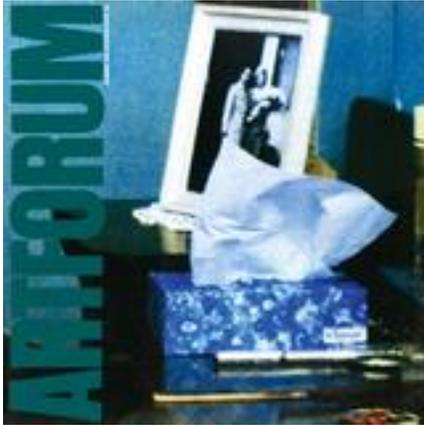


New York



PRINT Summer 1983

Reviews Summer 1983

Helmut Middendorf

Bonlow Gallery

No matter what one may think of it, “neo-Expressionist” painting has become the dominant mode of art production on both sides of the Atlantic. Studios and art schools everywhere are once again dirty with the traces of much frenzied paint throwing. As a convenient label “neo-Expressionism” is the most popular because the least specific, but when considering this kind of work I think it important to separate out artists who may be less interested in reviving an expressionist ethos than in using a look for a variety of more or less interesting ends—artists one might want to identify as “pseudo-Expressionists.” This distinction aside, however, the expressionist style will be with us a while.

But as the style has spread it has become clear that it is most often merely a style, and a carelessly understood one at that. Despite the rhetoric of authenticity that has been developed to surround and support them, few of the paintings do more than maintain appearances. The style’s speed has already overtaken it, and the paintings we have seen this year by new establishment stars like Sandro Chia, Enzo Cucchi, and Julian Schnabel, not to mention their countless dedicated followers, look dated and somehow beside the point. And in the meantime, further diminishing the style’s long-term chances, the only concerted attempt to give it intellectual credibility, Achille Bonita Oliva’s “Transavantgarde” theory, has become an apologia for provincialism. This should perhaps not be so surprising, since any definition of provincialism would include an overeager engagement with last year’s fashion. Which is all a rather

roundabout way of saying that we are now in a position to begin looking more closely at specific works and artists freed from the hot polemics of “the new.”

One group desperately in need of such reevaluation is that of the “violent painters” from Berlin, and Helmut Middendorf’s recent show provides a useful starting point. The main question is whether the work is to be understood as “neo” or “pseudo.” Middendorf never appeared to be one of the strongest of these painters, but it is often easier to discern the essentials of an idea in minor work. The Berlin paintings are fast, simplified, overscaled (American-scaled?) renditions of one or two Expressionist tropes used to depict single figures and figure groups that are usually meant to have something to do with Berlin’s nightlife—typically club scenes, sex scenes, street scenes, the occasional paranoid visions of ax murderers, and so on. Middendorf’s contribution has been a sad young man alone in a dark city street, and, more recently, large clusters of clownish faces gazing with apprehension into the gallery as though fearful of what they might have to look upon next. Middendorf’s signature is a dry midnight blue, the kind of color guaranteed to evoke an automatic response. But his repertory of imagery and effect is too limited to sustain itself. If the melancholy of the work is genuine, its repetition dilutes it; if there is an element of mockery in the work, it suffers a lack of wit (there is certainly none of the wry self-awareness evident in an earlier “pseudo-expressionist” if failed painting like Duchamp’s *Sad Young Man on a Train*, 1911). It comes across as merely ridiculous, sentimental, and blue, oh so blue.

As it first appeared over here this work, and that of the other Berliners, seemed interesting because it seemed to address issues of authenticity and authorship through its exaggerated use of the clichés of personal expression and, in a more limited way, through its preference for working collaboratively. However, whatever rigor there was in this seems with hindsight to have been imposed by the intervention of the viewer and critic, and not to reside in the work. It now appears likely that these painters were, and continue to be, sincere in the dopiest, least self-reflexive way possible. They are neither “neo” nor “pseudo” anything, simply lucky enough to stumble on something so dumb it had to be taken as smart, at least at first sight. In this their work seems analogous to a great deal of rock music, coming on strong and simple, with a speed and aggression that carries all before it until it is time to make the follow-up—at which time the packaging turns stale, overproduced, and pretentious. The fast lane runs from uncomfortable rebellion to easy comfort.

