

## New York



### PRINT Summer 1985

Jeanne Silverthorne review MetroPictures 1985

war was provided not in photographs but on the nightly news.

—CHARLES HAGEN

**DOROTHEA ROCKBURNE, Xavier Fourcade; ROXI MARSEN, CDS Gallery:**

#### **DOROTHEA ROCKBURNE**

As an abstract painter Dorothea Rockburne is in a class by herself. Going beyond the mere act of fixing form in space, Rockburne has found a way to a higher sentient realm in which constructive art is synonymous with heightened consciousness. Paintings like *Extasie*, 1983–84, *Narcissus*, 1982–85, *Capernaum*, *Gate*, 1982–85, and *Guide*, 1984–85, all featured in this exhibition, are truly breathtaking.

At first glance, the irregular geometries of these paintings appeal directly to our sense of reason. But the more we take stock of the harmony Rockburne makes of these shapes, with their multiple edges and corners and unusual color combinations (elements that would probably appear awkward in the hands of another artist), the more overwhelmed we are by the sense that something more is present here than immediately meets the eye. The viewing process is transformed, making a qualitative leap to visual meditation.

For example, it is hardly exaggeration to claim that a spiritual energy surges through *Extasie*. Once we understand the balance of the peaked top and the lateral, diagonally thrusting rectangular wedges, we begin to see how the precise measure implicit in the shape lends it a litigating sensation of weightlessness. The same is true of the color. After we have appreciated the complex value scale underscoring the relationships of blue and red, we in essence free ourselves to appreciate the spectral qualities of the pure pigments. In drawings accompanying these paintings, including watercolor-on-acetate models of the specific structures, Rockburne lays bare the logic of her method, but as in the finished paintings themselves, she reserves the secret of the mystery that marks her vision.

#### **ROXI MARSEN**

Although many still prefer art made the idea-oriented, Modernist way (and I put the media appropriators in this bag), the '80s have seen a growing dissatisfaction, even an uneasiness, with much of the predictable, overly derivative fare around, the inevitable product of programmatic thought. Yet the notion that art should be

meaningful is as strong as ever, with people seeming to want more and not less from art. This may explain the growing interest, particularly among younger artists, in primitive and other pre-Modernist sources. Giotto, for example, has become one of the hot topics and influences of the '80s. What's going on? Clearly the contemporary taste, whether consciously or not, has begun the search for a road back to a quality almost neglected in a century dominated by theoretical issues—visual imagination.

Roxi Marsen, a young New York artist, seems to have already found her own way on that road. In her recent paintings she reveals a clear ability to transform the familiar into the fantastic. Working in a bold, gestural style, she endows her landscape scenes with an oddly thrilling dimension. Trees, hills, earth, rocks, and water are seen in a new psychic light. In *Blinding Nightfall*, 1984, the crisscrossing patterns of black beams falling across a landscape suggest the generative force of nature. It is conveyed in the dense, dark surfaces of the pigment, animated by stark linear rhythms and contrasts in texture, and in the brown snatches of earth gleaming behind the black. Alternating the surfaces of the beams from patent-leather shiny to dull mat, Marsen encourages the viewer to confront the work's impenetrable perceptual physicality.

Mystery is the pervading sensation in the other paintings as well. Is the secret about to be revealed in the seemingly ceaseless change of *Dreaming Butterfly*, 1984? Here, Marsen's adroit use of black and white heightens the intensity of the painting's dominant blues, greens, and yellows, pushing the work toward iconic status. This in turn lends a compelling visionary urgency to the sweeping strokes surging across the surface in thick, luscious waves, and to the landscape forms created, which appear simultaneously in the process of becoming and of breaking up. Throughout this show Marsen's keen sensitivity to the sentient aspect of painting yields rich rewards.

—RONNY COHEN

**THOMAS LAWSON, Metro Pictures; WALTER ROBINSON, Metro Pictures:**

#### **THOMAS LAWSON**

An allegorist's need to fix a one-to-one correspondence and a synthesizer's need to elide those correspondences into some ultimate final term strain against each other in Thomas Lawson's

paintings. Looking at them, one is reminded of Alberto Giacometti's complaints about the inconstancy of vision, about how there is nothing but "granules moving over a deep black void . . . to fix one's gaze upon" in a "Sahara" between "one wing of the nose and the other." Nevertheless, Giacometti presents us in the sculpture with the very seeable result of the inability to see, whereas Lawson makes that instability both literal and more symbolic. It is often hard to make out a Lawson image; the screens of circles and flecks become signs as well as facts of unseeableness. The nature of these "spots before the eyes" is specific. Pick your reference and determine your view—your spots can be biomorphic shapes (like Jean Arp's), minimal (geometric), impressionistic (dabs), expressionistic (swipes). In *A Light through the Trees*, 1984, the view is further obscured by tree trunks; in *Kulture, Kulture*, 1984, by neoclassical columns. We see through the bars of our particular prison of misapprehension.

