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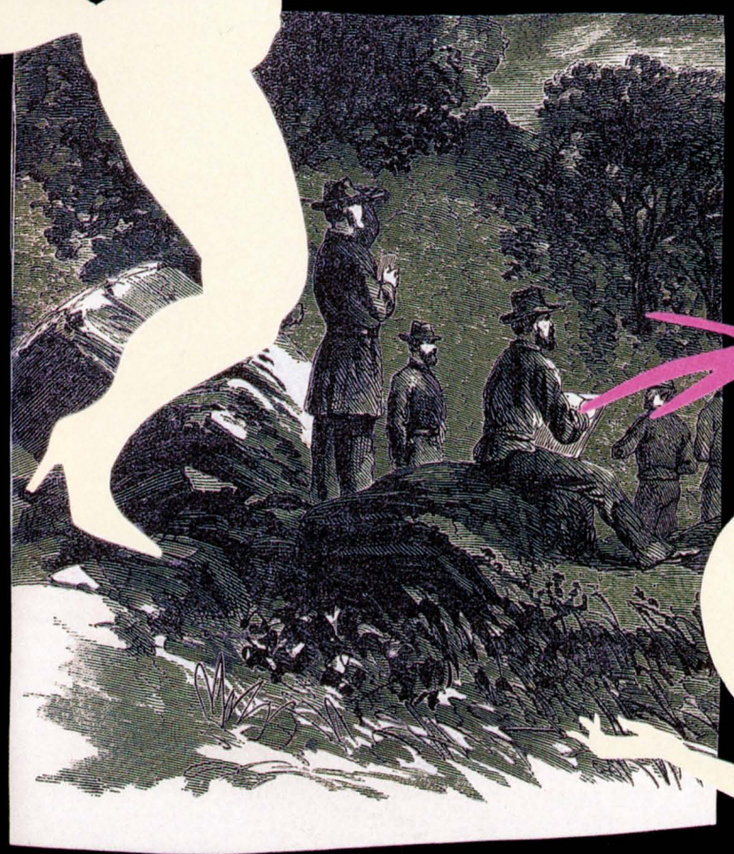
APRIL 2007

THOMAS BAYRLE
RUDOLF STINGEL
KARA WALKER



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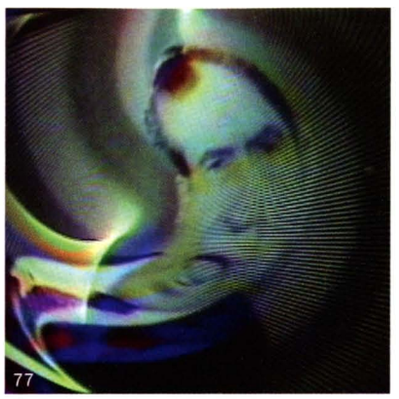
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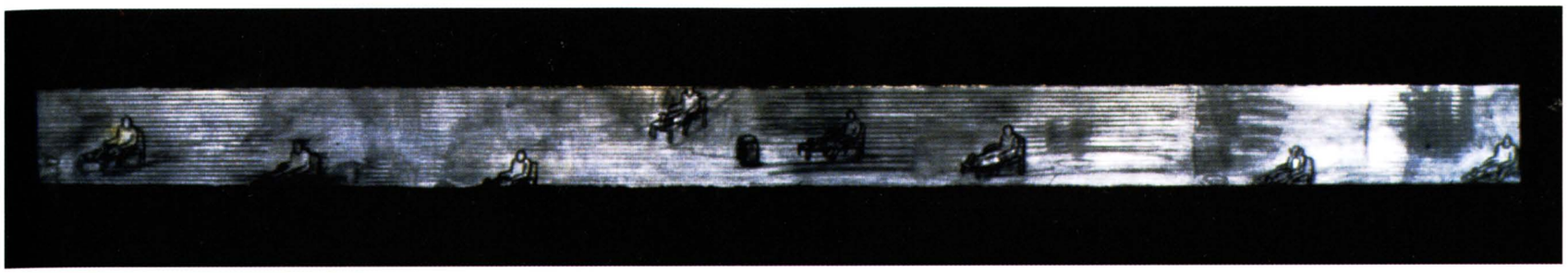
Cover: **Kara Walker, *Hysteria! Savagery! Passions!* (detail), 2006**, gouache and paper collage on eleven panels, dimensions variable. (See page 238.)

This page, from top: **Nam June Paik, *Electronic Opera No. 1* (detail), 1969**, still from a color video, 4 minutes 30 seconds. **Models wearing coats designed by Lukowski + Ohanian with textile pattern by Thomas Bayrle, Galleria Apollinaire, Milan, 1968.** Photo: Christian Roeder. **View of "Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love," 2007**, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Photo: Cameron Wittig. **Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (detail), 2006**, still from a color video, 112 minutes. The Spirit Helpers.

