

BOZEMAN, MONT.

Russell Chatham at the Museum of the Rockies

That a Russell Chatham print appears in the chic Manhattan loft inhabited by the Demi Moore and Patrick Swayze characters in the blockbuster movie *Ghost* suggests how well Chatham's pastoral vision serves as an alternative to contemporary urban reality. Chatham lives near Livingston, Montana, and his great subject is the Western landscape. Yet as this first major retrospective of his work demonstrates, he does not make stereotypical Western art: no cowboys and Indians here. Nor does he ironically play off artistic conventions, like many young landscape painters. He is a traditionalist who unapologetically sets out to create a representation of nature.

Chatham's grandfather, Gotardo Piazzi, was a distinguished California painter whose images have an uncanny sense of silence (the exhibition included pieces by Piazzi and other artists who have influenced Chatham). In Chatham's paintings, especially a pair from Eastern California, his debt to his grandfather is obvious. It took him a while to acclimatize after moving from California in 1972, but now he shows unusual sensitivity to the character of the topography and the play of light in Big Sky country. Although he is attuned to its expansive qualities, his ren-

dings are usually intimate and lyrical rather than epic.

A series of large paintings on the theme of the seasons, created for this exhibition, varies widely in quality: the closer Chatham comes to the conventionally sublime, the less convincing his work is. Still, it's always good to see an artist attempt such a stretch—literally, because some of the paintings use a difficult "wide-screen" format. Except for such monumental images as "The Seasons" and a few others—a thunderstorm, a peak breaking through the clouds—he sticks to low-key subjects and seems most at home in depicting summer stillness or the muffled quiet of snow-covered fields that dissolve into the distance with no clear horizon. The intimate paintings are haunted by what is not there: another human presence or some singular focus of attention. Chatham is a romantic who recalls the elegiac strain in Wordsworth.

From his California days on, he has shown a special skill at painting the flat light of noon; he has a nice touch with late-summer fields, making them not merely yellow but golden. Yet the classic Chatham is best seen in paintings such as *Evening Frying or Boulder River Valley* with its lovely rendering of the last sunlight striking the shoulder of a hill—gentle meditations on the pleasures of solitude and nature. His sureness of touch and subtle feel for color come through.

Noboru Tsutsumi: #8107247, 1991, mixed medium; at Hozomi. (Review on page 172.)



Françoise Vergier: *The Unfathomable*, 1990-91, painted wood, 28 by 38 by 23 inches; at Claudine Papillon.

This exhibition of more than 100 works might have been pared down. But it makes clear Chatham's mastery of place and mood and his delicate way of balancing openness and enclosure.

—Robert Silberman

PARIS

Françoise Vergier at Claudine Papillon

In the past five years younger American sculptors such as Maureen Connor, Robert Gober, Rona Pondick, Judith Shea and Kiki Smith have followed the lead of Louise Bourgeois and Bruce Nauman in reconsidering representation of the body. Their work has no equivalent in France, where artists generally have preferred to pursue such issues as gender roles and sexuality through performances or photographs. Françoise Vergier's second exhibition at Papillon may herald a change. Her sculptures have a kinship with current American works, but her touch, irony and flirtation with language mark her as an heir to Surrealism, and to Magritte in particular.

The show was titled "Je suis en pleineS formeS," a defiant claim translatable as "I am in great shape" or as "I am made up of full forms." Besides alluding to the defensive isolation felt by a figurative artist, it suggested the confident physicality of Vergier's first life-size sculptures, her most ambitious works to date. The four figures were titled with attributes named by Arthur Rimbaud: "Women will discover unknown worlds . . . things strange, unfathomable, repulsive and delicious." They were all made in the same rather conceptual manner: Vergier sought out suitable models—women both athletic and full-bodied—and shot multiple photographs of them in chosen

poses. She gave the photos to two professional wood-carvers, who cut successive profiles out of linden wood boards, laminated and carved them and sanded them smooth. Vergier then painted the sculptures and added a twist to each; for example, *The Strange*, who is standing on her head, has a tear-shaped pearl on the sole of each foot.

The Unfathomable holds a contortionist's pose with her chest on the floor, her body forming a graceful loop and her feet over her upturned head. A small oval oil painting of a belly and navel—by implication, a womb—is inset into the tops of her feet. She seems at once vulnerable (because this intimate center of her body is offered to us) and obdurate (because the convex glass over the painting is like an eye coolly watching us as we look). *The Unfathomable* celebrates woman's self-sufficiency, her fertility and sexuality and her power to capture our gaze and return it directly. In the other three sculptures the poses are stiffer, making us conscious of the distancing inherent in having the carvers work from photographs. These three works are like mannequins; because neither face nor hands nor sexual parts are expressive, it falls to the surface painting to infuse life into the figures.

