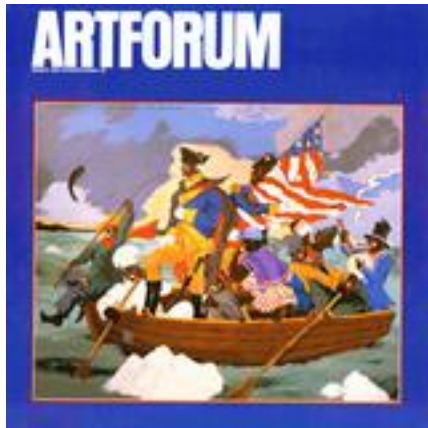


New York



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Review of show at MetroPictures

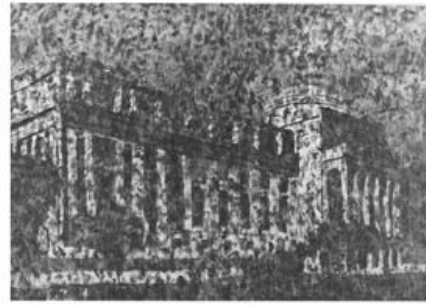
Lisa Liebman



Shigeo Kubota, *Bicycle Wheel*, 1963, mixed media, ca 50 × 24 × 8"



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*, 1983, color photograph, 70 × 46 1/2"



Thomas Lawson, *Metropolis: The Museum*, 1983, oil on canvas, 60 × 84"

ject of heightened interest, partly because her body of work of the last 25 years provides a sought-after stylistic link with the figurative pictorialism of several younger painters. Archaic quotation is a constant for Spero, and her gloomily erotic "Black Paintings," realized in Paris between 1959 and 1964, have an imagistic intensity and a psychological opaqueness that span the considerable distance between, say, Susan Rothenberg's emblems in grisaille and the febrile spellbinders of Francesco Clemente.

SHIGEKO KUBOTA

Rivers, mountains, time, death, and Marcel Duchamp have been the primary elements of Shigeo Kubota's work for most of the last twenty years—first in Tokyo, where in 1963 she met John Cage, then a year later in New York, where she almost immediately became "vice-chairman" of Fluxus. Since 1975 she has been making video sculptures of a very blunt lyricism, which poses some great gaga-metaphysical questions: "Are we dancing still on the gigantic palm of Duchamp, thinking it is a big continent and ocean?" "Can we communicate with the dead through video?" "Is video vacant apartment?" "Is video vacation of art?". In this compact retrospective put together by Brooks Adams, an art historian and writer, there were eleven sculptures, six of which established "contact" with Duchamp, and the rest, through Kubota's earthlier channels, with nature, perception, and self.

The dates of Kubota's pieces often involve hypens that cover five, six, seven years, and are still open-ended. Photo-

graphs taken in 1968 of a "reunion concert" chess game in Toronto between Cage and Duchamp were keyed, colorized, and transferred onto videotape in 1972-73. A sculpture shown here, *Video Chess*, included a clear chessboard with Lucite chess pieces mounted on a plywood frame containing a monitor facing upward and playing the concert tape. *Video Chess* was itself first assembled (and taken apart) in 1975, and seen in 1983 it conjured not only Duchamp, but random flashbacks of one's own from this fifteen-year period—not to mention reflections in the glass. Among the "Duchampiana" were also three plywood cubes on conforming pedestals, homages to his *Fresh Widow*, 1920, with miniature French windows that revealed monitors playing tape mixes of "snow," "stars," and "flowers"; *Upstate/Downstate Project: Green Installation*, 1983, a mirrored, stepped pyramidal structure, with eight monitors playing a synthesis of color tapes taken of the Southwestern landscape and the artist within it, and finally *Bicycle Wheel*, 1983, making a debut in this life, with a tiny revolving Sony playing a more local landscape.

Adams said he fell in love with Kubota's work when he saw *The River* (1979-81)—three live monitors suspended over and reflected in the activated water in an aluminum trough) in last year's Whitney Biennial. *Video Haiku* (first realized in 1981), a live monitor suspended in a rotating, spherical console over a mirrored dish on the floor, was the piece in this show that most closely echoed *The River's* elegiac meter. Using live cameras in finished pieces seems to release Kubota's contemplative, literary side. *The River* and *Video Haiku* have a

physical ambiguity that both effects and invites reflection. The synthetic mixes of the tapes themselves, considered apart from the structures they inhabit, are technologically whizzy, but otherwise tend to be one-dimensional.

This show of clunky masonry with "eyes," hovering '60s consoles, and "Duchampiana" was among the freshest-looking this fall. Free of documentation, fetish, and the rest of the clutter that often follows former Fluxites, the installation was a breeze.

