doll-like figures whose cutaway jackets, lacy collars and pink or green pants give them the look of old-fashioned vaudevillians. Their luxurious black hair and white rouged faces suggest a variant on Raggedy Ann and Andy, though they also evoke clowns, hockey masks or clock faces.

These figures cluster in groups, like a theater troupe posing for a group portrait; they inhabit Victorian settings or plainer ones that suggest contemporary California. There are signs of violence and surgical scars; frequent indications of romance, sex and family dysfunction; odalisques reclining before paintings of odalisques.

Ms. Ramirez also isolates her rainbow palette in small striped abstractions. Though there are no indications of it here, the artist, who understands English, speaks in a language of her own devising, which she also writes, filling tablet upon tablet with its somewhat Greek lettering.

This show presents a tantalizing first glimpse that is echoed in the two small spaces, known as White Rooms, that White Columns typically devotes to solo shows. From a young artist who goes by the single name of Carter come intricate collage drawings of a vaguely forensic cast with outlines of heads papered with small squares of marbled paper or drawings of locks of hair.

And Peter Gallo, a writer and self-taught artist in his late 40's from Vermont, is showing an array of scrappy paintings and drawings, often involving found materials and wryly incendiary messages. For viewers of a certain age, the sardonic works bring to mind the poem-drawings of Paul Bloodgood and the visionary paintings of Forrest Bess.

Richard Wathen

The young British painter Richard Wathen, at Salon 94 on the Upper East Side, plugs some 21st-century energy into the tradition of English portraiture. His "Over the Moor," one of the year's most beautiful figurative paintings, is a half-length portrait of a girlish woman of uncertain age and culture; she might have wandered out of a painting by Watteau or Gainsborough, but her conical hat seems Chinese.

The colors are grays and whites with touches of pink, yellow and blue for her garments. The misty landscape behind her seems to materialize across her bodice, as if she or it were a mirage, or her image were literally painted over one of a moor. And despite the history-laden images, the flat weightless paint handling feels contemporary, as if executed by an aesthete trained in billboard painting.

In the other four paintings in this show, Mr. Wathen makes various stabs at strangeness, painting full-length portraits of a girl and a boy who happen to be nude, and a forest idyll dotted with animals, insects and birds that seem to have been plucked from other paintings. These works are all interesting, but they are no match for "Over the Moor," which really gives the artist something to live up to.

Haavard Homstvedt

Where painting is concerned, we live in an age of realisms, of multiple approaches to the depiction of reality and the use of paint that take the grab bag of art history for granted. The strange, muted images of Haavard Homstvedt, at Southfirst in Williamsburg, confirm that some of these realisms descend from Surrealism, and the work of Max Ernst in particular.

Mr. Homstvedt, who is Swedish, earned a B.F.A. from the Rhode Island School of Design and an M.F.A. from Yale. He seems to take special inspiration from both Ernst's slightly stuffy collages made from cut-up 19th-century engravings and his fascination with paint texture and dense foliage. Mr. Homstvedt's figures suggest older art in their dress, gestures and poses, but their silhouettes are almost entirely masked with richly colored marbling or textile-like patterns. Everything is taking place behind a veil.

In "Tarp," five men lift what resembles a small striped tent but was clearly a coffin in the image's previous life. In "Feeling Man" the top-hatted silhouette of a dandy, rendered in rose and yellow textures, seems to take leave of a spectral figure made of multicolored veins in a dark but detailed garden.

There is an academic quality to Mr. Homstvedt's art that is bothersome -- it sometimes veers close to neatened-up Sigmar Polke and cooled-off Ed Paschke. But his palette and surfaces and their evocation of fabric are his own painterly ideas.

André Ethier

The German Expressionists and the Fauves, updated with horror movies and comics, inspire the efforts of André Ethier, a young

Toronto artist who is making his debut in Derek Eller's project space.

In small, intensely colored, vigorously worked paintings, grotesque heads float above landscapes or sit on shoulders cloaked in bright tweed. Genders are routinely mixed, and noses often go missing. Revised motifs include a scarecrow, Judith and Holofernes, and Goya's lurching Saturn, shown here interacting with a stripper rather than devouring his young.

