

Review of Exhibitions

NEW YORK

David Humphrey at David McKee

At a moment when the art world seems overrun with artists bent on banalizing every kind of intensity painting can yield, David Humphrey's first New York show was a wonderful surprise. The very difficulty of describing what there is to see in Humphrey's buoyantly improbable images is a clue to their strength as paintings. The best of them, such as *At the Office* and *She Does, He Doesn't*, have the illogical structural fluidity of dreams that permits places to turn into events and things to become characters in ways that defy narration.

Humphrey's proficiency as an image-maker shows most plainly in his control over the plasticity of illusionistic space. Though not yet 30, he is already artist enough to reveal the play of freedom and constraint that makes the art of painting pertinent to life even before questions of interpretation arise. When his imagery is in full force, there is no telling how spontaneous his inventions may be. He maintains a constant tension between slurred, palette-knifed painterly detail and wide sweeps of pictorial imagination. The result is pictures that offer plenty to look at from every vantage point. Even the images that don't quite work because they seem forced have a generosity and largeness of vision about them that is impressive and pleasing.

Humphrey's themes are broad—work, power, intimacy, subjectivity, isolation—but not attenuated. His images never break down clearly into symbols, metaphors or genres: they remain musings magnified to epic proportions. *At the Office* can serve as an example. The body of a man whose head is either missing or simply cropped out of the image lies supine across the picture space, clothed in rumpled, bright blue fabric. His huge body casts a faint shadow on the white ground plane that apparently runs beneath it. The image is outlandish enough to sap words such as "beneath" and "ground plane" of their customary precision, rendering them as provisional in a way that is at once irritating and intriguing.

On the stomach of the blue-clad man sits a woman at a desk, typing—perhaps a secretary, if we are to take the picture's title



David Humphrey: *At the Office*, 1984, oil on canvas, 44 by 52 inches; at David McKee.



Joseph Nechvatal: *Palace of Power* (left), *Blame it on the Radio* (right), both 1984, *Figurehead* (on floor), 1983-84, mixed mediums; at Brooke Alexander.

literally. She looks absorbed in her task, signaling no awareness of the strangeness of her situation as it appears to us. Her foot, extending from under the desk, rests innocently on the crotch of the man who serves her as a floor (or is he, as employer, the economic ground of her being?). Meanwhile, in the immediate foreground of the picture, at a scale different again from those of the secretary and the blue-clad man, two more figures appear. A large woman, whose form seems to grow from the recumbent figure's right leg, appears to be intimidat-

ing a much smaller man whose head and shoulders cast a diminutive shadow on the white ground plane. His face is partly eclipsed by her head. She is a faceless mass of blond, Medusan tresses that twine like muscular tentacles. In the background, if that's what it is, the blue-clad man's big left hand parts a bunched curtain of the same blue to reveal a distant piece of architecture: a tall, blue office building. Flared at the top on one side, the building suggests a parody of both present-day architectural stylization and its own phallic symbolism.

Are we seeing here an office-worker's nightmare of power relations on the job? The artist's fantasy of a vocation alien to his own? Or just a wild pictorial improvisation reworked until it looks deliberate? Is the title a chosen theme or an afterthought added as a finishing touch? The work gets some of its power from the way it leaves such questions unanswered—and unanswerable.

The influence of Philip Guston's late work on Humphrey's seems too obvious to ignore, and it is probably no accident that Humphrey's first show took place in what was Guston's gallery. Happily, it takes nothing away from Humphrey's accomplishment to cite Guston as a primary source. Humphrey's work is quite his own and shows him to be an artist of enormous promise. Guston used to say you could judge a significant painting by how many senses it gave to the questions, What is it? and Where is it? By this measure, Humphrey's work is the real thing.

—Kenneth Baker

Joseph Nechvatal at Brooke Alexander

Like Richard Prince, Gretchen Bender and others, Joseph Nechvatal positions his work in a chain of repetitions and reproductions. In his recent show he exhibited a series of diptychs of graphite and oil stick drawings along with very large photographic blowups of drawings not in the show. At the same time, the walls around the gallery entrance, a bench in the middle of the room, and several "Minimal" sculptural objects were all covered with 8-by-10-inch photocopies of his drawings. In this indiscriminate wallpapering of available surfaces, the content of his markings—fragmentary images of faces, rockets, classical and eastern statuary, cross sections of the brain—took on a varnished-over, decorative uniformity. But instead of simply describing a trajectory in which art is commodified through reproduction, Nechvatal indicated a more problematic movement in which original and copy stand at both beginning and end of his repressing circuit.

