

From left
Steve Mumford, from the **Baghdad Journal Series, 2003-4**, ink and watercolour on paper (one of 49 pieces), overall dimensions variable
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND POSTMASTERS GALLERY, NY. IMAGE COURTESY P.S.1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER, NEW YORK

Omer Fast **Godville. Richard, 2005**, production still
COURTESY POSTMASTERS GALLERY, NEW YORK

Jon Pylypchuk **i will stop fighting you when death stops fucking with me, 2005**, mixed media, 163 x 183 x 183 cm
PHOTO: LARRY LAMAY. COURTESY PETZEL GALLERY, NEW YORK

Ups and Downs

The Good, the Bad and the Very Bad

This September, Chelsea went off in our faces. More than 125 shows of contemporary art opened over the first three days of the season. People were out *en masse*; at around 7pm on the first Thursday, traffic on Tenth Avenue came to a standstill while all the cross streets between 20th and 26th were packed with pedestrians. Activity levels were frenetic, but despite all the energy Chelsea-bashing is rampant. And while I understand – the place can really get on one's nerves – people need to get a grip. A gallery isn't bad just because it's in Chelsea or better simply because it's not.

Whatever, currently there's a smattering of highs and lows in the downtown galleries. In fact, a simultaneous high and low turns up at Nicole Klagsbrun, where *Interstate*, curated by Adam McEwen, continues the summer's unbridled testosterone binge that saw the proportion of women represented in group shows averaging only 18 percent. In fact, McEwen's show actually comes in under that figure – out of 23 artists only three are female – which is shocking in something curated by such a smart artist. This New York enthusiasm for maleness needs to be curbed before it does more damage than it already has. Aside from this gross inequality (which is exacerbated by the fact that the vast majority of solo shows this month are yet *again* by men), *Interstate* ably cruises the psychic highways of America, portraying an enervated, deluded, oblivious realm. Especially gripping are Jeremy Deller's Texas documentary, which makes you think we may really be living in 'end times', while Donald Judd's 1968 American flag

in negative colours creates a malleable black-hole of hate, hope and irony.

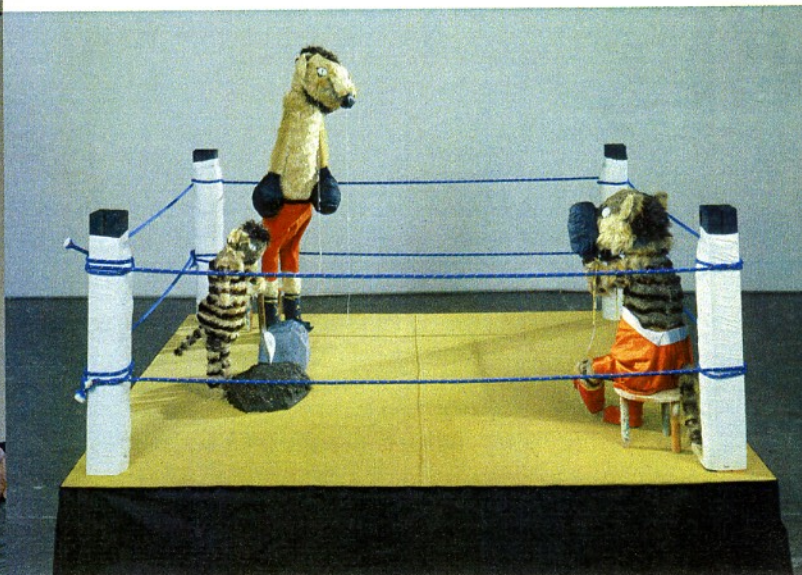
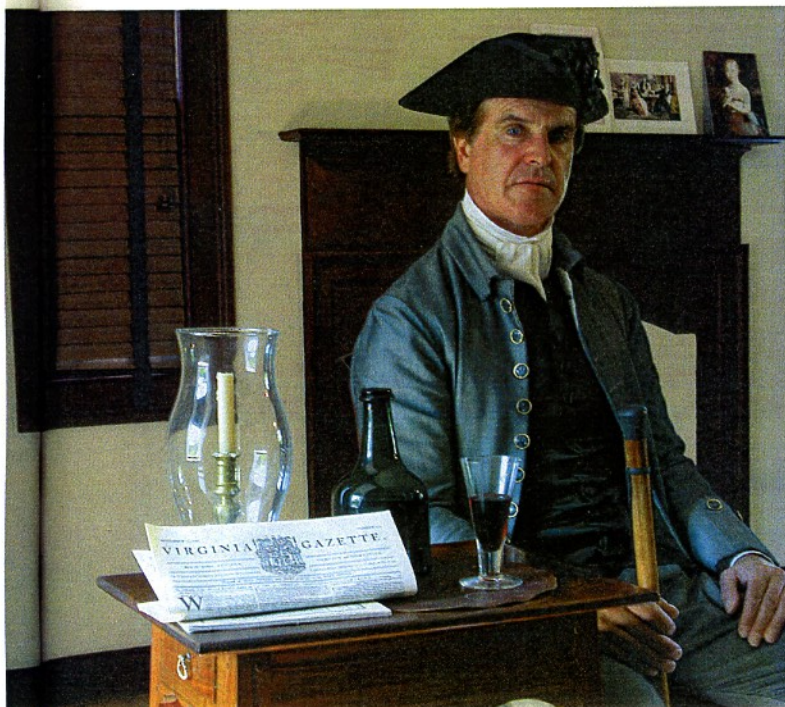
Another high-low split is cooked up by the French artist Orlan, whom I have long considered a frontrunner for the 'Worst Well-Known Artist Award' (a.k.a. 'The Jim Dine Prize' or 'The Kitaj'). At Stux, Orlan has dispensed with the usual gaudy videos of her multiple facial surgeries and is now simply digitally manipulating photographs of herself. Although, to my amazement, there's something compelling and touching about these awful, silly pictures, the fact is that Orlan is now merely failing tamely when she used to fail majestically. Luckily, she's back to her usual bananas self by the time you get to a bizarre naked Orlan mannequin. In the rear gallery, Brian Belott is like a Norse hero and doesn't seem to know the meaning of the word failure; his drawings, books and collages evince an artist adept at creating hallucinatory space, and who is apparently unaware that sundry critics have issued a fatwa against anything 'craftsy'.

