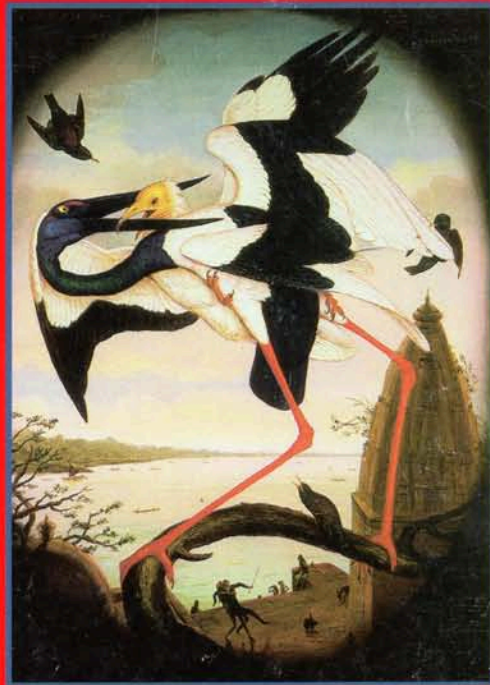
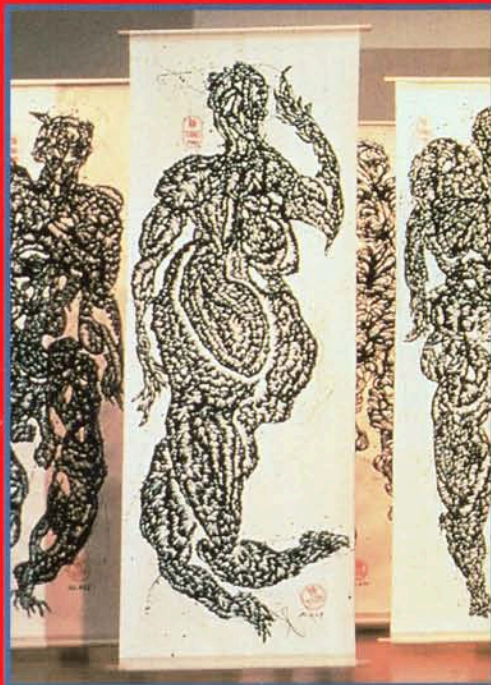
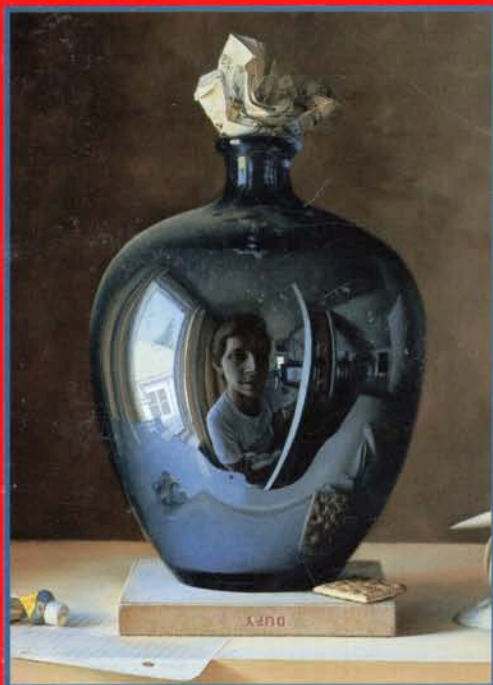


20<sup>th</sup>  
YEAR

COLLECTORS' COLORADO • DESIGNING DECO • POLLOCK: ALONE ON THE RANGE

# ART & ANTIQUES

December 1998



SPECIAL ISSUE

# Contemporary Art

- Modern Messages, Classic Styles
- China's Underground Art Surfaces
- Sculptor Albert Paley in the Winners' Circle



U.S. \$4.95  
Canada \$5.95



# PAST IS PRESENT

Painters are using historical styles to convey modern messages, proving that everything old can be new again.

By Edward Gomez

EVER SINCE THE SECOND CAVEMAN copied what the first caveman had crudely scratched upon the scraggy walls of his cavern home, artists have often taken art itself as their subject. Consider the sheer weight of artistic tradition, which has provided technical, stylistic, and thematic concerns for artists to wrestle with from one generation to the next in diverse cultures the world over. This was as true for Renaissance artists who strove to emulate their era's recognized masters as it has been among modernism's legendary provocateurs, with their dramatic reactions against the art forms that came before them.

