

ARTICULATE®

Vol. 2
Issue 8
DEC 1996

Contemporary Art Review

WASHINGTON • BALTIMORE • RICHMOND

Inside Features:

Mark
Clark

The Big Show

Fells Point Cultural Alliance

Triangle Artist

Sigmar Polke
at the Corcoran

Hip 2 Bith of
at the Studio

"Versification I"
by George Karos

"Word Up Baltimore"
by Blair Ewing

and way
way more...

HEY MAN,
IT'S FREE!

NOW WITH
RICHMOND
ADDED!



LARRY beantown
MULLINS

Photo: BRYAN HAYNES

ART POETRY PERFORMANCE DANCE MUSIC

STUART GREENWELL TALKS TO:
LARRY MULLINS

Washington is perhaps on the verge of losing another one of its most promising young painters in the person of Larry Mullins. Larry recently received a seven month fellowship to work in Provincetown, MA so he's packed his bags to see where the next phase in his artistic career will lead him. Larry grew in Charlottesville VA, and went to Bridgewater, a small liberal arts college in the Shenandoah Valley. His travels later brought him to Richmond, VA where his success as an artist and "street painter" gained him a modicum of local notoriety. In 1992 Larry entered graduate school at the University of Maryland which brought him to the Washington, DC area where his star quickly rose. His work has been featured in a number of prominent local exhibitions including ArtSites96.

SG: What brought you to Richmond and later to Washington?

LM: Richmond was a likely place if you want to make art in Virginia. I came to Washington because it felt like a natural step from Richmond. Also I felt that Richmond wasn't really offering me what I wanted from making art so I came to D.C.

So is Washington a stepping stone or will you come back after your fellowship in Provincetown ends?

I don't really have a good answer for that but, my wife and I see Washington as our home base. There's a good chance that we'll come back here after Provincetown. I'm trying to find myself a good gallery here and hopefully I'll be showing in Virginia next year. This is still the place where I see myself as being connected to — I've done most of my maturing as an artist here.

Will we be seeing your work in Boston?

You just might! There are a lot of people coming through Provincetown and there is a very strong New York City connection as well as from Boston. One of the things I'm very excited about is the opportunities that might be afforded to me in that area.

I met a couple of artists from Boston when Jim Stoudt and Cheryl Numark brought them up for a show Numark had this past summer. They were checking out the 7th street gallery openings and were rather impressed with the turnout and the level of art on the walls. They mentioned to me that the Boston scene was similar and that it looked like Washington was a pretty happening place. But maybe Boston is another "logical step" for you.

I explore the opportunities when I get it even but I think Boston makes the most sense since it is the closest major city to Provincetown.

Are you at all apprehensive about going to New York City, because it seems that you're inching your way up there?

Yeah, (laughs) well I feel that and certainly my wife and I have had that conversation a lot. Yes it would be nice to be successful there and to have that opportunity presented to me but, that daily living there — I would prefer to breathe the air that blows up and down Rock Creek park than I would New York City air. Those kinds of things are really important to me —



Photo: BRYAN HAYNES

"...there comes a time when you have to bait your hook and see how far you can cast."

really like working in a garden. I have one out back and flowers are very important to me. Putting your hands into the soil and watching things grow — up there things grow in pots, if you're lucky enough to have a yard. It's those little things that are important to me. It seems to me that if I were to move to New York it would signify that life would be becoming very

much about my career and it is already but, somehow that would amplify that feeling. My wife [Josephine] also has a very promising career in front of her so we need to balance the two. She's very aware that this is a very pivotal time for me and that I am gaining some momentum, in terms of attention to my work but, she is also working toward something that's pretty neat so we need to balance the two.

A big problem here is that a lot of our promising young artists are looking for greener pastures like New York or Chicago. I like to think that the Washington art market could be bigger or better but the fact that we are in New York's back yard makes it easy for a young artist to leave and to think that is all it takes to "make it."

Yeah, but there comes a time when you have got to bait your hook and see how far you can cast.

How has the move from Richmond to Washington effected your work?

That's a good question. I think that since I've been here my work has changed quite a bit. Graduate school had an big impact on me, and working the last two years in that intense working environment was very important. Before graduate school I set up this problem for myself. I was kind of at a low point where I wasn't terribly satisfied with the work I was doing, I knew that I could make more interesting work — I was sure of it but, I think that we all go through these phases every now and again where we ask ourselves, What am I doing? What is this "thing" called "Art" and why does it rule my life? Why does it make such a large impression on me? When I went to grad school I had a pretty good color sense and my sense of design was pretty strong but, that wasn't enough. I had been doing "street" work, this impromptu, unsolicited painting outdoors. They thrilled me more than anything else I had done. It's extremely exciting to go out there and to make these paintings in public — to paint with your pants down so to speak.

Was it the illicit thrill or was it that you knew you would have a broader audience?

That's part of it, the broader audience, because if you're working on 14th and U street you know there is going to be lots of people walking or driving around that might see your work. The larger thrill though was that the experience changed and influenced my work — and I would try to play to that. I then figured that I would take that love for street work and combine it with everything I know about color and surface and put the two together. My first semester was really bad. I was floundering around, I couldn't figure it out and then all of a sudden, sometime around December it started to click and I started making the paintings

which I am showing now... I don't know exactly what it was, but something wonderful happened. I began to notice that the paintings worked on a number of levels, and that they seemed so complete. I look at a piece now and say to myself "my god, how could I have not seen it? It was so obvious."