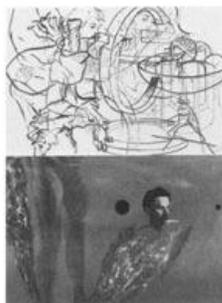
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David Salle, *Zeitgeist Painting #1, 1982*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 156 x 117"



David Salle, *Zeitgeist Painting #4, 1982*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 156 x 117"

New York

DAVID SALLE, Mary Boone Gallery:

David Salle's paintings look lush than before. The painted grounds of his canvases remain cinematic—smooth, thin stains that resemble projections—but they are more richly, even luridly pigmented. On the right panel of *Painting for Eli*, for instance, the contorted face and straining neck of a woman are drawn over a deep, indigo purple, while the left panel consists of a large daisy awkwardly chiseled into light wood, a concoction that is both bluntly simple and characteristically disingenuous. Post-existential eroticized angst and the emotional naiveté of stylistic awkwardness are Salle's dominant motifs. The recent work in this show shows adventurousness and increased confidence with materials; it was, all in all, a breakthrough with mixed blessings.

All but five of these thirteen works were executed in the first two months of 1983, suggesting (among other things) that Salle has been emphasizing the idea and pace of "production." This program is peculiarly appropriate to his admitted pictorial ideology: to compress, decompress, and thereby neutralize the connotative values in imagery. He has expunged the psychological quease that makes many of his previous female nudes disquieting, and is now bracketing, quoting, and categorizing his trouble-shooting episodes. A year ago I suggested that Salle's fascination was the issue of self-betrayal—of finding or losing the self—but this no longer seems to be the case. He seems for the moment to have chosen the role of rogue, and his

fascination has become more literary, concerned with finding or losing the moral of the story.

A combine painting called *Black Bra* sports one dangling at the tip of a wooden pole, and lest the jest seem too *Zéro de Conduite*, it has an art-historical coda in the form of a depicted bowl of apples derived from a Cézanne still life. *Fleisch Art*, 1982, is a nude, less in need of elaboration. The title of the latter work is incorporated in the painting; Salle uses words and objects more frequently and with greater aplomb here than before, and while his puns, verbal satires, and titles are now acute and speedy, the combines are the slickest yet most inert of these new works. Globes offer some of the world's best instant graphics and are thus a natural addition to Salle's visual inventory, but the four little ones hanging off the front of *Deaf Ugly Face* create stagnant congestion. Gratuitousness is part of Salle's strategy, but his actions nonetheless require something of his intellectual, rather than just graphic, presence.

The four "Zeitgeist Paintings," 1982, are grand improvisations, each keyed by the opportunities to riff graphically provided by the letters *c*, *u*, *n*, and *t*. Each letter prompts intricate "stream of consciousness" drawings on each of the paintings' top panels (one of which bears likenesses of Spencer Tracy and Bella Abzug), and slower-paced dissection studies of nudes and self-portraits below. They are Salle's most complex, most spontaneous, least glib, and most impressive paintings to date. The strongest element of his art is essentially narrative (or at any rate postnarrative), saturnine, sentimental, and psycholog-

ical. The art-historical spoofs such as *Black Bra* seem merely designed to offend some of the more easily offended sensibilities, and seem therefore time-killing dalliances. Salle's efficacy as an irritant is well established and annotated. At times it is also a potent provocation to visual thinking. The "Zeitgeist Paintings" and a few others here reconfirm Salle's dual position as sharpest thinker and Peck's Bad Boy among his peers.

