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- local
- express
- art
- books
- music
- dance
- film
- theater
- fiction
- streets
- poetry
- spotlight

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W web exclusive

Larry Mullins
Oral Moral
Bellwether Gallery

Joe Amrhein
Slightly Cryptic
Roebling Hall
November 2003

"Look around, this is the last generation of human beings that will be making paintings." This provocative statement of course grabbed a lot of attention at the birthday party where it was uttered recently by a painter who works for a museum at an upstate university, someone obviously more in tune with academic and student attitudes on these matters, so I deferred to his opinion. To paraphrase Peri Halasz, "Perhaps as a proscribed activity, painting will acquire a greater interest for rebellious youngsters." Maybe like the dinosaurs that evolved into birds, painting will simply adapt to the new world and learn to fly, or maybe read.

Letters, words, text, language, for Wittgenstein these may have been the limits of his world. For a pair of painters currently showing on Williamsburg's south side, they may provide an evolutionary device to answer that pressing question facing all contemporary painters, "What shall we paint?"

Larry Mullins is debuting in New York with a group of three large paintings on panel at Bellwether. All the paintings have a rugged, assured confidence. There is an overall graphic intensity that keeps the eye moving and the mind switching from a purely optical response to a mode where it reads, interprets, and attempts to decipher the language. For Mullins, lettering has a painterly even decorative quality, and the he investigates the symbolic properties and seductive mysteries of the letterforms. In *Studies in Semiotics*,



Larry Mullins, "Oral, Moral" (2003), Oil on panel.

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The Independent Press Association-NY recently honored *The Brooklyn Rail* with the following awards:

1st place: Best article about Immigrant Issues or Racial Justice--Gabriel Thompson, "One Immigrant's Journey" (September 2004).

1st place: Best article about the Arts--Amy Zimmer, "The Brownsville Rec. Center" (April 04)

2nd place: Best article about the Arts--Brian Carreira, "Harlem Arts: A Faux Renaissance" (Dec 03/Jan 04).

2nd place: Best editorial or commentary--T. Hamm, "The Issue is Free Speech" (Dec 03/Jan 04).

3rd Place: Best

Mieczyslaw Wallis discusses what he calls "semantic enclaves, ... that part of a work of art which consists of signs of a different kind from a different system than the signs of which the main body of a work consists." These recent paintings by Mullins seem to layer additional "semantic enclaves" through the use of typefaces. Contrasting Gothic Old English with an Old Fashioned Western typeface creates unusual compressions of references and allusions. Counter balancing the columns of words are patterned areas of curlicues, stripes, polka dots, and isometric cubes in punchy street wise colors, and in "WNYC" (2003), a metallic silver. These paintings have developed over time and the smoothness of surface is accomplished not only with a build up of thin coats of alkyd medium, but by sanding and revision. This kind of abrasive erasure gives the paintings a weathered, knocked-around look. The artist commented on his admiration of time worn and repainted signs one might see in the subway or the neighborhoods. "With these sign painters, there seems to be an urgency, a way of saying they really mean what they paint" stated Mullins. Words and phrases are used as a compositional framework, sometimes they rhyme visually, sometimes verbally. By varying their placement (horizontal and vertical) and scale, Mullins creates a kind of poetry that operates in the visual, conceptual, and oral traditions of Apollinaire, Picabia, and e. e. cummings. "Oral Moral" (2003) has the immediate readability of a truck sign, though this would be an ad for one bizarre carnival. While the top letters "O" and "M" are an Old fashioned style, the descending "ral" and "oral" are spiky black Gothic. Other fragments of text running mostly vertically are suspended in colored grounds of red or yellow or blocks of strong patterns. The resulting read is more than "slightly cryptic."

As a pioneering gallerist and Williamsburg booster, Joe Amrhein is known jokingly as the "mayor of the B'burg art scene." But he is also a nexus for the hundreds of artists he has presented through his flat file project and gallery. Now, perhaps more essentially, Amrhein is also gaining recognition as a painter of provocative innovation. Like Mullins, Amrhein's work focuses on letters and words. However these pieces derive much of their conceptual clout from their satirical skewing of critical bombast. From a more formal viewpoint, the typefaces used by Amrhein, though varied in style, color, italicization, shadow, all have straight-ahead legibility. Their function as carriers of linguistic content isn't compromised by exotic flourishes or ancient unfamiliar scripts. By utilizing these no nonsense styles, the words and phrases acquire a kind of momentum of authority that is subverted when the viewer reads and "gets the message." I've written before about Amrhein's painterly skills, and I enjoyed his expanded use of metal leaf, plate glass and, in this show, an old chair scrounged appropriately from an art critic friend. (Finally, something that's spent more time next to a critics behind than a New York artist.) "Retro" (2002) is the showstopper, a massive many-veiled piece that takes up an entire wall and extends into the gallery space 12 feet. OSCILATING BETWEEN BEING DEADPAN, SLIGHTLY CRYPTIC, AND UNEXPECTEDELY

Investigative News Story--
Marjory Garrison,
"Minimum Matter of
Survival" (May 04)

Honorable mention: Best
Investigative News Story--
Williams Cole, "Housing
vs. the RNC" (June 04).

Honorable mention: Best
Original Feature--Yvette
Walton, "My Life in the
NYPD" (Dec 03/Jan 04).
Come to the Brooklyn
Waterfront Festival.

ROMANTIC. This sentence is painted on a narrow strip of Mylar and mounted at ceiling level running nearly the entire width of the gallery. With each of the succeeding twenty-five sheets suspended about six inches apart, the lengths become slightly shorter, and the height greater until the final sheet covers the wall from floor to ceiling with one huge word. My only complaint is the difficulty of reading the receding texts, which may be the point. Much is made of the literary "content" of Amrhein's work, but there are painterly and compositional elements that may keep the textual a mere framework to structure the painting around. A sophisticated color sense and a use of analogous and narrow palettes enhance pieces like "Art (Art Forum, February 2001, P. 158)" (2003). This modest painting demonstrates the simple pleasures of a judicious use of black, white and gray.

Though the work of both Mullins and Amrhein is cutting-edge contemporary, dealing with abstraction and conceptual painting, perhaps its greatest affinity is to the ideas that brought about the crisis of the Iconoclasts at the council of Hieria in 754. Just as the modern abstractionists have tried to eliminate the figure or any reference to reality, the Iconoclasts sought to destroy any images of Christ, Mary, or God. The clever image-makers simply adapted to the times and started using letters and words as their subjects for veneration. Ironically by trying to enforce a type of abstraction, a "new realism" is born, the visual realism of written language.

—James Kalm

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