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ART REVIEW; Art Rediscovered a Home on the Upper East Side

By ROBERTA SMITH

As an art gallery scene, the Upper East Side may have an identity problem. The phrase itself lacks the cutting-edge hipness of those charmed double syllables, "SoHo" and "Chelsea." And the actual area -- less a neighborhood than an aggregate of them -- is amorously vague of border and devoid of geographical cohesion.

In addition it is chockablock with museums -- small, large, rich, poor -- that stretch 35 blocks from the Frick Collection to El Museo del Barrio, in a so-called Museum Mile that is closer to two. Without much logic, the conditions contribute to a downtown prejudice that sees the Upper East Side as both diffuse and monolithic: the land of museums, museum trustees and private dealers, not galleries and artists.

But these days, when SoHo is dotted with stores as chic as Madison Avenue's and Chelsea is dotted with galleries as chic as museums, a change of attitude seems to be in order.

It should be remembered that 20 years ago, before SoHo's rise, there was plenty of new art to be found above 72d Street. Leo Castelli's gallery, representing the Pop and Minimalist artists, was on East 77th Street, around the corner from Sotheby Parke-Bernet, the city's leading auction house. Ronald Feldman, who gave first New York shows to Joseph Beuys, Chris Burden and Hannah Wilke, was on 74th, in a building since swallowed up by the Whitney. At 24 East 81st, the Bykert Gallery (a fusion of the surnames of its partners, Jeffrey Byers and Klaus Kertess) introduced the painters Brice Marden, Chuck Close and Joe Zucker, as well as Alan Saret, Dorothea Rockburne and Peter Campus, who created (gasp) installation pieces in the small rooms of a once-elegant brownstone.

These days new art is still more likely to appear downtown, but at the moment, the Upper East Side's galleries and alternative-type institutions contain a great deal of interesting work by artists living, dead, blue-chip, emerging or struggling in obscurity. And its quiet, tree-lined streets are a

pleasant change from the congested sidewalks of SoHo and 57th Street and the wide-open desolation of Chelsea.

For limbering up, consider three shows at alternative spaces clustered near 68th Street and Lexington Avenue. At the BERTHA AND KARL LEUBSDORF ART GALLERY at Hunter College, "Nature Is Not Romantic" features eight fairly well-known artists, most in their 30's, including Alexis Rockman, Paula Hayes, Alyson Shotz and Gregory Crewdson. Their views of the natural ranges from dim to dimmer to downright caustic. Charm and man-made artifice prevail at the NEW YORK SCHOOL OF INTERIOR DESIGN, where the watercolors and drawings of the designer and amateur artist Mark Hampton, who died last year, cover the walls of a renovated carriage house.

Tiny renderings of houses, gardens and comfy-looking interiors compete with sprightly caricatures and cards made for family and friends, which win.

Next door, the SCULPTURE CENTER is showing two young sculptors from Brooklyn: John Beech creates long, low-lying brightly colored sculptures that look like car bumpers and use Minimalist precedents without extending them.

Christopher Lesnewski combines found materials, often labor-intensively, to create a large, cabana-like bundle.

A collaborative series of Frank Stella-like drawings and prints suggests that the artists work best solo. A fourth alternative showcase is the GOETHE INSTITUTE NEW YORK, which regularly features work by German artists in the beautiful parlor floor gallery of its Fifth Avenue town house. This month brings the boxy paintings on linoleum of Martin Noel, a 33-year-old artist from Bonn who is enamored of New York's cultural history. His small monochromatic fields divided by irregular lines evoke the city's land masses and waterways; think of Robert Mangold as a cartographer.

El Museo del Barrio

The notion of the Upper East Side as the exclusive enclave of the blue chip is further undermined by "The S-Files" at EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO. The show features 34 Latino artists from New York and South America, with results that are uneven but energetic; there's certainly enough good or promising work to maintain viewer interest.

Some works are squarely part of the esthetic mainstream. "Synchronicity," Monika Bravo's video piece, is projected onto small slabs of plexiglass and shows beautifully fuzzy color images of tugs and boats plowing through New York Harbor. It continues a tradition of the urban poetic initiated by Walt Whitman and Alfred Stieglitz. In contrast, the snapshot-size tableaux sculptures of Ronaldo Macedo personalize the post-modern convention of the setup, showing single figures in prison cells illuminated by single shafts of real light.

Also good are the muscularly Expressionistic paintings on newspaper by Jose Luis Cortes showing the squalid grandeur of the old Times Square; Luis Carle's eerie photographs of a summer storm on Brighton Beach, and those of Miriam Romais, which document the life of Jonathan, a teen-ager who grew up without a father and now lives apart from his own son.

