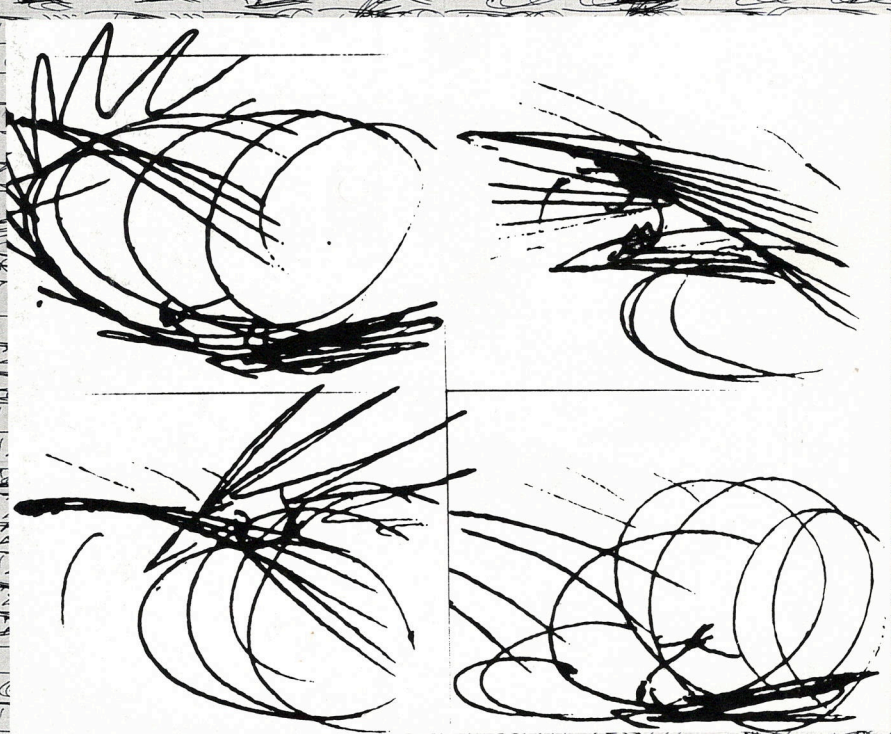
art issues.

number twenty

November/December 1991

published in
Los Angeles

four dollars



"History as Fiction"

at MEYERS/BLOOM, 1 August–7 September

"The Lick of the Eye"

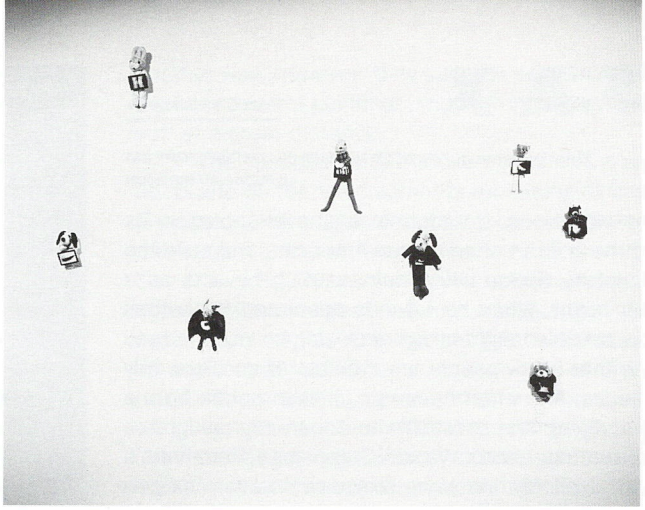
at SHOSHANA WAYNE, 20 July–21 September

"Presenting Rearwards"

at ROSAMUND FELSEN, 10 August–7 September

[In August, of course, New York galleries close their doors (this year, unfortunately, many won't reopen) and everyone tries to get out, for good reason. But by the middle of the month, I'm ready for September. The solution: two weeks in L.A., where it's business as usual, and—also unlike New York—many of the summer group shows actually mean something.]

It's no surprise that one of these exhibitions, "History as Fiction," is your basic New York group show, despite the fact that several non-New York artists are included. After all, L.A. has its own "history" of New York shows, and New York validation. This exhibition tries out the rather ordinary idea that history does not exist in a monolithic state of fact, but instead is particular, manipulated and manipulative. According to the accompanying essay by Dan Cameron, the art works presented here comment upon this predicament by employing a collage aesthetic that juxtaposes motifs and styles from different, incongruous periods. For example, Meyer Vaisman, in his tapestries, "treats past and present as interchangeable layers, whose meanings are only radicalized once the viewer sees them as having become disabled by their sheer conventionality as cultural signs." I accept such a statement to a point; my concern is whether or not such a self-conscious, ironic enterprise (and one could substitute almost anyone else's name from the show for Vaisman's—Guillaume Bijl, Juan Muñoz or Haim Steinbach) "radicalizes" meaning or merely trivializes it. This is not, however, a criticism of all the work in the exhibition. Those artists who play with the tension caused by the interplay and quick shifts between the radical and the trivial are most effective in their critique of what history often means when it is used as a weapon or a cover. For example, in Annette Messager's series, *Mes petites effigies* (1990), each reassembled body of a stuffed animal wears a



Annette Messager
***Mes petites effigies*, 1990**
Mixed media: eight dolls with photographs and texts
Dimensions variable

"The Lick of the Eye"
Installation view

Cindy Sherman
***Untitled*, 1987**
Color photgraph
47-1/2" x 71-1/2"

photograph of a human body part around its neck like an albatross, bearing the weight of the variable personal histories suggested in currently fashionable assemblage materials, while remaining just a touch asinine, as crayoned text dribbles below its little feet like a trail of droppings.

