

# Art in America

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serve as bedspreads, the still lifes to throw light upon the foibles of material excess that increasingly influence our existence.

—Carl Little

## Livio Saganic at Hal Bromm

It is difficult to pin down what is so compelling and satisfying about Livio Saganic's new sculpture, exactly what separates it from other commodity-oriented, fabrication-fetish displays of furniture. It may be that even as Saganic's counter-high, steel-legged pedestals, or "display tables," mug the viewer with their featurelessness, they nevertheless assert their presence as *sculpture*, as opposed to simple concretions of design strategy. They verge on a kind of Machine Age rococo, far too ornate in line and arrangement of materials to merely lift up for unencumbered contemplation whatever objects they might support; and yet their functionalism is too overriding for much else. These pedestals flicker into sculptural animation at precisely the moment when they appear abandoned by purpose, and the viewer is left with the beauty of their spare organization.

Saganic arranges elongated and squared steel piping into a volumetric armature that is topped by panels of colored glass or rubbed-down brass;

they are unions of fired, geometrically rolled and cut alloys. Considered on a strictly formal basis, the work seems loaded with possibilities for future development, suggesting, for example, a looser, less programmatic form of Minimalism. One can imagine Saganic moving toward a more improvisational art, away from symmetry into a jungle-gym extrapolation, say—something like a collaboration between Zogbaum and Judd.

Viewing Saganic's recent pieces, one is tempted to construct a fable about a sculptor who sets out to build the perfect pedestals for his work-to-come. In the act of designing and fabricating these lovely bases, he loses interest in what they are to support. The pedestals become such an obsession that when the sculptor has finished them, he has not only forgotten what he originally intended to put on them, but he also can't conceive of violating their purity with any further addition. Saganic's tables would appear to be caught in such a tug-of-war between possibility and foreclosure.

—Stephen Westfall

## Howard Kanovitz at Marlborough

In his latest show, titled "Works of the '80s," Howard Kanovitz, an artist known for his realist airbrush technique, presented re-

cent visionary-romantic canvases as well as rather surreal works from the earlier part of this decade. Of the latter group, *Chair Divided* is exemplary: a simple, Colonial-style chair, set on a mauve floor against a light blue sky with thin billowing clouds, has been divided horizontally into three sections, each a little skewed from the other—like a photograph that has been jiggled a bit while in developing fluid. In fact, Kanovitz often uses slide projectors, gels and a "double exposure" device to achieve such jarring and seducing effects.

Several more recent works consist of life-size doors and windows constructed out of canvas and wood. The format (which of course goes back to Duchamp) has its precedents in earlier Kanovitz works such as the 1968 *Studio Window* or the 1970 *Open Studio Window*. These last were created around the time of the waning of Pop art and show a similar affinity for hard-edged realities: boxes of nails, chicken-wire windows and, in *Open Studio Window*, fire escapes and window guards, elements of a highly theatrical view of the rooftops and water towers of SoHo.

The difference between the old windows and the new is the difference between the brash and the lyrical, the Pop and the outspokenly pretty, the urban and the pastoral. The standing, trompe-l'oeil piece *Tree and Meadow* is a blue-green, doorlike construction with 15 glass panes. Through the door there is a view of gravel, lawn, a big tree with lush foliage and a sunlit meadow, all airbrushed to an illusionistic fare-thee-well. In the same vein, *Montauk*, 1982-86 (Kanovitz wasn't satisfied with the piece and kept coming back to it), is a spectacular window ensemble that summons up the look of the ocean just after sunset, when the water, along with bordering hills and sky, turns a shade of deep, lapidary blue. Finally, *Full Moon Doors*, with its set of red, hand-painted French doors giving onto a yellow moonlit sea, orange mountains and a coal-blue sky, is just a step away from the grand Romantic nuances of Church and Bierstadt.

Throughout his long career, Kanovitz has toyed with the subject of beauty found in the mundane, be it his depiction of a sophisticated art-world opening, his vision of toast, jam and a knife floating above a New York sky-

line, or his view of garbage cans and cartons left out on the street. In his newest work, however, Kanovitz has fully discovered the beauty in the beautiful, and it makes for sublime, sometimes chilling visions of the world inside and outside our windows.