Most impressive is the work of Pedro Abreu, a 45-year-old photographer whose 10 images date from 1970 to the present and reveal a consistently astute eye for spatial surprises, saturated color and the hallucinatory aspects of everyday life. A prime example is "Picnic on the Roof," with its overhead view of man, woman, chessboard and dog on a New York apartment building.

J. M. W. Turner

In these parts, you don't have to go to a museum to see a museum-quality exhibition.

Exhibit A is the superb show of late watercolors, oil studies and paintings by the English painter John Mallord William Turner (1775-1851) at SALANDER-O'REILLY GALLERIES, which includes loans from the Tate Gallery in London, the foremost repository of the artist's work.

This is the first Turner exhibition in New York since 1966, when the Museum of Modern Art established the artist's lush late works, which he began in the early 1830's, as precursors of both Impressionism and modernist abstraction. The current show is a feast of Frankenthaleresque plumes of color; "proto-monochromes" of scumbled whites and yellows and fields of quick, erupting gestures.

Today Turner has more company than in 1966. Exhibitions of Degas's late landscape paintings on paper at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1994) and Victor Hugo's ink drawings at the Drawing Center in SoHo (1998) suggest that abstract painting spent the 19th century waiting impatiently in the wings. Yet Turner was also clearly obsessed with the real.

Most of these images are furtively structured, intimating the lay of the land, the rise of waves, the peaks of mountains or roofs.

Titles like "Calm Sea With Distant Gray Clouds" are specific, and when you step back from oil paintings like "Waves Breaking on the Shore," a sudden spatial logic snaps into place. None of which should diminish the pleasure of the brash minimalism of these works, which conflate extremes of sea and sky with extremes of painting, showing both to contain elements of the unfathomable and the unknown.

Jasper Johns

LEO CASTELLI, the dean of American art dealers, who closed his longtime SoHo gallery this year, has returned to his point of professional origin: an Upper East Side town house. His newest gallery, on 79th Street is small and characteristically spiffy, and its inaugural show is devoted to Jasper Johns, arguably the artistic love of Mr. Castelli's life. It is a modest affair, with 19 works

tracing the artist's involvement with a single print medium, the monotype, through nearly 20 years.

Suffice it to say that Mr. Johns handles this traditionally spontaneous and direct medium with his usually circumspect deliberation; many of the images involve several plates and barely read as monotypes. The viewer is continually pulled back and forth between the oblique and the obvious, between, for example, a photographic likeness of the Mona Lisa and its casual frame of thumbprints on a lavender field in which fragmented facial features hover at the edges, like cartouches circling a map of the world.

Andy Warhol

Given the high frequency of gallery shows of work by Andy Warhol, another star of the Castelli glory years, the exhibition at the GAGOSIAN GALLERY showing the Pop artist's little-known portraits of Philip Niarchos, based on a CAT scan of the subject's skull, didn't sound like much. At first the paintings, made in the mid-1980s, seem almost idiotically simple; a casual outline of a human skull is repeatedly imposed on the shadowy shapes of the CAT scan and some equally casual drips and strokes of paint.

But deconstructing the artist's process can be fascinating. The painterly details, identical from canvas to canvas, are part of the silk screen of the CAT scan. Some paintings have monochrome backgrounds and others have three broad stripes of color. Elsewhere the skull encloses areas of green-gold splatters suggestive of diseased cells. (These are a result of Warhol's famous oxidation process, which was urinating on copper paint.) The cloudy CAT scan image is reversed in some paintings; the skull outline is eliminated in others. Altogether, the paintings provide further evidence of Warhol's uncanny ability to get the most from the least, fusing and confusing drawing, painting and printmaking through brilliant use of the silk-screen process.

Another Castelli Gallery alumnus is Cy Twombly, whose prints and drawings are the subject of an elegant exhibition at HIRSCHL & ADLER MODERN along with a display of small smoky studies by John Lees. Next door at KNOEDLER & COMPANY are new paintings by Per Kirkeby, the Danish neo-Expressionist, in which the thatches of nervous line seem partly indebted to Mr. Twombly, although the heavy, burning colors do not.

Other younger or lesser known artists having shows in the area include Brenda Goodman, whose opulent, visionary paintings can be seen at KOUROS GALLERY on 73d Street. Across the street at SCHLESINGER GALLERY, Steven Harvey, who is a gallery director at Salander O'Reilly, is showing loosely worked paintings of nudes that bring to mind a host of precedents -- Bonnard, Alice Neel, Philip Pearlstein -- without much loss of face.

At ADAM BAUMGOLD FINE ART on 72d Street, Steve Greene shows collage paintings reminiscent of Robert Rauschenberg, but juiced up with overwrought images of tires and flatbeds that seem indebted to Robert Crumb. And on Madison Avenue at JAMES GRAHAM & SONS, Andrew Ehrenworth is showing big paintings of children's faces in which drips and pours of paint conjure abstraction, tears and melting photographs, a totality of diminishing returns.

