

Reviews/Art

Echoes of 60's and 70's Among the Young and Little Known

By ROBERTA SMITH

At any given moment in New York's galleries, there is work by young, relatively unknown artists waiting to be discovered. But this weekend, such art is unusually abundant in SoHo. While the quality is uneven, the work still indicates the esthetic inclinations of artists who have exhibited only a little or, in some cases, never before.

On the basis of these shows, it is evident that the 1990's, echoing the 1970's to some extent, are getting off to a pluralistic start in which several trends are discernible but none seem to dominate.

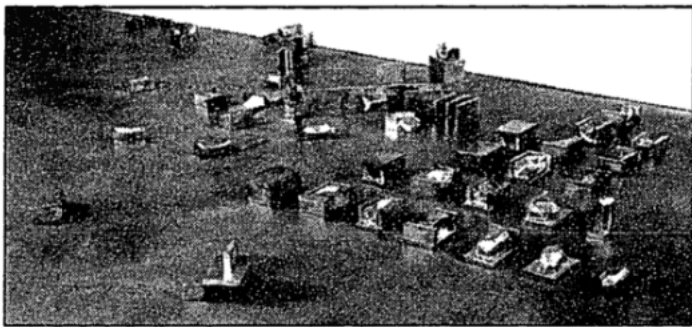
One disturbing trend is the continuing scarcity of interesting new painting, despite the strenuous attempts of Anton Henning, a young German artist having his first New York solo show, to prove otherwise.

This week, at least, artists of Mr. Henning's Neo-Expressionist persuasion are outnumbered by colleagues who are irresistibly drawn to the possibilities of 60's Minimalism and 70's Conceptualism, used separately or fused into a stylistic hybrid. These styles may soon be known as the art movements that wouldn't die, but, in fact, some young artists seem to be giving them new life.

On the Minimalist side, furniture and other everyday items are still used with great regularity. One of the strangest deployments of an object (although hardly an everyday one) is Michael Joaquin Grey's ghostly "Electron M.," an electron microscope covered entirely with Plasticine. The work is part of his impressive debut at Petersburg.

Written language, Conceptualism's basic unit of expression, continues to be pressed into service on many fronts, with much Conceptual-style work using words to analyze the pressures that society can exert on the individual. This is the case with a singular exhibition at the Drawing Center, where four artists have created large-scale wall drawings that push gently but incisively into the political arena without, for the most part, sacrificing esthetic beauty. In addition, Sean Landers's exhibition at Postmasters and Lily van der Stokker's at Feature, two exhibitions that take youth itself as their subject, also fall within the writing-as-art category.

Youth in a rather rebellious form is having its day at Simon Watson, where an artist named Richard Philip has organized "Total Metal," a provocative group exhibition that examines the terrain where contemporary art and heavy metal overlap. (The overlap may be larger than many of us would like.)



"Erosion Blocks: Units of Growth/Decay," by Michael Joaquin Grey.

Finally, the group show format takes an even more eccentric turn at the Andrea Rosen Gallery. Six young artists will attempt to use the space as a studio during the month of December, and the public is invited to observe their activities during gallery hours.

If this show doesn't provide a sense of being in on the latest thing, maybe nothing can.

Michael Joaquin Grey

The persistence of the Minimal-Conceptual tradition is tantalizingly affirmed by the scattered objects in Michael Joaquin Grey's show at Petersburg (130 Prince Street) through Dec. 30. Mr. Grey has his sources lined up like ducks in a row, with Robert Smithson and Bruce Nauman figuring prominently among them. But his debts to these artists have not hampered his own originality.

Sound, running water and electric heat figure into some of his simpler works, evoking Mr. Smithson's beloved concept of entropy. "Erosion Blocks: Units of Growth/Decay," which consists of 76 pieces of cast pewter, examines basic sculptural processes by putting a small rectangular volume through 20 permutations. Other works convincingly annex space-age technology and material. One such substance is low-density silicon airgel — one of the world's lightest materials — tiny pieces of which sit on a shelf of white Styrofoam like tiny translucent icebergs on a frigid sea.

Mr. Grey's interests seem to come together in his imposing Plasticine-covered electron microscope, which cloaks one of mankind's more elaborate tools in the staple of kindergartners and fledgling sculptors. It is displayed on a monumental yet makeshift steel base that makes one think of equestrian statues. Some pieces are obscure in meaning, while others rely too much on the sheer beauty of their materials. But the complexity and authority of this show, the artist's first, are extremely promising.