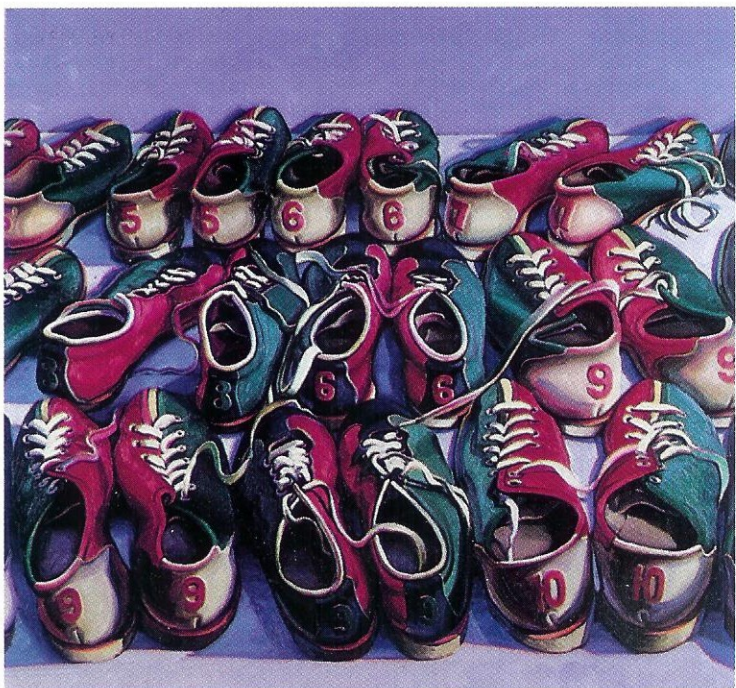
—Gerrit Henry

## Howard Kalish at Armstrong

Howard Kalish is a New York artist who, at mid-life, has given up sculpture done from "the simple observation of a natural model," as he puts it, and has jumped virtually headfirst into making ceramics based on myths and fairy tales. Kalish's next-of-kin in this endeavor is not in fact an artist, but psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, whose book *The Uses of Enchantment* details the strong subconscious appeal of myths and fairy tales. They deal, as Bettelheim has said, with "the greatest problems in human development, with awakening, growing up and maturing."

Kalish's freestanding and wall-mounted sculptures are actual illustrations of the tales and legends. Kalish feels that "the story, which is told in time, must find a space within which it can exist." Thus his *Frog Prince* is a 30-by-34-by-26-inch sculpture-in-the-round which retells the famous fairy tale in a sequential series of vignettes. The princess is first seen losing her golden ball in a pond, then protesting the promise she has made to the frog that he can eat, sleep and live with her if he retrieves it. Circling around, we next see the princess throwing the frog against the wall of her tower bedroom (which breaks the spell) and, finally, the handsome prince escorting her down the tower stairs to a waiting carriage. Space, indeed, seems to become time, as the figures repeat and various stages of the story unfold. The same story-go-round device is used for *Hansel and Gretel* and *Little Red Riding Hood*, which, in Kalish's inventive hands, regain dramatic urgency and an uncanny air of plausibility.

One of the nicest things about Kalish's work, considering its small scale, is its general lack of preciousness. This is especially true of the series of painted ceramic wall sculptures based on the stories of Hercules' madness and his 12 labors. Here, the artist abstracts lean and mottled forms from myth. The madness of the



Lorraine Shemesh: *Bowling Shoes*, 1988, oil on canvas, 36 by 38 inches; at Allan Stone.

hero, shown beating his wife and children to death with a club, is rendered in a suitably dramatic manner, the four struggling figures inextricably fused into one tangled mass. In *The Erymanthian Boar* (the fourth of the labors), a medium-sized piece, a blue-girdled Hercules carries off alive the huge, hog-tied multicolored boar that, the tale tells, was terrorizing the countryside around Mount Erymanthus. The tone is charming—and chilling.

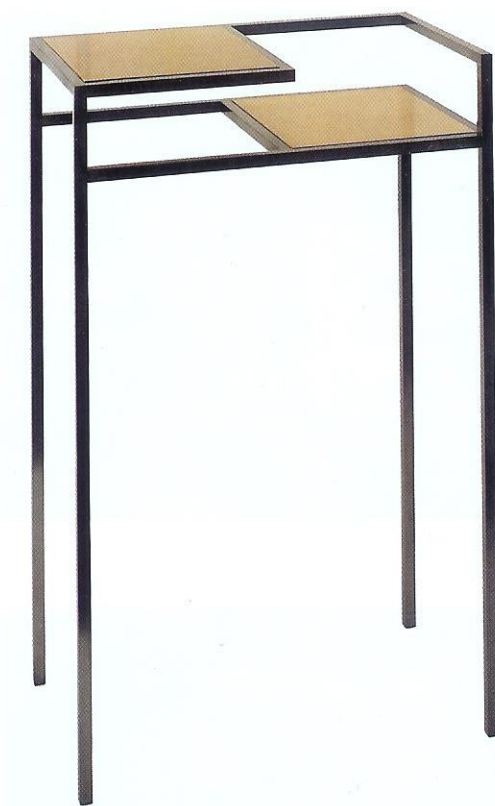
Even more vivid in sculptural characterization is *The Capture of Cerberus*. Here, a scumbly, brownish Hercules is seen grasping the necks of the three-headed hound of Hades, each of its faces a study in slack-jawed, slick-tongued lycanthropy. The most remarkable thing about this work is the suspension of disbelief it manages: the artist obviously feels deeply about the psychic authenticity of his material, and proceeds accordingly. Through the medium of contemporary sculpture, the stories are stripped of the patina of history and overfamiliarity and allowed to frighten—and enlighten—viewers all over again.

