

Review

THE CRITICAL STATE OF VISUAL ART IN NEW YORK

November 15, 1997

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The AICA 1996-1997 BEST SHOW AWARDS

ON TUESDAY, DECEMBER 2ND, THE UNITED States Chapter of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) will formally present the winners of the organization's 1996-1997 annual awards for the best United States exhibitions and catalogues of the 1996-97 Gallery Season.

These awards bring attention to the frequently under-recognized work of artists, museum curators, writers and gallerists. AICA's 300 American members vote on these awards each year.

The 1996-1997 AICA Best Show Awards will be presented at a reception at the Grey Art Gallery of New York University. John Elderfield, Chief Curator-at-Large of the Museum of Modern Art and Kim Levin, President of AICA/International, will be the chief presenters of the awards.

This year, there was a tie for first place in the category for BEST ART GALLERY SHOW: the award will be presented to both **Ronald Feldman Gallery** for *Hannah Wilke* and **Robert Miller Gallery** for *Yayoi Kusama*. Last year, Paula Cooper was awarded the first place prize for her exhibition: *Yayoi Kusama: works from the 1950s and 1960s*. The second place award in this category will be awarded to **Mishkin Art Gallery at Baruch Gallery** for *Women and Abstract Expressionism: Painting and Sculpture: 1945-49*, curated by Joan Marter. **Paula Cooper's** exhibition, *Tony Smith: Moondog*, will be awarded the prize for third place.

Andy Goldsworthy will be awarded BEST GALLERY SHOW OF AN EMERGING ARTIST for his exhibition at **Galerie Lelong** last Spring. Second place will go to *The True Poetry: The Art of Maria Izquierdo* shown at the **Americas Society**, and **Elaine Lustig Cohen's**



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David Humphrey

Sculptures

Deven Golden Fine Art, Ltd.
through December 6

BY ROBERT M. MURDOCK

UPON RECEIVING THE announcement for this exhibition I wondered if this was the same David Humphrey whose paintings I had seen at David McKee Gallery, and sure enough, it is. At first these bizarre sculptures, with kitsch thrift-store porcelain figures and animals embedded in dough-like celluclay, suggest an entirely different imagery and aesthetic than do the paintings. I might have guessed they were made by a West Coast, perhaps Bay Area, ceramic sculptor. But while they are more playful and whimsical than Humphrey's paintings, in which vintage photographic images from family albums are woven into a complex field of abstract elements and distorted figures, they are unquestionably of the same sensibility. In each, the veracity and loaded associations of the amateur snapshot or the manufactured *tchotchke* inform the work, giving it weight and irony. As in Dada and Surrealist collages and objects more than in Pop Art, Humphrey's images may be inverted or otherwise transformed, but the integrity and identity of the original object remain intact.

Born in the mid-1950s, Humphrey has chosen the icons of that decade as his source material. The familiar porcelain panther figurine, often manufactured in black or chartreuse as a decorative light atop the TV console, becomes a wall sculpture, *DRIP*, 1997, in which the poor animal, having grown a Tweety-Bird head, plunges headfirst toward the floor. In *RUFF*, 1997, a bemused pooch is trapped like a pig-in-a-blanket in an oozing glob of gray celluclay. Other works, such as

LOVE TEAM, 1997, are erotic or sexual, like a send-up of voluptuous Indian stone figure groups, with their rolls of flesh, inflated breasts and coital contortions. There are also references to forms in modern sculpture — Henry Moore, for example.

This sculpture may not be high art, but it is not shallow or derivative either. Unlike much recent "kid stuff" work incorporating dolls or stuffed animals, this is clearly work by a mature, sophisticated artist. Humphrey has a painter's eye for humorous, often absurd, juxtaposition, and a sculptor's direct approach to materials. The exhibition is a delight, and highly recommended.

Shahzia Sikander

Murals and Miniatures

Deitch Projects through November 29

BY ROBERT M. MURDOCK

WHEN I SAW THIS artist's work in the 1997 Whitney Biennial last spring and more recently in the *Project Painting* exhibition in SoHo this September, I was taken with its intimate quality and its blend of traditional and contemporary references. Her current exhibition combines some of the small works on paper that evoke Persian and Indian miniatures with a new element, mural painting — created directly on the gallery walls.

