ART

Reviews

Surreal thing

At Julien Levy's gallery, cocktails mixed with Modernism to shape the art of this century

By **Anne Doran**

In 1927, an aspiring filmmaker named Julien Levy introduced himself to Marcel Duchamp at a Brancusi opening in New York. Levy had convinced his wealthy developer father to buy a marble version of Brancusi's *Bird in Space;* Duchamp, who had organized the show, took an immediate liking to the young man and invited him to Paris to collaborate on some experimental films. There, Levy encountered Surrealism and became an immediate convert. Upon returning to America, he opened the Julien Levy Gallery, where, in 1932, he presented the first exhibit of Surrealist art in New York. That gallery and the man who created it are the subjects of this show.

Dorothea Tanning, *A Game of Chess*, 1947.

During the '30s and '40s, Levy (1906–81) was at the center of the second great period of America's engagement with Modernism (the first being the years around the Armory Show of 1913); his gallery, with its cocktail openings, film nights, performances and artist-curated exhibits, instantly became *the* place to see the latest in European and American art. Levy's roster of artists included Joseph Cornell, Salvador Dali and Frida Kahlo, among many others. By the time he closed his gallery in 1949, the postwar shift of the avant-garde from Paris to New York was complete.

Still, "Julien Levy: Portrait of an Art Gallery" at the Equitable Gallery might have been better as a book than as an exhibition: The wall texts are often more engaging than the objects on view. The show is divided into sections with quirky names like "Fetish" and "Realism." Each is rich in ephemera, and that, along with a freewheeling overall structure, gives the show a certain giddy energy. But "Julien Levy" suffers from a nagging incompleteness. What's missing is the art that Levy discovered and promoted—some of the century's greatest works. Most likely, they couldn't be borrowed for a show that should have been in a museum but is in a corporate lobby instead.

Nevertheless, there are some gems. In the section titled "Abstraction," a spectacular painting by Arshile Gorky hangs near two by Wolfgang Paalen. "Play" includes a charming toy theater made in the late '40s by William Copley, Max Ernst, and Dorothea Tanning. "Ballet" features a wonderful set design by Paul Cadmus for Lew Christensen's 1938 production *Filling Station.* In it, a great blue space lit by a wall-sized factory window dwarfs a muscular dancer in a gas-station attendant's uniform.

The strongest sections in this show are those devoted to photography and film. Following in the footsteps of Alfred Stieglitz—who pioneered photography as a fine art earlier in the century—Levy opened his gallery with a show entitled "Retrospective of American Photography." Later, he'd exhibit the solarized images of Lee Miller, the minimal compositions of Paul Outerbridge and the photo-grams of Man Ray. He also revived the work of Eugene Atget, whose work had been almost forgotten by the 1930s. The photos here range from an early Nadar view of a hot-air balloon from 1870 to a gritty portrait by Walker Evans of diners through a lunch-counter window in New York.

Other sections are more disappointing. "Magic Realism" is devoted to ornately framed monstrosities by Pavel Tchelitchew and Eugene Berman. And though Surrealism's objectification of women was one of the movement's richest and most problematic issues, "Sex and the Sexes" includes only four works.

In addition to promoting other artists, Levy continued to make films and, late in his life, videos. Visitors can watch Levy's filmic "portraits" of Max Ernst and the incomparably beautiful Lee Miller, as well as his documentation of a performance of Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's *4 Saints in 3 Acts.* Also on view are some of the films that had their American premieres at Levy's gallery—including Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929).

There are times when Levy's sensibility comes across as more avant-garde than the work he showed. His appreciation of photography, his interest in printed matter and mechanical reproduction, and his willingness to mix high culture and low (in 1938, he mounted a show of animation art from Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs;* another in 1940 featured the work of cartoonist Milton Caniff, creator of *Terry and the Pirates*) link him directly to '60s Pop Art.

In fact, there's evidence in this show that the world may have lost an exceptionally interesting artist when Levy became a dealer. One vitrine contains two examples of Levy's artwork that look startlingly like Andy Warhol's. In his 1977 memoir, he described them as follows: "I included my own frieze of negative photostats, a series of shocking cover-page seriocomic collages from the *New York Evening Graphic,* the yellowist of vulgar journalism, and incredible Americana...premonitions of Pop Art?" You bet. Not only did he shape the art of his time, he saw its future.

"Julien Levy: Portrait of an Art Gallery" is on view at The Equitable Gallery, through October 31 (see Museums).

"Wishful Thinking"

James Graham & Sons, through Sept 11 (see Uptown).

Interesting group shows that mix relatively well-known and emerging artists have become something of a summer tradition at James Graham & Sons. This year's offering would seem, judging by its title, to be an exploration of hoping for the best, but it's a grim sort of optimism.

The show's centerpiece, Frank Moore's *Angel* (1996), features a glistening snowscape littered with picked-clean femur bones; there's also a spinal column and a human brain swathed in a bloody red haze. Footprints in the snow trail off toward a luminous horizon, while another set of tracklike forms approaches from the sky. It's an eloquent meditation on mortality.

Flanking Moore's piece are a couple of small, obsessively rendered drawings by Russell Crotty of what appear to be constellations. Both are presented as if viewed through a telescope or, considering their globular and almost organic grouping of dots, perhaps a microscope. They play nicely off Moore's preoccupations with biology and the beyond.

The surprises of the show are Larry Mullins and Raven Schlossberg. The former's painting has an expertly crafted surface, built up of layers of vaguely kitschy patterns and text. Schlossberg also makes optically dense work, though with a cooler hand; she snips color images out of newspapers and collages them in overlapping sections. Her piece features perfect blond children surrounded by row after row of abstract, freeze-frame faces. The effect is both saccharine and ominous—as if a Disney movie had gotten digitally shredded in a video-disc player.

The artist who makes the most sense here, however, is Cary S. Leibowitz, that fine whiner of the late '80s, who never leaves you in the dark as to what he means. One of his small plaquelike paintings reads "i wish liposuction were free," another, "i wish painting were dead." Leibowitz's plaintive bitching is always refreshing, mainly because in his case, talent and chutzpah win out over pathos. He's so good at painting—and complaining—that he may never get his wish to do anything else.

—*Sarah Schmerler*

Larry Mullins, *Dream Girl*, 1997.