—LISA LIEBMANN

HELMUT MIDDENDORF, Bonlow Gallery; RICHARD BOSMAN, Brooke Alexander Gallery; FRANCESCO CLEMENTE, Sperone Westwater Gallery and Mary Boone Gallery:

HELMUT MIDDENDORF

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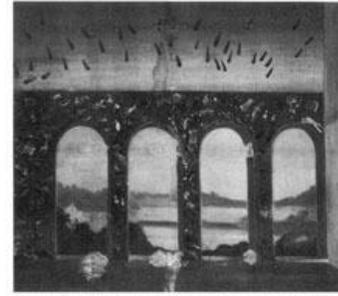
But as the style has spread it has become clear that it is most often merely a style, and a carelessly understood one at that. Despite the rhetoric of authenticity



Helmut Middendorf, *Witches*, 1983, powder paint on canvas, 88 x 72"



Richard Bosman, *Nightside*, 1982, oil on canvas, 82 x 66"



Francesco Clemente, *Judgement*, 1983, tempera on canvas, 192 x 220"

that has been developed to surround and support them, few of the paintings do more than maintain appearances. The style's speed has already overtaken it, and the paintings we have seen this year by new establishment stars like Sandro Chia, Enzo Cucchi, and Julian Schnabel, not to mention their countless dedicated followers, look dated and somehow beside the point. And in the meantime, further diminishing the style's long-term chances, the only concerted attempt to give it intellectual credibility, Achille Bonito Oliva's "Transavantgarde" theory, has become an apologia for provincialism. This should perhaps not be so surprising, since any definition of provincialism would include an over-eager engagement with last year's fashion. Which is all a rather roundabout way of saying that we are now in a position to begin looking more closely at specific works and artists freed from the hot polemics of "the new."

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RICHARD BOSMAN

Richard Bosman presents a somewhat similar problem. Another painter who looked hot when he first appeared, Bosman has so far been unable to develop his starting position into anything more substantial than a good beginning. He has fallen victim to that familiar syndrome: one big hit followed by too many, too similar remakes. Three years ago the corny violence he favored in both image and handling seemed timely, exactly keyed to pressing issues centering on the debate about appropriation (itself suffering from a repeater problem). For a while Bosman, like the Berlin painters, seemed to be concerned with intervening in that debate. His use of comic-book pictures and a patently borrowed, authentically inauthentic painting style placed him firmly within the "pseudo" rather than "neo" camp. The paintings looked highly romantic yet cynical. The stories they told, too-familiar melodramas of love, death, and detectives, were presented in a painting style which matched their degraded heroism.

The new paintings look the same, if a little larger, and that is the problem. There is no evidence in the new work of a continuing dialectic. A stasis has been reached, an understanding accomplished. Perhaps as a result of some complicity between the earlier paintings and their critical reception, the work has solidified into a mannerism, a barely conscious repetition of proven formulas.

Worse, instead of thinking about what he paints or why he paints, Bosman has been concentrating on how he paints. The new paintings are much smoother than the earlier work, the awkwardness of flailing limbs and torn faces is lost, and what could once be understood as a defamiliarizing device ("bad" painting) now seems much less exact, perhaps nothing more interesting than a kind of slovenliness.

What has happened is that the paintings have been reduced to stylized repetitions of their precursors. The detectives and hoods become emblematic not of the aspirations our culture, in high and low forms, invests in charismatic heroes, but of their already known existence as Bosman's trademarked production. They have ceased being the means through which Bosman advances his art and have become talismans that identify it and so take it over. The most emblematic of these new paintings illustrates the point only too well: a chase, two figures advance, but they are frozen into an awkward, relieflike immobility, suspended in a bright red field of brushstrokes, of bloody repetitions mirroring the collapse of art into production, practice into product, work into its representation.

