Marcel Dzama

ArtPace, San Antonio
July 9 - September 13

The young Canadian Marcel Dzama's recent exhibition of 160 drawings displays the trauma of modern life with a profound tenderness. Dzama pins his uniformly sized and untitled ink, watercolor, and rootbeer images to the wall in eight clusters of 20. His exacting control over his media allows for the production of sparse and eclectic illustrations of cowboys, mobsters, clowns, anthropomorphic animals, technology, empowered women, violence, and perverse sex acts. Rendering each drawing in a style distinctly unique, yet hinting at representational strategies from a bygone era, Dzama portrays the devastating alienation created by late capitalist society. His drawings also pose resistance to modern consumer culture's hegemony by invoking the feeling of nostalgia, which counters the nameless seriality of commodities with a longing for an unattainable past.

Upon entering the gallery, the sheer number of images covering the walls almost overwhelms the viewer. In two previous exhibitions from earlier this year (held in Los Angeles and New York), Dzama produced 500 and 300 drawings respectively for each show. Creating works with the reliability and consistency of a machine, Dzama saturates the spectator's senses with a proliferation of stimuli, a blur of smoking bears shooting guns at trussed up cowboys in masks. The experience, hindering the remembrance of specific drawings, transforms these representations into commodities; the drawings become interchangeable, decontextualized objects, alienating their producer from his product.

A closer inspection of Dzama's drawings, however, discloses not only the estranging effects of the commodification of the art object, but also, through the use of allegorical tropes, how everyday aspects of modern life isolate the individual. In a consistent theme, technological apparatuses alienate human interaction by demanding that discourses be negotiated through mechanical media. In one drawing, a "transmitter" connected to a circular image-making device (resembling a television) projects a melancholic superhero's head listlessly gazing back at the transmitter. Denied his superhuman powers, the fantastical hero remains constrained (even castrated) within the box, assuming a defeatist expression that reveals his dependency upon the visual apparatus to represent himself.

Dzama continues his investigation of alienated subjects through a look at how the voyeuristic gaze (a central aspect of modern spectatorship in cinema, television, and other visual media) objectifies gendered bodies. In the foreground of one image, a headless man has intercourse from behind with a woman who wears a clown's mask, denying her any recognizable identity. Three clowns intensify her abjection by laughing and dancing in the background as they watch the sex act. Reinforcing the clowns' objectifying gazes is the spectator's implicit voyeuristic involvement; no matter which way the woman turns (either towards her sexual partner, the clowns, or the viewer) she will never be able to simultaneously return all the gazes which construct her as an object of visual pleasure.

But to understand Dzama's work as merely a heavy-handed or clichéd critique of late-capitalism and modernity would obscure the subtle, tender modes of resistance which make his work intensely unique and reverberating. Whether showing absurd scenes such as a bear and a duck sharing a cigarette, or a sentimental guitar player accompanied by a singing grizzly, Dzama's ability to invoke a touching sense of humor removes his images from the endless chain of commodities. Engaging the viewer with just a small joke challenges the commodity status of the art object through stimulating a sentiment in the spectator which goes beyond the spectre of capitalism.

Dzama's most profound act of defiance—what makes his work so endearing and challenging—is his use of nostalgia. An unquantifiable sensation with no tangible referent, nostalgia comes into existence through fleeting encounters, arising from random objects, and stimulating a memory that completely absorbs the individual. Nostalgia fabricates images in one's consciousness as decontextualized experiences which lift a person, if only for a brief moment, beyond the confines and oppression of modern society. It is this experience of ephemeral longing which Dzama's drawings induce in the viewer. For example, in an image of a bound cowboy buried to the top of his head, Dzama simultaneously stimulates nostalgic desires while problematizing society's complex, sentimental notion of the hero of the Old West. Dressed in a light blue shirt and pants, complimented by a red bandanna, Dzama's cowboy looks like the Lone Ranger without his famous black mask. Now confined to a humiliating and effeminate position, the ultra-masculine savior of traditional American values becomes a pathetic victim. Although completely unable to free himself, Dzama's forlorn cowboy, marked by his dejected grimace, absently stares beyond his restrictive confinement. This stare, which hollowly looks beyond the paper, past the gazing spectator, represents the nostalgic moment: the instance where resistance is posed in the face of adverse conditions.

Alexander Dumbadze, *Austin*

Marcel Dzama, *Untitled*, 198, ink, watercolor, root beer on paper, 12 1/2" x 9 3/4" (photo courtesy of Richard Heller Gallery).