CINDY SHERMAN

Many of Cindy Sherman's new color prints, most of them larger than lifesize, bring back memories of the photographic layouts that fashion magazines used to run of actresses wearing clothes keyed by the movies that had put them in the big time; Faye Dunaway wearing "Bonnie" outfits was one such memorable instance. A few others suggested old *Life* and *Look* features on actresses in their Bel Air lairs. Sherman's images, though, are anything but nostalgic, and they are not campy. Jauntily enough, accurately enough, they consecrate a renewed marriage, telling us that fashion has for some time been taking its cues from art, not Hollywood, and that more and more "at home" spreads in the popular glossies are centered on the studios and personas of newly glamorized if sometimes physically eccentric specimens. With this to ponder, the sight of Sherman just kinda standing there in a rococo bondage jumpsuit by Jean-Paul Gaultier is pretty funny—and since she is in any case good-looking, the joke is not at her expense, not at anyone's expense. It simply and quite mirthfully ex-

tends itself: Louise Nevelson (or Bourgeois) peeling off a fur? Things were a lot tougher for Lynda Benglis back in 1974.

Sherman began this series with an agreement from the management of Diane B., purveyors of avant-garde threads. The store would be given a choice of photographs to be used for advertising. Sherman would get to use the clothes for the setups. No fiduciary interests were violated in the exhibition—an appealing arrangement in which all commercial ends were met without overlap. For the pictures Sherman obscured or generalized her backgrounds, and in becoming her own sole focus is less "herself" than ever. Sherman created of herself the ultimate Fashion Victim. Fast-lane Leisure Life clothes by Jean-Charles de Castelbajac prompt L.A. domestic pastorales in soft, spalike Elizabeth Arden colors. The No-Brechtian advance of Rei Kawakubo and Issey Miyake result in exotic, disgruntled, theatrical lamentations in smudged makeup. Saucy shopgirl styles from Dorothee Bis produce a tribute, also seen at the Whitney last year, to all those iron-lunged little birds of song from Edith Piaf to Ethel Merman. Gaultier's sophisticated hooker looks get a high-contrast, no-nonsense photographer's studio treatment. These were big, smart, well-produced images of a frivolity that only the truly serious can command.

THOMAS LAWSON

On one wall, a heavy scent of Thomas Mann—four mountain landscapes, two with *The Magic Mountain* in their titles. In each of them an overall pattern of oil-paint flecks screens the imagery. With-

Thomas Lawson

Metro Pictures

On one wall, a heavy scent of Thomas Mann—four mountain landscapes, two with *The Magic Mountain* in their titles. In each of them an overall pattern of oil-paint flecks screens the imagery. Without these quasi-pointillist veils, the pictures would coincide with a number of Romantic, even sentimental precedents with which the 19th century abounded. In *View from the Burghof*, a girdle of dark pines is supported and crowned with the cyclamen—and-indigo aurora of a northern winter's dusk. A lighter, western vista spreads horizontally from a balcony's view in

Purple Mountains Majesty, whose title is even more physically descriptive. The two “Magic Mountain” paintings include housing. Subtitled *Freedom* and *Drawing the Veil*, the first offers the snowbound silhouette of what resembles an Alpine hostel, the second a more detailed rendering of what might be a luxury chalet in the Rockies—in Vail, we may conjecture.

The possibilities for conjecture indeed run quite rampant here. Two landscapes unmistakably evoke Europe, they are nocturnal, and their flecked scrimms double as metaphors for snow and for cold. Two propose the Western U.S., suggesting daylight with a decorative, nearly impressionistic shimmer. The sources for Lawson’s images may themselves be conjectural, just as the scenery he depicts is clear dramatically, but unspecific from any other point of view. Postcards, literature, internalized clichés, and local hillocks are all likely mnemonics.

On a second wall something different occurred. Three paintings titled *Metropolis* involve precise architectural renderings of prominent New York buildings—the Brooklyn Federal Courthouse, the Brooklyn Museum, and one flecked field subtitled *The Glass Tower* whose sepia pigment, along with the hue of any glass of Scotch, is a subliminal advertisement for the Seagram corporation, its principal product, and its famous company headquarters. These edifices have in common a kind of smooth, noncommittal classicism that can serve any leader—they are by no means examples of fascist engineering, but at the same time no dictator need feel compelled to tear them down. Of comparable importance within the fields of government, art, and big business, they are successful urban flagships. The paintings are like a civics class.

Lawson is a really remarkable distiller, with his painting as in his criticism. His concision is all the more noteworthy for being the result not of innate simplicity, but of what appears, in both mediums, to be a complicated and usually thorough blend of intellectual and intuitive procedures. The trouble is—perhaps especially in these paintings, all 1983, which are technically more fluent and pictorially more alluring than any he has made to date—that I am not sure who or what he is addressing. The open and distanced stillness of the images, as I’ve suggested, invites conjecture, but upon one’s exit there one is with that same invitation still in hand. Surely Lawson isn’t saying that Europe is moribund and that avenues lie available in the far West; maybe he is implying that well-known ski resorts, Gstaad or Vail, are thinly veiled sanatoriums. I don’t think so, but I don’t know. The Sublime, there is that question of the Sublime, but it too is unresolved in these paintings, neither espoused, exposed, nor canceled, whether in the afterglow of history or in the context of recent European painting by others roughly his age. In the “Metropolis” paintings Lawson is very possibly alluding to some latent aptitude for totalitarianism in certain of our most visible, even laudable, structures. But because of subtlety, uncertainty, composure, or education, he will not tip the ladle.

