

# Art in Review

■ Conversations between paintings ■ Blending the real and the abstract ■ Cigars as exiles.

## 'Screen'

Friedrich Petzel Gallery  
26 Wooster Street, SoHo  
Through Feb. 24

This modest but brainy exhibition, which excludes as many worthy artists as it includes, takes painting's pulse and finds it healthy and, above all, diverse. Organized by the critic Joshua Decker, it just squeaks past the usual-suspects predictability by mixing generations and styles. In a dense, salon-style hanging, which accentuates a predilection for bright color, the works of virtual unknowns like Udomsak Krisanamis rub shoulders with those of éminences grises like Sigmar Polke.

Representation and abstraction and several points in between receive equal time; strategies range from the quasi-political (Glenn Ligon and Nicole Eisenman) to the quasi-formal (Mary Heilmann and Jonathan Lasker), and techniques include heavy-duty assemblage (John Miller) and sewn fabric (Jorge Pardo).

As the show's title suggests, the picture plane is seen as one screen among many. The show has its own Web site (<http://adaweb.com>) and the gallery is accessorized with three television monitors. One plays regular programming, and two display a tape of the exhibition itself, interspersed with a brief text and images taken mostly from the evening news. Thus on tape, Gerhard Richter's layered and patchy paint handling is juxtaposed with images of a wrecked bus and a blizzard, and Mr. Polke's luscious spill of white paint with an image of berries and cream.

There's plenty of back and forth in the show, too, as when Elizabeth Peyton's small, intense "Blue Liam" exchanges glances with Alex Katz's "Man in the White Shirt, No. 5," while sharing a lavender cast with an abstraction by Peter Halley.

Perusing these various screens confirms that there is no substitute for the real thing. But the image-collage of the tape does underscore

what the installation already encourages: a freewheeling experience of the works roams through all levels of cultural and personal memory. What's most valuable is not so much the individual paintings as the way their ecumenical aggregate, supplemented by the tape, suggests that the viewer's mind may be the most useful database of all.

ROBERTA SMITH

## Rita Ackermann

Andrea Rosen Gallery  
130 Prince Street, SoHo  
Through Feb. 24

Rita Ackermann is one of several young painters at work on a new blend of the abstract and real, flavored with large pinches of historical and political consciousness. (Fellow chefs include John Currin, Catherine Howe, Karen Kalimnik, Peter Doig and Lisa Yuskavage.) In her second show, Ms. Ackermann gets credit for moving on in terms of imagery. She has abandoned her clusters of sloe-eyed prepubescent girls — vaguely reminiscent of fashion illustration and of the artist herself — who had occupied landscapes defined by abstract clouds of paint.

Replacing them is a lone young boy in a plaid shirt and windbreaker, clearly taken from a snapshot. In painting after painting, he appears in various Alpine settings, robustly finger-painted in subdued browns and grays with an occasional touch of orange or white that suggest sendups of Abstract Expressionism. He brandishes a stick in "I Can Tame the Savage. . . ." tosses a snowball in " . . . And I Can Walk on Fire" and sits head in hands beneath a ski-lift in " . . . But I Know I'll Never be a Good Skier."

After looking at Ms. Ackermann's deftly worked backgrounds, one is inclined to substitute the word "painter" for "skier" in that last title, to see the young boy as a

substitute for the artist and the series as a rather wry allegory about the immense challenges faced by female painters. These works lack the visual edge of Ms. Ackermann's debut and, except when her colors brighten a bit, seem stultified by the conventions she seeks to recycle. Still, she seems intent on bringing several of painting's rich possibilities into play at once, and it will be interesting to see how the next chapter unfolds.

ROBERTA SMITH

## Andrea Robbins and Max Becher

'Shrinking People, Exiled Cigars and Galloping Dinosaurs'

Basilico Fine Arts  
26 Wooster Street, SoHo  
Through Feb. 10

Andrea Robbins and Max Becher use photography as a conceptual tool, recording the peculiar traces of history. Their show includes photographs from three different series. One records the difference between cigars produced by famous cigar makers — H. Upmann, Montecristo — sent into exile by the Cuban revolution, and cigars bearing the same names produced by the Cuban Government. A second shows the footprints left by galloping dinosaurs in Arizona's Painted Desert. A third captures the spatial anomalies that occur in an area known as the "Oregon Vortex."

The cigar pictures are by far the most successful. Not that they have any visual drama. On the contrary, the nearly identical photographs, each showing two cigars rising vertically into the picture frame, are deliberately flat-footed. But as your eye seeks out the small differences between labels, you can't help thinking about history and its ironies: After expropriating the cigar makers, Fidel Castro consolidated them into a single Cuban brand — only to find that sales dropped off dramatically. His customers had defected to exiled brands like the Romeo y Julietas, made in the Dominican Republic. Trying to win them back, Mr. Castro recreated the most important pre-revolutionary labels. It turns out that a tremendous amount of history can be compressed into a subtle difference in typeface or into the absence of the word "Habana." The other two series, documenting natural phenomena, are less engaging, although the Air Force should probably give U.F.O.'s a rest and send

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Larry LaMay/Friedrich Petzel Gallery

"Screen," at the Friedrich Petzel Gallery, includes works by, from left, Peter Halley, Elizabeth Peyton, Richard Artschwager and Alex Katz.

their scientists to investigate space warps in Oregon.

PEPE KARMEL

## Peter Campus

Paula Cooper Gallery  
155 Wooster Street, SoHo  
Through Feb. 17

Nature still has teeth in Peter Campus's new computer-altered photographs, but they are there as much to smile as to bite. In these large color images Mr. Campus combines photos of natural objects, including flowers, snakes and insects, with other images, creating collagelike constructions that are both attractive and repulsive.

