

POST

Boys & Girls

N I N E P A I N T E R S

November 15, 1990 **ARTISTS SPACE** January 5, 1991



NINE PAINTERS

Ken Aptekar
Greg Davidek
Nancy Davidson
Greg Drasler
Lee Gordon
Margo Machida
Holly Morse
Lillian Mulero
Millie Wilson

Catalogue essays by

Carol Zemel
Michael Kimmel
Renée Green
James Saslow

Organized by

Ken Aptekar

Introduction

Post-Boys&Girls: Nine Painters is not a show for Jesse Helms, nor the Cincinnati kids who went after Dennis Barrie, nor the troops massing against the NEA. All of them would be offended by at least some of the paintings exhibited, and are hereby forewarned to stay home. And too bad for them. Rich with visual pleasures, this show means to stimulate people's thinking about what men and women are supposed to be, and about what a painter in 1990 can say about that.

The nine artists I have gathered together are all painting their way out of gendered corners. Additionally, their work challenges the notion that only the media arts can mount social critique, that a painting is simply too precious, too tradition-bound to make a difference. Some of the work wrestles with authority in the forms of the father, king or hero; the museum installation; or the minimalist painting that refuses to communicate. Some works assert the existence of gendered subjectivities that have mostly been ignored or suppressed: feminine, Puerto Rican, gay, lesbian, Asian-American. Other paintings invite us with their seductive illusionism and sensuality to freely desire even while social injunctions keep saying "NO." Yet other works turn the tables on language that has been used to restrain, discriminate against, or belittle, in relation to sex and gender.

No stylistic line dominates. Formal strategies range from abstraction to appropriation, romantic realism to cool conceptualism, expressionism to process art. Nor is any value attached to "pure" painting and drawing accomplished without the aid of photography; most of these artists use photographs or slides in the creation of their work.

This choice of using paint now comes at a price. To make paintings has been, with few

exceptions, the exclusive activity of white men, some of whom could then choose other white men to assume the title “artist-genius.” For painters expecting to subvert or at least challenge the social order, participating in—or being shut out by—that old boy network triggers enormous conflicts. Despite all the satisfactions of making paintings and the medium’s rich history, we can’t avoid painting’s identification with privilege, racism, sexism, Eurocentrism.

The artists in *Post-Boys&Girls: Nine Painters* all confront these contradictions; they get their hands dirty. While the look of each artist’s work is distinct, all share the hope that painting can produce new freedoms for yesterday’s boys and girls.

I would like to thank the four writers, Carol Zemel, Micheal Kimmel, Renée Green and James Saslow, whose essays contribute enormously to the meaning and pleasure of this show. My conversations with each of them have been stimulating and formative in shaping the exhibition as well as my own artwork.

There are many others whose comments, suggestions and support have been helpful to me. Marcia Tucker first suggested how an exhibition that includes painting can shape our ideas about gender with her show *The Other Man; Alternative Representations of Masculinity* at The New Museum in 1987. Her belief and interest in my work has set a high standard for me, and her ideas for this show have greatly enriched it. Connie Butler has been encouraging, accomodating and eager to join with me in making the show a success, as have Susan Wyatt and the staff at Artists Space. My special thanks to Laura Miller for this catalogue’s thoughtful, fresh design. Others whose input I gratefully acknowledge are Robert Atkins, Carol Becker, Nancy Gonchar, Kellie Jones, Susana Leval, Melissa Myer, Lowery Stokes Sims, and Ann Snitow and fellow members of her enor-

mously stimulating seminar “Sex, Gender, and Consumer Culture” at NYU’s Institute for the Humanities. Eunice Lipton, my resident critic, confidante, and cohort has profoundly influenced both my painting and my work on this project with her incandescent thoughts, passionate feminism, humor, commitment, and rigorous intellect. I’d be lost without her.

Finally, my gratitude goes to all the artists for their participation. The lively exchanges I’ve had with each of them about their work and mine, and about this show have made the experience a deeply satisfying one. This is the artworld I hoped to find when, as a graduate student in 1973, I moved to New York City: smart artists and writers feverishly creating work that made you overexcited, and talking to each other about it all with delight.

— Ken Aptekar

Post-Boys&Girls: The Return of the Suppressed

by Carol Zemel

A decade after progressive critics proclaimed the “end of painting” and denounced the conservatism of neo-expressionist styles,¹ painting-with-a-politics has reemerged with a complex and challenging agenda. In some respects *Post-Boys&Girls* suggests a modish impudence towards serious categories of oppression and constraint. But within this playful posture, the exhibition sets the issues squarely before us. A lively range of pictorial strategies refutes the so-called bankruptcy of painting and offers a stirring cultural politics of gender, race, and ethnicity.

Because they are insistently political, the arguments against painting are worth reviewing. Briefly, painting as a practice was construed in class terms as a parade of styles produced by bourgeois artists for a capitalist market. Thus, painting, and specifically the return to figuration in the late ‘70s and ‘80s, was deemed a conservative impulse designed to perpetuate oppressive cultural hierarchies and forms. Neo-expressionist painting in particular,² with its display of angst-filled, heroic subjects and its veneration of the master’s “hand” seemed, like European figurative art after WWI, to repeat a reactionary flight from the problems of the present and to substitute a Reagan-esque nostalgia for traditional values, myths and hierarchies. For many artists, the way beyond the impasse of painting’s recapture by bourgeois culture was through deconstructive textual strategies, site-specific installations and mass cultural, photo-based techniques.

At the heart of these warnings is an idealist belief in the fixed or essential meaning of styles. Seen in these terms, a style is so laden with historical associations that it is

immutably bound to its period of origin, with every later incarnation signifying nostalgia or decadence. If post-modernism has shown us anything, however, it is that style can be deployed as a fluid, critical language with new meaning in its present usages, and as such, it can decode and disrupt those older values and mythologies. To be sure, critics acknowledge that time and circumstance shape the significance of these methods.³ But can we effectively decode these painterly revisions through the usual formal analyses and assessments of style? From what “official” perspective is the neo-Cubism produced in Moscow in 1985 deemed stylistically naive, retrograde, or derivative? Does a vehement, gestural style produced by an Asian-American woman in this exhibition signify the same narcissistic withdrawal that it did in the hands of German men?

The sites of conflict in contemporary culture have also shifted drastically in recent years. The Euro-centric polarities—West-East, bourgeois-socialist, realism-abstract—that structured the battles and victories of modernism have been supplanted by a political and cultural mapping of First, Second and Third World zones. In exhibitions as far-flung as the recent Soho/Harlem-sited *Decade Show* and the *Havana Biennale*, the issue is not the “end of painting,” but rather how various de-constructions and re-constructions of familiar media enable and voice a variety of gendered and multi-cultural points of view.

The painter who invokes a past style does not simply yearn for past traditions and histories. An elegant Deco-Surrealism, as Greg Drasler uses it for pictures of mannered bedroom interiors, produces uneasy attention to the “safeties” of the boudoir, the dreams of the bourgeoisie, and the private sanctuaries of class. The intricately patterned medievalism that surrounds Aptekar’s armored knights renders ironic the splendor of

that chivalric masculinity. Seen this way, what might appear as gadfly eclecticism—"eclectic-
neo" is Hal Foster's term,⁴ or "re-inventing
the Beaux-Arts" as New Museum curators
Laura Trippi and Gary Sangster put it⁵—is
evidence instead of an elaborate conceptual
repertoire that allows emblematic designs
(Davidson, Davidek, Machida) and image-
text combinations (Morse, Aptekar) to ap-
pear comfortably in company with pictorial
fragments adopted from photographic and
mass media practices (Davidek, Wilson) and
allegorical reprises of historical styles
(Drasler, Mulero). In each case, stylistic ma-
nipulations have a critical dimension, em-
phatically linking the personal and private to
cultural and social forms.

No less crucial in this exhibition are the
pleasures in the medium the pictures allow.
For those critical of painting, old master
methods meant old master pleasures, and
expert play of materials constituted seduc-
tive dominion over what was shown. Some
artists banished such pleasure to escape this
power play. The pleasures of paint return
here—albeit with a purpose. Neither titillat-
ing nor narrowly "aesthetic," these visceral
and immediate sensations direct the pic-
tures' impact and social meanings. Nancy
Davidson's oilstick rubbings of quotidian
objects like ironing boards and rugs, for ex-
ample, monumentalize the fragile intimacies
of a sensuously rubbed and caressed surface.
Holly Morse's pictures combine sinuously
curled texts with juicy fruit-laden hats. But
pleasure at this level is also, in a sense, poly-
morphous perverse. It can attract and engulf
in order to revulse; the pleasures of pigment
can coax us close to more repellent imagery.
For example, delicate shadows and high-
lights in oil and watercolor stage the gro-
tesque dimensions of Lee Gordon's pictured
masculinities, attracting us to the hooded
costume's sensual folds. Margo Machida's
thick facture invests her stark black, white

and red figures with ominous fury. And bright
patterns bring both a festive air and edgy
tension to Lillian Mulero's primitivist icons.

