

"Talent 1999" at Allan Stone Gallery



Stan Dann "Dancing Shoes"

The annual "Talent" group show at Allan Stone Gallery has become something of a tradition. Given the eye-boggling inventory of terrific work stored in that grandly refurbished former firehouse at 113 East 90th Street—not only by the likes of de Kooning, Kline, Graham, Cornell et al., but by less heralded geniuses as well—there's never any telling who or what may show up in any given year.

"Talent 1999," which ran through October 30, was a typically surprising grab-bag of eccentricity and excellence. One thing that knocked us for a loop right away was seeing a recent work by Marty Greenbaum, who has made himself scarce in recent years. In the post-Beat sixties, Greenbaum was downtown New York's answer to Bruce Connor, Wallace Berman, and that whole West Coast Junk and Funk School. He was known for his hermetic, wax-dribbled found object collages and assemblages, some of which looked like spooky altars for some unknown, voodoo-like religion. Represented here by a beautiful mixed media drawing of five simplified figures lined up frontally like voodoo dolls facing a firing squad, Marty Greenbaum obviously hasn't lost his peculiar touch.

Robert Valdes is another artist whose relative scarcity makes encountering one of his paintings especially pleasurable. No one else can imbue women's cosmetics with as much fetishistic impact and psychological resonance as Valdes, whose closest aesthetic ancestor, in terms of lending mundane objects an almost metaphysical quality, is Walter Murch.

Valdes' sumptuously finished oil on canvas, "Lipsticks," was somewhat larger than most of his works and depicted a group of oversized lipsticks lined up like a group of figures gathered with some sort of serious intent. Valdes does not paint lipsticks in a Pop manner, as symbols of crass commercial banality. Rather, they seem spooky symbols, like witch's charms. Surrounded by strange, atmospheric auras, they look both beautiful and dangerous.

Lisa Koda, whose work we had never seen before, is a startling talent in her own right, judging from her piece "The Prisoner," comprised of two hundred one dollar bills rolled up as tight as spitballs to make tiny shrunken heads with minute wisps of hair sticking out of them that she then pinned to the wall in two long, perfectly straight rows. This was obviously an expensive piece to make but worth every cent for its priceless originality.

Brian Haverlock is another eccentric who makes tiny, meticulous drawings in pencil and varnish on paper with an exquisitely surreal quality. In his "Portrait of a Man in Front of a North Dakota Landscape," the man has the head of a bird and has an egg balanced on top of it. Behind him, a fish swims through the sky. Haverlock's "Child with Sister Crow," another small drawing, is

ostensibly less surreal. Yet, this simple image of a little girl in an old-fashioned dress, holding a small bird, has the haunting, time-layered quality of a tynotype—a quality enhanced by the artist's almost outsiderish obsessive pencil technique.

Quite opposite in scale, Stan Dann's large carved wood reliefs of shoes have the impact of a less abstract Elizabeth Murray. These shoes are almost anthropomorphically expressive. With their bulging contours and flowing laces they look well worn, really "lived-in." Dann employs the conventions of caricature to exaggerate the individual qualities of a man's pair of leisure moccasins, with their loosely bulging tops, prominent stitching, and crepe soles, and a woman's pair of red dress shoes with their pointy toes, ankle straps, and high heels. But his distortions are more expressive than satirical, and his sculptures finally succeed by virtue of their flowing formal contours rather than their cartoon qualities.

Conversely, an actual shoe serves as the canvas for Nina Bentley's painted found object assemblage, "Crows Over Wheat Fields (Homage to Van Gogh)." On it, Bentley appropriates the style and subject of a familiar landscape, then crowns this wittily affecting tribute by filling the expressionistically painted shoe with dried flowers.

Another gifted sculptor is Dan Falt, whose two gigantic wood and epoxy bears tower over visitors to the gallery, their scale offset by their cutely simplified quality. Simultaneously cuddly enough to evoke memories of childhood teddy bears and imposing enough to be slightly intimidating, they provoke interestingly mixed psychological signals. At

the same time, we stand in awe of their amazing craftsmanship, their artful oddity, and their inspiringly impractical monumentality.

Then there is the painter/poet Nguyen Ducmanh, whose "I.I.I. Hanoi" (the title suggests both an affirmation of identity and Ricky Ricardo's exasperated cry, "Ay, ay, ay!") combines calligraphic grace with Dada zaniness: An energetically swooping gestural form in thick, juicy, rainbow globs of glistening acrylic sprouts tufts of what appears to be real human hair... Go figure, as they say. Ducmanh is definitely his own man in an art world where mundane careerism increasingly rules. A classic Zen lunatic in an era of art-yuppies, Ducmanh's visual work has the same delightfully warped, over the top quality as his fractured English poems and prose memoirs.

Mikhail Gubin displays both his wry humor and his bold approach to the figure in his vigorous oil on canvas, "Neighbor's Baby," an image of a monstrous, fretful infant clutching a doll like King Kong abducting Fay Wray from the Empire State Building. Of course, this is how everybody's neighbor's brat sounds when it throws things around and bawls incessantly, but only Gubin has captured that feeling with such painterly energy. And he is in good company at Allan Stone Gallery, one of the last real bastions of pure painting, as exemplified in large abstractions by Christian Spruell and James Scott, as well as several small gustural oils on paper by Ralph Turturro, and a number of vital works by artists such as Vince Baldassano, Gaela Erwin, and Pat Mahony, among others.

—Ed McCormack