What happened that day in December?

I think it was like a leap of faith — to do something I had suspected previously. Someone might look at my work and say that it was a simple bit of problem solving, but I worked very hard to get there, to get it right. I was sketching religiously at that time.

It looks like you've been developing your own language that is now coming into focus.

Yes, without a doubt. I think all artists carry with them this bag of tricks that are unique to that artist, I know I do and I'm always trying to find new ways to use them as well as to add new ones.

I love the playful nature of your work. One of its most eccentric elements is the text that you use to "ground" the paintings. For example, "Robert Johnson and his Sugar Beet Evenings" and "Living Upright and Tasting Edith" Where do they come from?

They're kind of random and slightly subversive. A lot of it comes from listening to a music, I can't say that I get the titles directly from the song but from my sensibilities at any given time. It's various stimuli filtered through me. I've been reading poetry too, Buck Downs' stuff, also street signs — It's amazing what will prick your senses. Words that land in your lap and "stick" to you, you know they just kind of sound right. Sometimes words will mutate into other words, words that might better serve the narrative. The words are worked out as the formal elements work themselves out.

Derived from that bag of tricks that you talked about?

Yes, with that bag of tricks. I kind of think of them as ballads, I think about how people write music. It's like you have this little string of lyrics and you think they're hot but you don't have the right music for them. You store them away to use at the perfect time.

Does the design carry equal weight with the text or does it take a back seat to the textual narrative?

That's a real good question. I see the background as a vehicle for the text which in turn carries the narrative, but I think they're very interdependent and equally important. Like the song analogy, the music drives the lyrics.

There is a lot of obfuscation involved in your work. There is a lot of overpainting and scraping and I can see words buried under layers of paint that are different than the words on the surface. Do those words retain any of their life? Could they be some conscious or sub-conscious meaning to them?

Things change in my paintings by necessity. Sometimes the word doesn't work in relation to the theme or design or it was somehow holding me back so I'll change it to suit the overall need of the painting.

But those words still exist in the layers of paint, they're still trying to exert themselves whether you've obscured them or not.

Well Yeah, maybe they work like ambient noise, I don't know, but I don't use them like clues or anything like that.

Because your work has a playful, naive, raw quality, do you find some people not connecting with



"Doper" 1995. Oil on Birch Panel, 41" x 29" x 3 1/2"

them or dismissing them?

You do find some people approaching art with some sort of agenda and if that piece doesn't fit that agenda then they might dismiss it prematurely. It's very odd that an artist might spend days, weeks or months on a painting and a viewer can dismiss it in a matter of seconds.

But that is the reality of the situation!

That is the reality but, all I can do is make sure I do my job. I consider every square inch of my paintings, I know every square inch because I put everything there. I'll destroy two weeks worth of work to move something up an inch. Any reference to a naïvete is simply inaccurate, I can't create naïve work.

I've been struggling to find the exact word to describe what I see in your work and now I think I know what it is - It's "humanity." Your works are just full of personality and they're so very approachable. Yes, There is also an irony about them which create this contradictory aspect to them.

How so?

Well, if you take them at face value they are very friendly and fun but the narrative has a duality about it. You must take your time and stay with the painting

long enough to decipher it because there are clues in it that won't reveal themselves in just a couple minutes.

What has attracted me to your work is that they have a carnivalesque appearance but there is an intellectual weight that is definitely present. There is an irony, decision and a deliberate hand behind them.

They are very deliberate, I work very hard to create an "all over" feeling that they can be taken in within the context of the traditional modernist "window," but as you look closer you find all sorts of things woven into them — they're like fabric.

Do you consider "audience" when you're painting.

Yeah, that comes from being a "street painter" where you're very cognizant of people seeing it. Painting is definitely a two part process, I create something then the viewer brings something to it. If I put a funny word or statement in a painting it's because I want to elicit a laugh. Some days you can make something just to make people smile. Other days I make things more for myself or to make a statement. I enjoy having people look at my work and responding to it.

Where do you draw your iconography from? I noticed a lot of "brand names" and Pop Americana — things like that.

It comes out of my childhood and being raised in the south, if you can call Charlottesville the south. I'm starting to realize that a good deal of it comes from my grandmother. She owned a country store for years on "Powell's Corner" and there were a number of signs, number and letters that were very prominent throughout the store, they were from the 30's through the 50's. She used to make these incredibly complex quilts that I sleep underneath to this day. She had no formal training but she had this great sense of design and I guess I was the beneficiary of it just by being around her. I experienced looking at that stuff every single Sunday for a long time and I'm sure that a lot of my ability and subject matter came from my childhood in that store. There's just something so, here we go again, "human" about it.

How does your work fit in with painting today?

Wow, it's like a gumbo out there. I'm not sure where I fit. I look at a lot of painting but I'm not terribly interested in "painting," I'm far more interested in music and signs and such. I do feel that I have carved a place for myself — I don't see a lot of painting that looks like mine. They have a character of their own, like them or hate them, but they are very hard to deny.

Larry, thanks for talking with me and good luck with your fellowship in Provincetown. I feel that good things are in store for you and I hope that Washington gets you back when your fellowship is over.

Thanks, that's certainly an option, like I said Josie and I feel like Washington is our home base and it's definitely a possibility.