But what adds special meaning to these
pictures is the gendered position of the maker
and the way viewers are challenged to en-
gage the work in these terms. Indeed, the
critique of painting has been lodged largely
by white male critics, speaking from and
about a masculine "mainstream." Acknowl-
edging the need to end the universalizing
myth of the artist-creator, critics proposed a
"death of the author" position adopted from
literary criticism, rather than a multiplicity of
artist-subject positions. The argument as-
sumes a simplified wholeness for "painting"
as a category, and slams the door on a more
inclusive painting practice.⁶ But gender, race
and ethnic issues introduced and made cen-
tral by feminism have significantly revital-
ized picture-making, despite some critical
anxiety that pluralism risks the loss of a cut-
ting edge,⁷ or that the "new tribalism," as the
New York Times calls it, will produce art
"suffocated by the requirement that nobody
be either offended or excluded."⁸ One
wonders, given this logic, just who it is that
now feels lost in the crowd. In the face of
such resistance, there is all the more reason
to recognize the growing multi-cultural pres-
ence and success.

The fiction of a unitary subject is ad-
dressed in Millie Wilson's installation about
lesbian painter Romaine Brooks, *The Artist
that is Not One*. The title derives from French
feminist Luce Irigaray's characterization of
women as *This Sex which is not one*, and al-
ludes to Natalie Barney's lesbian novel *The
One Who is Legion*, which Brooks illus-
trated. Wilson's design splits portrait images
and arranges blocks of paint and text in an
asymmetric sequence that precludes any vi-
sual center or "core." As elements of Brook's
ex-patriate, androgynous, artistic, and les-
bian "identity," these parts display the facets

of a utopian lesbian milieu, while insisting
that viewers not force the subject—or our-
selves—into any simple, single category.

The Asian faces and figures in Margo
Machida's paintings hurtle towards the viewer
with disquieting configurations of an ethnic
femininity. These glaring matrons, grimac-
ing men, demure daughters and anguished
nudes seem caught in some unspecified tur-
bulence; staring back, they engage us in a
grim familial and cultural authority. The pre-
sentation of a racially specific sexuality is
particularly challenging in Lillian Mulero's
image of a tattooed nude, positioned in the
painting field like a dusky-skinned anthropo-
logical object. Fondling his penis and grin-
ning broadly, the figure confronts male and
female viewers with a provocative layering of
exoticism and eroticized "othernesses".

Inverting the conventional emphasis on
the female body, *Post-Boys&Girls* highlights
the male nude as a deconstructive signifier of
masculinity. In *Self-Portrait as Nude Woman
with a Clown Nose* (both guises are indigni-
ties), Lee Gordon dislocates the body's gen-
der marks. The presumed femininity of a pas-
sive figure, arms hidden, the pale breasts almost
like musculature, the genitals bikini'd and
hidden—all of these cast sexual identities
exquisitely adrift and invite us to speculate
on their certainties. Greg Davidek also plays
with gender's visual language by fragment-
ing masculine "wholeness" and distributing
parts of the male body into panels of primer-
like signs. These and other pictures in the
exhibition—even Drasler's jaunty fedoras
tossed in the breeze, suggest a masculinity ill
at ease with its own authority, and self-con-
sciously so.

Suspicious woman that I am, I face these
images with pleasure and a wary curiosity.
They resonate with familiarly male combina-
tions of power, vulnerability and charm. But
they also call up another dilemma: the place
of bourgeois masculinity in the chorus of

multi-cultural subjectivities. Is this claim to
critique the very masculinity that empowers
them not disingenuous?⁹ Can white men have
anything to say about masculine authority
and its patriarchal construction that is not
simply a guilty confession or a chastened,
petulant whine? Is Aptekar's painted chivalric
conversation, *Fuck me? Fuck you.* more than a
prettily patterned joke? Or do these hooded
monsters, armored knights, and flying fedoras
disturb the macho assumptions of power
they invoke?

Engaging gender issues in these ways,
Post-Boys&Girls avoids a utopian compla-
cency and struggles for equal ground. No
doubt, as white bourgeois masculinity loses
some of its privilege, it will tighten its grip
with even more vicious racisms and misogy-
nies—the comedy routines of Andrew Dice
Clay or the rap-taunts of *2 Live Crew* are two
current examples. But with this show as evi-
dence, it is important to see an other term in
this gender discourse, and to recognize the
humor, pain and confusion embedded in
"new masculinities."

The exhibition thus stakes out charged
and risky territory, even as it is threatened
with loss. For if debates about "cultural trib-
alism" persist, coinciding with media repre-
sentation of Middle Eastern "tribalisms", we
will surely be Bush-whacked with more cul-
tural muzzling in the democracy's name. For
the moment, painting is alive, well and still
kicking; *Post-Boys&Girls* extends its possi-
bilities with humor and urgency.

1. Douglas Crimp, "The End of Painting," and
Benjamin Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of
Repression; Notes on the Return of Representation in
European Painting," both in *October* 16 (Spring
1981), pp. 69-86 and Hal Foster, "Against Pluralism,"
and "Between Modernism and the Media," in
Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics, Port
Townsend, Bay Press, 1985, pp. 13-58.

2. Buchloh made this argument about work by Chia,
Clemente, Kiefer. "Figures of Authority."

3. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority," p.132, and Foster, "Modernism and Media," p.41.
4. Foster, "Against Pluralism," p. 24
5. "From Trivial Pursuit to the Art of the Ideal: Art Making in the Eighties," *The Decade Show; Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*, New York, 1990, p.64.
6. There is widespread anxiety about this position across several disciplines. For a clear statement of the issue for feminists, see Nancy K. Miller, "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader," in Teresa de Lauretis, ed. *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986, pp. 102-120.
7. Foster, "Against Pluralism," and "For a Concept of the Political in Contemporary Art," in *Recordings*, pp. 139-156.
8. Richard Bernstein, "The Arts catches up with a Society in Disarray," *The New York Times*, Sunday, September 9, 1990, Section 2, pp. 1ff.
9. For a thorough discussion of this dilemma among literary scholars, see Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, eds., *Men in Feminism* (New York, Methuen, Inc., 1987), and in particular, Jardine's lucid comments in "Men in Feminism: Odor di Uomo or Compagnons de Route," pp. 54-61.

Carol Zemel is Associate Professor of Art History at the State University of New York at Buffalo. She is completing a book about utopian themes in the work of Vincent van Gogh and is the author of articles on contemporary art and feminism.

Post-Boys & Girls: Men & Women?

by Michael S. Kimmel

The title of this exhibition, *Post-Boys & Girls*, suggests several possible interpretations. It could mean that we're beyond our childhoods, grown men and women, taking on the adult responsibilities of producing adult art. Or it could refer to some new "post" movement, as if we are the post-modern, post-structuralist post-boys and post-girls.

I'm struck by another meaning of the phrase. To declare the exhibition "Post-Boys & Girls" is to suggest a way of seeing ourselves that goes beyond thinking that who we are is stamped indelibly on us the moment some doctor announces "it's a boy" or "it's a girl." Our personalities, our experiences and our interactions with one another have more to do with the cultural meanings attached to our reproductive biology than with that biological equipment itself. It's as though these artists are claiming that we must see beyond boys and girls, beyond male and female, to those creatures whose lives are shaped by the cultures in which they live. Let's call them men and women.

Gender is one of the central axes around which our social life revolves. Not "sex," the biological given, but "gender," the set of meanings that cultures give to those biological facts. Gender is as critical in establishing and expressing our identities as class or race, a foundation upon which individual personalities are built.

What's more, our gender identities, our experience of masculinity and femininity proceeds not from biological imperatives — boys will be boys — but from those cultural expectations. Gender is socially constructed. "One is not born a woman," claimed Simone de Beauvoir. "One becomes a woman." And we become women and men by learning the culturally prescribed roles that women and men are assigned in our culture.

It's not a unitary process, of course, and there isn't just one version of masculinity and femininity that everyone embraces. One version—white, middle class, heterosexual—is set up as the standard against which all other masculinities and femininities are measured, and the power of this hegemonic version marginalizes others, and makes them appear "deviant" or "problematic." Engendering is thus about power — about the power of men over women, and the power of some versions of masculinity or femininity over other versions.