A number of artists needed to make changes and did; some should have but didn't; several need to think about changing profession. In the 'made needed changes' category is Monique Prieto, whose new word-paintings at Cheim & Read are far more eye-catching than her previous formulaic blob-paintings. Sentences have been taken from Samuel Pepys' diary and rendered in odd, blocky lettering. Foreground and background mingle; image and text merge and twist into geometric-anamorphic swirls. With any luck, Prieto will avoid getting too wrapped-

up in the cute colourfield backgrounds, not rely only on words and sidestep repetitiousness.

I'm not a fan of Candice Breitz or Lara Schnitger but both have improved. Breitz's karaoke-on-steroids videos at Sonnabend of people singing Michael Jackson and Madonna songs are not deep but they are fun, if only for a few minutes. After that, they turn into display. At Kern, Schnitger's lopsided teepee shapes with written quips like 'It ain't going to lick itself' are now sexy and strange rather than merely formalistic – even if they still look too much like other art. At Feuer, Danica Phelps changed, but not enough. She's still recording her life maniacally in notes like 'went for walk' or 'made love with Debi'. These blurbs reveal next to nothing and suggest that Phelps, whose work I genuinely admire, is only leading a recorded life, not an examined one. At Postmasters, Omer Fast didn't need to change but did and made his work even more trenchant. This artist deserves more recognition.

In the 'needs to change but didn't' group, Mike Paré's friends should stage an intervention to wean him off the over-reliance on photographs in his otherwise enjoyable drawings of 1960s revellers at ATM. At Zwirner, Marcel Dzama's work has gotten bigger and more topical to good effect. Yet the overall look of his drawings is still so similar that everything fizzles. Why this artist insists on hanging hundreds of works in every show is a mystery; it has now turned into shtick. This is too bad because one Dzama at a time, small as it is, can still be pretty stirring. At Petzel, Jon Pylypchuk's show might look childish, what with its weird sock-puppet-like sculptures of stuffed-animal-like beings. But these creatures manage to present a disturbing vision and even pack some of the witchiness of primitive sculpture. Meanwhile, Suling Wang at Lehmann Maupin, Frank Nitsche at Leo Koenig and Pia Dehne at Haswelllediger all produce paintings that are so generic and derivative that a committee might have



made them. Each needs to deploy his or her talent far more imaginatively.