Two other group exhibitions (which owe refreshingly little to New York) uncover either end of the individual and/or social body's digestive tract, demarcating shifting territories of gratification within that ever-conflicted space between the repressed viewer and the liberated object. The passage from "The Lick of the Eye," curated by David Pagel, to "Presenting Rearwards," curated by Ralph Rugoff, travels lasciviously through the mouth to the anus, beginning with artworks that provoke salivating, oral responses and ending with others that celebrate the convulsive joys of creative waste products and the organ that makes the pleasure of their concrete manufacture possible. Therefore, Richard Hawkins's marker drawings on gay porn magazine pages, included in Rugoff's show, deftly couple the two exhibitions, as photographs of hearty male bodies are inscribed with crude images of periscopes that demonstrate how easily the whole sexy mess can be summed up in a conceptually (and physically) tight image.

Look into an anus and what do you see? Maybe a Lilliputian alpine village, as in Paul McCarthy's *Rear View* (1991), which is a smart update on Duchamp's (nowadays politically *incorrect*!?) *Étant Donnés*. I'd love to combine these shows and call it "The Lick of the Ass." Often in art there are painfully fine lines between looking, eating and defecating—it's all about taste. In Pagel's show, Doug Hammett's *Finger Licks* (1991), consisting of chocolate and vanilla frosting on stretcher bars, as well as James Hayward's *Absolute 55 x 46 Viridian* (1991), are as fecal as anything in the Rugoff show, and they play nicely off Johnny Pixchure's *Abstracted Love and Fear* (1988), a rubber and plaster ass that looks like both excrement and chocolate. (Which reminds me—where is Rona Pondick in Rugoff's show? Her work is too prescient and apt not to have been included. At least Pagel's show has the obligatory John Miller.) Lillian Ball's *Kiddie Pool Round* (1991) is as intestinal as it is visual, acknowledging and extending the potential of the horror vacua implied in Jackson Pollock's working methods, by literally grinding away under the watchful eye of unsettled viewers who have tripped the electric eye that starts its motor. The best work in each exhibition hits the eye, mouth and gut equally hard.

Abstraction is an essential part of both exhibitions, although "Presenting Rearwards" could have benefitted from a more complete understanding of the value of abstract painting as both eye candy and toxic waste product. Raymond Pettibon's 1991 target drawing, captioned with the phrase MY HINDER PARTS TOTALLY BESMEARED would sit well next to David Reed's *No. 290* (1988-91) or, even better, beside Carl Ostendarp's 1990 untitled painting from his "pancake"series, a sickly-colored load of foam, urethane and oil thrown up into the viewer's face. Such combinations cut to the core of Pagel's and Rugoff's theses: no matter how conceptualized a particular artistic approach (or a curated exhibition) may be, visual impact still has its privileged place in the viewer's body, even if it hits below the belt.

Terry R. Myers is an art critic who lives in New York, travels frequently to Los Angeles and teaches in the Graduate Fine Arts Department at Pratt Institute.

"The Spiritual Landscape"

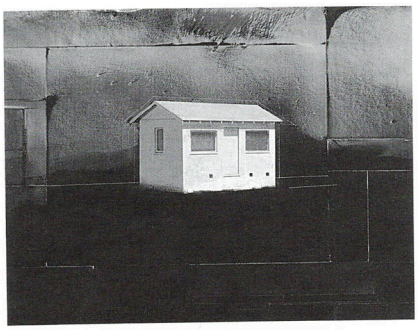
at BIOTA, 25 July–6 September

The landscape as subject matter and idea in art has often communicated a spiritual quality concerning nature, its power and the universe. Representations of the landscape in art can also be understood as attempts to capture and preserve those parts of the earth which are quickly deteriorating. The greatest achievement of "The Spiritual Landscape" is not, however, in its examination of these issues; it adds little insight to the nature of the spiritual, the sublime or their connection to contemporary art. Rather, the exhibition comprehensively makes a case for the degree to which artists have returned to the genre of landscape in the last 10 to 15 years.

Irit Krygier, curator of the exhibition, brought together 21 artists who exemplify the abundance of landscape painting today. Some do manage to capture and exploit the "mystery" inherent in the genre. Perhaps the best and most successful of the group, Vija Celmins, is represented by a series of lithographs from 1975, in which she meticulously renders ocean surfaces and desert floors. This work possesses a peaceful, ethereal quality unmatched by any other in the show. While Joan Nelson is known for recreating in exquisite detail small portions of landscapes from historic paintings, and then scratching and "aging" the surfaces to create a feeling of antiquity and the passing of time, she is represented here by a relatively unsuccessful suite of prints, which fail to demonstrate the surface work crucial to the impact of her work. The presence of her prints, however, indicates the influence her technique has had on many other painters, some in the exhibition. One is Brad Durham, who also paints small, dark snippets of landscapes on thick wood panels. His work makes a direct, concerted effort at addressing the spiritual—or more exactly, the supernatural—with its inclusion of mysterious geometric diagrams which seem to function as a secret code for the occult.

Photography has been instrumental in the demise of landscape painting since the nineteenth century, and it has recently been used extensively to reëxamine the genre by a variety of contemporary artists. This important story is left out of the exhibition, however, as only two photographers are included. Ellen Brooks, one of them, shoots small images from magazines through a fine black filter, and then blows them up. The large, abstracted, ghostly images that result are barely discernable as landscapes. Her work consequently sums up the exhibition's successes and failures, representing the mediated form our experience of the landscape takes today, and the difficulty we often have making it out.

Caroline Styne is President of Basically Baked, Inc.



Richard Sedivy
***Pictorial America (American Dream)*, 1991**
29-1/2" x 39"
Oil and varnish on masonite
Photo: Douglas M. Parker