Which means that gender is political. If gender is socially constructed, it means that we are not simply the passive objects upon which some abstraction called "society" inscribes its gender codes. We actively participate in the process, modifying the script, challenging it, transforming it. The enormous vitality of both the feminist and the gay and lesbian movements comes in part from the thrill of revolt against prescribed roles. If our masculinity and femininity are socially constructed, they can also be *deconstructed* — taken apart, re-examined and *reconstructed*.

The process of deconstruction, of disassembly, is serious business and exhilarating fun. Many of the works in this exhibition provide thoughtful meditation on the centrality of gender in our lives, and offer angry retorts to the ways in which gender-as-power is deployed against some of us. Nancy Davidson's rubbings of everyday items in women's lives—the ironing board, the oval rug — extracts surprising textures from ordinary objects, reminding us that even surfaces have depth. Margo Machida exposes the mechanisms of male intrusiveness in women's experience, either by surveillance, direct intervention, or distortion. Lee Gordon's version of masculinity and male sexuality is rendered even more menacing by concealing its human face; behind these black leather masks, clown faces, and white hoods lurk danger and terror. Even in his self-portrait, where he appropriates femininity as a badge of vulnerability, he conceals and

distorts his own features. This is a dark, frightening work, a chilling and visceral portrayal of men's capacity for violence.

Other artists expose the contradictions of gender by toying with them. There's a glee to our collective giggling at these works, solidarity cemented by shared laughter at the ridiculousness of the conventions which have been forced down our throats, recognition of common resistance. Take, for example, Greg Drasler's hilarious paintings of men so laden down with the tools of their trade that they could not possibly perform the roles that are suggested by their equipment. Or Greg Davidek's playful depiction of the male tendency to compartmentalize, to separate head from body. Or Ken Aptekar's brilliant painting of a standoff between two faceless armored medieval soldiers — two genuinely empty suits. By juxtaposing contemporary language Aptekar reveals the time-less insanity of that gendered discourse.

The works in *Post-Boys & Girls* hold the mirrors of gender up to us — some stark and honest, even brutal, others impishly distorted as in a fun house. And they invite us to explore the extraordinary hold that gender exerts in our lives, to deconstruct what it has meant to be boys and girls, so that we may reconstruct ourselves as responsible and caring women and men.

*Michael Kimmel is a sociologist at SUNY Stony Brook who specializes in cultural analysis and the sociology of gender relations. His books include *Changing Men* (1987), *Men's Lives* (1989) and *Men Confront Pornography* (1990). He is currently finishing a documentary history of men who have supported feminism in America 1776-1990.*

What's Painting Got to Do with It? Representing Gender & Sexuality in the Age of Post-Mechanical Reproduction

by Renée Green

The media have substituted themselves for the older world. Even if we should wish to recover that older world, we can do it only by an intensive study of the ways in which the media has swallowed it.

— Marshall McLuhan

It was February, 1987. Stretching up Mercer Street from the door of the Dia Foundation, a long line of unmistakably arty-looking people milled about, trying to keep warm while awaiting admittance to a program entitled, “Strategies of Public Address: Which Media, Which Publics?” This was to be the second in an ambitious series of open discussions on contemporary culture, geared toward a visual-art-oriented audience; it intended to traverse “artistic, critical, theoretical, philosophical, historical, political and anthropological” practices. The crowd’s anticipation was palpable.

While searching for a vacant seat, I spoke with a woman who sheepishly confessed to being a painter. When I asked why she had come, her response seemed indicative of the art-historical moment. She was there, she said, “to see if it’s possible for me to continue to paint.” She, myself and many others felt a pressing need to “rethink representation.”

Why did this need seem so particularly urgent at that time? After the passing of Neo-Expressionism, the fizzling of the East Village art boom, the New Museum’s publication of the influential book, *Art After Modernism* and that institution’s groundbreaking *Difference* show — to name a few of the unsettling events of the first half of the Eighties — confusion was in the air. For

politically conscious artists, some old, nagging questions could be put off no longer. What public could one conceivably reach? What methods might be used most effectively to reach it? What media were most appropriate to one’s messages? What messages should take priority? And most important, of what significance could anything one had to say be to one’s imagined audience?

Such questions had occupied my thoughts since my undergraduate years, especially in relation to “race” and feminism — and had propelled my own odyssey away from painting, which began long before I ceased to paint. Perhaps an account of my experience will help illuminate the very different path taken by the artists in *Post-Boys&Girls: Nine Painters*.

It would be wrong to presume that my being black and a woman were causes sufficient to shape my concerns. My longtime sense of opposition to the dominant order — my rebelliousness — may as easily be considered a personality trait as a sociological given. And the sociology of my background is more complex than the words *black* and *woman* might immediately suggest: Jim Crow, the Civil Rights movement, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Black Power, Lorraine Hansbury, Jimi Hendrix, cultural nationalism, gospel music, rock & roll, black Christianity, urban public schools, the Isley Brothers, the black middle class, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, the Beatles, Woodstock, Jack Kerouac, Hermann Hesse, upper-middle-class suburbs, private school, piano lessons, ballet class, ski club (to provide a short list) were all factors which had affected me by the time I arrived at college.

At Wesleyan University I was exposed to conceptual art, African-American studies, Women’s Studies, semiotics, structuralism and post-structuralism, all during the first semester. This was in 1977. When I arrived at college I considered myself an artist, spe-

cializing in no particular area. My most ambitious art-related project that year was the production of a play, which I wrote and directed.

I grew interested in conceptual art, and had difficulty sustaining interest in drawing classes. I had to transfer to the School of Visual Arts in New York to take painting and sculpture because I couldn’t win a position in the lottery for these classes at Wesleyan (where I studied the political economics and literature of “Third World” countries instead). When I interviewed at SVA it was assumed that as a black person I would go into illustration, but I stressed my interest in fine arts and was admitted to that program. I soon became frustrated by what seemed to be an archaic curriculum — figure painting, for example, and still-lives in the manner of Cezanne. On my own, I went to galleries; in the library I read of contemporary artists and “Post-Movement” art. I tried to incorporate these contemporary ideas into my own art practice, but was exasperated by the traditional categories into which my classes were divided.

In desperation I returned to Wesleyan, where I fortuitously participated in a seminar in which we wrote the catalogue essays for an exhibition of the Sol LeWitt Collection in conjunction with the Wadsworth Atheneum. Through that project, I was able to re-establish a connection with conceptual art. But figuring out how to give form to my own concepts was another story entirely. Upon graduating, I decided to pursue a career in publishing simultaneously with one in art; I hoped to keep the demands of the marketplace separate from my art production, so that I would be free to experiment. During this time of casing about, I was influenced by various projects by women artists that experimented with installations, performance and diaristic formats. Some of my models were Eva Hesse, Ree Morton and Adrian Piper.

I began studying video and super 8 film, but because of work and financial demands I needed a more expedient art form. I started doing mural-sized paintings on paper, which I thought of as conceptual pieces because the ideas behind them came out of literary theory and semiotics. The thought of these works being associated with the Neo-Expressionist art craze made me cringe, and I provided lengthy theoretical explanations when asked to discuss the paintings.

I left New York and lived in Mexico for eight months. There I had my first opportunity to read and think uninterrupted since college. While I was there I painted small works which were emotional responses to my experiences of alienation and of my perplexity at the way the indigenous people were lauded as having given the country its cultural heritage, yet abused in the streets. I spent a lot of time at anthropological museums and became very curious about epistemology.

When I returned to New York the art scene had changed. The painting-based East Village art boom was nearing its height. I was introduced as a painter at parties and openings full of painters. I felt uncomfortable with the designation, that it didn’t encompass all that I wanted to do creatively, but I continued experimenting with this form to see what I could do with it.

It was during this time that I became aware of a looseknit movement of artists engaged in a practice different from anything I’d known before, though they shared my feminist concerns. It was at the New Museum’s *Difference* show in 1984 that I first became acquainted with the work of Mary Kelly and other artists (British as well as American) engaged in a critique of media revolving around the issues of sexuality and representation. Griselda Pollack and Rozsika Parker commented on the media that appeared in the show:

“The range of media used defied the pronounced revival of ‘born again painting’ and sculpture. Thus what was displayed was not a range of objects advertising their medium and its manipulation by the expressive Artist but texts, combination of images and writings which produce what Mary Kelly has defined as ‘imaged discourse.’”

I had primarily associated feminist art with artists like May Stevens, Faith Ringgold and Nancy Spero, whose work displayed evidence of the hand and reflected rather personal investigations into the realms of politics, community, family and myth. Much of the *Difference* show by contrast, was based on photographic reproductions or looked machine-made, and it was influenced by psychoanalytic theory and semiotics. I had recently begun to re-read Barthes and Foucault, and soon became absorbed by the essays in *Art After Modernism* (edited by Brian Wallis) and, a little later, in “Race”, *Writing and Difference* (edited by Henry Louis Gates); the references in those two books led me to investigate the work of continental feminist theorists and black feminists. I re-evaluated my method of production. It seemed I’d pushed painting as far as I could, that I was breaking out of its boundaries. I wanted to engage more than just the viewer’s visual sense and to examine the conventions of looking by calling attention to the spectatorial process.

