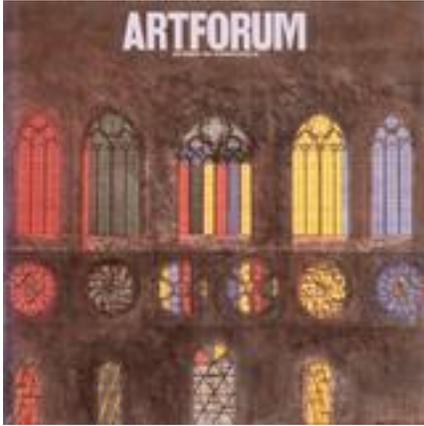


New York



PRINT September 1983

Allan McCollum

Marian Goodman Gallery | New York

For several years now Allan McCollum has been building little model paintings. Each has a central plane painted a monochromatic black or brown; a mat, usually off-white; and a raised, framelike border in brown or tan. The works vary in size but all are small, none much larger than 16 or so inches high. They are generic paintings, and McCollum often hangs them together to make generic installations and exhibitions. His work has always been funny, with an oddly embarrassed, rather sardonic air. In this show it became almost savage in its humor, tremendously aggressive, and yet surprisingly likable.

This show was McCollum's most ambitious to date, 553 plaster casts in 20 shapes and sizes, surrogates for paintings with little in the way of individuating character. The installation was hilarious, the walls banked high with interchangeable little blanks, making the gallery look like some crazed stage set for an avant-garde play about the Academy. Of all the ambitious shows of the season it was among the most successful, not simply because it made fun of the big picture, but because it pointed to the absurdity of the big show. McCollum's exhibition carried more visual punch than most of the big ego-inflating extravaganzas around town, his little nonimages paradoxically more memorable than many of the large, over-imaged works that sought to overwhelm us with their importance.

Much of this sounds familiar by now, standard deconstructivist strategy akin to, say, the practice of Sherrie Levine. But the brilliance of McCollum's work is that it steps beyond this, advances or, rather, sophisticates the argument, demonstrating that the aura of the work of art supposedly lost through the act of mechanical reproduction can be recuperated through that same repetition. The art object's aura may be destroyed by the photograph, but that loss is more than

compensated for by the additional aura invested in the image itself. Image becomes all, as the electronic media prove so well. Accordingly, McCollum divests himself of the image in order to recover the object. His pictures are blank, but in their blankness they assume the characteristics of the image, become images of a particular kind of image, of painting. And hundreds of them clustered together down the wall reaffirm the image of art. Strangely enough they discover, in the potentially endless repetition of the plaster cast, a reinvented aura of the art object, a contemporary aura, not that of a sacrosanct uniqueness but that of a communal guarantee of image recognition.

Mass reproduction has frozen our interest in the unique object or event; the unique seems suspect and unreal. We now seek meaning in rituals of partial identification, a kind of truth in labeling. In this sense the plaster casts reaffirm art as they appear to denigrate it, just as the more inflated expressionists denigrate art as they claim to save it. The paintings of the latter group seek to return art to the past, and so insure its impotence in the modern world. McCollum acknowledges the fragility of art, and in doing so produces these self-effacing mechanically reproduced objects that can command our attention.

“The Apocalyptic Vision: Four New Imagists”

Galleri Bellman

“The Apocalyptic Vision: Four New Imagists”

The observation that most of what passes for art criticism is little more than lists of worn clichés is itself a commonplace. But this familiarity does not make it any less true that art writers prefer to use resonant phrases which originally had little meaning and now, through overuse, have none. The popularity of such phrases rests in their utter inability to communicate any specific thing, idea, or emotion; thus they free the writer (and the patient reader) from any obligation to look at or think about the art in question. The upsurge of an expressionistically inclined imagism in painting—a cliché-ridden practice in its own right—provides an excellent ground on which the critic can practice his meaningless sport. One can easily imagine the thrill with which typewriters and word processors automatically list our favorite phrases—“personal urgency,” “disquieting mood,” “visionary character,” or “deeply felt, violent figuration”; a tremendous crescendo of demonstrably nonsensical rhetoric that ultimately peaks with the most overworked Big Idea of all—the Apocalypse.

The vision of Sam Hunter, who curated this show, is predictably opaque. In his catalogue essay he invokes the nuclear threat, mentions millennial fears, and suggests that such things have something to do with neo-Expressionist painting. Of course he may well be right, but his truth is so large and all-encompassing as to be useless in helping any but the wooziest dingbat better understand these latest trends in art practice. And it (his truth) is far too large to explain (even to that woozy dingbat) his particular selection of artists here. Two, Peter Dean and Michael Dvortcsak, are “expressive” painters, Dean frenetically so, Dvortcsak in a more studied,

mythopoetic vein. Both painters are clearly drawn to the catastrophic, but to see Jack Ruby's assassination of Lee Harvey Oswald (the subject of one of Dean's paintings) as a vision of apocalypse is to reveal oneself hugely provincial or fatuously wrongheaded. I find neither of these painters of much interest and find their pictures in fact provincial and wrongheaded, and, yes, unoriginal. But my prejudices in this area are so well documented that I must excuse myself from writing more.