Artists in today's postmodernist age can be just as contrary in outlook as their modernist predecessors were. At the same time, postmodernism is preoccupied with appearances and with how messages are conveyed. This has spawned artists who dabble in art history's catalogue of styles as easily as they dip their brushes from one color to another—that is, if they happen to be making paintings at all.

The five American artists discussed here have—sometimes knowingly, sometimes unintentionally—exploited postmodernism's anything-goes aesthetic. Most notably, these painters all have created memorable images. And they all have employed a mixed bag of older, but always personally revamped, techniques, themes, or styles to deliver thought-provoking messages that capture the spirit of our culture-melding, end-of-the-century times.

## SCOTT FRASER

Far away from the hubbub and the hypemeisters of the New York and Los Angeles art scenes, Scott Fraser has practiced—and, with each year, more remarkably refined—a unique kind of realistic representation. His technique is rooted in the long traditions of Western illusionism and in the American school of European-derived still-life painting, with a winking delight in skillful *trompe l'oeil*. Fraser, who lives near Boulder, Colorado, studied at the Kansas City Art Institute. In the 1980s, he spent a vitally formative period in Germany. There he learned the Old Master techniques of glazing, or the building up of luminous, oil-paint surfaces through the patient, meticulous application of layer upon layer of rich, translucent color.

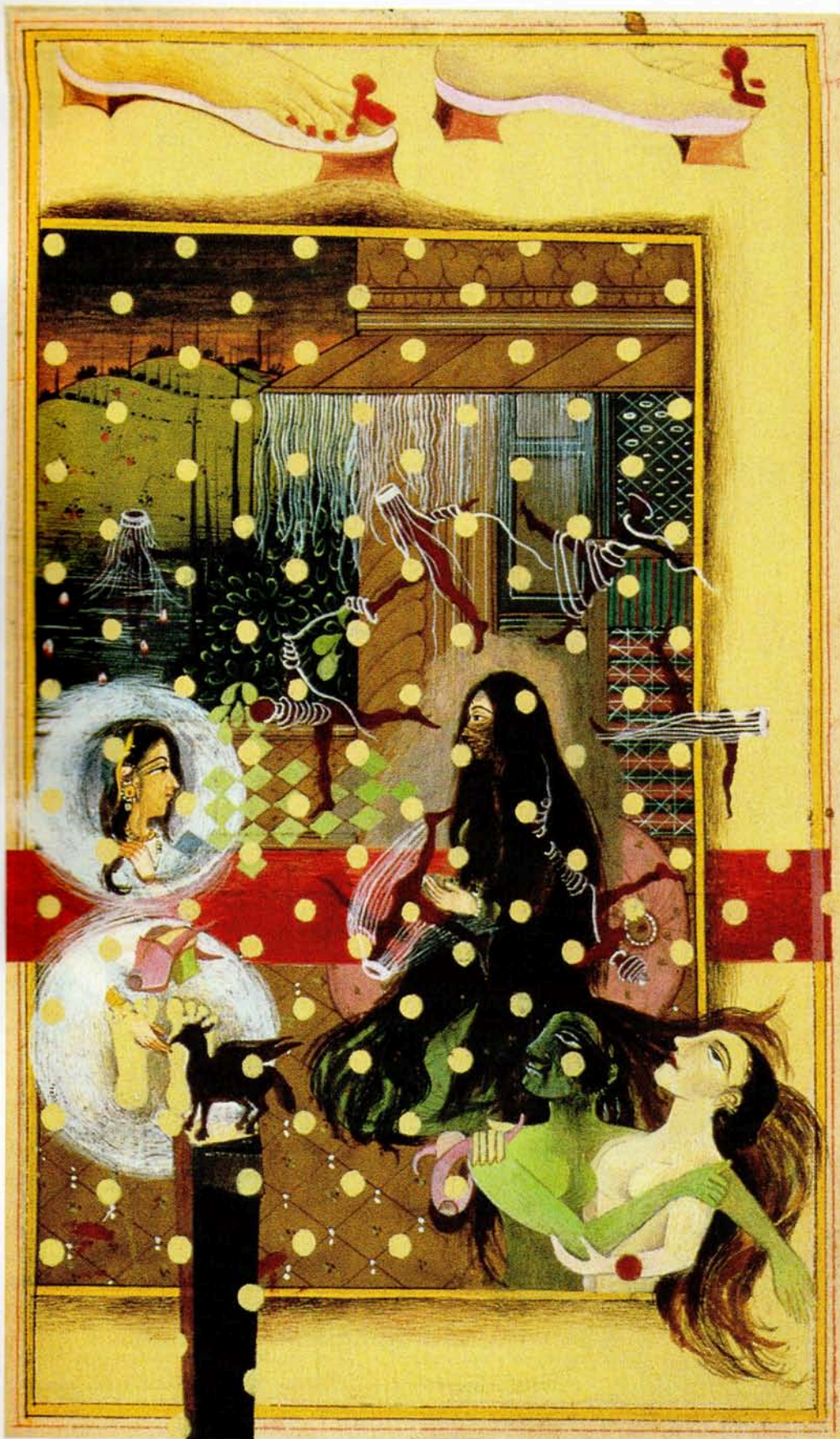
"I like to infuse common, everyday objects with a life of their own,"