So there was no one factor which led me to veer away from painting. There were multiple factors based on the times, and on personal history and inclinations. The shift to multi-media works felt like a return to something I’d left behind.

But as is demonstrated by the work in *Post-Boys&Girls*, the lines between genres don’t seem to be as rigidly drawn now as they were through the first half of the Eighties. Millie Wilson, to cite perhaps the most extreme example in this show, expands paint-

ing into installation. Even painters — those who, owing to a mysterious mix of temperament and sociology, have stuck with painting or returned to it — have been exposed by now to post-*Difference*-show critiques of contemporary media culture, and some have developed ways to incorporate these into their own practice. And painters, of course, are in a unique position to critique the history and political economy of painting in their work; Ken Aptekar’s work is an elegant example of such an enterprise.

In his essay *Art In the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin suggests that artists interested in founding their project on politics would do well to use the media most prevalent and most accessible to the “masses” of their era. Writing in 1936, Benjamin recognized the mass appeal of film. Today the equivalent audience could be found for television and advertising as well, and it was an audience conditioned by these media that the artists of the *Difference* show hoped to reach. But not every artist wants to work in the same genre or address the same audience. With the knowledge that what they produce will primarily reach a gallery- and museum-going public (which, in fact, includes the power brokers of the media industry), the artists in *Post-Boys&Girls* grapple with what remains of painting in the postmodern era.

One can postulate that the Age of Painting, like the Age of Europe, has come to an end. Painting no longer reigns supreme in the arts; its position, like that of the colonial powers, has shifted. But this is no reason for painters to despair. The current exhibition reflects a tug of war with both tradition and inevitable historical change.

Renée Green is an artist and writer whose multi-media installation, Anatomies of Escape, was exhibited at the Clocktower Gallery, May-June, 1990. She is currently working on a year-long installation for the upcoming exhibition Out Of Site at the P.S. 1 Museum.

New Moves in an Old Game

by James M. Saslow

Don’t talk to *me* about *gender*, honey. I may be a tweedy bearded art professor, but once a year I ride on a Gay Pride parade float wearing my signature white Empire gown and lace-fringed Russian tiara. And let me tell *you*, those counter-demonstrators outside St. Patrick’s have plenty to say about my gender identity — not to mention my moral right to exist on this planet. So I look at this exhibition, and it’s *fabulous* to see how many artists have woken up to gender as an aesthetic and political issue. But I also ask, When is the rest of the world going to smell the coffee? Since “Adam delved and Eve span,” the West has propounded a mythic history with profound implications for conventions of masculine and feminine roles and emotions. These pervasive rules of decorum are now as archaic as the King James language in which we learned them; but until the Renaissance, the visual arts did not much question them. Unsurprisingly, most artists reproduced prevailing norms: Madonnas were motherly or queenly, Jupiter suitably butch. And art critics were concerned with policing, not problematizing: In his 16th-century treatise *L’Aretino*, Ludovico Dolce praised Raphael for painting the proper physical distinctions between boys and girls and slapped Michelangelo, who “does not know or will not observe those differences.”

At about the same time, however, artists began carving out some small conceptual space for alternative consciousness. One tool, still evident in the present exhibit, was humor. Giorgio Vasari tells us in his *Lives* about an irreverent artist named Nunziato who, when asked for a Madonna that would not incite lust in parishioners, painted her with a mustache — a prank repeated centuries later by Marcel Duchamp on the Mona Lisa. A

more subversive method was to sneak some personal element into the interstices of official iconography. The androgynous grace of Botticelli’s and Leonardo’s adolescent angels takes on new meaning in light of their arrests for committing sodomy with boy apprentices. In the Baroque era, Artemisia Gentileschi’s empathetic portrayals of the biblical murderess Judith served as a private revenge fantasy for her own experience of rape.

However gleefully (and productively) modern historians are rediscovering such embryonic gender-variant artists, we should not expect to find in them the full-blown self-consciousness of a later time. Walter Pater, the 19th century English critic who first alerted us to the wistful androgyny of Botticelli and Leonardo, was himself a closeted homosexual; his reading of the past, however sensitive, tells as much about his own search for coded alternatives to Victorianism as about the Renaissance. Not until Pater’s own day could the realist Rosa Bonheur, who painted disguised self-portraits in drag, begin to imagine — and live — an alternative gender identity as a woman trying to move in the male sphere. Yet even she, ever ambivalent about the cost of nonconformity, preserved her lucrative ties with officialdom.

Only in the modern era has the artist shifted definitively from being an agent of society to being its adversary. And postmodernist culture, as Lyotard and his fellow post-structuralists have defined it, is characterized by a profound distrust toward our own sacred historical narratives, whether Adam-and-Eve or the progress of reason. Whereas earlier artists played by the rules of the dominant social-aesthetic discourse, artists like those in this exhibit aim not simply to make new moves within the old rules, but to question, even to change the rules of that game. They deconstruct those aptly named “master narratives” with humor, and lan-

guage, and unlikely juxtapositions; and Duchamp's nose-thumbing alter ego, Rose Sélavy, is the grandmother of us all.

As an index of this change, compare Jean-Baptiste Greuze's famous Metropolitan Museum picture *Broken Eggs* to Holly Morse's *Dirty*. Both are about "deflowering," but the 18th-century man assumes our complicity in his allegorized melodrama of lost virginity, while the 20th-century woman spells out the allegory, opening it for discussion. The etched pane over Ken Aptekar's painted "pansy" makes even more explicit how we "see" reality through a glass darkly — a glass of learned verbal narratives. Both artists seek to unravel the nexus of negative, even hostile associations between flowers, sex, femininity, and homosexuality.

Some of these artists seek substitute archetypes for the ancient gods and heroes; others question the very notion of historical precedent. Greg Davidek's "King" and "Centaur" dismember these antique symbols of male power and sexuality; in contrast, Margo Machida, like Bonheur, has been fascinated with the male image, in pictures (not shown here) of the sexually ambiguous author Yukio Mishima. Millie Wilson's mock-heroic academes about Romaine Brooks and friends simultaneously honors a lesbian artistic forerunner and lampoons the formulaic arthistorical pedigree.

An inevitable question: are there any differences between the male and female agendas? Nancy Davidson's medium of oilstick rubbing explores the current question whether women have a distinctively tactile sensibility; her process is as much about gender as are the domestic objects she depicts. Lillian Mulero also deals in traditionally feminine "decorative" pattern and fabric, subverting this cliché by treating a man as a pattern (and a flowered one, at that). The macho stance of her urinating woman, on the other hand, appropriates "Folk Art" to

claim male prerogatives. By contrast, the men seem more concerned with the burden of maintaining that aggressive male mystique. Aptekar's knights are far too armored to make good on their verbal challenge of penetration; Greg Drasler's *métier* figures are entrapped in the symbols of their work; Lee Gordon's masks render the homiest activity remote and ominous. As one transvestite put it in Mariette Allen's recent book, *Transformations*, "Women have needed liberation to; men need liberation from."

One further complication: art and gender are not independent of ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. Bonheur and Brooks were able to actualize their deviant fantasies largely because both were independently wealthy. Not that the connections are always so clear or simple. Mishima's homosexuality was integral to his hypermasculine conception of samurai-style male love, which I'd like to think is relevant to Machida's appropriations. But does she identify with him because he's a man, or a homosexual, or an icon of her Japanese heritage?

Perhaps a little of each: her "*Noli me tangere*" asks about the Eastern body no less than the Western myth of Mary Magdalene. Come to think of it, my own imagery draws on both gender and ethnicity, too; and sometimes gender may not be uppermost in my mind — or in my viewers'. My drag persona, the Grand Duchess Anastasia Sazlova, was born as much from nostalgia for the land of my own forebears as from the Duchampian impulse toward genderfuck. Her picture once made the morning papers on the very day I was to start a new teaching job. I needn't have worried: The dean turned out to teach Slavic languages, and — our contrasting notions of couture counting less to him than our shared love of things Russian — he cheerily greeted me as, "Ah, the Czarina!"

That's as it should be — but all too seldom is. As the gender wars drag on and the

discourse battles proliferate, this participant-observer is moved both to exult in the critical acumen and wit of the works here, and to lament how little territory such offensives have captured. Frankly, I'm tired of "problematizing" gender, of analyzing oppression, of preaching the crusade of diversity. Why is the process of deconstruction and transformation taking so long? Why hasn't every type-A corporate CEO long since felt



H.I.H.
The Grand Duchess
Anastasia Sazlova

the danger of heart attack in Drasler's images of men literally imprisoned in their jobs? To borrow an exasperated phrase from the Vietnam era, Why can't we just declare victory and go home?