A couple of shows by two male fortysomethings attest to the different ways artists are trying to deal with war (albeit that the two are dealing with different wars). On view in the last days of P.S.1's smorgasbord, *Greater New York*, were drawings that Steve Mumford did in Iraq. Mumford, who calls himself a 'war artist', was embedded with the Army's Third Infantry Division out of Fort Stewart, Georgia. He was with the troops in Basra, Baghdad, Tikrit and Kirkuk, and, by his own account, he was scared, thrilled and bored. But he was also incredibly productive. Equipped with a camera, brushes and other tools, over the course of 11 months and four visits he made hundreds of ink drawings and watercolours. Scores have been posted on Artnet.com as the visual component of his *Baghdad Journal*, his hardscrabble – to my ear monotonous and jargon-filled – but undeniably thorough 16-part, 75,000-word record of his and the troop's actions.

While I don't want to seem glib or impugn his motives, the war has been very good to Steve Mumford. His Iraq work has been exhibited in galleries and museums across the US. Last December, *The New York Times* ran a splashy feature on him and he was named 'Person of the Week' by ABC News. He was also interviewed by no less a person than the late Peter Jennings, who deemed him 'part of a great wartime tradition'.

Yet, even though many have compared his work to that of Winslow Homer, Otto Dix and Käthe Kollwitz, his art comes off as little more than courtroom drawing or generic illustration. Really, it's not that different from the news photos you see of soldiers relaxing, Humvees smouldering or locals milling about. In fact, he could almost have done them from home. There's little of what Susan Sontag, referring to photojournalism's relationship to war, called 'the photography of conscious'. There's

no Goya, nothing wrenching, ravishing or searching. Mumford obviously cares about the troops but his drawings have an academic, bleached-out detachment. The work is attentive but not insightful, detailed but not affecting. You never get the feeling he's examined the moral ambiguity of war, the guilt, adrenaline rush, deprivation or self-gratification of it. The pictures are proficient but impersonal. To me they're examples of our sleepwalking America.

At Paula Cooper, in his *Proposal for White and Indian Dead Monument Transpositions, Washington, D.C.*, Sam Durant proposes to 'move existing monuments commemorating lives lost during the historical period known as the "Indian Wars" from their locations across the country to the National Mall in Washington, D.C.' It is a pointed proposition but not preachy, clear-cut if slightly one-dimensional

a number of artists needed to make changes and did; some should have but didn't; several need to think about changing profession

and conceptually indebted – as Durant almost always is – to artists like Lothar Baumgartner, Stephen Prina, Allan McCollum, Mike Kelley, Sherrie Levine and Sol LeWitt (not to mention Cady Noland). In fact, if you didn't know whose show this was or the idea, then the repeating forms and scale, the grid configuration and appropriation strategies might make you think that all of these artists had collaborated on this show.

Despite these connections and the fact that the tactic of transposing one thing from one place to another is old hat, Durant's idea is still roguish and grave. Durant himself has utilized it since the mid 1990s in works involving absolutely standard artworld-approved references and subjects like modernist architecture and design, Woodstock, Kurt Cobain, Gordon Matta-Clark, Dan Graham and, of course, Robert Smithson. He has put dirt on mirrors and likes to talk about entropy. The rub is that right

now there's too much 'political art' around that is political in name only. Too many artists deal with Nixon but not Bush, Vietnam but not Iraq. Doing this places absolutely nothing at risk. It's true that the present is bewildering, and that the 1960s seems more romantic and its clothes so cool, but Durant – like an army of artists these days – needs to find a way to kill his parents rather than revisiting or continually deconstructing them.

The two most rewarding solo shows downtown are also the most challenging; both come on weak and take time to appreciate. On repeated viewings Lucy McKenzie's US debut at Metro yields philosophical depth and tenderness. Like a number of artists of her generation – notably Kai Althoff and Piotr Uklanski – this 28-year-old Glaswegian views history as material, something to use without memory, allegiance

or judgment. McKenzie has almost a lover's touch with history; she deploys dead, dormant and suspect styles, combining early-twentieth-century cartooning, Constructivism and Fascist neoclassicism in works on paper that initially seem like appropriations and tracings but are actually personal and invented.

Anthony Burdin's sparsely installed four-floor exhibition at Maccarone is equally thorny but more ecstatic. Burdin, who is a phantasmagoric combination of Vito Acconci, Bruce Conner and the Unabomber, inhabits the zone between art, life and music. A sort of travelling magician maniac minstrel, Burdin lives, makes art and stages performances in his van. His videos, drawings and sculptures tap into some vagabond voodoo that relates to witchdoctors like Paul Thek, Jack Smith and Dieter Roth. All of which means it might be better to just breathe Burdin's art in rather than look directly at it.