

Art in America

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square panels, as in *Bluemont* and *Culpepper*, pierces the frame like a sunbeam through a cathedral window, while the ghostlike effects of light crossing the horizontal expanses of larger works such as *Rancho Cucamonga* and *Angeles Crest* seem the result of a cinematic filter.

Leachman uses the hard surfaces of her birch supports to control the paintings' precise tonal effects. With an unexpected complexity that transcends its down-home subject matter, her work explores the elemental properties and interaction of geometry, color and composition in abstract painting.

—Michael Duncan

MILL VALLEY, CALIF.

David Best at Susan Cummings

In the 1980s, David Best became known for super-assemblages that took the form of bizarre automobiles, wagons and chariots. He would gather a crew of 300 to 400 participants who worked with him to assemble as many as 25,000 separate parts into a layered and tangled extravagant carapace of untrammelled fantasy. These works are now in the collections of the De Rosa Preserve in Napa, Calif., and the Houston Car Art Museum in Texas.

For "Paper Boxes," an exhibition of dioramas, Best acted alone and on a much more modest scale. But these works are no less excessive. He cut engravings and black-and-white reproductions out of old books and pasted them in many layers into meticulously crafted and decorated shadow boxes, creating sanctuaries of memories that recall Joseph Cornell's magically boxed journeys into enchanted worlds. Best's selection and use of a great variety of images rescued from the past constitute a similar poetic fusion of reflections and references.

The largest, *Triangle Factory Fire* (2000, 62½ by 29 by 7 inches), deals with the 1910 conflagration in New York's garment district in which 140 people, mostly women, were trapped and died. The box contains name tags of many victims, perhaps 100 prints of sewing machines (many of them hidden behind accretions of other images), hatboxes, thread spindles and yards of measuring tape, which are metaphors for life-

lines. A large floral motif indicating flames dominates the diorama.

Faithful Friends (2000, 29 by 33 by 6 inches) deals with the journey of life to death; illustrations subrogate for the artist's mother-in-law, who was dying of cancer. Seated in an armchair, the representation holds a bird, symbol of the spirit or a messenger of the ultimate journey. The artist's mother, also a cancer patient, stands nearby. The paper cutouts are matrices of magic, made by a shaman artist for whom the life-death continuum is a carnival of vivid images, layered in black and white.

—Peter Selz

LONDON

Victoria Morton at Sadie Coles, HQ

I was told by the gallery that Victoria Morton was thinking of Turner landscapes and angels' wings while she worked on these new canvases. Morton, a 29-year-old Glaswegian who has been showing in London for four years, is the kind of painter who can take what sounds like a recipe for disaster and produce work that is smart and visceral. Her unfailingly colorful abstractions are studied and carefully thought through. No bravura gestures accompany the extravagant palette. The paintings invite a cerebral engagement, but whether large or small, they can suck you in. Within a Morton painting things can become unsettled, even raucous.

Two large pieces dominated this exhibition. *Plus and Minus* (all works 2000) is Morton's Turner-esque painting. The surface is suggestive: imagine crumpling a canvas, smoothing it out and then using the tracery of creases to define areas within the final work. Broad expanses of flat brown and black paint end in abrupt, jagged edges that open onto cavernous vistas glowing with molten orange and red light. These direct suggestions of underground fire are more in keeping with the apocalyptic visions of the Romantic painter John Martin than with anything in Turner, if for no other reason than that there is something undeniably fun about Morton's painting. The ground shakes in *Plus and Minus*, but it's not the end of the world. Maybe a band is practicing in the building next door.

There is some kind of wing spread across the surface of *The Devoured*. Perhaps it has been severed from an angel or maybe some fantastic bird. The colors here include a range of oranges, reds and blues that anywhere other than a sunset make your teeth hurt. There is a flagrant use of turquoise, too, that would be unforgivable in almost any other context. Tight faceting suggests plumage, but those feathers could be forged of sheet metal. In any case, Morton makes the feathers fly in this one. Whereas *Plus and Minus* encourages you to step into its depths, *The Devoured* scatters your attention across its surface. —Charles Dee Mitchell



Victoria Morton: *Plus and Minus*, 2000, oil on canvas, 79 by 94½ inches; at Sadie Coles, HQ.

Merlin Carpenter at Magnani

A series of unusual deviations marked this intelligent show, Merlin Carpenter's first in London. As an introduction, two text paintings confronted you at the door. Carpenter's green canvas silhouetted "BECKS" in sans serif type (an allusion to the beer company that sponsors a British art prize?). A somewhat more obscure black painting contributed to the show by another artist, Sarah Staton, spelled "Harvest" in florid script. Rounding the corner, you entered an oppressively overhung installation of small gestural abstract paintings and still smaller image-filled drawings. Flimsy partitions divided up the gallery into claustrophobic rooms. The impression of a student show was completed by the sight of Carpenter's name on a grubby cardboard wall label toward the back of the space.

