

# ELLE DECOR

glorious  
gifts!

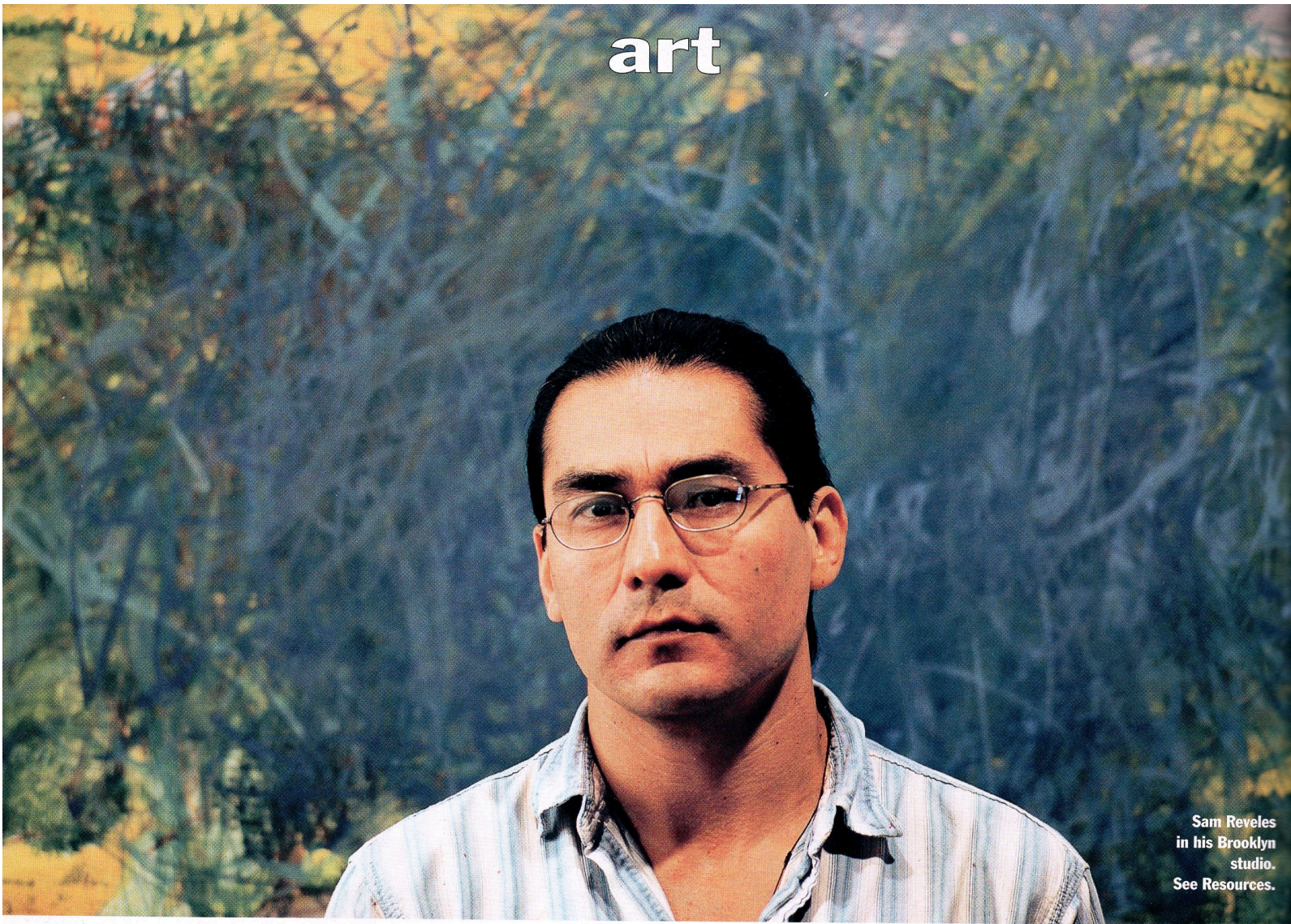
CLASSICS  
WITH  
A KICK

REAL  
FAMILY  
STYLE

## holiday cheer!



DECEMBER/JANUARY 1998 \$3.95



Sam Reveles  
in his Brooklyn  
studio.  
See Resources.

# three to watch

Two new faces and one enigmatic outsider are coming to the **forefront**



*Large Descent Drawing, 1997 (gouache and pencil on paper; 25"x41").*

Something of the experience of El Paso, Texas, where **Sam Reveles** was born and raised, is felt in the ineffable quality of his abstract painting. "One has a different relationship to the space out there," he says from his Brooklyn studio. "You're very susceptible to what happens in the sky and across the land. When the wind blows or the sun shines, you feel it within you. When it rains, it pounds you. It's very elemental in that sense."

