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# The Paintings of Joseph Leo Messina, Jr.

## Recent Works Gravity•Wind•Man

Joseph tells some great stories. One of his favorite sites, the Flagler Viaduct of the Seven Mile Bridge in the Florida Keys was wrecked by a hurricane in 1935 and is currently a ruin and an observation deck. Despite a magnificent storm, he decided to sneak into a restricted area at night and complete an unfinished painting. Imagine the artist as he struggled with the gale force elements, not with an easel, but with a six foot wind- operated painting machine of his own patented design. The pendulum-like structure swung wildly as paint dropped from the contrivance to produce the strokes of the finished art. Meanwhile, the artist held on for dear life, constantly negotiating both the shifts in weather and the spurts of liquefied pigment. He is at once traditional artist, inventor and conceptual provocateur.

Joseph Leo Messina, Jr. learned about art at an early age. His grandfather, Leo A. Messina, was a Senior Designer at the Burlington Company. As a child Joseph surrounded himself with the manufactured floral patterns and personalized landscape paintings of his grandfather's legacy. In his teens, Joseph began an industrial sign and neon light company where he learned to formulate typography, color and design on schedule and on a budget, in projects large and small alike. Although achieving commercial success, something was spurring Joseph in a different direction. The artist took a plaintive stroll on the beach and asked G\_d how his own life should proceed. As if on cue, a small sand-polished purple glass stone bubbled up from the waves and deposited itself before him. It was etched with the single word in capital letters: "FAITH". He was directed from this experience to become a fine artist, to seek out a life based on personal creativity and helping others. He still keeps the stone in a small felt bag bearing another inscription, "My Word" in order to commemorate this personal pledge.

From the very outset, Joseph's art would be different. He began by researching his favorite painters like Jackson Pollock, Joan Mitchell, Vincent van Gogh and especially Henri Matisse. He examined the works of these artists, yet

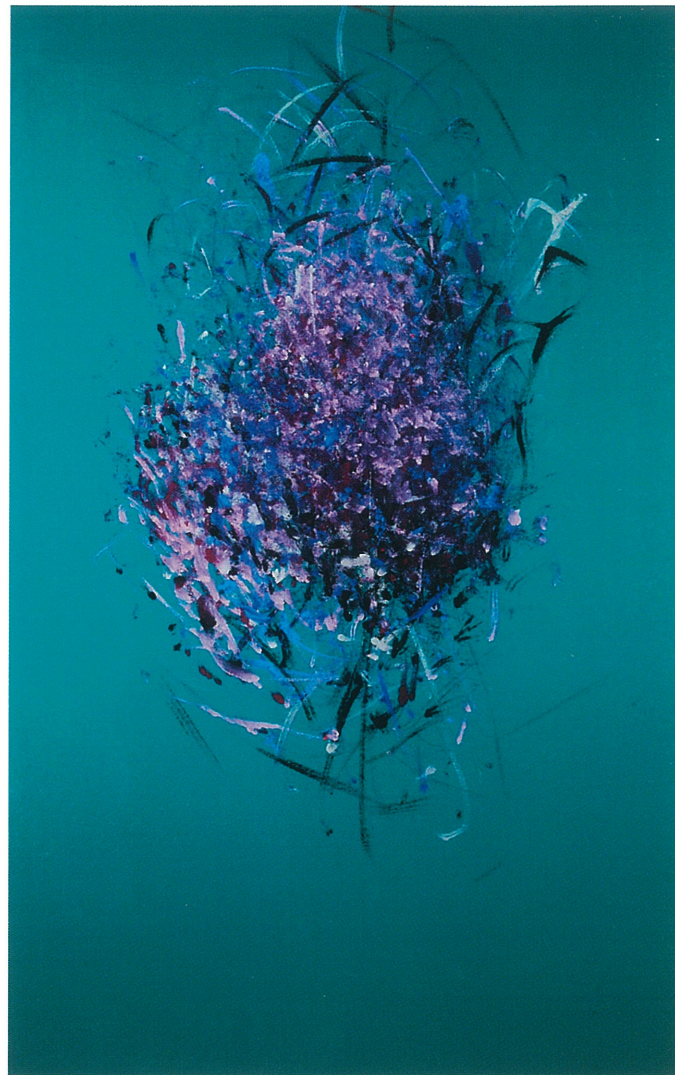


**Temp, 9/11/2003**  
30"x48" Oil & Sand on Canvas

Refers to the words temporal or temporary; the work of art as an object structured in time. The second in the 9/11 Memorial Series

did not set out to emulate them. In fact, Joseph insists that the essential nature of the work of art is about channeling something or someone outside of one's own experience; he's convinced his own work is richer, more resonant and mystical as a result. Conversely, the artist's creative personality also has a practical materialist side based on his industrial training and interests in science. He is an accomplished inventor, creating many product designs from a specialized laundry basket to the plans for a waste-oil refinery. His idol is the Renaissance master, Leonardo da Vinci. He is especially impressed with Da Vinci's Eight Barreled Machine Gun, 1482 where the Florentine envisioned a proto-Gatling gun creating a devastating assault. Whether the Renaissance genius actually built this contraption or not is beside the point. Da Vinci's inventions were designed to work both as technology and art, creating new definitions or boundaries for everyone living after him. It is this salient point that changed the method of how Joseph would create paintings.

The artist encountered a broken swing on the beach, its hanging chain creating unique designs through repetitive movement. Reflecting upon this process and employing the concept for studio practice, Joseph was led to invent and build a painting machine. There have been other artists who have done so, like the Swiss sculptor, Jean Tinguely, in pieces like *Art Machine*, 1959, also *Metamatic No. 17*, 1959, but these artists usually used industrial motors to do the work. Like the conceptual artists Andrew Goldsworthy, or Robert Smithson, Joseph wanted to use nature as an intimate partner in the creation of the work of art. He decided that the machine would be wind-powered and formed Gravity.Wind.Man, Inc., his own company. After six separate designs and countless trials and errors, the apparatus, (as he calls it) was completed. It is constructed from medical syringes filled with thinned out 1-Shot industrial sign paint in nine separate colors. These are held in check by a vacuum. Each color is connected to Neoprene tubing, which comes down the apparatus and ends in a spring-tipped shock absorber, similar to a finger joint. The joints are connected to nine artist-made brushes comprised of nylon and squirrel hair. Each brush takes at least an hour to prepare and can be used for only one sitting. The housing of the machine is a solid steel frame, which stretches as high as twelve feet in inclement weather. The sides of the machine are long enough so that the wind can properly move the brushes, creating the sweeps of a stroke that mimic the human hand. The canvas is firmly duct-taped onto a custom built easel at



***Time to Leave, 2003***  
30"x48" Oil & Sand on Canvas

Puns on leaving as an action word and/or a physical leaf stuck in the painting's surface.



**The 1st with 9, 2003**  
30"x48" Oil & Sand on Canvas

Painted in the Florida Keys, it is the first painting using nine brushes.

the base of the machine. The easel is a six foot steel arc, curved deeper at the center than at the sides to ensure that the strokes of paint are equal and firm throughout the completed work of art. As the artist adjusts the syringes, the paint begins to flow down. If he wants a different color or mix, he will insert his body into the process and adjust the syringe while the wind is blowing. The trick here is that if the artist inserts too much of his own will, the painting will be destroyed. Like Jackson Pollock dancing across a floor-based canvas while depositing paint, bits of detritus, cigarette butts, thumb tacks and the like in his Full Fathom Five, 1947, Joseph may use blown beach sand which sticks to the paint layer as part of the finished work. When the painting is completely dry, it is neatly stretched onto an aluminum stretcher. Joseph's use of the wind and rain as a creative force helps him to focus on cooperation with nature, rather than the hubristic pride often stemming from excessive artistic control. Nature used as a partner and held respectfully in balance gives the paintings a particularly organic and egalitarian feel.

Joseph's paintings are process-based abstract works, a hybrid of industrial and Abstract Expressionist aesthetics. In his rich use of colors: plum raspberry, midnight purple, sky blue, blazing yellow, and metallic colors like aluminum paint, one may assume he is being influenced by his favorite masters, Matisse, Mitchell and Pollock in a studio-based aesthetic choice. Yet he approaches the concept of color systematically and technically, using the 1-Shot industrial sign painter's chart. Like George Seurat picking optical mixes for his massive painting, A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte, 1884, Joseph's color begins conceptually, but through his artistic sensibility makes it experiential and ties it to the memory of real objects. The color is strong and expansive and has the saturated hues of still-life, fruits and layer cakes. In the case of his 9/11 Anniversary Series, the artist uses raw cotton duck to approximate the horror of the World Trade Center event. Within this context, the white unprimed canvas can be seen as a void or an abyss for the paint to act upon and change. In either case, environmental temperatures must be factored onto the working process as the paint is deposited by the machine. If the weather is cold, the paint thickens and must be diluted with industrial thinner. Likewise if it is too hot, the paint runs and must be thickened. Every situation is different and as a result, final painting is the sum of these choices.