There were three paintings in the show that I haven’t yet mentioned. Two of them punctuated the wall of architectural subjects and are of couples smooching, rather salaciously in *Betrayal*, pertly in *Kissing to Be Clever*. The third, situated alone, *To Those Who Follow After*, is a blue diptych with a recessed panel of a blank, Neoclassical marble slab—a war monument and tabula rasa. Its material presence matches the concreteness of its image. Somewhere among these pieces lurks a set of alternatives: emotional degeneracy versus emotional entropy (or six of one, half a dozen of the other) in the face of extinction. Why pin corruption on the nondescript figures of what might be high school sweethearts? Why the redundancy of “follow after”? It seems pointed, but after

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—*Lisa Liebmman*

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—LISA LIEBMANN

COLAB, "A More Store," Jack Tilton Gallery; STEPHEN LACK, Gracie Mansion Gallery;

COLAB

Prices so low they cannot be advertised—remember that one? I always get nervous in discount houses and stereo and TV stores where the goods aren't

priced, or aren't priced so that the customer can read them. They are coded. This makes me suspicious. Do they have one price for a guy in a suit and one price for a guy in overalls? I like the price right there where I can see it.

You never see prices in galleries, except in the ones that advertise "thousands of signed original oil paintings—new shipments arrive daily," or in restaurants with paintings on the walls. It's as if art is something they can't really put a price on. They can't but they have to so they hesitate. You have to ask for it.

Why? Is it intimidation? If you ask the price are they going to do a Dun & Bradstreet on you or what? Is the price held back so as not to distract from the esthetic experience? Or maybe sometimes to prevent people from hooting and laughing out loud in quiet white-walled rooms.

Give me paintings that dare to wear a price tag. That's what I liked about Colab's "A More Store," here during the Christmas shopping season. Good art at good visible prices. This wasn't a first. The same group had the same kind of show/sale last year at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, and Fashion Moda had a similar store at the last Documenta.

This was like an art world 5 & 10—dollars, not cents, with lots of things in that range and not much over \$100. There were paintings, sculptures (some that could double as paperweights), toys, and various art craft objects. There were unique objects, multiples, and variable multiples. Some things were quite useful (and beautiful), like Judy Rifka's throw pillows and shopping bags. Some things were witty references to utility, like Christof Kohlhöfer's Indian blanket (an Indian painted on a blanket) or his bag ladies (ladies painted on bags).

For four dollars you could buy a toy U.S. Marine head in a plastic bag, the tag bore a portrait of the Ayatollah and a claim that there was a special place in heaven reserved for anyone who owned one. I was offended and it's not easy to be offended by something so cheap. I dare the maker of these to vend them on the street. I don't know if these are post-Modern times but I do believe they are postironic.

I did fall for the Scabbage Trap dolls, though. They are even uglier than the real thing and seemed to be in no danger of selling out. A sort of a cross between a Cabbage Patch doll and the infant in *Eraserhead*—a sort of basket case baby—they were personalized too. The

one I picked up was called "Baby Joe Doe." I put him back down.

Colab's store idea is a great one—too bad if it just happens once a year. I'd like to see a permanent art dime store. In the summer they could sell original beach blankets and famous-artist bikinis. How about a department in Bloomingdale's or Bendel's?

STEPHEN LACK

Paintings, like people, had better be smart if they aren't beautiful. Then again, there's the old expression that nobody likes a smart ass.

To me Stephen Lack's paintings here, all 1983, are smart-ass paintings. They certainly aren't beautiful—but I don't think they know it. They have the vain vanity of a bad drag queen.

Standing in a gallery in a neighborhood where art galleries are starting to push out shooting galleries, I felt like someone in "Stan Mack's Real Life Funnies." I'm taking notes and an East Village Idiot comes up and asks me if I'm an art critic. I tell him I'm a sportswriter down on my luck and he believes me. I'm thinking something like how can anybody present such bad drawings in such bad colors and this guy says—"God, doesn't this remind you of Delacroix?"

Sid Delacroix? Norm Delacroix? Two sunnanted-in-December people come in and walk around in matching minks. Man: "This one looks like a de Kooning." Woman (with a wrist-flick of dismissal): "Who wants it to look like de Kooning?"

To get away with bad drawing or primitivism or whatever you call this expulsive trend you have to have at least one of two things and preferably both—an attractive palette and a sense of humor. When I was very young my mother told me that green and blue don't go together and I never even suspected she was right until I saw Lack's picture *Absolutely Nobody*.

I still like green and blue, but I will never like the colors, alone or in combo, of *Get in the Car Old Man*. Here's an ugly smear of ugly colors—scientifically proven ugly colors: industrial avocado, institutional mustard, inorganic lemon. Dripping yet, like bug blood.

So anything this ugly had better be a laugh riot, right? But this stuff is subconsciously arch at best, gaily insensitive and glibly cruel at worst. Like *Your Parents Get the News That You Are Dead*, which is cleverly framed in ripped upholstery, *Or Hit and Run*, *Youth Found Slain*, and