Well, in part because there's a lot of cultural inertia to be overcome, dating back to when the Roman architect Vitruvius assigned male and female personas to the orders of classical architecture. And also because most people aren't paying much attention, or at least not productive attention.

It is impossible to discuss the images in this show without acknowledging that the aesthetic and social space in which they circulate is painfully circumscribed. The avant-garde art world is only a thin layer of meat sandwiched between two heavier slabs of very white bread. Pressing down from the top is the officially sanctioned high culture of uptown museums and galleries; underneath is the thicker layer of popular culture — which, at least in the U.S., has historically lacked radical consciousness.

This mainstream culture has always sought to rope off the space in which poten-

tially destabilizing alternative visions can circulate, and to draw the noose ever tighter. It maintains its hegemony by various means: censorship, prosecution, and not-so benign neglect. And artists have long had to run the gauntlet of public tolerance. When Benvenuto Cellini proposed a statue of Jupiter wooing Ganymede, his archrival Bandinelli denounced him as a "dirty sodomite." Cellini consoled himself by carving a touchingly erotic sculpture of Apollo with the young boy Hyacinthus; but the swashbuckling artist, later sentenced to house arrest for sodomy, had learned enough to keep it in his own studio until his death.

And let's not even talk about Jesse Helms; or the Art Institute student who painted Chicago's mayor in a dress, bringing down a City Council order to lock up the picture; or Madame Mishima, who wouldn't let Paul Schrader make a film about her late husband without narrowing the gay angle to the point of invisibility; or Robert Mapplethorpe, whose visual statement that the male body could be as beautiful as a calla lily was so threatening to Western Civilization that the Cincinnati police had to videotape it for court evidence.

You think *that's* bad.... just imagine if Her Imperial Highness Sazlova wanted to stage a performance art piece in conjunction with the current exhibition. Would "she" get an NEA grant? Or a measly review in the dailies, to say nothing of a profile in the *Sunday Times*?

Don't hold your breath. If she were lucky, she'd be ignored; if not, she'd be videotaped for an obscenity trial. And beard or no beard, when the revolution comes from the right, this is one princess who doesn't expect to be saved by male privilege.

James M. Saslow, Ph.D., teaches Art History at Queens College, The City University of New York. He is the author of Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society and a contributor to The Advocate and other publications.

KEN APTEKAR

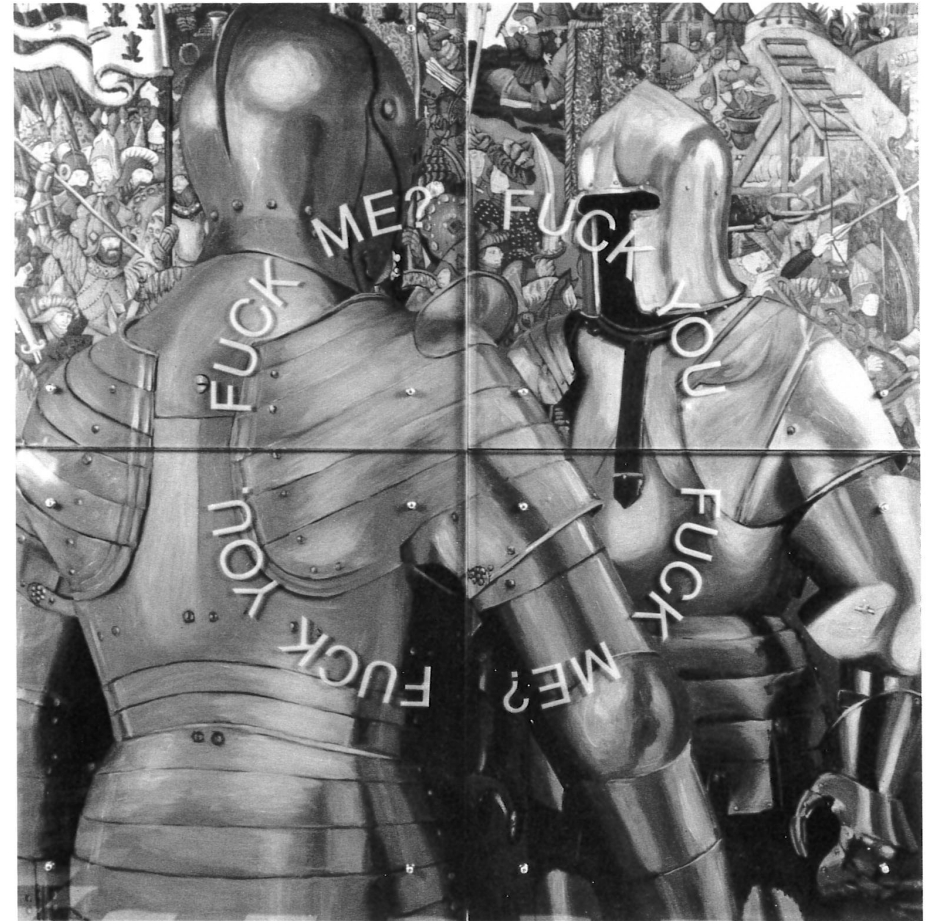
Born Detroit, Michigan
Lives New York, New York

Education

1975 Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY MFA
1973 University of Michigan,
Ann Arbor BFA

Selected Exhibitions

- 1990 *Critical Revisions*
Bess Cutler Gallery
New York, NY
Ken Aptekar
Margulies-Taplin Gallery
North Miami, FL
- 1989 *Ken Aptekar*
Bess Cutler Gallery
New York, NY
Gender Fictions
SUNY Binghamton Art Museum
Binghamton, NY
Serious Fun, Truthful Lies
Randolph Street Gallery
Chicago, IL
- 1987 *The Other Man, Alternative
Representations of Masculinity*
The New Museum of
Contemporary Art
New York, NY
- 1986 *Group Painting Exhibition*
Art in General
New York, NY



Above:
Fuck Me? Fuck You. 1990
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
Polyptych, 60x60 inches overall

Opposite:
Handsome 1990
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
30x30 inches

GREG DAVIDEK

Born Flint, Michigan
Lives Brooklyn, New York

Education

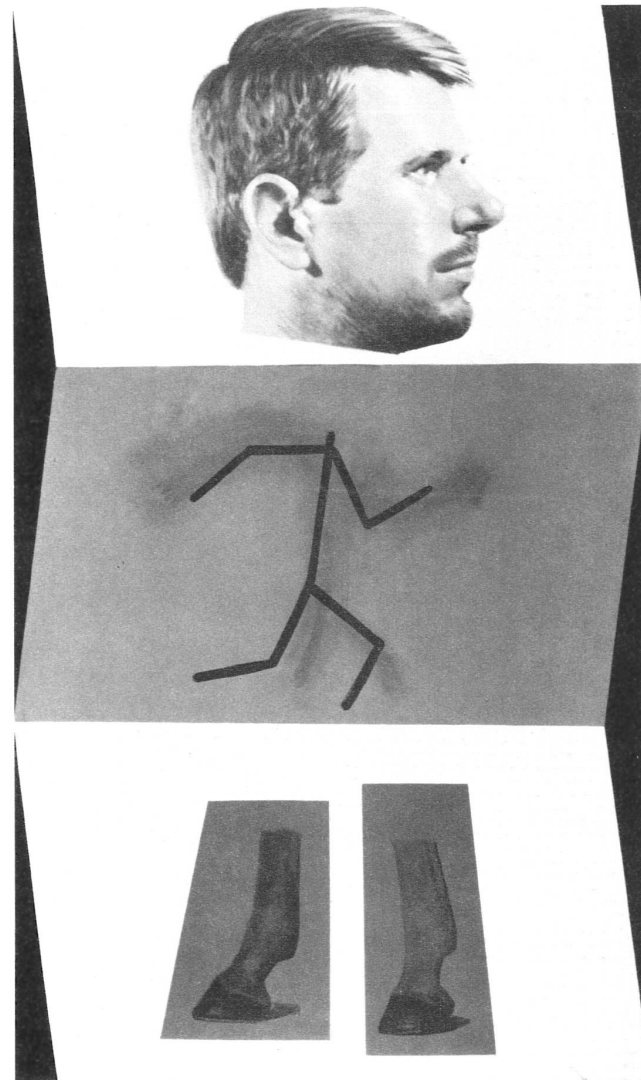
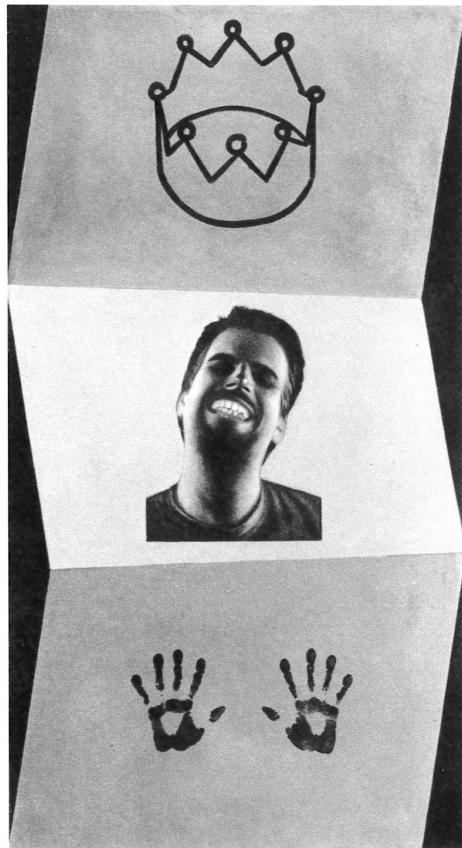
1983 Virginia Commonwealth University,
Richmond MFA
1980 Cleveland Institute of Art,
Cleveland BFA

