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The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW

Jim Shaw; Iran do Espírito Santo; Alex Grey



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Oct. 4, 2002

Jim Shaw

Swiss Institute

495 Broadway, at Spring Street, SoHo

Metro Pictures Gallery

519 West 24th Street, Chelsea

Both through Oct. 26

Jim Shaw, the California conceptualist, who in his art often pretends to be someone else, usually a bad painter, now gives us an artist named Adam O. Goodman, a believer in a made-up religion, O-ism. O-ism was founded at the same time as Mormonism, we're told. Goodman paints O-ist-inspired abstractions: circular canvases, like targets with brushy passages in the middle. Think Richard Pousette-Dart meets Ken Noland, with a little Adolph Gottlieb thrown in for good measure. They're perfect, which is to say generically awful, deadpan parodies of postwar art in its squishiest, spiritualist mode.

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Meanwhile, Goodman, so the story goes, must support himself as an illustrator. Disgraced, he hides behind a pseudonym, Archie Gunn. At the Swiss Institute, then, we find his (that is, Goodman's) circular paintings and also file cabinets (arranged in a circle or O) containing tacky yellowing magazine and newspaper clippings that he (that is, Gunn, who is really Goodman, who is, of course, Mr. Shaw) uses for his illustrations.

All very funny. At Metro Pictures, Shaw elaborates on O-ism with several dozen O-ist thrift store-style paintings, comically clumsy pictures of strange beings, obscure rituals, torture, stagecoaches and much else that makes blissfully little sense. These are by anonymous artists from Nebraska and Iowa, supposedly. The whole project is, as usual with Mr. Shaw, a sly, sardonic take on the mythologies of American art and high-low taste, raised to a clever pitch by his obsessive, black-humored, distinctly absurd sensibility.
MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

Iran do Espírito Santo

Parallel Reality

Sean Kelly Gallery

528 West 29th Street, Chelsea

Through tomorrow

In his second solo show in a New York gallery, the Brazilian artist Iran do Espírito Santo does a little bit of everything with strict elegance, unusual clarity and a tendency toward shallowness. Mr. do Espírito Santo wants you to see it and get it. A rather pure form of visual perception is the constant, whether the point he's making is Surrealist, traditionally sculptural or social.

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In the most substantial work in the show, he brings a Minimalist, Japanese-garden austerity — somewhat reminiscent of Scott Burton's rock chairs — to decidedly un-Minimalist chunks of black granite by simply slicing their polygonal sides smooth and their edges sharp and straight. He paints the gallery's segmented hallway with progressively grayer brick patterns, recalling the real brick walls visible near the entrance. (This work seems like smart graphic design; still, the gallery might think about leaving it in place.)

In a second wall painting, Mr. do Espírito Santo conjures trees and their destruction with a "forest" that resembles a bar code, made of wood-grained black stripes of varying widths. And he momentarily fools the eye with shuffled planes of clear, mirrored and etched glass leaning casually against the wall — arrangements that turn out to be made of a single piece.

If the getting sometimes feels like a superficial quick-fix, Mr. do Espírito Santo is weaker when more obscure, as in three works whose main message seems to be their Surrealist-Pop derivativeness: a shiny granite keyhole sculpture, a stack of giant copper pennies, and a lamp base and light bulb made of a single piece of stainless steel. It will be interesting to see if this artist can take his sensibility into deeper, more complicated waters without getting in over his head. ROBERTA SMITH

John Morris

`Drawings for the Austrian School'

D'Amelio Terras

525 West 22nd Street, Chelsea

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Through tomorrow

It might be a first, a drawing show sparked by the theories of Joseph Schumpeter, the 20th-century Austrian-born economist who held that economic change came about through the replacement — by entrepreneurs with new ideas — of old business models and practices. But these jottings by John Morris — more than 100 intricately layered sheets in which dots, spots, tracteries, patterns, webs, grids and other markings of utmost delicacy are made with different implements on variously treated surfaces — give only faint hints of the theories that spawned them.

Some tightly controlled, almost robotically repetitive in their imagery, others more freehand in their doodling, they evoke man-made and natural phenomena, among them patterns from nature, electronic circuitry, virus colonies, active spermatozoa, musical notations. In "A Drawing for F. A. Hayek No. 1," small white balls are strung in casual rows beneath a white stringlike grid on a black ground; "Untitled (Drawing for the Austrian School)" is a roundish pink haze of tiny dots and larger markings that suggests an agar culture seen under a microscope; and "A Drawing for Mancur Olson No. 1" very much resembles a vertebrate skeleton.

Though the drawings look fragile, they seem to be wired into one another in a way that lends cumulative strength. Altogether, they generate a lot of juice. GRACE GLUECK

Alex Grey

Tibet House

22 West 15th Street, Flatiron district

Through Jan. 3

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Feature

530 West 25th Street, Chelsea

Through tomorrow

Alex Grey's art, with its New Age symbolism and medical-illustration finesse, might be described as psychedelic realism, a kind of clinical approach to cosmic consciousness. In it, the human figure is rendered transparently with X-ray or CAT-scan eyes, the way Aldous Huxley saw a leaf when he was on mescaline. Every bone, organ and vein is detailed in refulgent color; objects and space are knitted together in dense, decorative linear webs.