Vergier's touch is surer in her smaller pieces, those measuring 20 inches or less in their largest dimension and generally hung on the wall. Working with simple gestures, combining things in perverse ways, exploiting the suggestiveness of silhouettes, her works catch our gaze and then change under our regard. *Little Prayer*, the only bronze casting in the show, consists of two winged hands with index fingers and thumbs forming a vulval opening. Hung by a rope high on

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Degenerate Art

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back of the LACMA catalogue (p. 405). What is not mentioned is the 1974 exhibition at the Frankfurt Kunstverein that examined official Nazi art; see the catalogue *Kunst im 2. Reich. Dokumente der Diktaturverfolgung*, Frankfurt, 1974.

7. Peter Klaus Schuster, ed., *Nationalsozialismus und "Entartete Kunst" Die "Kunststadt" München 1937*, Munich, 1967. Though smaller in size, this catalogue served in many ways as a model for the Los Angeles publication, with a selection of essays on a variety of related topics, including case studies of the havoc wreaked on individual German museums.

8. Barbara Miller Lane, *Architecture and Politics in Germany 1912-1945*, 2nd edition, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1985, pp. 188-211.

9. As indicated in the author by Stephanie Barron in an interview on Mar. 5, 1991.

10. For the record, it should be noted that it is historically inaccurate to label the realist art promoted by right-wing totalitarian regimes as "fascist," insofar as the artistic and cultural policy of Fascist Italy was substantially different from that of the Nazis. Mussolini never enforced a single style, and artists were left to pursue and publicly exhibit a variety of tendencies, which included not only realism but also geometric abstraction and expressionism. The openly propagandistic realist painting and the racial themes promoted in Nazi Germany had only a tenuous following in Italy; indeed, much of the art of the Italian Fascist period would have been considered "degenerate" by Nazi standards. The lives of the "Entartete Kunst" exhibition never occurred in Italy, and Marinetti and others openly derided the antimodernist campaign conducted by

the Third Reich. See Enrico Crispolti, *Il mito della macchina e altri temi del futurismo*, Turin, 1969, pp. 186-243; Philip V. Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso. Fasc. 1975*, and Emily Braun, "The Jewish Museum: Fact or Fiction?" *Art in America*, March 1988, pp. 128-37.

11. See Klaus Stork, *NS-Kunst im Museum? Göttingen*, 1988, and "Nazi Kunst im Museum," *Londoner*, no. 157, March 1987.

12. The conflict within the National Socialist party over Expressionism is noted in passing by Stephanie Barron in "Modern Art and Politics in Prewar Germany," p. 12, and by Christoph Zsching in "An 'Economic Exhibition': The Proceedings of *Entartete Kunst* and its Individual Venues," p. 86, both in the LACMA catalogue.

13. In 1938, when an exhibition of Expressionist art was mounted in London to counter the Nazi campaign, an unnamed reviewer wrote in *The Times Weekly Edition*:

It is easy to see why art of this kind is unpopular with the present regime in Germany, not because it is conspicuously Jewish, but because it is characteristically German, if the literature of "Storm and Stress," not to speak of the immanic musical composers can be taken as evidence. All genuine art is and must be subject to arbitrary systems of government, but modern German art, with its emphasis upon individual expression in direct reaction from events, is peculiarly so.

The review, "German Art in London: Expressionism and the Nazi Regime," from *The Times Weekly Edition*, July 14, 1938, was included in the documentation in the Los Angeles show.

Many of the seized works were saved by virtue of Nazi greed and sold for high sums to collectors and museums abroad.

14. See "Expressionism: Its Significance and Decline," in Georg Lukács, *Essays on Realism*, edited by Rodney Livingstone, trans. by David Fernbach, Cambridge, Mass., 1980. The most important contributions to the 1930s Expressionist debate can be found in Ronald Taylor, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics*, London, 1977.

15. Donald Gordon, *Expressionism: Art and Idea*, New Haven and London, 1967, pp. 179-81. Gordon finds certain affinities between Expressionism and Nazism, although he also notes the crucial differences between the former's quest for unity and reconciliation with the modern world and the latter's choice of a "hitlerly" that aims at the emasculation of individualism.

16. See Michael Löwy, *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism*, trans. Patrick Collinson, London, 1979, esp. pp. 82-86; and Robert Seyer and Michael Löwy, "Figures of Romantic Anti-Capitalism," *New German Critique*, no. 31, Spring/Summer 1984, pp. 42-82.

