

The New York Times

December 4, 2009

SPECIAL GALLERY ISSUE

Golden Oldies All Over Chelsea

Chelsea is the city's commercial hub for contemporary art and a savvy one. The art market may be riding out the economic storm, but dealers are taking no chances, which may account for the high percentage of golden-oldie fare this month. Canonical artists no longer with us, like Dan Flavin and Alighiero e Boetti, have gallery showcases. Active blue-chippers — Robert Ryman, Richard Serra, Mike Kelley and the Swiss team of Peter Fischli & David Weiss — do too.

The Flavin show at David Zwirner is a beauty. One of his earliest pieces, "The Nominal Three (to William of Ockham)," from 1963, is here. Ockham, a British medieval philosopher, was the original proponent of less-is-more, and that's what Flavin, who died in 1996, gave us: six vertical fluorescent tubes on a wall, one to the left, two in the center, three on the right, all emitting immaculate white light.

By contrast, "Alternating Pink and Gold," (1967), with its multiple groupings of pink and yellow fluorescence, is a blast of Baroque bling, and the 1974 "Untitled (to Helga and Carlo, With Respect and Affection)" complicates the formal game further by taking tubing off the wall and building a fence with it that cuts across a gallery. The barrier, luminous blue, gives off stay-clear vibes: maybe it's hot to the touch or delivers a shock? Really, though, it feels pretty benign: like a porous version of Mr. Serra's notoriously obstructive "Titled Arc."

At Gagosian's space on West 21st Street, Mr. Serra has two prodigious steel sculptures in his now familiar labyrinthine, walk-in format, to which he's added an extra thrill: the possibility of entrapment. Once you're inside, it can be hard to find your way out. Whether you find this fun or not will depend on your claustrophobia threshold.

But no such worries await in the Fischli & Weiss installations at all three

those who bring new mediums to bear on an old one, as Kelley Walker does, and Wayne Guyton, Cheyney Thompson and the estimable R. H. Quaytman.

The bump in abstraction follows a decade of interest in figure painting, and there's still a lot around. You find a historical precedent in portraits from the 1960s by Sylvia Sleigh, who is now in her 90s, at I-20 Gallery. The sitters were artists, writers and dealers of a smaller, simpler, maybe not nicer art world that was: an imperious Betty Parsons, a curly-haired John Perreault and Ms. Sleigh herself, with blond bangs and Cézanne-blue dress.

Painting is just one of several formal assault weapons in Mike Kelley's mid-career artist arsenal, but it's the predominant one in his solo at Gagosian's gallery on West 24th Street. The space is vast. Artists strain to fill it. Many shows there look like warehouse sales. Yet in "Day Is Done," his 2005 light-and-sound extravaganza, Mr. Kelley made

Matthew Marks galleries. They deliver the artists' customary blend of tart and sweet, neatly distilled in a single tableau of two toddler-size animal figures, a rat and a bear, asleep and softly breathing on a pile of blankets, like F. A. O. Schwarz toys gone homeless.

Gladstone on West 21st Street has pulled together a mini-retrospective of "Mappa" or "Map" pieces by — or at least associated with — the Italian artist Alighiero e Boetti. He did the prototype in 1969 when he hand-colored a printed world map, filling in each country with an image of its flag. Two years later, in Afghanistan, he commissioned local women to embroider the same image,

the vastness work, basically by blacking out the walls. His new exhibition of monochromatic paintings that look like stage flats and small, odd-shaped small pictures of weird things — blobby heads, transsexual pornography, frog portraits — feels somewhat stretched, but it's also of a piece. Some artists make paintings; some make worlds. Mr. Kelley is a world maker.

So is Nicole Eisenman, whose paintings at Leo Koenig are fairly densely installed. She began her career in the 1990s with murals depicting armies of women conquering armies of men. They were hilarious, zine versions of Socialist Realism, virtuosic without being fussy. In the years since, she has gradually shifted from what was essentially drawing to painterly painting, and her work keeps getting stranger, better and darker.

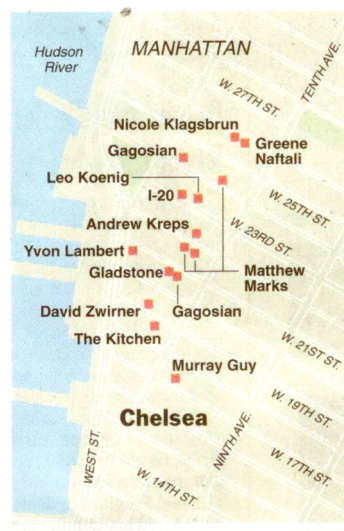
Several of the new pictures are of bars that could be in Brooklyn or some region of hell. The male and female customers — it's often hard to tell the difference, and some look like animals — eat, show off, act out, get drunk. In "Night Studio" the manic mood lifts. Two women lie as lovers under a starry sky, surrounded by books about painters — Bruegel, Goya, Munch and Picasso — whose work Ms. Eisenman has obviously studied before making something entirely her own.