Group Show

The pursuit of the Minimal and Conceptual continues in considerably simpler and less developed form in a four-artist exhibition at the Massimo Audiello Gallery (142 Greene Street) through Jan. 12. Gavin Brown uses paperback books, arranged on the floor as if they were Carl Andre's metal squares, to spell out obscenities, decidedly un-Minimalist messages that trigger a confrontation between violent emotion and knowledge, and between baser and more

refined uses of language. Moyra Davey's enlarged color photographs reveal that the heads and tails of beat-up copper pennies can have the patina of ancient artifacts.

Jorge Pardo uses Formica to embellish three different objects, including an old stereo console, that seem to represent different levels of abstraction. Best and most engaging is Sarah Seager's low-lying "Rail," which hoists a slender 12-foot length of white metal three inches off the ground on three tapering supports. It infuses Minimalism's usual flatness of foot with a precarious, balletic grace.

Sean Landers

Sean Landers's bizarre exhibition of writing-as-art at Postmasters (80 Greene Street, through Dec. 8) is best described as a portrait of the artist as a young untalented nerd. It is made up almost entirely of diatribes, screenplaylike vignettes and diaristic confessions written in ballpoint on pages of yellow legal paper tacked directly to the gallery walls. Their author is a fictional character named Chris Hamson, a young sculptor who, when he's not obsessing about success or sex or sending his slides to blue-chip galleries, likes to watch "The Frugal Gourmet" on television. Chris's clay sculptures, wrapped in plastic, sit in the center of the gallery, but it doesn't take much reading to conclude that they're not worth looking at and that their maker has delusions of grandeur.

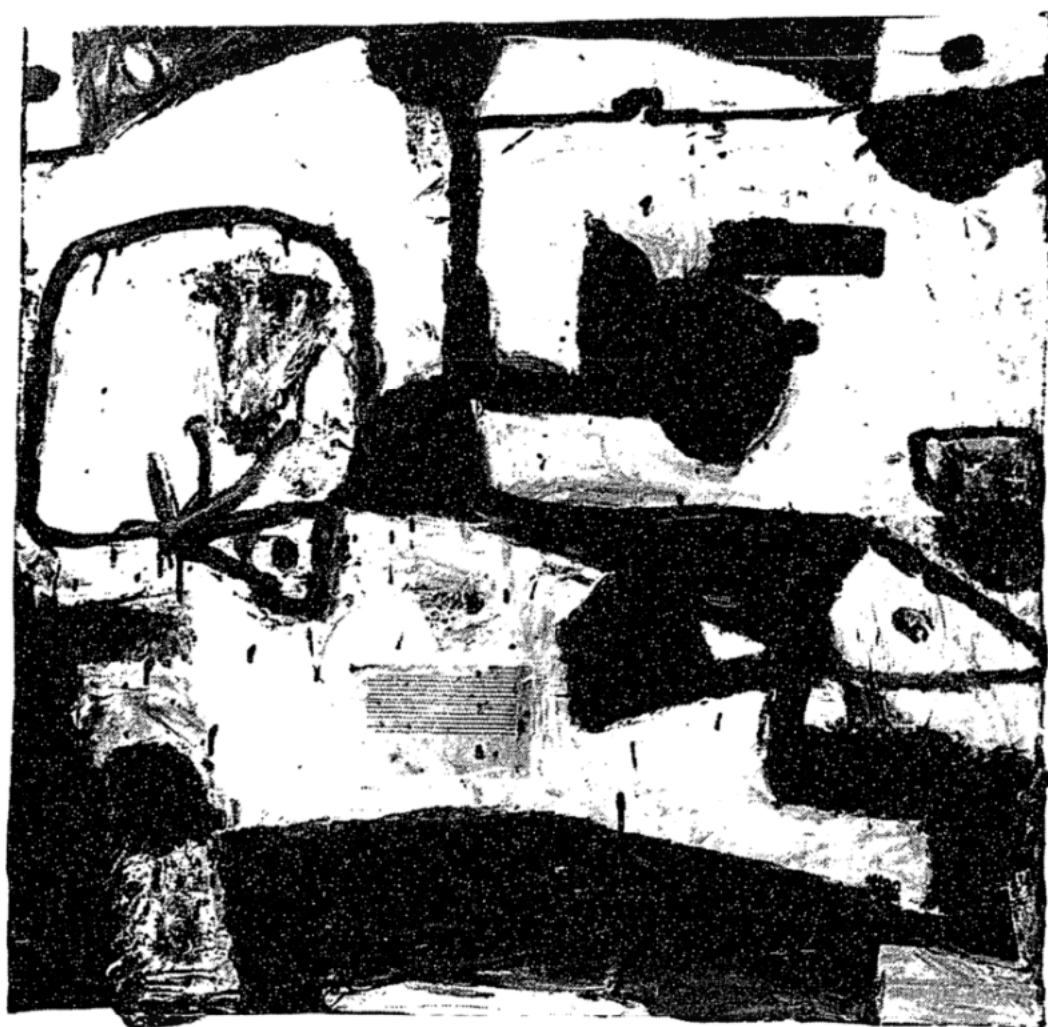
There's much to offend in Mr. Landers's excursion into the lower depths of Chris's uncouth and chauvinist young mind, but the pain and desperation he finds there are real enough. And what Mr. Landers's work lacks in visual impact, it recoups in discomfiting atmosphere: his sweaty narrative, sloppy handwriting and shrouded sculptures delineate a grim view of the art world seen from its outer limits.