When you get to the show's one landscape, with its blood-red cave, it is something of a relief from the figural ghouliness. These are modern fairy tales in which happy endings tend not to count, painted with consummate ease; their intimate scale works in their favor. For the record, Mr. Ethier's gallery in Toronto is Greener Pastures, newly established by Kineko Ivic, a former artist who made his solo debut at the Andrew Kreps Gallery in Chelsea in 2002.

Fairy tales of a sweeter sort are implied in the deft, watercolorlike paintings of a young Japanese artist named Saeko Takagi, who is making her debut at ATM, recently relocated to Chelsea from the East Village. Ms. Takagi's radiant landscapes belong to a familiar genre of seductive illustrational art, but her palette, imagination and touch suggest that she might rise above it. Her work can also be seen at Transplant Gallery in Chelsea, where she has drawn the images for an animated video by her husband, Masakatsu Takagi. The tiny stills from it, which compress Ms. Takagi's ethereal images into gemlike miniatures, may be the best work in either show.

Dean Byington

Old and new are seamlessly woven together in the photo-silkscreen paintings of Dean Byington, an artist in his late 40's from San Francisco, at Leslie Tonkonow. Their intricate patterns, mostly in black on white, suggest ultra-refined wallpaper; their landscape, plant and animal motifs derive from combinations of drawn and found images (the latter from old engravings), which the artist works together and then photocopies until a grainy coherence has been achieved.

Like Victorian fairy paintings, Mr. Byington's well-ordered nature seems benign but can turn sinister as you pick out images of conflict between insects and animals in the underbrush. It's Beatrix Potter filtered through Darwin. The works are interesting but need to reduce the sense of an obvious equation of precedents that include Bruce Conner, Philip Taaffe and Christopher Wool.

Neeta Madahar

The photographs in Neeta Madahar's solo show at Julie Saul are from her "Sustenance" series. Dissolving the line between real life and diorama, they might be considered a form of entrapment documentary, or "Candid Camera" for the birds.

Ms. Madahar, a 39-year-old British artist who has an M.F.A. from Tufts University and who now lives outside London, worked as a software designer before taking up photography. The images here were taken from the balcony of her apartment in Framingham, Mass., where she lived in 2003-4. They focus on a single screen of tree branches on which she hung well-stocked bird feeders. When the birds showed up, she took pictures.

With the branches as a kind of organizing grid, the five images meditate on the visual variables of light, season, bird feeder architecture and bird life. That the birds, sitting so still, might almost be stuffed is an element in the works' eerie artfulness. They resemble more optimistic versions of Gregory Crewdson's early setup depictions of nature, but without the labor.

Jackie Nickerson

The tensions between the staged and the natural continue in other photography debuts. At Jack Shainman in Chelsea, Jackie Nickerson is showing large portraits and full-length photographs of impoverished but dignified black South African laborers.

Their figures, shot up close, often have the power of monumental sculpture. But the images are not without a voyeuristic aspect, simply because the scale and color give their ragged clothing an aura of glamour, an effect that may reflect Ms. Nickerson's previous career as a fashion photographer.

Her newer images, big close-up portraits of Roman Catholic nuns and priests, notable for their doughlike complexions and open faces, are better, although here the Thomas Ruff scale is a problem.

At Jessica Murray in Chelsea, Una Knox's photographs of the Icelandic landscape depict vistas in which the man-made and the natural are often hard to decipher. At Kerrigan Campbell on East Ninth Street, Ben Nason takes things a little further in landscape images, most of them nocturnal, that have a bit of Crewdsonian bizarreness, but again involve no staging or manipulation.

On Rivington Street, Carter Mull is making his debut at Rivington Arms with setup photographs of plexiglass constructions that have been smashed to smithereens and drizzled with fake gold and salt crystals. The images are abstract and out there, like disco-punk

process art. They fit into a tradition that includes Barry Le Va's sculpture and James Welling's seemingly abstract photographs of tinfoil, a fairly unpopulated place to be.

Cordy Ryman

Abstraction isn't dead, but these days it is usually served spiked with decisive bits of reality, in terms of material, installation or both. Cordy Ryman, an artist who is included in the "Greater New York" exhibition at P.S. 1 and who is having his first show at the Phatory, in the East Village, favors both.

