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Luis Jimenez. *The Last Indian*, 1972. Polyester and fibreglas with epoxy and lights. O.K.Harris



Douglas Leichter. *Spanish Fly*. Acrylic/canvas, 48" x 48". Paley & Lowe, Inc.

NEW YORK LETTER

CARTER RATCLIFF

The extremes of American representational art might be plotted this month by looking at John Koch's paintings next to Luis Jimenez' sculpture. Koch, on view at Kraushaar Galleries, evokes an aura of genteel, delicately lit and emotionally muffled cultivation. Jimenez (O.K.Harris) presents monuments to sheer, screaming vulgarity. One of his works shows a pop singer made of inflated vinyl with a pudgy, puffy cloud of flames (a song?) shooting from his mouth. People in Koch's paintings appear mostly to whisper, when they aren't snoozing in quietly but sumptuously appointed interiors. The difference between these two artists is between the over- and the under-privileged. Koch's art ends by seeming over-stuffed—with standards of taste, of simplicity, of education larding each other until his imagery is soaked and heavy. Neither Koch nor the people he depicts seem able to inhabit the present. And they have none of the hidebound energy of the earlier culture whose forms they ape. These works are devices in a slow-moving game of escape and evasion. Finally the delicate light which is Koch's specialty—and perhaps what he considers to be his saving grace—is unconvincing: it begins to take on a sheen, a crassness.

Jimenez is aggressive in expressing the pain inflicted on the uneducated sensibility by the overload of the urban landscape. And he is able to suggest how this pain is converted to "pleasure" by the expedient of a desire worked up for the perfection of industrial finish, for hot color and a caricature of voluptuous shape. He is aware of the two-sided awfulness of his images and rather preciously points them up. This is the chief difference between him and the snooty Koch: Jimenez knows what he is doing; his suffering, his bearing up under vulgarity, has resulted in works with a grasp of their own meaning. His version in plastic of a famous statue of a dying Indian chief is brilliant—literally and otherwise—in its tastelessness. The Indian is mounted on a horse. The area between the animal's front and back legs is solid and inset with electric bulbs that light up and go out in patterns recalling movie marquees. This piece sums up Jimenez' taste and gives an index of its sources; beside movies, they are album covers, bad public sculpture, banal illustrations in magazines and children's history books, the funny papers, trademarks, drive-in restaurant architecture, and more. Naturally the horse's eyes light up—but only

when the other bulbs are all lit, and the reference has gone from movie marquee to Grand Canyon sunset.

Jimenez and Koch are profoundly similar in one way: they both use representational imagery to point beyond itself to moral issues, even conclusions. Koch says that it is only right to be disengaged, to be occupied with the leftovers of a cultural style that was fully formulated decades ago. Jimenez says that we must look vulgarity square in the face; that is, we must look at it in a fine art setting. Louis Finkelstein is different from these two. In an exhibition of drawings at the gallery of the New York Studio School, he shows his concern for a "particular awareness, which nature at the moment revealed to me [these quotations are from notes that accompany the show], and which, at least so it seems to me, will never at any other moment be quite the same kind of awareness".

These drawings—of the landscape in southern France—integrate three specificities: that of landscape seen from a single viewpoint, of the perceptual apparatus that does the seeing, and of a particular configuration of line. They do not point beyond themselves; that is not their representational function: they gather these disparate specificities to themselves; that is, the drawn configuration gathers aspects (meanings) of the others to itself, while leaving the way open back to them. These are beautiful—I mean, fully specific, fully engaged—drawings. And their engagement is finally a moral one, more significant, I think, than Koch's or Jimenez', because, as the precipitate of the artist's self-consciousness, it precipitates something similar in the viewer.

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The Martha Jackson Gallery is showing recent canvases by Frank Lobdell. He is in the Surrealist vein, a representationalist, but not at all photographic. In the late forties and early fifties he was associated with the Abstract Expressionists; some of the touch and texture of that period can be seen in his work. But his concerns are behind the surface. Energetic, irregular figures can be made out. They seem immense in their dancing, gesturing postures because the space behind them (which is often to be seen through them) seems very grand in scale; and they usually reach from top to bottom of the canvas. Clowns, dancers, crowned figures cavort monumentally—and menacingly. On occasion one will have seemed to gathered the moon into its embrace. Or its shape will recall the ordinary schematic for a star. A rapid, sketchy, explosive style appears to be working in the direction of cosmic concerns.

Lobdell works back from dreams to a universe

ordered by dream. Chassac, on view at Cordier & Ekstrom, works "toward" common materials; that is, he tears and pastes wallpaper, newspaper and so on with a view to revealing the (often peculiar, sly, bumptious) spirit lurking in them. There is a fineness in his roughness. It's as though he wants to say that the taste, balance and sensitivity required for traditionally beautiful art can be turned toward ordinary substance and spirit in order to reveal an unacknowledged cousin of the beautiful. This sets him apart from Dubuffet, whose shapes and textures seem to be lingering in the vicinity of Chassac's art. Where Dubuffet wants to demolish the traditional in order to reveal its eternal (?) substratum, Chassac wants to enlarge tradition. Where Dubuffet is suspect for the beauties that sneak into his work, Chassac is convincing for the ones he invites. The range of his hand's accomplishment, which is only hinted at in the collages and totems, is made fully clear in his gouaches.

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"Brute Art", found art, and Surrealism have been so important to the founding of the contemporary sensibility that one can overlook their influence in the work of new artists. Perhaps it's not correct to speak of something so pervasive as an influence. At any rate, the paintings of Douglas Leichter (Paley & Lowe) started out with acrylic drippings only vaguely recalling landscape and have gone now toward specific reference—and it is a haunted, magical reference, hence the relation to Surrealism, and to Dubuffet. The texture of process dominated a year ago, but that has receded to reveal strange organic shape clarifying itself out of dripping and trailing. High-keyed, almost fluorescent blobs of paint wriggle, float and hang against darkly stained fields. The landscape—or perhaps it's an underwater seascape—is framed and this makes it look like something observed through an optical instrument or the window of a bathyscope, or perhaps on the page of picture book.

Leichter is a quirky representationalist. Sharon Brant's paintings take part of their value from the way they drift toward representation (again, of landscape) and away from it. Her unstretched, low-keyed canvases are stained with faint, cloudy color. Sometimes a layer of unevenly spread transparent medium will alter the surface quality so that color is seen through reflection. Where the medium is thick, it can form edges which suggest maps. Again, this is extremely delicate: Brant alludes with these forms, giving breadth to concerns that are almost entirely formal. Drawn lines (which seemed a little too schematic in her previous paintings) cross and unite the surface, referring as much to its slackness as to particular shape. Light, depth