Brice Marden

The beautiful exhibition of Brice Marden's early work at C&M ARTS on 78th Street recalls a time when painting was on the defensive. Along with the work of Frank Stella, Robert Ryman and Ellsworth Kelly, Mr. Marden's paintings were seen as convincing.

Mr. Marden's distinct approach produced paintings that accepted the physicality of Minimalism without forsaking the implicit emotionalism of the handmade art object, enhancing their romantic moodiness with colors of the oddest, quietest sort. He worked with a combination of paint and melted beeswax smoothed with a spatula into matte skinlike surfaces, creating unnameable hues that were at once softly naturalistic and self-consciously artificial.

Recalcitrant and uncooperative, like the secretive blacks of Ad Reinhardt's work, these colors challenged the eye to measure the difference, if any, between closely keyed grays, as in "Number" of 1972, or to discern hints of the primaries in gray panels that are by turn faintly pinkish, yellowish and bluish, as in "Shunt" or "Parks (for Van Dyke Parks)". The dark, heavy yellow panel flanked by two shades of gray-blue in "Summer Table" of 1972-73 is shocking within this context and marks the beginning of Mr. Marden's long journey toward brighter color.

There is something mildly paralyzed about these works. It is hard to look at them without both respecting and regretting the effort with which Mr. Marden worked his way out of the Minimalist corner, while also leaving his most radical work behind.

Ellsworth Kelly

The exhibition of Ellsworth Kelly's spectrum paintings at MITCHELL-INNES & NASH is covered in a separate review of Kelly exhibitions in New York and Cambridge, Mass. (page 40), but its coincidence with the Marden show presents a rare opportunity for comparison. Mr. Kelly, whose use of the monochrome panel dates from 1952, is known to be touchy about Mr. Marden's use of it. He needn't worry. The proximity brings out stark differences that outdistance a few general similarities.

Mr. Kelly's art is not romantic or moody. He paints with a highly distilled attention to reality, in this case the reality of pure color and light. His colors, though arrived at intuitively, measure off the spectrum in amazingly regular intervals, while Mr. Marden's stick to a narrow, rather muddled stretch of it. Mr. Kelly's colors are completely optimistic about the human eye's ability, which they don't test or confound as much as invigorate.

Upstairs from the Kelly show, at RICHARD GRAY, is a selection of new pastel and charcoal works by David Hockney that reflect his continued interest in scroll-like compositions and convoluted excursions into pictorial space, these inspired by the Grand Canyon. They are too workmanlike and serious, despite their burning colors and energetic surfaces. Only when Mr. Hockney starts adding characteristically comic bits of greenery do they come to life.

Barbara Bloom

GLENN HOROWITZ BOOKSELLER may have earned a little niche in the history of late Conceptual Art. For the centennial of Vladimir Nabokov's birth, Mr. Horowitz invited the artist Barbara Bloom to create an installation using the Nabokov material he had assembled. This included a great number of first editions annotated by the author or inscribed to his wife (and first reader and typist), Vera, almost always with a drawing of a butterfly. There are also nearly two dozen first editions of Nabokov's most famous book, "Lolita," in different languages and with wide-ranging jacket designs.

The resulting installation is a marvel that if carefully attended to can give the viewer/reader the odd sensation of being inside Nabokov's brain, where various passions -- for writing and language, for the collection and study of butterflies, for history and for his wife -- mingle, illuminate and incite one another.

Ms. Bloom, whose interest in Nabokov is longstanding, achieved this with her usual sense of craft, which is more than a little obsessive itself. She has created a rug based on the author's copy of an edition of "Lolita," its green cover heavily annotated. On the computer she designed a font based on Nabokov's handwriting so she can display excerpts from his books on the 3-by-5 cards on which he wrote them. There's even Nabokov wallpaper, dotted with butterflies, snippets of annotated text, corrected copy, deletions and additions as well as the noticeably ribald verses of an unpublished poem version of "Lolita."

Under glass are displays of butterflies, including the blues that were Nabokov's particular passion, and arrangements of tiny photographs, many of them doubled into wing-like symmetry.

This is a dizzying show, which may precipitate a reading or rereading of the master's works and is probably most comprehensible when viewed with a magnifying glass, given the fineness of some of the print. Ultimately, one comes away thinking of the pages of Nabokov's open books as the wings of butterflies. He scrutinized both with an intensity that this show makes fantastically manifest.

Luigi Lucioni

The Italian-born American painter Luigi Lucioni (1900-98) is the subject of a revival exhibition at the GERALD PETERS GALLERY on East 78th Street. Lucioni's work is a strange amalgam of other artists' work. He's a kind of Magic Realist Precisionist whose images can evoke Charles Sheeler, Georgia O'Keeffe, George Ault and even Maxfield Parrish. His portraits are generic (even if he painted velvet with startling accuracy). His still lifes, full of Americana and American Indian art, are better. But best are his hyper-real paintings of Vermont barns. They have their own kind of strangeness, something that approaches photography and then moves beyond it toward abstraction. Notice how each slat of the chicken coop in "Clouds Over Equinox" is a different color, almost like a Kelly Spectrum.