It makes sense that Mr. Grey's images have been appropriated by a counterculture audience: they show up on promotional posters for rave events and on paper used for blotter-style L.S.D. Nor is it surprising that his paintings and sculptures look right at home at Tibet House, where contemporary versions of Buddhist tankas often hang, and at Feature, where alternative sensibilities in contemporary art are known to find a home.

In some of the pictures at Tibet House, hallucinogenic images of basic human functions — birth, sex, death — look wholesome, even bland; it's as if Norman Rockwell were collaborating with Hilma af Klint. Other paintings seem to have been conceived as altarpiece-style meditational devices. The most arresting of them, at Feature, is encased in an extravagantly wrought gilded frame crowned by a big staring face with a light-up third eye.

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This piece, like the others, might easily be dismissed as Orientalist fantasy, but Mr. Grey says it faithfully transcribes a vision he had, first in a dream and then on psychoactive drugs. Is his "contemporary sacred art" any less inventive or more conservative than most of the figurative painting around today? Earnestness and a certain clunky pictorial literalism set his work decisively apart, but those are also qualities that make it so transcendently zany. HOLLAND COTTER

Alison Smith

Ellen Altfest

Bellwether

335 Grand Street

Williamsburg, Brooklyn

Through Monday

Alison Smith's elaborate museological installation and Ellen Altfest's close-up paintings of trees and rocks share an impressive, promising intensity, a clarity of focus and industriousness. But their side-by-side solo shows also have complementary, even mutually illuminating strengths and weaknesses.

Ms. Altfest is one of several younger painters trying to negotiate a new trade agreement between the painterly and the realistic (or photographic); unlike many she is uninterested in emphasizing paint's inherent seductiveness. She also paints from nature. Viewed from a distance, her images of gnarly tree trunks and lichen-covered rocks have a strange, almost physical density that is something beyond photographic or realistic yet not expressionist. (Think Dürer crossed with Ivan Albright.)

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Closer in, however, the paintings become thin-skinned quagmires of awkward little brush strokes. This disintegration may be part of the plan, but it also lends the work an unexpected air of immaturity and decreases the viewing pleasure substantially. A little seductiveness could go a long way here.

Ms. Smith's work suffers the reverse problem. "Stilleven, evenStill," the installation with which she is making her solo debut, presents a confusing, off-putting whole but a plenitude of beautiful details, nearly all of which have been made by the artist. Her subject is a skewed Americana at once nostalgic and biting, one that includes quirky re-creations of theorem paintings, Pennsylvania German sgraffito stoneware, mold-blown jelly glasses, walking sticks, paper flowers and paperback books, as well as such oddities as George Washington's Masonic apron.

Ms. Smith's work adheres to the convention of both the room-size museological display (Barbara Bloom, Fred Wilson and Mark Dion) and the handmade, not quite trompe l'oeil facsimile (Kevin Landers, Tom Friedman, Jonathan Seliger). To these precedents she adds a distinctive awareness of craft as technique, history and identity; a wonderful color sense; and intimations of narrative complexities that suggest the down-home equivalent of Matthew Barney.

The main problem, at this point, is that looking at her work feels a little too much like work. Solutions could include making the meaning more accessible or, as with Mr. Barney, providing more aggressive visual compensation. Both seem well within her reach.

ROBERTA SMITH

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Justine Kurland

Gorney Bravin and Lee

534 West 26th Street, Chelsea

Through Oct. 12

These photographs (both color and black-and-white) are staged pictures of nudists in the wilderness, among hollyhocks, planting zinnias, riding horses, bathing in a river, walking through a meadow in slanting light. This is an imaginary utopia, in the here and now, although it's not clear precisely where here is or who these unprepossessing people (middle-aged men and women, young families) are.

The people, though perfectly ordinary, often seem to be uncannily lighted. The photographs have the strange, artificial quality of fairy pictures from the turn of the last century: false documents of fantasy scenes. The tone is buoyant, understated, almost matter-of-fact, hence more affecting and mysterious than much set-up photography these days. Paradise can be a state of mind. Ms. Kurland, eschewing irony, has found a subtle way to redefine beauty and in the process to give us a humane picture of Arcadia that is not at all what we might expect. MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

Ridley Howard

Fredericks Freiser Gallery

504 West 22nd Street, Chelsea

Through Oct. 12

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Sweet, daydreamy and a bit eerie, Ridley Howard's paintings are like a cross between Alex Katz and Edward Gorey. On medium-size canvases in a finely tuned palette of pale colors, he paints broad, simplified spaces wherein he stages suggestive dramas involving small, exactly drawn people of a certain comfortable class.

At best, Mr. Howard's paintings are surprisingly touching. In "Sweet Deep Love," for example, two men and a woman ride in an old-fashioned speedboat — a wooden craft from the 1930's or 40's, one guesses — across a wide, pale blue sea. Elegantly dressed in yacht-club style, they sit impassively as if in a car, their eyes hidden behind sunglasses. There is an exhilarating sense of freedom: the open sea, like the open road, a clean slate, an invitation to leave behind the entanglements of history. But you also find yourself tantalized by the relationship among the three people: what erotic tension underlies the elegant surface?