**The Story of the Stone, 2003**  
30"x48" Oil & Sand on Canvas



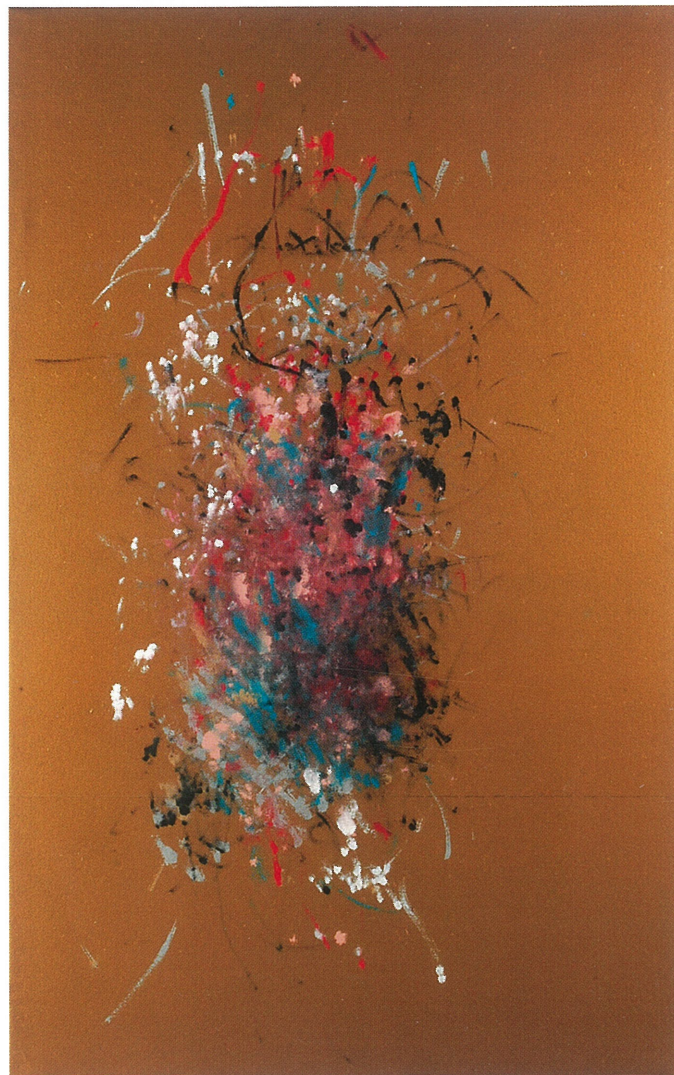
**The Stone**

In a seminal work, *The Story of the Stone*, 2003 the painting recalls his profound experience in finding the glass stone labeled "FAITH." The stone is likened to an immovable force even as the painting becomes a metaphor of pure energy. The artist references veils of sparks, fireworks and the surging star patterns of van Gogh's *The Starry Night*, 1889. In Joseph's painting the ground is a plum red; the marks are dark blue, off-white and orange. As paint is dropped, the process of the apparatus creates bold new colors by the tertiary mixes that are essentially unplanned. The painted image is seen as a metaphysical reality where transformation can take place. The format of the veil may reference Catholic doctrine and the artist's own religious beliefs. This motif has been depicted in numerous paintings portraying *The Veil of Veronica* by such diverse masters as El Greco, 1580-82 and Domenico Fetti, c.1620. These images depict Christ's human face, disembodied after the Crucifixion and displayed on a cloth as if by miracle. Joseph's contemporary painting stubbornly retains its abstract nature, yet evokes a face. The effect in a non-objective work is at once night sky and obscured human presence. According to the logic of Abstract Expressionism as expressed by the critic Clement Greenberg, brush marks cease to describe real objects existing in three-dimensional space and assert only their own material nature and the creative artist's personality. The works of such masters as Pollock, Mark Tobey, and Milton Resnick sparkle with accretions of paint, refusing to employ figurative meaning. Joseph embraces this abstract aesthetic but updates it and marries it to a working relationship with nature, random chance and the technology of the machine. The result is a profound freedom as he seeks to express what he feels is the world beyond our senses.

There is a strong conceptual aspect to this artist's work. It is the identity of the artist as nature's conceptual advocate and society's shamanistic healer. Joseph's uniqueness is not simply based on one aspect of his artistic effort. The creation of his machine, the set-up of the apparatus, the actions of the artist while the apparatus paints, the use of random chance as a factor, and the employment of nature as a partner in art are all ideas worthy of further documentation. In fact, the artist ceaselessly photographs and videos his process, so that others may see the entire constellation of his creativity. Other artists have worked with nature in a direct and primary way. The artist Robert Smithson created the *Spiral Getty*, 1970 by moving earth with a bulldozer on the shore of the Great Salt Lake in Utah.

In a series of recent works, Joseph retains the formats of 30"x 48", 30"x 53" and 33"x 63". The artist presents his base colors in a certain order: pink, black, silver, red-orange, deep red, green, blue-green, mustard yellow, and tan-brown. The strokes are then laid upon the pre-painted grounds. These strokes range from small and Pointillist in nature to a broad circular motion much like the patterns of a semi-circle. The painting's name is often determined by its conceptual history and working methods. Temp, 9/11, 2003 refers to the words temporal or temporary; the work of art as an object structured in time. Time to Leave, 2003 puns on leaving as an action and/or a physical leaf stuck in the painting's surface. Process based titles such as 1st With 9 recalls the artist's use of nine colors connected to separate brushes. Metal # 3 Gold Missing Man Got Skipped, 2003 evokes a memory of a missing man plane formation, an Air Force flying ritual for a downed pilot which the artist observed while painting on the beach. This process of naming the works with simple industrial titles, numbers or elliptical references again recall the great era of Abstract Expressionism, calling attention to the non-figurative qualities of the works, but also embedding them with a particular experiential history.

In the past, brush marks were seen as the indicator of an individual artist; unique and irreproducible. This was the case from Diego Velazquez to the Impressionists, to the Abstract Expressionists. When Jackson Pollock dealt with this issue, he distanced himself from the problem by flinging and pouring the paint rather than brushing it on. For Joseph, it is his apparatus or machine that is physically touching the paint. So is the mark a unique gesture captured by the artist, randomly captured by nature, a product of his machine, or all three? Like da Vinci's gun, the painted strokes create a hybridized category continually open to discussion. Are Joseph's strokes ironic comments on artistic production as in Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup cans and ideas regarding Pop Art? The artist is very emphatic about authenticity even as he comments on his own mysticism. "Remember that I have worked in all kinds of geography and weather: Long Island, the Florida Keys, and Rhode Island, painting during Hurricanes Gustav and Isidore in 90 mile an hour winds. You can't fake that. The paintings create themselves. I just channel the energy from nature or beyond and it's not about me. There are times when I try to influence the painting and the painting revolts. It has a will of its own!"



**Metal, #3 Gold Missing Man Got Skipped, 2003**

30"x48" Oil & Sand on Canvas

Evokes a memory of a missing-man plane formation, an Air Force flying ritual for a downed pilot which the artist observed while painting on the beach in Rhode Island.

This let the moved earth, erosion and drought change the environment, thus creating something both monumental and impermanent. After his experiences in World War II, the German artist Joseph Beuys used fat and felt to create powerful images of healing for him and others (Fat Corner, 1968 and Felt Suit, 1970). Like these artists, Joseph's essential belief is that art is positive, therapeutic and in dialogue with the sacred. To augment his work, he volunteers as an End of Life Counselor with terminally ill patients at a hospice on Long Island. As various patients have died, he has made memorial paintings in their honor. In *Reds # 9 Watch Out Diseases*, 2003 he sees painting as essentially talismanic, warding off evil through creativity. In *Jo-Ann Made the Party*, 2003 the artist makes a memorial for his deceased mother using her actual oxygen tubes within his painting apparatus. This is a strong conceptual and performative act that would not necessarily present itself in the final work; but of course it does, because Joseph knows it matters and sees it as part of his process.

Joseph Leo Messina, Jr.'s body of work demonstrates vividness, singularity of intent and variety. His paintings mirror the color and beauty of the world in the face of elemental nature, chaos, machines and the passage of time. They retain an awareness of the environment as something far greater than we will ever know, even as they memorialize a particular kind of American "can-do know-how." This is a machine-age aesthetic married to the most astute kind of Action Painting. It's painting that addresses the unknown but has great hope, skill and aplomb. The marriage of order and chaos typifies Joseph as a spiritual seeker of the greatest sort, a person that sees art as an adventure to be lived and invites us to come along for the ride. He is an artist who considers the joys of color, the frenetic qualities of random marks, the homegrown love of building a machine, the depth of awe in the face of the sublime, and the passionate desire for divine meaning. His message reminds us that we are in current danger of losing the essential things that matter; beauty, value, significance and transcendence, the real stuff of life, the real stuff of art.