VIRGINIA

Strictly Painting II
Radical Realism

McLean Project for the Arts, Emerson Gallery
September 17 - November 7

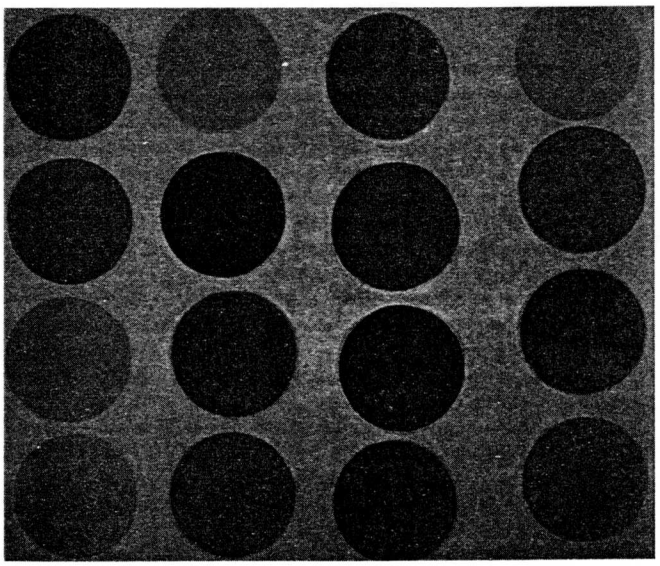
"A juried show, is a juried show, is a juried show;" surely some critic before has said these words. Juried shows serve various purposes, from introducing new talents to an audience, to familiarizing viewers with the art scene regulars still cranking out work, to codifying a local movement or style. When there is no unifying theme, the juried exhibition reflects what the judge(s) simply deem the best of the entrants.

In "Strictly Painting II," there is cream and there are dregs but at least there is variety. The two jurors, Annie Gawlak and W.C. Richardson, picked 28 paintings out of over 140 submissions by mid-Atlantic artists. The only criteria were that the object hangs on the wall and involves paint at some point; and some of the best works are, in essence, strictly painting.

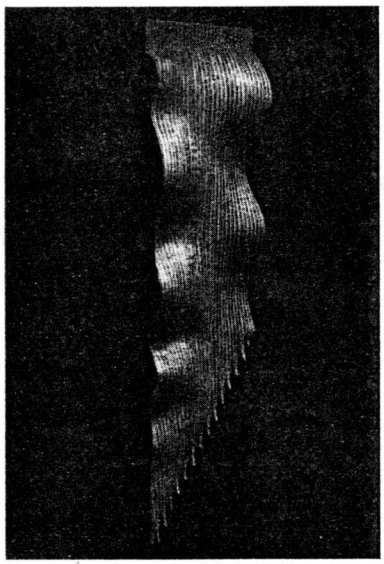
When faced with a cacophony of artistic voices, the most soothing and introspective ones beckon the most attention, as is the case with Isabel Bigelow's *Fall* (1998). This large painting lures the viewer into a sea of blue tones interrupted by mysterious shadowy shapes resembling portions of fences or ladders. These shapes fade in and out of the glowing blue mist like a blueprint of a mental journey. A Baltimore artist, Bigelow was also featured in an excellent, concurrent exhibition, also co-curated by Richardson, of abstract paintings shown at the Washington Project for the Arts last fall.

Also in the contemplative and puzzlingly familiar vein are paintings by Patrick Craig, *Twin* (1996), and Dan Treado, *Avagadro, Number's Up* (1997). *Twin* shows a kidney-shaped blob either splitting in two or with another identical blob peaking behind the first one. Floating in a cloud-filled background, the motionless blobs resemble Magritte's meticulous paintings of nonreality. Treado's diptych, with its curving, silvery lines over a blue grey background resemble biological forms, such as a set of ribs or a portion of colon. With the title and shapes, the painting suggests the deterioration of the human body, but the coolness of the tones provides an aesthetic distance.

In Gerard Devlin's *Chamber* (1997), a surface of lively and thick strokes of mainly white and black paint seem to dance around the few recognizable shapes: a bowl, a cane or hook, and a flat rectangle with handles. Devlin's style resembles that of Jennifer Bartlett's in his manner of including a few specifically placed, suggestive objects in a violent weave of paint strokes. Kurt Godwin's *Carousel/Air*



Carol Miller Frost, *Cool Jay*, 1997, acrylic on canvas, 55" x 65"
(photo courtesy of McLean Project for the Arts).