Born in Pakistan and now living in Houston, Sikander draws her imagery from her heritage and stereotypes of women in her native country. She has focused upon the miniature genre for the past ten years, since she was an art student in Lahore. Like the historic

RICHARD POUSETTE- DART

(1916-1992)

PHOTOGRAPHS

THROUGH DECEMBER 20

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examples that she emulates, her paintings may appear veiled (pun intended), sensuous or exotic to the Western eye. But they are really about women's roles and issues in a repressive, tradition-bound society, in which wearing the veil and making tea are societal requirements. And miniature painting itself is a tradition with strict pictorial conventions. Violence is also implied in some of Sikander's images, such as warlike veiled figures with multiple arms wielding swords, daggers and hatchets.

Somehow Sikander manages to translate the subtlety of the small works into her murals, which I would not have thought possible. The delicate drawing, the diaphanous painted white veils, the blood-red and magenta palette and tea-stained areas are all successfully integrated into her recent larger canvases and wall paintings. They look impressive in the narrow, high-ceilinged gallery with its almost chapel-like proportions. I also responded to her mural-scale installation of overlapping sheets of yellow tissue paper, each with images in watercolor and gouache, which she had mounted out from the wall on very long brass pins. It suggests fragility and vulnerability, and the clustered drawings appear to be suspended or fluttering in mid-air. Yet they are anchored to the wall, pinned down like butterfly specimens.

The mural in the side room, Deitch's "Storefront Gallery," is less successful, in part because of the shallow space. You cannot view it from a distance as with the mural in the main gallery, unless you look in through the window from outside. Also, the rendering of the veiled woman on horseback and the implied processional movement of the figures seems heavy-handed and less convincing than the fragmented heads and figures in space that make up her

other paintings.

As well as combining Hindu and Muslim elements, Sikander incorporates images from the British Colonial period, from European fairy tales (*Little Red Riding Hood*, *Cinderella*, *Rapunzel*), and from contemporary life, all in incongruous and unlikely juxtapositions. But the Eastern imagery dominates, and at first glance the work looks like its historical source. You have to look closely to discover the polyglot vocabulary and irony of these works. But it is well worth the effort — this is a rich and rewarding exhibition.

Jack Ox:
Visual Realization of Kurt
Schwitters' *Ursonate*
Stephen Gang Gallery
through November 29
BY ROBERT M. MURDOCK

I HAVE BEEN A LONGTIME admirer of Dadaist Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948), whose works, including his legendary *MERZBAU* (begun c. 1923 and destroyed 1943), have been among the most influential in the history of modern art.

Jack Ox's current work, based on Schwitters' famous sound-poem *Ursonate*, (1922-1932), consists of creating visual equivalents to Schwitters' verbal utterances, in color and image. As with any reconstruction or translation from one language or discipline to another, considerable license, intuition and interpretation are necessary. This exhibition consists of two sections of her complete work.

Ox began this work while living for six years in Cologne. Her approach is

highly analytical, akin to that of a scientist, mathematician or musicologist; her interpretation is intuitive, that of a visual artist (though she denies that she is a painter). During her research on Schwitters, Ox found an original recording of Schwitters himself reciting the *Ursonate*, on which her visual analysis is based.

The Schwitters poem consists of nonsense sounds (*Rrummpff t! Rr rr num!*) and German syllables (*Fŷmms bš wš tšš*), arranged in the 19th-century musical sonata form (rondo, largo, scherzo and presto). Ox's visual "score" consists of bands of solid colors to indicate broad sounds and fractured strips for trills or staccatos. Interspersed with the color bands are fragments of pictorial elements and landscape images from places where Schwitters lived in exile during World War II.

This is an impressive undertaking with considerable visual interest, but too esoteric for most gallery visitors; the aural-visual connections that Ox is exploring remain obscure. Moreover, like many translations or musical transcriptions (of Bach fugues for full orchestra, for example) the spirit of the original is eclipsed and the result becomes overblown and turgid.

As vintage photographs of Schwitters reciting his *Ursonate* attest, he was delighted with his mock-serious Dada recitative. But that sense of delight is lost in Ox's work which, while interesting conceptually, gets bogged down in its hyper-seriousness, exhaustive detail and massive scale.

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