The word "palimpsest" is specifically relevant to Nechvatal's work: his surface seems to carry the accumulation of repeated, futile acts of marking, scratching and erasing—much like an etching plate or tablet. With their tar-

nished metallic tones of dull gold, silver and ocher, the works have a seductive and sedimented density. Scarred and spotted, they seem in the process of a slow self-corrosion, their monochromatic bleakness occasionally tinged with a smeared flare of pale red or blue.

To distinguish which marks are motivated and which are aleatory is impossible. Nechvatal's fragmentary images drift in and out of a saturated, interwoven veil of lines and signs. He puts the very legibility of this field in question: distinctions of surface and depth disappear, and no image is given priority. His work is not consumable either as a totality or as a rebuslike aggregation of individual parts. Rather, it is a shifting zone of intensities and schizophrenic disjunctions.

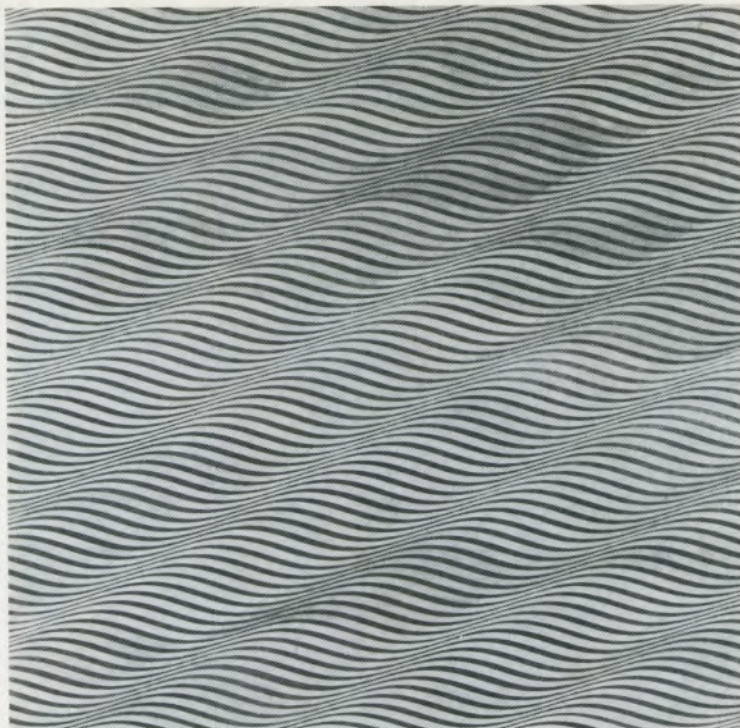
Though clearly the product of a hand and body at work, Nechvatal's markings seem bereft of intentionality, of autonomous subjectivity. Devoid of spontaneity or purposiveness, his work is not properly pictographic (like Twombly's) or expressive-gestural (like graffiti). Nechvatal's broken, insensate line is not so much generating new form as it is tracing over the contours of the awesome abundance of already given fragments and forces, recording the body's dissonance with the very space in which it is embedded.

What is especially important about Nechvatal's work is his ability to describe the effects of our collapsing and chaotic visual environment without recourse to an increasingly impotent vocabulary of electronic, video or "digital" imagery. Many young artists only engineer their own complicity with the circularity of media effect they purport to dismantle. But by not mimicking technological surfaces and at the same time by rejecting the expressionist option, Nechvatal inscribes within his work the forgotten activity of the body. He is able to insist on the immanence of this corporal subject in a space where anything can connect with anything else, in which languages and codes become scrambled—without endowing this subject with any centrality or authority.