Mr. Howard's temptation is to lapse into cartoonish stereotyping. A nocturnal scene with a man in a swimming pool and a laughing woman standing at pool's edge, drink in hand, has a lovely glow, but its satire of decadent rich folks lacks emotional resonance. Paintings of a couple making love in a bathtub or walking through a park on a snowy day have a more poignantly felt tenderness.

KEN JOHNSON

Torben Giehler

Leo Koenig

249 Centre Street

Lower Manhattan

Through Oct. 12

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Torben Giehler is one of several young painters working in the overlap of formalist abstraction, digital cartography and photography, exploring an illusionistic style that seems indebted to Al Held (who served as *éminence grise* in a four-artist painting exhibition at P.S. 1 this summer that has now morphed into a large show of Mr. Held's recent work). In his second solo show, Mr. Giehler has beefed up his paintings with jumpier colors, slightly thicker surfaces and tighter, more varied compositions.

Fashioned from bright shapes, zooming lines and tilting planes that must require hours of applying masking tape, these works dazzle the eye with their careering video-game sense of space and structure. Sometimes we look down through one patchwork plane to several others; sometimes they are stacked in front of us, accordion-style. In two especially impressive works, "Lhotse" and "K2-North Spur," the shapes alone coalesce into jagged mountain peaks that seem to have erupted from checkerboard floors.

Mr. Giehler has strong, less purely formal competition: Franz Ackermann, Jim Lambie, Sarah Morris, Benjamin Edwards, Julie Mehretu and Matthew Ritchie, for example. But the idea that space is still, or once again, the final frontier in painting enlivens his work, as it does theirs. ROBERTA SMITH

Oliver Payne and Nick Relph

'Mixtape'

Gavin Brown Enterprise

436 West 15th Street, Chelsea

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"Mixtape," the new video by the young British artists Nick Relph and Oliver Payne, strikes a more optimistic note than the trilogy of tapes seen in their auspicious New York debut at this gallery last year. Their deft, offhand collage style persists, but the bitter, pessimistic view of English life and the heroicizing of youth culture has subsided for the moment. Or perhaps the two have joined forces and metastasized into something deeper.

"Mixtape" is a seemingly mundane yet ecstatic 23-minute music video whose underlying message seems to be, simply, that in the midst of death, there's always life, and its pleasures are not limited to the young. Death — Judgment Day, really — is present here in a nearly unbearably loud soundtrack, Terry Riley's 1968 remix of Harvey Auer's 1968 Latin pop single "You're No Good" (not to be confused with the song of the same title recorded in 1963 by Dee Dee Warwick; Dionne Warwick's sister and then Betty Everett, and in 1975 by Linda Ronstadt).

The tape is screened in a little black-box amphitheater, where the song's relentless chorus — "you're no good, you're no good, you're no good" — rains down like some devilishly seductive form of hellfire and brimstone. We are all sinners. Meanwhile, the song's beat drives the images like a kind of pulse, its rhythm adapting to nearly every scene: a teenage rock band rehearsing; twin boys riding a scooter on a treadmill; a teenage girl practicing her hip-hop moves on top of a pavement drawing of Botticelli's "Venus"; a young woman doing a bit of soft shoe in a subway tunnel for an audience of one young man.

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Gradually, these random moments of isolated pleasure, joy or eccentricity start to form an encompassing celebration of sorts. When a man and a woman line-dancing in blue jeans are joined by a young raver who moves in and out of the shadows with them, peaceful coexistence seems possible. The final scene is almost corny: a sweet-faced older woman descends from a taxi, suitcase in hand, and walks, smiling, into a cemetery. Mr. Relph and Mr. Payne have a lot of interesting ideas about narrative. ROBERTA SMITH

Kaspar Bonnéen

DCA Gallery

525 West 22nd Street, Chelsea

Through Oct. 12

Abstraction and representation collide in these large canvases, which mingle recognizable fragments of furniture, architectural elements and human presences with dense areas of painterly shapes and markings. A catalog essay makes the point that the fusion of abstract and concrete "deconstructs" our normal vision of reality, paving the way for a new and more flexible way of looking at things.

Buy that notion or not, some of these layered but lightweight paintings have a cheerful energy that brightens up the austere space of the gallery. In a large one called "Untitled," the only recognizable shape is a head in profile like a sculptured bust, floating amid a jungle of colorful, unruly forms that you could almost walk into; in another, scribbled faces of various sizes, a child on what appears to be a rocking horse, a couple of chair backs and other elements that suggest a home appear on a ground of painted squares and rectangles overlaid by lines and splotches.

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In a rear section of the gallery, Kaspar Bonnéen shows smaller works in which a computer-created photograph with a homey theme appears behind a jumble of abstract forms drawn over the photograph with a mouse. Again, they are appealing enough without the weight of a theory. GRACE GLUECK

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