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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Chelsea Is a Battlefield: Galleries Muster Groups

By [ROBERTA SMITH](#)

In case you haven't noticed, the summer group show wars are raging in Chelsea. Over the last few years they have become something of an annual rite. Starting in late June and continuing through August, the solo shows drop off and the group shows — four or more artists — proliferate. The densely packed yet oddly discrete parallel universes in which galleries exist for most of the year lose some of their definition.

After all, proximity breeds a lot of things, including competitiveness, as well as pressures that need venting, and that seems to be what summer in Chelsea is for. It is open season for cool hunting and power gathering. Hipness prevails over blue-chipness.

Galleries let off steam, kick up their heels, make plays for new artists or higher profiles, or try to improve their standing. Their inner lives are more fully visible, not the least because group shows involve more decisions than the solo kind. There are more artists and more art and, frequently, outside loans and curators, all multiplied by the 100-plus group shows Chelsea has fostered this summer. Even a small sampling of these shows, as here, gives some indication of the tremendous amount of data about current art and the scene that is being released into the atmosphere.

A Few Signposts

The exhibition titles alone can trigger a kind of semiotic delirium, and in many cases are a show's main cleverness. Some are deliberately provocative: "Better Than Sex, Better Than [Disneyland](#)" at Ramis Barquet, "Binge and Purge" at Magnan Projects "Photography Is Not an Art!" at Alan Klotz and "Montezuma's Revenge" at Nicole Klagsbrun. Some form odd chains of words and ideas: "Men" at I-20, "Men and Materials" at Jeff Bailey, "Materiality" at Kravets Wehby, "Material Abuse" at Caren Golden.

Others may fill gaps in your liberal arts education: Wallace Stevens's Whitmanesque ode to summer has provided the title for "A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts," a group show at Mitchell-Innes & Nash. Organized by the photographers Justine Kurland and Dan Torop, it elegantly and peripatetically spans 140 years of photography: the rabbit pulled out of the 19th century's hat. And there is always a high-water mark of pretentiousness. This year's is the title of the Bortolami Dayan show, "War on 45/My Mirrors Are Painted Black (For You)."

Other Attributes

Titles aside, the first key to the import of a summer group show is its organizer. Is it an invited guest (curator, critic, artist, dealer) with a reputation of a certain weight and possibly a foreign passport? Or is it the gallery's owner or junior staff?

Equally important are the artists selected: Are they young and hot — like a fishing expedition or football draft — or are the generations mixed so as to reflect flatteringly in all directions? And how many artists in the show are already represented by the host gallery? Too many and it can seem overly promotional. It's usually a judgment call. A borderline example: In Cheim & Read's marvelous show about Chaim Soutine and modern art, 5 of the 20 artists whose work share the walls with the Soutines are represented by the gallery.

When the guest curator is an important artist, a courtship may be under way, or complete. For example the exhibition organized by Charles Ray at Matthew Marks is the first public sign that Mr. Ray, the prominent American sculptor, has joined this prestigious gallery. That the show includes loans from the Museum of Modern Art (a tall Giacometti figure) and the Whitney (an important early Mark di Suvero) reflects Mr. Marks's clout, the museums' interest in Mr. Ray, or both. But let's move on to other cups of tea leaves.

An Aesthetic Divide

Chelsea's group-show summer fray can evoke a farmyard with a surplus of roosters. This was especially the case last summer when male artists and curators seemed to dominate, along with a plethora of Conceptually-based black-on-black appropriation art. At the time the term "boys in black" came to mind, and to a certain extent they're back.

This summer's crop of shows confirms that an opposition present in art since the mid 1970's is still in force, if a bit out of whack. In the 1980's appropriation art and Neo-Expressionist painting were fairly evenly matched, which made for a really invigorating argument. These days Conceptually-based appropriation art — involving photographs, found objects, text, elusive meaning and usually not much in the way of form — has taken over some of Chelsea's sleeker galleries. While art that is more robust, colorful, physical and sometimes painterly tends to be found in less prominent shows, like "Diamonds Cut Diamonds" at Rare, where the work of five young sculptors exudes a material flamboyance that is curtailed by a banal sense of realism.

This duality is not absolute, nor is one side better than the other, but the lack of balance seems unhealthy. (Note to artists ransacking the 80's for heroes: More David Salle, less Robert Longo.) Yet several shows suggest that some artists and curators seem determined to find new ways to operate in the gap between the overly intellectual and the simplistically physical. The shows considered from here on progress from more to less severe, from cerebral to visual, revealing an increasing give and take between concept and objects, nonpainting and painting, form and the fear of it.