FRANCESCO CLEMENTE

Francesco Clemente's double show presented a different sort of problem, for the difficulty here was not that he has been content to stand still but that in seeking to develop his position he has chosen the wrong move. These two ill-conceived installations were by another artist who falls into the trap of overproduction, but who makes a virtue of his handicap, turning his fecundity into a

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Sperone Westwater Gallery and Mary Boone Gallery

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At its best Clemente’s work is an investigation of a fractured self, a self ambivalent about its acknowledged desire to dominate. To the extent that that self proves to be an elegant little princeling with an unusually avid appetite for the polymorphous perverse and only a self-congratulatory self-consciousness, the work’s merit is to be intolerable. What these pictures of endless penetrations and languid stares, of the enraptured fascination with self, accomplish is that

the sexualized gaze of the male is deflected from its object and internalized in an ambiguous narcissism. The work then serves as a broken mirror showing the (male) viewer a deeper structure of the quest for power. This is work about territory and subjugation—pissing and penetration—a display of force in the guise of creativity. There is a possessiveness here that, in its indiscriminate overproduction, disdains possessions in favor of a continuum of power. The work succeeds in direct relationship to the degree to which it, or what it conveys, is intolerable, and is intolerable only when it takes the risks of an attenuated dandyism and claims authority through impermanence and dispersal.

And so the new paintings must be judged failures because they are too obvious, too physical. This is made particularly clear by the unhappy conjunction of these shows with Julian Schnabel's second exposition this season of heavy paintings which, in their unimaginative way, seek to dominate through the inordinate display of material alone. Clemente's paintings here are shockingly clumsy; we have come to expect a greater finesse, a more subtle nuance. And they are clumsy not only in themselves, but in their presentation, relying overmuch on their context within the installation—which again seems too obvious a way to make a small thing large, to expand a territorial claim.

—[*Thomas Lawson*](#)

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—THOMAS LAWSON

BERND AND HILLA BECHER, Son-nabend Gallery: JOHN HEJDUK, Max Protetch Gallery:

BERND AND HILLA BECHER

Winding towers are conveying machines—industrial structures used to

transport workers and materials into, and out of, iron ore, coal, and salt mines. Alternately called "tipples," "A-frames," or "pitheads," they date from mid-19th-century England, locus of the Industrial Revolution, and have spread over today's global terrain. Their basic form consists of two elevated wheels circumscribed by cables securing load-bearing cages that ascend or descend in opposite directions. Form is generally determined by function; however, these towers exist in various regional styles, ranging from rustic, often ramshackle wooden edifices (small mid-20th-century towers in eastern Pennsylvania) to intricate traceries of steel. Surveyed from the surrounding territory they appear as awkward but imposing gargantuan triangles, looming over the horizon.

Physically uncanny but wholly serviceable forms, these winding towers may be the most intriguing of the different industrial buildings that Bernd and Hilla Becher have photographed since 1956. Conceived as a presentation of one individual type, the recent exhibition consisted of 222 photographs taken over a 24-year period and arranged in the Bechers' characteristic 6-to-15-unit grids. In its capacity, their method displays an enumerative vision that has justly been compared with August Sander's, but it also rebounds against a specific architectural interest in basic typological forms. The independent structures are treated as elements within one species, combining generic resemblance with individual identity, accommodation to function with differentiation according to period, material, and locale. Their presentation, conforming to the Bechers' normative approach, is keyed to the discernment of differences or details, each construction is placed full face or in perspective in the center of the frame, positioned close to the viewer and against a neutral background sky. A straightforward, precise, "documentary" approach, then, which enables all-out attention to the object, to material and fact. But it also tends toward hallucination, for the rhythm of form played against repeated form, of similarities salient through differences, and of obdurate structure opposing stylistic gradations links these images in an overarching ellipse. They defeat the superficiality of style by the immanence of structural form.