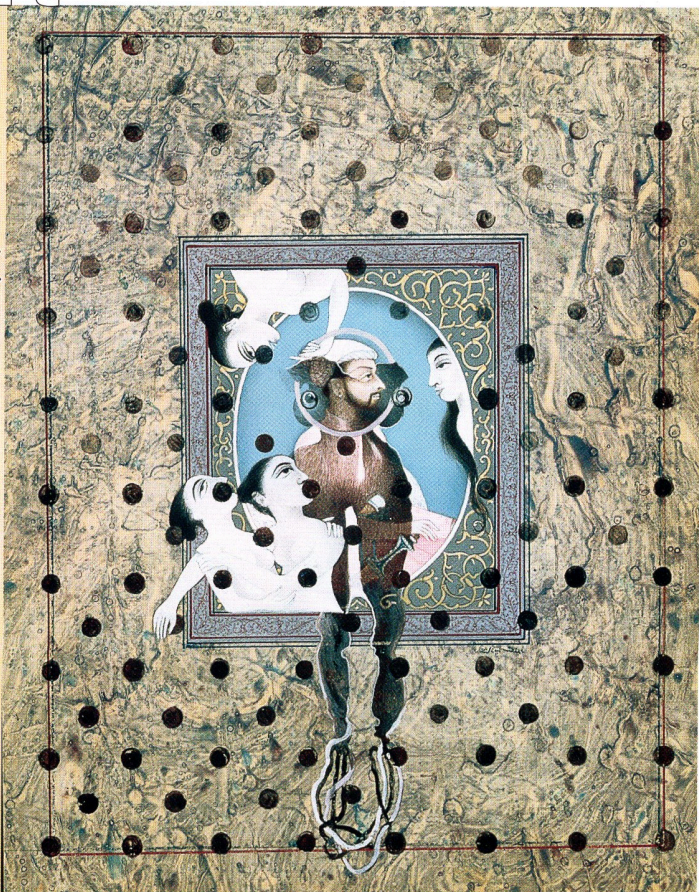
Reveles's work, which is on view at CRG Gallery in New York this spring and later at the St. Louis Art Museum, is a compelling mixture of staged conflict and high-velocity gestural transaction. Skeins of paint are laid over shadowy erasures; varying in speed and density and nuanced by rich autumnal color, these scorched-earth surfaces occasionally break into hot flashes of vivid lime-green and cool streaks of depthless azure. In

*(continued on page 68)*

text by NEVILLE WAKEFIELD



Shahzia Sikander in her studio. Right: *Perilous Order*, 1997 (pigments, watercolor, and tea water; 11"x8"). See Resources.



“Wearing the veil was a way of forcing people to **confront** their notions of what art is”

some, an elegant but random choreography of ricochet, overlay, and collision reads like the trace of a particle accelerator. Others are tighter and more organic, like the clusters of tumbleweed that blow through Reveles’s homeland. But for all the associations the work carries, its strength is visceral, bypassing the language of observation to emerge, as it were, from within.

Reveles describes his early work, made while he was a graduate student at Yale and later as an assistant to Elizabeth Murray, Donald Judd, and Brice Marden, as “skin paintings”: “I was stretching canvases directly on the wall in sizes related to the trunk of my body. These would then be painted with an idea of skin color—essentially my skin color—to become images of myself without arms, legs, or a head.” The resulting canvases would sag under their own weight, the tactile seduction of the paint-laden surfaces offset by the macabre connotation of a surgical peel.

Interested in conjuring the presence and energy of his own body within the painted form, Reveles soon moved away from the conceptual bent of the “skin paintings” and began to explore a territory distinctly his own. Underpaintings can now be

glimpsed from beneath the tangled webs of paint—sketchy copies of, for instance, a baptism or a crucifixion by Piero della Francesca, or an exotic garden taken from an Indian or Persian miniature. The forces of immediacy are set against these tranquil scenes, the poetic machismo of the snarled gesture beating like the erratic lifeline of a now stilled tradition.

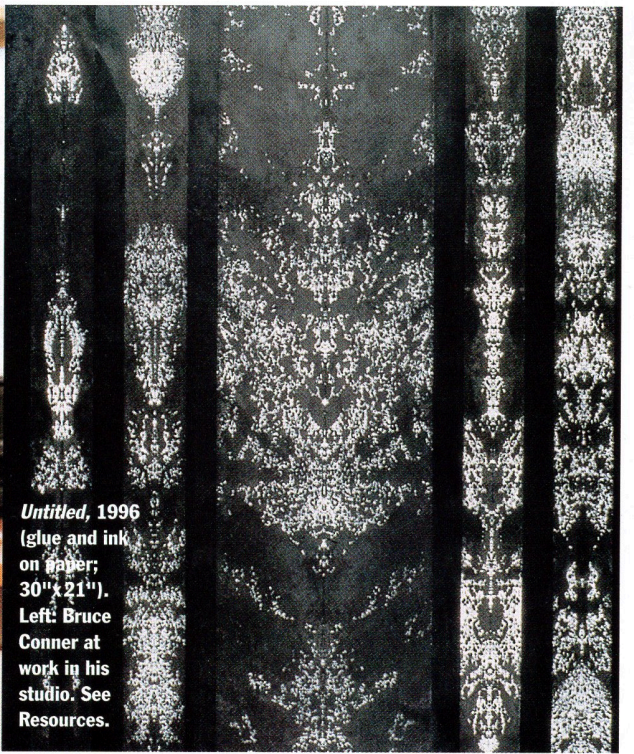
Reveles succeeds in large part out of an obstinate conviction in painting’s ability to address the grand themes of its own mythology. Such faith may be all too quickly dismissed as an anachronism shaded by the patrician figures of Abstract Expressionism’s past. In the end, though, all that stands between the viewer and such a dismissal is the raw energy and virtuoso presence of the paintings themselves.

