



April 2004

## Critical i

*Tricia Wright, Carlos Estrada-Vega,  
Jeffrey Mitchell, Manifest Artistry*

### The imports by Jeff Jahn

**M**arch was the month of art imports. Everywhere I looked it seemed as though someone from elsewhere was exhibiting in Portland – and claims of a new cosmopolitanism are apparently well founded.



Porlander views works by Tricia Wright at Savage Art Resources.

Besides, I've felt like Portland's best have needed to take a breather and reflect on what has to be different in 2004. Despite all that, I don't think the grass is always greener elsewhere and I hate the whole dynamic of "an expert is anyone who lives more than 500 miles away."

It's a bit like those people who don't realize that the current Whitney Biennial is mostly full of artists who have been on the New York "in-list" for the last four years and is therefore pandering to that crowd's perception of yesterday's news. For instance, everybody knew four years ago that Elizabeth Peyton is easily the best painter on the planet; forget about John Currin.

Problem is, New York's in-list has been pretty much static for four years, which implies something is rotten in Denmark. Don't assume that the OK stamp on the Whitney Biennial is a guarantee of freshness; it isn't. In fact, the last one had more excellent discoveries that simply weren't featured well enough.

So, despite the influx of some serious imported talent to Portland, I'm glad the best show was by a local, sort of.

"Meadow" at PDX Gallery takes top prize and the artist, Ellen George, resides in Vancouver, Wash. For readers outside the area "The 'Couv" is to Portland what East St. Louis is to St. Louis.

To be brief, George grew by a factor of 10 from her previous and considerably more contained show at PDX



EllenGeorge at PDX.

Gallery.

What I like about "Meadow" is variety. There is cultural anthropology, botany and a lot of late Matisse in this new work.

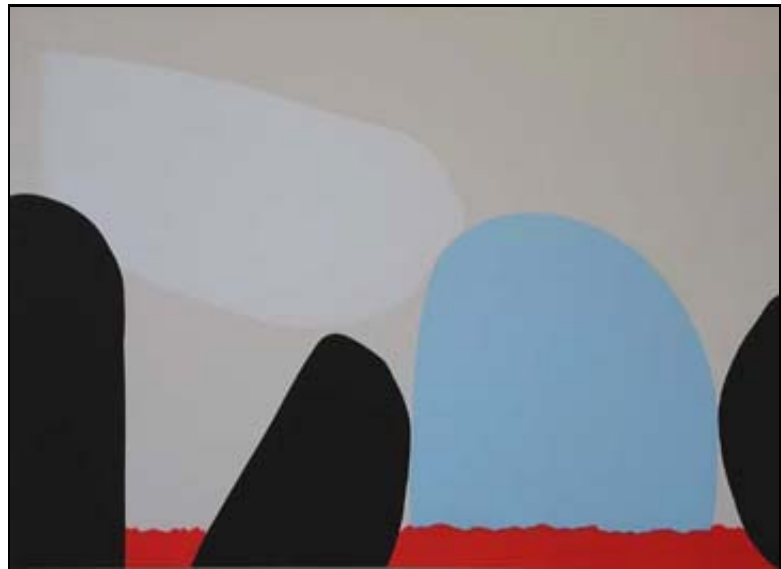
There is also a real Pacific-island vibe but, true to being art, its indeterminate nature gives it stand-alone strength.

Overall, George's work doesn't sneer, it glows. Add George to the list of other artists in the Portland scene, like Sean Healy and Brenden Clenaghan, who have gotten immensely better in the last year.

For the record, the big months are usually May, June, September and October – and it's those months when the galleries strut out their next hot thing or their long-standing big guns. It makes those months a bit like March Madness for college basketball: inspired and competitive. Still, there is rarely a dud month in Portland for art viewing anymore. Miss a month and you will miss something. But usually you have to know where to look.

**Tricia Wright  
Savage Art Resources  
1430 SE 3rd Ave.**

Tricia Wright is a Londoner living in New York, and hers is a wonderful gem of a show. In most pieces, there's an intense sense of anthropomorphic empathy implied by the various constructivist abstract forms. Although Wright's work is invariably going to be compared to British legends Victor Pasmore and Patrick Heron, her overall tone is less ambivalent and more personable. In works like "The Meeting," the central light-blue form does seem to be meeting the other more stoic Neolithic forms.



"The Meeting," by Tricia Wright, at Savage Art Resources.