Fraser says. The detached, observant air and the focus on otherwise overlooked details that characterize his object portraits recall the works of such 19th-century American still-life masters as Raphaëlle Peale and John Frederick Peto. But Fraser's symbolism is quiet and enigmatic; often it is deeply personal or amusing, too, with a metronome referring to his musician wife here or a piece of fruit that may or may not represent a human life there. With his choice



*Get out the handcuffs—still-lives are not all apples and flowers anymore. Colorado artist Scott Fraser's paintings draw power from a mix of traditional form and irreverent subject matter. OPPOSITE—Reflections (1995). Above: Vortex III (1998).*





of subject matter, from bubble-plastic packing material to handcuffs and running shoes, Fraser taps into his artistic heritage and pushes it forward. He does so in the service of a probing, poetic vision of the spirits that surround us in a material—and inescapably materialistic—world.

#### SHAHZIA SIKANDER

**B**orn in 1969 in the ancient Mogul city of Lahore, Pakistan, where she attended the National College of Arts, Shahzia Sikander has become one of the most closely watched young talents on the international art scene. In 1993, she came to the U.S. to study at the Rhode Island School of Design. Later she undertook a fellowship program at the art school of Houston's Museum of Fine Arts. By 1997, her work had appeared in the Whitney Biennial.

In Pakistan, Sikander took the unusual step of majoring



*Sikander's 1997 Then and N.O.W.— Repunzel dialogues (left) and 1997 Reinventing the Dislocation (above) grew from studying miniature painting in Pakistan.*



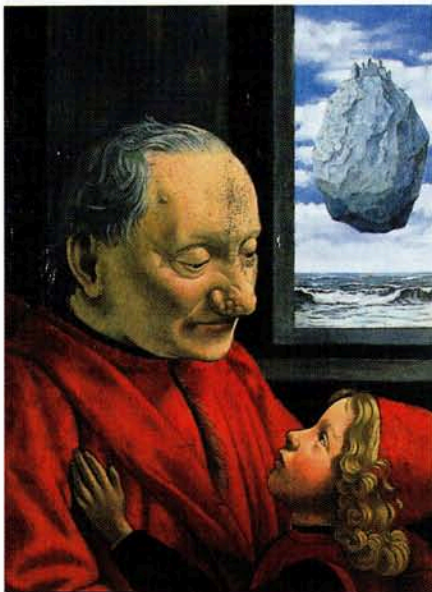
in miniature painting, a centuries-old, Indo-Persian tradition that had been overshadowed in its appeal to art students by modern Western styles. Its painstaking methods are time-consuming and exacting. "You work eight hours and cover an inch," Sikander has observed. In her best-known works, she has used dry pigments, watercolor, homemade vegetable dyes, and tea on traditional *walli*, a handmade paper. She also has created site-specific murals on gallery walls.

Sikander infuses miniature-painting with personal themes, including the cross-cultural tussles between East and West and between the traditional and the modern. She alludes to the conflict that women of her background experience between a desire for personal freedom and their expected social roles. Much of Sikander's technique is precisely considered and executed. But looser, brushier passages appear in her pictures too. She calls them "spiritually and intellectually liberating," with a spontaneity that "offers a release."

#### KATHLEEN GILJE

She could have had a career as a forger, if she so chose," the Boston *Globe* observed last year of New York-based Kathleen Gilje, a skilled conservator of Old Master tableaux who also has her own career as a painter.

"I love restoration work, but I've felt



a need to express my own creativity and my own thought, too," she says. Gilje earned a BFA degree from the City College of New York and apprenticed as an art restorer in Rome in the 1960s. She was later a conservator at the Capodimonte Museum in Naples, Italy, and she has restored paintings from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, Madrid's Prado, and other important collections.