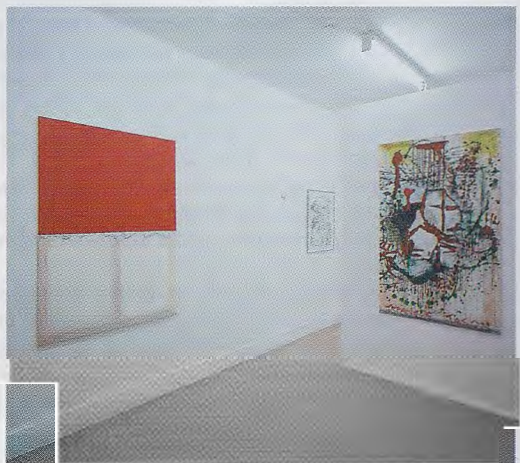
The paintings looked implausibly inept and derivative. Many works were congested with garish smears, splashes and congealed puddles of discordantly colored acrylic. Contrarily, the remainder resembled fumbling variations on monochrome painting. The densely linear black-and-white drawings were dogged accumulations of such imagery as fashion models, tractors, yachts and battling cyborgs—exercises in an adolescent, cyberpunk mode.

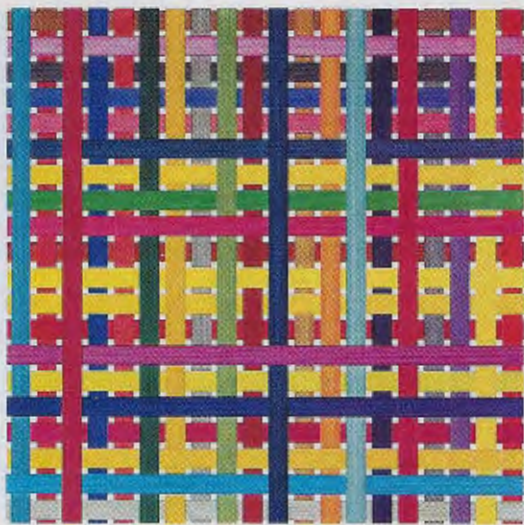
There was the momentary feeling that this

graceless show was all a terrible mistake: the artist needed to go to grad school, the dealer should get out more. Yet clearly the inconsistencies and awkwardnesses were intentional. The paintings were by turns gorgeously sensual, slapdash, thoughtful and unresponsive. Made on transparent Lycra, they were in a kind of pig-Polke style, exercising the master's idiom but making it obviously wrong. Too small to be heroic impostors, too earnest to be effectively ironic, they triggered a process of questioning long before one realized this might be their objective.

Carpenter's project seems the more exceptional for sustaining a painting discourse largely absent from London. Twenty years ago, or more, this discourse was redirected by the confident inventiveness of artists like Polke, David Salle and Martin Kippenberger, who indicated that an obligation to indeterminacy

Merlin Carpenter: Installation view of exhibition, 2000; at Magnani.





Jonathan Parsons: *World View (Diastereomer)*, 1998, oil on canvas, 21 1/4 inches square; at James Hockley.

with a thick accent. It's a strangely compelling painting strategy for these times.

—Mark Harris

FARNHAM, U.K.

Jonathan Parsons at James Hockley

Half the work in this exhibition hinges on the way Jonathan Parsons empties out commonplace signs (usually national flags) through an emphasis on material process. The "Skeleton" series (ongoing since 1998) consists

of framed ink drawings of the British flag. By reducing the Union Jack to a monochrome image, however, the drawings barely index their referent. Obvious qualities are forsaken in favor of re-creating idiosyncratic details, in this case the warp and weft of the flag's fabric. Similarly, the two actual flag works, both hung from the wall, *Commune* (1998) and *Babies*

Blue (2000), consist of flags from various nations with their color drained out. Hung in a gridlike formation, Parsons's monochrome flags are almost indistinguishable and, astonishingly, appear to avoid any discussion whatsoever regarding national identity. Indeed, by making esthetic experiences out of loaded semiotic structures, Parsons clearly differentiates himself from fellow "Sensation" alumni such as Gavin Turk and Sarah Lucas (to name just two artists who have appropriated the Union Jack), whose work is soaked in the rather glib notion of "Britishness."