When **Shahzia Sikander** began art school in Lahore, Pakistan, one of her first assignments was to procure a live squirrel. “I thought they were crazy,” she recalls, “and for the first three weeks I refused to produce one.” Realizing that tutelage came only with compliance, Sikander persuaded the gardeners of her hometown zoo to pro-

vide a few. “I came with about ten squirrels,” she says, laughing, “only to be told that the hair from their tails was too ragged for brushes and what I needed was a baby squirrel. At which point I thought, This is just too anal. Only later, after I’d learned to make the brushes, did I start to think, This is truly wild, and just the best thing.”

Sikander’s subsequent immersion in the traditions of Indian and Persian miniature painting have clearly stood her in good stead. In 1993, she arrived in the U.S. with a suitcase of work, having persuaded the then ambassador to grant her a show at the Pakistani embassy in Washington, D.C. The rest is recent history. Outstanding in this year’s Whitney Biennial, Sikander will have a major exhibition at the Renaissance Society in Chicago in the spring.

Combining drawing and painting, Sikander’s art makes delightful play of the popular assumptions about Western art and that of the Indian subcontinent. Painstaking exactitude and a looser, more bravura brushwork create a personal cosmology at once delicate and full of robust life. Humor, wit, and a precocious charm animate her small scenes; center stage is often ▷



**Untitled, 1996**  
(glue and ink  
on paper;  
30" x 21").  
Left: Bruce  
Conner at  
work in his  
studio. See  
Resources.

“The oldest and most traditional materials still carry the greater **mystery**”

taken by the figure of a woman, her features obscured by the white-painted tendrils of a tattered Muslim veil, a recurring image throughout the artist's work. Sikander, who never wore a veil before coming to America, occasionally experimented with its symbolic potency while studying at the Rhode Island School of Design. “Wearing the veil became almost like a performance,” she says, “although I never thought of it as my art in that sense. It was more a way of forcing people to confront their understanding and notions of what art is.”

Treading the fine line by which cultural identities are revealed and concealed, Sikander's paintings have the quality of fractured dreams. Elements float freely on the surface, held in delicate equilibrium like the rootless lotus. Some, such as the dancing figure that follows the form of the erotic goddesses of Gandhara sculpture, or the griffin, symbol of ancient Greece's penetration of southern Asia, trail histories born of the intersection of Western and Tantric art. But the narratives these jeweled hybrids imply are held in momentary suspension. Behind them may lie Sikander's experiences as an Asian woman subjected to the cross fire of patriarchal cultures. First and foremost, though, is their exquisite pleasure, the sheer delight of tradition rendered wild.

“It's so funny,” **Bruce Conner** says of the small sensation he caused in this year's Whitney Biennial, “because here you are, in the context of work that is supposedly high-tech and cutting edge, using the oldest and most traditional materials. Yet, strangely enough, these still carry the greater mystery.”

Conner's Biennial contribution was a series of modest inkblot drawings easily missed in the hubbub of new work and rising talent. First appearances suggested miniature versions of the sort of allover Zen abstraction practiced by artist Mark Tobey. Up close, surface detail curdles away from background field to reveal obsessive organizations of shape and form; the individual marks, made by repeatedly dripping and folding, are both intriguing and uncommunicative. Like Rorschach blots, their free-associative possibilities are endless and surprising: space-invading aliens, runic languages, the veneers of tricky marquetry and imaginary genitalia have all at one time or another been put to the task. Less surprising is that the artist, far from being new to the scene, has been doing them for “an awfully long time.”

Born in McPherson, Kansas, in 1933, Conner is a veteran of most of the defining postwar American-art movements. Emerging from the lo-fi Beat aesthetic of the '50s,

he was producing combines and assemblages concurrently with Johns and Rauschenberg, but while they and other artists were searching for a signature style, he demurred. To this end, his work embodied a number of media, including sculpture, photomontage, inkblot drawing, and engraving, although he's perhaps better known for his extended foray into experimental filmmaking. (“When I look at MTV, it seems they must have all been students of Conner's,” Dennis Hopper remarked recently.) But the same suspicions of Establishment values that have led him to exhibit under pseudonyms, to refuse to sign work, and to submit his obituary to *Who's Who in American Art* have also denied him the acclaim and canonization enjoyed by his peers. After more than 40 years of artmaking, Conner still remains something of an enigma.

Health problems have lately curbed some of the former diversity, restricting the artist to working on paper and making woodcut engravings whose imagery suggests a collaboration between Timothy Leary and Max Ernst. Conner will be the subject of a major survey at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis at the end of the century, and is characteristically skeptical. “One of the sure signs of success,” he says, “is becoming a cliché.” ★