Selected Exhibitions

1986 *MASS*
Group Material
The New Museum of
Contemporary Art
New York, NY

1985 *The National Studio Program
Exhibition*
P.S. 1
Long Island City, NY
Little Art By Big Thinkers
Bess Cutler Gallery
New York, NY

1984 *34/83/84*
The Clocktower Gallery
New York, NY
Members Select
1708
Richmond, VA
Contents Under Pressure
Anton Gallery
Washington, DC
New Realism
Robert L. Kidd Gallery
Birmingham, MI
Annual Juried Show
Staten Island Museum of Art &
Natural History
Staten Island, NY



Above:
Centaur 1985-86
oil on canvas
84x50 inches

Opposite:
The King 1986-87
oil on canvas
66x36 inches

NANCY DAVIDSON

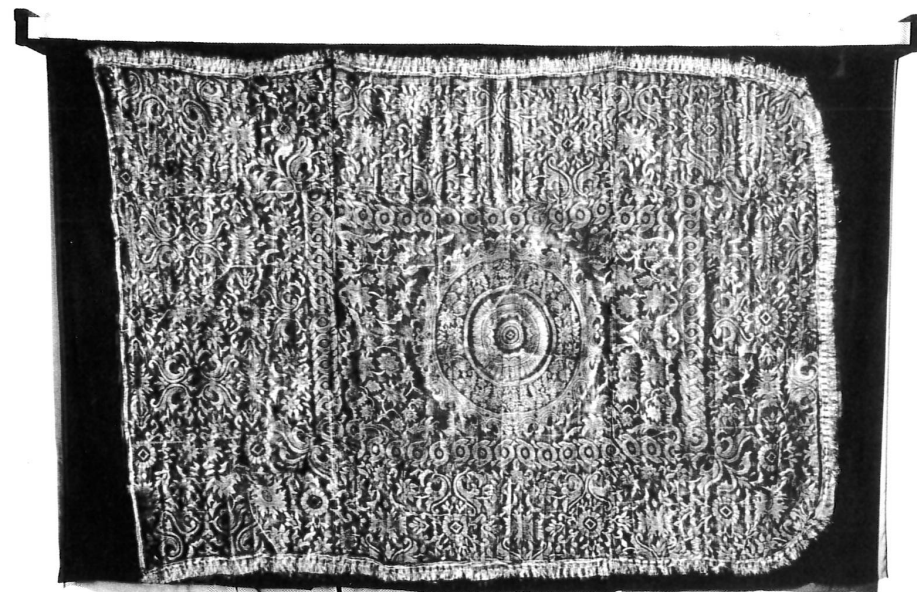
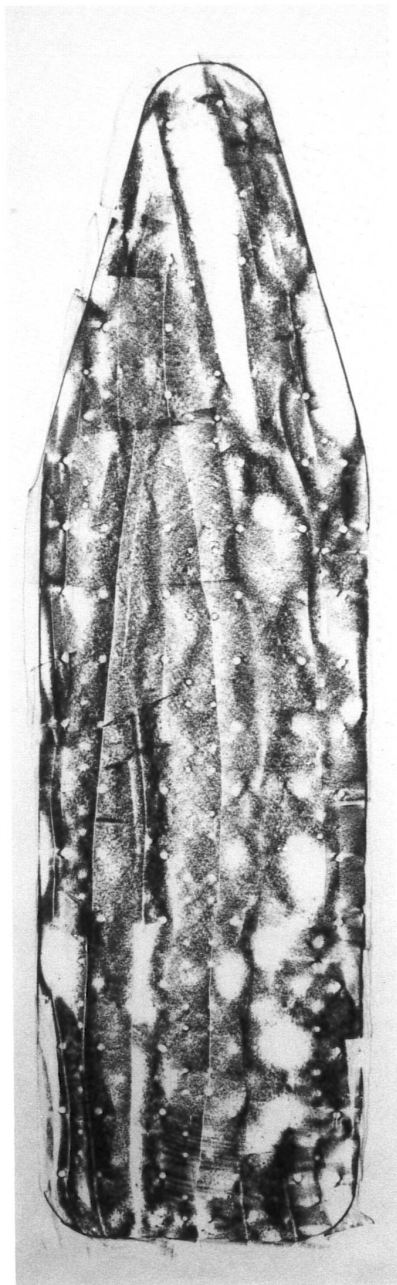
Born Chicago, Illinois
Lives Brooklyn, New York

Education

- 1975 School of the Art Institute of
Chicago MFA
1972 University of Illinois at Chicago
Circle BA
Northeastern Illinois University,
Chicago BE

Selected Exhibitions

- 1990 *Group Exhibition*
White Columns
New York, NY
Stained Sheet/Holy Shroud
Krygier/Landau
Los Angeles, CA
- 1989 *Invitational*
Shea and Beker
New York, NY
- 1988 *Nancy Davidson*
Marianne Deson Gallery
New York, NY
- 1985 *Group Exhibition*
A.I.R. Gallery
New York, NY
- 1984 *Salon*
Gracie Mansion
New York, NY
Drawings
Germans Van Eck
New York, NY



Top:
Victoria Falls 1990
steel, cloth, paintstick
96x131 inches

Above left:
Victoria Falls 1990
detail

Opposite:
Ironing Board 1989
oilstick on vellum
58x36 inches

GREG DRASLER

Born Waukegan, Illinois
Lives Brooklyn, New York

Education

- 1983 University of Illinois, Champaign
MFA
1980 University of Illinois, Champaign
BFA

Selected Exhibitions

- 1990 *Greg Drasler*
Center for Contemporary Art
Chicago, IL
Greg Drasler
Shea & Beker Gallery
New York, NY
- 1989 *Gender Fiction*
University Art Museum
SUNY Binghamton
Binghamton, NY
Drasler, Minter, Morse
Shea & Beker Gallery
New York, NY
- 1988 *Greg Drasler*
Marianne Deson Gallery
Chicago, IL
The Legacy of Surrealism
Ben Shahn Galleries
William Paterson College
Wayne, NJ
- 1987 *The Other Man, Alternate
Representations of Masculinity*
The New Museum of
Contemporary Art
New York, NY
*The Self-Portrait:
Tangible Consciousness*
Robeson Center Gallery
Rutgers University
Newark, NJ
- 1986 *Greg Drasler*
R.C. Erpf Gallery
New York, NY



Above:
Spare Bedroom with Shoes 1990
oil on canvas
40x32 inches

Opposite:
The Garden 1985
acrylic on canvas
70x60 inches

LEE GORDON

Born Brooklyn, New York
Lives New York, New York

Education

1982 Rutgers University,
New Brunswick, NJ MFA
1979 University of Massachusetts,
Amherst BFA

Selected Exhibitions

1989 *Erotic America*
Antoine Candau Gallerie
Paris, France

1987 *The Hooded Paintings*
Grey Art Gallery
New York, NY

*The Other Man, Alternate
Representations of Masculinity*
The New Museum of
Contemporary Art
New York, NY

Floating Values
Hallwalls Center for
Contemporary Art
Buffalo, New York

1986 *Drawn and Quartered*
White Columns
New York, NY

Genre Painting
Hallwalls Center for
Contemporary Art
Buffalo, NY

Philadelphia Collects
Philadelphia Museum of Art
Philadelphia, PA

1982 *Extended Sensibilities*
The New Museum of
Contemporary Art
New York, NY



Above:
Father Reading to Son 1987
oil on white lead on canvas
32x40 inches

Opposite:
Self-Portrait as a Woman with a Clown Nose 1990, detail
watercolor, gouache on paper
18x24 inches