**An essay by Joel Silverstein**



***Jo-Ann Made the Party,***  
2003 30"x48" Oil & Sand on Canvas

*Painted in Montauk NY at Hither Hills State Park. The only painting in the Gravity Wind Man series to take nine hours to complete.*

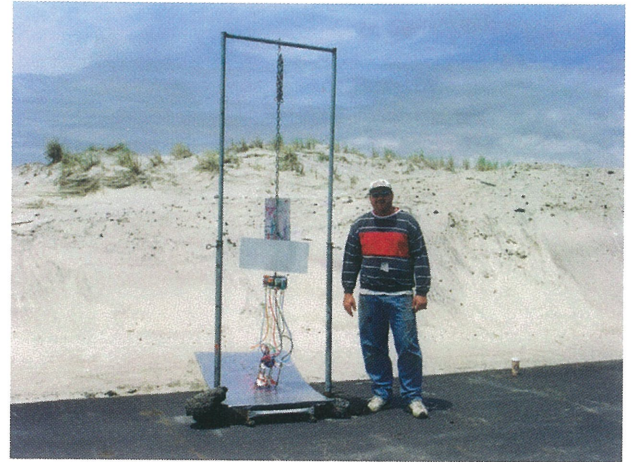
### **About the Artist**

Born in 1963 in Jamaica, New York, Joseph Leo Messina, Jr.'s interest in making things began in childhood, surrounded by the art and craft that his family produced. His mother created handmade beaded hair accessories and his paternal grandfather was a fabric designer and styling coordinator for textile firms. Messina has been particularly influenced by his grandfather's creative spirit and his lifelong work as a painter.

When Messina was three, he and his family moved to North Babylon, Long Island. He now lives with his wife and two children in Babylon Village. At age sixteen, Messina entered the sign industry, first learning to weld and to work with plastics. He went on to acquire many skills, including plumbing, carpentry, and electrical wiring. He also worked in a variety of jobs, ranging from bouncer, candy salesman, dog breeder and kennel operator. (Messina continues to volunteer as an animal rescuer of dogs and squirrels.) It was in the sign business that Messina concentrated his efforts beginning in the early 1980s. At first he worked for others, and since 1989 he has run his own firm, Absolutely Neon. Over the years his focus has shifted from signs to neon lighting installations in residences, salons, and clubs. Clients in the New York metropolitan area and throughout the Northeast have given Messina free artistic reign in the design of specialized lighting. Messina is also an inventor of novelties, tools, and pet and home products, including a laundry basket invention, chosen in 1997 as one of QVC's "Quest for the Best" top 20 products in New York. Messina has become a curator of art shows in the metro New York area. He also is a member of the Babylon Village Art Council Board of Directors.

### **About the Author**

Joel Silverstein is an artist, critic and teacher. He has written for Artcritical.com, Sculpture, d'ART, New York Arts and has also written several catalogue essays including, Julian Hatton and George Rada: A Painter's Odyssey. The artist/ critic is a Founding and Executive Board Member of the Jewish Art Salon and has curated, The Dura Europos Project at the Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art and UJA, NY.



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*Joseph from Babylon*  
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# The Shiviti Paintings of Jill Nathanson

*The Elizabeth Harris gallery is noteworthy for its focus on painterly painting. Ms. Harris maintains a space in Chelsea, where the concerns of process and material aspects of the painter's trade have an ongoing home. If the gallery has any sort of agenda, it is that artistic emotion and thought be embedded in this viscous and palpably tactile medium, a demand that illicitly startling admissions of honesty and vulnerability as demonstrated by the exhibited works. The examples of Pat Passlof, Jim Bohary, Tracy Jones, Victor Pesce and a group show appearance by the ever-mysterious Albert York, harness a well felt maturity and unflagging imagination usually inspiring confidence. What amounts to stylistic difference is far less important than initially apparent. As Harold Bloom has stated in *The Anxiety of Influence*, 1 a tension always exists between the exhaustion of a historical style and the will to be original at this late point in our culture. Thus, an aura of poignancy is added to these artist's considerable gifts, giving their work a meaning, emotional directness and resolve in an era that has often abandoned or ironized models of subjectivity.*



Jill Nathanson is also a member of the gallery readily demonstrating such complexity. In a body of work stretching over several exhibitions, Nathanson has sought to expand the context of abstract painting. Such works as *Influence*, 2002 and *Secrets of a Solid*, 2000 play off the schematics of traditional two-point perspective. Diamond-like shapes are held in place by a grid. This organization could easily double for the panes of glass on a skyscraper in any urban environment. Illusion is enhanced by the draftsmanship as a view seen from the ground. Vanishing points fly off rather steeply, implying great distance. Yet going to great lengths, the artist undermines this experience, aerating or encrusting the surface as she sees fit. Her interests in Matisse and Hofmann concern color as an organizational principle. Hofmann's Push-Pull theory is of particular importance, prioritizing color

relationships as dynamic spatial tensions inherently in conflict and addressed only through balance. This lesson is transposed to Nathanson's carefully layered and loaded trapezoidal shapes, which interrelate as flattened design elements but also exist within an implied perspectival matrix. Terra verde greens, salmon pinks or icy blues constantly invert expectation by the subtle intrusion of patches of color breaking against the picture plane. In her words, this sets up an "aesthetic of negation"; a contradictory flux employed against the positivism of the drawings perceptual evidence. A category is then created. It is neither abstraction as an autonomous object, or a nature-based reduction purified to an essence, but a dialectical and unstable relationship of the two. Its very meaning rests upon perceptual and cognitive anomalies that have sent human beings to scratch their heads in negotiating space and assessing experience since time began.

Nathanson's other body of work is related formally, but is more specific and personal in content. In her Shiviti Series, the artist has addressed her own Jewish background and its relationship to the ideas of Modernism. From the Kantian Sublime and Theosophy, to Mondrian, Rothko and Newman, artists have addressed issues of spirituality through what was impossible to express or demarcate in conventionally figurative terms. Robert Rosenblum traced this development from the Northern Romantic painters and their experience of an abstracting transcendental principal derived from the landscape.<sup>2</sup> However, Jewish painters like Rothko and critics like Clement Greenberg emerged from a different tradition. Jewish culture grapples with an invisible God, where the proscriptions of the Second Commandment do not out-law representational images as is popularly imagined, but proscribes their limitations. The overwhelming concern is a fear of idolatry, as Mimesis, the mirroring of nature may become something to worship in itself. Many philosophers characterize Mimesis as the essential Greek preoccupation, whereby hermeneutics and textuality remain the essential Jewish ones. This is experienced as a conflict in the West, as old as the Iconoclastic Controversy of the Byzantine Empire and as new as the anti-visual discourse of the French Deconstructivists. It sets up a Jewish dialectic as a unique arbiter of meaning, one that Nathanson comments upon and is readily familiar.

Shivitis are also called Misrachs. They are decorative plaques found on the eastern walls of Synagogues in Europe and the Middle East. During Diasporic times, eastern walls took on a special significance as they faced Jerusalem, the spiritual home of Jews in exile. The origin of the Shiviti comes from the 16th Psalm, transliterated into Hebrew and translated as: "Shivi Adonai Lunegdi Tamid. I have set the Lord before me always." The words became part of the daily prayer. By the 18th and 19th Centuries, votive tablets with these words on them were used as a point of focus and mediation in Synagogue worship. Nathanson has accessed the history of both Abstract Expressionism and Cubism to produce a series of creative Shivitis for no actual religious purpose, but for a powerful analogy between the specifics of

religious worship and the Sublime as related to Modernist Painting. The series is merely numbered, such as Shiviti #5 or 7, recalling the Greenbergian inspired practice of Jackson Pollack. They are also executed in an oval format, similar to the Cubist still-lives of Picasso and Braque. Nathanson employs text as does Picasso's *Ma Jolie*, 1911-12, but use of the painted Hebrew liturgical phrase slyly equates her technique with concepts and the process of the sacred text itself. In Talmudic thought, God consulted the Torah in the world's making, so so textuality is paramount and is subsumed into the visual. The artist effaces a portion of the phrase as part of her practice, another apparent aside to the act of creation as both artistic and divine.

The Jewish mystical tradition, called Kabbalah, sees the absolute unity of creation within the 26 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Nathanson perceives an affinity with the German Pictorial tradition beginning with Goethe and ending with Hofmann and relates it to Jewish thought. Colors have individual characteristics of their own, but as previously mentioned create aesthetic wholes through dialectical tension. From a Jewish point of view, this corresponds to the Kabbalistic concept of the Spherot, dynamic qualities of the Godhead that must be reconciled specifically through the moral actions, prayers and meditations of the individual. In this case, the aesthetic integration of the picture must be completed by the observer yearning for completion, yet never actually receiving it. The Shiviti paintings render a Jewish dimension to the teachings of Hofmann, even as it refers to Nathanson's other body of painting. If a German and Jewish connection seems odd, a worthwhile corollary to this premise is an article by the German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas on the German Idealism of the great Jewish philosophers 3 An important dialogue has been tragically cut short, one that is still open to speculation. For Nathanson the artist, the German artistic legacy must be embraced. For Nathanson the Jew, this embrace is inherently problematic but essentially dialectical. Historical conflict is a state never to be resolved, but diacritically presented through social, utopian, religious or artistic constructs. Strangely, this diacritical stance echoes the color and picture plane problematics so important to Hofmann and to the artist, herself.