The other major series (also ongoing) consists of lattice paintings in high-key colors. These oils on canvas rework that fulcrum of modernist painting, the grid. From a distance *1998 World View (Diastereomer)*, appears to be made up of a number of colored bands that overlap each other in the sequence in which they were applied. An "archeological" reading of the painting would, logically, start with the only unbroken band (maroon red) and work backward to the most fragmented one (cadmium

yellow). But Parsons's technique thwarts such a method. The overlapping is pure illusion: the bands have not been painted continuously from edge to edge but are constantly interrupting each other. Rather than weakening the painting's structure though, this method reinforces the tautness of the lattice. The fact that the colors strongest in hue are also, at times, the most interrupted (and so appear, literally, farther away) has the effect of pulling the entire structure even tighter.

The other two lattice paintings, *Formulation Picture* and *Aspect* (both 2000) repeat the idea but with wider bands and on a much larger scale. Consequently, some of the tension is lost, especially in *Aspect*, which at over 4 feet square, is almost double the size of *World View (Diastereomer)*. Ultimately then, what links these seemingly disparate but engaging works is the way in which Parsons untangles both esthetically and politically loaded semiotic systems and subsequently weaves them back together again with his own highly tuned handiwork.

—Alex Coles

might loosen the grip of an overdetermined practice. Disenchanted by the preoccupation of most current painting, Carpenter returns to those examples and rots around for unpredictable ways out.

This show suggests that Carpenter practices painting as if it were a second language. He falters, stammers, falls back on grand anachronisms and speaks

St. Louis

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and video programming. Though the gallery opened after my visit to St. Louis, a slide-sheet sampling of the painting, sculpture and installation work by more than 33 artists—in particular Jenna Bauer, Amber Slater and Joe Deutch as well as the two founders—shows works that look savvy and distinctive.

Gallery Districts

The city has two principal gallery districts—an "uptown" area in the leafy urban neighborhood of the Central West End, and a suburban scene in nearby Clayton. In the Central West End one of the anchors is the Greenberg Van Doren Gallery (also a partner in New York's Lawrence Rubin Greenberg Van Doren Fine Art). Recently the gallery showed Stephan Balkenhol's figurative sculptures and a series of Chris Ofili's watercolor portraits. Gallery partner John Van Doren, speaking from a dealer's perspective, says the area has had its ups and downs but is rebounding. This is partly due to the interconnectedness of the art world, he says, mentioning travel to art fairs and the various new arts leaders who've recently come to town.

The William Shearburn Gallery specializes in works on paper and contemporary master prints, recently those of Ross Bleckner. It also represents a handful of local artists including Sue Eisler, whose delicate paper works consist of layered paint

placed with thousands of tiny, hand-punched perforations. Owner Shearburn is another who believes the collector base is improving. "Traditionally it has been typecast as very conservative, with plenty of money but depending on dealers to apply a stamp of approval. That is less true now. People are more willing to take a chance."

Elliot Smith Contemporary Art holds concurrent shows in its 1,200-square-foot space, a former luxury-car showroom, in an effort "to offer something for everyone." Last fall there was a small show of Richard Serra etchings; photographs from Quinta Scott's recent publication *Along Route 66*; and large, impastoed, organic abstract paintings by Maxwell Stevens, a recent MFA graduate of W.U. Smith, who also shows the paintings of Dawn Marie Guernsey, says he is "very supportive of local artists and [does] not necessarily follow the latest art trends emanating from Chelsea."

Two of the galleries in Clayton, which cluster mostly along Forsyth Boulevard, were previously located in the city. Locus Gallery moved in 1994 from a downtown loft space because, according to owner Patience Taylor, "Most of the regional population lives in the suburban county, and here, everything depends on the car"—which made people reluctant to go downtown. Locus specializes in photography, prints and other works on paper by local and national artists and recently featured work by Lesley Dill, Michelle Stuart and Abelardo Morell, as well as Dan Gualdoni, a former master printer of W.U.'s print workshop.

Last fall the R. Duane Reed Gallery moved into

The city has two principal gallery districts—an "uptown" area in the leafy urban neighborhood of the Central West End, and an enclave in nearby Clayton that has followed the population to the suburbs.

a renovated Clayton storefront from its former space in the Central West End. "Most of our clients are out this way, and we follow our clients," says Reed, who has a second gallery in the River North section of Chicago. "St. Louis has recently lost 16 percent of its population to the suburbs," he adds. His new space has room for simultaneous shows, and he includes fine craft in his repertoire, such as glass works by Dale Chihuly. Reed's opening show featured large, painterly, abstract frescoes on linen by Marcia Myers. He says that to get people's attention here, you have to present things that they know. That sounds conservative, and probably that's an accurate characterization of the St. Louis populace. But it's important to remember: they did build that amazing arch. □

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