MARGO MACHIDA

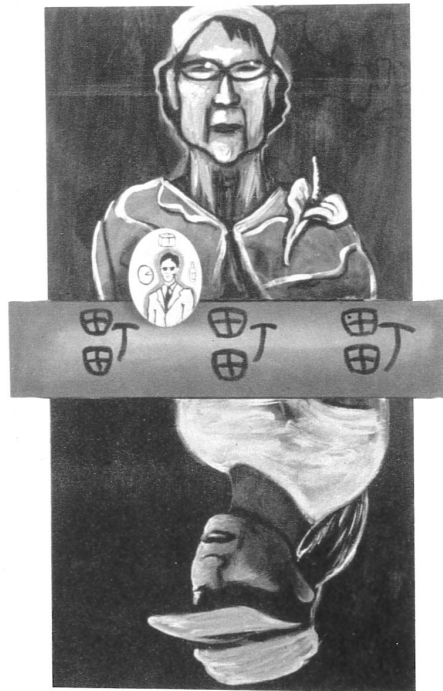
Born Hilo Hawaii,
Lives Brooklyn, NY

Education

1978 Hunter College, New York, NY MA
1976 New York University,
New York BA

Selected Exhibitions

- 1990 *The Decade Show*
Museum of Contemporary
Hispanic Art
New York, NY
- 1989 *Bridges and Boundaries*
The Newhouse Center for
Contemporary Art
Snug Harbor Cultural Center
Staten Island, NY
- 1988 *Cultural Currents*
The San Diego Museum of Art
San Diego, CA
- A Place in Art/History*
Henry Street Settlement
Arts For Living Center
New York, NY
- Autobiography In Her Own Image*
INTAR Gallery
New York, NY
- 1987 *Margo Machida*
Jerry Clifford Gallery
Bronx Museum of the Arts
New York, NY
- 1986 *Two-person exhibition*
Asian Arts Institute
New York, NY
- Transculture/Transmedia*
Exit Art
New York, NY
- Asian Artists of Brooklyn*
Brooklyn Museum
New York, NY



Above:
Noli Me Tangere 1986
acrylic on canvas
60x84 inches

Opposite:
Make Room for Daddy 1990
acrylic and mixed media on canvas
56x36 inches

HOLLY MORSE

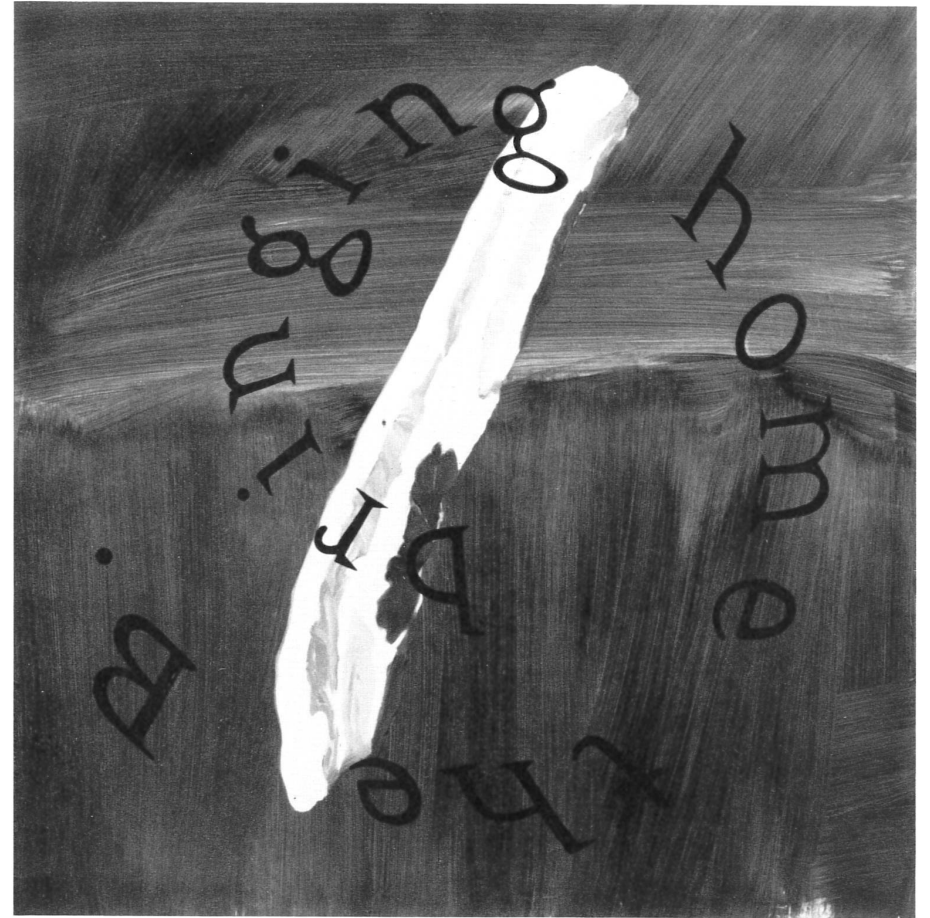
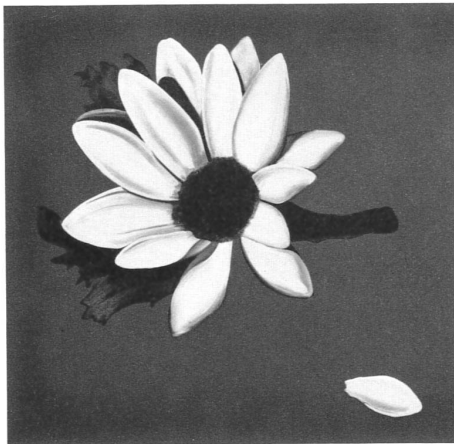
Born Newton, Massachusetts
Lives Brooklyn, New York

Education

1976 Tufts University, Medford, MA BFA
1983 California Institute of the Arts,
Valencia MFA

Selected Exhibitions

- 1985 *Group exhibition*
The Hudson Center
New York, NY
- 1984 *Group exhibition*
Southern Connecticut State
University
New Haven, CT
- 1983 *Muse On Loan*
Koplin Gallery
Los Angeles, CA
Holly Morse
California Institute of the Arts
Valencia, CA
- 1981 *Holly Morse*
Helen Schlein Gallery
Boston, MA
- 1980 *Group exhibition*
Helen Schlein Gallery
Boston Center for the Arts
Boston, MA