Allegory is not process, it is fiat. Lawson's method of arriving at a finished work may not be cool in reality, but tortuousness is never confessed. Despite its brush with fascism (shared with all Lawson's images of public structures), the iced Promethean statuette of *Pale Fire of Creation*, 1984, may represent something of a confession. No, if painting is uncertain it is never with the initial uncertainty of a coming-into-being, but through a check-mating in a netherland between dissolution and resolution. Image and paint are held in abeyance; Lawson has always called as much attention to the materiality of paint and canvas as to iconography, though his iconography has been more widely discussed. A separation process is at work. When looking at, say, Lawson's abused children, one sees them most clearly from a distance; from closer up the brush-marks assert primacy and the likenesses become ghostly. Vehicle and passenger repel each other like oil and vinegar. The viewer occupies the interface.

Clearly Lawson is attempting some ambitious synthesis of abstraction and representation, one that refuses to annul their distinct identities, and one that recognizes the outmodedness of both. Some of the veils of spots have the look of creased tissue paper (protecting an ancient bauble of naturalism), or of the wrinkled transparent skin on an aged arm (superannuated). The stage-set panoramas are silhouetted, backlit by the setting sun of empire. Modernism, on the other hand, is glossed and sub-

sumed in the making of a representational picture. A color can function as edge, on the side of the stretchers (appropriately with the stopping power of neon), assuring us that Lawson's canvases are cognizant of their objectness. It is no accident that these colors recall the unnatural hues of Frank Stella's early shaped canvases, with their similar acknowledgments. At the same time, the edge color continues around the corner to function as undercoat, thereby indicating both flatness (as in flat coat) and depth. A similar economy informs the allusion to color-field painting and to Morris Louis in particular: a painting carries many more hues than were ever applied, because one tone overlying another creates a third.

David Salle does it too, this separation of abstraction and representation. But Salle merely juxtaposes—he leaves the collating work to the audience, and because he never attempts synthesis, the separation never appears as great. Lawson works hard at resolution, an admitted lost cause, and to the extent that he is successful his work paradoxically seems "easier" to the viewer. He submerges his thinking process in "expert" painting, creating islands (dots, clues) out of what remains unsunk. These canvases are such well-done genre pieces as to be virtually anonymous.

Indeed, indentifications are curiously slippery. All sorts of subtle and obvious reciprocities are established here, then contradicted without being canceled out. A stream in *Cathedral Rocks*, 1984, visually rhymes with the line under the nuclear power plant in *El Diablo*, 1984, a line that one jumps to conclude is the San Andreas Fault. The red-hot associations of *El Diablo* are followed up by a painting depicting *Cold Storage*, 1984, and the power station's domes match those of the "temples of culture" (*Kulture, Kulture* and *The Temple of the Kultur Kritik*, 1984). A patch of light in *A Light through the Trees* occupies the same place in the picture as the museum in *Kulture, Kulture*, and these parallel-constructed paintings also both pun on enlightenment.

Yet while all these collusions never fail to establish an intellectual and moral position, they also become almost abstract by virtue of their ubiquity, their currency. The repetition of images of official buildings, for example, makes them like counters moved around in a game that is no longer about piling up winnings but is absorbed in the balletic beauty of the rules. If there is a third term in Law-

## Thomas Lawson

### Metro Pictures

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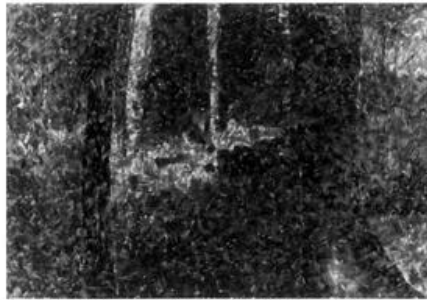
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—[Jeanne Silverthorne](#)



Thomas Lawson, *A Light through the Trees*, 1984, oil on canvas, 66 x 96"



Walter Robinson, *Vicks Vaporub*, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 36"

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#### WALTER ROBINSON

In a way it's as if Walter Robinson and Lawson, who showed together, are anxious to prove that they really can paint, in the old-fashioned sense of "render." They seem to be straining to be normal, competent, and well-behaved against the current of their own deep-dyed rebelliousness (a combination often misread as cynicism), but the rigid perfectionism of their "normalcy" is merely the logical outcome of turning that rebellious fault-finding inward. Take the bowl of sugar cubes that initiated this round of depicted objects. It was out of context in that almost every other painted item here would be found in a bathroom. "Excessive sweetness" is the work's message, self-consciously pinning down the cloying quality of Robinson's best-known imagery. In addition, the calculated prettiness of these still lifes of commercial products disinherits the earlier aggressively ugly or cute works. No doubt this partly reflects a desire to escape typecasting.