The Bechers occupy an important nodal position within a texture of different directions. On one hand, their work is an example of the intrusion of the photo-

graph within art discourse, where it performs the role of documentation. On another, it indicates the importance of the typology to architectural terrain, much as it opposes, by example, the bombastic and mystifying tendency of recent architectural photography. And in a third way it phrases the objective, materialist practice heralded by Walter Benjamin in the first third of the century, indicating how this practice leads, like Benjamin's, into a paradoxically visionary field.

JOHN HEJDUK

These sixty-odd works might be among the most beautiful architectural drawings ever made, subtle arrangements of hues—limpid yellows, ochres, greens, and blues—accenting masterly pencil lines. But they are also products of an idiosyncratic vision of architecture, one that is both speculative, reflecting on its underlying nature, and critical, primed by absences within contemporary terrain. They specifically address the notion of the "program," the relation between building and user, or space and action, long repressed under formal concerns.

Reflection on the relation between architecture and the activities occurring within it inevitably involves meditation on the nature of society, something that architecture's current irrelevance to social and imaginative needs has only recently revealed by default. This exhibition, conceived as a 35-year ellipse, indicates this "narrative" interest as Hejduk's abiding concern; it is evident from the early illustrations for *Aesop's Fables*, 1947, which adumbrate the allegorical focus in contemporary art, to the most recent ceremonial "Masques." Hence it is possible to see the 1967 *Diamond House Project*, a hallmark in "formal" architectural thought, as a kind of performance space in which the different functions arranged throughout the open plan lead the actor up, down, around, and through in a carefully staged sensuous trajectory. Projects like the *Devil's Bridge*, 1981, and the series of masques patterned on theatrical processions extend these implications; they are both tales, developing imaginary events, and allegorical structures, architectural narratives.

The *Retreat House*, 1980, for example, is a "rural Masque" designed for a single inhabitant—a spare wooden structure located on plains by hill and sea and furnished with minimal utilities. But these utilities are not casually aligned. With the kind of "objective" focus com-

mon to Alain Robbe-Grillet and Jean Baudrillard, Hejduk has placed them according to "anticipated function": much as chair faces diving board, so bed faces desk, and so on. Thus the architectural structure is not regulated by simple functions but by poetically determined activities, by relations of events which lead the solitary inhabitant through the encompassing spaces in a ritualistic procession. Moreover, the notion of the masque also implies another dimension: just as mask covers mummer, allowing him or her to enact the given festivities, so architecture's vocabulary of walls, floors, and other "formal" divisions covers, or masks, existential coordinates. Hence the role of the ritual: it is only through the processional, the "narrative" movement through space and all its constellating objects, that these radical relations are revealed.

The value of the tale in revealing these underlying profundities has been noted by modern writers, of whom Italo Calvino (*The Invisible Cities*) is only one. And that such allegorical statements might be applied to urban planning is evident from the *Berlin Masque*, 1981, Hejduk's prize-winning entry in the International Building Exposition *Bauausstellung* Competition for the reconstruction of Berlin. In the manner of allegorists, appeal is made to a precedent, recuperating it for the present period: "... as it was necessary for the highly rational-pragmatic city of 15th-century Venice to create masques ... for its time in order to function," we are told in one of the exhibited notes, "it would appear that we of our time must create masques (programs????) for our times." The twenty-odd drawings surrounding the pristine model are precise 3/16-inch scale renderings of a poetic conception easily translated into physical form; just as the masque is meant for the people of Berlin, so it is designed for a specific site located near the Wall. Each of the 28 elements is multiply conceived. A narrow steel watch tower functions as an observatory, allowing the solitary observer to survey the surround, but it also serves as a metaphysical tool, aligning one existentially. A clocktower, with its metal gnomon moving from 12 up to 12, down to 12 and on, presents a "double" way of seeing time. Bookstalls, a lottery woman, an arbitration hall, a pantomime theater, and a maze are among the different elements arranged within the site, which, in their interrelations, suggest the reticulations of the modern city. And throughout the drawings are figures who