Photography

The Upper East Side has its share of galleries devoted exclusively to photography. At the moment one of the most intriguing shows, in part because it is the first in New York in nearly 20 years, is the exhibition devoted to vintage prints by Eliot Porter (1901-1990) at ALAN KLOTZ PHOTOCOLLECT on 72d Street. In the late 1940's Porter perfected the time-consuming dye-transfer process, which gave his color photographs of nature an unnatural beauty that occasionally turns garish. It can make the banks of the San Juan River in Utah look like a close-up of chocolate or turn a lake's reflections into a high-keyed abstraction. The most ravishing image, and the only nonvintage print, is a large lacy view of a Kentucky woods in bloom.

A perfect antidote to Porter's color is to be found in the show of Vera Lutter's photographs at ROTH HOROWITZ on East 70th Street. Made with a camera obscura, they reduce the North Fork coastline and the Long Island Sound to a series of black and silver forms and bands that expunge color and change day to night.

Where the Galleries and Artists Are

Here is information on the shows in the review of Upper East Side galleries and museums. Admission is free unless otherwise noted.

1. THE BERTHA AND KARL LEUBSDORF ART GALLERY, Hunter College, 68th Street and Lexington Avenue, (212) 772-4991. "Nature Is Not Romantic" (through May 15).
2. THE NEW YORK SCHOOL OF INTERIOR DESIGN, 161 East 69th Street, (212) 472-1500. "Mark Hampton: Watercolors and Drawings" (through May 29).
3. SCULPTURE CENTER, 167 East 69th Street, (212) 879-3500. "John Beech and Christopher Lesnewski" (through May 13).
4. ROTH HOROWITZ, 160A East 70th Street, (212) 717-9067. "Vera Lutter" (through May 22).
5. HIRSCHL & ADLER MODERN, 21 East 70th Street, (212) 535-8810. "Cy Twombly: Selected Prints and Drawings" (through June 12).
6. KNOEDLER & COMPANY, 19 East 70th Street, (212) 794-0550. "Per Kirkeby: Recent Paintings" (through June 11).
7. ADAM BAUMGOLD FINE ART, 128 East 72d Street, (212) 861-7338. "Steve Greene" (through May 28).
8. ALAN KLOTZ PHOTOCOLLECT, 22 East 72d Street, (212) 327-2211. "Eliot Porter" (through May 15).

9. SCHLESINGER GALLERY, 24 East 73d Street, (212) 734-3600. "Steven Harvey" (through May 1).
10. KOUROS GALLERY, 23 East 73d Street, (212) 288-5888. "Brenda Goodman" (through May 15).
11. GLENN HOROWITZ BOOKSELLER, 19 East 76th Street, (212) 327-3538. "Revised Evidence: Vladimir Nabokov's Inscriptions, Annotations, Corrections and Butterfly Descriptions," an installation designed by Barbara Bloom (through June 18).
12. GAGOSIAN GALLERY, 980 Madison Avenue, at 76th Street, (212) 744-2313. "Andy Warhol: Philip's Skull" (through May 22).
13. GERALD PETERS GALLERY, 24 East 78th Street, (212) 628-9760. "Luigi Lucioni" (through May 15).
14. C&M ARTS, 45 East 78th Street, (212) 861-0020. "Brice Marden: Classic Paintings" (through May 29).
15. JAMES GRAHAM & SONS, 1014 Madison Avenue, at 78th Street, (212) 535-5767. "Andrew Ehrenworth" (through May 8).
16. MITCHELL-INNESS & NASH, 1018 Madison Avenue, at 78th Street, (212) 744-7400. "Ellsworth Kelly Spectrums" (through June 26).
17. RICHARD GRAY, 1018 Madison Avenue, at 78th Street, (212) 472-8787. "David Hockney: The Grand Canyon" (through May 28).
18. SALANDER-O'REILLY GALLERIES, 20 East 79th Street, (212) 879-6606. "J. M. W. Turner: Exploring Late Turner" (through June 5).
19. LEO CASTELLI GALLERY, 59 East 79th Street, (212) 249-4470. "Jasper Johns Monotypes" (through May 29).
20. GOETHE INSTITUTE NEW YORK, 1014 Fifth Avenue, at 82d Street, (212) 439-8700. "Martin Noel: Drawings and Woodcuts" (through May 15).
21. EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO, 1230 Fifth Avenue, at 104th Street, (212) 831-7272. "The S-Files" (through June 30). Admission: \$4; \$2 for students and the elderly.