—Jonathan Crary

Max Cole at Louis K. Meisel

The formula for Max Cole's painting appears pretty obvious: you take a tiny unit, in this case a hand-held pen stroke about a quarter-inch long, and if you repeat it often enough you end up with a vast structure in which the stability of the whole contrasts



Philip Taaffe: *Equivalent*, 1984, linoprint collage, enamel, acrylic on canvas, 84 inches square; at Pat Hearn.



Max Cole: *Matkatamiba*, 1984, 52 by 92 inches, acrylic on canvas; at Louis K. Meisel.

with the singularity of the units that built it. A similar system built the pyramids and lends visual interest to a brick wall. But there's nothing obvious about Cole's work. Her strata of myriad little vertical strokes laid across lengthy, taped-off bands of smoothly built-up acrylic paint accumulate into images of inexhaustible readings.

At first they seem to absorb light like like clothing (nothing if not distinguished, these are pure wool pinstripes and herringbones) before they miraculously begin to return light to the room. You're not sure how to place these exaggeratedly horizontal paintings. The obsessive forth-rightness of their method recalls Agnes Martin and Robert Ryman. They come on with that same self-possession—

the lowered voice that quiets a room. And yet, as you move among them you become aware of a surging vibrancy, each painting sending out a different pulse that builds to a fugue effect.

Cole's paintings are neither Op nor Minimal, even if they have elements of both. Like the work of John McLaughlin they employ a reductive modernist language while inhabiting some protected ground that has managed to escape the scorched-earth policy of modernism's march to Atlanta. They have little or nothing to do with the esthetic determinism that has preoccupied so much of Western art, but instead look eastward. They strike me as contemplative, almost Tantric. Every time I see her work I'm amazed at its organic quality. How can it

breathe like it does when she tapes off those bands of plastic paint? Neither the process nor the material lends itself to the subtleties of the handmade gesture. I think the answer lies partly in the complete absence of geometry. There's not a straight edge to be found anywhere in her work. The drift and sag of her bands and the bunch and spread of her ink-strokes create an effect both delicate and massive, like the sudden palm-print of a breeze on still water or a field of grain.

Cole hasn't exhibited in New York in a number of years and this show is consequently an event apart from the actual impact of the paintings. There's a cultish aura to the work peculiar to abstract artists who work slow, as if rarity enhances quality (an arguable but depressing proposition). Cole paints above the hype, however. It would be difficult not to appreciate the authentic rigor and patience in these paintings. The magic, too: the black and white paintings seem to create their own hues, mixing reds and blues in the eye that simply aren't there. This is the perceptual art that Irwin left painting to find. Cole has introduced actual color into some of her most recent canvases, mostly dark earth reds and subtle gray blues. The colors feel as right—as authoritative—as the straight black and white. They're not theoretical or symbolic colors, but are evocative of stones and of atmospheres simultaneously. This is the way Cole's paintings work, restoratively; it is an art of the mind that lets nature breathe through it. —Stephen Westfall

Philip Taaffe at Pat Hearn

Op Art became widely known and immensely popular in the '60s, even though its 1965 debut at the Museum of Modern Art ("The Responsive Eye") was generally panned by art critics. The dim view of Op classed it as a perceptual curiosity, vulgar and mechanical in its visual effects, and devoid of substantial social, philosophical or formal meaning. Twenty years later, when much new art is overloaded with meaning, it is precisely those negative qualities that recommend it.

Philip Taaffe, a 29-year-old painter from New Jersey, recently showed a series of his own versions of Bridget Riley's famous black-and-white undulating stripe paintings (the "cataracts"), plus an Op sphere composed of triangles and circle sections. Taaffe's paintings are much like Riley's in appearance, but quite distinctive

in manner of fabrication. His scale also varies from hers, both larger and smaller. Taaffe prints his stripes (or triangles) in sections on paper with linoleum cuts, then pieces them together and glues them to canvas. He uses a dark gray enamel; the assembled painting is washed down with tinted water and varnish, then scoured with steel wool, then burnished with a cloth.

Taaffe has sought to extend "the emotional pitch," as he put it, of the simple Op graphics with added color; in one work the white paper is stained a bright yellow; in another the ground is given faint earth tones of bluish and brownish green and gray. Up close, outside the range of the optical effects, the paintings look handcrafted and lyrical, like dark nuanced graphite on richly toned paper.