These paintings exist in a world where color is paramount as a speculum of metaphysical activity. Never slathered or wantonly spilled, the works are instead layered and stippled with utmost precision. Conversely, Nathanson is also an experimenter, evoking the text while creating webs of meaning that conceal even as they reveal. Reds, blues and violets dominate, reversing weights and perceptions of volume through chroma alone. By placing a purplish black on top, or a thin butter yellow on the ground plane, she analogizes universal concepts of creation as speculated by rabbinical sources, all while simply playing with color. If the weight of history has often stymied us, as Harold Bloom suggests, artists like Nathanson can reinvigorate abstraction by creating a dialogue with Jewish ideas and the

artistic past. Ultimately what is most Jewish in Bloom and Nathanson herself, is the idea that only through embracing the weight of the past, can joy and henceforth spontaneity be utterly possible.

- **Joel Silverstein** *is a NY based artist/critic*

#### Footnotes

- 1) Bloom, Harold The Anxiety of Influence. Pgs 19-96
- 2) Rosenbum, Robert Modern Painting and the Northern Sublime. Pgs 10-64
- 3) Habermas, Jurgen The German Idealism of the Jewish philosophers Pgs 21-43

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- 1) Bloom , Harold The Anxiety of Influence; A Theory of Poetry. NY: Oxford University Press.1997
- 2) Habermas, Jurgen The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers. Philosophy and Political Profiles, Pgs21-43 Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983
- 3) Julius Anthony Idolizing Pictures; Idolatry, Iconoclasm and Jewish Art. NY: Thames and Hudson, 2001
- 4) Kochan, Lionel Beyond the Graven Image. NY: New York University Press, 1997
- 5) Rosenblum, Robert Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition. NY: Harper and Row, 1975
- 6) Gabreille Sed- Rajna Jewish Art. NY: Harry N Abrams, Inc 1995



# Smack Mellon Studios

56 Water Street (DUMBO) 718-834-8761, hours: W-Sun. 12-6

What the New York gallery scene needs more of is organizations like Smack Mellon Studios, located in DUMBO. The art is presented unpretentiously and without much hoopla - in fact you will be lucky if you even see a person who works at Smack Mellon while you are there. Coming upon the entrance to the gallery is a bit like trying to find the late-night bar with no sign that your friend's friend told you was somewhere near the deli that one guy worked at, but that is all part of its charm.

Smack Mellon is run by a core staff of two. Founded by Andrea Reynosa and Kevin Vertrees in 1995, the helm was handed over in 2000 to Kathleen Gilrain, the current Executive Director and life-blood of Smack Mellon, and David Baskin, the Project Coordinator and general go-to man. Smack Mellon has six exhibitions a year, four curated by guest curators, and two curated by Gilrain, who received her BFA from the Cooper Union and her MFA from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and was the Director of the Socrates Sculpture Park from 1995-2000. Each Smack Mellon show has a curatorial theme such as the June 2002 Hash Brown Potatoes show of artists whose work dealt with alternative visions of American culture from Lucas Monaco's sprawling drawings of imagined cities and horizons to Francois Bucher's slide show of graffitied Brittany Spears advertisements. Smack Mellon accepts exhibition proposals from experienced curators and unsolicited slides from artists although it is rare that these slides fit with upcoming themes for shows.

The 5000 square foot space, which has been home to Smack Mellon since 1999, is raw with exposed wood beams running along its 40-foot ceilings, a stair-well to the mezzanine level that would make anyone think twice, and the utilitarian remnants of its former life as a spice factory still



Mir 2 at Smack Mellon. A multimedia installation and performance that uses the international space station as a model for a collaborative project

the belief of the late Leslie Fiedler, who believed that having an original voice and vision "is not necessarily a good thing for one's career these days."

And Giffin's voice was unique. He lived in an irony free zone. This does not mean he was without humor, but his sense of art's mystery was damn serious. It meant survival to him. As he told his wife Nancy, after a hiatus, he had to once again take the risk of creation "or go insane." This need to create life from the void that is the empty canvas was best expressed in his notebooks: "My link to romantic painting is found in a vernacular of the real world (painting as an object, a product of color) as much as it is in the illusions created." Giffin used his art to reach deeply into the unconscious realm, where we face the truest reality and from where he sought to create a new reality. A fearless and fear invoking endeavor. This dread is much less tangible than the apprehension of exclusion from the consensus of the trendy that now drives the art world, as it does our larger society. Don didn't care enough about being accepted. He cared about the work. As he wrote, quoting Pascal "Follow the form and eventually belief in the form will follow." Which I might amend to, "Follow the form and hopefully the 'nonconformists' will follow." Perhaps they would have had he lived longer.

But he didn't. So, I take with me one lasting memory of Don's work and why I shouldn't care if anyone agrees with me or not. After a particularly awful day, feeling fed up with the sound of my own inner voice, believing not the canard of The Emperor of

Modern Art having no clothes, but more aptly that often the clothes aren't worth talking about, I drove to the Grimes Gallery. A Giffin painting hung on a wall in the back room. I stood there for I don't know how long, and miraculously, I lost myself inside the painting: the colors,

shapes and the rising ineffable moods and images of light that seemed to breathe of the initial spark of life. I saw what great art means to me and why it is necessary for my existence: it presents a space for hope, beauty and redemption from the harrowing madness that surrounds me.



*Don Giffin, Blind Sight, 2002, acrylic on panel, 60 x 72"*

# Drawing Conclusions—Work by Artist-Critics

NY Arts Gallery December 12, 2003—January 13, 2004

Curated by Jill Conner and Gae Savannah

by Gae Savannah

In *The Open Work*, Umberto Eco notes, “to appreciate a work as a perceptible form means to react to the physical stimuli of the object, not just intellectually but also, so to speak, physically.” Through both tangible and intangible craft, the artist-critics in this show proffer a more poly-dimensional picture of each artist’s idiosyncratic vision.

Fragile eggshells clumsily form flat mountain peaks. Here, internally altering the routine *no-man’s land of permanent addresses, fixed thoughts*, and kitchen duties, Gushenn Calik, artist, (Lily Faust, writer,) meanders between language and landscape. Along the way in fact, *meanings peak here and there*, whisking the visual and verbal puns into an exquisite meringue.

Christopher Chambers makes writing and art akin to lyrics of a ballad. Inspiration is where you find it. “Sometimes you have to look pretty hard and other times it just won’t leave you alone,” he strums soulfully midstream a down-to-earth but poignant review. In both his writing and art, what stirs us is Chambers’ own brand of wry, seasoned vernacular. With minimal chords he really riffs on space and archetype.

Both visually and verbally, Ana Tiscornia portrays contemporary

life as shifting, contracting, and fusing layers of space. A house floor plan seen from above emphasizes how a home, which should be a warm, permanent, comforting entity, is also a cold commodity to be bought or sold, as is a beautiful, fine abstract painting. On another level, sensitively handling subtle, industrial, glowy tints, Tiscornia evokes a hazy fragile emotional basement that seeps up to the surface and beyond.

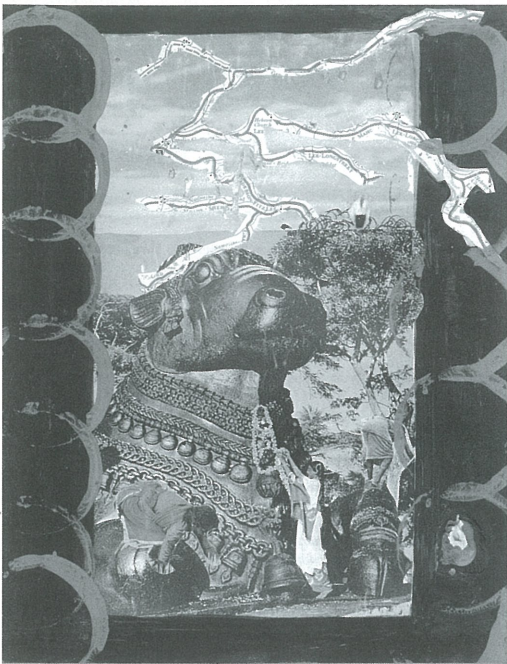
Words and images fill in alternate dimensions of Sabine von Fischer’s plugged-in panopolis. In her artwork, stark graphic overlays of dizzying patterns of sonic stimulation race around us as we again and again shoot up another dose of blissful technology. Tapping at the computer keys however, von Fischer forays into an underlying dread and angst over cold, barren, nature-less urban existence with copper wires and sewage as guts.

Alastair Noble’s sculpture is literally poetry. His drawing is shaped by a few lines of Mallarmé’s poem, *Un Coup de Des*. With the cut-out strips, the spare words of the poem, and the quadrangular shapes, the sails of sloops, the milky nebulous white space of the Japanese rice paper gently expands, enveloping us in the mist of timelessness.