The white form on the top left even has a less distinct border on the left side. There is also more than a passing comparison to Monique Prieto's paintings and grand master Alexander Calder's gouaches. Once again, those artists seem more formal tableau-oriented than the narrative anthropomorphism in Wright's work.

Other multi-part works like the "Desirable Objects, Palisades" series are more impassive toward one another, yet their almost-shiny-but-still-matte finish seems to invite touching,



The "Desirable Objects, Palisades" series.

or at least looking. Surface acknowledges the viewer's role in the viewing equation.

The largest painting in the show, "Scattered," is like a jungle gym for the eyes.

It has Bridget Riley-like optical effects, Gene Davis-like stripes, weird mod lily pads and some lichen forms. It is not easy to balance this many directions but the whole thing still comes off well.

It's still a successful piece, but with so many directions one loses a sense of focus in relationship to the other works. I think the empathy thing is a fresher and more

interesting tack.

**Carlos Estrada-Vega  
Elizabeth Leach Gallery  
207 SW Pine**

Elizabeth Leach Gallery showed noted Los Angelino Carlos Estrada-Vega, whose amalgamated combinations of tiny independent square paintings on magnets are quite wonderful.

A bit like boxes of chocolates or a bunch of tiny cakes, they add a slightly different spin on paintings with lots of squares and a new literalness to constructivism.

In the past, I found Estrada-Vega a bit stiff. But now, with various heights and color tones, his work takes on a nuanced mathematical vocabulary like music. A single note can be played a thousand ways.



"Calixto," by Carlos Estrada-Vegas.

The work calls to mind Paul Klee's "An Ancient Sound On Black." The smaller monochromatics were my favorites in one of the best shows I have seen in the last year. My picks were the monochrome blue "Calixto" and the red "Cletus," which incorporated rectangles and squares. The incorporation of uneven sizes made them look less like pixels and more like a visual language where the rectangles were punctuation.

**Jeffrey Mitchell  
Pulliam Deffenbaugh Gallery  
522 NW 12th Ave.**



Jeffry Mitchell

Pulliam Deffenbaugh showed one of Seattle's best artists, Jeffry Mitchell, in March. He is an inventive, if capricious, practitioner of a kind of modern Rococo. Like any good devotee of the Rococo, pattern and ornamentation are very important to his work. Problem was, there weren't any truly amazing moments of overload patterning as I've seen in previous shows by this artist.

Instead, this exhibition had lots of salable tchotchkes along with two large Styrofoam signs with the word hello above them. This was OK, but a disappointment considering his other work, which nearly always makes sophisticated use of negative space. Overall, I try to get past the initial greeting of a specific artwork quickly and want deeper stuff. I didn't see much beyond the greeting. If this show were a circus act, it seemed to shuffle us to "see the egress" too quickly.

This was a thin and unremarkable show for a pretty good artist who really needs to get beyond being pleased with being pleasing.

**Manifest Artistry  
Disjecta  
116 NE Russell**

The premise was simple; East Coasters show on the West Coast. Simple is good: it allows for complicated interaction without needless curatorial oversimplification.

Yet this was an interesting show of East Coasters most notable for how gimmicky and derivative much of it was. For example, Amy Lincoln's "Moments of Clarity" is eye-poppingly painted and pimple faced, but it seems more like a caricature than denouement.

Call it John Currin lite.

Kristin Dierup's "Vogue Rogue" is decoupage used for guileless anti-Saddam propaganda and Mary Mattingly's "Final Fantasy" has that Matthew Barney "hot-last-year" look, combining sports and fantasy costumes.



Amy Lincoln's "Moments of Clarity"

I liked Denise Schatz's drawing, "Trills Cellularis," which was well done if a little unexciting with its bird and cell balloon. Better work by Ramsey Barnes, like "Misfire," also questioned the action and war with its Boy Scout merit badge sashes and soldiers following orders. Besides Barnes and Schatz, the show was filled with very clear but brittle or even tinny statements. Some nuance is necessary.

**Visitor roll call**

In addition to Estrada-Vega, Elizabeth Leach Gallery had



Fin and Dorosz's "Road," at Elizabeth Leach.

the Bay Area duo Amanda Fin and Inga Dorosz. Their photos of falsified arctic adventures are something I liked a lot. Custom frames, no mattes and milky glass all serve to heighten their sculptural effect.

