

# Time Out

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**Natalie Portman**  
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## Reviews

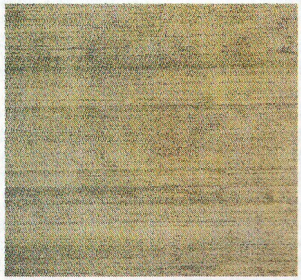
## Gary Gissler

Linda Kirkland Gallery, through Sat 29 (see Chelsea).

Some works of art, such as certain performance pieces, test the physical endurance of the artist. Gary Gissler's new paintings, on the other hand, put the viewer to the test.

Gissler's canvases are often no more than six inches square; to them he adds—in tiny microscript—lists of synonyms (as in works like *bad and honest*), poemlike compositions (*be all ears*), or the same phrase repeated over and over again (*women want and butt fuck love*). Reading these meticulously rendered texts in their entirety is like enduring an eye exam that's always at the point when the letters become impossible to read. (Fortunately, the gallery offers a magnifying glass for the weak of heart or eyesight.)

Gissler makes most of these works by building up each canvas with coats of gesso and then sanding them down. The result is a burnished surface that looks like marble or stone; while the paintings recall the spare, reductive style of Minimalism, the accompanying texts—end-



Gary Gissler, *doubt*, 1997.

lessly listing, repeating and representing words in the tiniest handwriting imaginable—dredge up much more complicated associations. There's obsessive-compulsive behavior, for one thing. (Who can forget Jack Nicholson's character in *The Shining* typing, over and over, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" as he drifts into criminal dementia?) And there's that other compulsion—the making of art itself—not to mention the way that inscriptions and the like are often sublimated into decorative motifs.

The formula Gissler has hit upon seems uncomplicated at first, but there is more here than meets—or doesn't quite meet—the eye. Given proper scrutiny, Gissler's works serve as meditations on perception and language. More important, they imply that appearances are indeed everything: How a text is presented becomes a fundamental part of what it means. It's a lesson that was chewed on by many a neoconceptualist in the '80s—particularly those who appropriated advertising techniques. But Gissler gives the idea his own '90s spin, combining a homier touch with a complete, if sadistic, workout for the eyes.—*Martha Schwendener*



Shahzia Sikander, *Cholee Kay Pechay Kiya? Chunree K*, 1997.

### Shahzia Sikander, "Murals and Miniatures"

Deitch Projects, through Dec 20 (see Soho).

By far the artist with the best debut this season, Shahzia Sikander, 28, is originally from Pakistan, where she was trained in the art of Indo-Persian miniature painting. But she also has a degree from the Rhode Island School of Design—which makes her art not only multicultural, but exceptional as well. At its best, Sikander's work reminds me of the very early efforts of Francesco Clemente.

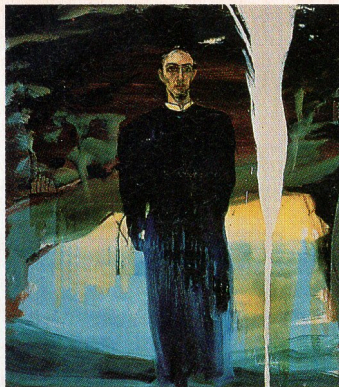
For such a young painter, Sikander's command of surface, material and color

is amazingly original and expansive. Her hues have an almost phosphorescent radiance; she limns her world in hazy shades of sienna, rust and amber, and in full-bodied, creamy beiges and silky whites. She uses dry pigments, watercolor, homemade vegetable dyes and even tea to achieve diaphanous stains, dense opacities and luminous translucent effects.

Her subject is intricate and complex: It is the fissure between East and West, between tradition and innovation, between women's desires for autonomy and their expected social roles. In exploring these contrasts, Sikander is reinventing her medium. In her work, voluptuous, powerful women abound: Some float as if disconnected from their environment; others have dangling entrails in place of feet, suggesting the rootless state they find themselves in. Often these figures embrace, and sometimes one is pictured nested inside the other. Always, they seem very intimate.

A number of Sikander's women wear the traditional veil and are thus enveloped in history even as they're saddled with stereotypical notions of the exotic woman of the East. Like Shivas, a few sport multiple arms bearing weapons.