Above:
Bringing Home the Bacon 1989
oil on linen
24x24 inches

Opposite:
Dirty 1990
oil on linen
36x72 inches

LILLIAN MULERO

Born Brooklyn, New York
Lives Albany, New York

Education

1983 State University of New York,
Albany MFA

Selected Exhibitions

1990 *The Decade Show*
MASS Group Material
Studio Museum of Harlem
New York, NY

Vistas Latinas
Henry Street Settlement
New York, NY

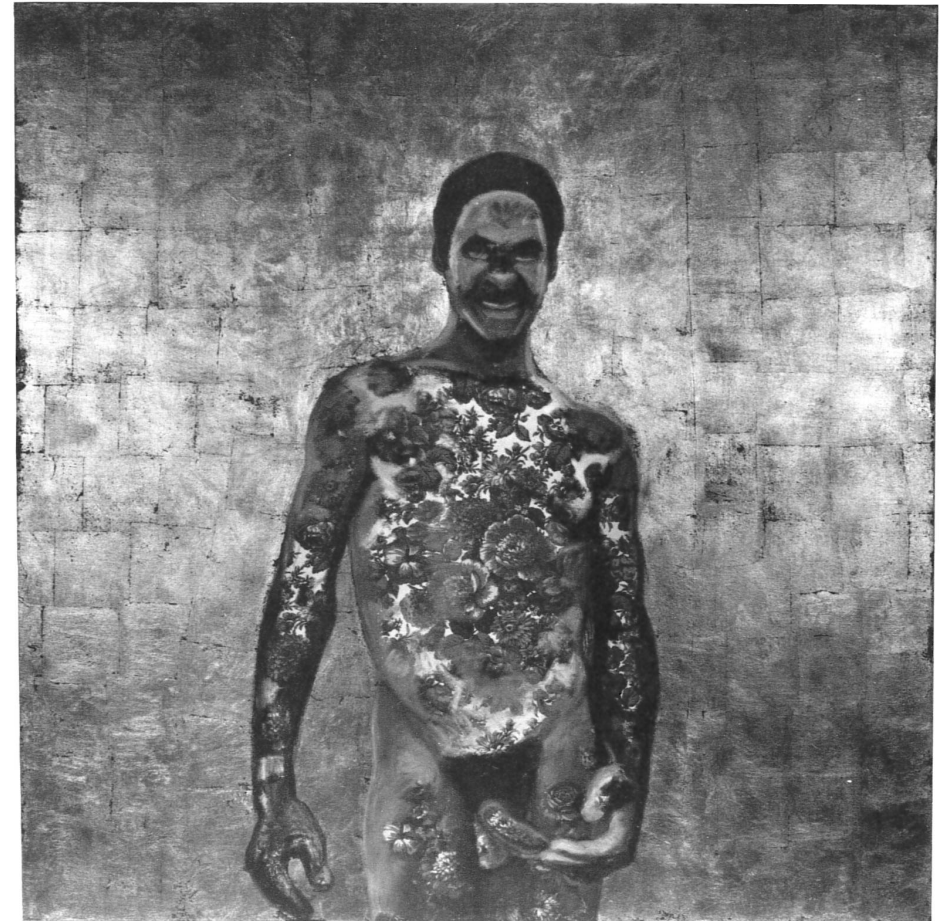
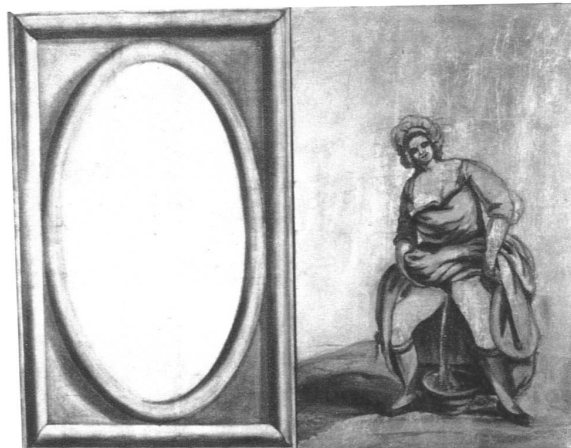
1989 *The Daughter Show*
Ted Gallery
Albany, NY

1987 *Head Sex*
Feature Gallery
Chicago, IL

Chung, Mulero, Santos, Wirtz
Intar Gallery
New York, NY

Chain Paintings of Love
Colab Project
P.S. 122
New York, NY

1986 *Toys ART Us*
Longwood Project Gallery
Bronx, NY



Above:
Untitled
oil and gold leaf on canvas
63x63 inches

Opposite:
Folk Art 1990
oil on aluminum leaf on canvas
40x50 inches

MILLIE WILSON

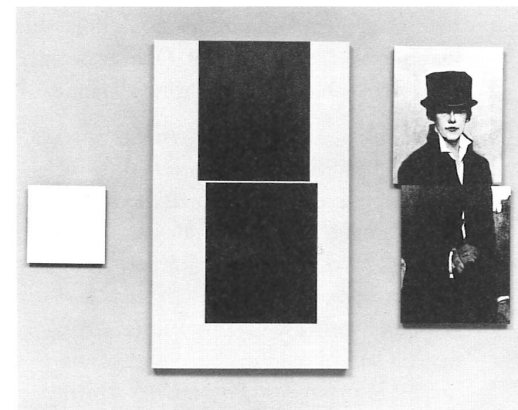
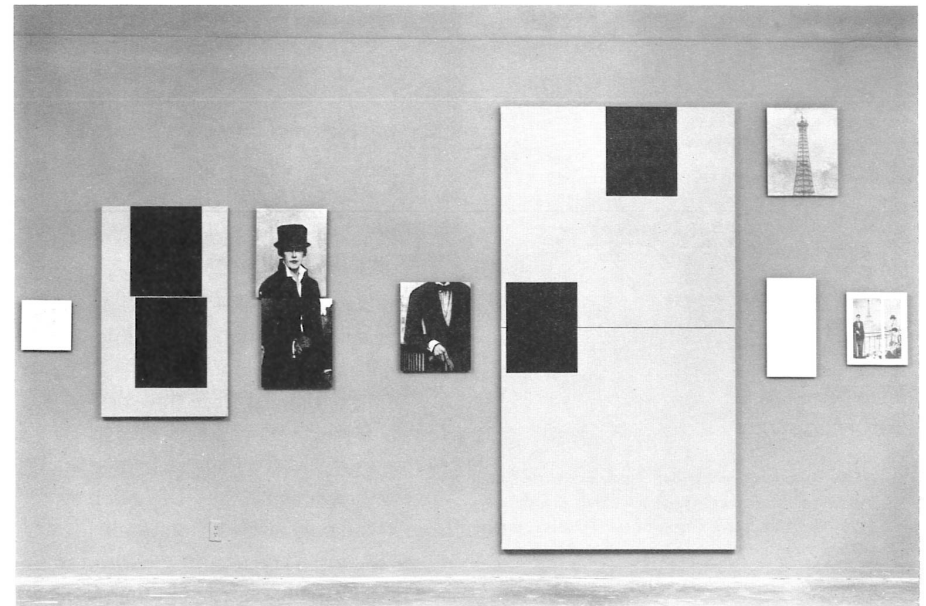
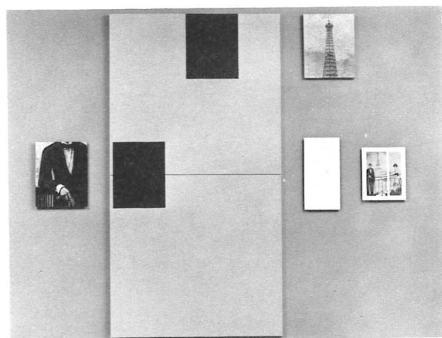
Born Hot Springs, Arkansas
Lives Los Angeles, California

Education

1983 The University of Houston, MFA
1971 The University of Texas at
Austin, BFA

Selected Exhibitions

- 1990 *Fauve Semblant: Peter
(A Young English Girl)*
San Francisco Camerawork
San Francisco, CA
All But The Obvious
L.A.C.E.
Los Angeles, CA
- 1989 *Los Angeles Times Series*
University Art Gallery
SUNY/Binghamton
*Thick and Thin: Photographically
Inspired Paintings*
Fahey/Klein Gallery
Los Angeles, CA
Loaded
Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery
Los Angeles, CA
Self-Evidence
L.A.C.E.
Los Angeles, CA
- 1988 *Drawings By Ten*
Mandeville Gallery
University of California
San Diego, CA
- 1987 *Selections*
Diverse Works
Houston, TX



Above and opposite:
installation, 3 views
Millie Wilson/Romaine Brooks
The Painter Who Is Not One 1990
paintings, photographs
13x25 feet

The Painter Who Is Not One is dedicated to Tony Greene.

Acknowledgments

I am very pleased that Artists Space is presenting *Post-Boys&Girls: Nine Painters* and am grateful to Ken Aptekar for his enthusiasm and clarity in proposing and organizing the exhibition.

Ken Aptekar is a painter whose work explores cultural myths surrounding gender. The ideas initiating *Post-Boys&Girls* originate from the existing critical discourse on gender issues in photography, video and graphic media. This exhibition challenges the notion of these as the only viable means of engaging in this discourse and argues the case for the critical capabilities of painting in this post-media climate. Not only is painting alive and well but the depth of its conceptual range is explored in this exhibition with renewed commitment. One suspects these artists have been painting all along.

On behalf of Millie Wilson, Artists Space would like to thank Art Matters, Inc. for their support of *The Painter Who Is Not One*. I would like to thank Robert Edelman and Bess Cutler for their support of the catalogue accompanying the exhibition and also Connie Butler, Artists Space Curator, whose able coordination helped to make *Post-Boys&Girls* a reality.

Susan Wyatt
Executive Director

Artists Space programs are made possible by: National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency, New York State Council on the Arts, and New York City Department of Cultural Affairs; AT&T Foundation, Inc., The David Bermant Foundation: Color, Light, Motion, The Bohem Foundation, The Cowles Charitable Trust, Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts, Inc., Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, The Greenwall Foundation, Jerome Foundation, The J.M. Kaplan Fund, The Dorothea L. Leonhardt Foundation, Inc., The Joe and Emily Lowe Foundation, Inc., The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, The Menemsha Fund, Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation, Betty Parsons Foundation, The Reed Foundation, Inc., The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc., and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.; American Express Company, The Chase Manhattan Bank, N.A., Consolidated Edison Company of New York, Inc., Equitable Real Estate Group, Inc., General Atlantic Corporation, R.H. Macy and Company, Inc., Morgan Guaranty Trust Company of New York, Philip Morris Companies Inc., and U.S. Trust Company of New York; as well as Artwatch, Galleries in Support of Artists Space, and numerous Friends.

Artists Space is a member of the National Association of Artists Organizations (NAAO) and Media Alliance.