Author Emily Braun is an art historian who recently curated the exhibition *Gardens and Ghosts: The Art of Jewish Life in Italy* for the Jewish Museum in New York.

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the wall, it could be missed entirely or taken for a goat's head or for an inescapably feminine angel. In other pieces Vergier creates ambiguous coats of arms using a repertory of knives, ropes, body parts and bits of red fur, all under bulbous glass covers suggestive of eyes. The sculptures are gently mocking appropriations of typically masculine self-representations. For example, in *The Blind Tie* an antique silver table knife is positioned vertically in front of a rope net painted on a wooden plaque shaped like a heraldic shield. Here Vergier neutralizes the aggressiveness of the elements and claims them as feminine. In her best works she summons a visual poetics of gender and obliquely reassigns the roles.

—Anne Rochette
and Wade Saunders

TOKYO

Noboru Tsubaki at Hosomi

Tsubaki (born in 1953) is part of a growing movement of "bad boy" artists who essentially reject the

influence of Western art while keeping a distance from Japanese traditions. Specializing in the grotesque and the vulgar, he dismisses the Shinto and Buddhist reverence for nature and espouses a kind of "ideological terrorism" that aims to elevate intuition and dispense with religion altogether.

This exhibition featured seven of his mixed-medium "drawings" and a small, framed portion of *Marginal Product*, a sculpture of macerated paper, resin and urethane—a bright yellow blob that seems to have come from the primordial soup, with fossils, shells and sediment coagulating into a bizarre and untidy ball. The whole of the sculpture was featured in an earlier Tokyo show called "Neo Totem." *Marginal Product* comes from the same series as *Fresh Gasoline*, the amorphous mound that toured America in the "Against Nature" exhibition (see A.L.A., Apr. '90).

Tsubaki once boasted that some of his paintings were completed in an average of five minutes. The "drawings" here—actually more a combination of collage and painting than drawing—may be as quickly made. With their extemporaneous, stoppy quality, they seem at once mass-produced and thoroughly

individualized. Paper cutouts, rubber bands, wooden beads, dollies, artificial grass and plastic bags, plus rubber cement and glue, finger paints and spray paint, are freely combined with a crudity reminiscent of children's art works. The found elements adhere only loosely to the canvas, nothing is proper or orderly—which is exactly Tsubaki's intention. Still, most of the works are quite engaging.

All these collage paintings (let's call them what they are) are filled with six-digit date codes. Tsubaki's splatter-and-play method is evident in #910123, which features two cutout blue plastic and paper missiles heading toward a shiny blue paper moon and a white block with a raised grid that seems to symbolize technology. Pencil marks are scribbled in the sky and rubber cement drips in huge, mossy globes between the missiles. The work is phallic and suggestive of ejaculation, emphasizing the aggressive/sexual nature of "boy toys." In #910124 the yellow-pigmented urethane from *Marginal Product* coats the canvas in thick, dripping circles. Handfuls of red rubber bands are thrown in clusters across the center. On the lower left are erratic marks that suggest the horned foot-

prints of some unknown animal. Stretching the boundaries of "drawing," and even of collage painting, these works toy with the contradictions of organic versus technological or man-made and imperfect versus machine-made and smooth—as do Tsubaki's sculptures. His witty and refreshing works are unlike anything else on the Japanese art scene.

—Leza Lowitz

Review Contributors

Brooks Adams, Eleanor Heartney, Gerrit Henry, George Meirod, Nancy Princenthal, Yasmin Ramirez, Calvin Reid, Shelley Rice, Joseph Ruzicka and Susan Tallman are critics based in New York. Lawrence Campbell, Ken Johnson, Richard Kalina, Walter Thompson and Stephen Westfall are artists who write on art. Eileen Myles is a poet who writes on art. Debra Bricker Balken is a critic based in the Berkshires. Michael F. Bulka reports on art from Chicago. Frances Colpitt writes on art from San Antonio. Ann Wilson Lloyd is a critic based in Boston. Tony Godfrey is a critic based in London. Carl Little's *Paintings of Maine* (Crown) has recently been published. Leza Lowitz is an American writer living in Tokyo. J.W. Mahoney and Curtia James report on art from Washington, D.C. Ben Marks is a critic based in L.A. Gay Morris writes on art from San Francisco. Anne Rochette and Wade Saunders are artists who write on art from Paris. Robert Silberman writes on art from Minneapolis. Robert Taplin is a writer and sculptor living in Connecticut.