

Art in America

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JEFF WALL

THE WRITTEN WORD:
GRIGELY, LANDERS, GOLDSMITH

YOUNG BRITS



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and trial studies reproduced in the exhibition catalogue, Zaugg clearly spent a lot of time making critical decisions as to typeface, word position and the like. There is something perverse, of course, in lavishing all the work of art-making on something that proclaims absence. What exactly is "Not Here"—art? meaning? I suppose Zaugg takes Magritte's "This is not a pipe" one step further. His point, no doubt, is the use of art techniques to make an object which serves as an interrogative device for questioning the meaning and purpose of art. But since it proclaims any answers to be elsewhere, there seems little reason for the viewer to stick around. —Reagan Upshaw

Martha Armstrong at Bowery

Each one of Martha Armstrong's paintings has its beginnings in an exactly drawn depiction of the view from her studio window. The finished works nevertheless differ a good deal from each other. The more one looks at these paintings, the more intriguing they become: always a similar underlying drawing, yet always a different completed picture. It is as though she had pointed a kaleidoscope at the window and twisted her wrist so that with each turn a different image took shape.

Charles Burchfield, a painter who is admired by Armstrong and who may have influenced her, wrote down in his diary some thoughts about the nature of landscape: "You cannot experience a landscape until you have known of its discomforts.

You have to fight, curse the mosquitoes, be slapped by stinging branches, fall over rocks and skin your knees, be stung by nettles, scratched by grasshopper grass, and pricked by brambles before you have experienced nature." It is true that Armstrong may have experienced nature framed by windows and thus have avoided the discomforts referred to by Burchfield, yet dangers manage to lurk in her paintings. Her forms grasp one another like talons, or they coalesce. They are like unwound rolls of bandages, or they wave loosely like pennons; some forms appear to be snipped out as though with tin shears. In some paintings the impetuosity of her brushwork seems to have produced gashes—great gaping wounds.

It is as if in each of these canvases there are two Armstrongs at work, one who makes the drawing and another who makes the painting. In the larger works much of the underlying drawing survives the onslaught of the second, painterly phase. The smaller canvases tend to nondescript forms. In all of them one makes out the roof of a cabin stretching out obliquely in perspective. It reminded me of the gray shape rising from the floor in Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* in London's National Gallery. When seen from a side angle, this strange gray form turns into a skull.

—Lawrence Campbell

Don Perlis at Sindin

In another period Don Perlis might have been dubbed an eccentric—an artist of obvious



Martha Armstrong: *Landscape with Stripes*, 1994, oil on canvas, 40 by 50 inches, at Bowery Gallery.

gifts, yet one who is out of step with current trends. Originally introduced at the Whitney Museum in 1970, Perlis has been exhibiting figure paintings for many years. Although best known for his paintings of people, either clothed or nude, in narrative situations, he also paints portraits, still lifes and landscapes. Balthus is certainly an important influence, also possibly Delvaux.

In this review I will touch upon three separate shows—two in 1993, at the El Bohio Cultural and Community Center and at Sindin Galleries, the third in 1995 at Sindin. At El Bohio, Perlis brought the New York subway system into sharp focus. The paintings evoke the period of Bernard Goetz, the subway vigilante and folk hero (or folk villain, depending on one's point of view), a time when graffiti covered not only subway cars but almost everything else in New York. Perlis shows us figures with frozen faces who avoid direct eye contact with panhandlers, as well as groups of youths clearly up to no good.

The other exhibition in 1993 was startlingly different. It consisted of scenes set in imaginary bordellos and featuring nude and partly clothed women and Hispanic-looking gentlemen. These works were inspired by the artist's reading of *The Dead Girls* by the Mexican novelist Jorge Ibarguengoitia and *Love in the Time of Cholera* by the Colombian Nobel Prize winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

The 1995 exhibition continued the bordello theme, but this time with the inspiration supplied by the works of the French writer

Georges Bataille. In these romantic tableaux, the young ladies have a quality of demure chic, reminding this viewer of the newspaper accounts of New York's so-called Mayflower Madam. Perlis evokes the pleasures of intimate encounters in dark interiors decorated with Victorian wallpaper, beautifully painted.

The 1993 exhibition at Sindin also showed some landscapes painted in Siena and Majorca; these present sharply angled buildings in slightly skewed perspectives. The 1995 exhibition included a remarkable painting which took Perlis four years to paint. It shows the view through his studio window, looking out on a corner of Astor Place and Lafayette Street near the old Wanamaker building on Broadway. This is a street one might not notice when walking along it, but in this painting it furnishes the material for one of the most beautiful evocations of a New York subject that I have seen in years.

—Lawrence Campbell

Don Perlis: From the series "Allegories of Love," 1995, oil on canvas, 46 by 60 inches; at Sindin.



Douglas Safranek at Schmidt-Bingham

Douglas Safranek's small, studiously rendered egg-tempera cityscapes recall the pleasures of realism. Brimming with sharply observed detail, his 16 bird's-eye views of Manhattan and Brooklyn present impersonal, often inhospitable, urban spaces with a refreshing clarity. Each labor-intensive panel portrays its subject—usually a stretch of street or patchwork of backlots—with consummate particularity. Viewers can determine precisely the location of