

## Reviews/Art; An Antic Hymn to a Never-Elegant New York

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As George McNeil gets older, his work gets younger. The new paintings by this nearly 81-year-old artist step out of his disco series, but they are even more topsy-turvy, even more antic. They are a hymn to New York City, composed by someone for whom Manhattan has the packed, labyrinthine concentration of medieval Celtic manuscripts.

In Mr. McNeil's world, everything is experienced in terms of the human body, and it is a body going in different directions at once. Skyscrapers may be upright, but they may also be horizontal, pointed at people like guns. The two eyes in a head are never the same. Legs rarely seem to belong to the same body. Faces are moon-shaped and homely, like the faces of Jean Dubuffet, but there is an affection for all of them as real people.

In this insistently democratic work, it is sometimes hard to tell age, race or gender. The heroes of these paintings are never elegant, never upper class, but rather neighborhood people who dance and fret and can't stop moving. With arms and legs flying in different directions, the dude on Fourth Street with goofy cap and glasses looks like a Hindu or Buddhist god. The size of the heads and their placement near the center of the paintings identifies street people with the medieval treatment of saints.

This is a welcome show for the Knoedler Gallery, where most exhibitions have a methodical, corporate sameness and production rather than inspiration seems to be the order of the day. Mr. McNeil had to paint these paintings. They are installed in a way that allows their joy and panic to jump off the walls.

Each of the nine paintings is named after a different place in the city. In "Broadway," buildings are flipped like cards and figures and streets seem to be belted out like a song. "Lincoln Center" features a raggedy singer flinging about her hands and feet. In "Astor Place," the color is subdued and the focus is a huge four-fingered hand that exposes its stigmatization and appeals for help.

Part of what gives these paintings their power is the blend of cool and warm, and bitter and sweet color. In addition, the way paint is applied fits the content - suggesting scatching, tying, mopping, writing and other aspects of daily life. And the surfaces are so dense that the paintings are almost like narrative tapestries or mosaics.

The most serious question is whether Mr. McNeil succeeds in his attempt to give the humble, nitty-gritty side of New York a heroic dimension. Along with his strong artistic identification with street life is a strong ambivalence about "high" culture. These paintings are filled with telling cultural references, but they are also informed by distrust of the kind of cultural imagination that could bring their narratives fully to life. Even if the weight of the form is greater than the weight of the content, however, these are exciting paintings.

The paintings of George McNeil remain at the Knoedler Gallery, 19 East 71st Street, through Feb. 2. Antonio Muntadas 'The Board Room' Gallery Moos 133 Greene Street Through Feb. 20

Antonio Muntadas makes art that analyzes the relationship between the mass media and power. He was born in Spain and is rooted in the Spanish tradition. The starkness and hard realism of his video installations, as well as his preference for extreme contrasts of light and dark, suggest Spanish painting. Like Susana Solano, another Spanish artist whose work is, in effect, defining the experience of living during and after Franco, Mr. Muntadas is obsessed with boxes, cages and traps.

"The Board Room" was organized by the Massachusetts College of Art, where it was shown in 1987. The installation transforms the gallery into a board room. Around a long black table are 13 black and chrome chairs. The carpet is red. Around the black walls are photographic portraits of 13 religious leaders, including Pope John Paul II, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Jerry Falwell and Billy Graham.

In place of each mouth there is a tiny television. We watch the men talk, preach and sell. We watch television sell them. Key words selected from the presentations are flashed across the screen. The catalogue cites the artist's remark that "words lose their meaning in our time." Listening to so many different voices at once, each preaching the truth of a particular religion, creates a sense of aggressive, babbling absurdity.

The work is effective in other ways as well. It is clear from the installation how well the religious leaders understand television, and how instrumental their manipulation of it is in establishing and maintaining power. Using forms of the mass media, like video, against power is a strategy Mr. Muntadas shares with other media artists.

The installation also challenges the sense of impregnable privacy that is part of the mystique of the board room. To sit at this table, which anyone can do, is to feel that the board room, the inner sanctum of a corporate headquarters, is being invaded.

Where the installation falls down is in its oversimplification. Mr. Muntadas's board room is an intrinsically dark, evil thing. All the religious leaders seem to be manipulative freaks, and the complicity of television is total. But this absoluteness and paranoia are what make this work so diabolical and hard to forget. Mia Westerlund Rosen Christine Burgin Gallery 270 Lafayette Street Through Feb. 2

Mia Westerlund Rosen is involved with the poetry of shape. She is drawn to simple forms that can multiply in meaning if she is attentive enough to material and scale. Both sculptures in this show involve disks five feet in diameter. The body of each disk is concrete; the skin is lead hammered against the body and soldered around the edge.

One sculpture is a single disk. The other consists of three stacked disks. Both sculptures seem as natural as a mushroom and as technological as a machine blade. They may seem light as a halo, with the capacity to float or rise. But the sense of the concrete always pulls them back to the ground, and gives them an almost crushing weight. The disks can also be imagined upright, in which case they could roll freely, or cut like an enormous wheel by Louise Bourgeois. Ms. Rosen can make leaden things seem magical. Nancy Spero Works From 1956-62 Josh Baer Gallery 270 Lafayette Street Through Feb. 4

What is particularly striking about these five early paintings and six works on paper by Nancy Spero -none shown before - is their total honesty. Although expressionist in style, the paintings were done not in a burst but slowly, over an extended period. Because of continual rubbing and erasing, the surfaces remain thin. The paintings are intensely private. On paper, the rubbing and erasing have an effect that is discreet and also brash.

These works are about feelings that seem to have been formulating themselves in the artist's mind. In "Mother and Children," a maternal figure armed with two children looks at us quizzically. Throughout the works, there is a puzzled sense of duality - two different faces, or two figures paired off. In "Hangman," one figure is upright and another upside down. In "Heads," there are faces right side up and upside down and perhaps others looming in the distance. No matter how accusatory Ms. Spero's work becomes, it never stops being the riddle it is here. Arthur Cohen Stephen Rosenberg Gallery 115 Wooster Street Through Feb. 11

The six lush abstract paintings in this show were inspired by Italian Baroque architecture, including Borromini's Falconieri Chapel, a subterranean funeral chapel in Rome. In each work, sweeping curvilinear shapes and movements are painted on three adjoining rectangular canvases of different size. In each painting, the serpentine movement tempts us beyond the architectural gateways of the canvases into cavernous spaces. There is a sense of primal energy sweeping us into an interior destination that remains unknown.

But these paintings are also about distance. The swirling movements form ovals that suggest large, all-seeing eyes. The eyes help push us back and make these paintings as much about the need for consciousness as they are about the need to be swallowed up. The way the pressure of physical immersion does battle with the pressure of perception gives the works their edge. What may be most impressive about this show is the ambition to hold many dimensions of experience together.

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