Likewise, Noble uses language verbally to laud Christopher Wilmarth’s use of aqua glass and light to compose physical poetry.

Jennifer Reeves amuses us with pugilistic blurting out of sophomoric invective. Pitching conventional figuration, she depicts just the abstract gestures of communication, such as one’s leaning forward in defiance. In consumer colors such as Baskin-Robbins pink, Reeves, with wit to boot, dishes out flip and facile yet also telling judgements. Similarly, starting a review lamenting, “Dear Albert, Pay no heed to my letter. I had it all wrong,” Reeves utilizes histrionic shifts in the language we expect, to shock-’n’delight.

Finally, Joel Silverstein plays high-and-low tag with viewers as he drives us through two continents on a faux mystical journey. On the itinerary are numerous postmodern monuments including those of kitsch, pastiche, and the flavorful mundane. Humble cow is made sacred god, highway-map roads mimic exalted Expressionist brushstrokes, unsensational mechanical reproduction meets exotic seaside. Likewise, in his review Silverstein adroitly navigates us through the multifaceted installations of Deborah Sperber.



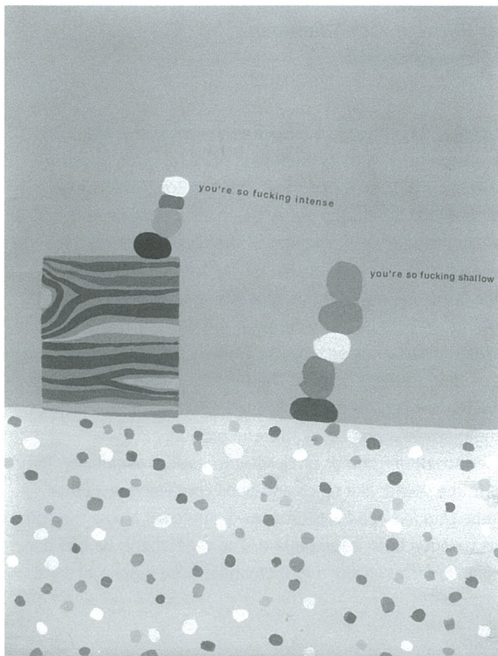
Joel Silverstein, Untitled, 2003, collage, mixed media

**Sculpture Magazine**  
**December 2001 Vol. 20 No. 10**  
**Review by Joel Silverstein**

*New York*

Devorah Sperber takes small modules or units of industrial production denoting the detritus of society and builds them into fantastic installations of visual aggregation and multiplicity. Mimicking old four-color reproduction, television, and contemporary computer imagery, she uses a special computer program to scan landscape photography into pixilated digits. These are blocked as coded color squares, which can be matched with a suitably toned industrial module. Viola! A sculptured mural of weight, gravity, and lyricism. The bridging of cheap industrial materials and epic size, scale, and a visuality lends Sperber's work a unique high/low impact not easily forgotten. The title piece, *Virtual Environment* (1999-2000), is composed of thousands of spools of thread. The image of a rural rock wall coalesces with the aid of the viewer's perception. It evokes 19th-century pointillist techniques, as well as the fractal, incremental nature of our own era. Color luminosity and richness of tone exist within the thread itself, yet they also serve as the equivalent of an abstracted brushmark loaded with pigment, the signifier of that planar form of expression, illusionist two-dimensional painting.

*Joel Silverstein, excerpt from review of Devorah Sperber in Sculpture magazine Dec. 2001*



Jennifer Reeves, Untitled, 2003, drawing

**Stella's New Name**  
**by Jennifer Reeves**

Dear Albert,

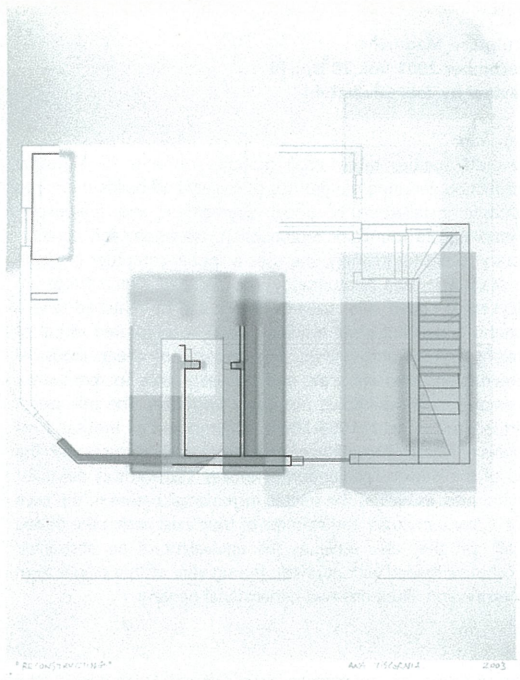
Pay no heed to my last letter. I had it wrong. I had it all wrong. When I first saw the Stella sculptures I was enamored. I told you they were too beautiful not to love and too cruel not to stay away. They were like bleak Lucifers bearing no obfuscation. The second time I saw them, I had reservations, but I didn't understand them and I didn't understand why.

The coolness of the air this morning is disturbing my skin. The petunias and vines in the flower boxes, which I hope you shall see, are making a recovery. Their leaves were eaten off due to the slugs. Due to my taking forever to plant them and for leaving them in harms way on the patio by the stonewall. Finally, though, all the rain we've been having has abated. So the roots have had time to dry out, ridding themselves of another problem. Rot. And now in the undercurrent, I feel another storm coming. The emptiness of the air is thick with wet. My intuitive eye can see it and the flowers sense it too. Far from the slugs, they are safe in their negative spaces. I feel strangely warm. Bring on the thunder.

Even though Ken Johnson of The New York Times gave recognition a stellar go, his roots got rammed in the muck. True, Stella gives us sci-fi machines but not inadvertently or to his detriment. It is deliberate. Not the sci-fi. That is not quite the right description. These sculptures are aggressive like monsters in a different sense. They are musical battle plans meant to chew up evil spirits with the elegant indifference of tractor blades. They are distressing because they seem like Edward Scissorhands without the vulnerability and they are hard in the way a man thinks he owns a woman just because she loved him once. They appear to be unsuccessful because they are all about justice without an ounce of kindness. But really, they are beasts stabbing themselves to death with their own obsessiveness.

*Jennifer Reeves, excerpt from review of Frank Stella in NYArts magazine Sept. 2003*





Ana Tiscornia, *Untitled*, 2003, drawing

halls of ARCO, waiting for a piece to cry out to me in a voice heard above the many others that would obviously be competing for my attention. I am still surprised at how quickly it all happened. A greenish reflecting surface suddenly revealed itself to me with unmistakable vividness. It was steel, treated in such a way that it was simultaneously imbued with the look of a mirror and of a digital screen, with a single word in the centre: *Lexotan*.

Ana Tavares, the artist who created the piece. It is a medication that helps people to deal with reality by separating them from it just a little bit. We could say that it enables one to look at reality from a standpoint of virtuality, a characteristic that is the leitmotif of Ana's work. *Lexotan* is a kind of complicitous call to look from within the mirror, to live life in provisional circumstances, through shifting episodes. Reflecting on the art system that is reflected in art, to distance oneself a little and to look at the interplay of cultural exchanges that come out of the consolidation of a transactional culture – this was just the first layer that was projected onto this pseudo-screen; the immediate interpretation imposed by ARCO itself as a context. Afterward would come the sensation of the inapprehensible and the unstable, the world of virtualities in which we live, our nerves and our fears, the demands and anxieties that have wound up making sedatives so popular.

ourselves and things, or between ourselves and others. They were, in the end, representations of contemporary life, a life which, more than moving in step with nature, develops under the pressure of a complex mass-media construction in a speculative landscape. Seen independently from its original installation, *Lexotan* works metonymically; it is a part that could indeed represent the whole. Everything is amalgamated in this piece which, during the weekend of ARCO, took on yet another dimension, since it was during those days that more than 2 million people took to the streets to protest against the war in Iraq. The tension that the world was experiencing, on the verge of another war, was not irrelevant to my choice of *Lexotan* – and surely not to its existence as an artwork, either. I include this among its merits: the way that the piece can be contextualised in its times makes it essential, not only because it reflects them, but also because, paradoxically, it offers a refuge from them.

