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TheNewMuseum
OF CONTEMPORARY ART

On View

To speak of painting today is to speak of an enterprise that many in the visual arts declared “dead” not so very long ago. The decade

of the 1970s witnessed an extraordinary rise of theoretical-critical practice which focused on issues difficult to manifest in the sensuous surfaces of painting. The social construction of representation, for example, seemed easier dealt with in photographic practice; sexuality, in film and video; and politics, in the form of a written text, often found anonymously on the streets. By the late 1970s, painting had become the province of late modern diehards, attempting to shore up a belief system of outmoded individualism, or of the new promoters of a pluralistic postmodernism, which, no matter where it came from (the South Bronx or southern Italy) could

become today's newest avant-garde in a matter of moments, even though it was clearly *déjà vu*.

Certain artists, of course, will always make paintings, not out-of-fashion, but out-of-persistence, not out-of-style, but out-of-need. To deny these artists that pleasure, as some critics are wont to do, is to promote a critical tyranny equivalent to the strictures that might be laid down against certain political manifestations in the name of freedom, or certain sexual practices in the name of public health. To be critical, of course, is a necessity; to be programmatically exclusive—to assume that all practice is the same—is to be blind.

▼ NANCY CHUNN, MICHAEL CORRIS, and OLIVIER MOSSET are each approaching what is commonly called mid-career. Chunn and Mosset have been painters since the late 1960s, while Corris has been a bit more typical of the decade past—his work included here is a serious though equally tongue-in-cheek “mid-career retrospective” which has assumed the form of the moment—painting—in a humorously, critical fashion (prior to this, Corris has been best known for a series of politically charged textual works, including a group of posters and postcards with subjects like “Logo for the Confused” and “Logo for the Dispossessed”). Not one of these three artists, however, buys into the myths of transcendence or redemption that currently inform painterly practice (though certainly we are reminded of Barnett Newman’s “sublime” fields of color when confronted by the monochromes of Mosset). On the contrary, the challenge has been to divest, without de-valuing, the act of painting from its mythos of heroism, so that painting can become a vehicle, like any other aesthetic vehicle, of rhetorical experience—an experience that will speak to more than personal fantasy or expressionistic ego. Seen in this manner, Olivier Mosset’s extraordinary expanses of colored canvas begin to contain within them the memory of **all** paintings and thus become the representation of painting itself: the sign, if you will, for the practice, procedure, and object of painting. Mosset, of course, is extremely self-conscious in this regard (he has been painting, one might say, the same picture since the first monochrome of January 1978): *A painting—that panel behind a TV set—(and the ideological discourse that its formal practice is) does not, of course, escape politics. But in refusing to give an image of it, a painting deconstructs its own reality*

*and in so doing produces the actual conditions of a change.**

Nancy Chunn’s paintings of maps, which in the last year have become increasingly abstract as she attempts to convey the gravity of what she depicts, are also representations of the unrepresentable, distinct, however, from the modern ideology of the sublime. These are places in the world few of us have ever seen, much less experienced. But they are the sites of a historical tragedy that continues to unfold: Africa is raked over; Angola is divided; and South Africa, waiting, is washed over by waves of anguish. Chunn makes paintings not to immerse herself in metaphors of self-expression but, as she says, in order “not to forget.” Michael Corris’s works also function historically, but as a “ghost” of his own history and, even more detached, of the larger social history of which they are a part. Though these thirty-six “paintings” initially may appear as a rather self-indulgent attempt to insert his own past into art history, they, in fact, possess as their referent the ideas of production and distribution, and pose the question: what happens when the process overwhelms the “original”? These issues have concerned Corris for years—“*the contradiction between the means of production and distribution and the relations of production and distribution in art practically determine how you can ‘represent’ meaning and reality.*”*** These three artists are perhaps symptomatic of a larger (and often younger) group of artists that is diverse enough to include Sherrie Levine, Allan McCollum, Peter Halley, Sue Coe, Larry Liss, and Aura Rosenberg, who have also assumed the task of making paintings, or signs for paintings, in a postmodern world.

▼ If Olivier Mosset pushes minimalism to an extreme where minimal becomes maximal, where one thing becomes all things, then AIMEE RANKIN pushes the notion to the point of excess. In four box constructions collectively titled "Natural History," similar in format to a previous series of "Renaissance Windows," Rankin represents a postmodern reading of nature, or natural history, as an accumulation of artifacts which, though natural in origin, are primarily cultural in meaning and affect. Butterflies, for example, become science-fiction creatures in one box devoted to the collapse (or implosion) of time; in another, human bones become architecture; and in yet another, an artificial sunset is the backdrop for a mosaic of coins. Rankin has written that ". . . *the ideal guarantor of value is no longer nature, but rather, the material order of exchange itself.*"*** Like the dioramas of museums (the modern containers of nature and culture; the final resting places of time itself), Rankin's boxes present, in her view, the "perverse beauty of that which is dead." In other words, nature, in the late twentieth century, is only a memory of what once was—"nature as the final Other." As Rankin's boxes suggest, nature is now just another simulation—an impossible site which we experience not merely from a distance (through a window—a metaphor for history), but as a representation of itself. The question of course is: what is nature when it is re-presented as "natural history"?

