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Levine's acumen shows through in his portraiture

Kenneth Baker

Saturday, August 19, 2006

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Can any young artist today capture the face of corruption with the seeming ease of Jack Levine's "The Texas Delegate" (1970)?

IMAGES



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This lithograph and a selection of other Levine prints and drawings hangs at Krevsky. The gallery has presented some of them before, but no matter.

While the current taste for frictionless images persists, we need to see often what Levine shows us: how drawing can bear witness as other media cannot, by isolating the sinew of human expressiveness beneath the impress of fashion and events. That sort of abstracting, which great actors also accomplish, and which frequently verges on caricature even in Levine's work, represents vision qualified more by wisdom than by mere fact or fad.

Now 91, Levine broke his productive stride some years ago. But his art remains persuasive both because of the genuine vitriol, tenderness and occasional sentimentality behind it and because he continually felt the pulse of the medium he had in hand, whether a lithography crayon, graphite pencil or oil paint, paper or canvas.

End-of-the-century postmodern temperament -- the waning credibility of old stories about the progress of events -- dissolved the stigma of anachronism in art. But Levine did it first, and the hard way, making a Rembrandtesque etching style appear perfectly suited to a profane mid-20th-century subject such as the political party boiler room. Mastery does not go out of style.

"Inscape" in Oakland: Most artworks contain a hidden ingredient: time. The Oakland Art Gallery has just opened a show by three artists whose works tend to make manifest the time they require.

Heather Kessinger takes black-and-white photographs by night, which results in prints almost too dark to read.

Only the streaks left by wheeling stars during the long exposure it took her to make "Tree" (2005) permit us to locate the picture's nominal subject. Where the streaks of starlight appear broken we can begin to descry the black-on-black of the tree's elaborate silhouette against the night sky.

Subject to annihilating glare from daylight and gallery lighting, Kessinger's prints



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demand of their viewers some of the patience that their making demanded of her, minus the fear of the dark to which she confesses.

Mel Davis' monochrome paintings stand up better under the OAG's problematic lighting but only because he apparently intends them to slip the noose of language.

Just try to name the color of each panel in his diptych "Between Vale and Peak" (2006). One tends toward blue or gray, the other toward brown, red or violet, depending on viewing angle, time of day and other shifting influences.

Davis has devoted much time -- only another painter might be able to estimate how much -- to achieving his panels' ambiguous hues. But the time element may make itself felt to viewers less in the works' material impaction than in the impression they leave that they probably will not look the same whenever one happens to see them again.

Jill Sylvia's cut and reassembled paper pieces make explicit the evidence of the time they cost her. Her "Untitled (Month)" (2005) takes the form of a calendar: a seven-element-long grid of 30 sheets of ledger paper, each held taut slightly forward of the wall by pins at their corners. Sylvia has carefully cut away the paper from within the ruled cells of each ledger sheet, leaving lattices through which the eye sees the pages grate against the shadows they cast.

The calendar format suggests that Sylvia might have spent a month working on it. In any case, the piece forms an image of captivity to a self-set task that fits with the cagelike quality of the perforated ledgers. "Untitled (Month)" also brings to mind the obsessive inscriptions and musical scores of Hanne Darboven.

Reminiscences of architecture and of textiles assert themselves in "Untitled (Vertical Ledger)" (2006), where Sylvia has attached several sheets of ledger paper end to end, making a sort of scarf of them.

Sylvia entwines the grid and the found object -- two staples of artistic modernism -- and even adds collage in works that repattern the detritus of her cuttings. She also references doilies, paper dolls and silhouettes -- long viewed as diversions for women -- and bookkeeping, by which men traditionally tended to business. From an apparently simple process she mines a wealth of connections.

A glimpse of a show: Perhaps if most gallery exhibitions lasted a week or less, as many do in Tokyo, we might hasten not to miss them.

Anyway, **Todd Bura's** untitled watercolors on found paper went on view Thursday at Triple Base in a small show that ends Sunday.

The brevity of the show suits the delicacy and modesty of the work. Two framed pages contain nothing but a few pinpricks. Others hold little exercises in geometry or improvised decoration, self-consciously mimicking Richard Tuttle. **Bura's** best work, like Tuttle's, has the effects of silencing analysis and intensifying scrutiny.

Bura has amplified the works' sweet graphic whispers by a staccato hanging that evidences the same sensibility operating in a more public and declarative, if somewhat less comfortable manner.

Jack Levine: Works on Paper:

Prints and drawings. Through Sept. 9. George Krevsky Gallery, 77 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 397-9748, www.georgekrevskygallery.com.

Inscapes: Mel Davis, Heather Kessinger, Jill Sylvia: Paintings, photographs and paper-cuts. Through Sept. 23. Oakland Art Gallery, 199 Kahn's Alley, between Clay and

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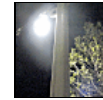
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Jill Sylvia's work, such as "Untitled (Vertical Ledger)," mines a wealth of connections, entwining the grid, the found object and collage. Photo courtesy of the Oakland Art Gallery



Courtesy of the Oakland Art Gallery

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Broadway, 16th and 14th streets. Oakland. (510) 637-0395, www.oaklandartgallery.org.

Todd Bura: Mighty Pretty Rain Crow: Works on paper. Through Sunday. Triple Base Gallery, 3041 24th St., San Francisco. (415) 643-3943, www.basebasebase.com.

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