3 x 90 x 7 cm



Ana Tiscornia, excerpt from review of Devorah Sperber in *Sculpture magazine* Dec. 2001



Steve Rockwell, *Inside*, 2003, printer's ink on laser print

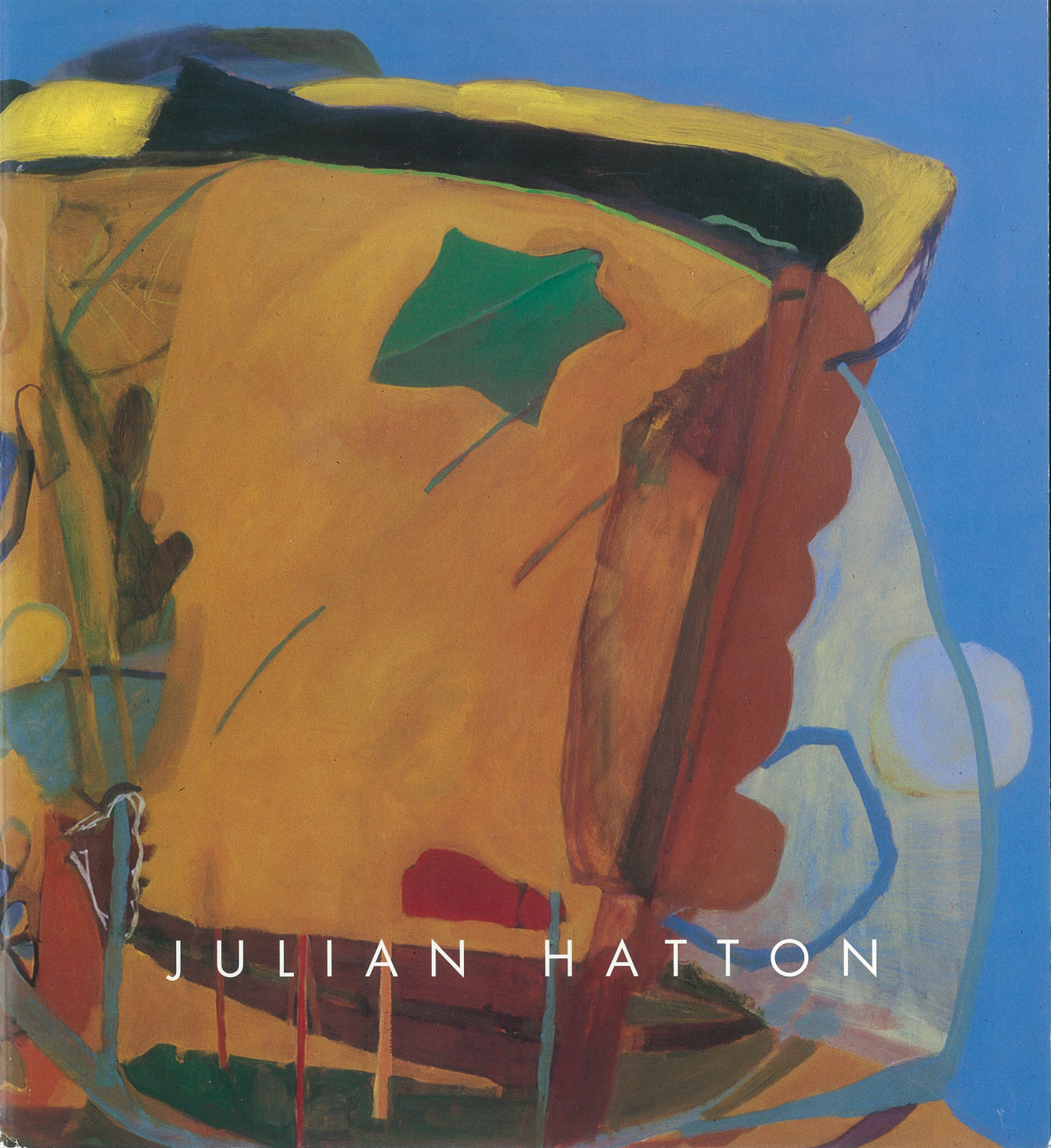
### Ross Rudel at Jack Shainman by Steve Rockwell

*Untitled #248* is a wooden structure the color of a night sky. Like a large bowl with its emptiness pointing out towards the viewer, it cups its own darkness. Sculptor Ross Rudel, after honing and polishing the piece, has made a tiny hole in its interior to allow the light to sift through. The effect is not unlike the viewing of a distant stellar body. The light settles in the hollow of the structure, giving it the appearance of a streaking comet.

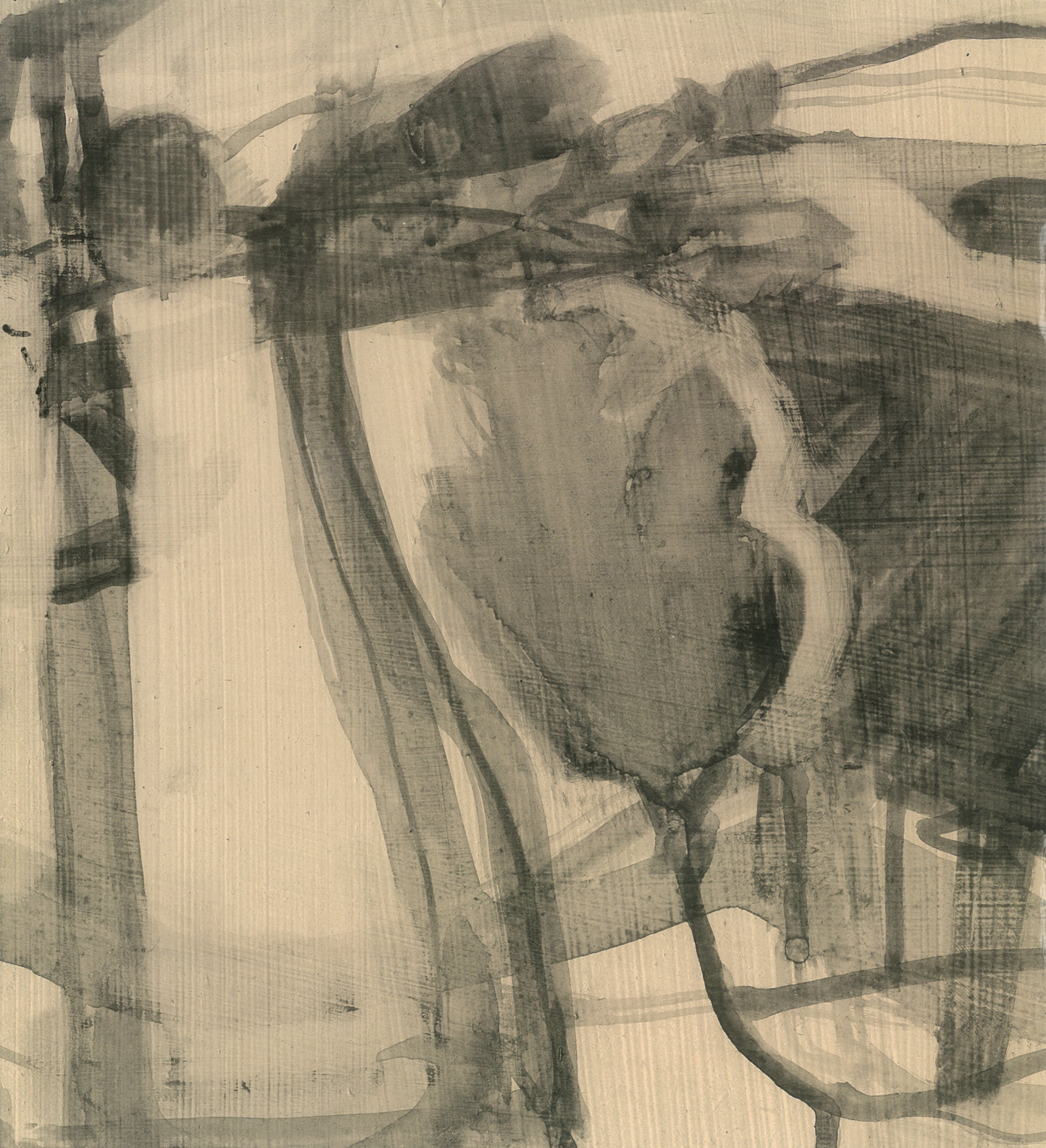
We discover Rudel's sculptures on the walls of the gallery like pebbles and sea shells on a beach. There is nothing hurried about the crafting of these objects. There is also nothing random or accidental in their execution. The artist subjects the wooden foundations to a precise, purposeful erosion.

Each sculpture unfolds or closes into itself in singularity. They inform the viewer like seeds and buds containing individual secrets. *Untitled #264* is bean shaped. Stretched across the surface of its wooden base is red pigskin. The vegetable is wrapped in animal. Its secret vitality might emanate from a grain of sand.

Steve Rockwell, excerpt from *Spring 1998 issue of dART International*



JULIAN HATTON



# Elizabeth Harris Gallery

529 WEST 20 ST NEW YORK, NY 10011

212-463-9666 FAX 212-463-9403

OCTOBER 10 - NOVEMBER 9, 2002

J U L I A N   H A T T O N

## AN INSURPASSABLE PLENITUDE

Joel Silverstein

“But what motivates the painter’s movement can never simply be perspective or geometry or the laws governing color, or, for that matter, particular knowledge. Motivating all the movements from which a picture gradually emerges there can only be one thing: the landscape in its totality and in its absolute fullness . . .”<sup>1</sup>

The paintings of Julian Hatton offer subtle pleasures in a time of marked contradiction. Much contemporary discourse sees nature as an extension of man’s interference, or merely a convenient linguistic construct. Hatton approaches the natural world as an external reality limned with the force of creation, its very alterity revealing lessons to be read through active engagement. Quietude, a hush of observation bridges artistic practice to reflection, the known to the unknown. Initial impressions are recorded through numerous studies, watercolors and small oils on site. Contrasting this procedure, he superimposes graphic elements derived from the landscape, boldly integrating them in the studio. The results stylistically differ from either realism or formalist abstraction. A battle is waged between perceptual mimesis and the willful deformation of nature, linking us

to earlier forms of high Modernist innovation. If Cézanne, as Merleau-Ponty pointed out, painted before Nature and Pollock personified it as himself, then Hatton paints after it, an abstract continuum evolving as his ongoing metanarrative.