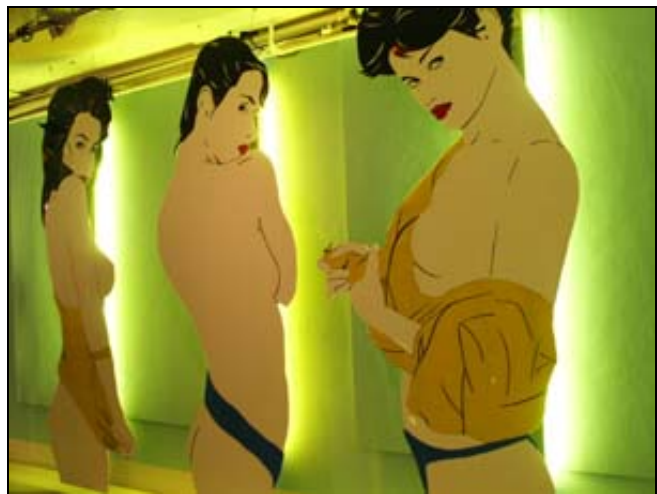
Photography as sculpture is sufficiently perilous and has become a favorite theme of mine.

The custom frames and milky glass are nice touches and not unlike the Joseph Kalusas shown in the gallery years ago or Mariana Tres's Annabella Gaposhk photograms.

In fact, Tres's MFA thesis show at PSU's Littman Gallery opens April 15.

With Tres's ridiculous expansion of the pseudo-historical theme (it has its own docent), I suspect it will be the smartest thing seen around here in a long time. That girl has the potential to be a future McArthur candidate.

Back to the auslander theme, Zeitgeist Gallery in the Everett Station Lofts had a mail-in show for people all over the globe. Folks, you can either travel to New York and London to check out a Scope art fair, or go to Zeitgeist. I've seen some of the same artists at both venues. The show will be up in April as well.



Robert Vergara at Gallery 500.

With Los Angelino Robert Vergara, Gallery 500 turned a corner of Portland into L.A. It was the hilarious sort of thing I've come to expect from L.A. art: slowed down Jane Fonda workout videos, wall drawings right out of Olivia Newton John's "Get Physical" video and giant Nagel figures backlit with neon.

It was entertaining but not exactly challenging. Mimetic irony in itself isn't content that reveals much more than fetish and parody – both of which are more modes of fashion than strong art. John Currin and, to a lesser degree Laura Owens, have this same problem. Still, Vergara's show was the strongest thing I've seen at G5 to date. Let's hope the upward trend continues.



Work by Donna Avedisian.

Haze Gallery featured L.A. composer Philip Marshall, who translated the works of Donna Avedisian and Melissa Smith into music.

Marshall's compositions are sometimes a tad too John Tesh for me, but the tango on the CD is right on, rough and flirty.

The CD was recorded in the new Frank Gehry-designed concert hall in L.A.

As for the art that inspired the music ... the nice, slickly executed but a bit too redundantly formulaic paintings of Avedisian (a recent MFA of RIISD, who just settled in Portland), and the decadent, sometimes uber-charming work of Smith (of Eugene), were definitely extremes. Sometimes imports like Avedisian end up staying.

If a little of Avedisian's stylistic coherency rubs off on Smith and some of Smith's sheer inventiveness and zing rubs off on Avedisian, then I'd say they both have careers that could go places beyond what we saw in this show.

It's great that an import like Avedisian is staying here and I'm certain her colors and spatial arrangements will become more varied and pronounced – Portland, with its flowers, Douglas firs, volcanoes and Rothko skies, does that to you.

To underscore another reason to watch Haze, both artists sold very well and brought in a very respectable amount (over \$10,000) when many galleries are struggling.

Also, the presentation was rather formal, so Haze definitely isn't some hamstrung DIY effort.

In fact, any comparisons of Haze to the Modern Zoo show last year (or DIY) are a bit of nonsense, as doing so ghettoizes an effort needlessly.



"World," by Melissa Smith.

I can't tell you how funny it is to hear people compare Haze to other DIY efforts as a pejorative when they clearly haven't been to the shows they are describing.

Whether discussing imports or local artists, it's important that context and parallels be borne out by the details seen in the work. Simply put, a scene gets judged by its level of discourse as well as the work.

And since there is good work most everywhere, the discourse becomes a major indicator of something more.

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*E-mail Jeff at [pivotofjade@hotmail.com](mailto:pivotofjade@hotmail.com), don't miss his [recent columns](#) and be sure to see his April 2002 essay, [Art and Threat: Untaming Humanism](#).*

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