His casual, hands-on, irreverent formalism features strong monochromes -- fluorescent pink, for example -- painted on scraps of wood and installed in corners, on the ceiling or on doorjambs. More conventional works, executed on squarish slabs of wood or Styrofoam, tend to have unpainted places that indicate where the artist held the piece while he was painting it. A sectional piece leans against the wall like a fat, folding measuring stick.

In essence, Mr. Ryman treats the Phatory's small storefront as if it were a canvas, accenting the eccentricities of the space and creating an artistic whole comprised of disparate, site-specific incidents.

Nicola López

Back in Chelsea, the gap between installation art and other mediums is busy with work. At Caren Golden, Nicola López, who has an M.F.A. from Columbia University, is making her solo debut with a playful architectural whirlwind.

Energetic woodcuts and silkscreens of skyscrapers and spires crowd together and swirl across the floor, up walls and onto the ceiling; smoke (also printed on paper) coils down from the vents. This work has a sense of urban romance more characteristic of artists of the early 20th century than those in the present, but its main weakness is over-finish, which makes its wildness feels feigned.

(Ms. López might establish a reciprocal trade agreement with Kadar Brock and Matt Jones, whose rough-and-tumble paintings are making their double debut at Buia, next door to Golden. All could use a bit of what the others have.)

Chelsea in general is swarming with first shows of varying promise: Corin Hewitt's at Taxter & Spengemann, Ian Cooper's at Cue and Linda Ridgway's at Charles Cowles. Anyone walking up 10th Avenue from 25th Street to 26th will come across a large window filled with the energetically motley work of Johannes Atli Hinnksson, a recent graduate of the School of Visual Arts, courtesy of the Kantor Gallery of Los Angeles.

Kelly Kaczynski

At Triple Candie in Harlem, Kelly Kaczynski, a graduate of Bard College who lives in Chicago, has unveiled an installation-art apotheosis of art about art and optical illusion. "Air Is Air and Thing Is Thing" consists of a series of separate sculptures that range throughout this large space.

But when viewed through a tiny eye-level hole in another sculpture, the menagerie organizes itself optically into an image of "Étant Donnée," the famous peephole installation that Marcel Duchamp worked on, in secret, during the last decades of his life. Now in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Duchamp's work centers on a recumbent nude torso, seen only from neck to knees, who holds a gas lamp in one hand.

In Ms. Kaczynski's piece, the sculptures (all made of building materials) evoke various techniques -- including modeling, carving, construction and even process art -- while replicating the landscape surrounding Duchamp's nude. Most surprising, the nude's form is implied with astounding exactness by the negative space between the sculptures. Her vulnerable form has been excised, an act with satisfying feminist implications. References are made to Duchamp's "Large Glass" and to Giacometti's "Palace at 4 a.m." Although, on second thought, a reference to the latter's "Woman With Her Throat Cut" would be more pertinent. Ms. Kaczynski has accomplished a particularly challenging kind of solo debut: the one that is a hard act to follow.

Introducing Artists

The solo debut exhibitions reviewed by Roberta Smith:

CHRIS MARKER, Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, Manhattan, (212)708-9400. Through June 13.

AURIE RAMIREZ, White Columns, 320 West 13th Street (entrance on Horatio Street), West Village, (212)924-4212. Through June 11.

RICHARD WATHEN, Salon 94, 12 East 94th Street, (646)672-9212. Through June 16.

HAAVARD HOMSTVEDT, Southfirst, 60 North Sixth Street, Williamsburg, Brooklyn, (718)599-4884. Through May 15.

ANDRÉ ETHIER, Derek Eller, 526-30 West 25th Street, Chelsea, (212)206-6411. Through May 21.

DEAN BYINGTON, Leslie Tonkonow, 535 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, (212)255-8450. Through June 18.

NEETA MADAHAR, Julie Saul, 535 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, (212)627-2410. Through June 11.

JACKIE NICKERSON, Jack Shainman, 513 West 20th Street, Chelsea, (212)645-1701. Through May 21.

CORDY RYMAN, Phatory, 618 East Ninth Street, East Village, (212)777-7922. Through tomorrow.

NICOLA LÓPEZ, Caren Golden, 539 West 23rd Street, Chelsea, (212)727-8304. Through May 14.

KELLY KACZYNSKI , Triple Candie, 461 West 126th Street, Harlem, (212)865-0783. Through May 22.

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