Pictorial elements are stretched to the confines of a traditional vanishing point, even as competing systems of perspective mark a single work. In *Dowser*, 2001–02, and *Suitcase*, 2001–02, hills, lines of trees, and bodies of water begin to cohere in deep recessional space. Conversely, crops of shape lie in shallow overlapping recession, rocks or tangled foliage juggled in mute projection recalling Chinese scroll painting or Matissean still life. These spatial disparities contribute to an air of Lilliputian or Brobdingagian proportion, where zones of pictorial organization are tossed about like children’s blocks. The urge to penetrate the furthest recess of the horizon belies a nagging force ever pushing you to the surface. A benign, playful, yet somewhat savage animism reigns as nature’s beneficence retains an echo of its cruelty. Kind and even wondrous, its essential anthropomorphism is the source of all mystery.

Cover: *Suitcase*, 2000–01  
Oil on canvas, 44 x 78 inches

The deification of nature reached culmination during the Romantic Movement and subsequent historical affinities. This great Northern European tradition encompasses Caspar David Friedrich, J.M.W. Turner, John Constable, Samuel Palmer, as well as the Americans Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley and Milton Avery. Pantheistic ideas formed the core of their inspiration. The natural world doubles as the physical embodiment of the Godhead, merging aspects of nascent abstraction with formal aspects of figurative illusionism. A new category of religious impulse found expression within art, coexisting for a time with secular Modernism. Hatton has an affinity for this concept, but his historical belatedness, as well as his artistic personality modifies its impact. The Sublime remains articulated by the artist / seer as divined by intuition, but the limits of our postmodern skins and the stunted sense of our own longing becomes achingly apparent.

Color is a revelation in Hatton's work, properly unified to shape. A careful student of such masters as Matisse, Miro, Soutine and Hofmann, the artist's vivid chroma constantly reasserts the artificial reordering of nature as an emotional category of expression. In *Beanbag*, 2001–02, percussive geological forms double as musical instruments, or tropical fruit. The heaviness of a cobalt blue suggestive of

running water leaps triumphantly into the sky. *Jack Pines on Naphthol*, in a painting of that title, 2001–02, rest on a field of synthetic naphthol and mustard yellow. Vaporous atmosphere is cogently solidified into ovals and root shapes of great precision.

Dictated by the mingling of other senses such as touch and taste, expectation is successfully reordered. Richard Wollheim<sup>2</sup> remarked that de Kooning crammed his pictures with infantile experiences, like sucking, biting, excreting, retaining, sniffing, swallowing, gurgling, stroking and wetting. While Wollheim emphasizes the essentially regressive and savage psychoanalytic qualities of de Kooning's oeuvre, Hatton also depicts this early stage of development, although in different terms. Hatton's universe is one of plenitude and luminosity, constituting a lip smacking ripeness literally good enough to eat. In psychological terms, the Oral Stage represents the infant exploring the world through his or her mouth. Art encourages the use of memory traces put to new service. The image of the overflowing breast and the recognition of the mother's face are a primary psychological inspiration for landscape's aesthetic symbolism, the experience of merging with the world and losing oneself. Hatton avoids the clichés of instinctual life such as simple sentimentality, or the fulfill-

ment of want through reconciliation, by insisting on certain oddness within his planar juxtapositions. The essential dislocation of friendly nature is the deformation of the all-giving mother, made mysterious and impractical for conventional relationship. Hatton's world, theoretically, cannot be surveyed or even transversed. The integration of place and abstraction frees up association through an inherent alienation mixed with awe, made sacred as in the best of Modernist and archaic traditions. As subliminal subversions go, these paintings carry a charge behind all the sweetness, the richness of experience as an ongoing project.

In "Cézanne's Doubt," the French Phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, invokes Cézanne as wedded to a primordial reality, enabling the artist to constitute perspective as a lived experience rather than an academic or photographic one. The multiple contours of objects within his oeuvre contribute to their sense of plenitude, where touch and even taste merge with vision. Merleau-Ponty claims that Cézanne's aim was that of visual convergence, just before a scene organizes itself in the viewer's eye. The historical, social and psychological ramifications imply a painted subject existing in an a priori state, before the inherent split with the object, the viewer with the viewed and the thing with the idea.

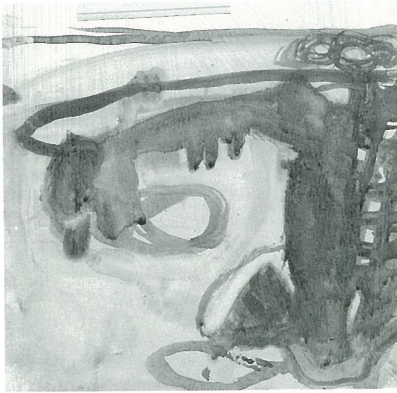
"Cézanne's Doubt" is a concept postulated by the artist's own comments, referring to his perceived insufficiency of means and the impossibility of his goals. Thus Cézanne was caught in a web of incompleteness and tragedy, apparent to many of his peers. Of course from our point of view, these are merely the prerequisites of modern life. Like Cézanne, Hatton is striving for that point of reconfiguration and convergence, before the thing can be named, rife with utopian possibilities. If this represents an inherent contradiction, a noble but doomed preoccupation, I would submit it is such a project our time sorely lacks. As Cézanne represents the problems of the first word, then it is Hatton, on the cusp of post-modernism, who represents the problems of the last. Luckily the nature of his work, keen, life-affirming and resolutely steadfast, continues to inspire.

- 1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," p. 17. *Sense and Non-sense*, U.S.A., Northwestern University Press: 1971
- 2 Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, p. 348. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press: 1984

*Jack Pines on Naphthol*, 2001–02  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches







Studies for *Conveyor Belt*, 2001–02  
Gouache on board, approx. 4 x 5 inches

*Conveyor Belt*, 2001–02  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches

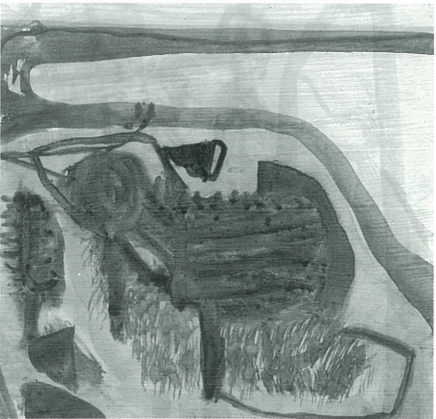
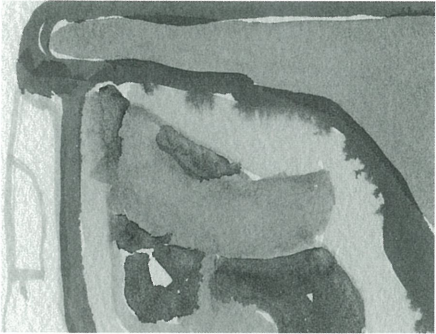




Studies for *Tweezers*, 2002  
Gouache on paper, 4 x 6 inches

*Tweezers*, 2001–02  
Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches

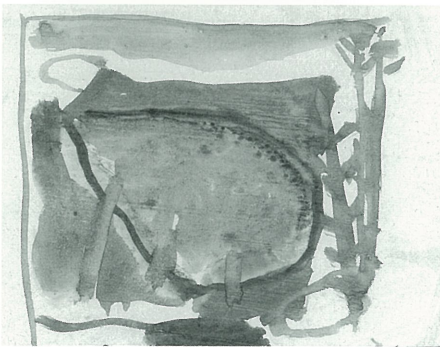




Studies for *Bean Bag*, 2002  
Gouache on paper or board,  
approx. 6 x 8 inches

*Bean Bag*, 2001-02  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 60 inches



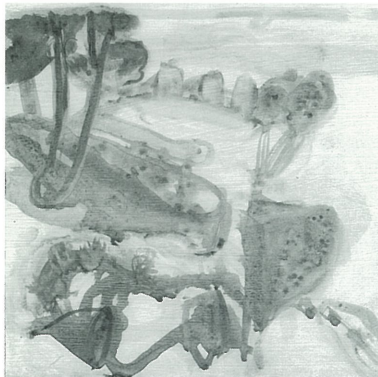


Studies for *Boxing*, 2002  
Gouache on board, approx. 3 x 3 inches

*Boxing*, 2001-02  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches







*Studies for Dowser, 2002*  
Gouache on paper or board,  
approx. 3 x 5 inches

*Dowser, 2001–02*  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 56 inches