The other artists in the show, Nancy Chunn and Robert C. Morgan, are much more interesting, not least because their work sits so uncomfortably with the curatorial ideas expressed in the catalogue. Both favor a dry, almost cartoon-like presentation of forceful imagery and yet address us from a point somewhat askew of the obvious pictorial content. Morgan's choice of imagery seems deliberately accidental, given an apocalyptic significance only through the exercise of will. The paintings are extremely, elegantly intelligent maneuvers around the various issues of formalism. The largest piece here, *Sudden Exposure (Amchitka)*, consists of four panels in which a very pink standing figure delineates a black nonspace through a series of related gestures. The figure is male, and wears nothing but a swimsuit and sunglasses—a version of the swimmers that have appeared in Morgan's work for a decade. As the swimmer swings his arms the blackness surrounding him broadens or narrows; spatial orientation is made uncertain. The painting is about balance and placement, in both formal and psychological terms, and seems adequate to the task without the rather heavy-handed addition of the nuclear reference in the title.

Of all the works in the show Chunn's have the least to do with the curatorial theme. Her paintings focus on certain kinds of emotive and cognitive dissonance, and only relate to that Big Idea in that nuclear war is an extreme case of such dissonance. She gives us weirdly deadpan images of violence—animals gnawing human bones, maps of countries hanging from meathooks—isolated and flattened against rich, dark grounds. These images verge on illustration, but are disturbing precisely because they fail to illustrate anything. Their point is not that a cheetah might chew a man, but that such an image ought to be frightful, and is rarely more than entertaining. In an age when images of massacre sell news magazines Chunn's paintings are horrifying, not because they portray horror, but because they remind us of our “normalized,” passionless response to most horror. It is the almost antiseptic nature of Chunn's presentation, its unnerving comedy, that is chilling; and that is the significance of her work.

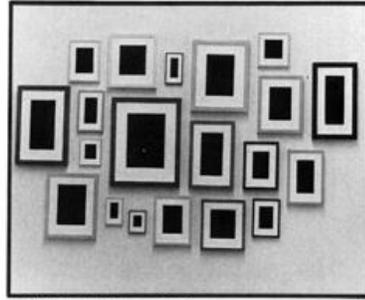
—[Thomas Lawson](#)



Susan Rothenberg, *One-Armed Float*, 1982, oil on canvas, 72 x 71"



Judith Shea, *Holding It In*, 1983, cast iron, 19 x 13 x 3"



Allan McCollum, installation view, 1983

attractive, in the sense the term conveys when describing a room full of casually well-dressed people. They are remarkably and quite unfailingly good-looking, and they function as visual and intellectual balm as one surveys them. They have social ease, are intelligent and well-educated, pleasant and serious. They are beyond reproach. *Attractive* through the mouthpiece of a well-bred jaw, money with class.

What has long bothered me about Rothenberg's work has something to do with a homogenizing system through which data—art-historical throughlines and conventions of process—are synthesized, if not exactly neutered then regularized, and somehow made to appear endemic to her scheme of things. Rothenberg has an excellent sense of composition; her paintings always strike a graceful balance between paint and line, the symmetrical and the out-of-kilter, event and emptiness. And one can spot them anywhere, which is all very well, but in staking out her pictorial identity Rothenberg does not so much claim authorship to an idiosyncratically expressed idea, or to a style, as she reiterates, in full earnestness, a good (*nouvelle*) recipe.

Simply put, Rothenberg does three things: she filters representational elements through etiolated screens of paint, ranging from slate grays to bluish whites, whose textures would resemble Robert Ryman's but for the fact that they appear sensitized and not systematic; she joins the abstract/conceptual ideology of "the mark" to a kind of digest, loosely quoted, of an American, semi-abstract landscape tradition which would, unexpurgated, include Albert

Pinkham Fyder, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, Milton Avery, and Philip Guston; she sets a currently revived esthetic of figurative awkwardness or primitivism off against a sophisticated, highly considered, and skilled technique. Rothenberg's paintings are virtually foolproof. They seem quintessentially timely without seeming to mean a thing.

Rothenberg showed over fifteen works from the last two years in this spring show. In at least one of the most recent pieces, there were signs of greater emotional precision, of intensifying conviction. *Black Dress*, 1982-83, a pared-down figure study, supplies the ripples of anxiety missing from countless visions of loveliness, visions of female formality, from the sitters of John Singer Sargent to the roles of Loretta Young. This is valuable, and gives hope.