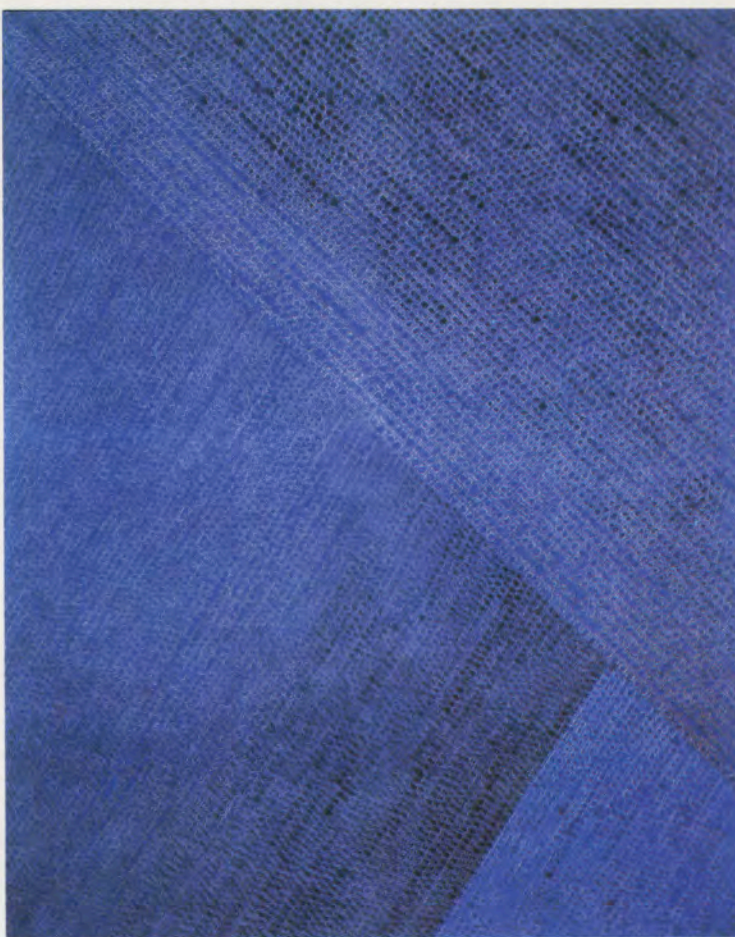
The appropriation of other artists' imagery, at first seen as a way to question the idea of individual artistic originality, has become so common among younger artists that distinct individual approaches have begun to emerge. In thumbnail fashion: Sherrie Levine is the conceptualist appropriator, personally absent and deadpan in her copying; Mike Bidlo is the performance artist, burllesquing the legend of Picasso, Pollock or Warhol; Taaffe is the abstract painter, bringing to his Op Art the kind of artificial, hedonistic focus on material and process that characterizes painters like Ryman or Marden.

Though the six Op Art paintings dominated the installation, the show included other works: two unassuming small paintings that looked just like Myron Stout's work, and a larger one that combined the shapes of Duchamp's "standard stoppages" on an abstract ground adopted from Ellsworth Kelly. These other paintings conceptually bracketed the Op pieces, and made them into a kind of postmodernist study, in which the artist creates an individual, personal relationship with a popular cultural motif. Taaffe has finished with his Op series—his most recent work in the show consisted of a field of floating biomorphic shapes—but I suspect that the avant-garde (cf. the recent work of Ross Bleckner and Alan Belcher, for example) is not done with Op Art yet.

—Walter Robinson

Kim Whanki at Dintenfass

These days you walk into a gallery expecting to be visually assaulted. This is not the case, how-



Kim Whanki: 19-VIII-72, 1972, oil on canvas, 104 by 82 inches; at Terry Dintenfass.

ever, with the exhibition of paintings by the Korean artist Kim Whanki, who died in 1974. It isn't that the work is passive or timid; it is just quietly persuasive. And despite a general enthusiasm for recent developments in American painting, one can't help but yearn, looking at Whanki's paintings, for a more contemplative art to emerge from the cacophony.

The earliest works in the show, small oils on paper dating from 1968, reveal Whanki's exploration of simplified formal elements after years of representational painting. These transitional-period works look like Oriental versions of the organic, nature-derived abstractions of Adolf Gottlieb. But unlike Gottlieb's chaotic calligraphy, Whanki's large orbs of color hover over infinite, silent landscapes.