Studies for *Middle Mist*, 2002  
Gouache on paper, approx. 3 x 5 inches

*Middle Mist*, 2001–02  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 62 inches





Study for *Maypole*, 2001  
Gouache on paper, 5 x 3 inches

*Maypole*, 2001  
Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 inches



# JULIAN HATTON

Born 1956 Grand Haven, Michigan

## EDUCATION

1980–82

New York Studio School of Drawing,  
Painting, and Sculpture

1979

Harvard College, BA in Art History

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2002

Elizabeth Harris Gallery, New York, NY  
(catalogue)

2001

Elizabeth Harris Gallery, New York, NY  
(catalogue)

1999

Elizabeth Harris Gallery, New York, NY  
1997

Kara Wharton & Wharton Ltd, Dallas, TX  
1996

Elizabeth Harris Gallery, New York, NY  
1995

The List Gallery, Swarthmore College, PA  
1994

Elizabeth Harris Gallery, New York, NY  
1988

The Connecticut Gallery, Marlborough, CT

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2002

New York Studio School Alumni Exhibiton,  
Frederieke Taylor Gallery, New York, NY

2002

*Curious Terrain*, Elizabeth Harris Gallery,  
New York, NY

2000

*On The City: Urban Realities and Fantasies*,  
New York Studio School of Drawing,  
Painting and Sculpture, curated by Irving  
Sandler, New York, NY

1997

*Winter Group Show*, R. B. Stevenson  
Gallery, La Jolla, CA

*Parallel Universes*, Eighth Floor Gallery,  
New York, NY

*Alive and Well—New Painting*, Elizabeth  
Harris Gallery, New York, NY

*Field of Vision*, Kendall Art and Design,  
Hudson, NY

*Summer Salon*, Robert Clements Gallery,  
Portland, ME

1995

*The Nature of Landscape*, The Gallery at  
Hastings-on-Hudson, NY

*American Painters and French Sculptors*,  
Museum at Rochefort-en-Terre, Brittany,  
France

1994

*Landscape Seen and Remembered*,  
Organization of Independent Artists,  
New York, NY (catalogue)

1993

*Introductions*, Campbell-Theibaud Gallery,  
San Francisco, CA

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

2002

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Art Guide, January 18, p. E41.

2001

Joel Silverstein, *Reviewny.com*, "Julian  
Hatton—Curious Terrain", exhibition  
review, April 1, (illustrations).

2001

Joseph Valentini, *Abstract Art Online*,  
exhibition review, March 20,  
(illustrations).

1999

Cathy Lebowitz, *Art in America*, "Julian  
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p. 146, (illustration).

Karen Wilkin, *Partisan Review*, "At the Gal-  
leries," Summer, p. 489–90.

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Variation—the Improvisational Landscape,"  
May, p. 13, (illustration).

Ken Johnson, *The New York Times*,  
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1998

David Ebony, "De le terre: Graham Suther-  
land," catalogue essay, *Sutherland, Une  
Retrospective*, Musée Picasso Antibes,  
p. 115.

Karen Wilkin, *Partisan Review*, "At the  
Galleries," Winter, p. 124.

1996

David Ebony, "David Ebony's New York Top  
Ten: Julian Hatton at Elizabeth Harris,"  
[www.artnet.com](http://www.artnet.com) (on-line magazine),  
November 26, (illustrated).

Jeanne C. Wilkinson, "Julian Hatton,"  
*Review*, December 1, p. 26.

1995

Victoria Donahue, "Julian Hatton at  
Swarthmore," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*,  
November 12, p. MD8.

Vivien Raynor, "One Man's Muted Land-  
scapes and Those of 14 Other Artists,"  
*The New York Times*, November 5, p. 18.

David Ebony, "Julian Hatton," *Art in  
America*, May, pp. 116–7, (illustration).

1993

Jude Schwendenwien, "Four Views that  
Connect at Paesaggio," *The Hartford  
Courant*, August 1, p. G6.

1992

Laurie Schrieber, "From Sensuality to  
Dreams at the West Side," *The Bar  
Harbor Times*, July 2, pp. C4-C5,  
(illustration).

1990

Vivien Raynor, "Full House at Gallery in  
Marlborough," *The New York Times*,  
June 17.

## AWARDS, RESIDENCIES, FELLOWSHIPS

2001

Pollock-Krasner Grant in Painting

1998

New York Foundation for the Arts  
Fellowship in Painting

1995

Rochefort-en-terre Artist Residency  
Fellowship, Brittany, France.

1993


National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship  
Grant in Painting.

1992

MacDowell Residency Fellowship.

## PUBLIC COLLECTION

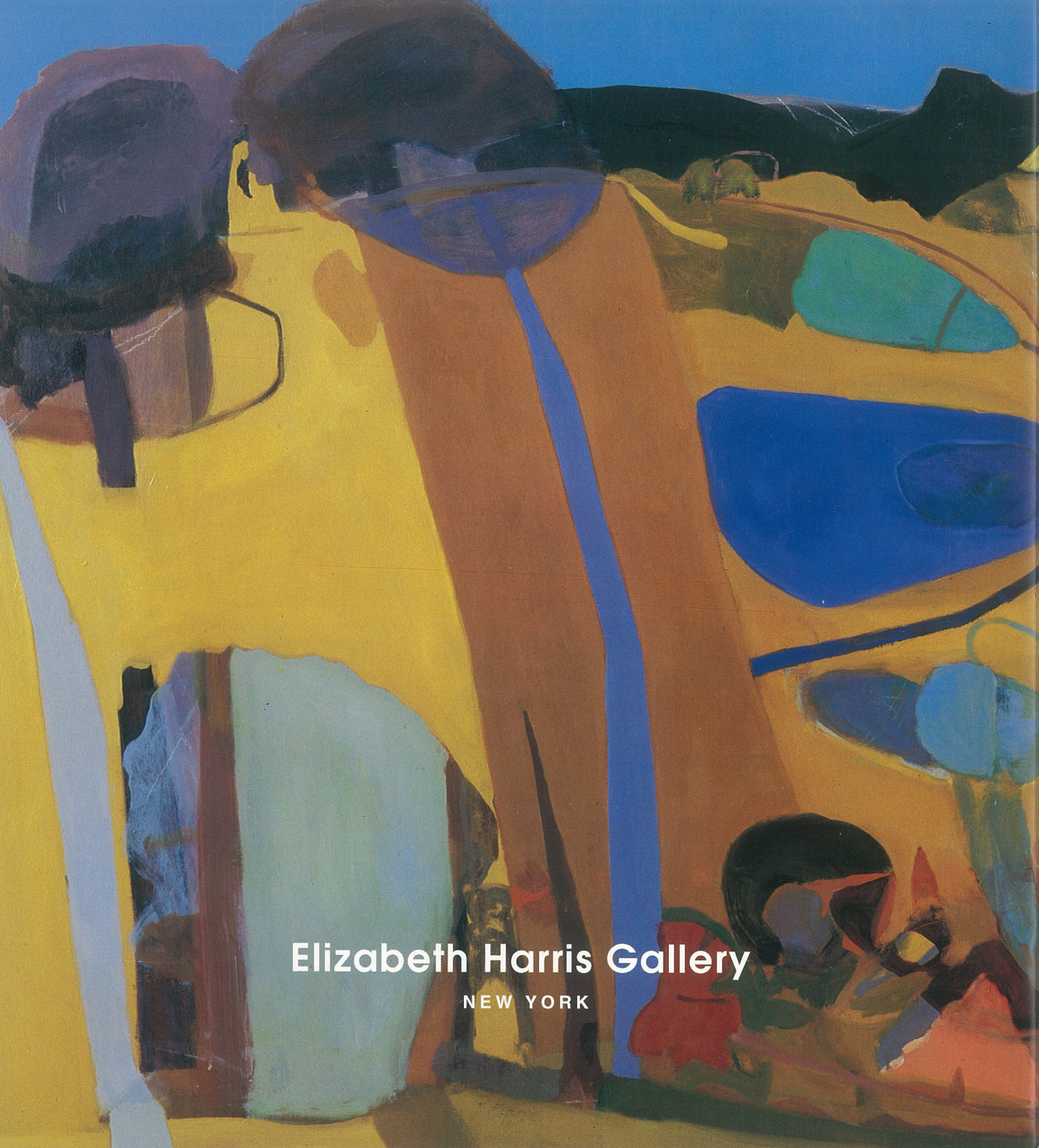
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Once again, thanks to  
Elizabeth and Bill, Larry  
Sunden, my friends and  
most of all, Alison.

J.H.





Elizabeth Harris Gallery

NEW YORK



ANNALYCE

D I V A  
Model Management

560 Broadway, Ste. 306 New York, NY 10012  
(212) 219-1616 • FAX (212) 219-2061