—Gerrit Henry

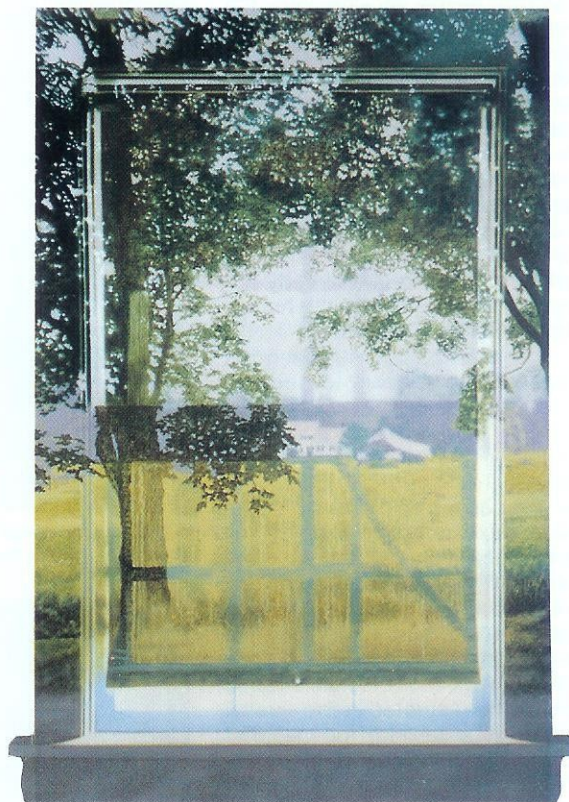
## Ching Ho Cheng at Bruno Facchetti

Between 1975 and 1980, Ching Ho Cheng, a young New York painter, was making pictures of things whose everydayness make them invisible to most people. Typical of his subjects were squashed beer cans, cracks in the plaster wall of his studio, the halo of light surrounding an electric bulb and so on. At the same time, Cheng's fondness for ancient ruins, steles and archeological shards, dating from visits he made to Mexico and Turkey, led him to make drawings on heavy rag paper, working with graphite over charcoal and elements of frottage. One day, displeased with a drawing, he ripped it in two. The result was electrifying: suddenly he saw a new direction for his work. The act of tearing could never be duplicated, it depended on chance, like the processes of nature. He did not use the torn papers to make collages but rather hung them next to each other, occasionally overlapping them.

Later on, an airplane flight to Cairo got Cheng to thinking about the desert he saw from the sky. He didn't want to paint it; he felt an urge to *make* it. Conse-



Livio Saganic: *Table II*, 1987, steel and brass, 42 inches high; at Hal Bromm.



Howard Kanovitz: *Tinmouth Window*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 70 by 45 inches; at Marlborough.

quently, he soaked rough rag paper in water for several days, adding gesso and acrylic paint to it until it was almost as hard as rock. Then he added iron or copper dust which, when re-immersed in water, respectively turns red and green.

All these developments led up to Cheng's latest one-man show titled "The Alchemical Garden." Visualizing the gallery space as a temple, the artist placed on the floor large basins of wood containing water in which he floated torn papers covered with iron dust. The mood was unbelievably quiet, and there was nothing on the walls to distract one's attention—nothing in the gallery except the basins, the slowly reddening papers and some newspapers spread on the floor beneath the basins. Only the news headlines brought the thoughts of the visitor back for a moment to the realities of our tormented present—away from thoughts of eternity and the age-old transformations of nature.

About the same time as this exhibition, Cheng installed a work called *The Grotto* in the two large windows of NYU's Grey Art Gallery that face Washington Square Park. *The Grotto* consisted of seven panels across

which stretched an irregular arch made out of paper reddening naturally (the arch swept across both windows). This work and the work in the gallery are both part of a series based on the Pelagian creation myth, which maintains that in the beginning there was only a mother goddess from whose womb everything tumbled: sun, moon, planets, stars and the earth, with its mountains, rivers, trees, herbs and living creatures. Cheng's interpretations reflect the elemental mystery and beauty of this myth.

—Lawrence Campbell

## Avner Moriah at Ruth Siegel

For some years, Avner Moriah has been making narrative paintings, often in three panels, which depict the interface between domestic life and war. In *Triptych #1*, 1985, for example, soldiers are seen entering a house in the right-hand panel; a young family—man, woman and two small children—hastily dress in the central panel; and on the left, the old mother is shown putting on her housedress. There is a sense of normality about the scene, as well as uncertainty about what is actually taking place, yet Moriah,

who served for several years in the Israeli army, is clearly depicting an actual threat to family security. The soldiers are probably going to arrest the man of the house as a deserter, spy or foreign agent. In any case, they are bent on destroying whatever tranquillity the household may possess.

Moriah's 1987 pictures continue to be narrational but within a much expanded stylistic format. Probably due to a visit to Italy the year before, Moriah now invests both his domestic and military figures with a sort of medieval blankness and flatness which lends itself very well to the pictorial telling of a story. In these oils, many of which are simply titled *Village*, different activities are depicted simultaneously. The rooms of houses are arranged like ceramic blocks—compartmentalized—with postcardlike views of their interiors. It is, however, necessary to make up the story oneself. For example, in *Village IV*, three couples are shown in separate rooms of a single house in various stages of nudity and distress; also visible are two other individuals, one a sad-looking naked male, isolated in the boxlike attic of the house, the other a shrouded figure who