Fractional Gift

THOMAS LAWSON ON MICHAEL HURSON



THE PHONE RANG early, usually the harbinger of some sort of trouble from New York or London. I paused before answering, uncertain if I was ready, without a cup of coffee for comfort, for whatever it was that wanted my attention so badly. I picked up the phone and unexpectedly heard the voice of an old friend. "Michael died—yesterday, of a heart attack," she said, before launching into a needlessly guilt-ridden account of signs missed, opportunities not taken. Michael Hurson was a sweetly funny man, a quick-minded friend as well as a remarkable, if too little appreciated, artist whose loss this past January at age sixty-five remains difficult to accept.

In recent years Michael had found a home in Garnerville, New York, reigning over a small community of artist friends in nearby Nyack. He often traveled to the city, to meet with friends and his longtime dealer, Paula Cooper, and to see shows. Just as when he was living in Manhattan, he had always seen everything, knew what was going on with everyone, and had a sharply observed opinion about it all. I last saw him at the Museum of Modern Art on the opening weekend of the Brice Marden show. We spent the better part of the day there, quizzing the subtleties of color, the precision of gesture; admiring Marden's risky flirtation with failure.

Hurson was born in Youngstown, Ohio, in 1941. Graced with a natural talent for drawing, he trained at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1960, he was introduced to the puppeteer Burr Tillstrom, whose puppet show, *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*, had aired on television throughout most of the 1950s. Tillstrom quickly became something of a mentor. Hurson learned from him about observation and improvisation as he worked as his assistant in the late '60s. He once helped change hand puppets during a live appearance on *The Tonight Show*. "My job was to get Ollie off and Fletcher Rabbit on," he recalled in an interview, many years later. "All the while, to the right of me, was a monitor showing what you would be seeing at home, the effortless flow of comedy. On the other side of the scrim is me . . . helping Burr to get his fingers into the paws of Fletcher. Then Fletcher comes up and there's this fraction of a second where I don't know where I stand, because the belief in Fletcher is so great, he is so real as an image, that everything below the stage doesn't exist."

The spare paintings Hurson started making around that time limn his ongoing attempt to capture this "fraction of a second." Working on an intimate scale, he challenged the orthodoxies of the grand, American-style heroics typical of the painting of the period. A six-inch-by-seven-foot painting of a seated man watching television (*Grey Picture*, 1967) uses the length of the canvas to suggest the passing of time. The odd, dancing figures in the descriptively titled "Eyeglass Paintings" of the early '70s resemble animated cartoons, but with a painterly overlay. With the "Palm Springs Paintings," 1971, Hurson pushed the analogy to the filmstrip further yet: A simple line drawing of a swimming pool was silk-screened onto three panels, one below the next. A single pool chair is floating in each, poignantly evoking a rootless loneliness.

From top: **Michael Hurson, *Grey Picture*, 1967**, oil and silk screen on canvas, 5¾ x 83¾". **Michael Hurson, Thailand, 1966.**

Together with friends like Jennifer Bartlett and Robert Moskowitz, Michael Hurson was an important precursor of the shift to a postmodern sensibility.

Hurson used a fluid blend of styles and materials, conjuring allusions to a range of twentieth-century art, from Cubism to the Pop of Hockney and Warhol. His paintings—with their weave of personal information and public style, and their untroubled incorporation of everyday imagery and nuanced referencing of popular culture—showed him, together with friends like Jennifer Bartlett and Robert Moskowitz, to be an important precursor of the shift to a postmodern sensibility.

Hurson's first show in New York—a 1974 exhibition for the "Projects" series at MOMA—did not include any of his paintings, however. Instead, he showed seven meticulously detailed, balsa-wood models of modern interiors. Placed at eye level throughout the gallery, the works were like miniature stage sets for plays waiting to take place. Years later, I thought of them again when Hurson made *Red and Blue*, his one foray into theater. Performed at the Public Theater in New York in 1982, this work was an attempt to imitate Tillstrom's method of improvising around chance observations and snippets of conversation. It was a sort of immobile puppet show, a gossipy conversation between two lightbulbs, one red, the other blue—two sides of the same persona.

Red and Blue typified the variety of approaches Hurson pursued in his search for an elusive something to make into art. As in his sly, Cubist-styled drawings of pencils, wire coat hangers, and odd bits of furniture, he sought to locate the hidden details that would bring the inanimate to life. His drawings often seem like portraits. Indeed, Hurson also painted a number of actual portraits, no doubt attracted, in part, by the social aspect of such work, which suited his love of storytelling. Hurson was a brilliant raconteur, as well as a flaneur, who kept a sharp eye on the comings and goings of the city. He was always alive to the passing parade of fashion and movies and the glitter of celebrity, and his networking instincts prefigured those of more recent generations. His antennae were always tuned to the moment, as when, leaving the Modern one afternoon, he spotted Truman Capote, and decided to follow him. The trail ended at La Côte Basque. □

THOMAS LAWSON IS DEAN OF THE SCHOOL OF ART AT CALARTS, VALENCIA, CA.