On the Severe Side

Last year Gladstone Gallery was boys-in-black central, with "Bridge Freezes Before Road," a flashy group show organized by the freelance critic Neville Wakefield that held many clues to this year's [Whitney Biennial](#). Now that sort of severity is concentrated in "War on 45" at Bortolami Dayan and feels very, well, last summer. Organized by the artist Banks Violette (who was in Mr. Wakefield's show), it evokes stylishly dour, punked-out graphic design. That which isn't obvious requires far too much explanation, in particular a slightly sinister hanging sculpture by Herwig Weiser involving a fat, dark red acrylic tube, spinning circles of oil, sounds transmitted from outer space and some incredibly delicate machinery.

The severity lessens in an untitled show of four (also male) artists at Cohan & Leslie, organized by the gallery's owners, Leslie Cohan and Andrew Leslie. Along with an impressive if rather Longoesque wall of drawings by Karl Haendel, titled "Post-War and Contemporary Group," as well as works by Ryan Gander and Pierre Bismuth, the show includes one of the season's standouts: T. Kelly Mason's compact yet evocative sound-video installation "Rain, Rain, Rain/Up in Smoke and Down the Drain."

Shrouded in packing blankets, its heart is a shadowy 26-minute video loop in which terse, expertly lettered phrases emerge and fade, obliterated by falling rain suggestive of eroding pixels. Poetic musings alternate with accusations ("Hippies Betrayed Us"), avant-garde history ("Victory Over the Sun") and instructions ("Step away from the text and listen"). Delicate sounds of drums, a guitar, wind, rain and surf culminate in a meandering song: "Black days are coming, black days are here." Occasional references to flatness seem to hold the key to the other works here, which recycle two-dimensional artifacts — images, texts or drawings — into new aggregates through redrawing or rephotographing or, in one instance, folding.

Nonflatness trumps flatness in "Pose and Sculpture," at Casey Kaplan. Organized by the Swiss critic and independent curator Daniel Baumann, with 12 artists split evenly between Europeans and Americans, this is an anorexic show. A piece by Heimo Zobernig involves two bare mannequins and a plain wood structure that might be awaiting Thomas Hirschhorn's camouflage and duct tape. But the works by Isa Genzken, Rachel Harrison, Andro Wekua, Justin Beal and Nathan Hylden in particular create a lively exchange on process, dimensionality and color. Julian Göthe and Liz Larner explore whiteness and angularity; Wade Guyton and Trisha Donnelly do too little with tubular forms. Emphasizing pose, and lining the walls, the photographs of Elfie Semotan include studied portraits of artists and movie stars and a funky, irreverent striptease by the Austrian artist Elke Krystufek.

Less Severe

The next three shows evince a more overt determination to combine the twain of Conceptualism and materiality, with the tension building between painting and other mediums. With "Galerie Daniel Buchholz

at Metro Pictures,” Metro Pictures gives a well-known art gallery from Cologne, Germany, the run of its beautifully revised gallery. (It’s amazing how adding one large doorway changes a space.) This dense, 30-artist, mostly European show ranges from paintings by Cheyney Thompson, Jutta Koether, Enrico David and Silke Otto-Knapp to films by Mr. Thompson, Jack Goldstein and Florian Pumhösl. In between lies a tremendous range of drawing, copying and appropriation by Lucy McKenzie, Tomma Abts, Mark Leckey, Wolfgang Tillmans and Henrik Olesen, among others. The subtext: Metro’s place in the history of early 80’s appropriation art is reinforced, but indirectly.

“A Broken Arm” at 303 Gallery has been assembled by Mari Spirito, the gallery’s director, using a title lifted from Duchamp, specifically his 1915 ready-made snow shovel, “In Advance of a Broken Arm.” With seven artists, the show pits painting against photography, flat against dimensional, found against made. Most works imply Duchampian degrees of disarray and chance, from Arnold Odermatt’s documentary photographs of car accidents in the Swiss countryside to Gedi Sibony’s mocking affirmations of formalism in twig, carpet and Sheetrock. Katy Moran’s deft, gestural paintings may do for abstraction what John Currin did for figuration: make it new and old at the same time. Djordje Ozbolt’s small, quirky paintings are sometimes worth a look. Works by Lutz Bacher, Hans-Peter Feldman and the under-appreciated Karen Kilimnik round out the bill.