JUDITH SHEA

Judith Shea's sartorial themes make for elegant, witty sculptures. Whether she casts a dress in bronze, iron, canvas, or any more traditional haberdasher's material, she winds up with a modern figurative archetype and a succinct accommodation of our two abiding formal referents, human anatomy and the exposed esthetic of minimalism. Shea never strays far from the dressmaker's dummy or from the standard sectional organization of sewing patterns, which also places her work within shouting distance of the altered ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp and, surprisingly perhaps, a mere whisper away from some of Duchamp's less-known, later sculptural objects such as *Wedge of Chastity* and *Female Fig Leaf*, both of 1951, cast in bronze, and bearing fashion messages.

The dummy's suggested presence has the further, and felicitous, effect of transporting Shea's figures out of the realm of currency (the domain occupied by the tabloid-Gotham configurations of Robert Longo), giving them the status of mythic Modern citizens. Shea's female forms—bodices, skirts, full dresses, sleeve insets with darts—stand in as women of substance who, while thoroughly contemporary, denote the original Gotham: a wartime and rather Amazonian New York when women hit the work force. Shea's own response to these various signals is anything but dogmatic. She is laconic. *Crusader*, 1982, a cast-iron sculpture laid out on the floor, is a halter top and skirt welded papoose-like at the "seams," whose near-epileptic stiffness suggests latterday, lightweight armor, *Form and Function*, 1983, in cast-iron and upright on a pedestal, takes the shape of a tight, straight, slit skirt; *Holding It In*, 1983, is a cast-iron wall relief of a crooked elbow with a seamed-in bust. *Taking Shape*, 1983, a horizontal bronze floor piece, suggests Eve-as-Adam, in a state of becoming, in a cocktail dress; *Black Dress*, 1983, in wool, felt, wax, and india ink, stands on a pedestal in mid stride, a headless and wingless victory. In the formal-developments department Shea (who has also designed wearable clothing and, recently, performance wear for Trisha Brown's dance company) now holds a position that Joel Shapiro used to have more or less to himself, that of fusion specialist. Shea, however, is never coy.

—LISA LIEBMANN

ALLAN McCOLLUM, Marian Goodman Gallery; "The Apocalyptic Vi-

sion: Four New Imagists," Galleri Bellman:

ALLAN McCOLLUM

For several years now Allan McCollum has been building little model paintings. Each has a central plane painted a monochromatic black or brown; a mat, usually off-white; and a raised, frame-like border in brown or tan. The works vary in size but all are small, none much larger than 16 or so inches high. They are generic paintings, and McCollum often hangs them together to make generic installations and exhibitions. His work has always been funny, with an oddly embarrassed, rather sardonic air. In this show it became almost savage in its humor, tremendously aggressive, and yet surprisingly likable.

This show was McCollum's most ambitious to date, 553 plaster casts in 20 shapes and sizes, surrogates for paintings with little in the way of individuating character. The installation was hilarious, the walls banked high with interchangeable little blanks, making the gallery look like some crazed stage set for an avant-garde play about the Academy. Of all the ambitious shows of the season it was among the most successful, not simply because it made fun of the big picture, but because it pointed to the absurdity of the big show. McCollum's exhibition carried more visual punch than most of the big ego-inflating extravaganzas around town, his little nonimages paradoxically more memorable than many of the large, over-imaged works that sought to overwhelm us with their importance.

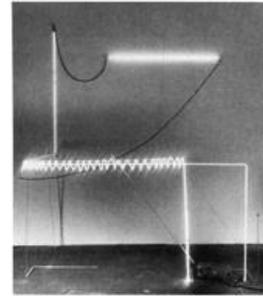
Much of this sounds familiar by now, standard deconstructivist strategy akin to, say, the practice of Sherrie Levine.



Nancy Chunn, *South America*, 1983, oil on canvas, 120 x 84", from "The Apocalyptic Vision..."



Peter Dean, *Crazy Horse Memorial*, 1981, oil on canvas, 66 x 72", from "The Apocalyptic Vision..."



Keith Sonnier, *Neon Wrapping Neon*, 1969, neon, 8 1/2 x 4 1/2 x 7'

But the brilliance of McCollum's work is that it steps beyond this, advances or, rather, sophisticates the argument, demonstrating that the aura of the work of art supposedly lost through the act of mechanical reproduction can be recuperated through that same repetition. The art object's aura may be destroyed by the photograph, but that loss is more than compensated for by the additional aura invested in the image itself. Image becomes all, as the electronic media prove so well. Accordingly, McCollum divests himself of the image in order to recover the object. His pictures are blank, but in their blankness they assume the characteristics of the image, become images of a particular kind of image, of painting. And hundreds of them clustered together down the wall reaffirm the image of art. Strangely enough they discover, in the potentially endless repetition of the plaster cast, a reinvented aura of the art object, a contemporary aura, not that of a sacrosanct uniqueness but that of a communal guarantee of image recognition.