Some of the works, however, are stronger than others. *Hood's Red Rider #1*, a large painting, is glutted with imagery, whereas *Veil 'n trial*, a wall painting, shows Sikander perfecting her technique while exploring a new scale. *Beyond Surfaces*, an installation collage of ink, gouache and watercolor on tissue paper, demonstrates that Sikander is developing new ideas and new textures. She may be young and still learning in public, but Sikander is definitely on the rise.—*Jerry Saltz*



Julian Schnabel, *Portrait of José Luis Ferrer*, 1997.

### Julian Schnabel, "Portrait Paintings"

PaceWildenstein, through Dec 13 (see Soho).

It's fashionable to sneer at everything Julian Schnabel does, and I walked into his Pace extravaganza expecting to do the same. I left, however, feeling I'd seen his most interesting show in years—though I have no idea if this was because some of the work was actually good, or because the display was sociologically fascinating. This time around—in case you haven't heard—Schnabel tackles portraiture. The show includes eight likenesses of family and friends, painted in a style "reminiscent of 17th- and 18th-century Spanish court painting," as a gallery statement puts it. Naturally, each is painted in oil, monu-

mental in size, and enclosed in an ornate, putty-colored frame.

The portraits here fall into two groups, and the first I don't mind painting. In it, the artist's friends (such as Rene Ricard) are dolled up like characters from a Velazquez and positioned against a murky, abstract background. What made me groan, however, wasn't the subject matter, but the weird white blob that cut across each figure. The only possible response is, Why?

Much better are the portraits with landscapes for backgrounds. In these, the characters seem almost frivolous, as if they'd sprung from Schnabel's imagination. There is Schnabel's wife, a golden glow emanating from her décolletage, reminding me of a Gainsborough. In another work, his daughters lounge on a country road, dressed like Bouguereau peasant girls. The final painting—his young son standing nude against the sky—slips into a pastiche of early Picasso.

What's so amazing—and infuriating—about these works is their complete lack of self-consciousness. Portraiture is back, and Schnabel knows it. But he paints as if he couldn't care less about the tactics—satire, idol worship, meticulous technique—that chic portraitists such as John Currin and Elizabeth Peyton are using. Instead, he keeps painting away happily—exuding a white Euro-style machismo as he casts himself among the greats of the past. So here's what I can't decide: Does this make the work egregiously bad? Or just the opposite?—*Carol Kino*

### Roman Signer

Swiss Institute, through Dec 23 (see Soho)

Swiss artist Roman Signer quite literally knows how to explode the art world's expectations. A sort of artist/stuntman, he choreographs and photographs all sorts of odd and humorous events: dynamite charges that shoot black hats into the air; a rocket launch that sends his ski cap—tied to one end of the rocket—flying; a systematic self-drowning in a kayak. All of Signer's actions involve an element of surprise, but what amazes me the most is how an artist of 59 willingly takes more risks—personal and creative—than most artists half his age.

Signer's various "actions" (his term) are ephemeral—hence the prevalence of photographs in this show. *Balloon with Rocket* (1981) consists of two images: in the left frame, a cute red balloon floats in a tranquil, snowy mountain landscape; in the right, it erupts in a huge, fiery mass, its string now a ghostly line of flame. In a Muybridge-like series of four images from 1992, the windows of a rustic Alpine hotel burst open with fireworks, then emit darkened smoke, their shutters flinging wide with the precision of a military marching band. Decisive moments, indeed. (You have to admire the precision with which the camera shutter was snapped as well.) Whether Signer is going for formal beauty or latent violence, every image here crackles with suspense and possibility.

There's something titillatingly subversive about many of these images. (I particularly took delight in one series from 1993 that shows Signer buying a Christmas tree, then chucking it over a



Roman Signer, installation view, 1997.

ravine.) There's something doggedly optimistic about them, too. Take for instance, *Hat* (1997), one of the few video works on display. In it, Signer repeatedly drops what look like lead balls from a fourth-floor window onto a Rube Goldberg-like contraption, causing a hat to explode from a bucket and then—when the trick works—to fly up to his waiting hands and onto his head. More often than not, the trick fails. But even when Signer looks foolish, we can't stop watching him. Not many artists can match that.—*Sarah Schmereler*