Putting things back together again is central to “Dereconstruction” at Gladstone. This show’s 19 artists have been assembled by Matthew Higgs, director of the venerable alternative space White Columns, who has been criticized for stepping out of the nonprofit sphere. But White Columns already participates in art fairs, and Mr. Higgs’s selections include only one Gladstone artist ([Bruce Conner](#)) and display his usual ecumenical mix of the self-taught, overlooked, hip and formerly hip.

The transformation of the everyday through process rules, whether in a Dalí-esque manipulated film by Takeshi Murata or the obsessively wrapped sculptures of the outsider Judith Scott. A dazzling 1978 sewn fabric painting by Lucas Samaras fills the usual Robert Smithson slot, finding common cause with Ms. Scott’s sculptures and the knitted and knotted works of Alexandra Bircken, one of the show’s emerging artists. The aggregate forms of A. R. Penck’s sculptures from 1972-73 presage those of Vincent Fecteau and B. Wurtz. The collages of John Stezaker and Linder Sterling resonate with the very different efforts of Eileen Quinlan and Rita Ackermann, whose large tribute to the British performance artist Leigh Bowery is one of the best works of her career. In the wake of of Gladstone’s 2005 summer show, this exhibition feels almost like a purification rite.

“Fountains,” the nine-artist show that inaugurates D’Amelio Terras’s new quarters, is as good as, if less process-oriented than, the Gladstone show. It has been organized by Lucien Terras, one of the gallery’s owners, on a summery theme. Jonah Freeman makes dystopic fountains, using soap suds, compound buckets and food coloring, while Sanford Biggers achieves a shimmering diaphanous beauty by merely videotaping the effects of a disco ball. Michael Vahrenwald evokes fountains of youth with a series of Minimalist photographs of therapeutic lamps (very Hiroshi Sugimoto).

The inimitable Carol Bove evokes a darker human energy with plenty of color in a Minimal-Conceptual, box-text combination of books, objects and shelving; it proves that some things don’t have to be glued down to be unified. Michael Phelan’s tie-dyed mandala painting is a pictorial fountain. Noah Sheldon makes a sound fountain with two cosmically opposed chimes, a broomstick and a tiny spiral ramp. Best of show is Daniel Lefcourt’s positive-ion-evoking “Optimism Is a Force Multiplier,” a mural-size photograph of carefully ordered objects and tools that suggests he may be collaborating with Mr. Freeman. Each item has been photographed separately in perfect one-point perspective, creating the strange impression of all things being equal.

Less and Less Severe

Artists can be counted on to provide the last word. In “Men” at I-20, paintings of men by 10 women comment on the prevalence of the male gaze in art and of male artists in certain Chelsea summer group shows. Several confident realists carry the show, including Sylvia Sleigh, Karen Heagle and Catherine Murphy, who offers a weirdly prosthetic rendering of her husband’s nipple. Katherine Bernhardt paints a suave Neo-Neo-Expressionist dandy, while Clare Rojas ridicules the male need for combat in her buoyant faux-folk style. The strongest painting is by the show’s organizer, Ellen Altfest: a full-frontal, highly detailed masculine version of Courbet’s “Origin of the World” that shows the model perched on a paint-

splattered stool. For all its verisimilitude, Ms. Altfest's paint-handling gives the surface a life of its own.

In "Two Friends and So On" at Andrew Kreps, the artists Jonathan Horowitz and Rob Pruitt set in motion a curatorial round-robin selection process that reveals a network of style-based friendships. They chose Jennifer Bornstein, who chose Chivas Clem, who chose Meg Webster, and so on to a total of 30 artists. The show is a cheerful, illuminating mess partly because it is crowded, and has green arrows tracing the selection process, and partly because it ignores current trends.

Moving from the realm of the Conceptual through abstract painting and sculpture and back, it circles in and out of fashion and in again. Most of the fun is to be had in the middle, where works by Joanne Greenbaum, John Newman and Colin Thomson are noteworthy. The whole thing is like a sandwich on thin slices of bread with a very rich filling. And it suggests that the narrow view — which is what fashion is — is often not fully satisfying. But the allegiances and alliances traced here sum up art's latest version of the opposition of mind and matter. Each side has something the other lacks, and a third way, down the middle, is wide open.