

Illuminating An Image's Essence

By Eric Ernst

While in principle abstraction and figuration are often assumed to be irreversibly separated by both concept and dogma, the current exhibitions at Surface Gallery in Springs and the Crazy Monkey Gallery in Amagansett seem to emphasize the painterly tendencies to blur these lines of demarcation.

This seems to occur—for figurative, naturalist and abstract artists alike—in an approach that orients the viewing experience as a projection of an underlying emotional and intellectual design, primarily through a perception of structure as transcending mere physical exterior and striving to illustrate the essence of the image itself.

What is left, then, are more amorphous differences between figuration and abstraction, leaving measures of intent as the sole delineator. Basically, as the South African painter Marlene Dumas described it, "Abstract painters always insist on their connection with the visible reality, while the so called figurative artists insist that what they really care about are the abstract quali-

ties of life."

This description seems to fit the abstraction at the Crazy Monkey Gallery, featuring recent works by Eileen Hickey-Hulme and Len Bernard and titled "Bang Bang Meets Bernard" (insert your own porn movie joke here).

Mr. Bernard's work is of particular interest, in no small part due to the heretofore rather limited history of politicians becoming artists (or vice versa)—other than Winston Churchill or George Caleb Bingham (and Hitler, of course, although no artist likes to be reminded of that one).

Interestingly, when Churchill described his approach as taking "a joy ride in a paint box," he might well have been describing Mr. Bernard's works as well his own. Featuring brightly playful colors arranged in tight yet seemingly spontaneous geometric configurations, there are echoes of Miro (especially in the oil on canvas "Well After Miro") but just as apparent are motifs and images reminiscent of Kandinsky and other Bauhaus painters, as well as colorful patterning that calls to mind contemporary aboriginal artwork.

Patterns play an even more significant role in Eileen Hickey-Hulme's works, although often their imposition is more intentionally random, with any rhythmic coherence becoming apparent only upon reflection over time.

This is a constant in her works, regardless of the context, conjuring a resonant pulse that might appear as a universe of colors and movement, as in "Persian Candy" (nail polish on canvas, 2008), or within a tightly constructed grid, as in "Rose Bowl Float Paper Plates" (lipstick, eye shadow, and nail polish on cardboard, 1992), into which texture and tone dart in and out of view.

This rhythmic effect reaches an apogee of sorts in "Blue Surrender with Pistol" (c-print mounted on aluminum) wherein the artist creates a maelstrom of movement in her mix of light and dark colors while the composition is anchored by an oversize, superimposed hand clutching a firearm. Drawn in a cartoon-like style in the manner of Roy Lichtenstein, the imagery offers potential malevolence that is actually muted by its pop art elements, allowing it to serve as a humorous foil for the more portent-filled patterning in the background.

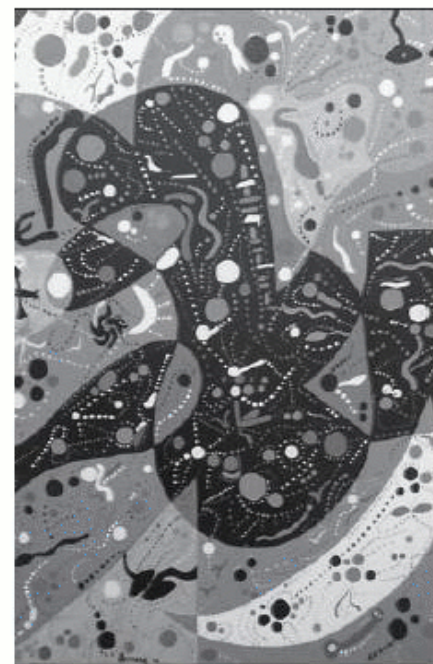
"Bang Bang Meets Bernard" continues at the Crazy Monkey Gallery in Amagansett through October 27.

At Surface Library in Springs, in an exhibition titled "Figuratively Speaking" and curated by James Kennedy, the inclination toward abstraction as a means of configuring representational imagery represents a dominant trend throughout the exhibition.

While this approach appears to be less of an impulse in works by Jerry Schwabe, whose antecedents run mostly to Degas dancers or Thomas Shelford's classically rendered paintings, the tendency toward abstraction is nevertheless powerful in pieces by many of the other artists in the exhibition.

Richard MacDonald's "Sitting Girl" (oil on canvas, 1998), for example, uses a powerful juxtaposition of whites and blues, all applied in a sweeping wash of colors, to create not just the image itself, but even more important to mix with a strong compositional structure to reflect a dynamic sense of emotion and a profound sense of solitude.

Eunice Golden's "Dreamscape #6" (mixed media on paper, 1980), on the other hand, uses a superficially more



"Well after Miro" by Len Bernard is on view at Crazy Monkey.

busy and active interplay of colors and patterns that sometimes actually submerges the figurative imagery into a blend of symphonically colorful movement.

Ms. Golden's series of serigraphs, by contrast, make significantly more immediate use of positive and negative space, as do Barbara Groot's "Figure Studies" (ink on paper). This effect might also be noted in Ann Brandeis's use of shadow and shade, as in "Ray II" (archival pigment print, 2008), while Abby Abrams's sculptures veer from pure abstraction in "Reclining Figure" (copper wire, 2008) to straightforward and uncompromising realism in "In My Grey Chemise" (acrylic on fired ceramic, 2008).

"Figuratively Speaking" continues at the Surface Gallery in Springs through November 2.



Thomas Shelford's "Palimpsest" is on view at Surface Library.