As the work grew in size, Whanki began to expand or rearrange the shapes and color in his compositions, thereby effectively eliminating any referential imagery. In *Untitled, 1969*, a bright red circle is divided into four parts by two blurred purple lines that cut across the painting vertically and horizontally. Thin slices of alizarin, deep blue and green fan out from the ends of the purple lines and disappear at the edges of the

warm white ground. Just above and parallel to the horizontal line is a row of small dots of pure color that look like tiny lights in the distance.

Whanki used the technique of applying thinned-out oil color to an unprimed canvas in his later work, and the slight bleeding of the edges of the paint is an integrated part of his working process. Whanki constructs a free-hand grid in *27-II-70*, by painting a blue-black color field, leaving small, open squares of raw canvas. He fills these with touches of bright color which resemble a multitude of lanterns seen against a dark sky. Whanki divided the almost square *26-III-70* into four unequal rectangles, each with its own inner structure of cells and nuclei. This subdivision of the picture plane flattens out the surface, suggesting walls made of little bricks or stones or some of the magical pictographs of Paul Klee.

Whanki's last, large paintings, his best, are precise yet spontaneous. In *19-VIII-72*, Whanki builds up a monochromatic network of blue touches in three overlapping triangles, creating a subtle shift of tonal gradations. What is surprising is that so many small gestures

can add up to a cohesive pictorial statement. The most impressive work here was the horizontal *22-II-72*, a deceptively simple composition partitioned by a black line into two sections, radiating concentric circles above and parallel lines below, all developed from minute touches of gray wash. Whanki slowly evolved a luminosity in this serene work that many painters work a lifetime to achieve. —Robert G. Edelman

Richard Crozier at Tatistcheff

Richard Crozier claims to have come up with a relatively unique way of painting landscapes: from imagination crossed with memory, landscapes that are real, but "all in the mind." His goal is to produce, in his own words, "unremarkable, familiar, anonymous landscapes," the elements of which have been "rearranged and reinvented at will."

So we might have expected to find in Crozier's oils the landscapes we happen upon in dreams, "familiar" as a sunny day in the country, "anonymous" as only dreamscapes can be. But this was not the case, as the viewer soon found out. For one thing, Crozier often paints outdoors—a series of 12-by-16-inch works were painted on site. His show was titled "New Albemarle Landscapes" (all the works shown were from 1984), in honor of the county in which he lives in Virginia—real enough, that. And, for all his disclaimers, Crozier has a quite naturalistic style, safely to the left of Wyeth, but more than a little to the right of Painterly Realism.

A triptych titled *11:15 a.m. West of Charlottesville* illustrates his not entirely revolutionary approach: the central panel, showing patches of grass against earth, foliage-covered hills and powder blue mountains against bluer sky, was painted on site, while the panels to left and right are studio improvisations on the central scene. They look, frankly, more like extensions of the center than variations on a theme. Still, these landscapes—real or imagined—have a charm and a freshness that are perhaps intrinsic to the artists' geographic/aesthetic territory.

In *Near Amherst, Virginia* rows of pines appear in the foreground; another, higher row of pines rises behind them, with brick red and blue mountains above that and another, dimmer mountain range and blue sky rife with gray clouds yet further on. *Snow Field, Jarman's Gap* makes for a particu-

larly lush winter scene, with slopes of white snow topped with snow-brushed firs, and a panoramic view of hillsides and mountains above. After a while, the viewer stops applying the labels of real or imaginary, and takes the landscape at face value—and they are quite valuable, this viewer concluded.

One further conclusion: if he doesn't do exactly what his statement claims, Crozier *is*, nonetheless, something of an experimentalist, perhaps more than he realizes. He even enters the realm of true fascination in two paintings in which deep green foliage is nearly swallowed up by "back lighting," the sun at some impossible point behind the painting, the shadows to us, engulfing trees and bushes and grass in brooding darkness. *Mountainside, Backlit* has all the morbid charm of Mahler *Totenlieder*, and *Back Lighting, Spring Landscape*, is a post-post-Impressionist composition of trees in the shade, the shade composed, arrestingly enough, of russets, oranges, dark greens and deep reds. Perhaps all Crozier really meant to say in his statement was that these were landscapes the artist knows by heart.