Young artists have, in turn, been influenced by her work. And a passel of them — Leidy Churchman, Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, Dawn Frasch, Dawn Mellor, Dana Schutz — are in a vigorous group show in Koenig's adjoining project space. The exhibition has been assembled by Ms. Eisenman and A. L. Steiner, working under the moniker Ridykeulous, an umbrella identity covering artists in many disciplines who work — and here I quote press material — to "subvert the languages, theoretic-

A savvy hub banks on canonical artists and active blue-chippers.

and renewed the commissions, which chart the reshaping of national borders over a quarter of a century, until his death in 1994. The show is most striking for questions it raises about collaboration versus exploitation, though there's no question that as an exercise in global consciousness the series was ahead of its day.

Very much part of the present day, as it happens, are three vintage all-white Robert Ryman pictures at Yvon Lambert. Abstract painting is having a moment, and for a crash course in what its younger exponents are up to, drop in to see "Besides, With, Against, and Yet: Abstraction and the Ready-Made Gesture" at the Kitchen. Selected by Debra Singer, the show has 22 artists and almost as many formal moves, but still feels — why? — 1970s SoHo. The artists who look best, meaning freshest, are



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cal and visual, which are commonly used to define feminist and lesbian art.”

The artists of Ridykeulous are forthright in insisting that they don't aspire to be viewed as alternative anything; they want their aesthetic right in the flow. Other artists have had fewer reservations about operating on the margins, Wallace Berman (1927-76), who has a solo show at Nicole Klagsbrun, being one. He was a mentor to Beat poets in San Francisco, the founding editor of the experimental journal *Semina*, the maker of talismanic collages — physically intricate, highly coded — and the creator of the sensationally jazzy film “Aleph.” His first gallery show was his last. Police closed it down on obscenity charges. Thereafter, he showed his art only to family and friends.

The contemporary Los Angeles artist Andrea Bowers combines art, life and a subversive sensibility in ways Berman would have understood. In projects using video, drawing and scrapbook archiving, she immerses herself in tense, participatory social situations, most re-

cently political activism. Her show at Andrew Kreps emerged from a stay earlier this year in an American Indian village in northern Alaska, where complex environmentalist issues pitted members of the local population against outside activists, and one another. The exhibition looks, at first, investigative rather than polemical, but it's utterly passionate. Like Berman, Ms. Bowers is one of those artists who know that the side they're on will always be the outside.

The New York artist Paul Chan is also intimately acquainted with on-the-ground politics, but his show at Greene Naftali — up only through Saturday but worth making an effort to see — is in a more elusive mode. The most captivating visual feature is an animated wall projection, nearly six hours long, inspired by the writings of the Marquis de Sade. In it bodies, or body parts, silhouetted in black against white, twitch and heave in unrelieved states of desire and pain.

The show's other major component is computer-driven and language-based: a set of 21 computer type fonts invented by Mr. Chan. Whatever text is typed on a monitor using one of these fonts will

be transformed into violently eroticized language derived from one of Sade's books. The gallery displays samples of output as large printouts. A computer keyboard from which the fonts could potentially be derived has keys in the form of phallic-looking tombstones, bringing language, sex and death together in one image.

Language, death and love are active elements in Moyra Davey's photography exhibition, “My Necropolis,” at Murray Guy. Like many other shows now, it has a retrospective cast, with work dating back to 1990: close-up pictures of pennies worn and scratched, taken after the late-'80s stock market debacle; others of the artist's obsolete record collection; still others of whiskey bottles left by departed drinkers.

The new work, done in France this year, includes similar still-lives, but centers on a video the artist made in Paris' cemeteries, a meandering tour in which the camera lingers over the tombs of celebrities — Stendhal, François Truffaut, Gertrude Stein — in Père Lachaise, but dwells on epitaphs and details of more modest monuments too.

On the soundtrack we hear voices discussing a passage from a letter by the philosopher Walter Benjamin. He wrote it in 1931, when he was broke, lonely and depressed, to tell a friend how he had become fixated on the sight of a public clock across the street from his apartment. He found himself looking at it constantly, as if it might have some answers about his life, though he didn't feel reassured. The effect of Ms. Davey's show is similarly ambivalent — is it about life or death? — though its meditative mood makes it an ideal exit point for a Chelsea tour.