Mass reproduction has frozen our interest in the unique object or event; the unique seems suspect and unreal. We now seek meaning in rituals of partial identification, a kind of truth in labeling. In this sense the plaster casts reaffirm art as they appear to denigrate it, just as the more inflated expressionists denigrate art as they claim to save it. The paintings of the latter group seek to return art to the past, and so insure its impotence in the modern world. McCollum acknowledges the fragility of art, and in doing so produces these self-effacing mechanically reproduced objects that can command our attention.

"The Apocalyptic Vision: Four New Imagists"

The observation that most of what passes for art criticism is little more than lists of worn clichés is itself a commonplace. But this familiarity does not make it any less true that art writers prefer to use resonant phrases which originally had little meaning and now, through overuse, have none. The popularity of such phrases rests in their utter inability to communicate any specific thing, idea, or emotion; thus they free the writer (and the patient reader) from any obligation to look at or think about the art in question. The upsurge of an expressionistically inclined imagism in painting—a cliché-ridden practice in its own right—provides an excellent ground on which the critic can practice his meaningless sport. One can easily imagine the thrill with typewriters and word processors automatically list our favorite phrases—"personal urgency," "disquieting mood," "visionary character," or "deeply felt, violent figuration"; a tremendous crescendo of demonstrably nonsensical rhetoric that ultimately peaks with the most overworked Big Idea of all—the Apocalypse.

The vision of Sam Hunter, who curated this show, is predictably opaque. In his catalogue essay he invokes the nuclear threat, mentions millennial fears, and suggests that such things have something to do with neo-Expressionist painting. Of course he may well be right, but his truth is so large and all-encompassing as to be useless in helping any but the wooziest dingbat better understand these latest trends in art practice. And it (his truth) is far too large to explain (even to that woozy dingbat) his particular

selection of artists here. Two, Peter Dean and Michael Dvortcsak, are "expressive" painters, Dean frenetically so, Dvortcsak in a more studied, mythopoeitic vein. Both painters are clearly drawn to the catastrophic, but to see Jack Ruby's assassination of Lee Harvey Oswald (the subject of one of Dean's paintings) as a vision of apocalypse is to reveal oneself hugely provincial or fatuously wrongheaded. I find neither of these painters of much interest and find their pictures in fact provincial and wrongheaded, and, yes, unoriginal. But my prejudices in this area are so well documented that I must excuse myself from writing more.

The other artists in the show, Nancy Chunn and Robert C. Morgan, are much more interesting, not least because their work sits so uncomfortably with the curatorial ideas expressed in the catalogue. Both favor a dry, almost cartoon-like presentation of forceful imagery and yet address us from a point somewhat askew of the obvious pictorial content. Morgan's choice of imagery seems deliberately accidental, given an apocalyptic significance only through the exercise of will. The paintings are extremely, elegantly intelligent maneuvers around the various issues of formalism. The largest piece here, *Sudden Exposure (Amchitka)*, consists of four panels in which a very pink standing figure delineates a black nonspace through a series of related gestures. The figure is male, and wears nothing but a swimsuit and sunglasses—a version of the swimmers that have appeared in Morgan's work for a decade. As the swimmer swings his arms the blackness surrounding him broadens or narrows; spatial orientation

is made uncertain. The painting is about balance and placement, in both formal and psychological terms, and seems adequate to the task without the rather heavy-handed addition of the nuclear reference in the title.

Of all the works in the show Chunn's have the least to do with the curatorial theme. Her paintings focus on certain kinds of emotive and cognitive dissonance, and only relate to that Big Idea in that nuclear war is an extreme case of such dissonance. She gives us weirdly deadpan images of violence—animals gnawing human bones, maps of countries hanging from meathooks—isolated and flattened against rich, dark grounds. These images verge on illustration, but are disturbing precisely because they fail to illustrate anything. Their point is not that a cheetah might chew a man, but that such an image ought to be frightful, and is rarely more than entertaining. In an age when images of massacre sell news magazines Chunn's paintings are horrifying, not because they portray horror, but because they remind us of our "normalized," passionless response to most horror. It is the almost antiseptic nature of Chunn's presentation, its unnerving comedy, that is chilling; and that is the significance of her work.

—THOMAS LAWSON

KEITH SONNIER, P.S. 1; GEORGE SEGAL, the Jewish Museum:

KEITH SONNIER

Keith Sonnier's mastery of neon signals his awareness of our society's technological destiny—his sense of its destiny being dependent on its means, not its ends. The question in Sonnier's art is