—Gerrit Henry

Marcia Clark at First Street Gallery

In painting Manhattan, Marcia Clark joins the ranks of older artists like Jane Freilicher, Rackstraw Downes, Yvonne Jacquette and the late John Button. In such company, it's no wonder that Clark has had to hit upon her own approach to the city, her own style and viewpoint, indeed, her own Manhattan.

Clark's New York is one of the most stunning yet seen. She approaches the city from two vantage points: one from her apartment on the Upper West Side, around 106th Street. *Night, Upper West Side* is a brushy but naturalistic, relatively intimate view of the neighborhood from the 12th floor. The buildings are delineated in browns and grays, and the light from street lamps reflects off cars and in the streets. A pastel, *Morning, Upper West Side*, echoes the night scene with its gray and brown buildings, while *116th Street* shows Riverside Drive on a brighter morning, with cars parked along those rounded Drive buildings, a sketchy view of Riverside Park, and a blue sky.

The other vantage point from which Clark limns her city is a borrowed office high up in the World Trade Center—indeed, most of her paintings are executed here.



Richard Crozier: *Back Lighting, Spring Landscape*, 1984, oil on canvas, 48 by 60 inches; at Tatistcheff.



Marcia Clark: *Twilight*, 1984, oil in canvas, triptych, 92 by 72 inches overall; at First Street Gallery.

And what vistas! There's *From the World Trade Center #1*, a vertical panel (a favorite format) in which we have a bird's-eye view of downtown Manhattan buildings in painterly creams, yellows and umbers; heading out toward the East River, the buildings go more umber and purple and become indistinguishable from one another. We get the same view—from a little closer up, it seems—in *Gray*

Morning, lower Manhattan in dully lustrous grays, greens and pinks.

At one point, Clark descends from her 104-story perch to paint *Wall Street Sunday Morning*, a three-piece canvas that eloquently enunciates an empty, daytime-dark Wall Street, with cars parked on the right and sun-splashed buildings in the upper right corner. But it's those paintings from the World Trade Center that walk

away with the show—especially the 8-by-6-foot triptych *Twilight*, which shows downtown at closing time, buildings ever more absorbed in purples and deep blues, traffic mere strings of light along the never-ending streets, the view encompassing the river, the 59th Street Bridge and even the far Queens shore. It's a pinkish Renaissance landscape, as Clark sees it.

There are, of course, other painters closer to Clark's age who paint the city—Bill Sullivan and Darragh Park come to mind. But neither of these gifted painters takes on Manhattan in quite the same way Clark does for its epic grandeur and—I hesitate to say—its fairytale beauty.

Clark's paintings reach an apotheosis of sorts in *From the World Trade Center, Night*, when sunlight has flown and Manhattan is self-lit and self-powered. This is visionary painting of a bold sort. Where Button caught the edges of city buildings at sunset, or Downes takes an almost Constable-like approach to ground-level city streets, or Jacquette watches the city from an airplane window, Clark takes it *all* in—at least, a good chunk of it—and yields a stellar beauty from urban chaos.

—Gerrit Henry

Stephen Westfall at Tracey Garet

This was Stephen Westfall's first solo show in New York. The earliest work in the exhibition, *Leaf*, is a small semi-organic abstraction somewhat reminiscent of Bill Jensen in its sense of internal as well as external scale and in the connotations and placement of its primary image, but quite different from him in its suave paint handling. All the other paintings shown share a common premise and together form a coherent group, with the best of them fully able to stand alone.

The consistent formal dynamic in these paintings is the opposition of open and closed spaces—generally flat geometric bars which frame a more richly painted and variegated ground, or function singly or in twos as figures within it. Understated tensions are generated by the intrusion of a vertical element into an essentially tonal field. This, as well as the symmetries and quiet asymmetries of paired shapes, owes something to the work of Newman, of course, but more specifically to Marden and Jake Berthot. However, Westfall's treatment of the field within which he arranges his geometric segments is his own. At once atmospheric and