In revisiting classic works—she literally repaints them, in her own way—Gilje "recontextualizes," as post-modernists would say, their meanings and expressive power. Gilje imbues her new, Old Master canvases with edgy

*When Kathleen Gilje "restores" a classic work of art, she throws in a few modern twists. Above: Lady with an Ermine, Restored (1997). Left: Portrait of an Old Man with a Child, Restored (1995).*

humor by tweaking them with anachronistic detail. Thus, her take on a portrait by Petrus Christus shows a 15th-century damsel outfitted with nose and lip rings, and other emblems of today's pierced-body chic. And in Gilje's version of Leonardo's *Lady with an Ermine*, the woman's chest bears an ornately inscribed animal-rights slogan. ANIMALS ARE NOT OURS TO EAT,



EXPERIMENT ON, OR WEAR, it declares.

"The insight that a restorer acquires from working on actual Old Master paintings, the intimacy of it—all of that has inspired me," says Gilje, who teaches at the School of Visual Arts in New York. More recently, in a send-up of art history's methods and premises, Gilje has made fictitious "second" versions of certain works, such as Caravaggio's *The Musicians*, complete with their under-painted, equally fake earlier stages, which she X-rays. Then she presents all of this material in scholarly-looking museum installations.

### WALTON FORD

Don't be fooled by the first-glance, vivid resemblances to John James Audubon's classic images of birds and wildlife, or to 19th-century American landscape painters' spirit-lifting panoramas. These come to mind when looking at Walton Ford's eve-of-the-millennium nature scenes. Ford is a transplanted Southerner who lives in upstate New York's Hudson River Valley, the region that inspired his artistic forebears of the Hudson River School, with their deep reverence for nature. Ford, who has been drawing since childhood, studied film-making at the Rhode Island School of Design. But he was always painting. "I spent my senior year in Italy looking at Renaissance art—and it changed my life," he recalls.

Despite his accomplished assimilation of Old Master techniques and styles, Ford subverts their usual purposes and assumptions. He uses them to comment



Walton Ford invests the apparently innocuous genre of ornithological painting with hidden political messages. Above: *Sadhana* (1997). Left: *Funk Island* (1998).



allegorically on modern civilization's desecration of nature, on the lingering impact of colonialist attitudes, and on rampant corporatism. Thus, in one picture, pesky European starlings attack a big, stately Indian hornbill. In others, a viewer can discern nude Western sunbathers on a beach, or a mountaineer hauling a case of Heineken beer, in the otherwise nondescript background pas-





sages that fill out painting of this genre.

"As Asia's spreading economic crisis shows, nowadays we're really all connected," Ford observes. "I love narrative painting, and I'm using it to explore this kind of big theme. I use symbols that are deliberately obscure, so it's not a super-easy read. I'm after something like you see in Bosch: You can't really figure it out exactly but you do get the idea."

#### CARLO MARIA MARIANI

A native of Rome, where he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts, Carlo Maria Mariani carries art history around easily in his back pocket and taps this resource effortlessly with each stroke of his brush. He is sometimes called a "neo-neoclassicist" for his large canvases filled with laurel-crowned maidens and reclining nudes.

*Mariani uses images from Cubism, the Renaissance, and Greek and Roman art in his 1997 L'Imponderable (above).*

Mariani has lived and worked in New York since 1994.

In the 1960s, his art was influenced by both hyperrealism and conceptualism; a decade later, Mariani began





quoting from masterworks of antiquity, a tendency that later evolved into his signature, exalted-erie style. For the mood of Mariani's pictures can be as cool as their allegorical drama is high-pitched, sometimes exuding the hushed, airless atmosphere of classic surrealism. This is because, as the critic Donald Kuspit has noted, Mariani is "obsessed" by the intellectual idea of beauty, and the classical bodies he depicts "are so many exemplifications

of it, not physical ends in themselves."

"The search for ideal beauty continues to be at the center of my work," the artist has said. "But my awareness that this beauty is becoming an ever rarer commodity, ever more difficult to find, has grown."

So in pictures in which handsome nude figures sporting statues' heads or wrapped in Lego blocks are spied upon by another with a Picasso-esque head, or in which a maiden in flowing robes is seen

*Mariani's take on French classicism tilts toward a kind of surrealism in his 1996 Weaver of the Ideal (above).*

falling out of a window—was she pushed or is this a dream?—Mariani paints "beautiful" subjects or themes "beautifully." But he uses his stylistic references and flourishes ambiguously, too, reveling in the freedom of an art-making environment today in which the only binding rule is that there are no rules at all. □