

This small exhibition of small drawings collects three very different bodies of work that taken together span the past, tumultuous decade. In 1974 the power of the US suddenly seemed no longer so formidable, in the economic, military and political spheres a great deal of credibility had been lost: The oil crisis had shown that the US could not control the world economy, Vietnam had demonstrated a possibly fatal flaw in US military strength, and Watergate had unearthed a similar flaw in its political strength. Ten years later and the international credit problem is reaching catastrophic proportions while in the US individual liberties are once again threatened by a right wing Administration that pays scant attention to the law or the Constitution.

Throughout this period the mass media have become a more and more pervasive presence in our lives (witness the boom in magazine publication, pay TV, and movie production), and a more and more conservative one. The image of life in America presented to us in the ether and on the printed page is one of glowing health and untroubled finances. Even accident victims look ruddy cheeked and well dressed, safe in the knowledge that they have the right insurance. But we know our lives are not like that, that often enough we don't have any insurance. Each year millions more fall below the official poverty line, victims of an imploding economy. In the real world there is desolation; in the represented world that would tell us who we are that desolation is glossed over, or worse, made to look interesting. The artists here are representative of many who have found in that discrepancy a great pathos, and are moved by that to make an art of real life.

Paul McMahon was among the first of a generation trained in Conceptualism to realize a need to return to making an art that dealt with ordinary, everyday pictures. Living and working in Boston in the mid-Seventies he kept in touch with a wider art world by operating a shoestring gallery showing work by established figures like Douglas Huebler and Lawrence Weiner as well as young unknowns like David Salle and Matt Mullican. The work he was doing at that time seemed perverse, out of sync in its refusal to adhere to the strict prescriptions of his teachers. We now know it to have been uncannily prescient.

Noting the powerful appeal of even the most banal of news photos McMahon started clipping those he found most effecting. During the course of this activity he amassed a collection of all the usual suspects: politicians and sportsmen, soldiers and firemen, a few animals and those extraordinarily self contained models who people the advertising pages. Once selected the images were colored in pastel; sometimes arbitrarily, sometimes humorously, always beautifully. Even now the color seems strange, not at all like a standard pastel drawing, nor like colored newsprint. There is something insubstantial about it, it has a flickering lightness, as if it came from a badly tuned, badly faded television.

By the late Seventies McMahon wanted to expand his work to include music and humor in a situation that would involve a direct relationship with an audience. It seemed important to hold on to a certain ephemeral quality in the work, but at the same time to enlarge its range. For a while he participated in the *no wave* rock

scene, leading short-lived bands like *Daily Life* and *A Band*, before conceiving the troubadour act he has been perfecting since. Now, standing before a changing backdrop of painted salamanders and art stars he sings sentimental songs, tells silly jokes and spells ad hoc rhymes about life and art.

The controlled vision of life offered by the glossy magazines and television is something that fascinates Richards Jarden, and empowers him to make a highly controlled art. The hallucinatory glow of these manicured images of an everyday life from which people have been banished exerts such a hold that he finds himself obsessed with the desire to unravel it. Every attempt has been made to take time out of these images. They are 'contemporary' of course, but all clues concerning a particular history have been carefully sanitized. Jarden's desire is to refill these pictures with his own time, to make these clean, impersonal images into a fragmentary record of one individual's struggle to understand his situation. To do this he cuts the picture into strips, only to reweave those strips with a deliberation that allows him to possess that which would possess him. Or, with incredible care, he makes colored strips of wax and then uses them to build a translucent shard of an image, a demonic archeology of TV culture, making solid flitting moments as they pass through the screen.

Where McMahon and Jarden look to the more respectable media like the *New York Times* or *House and Garden*, artists of a younger generation, like Jessica Diamond, turn straight to the comics. The older artists, the male artists, consider both the printed

media and television, but their consideration of television is essentially as a static image—they want to seize onto something and make it stop so that they can look at it. Diamond also looks to both media, but she wants to glance rather than stare. She wants to make a static image that is as fleeting as anything from the TV. Newspaper comics provide the most obvious bridge, solving problems of content and presentation at once.

Cartoons give us a collective sense of hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, and do it in as punchy a way as possible. They get straight to the point, delivering cliché with a twist so that it might appear fresh and true. Understanding this Diamond has fashioned her own comic strip so that she can put down her sad but funny perceptions of sad but funny lives in a sad but funny way. Diamond is passionately disturbed by the pop foolishness of the men and women who offer public commentaries on our lives—the self-satisfied newscasters and smarmy talk show hosts as well as the more 'creative' types like pretentious rock stars and neo-expressionist painters. But she knows the only way for an artist in her position to deal with that anger is with a distanced wit, a put down so eerie as to seem almost disembodied. Indeed her carefully worked collage drawings have that lightness of touch characteristic of the best jokes, a flash of wit that stings with an unexpected sharpness. The sharpness is undeniable, but if that were all there were, the sting would soon fade. What gives this very ephemeral seeming work its weight, what gives it its pathos, is an undercurrent of sorrow. The work can seem flip, but it is in fact deeply sympathetic.

Thomas Lawson
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