▼ As this brief text indicates, the work in this **On View** program has been selected expressly to coincide with the exhibition, "The Art of Memory/The Loss of History."

—William Olander

▼ Although publicly sited, ANN MESSNER's work *Look-Out for Broadway* avoids reciting the familiar clichés of public sculpture. For instance, the work is small (relative to, say, Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*), and instead of blocking pedestrian traffic, it is placed discreetly, high on a lamppost and well out-of-reach. Yet, the sculpture is confrontational, even agitational; a megaphone or spyglass is directed down at the viewer and a jagged, stepped arm reaches out as if to tap passersby on the shoulder. This direct address, the bright red megaphone, and the planar geometric forms recall certain constructivist street sculptures, particularly the radio kiosks of Gustav Klucis. Like those works, Messner's sculpture provides a clear, immediately identifiable abstract form. Unlike the constructivist works, her sculpture is mute, nonfunctional. Rather than broadcast its political message, *Look-Out for Broadway* serves a symbolic function: standing in the midst of more mundane signage, it represents a way of visually activating the streets and constructing new forms of material culture.

—Brian Wallis

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REFERENCES

* Olivier Mosset, "Deux ou Trois Choses que Je Sais d'Elle," **COVER**, no. 6 (Winter 1981-82): 33.

** Michael Corris, "Paint What You Do?," **COVER**, no. 6 (Winter 1981-82): 28.

*** Aimee Rankin, "The Parameters of 'Precious,'" **Art in America** LXXIII, no. 9 (Sept. 1985): 115.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Nancy Chunn

Africa, 1983

Oil on canvas, 108 x 108"

Angola, 1984

Oil and wax on canvas, 96 x 60"

South Africa: Waiting, 1985

Oil and wax on canvas, 72 x 72"

Courtesy Ronald Feldman Gallery,
New York

Michael Corris

Based on 1975-1985, 1985

Ink, acrylic, and paper on canvas,
36 canvases: each 24 x 20"

Retour à la Normale, 1985

Oil on board, 48 x 32"

Ann Messner

Look-Out for Broadway

Welded steel sculpture

Olivier Mosset

Untitled, 1985

Acrylic on canvas, 118 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 236 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

Untitled, 1984

Oil on canvas, 108 x 108"

Aimee Rankin

Natural History, 1985

Mixed media constructions

Window installation.

NANCY CHUNN received a B.F.A. from the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, in 1969. Her work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Canis Gallery, Women's Building, Los Angeles; A&M Artworks and Concord Gallery, New York. It has been included in many group shows, including "Otherland," Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York (1985); "Drawings: After Photography," organized by Independent Curators, Inc. (a traveling exhibition, 1984-85); and "The Apocalyptic Vision: Four New Imagists," Galerie Bellman, New York (1984).

MICHAEL CORRIS attended the Maryland Institute of Fine Arts, Baltimore. From 1972 to 1977, he worked exclusively with Art & Language, New York; since 1980, he has worked as an individual artist and had his first solo exhibition in 1984 at Gallery 345, New York. His work has been featured in numerous group shows, including "Disinformation: The Manufacture of Consent," Alternative Museum, New York (1985); "Hunger for Words," Gallery 345, New York (1984); and "Das Andere Amerika," Neu Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, Berlin, West Germany (1983).

OLIVIER MOSSET has lived and worked in Paris from 1965-77, and in New York and Switzerland since 1977. His work is currently the subject of a retrospective, organized by the Musée Saint-Croix, Poitiers, France (catalogue by Maurice Besset and Bernard Lamarche-Vadel). It has also been included in many group exhibitions in the United States and abroad; most recently, "Paravision," Postmasters Gallery, and "Final Love," Cash/Newhouse, New York (1985); "Radical Painting," Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts (1984); "L'Art en France dans les années 1960," Musée d'Art et d'Industrie, Saint-Etienne; and "New Abstraction," Sidney Janis Gallery, New York (1983).

AIMEE RANKIN received her M.F.A. from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1985, and was a participant in the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, 1984-85. Her work was seen most recently in a solo exhibition, "History and Desire," at Postmasters Gallery, New York (1985).

ANN MESSNER is a filmmaker and sculptor who lives in New York City. From 1979-80 she staged short performances and sculpture installations in the New York City subway system. In 1980 she was instrumental in organizing *The Real Estate Show*, which led to the establishment of ABC No Rio. Her work has been included in the exhibitions "Illegal America" at Franklin Furnace (1982); "Timeline-Central America" at P.S. 1 (1983); "Neo York" at the University Art Museum in Santa Barbara (1984). In addition, she has had major installations of sculpture in London, Cologne, Stockholm, and New York. In 1985, she received a fellowship in sculpture from the New York Foundation for the Arts.