Not everything has changed. Robinson continues to balk at taking art seriously (potentially the most serious of all positions because it can come out of the most seriously disappointed expectations), and the sugar is a warning that confection is what follows. True, the paintings have a straightforward quality, but

that confounds what may be a slyly pornographic comedy. On the one hand, the show had an almost meditative air; imagine Andy Warhol or Wayne Thiebaud getting a crush on Giorgio Morandi. On the other hand, the inventory included baby oil, Vicks Vaporub, Vaseline Lotion, tiger balm, and Tampax, commodities rampant with conflicts between baby innocence and adult sex. A head-and-gut dichotomy, the Excedrin and Bromo-Seltzer, "morning after" remedies, also signal excess. Many of these bottles and jars contain viscous substances, and viscosity defines the paintings themselves—though acrylic, they are smeary, drippy, slick with the primal quality of finger painting. It's as if the contents of the jars have become the medium for their constitution, or, conversely, as if the containers are attempting to solidify their outlines in the face of the insistent drubbing they receive from the paint. Of course, it is madness to suggest that paint itself is obscene.

Pop art is fetishization. In its heyday it was accused of being as dumb as it pretended to be; if judged intelligent, it was charged with corruption. Robinson's paintings play tag with that history.

—JEANNE SILVERTHORNE

## Chicago

**BARRY FLANAGAN, Richard Gray Gallery; TONY CRAGG, RICHARD DEACON, Donald Young Gallery;**

#### BARRY FLANAGAN

Barry Flanagan's sculptural variations on the theme of the hare are as fecund as the symbolic equivalents this animal has evoked in images and literature since the

Middle Ages. Flanagan's contributions to the artistic dossier on the trickster rabbit run the gamut here from the droopy but statuesque *Large Boxing Hare on Anvil*, 1984, to the highlight of the show, *Baby Elephant*, 1984, which combines the speediest hare in the West poised on the head of its polar opposite—the solid, balanced elephant. In medieval imagery, the rabbit is seen as the furry beast of Venus. The animal's overtly sexual suggestiveness is underscored in Flanagan's mounting of hares with open bells, crescent moon, and vessels whose open forms suggest female equivalents. In one dramatic piece, like a fantasy tableau of a George Stubbs painting, an expressionistically modeled cougar rears up on the back of a serene life-sized horse; since this green-patinaed horse is a close relative of those perfect creatures on the Basilica of San Marco in Venice, the cougar is probably the savage beast threatening civilization. But the tense dichotomy that Flanagan seems to desire is better represented in the pairings of the liquid, fluid hare with the elephant, the least sexual of animals. Stoic, the baby elephant is the classic counterpoint or literally the support for the hare, who is wired and ready to go with bronze limbs that appear at once as sinews and as coils of clay.

Before turning to these traditional materials and techniques in the '70s, Flanagan had explored the properties and signifying capacities of other materials. Beginning in the '60s with casual arrangements of lumpy sand-filled bags which appeared almost untouched by artistic intervention, he then moved to ceramic clumps and to erotic clefts carved in stone. His interest in piles, heaps, and ropes can still be seen in the

bronzes which shift back and forth between figuration and snaillike spiral mounds that are close to the clay coils from which they are built, in a derivation of a basic pot-making process. The psychological and sensual pleasures of squeezing and pulling are perfectly reproduced in both types of bronzes; in place of the signature on the painting one can see and feel the hand of the sculptor as he models and animates his material.

Less overdetermined than the animal stories, but also dependent on fairly obvious dichotomies, are a group of simple linear "pilgrims," again mounted on oversized solid anvils. These works relate to a small 1981 piece called *The Long Man of Wilmington*, whose linear openwork figure is formed from the cup, risers, and runners used in the casting process. This work completes the circle to total formalist self-referentiality. The process of artifice is revealed and even insisted upon as it is transformed into subject matter. Never do the pairings in the piece, no matter how dissimilar or incompatible, become jarring or discordant; although opposed, they are never unsuitable.

This unerring sense of good taste almost freezes the show into elegant, traditional, and very luxurious decoration. (A unicorn in gold invokes too powerful a cliché for even Flanagan to parody.) What saves it is the hare. Albeit a surrogate for the human figure and certainly referring to Matisse's *La Serpentine*, 1909, it is a creature both mocked and mocker, trickster and tricked; like the roadrunner whose gesture it emulates, it is always elusive, no matter how rich its patina, expensive its materials, or upright its pose.