In one work, for example, a snake, a chipmunk and a red leaf all rest on a crumpled star chart; in another, a discolored thumb seems to hold up a picture of a bug and a delicate white flower floating in front of creamy clouds.

Objects in these assemblages are defined with an eerie crispness, thanks to digital techniques, but in general the works take on a dreamlike congruence that recalls Joseph Cornell's Surrealist collages.

In one work, for example, a pink flower and a piece of reddish wood are combined with a photographic negative of a woman, all presented against the background of a dark star chart. In many of the works, the lush physical presence overwhelms any sense of threat posed by the ominous subjects.

The harsh lyricism of Mr. Cam-

pus's earlier photographs and computer images here blossoms into richly colored, openly emotional works. In a self-portrait, Mr. Campus peers from behind a heart-shaped stone; other works pulse with an energy that's almost cheery.

CHARLES HAGEN

## Neil Winokur

Janet Borden Gallery  
560 Broadway, at Prince Street  
SoHo  
Through Feb. 17

With his new portraits, Neil Winokur has become something like a forensic photographer with a decorative bent. In earlier works he photographed sitters surrounded by pictures of their favorite possessions; here he concentrates on the people themselves, dressed in casual clothes and standing in front of the camera in relaxed poses and with utterly deadpan expressions.

He assembles his portraits out of fragmented views, stacking images to show the sitters from head to toe, chopped up like magician's assistants. Alongside these composites he presents close-ups of eyes, ears, mouths and other features, all photographed and framed separately.

The rigidity of these catalogues of images is broken by the lurid color backdrops against which Mr. Winokur poses his sitters. Solemn-faced subjects appear in front of backgrounds ranging from canary yellow and lime green to plum purple; the conflict between method

and manner creates a strangely cheery sense of threat.

Mr. Winokur's approach varies little in the half-dozen portraits here, most of which are of fellow artists. In these emotionally distanced images he rejects the conventional idea that a portrait should reveal a sitter's personality, or that it can reflect an expressive bond between subject and photographer. Instead, the people take on the cold beauty of butterflies pinned in boxes.

CHARLES HAGEN

## Josef Albers

'Works on Paper'

André Emmerich Gallery  
41 East 57th Street  
Through Feb. 17

New York has seen some memorable Josef Albers shows in the last few years — at the Sidney Janis Gallery and at the Guggenheim Museum — and this modest offering of works on paper is a valuable footnote to those. In two dozen works it leaps from the German beginnings of Albers's career before World War I to its maturity in America after World War II, tracing a path from realistic portraiture to geometric abstraction.

Charming is not the first word that comes to mind when thinking about this painter of severely luminous color studies, but it fairly describes the early drawings here of Bavarian chalets and cows grazing in a field, and even the carefully rendered pencil portrait of a man who manages the barest ghost of a smile.

The greater part of the work, though, is abstract, ranging from linear conundrums with the optical tease of Islamic decorative patterns to studies for the "Hommage to the Square," the color-intensive paintings that the artist worked on ceaselessly for the last decades of his life. That extraordinary series is art as a kind of yoga, both a formal and psychic discipline. Some of these works on paper partake of that rigorous practice; others are, by contrast, brisk and relaxed vacation jottings. The combination, of course, is exactly what lies behind the profoundest work.

HOLLAND COTTER

## Alan Turner

Lennon, Weinberg  
560 Broadway, at Prince Street  
SoHo  
Through Feb. 10

The idea sounds unpromising, to say the least: paintings of three-dimensional biomorphic shapes, with square masculine hands caressing their contours or inquisitive eyes peering out through apertures in their surfaces. (There's one "feminine" painting with a braided pigtail emerging from a heavy-lipped spout.)

In some pictures, Alan Turner makes this conceit interesting by shifting technique from one area of the painting to another. In "Untitled No. 32," for instance, the caressing hand (upside down, in this case) is drawn and hatched with decisive pencil strokes, while the biomorphic shape is painted an uncanny flesh color. And Mr. Turner's intentionally awful colors — yellow, violet, orange, lime green — begin after a while to exercise their own hypnotic fascination.

In other pictures, he's tripped up by the technical challenges of trompe l'oeil painting. His painted (as opposed to drawn) hands are unconvincing, so they don't generate the Surrealist shiver we're evidently meant to feel as they slide over the coldly sensuous curves of their companions.

PEPE KARMEL

## Mark Dion

American Fine Arts  
22 Wooster Street, SoHo  
Through Feb. 10

The centerpiece of Mark Dion's new show is "Tar and Feathers," a tree trunk with dead animals suspended from its bare branches: a cat, a squirrel, a bullfrog, a starling and several others. The whole ensemble has been drenched in shiny black tar and dotted with, yes, little white feathers. This is apparently a meditation on the character of "pest" species that have an exceptional ability to invade new ecological systems, often driving out more attractive native species. (Surely rats, roaches and human beings should have been added to Mr. Dion's roster.)

In "The Library for the Birds of New York," a similar tree trunk supports books instead of corpses. The branches serve as shelves for the collected works of Rachel Carson, the poetry of Poe and Baudelaire, tomes on animal rights and so on. In the back room, a brown paper "Bag of Bones" provokes a somber reflection — if we bring home dead meat from the supermarket, why not bones? — but its visual effect is surprisingly cheerful.

So, too, a pair of silkscreen prints devoted to the dodo and the bugs of the Black Forest. Mr. Dion's ecological concerns provide a capacious rationale for a kind of ghoulish humor, recalling Tim Burton's deliciously creepy movies.

PEPE KARMEL