Lily van der Stokker

While Mr. Landers's work takes male adolescence as one of its subjects, Lily van der Stokker's Magic Marker drawings, on view at Feature (484 Broome Street) through tomorrow, adopt what might be called the graphic style of female adolescence. These works have the bright colors, cute doodles, fat words and pointing arrows that high school girls used to write on their cloth-covered notebooks (maybe they still do). But the messages conveyed in this terminally cheerful manner usually have a double edge. "Art Is Dead" proclaims one drawing dominated by a Minimalist grid; "Macho" is the only utterance of another. These drawings are studies for wall murals and, as a single example shows, larger size strengthens them.

Drawing Show

In one of its best shows in recent years, the Drawing Center (35 Wooster Street) has given four young artists the run of its generous wall space. Their work, on view through Dec. 22, is linked by political interests, but also by an understated visual beauty that repeatedly stretches the definition of what a drawing might be.



"Portrait of a Matron in a Green Skirt," 1990, by Anton Henning, at the Vrej Baghoomian Gallery.

Simon Leung's labor-intensive drawings, set out on individual cantilevered shelves of clear Plexiglas, are made with hundreds of tiny pinpricks, their words and images visible only to the most attentive gaze. Look closely and the ultra-fine image of a hand or a song lyric may appear, pull back and then go blank, like a coded message without a key.

John Lindell's "Goin' Down" confronts the United States Naval Academy's ban on homosexuality, using language to contrast two equally fictive stereotypes of Navy life. Against a background of enormous drawn portholes, bold black letters spell out official words to live by (discipline, good order, morale); meanwhile, faint penciled texts taken from homosexual pornography give the "underground" version.

Pat Courtney's piece, "A Fortified Castle Is an Empty Castle," is also penciled directly onto the wall. An elaborate sequence of layered storybook-style images, it takes a critical look at America's Puritan (and Puritanical) forefathers. Judith Weinper's "Red Hot Black Eye Blues," whose expanse of blue vinyl square introduces the show's single instance of strong color, uses the lyrics of two blues songs, writ large, to contrast

powerful and victimized women. While the larger point of the piece is not quite clear, the pungent language and saturated color play off each other effectively.

Anton Henning

In his debut exhibition, Anton Henning paints as if the early 80's never happened. This young Berlin artist's Neo-Expressionist canvases, large-scale collages and drawings, which can be seen at the Vrej Baghoomian Gallery (555 Broadway, near Prince Street, through Dec. 22), reflect a capable melding of styles: Julian Schnabel, George Condo, Joseph Beuys and Cy Twombly, with a little bit of Picasso thrown in for good measure. In other words, these paintings would be impressive if their recipes weren't so thoroughly known.

Even so, one can't be entirely unimpressed. Mr. Henning is only 26 years old, so he gets some points for precociousness and a few more for the fact that Germany has produced very few artists who paint with his exuberant Mediterranean joie de vivre. Who knows what he might do with some ideas of his own.

'Total Metal'

This is the last weekend to catch "Total Metal," at Simon Watson (241 Lafayette Street) through tomorrow. The show groups work by contemporary artists like Mike Kelley, Ashley Bickerton, Julie Wachtel and Sean Landers with artifacts of the heavy-metal way of life and music — jewelry, posters, clothing and even fan letters. In its own highly specific and rather disturbing way, it reveals yet another point at which the twain of high art and popular culture have met and intermingled.

'Work in Progress'

This is the first weekend to drop in on "Work in Progress," at the Andrea Rosen Gallery (130 Prince Street). The six artists who will be doing their work on the premises throughout December are Karen Kilimnik, Sean Landers, Liz Larner, Matthew McCaslin, Linda Montano and Laurie Parsons. The art resulting from their efforts will be exhibited in the gallery during the first week in January.