Nancy Sansom Reynolds, *Loose Ends*, 1998,
laminated plywood, 70" x 15" x 8"
(photo courtesy of Hand Workshop Art Center).

(1997) features a wrecked carousel on a bed of twigs and sticks, resembling a ship lost and adrift. As a neurotic child who feared clowns, circuses, and carousels, I enjoyed a sense of revenge while reviewing the carnage of the swan and horse seats thrown askew.

A small grouping of paintings toward the front of the exhibition deal with text as both a visual and a thematic issue. The most arresting of these is Mark Cameron Boyd's *Deviled Blonde* (1998), a full sheet of plywood covered with strips of newspaper, mostly in an Asian language. The title refers to a headline from a tabloid pasted at the top of the work, and also to a few scattered images of women including one that looks to be Ivana Trump. *Deviled Blonde* becomes a Pollock-like allover mass of language, a muted attempt at vociferous communication. Susan Main's *Quoting Birds* (1998) has words strewn about the canvas, painted frantically as if confused calls for help, sometimes buried under white paint or pushed to the sides. Even the most realistically painted work, *Still Life with Destroyed Books I* (1996) by Ephraim Rubenstein, presents unreadable text. The represented books have been violently torn, hung from a vertical surface, and the text is painted only as dashes or dots.

Also on display at the McLean Center for the Arts was "Radical Realism," a display of 12 lithographs from the late 1960s to early 1970s by photorealist painters such as Robert Cottingham, Richard Estes, and Malcolm Morley. Organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, this small exhibition displays the end-point of representational painting, but through the means of photo-lithography. The irony of relying on photography to create a lithograph based on a photorealistic painting is somewhat disturbing, as a major theme in photorealism was to reproduce the verisimilitude of photography through paint. In the absence of paint on canvas, these prints look like staged photographs. But as a companion to "Strictly Painting," this small print exhibition reminds viewers of the crisis in painting over the past few decades, and how the survivors have picked up the remains and moved on.

Elizabeth Schlatter, *Washington, D.C.*

Hard Wood

Hand Workshop Art Center, Richmond
June 26 - August 23

Sculptors Mark Iwinski and Nancy Sansom Reynolds come from dissimilar perspectives to explore wood's more nimble qualities and to elevate its parameters to a higher plane. For Iwinski, wood poses contemplative studies in flexibility. He floats stripped twigs from spherical orbs like undulating seaweed emerging from the ocean floors, then balances curls of branches perilously off a wall. Using laminated plywood, a lyrical melding of thin, layered, speckled strips, Reynolds similarly approaches wood as a potter would a wheel laden with clay. In *Roundabout*, for instance, she rounds the layers into a singular stream of meandering curves. For *Loose Ends*, the plywood ripples down the wall in a relief of cascading curls and drips.

What distinguishes the two clearly is their roots. Iwinski's forms began with more alchemic sources, reflecting the fundamental makeup of life, of thought and aesthetics. His early, more illustrative works resemble researchers' bubbles composed not of air but of wooden circles, stacked and craning Brancusi-style towards the ceiling. *Curie's Crucible*, an oversized beaker of oak and copper, recalls this earlier tradition. Patterned after scientific instruments and essentials, the work is sequestered within the gallery with two hypothetical products of laboratorical experimentation, an oak and gold leaf orb titled *Luminary*, and a podlike oak, lead and gold leaf piece titled *Retort*.

With this trio, Iwinski allows the surface distinctions of the wood to peer through the gold leaf or remain altogether, never permitting the form to overpower the source. Through his use of luminous metals, the works and others, such as the walnut, dissection of ultramarine pigmented and copper *Reliquary* (1996), tap the elemental and the natural to emit a serene regality.

More recently, however, Iwinski's works have come to exhibit the delicate linear space inherent in drawings and the iconography of his Christian upbringing. Resembling his ongoing attachment to drawing, the artist simplifies his figurations to branches of three progressively larger lengths that emerge from a stationary base in the alder and maple piece titled *Small Epy* (epy being short for epigenous), the walnut, gold leaf and hickory piece titled *Epigenous*, and the oak and beech piece titled *Large Epy*. The works illustrate the artists' current interest in moving from solid form to chaos, from the organic to the haphazard.

Although as evolving as the other works, Iwinski's more solemn reliquary